

## Looking from above: saying and doing in the history museums of Latin America

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### Abstract

What functions might the history museum fulfill in the twenty-first century? How could this powerful ideological device, so closely linked in its origins to the nation-state and neo-colonial expansion, be changed into an instrument of multicultural citizenship? In some Latin American museums, new historical subjects and audio-visual media have been incorporated into the exhibits. But, is that enough? We do not believe so, because things are said in a museum, but things are also done while speaking: reality is ordered, evaluated and hierarchized, so that a certain way of conceiving and being in the world is conveyed. Therefore, making the museum suitable to the new needs of the community demands changes not only in what is said, but also in the way it is said. It serves little to incorporate new social subjects (the native peoples of Latin America, for example) if this inclusion results from a pejorative conception of these communities, which is just what happens in the Museum of America in Madrid, where the Spanish appear as masters of the word while the indigenous people are represented by ceramic vessels. If, in the accounts of the museums, the part continues to be taken for the whole by essentializing and naturalizing the difference, then those other social subjects must appear to be merely a historical afterthought. It seems to us that the performative dimension of the discourse in the museum is a very important aspect at the moment its function in the new global society is evaluated. We propose two objectives for new museums: serving the purposes of multicultural coexistence, and being spaces where the subjects may examine their social situation. In order to do this, we have analyzed the setup of three museums: a colonial museum (the Museum of America in Madrid), a national museum (the National Historical Museum in Buenos Aires), and an ethnic museum (the Mennonite Jacob Unger Museum in the Paraguayan Chaco).

**Key words:** representation, otherness, performativity, narratives

### Looking at the forest from the ground

*I myself remember that when I was a child... we used to climb the tallest trees just to get a better view, right, to improve the scenery, yes?*

*It seemed so restricted to us, because as we looked in any direction, there was the forest.*

*The world ended... The biggest sensation that we could have possibly dreamed of was going up in a plane and looking at the Chaco from above. That was the dream of every child.*

*I remember when they put a radio tower in south Filadelfia... all the children climbed it to look at the Chaco from above...*

*That was the sensation, wasn't it? ... Since there are no mountains, and... it seems to me that we grew up with a diminished perception of space... (Niebuhr 2009)*

That is how Gundolf Niebuhr, the man in charge of the Jacob Unger museum, stated his greatest desire and that of the children from his community in the 1960s, before the Trans-Chaco Highway was put in to connect the isolated Mennonite colonies with the outside. It was a world that was partitioned off and closed up behind the impenetrable Chaco forest, which cut off any possibility for communication or exchange with whatever lay just a little beyond. Therefore, looking from above was the only conceivable way of getting around that obstacle and encountering the (un)known from another perspective: they had to defy the thicket that held their vision captive. From the ground, the forest was an impassable barrier, the end of the world. But from above it could be a boundary (separating what was known from what was not) and an opportunity: precisely because it separated both realities, it called for an encounter between them.<sup>1</sup>

In a world like ours, which only *seems* to be very different from the Mennonite world of that decade, obstacles also exist that threaten to curtail, tame and mortgage away our perceptiveness. In spite of all the debate about the reach and effect of globalization (Albrow 1994; Ferguson 1993; Nederveen Pieterse 1995; Appiah 1991; Steger, 2009) and about the ability of local cultures to appropriate Western modes of thinking (Spivak 1985; Robertson 1995; Bauman 1998; Chakravarty, 2007; Mignolo, 2003; Shohat, 2008; Dirlik, 2007; Ashcroft, 2001; Young, 2001), it seems undeniable that there is a tendency to erase or eliminate those differences – those other “forms of being in the world” – that work against converting citizens into consumers. It is in this context, which alleges its diversity while being obsessively homogenizing, where the museum can have an important role as a place for *difference*. And within the museum, history museums in particular may be places for encountering and re-working those differences in the past, which is its own “foreign country.”

Museums continue to be powerful visual and ideological systems whose messages shape collective imaginaries in various ways. In them, things are said, but things are also done while speaking: reality is created, ordered, evaluated, hierarchized, and justified. That is, when statements are made in museums, a way of perceiving the world is being recorded at the same time. But their word has great value because the museum aspires to be not just like any other institution, it works as a space for gaining knowledge, a place where what is exhibited is not included as a product of a historically conditioned interpretation. The museum aims to be a locus where discourse, constructed from “scientific facts... unequivocal statements”, must be located (Macdonald 1998: 2).

In museums, things are said, and things are done while speaking. And all these actions by way of inscriptions and imprints, comprise a major ideological operation and policy that the museum strives to efface by appealing to science and true knowledge. It is this performative or actualizing dimension of language (Austin 1975; Derrida 1992; Butler 1990 and 1993) that merits evaluation at the moment of redefining the objectives of this institution. Because the museum is not a product of modernity, but one of its allies, it is “one of the technologies through which modernity... is constituted” (Macdonald 1998: 9). What do the accounts in history museums say and do? In the more modern museums, new subjects have been incorporated, and new mechanisms for exhibition have been added for historical narratives. But is that enough? If we want the history museum to accompany multicultural societies in their development, is it enough to have new subjects or to outfit the exhibits with new interactive devices? If we accept that the museum has the ability to affect the lives of citizens not only by what it says but also by what it does as it is speaking, we should understand that it is not only the statements that are made which must be questioned, but also the way in which they are made. Because museums are spaces for the creation and re-creation of identities, they are “contact zones” (Pratt 1992: 6-7). This means that they are places for knowing and recognizing the strategies of domination and resistance that constituted the subjects in the past and which, above all, define them in the present (Clifford 1999; Lindauer 2007). Perhaps then we will be closer to re-imagining other uses for this institution. It is time, then, to defy the mandate of civilization and climb up into the trees.

## Climbing trees

History museums are a genre within the kind of public museums that were popularized in the 19th century. As formidable visual devices (Preziosi 2004: 71-84), these institutions were created to gather, classify, preserve, exhibit and study vestiges of the past that might permit – at a time of great changes – the education and indoctrination of the new subjects of modern nation-states: their citizens (Coombes 1988; Duncan 1991; Earle 2006; Kaplan 2010). This reorganization and re-creation of memory contributed toward naturalizing the idea of the nation, and it also served to show that the superiority of the West was not the result of force, but rather of historical rationality that the world should imitate (Heartney 2001; Mitchell 2004; Simpson 2001).

However, this hegemonic and little-debated viewpoint began to change around 1950, and its critics have intensified their debate in recent decades (Clifford 1988; Simpson 2001; Walsh 1992; Dubin 2010). National minorities and subaltern groups that have traditionally been excluded from representation in the museums – as well as professionals from those institutions and scholars dedicated to research in the social sciences – have lifted up their voices against what they consider to be an anachronistic institution that fails to meet the needs of its citizens. With some insistence, various people from these groups are asking that museums stop being places of inculcation and indoctrination, and become spaces where one who comes there might see herself as part of a larger story. Access to history and memory is seen, from this critical perspective, as a fundamental right that affects the identity and ability to act for all the actors and subjects involved. The historical invisibilization and negative appraisal of certain groups contemporizes and reinforces the structures of domination, and incapacitates the actors from being able to mount an active resistance (Sepúlveda dos Santos 2005; Lindauer 2007: 304).

This shift in the purposes, functions and uses of museums has found broad resonance in the English-speaking world, where distinct ethnic minorities have found a place and have demanded to participate in the making and the management of how they are depicted (Simpson 2001). Somewhat closer to the cultural environment of the authors of this paper, we may cite the conflict that took place in 1992 in Catalunya, which revolved around the embalmed body of a pygmy on display at the Darder Museum of Natural History in Banyolas. The existence of this display was condemned by the African immigrants in the area, which jeopardized the participation of teams from that continent in the Barcelona Olympic Games. The incident was finally settled when the body was repatriated to its native land in the year 2000.<sup>2</sup>

In Latin America, whether it is because of pressure from ethnic groups or because of the sensitivity of those responsible for making cultural policies, the traditional historical accounts that affect the indigenous communities are being called into question with increasing force. Not only are statements beginning to be voiced about the pertinence of displaying human remains from primitive cultures in the exhibits,<sup>3</sup> but on several occasions the demand has been made that those remains be returned to their descendants (Brooks and Rumsey 2007; Alberti et al. 2009). Such was the case of the ancient chief Mariano Rosas (Painé), whose remains were claimed by his Ranquel family members at the Natural Museum of La Plata, where he was on display. His remains were finally sent to Victorica (La Pampa) in July of 2002.<sup>4</sup>

But apart from these episodes, there have not been great debates in the Latin American world about the functions of the museum. Some have endured notable transformations. They have become more interactive, with the resultant effect that this might have on the attitude of the visitor toward the knowledge being displayed there. Yet we believe it is not an exaggeration to say that these changes have not permeated the discourse of the history museum, which may still be considered in the majority of cases to be a “temple of knowledge,” or, the place where a visitor comes in search of a true account.

One of the places that represents all those things is the Museum of America (MAM) in Madrid, founded during the dictatorship of Franco. It is the only museum in the world that seeks to represent the reality of the entire continent, and it accurately conveys a certain colonial melancholy. The permanent exhibit in this museum is an example of how a presentation that appears to be very modernized with multi-media and audio-visual accoutrements can still contain discourses that are traditional, if not openly reactionary. In Spanish, the museum is called the ‘Museum of America’ (singular). This name may give rise to some confusion, since

'America' tends to be associated with the United States of America. However, it is the idea of the 'Hispanic World' in particular that Franco used as a resource in the first years of the Second World War to compete against Pan-Americanism. Therefore, the use of 'America' in singular in the name is a vestige of the competition to lead or hegemonize the political will of that continent.

Another example might be the National Historical Museum (NHM) located in Buenos Aires. The permanent display is an attempt, to some extent a failed one, to change what was until recently the hegemonic discourse of a national museum, characterized as it was by heroes and toms. The museum reverses the hierarchies of the protagonists, but it does not manage to subvert them: where the elite once were, the masses now are. The old military heroes are replaced by new ones, represented by groups traditionally excluded from the official history, leaving the traditional imaginary structure untouched.

Finally, it seems interesting to assess the state of affairs of a museum for an ethnic community, a kind of museum that is experiencing an ever-growing boom today as it fundamentally changes the scale for analysis and incorporates new subjects to depict history. We shall consider the case of the Mennonite Jacob Unger Museum (JUM) in the Paraguayan Chaco. In this final example – where we have designated the exhibition as "Nature and Culture" – we wish to stress that the key is not the inclusion of new historical subjects, or at least it is not the only important feature, when thinking of new functions for the museum. The critical use of these institutions cannot be reduced to adding more characters to the cast, but rather a new form of expression must be *written* into the museum.

Returning to the premise that things are said in history museums about the past at the time that messages are inscribed in the present, it is fitting to ask about the strategies of meaning: How is meaning created in the permanent exhibits of these history museums? When we enter a museum, the space is not simply filled with random artefacts. Rather, these artefacts are arranged in a particular way that is coherent with the cultural conceptions or the ideological positions of the society or community that creates or maintains the museum. What we mean by this will become apparent as we describe the three museums that are the focus of this study. So then, the museum conveys significance, in the first place, through the organization of a symbolic space that seeks to transmit statements that say things about the museum and what is represented there. In the second place, the museum speaks through the structure and circulation of accounts that are composed of texts and objects. Finally, the interaction between the space and the accounts produces a sort of discourse that goes beyond the institution itself to shape our way of thinking and of perceiving reality (García Canclini 1989; Geertz 1973, Barthes 1991, 1993; Chartier 1992).

### Emblems

The three museums mentioned – the MAM, the NHM and the JUM – are situated in places that are emblematic for their respective communities. Whether these places have been built for the purpose of housing the museum or not, their location seemed appropriate for what was going to be exhibited there. The MAM, a building of brick and hewn stone with a rectangular, "L-shaped" floor plan that imitates a Baroque colonial convent with a church and tower, is situated at one of the busiest entrance points into Madrid, the one that connects the city with the entire northern part of the country. It was founded in 1941, during the dictatorship

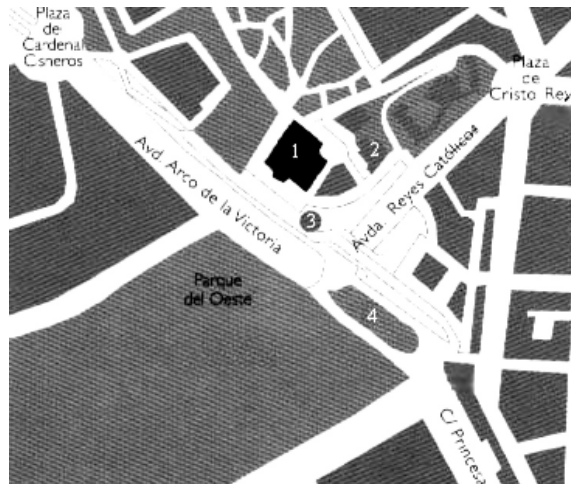


Fig 1. Spatial syntax of MAM



Fig 2. The Museum of America located at the intersection of the two main boulevards, with the Arch that commemorates the triumph of the fascist troops during Spanish Civil War.

of General Franco, two years after the end of the civil war. However, its collections wandered around other institutions until they were ultimately transferred to their current resting place in 1965. It is located at the intersection of two main boulevards, the Avenue of the Catholic Monarchs and Victory Arch Avenue, which ends a few meters away with an enormous arch that commemorates the triumph of the fascists troops in the war. The MAM is situated on a hill that demarcates Western Park, a verdant expanse where statues and monuments have been erected over the decades to heroic Latin American figures, and to the (Spanish) heroes who fought against the freedom fighters in Cuba and the Philippines.

The Museum forms part of the University District, which was the scene of military conflict during the civil war, as attested by the preserved bunkers and the altar to the Virgin of the Siege. The maintenance of this religious image is very interesting because it is accompanied by a plaque on which a large text, which was placed there by the Ruling Executive Body of the University District (Junta de Gobierno de la Ciudad Universitaria), praises “the soldiers of Franco (that) made her a mirror of their fortitude” (Fernández Delgado *et al.* 1982: 141).

Behind the Museum, a few meters from the Plaza of Christ the King, stands the School of Naval Engineering and the Hispanic Library, which occupies part of the building that once housed the Institute of Hispanic Culture. Something in this obstinate and repetitive spatial semantic (of the Cross and the Sword) tells us that the place where the Museum rests is not a casual choice, but rather that this site has been selected with its appropriateness for the institution in mind. One need only know the basic tenets of Franco’s foreign policy for this all to be consistent with the Regime’s objectives: to use the presumably privileged relationship of Spain toward the American nations – by virtue of language, religion and history – as a currency of exchange with the leading powers on the international scene, i.e. Germany in the first years of the Second World War, and afterwards the United States (González de Oleaga 2001).

The Museum opened its doors at its present location in 1965, and closed them again for





*Fig 3. Tower of the Museum and 'Lighthouse of Moncloa'*

repairs in 1981. It was not completely reopened until 1994, when it housed an entirely new exhibition that it has maintained since that time. The Museum of America opening its doors again in full democracy is one of the legacies of Franco. But the new government and the local authorities do not seem interested in re-drawing this cumbersome imperial historical legacy, which clearly extolled language and religion as Spanish contributions<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, the grand opening in 1994 was spatially related to the prior construction of a 92-meter tower called the 'Lighthouse of Moncloa', which "illuminates the facilities that rise beneath its feet"<sup>6</sup>: that is, the Museum of America. The Lighthouse signals and marks what is locked away, the spoils of war obtained thanks to the Discovery and the Conquest, accentuating the colonial bias that we shall see in the exhibition itself.

The National Historical Museum (NHM) in Buenos Aires was founded in 1889 as a Municipal Museum, and nationalized in 1891. Since 1897 it has been housed in a rectangular building in the Italian style, painted the colour of ochre with white moldings, above one of the gullies of Lezama Park in the San Telmo neighbourhood, where Pedro de Mendoza supposedly founded Buenos Aires in 1536. The property belonged to the English until 1857. For this reason, it was known for decades as the "English Estate." The European ambience suggested by the house and garden make the Museum seem like part of the Old World that has been grafted or tacked on to Buenos Aires. It is accessed by an iron gate that opens onto Defensa Street, and one reaches the entrance through a courtyard surrounded by gardens that, were it not for the bars, would be part of the public park. In the courtyard, one may contemplate a colonial cistern, the brass bells of one of the oldest churches in Buenos Aires (that of the Virgin of Merced, Patroness of the Army, whose cult was imported from Spain), carriages and cannons of brass, and the statues of powerful sitting lions that seem to be keeping watch to safeguard the relics of the homeland. The building is accessed through a covered gallery, in which there are two statues in offset alcoves: one statue is of the first director of the Museum, Adolfo Carranza, and the other is of Christopher Columbus. On one side of the gallery, there is a series of plaques

out in the open commemorating key moments for the institution and visits made by persons or institutions who rendered homage to the Museum.

The entire space is saturated with references to the Old World. This is because, from its inception, it was never clear what its function was, or what Argentine reliquaries should be designated to represent the country. Its first director, Adolfo Carranza, solicited donations from the patrician families of Buenos Aires – and later from the families of the rest of the country – to include the greatest number of “trophies” to embody the nation of Argentina. His basic role was to gather objects without order or systematization in order to saturate the eye of the spectator. The objects chosen represented the matrons and patricians, the Creole elite, and idolized heroes who were changed into a model of humanity and civility. This Europeanizing environment may seem paradoxical when one considers that it occurred in the context of defining a nationality that, in order to come into being, had to break its ties with the *metropoli*. But one need only know a little Argentine history to resolve the apparent contradiction. Argentina as a nation never valued native contributions or the influence of popular culture, and the national identity was always considered to be an inheritance of the values of high European culture. Nevertheless, this imported ambience that was intended to define the nation must have been a liability for the team that designed the current permanent display that was launched in 2006. In the foyer at the entrance before starting the tour of the exhibition, there are large panels explaining the traditional function of museums in Western thought (the domination of space, the pedagogy of progress, the memory of the nation) and the origin of the National Museum, which was born from the will of “patricians” who assembled their own histories and wanted to convert them into collective history. In these texts, the critical spirit of the current display is mentioned, as are the debates concerning the importance of museums. The caution is given that the objects and accounts on display are not the only ones possible or, perhaps, the best ones, and that by drawing from everyone – visitors and curators alike – other accounts may be constructed. It is as if they were attempting, with this warning, to counteract the effects of narratives inherited from other eras<sup>7</sup>



Fig 4. Outside the NHM

Finally, the Jacob Unger Mennonite museum at the Fernheim colony in Paraguay is a community museum and also an example of the ethnic museum so much in vogue in recent decades. Each colony possesses a history museum, and Fernheim, furthermore, has a house museum: the Knelsenhaus. The Fernheim museum is located in the middle of the colony at the intersection of Hindenburg and Unruh Avenues, just in front of the cooperative building, the supermarket, the bank, the civil association, the industrial plant, and the department of education and culture, and it is a few meters from the hospital. It is a central place for the community, at the crossroads of social and administrative life for the colony. It was founded in May of 1957 at the insistence of a teacher who deemed it necessary to “gather and protect things,” and to make use of them as an educational resource.<sup>8</sup> In 1970, the display was transferred to the second floor of the “Colony House,” one of the four original buildings, where it remained until May of 2009, when it was decided to move the samples of local fauna to the adjoining school in order to protect them from the harsh climate.<sup>9</sup> The installation of the museum in the *Coloniehaus* demonstrates the value that the memory of the community and the history of the pioneers have for this group. The building that houses the museum is a wooden structure, with a rectangular floor plan of two levels, *corredor jeré* (a gallery around the perimeter), and a gabled roof.



*Fig 5. Jacob Unger Museum, Façade and main entrance in the intersection of the Hindenburg and Unruh Avenues.*

It features two symmetrical apertures, one in front, and another in the back portion of the building. The one in the back leads to the gallery and a garden. At either side of the two doors are two windows, both on the upper and lower floors. The façade is split by an outside staircase that connects the front garden with the upper floor. The style of the building is an example of an architectural hybrid, with central European elements (materials, structure, roof design) and other characteristics from Paraguay (such as the corridor that circumbambulates the entire building). The floor of the lower level, where the pioneer exhibit is kept, has been preserved with its original clay floors, and the structure of the building has been maintained nearly intact. Thus,



a small aperture can still be seen in one of the wall dividers on the upper level, a sort of window through which the telephone operator attended to the public. This is not, then, a building conceived as a museum, but rather an exhibit adapted to one of the places that is emblematic for the community.

In all the cases described, the museums are located in significant places that, through the interaction of these spaces and their exhibits, are each transformed into a significant *locus*. In the three museums mentioned, there is a common spatial language – albeit with slight variations – that is able to influence the experience of the visit. It involves the way that the tour of the exhibit is organized. In the MAM, the itinerary to be followed is pre-arranged by the architecture and the manner in which the display is organized. This is a museum/gallery, a concrete spatial typology (Hillier and Tzortzi 2010) that is characterized by “a gathering space near the entrance, which serves as a space for setting out from and returning to; and, linked to this, there is a set of spaces which are strongly sequenced so they can be walked through without back-tracking or getting lost” (Hillier and Tzortzi 2010: 298). It is organized into two floors in which the rooms follow one after the other in a chronologically arranged tour. There is no possibility of following a different route, or of the visitor choosing an order different from the one proposed. Each exhibition hall has an exit that leads to a glass-enclosed cloister from which one may see a conventual garden with red earth that evokes the gardens of the Spanish religious missions in Latin America.

The JUM also has this gallery structure on the lower floor. At the entrance, as soon as the visitor enters the door, she is compelled to follow the itinerary on the left where, in a chronological and evolutionary fashion, she may follow the accounts about the history of the pioneers. The display concludes with the visitor positioned back at the beginning of the exhibit, facing the guest book. If she pushes on and climbs the stairs to the second floor, the visitor finds that here, in this second room, the route is determined by the architectural barriers, though there is a slightly larger margin for the visitor to choose her own itinerary. The upper floor of the old Colony House is divided into three consecutive bedrooms. The first room that the visitor enters is dedicated to the Chaco War. From there, one may continue to the right, to the room for ethnography and archeology; or to the left, which is dedicated to the fauna of the area. In contrast to the MAM and the JUM exhibit on the first floor, the visitor is not obliged to continue forward or retrace her steps. To a certain extent, it is possible to move from the room dedicated to the war to the local fauna room, thus dispensing with the ethnography exhibit, or deciding on one and avoiding the other.

Finally, the route proposed in the NHM is a bit more complicated. A single hall comprises the permanent collection, which opens with a display case devoted to the ancient indigenous population. From there, the visitor may choose two itineraries: The one on the right, or the one on the left. In each of them, problematic events or aspects of national history are addressed. This culminates in a large-scale photographic screen that attempts to resolve the political conflicts discussed in the two tours. The space is so small that, in spite of these two options, visitors circulate clockwise, moving from the origins of the nation's history to contemporary history, then returning to the battles for independence.

However, apart from how the space is organized, the museum produces meanings and feelings, due to the structure of its accounts and the way in which the selected information is arranged and displayed.

## Texts

In spite of differences in theme, size and budget, the three museums we have studied are united by a common discourse, the product of ingrained empiricist and evolutionist concepts that belong to modernity. In all these instances, reality is conceived of as being a coherent and ordered whole that is waiting to be decoded and understood; this is a role that belongs to science, a field to which the museum is indebted.

The permanent exhibit of the MAM has the appearance of a very modern display because of the characteristics of the materials used and the abundance of audio-visuales. Enormous glass display cases give the impression that the objects are floating within reach of the visitors. The exhibition halls are largely accompanied by supporting video, which gives them

the feel of a contemporary museum. Nevertheless, there is no interactive display in the entire exhibition. In every instance, there are dioramas or DVD documentaries that appeal to the visitor's passivity. The display is arranged around five thematic areas: 'Knowledge of America,' 'The Reality of America,' 'Society' 'Religion' and, finally, 'The Means of Communication' As if these were the chapters of a book, at the beginning of the tour – in large display cases – the Museum advertises this structure and its corresponding sections. It is these titles in the singular that first catch one's attention. How can a continent with so many countries be distilled in such a way that we might be able to talk about *one* knowledge, *one* reality, or *one* society? It is clear that the museum seeks to give this vision of unity, an almost natural one, even while it is faced with obvious (ethnic and cultural) diversity that accompanies the entire exhibition through photographs and objects. The display is arranged vertically, so that what is above is more significant than what is shown on the first floor. If we take into account the kind of religious edifice that this is, the exhibition is placed along superimposed naves and an apse, the place of the sacred. In the apse is found the Treasure of the Quimbayas, funeral offerings made of solid gold and donated by the Colombian government in the 19th century. Because of the kind of lighting provided, there is no room for doubt as to the importance that the museum bestows on this place and what is being exhibited there, reproducing yet again the old images of the Conquest. Two easily detectable common threads run through the entire exhibition: The first extols the Spanish technological progress that established the *metropoli* at the height of imperial power, and the other defends the unity in diversity that is presumed by the conquest and colonization. In the former case, this is a progression from "Mythos" to "Logos": That is, from the first fantastical representations of America ("Mythos"), to the "Logos" that in this instance is shown graphically in the reproduction of a satellite map of the planet. Thanks to science and technology, Spain conquered America and, along the way, the museum allows us to "truly" know those realities. The second is a journey through Babel, from the variety and diversity of ethnicity, geography and culture, to the unity brought by the Spanish language, a tool of progress in the



Fig 6. The Quimbayas Gold Treasure

world today. In this two-fold itinerary, the Spaniards are always represented by the word: they have a voice, and they are the ones who describe, tell and relate the accounts. Meanwhile, the native peoples are represented by objects that in the majority of cases are different kinds of earthenware vessels.

Different groups of human beings traveled along this road toward cultural and linguistic unity, and their demographic contributions are shown in the hall titled "The One Mankind."<sup>10</sup> There, Africans, Asians and Europeans are integrated into the American population with no problems, with the natural flow of an organized voyage. Nothing is said of the violence, power, submission, domination and resistance that took place among them (Price and Price 1995). Slavery, which is represented by the everyday objects of the African settlers, is called "African Emigration," and the rest of the panels in this hall seem to be a clear and deceptive attempt to show that the demographic catastrophe in Latin America was not produced through the Spanish Conquest, but rather during the wars of independence. In the same way, maps and charts hint that the conquest of North America was more traumatic, in demographic terms, than that of the rest of the continent, thus attempting to counter the "Black Legend", regarding the Spanish Conquest.



Fig 7. DVDs dedicated to indigenous languages

In the entire display, one sees a tension between the acknowledgement of diversity – ethnic, cultural and religious – and the emphasis placed on hinting that these differences are only a question of form because, deep down, we all belong to the same species (Are we not all the children of God?). This is so much the case that in the hall dedicated to "society" – which is divided according to "life cycles" as if it were part of a natural history museum – different rites are dressed up as the same thing: a Catholic communion, an indigenous initiation rite, a Jewish Bar Mitzvah, and a fight between what appear to be gangs of teenage hoodlums. The dissimilarity is expressed by being automatically placed under the label of our *common humanity*. Another such example appears in the hall of religion where it is expressly stated in

a documentary that “men, no matter what their ethnic or cultural background may be, or the place where they may live, have through religion sought solutions to their problems, which are and have always been universal.” Then it goes on to speak of some kind of religious thought whose function has been to legitimize the established order, in a sufficiently antiquated sort of functionalism. In spite of the universalist tendency of the museum that accentuates what humanity has in common, we find that almost all the scenes that represent the indigenous world are in black and white, while those that have to do with the Western world are in colour.

At the end of the exhibition is the hall dedicated to communication, where two documentaries are shown. One of them is devoted to indigenous languages, where representatives of the native peoples talk about their creation myths as they are framed against a parchment backdrop that evokes history and times long past. In contrast, the documentary devoted to Spanish is a procession of great writers who talk about the advantages of the language, using images that radiate rhythm, modernity and the future.

In the NHM, there were no important changes in the organization or collections of the museum in the century after it was founded. (Di Liscia, Bohoslavsky y González de Oleaga 2010). The old political history, along with its share of heroes and tombs, overran the whole exhibition. Something appears to have changed since November 2005, when the directorship was taken over by José Pérez Gollán, an archeologist and historian who was exiled to Mexico during the last military dictatorship. A certain problem – violence – is highlighted in the new arrangement of the museum, and an objective is proposed: a stable and inclusive democracy. These are very novel traits from the broad scope of Argentine museums in recent decades, since they involve a display in which the old heroes have not disappeared, but they are condemned to live alongside the new ones, who are now the popular masses. Yet, in spite of these changes and the best of intentions, the relics of one of the national heroes, San Martín, remain just as they were before: replicas are exhibited there of his bedroom and of the door to his house in Boulogne Sur-Mer, where he died during his exile in France.

The simulated chamber of this heroic figure is the first thing one sees upon entering the exhibition hall, and it is located in such a way that it surveys Argentine history from the time of indigenous settlement (10,000 years before the present day) to the restoration of democracy (1983). A series of “altarpieces” separated from each other by large-scale, transparent photographic screens establishes different historical stages, and it allows the visitor to see the historical process from the beginning in the form of layers. In general, the large screens illustrate anonymous persons who symbolize the abstract community of the nation: creoles playing *truco*, demonstrators on Loyalty Day, immigrants arriving at the port of Buenos Aires, an assassination attempt in the 1970s... The only recognizable figures in the enlargements are those of José de San Martín and Jorge Rafael Videla. Despite its attempt to unburden history of the weight of individuals, the museum here harkens back to its pedagogical and moral role by distinguishing between good and evil, between heroes and villains.

Two itineraries may be followed in the display. In the one on the right, the visitor retraces the history of Argentina from 1810 to 1976



Fig 8. Transparent photographic screens:  
*Cueva de las manos*





*Fig 9. Violent intervention of guerrilla groups in the '70s*

last military dictatorship, and leaflets from the majority political parties that ran in the democratic elections of 1983. All are symbols of a new Argentina, the new relics of the homeland.

In the JUM, the exhibition is arranged on two floors that do not communicate with each other except by an outside staircase. Many visitors are not aware of this division, and only visit the first room: that of the pioneers. In this large diaphanous room without partitions, the history of the first Mennonites who came to the Chaco from Russia is revealed. In it, what predominate at first glance are the objects, the machines and contraptions related to work in the colonies. The exhibit is arranged on two axes. One of these is the technological axis, by which the evolution of Mennonite technology is shown: from the drums for making butter to the printing press for the colony, and from oil and kerosene lamps to the electric lighting facilities. The other axis – that of everyday life, shows objects that are used on a daily basis: clothing, possessions, clocks, and photos of the

as the attention is focused on its heyday; but above all, the visitor sees Argentina's times of crisis. A critical look prevails over the violence in recent history, not over those exploits traditionally extolled by national patriotism, such as the British Invasions, The War with Paraguay, or the conflict in the Malvinas/Falkland Islands. It seeks to highlight the disastrous effects of these coups, because patriotic pedagogy for the Argentina of the 21st century is to promote democracy.

If the visitor follows the itinerary on the left, she is met with a path that carries her from the Colony to the armed groups of the 1960s and 70s. Sectors that are ignored by politics are included: indigenous peoples, women, workers, immigrants and students. This legitimizes their interventions – even the most violent ones – as just causes. Both itineraries conclude with a large-scale screen where one can see the citizens celebrating the coming of democracy. Below, there is a display case containing three symbolic objects: the headscarf of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the *Never Again* report about the "Disappeared Ones" during the



*Fig 10. Display case containing symbolic objects: headscarf of Madres de Plaza de Mayo, the Never Again report about "Disappeared Ones" (1976-1982) and leaflets from political parties that ran in the democratic elections of 1983.*



*Fig 11. Porcelain dishes in the first display case*

administrators throughout their history. The axis of everyday life has a peculiar structure, a certain language: from porcelain to brass, and from brass to iron. In the first display cases, which are kept under lock and key, are porcelain dishes and other personal effects which once belonged to people of a certain social status and cultural formation. The musical instruments accompanying this porcelain indicate that the pioneers were not poor farmers, but rather affluent agriculturalists who were obliged to emigrate, given the political situation in Russia. They brought porcelain to remember where they had come from, but had no reservation

about exchanging it for plates of brass, for those modest accoutrements that the society of colonization provided to each Mennonite family. It was acceptance of these new conditions and hard work that allowed them to reach a notable improvement in their standard of living, represented by the printing press, electric lighting, the hospital alarm, and the books published in the colonies. There are no references to the present day, and the exhibition concludes at a moment that is temporally undefined – as if there is no need to show the current situation, the community's success. Its prosperity is evident, as one can see merely by stepping foot into this region. But they do have to answer for these differences, for living in a reality so different. It is here that the museum attempts to give a response.

The floor of the lower level of the museum is not connected to the second floor. As if they were dealing with different worlds, an outside staircase gives access to the floor above, where the exhibit shows the collection of fauna, the room devoted to Paraguay, and the collection of ethnic handicrafts. There is no continuity, intersection, or relationship between the account of the pioneers and the accounts devoted to Paraguayan fauna, ethnography and history. In the first room are the remains from the Chaco War (1932-1935). This is the only mention of Paraguay and its inhabitants, who are represented as soldiers. Grenades, ammunition, rifles... all of this places the military conflict as the only context in which to define the Paraguayans. If the Mennonites were linked to hard work and sacrifice, then the Paraguayans would be linked – in this representation – to war. Bearing in mind that the Mennonites are a pacifist group, this association seems to take on an even greater ominous implication. It is no wonder, then, that in the drawings of Mennonite children the Paraguayans always appear as soldiers, while the colonists are made out to be businessmen or merchants.<sup>11</sup>

The indigenous people, for their part, are represented by objects like axes, baskets,



*Fig 12. Everyday life: from porcelain to brass*



*Fig13. Upstairs exhibition: remains of the Chaco War (1932-1935)*

earthenware, textiles and – in the case of the Ayoreos – by weapons and adornments. Everything seems to indicate that the ornateness of the objects, at the discretion of the collectors, was the criterion for selecting these indigenous pieces (Classen and Howes 2006). There are almost no texts to explain their world or context, as if the visitor is obliged to be content with the graceful colours and geometric shapes. No great distinction is established from one indigenous community to another, nor is there an abundance of their history or differentiating characteristics. The explanatory labels that accompany the ceramics give the name of their donor – or the place where a piece was found – with greater precision than they list its characteristics, whether it belongs to one ethnic group or another, or the uses to which this object was put; this is the same sort of thing that happened in the first science museums (Macdonald 1999: 8).

The Ayoreos merit special mention because they were the most warlike tribe in the region since the beginning of the colonization (Zanardini y Biedermann 2006). A frame notes the killing of a Mennonite family, the Stahls, at the hands of the Ayoreo Indians. The ages of the children and wife who were murdered are noted. The manner of classifying the ethnographic materials is not much different from the one employed in the exhibit about local fauna. The display cases with birds, mammals and reptiles bear the names of the specimens without further details. The displays devoted to the indigenous world do not abound with explanations either, and they order their materials according to a formal logic: all the feather headdresses, all the hats, and the fibre bags are categorized in a general way, without taking into account whether these objects had an everyday or ritual value. The Ayoreos are singled out from among all the other tribes, and they remain associated with a legend for ferocity and violence. Nothing is said, even though it is known, about the dispute over the land between this indigenous community that had inhabited the area since ancient times, and the recent arrivals who believed that they had purchased lands that were empty and devoid of local population. Furthermore, the threat



that the colonists posed to the traditional Ayoreo lifestyle or the survival of their hunting grounds is never mentioned in the exhibition.



*Fig 14. Indian textiles and feather adornments*

There are no maps in this museum, neither of the colony, nor of Paraguay. It is as if the space were intended to be dominated rather than represented. The entire display on the upper floor seems to bear this mark: to know in order to control. This is as much true for the flora and fauna as it is for the indigenous peoples, who are divided according to whether they are peaceful or warlike.

### **Inscriptions**

In each one of the examples given, accounts are circulated that, in spite of describing and talking about very different historical realities, contain common elements. A continent, a country and an ethnic group are the objects and subjects of the presentations in each of the museums, but in each exhibition there is a common, underlying narrative structure. In the colonial melancholy that exudes from every display in the MAM, there are several questions that the museum attempts to answer; but above all there is a question that explores Spanish identity five hundred years after the Conquest and Colonization of America. Moreover, we might be so bold as to say that the museum is a pretext for creating and constructing that identity, which was injured in the disaster of 1898, silenced during the century that followed, and of which a reminder was provided through the Quincentennial celebrations – the moment when the current collection was created. Therefore, the others (the indigenous peoples, the Africans) are of no interest in themselves, but are merely reference points against which to define oneself. “We are what the others are not,” could well be one of the mottoes of the museum. But in order for that to be the case, we need to create and describe those others who are the anti-type. We need a strategy that will create these Different Ones and subject their specifications to the needs of self-



glorification (Edwards *et al.* 2006: 16). From there stem the two axes of the account: the technological axis and the linguistic axis, which accentuate Spain's change and progress before the continuity of the other worlds which, only by being touched by Spanish civilization – thanks to the language, culture, and religion – may be incorporated into modernity and the future. The documentary on languages, which closes the display, is a clear example in this sense. Everything reverts back in one way or another to a dynamic picture of Spain. Furthermore, the general account of the museum is fairly archetypal: an 'event' (the encounter between two worlds), conflict (how these differences are functionally organized), and denouement (the integration of those cultural spaces into modernity thanks to Spanish colonization). If indeed there is nothing objectionable in this structure, what changes the museum's interpretation into a justification of conquest and colonization is the total lack of other voices, of alternative accounts, of a certain polyphony. One group speaks for the others.

Just as much could be said of the NHM and its proliferation of heroes and tombs. In spite of its attempts to create a critical display about the history of the nation, that desire is not reflected in the accounts of the exhibition, but in the statement of intent that precedes it. There is no single version of the past, the museum tells us. Yet this does not appear to be indicated in what is said in the collection, which wagers on reversing the traditional histories: where the great heroes used to be, now there are the popular masses. Here, the exhibition appeals to and dialogues with the more traditional versions of Argentine national identity asking: "Who are the Argentines?". Before the elitist notions that defined nationality as the legacy of high European culture, the new exhibition incorporates the great majority, that amalgam of immigrants and native population that represents the popular culture. Here, also, the inclusion of new subjects in the account or the reconsideration of its historical role makes the others into the opposition: the oligarchy and the military, of whom little is said – except that they are the root of the country's violence and political instability. The others are again an excuse to redefine one's own identity; in other words, they are merely a point of reference, against which the Argentines are to define



Fig 15. Peronism in the museum

their own identity. But violence remains on the side of the others, because their own violence is justified as the only way out when faced with the lack of democratic alternatives. Finally, the general account also takes part in that tripartite structure, in which the political instability (occasioning event) leads to singling out the problem of violence as the cause of all evils (conflict), and democracy as a system of collective coexistence thus becomes the solution (or denouement) of the problem.

Finally, the JUM reproduces the same thing around the motto nature and culture. On the one hand, this is an exhibit geared toward Mennonite success in a poor country. In order to do this, it gives its account around two access points, of which we have already spoken: technological and familiar, the history of effort, discipline and sacrifice by the pioneers, which counterposes the natural life of animals and indigenous peoples. This exhibition also has an 'occasioning event' (the 'anomaly' of the Mennonite community that is so different from those around it), a conflict (their economic success), and a denouement (the keys to that success).

In all of these exhibitions, things are not only said: they are also inscribed by dint of repeating them, these images in the collective imagination. Through these skewed, partial descriptions – which are processed as true characterizations – reality is created; it is ordered, evaluated, hierarchized and justified. The part is mistaken for the whole, and it is taken for granted that there exist stable entities like America, Spain, Argentina, Mennonites, and indigenous people. These entities, just the way they appear in the exhibitions, do not seem to have any cracks, and – according to the museum – they possess (they are not assigned) concrete characteristics that define them. But these qualities, by having different values, hierarchize these created entities in different ways. Some are placed on the side of progress, and others are on the side of poverty. All of this justifies the power that some exercise over others: Spain over America, the Mennonites over the indigenous people, certain popular groups like Peronism (or those defined as such by the museum<sup>12</sup>) over those who are not part of it. In these exhibitions, the course of history is not only justified by recording one account in the face of other possible accounts, but a way of interpreting the world is also being recorded that takes itself for granted, that is not subject to criticism: It is a view of reality that is empiricist, evolutionist and modern.

### Looking from above

It does not seem, based on what has been discussed up to this point, that the dimensions of what is represented in these three museums provide great innovations in their contents. We have seen cases of the historical representation of a continent, a nation, and an ethnic group. In all of them, their discourses have many similarities. Neither would it seem that the inclusion of new historical subjects in the displays presupposes an important change in them, although it could be a significant inclusion for whoever is represented. We have seen in the case of the NHM that the old heroes were substituted for new ones, which reversed – but did not subvert – the structure of the official discourse. Moreover, the audiovisual innovations, if perhaps they might reorient the visitor, were still not significant when the time came to suggest new perspectives in the museum (Classen and Howes 2006: 216). The MAM is an example of these winds of change. Nevertheless, its conversation is no different from the conversation of the JUM, which is completely opposite in terms of its use of any kind of media technology.

In the three museums described (the MAM, the NHM and the JUM), there is a way of perceiving the world and finding one's place in it that, apparently, does not have visible cracks, which is put forth as a true (scientific) way of knowing and making use of reality. This way is not expounded as a social, political or ideologically biased form of arranging it. Is it the duty of the public museum, as it was at its inception, to indoctrinate citizens? Or, on the contrary, should its democratic service be directed at historicizing every account, at de-essentializing any reality, definition or identity? If we were to opt for this latter option as the criterion for new exhibitions and contemporary museums, what advantages (and what problems) might it bring with it? Stated another way: why should these museums, where people speak of interpretations of reality instead of facts and events, be more functional for collective coexistence? Why must these museums, where everything exhibited is historicized and relativized, better serve the purposes of a multicultural citizenship?

Let us take this piece by piece. It is not our belief that the function of the public museum should be to indoctrinate the citizenry in one sense or another, whether this indoctrination comes from the colonial elite of the MAM or the popular spokespersons of the NHM. Nor do we believe that the museum or the institution of the museum has to be abandoned, or that it has to be condemned to mere entertainment. The institution continues to have possibilities. We propose two functions: one is horizontal, to make this multicultural coexistence possible, which seems to be the trend of the future. The other is vertical, that of making it possible for social subjects to grasp their own position of dependence or exclusion with regard to power or to a hegemonic center. In both cases, these two functions demand the emergence, recounting and spread of difference, of otherness, of those other worlds where power relationships may have been and could be different. When we speak of multicultural coexistence, which is one of the universal features of the last decade, we are referring to the possibility of social and cultural interactions that are more egalitarian and less authoritarian, exclusionist and violent. In sum, they are more democratic. But in order for this to be able to become a reality, the political playing field must be rearranged. This is not about “nationalizing” the minorities now or excluding them from power, as was traditional in the models for integration during the 19th and 20th centuries. Rather, it is about negotiating new spaces and articulating new ways of coexistence. To that end, all the players from each side must revise their values and strategies for coexistence. Every successful negotiation inaugurates a new consensus, a new hybridization, and demands examination of those positions that are considered natural, normal, or universal up to that moment. It is here, in the need to ask oneself about the relevance or the working potential of the positions that have been held until now, where the museum can make its claim: in exposing and causing accounts about difference to circulate. Knowing and acknowledging that there have existed other forms of seeing the world, of organizing oneself, of participating in reality (whether these are family structures, interpersonal relationship or sensory regimes) may counter the tendency towards the uniform life styles to which we seem doomed; and it may help to put in check, and question, what is our own. Making accommodation for what is foreign is a way of thinking about what is one’s own.

If diversity or difference is a necessary condition (albeit not a sufficient one) to be able to think about one’s own values and attitudes, then it is also a necessary condition for being able to recognize the historical situation in which there are those who are excluded or are in positions of subordination (Lindauer 2007); because one of the conditions of liberation “begins with the recognition that one’s place in a social structure is constructed” (Lindauer 2007: 304). Here we connect with the second function of the museum. Only if someone recognizes that there is nothing natural, but only historical, in her own position of subordination can she begin to think of other possible realities. The de-naturalization of this position of subordination as the imagining of other possible worlds (for example, the places of resistance for those subordinated throughout history) can be shown in the museum. To state it another way: difference, and knowledge and the appropriation of this difference (Hassoun 1994) is a condition for the possibility of action. We do things, we take different courses of action, or we project different behaviors when we can imagine that these actions are possible and, in many case, desirable in accordance with the ends put forth. And we do this, moreover, when we can feel ourselves to be potential agents of action. But in order to be able to imagine those other actions we have to have some place where we can perceive and understand that this is possible. If everything is the present, if our reality is a *continuum* without too many skip or jumps, or a theme park where difference is only a consumer commodity, how can we imagine new landscapes? With this we are not saying that the historical accounts and the museum are repositories of possibilities in themselves. Nobody can repeat or reproduce what has already occurred and taken place. But it is a place where it is confirmed that other worlds have been possible, and that they continue to be so. Therefore, the museum is not just any place. It is a politically important space, because there identification can be enacted.

Of course, this function of the museum as a space for spreading possibilities that might favour coexistence or consciousness of social subjects is a condition – one we believe to be necessary – but not a guarantee. Therefore, it is fitting to include two criticisms. One is by Tony Bennett regarding cultural logics and the risks of difference. The other, by Gayatri Spivak, is about the ability of subaltern groups to speak (and act). As Tony Bennett indicates in his

perceptive article 'Exhibition, Difference and the Logic of Culture,' one runs a number of risks when invoking cultural difference. One of them would be to turn these museums ('people movers', Bennett 2007: 51) into spaces for the intellectual elite, for those who possess sufficient cultural capital to feel comfortable in this "perpetual perceptual revolution" (54). Another risk of having museums as "differencing machines" (46) could be the reactive harboring of personal identities or the transformation of difference into "a collection of otherness" (61), where diversity would be, yet again, a kind of national possession (Hague in Bennett: 61). After all, as Bennett himself indicates, as he cites the work of Ghassan Hage, if making the native into the exotic "was the product of the power relation between the colonizer and the colonized *in the colonies*...., [then] the multicultural exhibition is the product of the power relation between the post-colonial powers and the post-colonized as it developed *in the metropolis*..." (Hage in Bennett: 61-62, emphasis in original).

While the criticism by Bennett is very relevant, it seems to us that it does not entirely overturn our proposal. Perhaps the risk of making the museum into a space where only the educated elite feel comfortable might be better applied to art museums than to history museums, because the latter present fewer possibilities for "perpetual perceptual revolutions": even in the most Post-Modern historical narratives, there is still a referent (the constraint of the past). On the other hand, it is true that reactive behaviors could be a possible consequence of the noise that diversity can generate, in the same way that there is a risk of changing history museums into displays of "zoological multiculturalism" (Hage in Bennett: 61). But, in each of these cases, the problem lies not so much in exhibiting the differences as it does in the manner in which this is done, and perhaps in the categorization itself of the concept of "difference." Our concept of 'difference' has nothing to do with the one that the MAM seems to propose: difference is formal, but it responds to the same human needs or to diversity, which is understood to be a catalog of ways of doing things or ideas about the world. When we speak of 'difference' we are not just referring to what is different (the "other" as a unity), but to the marks that this difference has left on what has happened, to the difference that allows history to be read from another place (Derrida 1978; Bhabha 1994). When we speak of difference, we are talking about that diversity or otherness that displaces, examines, appeals to, and casts doubt upon the certainties of the individual, about her own self and about that that belongs to her. But for that to happen, the accounts must be oriented in this sense, committed to the idea that what was, what occurred, was not the only possible outcome. Difference in the past tends to de-naturalize the present, to open it to other options. These 'many presents of the past' (Dening 1996) continue to influence the present and echo today by pointing out current possibilities.

The criticisms of Gayatri Spivak in her work 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' may also be useful to our argument. How can the museum be used as a place for difference and possibility, where those who are excluded might recognize their position – bearing in mind that it is quite probable that the subordinated people, beleaguered by the discourse that is instructing them, may not want to see or recognize themselves? How can an appeal be made to a policy of resistance based on the accounts of the museum, when the purpose of the institution is to see that all the accounts are circulated without deciding on any one of them? In her already classic article and in all the polemic it has generated, Spivak asks whether the subaltern have the ability to constitute themselves as such, whether they can be agents of their own destiny. These questions are of utmost importance. To the first question we can only answer that the museum offers a possibility, but it does not constitute efficient cause. There might be individuals who are able and willing to recognize themselves, and others who are not. But that does not diminish the potential of the museum. There is a certain tendency to want to manipulate certainties and absolutes in the debates about the agency and position of the subject. If we propose that the museum can be a space for recognizing the subordination of social subjects, the wager must be guaranteed. When we say that the subjects can recognize some of their positions in the museum, we know or take for granted that we are all conditioned by the power that instructs us. But while this may be true, it is also true that this power is not unlimited: it has loopholes, inconsistencies through which those subjects can penetrate. This is because, despite the weight that power has in the construction of their identities, those subjects maintain their capacity for action; and this capacity can be extended, thanks to a vocabulary that is suitable for transgressing or challenging the limits established by that power (Appiah 1991).



Regarding the second question that deals with the ability of the subjects to act in contexts of uncertainty, it seems to us that one must distinguish – as Spivak herself does (Spivak 1990) – between universalism and strategic essentialism. One concern is that the museum should not impose on the visitors a single way of seeing things and passing it off as true and/or scientific (by erasing the principles on which it is based). Another very distinct concern is that the museum should not have its own discourse linked to democratic political notions. It is one thing to say that it must not impose some truth. It is another very distinct thing to say that the museum must not have a certain truth to advance according to political or philosophical positions that it must express. The pitfall of the modern museum is that it changes its truth into one that is universal and transcendent. Perhaps if we use another notion of truth, not as the correct representation of an order underlying reality, but as a descriptive vocabulary at the service of human activities (i.e., “truth as an attitude toward one’s fellow human beings rather than an attitude toward something non-human”) (Rorty 1997: 25), we will be closer to understanding that “a truth” can be said without turning it into “the truth.” Thus, the museum would be one of those spaces in which to seek, if one so desired, new vocabulary with which to widen our critical imagination.

This displacement in the idea of truth as adequation to truth as uncertainty or ‘operative truth’ calls together new kinds of individuals: those that are less assertive and more responsible, and that are not condemned to passivity. Indeed, one expects greater reflexivity from them. They are responsible because they know that what they say has political effects, and may affect other people; so they must answer for it. Their unstable position is not a product of the truth, but of the choice of a perspective or position. These same responsible individuals draw upon the premise that definitive knowledge is fundamentally impossible, based on the impossibility of expressing the difference, or that this expression could be taken as the whole. They are, then, subjects who know that all knowledge makes an appeal to the Other (including the Other that is nestled in every identity), to the one who is different, in order to probe this distance. We cannot speak for the others, but we can convoke them so that they speak of and for themselves. It seems evident that the subjects that are open to reflexivity and dialogue – whether they are individual people or social subjects – are more functional, or at least should be better adapted to multicultural coexistence. On the one hand, these subjects are more reflexive because they are more interested in the relationship between what is said in a museum and its corresponding political and ideological accounts; they are the ones best prepared to be able to describe their own condition of subordination and act as a result. Perhaps this type of museum, the one we have proposed, can contribute to building these new subjectivities, and these positions will in time be better endowed to take advantage of the resources of the institution.

Finally, all these discussions about the possible criteria for devising accounts in our museums leave one key question yet to be clarified: What do we do with existing museums, with the majority of the permanent exhibits that comprise the bulk of history museums? This is a rhetorical question, because neither we nor – it seems – anybody else can alter the policies that govern these institutions in the immediate future. But, posed in a different way, what concerns us is that the majority of these exhibitions continue to function, issuing messages, sending texts and inscribing images into the collective imagination. And all of this affects policy in the present and in the future. On the other hand, these exhibitions are also an imprint, the document of an era. How, then, can their status as a historical document be preserved while removing their status as a monument? It can be done through the resignification, the historization of their contents; or else by removing the exhibition from the realm of science and perfect understanding in order to place it in the realm of interpretation and biased knowledge.

Working in a museum with these characteristics, one would not be concerned solely with the collection of data, of dates, or with the comprehension of processes that the student or visitor might gain. For this proposal, every time someone entered the museum it would be an event, a singular and unrepeatable phenomenon with personal and social consequences... like looking at the forest from above and seeing that beyond lies the lowland and the mountain, the cities and the rivers. And we would see that we are quite fragile, among so many others...

## Notes

- 1 We are aware of the discussion about the hierarchization that has begun in the West in the second half the 19th century and, specifically, the criticisms of making what is visual into a rational sensory perception, making it somehow preferable to other 'lower' and 'more basic' senses, such as taste or touch. However, what this metaphor emphasizes – or at least what we wish to emphasize – is not the need of seeing in order to know, but rather the exigency of circumventing this green wall made up of the Chaco forest. If instead of looking to see what was further away the Mennonite children had wished to hear or smell what was beyond their villages, they would have had to negotiate the barrier that consisted of the impenetrable prickly saltwort. On control through seeing, see the classic work by M. Foucault, 1970. An outstanding work about the form in which the modern West has construed the Eastern World – specifically, Egypt – as an exhibition (ie, the 'world-as-exhibition') or as a picture is found in Timothy Mitchell, 1991, (see chapter 1: Egypt at the exhibition, 1-33). In this sense, see also the work of Sharon Macdonald, 1999, pp.1-24, (particularly the epigraph "Modern museums of science: diagnosis, publics and progress"). Tony Bennett has an article about the construction of 'civic seeings' through regimes of vision in museums, in T. Bennett, 2010, pp. 263-281. By the same author, 1998, pp. 25-35. Regarding the museum effect as a way of seeing, Svetlana Alpers, 1991, pp.25-32. A very detailed development, from the 'anthropology of the senses', to how colonialism has attempted to impose its particular way of being-in-the-world through sensory economies on the material culture is found in Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth Phillips, 2006, pp. 1-31; 199-222 (see especially Edwards, Gosden and Phillips, "Introduction"; and Constance Classen and David Howes, "The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts").
- 2 More information is available at the History Department of the University of Botswana [www.thuto.org/ubh/afhist/elnegro/eln01.htm](http://www.thuto.org/ubh/afhist/elnegro/eln01.htm). Accessed September 15, 2010.
- 3 See, for example, the statement from the National Historical Museum of Argentina at [www.cultura.gov.ar/direcciones/?info...id...5](http://www.cultura.gov.ar/direcciones/?info...id...5). Accessed September 16, 2010.
- 4 See "Restituyen los restos de un cacique ranquel" in La Nación, November 16, 2009.
- 5 At the beginning of 1990, there was a special Project for the Museum of America, coordinated by the anthropologist Manuel Gutiérrez Estévez. Political disputes derailed this attempt. See Richard and Sally Price, 1995. *Executing Culture*. Musée, Museo, Museum. *American Anthropology* 97, 1, pp. 97-109
- 6 As told on the website for the lighthouse, [www.elfarodemoncloa.com](http://www.elfarodemoncloa.com), Accessed September 15, 2010, created by the Municipal Government of Madrid.
- 7 We know, through the interviews and informal discussions conducted with the director and the conservators, the enormous efforts that have had to be made to introduce a certain critical perspective about Argentine national history and the conflicts implied in desiring to introduce new historical subjects in the traditional viewpoint of the museum. As a legacy of that 19th-century historiography, which Director Gollán calls 'history in the style of Billiken', in reference to the children's magazine, there is the bedroom of José de San Martín and the replica of his house in French exile. This is all a perfect example of the old heroes and tombs. The interview may be read at <http://edant.clarin.com/diario/2005/11/19/sociedad/s-06301.htm>
- 8 From an article in the *Mennoblatt*, May 1957, reproduced in a brochure from the Jacob Unger Museum.
- 9 The transfer of the collection began in May 2009, and the opening of the display in its new location coincides with the World Mennonite Congress that took place between July 14 and 19 of 2009.

- <sup>10</sup> The title in Spanish 'El hombre', like the other titles, has a definite article. Furthermore, rather than saying 'La humanidad' ('The Humanity' or 'Humankind'), the museum has chosen 'El hombre' ('The Man'), to the exclusion of woman.
- <sup>11</sup> This was an experiment conducted by C. Redekop with Mennonite children whom he asked to draw Mennonites and Paraguayans. The drawing can be seen in Appendix A of his book Calvin Redekop, (1980). *Strangers Become Neighbors. Mennonite and Indigenous Relations in the Paraguayan Chaco*. Ontario: Herald Press.
- <sup>12</sup> Peronism is very complex movement that brings the extreme left and the extreme right together. What the museum does is to recognize as Peronists only a segment of the movement, instead of all the factions that comprise it.

### Interviews

Nieburh, Gundolf, 2009. *Memory and Museums among the Mennonites* by Marisa González de Oleaga (MP3).

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