Virtual Museums and Art Projects, between the Analogue and the Digital: Catalogue Raisonné Graça Morais

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This paper addresses the conceptual similarities between the ongoing digital project of the Catalogue Raisonné Graça Morais, developed in the Laboratory of Arts in the Mountain – Graça Morais and the concept of the "virtual museum". Both the digital catalogue raisonné and the virtual museum are bringing together agents who organise and disseminate information, eliciting meaningful narratives. We note that digital projects can draw on their tools and characteristics, assembling diverse types of documentation in the same platform, regardless of their original nature, and encouraging innovative and non-linear narratives about the exhibited objects. Ultimately, these projects contribute to the creation of a new heritage – "digital heritage". In addition to these issues, this paper also seeks to contribute to the debate about the challenges of gathering analogue and digital ways of thinking and acting, and about the epistemological questions that emerge when the Social Sciences and Humanities are combined with the digital and virtual sphere.

Catalogue Raisonné Graça Morais – a work in progress

To understand the efforts to create the Catalogue Raisonné Graça Morais, it is necessary to mention the Laboratory of Arts in the Mountain – Graça Morais (LAM-GM). Launched in 2018, LAM-GM is based at the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança and its structure was established through a collaboration protocol signed between several institutions and the Portuguese painter Graça Morais (b. 1948), providing access to her work and related documentation for the purposes of study, cataloguing and dissemination.[1] The LAM-GM was conceived

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as a research and practice project that combines arts, sciences and teaching in an integrative way, giving particular emphasis to establishing relationships with society at a local, national and global level (Baião and Meireles, 2020).

Two priority tasks were established by the LAM-GM: the systematic inventory of Graça Morais' artistic work and the formation of a collection of documents relating to her career (photographs, exhibition catalogues, ephemera, press clippings, etc.). The goal is to create a Catalogue Raisonné Graça Morais and a Documentation Centre, both of them in a digital format. By establishing a dialogue with one another, these two projects will increase access to a significant amount of information, stimulating the development of new knowledge about the painter's work (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 → Top: Graça Morais, *As Escolhidas* [The Chosen Ones] (from a series of 16), 1994. Sepia on paper, 14.8 x 21 cm. © Col. MB / CACGM, Bragança. Bottom: Left – Women at the cemetery in Vieiro, photographed by Graça Morais, c. 1994. © Graça Morais Archives; Centre – Cover of the catalogue *As Escolhidas*, 1994; Right – Frame from the documentary *As Escolhidas*, directed by Margarida Gil, 1997. © Archives RTP, available at: https://arquivos.rtp.pt/conteudos/graca-morais-as-escolhidas/ (Accessed: 2 September 2021).

The two projects have been built from digital content. However, this content is wide-ranging and complex, bringing together digital materials with quite distinct characteristics, which means different forms of access, interaction and preservation. In addition to this complexity, the intention is to create complementary links that will connect the data contained in the Catalogue Raisonné and the Documentation Centre to external sources: websites, blogs, videos, other projects and initiatives, etc.

It was this context that led us to develop an interest in the impact of digital technologies at institutions that manage cultural heritage (archives, libraries, museums), and at the "virtual museum" as a particular product of these processes.

Cultural heritage and digital technologies

Digital technology began to be used in an expressive and consistent fashion in the cultural area and, more specifically, in the world of museums from the last two decades of the twentieth century onwards. At first, its main application was in information systems for inventory and collection management, responding to the challenges faced by institutions with specific internal functions (Mairesse, 2011, p. 305); after this, the potential of new digital interfaces in communication and interaction with the public began to be explored, both in relation to physical visits and at a distance, through online resources or through the use of tools for consultation and interaction that could also be used in an offline environment (Andreacola, 2020).

These technologies have had an ever greater impact on the conception and development of research projects at academies, museums and cultural management institutions, often working together in partnerships. These projects provide different means of access and several levels of information about a particular object of study, helping to increase the knowledge of its tangible and intangible aspects (Roque, 2018, p. 21), thus stimulating new forms of accessibility and communication with audiences/users. Simultaneously, such projects are themselves part of a new kind of heritage – "digital heritage":

> Digital heritage is made up of computer-based materials of enduring value that should be kept for future generations. Digital heritage emanates from different communities, industries, sectors and regions. [...]
> It is a heritage made of many parts, sharing many common characteristics, and subject to many common threats. (UNESCO, 2021)

The notion of "digital heritage" is linked to the idea of deterritorialised information, which is transmitted through digital networks. Theoretically, it ensures access to a greater number of users and, therefore, fosters the democratisation of knowledge. Thus, digital heritage presents new challenges for contemporary society, relating to the very notion of accessibility and

the permanent need for technological, conceptual, social and political updating, in view of the new practices for its constitution and preservation (Musiani and Schafer, 2017).

These are the same challenges that frame our research work, as the Catalogue Raisonné Graça Morais is a digital product that seeks to connect data in multiple (and almost infinite) ramifications, building a new heritage. Furthermore, it seeks to intertwine research, artistic creation and teaching, while also fostering diverse interactions with society. It is our main goal to make the contents of this catalogue raisonné a catalyst for instigating different narratives about Graça Morais' work. Accordingly, we recognise a conceptual affinity between the catalogue raisonné and the virtual museum, since both are structures that enable information extension, not only making data available about the collection itself (the catalogued objects), but also creating links to documentation and other sources and thus presenting a strong discursive and communicative potential.

Some considerations about the digital catalogue raisonné

In its most basic definition, the catalogue raisonné is 'a publication that provides information on an artist's complete oeuvre, [which] has long been considered the definitive source of attribution and provenance information on the work of a particular artist' (Atwater, 2012, p. 186). As a repository of information resulting from an intricate research process that involves data collection, inventorying, systematisation, documentation, interpretation and dissemination, the catalogue raisonné enables knowledge to be created about a certain subject – in this case, the body of work produced by an artist.

At the same time, the catalogue raisonné is increasingly understood as a safeguard tool, whether in a material sense – for example, allowing for the detection of intrinsic changes in works (aging, deterioration, restoration interventions) and making it possible to check their conditions of exhibition or storage – or in a legal sense, due to its role in artwork authentication processes. As stated by Pierre Valentine, a member of the International Catalogue Raisonné Association (ICRA): 'catalogues raisonnés are essential to preserve an artist's legacy and protect the integrity of his or her oeuvre' (Carrigan, 2019).

As has been the case with other research projects that resort to information and communications technology, digital catalogues raisonnés began to be developed from the 1990s onwards. At first, they were accessible through offline devices (CD-ROMs), presenting structures and usage options that were still very rigid and closely linked to the analogue (printed) version; in recent years, these projects have multiplied, driven by the 'growing trend in libraries and archives to digitize and provide materials online [which] has contributed to an increase in provenance research, as scholars are now able to access records and archival materials that previously required a visit to an institutional reading room to view' (Echeverría, 2016, p. 3).

Based on increasingly flexible and relational database systems, digital catalogues raisonnés present advantages that are easy to list. Here, we highlight three advantages in particular: firstly, they allow for permanent information updates, countering the inevitable obsolescence of printed editions, namely those relating to the most easily changeable aspects, such as provenance or exhibition history (Echeverría, 2016, p. 4); secondly, they enable the object to be presented in a variety of formats, which is particularly suitable for artists working in three-dimensional media or in non-traditional formats, such as performance, video and installation (Rogers, 2015, p. 5); thirdly, they allow for the inclusion of other resources and features, such as three-dimensional views of sculptural objects, virtual visits to certain places or works *in situ*, archival materials, or hyperlinks to external sources (Gabrielli, 2015, pp. 42-43). Furthermore, it is important to mention the associated costs:

> […] printed catalogues raisonnés generally carry high production costs, due to which they tend to be printed in limited editions and sold at high prices. (Gabrielli, 2015, p. 42)

> Since the aim of a catalogue raisonné is to preserve and promote the legacy of an artist, limiting access to researchers and institutions that can afford to invest $100 or more on a single book seems counterintuitive to this mission. (Echeverría, 2016, pp. 3-4)

Despite these advantages, the transposition from analogue to digital not only involves the same issues as those that are intrinsic to catalogues raisonnés – namely the questions of authority and legitimacy; discoverability and access; update methodology; cost of the resource; format variability; rights management concerns; legal implications for the art market (Atwater, 2012) – but also implies several other challenges.

On the one hand, there are technical challenges, such as the creation of different levels for accessing digital material and its medium to long-term preservation (Duncan, 2017; Echeverría, 2016). Without digital preservation (a considerably complex process that requires specialised knowledge), there is a danger of losing information and thus distorting the project, which will ultimately lead to its disappearance.

On the other hand, there are also epistemological challenges, including those associated with the way that narratives are created, transmitted and interpreted in digital contexts, based on a bottom-up logic guided by user interactivity and representing a new distribution of narrative authority (Rigney, 2010, pp. 116-117) that is therefore different from the analogue context. The fact that Humanities researchers are still reluctant to view the web as a source of information, or even as a research topic in itself, is also an issue to consider (Brügger and Finnemann, 2013, p. 68). Such resistance is an obstacle to knowledge production in contemporary times, especially when a significant part of human social activity is deeply rooted in "being" and "doing" digital.

A question therefore emerges: how to overcome the conceptual and practical challenges related with the transposition of analogue thought and methodologies from the Social Sciences and Humanities (in this case, from the History of Art) to the digital environment?

Currently, there is a general acceptance that the scope of Digital Humanities reaches far beyond the simple transfer from analogue to digital (Dodebei, 2006; Guerreiro and Borbinha, 2014). However, there is no doubt that several digital projects in the fields of Social Sciences and Humanities remain rooted in conceptual and methodological structures that are essentially analogue in nature. This occurs not only because most Humanities researchers belong to a transition generation that was initially trained in a mainly analogue world, but also because it is often difficult to establish unambiguous communication between Humanities researchers and computer specialists, given the inevitable differences in their technical languages and thinking processes (Holm, 2015, p. 64).

Transposing these questions to the context of catalogue raisonné projects, we should mention the words of Reesa Greenberg (an art historian specialising in exhibition theory, and art-world responses to the Internet):

> Because the catalogue raisonné emerged long before the digital era, there is a tendency to use analogue principles of construction, interface, storage, and dissemination, even when the platform is digital. Unless carefully rethought from the moment of its inception, the online catalogue raisonné risks minimizing the extraordinary potential that digital technologies offer for revisioning what an archive might be and how it can be used. (Greenberg, 2019, p. 36)

Currently, despite the willingness to transpose analogue into digital, the dynamics and barriers between the two spheres are increasingly fluid. As such, Humanities researchers have been adapting their methods, tools and *modus operandi*. The fact that transitioning from analogue to digital implies the production of, and access to, information sources on digital supports has led Neils Brügger (2016), a specialist in web archives and web history, to predict that, during the twenty-first century, the development of the Social Sciences – especially the Humanities – will be guided by the natural progress of their becoming, more and more, Digital Humanities.

The catalogue raisonné as a virtual museum?

Parallel to the evolution of the digital catalogue raisonné, the origins of virtual museums – although currently supported by the potential of the Internet – also date back to an offline environment in the 1990s, being specifically based on the CD-ROM format.[2]

There are several proposed definitions of the concept of "virtual museum", as well as multiple terms for identifying the experience of the museum using digital tools and technologies, such as "cyber museum", "online museum", "electronic museum", "web museum" or "'digital museum". At the same time, there are numerous virtual museum projects that exhibit a wide-ranging array of characteristics, functions and purposes. Thus, although the literature is not clear on how to unequivocally define "virtual museum", it leaves no doubt that this fact stems from the fragile understanding of the epistemology surrounding the subject, despite the profusion of authors who have been working on

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2   The pioneering project known as Computer's Virtual Museum (1992), promoted by the Apple Company, used the CD-ROM format to present a 3D simulation of three museums linked together. Throughout the 1990s, its success spurred several prestigious institutions, such as Musée d'Orsay, Musée du Louvre, and the Hermitage Museum, to develop CD-ROMs that were sold in their stores, and from which information about selected objects from their collections could be viewed on a personal computer. The development of these projects and their transposition to the Internet paved the way for the contemporary meaning of "virtual museum" (Huhtamo, 2010, p. 122; Sviličić, 2010, p. 589).

establishing such a framework (Antunes, 2015, pp. 75-76; Biedermann, 2017, p. 283; Henriques, 2018, pp. 53-70; Sviličić, 2010, pp. 590-594).

In this paper, we adopt the term "virtual museum", in keeping with the explanation provided by Werner Schweibenz (2019), who noted that this term has been the most widely used since the spread of the World Wide Web. As for its definition, we follow the one suggested by V-MUST – Transnational Network of Virtual Museums (2011):

> A virtual museum is a digital entity that draws on the characteristics of a museum, in order to complement, enhance or augment the museum experience through personalisation, interactivity and richness of content. Virtual museums can perform as the digital footprint of a physical museum, or can act independently, while maintaining the authoritative status as bestowed by ICOM in its definition of a museum. In tandem with the ICOM mission of a physical museum, the virtual museum is also committed to public access; to both the knowledge systems imbedded in the collections and the systematic, and coherent organisation of their display, as well as to their long-term preservation.

Built after a long debate and continuous review, and based on the definition of "museum" established by the Statutes of the International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2007), the V-MUST definition focuses on five main aspects: (1) a virtual museum is always associated with an institution, which can be accessed either digitally via the web, in the physical space of a museum, or as a multimedia product; (2) the heritage that the virtual museum owns can be completely virtual, and therefore not associated with a physical collection; (3) the main objective of virtual museums is communication; (4) the presence of the public in virtual museums is as important as it is in physical museums; (5) the scope of virtual museums is broader than that of museums, as in addition to framing the same scope as museums, they are responsible for improving and strengthening them (Ferdani and ITABC, 2015, pp. 6-7).

The V-MUST definition of a virtual museum does not distort the classical definition of a museum; instead, it adapts this definition to the context of digital technologies and their capabilities. In fact, the museum located in cyberspace must not neglect its main "traditional" functions – as Pierre Lévy observed in the late 1990s, it cannot be just a mere (and often poorly structured) catalogue on the Internet (Lévy, 2000, p. 202). On the contrary, and following the arguments of André Malraux (1947/1974) about the imaginary museum – considered one of the theoretical bases of the virtual museum – the visitor's experience is not

replicated by the virtual museum, but enriched by it, instigating new reflections and revealing new points of access to interpretation and knowledge.

It is interesting to reflect on how both the digital catalogue raisonné and the virtual museum set up a collection-construct – i.e., a collection of deterritorialised, but intellectually gathered objects. Assuming that the objects (paintings, drawings, etc.) do exist in the physical world, their transition to the digital environment implies a change in their status and the establishment of new interactions with the visitor/user (Muchacho, 2005, p. 581). In fact, the exponential presence of digital reproductions which we can easily access from our screens changes the perception of the museum visitor when interacting with the original object (Schweibenz, 2018, p. 10). This perceptive reconfiguration of the subject has, in turn, consequences for the perception of the digital object "itself": more than mere reproduction, it can be perceived as having its own intrinsic value rather than being an imperfect surrogate of the original (Frost, 2002, p. 84); or it can be perceived as a simulacrum, resulting from the dichotomy between "real" and "artificial" (Roque, 2019, p. 23).

Finally, it is important to note the role of the digital in reinforcing the museum as a space for decontextualisation and representation. The digital technologies that support the virtual museum make it possible to outline new connections between objects and to interlink a wide range of information, thus promoting the conception of multiple narratives about the same subject. Therefore, if the analogue museum was already a space of artifice and de/re-contextualisation, its integration into a digital environment will reinforce this apparatus of fictionalised narratives about objects (Roque, 2018, p. 23). The same happens in relation to the digital catalogue raisonné, which, in addition to its basic inventory function, must now respond to the demands of the users who 'in the current digital age have come to expect a highly-interactive experience, one which allows for detailed exploration of individual works as well as the ability to discover connections within the works in an artist's oeuvre as a whole' (Helmreich cited in Echeverría, 2016, p. 4). In short: the digital catalogue raisonné goes potentially beyond a mere inventory, thus surpassing its apparent neutrality, since inventorying and cataloguing also mean selecting and judging, and can therefore never be a neutral gesture.

Conclusion

The notion of digital heritage is related to deterritorialised information, which implies a set of potentialities and challenges for the researcher. Concerning the digital catalogue raisonné, there are clear advantages related with information access, the possibility of permanent content updating and the inclusion of technological resources that enhance new approaches to information analysis. However, it requires expertise in specific technical language and tools, while also presenting new challenges in dealing with digital preservation. At the same time, working with digital presupposes a set of epistemological challenges that emerge from the transition from analogue to digital ways of doing and thinking. In this context, a transformation occurs in the way that narratives are constructed, transmitted, and interpreted.

The research activities currently being undertaken at the Laboratory of Arts in the Mountain – Graça Morais raise these complex issues. Combining the two digital projects (Catalogue Raisonné Graça Morais and Documentation Centre) means outlining a field of work that is simultaneously synchronic and diachronic: on the one hand, the Catalogue Raisonné and the Documentation Centre imply a synchronic approach to the artistic production of Graça Morais, defining a "state of the art"; on the other hand, the potential reconfiguration of those projects into a "virtual museum" allows for a diachronic approach to that same production, enhancing the study both of the "singularity" (a theme, an object) and of the "whole". These dynamics promote not only new perspectives and narratives about the painter's work – the projects' main purpose – but also a heuristic and critical approach from the several scientific domains involved, catalysing the production of new knowledge in a broader way.

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