

Queer Museum: A Possibility

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Benjamín J. M. Martínez Castañeda

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), México

b.martinezc@fad.unam.mx | ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6624-0099>

Translated by Carmen M. Plascencia

ABSTRACT

This essay presents a series of concerns about the museum as an institution, which has been validated by patriarchal and heteronormative strategies, such as looting, invasion, objectification, and exclusion. From this, the idea of queering the museum and reversing its normative effects emerged, aiming to achieve inclusivity and to bring dignity to the bodies and subjectivities that this institution has silenced and excluded from discourses. Therefore, the utopia of a queer museum is proposed as the future territory for these subjectivities to claim their history.

KEYWORDS

museology, queer theory, gender studies, aesthetics.

Let us begin by mentioning that the museum is a semiotic-political architectural complex (Preciado, 2019, pp. 19-23) in which power and knowledge are generated, something that can be clearly observed in the distribution of resources. For instance, the areas of research, curatorship, and museography are assigned resources in much greater quantities¹ than those assigned to social communication and educational mediation. This complex is

¹ The reviewers of this article have insisted that I “support” this statement. Although this is not the space to debate it, I am not going to do so if they are not willing to assume that, in museums, the organizational chart and the distribution of the budget are a caste system. It is something that is seen, felt, and experienced by those of us who work in cultural mediation, where many times we do it without payment. Thus, to support the statement and provide figures and hard data of this inequality would be to fall into hegemonic systems, where if what you reported is not measurable and verifiable, it does not exist, leading to emotions, experiences, and affections being silenced.

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also seen, otherwise, in the location of each department;² that is, those of curatorship and museography have privileged spaces, while the mediation department is usually relegated to small spaces and unfavorable locations. An example could be the Museo de la Ciudad de México (Museum of Mexico City), where on the left side of the main staircase there is an office for the curatorship, while on the right is a hidden mezzanine office in which mediators, social communication workers, and social service providers coexist.

Asking ourselves if it costs the same to produce an exhibition as it does an educational program is to reinforce the dynamics of power-knowledge. In this regard, Foucault (1980) mentions that “power relations are embedded in other types of relationships (production, alliance, family, sexuality), where they play a role that is both conditioning and conditioned” (Foucault, p. 170).³ They have, I add, a specific purpose, constructing the so-called truth and legitimizing stories (discourses) which, in a museum, take shape in the unequal distribution of resources and spaces as well as in the tasks of each area; for instance, the location of the curator in relation to the museographer, and the location of both in relation with the educational mediator. The example could be those who perform social service: people who have completed their undergraduate education and that must complete hours of unpaid labor and that most of the time—although they could work in almost any area of the museum—are more commonly found in educational departments, guiding tours, or teaching artistic workshops, less professional tasks that tend to turn arts into handicrafts.

In that sense, for Paul Preciado, the semiotic-political architecture of the museum “is a performative apparatus that produces both the object and the subject it claims to represent” (Preciado, 2019, p. 21). On the one hand, the museum is constituted by authorities, such as the director and the chief curator, who issue the official truth discourses, and, lower in the hierarchy, the museographers, subordinates of the curator, with the function of materializing the latter’s ideas.⁴ On the other hand, the museum receives an object to give it a story or place it in a historical space, regardless of whether the venue is dedicated to history, anthropology, art, or science. It is up to the researcher, museologist, and curator to

² I further the previous note with the college definition of *departamento* (department) from the *Dictionary of the Spanish Language*; the forth meaning says: “In colleges, administrative unit of teaching and research, constituted by one or several professorships with common interests.”

³ Editorial translation. All quotes are translations from the original texts in Spanish.

⁴ I do not deny the creative character of the museographer, but it is important to mention that his creative capacity must consider the objectives of the curator, who designs the legitimizing discourses.

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frame the object in a discourse that is understood and to uphold “the truth” that is attributed to it. The museum also questions the subjects to determine them as its users, audiences, or publics. And here I wonder from where and who can validate these identity constructions and who is represented in that space.

Now, I would like to recover the notion of the *exhibition as a war machine* proposed by Didi-Huberman (2011, p. 25), and that of the museum as a device capable of following, or contradicting, the guidelines of the State, which allows us to reconsider the two faculties of power: one, *potestas*, with which it exercises it over the bodies, reifying and administering them; and the other, *poietic*, with which it can design its own discourses (Foucault, 1980, pp. 103-110). An example of *potestas* faculty would be a national history or art museum such as the National Museum of Art (Munal), in Mexico, in which the discourse ranges from the viceregal to the art of the first half of the 20th century, and the images exhibited are the same ones that have been introjected by the educational system to create a Mexican identity; whereas the Museo Transvesti del Perú (MTP, Transvestite Museum of Peru) would be an example of *poietic* faculty. The former addresses the official history, and the latter one addresses the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBTIQ+) history that has been erased from the official historical narratives of Peru. I will return to this case later.

This essay adheres to the second faculty: a political act, an intervention, and a stance towards official speeches is what I am interested in seeing in the exhibition. This is where the idea of museums as war machines falls into place, a dialogue to create a non-dogmatic space in which thought is inexhaustible. Therefore, for it to be effectively a war machine, we must think of the museum as a utopia. The utopia that matters to me now is the queer one, where the queer

[...] is a structuring and intelligent way of wishing that allows us to see and feel beyond the predicament of the present. The here and now is a prison. Faced with the totalizing representation of the reality of the here and now, we must strive to imagine and feel a *then* and a *there* [Muñoz, 2020, p. 29].

The queer utopia allows us to question the present and its narratives, and, in the context of the museum, it helps us rethink the power relations in the organizational chart, the forms of acquisition of collections, the curatorial processes, the exhibition design, the mediation dynamics, and socialization of the venue based on in-

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tersectional processes and resources that incorporate race, body, gender, sexuality, and class in the exhibition processes and projects therein.

The issue of a queer utopia revolves inside and outside the museum; first because it allows us to understand it as a power relationship and as social orthopedics that shape official discourses based on political regimes; and outwards because it helps us address more audiences and generate publics; that is, it does not only matter if the museum is full or not, but also for whom are exhibitions held and why we want them to attend. In this regard, we could visit Sara Ahmed, who states that “the bodies adopt precisely the form of the contact they have with the objects and with the others” (Ahmed, 2015, p. 19) and that there is a queer feeling in the face of the inability to inhabit heterosexuality (Ahmed, 2015, p. 224). An example within the context of museums could be the discomfort generated by seeing a painting by Abraham Ángel in the Munal compared to another by Manuel Rodríguez Lozano—discomfort for us, the “locas”, because we know their tragic love story⁵—. For those outside the museum I will refer to the exhibition *Imaginaciones radicales. Una lectura disidente de la colección del MAM* (Museo de Arte Moderno), (*Radical Imaginations. A dissident reading of the MAM collection [Museum of Modern Art]*), which the MAM housed til August 2023, gathering a series of visual artists who are part of the museum’s collection, as well as current emerging artists. The exhibition as the outside of the museum is what Ahmed refers to as queer pleasures, that which “puts body into contact that have been kept apart by the scripts of compulsory heterosexuality” (Ahmed, 2015, p. 254). That hyphen (-) is the queer hope⁶ for the museum, as it brings together new forms that can produce changes in the social space, by specifically designing an exhibition for the LGBTQ+ community.

⁵ Abraham Ángel was a Mexican painter who, at the beginning of 1922 (at age 17), met Manuel Rodríguez Lozano (14 years older than him). They established a romantic relationship as teacher and student. This power relationship led Abraham Ángel to suicide in 1924 when he learned that he was no longer the favorite of Rodríguez Lozano, who began another relationship with Julio Castellanos, another of his students.

⁶ Sara Ahmed mentions that queer bodies inhabit a negative feeling of failing compulsory heterosexuality; however, she proposes the idea of hyphen (-): a link between hegemony and dissidences to dialogue and search for affective alternatives to transform queer life experiences.

QUEERING THE MUSEUM?

So, if the museum shapes identities and generates official discourses, what does it mean to queer it? First, it must be mentioned that the word queer has its origin in the degradation and repudiation of non-hegemonic subjectivities,⁷ but the contemporaneity of the term includes the significant reappropriation of the insult and the vindication through and against the discourses from which they were expelled (Butler, 2010, p. 315). In that sense, queerness as politics has a power of action, as queering implies the study of the historical formation of alterities and the capacity to twist and deform historical discourses. Therefore, returning to what Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba mentions, queering can be read as “faggifying, turning fruity, divert, pervert, twist [...], it means understanding the deviant as a subject of historical change in the cultural and political sphere [...], it consists of opening an anti-hegemonic space for excluded, oppressed, and marginalized individuals” (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, 2019, pp. 17-18, 76). Thus, it is necessary to ask ourselves what it means to queer, twist, and faggify a museum.

In that sense, and to reinforce the idea of queer utopia, queering the museum “is an endless process and, perhaps more importantly, one without a definitive objective [...]. *Queering the Museum*, then, should be seen not as a model, but rather as a (necessarily incomplete) toolbox that can be used, expanded, and adapted in ways that are perhaps unimaginable” (Sullivan & Middleton, 2020, p. 6). The tools to queer the museum are meant to make a harsh critique of it from its origins; for example, to question all those actions linked to looting and war trophies that composed the private collections today housed in national museums, to analyze why the museum heterosexualizes the lives of LGBTQ+ artists, or why strike posters are neutralized on the walls of the museum. It would be worth mentioning the complete lack of sensitivity regarding the LGBTQ+ visitors, the minute number of public programs that consider said visitors as audience, or the disregard for said subjectivities in the work groups.

Queering the museum implies understanding how sexuality classifies and polices culture. According to Nikki Sullivan and Craig Middleton (2020), it goes beyond labeling it as gay. It is a promise, “a critical engagement that offers new meanings, new ways of thinking and acting politically” (Duggan, 1992, p. 11 cited by Sullivan & Middleton, 2020, p. 31). In this regard, Isabel Hufschmidt suggests erasing the idea that queerness is about minorities since

⁷ By *hegemonic subjectivities*, I am referring to all those identity and body-based constructions coming from heterosexuality, whiteness, and canonical beauty.

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they are represented as subaltern objects of marginalized groups instead of subjects of history and culture (Hufschmidt, 2018, p. 30). It goes beyond inviting three drag queens to offer a staged tour of an exhibition, giving an online talk on LGBTQ+ art on Pride Day, and placing the rainbow flag filter on Instagram in the month of June. This type of actions only shows that museums continue to see the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTIQ+) population as statistics and agendas. It is also studying, assuming, and questioning the museum as a patriarchal, elitist, and colonizing device, something that feminist, black, and third world artists have tried to make visible.

If we stop thinking about queer as a minority, we must see intersectionality—the intersections between body-gender-race-class-geographic location—as a methodology to criticize the heteronormativity of the museum as an institution, whether to show the contents established from heterosexual thought, the eroticism of whiteness in the curatorships of historical painting, the health discourses around slenderness, beauty, and physical condition, and even class privilege by asking ourselves who commissions works and how. This, in terms of what we see of the museum, but it is also necessary to do it in what we do not see: the collective labor contract, nepotism and cronyism in management and coordination positions, the share and distribution of resources for projects that are considered important, and a long etcetera.

THE QUEER MUSEUM AS A UTOPIA

As has been widely mentioned in this essay, it is the space itself that produces its audience and its representations. This is important because this is where both taste and museum narratives are shaped; but now the question is who builds and who controls the museum as an institution. Answering it forces us to observe how limits are constantly managed. If we are looking for a participatory question, of inclusion or of making museums and communities, it is important to observe and transgress the limits of the museum, from the semiotic-architectural ones, to the methodologies it uses to organize the body, discipline taste, and model the imagination.

It is at this point where queerness appears, no longer as a methodology (queering), but as a utopia or possibility. In this regard, José Esteban Muñoz says that “Queerness is an ideality. In other words, we are not queer yet. We may never reach queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon tinged with potential” (Muñoz, 2020, p. 29). Queer is imagining the future in

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the face of the fulminating present, it is dreaming of ourselves in a different then and a different there while we find new, more joyful ways of inhabiting the world.

Now, if we return to the semiotic-political sphere of the museum, both architecturally and exhibitively, we will have to rethink these edges based on the queer aesthetic proposed by José Esteban Muñoz, the borders between the museum as an architectural space and as an exhibition space are performative, for “it is not simply a being, but a doing, by and for the future. Queerness is, essentially, the rejection of a here and now, and an insistence on the potentiality or concrete possibility of another world” (Muñoz, 2020, p. 30). Thus, it would be valuable to see in queerness the possibility of transgressing the limits of the museum, no longer to construct alterities, as usually happens, but rather to imagine a space that represents and challenges us with dignity.

The queer possibility of the museum demands seeking an answer to the question, what is the museum we deserve? I have adjusted the question a bit: Douglas Crimp (2005) first posed it around why art history excludes sexual subcultures since “what is at stake is not history per se, which in any case is a fiction, but what history, whose history it is, and what is its intention” (Crimp, 2005, p. 170). With the above, we seek to question the object and the subject at the same time, and see in queerness a historical richness to counteract heterosexist thinking, as well as the reification of corporalities through art.

Thinking about the queer museum is a specific/precise utopia, related “to historically situated battles, to a collectivity [it may] be like daydreaming, but therein are the hopes of a collective, of an emerging group, or even of a strange and lonely creature who dreams for many other people” (Muñoz, 2020, p. 32). The queer museum will seek the restructuring of the collections, will make every cultural document a heritage possibility and, in pursuit of a common experience, will cancel all types of otherness.

THE TRAVESTIVE MUSEUM AS AN EXAMPLE

The Museo Travestí del Perú (MTP) was born in 2004 as an initiative of the philosopher and drag artist Giuseppe Campuzano (1969-2013), with the purpose of inviting “to reread a colonized sexual history through the conjugation of various artistic disciplines [...], to build a solid aesthetic and political project represented in performance, dance, exhibition, conference, and book” (Campuzano, Lorenzo & Rodríguez, 2015, p. 46). The MTP reacts to the museum

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as a hegemonic space, first, because it does not have a specific location: it is a traveling museum; second, because it has no works of art, but cultural productions; and third, it does not have curators, but transvestite communities reconstructing their life stories.

The MTP is a relational artistic practice, conceived as “an art that would take as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its social context, rather than the affirmation of an autonomous and private symbolic space” (Bourriaud, 2008, p. 13). Thus, it is worth saying that the MTP as a relational artistic practice can help us designate it as a performative museum. Regarding this, Carla Pinochet Cobos says that it has the capacity for self-enunciation, regulates its own discursive fiction, and models its own device. Performative museums “are products and producers of their own projects, which, precisely from their doing, imagine peculiar ways of thinking and practicing it” (Pinochet, 2016, p. 46); performative museums invite us to think about the realities that are outside the museum, different ways of managing heritage and architectural design without walls.

Based on the above, the MTP is a war machine, being

[...] a dialogue with space—to intervene and be intervened—moving away from the abstraction of the white cube as the continuity of the fragmented society. Each exhibition means occupation and assembly, but above all a dialogue between research project and curatorial project, a research that is always in progress and whose curatorship is its embodiment in the concrete space, and the experience of that curatorship as feedback [Campuzano, 2013, p. 67].

On the basis of the museology of the MTP, the voice and memory of the transvestites cross all the hegemonic discourses to recover the history that was taken from them and with which they were stigmatized, and, by having it in their hands, they reappropriate it to reconstruct and validate themselves in the “reordering of the historical narrative from the transvestite point of view while denouncing the injustice to which they have been subjected. The transvestite, thus, stands as the only voice authorized to articulate their History” (Campuzano, Lorenzo & Rodríguez, 2015, p. 47). Thus, the MTP is an example of a realized dream, a non-space that symbolizes the then and there of queer utopia.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this essay, the museum was presented as a totalizing space; that is, one that constructs official discourses and objectifies into otherness all cultural documents and all subjectivity that do not agree with its discourse. Likewise, museum architecture was studied from its semiotic-political sphere to understand that in its private part it is also a power relationship, both in the place it occupies in the organization chart, and in the location and spatiality of the site and the department in which work is done. The example used was the economic contrast between the curatorship department and, if it deserves the name, the educational mediation department, where the first has a fixed space and the second, not always.

Conversely, it was explained that the museum moves in heteronormative logics, which is to say that everything is modeled based on patriarchal thinking,⁸ and from there we seek to reach a queer museum, where queer functions as a strategy to question and dismantle power relations (patriarchal and heteronormative) in pursuit of recognition and inclusion of sexual diversity both in the organization chart and in the expository discourse. Queering the museum translates into seeking new meanings in the intersectionality of the body-gender-race-class-sexuality with the museum, as a concrete utopia for a better future for all those bodies excluded from the museum's official discourses.

Therefore, a queer museum is a territory still to come, a way of insisting on, for, and from the institution for its transformation. A clear example of this is the Transvestite Museum of Peru, where drag queens, transvestites, faggots, dykes, and transsexuals themselves are the ones who compile their archives, research their history, and protect their heritage. What we must avoid is forced inclusion: we are not quotas.

⁸ First, it is acknowledged that the assembly of their collections started by means of sacking; second, the masculinist eroticism, where seeing the naked body of women is more attractive, is reiterated; third, the idealization of masculine authorship, where men are geniuses and women are creative; fourth, when homosexual artists enter the museum gallery, their public life becomes private and their partners become a great friend and an ever-present company.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Benjamín J. M. Martínez Castañeda

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), Mexico

bmartinezc@fad.unam.mx

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6624-0099>

Holding a PhD in Arts from Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura (INBAL, National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature); he is currently a full-time profesor at the Faculty of Arts and Design (UNAM), where he takes part in the Seminar on Creating, Designing, and Managing Exhibitions “Patricia Real Fierros”, with a research focused on *LGBTIQ+ Museology*. His work has been featured in *Hysteria!* magazine, *Agenda Kuir*, as well as in the books: *Todos los mundos posibles* (UNAM); *Manifiestos Kuir*, (UNAM), and *Cartografías de la educación artística* (Universidad Alberto Hurtado). He directs the Museo Digital de la Insurrección Sexual (MUDIS, Digital Museum of Sexual Insurrection), and is a co-curator of the Instituto de Investigaciones Noa Noa.



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