

# Art, USP and the coming-to-be of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MAC)

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THE RECENT autonomy achieved by the Museums of the University of São Paulo has provided the opportunity for the preparation of this Report on the USP museums, a suitable occasion to raise some questions about the Museum of Contemporary Art (*Museu de Arte Contemporânea* – MC) of the University of São Paulo (USP), which on the eve of its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2013 and of its transfer to a new location, is experiencing the need to publicly rethink its history within the University in order to better design its future.

Starting from the basic question - What does a museum like the MAC mean or can mean to a University like USP? - this paper aims to contribute to this process of reviewing the history of the Museum we have had so far, as well as to the process of prospecting the MAC we want.

A datum that will help to explain the peculiarities of the situation experienced by the MAC within USP is to remember that it was not created in 1963, as the result of a project of the University itself, anxious to have a museum of contemporary art understood as another center of excellence on campus, a museum dedicated to selecting, preserving, studying and displaying works of contemporary art. On the contrary: USP, that year, when negotiating for itself the significant collection of the former Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo - consisting of national and international works of art spanning the first five decades of the last century - suddenly found itself as the custodian of a heritage which - and the history of relations between the MAC and USP attest to this statement - it was neither prepared nor interested in managing.

The University succeeded in adapting to this heritage by devising palliatives for its preservation and study, without, however, creating effective conditions for this initial heritage (now greatly expanded, thanks mainly to the MAC directors and staff) to find a physical and symbolic space worthy of itself and of the University where it is housed.<sup>1</sup>

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Until December 2010 the MAC USP - as well as the other museums of the University - was not part of the general project of USP, which was under-

stood as a center of knowledge production in the areas of Sciences and Humanities. Again, like the other museums of the University the MAC, until then, had been relegated to the area of cultural diffusion of the University. That is: in practice, it was not recognized in its legitimate condition as a center of knowledge production from a material and symbolic universe determined by its collection: the production traditionally linked to the area of fine arts (drawing, painting, printmaking, sculpture) but today expanded, open not only to new technologies (photography, video, digital media, etc.), but also to artistic areas (performance, installations, publications, etc.) that were an alternative to those already fully established.

In fact, if this marginal situation within the University was painful to all museums of USP, it seems to have had more serious consequences for the MAC,<sup>2</sup> due to certain peculiarities involving the way in which USP has always viewed arts in general - and visual arts in particular - and the discipline that has traditionally had them as its object: the History of Art. The University of São Paulo has never included in its project the field of the arts as an autonomous area of knowledge. To prove this statement, I will provide three examples: 1. the arts, within USP, emerged only in 1971 as an appendix of the School of Cultural Communications (founded in 1966, after the School of Communications and Arts), which houses the departments linked to the area (Fine Arts, Scenic Arts and Music); 2. The History of the Arts, an area of knowledge that, on modern bases, Emerged along with archeology during the eighteenth century, has never, to date, been recognized within USP with enough scientific dignity to merit a specific course in graduate programs;<sup>3</sup> 3. The last but not least example is found in the way the USP Museum of Contemporary Art has been treated by various USP administrations in the last five decades.

In a culture such as ours, still impregnated by its past of slavery, any work in which its operative, manual dimension stands out (one of the traditional features of the work of the artist dedicated to fine arts) is understood as typical of socially disqualified producers. This explains the little appreciation with which society regards the production of artists. In the eyes of society, art, besides traditionally attributed to “disqualified” individuals, produces objects seen as superfluous. In the case of the elites supposedly concerned with the development of Brazil and imbued with a certain veneer, art seems to be nothing but a kind of “burden” inherited from the Western classical tradition, a burden which, as essentially unnecessary, currently would not even serve as a hobby, since it would have been overcome by the cultural industry, which is better “prepared” to fill leisure spaces – the only territory attributed to art by that same elite.

This position, I believe, would explain in general why the word “art” is appended to the name of the School of Communications of USP. Why, after all, establish an institute for the teaching and production of art within the University - as occasionally suggested within USP - since these activities, in a very

debatable conception, were no longer able to meet the demands of a society increasingly engaged in productivity and efficiency and in achieving practical results? Better leave them to starve along with the most “dynamic” areas included in the project which, by defining Brazilian society as a whole also defines USP.

The same could be said to explain the inexplicable, i.e., the absence within USP of an undergraduate program in History of Art: Why encourage the education of young people in an area that fuels itself by expanding the knowledge acquired in a type of production of an allegedly merely operative nature, when other hobbies show greater efficacy and mathematically measurable results?

Brazilian society in general and the University of São Paulo in particular have not yet realized that the universe of the arts is a specific area of knowledge and that alongside Science, its various applications, and the Humanities, should make up the foundation of any university center. And there is more: currently dominated by the logic of measurable productivity at all cost, art has been – both abroad and in Brazil - one of the rare areas where it is still possible to establish a critical interpretation of that same logic, capable of revealing/questioning its structures and resonances, which are not always socially beneficial.

In a University where the critical dimension brought by the arts is not really recognized, what would be the situation of its museum of contemporary art? If has taken the USP museums linked to areas as respected as History, Zoology, Archeology and Ethnology such a long time to win official recognition from the University, would it be reasonable to think that the MAC has also achieved its autonomy by dragging behind those other institutions?<sup>4</sup>

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Four years ago the State Secretariat of Culture of the State of São Paulo decided to transfer to USP the architectural complex where the old DMV of São Paulo had been located until then, so that the University - after the renovation/rehabilitation of the complex and the construction of an annex by the Secretariat – could house the MAC USP.

Please note that in the preceding paragraph I used the expression “decided to transfer to USP”, meaning that the Secretariat, by so doing, did not seek to meet a demand of the University itself, which was interested in securing the ownership of a building of significant aesthetic and historic value that finally recognizes the importance of the collection of its Museum of Contemporary Art. USP only reacted, in a quite peculiar way, as shall be seen, to a demand of the Secretariat.

What seems to have motivated the Secretariat to make such a proposal was recognition of the importance of the MAC collection and the need for the USP Museum of Contemporary, in those new and great facilities, to be absorbed by the logic that has prevailed in recent state governments in the field of arts and culture: that which sees these institutions as facilities linked to leisure and tourism services.

However urgent the discussion of these objectives of the secretariat in relation to the MAC USP may be, it is certainly not appropriate to discuss them here, but rather to comment on how USP, as a whole, reacted to that proposal.

Despite certain initial uneasiness and disbelief by the members of the Museum itself, the secretariat's proposal was accepted passively by USP as a whole, without deeper internal discussions to assess how the University perceived the proposal and what would be at stake if it were accepted.

Within the administrative structure of USP, which must have contributed to accepting the proposal, one can speculate that for the administration of the University, removing the MAC USP from the USP campus meant nothing, except, perhaps the idea - in fact, wrong - that the property owned by the Museum on the campus would be vacated, freeing it to meet priority occupancy demands.

If the reaction of the administration of USP can be described as a mixture of disinterest and relief, the USP community in general endorsed this proposal with the same passivity. Despite the seminar "Thinking the new MAC", promoted by the institution itself, which discussed specific aspects related to the management of museums,<sup>5</sup> the actual meaning of removing the Museum from the University City more than three decades after a significant part of the MAC had been transferred from its primitive accommodations on the third floor of the building of the São Paulo Biennial Foundation to the Butantan campus was never publicly discussed.<sup>6</sup>

As a corollary of this lack of discussion, a datum of general concern also failed to be raised: the gradual but significant loss of resonance of MAC actions following that transfer that began in 1983. Would the "return" of the MAC to Ibirapuera, upon its transfer to the old premises of the DMV, plus the new annex, mean to the Museum recovering the central role it had already played among the most significant centers of art and culture in the country, or would this "return" mean actually leaving it at the beck and call of the interests of the exhibition-media products market?

So far, there seems to have been no meeting, seminar or document showing any actual interest on the part of the academic community in the future of the MAC in the new location, and in the role the museum of contemporary art belonging to the University of São Paulo would play by occupying an architectural complex of historical and aesthetic interest designed by Oscar Niemeyer, in Ibirapuera Park. Another issue that failed to be publicly discussed was whether the fact that the MAC would be occupying that new complex - thus becoming part of the group of museums whose objective is to offer the city of São Paulo leisure and tourism attractions<sup>7</sup> - could conflict with the educational purposes of the institution.

The indifference with which the now imminent transfer of the MAC USP to the building of the former DMV of São Paulo was treated, ratifies the entire

50-year history of the Museum in its relations with USP. After all, what is the meaning of a university museum of contemporary art at a University where the arts - and visual arts in particular - have always been treated as virtually expendable appendages within a philosophy founded on pragmatism?

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The current administration of the MAC, in accordance with the guidelines established by the Dean of USP, Prof. João Grandino Rodas for the University museums, sees as positive the transfer of a significant part of the MAC USP to the adapted building of the old DMV, as it understands that the MAC on the Butantan campus cannot actually meet the challenges currently facing any museum linked to the visual arts lying outside the city's still underdeveloped art circuit.

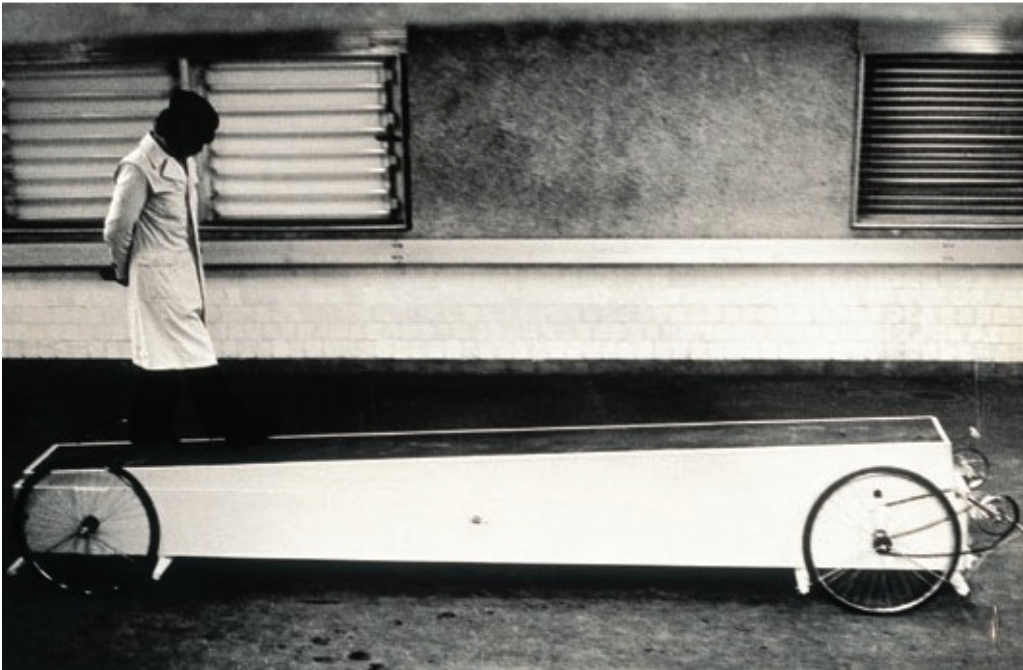
The MAC understands that concentrating its activities in a space full of the architectural qualities that characterize the old DMV, along Ibirapuera Park, can help the institution to recover the central role it had played for decades in the city. However, we all know that just occupying one of the most beautiful modernist architectural complexes in São Paulo is not enough for the MAC to re-emerge as a true university center of contemporary art.

For this transformation to have concrete chances of success, it is urgent that the University of São Paulo awaken from its torpor or sheer indifference toward the future of the MAC USP, and recognize once and for all what is crystal clear to everyone: it is not the MAC that is moving to that complex; it is the University of São Paulo which, through its Museum of Contemporary Art, will occupy it.

What USP needs to understand is that, should it become aware of this huge step, it may be the only University in the entire Southern Hemisphere to have a museum which, based on a collection envied internationally, will establish new crucial levels for the actions currently governing the areas of curatorship, museology and education/development of audiences in art museums. However, should USP fail to realize that, it will be compromising its reputation in the areas of arts and culture, with unpredictable local and international consequences.

For this awareness to consolidate in a positive way, it is essential to implement a policy that involves the entire USP community, which should be prepared for this huge step the University will be taking when most of the MAC is transferred to the old DMV facilities. And for students, staff and faculty to engage, to finally feel that they are directly responsible for this heritage, it is important that they actually know the MAC and understand its importance, realize what a museum of contemporary art can actually mean to both the University and Brazilian society at large.

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*Krzysztof Wodiczko, vehicle, 1973.*

The German scholar Boris Groys (2008, p.184ss.), in the essay “El museo en la era de los medios” (The museum the era of the media) argues about the importance of the art museums in our days, an era of supremacy of the media. Even at the risk of simplifying his ideas, I believe that bringing them into this discussion will help to understand what an art museum like the MAC can mean to a University such as USP.

Groys begins the article by describing not only the history of the museum as an institution that embodied and defined the dominant taste during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also the attacks against the museum itself, which have been recurrent from the vanguards of the early twentieth century to the present day. The author informs, however, that the current attacks do not have the same characteristics as those of the vanguards, because “today the museum has been stripped of its normative role. In our own era it is the mass media that dictate aesthetic norms, having long since dethroned the museum from its crucial social role” (ibid, p.185).<sup>8</sup>

Groys also stresses that the media insists on presenting the museum as a space where the initiated few decide what is and what is not art based on supposedly airtight criteria and that ultimately are of interest to no one. Hence the questions: “Why anyone at all is needed to decide what art is and what it is not? Why can’t we just choose for ourselves... without patronizing...? Why does art refuse to seek legitimacy on the open media market just like any other product?” (Ibid, p.187).

All those who work in contemporary art museums know that these questions are quite recurrent, either when we accompany visitors to exhibits or in newspapers previews and reviews. We at the MAC USP are used to hearing them, accompanied, almost always, by a disdain that tends to limit any sort of argument. But going back to Groys’ text, at one point he establishes the differences that the media insist exist between them and the museum. If the latter – normative, didactic and authoritative, according to the media - seeks to impose its point of view, the media, in turn, do not attempt to establish any paradigm, being supposedly concerned with offering the public only that “which people enjoy.” For the author, this view that the media would have of themselves is not supported by the fact that the new, or current, is shown by them as a value to which the viewer has his taste submitted:

So on the one hand the media profess they are simply satisfying existing tastes, while on the other they are directly and indirectly canvassing for these tastes to be revised and adjusted to the zeitgeist. Consequently, it can hardly be claimed that the media market provides the consumer only with what he ‘really’ wants to see and hear - without any form of patronizing control. On the contrary, at every turn he is being lectured and instructed about what supposedly constitutes the current zeitgeist - and what does not. (ibid, p.191)

According to Groys, anyone learns from the media what is specifically contemporary about the present, and for one simple reason:

The global media market lacks the historical memory which would enable it to compare the past with the present and thereby determine what is really new and genuinely contemporary about the present. The old product range in the media market is constantly being replaced by new merchandise, barring any possibility of comparing what is on offer today with what used to be available [...]. Hence, where the media market is concerned, one has the simultaneous impression



of being bombarded relentlessly with something new and also of permanently witnessing the return of the same over and over again. (ibid, p.191-2).

Explaining the differences between the logic of the mass media and the art museum, Groys draws attention to the fact that the museum gives the observer “ this opportunity to distinguish between the old and the new, and to critically challenge with his own eyes what the media insist is novel, up-to-date and ground breaking”(ibid, p.193). For the author, in a period when under the influence of the mass media we live in a continuous present, only the museum offers a means of comparing the present with the past, enabling maintaining a critical dimension that tends to be irretrievably lost if the institution is abolished or left to die of starvation in the aesthetic ideological tsunami of the mass media. Reiterating his final arguments, Groys (2008, p.197-8) ends the article as follows:

For in stark contrast to the mass media, museums possess the means and possibilities to be sites of critical discourse. Furthermore, given our current cultural climate, the museum is practically the only place where we can actually step back from our own present and compare it with other eras. In these terms, the museum is irreplaceable because it is particularly well suited to critically analyze and challenge the claims of the media-driven zeitgeist.

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From this synthesis of the thought of the German theorist, one point deserves to be stressed: the opposition between the new, understood as a merchandise by the media, and the relative character of the new, as shown by the art museum, should not mean that an a museum of contemporary art can only provide the historical criticism of the new within the artistic production that it displays.

Although not explained by Groys, it seems clear that from the perception of the new within a broader time frame (offered by museum exhibits), it is possible to establish discussions which, starting from certain aesthetic and/or artistic assumptions present in the items displayed, transcend these initial limits, thus creating the necessary conditions for expanding the historical and critical perception of the period determined by the exhibit.

A museum of contemporary art such as the MAC USP, therefore, by exhibiting juxtaposed or contraposed works and/or documents of artistic actions from the early twentieth century to the present, becomes a key center for the public to think about themselves and the collectivity to which they belong within levels that the media - as well as many university areas – either fail to offer or withhold.

We all know that the MAC USP, due to the richness and representation of its collection may establish itself as a hub that absorbs and discusses the mainstream issues that shook Brazilian and international society in the last century and in the first decade of this century.

Reflecting critically about the legacy left to us by the various “modernisms” and their many “successes in overcoming adversities” that marked the previous century, putting them in sharp conflict with the production of the present day, is one of the challenges the MAC USP wants to meet and knows it can meet, provided that it has concrete conditions for doing so: continuity of its capacity to preserve and study the existing collection; expansion of the staff to fulfill these obligations; conditions to expand the collection; increase in the art-educators staff, etc.

If the USP community is also committed to this strategy of transforming the MAC USP, in its new location, into a hub of productive and critical awareness of the issues that affect our very problematic contemporary reality, it will be able to reverse the situation of the debate on arts and culture at USP, which has been quite obstructed in recent years. Otherwise, it will only accelerate the complete subjection of that debate to the logic of the market of cultural goods which is, in theory, the very negation of the concept of a museum like the MAC and of a university like ours.

#### Notes

- 1 Next I will comment on the proposed transfer to USP of the architectural complex where the old DMV of São Paulo was located, implemented in 2007 by the Secretariat of Culture of the State of São Paulo, so that the University could house there a significant part of the collection and activities of the MAC.
- 2 The Paulista Museum (*Museu Paulista* - MP), a centenary institution and therefore older than USP itself, enjoys significant legitimacy among the population of São Paulo, owing mostly to its interpretation of the formation of Brazilian society, which until a few years ago was seen by the Museum merely from the perspective of the members of the São Paulo elite - that same elite that helped to create this University. In symbolic terms, the MP intertwines with São Paulo and thus with USP itself. Accordingly, however arduous the difficulties faced by the Museum since it joined the University may have been, they have always tended to be overcome in a positive way; also of centenary origin, the Museum of Zoology (*Museu de Zoologia* - MZUSP) was integrated into USP in the threshold of the 1970s, after a track record (in part similar to that of the MP) in which it gained recognition in its area of action. If, on the one hand, like the other museums of USP the MZUSP operates with great difficulty, on the other it enjoys great prestige within the university community, not only for the excellence of its collection and the work of its staff, but also for belonging to one of the dearest areas to USP: Biological Sciences; the Museum of Archeology and Ethnology, in turn, although like the MAC still lacks a location worthy of the excellence of its collection and of the work it does from said collection, at least enjoys the respect that the University devotes to two fields in which it operates: Archeology and Ethnology, two important areas recognized by tradition as significant and necessary to any university worth its salt.
- 3 This situation occurs despite both the historical commitment of many USP professionals to reversing this situation and the side position that USP is prone to take in that area, since for some time now other Brazilian universities have been establishing their

own graduate programs in History of the Art. On the situation of this discipline at USP, see, among others, Zanini (1983, 1994).

- 4 For those interested in more information about the difficult relations between USP and the arts, see, among others, Amaral (2010, p.112-26) and Zanini (1986, p.32).
- 5 The seminar “Thinking the new MAC” was promoted in five stages during the years 2007 and 2009: “Economics and culture: new paradigms in museum management” (internal seminar), December 17, 2007; “Architecture and Security in museums”, March 28, 2008; “Research and curatorship in museums and the outsourcing system of cultural production”, August 13, 2008; “Archive of art documents”, October 23, 2008; and “Conservation in art museums”, November 11, 2009.
- 6 It is important to clarify that half of the third floor of the building occupied by the Biennial Foundation of São Paulo in Ibirapuera Park is still occupied by the MAC USP, with part of its collection, exhibit area and other services critical to its full operation.
- 7 When transferred to the expanded architectural complex of the old DMV, the MAC USP will be part of a set of institutions focused on promoting art and culture, such as the Biennial Foundation of São Paulo, the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo and the African-Brazilian Museum among others.
- 8 Therefore, following the thought of Groys on the differences between the negation of the museum during the period of the vanguards and the current period, the main data to be highlighted is that in the current days, dominated by the imposition of taste conveyed by the media, being against the museum does not mean fighting for the establishment of the “new” – an attitude typical of the vanguards of the twentieth century - but rather encouraging the total all-embracing stabilization of the dominant taste of the media.

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*ABSTRACT* – The text aims to reflect on the Museu de Arte Contemporânea de São Paulo, its history and prospects, within the general framework of the University of São Paulo in its relation to the visual arts.

*KEYWORDS:* Museu de Arte Contemporânea USP; Universidade de São Paulo; Visual arts.

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