

## Museum without walls: Imagining new formative spaces

*Gladir Cabral, Celdon Fritzen, Maria Isabel Leite*

*(Post Graduation Program on Education—UNESC, Museum of Childhood, Criciúma (SC) 88810-000, Brazil)*

**Abstract:** The “Museum of Childhood” is a project connected to the Post-Graduate Program in Education at Unesc (Brazil) and since 2005 has been developing interfaces with research, teaching and extension. In this paper, the authors would like to show how the museological conception of the Museum of Childhood makes imagination from one of the central axis of its formative relation with the public. Such conception breaks with the traditional view of museums as buildings where old things are collected and preserved. In fact, the Museum of Childhood, in the light of its objective conditions, wants to be a museum without walls, a museum that, using the device of spatial demarcation, spreads itself in the university campus and other public places, with the objective of communicating with the people. This conception comes closer to the transgressive nature of modern arts, which desacralizes the work of art as masterpiece and proposed, for example, the fugacity of installations and aesthetic interventions. This conception takes the Benjaminian notion of the past as the dimension where other futures remain latent, that is, the museum is seen not as a guardian of the past, but as an establishment that wants to use its collections to communicate with the public. The overrunning of the static physical space, for example, forces the public to recreate its horizon of expectations concerning what a museum show be. In order to accomplish its original objectives, the Museum of Childhood works intensively on the formation of the public by proposing monitored visits in which creative activities are developed and by improving its homepage.

**Key words:** Museum of Childhood; imagination; education

### 1. Introduction

In 2005, a group of researchers started an extension project called “A Place for Childhood Education, Language, and Memory”, which at the end of 2006 became the “Museum of Childhood”. It is developed in Criciúma—the fourth largest city in the state of Santa Catarina, in the South of Brazil, with 180,000 inhabitants—at the UNESC (Universidade do Extremo Sul Catarinense). The project was originally thought as a virtual research program. At that time, the authors thought of giving preference to the virtual dimension, considering the lack of space at their university to safeguard their objects. The authors thought that the Web would be the main instrument for organizing the collection.

Since then, the general objective of the Museum of Childhood has been to preserve, produce and disseminate scientific and artistic-cultural works according to 3 different facets: memory and culture by children (which encompasses all that is done by children), memory and culture about childhood (which includes films,

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Gladir Cabral, professor and researcher, Post Graduation Program on Education—UNESC, Museum of Childhood; research fields: cultural identity, literature and education.

Celdon Fritzen, professor at UFSC (Federal University of Santa Catarina), member of Post Graduation Program on Education—UNESC, Museum of Childhood; research fields: Brazilian literature, Portuguese literature and education.

Maria Isabel Leite, lecturer and associate professor, Post Graduation Program on Education—UNESC, Museum of Childhood; research fields: museum, childhood, education.

iconography, literature and scientific researches that have childhood as the main subject), and memory and culture for childhood (containing toys and children's literature). The central idea is to contribute to the widening of the artistic-cultural repertoire of children and adults, the reformulation of teachers' and researchers' training process, and the pedagogical action projects in schools and other cultural activities, as well as to provide materials and discussion points to public education policy makers and access to culture. By focusing on childhood, the authors are evoking and subverting the established order, questioning the "asymmetrical relationship to power, gain and social status both adults and children have" (Sarmiento, 2005, p. 19).

Therefore, rather than a space of appropriation of knowledge exclusively devoted to children, the authors propose a museal field for children and adults—in particular teachers and researchers on childhood. The museum intends to contribute to research focusing on singularities and differences that structure social forms. By emphasizing the heterogeneity of children's social condition, the authors expect to make researches related to other categories, such as "gender, ethnicity, social context (urban and rural), the linguistic or religious universe children belong to, etc." (Sarmiento, 2005, p. 20).

In sum, the essential function of this cultural space is to critically discuss different views on childhood in its several dimensions. By knowing children better, the authors can question the current pedagogical practices in order to rethink them and create another way of conceiving the relationship between education, art, culture and childhood. The authors wish to contribute to the education of a more humane and democratic society, a society where individuals can share their experiences. The authors are making an effort to reach a more creative, reflexive, sensitive, imaginative, inventive, aesthetical and poetic education for all.

## 2. Museum without walls

The greatest treasure of a museum is its collection and forms of access, and the idea of accessibility has become of superb importance in the museal field. Therefore, giving visibility to the physical collection of the Museum of Childhood has become its first challenge in order to ensure the good accomplishment of its different social roles. For want of an adequate space, the visibility of the museum in temporary expositions has become partial and fragmented. In order to transform a limitation (that is, the lack of space) into advantage, the team of the museum developed, in collaboration with the visiting professor Dr. Julio Romero Rodriguez of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, a concept called "museum without walls":

If we see them (the difficulties—in our case, the lack of space) as restrictive for the creative process, we should recognize them as guiders as well, since it is from inside limiting and through them that we find alternatives to continue, widen and even find new directions to our work. In fact, only by admitting and respecting the determinants of the material with which we work as essential, our spirit can create wings and search for the unknown. (Oliveira, 2008, p. 87)

Thus, taking advantage from the lack of space in the Museum of Childhood and from its great communication potential, the authors used insulating tapes to draw lines and colors as spatial markers for a new museal proposal. This concept is based on esthetic references found in different artistic languages, such as in the sceneries of the films *Dogville* and *Manderlay*, directed by Lars von Trier, from Denmark; in the artists like the Cuban Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), Alberto Greco (1931-1965), from Argentina; Susy Gómez (1965), from Spain; and in the photographs of Florentino Diaz (1954), from Spain. The authors also employed as reference resources commonly used for marking spaces in parking lots or lines in a bank office, as well as elements from childhood culture, such

as some toys and labyrinths in playgrounds. This profusion of lines and colors delimits and simultaneously opens empty spaces, while transforming the museum into an entirely accessible space the whole day.

Based on this proposal, the Museum of Childhood started to assume itself, in its physical dimension, as a space without definite borders; flexible, porous; merged into the university campus; a place permeated by interchanges, receptive, open; a locus of discoveries and awakening of the senses of all who pass by bringing their cultural, social and historical marks that gives meaning to what is seen, felt and heard in the museum. This is a daring proposal, which “works in the limits of the body, in the limits of physicality. Just a little more and it does not exist”<sup>1</sup> (Oliveira, 2008, p. 55).

In the process of making strange the dialectics of quotidian life, the authors came across with another strong aesthetic reference for the concept of museum proposed: some modern and contemporary sculptures and installations. According to Oliveira (2008, p. 58), “The concept of sculpture has been so much tested and expanded that it has fall apart”, besides, “among its fragments, different modalities emerged as well as the concept of installation”. This is the concept of installation that the Museum of Childhood borrows in order to think its new proposal to the physicality: “It is not a piece that we see from the outside, like a traditional sculpture. The installation is a sculpture in which we enter, and it involves the various senses: the sense of smell, vision and touch. It is a sensation of synesthesia”, according to Oliveira (2008, p. 8).

Elvira Almeida sometimes treats sculptures as “characters that talk with the visitor and sometimes as objects that create ambience to a scenery” (Oliveira, 2008, p. 112). Elvira Almeida argued against the idea of sculptures as objects destined only to contemplation and suggested that people should “open space for the ludic contact with sculptures, an invitation to the poetic interpretation and to the use of the body” (p. 112). The concept of ludic sculpture draws the artistic object (a sculpture) near to the ludic object (a toy)—both loaded with symbolism, awakers of subjective images and facilitators of aesthetic, delicate and imaginative experiences. According to the concept formulated by Oliveira<sup>2</sup> (2008, p. 127), sculptures can be considered “sensory, time and spatial, corporeal, imaginative adventure”.

If it considers art and its plurality of significance, the contemporary art, specifically, is based on a proposal that disturbs the spectator, wakes him/her from the torpor of routine, from the fortuitous circumstance of just passing by, and invites him/her to take a position. This same posture can be associated to education, to the process of learning and producing knowledge—a movement that always starts from the point of discomfort in the direction of the new. It can be said, then, that art places the spectator—and education places the apprentice—in a “state of suspension”. Thus, paraphrasing Oliveira in her reflections about the sculpture, the authors propose an almost immaterial museum, one which can be confounded with the space itself, something that can be understood “not necessarily as an object, but as an attitude, an action, ... as an action of formalization of the human being, who works, operates in the world, in the matter”<sup>3</sup> (Oliveira, 2008, p. 52)—a special area of production of meaning and imagination of spaces.

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<sup>1</sup> This commentary was made in relation to the sculptures by Waltércio Caldas.

<sup>2</sup> Based on the book *Adventure Sculpture*, by Kátia Canton. São Paulo: Editora DCL, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> He is talking about the concept of sculpture.

### 3. Museum as a formative place

A museum, in order to fulfill its role, should obviously have a public. But, how can the public be attracted to the Museum of Childhood, if the public is not yet accustomed to visit regularly these places, considering that today in Brazil the number of visitors in museums is almost insignificant? The challenge of forming a public and offering visual education is, then, inseparable part of the educational mission of this museum. Preparing the exhibition and expecting for the positive reaction of the public is not enough. The educational mission of the museum includes the intention of transforming the momentary uneasiness into assimilated landscape, in reiteration, in frequency, in production of meanings through the development of imaginative processes and improvement of the gaze. In this sense, the educational institutions (schools and universities), with their teachers and groups of students, are the great focus of attention, since they are the most important locus of education. Under this prerogative, the Museum of Childhood builds its politics of public education.

The museum is structured to receive and foment the visit of adults, particularly pre-service teachers, as well as groups of children. In both groups, the relevance of imagination in the formative process can be observed in the workshops offered to children (with games, painting activities, sculpture, story-telling, films, etc.). In one of its educative activities, the Museum of Childhood receives the visit of school children. During these visits, children are helped by monitors who are attentive to their reactions and commentaries on the collection exhibited, always with great care lest influence their reading, since the authors' intention is only to provoke the dialogue between the children and the objects exposed. As part of this dialogical attitude, the museum offers workshops aiming at, through the aesthetic elaboration, offering to children the opportunity of exercising their prerogatives as producers of culture.

During the children's visits, the museum offers activities like clay modeling, story-telling, painting with natural ink, building of toys made of recycled material, games, sculptures, etc.. These workshops had as main objective to make available opportunities for the exercise of imagination as a form of elaboration and appropriation of knowledge, besides, the contact with aesthetic experiences. These activities were based on the concept that imagination, fantasy is one of the 2 instruments by which the children deals with the world and re-elaborates their experiences with it (Sarmiento, 2005).

The activities proposed to teachers were conceived in order to overcome a conception of continuing education characterized by the simple transmission of information. Face to the low qualification of graduate teachers, the Brazilian government offers training programs on educational theories and practices, but usually those programs are created without the necessary dialogue with the teachers' experience (Kramer, 2001; Zilberman, 1988). By contrast, the authors' intention was to build with them a possibility of reflection based on the themes proposed in the exhibitions, debates and activities promoted by the Museum of Childhood. This is possible because the authors understand the museum as a space of education, in which the contact with aesthetic and cultural objects makes possible the dialogue with the experience, memory and imagination of the spectators, which allows the authors to think "the continuing education less as a training or qualification process and more as a dynamic historical movement, as a cultural formation, which is essential if we wish that teachers become autonomous individuals in history" (Kramer, 2001, p. 65).

Vygostky had suggested that imagination works through processes of dissociation and association of the impressions acquired through perceptions of reality and experiences accumulated by human beings (Vygotsky,

2004). This idea marks the pedagogical relevance of granting to the children access to a larger repertoire of experiences in order to enrich their imaginative possibilities. It also denotes the social nature of imagination: “No matter how individual every creation is, it always contains a social coefficient. In this sense, no invention will ever be individual in the strict sense, it will always involve some element of anonymous collaboration” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 31).

Therefore, in order to occur with more intensity, imagination requires objective situations and opportune socio-cultural conditions. When the authors refer to the environment in which the human being is situated, they are not talking about the physical space itself, but about all the experience accumulated in the social-historical processes available in the environment, that is, in its relationship with the historical time. Here the authors see the importance of museums in the search of this imaginative space. The authors understand that the Museum of Childhood has the role of becoming an imaginative space where the contact with diverse collections mediated by a well planned educative relation contributes to the amplification of the imaginative repertoire of the public. Besides, the lack of physicality of the museum without walls makes the public rethink the very concept of museum and understand spaces in general as being subject to the creative intervention of imagination.

Bakhtin’s dialogical comprehension of language is also one of the theoretical fundamentals of the authors’ proposal of the museum. “Individuals do not build themselves in isolation”, says Bakhtin (1992), but in a process of social interactions. Language, one of the basic dimensions in the building of identity, is always dialogue, an answer that I give to a word that questions me. For Bakhtin (1992), the dimension of answerability is essential. Thus, more than a monolithic object or a monologic exercise, the authors think that the museum must present itself as an expectation of meeting the other, who waits for an answer and who also answers “Me”. The authors believe that Bakhtin’s dialogism can be connected to the understanding of imagination. Just like language, imagination occurs through dialogue, not as a mere psychological or subjective process, not as an abstraction (something totally external to the subject), but as a result of the interaction between the “I” and the other. Imagination is, therefore, a social phenomenon: Partially, it is a composition of the memory based on a common past; Partially, it is a project, a look towards the future; Partially, it is a look towards reality, to the present time. Imagination, just like language, is a phenomenon of creation of meanings. By emphasizing the relation between museum and imagination in the authors’ proposal, they think of offering possibilities of signifying the surrounding reality in a double articulation process: the individual and the social. Imagination is a product of the interaction between the subject and the community to which the subject belongs.

In this perspective, to the Museum of Childhood, imagination is more than a learning tool. It is also construction of reality, of the self and the other. This because imagination, like language, is a cultural, historical and social phenomenon. It must be understood that each culture finds its own imaginative solutions, each epoch has its own imaginative resources, each society cultivates its own icons, its imaginary and its imaginative practices. Therefore, it must be considered also a space of conflict and of ideological war, a dispute about power. Since imagination is not the act of an individual, but a social construction, the dimension of power is present and needs to be regarded with care.

#### **4. Musealization workshops**

Connected with the proposal of the museum, and also a suggestion by Professor Julio Romero, the authors

develop a workshop with children during their scheduled visits, which demonstrates the role of imagination in the production of new realities. It is a musealization workshop. According to this proposal, children are invited to collect in their neighborhood several objects: leaves of trees, bottle caps, twigs, shingles pebbles, etc.. Afterwards, in a tacit dialogue with Marcel Duchamp, children are invited to give museal dignity to the objects collected. On a table, on a desk or on a chair, the authors set a small scenery, an ambiance with a purple piece of paper or cloth, small exhibition pedestals and the informative labels. In these new sceneries, objects will be placed and exhibited, taken from their previous condition of indifference (invisibility) and transformed into objects of contemplation in this little “museum” created by the children, who then reflect about how imagination helps to create meanings.

It is possible to connect this workshop developed by the Museum of Childhood to the meaning of the collector’s passion referred to by Benjamin. Questioning those who perceived in history a linear succession of events that culminates in the bourgeois present time or in the necessary communist-proletarian society, Benjamin proposed a distinct view according to which the past must be read in such a way that its revolutionary possibilities silenced by the utilitarian perspective of capitalism may emerge. Rediscover, in the past, in its fringes, in its ruins, in the palpable garbage, elements full of meaning capable of repopulating the dream of the present time, and reconnecting, through what seems to be useless, a redemptive perspective, that is what moves the collector’s passion, according to Benjamin. Certainly, this passion was source of his great interest for old children books and toys, for example. He said: “But when a modern poet says that everyone has a picture for which he would be willing to give the whole world, how many people would not look for it in an old box of toys?” (Benjamin, 2005, p. 120). The collector resists the barbarian massification of the modern world by opposing the recovery of the garbage produced by the same society in its homogenizing path. He was convinced that, in the debris of history, “The past brings a mysterious symbol which impels it to redemption” (1994, p. 223).

The Museum of Childhood, a museum without walls, can be located in this revolutionary perspective revealed by the work of the collector, who labors through the activation of a nonconformist memory that lies in the ruins produced by the progress, globalization and the homogenization of life over old traditions.

## 5. Conclusion

As a formative space, the Museum of Childhood develops several projects in which education and imagination play an important role in the context of an enriching the dialogue with the public: students, teachers and researchers. Understood as a space of education, the museum allows the contact between the aesthetic and the cultural, experience and the wish of knowledge, memory and imagination, in a continuous process privileging autonomy and historical consciousness. But since imagination is not the act of an individual but a social construction, the museum must be considered also a space of conflict and of ideological war. The dimension of power is present and needs to be tackled with honesty and attention.

The authors want very much that researchers interested in the field of childhood and in the history of childhood as well as researchers of the museal field and art education from here or from other parts of the world become interested in the project and take part in the project, therefore, they highly value the possibility of starting an exchange program with other museums, universities, institutes or related research groups. They are really interested, for example, in studying the points of connection, similarities and differences between conceptions of childhood in Brazil and China. People imagine the differences and affinities between the work with children in Russia, in Italy or

in Canada. In this way, they even consider the possibility of a childhood museums world net in the near future, a virtual environment converging multidisciplinary researches, reflections as well as multicultural interests.

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