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Taboos in Museology: Difficult issues for museum theory

Call for Papers

Elizabeth Weiser, Marion Bertin and Anna Leshchenko

A taboo is a social custom that prohibits or inhibits the discussion of a particular practice. A taboo is embedded in cultural distinctions, and can be a prohibition or an obligation. Those who break the taboo may be shunned by their community. Taboos have been studied by psychoanalysts, Sigmund Freud (1960) first, as well as by anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) and Edmund Leach (1989), and by scholars of religion. In museum studies, taboos have been approached through different topics, such as politics, religion and the sacred, or dealing with difficult pasts.

These taboos involve museums' collection and display practices, personnel and community relations. For instance, Dominique Poulot describes some of the problems with the recent exhibition turn to telling individual, emotional stories of traumatic events, noting that "the very insistence on the emotional specificity of the story means that all trauma stories sound similar: they are histories without history" (2012, p. 9). He cites Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman's observation that "Both before and after the tsunami, the survivors in Aceh were already victims of political domination, military repression, and economic marginalization. [...] Trauma is not only silent on these realities; it actually obscures them" (2009, p. 281). Contested repatriation efforts, meanwhile, are multitudinous across the globe. For instance, George Abungu accused the 2002 "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums" of being a way for major museums to refuse "to engage in dialogue around the issue of repatriation" (2004, p. 5). Ariella Aïsha Azoulay in her institutional critique digs even deeper by saying that "looted objects did not just happen into cultural institutions but

are constitutive of the various scholarly, curatorial, and professional procedures (of which collecting is but one example), which have transformed world-destroying violence into a decent and acceptable occupation” (2019, p. 64).

Others have taken on institutionalized taboos, such as the 2018 “Fair Museum Jobs” manifesto (2021) or the 2019 Art/Museum Salary Transparency campaign, in which low-paid staff posted their salaries to a public website. “Just be brave and add your information to the list,” wrote the site’s co-creator, Michelle Millar Fisher, which another participant likened to “undo[ing] some of the secrecy that plagues the industry (Small, 2019). Others dare to raise awareness of “hostile conditions” and institutional racism while trying to create “an alternative model for curators working in white museum spaces who ground their praxis in caring for Black communities” (Autry, 2021).

In theories of museology, taboos seem to be still a taboo subject, and are understudied. Decolonizing is a process that involves so much more than a degree of power-sharing, for instance, as Shahid Vawda notes: “It is to question and unmask the epistemological, sometimes the ontological, foundations of such ideas, which inform the knowledge that make the societies and people of Africa, Asia and Latin America ‘invisible’ for the colonizers” (2019, p. 76). Such processes are still in their infancy in a field still dominated by scholars (writing in languages) of the Global North and West.

As ICOM gathers to discuss the theme of the *power* of museums, then, we in ICOFOM propose to discuss the ways that museums and museology also have the potential to *disempower* by inhibiting discussion of sensitive topics. We invite scholars and professionals to think about taboos in two different arenas: museums themselves and how they deal with or maintain taboos surrounding some practices; and museology as a theoretical discipline and the ways that taboos leave gaps in our scholarship.

Amongst the different subtopics that could be looked at are those below:

In Museums:

- **Taboos around collection decisions.** How do museum exhibits present difficult heritage and unresolved memory conflicts, including those dealing with

human rights and land rights? What impact does the myth of museum neutrality have on exhibition decisions? Should narratives and labels include or exclude emotional expressions? How do taboos regarding sex, nudity, or bodies generally affect exhibits? How is the museum responding to global issues of collection ownership, repatriation, and the role of the universal museum?

- **Taboos around community/society relations.** How to develop/maintain equitable and democratic relationships with local communities? Who decides how tabooed objects or knowledge are displayed? How are political pressures from fundamentalist or autocratic authorities affecting exhibition decisions? In what ways are museums promoting (or not) physical, social, and intellectual accessibility?
- **Taboos around funding inequities.** Should states aim to reduce the income inequality between their museums? How do neoliberal economic pressures exacerbate the precarity of underfunded museums?
- **Taboos around staffing inequities.** How are institutional racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, etc., excluding full participation in staffing decisions? How do salary differences affect staffing and professionalization?

In Museology:

- **Taboos around global participation.** How does the hegemony of the English language in the international conversation impact global scholarship? How do structural asymmetries exclude or delegitimize research/researchers from the Global South, including the systemic dependencies of colonies and former colonies?
- **Taboos around funding inequities.** How do material constraints inhibit participation in international forums and publication in journals? How to address inequities in training and professionalization?

- **Taboos around differing ideologies.** How do differing perspectives on difficult shared histories impinge on collaborative efforts? Can museology successfully address its ongoing racism/sexism/classism/ homophobia?

Provocative questions:

- What is taboo in museology?
- How does museological scholarship today perpetuate the taboos of the field, particularly taboos of race, gender, class, orientation, ability, coloniality, etc.?
- How do museums address taboos in their exhibitions?
- How do museums address the taboos in their staff and community relations?
- If the museum staff's and university lecturers' mindset is not decolonized, will they create more taboo topics as a reaction to decolonial processes?
- What does the museum lose if it addresses topics of deep-seated cultural, gender, religious, social taboos?
- How can museums become part of civic space?
- What role does museum ethics play in our work?
- How do/should museums approach topics that their communities would prefer to keep silent?
- Who decides that something is tabooed? Is "taboo" the same as "censored"?
- Can museology counter cultural hegemony, especially under theocratic or autocratic regimes?
- What can be done, in museums or museology, to break the taboos?

Terms of Submission

- Accepted proposals are collated and published as ICOFOM's *Materials for Discussion* prior to the conference. Therefore, all proposals should be sent by 31 March 2022 (at the latest) via the ICOM conference's platform: <https://guarant.eu/icom2022/committee-meetings/index.php>. To submit your paper please upload it to any cloud service of your choice – for example, your google drive or dropbox (do not forget to open access to the paper). Then go to the link mentioned above and put an abstract of your paper followed by the link to the document on the cloud service.

- Proposals must conform to the requirements below or they will be rejected.
- Contributions should be concise (12,000 characters maximum, including notes and references, as specified in our guidelines, which are available via this link: <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/8xa40uvm08uy3zz/AAC95j4zZaQIMtXWshAm0VIma?dl=0>. Proposals must integrate one of the proposed axes of analysis. They should follow the formatting rules of ICOFOM and be written in one of the three languages of ICOM (English, French, Spanish). While English will be the language of oral presentation at the symposium, you are strongly encouraged to submit your written proposal in the ICOM language (English, French, Spanish) you know best. Proposals which are unclear will be rejected for both publication and presentation. Notice of acceptance of proposals will be given within two weeks.
- *Materials for Discussion* will be sent to the authors and symposium participants, in electronic format, during the month of August 2022.
- The workshops of the annual symposium will be held only in person without online streaming. However, if you cannot attend you will still have the opportunity to participate remotely with a poster or a pre-recorded video. In both cases the payment of the registration fee is required. Registration page: <https://prague2022.icom.museum/registration-information>.
- The series editors and ICOFOM board will select, after the colloquium, those written contributions whose authors will be invited to develop their articles in a longer format for publication in the ICOFOM Study Series following peer review and revision.

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