



SUZANNE COTTER
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Suzanne Cotter, directora do Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto, desde Janeiro de 2013, dedica-se há mais de duas décadas à curadoria, à programação artística e à gestão cultural. Entre 1996 e 2009 foi, sucessivamente, curadora na Serpentine Gallery, na Whitechapel Gallery e na Hayward Gallery, em Londres, e curadora sênior e vice-directora do Museum of Modern Art de Oxford. A partir de 2010, e até à sua mudança para Portugal, foi curadora da Fundação Solomon R. Guggenheim para o projeto Guggenheim de Abu Dhabi, liderando o trabalho de pesquisa e desenvolvimento da coleção de arte e do programa artístico do futuro museu naquela cidade. Tem sido responsável por exposições monográficas e temáticas de artistas como Monica Bonvicini, Angela Bulloch, Daniel Buren, Cecily Brown, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Trisha Donnelly, Jannis

Kounellis, Mike Nelson, Silke Otto-Knapp, Fiona Tan, Kelley Walker, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Monika Sosnowska e Yto Barrada e foi co-curadora da décima edição da Bienal de Sharjah em 2011. O seu profundo conhecimento da arte contemporânea internacional e da instituição museológica foi o mote para esta entrevista, que decorreu na Fundação de Serralves, no Porto, em Abril de 2015.

Susan Cotter has been the Director of the Contemporary Art Museum of Serralves in Oporto since January 2013. For more than two decades she has been engaged in curating exhibitions, in developing artistic programmes and in cultural management. Between 1996 and 2009 she has worked as a curator at the Serpentine Gallery, at the Whitechapel Gallery and at the Hay-

ward Gallery in London, and as a senior curator and deputy director of the Museum of Modern Art Oxford. Since 2010, and before moving to Portugal, she acted as a curator for the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi project. In this context, she directed the research and development of the art collection of the future museum of that city. She has curated monographic and thematic exhibitions of artists such as Monica Bonvicini, Angela Bulloch, Daniel Buren, Cecily Brown, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Trisha Donnelly, Jannis Kounellis, Mike Nelson, Silke Otto-Knapp, Fiona Tan, Kelley Walker, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Monika Sosnowska and Yto Barrada. In 2011, she co-curated the 10th Sharjah Biennial. Her in-depth knowledge of international contemporary art and of museums was at the centre of this interview, realized in the Serralves Foundation, in Oporto, in April 2015.

COM SUZANNE COTTER

CONDUZIDA POR CATARINA ROSENDO

Entrevista

Catarina Rosendo – The idea of crisis has been very much present in the general discourse since 2008, although it is older than that. If one thinks about it, it (this idea) can go back to the 1960s. There is talk of an economic crisis, a financial crisis, a cultural and value crisis. How do you view this much-talked about notion of crisis?

Suzanne Cotter – Throughout my career working in museums people have talked about crisis. “The crisis in art”, “The crisis in curating”, “The crisis in criticism”, “The crisis in funding” – a crisis that is ever-present. When people talk about crisis now, I think it’s a continuation of that sense of siege, and challenge. I understand the crisis and the concept beyond crisis in a different way now just because I know more and have greater perspective and can see things with a little more context. How do I understand it when people talk about it? Sometimes I think people are exaggerating, sometimes I think it’s just the way things have always been. Other times I think, “what are you doing about it?” because there is a tendency to constantly focus on the negativity and impossibility of things, without necessarily proposing solutions.

If we stick with the museum and the world of the arts that are publicly supported and not-for-profit situations, I think the challenge we face increasingly is that culture has been seen as something expendable. I don’t think we’re completely there yet, but I think there is a looming crisis and I feel many of my peers, museum directors and people who are engaged in trying to keep some sustainable cultural activity going, that it is a deeply worrying period.

I was living in the UK when, under the conservative Thatcherite government, they embraced the free market economic model, based on an American system where government is reduced and everything becomes market driven. This was the time when support for the arts turned to businesses and private individuals and sponsorship. This is a model that, to some degree, was successful but now it has tipped over to such a point that most institutions have to rely on this more and more, with government support becoming less and less. And to the extent that government says “we can’t pay for this”, “we can’t contribute to this”, if you want your museum to continue, if you want your experimental based arts to continue, you have to find the money.

The danger and the potential crisis of that is that, in democratic societies, this amounts to an admission that we do not place value on culture and therefore think we should not spend any money on culture. It’s a very difficult thing, because we believe and want diverse publics to feel that they benefit from it, that culture contributes to society and to the wellbeing of everybody, in different ways, and upon its access being available to them, just in a way that being able to see a good doctor, having good healthcare at the right times is a necessity of a healthy society. So if government says “we are not prepared to put money there”, what they are saying is “the people who we represent don’t think that culture is important”, and that’s where I think there’s a crisis, because culture is important and people know it is.

CR – There is a contradiction in the way governments think that they should not invest so much money in culture and, at the same time, the fact that the number of visitors keeps on increasing in all the museums. In a certain way this reaffirms the importance that culture has for people.

SC – It has been well documented and acknowledged around the world that culture generates not only tourism, with tourism functioning in the post-industrial economy as a major driver for economies, but also serves as a positive projection of any society. Why is Abu Dhabi building museums in the Gulf and creating the twenty-first century vision of the museum island? Because they believe that culture projects the openness and imagination of their people. It is also what attracts people: world-class hotels, world-class museums, the possibility to learn something they don’t already know. Countries and cities that are developing out of a later modernity recognize culture as being incredibly important, whereas in Europe, which we think of as the birthplace of the museum, that importance is recognized but is no longer supported in the same way. I am not an economist, I don’t set national budgets, and I am not suggesting there should be a choice between supporting a school or a hospital and supporting a museum – I believe the museum and its role needs to be considered as part of a holistic view of education, inclusion, identity and society, as well as in terms of developing people who can actually contribute to society through culture. It has been shown, in studies carried out in the UK and

other parts of the world, that children who have had the experience of an art education and of visiting museums are more likely to succeed later in life and become active contributors to society as a whole regardless of their profession.

In Portugal, one of the things that seems to be lacking in museums is a culture of succession planning that creates opportunities for the transfer of knowledge and know-how and the development of cultural leaders for the future. I'm not saying we should get everyone out of the positions they're in, but, rather, there should be more investment in the training and development of the arts professionals for the future, be they conservators, registrars, curators, educationalists, or museum directors. To be a museum director, it's not sufficient to just be a curator, you have to have experience in leadership, knowledge in administrative procedures, in governance, and so on. You need these capacities and skills in order to lead an institution in a way that's sustainable, so you don't send them broke, so you don't spend all the budget, so the people who work there have the right conditions not only to carry out their responsibilities, but to be able to innovate.

The other crucial aspect is that with the changing times culture changes. New generations have a different perspective, a different take on culture from their elders, and in the present we need to be constantly nourishing ourselves with these new perspectives. Once again I'm speaking institutionally, that's the way institutions evolve: you have to be a learning institution.

When you work in the world of contemporary art the whole point is to be with your time. I'm with my time, but my perspective is different from someone who grew up in the seventies, for instance.

CR – Regarding the proliferation, in recent years, of contemporary art museums in the Middle East, or the extension of the art market to Asia and South America, can these new realities create a different comprehension of museum culture by introducing a feeling of crisis in European traditional museum institutions and in their way of preserving, researching and displaying art?

SC – For a western museum to acknowledge that there are other histories that might be recognized and presented in an institution doesn't necessarily come out of crisis, that comes from growing up. And this growing up had already begun in the 1960s, so it has been a long time coming. One of the positive aspects about globalization and our post-colonial world is that we no longer have an excuse to think that there's only one narrative that is western, that is white and that is male. Gender, geography, identity are all part of this. We can look, however, to historical moments of crisis as generating new or more urgent forms of art production that challenge the institutional model for museums. The AIDS crisis in the US in the 1980s, for example, generated new forms of artistic practices that privileged public intervention, such as the collective actions and projects of Gran Fury or General Idea. Historically, shifts in curatorial models and museum strategies have been

in response to artists and the nature of work being made. International biennials have also played an increasingly important role also in acknowledging that we are part of a global world with multiple histories and perspectives. We can no longer talk about centres, what we can talk about is of multiple centres that coexist in multiple ways. All of these things have informed not only curatorial narratives but also the ways in which these narratives take form, be it through spectatorship, participation, or other.

Funding and the nature of sponsorship in an era of globalization are also relevant. If a sponsor has an interest in Africa because of business or commercial interests, this can enable certain projects. In our present age of the cultural boycott, these situations also carry with them delicate questions of corporate, social and ethical responsibility. If you take the idea of a programme that looks to address a different set of cultural realities and there are sponsors who will support these programmes, this is not the result of a crisis. It's a reflection of new ecologies that are also economic.

If you want to be able to engage with what is happening, with a particular artistic scene, or set of artistic positions in a particular part of the world, it is because you think it's relevant, not because you are in crisis. I don't know if a society is in crisis because a younger generation of artists want to interrogate or excavate the history of colonialism, for example; I think it's perfectly normal. Look at Germany and the post-war period, the way that artists explicitly addressed the history of the Holocaust did not begin to be apparent until the 1960s. It wasn't until after [Claude Lanzmann's] *Shoah* that the subject of the Holocaust really began to be addressed in an overtly public way within the cultural realm. It is deeply human and I think deeply normal. How do you express a history of trauma when you are part of it? I don't think that means that a country or a society is in crisis. I think that's a sign of health that they can begin to talk about this.

CR – Regarding the cuts that governments impose on culture, the crisis also brings the necessity for museum institutions to seek funding from other sources. To what extent can corporations seek to guide or influence the programming of museums considering the urgent need of funding?

SC – Every institution wherever I have worked has a very clear understanding of the line between support and conflict of interest, and fortunately, up to now, sponsors do also. Big businesses think as business people, while museums are not thinking in terms of monetary value and profit, but of intrinsic values. The relationship is necessarily one of mutual respect but also of mutual education.

Philanthropy of a truly disinterested nature exists and we love it and it would be wonderful if there were more, but I think when you are dealing in the commercial realm, there's a different kind of accountability – companies have to be able to provide answers to their shareholders as to the benefits of supporting a cultural

project. In Portugal, and in Europe in general, as well as in many other countries, governments fiscally acknowledge this support and the idea of social responsibility, which is crucial. I do think there could be even greater fiscal benefits that would encourage, not just businesses or sponsors, but private individuals to be more generous, in acquisitions of works of art, or donations of works of art... that's something where there could be more.

The Musée Picasso in Paris, a museum I know well, since working there many years ago as a young intern, the collection is based on the concept of gifting in lieu of tax. This is something set in place by the French state and many of their collections are enriched because of this policy which allows people to gift a work of art in lieu of paying tax on their assets. The Musée Picasso is created largely from this; the principle holdings of the museum after the artist's death came from the family and inheritors of Picasso's work who gifted works in lieu of paying inheritance taxes.

So what are the benefits in the long term? You have a museum that has a million visitors a year with an income from ticket sales that amounts to 65% of the total revenue for the year. Every tourist in the world wants to go there, people who live in Paris want to go there, why do they want to go there? Because they have great works of art; not because the museum could afford to buy them, but because the State made it possible for people to gift them. And like a multiplying cell, this healthy body that is the collection, continues to attract more gifts and *dations*.

CR – The crisis also seems to extend to the notion of criticism. It is said that art criticism has disappeared, that it has been transferred to curating, to the works of the artists themselves, and that the disappearance of criticism from the press indicates the reduction of public space understood as an Agora, a place open to discussion and exchange of ideas. Can museums do something to compensate for this apparent lack of critical thought?

SC – I don't think the museum can provide answers to all of these questions. The essential is that it continues to provide content that can generate critical discussion. It is difficult, although not impossible for a museum to create its own critical magazine because of the risk to impartiality. Tate Magazine exists – it has excellent content, but it's not a magazine of art criticism.

I do agree that criticism, as an expression of culture in general, constitutes a form of public space. But you need a platform. You also need people who are prepared to occupy that platform. Unfortunately, what we see in the majority of newspapers is more journalism than criticism.

But criticism is also a part of a culture. In art schools in the US for example, there is a strong culture of critique embedded into the way the school functions. There are positions to be assumed and also held. There is an indebtedness of course to the history of the creation of an 'American Art' in the post-war period, with Clement

Greenberg as one of the principle voices. Frieze magazine began in the 1990s to reflect new attitudes in contemporary art in Britain – its first issue published in summer 1991 had only 32 pages. Some magazines have folded, others continue, but with the dependence on advertising (and the market) becoming more and more present. Criticism thrives when there is a perceived need and a critical mass. With the digital age, this need is perhaps filled more instantly, but it can also be problematic. What certainly is missing and is extremely important are critical platforms that are not only in the so-called art language of English.

CR – In your opinion, what are the reasons for which this space does not exist? The critical mass exists though, while what seems to be lacking is the place to practise the critical mass.

SC – What we hear is in times of financial hardship and budget making, culture goes and news stays. There are editorial choices, but there are also financial. To publish a critical magazine you need financial backing of some sort. Online, I am not sure. E-flux has been remarkably successful, but here I think we hit on one of the contradictions of globalized communication. Everyone can connect and be aware of ideas around the world, but the specificity of context, which is key to thinking critically, is lost.

We know, when we're having individual conversations, that people have viewpoints and you can have very critical conversations, but it would be nice to see it a little more public. For example, here in Portugal, someone could be talking about a group of exhibitions or a certain approach to certain tendencies in curatorial practices that are happening across the country, the different ways of thinking about it. [At Serralves] we organized a symposium at the time of the "12 Contemporaries" exhibition [in 2014]. A lot of interesting things were presented and discussed relating to the past, but we didn't get to the point of talking about the present and possible futures for criticism.

CR – Some museums have considered the possibility of selling works of their own collections. This destabilizes the traditional idea of the museum as a stable repository of values of the past. In your view, what are the advantages and disadvantages of actions of this type and in what way do they modify the very concept of museum?

SC – The idea of de-accessioning is not a popular one, and in general museum directors, including myself, for the most part do not believe in it. When museum directors arrive at an institution they inherit a history, and that history includes a history of collecting. It may be that a collection holds a large number of works by one artist in which there are duplications; the sale of one of those works might mean that you can nourish the acquisition of newer works or works by another ar-

tist who may be missing from the collection. I think in the right circumstances and with the right due diligence, that's a perfectly valid approach.

In the twenty-first century, museums have huge challenges because I don't think there's any museum in the world that is capable of showing all of its collections at any one time. Many, if not most museums are showing anything from quarter to a tenth of their holdings. Centre Pompidou has a hundred and twenty thousand works and they are building a new building to expand and show more and more of its collections. But the other relevant role of the museum is to conserve, and works can't be on display all the time. You have some things you can only show once every five years, vintage photographs, for example. There is always this balance to strike between preservation and display. Then there is the challenge of history. If you begin as a museum of modern art like MoMA in the 1920s, and one hundred years later you are still collecting, there are decisions to be made. Do you continue on forever, annexing more and more space, or does the contemporary continue to secede from its core? Now we have the Musée d'Orsay because, while it's a part of our understanding of modernity in the first part of the century in terms of historical narrative, you can't look at those works in the same way and with the same understanding of a work made in 2010.

There are lots of challenges. Is the role of the museum to become bigger and bigger, and just build more and more buildings in order to be able to show? I think this is a very interesting but very challenging situation for museums now, particularly the smaller scale ones: do you stay a perfectly small scale museum that does partial displays of the collection, that tours the collection as a mobile entity to achieve maximum access? What are the ways in which the collection can be used as the basis for research – art historical, curatorial, conservation, etc.? There are many practical questions that are equally imperative: how do you store? Can you afford insurance? What are your emergency provisions, your disaster provisions? Are the collection policies intelligent? Are they forward thinking? How selective should they be? But there are also opportunities for thinking more imaginatively about collections.

It's better to acknowledge that sometimes museums will part with certain works. I certainly don't agree with the idea that you build a collection as an investment, then you sell it to make a profit. In my book that's not what museums do, that's not what they mean symbolically and culturally, but you have to think intelligently about how you can achieve a museum to be meaningful and active, and not just a depository of an accumulation of objects. ●