

# Archives of the Commons: Collective Cataloguing in Art Museums

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## SUMMARY

In this article, we argue the need for documentation centers in contemporary art museums to use cataloguing processes, in particular, and information management, in general, to build new audiences and to create communities of sense around their collections. The starting question is how to make catalographic description a channel for collaboration that connects all involved parties: archivists, artists, curators, art critics, activists, researchers, other related professionals, and even visitors, both inside and outside of the museum. Taking the category of *conceptual art* as a case study, this research analyses the effectiveness of social tagging tools used by standardized cataloguing models.

## KEYWORDS

cataloguing; communities of meaning; public programs; folksonomy; conceptual art

In recent years, contemporary art museums have grown more interested in incorporating personal documentation of living artists into their collections, as well as recording the political activity of groups who protest social and human rights movements today. Given the material characteristics and the political-ethical specificity of these records, the documentation centers of museums that safeguard them have been forced to rethink both their cataloguing strategies and even the very make up of their communities of experts and non-experts, that are indispensable for preserving,

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and thus keeping alive these documents as testimonies. Interviews with artists, testimonies from family members, people linked to social processes, activists and civil society organizations, photojournalists, museum visitors, etc. all appear in this new scenario as key elements both for collating archival information and for maintaining the political and aesthetic impetus of the documentation, once it has become part of the museum's documentary heritage.

Faced with the need to adequately process materials as specific as the ones derived from a social movement —let us take as an example the protests concerning the 'detained/disappeared' of *Ayotzinapa*—, museums have begun to ask themselves the following question: is it possible to go beyond the practice of mere indexing, to the point where the process of cataloguing becomes an ally to a museum's outreach public programs, in such a way that its *communities of sense*<sup>1</sup> grow and, with this, the political force, social memory and aesthetic activation of artistic documentation are nourished? Taking as our starting point the hypothesis that this is not only possible but necessary, in what follows I will evaluate whether the descriptive categories offered by thesauri and controlled vocabularies can act as contested territories for the creation of hybrid communities of sense in which, in addition to museum professionals, artists, curators, activists and researchers from outside these institutions can all participate.

In the first part of the article I will deal with the epistemic dimension of specialized thesauri and controlled vocabularies. In the second part I will analyze the concept of *folksonomy* as it is used in documentary environments. In the third part I will describe the principles set out by the ICAA Documents Project of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (MFAH), which clearly express the institutional, discursive and archival mechanisms by which descriptive categories become authorized voices for indexing in museological

<sup>1</sup> The expression *communities of sense* has been used since the 1970s in different fields and areas of knowledge, from social psychology or theology to museum public theories. For some theorists, the term *sense* is related to "sense of belonging", with the generation of significant links and with forms of sociability. Unlike this point of view, for us the word meaning is directly linked to the role of the senses and the sensory in the processes of construction of the common, communities and social subjectivity. More than the field of sociology, we associate "community of sense" with the politics of aesthetic experience. As Jacques Rancière argues: "Community of sense means that the kind of equality and freedom that is experienced in aesthetic experience has to be turned into the community's very form of existence: a form of a collective existence that will no longer be a matter of form and appearance but will rather be embodied in living attitudes, in the materiality of everyday sensory experience" (Hinderliter, Kaisen, Maimon, Mansor y McCormick, 2009, p. 38). Other interpretations of the concept can be consulted at: *Communities of sense/Communities of sentiment: Globalization and the museum void in an extreme periphery* (Buntinx, 2006, pp. 220-246).

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environments. Finally, I will take as a case study the category “conceptual art”, through which on the one hand, I will describe how metadescriptive authority is constructed in an art museum and on the other, I will analyze the tools for social engagement offered by the different standardized cataloguing models used by art museums, such as the CDWA (Categories for Description of Works of Art) or the CIDOC-CRM (Conceptual Reference Model).

### THESAURI AND CONTROLLED VOCABULARIES

Although thesauri specializing in cultural objects have existed for a long time, it was in the early 1980s that more rigorous and specific standardization began to be developed within the field of visual arts, architecture, new media and the performing arts. Described in a very generic way, a thesaurus is a compendium of terms or phrases that, unlike a dictionary, does not provide definitions but rather determines and restricts the uses to be made of each of them in a given context. Thesauri, therefore, fulfill multiple functions, among them, to establish authorized voices when using polysemic or even antagonistic expressions such as: *works of art*, *document*, *artifact*, *Modernism*, *Baroque style*, etc.

They also serve a somewhat opposing function: to link different words that refer to the same concept. Moreover, a thesaurus identifies spelling variations and syntactic errors common in the writing of a word to facilitate the effectiveness of search engines. Furthermore, it is usually multilingual, so that it may function to link terms that are used in different languages that refer to the same concept. In relation to search engines, thesauri allow the crossing of fields and establish disambiguation criteria, that is, they determine terminological families and the degree of linkage between concepts to facilitate optimal and controlled access to information.

The structure of a thesaurus is based on three elements: equivalence, hierarchy, and relationality between terms. To fulfill their objectives, thesauri operate with what are known as controlled vocabularies, that is, with an authoritative compendium of terms and a framework of reference for their descriptions (Harpring, 2010). The ability to control a vocabulary determines the functionality and adaptability of a thesaurus over time. Entering a new term into the body of a thesaurus therefore requires a series of complex and sophisticated institutional, conceptual and informational protocols. If we take for example the term *hybridization*, we would see that it has a diametrically opposed connotation when used in the field of genetics than when used in that of postcolonial theory. Para-

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phrasing Mieke Bal, hybridization would be one of those *traveling concepts* that moved from biology to the field of humanities and, in that migration, reversed the sense of its meaning (Bal, 2009, pp. 38-39).

From an archival science point of view, the usefulness of controlled vocabularies in document management and information architecture are unquestionable (for example, for cross-catalogue consultation, to establish criteria for qualitative research or in the construction of semantic webs). However, from a humanistic perspective, or more specifically, when considering the impact that these semantic restrictions have on the processes of research, visualization and knowledge construction, the question of validation policies and the conceptual models that give legitimacy to the system of authority over controlled vocabularies must be kept open to diverse communities of experts: how are such compendiums of terminological authority constructed? Who participates in their conceptualization, translation and management? In the end, what kind of epistemological debts do thesauri have to their predeceasing illustrated encyclopedic structures that were based on taxonomies and hierarchically organized content?

My opinion is that beyond their mere practical application, the impact of thesauri in the processes of research, canonization and visualization of fields of knowledge, should be considered as objects worthy of study in and of themselves. Thus, while it may seem redundant, I think it is necessary to establish a kind of *metacritique of the metadata*. One which would deal, not only with the epistemic value of how far one set information accurately accounts for other pieces of information, but also, with the historical and institutional processes through which these sets of information acquire meaning, and are transformed and visualized over time. Following from the earlier example of the concept of *hybridization*, it would be of great informative value its use in the field of humanities and its disambiguation from that of some medical sciences, but also the very process of its translation, assimilation and legitimation that has been granted to it by its respective community of experts when they accepted it into the field of critical theory and cultural analysis. In other words, the historical evolution behind the meaning of terms constitutes an especially important degree of information that must be preserved as part of a specialized thesaurus.

From what has been said so far, it is easy to recognize that the epistemological dimension of thesauri pose a series of problems to the effective public service given by the institutions that safeguard our archives and even, to the capacity of agency of the communities







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tion about art, architecture, and material culture, focusing on academic researchers and scholars” (Lanzi, 2010, p. 5672). In its latest versions, the CDWA includes a category called “critical responses”, designed to record “critical opinions about a specific work by artists, art historians, art critics, art dealers, sellers and buyers, public officials, and the general public” (Lanzi, 2010, p. 5673). At the same time, as Murtha Baca has pointed out, from conceptual models such as CIDOC-CRM (Conceptual Reference Model) it is feasible to put into operation *social tagging* tools, that is, multidirectional systems of a collective construction of tags. In her own words:

Incorporating input from curators, experts, and other specialists is an area that institutions must foster if they want to generate rich and accurate descriptions of the non-bibliographic works in their collections. Information from non-cataloging experts could be collected routinely if there were effective methods of communication and collaboration between cataloguers and curators. Social tagging by experts (that is, the inclusion of keywords, names and topics by experts who are not part of the official cataloging unit of the institution) can be, at the same time, an effective method to enrich the records descriptive metadata (Baca & O’Keefe, 2008, p. 3).

### THESAURUS EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY

Since the 1980s, the Getty Foundation has been developing various specialized vocabularies. One of them being the Art & Architecture Thesaurus (AAT), a vocabulary of authorized terms specialized in art, architecture, decorative arts, material culture and archival material. The AAT currently has about 375,000 terms structured hierarchically from concepts organized through some 60,000 entries or records called subjects. The AAT is a poly-hierarchical thesaurus, that is, it has different levels of internal hierarchy, so that a term may be related to one or more *conceptual families*. One of the most important hierarchies of the AAT is linguistics, meaning that it is a multilingual vocabulary in which English is the dominant language:

In a completely dominant vocabulary, all languages are treated equally, with none serving as a so-called dominant language. However, in practical applications it is often necessary to treat one language as the default dominant language, particularly when the vocabulary is rich and complex. An example is the AAT, in which each concept record includes over one hundred fields

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or data elements in addition to the term itself [...] For the AAT, English is the dominant language, although terms and scope notes may be in multiple languages. In addition, if every term in the original source language has not been assigned equivalent in all other target languages, the status of the other languages is not equal to that of the source language, and they are known as *secondary languages* (Harpring, 2010, p. 92).

However, despite its status as a *secondary language*, in the last decade Spanish has begun to expand its presence both in the public sphere and in the documentary and computer environments of American institutions. That is why, as Chilean researcher Cristián Gómez-Moya recalls, in the second half of the 1990s the Getty Vocabulary Program and the *Dirección de Bibliotecas, Archivos y Museos* (Dibam), part of Chile's Center for the *Centro de Documentación de Bienes Patrimoniales* (CDBP), began the process of translating the AAT into Spanish (Gómez-Moya, 2010). The result of 10 years of work was the creation of the *Tesaurus de Arte & Arquitectura* (TAA), which consists not only of the translation of terms into Spanish, but also in the creation of *equivalences* and *preferred terms* for the different uses of Spanish terms throughout the world. This is important for our analysis since, to a large extent, the aim is to extend the linguistic hierarchy of the dominant language (English) and the dominant vocabulary (AAT) to the different local registers of Spanish without losing the interoperability of the translation. If I have expanded on the general foundations of the Art & Architecture Thesaurus and its derivative, the *Tesaurus de Arte & Arquitectura* (TAA),<sup>6</sup> it is because both operate like the “archival grammar” of the ICCA Documents Project.

In January 2012, the ICCA at the MFAH first made available to the public part of its Documents Project, an ambitious project to digitalize documents of Latin American and Latino art of the 20th century.<sup>7</sup> On the ICCA website itself, this project is defined as:

the result of a decade-long, multimillion-dollar initiative to identify and retrieve thousands of primary and critical texts [...] by notable Latin American and Latino artists, critics, curators, and others

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note how the editors of the *Tesaurus de Arte & Arquitectura* decided to leave the conjunction in English (&) to establish a visual and syntactic identification with the vocabulary in that language.

<sup>7</sup> In its first phase, this project sought to make 10,000 documents accessible (manifestos, newspaper articles, letters, artist sketches, papers and unpublished manuscripts) and, from that first block, currently aims to expand the digital archive following the mechanics of a *work in progress*.



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who have played an important role in the development of the art produced along this cultural axis [...] the *Documents Project* addresses the lag in the field of Latin American art history, research, and teaching. The monumental, long-term impact facilitates the pursuit of new knowledge in the field and establishes a legitimate area of scholarship in U.S. universities (Ramírez, 2012, pp. 27-32).

To carry out this project, the ICAA —founded in 2001 and directed by Mari Carmen Ramírez —has worked for 10 years with more than 100 renowned researchers as well as numerous educational and cultural institutions located throughout the continent. It can be concluded that we are facing one of the most solid, most ambitious and best coordinated documentary projects linked to Latin American and Latino art developed so far.

However, given its documentary architecture, its geographical framework and its aspiration to create a new area of study in American universities, it seems to me that it is necessary to go beyond the mere recognition of its importance and scope as a tool for research. Because it is already in the second phase of its expansion, and its consolidation, I believe that the impact of this type of project should be analyzed from various perspectives, including considering what epistemological consequences its role as an agent for the standardization of categories related to art in the region, will have. In other words, a critical reading of the *metadescriptive authority* on which projects of this type are structured is needed.

ICAA Documents Project has two main platforms: a digital archive of documents (Documents of 20th Century Latin American and Latino Art) and a collection of thematically structured documentary collections (Critical Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art). The interesting thing is that both platforms are structured from the same set of metadata; that is, one and the other are the result of the standardization of a series of categories (titles, names, authors, subjects, places) and of terms-themes authorized by an editorial committee. The function of these metadescriptors is to structure not only the semantic architecture of digital search engines but also the editorial architecture of publications.<sup>8</sup> Hence, these are understood as the documentary extension of the

<sup>8</sup> These categories are the following: 1) Latin American and / or Latino?; 2) Abstract vs. figurative; 3) Art, political activism and social change; 4) Race, class and gender issues; 5) Conceptualisms and non-objectual art; 6) Exile, displacement, diaspora; 7) Globalization; 8) Graphics and community building; 9) Hyperrealism, magical realism and the fantastic; 10) National Imaginaries and Cosmopolitan Identities; 11) Mass communication media, technology and art; 12) Recycling and hybridization; 13) Geometric and constructive utopias.

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where the standardization of categories can be DISCURSIVELY RESISTED but also where one can POLITICALLY INTERVENE in the terminological architectures on which our archives are ordered. I am referring to the disruption of the METADESCRIPTIVE AUTHORITY of controlled vocabularies by creating communities of sense that appropriate and diversify the public use of catalographic description. However, as I have pointed out before, just because they can get out of control does not mean that it is easy or that their political and epistemic consequences can be entirely predictable. In fact, carrying out such a type of intervention requires a high degree of archival activism in a field still largely unexplored by institutional critique.

### CONCEPTUAL ART AS A DISPUTED CATALOGRAPHIC TERRITORY

To date, neither the Art & Architecture Thesaurus nor its Spanish version, the *Tesaurus de Arte & Arquitectura*, offer entries that allow for an adequate contextualization of the differences between the categories of “conceptual art” and “conceptualist practices”. This means that when describing, for example, the documentation of a collective experience of aesthetic-political rupture such as Tucumán Arde, one is forced to enter the category of “conceptual art” and correlate it with others, such as “political art”, “Argentine art”, etc.

The case of Tucumán Arde is relevant not only because of its place in the history of Latin American art, but also because of the problems that its institutionalization has entailed in terms of museology and cataloguing. As we know, Tucumán Arde is a name that acquired a set of aesthetic-political interventions and direct actions of semiotic disruption in Argentina towards the end of the 1960s. Broadly speaking, the experience consisted of three stages. First, an artists’ collective traveled to the Tucumán sugar region to document the marginality and poverty that had been generated by Argentina’s economic developmentalist ideology. At the same time that a press release was being issued at the Museum of Fine Arts, a series of interventions in public spaces began to appear in the cities of Rosario and Santa Fe, consisting of graffiti with the words TUCUMÁN ARDE and the pasting of posters announcing the holding of the First Biennial of Avant-garde Art. Then, the collective carried out an action-exhibition at the *Confederación General del Trabajo* (CGT) in Rosario, in which it showed through photographs, banners and performances, the conditions of exploitation that were being experienced in Tucumán. Given its radical nature and semiotic

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strategy, this action was blocked and censored by the police, who prevented the third phase of the project to be concluded in its entirety in Buenos Aires as intended.

From the early 1970s, European and American art historians took Tucumán Arde as the quintessential model of Latin American conceptual art, defining it as the antithesis of the typical Anglo-Saxon analytical, cold, rational and apolitical conceptualism, while the Latin American one was described as ideological-political conceptualism. The entry of archival materials related to Tucumán Arde into the collections of major international museums in recent decades reopened the debate around these antagonistic and stereotypical characterizations, raising questions not only about the collection of global art but also about the cataloguing systems and the most appropriate terminologies to be used when speaking about the different conceptualisms and their historical disputes.

In 2015, the *Red Conceptualismos del Sur* (Southern Conceptualisms Network) —to which Graciela Carnevale, a member of the collective that carried out the original Tucumán Arde art protests, belongs— published *Desinventario. Esquirlas de Tucumán Arde en el archivo de Graciela Carnevale (Un-inventory: Splinters of Tucumán Arde in Graciela Carnevale’s archive)* with the intention of analyzing the potential problems involved in referring to the Tucumán Arde archive either as a Latin American model of conceptual art or as a concrete experience of what the book defines as Latin American conceptualist practices (Carnevale, Expósito, Mesquita & Vindel, 2015). The publication is interesting for my argument insofar as it invites an analysis of the case of Tucumán Arde from the point of view of the cataloguing protocols and the archive policies of the art museum. In controversial cases such as this one, we are faced with the dilemma of deciding which terminology to use to most effectively highlight the aesthetic-political conjunctures that have defined the documentary and heritage history of art documentation.

Without claiming to offer a single solution for the different possible cases, an alternative would be, in the event that the CDWA model is being used, to include a commentary in the Critical Responses category clarifying the distinction between “conceptual art” and “conceptualisms”, and framing the historical-political context of their disambiguation. However, given that we already have an important body of documents that could easily justify the relevance and authority of alternative categories such as “conceptualisms”, “conceptualist practices”, “non-objectualisms”, etc., it is also feasible to think about granting them DESCRIPTIVE AUTHORITY within the con-

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trolled vocabulary. In fact, the editorial metadescrptors of the ICAA project include both “conceptualisms” and “non-objectual art”. This is undoubtedly highly suggestive, as it opens up a whole space of theoretical production; however, it also entails two different types of problems that have to be discussed in detail.

On the one hand, as I have already said, the hierarchical structure of thesauri is designed precisely to resist the instability and lack of control of their terminology, which implies a series of technical and conceptual aspects that need to be resolved taking into account the possibilities offered by folksonomy (the creation of diversified communities of experts, the permanent collection of critical responses, the revision of vocabulary entries, intervention in linguistic hierarchies, etc.). On the other, the very idea of equalizing the degree of authority of non-canonical categories so that they operate in the cataloguing process means, to some degree, the loss of their destabilizing function and the beginning of their canonization.

In relation to the latter point (the imminent canonization of a series of categories that until now had operated as counter-discourses), it is worthwhile raising the possibility of granting them some kind of *alternative* (*satellite* or *tactical*) authority with the intention that these type of *semicanonical* categories can really preserve the critical and disruptive force that they had before they were integrated into the controlled vocabulary as authorized entries. However, such an idea entails, in turn, a number of potential problems that must be taken into account. If we were to apply, for example, the category “conceptualisms” as an *ALTERNATIVE AUTHORITY* to the category “conceptual art”, we would have to assess at least three scenarios.

A first potential danger would be that “conceptualisms” could be used as a manifestation of “conceptual art” that is, as one of the forms in which art as an idea or concept is materialized (which would leave the canonical basis on which the category “conceptual art” is currently built, intact). Secondly, “conceptualisms” could be understood as the Latin American expression of “conceptual art”, that is, as “Latin American conceptual art” (which would not only leave its terminological authority intact, but would also create a false familiarity between totally dissimilar and even opposing conceptual experiences). A third potential pitfall would be that “conceptualisms” could be understood exclusively as the authorized meaning of the Spanish translation of “conceptual art” that is, as the preferred term to refer to such category in the Spanish language (which would underline the character of Spanish as a secondary language in terms of metadescriptive authority).



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## CONCLUSIONS

As can be deduced from the above, the use of controlled vocabularies in art museums exposes a series of theoretical and practical problems obliging the active and involved participation of different COMMUNITIES OF SENSE, which must discuss the value of FOLKSONOMY and of authorized voices when including new terminologies in the cataloguing processes. Therefore, in order to consider the catalographic viability of categories such as “conceptualisms” we need to first ask ourselves: to what extent it is desirable to claim their descriptive authority in a given documentary context and above all, what the consequences would be of doing so in one way or another.

If we accept that museum archives are places for reflection, negotiation, identification and a construction of the common; that is, if we are willing to consider them as instruments for the activation of political life and for the breaking of consensus in giving body and meaning to social memory, we will also have to accept that the analysis of the *metadescriptive authority* of controlled vocabularies must involve different communities of meaning, including archivists, social scientists, curators, artists, activists and non-expert audiences, even though they do not all speak the same language or have the same objectives in mind.

In this way, the documentary categories used and consequently made problematic by art museums, would become true territories of dispute, and documentary management would be able to overflow towards the creation of social links and communities of sense more in line with the supposed public service role of museums and with the development of digital humanities.

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