

From the periphery to the centre: Community engagement and justice in conservation decision making

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ABSTRACT

Conservation nowadays is understood as a broad concept that considers objects as contextual and contingent. The social dimensions of the conservation object, however, have been successively overlooked in most conservation endeavours. Although communities are considered an important stakeholder in conservation decision-making processes, engagement with communities in practice is clearly deficient. The lack of communication with these communities can be understood as a symptom of the overall misrecognition of this peripheral stakeholder that raises questions concerning the justice of the conservation process in its social context. The aim of this paper is to explore how the notion of *justice* can be applied to conservation decision-making through the example of two performance-based artworks. Finally, a reflective approach that acknowledges the 'documentation of absence' is suggested.

INTRODUCTION

In 1979, the Portuguese artist Carlos Nogueira (b. 1947) started planning a participatory action called *The grey days (Os dias cinzentos)*. After 41 years under a dictatorship (1933–74) and tainted by a long and violent Colonial War in Africa, Portugal was still a young democracy. *The grey days*, which emerged as a reaction to this period of repression, and the work *To Camões and to you (A Camões e a ti, 1980)* were two of the first participatory performance works created by Carlos Nogueira. *The grey days* was held in an art gallery (Galeria Diferença) during the spring equinox, at around 10:30 pm, when, according to the artist, winter would become spring (Nogueira 2015b). With a slide projection, the artist showed pictures of grey skies in an allusion to the absence of colour that soldiers felt while fighting in the Portuguese Colonial War (Nogueira 2015b). Nogueira then moved the projector's light to show a pink pencil placed on the floor, intended to hint slightly at a hope that was yet to come. When the projection stopped, the artist sprinkled tiny pieces of paper of various colours in an attempt to disrupt the monochromatic tone with colour. Later, after changing his clothes from grey to white and revealing a bright blue sky by projecting blue onto the gallery's ceiling, he gave pencils to the participants and invited them to paint their own sky (Nogueira 2015b). *To Camões and to you* consists of a public celebration of the 400th anniversary of the death of Portuguese poet Luís de Camões. During the performance, 400 paper bouquets were placed on the floor, while spectators received a flyer stating 'The whole world is made out of change' (Nogueira 2015a, see Figures 1 and 2). This sentence, coined by the poet Camões in *Os Lusíadas (The Lusíads, first published in 1572)*, was particularly meaningful for a generation that was born during the dictatorship and was experiencing political change for the very first time.

Returning to the present day, and looking through conservation lenses, these works are incredibly difficult to preserve. Not only are they created and disseminated through gestures, actions, relationships and emotions, which cannot be transmitted or replicated by any means of language (Phelan 1993), but they are also part of an (art) historical narrative whose conditions are not replicable or even representable. Moreover, the artwork lives through the empathy that the artist creates through a kind of aesthetics of engagement with spectators. In this context, the role spectators undertake

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Figure 1. Detail from the 1980 version of *To Camões and to you*, held in Vila Nova de Cerveira (Portugal), showing the artist delivering flyers to the town's inhabitants

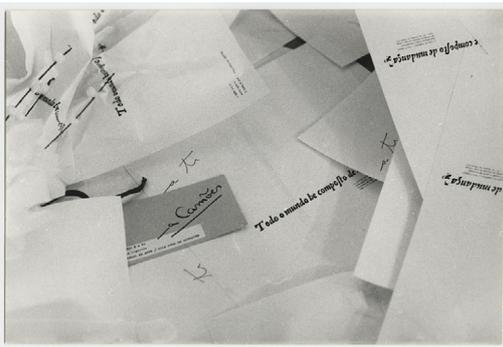


Figure 2. Flyers from the 1980 version of *To Camões and to you*

in both performance works – as willing and active participants – raises some issues regarding their own participation in the preservation of these artworks for future generations. Should conservation accommodate the different voices of communities in the decision-making process? After all, for whom are we conserving this cultural heritage?

Drawing on the concept of *justice*, conceptualised by the critical theorist Nancy Fraser, it is important to explore how this notion can be applied to conservation decision-making, while discussing the role and significance of the stakeholders involved in that process.

ON THE CONSERVATION OF PERFORMANCE-BASED ARTWORKS

In recent years, the notion of conservation as an object-oriented discipline has been reviewed. The shift from material-based conservation to an approach that focuses on subjects instead of objects (Muñoz-Viñas 2004, 147) has made very clear that objects are contextual and contingent. In theory, conservation is thus considered an integrated process that encompasses many dimensions within a social framework (Avrami et al. 2000). In practice, however, the social dimension of objects (i.e. the relationship between objects and the communities that participate in their development and fruition) has been successively overlooked in most conservation endeavours. This situation is currently endangering works that present themselves as within a socially engaged, performance-based, or participative framework. These works, such as *The grey days* and *To Camões and to you*, have a social presence that cannot be disregarded in the decision-making process that leads to their conservation.

The decision-making process in conservation: Acknowledging stakeholders

As part of the decision-making process, which consists of a phased process that starts with a conservation *problem* and usually ends with a conservation *strategy*, the main stakeholders are identified. Communities, together with owners, artists and conservators, among others, are usually part of those stakeholders. Indeed, several cases in conservation literature refer to community consultation without specifying how they define ‘community’, or how that consultation process would work. In a systematic study about collaboration with artists and communities, Jane Henderson shows that conservation literature reports some instances of community engagement (Henderson 2016). It becomes clear, however, that in the current system, consultation with dominant stakeholders such as the owner, ‘experts’ (as defined by Muñoz-Viñas 2004) and, sometimes, artists has a clear prevalence over consultation with communities. In the same study, Henderson concludes that, although there seems to be effective communication regarding the values of cultural heritage, where ‘consultation strays into the aspects of conservation practice and decisions that impinge on the physical manifestation of the object there is less ease with the community’ (Henderson 2016, 77). And when there is, in fact, interaction with communities, this detail remains absent from the conservation documentation that accompanies the object into the future (Henderson 2016, 75, referring to a 2009 essay written by R. Sloggett). This situation is highly problematic for the conservation of cultural heritage objects in general, but it is even worse when it comes

to the preservation of cultural heritage involving social artistic practices, ethnographic objects, public art and participatory or performance art, which comprise necessary cooperation with communities and artists and where, sometimes, documentation is the only thing that endures the passage of time.

Acknowledging that documentation is always incomplete, it is important to understand what is missing in this case. By being successively absent from the conservation decision-making process and from the documentation that is produced as an act of remembrance for present and future generations, communities connected to the object are being forgotten by systems of power that tend to enhance certain voices instead of others (Waterton and Smith 2010). On the other hand, the concept of ‘community’ is very heterogeneous, and if some of the social groups and communities involved may easily be identified due to the development of formal or informal associations, in some instances the stakeholders are impossible to identify and, therefore, to reach in an effective manner (Waterton and Smith 2010).

But how does this unbalanced participation in the decision-making process affect the preservation of these works? How can conservation decision-making processes be just to all the stakeholders?

JUSTICE AS PARITY OF PARTICIPATION

Acknowledging that cultural heritage is something that belongs to all of us, it is possible to consider it in terms of a public realm, or *public sphere*. As stated by Mitchell (1995, 117), this term, coined by Habermas (1964), refers to a realm in which democracy occurs. Going beyond the critics of Habermas’ term ‘public sphere’ and determining the roles communities should have in the decision-making process, it is important to consider the ideas of the critical theorist Nancy Fraser about the ‘actually existing democracy’ (Fraser 1990, 56). According to the author, not only are publics (in the broad sense of the term) differently ‘empowered or segmented’ and some ‘involuntarily . . . subordinated to others’, but this inequality is often invisible within these publics (Fraser 1990, 77). In this context, justice, which according to Fraser ‘requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers’ (Fraser 2003, 36), is absent from most areas of society. This notion, also known as *parity of participation*, is at the core of Fraser’s theory of social justice. The main challenges to this utopian ideal are, according to the author, *maldistribution*, misrecognition and injustices of representation (Fraser 2003). Waterton and Smith’s essay about misrecognition of community heritage (2010), based on Fraser’s model of social justice, explain that misrecognition is the main challenge associated with heritage studies. Waterton and Smith’s account is focused on what is considered cultural heritage or not, but this notion of misrecognition can also be applied to the decision making in conservation.

According to Fraser, misrecognition is a problem that ‘denies some individuals and groups the possibility of participating on a par with others in social interaction’ (Fraser 2001, 27). Drawing on this perspective, it becomes clear that communities have been misrecognised in conservation decision-making processes. Either by failing, or not even attempting, to

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Figure 3. Detail from the 1981 version of *To Camões and to you*, held in São Paulo (Brazil), showing a museum wall painted with Camões' sentence



Figure 4. The artist throwing coloured papers to the audience in the São Paulo version of *To Camões and to you* (1981)

identify possible spokespersons within communities, or by making their accounts about the work invisible, or even by transforming communities into mere consultants, conservation is withdrawing power from this stakeholder. Fraser's notion of justice suggests that, as users of cultural heritage, communities should also be responsible for its preservation. This unbalanced participation creates at least two problems: 1) in the case of works based on intangible or performative features, the voices of *present generations* are successively being forgotten; and 2) it increases the barrier between publics and cultural heritage, compromising the identification that communities might feel towards the object.

Returning to Carlos Nogueira's artworks, it is possible to say that communities are particularly relevant as a stakeholder in the decision-making process. But which communities should be part of that process? Should people who have received the paper bouquets in *To Camões and to you* be called to decide if and how the work should be preserved? Or could each of the participants that painted the grey skies in a myriad of bright colours in *The grey days* be part of the decision-making process along with conservators and the artist?

CHALLENGING DECISION MAKING: COMMUNITIES AS STAKEHOLDERS?

In 2012, an anthological exhibition entitled *Carlos Nogueira: A place for all things* opened at the Centro de Arte Moderna (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation). In this exhibition, the gallery's *white cube* format transformed the participatory action *The grey days* into photo documentation. In an adjacent room, a version of *To Camões and to you* was re-created. Instead of the first version of this work, produced for the first time in 1980, the curatorial department decided to use the version that was presented in São Paulo (Brazil) in 1981 (see Figures 3 and 4) as a basis for the 2012 presentation. Although very different, both versions (from 1980 and 1981) shared some characteristics: 1) they were performed outside the museum; 2) they interacted with the audience (either by delivering flyers with Camões' sentence, by influencing their path or by throwing coloured tiny papers at them); and 3) they consisted of an action performed by the artist. In 2012, the (less than four-hundred) bouquets were placed on the exhibition floor. The white wall above them, mimicking São Paulo's version of the work, was occupied by Camões' statement 'the whole world is made out of change' (see Figures 5 and 6). And while both versions from the 1980s included a performance element and some kind of interaction with spectators, this time museum visitors experienced this work as a historic artefact. Spectators, engaged in their own *flânerie*, did not interact with *To Camões and to you*. In this exhibition, these two works, which were created in a context of generosity and sharing between artist and spectator, became museum objects. Although visitors today do not share the excitement of change that a generation involved in four decades of austerity and repression was clearly exteriorising, the artist himself explains that the *concept of change* remains current, from 1572 (date of the first print of *The Lusiads*) until today, and into the future (Nogueira 2015a).

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Figure 6. Museum wall, adjacent to the 2012 version of the work, showing some images from the 1981 version of *To Camões and to you*



Figure 5. Detail from the 2012 version of *To Camões and to you*, held at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (Lisbon, Portugal), showing a museum wall painted with Camões' sentence and the paper bouquets on the floor

The documentation process for this work began in 2015. Carlos Nogueira, 68 years old at the time, could not remember some of the details of the work exactly, but was extremely clear about its nature, stating: 'All my work, particularly the performative, is a work aimed at communication and giving' (Nogueira 2015a). Throughout several meetings, the artist remained sceptical about the place of these performance works in contemporary society and seemed to be more inclined to transform the material *remains* (even if re-created, as happened with the bouquets in *To Camões and to you*) into historic evidence or documents. By complying with the artist's opinion (not the same as *intention*), the preservation of these participatory performance works loses both its participatory and performative elements. The museum team decided, nonetheless, to follow the artist's opinion by presenting the works as historic objects, following conservation's codes of ethics and current theories (in which the artist's voice is considered in the decision-making process). But in these cases, should they have consulted communities? And should communities have had an active voice in the decision-making process?

Towards future engagement: The role of present communities

The absence of communities in decision-making circles is not accidental. As explained by Waterton and Smith (2010, 13), 'communities of expertise have been placed in a position that regulates and assesses the relative *worth* of other communities of interest, both in terms of their aspirations and their identities.' For this reason, and in this case, it is possible to consider this heterogeneous group as a set of people who share an interest on the object and on its conservation.

Communities with a connection to *To Camões and to you* and *The grey days* include the artist and his social circle, the participants, audiences of all versions from both performances, the museum visitors of the anthological exhibition of 2012 and the people that heard about both versions of the performance and share an interest in the work. This notion of community,

perhaps somehow more inclusive, leaves conservation decision-making in a conundrum: being inclusive means becoming unmanageable. Indeed, although it would be possible for conservators to promote a participative action, by creating multiple open, physical and virtual forums where individuals of different communities could directly engage in the conservation process of a given artwork, that would inevitably raise some problems by: 1) creating an issue with community representation as, probably, different communities would not be *equally* represented in the process; 2) making conservation processes more time consuming; 3) increasing the costs of conservation actions due to the employment of more (and more specialised) human resources in order to analyse the data; and 4) transforming conservation into an openly political action, as many voices (the ones that would argue for the objects destruction, for example) would probably not be considered. Despite these problems, communities still need to be involved in order to promote a more just decision-making process. In the case of Carlos Nogueira's performative works, it becomes even more relevant as these works need to be preserved for present generations in order to transmit their memory – through documentation, or by re-performance – to future generations. This issue, that embodies the idea of intergenerational justice (Taylor 2013), makes even more evident the role that present generations need to have in the preservation of intangible manifestations. After all, what is the purpose of conserving cultural heritage for 'future generations' if 'present generations' are not asked to decide in the process?

LINKING PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE THROUGH CONSERVATION

Those 'whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation and does not encompass decision-making' cannot claim to have real influence (Fraser 1990, 75).

As suggested by Nancy Fraser in the citation above, justice in conservation means allowing all stakeholders to equally intervene in the decision-making process. That practice can easily become unmanageable, as communities remain undefined and lack proper means of interaction. More than being an issue of social justice, it is also a matter of intergenerational justice. Present communities are misrepresented in conservation decision-making processes in two instances – as peripheral stakeholders (by being members of 'communities' that are not asked to decide), and as a generation with fewer rights than past and future communities, which are now being represented by 'experts'.

Looking at Nogueira's works, it is possible to see how easily the preservation process can become unfair for communities. It is important, however, to acknowledge the limitations of the decision-making process, including the misrepresentation of communities. That acknowledgement can take form in the work's documentation. By documenting all decisions, including all stakeholders involved in the decision-making process, the engagement process, and the way decisions have been made, conservators in the present can make sure that future generations make more informed decisions, linking the past of the conservation object to its future. On the other hand, by including reflective remarks about the decision-making process in the

technical documentation it is possible to acknowledge the incomplete nature of documentation, recognising the stakeholders that have been inevitably missed in the process. This new field, called ‘documentation of absence’, will allow conservators to reflect upon the limitations of the conservation process, including not only what got lost, but also what could not be recovered.

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