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COMCOL is the International Committee of ICOM with the mission to deepen discussions and share knowledge of the practice, theory and ethics of collecting and collections development.

*COMCOL Newsletter* is a forum for developing the work of COMCOL and we welcome contributions from museum professionals and scholars all over the world: short essays on projects, reflections, conference/seminar reports, specific questions, notices about useful reading material, invitations to cooperate, new research or other matters. Views and opinions published in the newsletter are the views of the contributors. Contributions for the next issue are welcomed by **20 September** to the editors, and contact us also if you wish to discuss a theme for publication.

*COMCOL Newsletter* is published four times a year and is available at COMCOL's website <http://www.comcol-icom.org> and at ICOM's website <http://icom.museum/who-we-are/the-committees/international-committees/international-committee/international-committee-for-collecting.html>.

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## Statement from the Chair

Dear readers!

Summer is finally there and I hope you all can enjoy the wonderful holiday season. The last couple of months we have been working hard to organize our Annual Conference, which this year takes place in Cape Town (South Africa). I write **we**, because we organize this Annual Conference together with a lot of partners: The International Committee ICMAH, ICOM-South Africa, the IZIKO Museums and the District Six Museum. With so many stakeholders things are not always moving so fast, but in this newsletter you will find not only a preliminary programme, but also some additional information about our COMCOL Collecting workshop, organized with the District Six Museum. This workshop is a follow up of the contact and discourse that started during our conference last November, when Chrischene Julius was one of our speakers in Berlin. Information about the fees and application will be distributed as soon as possible. Please also check our website regularly: [www.comcol-icom.org](http://www.comcol-icom.org) for the newest information.

In the previous Newsletter I wrote about an excursion to Belgium in the beginning of September. The response was moderate and I can imagine that this might have something to do with the proposed dates. I suggest that I postpone this idea of a COMCOL excursion to our next Newsletter. An alternative to Belgium would be Liverpool, because last time

Elisabeth Tietmeyer and I spoke on the phone, Elisabeth had just met David Fleming (Director of the Liverpool Museums) and was very enthusiastic. I will keep you posted!

Last, but not least I want to draw your attention to the article of Åsa Stenström, published in this Newsletter. In her article, Åsa writes about the end of a Samdok era, but also about new beginnings. Out of modesty Eva Fägerborg has deleted the following: “One person has also been very important for Samdok, Eva Fägerborg. She has been enthusiastic and inventive and has planned and organized a lot of autumn meetings where ethnologists from the museums have shared their experiences with invited guests who have held seminars on different themes. We all, who have been involved in Samdok, will miss Eva and her fantastic work!”.... Sorry Eva, being the Chair of COMCOL means that I can write and quote whatever and whoever I want...

Looking forward seeing you all in Cape Town and to communicate with you via our Facebook page, but don't hesitate to mail me with your questions, opinions, ideas and suggestions. We are all part of the COMCOL community!

***Léontine Meijer-van Mensch***

Chair of COMCOL

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## COMCOL Annual Conference 2012

**ICMAH/COMCOL/ICOM SOUTH AFRICA: *Museums and the Idea of Historical Progress*.** Annual Conference 2012, Cape Town  
Draft of the conference programme

**Tuesday 6 November** 10.00-15.00

Venue: District Six Museum

*COMCOL workshop:* Collecting Memory as a 'Collections' Practice.

We are pleased to have the opportunity for a special day at the District Six Museum and Prestwich Ossuary Memorial Complex. Our aim is to facilitate the sharing of different institutions learnings around collecting memory as a 'collections' practice. The District Six site that speaks to living memory and the Prestwich Memorial that speaks to historical memory and how it lives today. (Open to all, max. 30 participants.)

**Wednesday 7 November** 9.00-18.00

Joint programme

Venue: Iziko South African Museum

Opening of the conference  
Welcoming speeches

*Keynote speaker* Mokena Makeka, Director of Modila, Museum of Design, Innovation, Leadership and Art, Cape Town, South Africa

*Session 1:* Idea for a Better Society

Museums in colonial and post-colonial times: values and practices in collecting and presentations (especially economical, political, ethnographical, and historical concepts)

Lunch

*Session 2:* Museums as Vehicles for the Advancement of Tolerance, Recognition, and Acceptance of Diversity and Human Rights.

Are there differences in the way these concepts are conceived in North and South, East and West? What are the consequences for collecting, presenting and educational work?

*Pitch of ideas for cooperation projects*

Introduction by Dr. Ruth Sithole.

18.00: Evening programme

Iziko South African Museum

**Thursday 8 November** 9.00-18.00

Joint programme

Venue: Iziko South African Museum

*Keynote speaker* Professor Susan Legêne, VU University, Amsterdam, Netherlands: Powerful Ideas – Museums, Empire Utopias and Connected Worlds.

*Session 3:* A new Future, a New Type of Museum?

What task for museums in an era of new utopias and dystopias? What new form of co-operation (South-South, East-South) between the institutions? Exchanging collections, people, ideas?

Lunch

*Session 4:* Museums in the Digital Age

*Conclusions from the joint days*

18.00: Evening programme

**Friday 9 November** 9.00-18.00

Separate programme for COMCOL

Venue: Iziko South African Museum

Session

Lunch

Joint workshop of the working groups Resources and Contemporary Collecting. Presenting COMCOL as one of the International Committee of ICOM. COMCOL annual meeting (General Assembly)

**Saturday 10 November**

Excursion day: Robben Island Museum

**Sunday 11 November**

Post-conference tour

## Brought to Light: unlocking the Powerhouse Museum collection

*Sarah Jane Wick*

The Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, Australia, began its life in 1879 as the 'Technological, Industrial and Sanitary Museum'. Its first objects were gleaned from the International Exhibition at the Garden Palace in the Botanical Gardens in Sydney. In 1893, the name was changed to the "Technological Museum" and this was accompanied by a move to new premises in

Harris Street, Ultimo. The Technological Museum collected objects both familiar and exotic. Chinese musical instruments, Australian decorative arts, Japanese swords, model locomotives, reproductions of the 'treasures' of Europe and the latest in technology. In 1945, the Museum was renamed the "Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences".



*Interior of Powerhouse Discovery Centre. Photo: Marinco Kojdanovski. Reproduction courtesy of the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney*

With the ever expanding presence of on-line collections, objects can be viewed at the click of a button. The Powerhouse Museum itself has over 91,000 objects available to be viewed on-line – but how many objects can be viewed in person? The reality is less than 5 per cent. With such a large number of objects and collections in storage how do you engage an audience beyond a traditional museum exhibition to communicate a collection that is

in its very nature much more that meets the eye?

Opened to the public in March 2007, the Powerhouse Discovery Centre's Collection Stores at Castle Hill is the Powerhouse Museum's off-site collection storage and preservation facility. The 2.8 hectare Castle Hill property is 35 km North West of the city. The site contains seven dedicated storage



buildings that were constructed over a 30 year period.

The Discovery Centre offers visitor access although this is poles apart from the Powerhouse Museum experience. The nature of the site, both as a storage and collection care facility, offers a complementary experience to the traditional museum one. The Powerhouse Discovery Centre aims to capture the rawness,

directness, and uniqueness of the visitor's engagement with the site, the collection and the objects. It combines state-of-the-art museum storage with a strong emphasis on education and direct engagement, in order to be an open and collaborative museum. Drawing on people's personal experience with objects in the collection, the visitor becomes the 'Co curator'.



*Volunteer guide giving talk on the Standfield mousetrap making machine. Photo: Jean-Francois Lanzaone. Reproduction courtesy of Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.*

The Display Store, the centrepiece of the Discovery Centre visitor experience is a museum housing some 3,000 objects covering the scope of all the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences collection areas. The selection of objects on exhibit in the Display Store presents the strengths, the diversity and the history of the Powerhouse Collection. The Display Store is an immersive introduction to the broad range of the collection; pop culture fused with transport and architecture, from arts and craft, to military memorabilia. The lower level of the Display Store features objects from the transport collection that dwarf the visitor with their size. Seven light aircraft and gliders are suspended above coaches, trams, buses, cars, steam engines and even a gypsy caravan. The large upper level of the Display Store houses a range of objects showing how they are stored, including pallet racking, specialised metal storage units and drawers. The drawers enable visitors to actively discover the diversity of

objects in the Powerhouse Collection from indigenous artefacts to early domestic appliances to fine china and Olympic medals. A selection of drawers provides information on Collection care, Conservation and documentation of the vast collection.

The Discovery Centre's education and public programs provide visitors with a range of engaging activities which encourage discovery and learning. The Discovery Centre is able to tailor programs which directly relate to specific syllabus outcomes for primary and secondary students in consultation with teachers. Tertiary students and those seeking wider professional development programs are also invited to pursue their individual needs.

The primary aim is to enable visitors to enjoy and explore the museum's collection. History students take on the role of a historian/museum curator allowing them to handle a variety of

education collection objects in order to explore the nature and significance of history. A typical visit begins with a multi-media presentation introducing the concepts of history, museums, and the importance of the conservation of heritage, followed by a tour of selected museum objects in the Display Store, focusing on historical inquiry and the necessity of preservation.

Beyond the Display Store are a series of multi-storey environmentally controlled building which house specific collections from the earliest forms of transport to hybrid cars; from Georgian furniture to the Lockheed lounge; and three meter computer main frames to astronomic slide rules. The buildings are designed to enable ongoing collection care and maintenance with ease of access. Obvious design features include; hoists, loading docks and work spaces featuring a large photography studio space with offices for the day to day operation of this extensive site. There is also a Conservation workshop where restoration and treatment of large objects can take place. Currently, a group of volunteers is assisting Conservation staff with the restoration of a steel hulled yacht that sailed to the Antarctic.

The stores are purpose built with full environmental control, security and fire protection systems. The stores contain RF wireless systems that enable the Collection Management System (KE Emu) to be used through Tablets, PDAs or laptop computers. All locations and objects within the stores are barcoded allowing for instantaneous updating and location control of the collection. Objects are stored in a mix of conventional and specialised storage systems including pallet racking, shelving, compactus units and purpose built object supports. Mezzanine levels have been installed for the storage of smaller collections, for example an extensive collection of early Australian wool samples which are housed in specialised Museum cabinets and a large collection of piano rolls are housed in rows of movable shelves. One of the Powerhouse's most recent acquisitions is over 100 quilts with panels commemorating individuals who have died from HIV/AIDS. Multiple volunteers have recorded and catalogued information about the people remembered on the quilts and about the friends

and families who made the panels. Special trays are constructed to move and store the large and heavy quilts. They are packed using archival materials, including 'pool noodles' to prevent the fabric lying in sharp folds which may later crack. Once folded the quilts are stored flat in purpose built pallet racks. In addition to the vast size of the stores there is an integrated pest management system and carefully monitored environmental controls to manage temperature and humidity.

Visitors can catch a glimpse inside one of the Discovery Centre's 'behind-the-scenes' storage areas with specialist tours led by Staff and over 60 dedicated volunteers, providing visitors with the unique opportunity to learn about the work that goes on beyond the realm of traditional museum displays. This opportunity is often linked to the Powerhouse Discovery Centre's themed monthly open days which explore themes such as 'Spies and sports cars' incorporating activities and tours directly linked to the collection – in this instance the code-cracking Enigma machine and our Austin 7 motor vehicle!

Visitation to the Powerhouse Discovery Center continues to grow. The Museum will continue to utilise the Discovery Center as its principal off-site storage facility. The site looks toward expansion including additional collection stores, facilities for more visitors as well as new conservation laboratories and expansion of the current workshop. The success of the Powerhouse Discovery centre reflects the commitment of program coordinators, conservators, registrars and curators and dedicated volunteers to bring to light a truly spectacular and diverse collection as well as providing the best storage possible for the Powerhouse collection.

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## Samdok: the End and a New Beginning

*Åsa Stenström*

When the Nordiska Museet in 2011 decided that the museum no longer wanted to finance the Samdok Secretariat, a lot of Swedish museum ethnologists became worried and concerned. I was one of them. Samdok has been the only museum network where ethnologists have been able to meet, discuss documentation issues, document the present together and get educated through the seminars at the autumn meetings. Through the working groups, the "pools", we have found similar interests between museums and have been able to document a theme together – sometimes during a longer period of time, sometimes shorter, but always together enriching the documentations of the present. Themes could for example be unemployment. In 2009-10, together we gave a picture of how people were affected by unemployment, all over the country. To start this kind of project together was natural through Samdok.

The Samdok network has been dependent on the Secretariat at the Nordiska museet and its service to the member institutions, not least the annual autumn conferences. What will happen now? At Samdok's last autumn meeting we were all convinced that we wanted the network to continue in one way or another. In March 2012, representatives from a lot of museums therefore met at Stockholm City Museum to discuss how to move on. Six museums were elected to figure out how a new network would function. My museum, Västerbottens museum (a regional museum in the northern part of Sweden that has been active in Samdok for several years), was elected as the chair museum. The other participants represent specialist museums, municipal museums,

and regional museums in other parts of the country. So far we have met twice to discuss the future. We are convinced that whatever happens, the network must be inclusive in that every museum and archive that wants to participate shall have the possibility to do so. In Samdok we have had participants from the largest state museums to the smallest museums with only a few employees. So big costs or membership fees are not an option.

A name competition is running where everyone can suggest new names for the network – or suggest to keep the name 'Samdok'. The pools are evaluating their work; some of them want to continue their collaboration, some are ending their work and others are not sure yet about how they will proceed. Themes will however be important in the future as well, to gather different museums and archives around. We want to continue the enriched documentations.

We have already decided that the autumn meetings will continue, we want to keep the educational part of Samdok. The next autumn meeting will be held in Malmö in November this year. In the meantime, we will work on a plan for the future – a new beginning, which will be ready for presentation at that meeting.

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Västerbottens museum is a regional museum with 55 employees. Cultural history, ethnology, archaeology, art, documentary photography are the major topics. The work in the large region is as important as the work inside the museum and the open air-museum Gammlia. Interaction and dialogue are important. Västerbottens museum has about 250 000 visitors per year. <http://www.vbm.se/>

## In brief – web link tips

### Contemporary Collecting blog

Arjen Kok, Chair of COMCOL Working Group for Contemporary Collecting, has created a blog and welcomes "contributions by anyone who likes to participate in our exploration of this fascinating museological phenomenon". Visit and take part!  
<http://contemporarycollecting.tumblr.com/>

### *A Finnish Winter Day* – new web exhibition

Wednesday 2 February 2011 was an ordinary but yet exceptional day for some people in Finland. That specific day, eleven families in different parts of the country were followed by researchers and photographers from eleven museums, who recorded the family members' activities from early morning to late at night. The project was conducted within the TAKO collection network, and was presented in *COMCOL Newsletter* No 15 by Riitta Kela from one of the participating museums (Tampere).

Images and texts from the project have now been compiled to a web exhibition, published in three language versions (Finnish, Swedish and English). These eleven stories, one for each family, are presented at  
<http://tako.nba.fi/suomalainentalvipaiva/en/#/etusivu>

### **Eunamus – European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen**

[www.eunamus.eu](http://www.eunamus.eu) is the informative and comprehensive website of the three-year research project *European National Museums: Identity politics, the uses of the past and the European citizen*, funded by the European Commission.

The project "explores the creation and power of the heritage created and presented by European national museums to the world, Europe and its states, as an unsurpassable institution in contemporary society. National museums are defined and explored as processes of institutionalized negotiations where material collections and displays make claims and are recognized as articulating and representing national values and realities. Questions asked in the project are why, by whom, when, with what material, with what result and future possibilities are this museums shaped" (*Building National museums in Europe 1750-2010*, p.1).

Although focussing on European museums, the project presents important questions and findings also in a global perspective. Eunamus activities are divided into six thematic research strands:

- \*Mapping and framing institutions 1750-2010: national museums interacting with nation-making

- \*Uses of the Past: Narrating the Nation and Negotiating Conflicts

- \*The museology of Europe: the language of art, the local nation and the virtual Europe

- \*Museum policies 1990-2010: negotiating political and professional utopia

- \*Museum citizens: audience identities and experiences

- \*National museums, history and a changing Europe

Open Access publications:

**Eunamus report No 1: *Building National Museums in Europe 1750-2010*.**



”...the first comprehensive overview over national museums in Europe including an outline of the basis of comparative elements and significant variables.”



activities which are peculiar to museums and which result from the manner in which museums assemble and deploy objects. This research investigated the ways in which capital cities, national art museums, online museum-like spaces, and national, regional and local museums produce opportunities for connecting identities.” (Presentation on web page; this report also gives an account of the Swedish Samdok work.)



**Eunamus report No 2:**  
***Crossing Borders: Connecting European Identities in Museums and Online***

”This report presents key findings of research undertaken by the EuNaMus consortium in its attempts to understand the ‘museology of Europe’. This notion is used here to describe