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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 **1 December** to the editors, and contact us also if you wish to discuss a theme for publication.

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## Statement from the Chair

Dear Readers,

In the previous Newsletter I spoke about summer. When I now look through my window in Amsterdam I definitely see autumn. In the summer we unfortunately lost one of our most passionate COMCOL members, who was with us from the early beginnings. After a brave battle with cancer, our board member Roger Heeler passed away peacefully with family at his side on Wednesday, July 4, 2012, in Toronto. He was the husband of Joan, father of Tasha and Mark and grandfather to Evan, Ella and Atticus. Roger will be remembered as an intellectual and iconoclast with a great sense of adventure and a penchant for puns. He was a professor of marketing at York University, an avid sailor and world traveler. Roger had asked that there be no funeral service. As an expression of sympathy, memorial donations may be sent to the Kensington Hospice where he resided during the past few months: [www.kensingtonhealth.org](http://www.kensingtonhealth.org). We will miss Roger, but when we see each other in Cape Town during our Annual Conference he will be in our hearts and thoughts.



*Roger Heeler*

The Annual Conference is coming closer and closer and I am happy that you will find the program in this Newsletter. We are aware of the fact that not everybody is in the position to come to Cape Town, but we will try to document the conference in such a way that you won't miss the outputs.

By the coming December our probationary status will be "proved" by ICOM and I sincerely hope that we will become a regular International Committee. Although COMCOL wants to be a committee that defines itself through quality and not quantity, I would like to ask all the enthusiastic readers of the Newsletter to become a COMCOL member! As a large(r) committee we can make an even better stand for ethical, theoretical and practical collecting issues.

I hope you'll enjoy this Newsletter and you are more than welcome to contribute to the next one!

### ***Léontine Meijer-van Mensch***

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## COMCOL Annual Conference 2012

In the beginning of November we will meet for several days of inspiring conference, workshops and meetings in Cape Town, South Africa. It starts on 6 November with COMCOL's workshop at the District Six museum, continues with the ICMAH/COMCOL Annual Conference on 7-8 November, a separate COMCOL Day on 9 November and concludes with an excursion to Robben Island on 10 November.

The programmes of the conference days are published here on page 3-6 in the newsletter; for full information please visit COMCOL's website [www.comcol-icom.org](http://www.comcol-icom.org).

### TUESDAY 6 NOVEMBER

#### *District Six Museum Workshop*

Aim of program:

We would like to offer you an experience of Cape Town through the story of District Six and the Prestwich Memorial. The aim of the workshop is sharing experiences of the different institutions and participants around collecting memory as a 'collections' practice.

10:00- 15:00

Welcome and tour of Museum

Site walk from Museum to District Six

Bus to Prestwich Ossuary Memorial Complex

Site walk from Complex to District Six

Lunch at District Six: Traditional Cape Town food

Feedback from visit and discussion: focus on 'collecting' memory as part of 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.

#### **Additional information in the locations:**

##### **District Six:**

District Six was named the Sixth Municipal District of Cape Town in 1867. Originally established as a mixed community of freed slaves, merchants, artisans, labourers and immigrants, District Six was a vibrant centre with close links to the city and the port. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the process of removals and marginalisation had begun. The first to be 'resettled' were black South Africans, forcibly displaced from the District in 1901. As the more prosperous moved away to the suburbs, the area became a neglected ward of Cape Town.

In 1966 it was declared a white area under the Group Areas Act of 1950, and by 1982, the life of the community was over. 60 000 people were forcibly removed to barren outlying areas aptly known as the Cape Flats, and their houses in District Six were flattened by bulldozers. The District Six Museum, established in December 1994, works with the memories of these experiences and with the history of forced removals more generally.

##### **Prestwich Ossuary Memorial Complex:**

In 2003 a burial ground was discovered at the eastern edge of the city. Dating to the colonial period and roughly identified as a pauper and slave burial ground, the Museum was part of a partnership to prevent the exhumation of the remains, and to prevent the development from taking place. The battle that ensued between forensic anthropologists/ archaeologists, heritage authorities and the developer on the one side – and a small group of heritage activists on the other – illustrated the tension between the historical memory of slavery (traditionally unearthed through the academic disciplines) and the living memory of those who associate their life histories and experience with that of slavery. The Museum lost the battle and the human remains were exhumed and transferred to the Prestwich ossuary complex, after which, the city promptly allowed a coffee shop to move into

the space. The site tour is focused on how memory around Prestwich and slavery is 'collected', interpreted and owned in ways that go against the grain of 'science.'



The workshop is sponsored by the International Master Degree Programme of Museology of the Reinwardt Academy, Amsterdam

## 7-8 NOVEMBER

### *Museums and the Idea of Historical Progress*

The second annual conference of COMCOL will be organised together with the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Archaeology and History (ICMAH) and ICOM South Africa. Theme of the conference is **Museums and the Idea of Historical Progress**. The conference will be hosted by Iziko Museums, Cape Town.

#### **WEDNESDAY 7 NOVEMBER**

##### **09:00 Opening of the conference, welcoming speeches**

Rooksana Omar, ICOM SA

Leontine Meijer-van Mensch, COMCOL

Jari Harju, ICMAH

*09:30 Keynote speech*

Mokena Makeka

10:30 Coffee and tea

*11:00 Session 1*

##### **Exhibiting the Human Image: John Ruskin's Effort to Present the Past**

Stephen Keck, American University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

##### **Artefacts Rights and Human Obligations. Archaeological Examples from South African Museums**

Sven Ouzman, Iziko South African Museum, South Africa

##### **Art Museum in Africa - A Utopian Myth**

Anitra Nettleton, Centre for Creative Arts of Africa, South Africa

12:30 Lunch

*13:15 Session 2*

##### **It Looks Pretty from the Distance, Doesn't it? A Closer Look at the Process of Rediscovering the Jewish Heritage in Poland**

Aleksandra Janus & Dorota Kawecka, Jagellian University, Poland/Reinwardt Academy, Netherlands

##### **Museum Collections between Ideology and Reflection**

Tanja Rozenbergar Segar & Tone Kregar, Museum of Recent History Celje, Slovenia

##### **Utopia of War? South African Participation in WWII as Depicted in the South African National War Museum 1947-75**

Susan Blendulf, Ditsong Museums of South Africa

15:00 Coffee and tea

##### **15:30-16:30 Pitch of ideas for cooperation projects**

Introduction by Dr. Ruth Sithole

18:00 Evening programme

## THURSDAY 8 NOVEMBER

*09:30 Keynote speech*

### **Powerful Ideas – Museums, Empire Utopias and Connected Worlds**

Professor Susan Legêne, VU University, Amsterdam, Netherlands

*10:30 Session 3*

### **The Utopian Space**

Stefan Krankenhagen, Universität Hildesheim, Germany

### **Expectations, Disillusionment and Hope**

Balthi du Plessis, Balthi du Plessis & Associates, South Africa

### **Rethinking the Notion of a Museum and its Utopian Ideologies in a Post-Colonial State**

Njabulo Chipangura, University of Western Cape

*12:00 Lunch*

*13:00 Session 4*

### **Collections and Representation: Towards an Inclusive Way of Collecting**

William Gamboa Sierra, Universidad Externado de Colombia, Colombia

### **Seeking Common Ground: How Digital Museums Promote Peace and Progress in Post-Conflict Societies**

Laura Kate Gibson, ETHER Initiative, South Africa

### **Images for the Future**

Merja Diaz & Elisabeth Boogh, Sweden

*14:30 Coffee and tea*

*15:00-16:00 Conclusions from the joint days*

*18:00 Evening programme*

## FRIDAY 9 NOVEMBER

### ***COMCOL DAY – papers, workshop, annual meeting***

Words of welcome

### **Panel I: Collections between the local and digital**

Chair: Dr. Minna Sarantola-Weiss, Head of research, Helsinki City Museum, Finland

*09:00-09:20 The Nationaal Historisch Museum*

Arjen Kok, Rijksdienst Cultureel Erfgoed, The Netherlands

*9:30-9:50 The project is called Obey, Play and Learn*

Christine Fredriksen, Bohusläns museum Sweden

*10:00-10:20 Global Challenges for Regional Utopias*

Dennis Herrmann, University of Oldenburg, Germany

*10:30-10:50 Attaining cultural utopia: South Museums and Wikipedia*

Isla Haddow-Flood, Africa Centre, Cape Town, South Africa

*11:00 – 11:30 Coffee*

### **Panel II: Collections between Tradition and Renewal**

Chair: Dr. Eva Fägerborg, Former curator, Nordiska Museet, Stockholm, Sweden

*11:30-11:50 From one utopia to another: Polish Museums since the Communist Era*

Anna Zakiewicz, National Museum in Warsaw, Poland

*12:00-12:20 From military museum to remembrance museum: finding a balance*

Danielle Kuijten, Scheepvaartmuseum Amsterdam, The Netherlands

*12:30-12:50 Imposed utopia. Establishing collections; building the Israeli nation state*

Judy Jaffe-Schagen, VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

*13:00 – 14:00 Lunch*

**14:00- 16:15 Joint workshop of the COMCOL working groups****Resources and Contemporary Collecting**

Moderator: Arjen Kok and Peter van Mensch

The aim of this workshop is to create guidelines for museums on contemporary collecting.

The guidelines aim to be a tool and reflective framework for museum professionals and heritage workers in general to help them create, develop and sustain an effective and successful practice of contemporary collecting.

**Annual Meeting**

Report for 2012, official status of COMCOL, information about election process 2013, Annual Meeting and Conference 2013, and other matters.

The 2013 Annual Conference will be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 10-17 August, in conjunction with ICOM's 23rd General Conference. The theme of the General Conference is { **Museums (memory + creativity = social change)** }.

**SATURDAY 10 NOVEMBER**

Excursion Day: Robben Island

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## Being Rubbish – becoming European? Some thoughts on recollecting Europe

*Stefan Krankenhagen*

As a report given by the EUNAMUS project (see *COMCOL Newsletter* 18/2012) shows, it is culture that is both considered a problem and a solution to the European integration problem. It is true that European institutions increasingly discover the museum as an instrument of cultural integration. However, what is important is the fact that this also works in reverse: EU-Europe is today both considered a problem and a solution to various actors in the museal field. This is true also for the field of collecting as we can see by addressing a project that is explicitly aimed at making objects European.

Under the rubric “Daily Life” in the ICOM publication *Reflecting Europe in its Museum Objects*, there is a picture of a blue rubbish bin. The catalogue data for this identifies this object as a rubbish bin from Novosibirsk “second half of the twentieth century” (ICOM Europe 2010, 64). The object is held by the Ethnographic Museum in Geneva. This raises several questions: how did a Russian rubbish bin come to end up in a Swiss Museum, why was it collected and exhibited there? And how did it then come to be included in the

meta-collection of ICOM Europe and there supposedly reflect Europe through a selection of museal objects? Why is a blue rubbish bin from Siberia a European museum object?



©Musée d'Ethnographie, Genève



Because things cannot talk, the object in the Geneva Museum has its own explanatory text. Two arguments are advanced to help make an object from Novosibirsk a European object. Firstly, the rubbish bin is defined as a sign of European cultural history: “The bin is a fairly recent companion of European societies and carries many historical, economical and cultural implications.” (ICOM Europe 2010, 64) Because collecting rubbish and sorting it is part of European daily life and cultural history, an object that highlights this process can become a European object. Secondly, its actual transfer from Siberia to Switzerland can be dealt with as a sign of the former conflict between east and west. The rubbish bin memorialises a political frontier that no longer exists, and so signifies the history of the Cold War in Europe.

The attached text also includes an anecdote that highlights the process of musealisation that happens to every object that is collected, archived and exhibited in a museum: “The abduction of this (now) Russian bin into a Swiss museum was greeted with incredulous laughter. Yet one cleaning lady at the site called it ‘the only thing left here that had any value’.” (ICOM Europe 2010, 64) Without being aware of it herself, this cleaning lady referred to a constitutive moment of cultural value creation that Michael Thompson has dealt with in his theory of rubbish. Here Thompson describes (2003 [1979], 29) how the cultural treatment of objects is lent a dynamic: “In our culture objects are either ‘ephemeral’ or ‘durable’.” Correspondingly, there are ephemeral spaces and institutions – department stores, street parades, newspapers – as well as enduring spaces and institutions – libraries, museums, archives.

Thompson’s approach enables us to address the possibility of a transfer between the spheres of the ephemeral and the durable, between everyday life and the archive. He argues that the category of rubbish represents the necessary dynamic between the two spaces. Given that an object categorised as ephemeral steadily loses value, it eventually becomes rubbish: “I believe that an ephemeral object whose value and expected life gradually diminishes can move into the category of rubbish.” (Thompson 2003, 31) Only then – and exactly at that point – can it be discovered to have value, and so become durable as an

object in an archive. The rubbish bin from Novosibirsk, an ephemeral object, has itself from this standpoint become rubbish.

One glance at the object confirms this view: the blue paint on the rubbish bin is flaking off in several places; it is covered with patches of rust, as well as scratches and dents. In the process of its musealisation there are several durable properties that can be attributed to it – that for instance it is an object of European daily life that symbolises the East-West conflict, but which through its presence in a Swiss museum comments upon this ironically and so becomes an object suitable for inclusion in a meta-collection of European objects. And so we have not the birth of a nation, but rather the birth of a European object. The Geneva museum, the editors of the ICOM publication, and us, the observers, produce and testify to the enduring value of the blue rubbish bin as it is society itself that attributes meaning and functions to museal objects.

The blue rubbish bin from Novosibirsk is to be found in one of eleven cabinets that, taken together, outline a narrative for Europe: Daily Life, Power, War, Migrations, Borders, and Towards United Europe. All 48 objects in this meta-collection are in one way or another defined as European. The narrative reaches from imagined European origins – using objects from prehistory – to an ideally-conceived European union. In the closing category, Towards United Europe, two of the three works selected are works of contemporary art. Jörg Frank’s picture, “Europa: Work in Progress”, held by the Musée de l’Europe, closes the meta-collection of European objects.

*Reflecting Europe in its Museum Objects* is one of those examples in which it is possible to track the manner in which European objects are made today. The musealisation of Europe takes place here solely in the context of the publication, since the process of musealisation requires a lasting actualisation that has traditionally been supplied by the institutions of the durable (Maranda 2009, 256). Precisely because this collection is not materialised outside the publication, and in this sense is no kind of collection at all, it exemplifies the logic and aporia of recollecting Europe:

It avoids any kind of essentialist and homogenous ascription of value and produces

instead objects like the blue bin, which I elsewhere have defined as relational (Kaiser; Krankenhagen; Poehls 2012); it can be captured not in objects alone but through thematic contextualisation – primarily involving war, migration or frontiers; it is the outcome of individual actors and cultural-political forces in the domain of museums that aim at Europeanisation – like ICOM Europe or the Musée de l'Europe; and it reacts to models that have been employed in a national or regional framework aiming to redefine the possibilities and qualities of objects and collections today. Finally, the process of resemantification needs a period of devaluing the qualities of objects and collections before being rendered European.

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## Museum as initiator and participant: using the emotional potential of contemporary collecting

*Marija Jauković*

Questioning and re-defining identity and acknowledging both the positive and negative forces that are shaping it, is an ongoing and difficult process within any society, and it should be addressed as such. Identity is defined by history, memory and remembrance, which are essentially multilayered and strongly dependent on individual, emotional and rational relation towards both tangible and intangible remains of the past. Often, museums are perceived as holders of the history and the truthful narrative of the past, offering both visualization and explanation of the rules of living memory. However, a conservative approach to the storytelling within the museum could prevent the existing dynamic process of identity formation, and could be seen, nowadays, as insufficient. Therefore a question can be asked: how can an approach to museum

collections be defined in order to maintain the dynamic relations between history, multilayered narrative and the contemporary society that is built on their grounds? However, it is important to note that the necessity for the change in museums is debatable. If museums are understood as institutions with a predominantly preserving function, changing would be a contradictory action. Nevertheless, it is appropriate for museums to satisfy the needs of the society, and therefore a change can be perceived as inevitable. The question, then, concerns the working model museums will choose in order to fulfill the changing needs of the society it is situated in. Is a museum a forum for discussion or an active participant in change, or should it be both?



### **The Museum Development project**

Museums in Serbia are facing a difficult position of being important for the society but not being important to an individual visitor. Addressing the needs of individuals is important if the museums are to remain relevant. The process of rethinking has started and frequent co-operation with international museum professionals has been of utmost importance. Sharing experiences and developed methods are marked as an opportunity for efficient definition of specific tools, based on the parameters of the Serbian society.

Such co-operation and sharing were supported by activities of the Swedish Embassy in Belgrade, especially with the start of the "Museum Development" project in 2009. The project was conceived as a four year project, funded by the Swedish Institute. Focus was put on the development of an education discourse in museums in Serbia, offering expertise and introducing tools of contemporary collecting. Additionally, a professional network between museum professionals in Sweden and Serbia was created. From the interview given by Helene Larsson, the Swedish Cultural Counselor at the Embassy of Sweden in Belgrade in the ICOM Serbia Newsletter (2011), it is understood that the project was started with two main goals – to address the importance, necessity and opportunities of education in museums and, consequently, to re-examine the role a museum can and should have in society. These goals were achieved by organizing workshops, conferences, exhibition programming and residencies and visiting opportunities for professionals, from Sweden and Serbia.

"Museum Development" presented education as both a tool and a goal of a museum. Independently from an education lead approach, an attempt should be made to reach a similar result of re-examining the role and responsibility of museums in society. Having in mind both the history and contemporary state of Serbian society, as it is going through a period of re-definition, it is necessary to determine which questions are important to raise. Is confronting recent history and living memory beneficial for social healing and the process of re-defining identity? If so, how can museums define an appropriate tool for

achieving necessary transparency and equality of numerous narratives and emotional states of individuals? Methodologies of contemporary collecting, applying ethnological methods of documenting contemporary cultures through interviews, stories and photography or video, can be perceived as one of a number of possible tools. Even though this method was and is used by artists when addressing social issues, it is not used in museum activities in Serbia.

In order to introduce contemporary collecting to the museums in Serbia, at least on the individual level of professionals working in a museum, a conference/workshop "Contemporary Collecting on Hot Topics" was organized in 2011, in co-operation between Fund B92, Cultural Centre Rex, C31– Centre for Developing Children's Rights Culture and the Embassy of Sweden in Belgrade. During the workshops participants were introduced to the experiences of the key speakers in applying contemporary collecting methods in their work, and later conversation shaped a common understanding of the potential of this method if applied to the meters of history, memory and layered narratives in the process of re-defining of identity. Anna Ulfstrand from Stockholm City Museum stated that "Contemporary collecting is making 'future memories' but also a tool for reflection, discussion about society and culture'. The role of the museum is being much more in a dialogue with people." (Rex Cultural Center website).

### **The Urban Transformations project**

Contemporary collecting as a method has been emphasized since the beginning of the "Museum development" project and it was used by Anna Ulfstrand and art group SIMKA, in May 2012, as a part of the program of the MIXER festival in Belgrade (see Mikser Festival 2012 website). Their project was designed as a series of workshops with students of architecture. Participants were instructed and encouraged to address the space and narratives surrounding it, through documenting the landscape and interviewing people living in and visiting one of the first urbanized areas of Belgrade, Savamala. In the same period, I had an opportunity to participate in two workshops with Anna Ulfstrand and Helene Larsson, organized at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, with MA and PhD

students from departments for Art History and Pedagogy. Concepts of contemporary collecting were introduced to us and we were encouraged to think about the actual emotional potential contemporary memory and objects can have. The power of evoking emotions through objects and opportunity to draw out more than one narrative with a similar emotion was seen as a beneficial tool for addressing difficult topics of history and memory, and for creating a stronger relationship between the institution and audience. It was seen as a possibility for inviting audiences and professionals to actively participate and to clearly state how the museum should answer their needs. The necessity of using the contemporary collecting method supported by such active participation could be seen as a starting point for re-connecting audiences, professionals and institutions, that can result in the re-thinking and re-defining of the role of museums and consequently reshape the understanding of the museum's responsibility. Furthermore, these workshops should be understood as an attempt to create communication pathways between, not only two departments of Faculty of Philosophy, but as formation of future co-operation between different, but complementary, museum staffs. The development of co-operation on the level of training of museum professionals in Serbia will eventually be mirrored in the staff structure and way of operating within the institutions. When achieved this mirroring will be the long term end result of the process that started with the "Museum development" project.

Understanding the potential that is embedded in education as a tool can help institutions to overcome their limitations in approaching audiences, and transform their activities into collaboration, dependent on transparency and methods of listening, hearing and acting. Additionally, education is more than a tool, it can be the purpose of the institution. It is

important to note that if seen as a goal it is necessary to understand that the education process is two-way. The museum is a forum for communication and learning, in which both the professionals and the audiences are giving and receiving knowledge and are supported to re-examine and question their identities and their roles in the society. Even though contemporary collecting is not used in everyday actions in museums in Serbia, a first step was made with introducing it to professionals on an individual level. Understanding of the method made clear the necessity for developed collaboration of different vocations. Moreover, it can be perceived as an ideal match for opening often painful narratives and exploring emotional potential enhanced by a single object. "Museum development" encouraged and inspired individuals to re-think their way of working, challenging the common understanding of the role and potential of museums. It formed connections that are beneficial for both sides and that will hopefully be nurtured and supported by the sharing of future experiences.

#### References

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Mikser Festival 2012 website  
<http://mikser.rs/program/svi-projekti/77-svedska-na-mikseru/> (last accessed on 26<sup>th</sup> of September 2012)

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## Old Science, New Audience

Marie Roos Wijnen

This article discusses the differences between the overprotective curator and the curious audience in relation to anatomical collections and how a museum can deal with them. While working on my Bachelor thesis about historical anatomical collections in the Netherlands, I interviewed the curator of a collection of prepared bodies with congenital abnormalities in the Museum of Natural History, Rotterdam. During the interview, he gave me a tour through the depot where the collection is stored. As I was admiring the collection, two questions formed in my mind: *Why is this remarkable collection behind closed doors? Aren't such materials valuable for a non-medical audience?* After finishing my thesis and having considered the reactions to my work, I still don't have a clear answer to those questions. I realized, however, that this specific collection can and must be used for medical as well as non-medical interpretation, research, experiences and stories. To realize this, anatomical collections must be released from their historical approach and their overprotective curators and be handed over as free interpretational collections to a larger and modern audience.

My thesis 'Old Science, New Audience' is about academic anatomical collections, which have been collected for medical research and education. They have lost their primary functions and have been sifted to dusty, old, scary objects, mostly held in scientific museums. And they are really dusty, because most of the anatomical objects are kept in depots far away from the curious audience. Why are these anatomical collections protected and locked away? What does the museum visitor want? And how can museums that possess an anatomical collection present themselves as an open institution where both (the visitors and the curator) can walk through the same door? In this article I will answer those three questions, which I also examined in my thesis.

A collection mostly based on human remains is, in theory as well as in practice, difficult to display. The use of human remains for medical research has been accepted for decades and

still is, within the ethical guidelines that specify when and how an examiner can use dead bodies and for which purpose. Not only for medical examiners but also for museum curators, the most important rule regarding the use of human remains is that they be treated with respect. This is a very broad conception, which can be interpreted in many different ways. Curators have to deal with two difficulties. First of all, most collections are collected in different time periods with different definitions of the concept of "respect". The second problem is: to whom does the curator have to pay respect, to the human remains or to the living audience who see themselves reflected in the anatomical objects? In my study I point out that curators generally exercise restraint in connection to anatomical collections. Often such collections are kept behind closed doors, like the collection of the anatomical museum in Leiden and the collection of congenital abnormalities in the Museum of Natural History, Rotterdam. Sometimes curators do this out of fear for demands of restitution of anatomical specimens, which would be considered as a permanent loss for science.

But that's not the only problem curators and museums have to deal with and that may make them reluctant to display anatomical objects publicly. Another difficulty is that the objects can be shocking or disgusting for a non-medical audience. Anatomical collections have many layers. First of all, the collections present a long line of medical research and have been collected and studied to understand the human body, its growth and its diseases. Not only professors are curious about those aspects but almost every human being. We're a curious kind of species, trying to understand the things around us including ourselves. Secondly, death and the presence of human remains have always been good material for scary stories in a non-medical way. Museums wish to protect their visitors from unpleasant experiences (or shocks). This clearly has an effect on the manner in which anatomical collections are exhibited in the Netherlands.

These two issues have contributed to the current situation in which anatomical collections are predominantly displayed in a historical context. The collections are emphatically linked to the historical period in which they were created. Today, one-way communication where the audience is being educated with the stories the museum wants to tell, is starting to be outdated. We have the opportunity to express ourselves in so many different ways and a modern museum audience wants to get more involved, online as well as offline. Slowly museums are trying to be more open institutions, where information is provided more openly and interactively. Museums such as the Wellcome Collection in London (UK), present their anatomical collections at multiple levels which on the one hand respect their historical and medical background, but on the other also connect the collection to contemporary subjects, like art, organ donation or Q&A hours with professionals in the medical field. The museum connects the past in an open and original way to the present and future with an open attitude to their audience. I think that this is a good start.

There is another good example which I didn't use in my thesis, but think is really inspirational for the medical curator responsible for anatomical collections: In 2004 the University Museum in Groningen invited Wim T. Schippers to be a guest curator of their collection. Schippers worked with the academic collection in a non-academic way and displayed every scientific object out of its "normal" context for a temporary exhibition 'Sporen van het Spullenbeest' (traces of the stuffbeast). One of the displays was very creative and original; he had children skeletons being put next to a swimming pool full of plastic balls, which kids nowadays love to play in (see the picture). The skeletons were presented in a new way where science was more used as an art piece than a scientific representation.



*Photo source:*

<http://www.medischerfgoed.nl/topstukken.aspx>

This strong display doesn't ignore the fact that those skeletons have been a part of real living children. It has given new meaning to those anatomical objects, in a non-medical or historical approach, which allows the audience to reinterpret the objects. Of course we should never ignore the primary function of the anatomical collections. This will always be their strength, to teach an audience about medical history and how we looked at the human body over past decades. But the example of Schippers makes science more open in a new and alternative way to think about science, death and ourselves.

It is not the history of the objects that have changed but the history around the objects. That makes it an interesting, good and new possibility to use the objects in different ways, whether it's on a horror/spooky level, learning more about the human body or for a historical experience.

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Please contact me for comments, suggestions or if you would like to have more information about my graduation thesis.

## What remains of the present? Contemporary collecting in "museums of society"

*Jacques Battesti*

This article introduces a book, to be published in November, that emerged from discussions in the Basque Museum of Bayonne, France. Created in 1922, it is an old "art and tradition" museum, like many others founded in Europe in the decades around 1900. These museums were built as "Noah's Arks" to host and save the material remains of rural societies of the end of the nineteenth century, societies considered as "traditional", bearers of a timeless, local identity about to disappear, as a result of modernity.

Entirely renewed in 2001, the Basque Museum of Bayonne is now calling itself «musée de société», but its collections and its permanent exhibition have not evolved much since its creation: the same subjects are covered, the same chronological sequences treated, stopping around the 1950's. There is a growing gap between, on one side the Basque country as it is now, with a very strong culture which mixes modern and ancient forms, a specific language still in use, an identity that continues to evolve and, on the other side the Basque museum itself, which only shows a very small part of this history, which is unable to link the outside reality to the objects exhibited because there is nothing to explain the transformations of the country during the twentieth century. Yet, these transformations are central to understanding the contemporary Basque country. This leads to a situation where the visitors who come to the museum to understand what is now the Basque country cannot relate the territory that they can see outside and the territory as it is shown inside the museum.

Therefore, bringing the collection up to date is now seen as a necessity in the museum. The idea would be to use the contemporary world as a starting point for all questions and subjects developed in the museum, rather than the rural society of the nineteenth century. And contemporary collecting is a key part of this approach. But it seemed to us such a wide and complex strategy that the first step should be one of collective reflection. This book is here to play this role.

### **Contents: an attempt to open an eye onto the world**

In France, the question of contemporary collecting is still a secondary one. It is not a common issue debated among curators. Many clichés on the subject are still strongly believed, like the idea that starting contemporary collecting would necessarily lead to putting the whole world inside the museum – and so lead to the end of museums – or that time alone can dictate what is relevant and what should be collected (making contemporary collecting just absurd). In France, the Ministry of Culture that gives advice about every object collected in museums, is reluctant to grant authorization for recent objects to enter a public collection, unless they are works of art for an art museum. However, despite this unfavourable context, some "museums of society" in France are working on this question and do collect contemporary objects. To help us shape the book and define the contents, we formed a scientific council with those people.

As French museums do not provide models for contemporary collecting, it seemed important to look widely at this subject in other countries, other experiences, other ways of seeing and other cultural backgrounds. At the end, the book hosts 42 contributions from 14 different countries. The idea was also to mix different theoretical reflections and syntheses of practical experiences in museums. Although we have tried to present a representative range of contemporary practice, we may have missed important museums. Due to lack of knowledge of what the other museums are doing internationally, this "failure" (even if we were never pretentious enough to try an exhaustive book on the subject) has at least demonstrated the importance of having an international network for the subject – like COMCOL!

We believe this book should emphasize illustration, to *show* the diversity and the richness of the subject, and be shaped, as an "object", with the most contemporary graphic design, to be a precise reflection of the current world.



### Pending questions about collecting the present

If this book has helped us to define the questions, it does not pretend to provide answers, to propose solutions or methodologies that can be applied everywhere, in every situation, for every kind of museum; the idea is rather to make an overview of the issues to see clearly the objections that are raised by this approach, to go beyond clichés, to define precisely the challenges of this kind of collecting for museums of society today.

Among the questions facing every museum that collects contemporary material, three main ones, which seem to be structural, can be underlined here:

#### - About the objectives of the collection:

Are we collecting for today or tomorrow? Is the aim of contemporary collecting simply to form reservoirs of objects for the future, just because these objects are now available? Or do we collect for today, to make sense today, to allow the museum to fulfill its social role, without worrying about the future, knowing that what makes sense today may have less importance tomorrow? In other words, *do we collect contemporary material for conservation purposes*, to avoid the potential loss of documents which might be meaningful – an approach that would tend to be encyclopedic because no one can know what would be necessary tomorrow – or *do we collect to illustrate contemporary challenges*, choosing precisely objects that have meaning now? And can these two objectives be united in the same collecting policy?

#### - About the objects that could be collected:

What should we choose? Is it better to emphasize the banal object, witness of our daily life, and which would be the most representative, or conversely, to pay more attention to the special pieces, maybe rarest and less common but with more capacity to attract the visitor in the museum?

About the relationship between the artwork and the object: is the *common and everyday object*, a priori familiar to the public, the most pertinent to account for a contemporary reality, or is it the *artwork*, that already contains an interpretation of reality, a reading which is already a critical distance from our present

time? The artwork, which, because of its *aura*, is generally regarded more than the common ethnographic object, is often used in museums of society to introduce contemporary challenges. But if the artwork is better at capturing the visitor's attention, and arousing curiosity, is it the most relevant to account for *social facts*, since the witness it bears is always processed through the prism of the artist?

About the *materiality* of the object: regarding the fact that today, the museum object is no longer regarded as a relic – it is now primarily a document – couldn't we get rid of this almost sacred respect to the materiality of the object and focus on *intangible* media (video, documentary records, etc.) that might be more likely to evoke the contemporary world than an artifact, inherently dumb to the visitor and which needs interpretation? This could also have advantages in terms of storage. But without objects, can there be museums?

Can contemporary objects in a museum be considered as *Heritage*? If they are banal, not old, not yet historical, not remarkable from an artistic point of view, can they be called Heritage? This would be in opposition to all the usual heritage criteria. These criteria would define them as future objects of Heritage – or not, depending on future choice – unless we accept that everything that enters the museum is Heritage. The first French museums of society to have collected contemporary objects, the Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions in Paris and the Musée Dauphinois in Grenoble, faced this ambiguity by establishing what they called a "purgatory", an undefined space for collections waiting for validation over time... Yet this intermediate status is untenable, unsustainable and indefensible intellectually: why would there be a distinction of value in the objects selected by the museum as relevant?

#### - About the publics and their role in the act of collecting:

On the level of the *receipt*: The question of contemporary collecting often generates two kinds of public reactions, both of which complicate the collection process and are often an obstacle to its implementation. Either it is very strong, because the museum is dealing with *memory*, something living, which can



generate tenseness and discord (cf. the controversy aroused when the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam decided to collect the gun that was used by the murderer of Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands; see Peter van Mensch in COMCOL Newsletter No. 11, reused by us in the book). Or, on the contrary, it may encourage indifference, because what is shown is considered common and too familiar, and because in the act of coming to visit a museum there is usually the hope of seeing something uncommon, something special.

On the level of *participation*:

Among the advantages of public participation in collecting, there is the idea of legitimacy. It is no longer the curator or the expert alone who chooses the relevant object, but the users, the ones who live with it, who are immersed in the social fact and the social integration or representation. The museum is no longer a place for an upper class who decides for others, everyone is invited to the museum, to build a common heritage. But there might be some risks in this approach. First because, as we have written, contemporary objects are sometimes linked to very sensitive memories, how could a consensus be found for those objects in the collection? Secondly because this practice strongly appeals to the emotions, it contains the risk for the museum of getting lost in particular memories of each community, each social group, and of being too much involved in the particular discourses of social groups. It is thus difficult to place it on the plane of history, which requires greater objectivity.

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**The book:** *Que reste-t-il du Présent?*

*Collecter le Contemporain dans les musées de Société*

384 pages, 400 images, 42 contributions from 14 countries. Texts in French with summaries in English, some texts in English with summaries in French, one text in Spanish. Price 39 €.

Co-editors: Basque Museum of Bayonne / Society of the friends of the Basque Museum / Ecomuseums and society museums' Federation (fems) / Le Festin (publishing house in Bordeaux).

**To buy the book** (on the website of the publishing house Le Festin):

<http://www.lefestin.net/livre/que-reste-t-il-du-pr%C3%A9sent>

## Notes on contemporary collecting

Arjen Kok

### Seminar on contemporary collecting

On 23 October a seminar on contemporary collecting will be held at the Museum of London, organised by Philip Attwood (British Museum) and Jim Gledhill (Museum of London).

There will be presentations by

**Michael Terwey**, National Media Museum and Social History Curators Group

**Owain Rhys**, St Fagans National History Museum – ‘Refugee House’

**Qaisra Khan**, British Museum – ‘Collecting Stories: Hajj today’

**Paul Gallagher**, Museum of Liverpool – ‘The Secret Life of Smithdown Road’

**Hilary Young**, Museum of London – ‘Citizen Curators’

**Ian Cooke**, British Library – Web Archiving

The seminar will be ended by an open discussion, chaired by Jim Gledhill.

For information contact Jim Gledhill  
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### Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Netherlands

Halbe Zijlstra, minister of culture, signed the UNESCO convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. He did so at the flower corso of Zundert, which like other events and traditions, is an important candidate for the Dutch list.

Intangible cultural heritage is by definition always contemporary heritage. It is now and here, and one cannot distance oneself from the ethical dilemmas that are posed by some of the traditions. John Helsloot, researcher at the Ethnology department of the Meertens Institute in Amsterdam, discusses the development of his opinion on the position of the anthropologist in his article “Zwarte Piet and Cultural Aphasia in the Netherlands”. Zwarte Piet, the black assistant of Saint Nicholas, is part of one of the largest intangible cultural heritage phenomena in the Netherlands: Sinterklaas. Helsloot argues that “Merely establishing that *Zwarte Piet* is contested will in my private as well as my professional opinion not do. (...) In the case of *Zwarte Piet*, my private and professional views coincide.

The ghosts of the ethnological past, fraught with awkward, bad positioning, must make one very wary in taking a step like this. But (...) ethnologists sometimes have an obligation to make their voices heard in current debates in society.”



*Dutch Minister of Culture Halbe Zijlstra gives the official start signal by symbolically signing the Convention for Intangible Heritage at the Flower Corso in Zundert. Photo Rick Huizinga.*

John Helsloot's article is published in the latest issue of the Quotidian, Dutch Journal for the Study of Every Day Life.

<http://www.quotidian.nl/vol03/nr01/a01>

The Centre for Folkculture and Intangible Heritage in Utrecht is commissioned, together with the Open Air Museum in Arnhem, to make an inventory of intangible heritage in the Netherlands. Sinterklaas will certainly be on that inventory. “Pakjesavond”, St Nicholas' Eve was number one in the list of the top hundred of traditions in the Netherlands that the Centre compiled two years ago on the basis of a nationwide poll.



*Saint Nicholas arrives in the Netherlands on his white horse and is accompanied by his assistants, the Zwarte Pieten. Tradition has it that Saint Nicholas rides on the roofs at night together with Zwarte Piet, who slides down the chimney to distribute the presents. Photo Ronald Boutkan.*

### Quotidian

In the second issue Stijn Reijnders started a discussion on contemporary collecting and the imagined city. He touches upon three issues that can form obstacles in the museum practice of contemporary collecting. First he stresses the importance of the stories, the context connected with the object. He argues that he would rather wait some years before collecting the object, so it can gather some ‘experience’, than buy it straight from Marks & Spencer or IKEA. Then he moves on to criticize what he calls “the strong fixation on migrant cultures.” It leads to an uncritical presentation of cultural diversity on the one hand, and the neglect of collecting other groups such as the nouveaux riches. Thirdly he questions the effect of contemporary collecting, which focuses on a certain group. He points at the reality of the visitor numbers that lag behind initial expectations. Is the story of one group interesting and compelling enough for a larger audience? As a solution to these problems he proposes the concept of the imagined city to produce the greater overarching story that taps into the mental map of the world of each individual.

Three pioneering museums in the field of contemporary collecting react to Reijnders essay: Jacques Börger (Museum Rotterdam), Annemarie de Wildt (Amsterdam Museum) and Pieter-Matthijs Gijsberts (Nederlands Openluchtmuseum).

<http://www.quotidian.nl/vol02/nr01/a06>  
[www.quotidian.nl](http://www.quotidian.nl)

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