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COMCOL delegates in Rio waiting for the bus to Museu da Maré on 15 August 2013.  
Photo: Tanja Roženbergar.

## Editorial

COMCOL – Committee for Collecting – is the International Committee of ICOM dedicated to deepening discussions and sharing knowledge of the practice, theory and ethics of collecting and collection development.

*COMCOL Newsletter* provides 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, introductions to 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 February 2014** to the editors, and contact us also if you wish to discuss a theme for publication.

*COMCOL Newsletter* is available at COMCOL's website <http://network.icom.museum/comcol/>

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## Statement from the Chair

### Some first food for thought

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch*

Although part of my luggage disappeared at the airport and I took a really bad virus with me from Brazil, I sincerely feel that the triennial conference in Rio was a big success. Apart from the virus, I picked up new ideas and inspiration, not only in the field of collecting and museums, but more importantly, a critical reflection on how we as COMCOL should do our utmost to be a genuinely diverse and truly international organisation.

This needs critical discussion and friendly reflection and I am so grateful that during our Annual Meeting we had such an open and reflexive atmosphere. If we want to be truly international, COMCOL needs to go, deliberately, outside the European context for its Annual Conferences and we actively need to pursue inclusive practices. To offer one example: during our Annual Meeting I referred to the months October and November as Autumn, but of course in countries like Brazil and South Africa, these months stand for spring time. I knew, but still I made the “mistake”. To be made aware of and to have to reflect on the making of such “mistakes” is I hope a first important step. It is so promising that we have such an intimacy with each other that we can be open and reflexive about this. Because of this I am very happy that our newly elected board is more global than before. This, I hope, will also change the practices of COMCOL.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Minna Sarantola-Weiss, Eva Hult and Susanna Pettersson for their work for COMCOL and their roles on the board, and I hope that they will stay active within and for the COMCOL cause! We can’t and will not do it without you ladies!!! I would like to ask all the people who are members

of COMCOL, or have an interest, please become active and express your ideas and wishes!

In this newsletter you will read about the conference in Brazil, but I would like to take the opportunity to also give some first impressions that Peter and I had during the conference. COMCOL perceives collections not as the end, but as means to achieve socially defined aims. This understanding of the role of collecting and collections involves a continuous assessment of the relevancy of museums in general and individual museums in particular on three levels:

- the objects that compose the collection,
- the collection as such, and
- the mission of the institution as an expression of its social role.

It is interesting and relevant that in our sessions a distinction was made between (re-)assessment and (re-)interpretation. This distinction has much to do with the relation between the three parameters (levels) mentioned above. Assessment refers to the value of one parameter for the other; for example, the value of a specific object in relation to a specific collection, or the value of a specific collection for a specific mission. Collection development and the concept of dynamic collecting involve the upgrading of values. In this sense, (re-)assessment was only partly discussed during the sessions of the last three days. Most speakers focussed on (re-)interpretation.

Re-interpretation, as understood by most of the speakers, refers to three approaches.

For each approach examples were given throughout the conference sessions.

The first approach to re-interpretation involves the challenging of the very concept of collection, and ultimately the very notion of museums as social institutions. This approach can be found in the work of many artists. Jacqueline Heerema presented some examples of her work in this respect. Miriam La Rosa, Marija Jaukovic and Riccarda Hesseling showed how three major Amsterdam museums redefined themselves in terms of their institutional mission, with consequences for the other parameters as outlined above. They made an interesting distinction between two dimensions and two directions of re-interpretation, worth exploring further.

The second approach to re-interpretation involves the identification of new layers of meaning. In her presentation Lotta Fernstål spoke of a polysemantic approach. The multiple meaning of objects may (or should) be reflected in temporary exhibitions as well as in the collection management system. Lotta focussed on collection management systems while Annette Loeseke in her presentation explored the re-interpretation of objects and collections through (new) exhibition formats. New technologies can provide useful platforms. Sylvie Dhaene, for example, showed how her museum (Huis van Alijn, Gent, Belgium) worked with social tagging.

Polysemantic approaches towards heritage challenge disciplinary approaches to classification. During the Monday afternoon session this was briefly touched upon in the discussion. Significance is a social construct. An object in an art museum is framed as art, but the same object may be framed as historical document in a history museum. An object in a natural history museum may be framed by taxonomy as its academic discipline,

but may at the same time be used as evidence documenting the history of exploration, and so on. In this context it is relevant to refer to the concept of the integrated museum as introduced at the 1972 conference in Santiago de Chile. To link up with a contemporary professional discourse, one might say that re-interpretation involves liberating museum objects (or heritage in general) from the Authoritative Heritage Discourse.

The third approach to re-interpretation involves the search for new relevancy: the need to connect old collections with contemporary social issues. Gudrun Fritsch' paper followed a similar line of thought by exploring the contemporary relevancy of the work of the German artist Käthe Kollwitz.

Miriam La Rosa, Marija Jaukovic and Riccarda Hesseling reflected upon the possible cause of the "sudden" interest in re-interpretation. Their hypothesis was that the participation paradigm was to blame. Whether this is true or not, re-interpretation is a necessary policy for museums. However, as Annette Loeseke showed us, in this process we should not forget our audiences. The aim of re-interpretation should be making new connections, connections that are sustainable.

I hope you are interested in (re) reading the abstracts of the papers and I hope that we can turn the full papers into a publication. We are now reaching such a stage with the papers from our conference in Cape Town, so that looks very promising. I am also very proud that the publication of our first Annual Conference in Berlin is ready and printed....

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## In brief

### COMCOL Board 2013-2013

The newly elected Executive board of COMCOL consists of the following persons:

*Chair:* Léontine-Meijer-van Mensch, The Netherlands; *Vice Chair:* Elisabeth Tietmeyer, Germany; *Treasurer:* Tanja Roženberger, Slovenia; *Secretary:* Eva Fägerborg, Sweden; *Members:* Zelda Baveystock, UK; Etienne Boumans, Belgium; Freda Matassa, UK; Antonio Motta, Brazil; Cláudia Porto, Brazil; Rayaprolu Venkata Ramana, India; Kim Smit, Ireland; Åsa Stenström, Sweden.

### More from Rio - links

Parts of the contents of the General Conference – also some COMCOL presentations – are available online. At Fórum Permanente you will find the opening and closing ceremonies, the keynotes, the General Assembly and other meetings, along with some written reports:

[http://www.forumpermanente.org/event\\_pres/encontros/icom-2013](http://www.forumpermanente.org/event_pres/encontros/icom-2013)

Pictures taken by the official photographer can be downloaded from:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/v3tzqf2kpp1wfm6/23rd%20General%20Conference%20Photos.pdf>

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCb8nZdQ2K4ciiLZZh1zR2PA>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/ICOMRio2013>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/IcomRio2013>

### New COMCOL publication

#### *Participative Strategies in Collecting the Present*

It is a great pleasure to announce that *Participative Strategies in Collecting the Present*, the book from COMCOL's first conference in Berlin 2011 is now released. The volume is issued by Léontine Meijer-van Mensch and Elisabeth Tietmeyer and published by Panama Verlag, in the series Berliner Blätter, 63/2013.

In this book, the papers from the conference discuss participative collecting from various perspectives and present/give examples of participative museum projects. The articles are grouped under four main themes: Reflections on methods of participation, (Re)defining the museum with participation, Perceptions of community, and Challenging authority and control.

The volume is available both as a printed book and as e-text and can be ordered from <http://www.panama-verlag.de/programm/participative-strategies/index.html>



## Abstracts for COMCOL Annual Conference 2013

*The abstracts are grouped according to the sessions they belong to, and published in that order – except that the papers presented at the joint day with ICME, ICR, ICMAH and ICOM Korea finish the presentation. Two of the authors, Jian Xi and Njabulo Chipangura, unfortunately could not attend the conference, but we are glad to publish their abstracts.*

### COMCOL Session I: Collections between different ideologies

#### Actualized Significance – Filtration – Sedimentation: Three Different Models for the Assessment of Older Collections

*Markus Walz*

The Australian significance assessment model *Significance 2.0*, an extended version of which was presented at the COMCOL conference 2011, declares that every assessment result is tied to its period. Therefore the assessed significance must be actualized within undefined intervals.

*Significance 2.0* is based on heritage assessment, focused on historic monuments and cultural assets. Using it as a universal model could be criticized, because the relations to the past and the values of past assessments differ from one museum type to another. A tripartite structure of all museums offers the starting point: art collections – classificatory (taxonomic) collections – collections dealing with relative aspects.

Obviously *Significance 2.0* uses such a relative perspective: All rationales are tied to their respective present moment and older rationales give impressions of that past time; the assets get new meaning as a phenomenon of the history of academic reasoning and / or of societal history. Reassessment of an aged collection uses two different points of view for one reassessment result. It looks for the significance of each asset on the new contemporary level and for the historic relevance of the older values with the combined possibility of getting new values

or not, of seeing old values as new historic ones or as expired criteria.

Classificatory collections, typically, but not exclusively in natural history museums and museums for arts and crafts, act differently: each asset represents its taxon in time and space and differs from any other collected asset. The basic system of this kind of collecting is sedimentation without any thought that an older spectrum within these collection sediments might lose its value – just the contrary: The value of the whole collection increases with the volume of sedimentation, with the multiplication of comparisons between assets belonging to the same taxon but to different strata.

The German art historian Oskar Bätschmann outlined a theoretical model for the art of the past: In his opinion, actual art is not yet defined as art: assets of actual art turn first to “non-actual art” but later on, they flow into three different categories (“permanent art”, “latent art”, “non-art”) – including the point that the quality of being a piece of art is neither exclusively defined by the author nor the scientists or the art audiences. Because the quality of a piece of art (and with this quality the character as a collectable asset for an art museum) can be lost by shifting positions within the society (the art audiences, the art

historians, the art critics...), collections of actual art need a fundamental reassessment, which I call filtration of the aged collection of actual art: only the “permanent art” is kept definitely, the non-art will be deaccessioned completely. There remains the second category as an indifferent and at the moment undecidable decision point – up to the next filtration act. Some definite non-art assets or irrelevant latent-art assets change their meaning from an artistic position to a historic value; their deaccession leads to an

accession in a museum of history. Transferred musealia are those rare assets which switch from one part of the described tripartite model – art as art – to another, the collections with relative values. ■

Markus Walz, Cultural Anthropologist and Professor for Theoretical and Historic Museology at the University of Applied Sciences, Leipzig, Germany.

## “Now this is my legacy: Seed for sowing should not be milled“

**Gudrun Fritsch**

For ICOM’s General Conference 2013 and for COMCOL, whose theme for this international meeting is *Museums [memory + creativity = social change]*, I feel that Käthe Kollwitz’ legacy is worthwhile sharing with the international readership: “Now this is my legacy: Seed for sowing should not be milled“.



"Seed for sowing should not be milled".  
Photo: Käthe-Kollwitz-Museum Berlin.

This is a quotation by Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) which she used for the first time in her written plea against World War I (23 October 1918) and then, once again, in the title of her famous last graphic work. Stressing the two lithographs by Käthe Kollwitz *Saatfrüchte* “Seed for sowing

should not be milled” (end of 1941) and “Never war again” (1922/23) it seems to me that her oeuvre is current because of worldwide political problems.



"Never again war. Photo: Käthe-Kollwitz-Museum Berlin.

The artist, famous daughter of the city of Königsberg (today Kaliningrad), became one of the most significant German artists during her lifetime. She had an

international reputation and was recognized all over the world, in particular in Russia, later Soviet Union, China, Japan and North and South America, especially Brazil and Argentina.

Her two lithographs communicate the outstanding graphical and sculptural oeuvre and her life-long anti-war message. In 1922/23, she completed the series of woodcuts called “War” after long and agonizing attempts with this theme. She wrote to Romain Rolland about this series: “I have always again and again tried to depict ‘War’. I could never understand it. Now, I have finally completed a series of woodcuts which to some extent say what I wanted to express. These sheets should travel all over the world and should, in summary, communicate to all human beings: so it was – and this we have all endured throughout these unspeakably difficult years.” She took up this theme once more in 1941/42, fearing that Hitler’s taking over of the supreme command would appeal to young males willing to fight without realising that they would lose their lives.

Her life and her oeuvre are closely related to German history. She was four years old at the time Germany became an Empire, when Wilhelm I was proclaimed Emperor in 1871 in Versailles. She was 47 years of

age when, after living in Berlin for 23 years, the First World War began on the first of August 1914. Her youngest son would be killed in this war. When the war ended in political revolt in 1918 with the abdication of the Emperor Wilhelm II on November 9th 1918, (and with the subsequent establishment of the Weimar Republic on August 11, 1919) she was 51 years old. In her 66<sup>th</sup> year she experienced both the collapse of the first German democracy and Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor on January 30, 1933: with the accompanying frantic march toward a National Socialist dictatorship in Germany. The outbreak of the Second World War took place on September 1, 1939 when she was 72. Her first grandson was killed in 1942. She did not live to see the end of the war. She died on April 22, 1945 in Moritzburg near Dresden.

Her oeuvre and the Käthe-Kollwitz-Museum’s collection in Berlin are especially interesting for visitors because the world will be commemorating in 2014 the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of World War I. ■

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## A shifting Identification: from Kanto Totofuku Museum to Lvshun Museum

*Jian Xu*

As one of the earliest museums in China, the Lvshun Museum is a significant case for understanding how museum collections are formulated and re-shaped, in both physical and cognitive aspects, against a background of dramatic social change. Based on studies of museum inventories, catalogues, excavation reports, research

papers and personal correspondences and memoirs, on-site observation in the museum and re-visits of archaeological sites, I will reveal how artifacts and collections were organized, displayed, interpreted and re-interpreted, how the museum was designed and re-oriented, and finally how the shifting role of the past



served the present in the 20<sup>th</sup> century China.

Established by the Japanese colonial government in 1917, the Lvshun Museum was firstly known as the Kanto Totofuku (Kanto Governor's Mansion) Museum. Housed in the unfinished Russian generals and officers' Assembly when it was surrendered, the museum, an invention of Japanese colonists, constituted part of the cultural ambitions of the new Japanese colony.



The Lvshun Museum; photo provided by the author.

Originally designed to collect and display archaeological and ethnographic artifacts from eastern Mongolia and Manchuria in order to legitimize the Japanese occupation, the Museum quickly transformed into a major collection of cultural “treasures” by accepting several magnificent collections. Hamada Kosaku (1881-1938) and other Japanese archaeologists surveyed and excavated in the Liaoning peninsula in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and all their findings were bequeathed to the Lvshun Museum. The archaeological collection was not only significant in re-writing the early regional history, but also ensured the museum a crucial position in the discipline of archaeology in East Asia. The museum

was further enriched by the collection of Buddhist manuscripts and paintings gathered by the famous explorer Otani Kozui (1876-1948), and other gifts of Chinese bronzes, porcelains and stone carvings by various Japanese investigators. In a certain sense, the Lvshun Museum exemplified Japanese cultural strategy and propaganda during the WWII.

During the short period of control by the Russian troops, the Lvshun Museum was renamed the Oriental Culture Museum in Lvshun and faded away from public attention. When it was handed over to the Chinese in 1951, the administrators faced a dilemma of how to use the “old” collections in celebrating the national glory, but cautiously avoiding the Japanese or colonial memory. The concern was reinforced soon after by a major expansion of the museum's collection. Various collections of the great connoisseur and scholar Luo Zhenyu (1866-1940), dismantled by Russian's occupation of his personal museum, Dayun Shuku, were reunited at the Lvshun Museum. Abiding by the new ideology, the Museum divided the collections into two major groups, national treasures and local history, but the collectors in the former and the investigators in the latter were omitted. The collection of natural history was relocated to a newly founded specialized museum, to erase its former link with colonial politics. Therefore, the case of Lvshun Museum vividly shows how the old collections are used and re-interpreted to satisfy different agendas and gain shifting identifications. ■

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## Creative curating for today

*Jillian Carman*

Towards the end of 2012 I visited a remarkable installation that evoked two historic exhibitions: Clare Butcher's *The Principles of Packing: A case study of two travelling exhibitions 1947-9*, exhibited at Michaelis Galleries, University of Cape Town. No artworks were used. Instead Butcher chose and curated activities (live and recorded), items and concepts to evoke an era of close British-South Africa cultural ties and improved museum practices. This was the late 1940s, when Britain honoured South Africa, a major Commonwealth ally in the recent World War, with a Royal state visit in 1947, a loan from 1947 to 1948 of an exhibition of contemporary British paintings and drawings, and assistance with a loan to Britain, for the first time, of a major exhibition of South African paintings, drawings and sculpture, which opened at the Tate Gallery in London in 1948.

The period was significant for both South Africa and the world at large. It was a time of reconstruction after the devastating Second World War when the United Nations and United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (Unesco) were established in 1945, and their affiliate the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 1946. War-damaged heritage sites and monuments were restored and good museum practices were implemented under the guidance of Unesco and its series of Museums and Monuments Manuals. Chapter V (*The principles of packing*) of number V in the series, *Manual of travelling exhibitions*, 1953, forms the curatorial framing device for Butcher's case study. She evokes the manual's guidelines in various ways (lighting samples, a loose-leaf stock book, mason's scaffolding) and skilfully interweaves these with clues to the nature of travelling exhibitions and South African society in the late 1940s. Such exhibitions

could assume the role of goodwill ambassador mediating between different geographies and cultures. And they enhanced the sense of belonging of British-South Africans, many of whom referred to Britain as Home. The first exhibits and their label at the entrance to the display, Butcher's grandparents Denzel and Janet Cochrane, skilfully capture this type of genteel South African. They are dressed casually, 1940s-style, engage visitors in conversation with their British accents, and invite them to share their Ceylon tea served in Poole china teacups, imported from Britain.



T43. Tea with Denzil and Janet Cochrane, 2012. Ouma's economical ice-cream, Ceylon tea, Poole china, newspaper, pink wool, conversation. Photograph: Clare Butcher.

The neo-British character of the time weaves in and out – in articles and photographs pinned to a board, a partial

recording of a guided tour, a flower arrangement – but the principal structure of the exhibition is the concept of a curated travelling show.

Butcher explains that her aim was to create an archive of these two travelling exhibitions, using a discursive curatorial approach which destabilises historical certainties and enables movement between and beyond embedded

things, venues and times. The result was an exhibition that creatively addressed issues of relevance for a contemporary audience and illuminated a past moment in history. It was utterly compelling. ■

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## COMCOL Session II: Generating new meaning for collections

### Old Collection of Eternal and Universal Values

*R. V. Ramana*

A general consideration for inclusion of an object at a museum in India, apart from its cultural value, is to be of more than one hundred years old. Items of history, folk art, crafts, etc. are endowed with meanings and associations of continuing values to humanity all over the places, which may be considered as ‘glocal’ (global+local) in nature. It is becoming increasingly gratifying to museum personnel in India to notice and correlate the daily happenings in the country and around the world to the day to day activities and general objectives of the respective museum institutions they serve. However, to visualise, interpret and understand these connections is not always easy, as collections displayed at museums originate in complex and diverse situations – dispersed and distanced by time and space, and as a consequence, require systematic efforts by museums to document and exhibit them.

Considering the fact that classical museums mostly conveyed their message through their objects, and that a vast majority of modern museums continue to do so; it is necessary to (re)interpret the collections periodically to explore the prospect of their (re)use and utility to

diverse stakeholders – visitors, staff, policy makers, leaders, experts, researchers, communities, societies, nations and the world.



Bronze © Department of Museology, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, India.

Exhibits (collections – studied, understood and shared with humanity) are the primary things one gets to see, enjoy, experience, and know about; at museums. A museum visit may be a chance, impulsive or planned and informed activity, and may give euphoric feelings of being informed about some hitherto unknown subjects, issues, phenomena and facts of bygone times – demonstrated through material evidences and their description, explanation or performance.

Of course, not all collections are about pleasant events and incidents. If the theme and its material is about conflict, crime, exploitation; the resultant experience tends to be disturbing and sad. Nevertheless, collections of this nature inform visitors of what went wrong in past; thereby what should not be continued and repeated in future. Museum collections are thus capable of giving a sense of comfort, fulfilment, challenge and a sporadic element of surprise and edification about the different stages of progress of various civilisations, cultures, natural history and the physical environment. They may cause attitudinal changes, correct erroneous opinions and perceptions about self and others.

Collections must therefore, strive to be relevant, as visitors seek to relate and position themselves with the purpose of knowing or experiencing the object put on display. Possession, preservation and promotion of antiquity has been a universal practice in museums. Collections acquire

new meanings and connections, as awareness, understanding and knowledge about these objects tend to grow with the passage of time, with continuity of quests for information about these items and their associated issues.

Collections displayed at museums comprise and demonstrate artistic and aesthetic achievements, cultural diversity, history, socio-political-economic changes, biodiversity and scientific progress. Antiquities not only document and offer narratives of the past, they may also have a message and moral embedded, which is of contemporary use and relevance. Collections promote understanding of the self and the exotic, promote appreciation of cultural diversity and with it, peace and tolerance. ■

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## Wheels of Time: Living with vintage cars yesterday, today and tomorrow

### *Njabulo Chipangura*

Mutare Museum in Zimbabwe holds a collection of vintage cars that needs to be re-interpreted for the contemporary world. One way of attaining a reinterpretation of the collection will be to start a dialogue around the vintage cars, through engaging surrounding communities about their preferred choices of cars of the 1940's, 50's, 60's and 70's. Essentially, the idea will be premised on the need to re-engage members of the society by allowing them to reflect upon certain symbolic attachments and the nostalgia that comes along with seeing the vintage collection at this museum. From this perspective new aspects of this collection can be relayed by

giving a certain degree of inclusion to the community through listening to their stories and how they still relate with these cars.



The present set up of the vintage cars collections at Mutare Museum. Photo Njabulo Chipangura.



The vintage cars collection at Mutare Museum comprises of models such as the 1951 Morris Minor, 1957 Chevrolet 782R, the 1959 Peugeot 203, the 1964 Austin 110 Westminster and the 1966 Ford Corsair among others. Members of the community will be asked to send in their photographs of the 'golden period' in which they posed close to their cars as individuals or as families. It is most likely that some of the vehicles in these photographs will be similar to those now on display at the museum. These photographs will then be displayed and juxtaposed in the same gallery that houses the vintage cars.



An example of an old photograph that is submitted for the planned exhibition. The photo was taken in 1963.

Such a close involvement of members of the community in this proposed new display will ensure that they are given a sense of ownership of the collections in this museum. That way new meanings derived from the collection will be

generated. An artist will be engaged to create a visual backdrop in this gallery and also to give a new impression to the space.

All these initiatives will be modelled in such a way that the old vintage collection at Mutare Museum, which appears to be losing meaning in contemporary society, is reinterpreted and made relevant again. Another initiative that can also give new life to the vintage collection will be through hiring out some of the functioning cars, an idea which the Mutare Museum has been contemplating for a long time. The vintage cars can be hired out to willing members of the community and can be used for special events such as weddings, anniversaries and even for vintage car rallies. Motoring enthusiasts from the city may also be interested in this vintage collection and this can also help to generate a new life for it. A resuscitation of the vintage cars collection at Mutare Museum through various community hands-on-engagement exercises will not only ensure that the collection is given a new meaning, but also entails generating waning public interest on this museum. However, in many respects such use of collections in the public realm is largely discouraged because it is against conservation practices. ■

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## Gender and tattoos

### *Eva Hult*

The Maritime Museum in Stockholm currently displays its own old collection of sailors' tattoos from the 1920s and 1930s, and tries to interpret the designs from a gender perspective. The old designs, photographs and interviews are completed with new material, which inform about the use of so called old school tattoos in contemporary society.

The old collection consists of original tattoos made by Scandinavian tattooists. The anthropologists at that time believed that tattoos would soon disappear in modern society, and therefore they collected the phenomenon. About the same time photographs were taken and interviews were made by the museum.





The entrance to the exhibition showing the tattooed sailor from the 1930s together with a young middleclass woman living in Stockholm today. Photo Anneli Karlsson, CC BY-SA, National Maritime Museums of Sweden.

Tattoos were mainly regarded as a part of the culture of the lowest classes – vagabonds, sailors, prisoners, people working in circus, and others a bit outside the well organized Swedish so called *folkhemmet* (“the people’s home”), which promised a place for everybody in a more equal, homogenous society. When everybody had become a part of *folkhemmet* there would be no real “lowest classes” anymore and accordingly no tattoos – that was what they thought.

But today there are still tattooed people, and moreover, there are, at the moment, more of them in the Western society than maybe ever before. Tattoos have gone from working classes to middle classes, from sailors to “everybody” and from men to women. How come? It seems like it has become one way among many to express uniqueness and individuality, so much wanted in our societies of today.

Our focus today at the museum has been gender combined with a class perspective. I will give some examples:

- \* The exhibition has set the tattoo phenomenon in the context of the male collective on-board and the workingman culture of sailors, where you should not talk much about feelings.
- \* We discuss why so many of the motives are butterflies, roses, swallows and hearts – motives that today are regarded as

“feminine”. They are combined with motives like daggers, pistols, tigers – today maybe regarded as “masculine”. We make the conclusion that they all are about strong feelings that you seldom talked about: love, pain, life, fear and last but not least, about longing.

\* On the male bodies there were put many stereotypes of women – the fiancé, the exotic woman, the frivolous woman, the nurse (!), the mother (who is always dead). We have a discussion about male and female stereotypes.

\* Two of the tattooists mentioned in the old material are surprisingly women.

\* A young woman of today in our new documentation has a big pin-up girl on one arm. For her this is a way to play with stereotypes and she thinks it is such a lovely picture.

\* Among contemporary sailors I have noticed that while men say that they have their tattoos mostly because their father or grandfather had some, and/or they think it is cool, women much more express themselves and their lives in their tattoos when they talk about them.



Malin is a 29 years old woman living in Stockholm, and she has never worked as a sailor. She says that she wears the pinup-girl because it expresses and plays with an extreme femininity. Photo Anneli Karlsson, CC BY-SA, National Maritime Museums of Sweden.

A tattoo is both a decorative and a communicative statement. It is not surprising then that they offer a glimpse into various ideas of gender and sexuality. Notions of what is special for men and for women, change over time and need to be

discussed and questioned – and that is what I mean about a gender perspective. Hopefully this can provide inspiration and rethinking this old collection that we have kept in the museum for over eighty years. ■

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## Can art contribute to new concepts of heritage, museums, collections and society?

*Jacqueline Heerema*

Understanding collecting is basically understanding your own values, as a person, as a member of a family, a community and society and as an expert.

As a conceptual artist I studied museology, and work as an independent urban curator. I collect, connect and interconnect local knowledge on a global level, and act as a catalyst between local communities, arts and science.

I wish to question our presumptions and the manipulations that we accept, integrate and create in our daily lives. Who determines what is important, what should be cherished for future generations to become part of our global heritage and what may contribute to understanding the incomprehensible?

What interests me most is the conceptual and contextual nature of contemporary arts. Not as a discourse within the domain of arts, but as a dialogue interconnecting different fields of reflections on arts, culture, heritage and science... in short the things we tend to value. There is never just one story to tell. The former top down approach of museums shifts to a broader understanding; more inclusive and based on social, artistic or scientific research in the how, why and when we construct the incomprehensible world around us.

Three projects are summarized that focus on the concept of 'innovatory heritage': *Museum Oostwijk*, *The Chamber of*

*Marvels*, and *Anthropogenic collection on coastal transitions*.

*Museum Oostwijk* was an investigation of perceptions of cultural identity of the residents in Oostwijk, part of a Dutch town. Starting from the concept that everybody is a director and curator of a museum I converted this urban neighbourhood into *Museum Oostwijk* – shifted the established construction of formal museums 180 degrees and stated that everybody and everything in this area is part of the collection of the Museum. The inhabitants became the directors, curators and guides of the Museum. Artists and experts were invited to work with the inhabitants on research to reveal this collection.

**"Everybody is  
director and curator  
of a museum."**

At the City Museum of Zoetermeer I developed the concept of *The Chamber of Marvels* to publicly deconstruct the system of museums and museology. Every step in the process of an object and story being

transferred into a museum object as part of a collection was researched within the museum spaces, together with the locals and experts in four steps: The Naked Object = observation; The Talking Object = perception; Object Speeddating = composition and cohesion; Beyond the Object = transformation.

I co-founded Satellietgroep, an artist run initiative that explores, through arts and culture, how the sea and waterways influence cities, people, communities and the environment. Our aim is to enhance public and professional awareness on coastal transitions. Long term projects are *Badgast* and *Now Wakes The Sea*. In these projects new works are developed that reflect on the geographical, ecological, conceptual and philosophical shifts due to coastal transitions. These works contribute to the international contemporary collection relating to coastal transitions of Satellietgroep. Satellietgroep interconnects coastal communities by contextualizing contemporary research and new works to historic and future coastal developments and works.

Lately I proposed that heritage has a new connotation as *innovatory heritage*. Not the type of heritage only to be smartly managed and maintained (like the English 'Innovative heritage') but an active cyclic

system of understanding. Museologist Peter van Mensch recently stated that arts can (also) contribute to new concepts of heritage, by developing new questions that derive heritage from dogmatic and institutionalized notions to new ideas about how material heritage shifts to immaterial heritage, in the sense that it shifts from tangible to the carrier of intangible heritage. Heritage no longer deals with the representation of the past as 'innovatory' heritage focuses on the future! ■

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<http://www.jacquelineheerema.nl/catalogusMO.htm>

De Wonderkamer van Zoetermeer/The Chamber of Marvels:

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Badgast:

[http://www.satellietgroep.nl/about\\_badgast/1](http://www.satellietgroep.nl/about_badgast/1); Artist in residence Badgast:

[http://www.satellietgroep.nl/badgast\\_air\\_sea/1](http://www.satellietgroep.nl/badgast_air_sea/1);

Cinema and Talks at Badgast:

[http://www.satellietgroep.nl/cinema\\_sea/1](http://www.satellietgroep.nl/cinema_sea/1);

International exchange Now Wakes The Sea:

[http://www.satellietgroep.nl/now\\_wakes\\_the\\_sea/1](http://www.satellietgroep.nl/now_wakes_the_sea/1)

Link to this presentation online:

[http://www.satellietgroep.nl/actueel/1/guestspeaker\\_at\\_icomrio2013](http://www.satellietgroep.nl/actueel/1/guestspeaker_at_icomrio2013)

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## COMCOL Session III: Sustainable re-interpretations of collections

### (Re)interpretation: rebuilding or restoration?

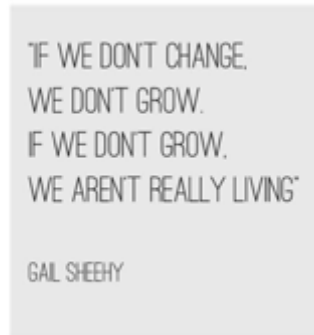
*Miriam La Rosa, Marija Jaukovic, Riccarda Hessling*

It was a decade ago. There was a building housing a collection: there was a museum. The building closed down to the public because of renewal: what happened to that museum, its space and its collection? The paper addresses the question of (re)interpretation of collections caused by

the change of the museum's physical space, i.e. building's renewal. It furthermore analyses the impact that such a renewal has on the interpretation of the museum and, in particular, on the relation between collections' narrative and physical

space. The process of (re)interpretation of museums' collections and functions is investigated through the analysis of three case studies – Rijksmuseum, Stedelijk Museum and Van Gogh Museum – which formulate a specific city landmark in Amsterdam: the Museumplein. The museums house collections of great national importance for the Netherlands. Their reopening after several periods of closure has been in the spotlight of public and professional attention, marked as one of the most important events of the year 2012-13. The different degrees of physical inaccessibility of the museums' original spaces and their collections raise various questions: How do these historical collections function within their renewed space, a transformed society and the recent developments of museum theory and practice? In order to outline the implications caused by closing the physical access to both building and collection and by the public expectations made over time, a multi-layered analysis is conducted.

It highlights that the reasoning behind the museums' closures is not related to the physical accessibility and rendering of the museums' spatial configuration but rather influences the entity of museums' core functions. In particular, some joint tendencies developed by the three museums during their closure can be identified: collection development, visibility of collection and institution, and new experimental strategies such as laboratory approaches. It follows that: in the specific case of a temporarily closed museum, collections' reinterpretation is inevitable and the period of closure is the core moment for reinterpretation. In this respect, reinterpretation implies both a dual dimension and a dual direction: Firstly, reinterpretation is influenced by two dimensions: internal (by the museum's actions) and external (based on the public's opinions and reactions). Secondly, the dual direction of reinterpretation occurs for both the museum itself and its audience.



Reinterpretation can be identified as a current and growing trend in the museum field. If understood as such, it can be defined as a necessity when attempting to apply other notions such as the participation paradigm to the day-to-day functioning of museums. However, is reinterpretation a trend? Is it justified to claim its appearance as answering to the contemporary *Zeitgeist*? It can be argued that reinterpretation has been silently present in most segments of the museums' core functions from 'beginning of time'. Recognizing reinterpretation as a permanent, continuous process within a museum imposes a question of maintaining and regulating this process currently marked as a trend. One possible solution might be approaching reinterpretation within institutions policies. This could possibly guarantee continuity of reinterpretation and open the space for museums to more freely experiment and develop new strategies towards their collections and their meaning(s). Including reinterpretation at policy level would possibly allow the recognition of both opportunities and obligations of museums towards their role within society, fulfilling the ultimate goal of generating social change. ■

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## Reviving the collections. A polysemantic approach for working with collections in online museum management systems

*Lotta Fernstål*

In the project *Polysemantic Digital Collecting*, at the Swedish History Museum, we work with online museum management systems and new ways to include perspectives and interpretations in the information in these systems, which today is usually not the praxis. The word ‘polysemantic’ is our point of departure for this. A synonym to this word would be pluralistic.



The word *polysemantic* refers to the fact that objects often carry several stories and mean different things to different groups of people. It derives from *poly* as in plural or multiple, and *semantic* as in meaning. St Sebastian in this picture can illustrate the concept quite well. Within the frame there is the information we have about the object today in our online database at The Swedish History Museum; quite traditional, antiquarian information. But there is so much more to St Sebastian than this, which is illustrated with the orange bubbles. E.g. Sebastian was a Christian martyr who became a patron saint for different illnesses, and he can be used in discussions about gender and LGBT-history.

While thematic knowledge and narratives are important for collections used in exhibitions and school programs, the online information about collections is usually more or less digital versions of the old catalogue cards; not so easy for

someone who is not a specialist to put into context or understand. In fact, studies in our project show that there is quite a big gap between the existing information in the museum systems and what the public is interested in knowing about, for example, history.

To turn the museum collections into useful sources for the online public we need to revive them. By creating new themes and orders within the systems that may not follow the traditional ways of categorizing the collections, and presenting this in attractive ways, museums can amuse, educate and challenge their online visitors. We believe that this will lead to a more engaging interaction between the public and the museums and their collections. This can also spur creativity, and may lead to a more pluralistic view of history. In fact this – the pluralistic view of history – may be the main value of reviving the collections through online systems and an impetus to start working within the online systems in new, polysemantic ways.

The public will be able to find what they are interested in if we present the information in more accessible ways. But if we work with, for example, gender and minority perspectives and strive to include different groups of people in the narratives, we also contribute to show the plurality of society and of the past. Groups and people who have their stories told with the help of museums also exist in a more profound way.

Museums are institutions of memory and play important roles in creating the past and the present, as well as the future. If the past is full of different stories and different groups of people, it also promotes plurality today – or at least it doesn't legitimate a



narrow, intolerant social climate based on history. We already do this at the museums to a large extent in exhibitions and school programs. But we also need to take on the polysemantic approach to start reviving the collections online for all those people who are interested in our objects and knowledge but who for various reasons do not come to the actual museum buildings. By doing this we can make the collections and the museums important and significant also on the Internet – because let's face it, that's where most people are today. And through this we can further contribute to creating a society that is socially sustainable. ■

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## Re-interpreting collections through new, contemporary exhibition formats

*Annette Loeseke*

My paper discusses the re-interpretation of existing collections through developing new, contemporary exhibition *formats*. I interpreted the ICOM conference motto "memory plus creativity leads to social change" from an audience- and reception-centered point of view: "Memory" is understood as active practice, as reception-related rather than object-centered. "Creativity" is interpreted with particular regard to new approaches to curating. And "social change" is interpreted with regard to contemporary pluralistic societies

My paper built on empirical research on reception I recently carried out for the Asian Art Museum in Berlin, the British Museum and Shanghai Museum. A range of empirical methods were used to analyse visitors' reception and interpretation, such as face-to-face interviews and tracking studies, following visitors on their path through the exhibition rooms, observing visitor behaviour and identifying movement patterns. Key observations included visitors' appreciation of the co-presentation of contemporary and older items, and the significant impact of visual

impression, exhibition design and space layout on reception.

I therefore suggested that reception should be understood as process and practice. My paper explored the hypothesis that contemporary exhibition formats play a major role in how collections, whether old or contemporary, are received by contemporary audiences. In order to re-interpret existing collections and reflect their value for contemporary recipients I suggest the development of new, contemporary exhibition formats referring to contemporary pluralistic narrative structures and reception practices.

This would imply a reception- rather than content-centered approach. Displayed items should be understood as 'exhibits' rather than given 'objects' which were 'found' as such and presented for documentation. On the contrary, reception-centered exhibitions would reflect the museum presentation as a specifically constructed, contemporary context for reception and interpretation of interrelated exhibits rather than a neutral space for the documentation of objects. Such a

pragmatic notion of curating implies a curatorial concept which reflects the subjective, contingent view 'of' the displayed exhibits as an inherent structural element of the exhibit within its contemporary context of display in the museum.

In order to re-interpret existing collections for reception by contemporary audiences, we would need to develop contemporary exhibition formats responding to the complexities of today's societies and contemporary practices of meaning-making, which implies the (intercultural) variety of narrative structures. Developing new and diverse exhibition formats would allow the constant re-interpretation of collections, diversify and vary perspectives, discover overlooked, unexpected aspects of collections and single items, and thus emphasise the diversity of cultural paradigms and interpretations.

Building on hypotheses from my research and combining curatorial and empirical approaches, my paper presented strategies and creative tools for systematically developing new, contemporary, more diverse exhibition formats. In order to find inspiration for generating alternative approaches to common presentations of collections and exhibition models I suggested looking at, for example, journalistic formats, both in print and online.

The diversity of journalistic formats might inspire us develop our subject matter in new ways, change aspects in focus and the hierarchy of exhibits on display, highlight marginalised details in unexpected contexts, and juxtapose items to make new connections. ■

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## The endless cycle: collections and sustainability

**Carla Prat**

This presentation explored the growth of the concept of sustainability by addressing issues that emerge from new developments that take place within the *Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil* (MACG) in Mexico City.

Nowadays, most museums struggle to balance their resources, their mission, collections, functions and visitor needs with continuing to be innovative and creative institutions. Besides all this, MACG also encounters the issue of knowing that it is historically known for its collection, which includes the works of famous Mexican modern painters. Although, this collection is normally not shown due to the museum's desire to interact with the contemporary art scene. This re-positioning of the museum leaves a

team of museum professionals debating how to re-integrate the old collection into the new narrative of the museum. Moreover, they also ask themselves how to keep being relevant and sustainable.

As Georgina DeCarli (2004, p.13) pointed out, a sustainable museum is any institution that conducts research, preservation, communication and revitalization of heritage through a modern museum management appropriate to the requirements of their environment. It is also one that, in order to generate sustainable local development and benefits for the museum, performs in conjunction with community members, projects and active preservation activities by exercising

responsible enjoyment of heritage resources.

Although in the MACG there are no specific goals or visions regarding sustainability, I found myself faced with an institution that acts quite sustainably. I would like to briefly point out some general examples that caught my attention in that regard. Indeed, the museum works together with other museums and institutions, making co-productions and allowing the collection to move abroad. It seeks for civic engagement and for ongoing relationships with community organizations and civic groups. MACG works on the development of partnerships that can be helpful economically, but also enable to reach diverse audiences. It involves the local people in rethinking the collection. It invests time in establishing whether the public is emotionally engaged with the institution and what they would like to see inside it. Furthermore, it has been documenting the collection in order to make it more accessible and, to define an acquisition policy.

As can be seen the MACG is a museum still in a process of re-discovery, where each time new issues and new perspectives surface and need to be discussed. Yet, at the same time it re-evaluates itself and responds to the needs of a renewed museum model.

I would like to stress that sustainability calls for a new awareness of culture, as well as seeking a new understanding of the museum space and the work inside it. Sustainability, I argue, allows for much more than just preserving heritage: it opens a world to new opportunities that have not yet been explored. Sustainability represents a chance to increase resources, helps



To be opened. Photo Carla Prat.

institutions grow, involves local people, creates a sense of pride and satisfaction among all stakeholders, develops networks and partnerships with related institutions, among many other factors. There is no right or wrong way for institutions to relate to the pillars of sustainability. In fact, being sustainable is not another task, it is just taking a step further. ■

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## COMCOL Abstracts from the joint day with with ICME, ICR, ICMAH and ICOM Korea

### Session I: New Futures for Old Collections – Community Involvement

#### Participative Contemporary Collecting, an Everyday Dialogue

*Åsa Stenström*

The regional museum of Västerbotten in Umeå, in the northern part of Sweden, has a large collection of objects and photos dealing with the cultural history of the region. As in many museums, objects in the collection sometimes lack context, such as memories about the objects and what they have meant to different people at different times. When our predecessors collected they often just measured and described the objects and unfortunately neglected to add associated memories which provide important context. That creates a problem for us dealing with collections today: if the objects lack the context of when they are collected, then they will lack context – and meaning – all through their musealised life if you don't find a way to create the context around them.

One way of creating context is through everyday dialogue. Of course you can't create the context of a specific object in your collection through dialogue unless you find and interview the previous owners. Instead dialogue creates context to different categories of objects and thereby show what context the object could have had in the society and also what kind of context – and meaning – it actually has today.

In 2003 the museum of Västerbotten was granted funding from the European Union to create a new kind of exhibition, which deals with the past, the present and the future of the city of Umeå, and addresses its inhabitants. The key words are participation and dialogue. In the exhibition questions are posed by the

museum about objects and photos and the audience brings answers.



The "Memory container" where the audiences are in charge and can put their objects with context on display. Photo © Petter Engman, Västerbottens museum.

The most important thing however is that the audiences are invited to share their own memories with the museum curators and ethnologists who work in the exhibition on a daily basis. Audiences have the opportunity to exhibit their views of Umeå and to decide what the museum should collect. If they have an object or a photo

with a memory based context and want the museum to collect it, the museum actually will collect it. It is then put on display for a while in the “Memory container” and this encourages other people to take part in the collection process and the dialogue around objects.

The collection of contemporary memories is made possible through dialogue. With a bowl filled with sweets as an “ice-breaker” we have started discussion with a large part of the audience. People who did not know that their memories could be of any interest to a museum have now shared stories from their lives. People from other social classes than the museum usually interacts with have shared their memories and given a new perspective on the contemporary history of Umeå. Stories about poverty in the 1950’s and social exclusion have been collected and communicated back to the museum’s audiences. Topics that people have been unwilling to talk about have

now been collected. This dialogue method is a sustainable way of working and has been carried out in this museum since 2004.

The next step is to continue the dialogue with the support of our collections database *SOFIE*, a museum database developed since 1991 at the museum of Västerbotten, with 400 users. Through new applications, digital tools – and of course dialogue – we are planning to involve and inspire people to bring their memories around objects also the digital way. Through this our old collections can continue to be reinterpreted, reused and also will gain a new value for contemporary society. ■

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## Session II: New Considerations – Identity Building

### Contemporary collecting in Qatar: reimagining identity in a new nation state

*Karen Exell*

Arguably all collecting in Qatar is contemporary collecting as collections are in the process of being created to illustrate new narratives of identity at multiple scales. The state of Qatar gained independence in 1971, and now reaps enormous wealth from its oil and gas reserves. The father Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani (r. 1995-2013) instigated a programme of cultural development including the building of numerous museums such as the Museum of Islamic Art (2008) and the new National Museum of Qatar (due 2016). Some of the state museums hold and display collections created from the 1970s, newly interpreted; for other museums collections are in the

process of being constructed. The collecting process in Qatar at state level is intimately linked with the construction of a new Qatari identity for global consumption and national cohesion. The act of collecting at state level is highly politicized in a culture that fully grasps, and utilizes, the power of the museum to validate certain narratives. At a community level, the Msheireb Arts Center holds the Echo Memory collection of found objects from the cleared site of the down town Heart-of-Doha urban redevelopment project. This collection represents the lives of the South Asian communities that lived in the area, and is now used as inspiration for art work by Qatari artists to be included in the new



development, a complete reimagining of the objects. At an individual level collecting is popular, and can be linked with a need to preserve a disappearing present in the face of Qatar's rapid economic and social development, as well as representing local traditions of authority and erudition.



Pink Suitcase labelled Doha to Bombay, Building 456. Sadaa al Thikrayat (Echo Memory Project) collection, Msheireb Arts Center, Doha. © Ben Barbour, Msheireb Arts Center.

The limited literature in the English language on collecting in non-Western contexts, the fact that the discipline of museology is a western construct within which collection studies sits, and the existence of collections created about people rather than by people as a result of colonialism, can suggest that the practice of collecting as an indigenous non-western practice does not exist, but there are many examples that indicate otherwise.

Western collections studies contextualize practices of collecting within social, cultural and political conditions, such as colonialism and the development of museum collections or consumer culture and its impact on an individual's relationship to material possessions. This contextual approach, which sees collecting as a manifestation of wider cultural conditions offers a framework of analysis which can be utilised to explore the practice of collecting in other parts of the world. For example, collections at all scales present a narrative of the collector and his/her cultural context, regardless of the value of the object collected. The extraordinary art market purchases made by the Al-Thani family over the last decade narrate their extreme wealth and the state's global agenda; the multiple uses of the collection of found objects left by a displaced community at the heart of Doha narrates the varied philosophies of those involved in the collection project; and the preservation of traditional coffee pots and retro radios in private collections narrate a reaction to an unstable present.

The paper presents and examines how at these three levels, or scales, objects and collections are created and (re)interpreted in a dynamic process of identity construction: narratives of the state, of the included/excluded and of the individual. ■

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## Museums in New Towns: identity, image and participatory culture

*Irina Leifer*

In The Netherlands and in Russia hundreds of thousands of people live in so called New Towns – towns that were built at a

rapid rate after the Second World War by and for domestic migrants. Since the 1980's New Towns have found themselves

in a difficult situation. They are searching for their identity, for characteristics, which will contribute to their clearer positioning and they are exploring different possibilities to improve the quality of life – with varying success until now.

Various institutions, including museums, contribute to this search. In the Netherlands museums in New Towns position themselves more openly, experimentally and inclusively in relation to their city communities than in Russia. By means of participative collecting projects two museums – Stadsmuseum Zoetermeer and Nakhodka City Museum – began research along with their citizens, aiming to explore what it really means to live in a town where everyone is in fact a migrant. Within such a framework the input of city communities is of crucial importance.

Stadsmuseum Zoetermeer already has experience with participatory projects and building on their results it is particularly interesting to conduct such an experiment in another New Town and to compare the outcomes. How does this form of co-curatorship work in another political, social, economic and cultural context? How to design an open-ended museological process whereby the contribution comes from different sources and which is supposed to become a catalyst of developments desirable by the local communities and meaningful for the specific local situation? During recent decades museums in Russia have had to cope with drastic social transformations and were forced to think about important dilemmas related to their present-day role, mission and functions. Do participatory projects have the potential to help museums redefine their place in the contemporary urban landscape and reinvent themselves as dynamic and meaningful institutions? Can such projects catalyse changes in professional relationships within the museums and between the museums and various city

communities? Can the public really become co-curators and what consequences can this have for the position of the institution in a professional circuit and in the city?



*Museums in New Towns in process.* Photo: M. Nurgalieva and O. Tiukavkina.

It is significant to compare the results of the projects on different levels. Firstly, which communication strategies aiming at community participation can be considered successful in The Netherlands and in Russia? Secondly, which community representatives participate more actively in experimental museum projects and why? Thirdly, which objects have been collected and what can these contemporary collections tell about the emotional bond of citizens with their cities? And lastly, which role do (shared) memories and immaterial heritage play in identification and image making of New Towns and how can museums contribute to the process of transforming a planned city into a real one?

Both museums in Zoetermeer and in Nakhodka succeeded in making a group of citizens co-curators of the exhibition in a very specific way. It will be a challenge to continue this co-curatorship as part of the museum's further functioning. Building on the results of the experimental project Nakhodka City Museum started developing a strategy aiming at continuous participation of city communities in its work. Besides that, the museum started seriously thinking about collecting and working with immaterial heritage.

Another step is the development of a digital platform which facilitates the physical participatory process and offers a possibility to continue the project after the closing of the exhibition. Such a tool will make it possible to collect and share the knowledge obtained during the process-oriented exhibition and to continue communication between all the involved organisations and citizens. ■

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## Session III: Old Collections – New Interpretations

### The House of Alijn – A traditional folklore museum rebuilt as creative & social hub

*Sylvie Dhaene*

The House of Alijn in Flanders collects, preserves, studies and presents tangible and intangible cultural heritage of everyday life. The museum deals with global, universal themes such as rituals and social practices at transitional moments, celebrations and religious beliefs. The museum practice is driven by the following mission: 'The House of Alijn is fascinated by the culture of everyday life, and wants to share this passion in a dynamic, inspiring and mind-broadening way with both young and old in order to deploy and pass on meaning-engendering ideas, stories and images.'

It was in the year 2000 that the Museum of Folklore, which was founded in 1928, embarked on this new inspiring course. We felt the urgent need to search for new ties with the public. The connection was lost, only a small group of diehards with an interest in folklore came to visit and tourists came along to discover 'the local folklore from the old days', but in spite of this, there was a general loss of interest from the broader public, and even more

dramatically, from the locals. So it was time for an innovative change! The museum decided in favour of a transformation into a new kind of institution: no longer only a 'showplace', but also a 'workplace for, through and with the public'. The new name 'The House of Alijn – museum of things that (never) pass' marked the beginning of a new era.

For more than ten years now, the museum has taken the lead in Flanders in the area of the renewal, dramatisation and multidisciplinary broadening of the notion of cultural heritage. At the same time, it has altered the traditional idea about what a museum should be. The museum practice is strongly driven by values; its central points of interest are commitment and involvement with the public while bringing the collection to the centre of exchange, dialogue and creative participation, in order to establish hyperlinks between present, past and future.

Keeping alive the renewed connection between public and the collection is a main

concern of the daily practice. In the latest years crowd sourcing was initiated in pilots, from social tagging to initiatives to enlarge the collection in co-creation with the public.



From the project *Supertagger*, education in social tagging. Photo: The House of Alijn.

In all these actions, we try to build up a sustainable and active relationship with the public, both on and off line. We work very hard on the creation of a network of

volunteers and engaging experts in the cultural heritage community. The choice for an experimental role as creative and social hub saved the museum from a silent death. Actualisation of the collection, participative collecting, creating interaction and dialogue onsite and online, questioning and reflecting on the traditional collection policy and taking a seat on the social media channels were some of the proven strategies for reviving the museum and generating new meaning for the collection. But above all: sharing passion and knowledge, not fearing experiment, being part of society, touching boundaries by artistic and creative thinking are the keys words in this vibrant story. ■

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## Museu da Maré

### Museu da Maré, Rio de Janeiro: Audience-centered Collecting and Exhibiting

*Annette Loeseke*

During the ICOM 23<sup>rd</sup> General Conference in Rio de Janeiro in August, COMCOL delegates went on a one-day-trip to Museu da Maré, internationally renowned as the first community museum in a favela ([www.museudamare.org.br](http://www.museudamare.org.br)).

The museum started as project in 1989, producing and exhibiting videos about daily life in the favela. The future museum founders then started research in public archives for documents and photographs of the favela Maré, and offered training for university admission tests to young locals. In 2003, an archive was set-up to store documents collected and videos produced since 1989. In 2004, the archive became a museum, organising the first exhibition of

those photographs and objects, lent, then donated to the museum by local residents to start building a permanent collection. Located in a former boatyard, the museum is currently expanding its archive and exhibition spaces, creating working space and galleries for temporary exhibitions by local artists.

#### **Collecting and Exhibiting Policy**

Collecting objects and curating exhibitions referring to local residents' daily lives, jobs and experiences, the museum aims to foster identity by building history through linking past, present, and future. The museum, for example, addresses violence in the favela as one of the community's contemporary experiences. However,



rather than putting violence in the centre of exhibitions, the museum has focussed on the traces and effects of violence on the community in the past and present. In the past, when residents of Maré lived in houses on stilts, water was considered a major threat as children, especially, risked drowning. Today, the community suffers, instead, from violence by local gangs. Traces of this violence are exposed through x-rays of persons shot, showing bullets in the bodies, or bricks with bullet holes, collected in the neighbourhood by young locals.



Reconstruction of a stilt house in the museum. Photo Eva Fägerborg.

Local residents are proud of donating objects to the museum. However, objects are donated on loan, it has happened, that donors retrieved their donation. A local family of fishermen, for example, donated a statue of St. Peter, patron of fishermen, which they had taken on board for generations when fishing. After some time though, the family wanted the statue back to take on board again when fishing.

The museum follows an open collecting policy, accepting all objects brought for

storage in the archive, which is open to the public and spatially connected to the exhibition space by an open architectural structure. The museum is also experimenting with new exhibition models inspired by the cyclic structure of the tide ("maré") or the calendar.



Bullet hole in the collection. Photo Eva Fägerborg.

### **Key Strategic Management Issues**

To sum up: Even though the museum collects and displays objects and other documents, the approach to collecting, exhibiting and programming is audience-centered, starting from local audiences' experiences, analysing potential audiences' needs, pro-actively approaching potential audiences, and involving them as participants-donors instead of passive visitors. Key issues of the museum's strategic management approach include:

*Project-based, informal start:* The museum started on a project basis, over time working on becoming a cultural hub.

*Pragmatic, audience-centered notion of the object-as-exhibit:* The museum addresses local residents as potential audiences, connecting to local residents' experiences and values, collecting objects of their daily lives. It follows an open concept of collection as objects are loaned and might be retrieved. Collected objects of practical use or actual spiritual value are transformed into displayed 'exhibits', and might be transformed back again to their original use.



*Generating and nurturing response:* From the beginning, Museu da Maré has been pro-active in developing audiences and nurturing response, building its activities on local audiences' experiences, values and needs. The museum has followed a holistic strategy to generating response: initiating and producing cultural activities in addition to collecting, involving audiences as participants-donors, offering educational and academic training, and following a pro-active word-of-mouth PR strategy: Participants of the training programme, for example, promoted the cultural centre, now museum, once they went to university, inviting fellow students and professors to visit the centre and promote it further.

### Best Practice

The museum's collecting policy and strategic approach raise key questions for discussion on community outreach and audience development, and Museu da Maré has served as a model for community building. Considering the museum's strategic management approach further research might particularly focus on implications for the success of bottom-up approaches and inclusive management strategies for nurturing response, for building communities as well as audiences. ■

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## Reflections on Museu da Maré

*Eva Hult*

Museu da Maré in Rio de Janeiro is the first Brazilian museum located in a favela. It was very interesting to visit it as a part of COMCOL's program during ICOM's General Conference in August 2013. The first time I heard about the museum was at COMCOL's conference in Berlin in 2011, when the Brazilian museologist Paula dos Santos gave a presentation of the museum (see *COMCOL Newsletter* No 16) – and in Rio we met again! Together with COMCOL I have made three excursions in the same positive spirit: in 2011 to the Documentation Centre in Eisenhüttenstadt where life in former GDR is documented and shown by the community (see *COMCOL Newsletter* No 16), in 2012 to District Six Museum in Cape Town, which collect memories from, and by, people from a troublesome past of poverty and mass deportation (see *COMCOL Newsletter* No 20), and now Museu da Maré.

I believe that it all started in the favela in 1989 when young people began to

document daily life there. That was because life there radically changed once they reclaimed land where there used to be water. The dominant way of life as a fishing society disappeared. (For me working at a maritime museum this background is extremely interesting).

I have of course, like my co-visitors, many reflections after COMCOL's visit to Museu da Maré, but one maybe is a bit special and I think that I would like to share it with you. It is that this museum, which is so much talked about in museological and sociological circles, reminds me of other local museums I have visited. Museu da Maré collects objects, photographs and memories just like museums always have done. (Like in Eisenhüttenstadt and like in District Six Museum). They have their collections, and their exhibitions consist of built settings, objects, photographs and text. And I like this very much, since I do not think that museums and exhibitions without objects

really are museums, they are something else.



Key objects. The bottles used to contain chlorine, used for bleaching clothes. Photo Eva Fägerborg.

It all reminds me of how small local museums were established in Sweden when the old agricultural society changed dramatically and was transformed into an industrial one. Today we also have many small local museums preserving memories of the local industrial era. The museums start in areas which rapidly change and people who live there want to preserve some of the old things and memories before they disappear. The museums are all managed by the local people themselves. People come with their old possessions and the people involved in the museum sometimes have difficulty saying no to it, just like they said they found it hard to do in the Museu da Maré. These activities are probably something that often happens in society, both local and national and global, during time of great social change. Soon you need storage rooms, archives, exhibitions, educational staff and somewhere to sit down and drink coffee and talk. All of which still seems to be essential to the worldwide very strong concept of “museum”. I also noticed “the kitchen”, the room where they lived in the older society, and which was the first thing that they built in the rebuilding of the

Museu da Maré. This is a room important to every local museum – and also to many other museums – which wants to tell us how people once lived.

Of course I understand that the special thing about Museu da Maré is the way they work, and have worked, with enormous participation from the local community. The biggest difference between the local museums we have visited with COMCOL and the many local museums in Sweden, is probably the strong evidence of solidarity and political activism in the museums in Cape Town and in Rio de Janeiro. They also belong to societies with a more dramatic past and present than Sweden. And the way the donors in Rio are said to produce a collection that is dynamic and not everlasting represents thoughts you would not really find in the small local Swedish museums.

I hope I will be able to follow the development of Museu da Maré. Now they have more money than before, and it becomes more and more popular. It may well be a tourist attraction in a so-called “pacified” favela. (A term used by the police in Rio). I hope it will have a sustainable future, and will continue to activate people living there. In Sweden the local museums are quite active after all these years and I found this motto on their webpage. “We are convinced that a deep knowledge about the history in the place in which you live, is of great importance for a sustainable future”. ■

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