

COLLECTINGNET

An international museum network for collecting issues

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NORDISKA MUSEET



Samdok

Collectingnet is an international museum network for collecting issues created at the conference *Connecting Collecting* at Nordiska Museet, Stockholm in November 2007. Collectingnet invites museum professionals and scholars to take part in developing the network into a vital association and mouthpiece of international cooperation. The Newsletter will be published four times a year. We welcome contributions with reflections, conference/seminar reports, project presentations, specific questions you wish to raise, literature tips, invitations to cooperation or other themes. Please send your contribution to the next issue by **1 JUNE 2009** to collectingnet@nordiskamuseet.se. You can also contact the editors personally: catherinemarshall5@yahoo.com, eva.fagerborg@nordiskamuseet.se, lotta.hylten-cavallius@mkc.botkyrka.se

ICOM propopsal

One aim of Collectingnet is to develop the network into a new international ICOM committee, a platform for reflections on the practice, theory and ethics of collection development. Such a committee would also fill a gap in the present range of function oriented committees within ICOM. As all readers of our Newsletter know, a proposal regarding the establishment of an International ICOM Committee on Collecting has been distributed worldwide. The proposal, with support from 137 ICOM members from 25 countries, is now sent to the Standing Committee on International Committees for review. This first step in the formal process will be followed by recommendations to the Executive Council, who makes the final decision.

Eva Fägerborg
Collectingnet and Samdok

New collaboration network in Finland

Collection policies and practices have been amongst the major discussion themes in the museum field in recent times. The National Museum of Finland got its collection policy defined by the end of year 2008. This was a result of a long, history-conscious process, where a wide range of aspects concerning

not only present-day collecting activities but also museum practices in general were discussed. During the process the question of a collaboration network between museums was also brought up. Soon after, on 23 January 2009 a meeting was arranged between 86 participants from museums of cultural history in order to discuss collecting issues and to outline future collaboration. The idea to establish a network similar to that in use in other Nordic countries got strong support. The meeting elected a steering committee which consists of eight representatives from both provincial and specialised museums from all over the country, and two secretaries from the National Museum. This steering committee held its first meeting in March, in which it decided to name the organisation *Tallennus- ja kokoelmayhteistyöryhmä* (abbr. TAKO), meaning *Collaboration network for documentation and collecting*. As its first activity the group will carry out an enquiry in order to get a general view on the collection policies and practices that are in use as well as the hopes and needs that museums have in relation to this new network.

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Local Histories, Global Cultures: Contemporary Collecting in Transnational Space

The start of a PhD research project at the Museum of the Riverina in New South Wales, Australia

Rachael Vincent

I have often wondered why museology produces such little collecting-based research to explore concepts of spatial demarcation. This stems from an idea that transnational social space could generate tremendous potential for developing new types of collections, and collecting methods, to enliven the collecting sector. Museums lack robust strategies to validate new identities and practices that routinely cross borders and distance. A consequence of this situation is that migration histories are often shown as a one-way process (McShane 2001).

Few collecting policies acknowledge new identities formed by contemporary transnational movements (Van den Bosch 2007). Yet an understanding of transnational identity could be a key to future collecting practice. To pursue these ideas further, I began my PhD research project at Sydney's Macquarie University last July. Over the next three years, I hope to reconfigure and rethink collecting boundaries for "local" collections, with the aim of including populations with ties to wider spatial and temporal worlds.

This article considers the rationale and aims of the research project, and describes a first meeting with my case study museum to develop a strategy to collect from transnational space.

Transnationalism and transnational social spaces

The project explores the idea that collecting across multiple spatial delimitations will help history museums to respond to, and engage with, a significant effect of globalisation, namely the formation of transnational identities. Therefore, the research posits the need for a new theory of collecting to encompass transnational social spaces.

Transnationalism is a phenomenon encapsulating identities and practices that cross borders and distance. Migration theorists (Khagram & Levitt 2008) use the term to describe a new category of migrants able to maintain attachments to people, identities, traditions and movements beyond the borders of their home nation. The mobility of transnational populations has lead geographers to "rethink territorially bounded concepts of culture or culture groups" (Scott 2004: 30). It is the experience, noted by Giddens (Macdonald 2003: 5),

of becoming 'disembedded' from geographical borders, that is of particular interest to this research.

Transnational approaches can be seen in the field of social history, where collaboration with geographers considering spatial issues is now encouraged (Kaelble 2003; Kocka 2003; Stearns 2006a, 2006b). There is a move away from national historical paradigms, and the study of defined spaces such as regions and towns, towards experimental research into "global" or "world history". Many historians are reviewing existing geographical frameworks to critically analyse transnational 'networks and relations' instead of 'specific societies or groups within specific societies' (Kocka 2003:27). Stearns (2003:16) identifies transnational movements as 'the next conceptual challenge' for the profession after the 'new cultural turn' in the 1980s.

My research considers the enormity and complexity of transnational social spaces as unacknowledged remits for contemporary collecting. These spaces are defined through mobility, and dynamics between global communication flows and shifting patterns of residence, that subvert traditional forms of place-based identity (Bærenholdt & Simonsen 2004; Faist & Özveren 2004). They are multidimensional networks of social relations; and connections within them are multi-locational, characterised by complexity and simultaneity (Jackson et al 2004; Massey 2005). They comprise movements of people, technologies, finance, information, ideologies and commodities (Crampton & Elden 2007; England 2008). As subjects for research, they can be studied through the social lives of those living at a micro-territorial level (Friedman et al 2004).

Whilst museology explores concepts of place from numerous perspectives (e.g. Vanclay et al 2008), transnational concepts of place and space have not been widely considered. Implications for regional social history, and the collection of local identities in light of new socio-spatial realities, have been largely ignored. At Macquarie, my project sits within the Department of Environment and Geography. I find that common themes at the heart of Human Geography, such as the relationships between people, place, space and culture, are useful starting points to begin to question transborder linkages between local populations.

Collecting at the Museum of the Riverina

Data collection for my research project will take place at the Museum of the Riverina in the city of Wagga Wagga, New South Wales (see <http://www.wagga.nsw.gov.au/www/html/741-museum-home.asp>). Wagga Wagga is a major regional centre with a population of around 60,000 people. It is located midway between Sydney and Melbourne. Wagga, in the dialect of the Wiradjuri Aboriginal tribe, means “crow”. The repetition of the word expresses the plural, thus the city’s name means “place of many crows”.

The Museum of the Riverina operates two sites in Wagga Wagga; one at The Historic Council Chambers, which opened in 1999, and the other at The Botanic Gardens, which was formerly operated by the Wagga Wagga & District Historical Society, and was opened in 1965.



Museum of the Riverina’s Botanic Gardens and Historic Council Chambers sites. Photo Rachael Vincent.

Through outreach services, the museum engages with another 38 museums in 20 individual shire councils. In 2008, it was designated a ‘Marvellous Museum’ by ABC Radio National in their annual Regional Museums Award scheme (see <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/museums/>). I chose this museum because of its long tradition of successful

engagement with local communities, including new and existing migrant groups, and its enthusiasm to push the boundaries in terms of collecting and exhibition practice.



‘Memento Mori’, currently on display in the temporary exhibition gallery at the Historic Council Chambers site, is an exhibition exploring the relevance of gothic subculture in regional Australia. Photo Rachael Vincent.

Towards the end of March, I met with Museum Manager, Madeleine Scully, to discuss the logistics of progressing my project, and generating information to satisfy three research questions:

- How can regional history museums identify and collect identities and practices unique to both transnational social space and regional context?
- What happens when transnational social spaces are mapped against museological concepts of regional space?
- How can regional history museums define catchment areas for transnational communities, and support networks of participation?

We focused on how to shape my proposal into a collecting project that would not only engage local people with transnational connections generating the required data for my research, but also produce a popular, accessible exhibition for the Council Chambers! Our initial ideas have focused on a project to create “personal maps” to show individuals’ relationships to space and place across different scales. The project is still at a very conceptual phase, and we aim to refine and develop our ideas over the coming weeks.

Participatory cultural mapping

So how will I collect, or conceptualise, transnational space? I will use a methodology called “participatory cultural mapping” to generate the majority of my data. This is a relatively new practice for museology, but an effective means for participants to identify and communicate resources

and values that are important to them (La Frenierre 2008). Mapping is a group process that promotes an exchange of ideas and experiences. It produces visual representations to express issues that are not always easy to communicate (Kindon et al 2007). I will facilitate a series of “mapping workshops”, with up to 30 participants, to explore the nature of “identity”. These will be framed within the wider context of travel, connections, relationships, place and space. Here, participants will create “personal maps” using highly visual and tactile material. The process encourages participants to discuss and analyse their work, and these insights will be recorded. The aim is to capture “personal geographies” reaching beyond Wagga Wagga’s regional boundaries. Within these new cartographic boundaries, I hope to uncover practices, traditions, and expressions of knowledge and identity arising from complex global communication flows.

Participatory approaches are familiar to human geography, and I aim to prove that their strategic application, in documenting transboundary expressions of modern cultural identity, could significantly enhance regional history museum collections. These methods strongly support current museological thinking, which in the last decade has made a conscious move away from primarily Eurocentric notions of universal knowledge, towards an acceptance of many voices and multiple perspectives.

This seven month project begins in mid June, with the recruitment of participants with transnational connections. Mapping workshops are planned from August to October, with the exhibition, collaboratively curated by myself, key project participants and the museum’s design team, scheduled for the New Year. I will then evaluate and analyse the data generated by the project throughout 2010.

Expected benefits of this research

The significance of the Riverina project lies in its potential to offer participant-owned methods to delimit and collect from previously unacknowledged social spaces. My aim for this research is to theorise a new strand of active collecting practice that favours intangible identities over tangible material culture, to ensure collections represent culturally complex regional identities that mirror contemporary Australia. Through participatory cultural mapping, I hope to present a dynamic collecting method that moves – perhaps controversially – from “the object” to a trinity of participant-lead processes (mapping, shaping and interpreting one’s own identity) to revivify the collecting process.

By actively engaging with local populations through their links to local and global worlds, I look forward to contributing to a heightened understanding of “the region”, and embedding the concept of transnational social space in regional collecting remits.

I plan to share the triumphs and challenges of this project with colleagues in the collecting sector and beyond from mid to late 2010.

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A Quest; Zoetermeer's Room of Marvels, February – April 2009, City Museum Zoetermeer

Jouetta van der Ploeg

Zoetermeer is a medium-sized city near The Hague which has grown tremendously over the past three decades. While the residents of Zoetermeer may boast a history that goes back to the eleventh century, the city as we know it today was created over a very short period of time. The old village was officially designated a 'New Town' in 1962 to allow it to grow and thus reduce The Hague's housing shortage. Zoetermeer is rather affluent and has a large percentage of foreign nationals and like other New Towns is inhabited by people from a wide variety of backgrounds. Anyone walking through Zoetermeer takes a journey through a wide ranging history of the post-war architecture of the Netherlands. Each section of the town differs in design and architecture, each characteristic of its time. This means that Zoetermeer is a very contemporary place in which people live together, each with their own history and their own 'elsewhere'.

The City Museum of Zoetermeer

The City Museum of Zoetermeer focuses its attention on the fashions and spirit of the times since the 1950s when these new developments began to take shape. Public and domestic property and household items are starting points for its exhibitions and projects. In addition, the museum examines contemporary attitudes to the environment. It propagates the knowledge, experiences and customs of the various Zoetermeer citizens, by offering them a platform. Does Zoetermeer's popular image as a dormitory town reflect reality? What do its inhabitants think of themselves? What occupies their minds? What stories, cultures, identities and faces does the town harbour? The City museum of Zoetermeer offers a meeting place for the various experiences and cultural expressions that the town encompasses.

Zoetermeer's Room of Marvels

In the project *Zoetermeer's Room of Marvels*, curated by guest curator, Jacqueline Heerema, the City museum of Zoetermeer asks questions that many museums are faced with today; questions about representation, about the role of a museum in an ever changing world, questions on collecting new heritage and the involvement of the public in collecting.

Background to the project

From the 18th of October 2008 to the 31st of January 2009, the City Museum of Zoetermeer organized a participation project called 'Give & Take', – an exchange exhibition about being 'at home in Zoetermeer'. During this project, inhabitants of the city were asked to present to the museum an object which, for them, symbolized Zoetermeer's specific character. In order to encourage participation people, in exchange, received a bottle of Champagne or a designer bottle of water. The objects were exhibited with a donor's statement, explaining his/her choice of this particular object. After the exhibition, the museum kept the 87 donated objects as its *Zoetermeer 2008 Collection*.



Artist performer Adriaan Nette seduces the participants to actually interact with objects. Photo: the City Museum of Zoetermeer.

The Project

The starting point for the project, 'Zoetermeer's Room of Marvels', is to research the significance of the *Zoetermeer 2008 Collection*. By means of a wide range of approaches, the museum's collection of objects of popular culture is put under the microscope. Together with the participating citizens of Zoetermeer, nationally famous specialists in different fields, such as photographers, writers, artists and museum professionals will examine the *Zoetermeer 2008 Collection* in a series of workshops and masterclasses, followed by a concluding conference. This will be done in four phases. After each meeting the results will be directly presented in the museum.

Phase one: *The naked object*

This phase focuses on what one actually sees when one looks at an object. The museum becomes a photographer's studio and registration office. Led by photographer Eric van Straaten, museum consultant Kirsten de Vries, artist/publicist Sjaak Langenberg and author/poet K. Schippers, the participants examine, photograph and register the objects and learn something about historical representation and misrepresentation. The participants become curators.



Art historian Andre Koch describing an energy-saving lightbulb as an extraterrestrial creature. Photo: the city Museum of Zoetermeer

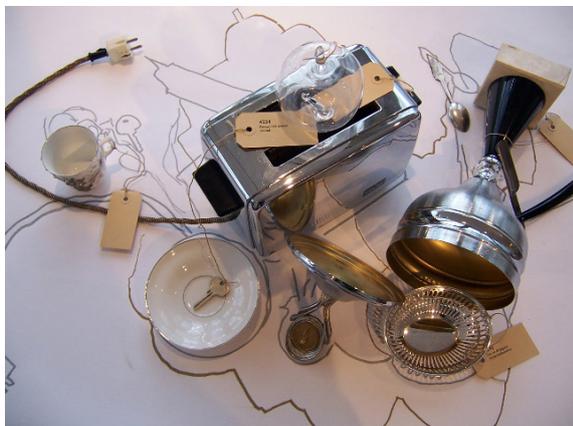
Phase two: *The speaking object*

In this phase the participants examine what a story adds to one's experience of an object. The museum becomes a story theatre. All items surrounding us contain a story of some kind. In everyday life we develop a personal relationship with the objects surrounding us. This personal relationship colours our view of them. While describing the objects of the *Zoetermeer 2008 Collection*, the participants are stimulated to verbalize this colourful relationship, guided by art historian André Koch. Artist/performer Adriaan Nette will then induce them to personally interact with the objects. In another masterclass the Flemish philosopher, Ann Meskens, will examine the relationship between owners and objects in her lecture 'Cherishing old kitchen tables, new DVD players and a stylish standing lamp'. National heritage specialists Peter van Mensch, Arjen Kok and Tessa Luger will subsequently brainstorm with participants about the 'information set-up' of objects, about experiencing objects in a museological context and the personal as well as the general value of objects.

Phase three: *Object speed-dating*

This phase is all about the interaction between the objects themselves. The museum becomes a platform for the *Zoetermeer 2008 Collection*. During 'Object speed-dating', participants may couple the objects differently, making various compositions led by the artist, exhibition-maker, Ton of Holland, while artist Marjan Teeuwen gives a presentation on 'Cluttered rooms and festering staples'. At the next

meeting, the ethnologist Gerard Rooijackers will talk about the construction of identity and the rituals of daily life, while the artist Birthe Leemeijer presents the participants her 'Museum of forgotten objects'.



Object speeddating: creating new compositions.
Photo: the City Museum of Zoetermeer.

The Final Phase: *Beyond the object*

In this phase, the participants will evaluate whether the objects of the *Zoetermeer 2008 Collection* have initiated a new story about the town. During the project the museum has slowly been transformed into Zoetermeer's Room of Marvels. The objects of the *Zoetermeer 2008 Collection* have been enriched with photographs, quotations and descriptions, and have been rearranged. In the final debate, the architectural historian Michelle Provoost will give a short introduction to the New Town phenomenon, while the creative industry consultant Max Meijer assesses the results of the project. Many things that have not yet been said about the *Zoetermeer 2008 Collection* will be addressed. What are the outcomes of this intriguing examination of the role of the museum, its collection and its relevance for the town?

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Preserving tomorrow's heritage today – a conference report on computer heritage

Maike Smelt

The iPod Nano had scarcely hit the market when it was made obsolete by the iPod Touch. With products being introduced in such rapid succession these days, there is a risk that they will disappear before we can even add them to a collection. That is especially the case for computers and other objects belonging to our digital heritage. The Dutch Computer Heritage Foundation (SCEN) invited the heritage sector to discuss computers and other relics of the recent past at its *Now for Later!* conference in February 2009.

Founded in 2004, SCEN's aim is to track historical computers in the Netherlands and document where they are located and who owns them. SCEN wants to get museums and private collectors – who generally own the best-preserved examples – to coordinate their computer collections. The foundation has set up a national database of historical computers (and their provenance) in the Netherlands (www.computer-erfgoed.nl).

IT history in Sweden

The notion that we should be preserving the very recent past is less novel – and less controversial – in Sweden than in the Netherlands, explains Peter du Rietz, curator of the Swedish National Museum of Science and Technology. Swedish museums became

more interested in contemporary society in the 1970s. A new organisation, Samdok, was set up to encourage museums to start collecting contemporary objects. That was the start of a close partnership between museums, universities, and the general public. In 2004, the Swedish Computer Society launched the project *From Mathematical machines to IT*, intended to document the history of computers in Sweden and explore the digitisation of society in the past fifty years. The project participants included the Swedish National Museum of Science and Technology and the Department of History of Science and Technology at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm.

According to Du Rietz, the project is unique in focusing on computer *use*. The history of the technology takes a back seat to people's stories about the way computers changed their working lives and about how different areas of society implemented computer technology. This meant developing new source material: interviews, witness seminars and the collected autobiographies of more than 670 managers and employees. "In the end, we had 22,000 minutes of audio material," says Du Rietz.

Preserving computers

But there are also museums (and therefore visitors) that are more interested in the technology. One of these is the Computer History Museum in Silicon Valley, California, where British curator Dr Doron Swade has displayed a working version of Charles Babbage's Difference Engine No. 2, one of the earliest (1847) designs for an automatic computing engine. Babbage was never able to build the computer himself.

But what is the historical relevance of preserving and maintaining an old computer? How long can something like the Babbage project continue, and is it even possible to restore computers after the specialists who once built and repaired them have passed on? In the electrical era, can rubber insulation parts be replaced with plastic, or would that be misleading to subsequent generations?

Swade describes six 'levels of intervention' for preserving old computers.

1. Do nothing: keep or exhibit the machine in whatever condition it is in.
2. Conservation: preserve by stabilising or passivating to retard degradation. The computer is conserved and remains operational.
3. Restoration: return to 'original' state (whether working or not)
4. Replication: make a physical copy of an existing original.
5. Reconstruction: recreate a machine for which there are no surviving examples.
6. Simulation: duplicate performance in software on a different hardware platform.

Every level of intervention has its own ethical dilemmas. Copying a machine from 1840 might involve taking it apart, but by doing that we lose subtle information. "Should you undermine the physical integrity of the object in order to save it from extinction?" One particular example is an IBM computer. The original computer memory could not be restored and the unit was replaced with a modern functional equivalent. "How important is it to remain true to the original if you can get a computer to work again using alternative materials?" In the case of the WWII Colossus used for code-breaking, conservators had only a photograph to show the size of the machine. "How do we know whether the reconstruction is dimensionally accurate? In the case of the Babbage engine, would Babbage have used bronze, iron or steel?"

The ethical disadvantages are balanced by the importance of education and knowledge transfer (Swade refers to this as "social capital"), which help to offset a collective loss of memory in subsequent

generations. Museums can offer visitors a valuable experience by showing them working examples of old computers. Restorations also mean more complete collections. And let's not forget the pure enjoyment of the engineers. The pleasure that they derive from a restoration project can make theirs a very rewarding profession.

Engineer-restorers and conservators sometimes have different priorities: the conservator sees historical authenticity as sacred, whereas the restorer is delighted if he can just get the computer working again.

Swade does not come down on either side. Conservators should certainly take a less rigorous view, but we must never lose sight of the integrity of an historical object. It is up to the curator to find the right balance and play referee between the two. "That's why I think being a curator is the best job in the world. I'm the one who decides what we preserve!"

Han Heijmans at Delft University of Technology agrees that it is his prerogative as curator to decide what will and will not be preserved. But Heijmans takes the side of the conservator. "Heritage is what remains after part of a culture has died. Why should we want to revive it?" He cites the example of a seventeenth-century chair in a museum that has the sign "Please do not sit here" on it. "You shouldn't *want* to sit on it anymore, because it's become an historical object."

"It's the same story when people talk about bringing mummies back to life," says Heijmans. "It's not the Egyptologists who want to, it's the medical researchers." Heijmans' example refers to Swade's comparison between conservators and engineers. "It's only the proud engineers who want to bring our mobile or digital heritage back to life, because it's their hobby."

Making choices

The next question, according to Swade, is: what is contemporary heritage? How do you know whether something will be relevant in fifty years? "You don't know. But if curators keep close track of what's going on in society, they will make the right choices and act as a filter for the museum."

"But should we be making choices? Why not just save everything and wait until later to start disposing of things?" asks Rens de Jong, chairing the conference and a journalist for BNR news radio. "I mean, just because I expect 2009 to go down in history as the year of the credit crisis doesn't mean that I should toss out all the other news."

“Where will we ever find enough space?” Swade believes that for practical reasons alone, it would be impossible to take De Jong’s advice literally, preserve everything, and wait fifty years to let history decide what we can throw away. How are they tackling this problem in Sweden? “Well, we don’t save everything,” says Du Rietz, “but because the institutions coordinate their collections, we’re all moving in the same direction, working toward the same goals.” Why don’t institutions in the Netherlands collaborate in the same way? “We had a similar conference in the 1990s,” says Peter van Mensch, professor at the Reinwardt Academy, “and we came up with Headdok, the Dutch equivalent of Samdok. But cooperation between the institutions at national level never really got off the ground. No one was prepared to take responsibility.”

“In Holland we have our polder model,” De Jong tells his foreign guests. In other words: none of the institutions wants to sacrifice some of their autonomy in favour of closer cooperation.

“In addition to developing a joint collections policy, museums ought to be working with private collectors more,” says historian Klaas Kornaat. “In the Netherlands, it’s the private collectors who have the rarest IT heritage objects, and they can help us fill in gaps in our computer collection.”

The *Now for Later!* conference reached the following conclusions:

- Museums, the national government, universities and private collectors should work together more closely to ensure that ‘the Netherlands’ today heritage collection’ in general as well as IT, is as complete as possible.
- Dutch institutions should do their best to swap the “polder model” for the Swedish model.

Maike Smelt, April 2009

Maike Smelt is a journalist and wrote her article at the request of the Netherlands Institute for Heritage. With thanks to Mrs Loes Peeperkorn, chairperson from the Dutch Computer Heritage Foundation (<http://www.computer-erfgoed.nl>).

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