

COLLECTINGNET

An international museum network for collecting issues

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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 is published four times a year and distributed to members of Collectingnet, and is also available online at <http://www.nordiskamuseet.se/Publication.asp?publicationid=4213&topmenu=143>. 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 DECEMBER 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

From the editors

Welcome to the seventh issue of *Collectingnet Newsletter*, with two contributions from the Netherlands. One is a follow-up, informing about and discussing an interesting museum experiment that seriously tries to examine ways of working with social inclusion; the other presents an EU project on collection mobility.

The next issue for 2009 will be published in December and we encourage our readers to use the newsletter as a forum for information and dialogue.

December next opportunity for ICOM proposal to be considered

As we informed in No 6 of this newsletter, the proposal to establish an International ICOM Committee on Collecting was supported by 140 ICOM members in 27 countries and five continents.

The proposal was sent in due time to be considered during the ICOM meetings in Paris in June; however it was not brought to the agenda. The next opportunity will be at the Executive Council's meeting in December. If the Executive Council approves the proposal, this means that Collectingnet will have reached a goal – to be developed into an International ICOM Committee. With such an

achievement, an institutional platform for reflections on the practice, theory and ethics of collection development is created, which means new possibilities and obligations for our network.

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Collectingnet and Samdok

Peter van Mensch
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Zoetermeer's Room of Marvels: a follow-up

Jouetta van der Ploeg

In Collectingnet Newsletter No 5 2009 I presented the project *Zoetermeer's Room of Marvels*. In this article I discuss its results and lessons learned from it.

Zoetermeer's Room of Marvels, curated by Jacqueline Heerema, was based on the earlier interactive project *Give & Take*, that resulted in a temporary exhibition about being 'at home in Zoetermeer'. It started by asking people living in the city to present the museum with an object symbolising Zoetermeer's specific character. The objects were then exhibited with a donor's statement explaining his/her choice of this particular object. After the exhibition, the museum kept the 86 donated objects as its 'Zoetermeer 2008 Collection'.



Participants in the registration office. Photo: Citymuseum Zoetermeer.

The starting point for the following interactive project *Zoetermeer's Room of Marvels* was to research the significance of the 'Zoetermeer 2008 Collection'. The collection was examined in a series of workshops and masterclasses attended by people living in Zoetermeer and run by nationally recognised specialists in such fields as photography, writing, visual arts and museums. These activities progressed in four phases:

Phase one: The Naked Object

This phase focused on what one actually sees when looking at an object. The museum became a photographer's studio and registration office.

Phase two: The Speaking Object

In this phase the participants examined what a story adds to one's experience of an object. The museum became a story theatre.

Phase three: Object Speed-dating

This phase was all about the interaction between the objects themselves. The museum became a platform for the 'Zoetermeer 2008 Collection'.

The final phase: Beyond the Object

In this phase, the participants evaluated whether the objects of the 'Zoetermeer 2008 Collection' initiated a new story about the town.

(For further details: see Collectingnet Newsletter No 5)

The results of each activity were presented immediately in the museum and the whole project is summarized and analysed in the publication 4289, *Wisselwerking. De 'Wonderkamer' van Zoetermeer* (2009), with contributions by Peter van Mensch, Max Meijer, Leontine Meijer van Mensch, Arjen Kok, Michelle Provoost, and Annelieke van Halen.

What has this museum experiment actually produced?

In his essay, Peter van Mensch writes that the Stadsmuseum Zoetermeer is one of the few museums willing to call into question how it functions as a professional organisation. With the *Give & Take*-project, the museum did nothing to classify the objects in any way or to provide explanations. In doing so, the museum called its authority into question. It suggested that the city's inhabitants were the real experts and that their stories were the pieces of the puzzle that could be assembled to tell 'the' story of Zoetermeer: perhaps fragmentary and incomplete but authentic. During the project *Zoetermeer's Room of Marvels*, however, the museum went a step further than most museums in this regard: the step from audience participation in the collecting process to co-curation.



A participant describing an object in the Zoetermeer 2008 Collection. Photo: Citymuseum Zoetermeer.

Max Meijer reflects on the multi-layered relevance of the project *Zoetermeer's Room of Marvels*. It produced insights that can be employed in the continuing development of new museum methods and collecting. It was a small-scale project about today's big questions relating to policy and museums:

* How representative is a museum collection that is selected by heritage professionals for the community that it wants to represent?

* How can a museum relate in very specific terms to the community in which it is embedded and develop into a centre where both high and low culture reinforce and influence each other?

* Do mission-driven concepts such as 'the museum as the centre of civic dialogue', 'social inclusion', and 'a multiplicity of voices' actually lead to developing deeper and broader public participation?

* Does this encourage 'cultural citizenship' which, according to the Council for Culture, develops within our own residential and work environments of which municipal museums are a part?

* How should a cycle of knowledge, in which *Zoetermeer's Room of Marvels* is included and is an example, be structured further? The project consisted of a process of activating, organising, observing and recording that led to reflection and analysis. However, the application and integration of this knowledge as part of Zoetermeer's collective memory has yet to begin.



National heritage specialist Arjen Kok during a brainstorming session with the participants about the 'information set-up' of objects. Photo: Citymuseum Zoetermeer.

Lessons learned from *Zoetermeer's Room of Marvels*

First of all, it became clear that working and communicating with groups within the community required something other than the traditional top-down strategy of information processing and knowledge ordering typical of museums. Instead, it required an attitude that would deal differently with information and knowledge: less evaluative, more inquiring, more interactive. In effect, it required more of a journalistic-anthropological approach. Based on the 'Museum 2.0' concept, the Stadsmuseum Zoetermeer introduced little if any real intervention during the process of

including objects in the 'Zoetermeer 2008 Collection'. But if the research question had been more specific or, for example, if comments or supplementary information about elements of an existing museum collection had been requested, could this have led to a broader or less obvious input from the participants?

The motto 'at home in Zoetermeer' probably evoked association with 'belonging somewhere'. And where does one belong? Is this the country or city where one is born or where one grew up? Considering the donated objects this seems to be true. Lots of the objects in the 'Zoetermeer 2008 Collection' represent childhood in the old village of Zoetermeer, or else refer to the trades of one's parents in an idealized past. These objects evoke the 'historic' Zoetermeer, the village that stood on this spot for centuries, or the pastoral orchards left over from the region's agricultural past.

Other objects refer to the pioneering of the 1960s – for example a portable TV, someone's first radio, a 1960s toaster, a model of the Sprinter (the train connecting Zoetermeer with The Hague). It appears that a 1960s idea of modernity and progress is being fostered. For some people 'being at home' is obviously linked with building a new life in a new town. This tells us something about the collective memory of the first generation of newcomers in Zoetermeer. Interesting is the fact that these objects and memories are associated with strong romantic meanings. And one starts to wonder whether the negative, sad meanings of objects randomly selected will find their way into museums?

The next conclusion that can be drawn from this experiment is that the public has little insight into what museums stand for and what they do. This could be seen in the concluding discussion of *Zoetermeer's Room of Marvels* when the participants expressed the surprise they experienced in the workshops and masterclasses at the complex process involving the acquisition of objects for the collection, the accumulation of knowledge, and the placement of objects within a context. Public support is nourished by becoming acquainted with and developing respect for this process. The museum's back office offers unprecedented potential for accomplishing this objective

Another conclusion is that a process of museum inclusion in which a small group presents itself as co-curator inevitably excludes others. Participants in the project were primarily older ethnic residents of Zoetermeer with an intrinsic interest in museums and the history of Zoetermeer. This could be a question of communication surrounding the project, but to what degree is the general public really interested in objects that shortly before were still stacked in their neighbours' attics? The museum

didn't select a group of inhabitants to participate. By advertising and free publicity it tried to appeal to the whole city of Zoetermeer.

The theme selected for the inclusion of objects ('at home in Zoetermeer') and its connection with material witnesses also appeared to be a limiting factor in attracting a wider public to participate.

It appears that the the concept of being 'at home in Zoetermeer', but not having originated there, was difficult to grasp, considering the donated objects and the group of people who actually participated. It obviously didn't appeal to inhabitants with culturally diverse backgrounds. One might feel like a true inhabitant of Zoetermeer, but one feels truly at home in one's country of origin. The focus on the material aspect (the museum asked for objects as well as stories) might have excluded some people. What if one is born in a culture where memory and identity is transferred by rituals, storytelling and dance, instead of material objects?

Another question could be raised in reference to the fact that the museum played an intermediary role between the parties for the *Give & Take* and *Zoetermeer's Room of Marvels* projects. The museum had a monopoly on this role granted to it by the 'authoritative' position it occupies within the Zoetermeer community. As the independent and permanent guardian of Zoetermeer's heritage, the museum enjoys the public's trust to receive donated objects and to elicit personal stories. Yet this is precisely the dilemma. How long can a museum acting as an open source hold onto this position and this public trust?

The *Zoetermeer's Room of Marvels* project was labour-intensive and thus relatively expensive. A great deal of time was invested in an intensive collaboration with a small group of participants. Less than a hundred participants produced a small collection for an exhibition that failed to attract many visitors and that was negligible in financial terms and modest in traditional museum terms.

Nevertheless, the museum succeeded in making a group of people from the Zoetermeer community co-owners of the museum in a very specific way. Some of the participants have become friends of the museum and others still visit frequently to see if something interesting is going on. It will be a challenge as well as a considerable task to continue this co-ownership as part of the museum's routine operation.

Michelle Provoost writes: "Can the residents of the city contribute, according to the goals of *Zoetermeer's Room of Marvels*, to the knowledge about Zoetermeer and how it is perceived? To achieve this, perhaps the residents should take a look at their own city to discover other aspects and other stories about the city's recent history. What are the myths surrounding Zoetermeer? What anecdotes are connected to these myths – not the pretty orchards but those high-rise apartment buildings? Will Zoetermeer ever become a real city? If so, the people living here will have to construct their own myths and start telling their own stories about the city, its people and its history. The city was planned by professionals – by planners and architects – but will not become a fascinating exciting city until new layers are added to its original story. Not until then will this one-liner city become a 'real' city."

Mindful of the recent statement and heartfelt cry made by the Council of Culture that 'Museum policy should intend not only to preserve the museum as an institution as we now know it but also be aimed at its continued development, that experimentation is necessary, and that the process is more important than the results,' 'The Room of Marvels' as a once-off event is no option.

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Collection Mobility 2.0/ Lending for Europe 2009 – 2011

Exhibitions and museums play a vital part in spreading knowledge of and appreciation for our richly varied European culture. Sharing our heritage is of great importance to the European ideal and stimulates the European intercultural dialogue. Therefore we should enhance the access of European citizens to our common cultural heritage by improving the mobility of our collections between member states.

In the beginning of this year, a group of nine highly ranked institutions from eight European member states received a grant from the European Commission for their project Collection Mobility 2.0/ Lending for Europe. The grant was awarded within the context of the European Culture Programme (2007-2013).

Aim of the project

The aim of the project Collection Mobility 2.0/ Lending for Europe is to introduce and implement

the most recent concepts, standards and procedures on lending and borrowing of museum collections into the every day museum practice of museum workers at all levels. A large part of these concepts, standards and procedures have already been developed within the context of *The Action Plan for the EU Promotion of Museum Collections' Mobility and Loan Standard* (2006). Now is the moment to widen the horizon. 'Getting practical' is the main motto of this programme.

Heart of the project: developing a training package

In order to do so, an innovative training package will be developed, covering best standards and practices for lending and borrowing between museums in different member states. The training package will be made available to each member state on a 'train the trainers' principle: Collection Mobility 2.0/ Lending for Europe will provide three three-day expert courses which will be held in Madrid, Budapest and Belgium, starting from May 2010. The courses will cover subjects including: insurance, valuation, immunity from seizure, legislation, indemnity, long term loans, standards, safety and environmental conditions. The courses are open to a limited group of professional (museum) trainers from each country. After the course each trainer can transmit the training programme to others in their own country, using the training package that is being developed. This approach is quite different to the classical way of organising international conferences.

Web portal and handbook

To sustain the information of the training package and to centralise the relevant information in a practical and accessible way for trainers, trainees and other professionals, a new digital platform will be set up. In the future this web portal will be closely connected to the website of NEMO (Network of European Museum Organisations). Added to this a scientific handbook will be published which provides theoretical background to the subjects covered by the training programme.

Sustainability

By combining the training package, portal and handbook and promoting all three aspects of this project together, it will be possible to reach all the different levels of museum workers dealing with collection mobility on a professional level. In addition to this, the involvement of the partners and associated partners will secure a sustainable change of mindset as well as the improvement of knowledge

throughout the EU as new networks develop. And the overall aim of increasing the mobility of objects between museums throughout Europe will be achieved, which will in turn provide an improved offer to citizens throughout Europe to share our rich cultural heritage.

Partners

The institutions working together in this project are:

- Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (ICN)
- Erfgoed Nederland (The Netherlands Institute for Heritage)
- General Directorate of Fine Arts and Cultural Goods of Spanish Ministry of Culture
- Hellenic Ministry of Culture-Directorate of Museums, Exhibitions & Educational Programmes – Department of Exhibitions & Museum Research
- Finnish National Gallery
- The Romanian Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs
- Agency for the Arts and Heritage of the Flemish Community
- Department for Culture Media and Sport of the UK
- State Museums Berlin, Institute for Museum Research
- Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest

The project is also supported by eleven associated partners from eleven different Member States:

- Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO)
- National Board of Antiquities, Finland
- Netherlands Museum Association, Netherlands
- Amsterdam Historical Museum, Netherlands
- European Registrars Group (network)
- Byzantine and Christian Museum, Greece
- Collection Trust, United Kingdom
- Hungarian Ministry of Education and Culture
- The Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp, Belgium
- Swedish National Gallery
- Landesmuseum Linz

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