



Shikibu Horiuchi representing ICOM General Conference in Winnipeg, Canada
 Photo: Danielle Kuijten

Some words from the Chair

Åsa Stenström

Not so long ago we were struck by the terrible news that the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro Brazil experienced the worst of nightmares as their museum and their collections were destroyed in a devastating fire. ICOM President, Suay Aksoy, proposed a task force to help the Brazilian colleagues with anything they should needed. COMCOL of course, as well as other international committees of ICOM, declared itself prepared to help in any way possible from our expertise in collections and contemporary collecting – and as museum colleagues. When you know how much time, work, effort and engagement lies behind the creation of a collection, the whole situation makes you very sad. We send our thoughts to our Brazilian colleagues and wish them all the best in rebuilding their museum.

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 The logo for ICOM Kyoto 2019 features the letters 'ICOM' in a large, bold, black serif font. The letter 'O' is replaced by a red circular emblem containing a white silhouette of a traditional Japanese building with a thatched roof. Below 'ICOM', the words 'KYOTO 2019' are written in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

ICOM KYOTO 2019

Conferences

As you know the major themes COMCOL is working with are contemporary collecting and collections. The collection, as the foundation of a museum, needs to be inclusive, as the conference in Umeå in Sweden in 2017 stated in more than one way. Different perspectives are important as the collections should reflect the diversity of society. The conference this year looked at another angle: human rights and collections/collecting. It was a successful conference and a fruitful collaboration with the Federation of International Human Rights Museums (FIHRM) and the host museum, the Museum of Human Rights in Winnipeg, Canada. Museums can make a difference in society when collecting and discussing important matters, such as human rights. As guardians of collecting we need to collect all perspectives and see that they are displayed, discussed and put on the agenda in our museums and society. Only then will people feel included and see that the museum is also a place for them. And we have a responsibility to our future curators, if we fail to collect widely and inclusively today, they will have difficulties in the future making exhibitions about our time. So let us continue our fruitful discussions about the importance of collecting and collections, share best practices – and continue to inspire each other! In this issue of COMCOL Newsletter you will definitely find inspiration!

Welcome to Kyoto in 2019!

I also hope that as many of you as possible will have the opportunity to attend the General conference of 2019 in Kyoto, Japan. There the inspiration will continue. The conference will discuss the theme: Museums as Cultural Hubs: the Future of Tradition. COMCOL will dive into these topics together with other international committees in joint sessions together with CIPEG and CIDOC, and we will also have separate COMCOL sessions. Call for papers has

already been sent out <http://network.icom.museum/comcol/news/detail/article/2019-call-for-paper-kyoto-out-now/> COMCOL will start with a pre-conference late afternoon on the 29th of August, with a keynote address and a museum visit in Nara. The pre-conference will then continue on the 30th and on the morning of the 31st of August with more visits to museums, sites and gardens in the region and we will have fruitful discussions with our Japanese colleagues. Planning is underway and you will get more information as soon as the program is set. On the afternoon of the 31st we will go to Kyoto to attend the general conference from the 1st-7th of September. Please visit the Kyoto 2019 website for inspiration and to keep updated: <http://icom-kyoto-2019.org>

A new COMCOL board

In conjunction with the General conference every third year, we vote for a new board – and of course we will do so also in 2019. So I would like to welcome you all to sign up for election for the board of COMCOL for 2019 – 2022. More information about the process will be sent to you shortly.

Finally I would like to thank you all for a fantastic 2018 and wish you all the best for the year to come. I hope to see as many of you in Kyoto as possible! Now have a nice time continue reading this issue of COMCOL Newsletter.

Warmest regards,

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Museum of Human Rights in Winnipeg, Canada
Photo: Danielle Kuijten

Contemporary Collections: Contested and Powerful, COMCOL Annual Conference 25 -28 September 2018, Winnipeg Canada

Danielle Kuijten

This year COMCOL had its first annual conference in North America. For this occasion we partnered with the Federation of International Human Rights Museum (FIHRM), the

City of Human Rights Education (TheCoHRE) and the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) who was also our host. During the three days, the presentations and panels tackled a vast array of issues around the challenges of acknowledging events in the past to bring about change for the future. The cases presented examples from all over the world on meaningful collaborations between museum professionals and their various communities, from indigenous peoples to the LGBTQ+ community. Together we explored how collections and collecting can promote human rights, equality, provoke empathy, and facilitate meaningful dialogue leveraging the soft powers of museums. Here follows a short account of the presentations.

The conference started with a traditional ceremony performed by Elder Kelly to honour and recognize the land of the five indigenous inhabitant groups: the Anishinaabe, Mushkegowuk, Dakota, Dene, and Métis, on whose traditional lands the museum is situated. After this we had the opening speeches from mayor Brian Bowman, the president of CMHR Dr. John Young, David Flemming (FIHRM) and Danielle Kuijten (COMCOL).

Contemporary Collections: Contested and Powerful

In the current climate of contested realities, where objects are questioned, the multiplicity of perspectives is extremely diverse and contradictory, where news and information is subject to personalization, and media literacy is ever more important, the role of contemporary collecting is under great scrutiny. Equally, museum collection efforts have never held more potential to promote human rights, equality, provoke empathy, and facilitate meaningful dialogue. International Museums Day 2017 proposed that museums are considered “an important means of cultural exchange, enrichment of cultures, and development of mutual understanding, cooperation and peace among people.” This asserted role sees museums leveraging their soft power to effect social, political, and environmental change. How can contemporary collecting and museum collections promote human rights for all? How is difficult material collected? Within which context? With these questions we started our conference on Thursday 25th at the CMHR.

Mechanisms of collections

The keynote came from Gail Lord, who worked on various occasions at the CMHR. In her presentation she discussed softpower of museums as the ability to influence behavior through persuasion, attraction and agenda setting. She argued that perhaps the most significant shift in how we use our collections lies in the changes that are occurring in society. “Debates on transparency, freedom of speech, equality, social justice, environmental action and decolonisation resonate in our cultural institutions more loudly than ever, and have profound implications for the use, understanding display and retention of collections.” She talked about how current movements like the decolonisation of museums are impacting the way in which institutions collect and interpret their collections, how we can look in different ways at collections and how they can be used. She highlighted three forms of collections. First the Empowering Collection: how collections can tell empowering stories, be used for social impact and to decolonizing collections; second the Relevant Collection: how revisiting collections and contemporary collecting can reveal new narratives and finally the Dynamic Collection: how managing collections knowledge, rationalising collections and stored collections should always been seen and used as moving processes.

Lord emphasises the balance between using your softpower as a museum but also still gaining the public trust. The importance of being relevant and transparent, to consult and actually listen and acknowledge all sides of the story.

Contemporary Collecting

Alina Gromova talked about how the Jewish Museum in Berlin launched the project Object Days, in an effort to



Contemporary Collections: Contested and Powerful, COMCOL Annual Conference 25 -28 September 2018, Winnipeg Canada
Photo: Danielle Kuijten



Opening ceremony 2018 conference by Elder Kelly at the CMHR
Photo: Danielle Kuijten



Welcome address COMCOL by Danielle Kuijten at the CMHR
Photo: Francoise McClafferty



Keynote by Gail Lord at CMHR
Photo: Danielle Kuijten

enrich the museum collection through objects which are connected to contemporary Jewish migrations to Germany. Next to extending the museum collection, the museum also took on their social and political role with this project. Objects and stories of Jewish migrants from the former Soviet Union – which had been ignored for so long, now a substantial part of the Jewish society in Germany. Where the Jewish Museum started this new trail in their collections Veerle van den Daelen from Kazerne Dossin in Mechelem, Belgium, discusses how they struggled with finding new trails for their collection. The museum went through the transformation of becoming the “Memorial, Museum and Documentation Centre on Holocaust and Human Rights”. They explicitly wanted to broaden their approach by incorporating “human rights” in their name as well as providing information on other genocides and crimes against humanity into the permanent and temporary exhibitions. But by changing their mission they saw themselves challenged how to open up a wider dialogue on human rights through the corpus of literature and sources on the Holocaust and history of place. How to transform your acquisition policy to connect but not dilute what has been created so far?

Different challenges came to light at the project Museum of Movements, because what would you do if you were asked to create a brand new national museum, a museum without inherited collections or archives; with no handed down (colonial or other) structures and methodologies? This Swedish project started literally from zero. Roxanne Ortiz talked in her presentation about the questions, challenges but also the opportunities they faced while creating processes for this new museum. Can we create a fully democratic institution? A museum addressing issues of democracy, migration and human rights aiming not only to prioritize historically marginalized voices but also inviting them to act together in the process of its establishment and functioning.

Human rights issues are immensely diverse and collecting and representing topics have their own complexities and challenges. Elias Robles from the Museum Lesislavo Sentimientos de la Nacion Mexico, presented the exhibition on the women of X'Oyep de Pedro Valtierra: 20 years after the massacre of Acteal. With more than 45 deaths, the event became an emblem of the systematic violence suffered by the indigenous communities; which intensified as of January 1, 1994, with the armed uprising of the EZLN. In telling this story the objects are less evident. They are in the memories, the archives of the body, maybe also absence can be seen as an object. On January 3, 1998, Pedro Valtierra photographed an iconic moment of indigenous resistance to the intervention in Chenalhó, as a result of the passivity of the authorities in the face of the Acteal massacre. These collected documents of activism are used as a means to link the present and the past, allowing a dialogue with the contemporary social political scene.

Revisiting Collections

The panel Museum Queeries investigated on a more theoretical level the institutional museum space and their collections. How they often are still very much linked to national identities and histories and also, to hetero- and cis-normative representations. Four research assistants from the University of Winnipeg presented their interventions into museological practices and spaces through the Museum Queeries project. Topics such as “Cur(e)-(n) ation: Care in Museology, from Human Rights to Object-Oriented Feminism” (Nicole Ritchie), “Decolonizing Representations of Queerness at the CMHR” (Jana Elazar), “Silencing of Context: Gareth Henry in Rights Today” (Dallas Gillingham), and “Reframing Trans Representation at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights” (Evan Durance) were discussed in an interactive session.



Final discussions at the CMHR
Photo: Danielle Kuijten

Questions on representation were also the drive for Ying Ying Lai from Taiwan, who presented her project “Herstory: the forgotten corner of history”. As the majority of Asia-Pacific region are patriarchal societies, there has long been a deficiency of the feminine point of view of history. Diverse aspects of microcosmic history have replaced unified macrocosmic history to be the narrative direction in the museums. In the environment of a virtual museum they are compiling stories of the women in an effort to illuminate the corners that have been forgotten by history.

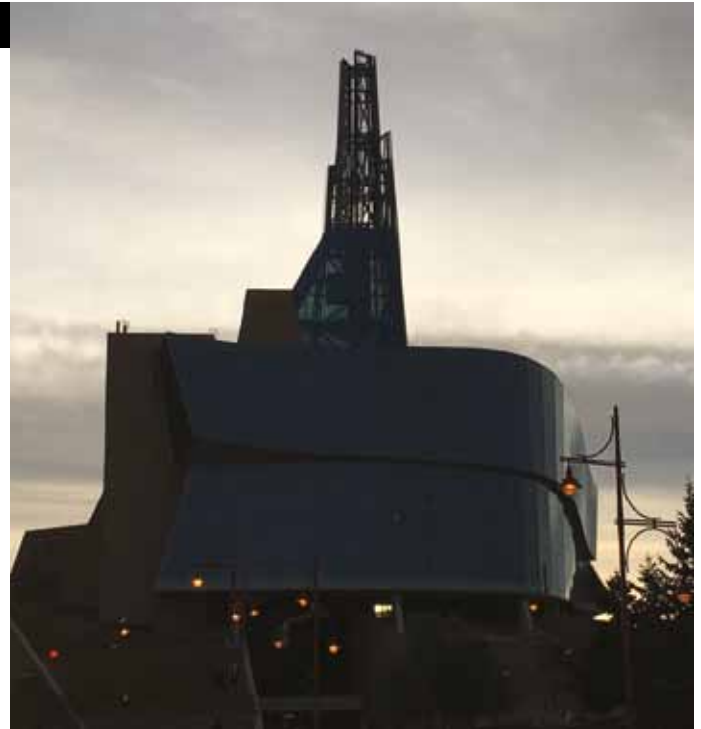
Some final thoughts. The three days showed us how museum professionals reinvent not only their working environment but also their own role in it. In search for a balance in objective subjectiveness. The most frequented words in the presentations were: legacy, transition, tension, narratives, democracy, representation, context and trust. Museums are the most trusted institutions in the world, above governments and newspapers. In a time where the defence of Human Rights is more important than ever, they have the great responsibility of ensuring that, as narratives change, they change for the better.

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Canadian Museum of Human Rights, Winnipeg
Photo: COMCOL

A New Approach for Diversity: Intersectional Politics

Sinem Cerrah

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 was established to protect humanity through achieving unity in diversity. However, seventy years after the declaration, societies still remain fragmented. To make sense of the political failings that hinder societal change towards human rights, identity politics (one of the pervasive political approaches that influenced current social and cultural policies) has been drawn into question. One of the main arguments states that while identity politics has been a source of strength and community for marginalized groups, it ignores or conflates the differences within them. This leads to the idealization of group identity through institutional practices and to the homogenization of communities by the marginalization of others within the community. Intersectionality is a concept that is coined for remedying such failings. In this paper the

each other (Collins & Bilge, 2016). In other words, intersectionality considers identity categories not as discrete formations, but as intersectional. For example, race and gender intersect and shape the experiences of men and women of color, whilst race and sexuality intersect and shape the experiences of straight and gay people of color.

What links intersectionality with museums is its political insistence that it influences the course of institutional practices. Politically, intersectionality focuses on alliances built across differences, rather than separatism based on sameness. Kimberlé Crenshaw, who introduced the term intersectionality, reconceptualizes the idea of social groups by suggesting that social groups are in fact coalitions of differences rather than organization of sameness (1991). As such, it calls attention to diversity within the groups and the connections among the groups (Carastathis, 2013). It offers to build the course of actions on the contexts that brings different identities together. In terms of museum practice, these contexts are related to heritage which engages with acts of remembering. Emotions triggered by memories are the elements that connect different identities. Objects that exist in collections and that are the subject of collecting practices are just media for memories – the memories that people attach to objects.

“Heritage Left Behind”, a traveling exhibition organized by “Heritage Brabant”, might be an example for the implementation of intersectional politics in museum practice. Even though the theme of the exhibition, immigration from Syria, has been addressed by many different heritage institutions, Heritage Left Behind differs in its emphasis on the interconnection between Syrian refugees and Dutch people (differences), rather than characteristic experiences of Syrian refugees (sameness). In the exhibition, photographs of the Netherlands from the time of the Second World War and photographs of Syria from the present were presented side by side in the context of war-damaged heritage. The memories attached to all these photographs were the triggers for the sorrow of losing home, which connected Dutch and Syrian people. Furthermore, the process of exhibition-making establishes that even though people from Syria and people from the Netherlands are separate in terms of ethnic identity, they are interconnected through the identity which values material culture. During the process, Dutch staff and Syrian archeologists worked together and then introduced the exhibition to the public.

Conclusion

Museums as an agent for change have potential to promote and enable change within society. Change towards human rights necessitates understanding its universality to find the correct political approaches for museum practice. Despite the achievements of group-related identity politics, there are flaws, which are evident in current societal reactions. Intersectionality as a social concept carries potential for overcoming these flaws, and therefore accelerating societal change towards human rights. It offers a different course of action for the implementation of collecting practices, and for the interpretation of existing collections. At this point, the important issue is whether we as museum practitioners are ready for a new orientation at a time when we are becoming accustomed to the course of identity politics.

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Presentation during Hack Your Heritage
Hackathon in Helsinki
Photo: Karoliina Niemenkari

Digital Collections and Open Culture – Hack Your Heritage

Outi Putkonen

Digitalization promises us the possibility to display our collections while preserving the originals in pristine condition. It also grants us new opportunities to engage our audiences and attract new ones. While digitalizing our collections we can also open them up and give them freely to the public to be discovered and re-invented. Open culture increases our sense of belonging and our collective identity while inspiring us to think in new, creative ways increasing productivity, innovation, learning and overall well-being. The benefits are obvious and they are all apparent in cultural heritage hackathons – a unique way to engage different audiences directly with our collections.

Hackathon – A Tool for Participatory Engagement

Hackathon is a three-day event that guides the participants through an innovation process based

upon digital open culture. The word hackathon comes from the words hack and marathon indicating an intensive (digital) working sprint. It is a workshop and the end results can be services, concepts, works of art or processes based on open culture and open data.

Hackathons are a great tool for participatory engagement. The participants are given tracks, or challenges, which present them with conundrums that cultural heritage institutions are interested in. Hackathons are crowdsourced problem solving but they also represent something more – a way of giving a voice to the people, a way to share expertise, and a way to generate dialogue about our collections; how they should be preserved, accessed and utilized.

Helsinki City museum had the privilege to organize the fourth Hack4FI – Hack your Heritage, cultural heritage hackathon during 5.–7.10.2018. Hack4FI is part of the Nordic Hack your heritage family of

open cultural hackathons: Hack4DK (Denmark), Hack4Heritage (Sweden) and Hack4NO (Norway). The event was organized in collaboration with AvoinGLAM and Open Knowledge Finland while several other memory organizations contributed tracks and data sets (e.g. Finnish National Gallery, The National Archives of Finland, Finnish Heritage Agency to name but a few).

The event focuses on digital cultural heritage and multi-professional collaboration bringing together artists, programmers, designers, humanists and educators. The purpose of the event is both to celebrate and raise awareness of digital cultural heritage and open collections, and experiment and showcase different and creative ways these materials can be reused. The weekend culminated in 18 presentations with new viewpoints on our cultural heritage and how it is relevant for different people living today. Some of the projects presented were prototypes but some were finished services, installations or platforms ready to be displayed and shared.

Through exploring, tinkering and having fun with their digital cultural heritage people construct a personal relationship with the collections and by proxy the museums. Suddenly, a piece of digital cultural heritage takes on a new meaning and context and it becomes more relevant to the people here and now. When people identify with the collections they become more committed to the institutions as well. Hackathons help people to understand what museums are and help museums to understand what people expect of them.

Test Lab for Open Collections

Hackathons are based on open data, in this case open digital culture. Open culture refers to material freely available on the internet to be shared and adapted for any purpose. Either the material is in public domain or made available by other means e.g. licensed with Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License (CC BY 4.0.). For some, open collections in this sense and magnitude sound like a beautiful but unrealistic idea. Resources, copyright laws, data protection regulations and even in some



Working during the Hackathon
Photo: Karoliina Niemenkari



Interesting discussions

Photo: Karoliina Niemenkari



Group work

Photo: Karoliina Niemenkari

cases attitudes can become obstacles along the way to open culture. But in order to become more relevant, to be part of the community they want to serve, museums need to become more open. Hackathons are a good way to start experimenting with open culture. Opening a small curated collection or a sub-collection is a good way to start moving towards open culture and connecting with our audiences from a more participatory viewpoint.

However, opening a collection for public use is not the same thing as making it accessible. We at the Helsinki City museum learned this the hard way during Hack4FI 2018. As our data set, we uploaded a zip file to Helsinki Region infoshare site containing maps and photographs from early 20th century Helsinki. The content of the file could be defined as open culture. The only problem was that nobody used it. First people needed to find the site, then the file, figure out how to download it, extract the information, and go through it. In theory, the material was accessible but in reality far from it. In Hack4Fi some of the collaborating museums and archives used such services as Flickr or Vimeo. Unsurprisingly, these were some of the most popular data sets used at the hackathon. Accessibility not only concerns licenses and the criteria for open data, it is also about curating the content into manageable collections and making them readily available. Keep it simple, learn from your mistakes and learn by doing – together with your audiences. Encourage people to explore.

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Bearing testimony to the 1998 bombing of the U.S. embassy in Nairobi

Kiprop Lagat

Introduction

Terrorism is a form of military strategy that involves the unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians in the pursuit of political aims. In the last few decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the world has witnessed an unprecedented increase of these heinous acts. Terrorism is a global phenomenon that has affected most regions of the world from the Middle East to the United States of America, Asia and Africa. Kenya has not been spared. One of the worst terror attacks to have happened on Kenyan soil was on August 7, 1998. At around 10.30 am on this day, a bomb-laden truck attempted to force its entry through the rear entrance of the United States embassy building in Nairobi, instigating a brief argument and confrontation between the men in the truck and the embassy guards. This led to a shoot-out between them before a powerful explosion completely tore down half of the embassy while the entire Ufundi Cooperative Building next to it was obliterated. In the aftermath of the attack 218 people were declared dead, over 5,000 injured and property worth billions of Kenyan shillings, an equivalent of hundreds of millions of US dollars, destroyed.

Its perpetrators were external, namely, Al-Qaeda terrorists who claimed this attack targeted at the U.S but not Kenya. Kenyans, therefore, saw this as a tragedy visited upon them as a people collectively. It was an assault on their sovereignty and social peace.

Immediately after the terror attack, activities were mooted to help people work through the collective trauma. These ranged from musical vigils to performance art as well as visual art exhibitions. A memorial park, the August 7th Memorial Park, was also



The bombed U.S. embassy building, Nairobi, 1998

Photo: Jacob Otieno

created. In the park are monuments commemorating those who lost their lives to this tragedy. A museum and archive were also established as permanent tributes to the victims. This paper focuses on the exhibition presented in the August 7th Memorial Park Museum.

Bearing testimony to the tragedy

The museum at the August 7th Memorial Park, which opened in 2004, is not only dedicated to remembering the bombing but also serves as a historical archive of the attack. It tells the story of the bombing and its aftermath in an exhibition organized into five sections using a mix of media and styles: written texts, photographs, artefacts and video documentaries which communicate different messages to its visitors. It starts with a brief history of Nairobi, then takes the visitors through a time-line of activities of the day of the bombing beginning with the normal events and calm prevailing on the morning of August 7, 1998. It presents this as a day like any other, with people engaged in ordinary activities: going to the bank, being at work, waiting for a friend, applying for a visa, having tea, reading a newspaper, and so on. This is

told through personal narratives, showing the people affected as innocent, oblivious of anti-US hatred by the perpetrators or what the day had in store for them.

The 'Bomb Blast', - as the 1998 embassy attack is remembered - captures the chaotic scenes in and around the embassy building with photographs of burnt buildings, strewn bodies, and mangled vehicle-wrecks. These photos are intended to create an experience of the bombing to engender empathy and shock in visitors.

A display of objects donated to the exhibition by the bereaved is next. Among these are: a necktie donated by a widow whose husband had worn it; a wallet with blood stained papers belonging to a Mr Madegwa who died in the blast; and a glass case containing bottles with foreign bodies removed from some survivors.

Displaying the objects in their damaged, dusty and blood-stained form allows them to function as substitutes for the injured and dead. Personal possessions serve as a kind of memory due to the imprint that their owners have left on them; they are projections of the human body that re-animate a now absent people.

The stories and the confidence imparted to these objects by survivors, and family members and their descendants convert the exhibition space into one of private mourning and public ceremony. The objects relating to the August 7th, 1998 bombing, are conferred with special status in telling the narrative of that day to the public, and hence become part of the collective memory of the tragedy. It is against this background that some of the objects on display in the Memorial Park Museum are imbued with new meanings qualifying them as aide de memoire to the survivors and evidence of the Nairobi terror attack.

Conclusion

This paper has described and analysed the ways by which the 1998 Nairobi terror attack has been represented through the curation of an exhibition in the August 7th Memorial Park Museum. The presentation, though limited, nevertheless raises salient points regarding Kenya's responses to the harrowing events brought out by this tragedy.

The objects presented illustrate that moments of rupture, like the bombing of the embassy, are



Handbag and necktie retrieved from the site and donated for exhibition.
Photo: Kiprop Lagat (2010).

important in the generation of collective memory and in providing foci for narratives about collective experience and identity, can offer mnemonic devices for understanding and ordering the past; and they have the potential to transform the everyday, vernacular, contemporary objects into heritage. The objects in this case act as 'witnesses' to the traumatic event. Having them on display ensures that the narratives imbued in them will create an understanding of the tragedy and in keeping the memories alive, facilitate the mediation of the trauma event.

Further, the exhibition at the centre utilizes few objects but many photographs. The curator's explanation was the lack of a concerted effort by any heritage institution in the country, including families of the victims to preserve objects associated with such trauma. This demonstrates that the culture of memorializing tragedies of this nature is not yet rooted in the country

nor has there been any serious national discourse on national memorialization. It is, thus, imperative that in the future the government should proactively engage in activities memorializing major public events, even tragic ones, in order to create public memory for her citizens. Institutions tasked with the management of Kenya's cultural heritage and the preservation of national memory, such as the National Museums of Kenya, should have collected objects associated with the bombing for posterity and perhaps utilize them in exhibitions to provide a moral reflection among the larger society and for public education on the futility of terrorism.

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Family Barsky, Jewish Community in Regensburg, March 2017

Photo: ©Jewish Museum Berlin

Object Days – Collecting Jewish Migration and Contemporary Life in Germany since 1945

**Alina Gromova, Tamar Lewinsky and
Theresia Ziehe**

Introduction

In 2016 the Jewish Museum Berlin initiated a project called Object Days – a project which was targeted at enlarging the collection of the museum and including contemporary objects which are connected to Jewish migrations to Germany from the former Soviet Union, but also from Israel, various Eastern and Central European countries, and the Americas. Moreover, this

initiative acknowledges the social and political role of the museum and the responsibility accompanying it. The objects and histories of Jewish migrants should not remain invisible and their owners need not be ignored any longer, as a substantial part of Jewish society in Germany.

Thus, the Jewish Museum Berlin invites Jewish migrants to places which are familiar to them: Jewish community organizations, Jewish education centers, residential care homes. We ask people to bring everyday objects such as clothing, toys, tools, secular and ritual objects; but also photographs, letters, awards, and handwork. We are curious to listen to the stories about migration connected with these objects. In addition, all protagonists are photographed with their objects.

Considering this growing outreach to communities, the Jewish Museum Berlin is confronted with new questions: What to collect and from whose perspective? With whom and for whom to collect? Along with collecting, the field of outreach and networking with communities shifted to focus on the work of the museum. The way we collect contemporary objects and connect to contemporary migrant minorities – both are crucial challenges for the museum.

Re-thinking the traditional role of collection and collecting methods in order to make stories visible

Since its inception, the collections of the Jewish Museum Berlin have focused on individual narratives. “Telling stories with objects” is a guiding principle. This can take shape through extraordinary individual items or through groups of different objects, images, artworks, and documents. This is how we shed light on the lives of German Jews and Jews in Germany. However, most of the objects in our family collections date from the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. They document middle-class life at the onset of the modern age as well as experiences of persecution and emigration. The majority of these family collections are in some way or another connected to Berlin.

Object Days enable us to broaden the focus of our collection, including objects and narratives that testify to the multifaceted Jewish life in Germany since the end of WWII – in various regions of the country, in and outside organized communities. We encourage members of all age groups and educational backgrounds to participate. As a participative project,



Boris Wachs with the Medal for “60 Years of Victory in the World War 1941-1945”, Jewish Community of Regensburg, March 2017
©Jewish Museum Berlin

Object Days uses a format that brings specific questions to the fore: What is the narrative, within which the participants would like their objects to be presented in the exhibition? How do they define migration in the context of their biographies? How do the power relations between the museum and the participants influence the process? As a result, the degree of interconnectedness of objects and narratives becomes more transparent.

Empowerment of communities through the work of the museum

Since November 2016, we have conducted seven Object Days in five cities all over Germany. We talked to 82 people from different generations, took 76 portraits and collected hundreds of objects in photographic documentations. When we arrived at each venue,

the organizers in general presented us with accurate lists of expected visitors, with a time slot assigned to everyone.

The majority of the participants of Object Days were born in the former Soviet Union. After over 25 years of the beginning of their migration to Germany, the ex-Soviet Jews – who constitute about 90% of Jews in Germany – remain largely invisible in German society. They are neither represented in key positions in German life and German-Jewish organisations, nor are their biographies and histories known to the larger public. Even more, their Jewishness, often stripped of its religious elements by the brutally anti-religious Soviet system, has been questioned in Germany.

Prior to each Object Day, we recruited assistants from community organisations to help us to conduct interviews. So, when the participants arrived, they were received by familiar faces. Some of them stayed just for an hour, others remained there for two or three hours. Some people brought written texts in German because they judged their spoken German as not good enough. They opened up when they realized that every part of their immigration and life story that is interesting to them, is also interesting to us. Most of the visitors were very surprised when they learned that some of our staff spoke Russian and that they could give their interview in Russian. People didn't expect the Jewish Museum as a large German cultural institution to reflect their life experience in such a respectful way.

New results, insights and awareness

With each new Object Day, the results of this project found their way into more and more museum exhibition and discussion spaces. Some photos and objects are now shown in our new temporary exhibition, which opened in November 2018. A number of objects will be included in the permanent exhibition which will re-open 2020. Also, the process of collecting, networking and outreach during Object Days was part of an expert workshop "Whose museum is it anyway? Social and Political Relevance in Museums" which took place at our museum this year.

Furthermore, in summer 2018, we launched an online-series of photo portraits taken during Object Days. All protagonists were photographed with the object they brought with them. In all venues, we chose similar settings, so that at the end the individual portraits result in interrelated series: the background

is unobtrusive, but shows structural elements of the shooting location, the person with the object is foregrounded. The portraits are accompanied by short texts composed of the interviews.

As an ongoing project, Object Days challenges us to critically question our methodology. Many questions have come up during our work, for example: Can we consider individual voices, which we have collected, as a basis for general statements about communities? How can we build a bridge from theory to practice and develop a multi-directional approach in dealing with collected items? How can the museum become relevant for the participants and what makes a contemporary object relevant to the museum? The future development of Object Days will show whether we are "neutral" as a museum or whether we have to show our colours considering our commitment to social and political responsibility.

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COMCOL Annual Conference 2017: a brief report

Julianna Monteiro

It's been a year since I participated in the annual conference of 2017 in Umeå. The experience was unique, intense and incredibly inspiring.

As the spirit of COMCOL proclaims, the friendly atmosphere of the whole event was a great environment to exchange ideas, experiences and knowledge. The word sharing was, without a doubt, on the agenda of the conference as a whole. I had the opportunity to meet people from many corners of the world, such as Japan, South Africa, Argentina, Estonia, Germany, Holland, Greece, Norway and, of course, Sweden itself. I also had the pleasant opportunity to re-encounter colleagues I met at other ICOM events such as CIDOC Summer School 2012.

The conference took place between 5 and 8 December 2017 at Västerbottens museum, located in the city of Umeå. The central theme was Guardians of contemporary collecting and collections, with the objective to discuss questions related to the sharing of collections in the contemporary world. It also aimed to discuss the roles of museums, museum professionals and their practices in the (de- and re-) construction of cultural heritage in the present time.

This report is my personal reflection on the experience, in which I would like to highlight two main lessons I took from it, adding some thoughts and critical analyses when connecting it to the Brazilian context.

Thus, it is possible to say that:

1) I understand that objects are still an essential part of the contemporary collecting process, however, objects should not be isolated from their context, as mere material items with no link to their origins or uses. This statement is not new in itself, but it is good to reiterate it, considering the discussions related to whether or not objects are that relevant to contemporary collecting. At the heart of the discussions is the creation of several museums with no museum objects, for example "Museu do Amanhã"

(Museum of Tomorrow) or "Museu da Língua Portuguesa" (Museum of Portuguese), in Brazil. They are very important as examples of new ways of conceiving engaging and inspiring museums. But it can be a risk to accept that only digital collecting is a definitive solution for a diversified or democratic collecting process, since one thing (material culture) does not eliminate the other (digital reproductions). I consider this point extremely relevant, as I understand the shared vision during the conference - that objects, as cultural references, are still fundamental and relevant to museums. Perhaps no longer as objects with the sacred "aura" of a relic or something unique or exotic, but as items that still belong somehow to our social life, eternally open to new interpretations. Moreover, the innovative aspect of such an approach is the consideration that no single interpretation is more important than others, that all interpretations are parts of narratives on which different actors have influence (this includes professionals in the field).

2) The second point of discussion was the acquisition process of museum objects. Acquisition policies and processes are permeated by rules, procedures and policies that do not always depend exclusively on the will of the institution, since its capacity to change is variable. In other words, contemporaneity demands not only new views on museum objects but also on acquisition processes. In practical terms, much has been discussed about acquisition models that imply shared responsibility among source communities, local communities and museums. Such interaction between these players would allow for the implementation of



Participants of the 2017 COMCOL conference in the Västerbottens Museum Umeå, Sweden
Photo: Danielle Kuijten



Conference participants checking out interesting exhibitions in Umeå

Photo: Riitta Kela

approach as precisely one of the things that we need to do in the development of the democratisation of collections, of institutions and their technical processes. In discussing the reasons for the difficulties, one point stood out: that one of the main obstacles to change is the very tradition that institutions and their professionals have built for themselves.

And perhaps the question is: how can the expert really collaborate with more libertarian and disruptive ways of managing collections? After all, would it not be timely for us to review our role as specialists, not by disqualifying ourselves, but by changing our position as authorities to become another actor in the management of museum collections? If we combine with this complex discussion the orthodox and bureaucratic logic to which the institutions are attached, we have a highly challenging scenario ahead.

Many other points were discussed and explored throughout the days of the conference. However, I find that the two mentioned above were for me the core topics. Based on this experience, now almost a year later, I can see that these two issues are still very much alive and relevant. Not only for me, but for everyone who wishes to try and make museums more relevant and reflective places.

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more responsive and innovative acquisition processes, and include new voices in institutional decisions.

So here is an observation: it is fascinating to imagine museums bringing together technical professionals with representatives of source communities and the local audiences to decide together on whether or not to acquire an object for the institution. Alternatively, this could be applied to other collection management procedures, as was also put on the agenda during the conference.

However, as colleagues reminded us, this would still be difficult to do for most institutions. I wonder what such an experience would be like in Brazil if the institutions here decided to follow such a challenging path. However, it is fundamental to recognise this

Help Museu Nacional, Brazil

Claudia Porto

On 2 September, a catastrophic fire destroyed most of Museu Nacional, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Founded in 1818, the museum contained 20 million items, including cultural objects from archaeology, anthropology, zoology, geoscience, culture and ethnographic collections, among others. The fire represented an incalculable loss for Brazilian science, education and history. Throughout the world, many organisations - including many ICOM committees and ICOM itself - offered help. COMCOL publishes here the English version of the call of help issued by the museum, hoping to spread the message of the institution at this difficult time.



How to help the MUSEU NACIONAL?

(National Museum of Brasil)

Do you have any **pieces or digital copies** that you want to **donate**? Contact us through the email falecomdiretor@mn.ufrj.br (subject: DOAÇÃO). 

Do you want to **volunteer**? Email us at falecomdiretor@mn.ufrj.br (subject: VOLUNTARIADO). 

Do you have any **pictures from our collection**? **Send it to us** through our institutional link museunacional.ufrj.br/memoria. Help us rebuild the museum digitally! 

Are you organizing any **protest in support of the Museu Nacional** (National Museum of Brasil)? Let us know: falecomdiretor@mn.ufrj.br (subject: MANIFESTAÇÃO). 

Are you part of an organization that wants to **support us**? We are more than happy to accept it! Email us at falecomdiretor@mn.ufrj.br (subject: APOIO). 

Do you want to support the museum with **donations**? You can do it through the Friends of the National Museum Association (**Associação Amigos do Museu Nacional**) via Bank transfer:



(Bank) **Banco do Brasil**
Branch: 3010-4
Checking account: 60.618-9
CNPJ ("Company" ID): 30024681/0001-99

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After making the deposit you can send the proof of donation to: sosmuseunacional@samn.org.br. This way, you will receive a receipt of your donation.

Please **don't send pictures or documents to any other emails**; these are the official ones. We, the Museu Nacional (National Museum of Brasil), thank you for your help!

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, scholars and students 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 March 2019**. Please contact the editors if you wish to discuss a theme or topic for publication.

COMCOL Newsletter

is available at COMCOL's website <http://network.icom.museum/comcol/> Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/comcol.icom>

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