

ComCOL



International Committee for Collecting

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COMCOL is the International Committee of ICOM with the mission to deepen discussions and share knowledge of the practice, theory and ethics of collecting and collections development.

COMCOL Newsletter is a forum for developing the work of COMCOL and we welcome contributions from museum professionals and scholars all over the world: short essays on projects, reflections, conference/seminar reports, specific questions, notices about useful reading material, invitations to cooperate, new research or other matters. Views and opinions published in the newsletter are the views of the contributors. Contributions for the next issue are welcomed by **1 June** to the editors, and contact us also if you wish to discuss a theme for publication.

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Statement from the Chair

Dear readers!

COMCOL time goes fast... I hope to give you some updates on recent developments and events.

COMCOL's treasurer

Unfortunately our treasurer Roger Heeler has become seriously ill. Due to his condition, he can no longer act as the treasurer of COMCOL. I am however very grateful that Roger still wants to be part of the COMCOL board and I wish him and his wife and family all the strength and love in the world. Fortunately we have a new affiliated board member Tanja Roženberger Šega, who – without hesitation – was prepared to take up the responsible task of new COMCOL treasurer. I am honored that Tanja is now part of the COMCOL family and I am certain that we will all benefit from her expertise and passion for museums and museum work.

Annual meetings 2011/2012

Another museological powerlady is, of course, Elisabeth Tietmeyer. The Museum for European Cultures opened its doors with a very interesting new exhibition and I recommend that everybody should go back to Berlin to visit it. Thanks to the status of Elisabeth within the German museum landscape and the positive resonance of our conference 2011 we are fortunate to publish the most relevant subject-matter contributions as an English edition of the *Berliner Blätter*. This well-known German magazine is a series published by the Society for Ethnography and the Institute for European Ethnology at the Humboldt University Berlin. It serves as a forum for ethnographical and empirical studies. This concerns cultural history as well as research and reports within the area of ethnography, anthropology and related disciplines (http://www.panama-verlag.de/programm/berliner_blaetter/index.html).

The publishing house Panama is itself also very interesting. It is a small publishing house with a focus on literature with a scientific content. Panama wants its books to enrich society and “maybe even help perceiving things from different perspectives”. Furthermore Panama says that its books “not only should provide the reader with knowledge, but that the books also should be fun and the design appealing”. You can imagine that this publishing house fits very well within our COMCOL “mission statement”.

The articles will be edited by a small group within the COMCOL board, but we need help! We are looking for native English speaker(s) who are willing to assist with linguistic checking of the texts. Please contact me if you are interested!

Unfortunately it took a bit longer than expected to prepare our Call for Papers for our Annual Conference 2012 in Cape Town in the Republic of South Africa. But I am positive that our joint (in part) Annual Meeting with ICMAH (International Committee for Museums and Collections of Archaeology and History) and ICOM South-Africa will be a success.

COMCOL 2.0

COMCOL wants to “rebuild” the website to have more possibilities for access, representation and participation. I think communication with our members and other stakeholders is very important. COMCOL wants to be an inclusive committee, where a large, heterogeneous and culturally diverse interest group can feel included. This is why we want to professionalize our communication tools, especially our website. We want to “rebuild” our website into a 2.0 participatory format, where an inclusive body of COMCOL stakeholders can converse with each other to exchange ideas, initiate new discourses and actively participate in the further development of our profession. We strongly hope that this website will enable the access, representation and participation of a large interest group, and crucially for COMCOL it should cater for the other official ICOM languages. We have already translated the most important parts of our website into French and Spanish, but in order to have access to these languages, our website needs to be “redesigned”. I hope we will get funding from ICOM to achieve this...

More 2.0: COMCOL is now also on Facebook! Welcome to take part on <http://www.facebook.com/comcol.icom>.

COMCOL Excursion to Belgium

Apart from our Annual Conferences and active participation in the working groups, COMCOL is thinking about organising excursions for its members and others who have an interest in collecting issues. A place date and location for the first excursion could be 7-9 September in Belgium. If you are interested in participating, please do not hesitate to contact me!

Léontine Meijer-van Mensch

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Open Window: A Virtual Collection, the Museum of the Future?

*Brenda Moore-McCann
Denis Roche*

In the late 1990s, the Director of the National Bone Marrow Transplant Unit at St. James's Hospital, Dublin, Professor Shaun McCann, looked for some way to improve the quality of life of patients undergoing transplantation. This is a form of treatment for people with leukaemia and other blood diseases that, while very successful in the majority of cases, can also prove fatal due to the severity of the side effects of treatment. Because of the risk of infection patients are cared for in isolation in a completely sterile environment for up to six weeks. Visits from family are restricted and pictures on walls are prohibited, although television is permitted as it is amenable to daily cleaning. The views outside each patient's room did little to enhance this experience due to inadequate landscaping surrounded by the harsh built environment of one of the poorest urban areas of the city. Even some of these views were blocked by an air-conditioning plant. The quest to improve patients' quality of life by providing stimulation of the imagination and creating a greater sense of connection to other worlds was achieved through the art intervention, *Open Window*.

In the belief that art is one means of providing such an environment, a virtual window was created using modern technology by a team set up to realise the project under the direction of Professor McCann. The idea of a virtual window was conceived by artist Denis Roche, the curator of the project. The management of the technology was carried out by the hospital's medical physicist and artist, Fran Hegarty. Catherine McCabe, a nurse/lecturer devised a questionnaire and conducted interviews in a randomised prospective controlled trial, financed in large part by the Irish Cancer Society, into the effects of *Open Window* between 2006 and 2009 on over 200 patients. Finally, a review committee to assess all artworks was set up consisting of medical and art personnel, to balance possible issues of censorship with the duty of care to patients.



*'A Clinically Useful Artwork?Part II' by Denis Roche, (photo Fionn McCann)
Inflatable ripstop nylon pavilion, 6 people,
projected media. 4m x 3m.*

Open Window projected nine channels onto the wall of the patient's room which provided access to a specially assembled collection of art. The artworks ranged from contemporary painting, photography, silent videos or videos with accompanying music, and reproductions of classical art in the form of mosaics, sculpture and painting. The collection spanned not only different media but also subject matter, from the visually complex and abstract to a wide range of images from nature and urban environments. Established and emerging national as well as international artists were commissioned by the curator in the light of their practice and willingness to participate in such a sensitive environment. The majority of artists willingly submitted to the restrictive brief seeing it both as a challenge and a commitment to communicate with a new audience at a fragile time in their lives. Mobile phone cameras and camcorders recorded images selected by an artist which were then transmitted in real time to the patient's room over the internet and mobile phone networks. A connection to the world outside was also provided by a channel of personal images, requested by a patient in discussion with the curator, sent in by family members. One of the latter allowed a patient to see his newborn baby before meeting her.



'Open Window' by Denis Roche. Digital photograph.

In line with contemporary art practice where greater freedom and participation is afforded to the viewer, all channels were completely under the patient's control by means of a specially designed remote control. In addition, patients became co-curators of the project through discussions of art with the artist/curator, Denis Roche, while families also became part of a wider psychosocial network of support through art.

Aside from an inventive way of bringing art into a difficult environment based upon premises that related primarily to the clinical management of patients, *Open Window* was probably the largest randomised controlled trial available that tried to evaluate the effect on patients' experience compared with a similar number of patients not exposed to it. All had the same medical treatment. The results showed a statistically significant positive reaction among patients exposed to *Open Window* in terms of reduced anxiety, negative expectations of the transplant, and an increased sense of connection to the outside world compared with the non-exposed group. While it was not claimed that *Open Window* had any role in patients' medical outcome, it was a significant factor in relation to overall experience and quality of life while undergoing the procedure. An important side effect of the art intervention was that patients, nurses, doctors and family visitors had something else to talk about, besides illness.



'Poppy' by Pam Berrie - MovingWindow Image.

New strategies of audience participation and response have been part of art practice since the 1960s. This included a change of context in how an artist related to an audience. What was created was less important than the kinds of relationships opened up between an artist and an individual or group. *Open Window* espoused this approach. But it also provided a novel way to build up an art collection that reached beyond the traditional boundaries and assumptions of the museum. Not only did *Open Window* prove to be a success in an extremely difficult environment at time of great stress with mortality a real possibility, but it pointed to the way art can be sensitively used to assuage a sense of isolation, despair, powerlessness and panic in human experience. If this could be done in the situation described, where the majority of patients had no art knowledge, it could also be a means for art to reach far beyond the elite art audience to find its place as a valuable part of ordinary life.

Brenda Moore-McCann, art historian, writer, and critic is a member of the Open Window review committee.

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Reference

For a full report of the trial see Catherine McCabe, Denis Roche, Fran Hegarty, & Shaun McCann in *Psycho-Oncology*, 2011, DOI: 10.1002/pon.2093

Participating artists

Barrie Cooke, Nick Miller, John Gerrard, Brian Maguire, Andrew Folan, Remco de Fouw, Kurt Ralske, Cathy Fitzgerald, Denis Roche, Fran Hegarty, Anthony Lyttle, Paul O'Connor, Sheila O'Gorman, BPaul Monaghan, Dominic Thorpe, Suzanne Mooney, Emma Finucane, Pam Berry.

The Public Perception: Collecting Artefacts of War or not?

Laurette Laman Trip and Selwyn Ramp

From early childhood almost all of us have either collected or are still collecting; ranging from a few trinkets to an extensive assortment of items. We scrutinize and deliberate before a potential object is added to our expanding collection. This is a process done entirely for our own pleasure and does not, in general, involve others. Museums, however, do not have that luxury since they have to assemble a collection that is meant for a broader audience. This makes the decision making process far more complex when there are more stakeholders involved. The collection should not only appeal to a large range of people, but it should also include a wide variety of artefacts.

Nowadays the discussion that has had museum professionals locked in endless debate is not so much about *what* to collect but rather the topic of *non-collecting*. In The Netherlands (and no doubt this is happening abroad as well) museum budgets are cut considerably which could result in difficulty in maintaining the existing collections to the standard that has been expected of these institutions. Nonetheless, depending on the mission statement, the museum has a responsibility to make sure their collection is up to date and a reflection of the current society.

Comparative Study: The Netherlands and the United States of America

As an assignment for our MA Museology course at the Reinwardt Academy in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, we were asked to interview the public and find out their points of view when it comes to the acquisitioning (and non-acquisitioning) of contemporary artefacts. To create a framework for questioning, we first wanted to define 'contemporary'. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the term is described as; 'of the present time, modern' (Cowrie, 1989). This phrase applies not only to tangible (and intangible) works of art, but it can also relate to the chronicling of events that have taken – or are still taking – place within our current timeframe.

To focus our study we compared two countries, The Netherlands and the United States of America to discover if attitudes and ideas on this subject would either be similar or radically different. We also wanted to come up with a subject that would be known in both places. If one looks into events that have taken place these past few decades, a common denominator is *war*. War fought either by nations or by individuals who are fighting their own crusade against society by using terrorist tactics. In both cases the impact on society is considerable, and with it comes a wide range of emotions concerning this topic. For the purpose of narrowing down this field research, a decision was made to concentrate on two case studies, one involving the war in Afghanistan and the other on the (individual) attack of Anders Behring Breivik on a Governmental building and a political youth camp in Norway.

To understand the thought process of individuals and to enhance the research, the same questions were put forward to people both in the USA and in The Netherlands. The ages of the interviewees (45% men/55% women) ranged from 25-65 and over. Almost all have benefitted from either higher education or university, and some held MAs and MBAs.

To start off the interview, a basic question was asked in order to create a 'proper' mind set and to get the interviewees thinking about the cultural sector and their experiences in the museum environment. The introductory question "Should museums collect artefacts of important events from present day life? If so, what kind of artefacts?" gave a wide range of interesting answers. For the Dutch interviewees it was not so much *what kind* of artefacts that should be collected that was of interest – most could not really think of examples – but more to the point was that artefacts should be few in number, and of the highest possible quality. Quality was defined as objects that hold a sense of artistry, craftsmanship and above all are the best of their type. Depending on the financial situation of the museum, only the best exemplar should

be considered. The identical question given to the interviewees in the USA was answered with a resounding yes; we should collect artefacts of important events from present day life. Though there were some differences of opinion on some of the details of collecting, it was mostly agreed upon that collecting artefacts from important events is essential to chronicling human history. It was believed to be the main reason for collecting.

Collecting Artefacts of War: The Case Studies and the Public Perception

After opening the interview with the subject of collecting in general, the tone was set to present the case studies to the interviewees, beginning with the Afghan war. Afghanistan has been the centre of conflict between Western forces and the Taliban regime and the Al-Qaeda terrorist organisation for the past eleven years. The war on terrorism began soon after the attack on the Twin Towers, New York (USA) on the 11th of September 2001 with the so-called 'Operation Enduring Freedom' (Wikipedia, 2011). Though the United States has been sending troops to the region and are the main military force, several other nations (such as The Netherlands) have been stationing support troops to help with the recovery of the country.

The second case study involved the attack of Anders Behring Breivik in Norway last summer (22nd July 2011). In one day a bomb planted by Breivik killed eight people in the city centre of Oslo. A further sixty-nine youths attending a political (left wing) youth camp on the island of Utøya were massacred when Breivik, dressed as a policeman, opened gunfire on them. Being a Christian fundamentalist, he proclaimed himself a warrior against the multiculturalism in the country and 'the Commander of the Norwegian Anti-Communist Resistance Movement' (NY Times, 2012).

What has been evident from the Dutch response to the possible accessioning of war memorabilia (both of the Afghan war and artefacts from individual [terrorist] attacks), is that when it comes to these types of objects there is little interest in having them displayed within a museum. However, if documents on

warfare tactics as well as doctrines related to the justification of the Afghan war were to be collected, then this would be deemed the most valuable. In this age of high technology and with the speed at which information is obtained, there are ample ways not to forget these historical events. Digital news records, photographic archives, or virtual museums would be considered the best way to show artefacts related to the subject of war. When presenting the Breivik case study in The Netherlands, there was hardly any interest to collect artefacts from these types of incidents. Even though it was an awful display of violence, in a few decades this would not be remembered as a key event in the larger framework of social history.

In contrast, for the American interviewees it was not the question of *if* we should collect and present artefacts of war, but rather *who* should collect it and *how*. It was debated whether museum professionals should go out and collect artefacts of present day events themselves; or if they should wait until they receive items post data from other sources. More specifically, a clear distinction between items from 'a nation at war' and an 'individual act of terrorism' should be considered. There is an apparent interest in keeping artefacts from a war such as the Afghan war, and the potential of using them as research or educational tools. However, opinions differed considerably on the way – and in which context – these artefacts should be displayed. In the case of an individual act of war (or terrorism) as Anders Behring Breivik was described, it was commonly agreed that the story and the context should be documented and maintained, but artefacts from a situation like this is not something these visitors would be interested in seeing. For the American interviewees the story connected to the objects appears to be crucial in both cases. When it came to the 'nation at war' artefacts, these were considered to be of equal importance as the story, and thus should be collected and maintained together.

Conclusion: Reasons for Opposing Views

There are clear distinctions in the perception of the interviewees in how museums should deal with collecting heritage. But why is there such a difference in ideas about collecting war artefacts in The Netherlands and the United States – and what are the differences between

the militaristic equipment used by Anders Behring Breivik and the ones used in Afghanistan by the army? To understand this, one should consider that even though the factual identity might be the same of the objects, the actual identity of the objects are not identical in both countries.

Factual Identity, as explained by Peter van Mensch (2011:7) in his essay *Object as a Data Carrier* "... refers to the realized object with its structural, functional and contextual aspects. It is the sum total of the characteristics of the object as it was intended (and not-intended) by the maker, and exists at the moment the production process has been completed". Van Mensch (2011:7) explains that the Actual Identity is the identity of the object that has been changed and altered during its life history, which he calls secondary data. He further writes: "...in general its information content will grow, although quite often an erosion of information occurs." The Actual Identity is "...The result of the accumulation of information, on all levels" "i.e. the object as it appears to us now".

In the case of the different artefacts of war, and the perception of the audience towards collecting this, it is clear that artefacts have 'picked up' information along the way of their existence. They carry along information on many levels. It shows that objects do not appear to be the same, nor convey the same message to people from different locations and backgrounds.

To further complicate things, it is not just the factual identity of the object, or if you will, its intrinsic information that should be respected. The stories (the extrinsic information) are essential to both case studies as well and can be considered to be immaterial objects in themselves. These narratives also contain their own factual and actual identity. To fully understand the difference of opinion and importance between The Netherlands and the United States, we have to look into the story identities. The facts of both events are the same in both countries. However, in case of the Afghan war, the perception of the events, the level of involvement in the war, and the general feeling towards going to war is different in each country, and thus changes the actual identity of these stories. The Afghan war

is perceived differently in each country and perhaps national pride is not expressed in the same way in The Netherlands as in the United States. Americans tend to be more outspoken in their patriotic feelings, whereas the Dutch might express this on a personal level. In the Breivik case, one could argue that, even though for both countries this is not something local to them, the culture in the United States appears to allow for more remembrance and reflection on these kinds of events than in The Netherlands.

By reviewing the opinions and concerns raised during the interviews, current and future museum professionals are left with a considerable challenge. One of the missions of a museum is to educate. Therefore one could argue that collecting these types of artefacts would be a necessity to record the current political climate. However, if the public is not responding positively towards this category of collecting; should a museum be concerned with the *current public perception*? Should museums not rather collect everything now, to be able to proceed in the chronicling of human history? The public perception of current events may change, and as a result, so will the future expectations of a museum audience.

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Donation of objects to museums

Daniel Fjellström

The gift as a social phenomenon has a special significance for the museum context and for the museum organization. Without gifts, or donations of objects, museums would barely exist and they would eventually lose their legitimacy as a carrier of society's "collective memory".

Museological research on objects and collecting has traditionally been undertaken from the museum's point of view, without paying much interest in the donors and their role in the process. In my Master's thesis in Museum and Heritage Studies, *The Gift 2.0: A Museological Study of donations of Objects and its Underlying Motives*, I make an attempt to present two different hypotheses as to why people might consider donating items to museums rather than other available options.

I argue that research on the underlying reasons why people choose to donate items for cultural heritage institutions such as museums is crucial for the survival of these institutions and to maintain public confidence in them.

The study

For my study I conducted seven semi-structured research interviews with antiquarians with long experience of receiving donations of objects, at museums all over Sweden. It was a qualitative study in which I chose two state museums, and three regional museums, as well as two city museums. The interviews were conducted in all cases, except one, at the informants' workplace. The choice of museums was made so that the study would have a regional spread in order to interpret any differences based on regionality.

The reason why I chose to interview professional museum workers rather than the donors themselves was due to the context of a master's thesis. It was difficult to get in touch with donors with regard to the museums' ethical policy. Also, the statistical drop off with the donors would have been much greater than with professional museum workers. My original intention was to interview a number of donors as well, but time constraints made it

impossible. With continued research on the topic however, this would be essential.

The research questions were focused on trying to determine the underlying reasons why people choose to donate items to museums. And to try to verify or falsify the two hypotheses I assumed. Besides the research questions I also analyzed a small quantity of source material that I acquired in connection with the research interviews. For example, one of the source material items was a letter of donation that my informant provided me with, which I then analyzed in accordance with my hypothesis.

Below, I summarize the two hypotheses I assumed regarding people's motives for wanting to donate items to museums.

Gifts as Inalienable Possessions

Some things, like most commodities, are easy to give. But there are other possessions that are imbued with the intrinsic and ineffable identities of their owners which are not easy to give away. Ideally, these inalienable possessions are kept by their owners from one generation to the next within the closed context of family, descent, group or dynasty. The loss of such an in-alienable possession diminishes the self and by extension, the group to which the person belongs. Yet it is not always this way. Theft, physical decay, the failure of memory and political maneuvers are among the irrevocable forces that work to separate an inalienable possession from its owner. (Weiner 1992:6).

The anthropologist Annette Weiner believes that there are complex strategies in any society to keep certain items out of commercial circulation. Some items may therefore acquire value, not because they are changed or given as gifts, but because they are *not* (Weiner 1992: 6-7).

I argue that donating to museums is one of these strategies people use to keep some objects, inalienable possession, outside of commercial circulation. Donating an object to a museum, rather than any other means of

disposal, may solve a variety of problems for the donor. The object is guaranteed to be kept out of commercial circulation, while the object's cultural biography can be retained by the donor, even though the object is now consigned to the museum. Weiner calls this the "paradox of keeping-while-giving" (Weiner 1992, p 6).

The museum through its paradoxical ability to take an object while it is still "owned" by their donor, acts as a bulwark against the increasingly commercialized society of today.

Gifts as cultural capital

Art and donations thereof, have previously been considered to be, what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defines as *cultural capital*. The capital concept is part of Bourdieu's theoretical framework, and he defines capital as various values and assets that people arrogate to themselves during their lives. My hypothesis is that cultural objects donated to museums should be seen as cultural capital. And I argue that those who donate items to museums as part of expanding their cultural capital, are people with a certain kind of *habitus*, as Bourdieu defines it. The museum can be regarded as a distinct *field*.

Summation

It is certainly not appropriate to draw firm conclusions from my limited, empirical material. But I would argue that my results

provide strong evidence that people's reason for wanting to donate items to museums is because they regard objects as inalienable possessions or that they see the process as a way of enhancing their cultural capital. I believe future studies will concur this. My hypothesis can be seen as a starting point, against a subject of utmost importance to museology and museums.

My hope is that the donor's underlying motives for wanting to donate items, in the future will be an integral part of the contextual information that museums need of donors. And therefore extend our knowledge, not only of museums and objects, but also about human action.

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It all starts with a conversation. A Polish museological blog

Dorota Kawęcka and Aleksandra Janus

‘Inne muzeum’ (‘a different museum’) is an initiative that was established as a result of a university research project conducted by us in Polish and European museums. In the beginning the website <http://innemuzeum.pl> was a tool for disseminating the results by posting reports from each part of the project. After its completion, in May 2010 we decided to transform it into a blog and create a space to initiate a discussion about what museums should be like with other museum professionals and academics.

As we are now experiencing a sort of ‘museum boom’ in Poland (with new museums under

construction and many others undergoing redevelopment), we perceive initiating a profound debate on the future roles and responsibilities of these institutions as urgent. Professional organisations and policy makers now dedicate more attention to collection safety, mobility and restitution of objects lost or stolen from national collections. At the same time, the media persistently focus on the issues of design in terms of architecture and exhibition technology (so-called ‘modern and interactive’ discourse), while the wider discussion on the vision for museums and public expectations is missing. Moreover, the

transfer of ideas and international dialogue is often hindered by language barrier.

To draw attention to these issues we decided to translate and publish on our blog the opening and concluding speeches of the joint COMCOL-CAMOC-ICOM Europe session at the conference *Participative Strategies* in Berlin in November 2011. We are hoping that by promoting a new, fresh perspective on the upcoming challenges and their possible solutions we will be able to build people-centred museums and transform the existing ones into active agents of social change.

Polish translations of the speeches are available at: <http://innemuzeum.pl/comcol/>



Museums currently under construction:

Museum of Polish History, Cricoteka - Tadeusz Kantor Museum, Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Museum of World War II, The Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, John Paul II and Stefan Wyszyński Museum, Theatre Museum in Cracow.

Recently opened museums:

Warsaw Uprising Museum (2004), National Museum of the Przemysł District (2008), ms2 Art Museum in Lodz (2008), Fryderyk Chopin Museum (2010), Copernicus Science Centre (2010), Polish Aviation Museum Cracow (2010), European Tale Centre Pacanów (2010), Museum of Contemporary Art in Cracow (2011).

Dorota Kawęcka, MA student at the Reinwardt Academy, social activist, blogger.

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Report from COMCOL Working Group

Working Group: Collections Mobility

The first ever COMCOL annual meeting in Berlin in November 2011 provided a platform for several working groups and discussions, one of them concentrating on the theme of the *mobility of collections*. As discussed before, also in the context of this newsletter, issues related to the mobility of collections have been very high on the agenda during the past ten years. Several conferences have taken place, professional partnerships made, new guidelines and recommendations written, surveys conducted, reports published and so on. The collections mobility handbook *Encouraging*

Collections Mobility, A Way Forward for Museums in Europe (2010), and its articles, in their turn, have been translated to several languages. The book can be downloaded at www.lending-for-europe.eu.

At the COMCOL annual meeting, the group discussed the collections mobility focus areas and next steps to be taken. It was agreed that all the good work done within the context of European Union and member states should be implemented to wider circles. The COMCOL Annual Conference 2012 in Cape Town, South Africa, provides excellent opportunity for that and this theme will be included in the program.

Meanwhile, all of those responsible for collection policies, should take a closer look at the use of the collection resources and ask if there's unused potential? Would some other collection benefit from the items in the stores? Is there any chance of joining forces and starting up a research program with other stakeholders? How about staff training and job shadowing opportunities? The list could be continued with several equally important questions not to mention larger issues such as the ethics of collecting in contemporary society.

In order to go global the work need more hands, more brains, and more people. Therefore, it's necessary for you to join the discussion – in Cape Town at latest!

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Contemporary collecting – book review and call for papers

Owain Rhys: *Contemporary Collecting. Theory and Practice.*

Reviewed by Arjen Kok

In 2011 the Scheepvaartmuseum Amsterdam (Maritime museum) acquired a photo of Marianne Thieme, member of the Dutch parliament and more specifically, leader of the Party for the Animals. This party strongly advocates the rights and wellbeing of animals in our modern, industrial and technological society. At the opening of the parliamentary year in September some female members of parliament attended wearing extravagant headdresses. Marianne Thieme used the occasion to make a political point with a large admiral's cap, bearing the text Save our Seas.

Sara Keijzer, junior curator of photography and film at the Scheepvaartmuseum, and responsible for the acquisition, states: "the photo belongs in the collection of the Scheepvaartmuseum, because it shows in a beautiful way how maritime metaphors can be used to propagate a political message. The image invites us to discuss public issues, which is an important objective of the museum."

It is a perfect example of contemporary collecting, connecting present day public issues to the collection that documents a maritime history of centuries. It at once updates all the objects that are related to the exploitation of the seas as natural resources and puts Marianne Thieme's action into a historic perspective.

It also illustrates the modern practice of collecting alternative forms of representation instead of the object itself, in this case the cap.



Marianne Thieme, leader of the Party for the Animals, wears an admiral's cap with political statement at the opening of the Dutch parliamentary year. Photo David van Dam 2011 (copyright). Collection Scheepvaartmuseum Amsterdam.

The object v. alternative forms of representation is one of the themes that Owain Rhys discusses in the chapter Themes and Narratives in his book *Contemporary Collecting. Theory and Practice*, published by MuseumsEtc, Edinburgh 2011 (ISBN 978-1-907697-34-0). Rhys is probably one of the relatively few curators who are appointed to deal exclusively with contemporary collecting and St Fagans: National History

Museum, Wales (UK) and policies and planning for contemporary collecting are still at an embryonic phase in most museums. So it is generous of him to share his knowledge, experience and vision on this complicated sector of collecting with us in this excellent and accessible publication.



Rhys addresses the subject in three ways. He starts by discussing theory and practice in four themes, the other three being 'the object v. people's experiences', 'collecting popular culture' and 'popular collecting'. Then he gives an overview of the history of contemporary collecting in Europe and North America in the 20th century. Rhys concludes his book with the story of his own curatorial experiences, collecting the 21st century in Wales. The Contemporary Collecting Strategy and the Contemporary Collecting Plan of the National Museum Wales are included as appendices, providing useful examples for other museums that want to professionalize their practice of contemporary collecting.

Contemporary collecting proves to be a challenging practice for many social history museums. It brings questions to the surface that remain hidden in the more traditional forms of collecting, for instance the question of what to select when everything is still in use and available in abundance. One of the possible solutions that Rhys comes up with is to team up with the new breed of collectors that collect mass-produced objects. The People's Show Festival in Britain in the nineties, showing private collections in more than 50 museums, is a successful example of exhibiting contemporary culture with the help of a wide range of collectors.

Rhys notes that contemporary collecting raises some interesting and fundamental shifts in traditional museum practice in a seemingly natural way. For instance, when some museums started to combine contemporary collecting with community outreach projects, the accent in collecting shifted from an object-based activity to a social activity. The object becomes more a vehicle for social activities, community development and the building of identities. The story connected to the object becomes almost more important than the object, which loses much of its significance without the story. It can even be experienced as an ethical problem when the object is displayed out of context and without its 'autobiographical' story.

This development is experienced by many museums with city collections. They have difficulties with proving their importance for many groups in society that do not identify with the power-elite. All museums have to deal with the experience economy, but city museums especially have to learn new techniques that turn objects into instruments to create relations with new audiences and communities. Instead of concentrating on the significance of the *object*, the museum has to look for the significance of the *experience* that can be supported by the object.

Contemporary collecting involves much more than the straightforward collecting of objects, concludes Rhys. It forces the museum to reconsider its function in society and relation with the public. Contemporary collecting requires a far more pro-active approach to the selection and acquisition process. I think one of the most important results of contemporary collecting is

the shift from the tangible to the intangible qualities of the object and the collection. An interesting phenomenon in that respect is that more museums are using their website as a collecting tool, both to collect stories and to collect additional information about objects in their collections.

In a way contemporary collecting is also influenced by indirect circumstances. One may ask whether the acquisition of the Thieme photograph by the Scheepvaartmuseum really illustrates the theme object v. alternative forms of representation. It was acquired by the curator of Film and Photography, for whom a photograph is not an alternative form of representation, but rather the object itself. Using this as an example shows how perspectives easily shift and

consequently problematize the discussion. Or as Rhys has to conclude about contemporary collecting at the end of his introduction: "... it remains a fuzzy concept." It is quite an achievement therefore that Rhys managed to present the issues that are related to contemporary collecting in an accessible and comprehensible way.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Collecting the contemporary

Edited by Owain Rhys and Zelda Baveystock

We invite international submissions to be included in this forthcoming book, to be published by MuseumsEtc [www.museumsetc.com] in Winter 2012.

The book will be edited by Zelda Baveystock, Teaching Associate at Newcastle University and Owain Rhys, Curator of Contemporary Life at St Fagans: National History Museum, Wales.

Why and how should social history museums engage with contemporary collecting? To fill gaps in the collection? To record modern urban life? To engage with minority communities? To link past and present? There are many possible responses... Many museums collect contemporary objects, stories, images and sounds – consciously or unconsciously. But reasoned policies and procedures are very often lacking. And – given the uniquely detailed record of contemporary life recorded by other media institutions – how best are museums to record and present contemporary life in their collections?

An overview of contemporary collecting in a social historical context is well overdue. Original source material, ideas, developments and research has never before been brought together in a single volume. This book will bring together practitioners from around the world, to provide a contemporary and convenient reader which aims to lay the foundations for future initiatives.

We welcome submissions – of between 3000 and 5000 words – on the practice, theory and history of contemporary collecting in social history museums, based on – but not confined to – the following issues and themes. We are particularly interested in new and pioneering initiatives and innovative thinking in this field.

Practice

- Projects (including community outreach, externally funded collection programmes, projects with specific goals)
- Exhibitions (including popular culture, contemporary political issues, under-represented groups)
- Networks – including SAMDOK, COMCOL and other initiatives
- Fieldwork and contemporary collecting
- Adopting a strategic approach to contemporary collecting

- Digital collecting – challenges and practicalities
- The influence of the internet, how to collect, and associated museological issues
- Contemporary collecting and contemporary issues
- Access, storage and conservation issues

Theory

- What to collect?
- How to collect?
- Who should collect?
- Community involvement - advantages and disadvantages
- Contemporary collecting - key priority or passing fad?
- The relationship of globalised culture to local identity and place
- Should contemporary collecting be object or people based?
- The case for nationally or regionally co-ordinated policies
- The impact of social and digital media for the future of contemporary collecting

History

- Origins and development of contemporary collecting
- Differences between institutions and countries

The editors

Zelda Baveystock has a long-standing interest in contemporary collecting, and was instrumental in developing the subject at Tyne and Wear Museums, where she established the post of Keeper of Contemporary Collecting. She was responsible for setting up a Subject Specialist Network in contemporary collecting in 2005, bringing together museum practitioners working in the field across England. Zelda has lectured nationally and internationally in the subject, and most recently has been working with the Hampshire-Solent Alliance to help them develop a collaborative contemporary collecting strategy across five major museum services.

MuseumsEtc has recently published an introduction to the subject by Owain Rhys which gathered together disparate strands of contemporary collecting theory and history, and provided an insight into current practices at St Fagans: National History Museum. Owain is interested in formalising definitions and procedures, and in strengthening the bonds between museums who are involved in contemporary collecting.

If you are interested in being considered as a contributor, please send an abstract (up to 250 words) and a short biography to both the editors and to the publishers at the following addresses:
zbaveystock@yahoo.com, owain.rhys@museumwales.ac.uk and books@museumsetc.com.

Enquiries should also be sent to these addresses. Contributors will receive a complimentary copy of the publication and a discount on more.

The book will be published in both print and digital formats by MuseumsEtc later in 2012.