

## Statement from the Chair

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch*

Dear readers,

As you can see, we have “kicked off” 2014 with a new COMCOL Newsletter design and layout. We are very happy with this new look, designed by Rafael Počivašek from Slovenia. Please tell us what you think. We are very eager to hear from you and learn from your feedback. But since design is just design, no matter how sexy, when there is no content, I am very pleased that this is yet again a Newsletter that is also interesting content wise.

During the Christmas Holidays I was writing our COMCOL Annual Report and, reflecting on the milestones we have achieved last year, I felt satisfied. But COMCOL goes on and we aim to stay dynamic and relevant. Therefore within the board we are working hard to prepare for this year’s Annual Meeting, which hopefully will be even more interesting than the meeting of 2013.

In this Newsletter you find the call for papers (which has also been distributed via other channels). One of the key issues within the developing COMCOL discourse on collecting theory, practice and ethics is the social context of collection development, in particular the impact of prevailing ideologies. The 2014 annual conference is the last of a series of three conferences in which COMCOL explores this issue



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visitors at  
exhibition  
Photo: Jette Munk  
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from different perspectives. In 2012 (Cape Town) we discussed how the concept of utopia influenced (and influences) the forming of collections. In 2013 (Rio de Janeiro) we discussed the re-interpretation of older collections, focussing on exhibitions as the medium for this. In 2014 we would like to explore the triangular relation between ideology, mission and collection profile. In particular we would like to study how museum missions follow changes in politically inspired ideologies, and to what extent collection profiles are adapted to the new missions.

Thinking about collections between different ideologies a possible very “special” guillotine came into my mind, which was recently (re-)discovered in the store of the Bavarian National Museum in Munich. These brutal eighteenth-century instruments were used by the Nazis between 1933 and 1945 to kill thousands of their opponents. Research has shown that this particular guillotine might very well be THE instrument used to kill the members of the student resistance group *Die Weisse Rose* (the white rose), the siblings Hans and Sophie Scholl being the most famous of the group. I am so intrigued by the fact that this horrible instrument, that has been catching dust in the museum’s store for more than 70 years, has overnight got a new layer of significance. Why was this object “forgotten”? Is our era the only one to provide the right societal climate in Bavaria (or the museum) to conduct this kind of research and to make the biography of such objects known? Did the guillotine become a more significant object only because research has shown that members of *Die Weisse Rose* were killed by it? And what about all other (anonymous) victims?

Museologically most interesting for me is the discussion about whether this object fits at all into the current collection profile of the museum and whether it should, or should not, be exhibited and where and in which context? In my lectures at a German University, the students responded (and that is probably logical) very differently to the case study and all its layers and nuances, from my international students in Amsterdam. How much context is needed, but also to what extent is context a possible trap? I will continue to follow this particular case study with huge museological and personal interest. Sophie Scholl was and still is one of my big heroes. Interestingly – although she has turned into an iconic figure in the discourse of German collective memory – it is not widely known that she was killed in such a way. In

the main building of the University of Munich there is a bust of Sophie Scholl, showing her head and a little piece of neck; maybe the recent ‘discovery’ of the guillotine will shed some new light on the particularities of this bust as well. This is just one example that crossed my path recently. I am sure all of you are able to share case studies that can serve as illustrations for the sort of issues that we would like to discuss in COMCOL.

Showing the guillotine is I think also related to “taking a stand as a museum”. Teaching professional ethics I am very interested in this. According to Richard Sandell, museum ethics of the 21st century is all about “having and taking an activist approach”. In this Newsletter we have three articles that touch activist approaches that museums can and maybe should take with their collections and collection policies. Roger Mayou reflects on an exhibition that deals with deep humanitarian issues. That museums are far from neutral spaces is clearly shown by Diana Chafik and Anneken Appel Laursen, the latter maybe describing a very radical position. These articles show different approaches to how museums collect, exhibit and discuss difficult social issues in contemporary society, and it would be very interesting to engage our readers in a debate – and to present other cases/examples of “activist approaches”. We invite our readers to comment and share your reflections on this and other matters.



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CONFERENCE CALL FOR PAPERS – COMCOL Annual Conference 2014

## ***Collecting and collections in times of war or political and social change***

**Celje, Slovenia, 3 – 6 December 2014**

*Conference partners:*

*National Committee of ICOM Slovenia*

*Museum of Recent History Celje – department School of museology Celje*

The aim of COMCOL is to discuss the theory, practice and ethics of collection development. One of the issues is the social context of collection development, in particular the impact of prevailing ideologies. The 2014 annual conference is the last of a series of three conferences in which COMCOL explores this issue from different perspectives. In 2012 (Cape Town) we discussed how the concept of utopia influenced (and influences) the forming of collections. In 2013 (Rio de Janeiro) we discussed the re-interpretation of older collections, focusing on exhibitions as medium for re-interpretation. In 2014 we would like to explore the triangular relationship between ideology, institutional mission and collection profile. In particular we would like to explore how museum missions are influenced by changes in political ideologies and regimes, and to what extent collection profiles are adapted to the new missions.

During the conference we would like to focus on theoretical views and different recent and contemporary examples. Since in recent decades significant regime changes took/are taking place in different parts of the world, we would like to ask participants to look at the impact of changing ideological perspectives on the formation and development of collections. Furthermore, the conference takes place in the year in which the start of World War I is commemorated - a war that had a huge impact on political developments in Central Europe and in other parts of the world. How did museum collections respond to the aftermath of the turmoil of war, and how are they being used in today's commemorations?

We invite papers from researchers, museum professionals and students that address the impact of changing ideological perspectives on the formation and development of collections, including, but not limited to, the following topics:

**The triangular relationship between political & social ideology, museum mission and collection profile.**

**The adaptation of museum missions to ideologies and adaptation of collection profiles to new missions.**

**Using collections to memorialize WW I.**

### **Abstracts for presentation:**

Presentations should be 20 minutes in length. Please send a 200-300 words abstract, a short biographical note and contact details to: [comcolcelje@gmail.com](mailto:comcolcelje@gmail.com) by March 15, 2014. The proposals will be reviewed by a working group. Successful proposals will be acknowledged by May 1, 2014.

### **Conference information:**

More details on the COMCOL Annual Conference are soon available on the COMCOL website.

# The place of the witnesses in the new permanent exhibition

## The Humanitarian Adventure

Roger Mayou

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum was founded in 1988 on the initiative of a former ICRC delegate. It closed on 30 June 2011 and reopened on 18 May 2013 after 22 months of work with a new permanent exhibition.

Why change a benchmark exhibition? The world has changed, humanitarian work has changed and the Museum needed to reflect that. One of the fundamental constants that accompanies our work is the following question: in the age of the internet, what position can be adopted by a museum of history and society, a place of knowledge and reflection that helps us to understand the world in which we live, and how can its special role be preserved? Today, if you want to find out about the work of the Red Cross and Red Crescent or of humanitarian organizations in general, you will gather more information at home in front of your computer than by going to a museum.

However, exhibitions have the unique privilege of being able to draw on all disciplines of knowledge and, at the same time, to use all media to communicate them – without losing sight of the fact that technology is there to serve the content.

### Our choices – three themes and three elements

After a long period of reflection, we took two radical decisions: To create a thematic exhibition (rather than to adopt a chronological approach as in the last one) and to highlight our specific nature as a museum by focusing on three elements: emotion, visitors' personal involvement and testimony.

We chose three themes and, following a competition, entrusted their realization to three architects from different cultural backgrounds: *Defending human*

*dignity* (Gringo Cardia, Brazil), *Restoring family links* (Diébédo Francis Kéré, Burkina Faso) and *Reducing natural risks* (Shigeru Ban, Japan). Atelier Oi (Switzerland) drew up the master plan and designed the common spaces.

The choice of elements to highlight the nature of the museum emphasized: *Emotion* – not for its own sake but as the way of accessing information. As one of our trainers says, “Emotion is like water. We need it to live, but if there is too much, we drown.” Each thematic area thus starts with a stage with a specific emotional content before visitors move on to the information stages. *Visitors' personal involvement* – the challenge here was not to restrict visitors to the role of spectators. They can pick up objects, take part in games, and activate the testimonies. *Testimony* – we wanted to remind people that human beings are at the heart of humanitarian action.

### The witnesses – place and role

The first room that the visitors enter is the *Chamber of Witnesses*. Visitors are “welcomed” by twelve people – life-size video projections that move but do not speak. At the end of each of the three spaces, visitors meet four of them again – and this time they speak. We placed them at the end because we did not want the visitor experience to start in a story-telling mode. As I have said above, we wanted to start with a moment of emotional awareness and did not think that narrative testimony was the best means to achieve that.

Wherever they appear, the witnesses are life-size. That is doubly important: both to put them on a level of physical equality with the visitors and, at the same time, to highlight this specific feature of the museum, which, by virtue of its use of space, thus differs from testimony on the television or computer screen.

Each witness speaks his or her own language (translated in the audio guides), but their words are not played continuously. Visitors have to activate the testimonies. So that visitors can select the testimonies most closely related to their own interests, the names of the four witnesses are featured, together with the biographical reason for their inclusion, at the entrance to each *Chamber of Witnesses* (see below). The length of the testimony, between 2.5 and 3.5 minutes, is also displayed.

The witnesses have been placed against a black background as we believed that a more colourful setting could distract the listeners' attention and make the testimonies more anecdotal in style.

We wanted to include people who had played a part in or benefited from humanitarian endeavours as well as one theoretician per area. We first selected the subjects within each thematic area that we wanted to address through the testimonies – either to complement the issues previously tackled or to blend with them. That is why we see the testimonies as “exhibits” because what they contribute is a constitutive element of the content. We then traced people whose personal experience matched our thematic expectations.

We did not tell them what to say. What we did tell them was why they had been chosen, which of their own experiences was relevant and that they were there to speak about that specific experience. To give them support, a journalist was engaged to talk to them before the recordings were made. Our idea was to achieve, in the words of Primo Levi, the “calm, sober language of the witness”.

Chamber of witnesses / La chambre des témoins  
© MICR, photo Alain Germond.

## The witnesses and their experiences

*Defending human dignity:*

**Carla del Ponte**

Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia from 1999 to 2007. Switzerland.

**Najmuddin Helal**

Director of the ICRC orthopaedic centre in Kabul. Afghanistan.

**Emmanuel Jal**

Child soldier from 1987 to 1991. Sudan.

**Adriana Valencia**

Economic migrant. Colombia/Switzerland.

*Restoring family links:*

**Sami El Haj**

Al Jazeera journalist, held in Guantanamo from 2002 to 2008. Sudan.

**Boris Cyrulnik**

Neuropsychiatrist and ethologist. France.

**Liliose Iraguha**

Survivor of the genocide. Rwanda.

**Toshihiko Suzuki**

Dentist and specialist in craniofacial anatomy, in



charge of identifying victims of the 2011 tsunami. Japan.

*Reducing natural risks:*

**Benter Aoko Odhiambo**

Head of an orphanage, who launched a market gardening programme. Kenya.

**Abul Hasnat Taslim**

Schoolteacher, Red Crescent volunteer. Bangladesh.

**Jiaqi Kang**

Chinese schoolgirl. China/Switzerland.

**Madeleen Helmer**

Head of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Centre. Netherlands.

## Conclusion: A dimension of Hope

Our non-theoretician witnesses have one thing in common: they have survived. We wanted to express that dimension of hope, which is the raison d'être of humanitarian work. From the largest organization to the smallest NGO, the objective is the same: to provide relief, to help the victims to overcome a (human or natural) disaster situation. Crucial to survival is the concept of resilience, as explained in the testimony of Boris Cyrulnik: "The word "resilience" is very simple to define; it means making a fresh start after a traumatic experience".



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Chamber of witnesses of Reducing natural risks' area. / La chambre des témoins: Limiter les risques naturels.

© MICR, photo Alain Germond.



# La place des témoins dans la nouvelle exposition permanente L'Aventure humanitaire

**Roger Mayou**

*Le Musée international de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge a été fondé en 1988 à l'initiative d'un ancien délégué du CICR. Il a fermé le 30 juin 2011 et a rouvert le 18 mai 2013 après 22 mois de travaux.*

*Pourquoi changer une exposition de référence ? Le monde a changé, l'humanitaire a changé, le musée se devait de le refléter. Une des constantes fondamentales qui nous a accompagnés tout au long de notre travail était la suivante : à l'heure d'internet, quelle peuvent être le positionnement et l'originalité d'un musée d'histoire et de société, qui est un lieu de connaissance et de réflexion, et qui aide à comprendre le monde ? Aujourd'hui, si vous souhaitez vous informer sur le travail soit de la Croix-Rouge soit de l'humanitaire en général, vous en saurez plus chez vous devant votre ordinateur, qu'en allant dans un musée.*

*Mais une exposition a le privilège unique de pouvoir faire appel à l'ensemble des disciplines du savoir et, en parallèle, de disposer simultanément de tous les médias pour les transmettre, sans jamais oublier cependant que la technologie est au service du contenu.*

## Nos choix – trois thèmes et trois éléments

*Après une longue période de réflexion, nous avons pris deux décisions radicales : Réaliser une exposition thématique (et non plus chronologique comme la précédente) et marquer notre spécificité muséologique. Nous avons choisi trois thèmes dont nous avons, après un concours, confié la réalisation à trois architectes provenant d'horizons culturels différents : Défendre la dignité humaine (Gringo Cardia, Brésil), Reconstruire le lien familial (Diébédo Francis Kéré, Burkina Faso) et Limiter les risques naturels (Shigeru Ban, Japon). Atelier Oi (Suisse) a établi le masterplan et réalisé les espaces communs.*

*Afin de marquer notre spécificité muséologique, nous avons privilégié trois éléments: L'émotion – pas pour elle-même mais comme porte d'entrée à l'information. Comme le dit une de nos formatrices : « l'émotion c'est comme l'eau, un peu il en faut, trop on se noie ». Ainsi chaque espace thématique débute par une étape d'émotion avant les étapes d'information. Des implications personnelles du visiteur – ne pas le cantonner au seul rôle de spectateur. Il peut prendre des objets en main, il peut jouer, il doit déclencher les témoignages. Le témoignage – Nous souhaitons rappeler que l'humain est au cœur de l'action humanitaire.*

## **Les témoins – la place et le rôle**

*La première salle dans laquelle entrent les visiteurs est La Chambre des témoins. Douze personnes les « accueillent ». Ce sont des projections vidéo grandeur nature qui bougent mais ne parlent pas. Puis, à la fin de chacun des trois espaces, on en retrouve quatre qui, cette fois, parlent. A la fin, car nous ne voulions pas commencer les espaces par le story telling. Comme je l'ai dit, nous voulions commencer par un moment d'émotion et nous ne concevions pas le témoignage comme tel.*

*Partout, les témoins apparaissent grandeur nature. C'est doublement important : à la fois pour créer cette expérience d'égalité physique avec le visiteur et en même temps pour marquer la spécificité du musée qui se distingue ainsi du témoignage écran de télé ou d'ordinateur, par sa spacialité.*

*Chacun parle sa langue (traduite dans les audioguides) mais ne tourne pas en boucle. Les visiteurs doivent agir pour déclencher un témoignage. Pour pouvoir le faire en fonction de leurs intérêts, les noms des 4 témoins et l'élément biographique pour lequel ils sont là figurent à l'entrée de chaque Chambre des témoins (cf. ci-dessous), ainsi que la durée du témoignage, de 2.5 à 3.5 min.*

*Ils se détachent sur un fond noir puisque nous étions convaincus que le décor pouvait entraîner une distraction de l'audition vers l'anecdote.*

*Nous voulions donner la parole à des acteurs ou des bénéficiaires de l'humanitaire et, une fois par espace, à des théoriciens. Nous avons d'abord choisi les sujets que nous souhaitons aborder par le témoignage, à l'intérieur de chaque espace thématique. Soit en complément des sujets préalablement traités, soit en*

*résonnance avec eux. C'est pourquoi nous considérons les témoignages comme des « objets » d'exposition car ce qu'ils apportent est constitutif du contenu. Ensuite, nous avons localisés des personnes dont les vécus personnels correspondaient à nos attentes thématiques.*

*Nous ne leur avons pas dit ce qu'ils devaient dire, mais nous leur avons dit pourquoi ils avaient été choisis, pour quelle expérience propre et qu'ils étaient là pour parler de ce vécu spécifique. Pour les accompagner, une journaliste s'entretenait avec eux avant d'assister à l'enregistrement. Nous avons en tête l'idée du langage « sobre et posé du témoin » selon la formule de Primo Lévi.*

## **Les témoins et leur vécu**

Défendre la dignité humaine :

**Adriana Valencia**

*Migrante économique. Colombie/Suisse.*

**Emmanuel Jal**

*Enfant soldat entre 1987 et 1991. Soudan.*

**Carla del Ponte**

*Procureure générale du tribunal pénal international pour l'ex-Yougoslavie entre 1999 et 2007. Suisse.*

**Najmuddin Helal**

*Directeur du centre orthopédique CICR de Kaboul. Afghanistan.*

Reconstruire le lien familial :

**Toshihiko Suzuki**

*Dentiste, spécialiste de l'anatomie cranofaciale, chargé de l'identification de victimes du tsunami de 2011. Japon.*

**Liliose Iraguha**

*Survivante du génocide. Rwanda.*

**Sami El Haj**

*Journaliste à Al Jazeera, détenu à Guantánamo de 2002 à 2008. Soudan.*

**Boris Cyrulnik**

*Neuropsychiatre et éthologue. France.*

Limiter les risques naturels :

**Benter Aoko Odhiambo**

*Directrice d'un orphelinat, initiatrice d'un programme de maraîchage. Kenya.*

**Abul Hasnat Taslim***Instituteur, volontaire du Croissant-Rouge. Bangladesh.***Jiaqi Kang***Ecolière chinoise. Chine/Suisse.***Madeleen Helmer***Directrice du Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Centre. Pays-Bas.***Conclusion : une dimension d'espoir**

*Nos témoins non-théoriciens ont un point commun : ils s'en sont sortis. Nous voulions donner cette dimension d'espoir qui est la raison d'être du travail humanitaire : de la plus grande organisation à la plus petite des ONG, le but est identique : porter secours, aider les victimes à surmonter un état de catastrophe, humaine ou naturelle. Comme le dit Boris Cyrulnik dans son témoignage : « La définition du mot résilience est très simple : il s'agit de reprendre un nouveau développement après un fracas traumatique ».*



Roger Mayou, Directeur du Musée international de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge, Genève.



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# ***Homeless in Den Gamle By – Ulrik Szkobel exhibited his life on museum grounds***

## **Anneken Appel Laursen**

The Danish Open Air Museum Den Gamle By gave space to a homeless man where he built his home and showed it to visitors to tell them about his life. The project provided a space to tell a story that is not often told in museums, contemporary collecting on equal terms with the main storyteller, telling his story

during the process. And it gave us an opportunity to explore how communication between people could be created. The whole building process was thoroughly documented and the dwelling and the interior was collected and is now part of the collection of the museum.

In spring 2012 the museum was contacted by this man, who asked if we would show the 'home' of a homeless person and tell his story. The idea was to show Danes how homeless people live in 2012.

Our immediate reaction was positive and we met with Ulrik Szkobel, the homeless man. We were convinced that he had an important message, which we could help to put across. The project raised some serious questions at the museum though: Were we putting a person on display, as one did in marketplaces in the old days?

We decided however that it offered a way to be inclusive, putting the museum's expertise and setting at a citizen's disposal to tell his own story. In doing so, we would provide an opportunity to speak for a group who were not normally heard. And the story of homelessness is something that the museum is obliged to show, since it aims to show life as it has been in Danish towns for centuries.

## **Building the dwelling and the exhibition**

We went ahead and in collaboration with Ulrik Szkobel, we agreed to erect *his* exhibition. He would set up a home in Den Gamle By, which people could visit. When he chose to, he would be there himself and talk about his life. It was agreed that the exhibition should close at the end of December 2012.

During this process we were in contact with the local shelter for homeless people, having discussions about the more ethical aspects of the project. Jointly we celebrated the International Day of Poverty, which in Denmark is marked as the day of homelessness.

## **When the project changed**

Ulrik had trouble finding anywhere to live when the exhibition opened, so he moved into his dwelling at the museum while he continued working on a new home.



Ulrik furnished his home using material from waste containers and dumps.

Photo: George Zeuthen © Den Gamle By.



The whole process was thoroughly documented. Thanks to this documentation we can recall the highly skilled building process, making a shed dry and insulated. Indeed the project was about being homeless, but we learned a lot as well about reusing thrown away stuff. Cardboard around new bikes is normally seen as waste. In the hands of Ulrik it became highly functional floor insulation.

Photo: George Zeuthen © Den Gamle By.

We took great care to ensure that he did not feel any obligation to be available at all times, but that he could and should live his own life. The terms were that his home was a public place during opening hours. Ulrik moved in, and he proved to be a brilliant communicator who entered into a dialogue with visitors and gave them something to think about.

All went well for the first month. Ulrik announced that he was flourishing at the museum, while living his own life outside the walls of the museum as well. But he became unwell, and lost his energy, although he was still totally positive towards the visitors. We turned to the local shelter uncertain of the best way to help Ulrik, not being qualified to deal with this type of illness. The employees at the shelter pointed out to us that we had to continue being a museum, sticking to the mutual agreement, not turning into social workers.

But we did feel helpless about Ulrik's situation and offered to close down the exhibition, to give him some quiet and peace. But he did not want that. He wanted to let people see the whole truth of being homeless. He stayed away more often though – visitors still being able to see his empty dwelling.

Just before Christmas, Ulrik moved out. We kept the dwelling open until New Year in agreement with him. Then we took everything down, registered all the items, storing it for the future as originally planned. The collection consists of around 100 objects including the shed and tiny devices for making life easier, a thorough documentation of the building phase with more than 500 photographs, a report about the process, interviews and a small survey on visitors behaviour.

## Reactions from the press

When the exhibition opened the press took up the subject of the potential problem of exhibiting people. A journalist from a national paper asked: Was a living person being exhibited in a museum? Ulrik responded quite directly: "I'm not on display, I think you people coming here are – reflecting your life in my life". A quite intense media debate arose. Ulrik gave interviews and put his case, and the media coverage was positive about the project and respectful in its portrayal of Ulrik.

## Visitors' reactions

During the exhibition period the visitors could visit Ulrik's dwelling, and look at a photographic exhibition about his life. Sometimes Ulrik was there to talk with the visitors, sometimes he wasn't. How did the visitors experience his exhibition? We wanted to gain some insight into how the public received this proposition that such a personal story from the reality of today was shown at the museum. On the opening weekend it was announced that the public could meet Ulrik. More than 600 people came along, which provided a rich opportunity to talk to the visitors and observe their reactions.

- The findings predominantly revealed curiosity about visiting Ulrik's home.
- The vast majority of visitors accepted the invitation to come in and meet him.
- The guests expressed great respect for Ulrik, for his frankness and courage in telling his story.
- Many reflected upon the inequality that exists in Denmark.
- There was also due recognition of the way the museum had taken up such a matter for concern, which some felt was even more relevant than "the old houses and the old days".
- Some observed that it was easier to enter into a dialogue with a man like Ulrik in the setting of a museum, whereas out in the real world they would have avoided him.

## Lessons learnt from the project

We have learned tremendously from the project. Ulrik's dwelling and his exhibition fitted quite well within the framework of Den Gamle By. But the fact that the dwelling was contemporary and occupied by a living person gave rise to a number of ethical and moral considerations. Including Ulrik and his life in the museum exhibition can be considered exhibiting a person.

I do find a strong link between collecting and communicating, when it comes to working with contemporary issues. Contemporary collecting must be carried out together with the people the project is about. Communicating people's own stories is an essential part of the process. In giving space for people to communicate their story, we as museum truly can discover and learn what is important to save for the future. But it means that we as museums need to take on a different approach, listening and facilitating:



The museum was able to acquire a bicycle shed Ulrik had once lived in, so we had an authentic dwelling like the other houses in Den Gamle By. It was a more secret place, a bit away from the main streets in the museum. But as it turned out the visitors didn't have any trouble finding it.

Photo: Jette Munk © Den Gamle By

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A photographic exhibition next to the dwelling showed 24 hours in Ulrik's life. As it turned out, practically all visitors spent a long time studying the photo exhibition regardless of whether Ulrik was in his dwelling or not.

Firstly: giving a person space at the museum also means giving up some of the museum's control. It became apparent when Ulrik became unwell. In some ways we felt we were overstepping the limits for decent treatment of a human being by not stopping the project. But being in a partnership it was not for us alone to decide.

Secondly: The role of the museum is to be a museum, not a social welfare institution. We give space, letting partners tell their own story, hopefully giving them a good experience and transmitting valuable messages to the surrounding world. But we cannot solve problems for the people in the world outside the walls. The local shelter was very explicit on this matter. Had we engaged in finding solutions to Ulrik's personal problems, I think we would have overstepped all limits, and put a man on display in a spurious way. It would have become a story of the museum as rescuer and salvation.

Thirdly: The story of Ulrik was absorbed positively by the visitors, many of them well aware that they would not react the same way outside in the real world. Homelessness is for most people a matter of concern, but really understanding it, getting into dialogue with homeless people in "the real world", is not what people do. Something different happened at the museum: the visitors met Ulrik on equal terms. The museum was seen as a "safe" setting and the project made a dialogue possible between people from different "places" in society.

When a homeless man saw the museum as a suitable setting where he could present his own story and view of reality, we were naturally obliged to react positively to his approach. It proved to us that museums *can* be a space for an enquiring and open meeting between strangers. As a museum we also help to ensure that stories from the "underside" of life, stories about poverty, mental illness and homelessness are told in terms of the people themselves, both now and in the future. The documentation and the objects are secured for the future.



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At the entrance visitors asked if Ulrik was home, they really wanted to meet him. We couldn't tell; it was for him to decide when he wanted to be in his home. From interviews and comments in a Visitor's book we know, that they reflected upon Ulrik's life as homeless. Photo: George Zeuthen © Den Gamle By.

# Livsbild.se – digital collecting of life stories

**Diana Chafik**

Conversation, storytelling and news reporting are performed today in various digital arenas. People use a variety of ways to communicate, such as social media like Facebook and Twitter. They have their own blogs or comment on various forums. Society has changed and people nowadays have dialogue in new ways. For museums, it is important to reflect and seize the opportunities this change brings.

The usage of digital techniques as a tool for collecting in museums is a way to meet the digital world. *Livsbild.se* (Image of life) has been a methodology development project, where the gathering of information has been based on previous existing methods and approaches but with the incorporation of new techniques.

*Livsbild.se* was a part of a bigger three-year Swedish project about the history of disability that was

conducted by the Nordiska museet, Stockholm 2010–2013. The project was called *Handikapphistoria i kulturarvet* (The disability history in cultural heritage) – HAIKU– and was a collaboration between HandikappHistoriska Föreningen (Disability History Association) and Nordiska museet. It was financed by Arvsfonden (The Swedish Inheritance Fund Commission).

On *Livsbild.se* we collected and documented life stories and photographs from people with impairments and from their relatives. We also collected the history of associations and organizations linked to people with disabilities. The stories give an insight of how everyday life can be for people with impairment, both now and in the past. We received over 260 stories and over 50 000 visits during the year the website was open for collecting. All the stories are still available on the website [www.livsbild.se](http://www.livsbild.se).

Through *Livsbild.se* the archive was filled with cultural stories of everyday life, living conditions, and how the society works for people with impairment. We wanted to throw light upon the life of people with impairments in everyday situations. Documenting people's life stories provides an important source for knowledge about what makes a sense of belonging and who is represented in history.

Screenshot of homepage of the website: [www.livsbild.se](http://www.livsbild.se) during May 2012.

Screenshot from the website illustrating the three ways to contribute to the collecting. Text, sign language or speech.

## Method

Accessibility was one of the fundamental ideas of *Livsbild.se*. There were two main objectives in terms of accessibility: first, ensuring that as many as possible would be able to submit their story, regardless of the way one communicates. And second, to be able to take part of other people's stories with few obstacles since all stories were translated. People have been given the opportunity to share their story on an equal basis, regardless of whether they wrote, used sign language or oral recording to share their stories.

Everybody was given the option to choose whether they wanted the story to be saved in the archives only or to be published on the website as well. The publication on the website provided the participants with the opportunity to reach out to a broad public with their stories. Almost every story was published originally with no intervention from the project. Furthermore, through the function of forum comments, the participants could communicate with their readers.

The structure of the website was created in conjunction with a web agency in order to ensure optimal technical support – accessibility and ease of navigation being the main cornerstones for the website. This was realized by enabling the participants to share their life stories with text, speech or sign language, and also by enabling easy functionality to upload images, audio and video files.

Another important idea of the collection was to let the participants themselves decide what they wanted to tell. Providing them with a virtual blank paper, the choice has been theirs to make if they wanted to tell about a part of their life, an important event or an interest they are passionate about. Also, the participants were free to decide themselves in which way they considered themselves to belong to the target group for the collection; i.e. if they themselves are persons with a disability or if they are a relative of such an individual.

*Livsbild.se* received stories in words and pictures, sign language via webcam as well as in speech through an internet-based digital answering machine. All stories sent to us in speech or with sign language were translated into text and then posted on the page along with the original post.

Diversity was another key point of the project. We wanted to broaden the concept of diversity to also include people with impairments. This was achieved through the different life stories of the participants, as they highlight descriptions of everyday life in which the impairment is not the basis for selection. One of the main objectives of this digital collection is to ensure that the disability aspect will be included in the regular activities of the museum in the future.

## The collecting

Historically, research regarding disability has been an issue for the medical sciences and the research has been focused on the deviations from the standard body. Within social science, theories of interactionism



Caroline Andersson participated in the collection with the story "Station Normal" about looking for a "normal" state, but she never found it. When she was diagnosed with Aspergers it gave her power and she is now proud of herself.

Photo: Julia Sjöberg © Nordiska museet.

were presented during the 1960s and 1970s and this interactional approach highlighted the social impacts of having a disability. The medical perspective however remained and eventually, at a later date, came to be criticized by representatives of the social 'model' (which focused on reducing barriers in society) and by the disability movement.

There is a great need to talk about one's life and communicate one's experiences to others. The reasons are several of course. Through the stories, which may be formulated for the first time, the narrators try to understand their own situation and gain understanding and recognition from experts and the public.

With the stories one often demonstrates social injustices and disseminates the experiences to the – by many perceived as unsympathetic – surroundings. An important unspoken motive is that storytelling involves “taking power”, something that has significance for the self-perception – It is my life and my story, “I am worthy of being listened to.”

Through the stories we formulate an interpretation of who we are, who we want to be, which in turn tells us something about the culture and the society we live in. The stories can serve as a counterweight to the “big” discursive and normative narratives and values about persons with disabilities and different diagnoses which exist in society.

The conclusion of this project has been that it pushed several barriers in the field of museum collecting. The digital approach enables more people to participate and contribute to the collecting; it is also a way for museums to interact with their audience. Needless to say and also the main reason for this project – it provided the audience accessibility to historical material in a broadened way that has never been done before. To document and collect disability history is important for the diversity in society.

The HAIKU project – of which Livsbild.se was a part, has created a great interest in many areas such as digital collecting and disability history. It also led to the creation of a new, two- year project: *Funktionshinder Och Kulturarv, Utbildning och Samverkan* (Disability and Culture Heritage, Education, Collaboration), FOKUS. As HAIKU, FOKUS is a collaboration between a museum – this time Upplandsmuseet – and HandikappHistoriska Föreningen (Disability History Association) and is financially supported

by Arvsfonden (The Swedish Inheritance Fund Commission). Our main goal is to create an educational possibility for museum professionals from different parts of the country and to create a network for including disability perspectives in the museums' work with diversity. The program will work closely with the disability movement. We want to develop and spread the knowledge that came out of the HAIKU project.



*Diana Chafik*

*Ethnologist and project manager for Livsbild.se, now project manager for FOKUS.*



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## ***Museum collaboration and networking in the Rio de Janeiro State***

### **Interview with Mariana Varzea, Museums Superintendent at the Rio de Janeiro State Secretariat of Culture**

***Cláudia Porto***

***Which actions have been implemented so far by the Superintendence of Museums of the Rio de Janeiro State aimed at implementing a consistent collecting policy?***

The Superintendence of Museums (SMU, in the Portuguese acronym) is a Rio de Janeiro State Secretary of Culture' unit created in 2008. Its mission is to become the connecting agency of museum policy, strengthening the liaisons between the State Government – through its State Secretary of Culture, the *Instituto Brasileiro de Museus – IBRAM* (Brazilian Institute of Museums), the Rio de Janeiro City Hall, and the *Rede de Museus* (Museums Net). Important achievements have been accomplished in these six years, some of the most important ones being: the

creation and implementation of the *Sistema Estadual de Museus* (Museums State System), the promotion of the museological culture through the incentives to museum projects and the institutional development of important organizations in Rio de Janeiro, the renovation of its museums, such as the *Museu da Imagem e do Som* (Image and Sound Museum), *Museu do Ingá* (Ingá Museum) and the *Museu Antonio Parreiras* (Antonio Parreiras Museum) – all these being entirely reconstructed or restored – as well as the *Museu da Moda* (Fashion Museum) development project. SMU also actively participated in the organization of the ICOM General Conference 2013, a very interesting impetus for the museological development in Rio de Janeiro.

In 2013 we began to publish collecting management guidelines, aiming to systematize the process related to the state collections, as well as to contribute to the standardization of the area, which still lacks many normative rules.

Regarding the development of a collecting policy, in the last two years SMU reviewed all Secretary of Culture collections' documentation and digitization. Thanks to its technicians and museologists, SMU developed and implemented the SISGAM system (museums management and documentation system), thus qualifying for a new standard in organisations management and technical work. SISGAM proved to be a high impact tool that helped building a new museum's collaborative and integrated management form for all Rio de Janeiro's state museums. As a result, in 2014, SMU will install SISGAM in ten other museums located in the state of Rio de Janeiro, public or private. This will form the "Rede Musa" (Musa Net), the first web connected museums network in Brazil.

The first phase of Musa has 3 main goals:

- to help collections located in the interior of the state to use a common documentation language regarding the collections. This will promote a standardization of the information, a more effective connection between collections and the broad access of the public, as well as joint research and curatorship;
- to foster the creation of a collaborative and creative work model, thus building shared terminologies and an exchange area where institutions will be able to interchange and develop methodologies and experiences from coping with their own challenges;
- to enable the public, by means of the availability of collections' data online to research (simultaneously) in the collections of different institutions. This will

enable coordinated researches in a wide range of collections, allowing cross-sectional surveys that will benefit not only the researches themselves but also the creation of new contents and the appearance of new curators.

***Do you think “collecting” (including acquisition, development, accessibility, mobility etc.) is a topic that is sufficiently discussed in Brazil, especially among young museologists?***

Many possibilities have emerged with the publication of the IBRAM's statute in 2013. I believe many paths have appeared since then, but surely we need to go further. For that we'll need extremely close integration between government spheres (and I'd like to say that the ICOM Conference in Rio was a very important



Mariana Varzea Photo: Caru Ribeiro.

moment for the strengthening of these links) as well as with universities, and with public and private collectors.

*What international example do you think is particularly relevant for collecting policies?*

We are now working with the possibility of implementing a shared storage area in Niterói, the second biggest city in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Niterói has a very important art museums network, with a wide range of collections that include works from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This shared storage area proposal already exists in Glasgow, Scotland, and in Montreal, Canada. We believe this approach may work very well in Brazil, as these storage areas demand a lot of investment to be established and maintained. It will be a more sustainable solution to storage problems and will foster the professional qualifications of the staff that will be working in its management.

In May 2014, during the Museum's Week, SEC (through SMU) will sign a Memorandum of Understanding between IBRAM and Niterói's City Hall, aiming to establish the place, a sustainable architectural project (taking into account the specificities of the tropical country we live in) and the study of models of shared governance needed to implement the new storage area. It will be a major, innovative step for Rio de Janeiro, that later can be replicated in other Brazilian cities.

*Do you believe that partnerships with universities and foreign institutions are a relevant way to foster museum discussions in Brazil?*

To think together, think locally and globally, to gather different views on any subject is always a good thing. But I think the first step should be taken by the universities – both Brazilian and foreign – that should establish partnerships between themselves aiming to build a vision of how they could really train future museum professionals so that they are prepared to face the many challenges we have ahead of us.



*Cláudia Porto, independent consultant in Museology and preventive conservation and board member of COMCOL.*



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## *The Boulders Project, a collection mobility research project*

*Jolijn Boland*

The project is a collaboration between five Dutch museums of modern art, seven students and two lecturers from the Reinwardt Academy, and COMCOL via its chair, Léontine Meijer-van Mensch. Participating museums are Gemeentemuseum (Den Haag), Kröller-Müller Museum (Otterlo), Bonnefantenmuseum (Maastricht), Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), and Centraal Museum (Utrecht). The aim of the project, initiated by the director of the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, is to improve collaboration in terms of collection development. During the first phase of the project students analysed for each museum the relation between mission and collection profile which resulted in identifying works of art with limited significance in relation to mission and collection profile, the so-called “zwerfkeien” (literally “glacial erratics”, here translated as “boulders”). The second phase of the project focusses on the potential of collections mobility as an instrument to improve collections by, amongst other options, the possible relocating of the “zwerfkeien”.

### **Case study Gemeentemuseum (Den Haag)**

In the collection of the Municipal Museum of The Hague there is a strong emphasis on Symbolism, (German) Expressionism, De Stijl, Zero, and Minimal Art. The student research project focussed on the role of the director (in particular the former director Rudi Fuchs) in acquisition policy. The research showed that more than half of the collection was not shown or loaned. For example, in 1964 the museum organised the exhibition “New Realists”. The exhibition was viewed as bizarre, extreme and provocative. As a result of the exhibition the museum purchased some of the exhibited works. According to the staff these works have no function in the present collection. In the second part of the research project proposals will be studied to find new relevancy for these works.

## Case study Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam)

Like the Gemeentemuseum, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam has a history of successive directors with different views on acquisition policies. The present emphasis is on collecting in depth works from one artist representing a movement or group, rather than documenting the movement by collecting works of different artists. Within the context of the research project, the focus is on how visitors can be part of the process of giving new relevancy to “forgotten” works.

## Case study Centraal Museum (Utrecht)

The Centraal Museum comprises five main collections: modern and contemporary art, history of Utrecht, old masters, design and fashion. The modern art collection has a core which consists of figurative and realistic art. Different directors have each built on existing directions, each placing new accents and making new additions. During the research project members of the friends organization of the museum were interviewed about their opinion concerning the profile of the collection. It appears that the friends seem to appreciate the diversity of the collection, while a relation with the city of Utrecht is mentioned as a binding factor.

## Case study Kröller-Müller Museum (Otterlo)

The Kröller-Müller Museum differs from the other museums in the project since it started as the private collection of Helene Kröller-Müller. The core of her collection was the work of Van Gogh and the leading modernist artists of her time such as Picasso and Mondriaan. Her collection has been donated to the government of the Netherlands under certain conditions. These conditions have been a continuous guideline for the acquisition policy of the following directors. As a result of that and a long term focus of these directors, the collection developed in quite a consistent way. Research shows that a relatively small amount of works have not been shown for a long time. The museum is willing to offer these works for loan to other museums, but feels restrained by requirements in terms of conservation and security. In the context of the project an inventory of these problems will be made followed by proposals for possible solutions.

## Case study Bonnefantenmuseum (Maastricht)

Over the years the Bonnefantenmuseum has developed from a museum of history and archaeology, to a museum with collections including history, old masters, modern and contemporary art. Major ensembles in the collection consist of a so-called basic collection of art works by internationally renowned artists related to movements such as Concept, Minimal Art and Arte Povera, as well as ensembles and individual works by contemporary protagonists. The museum is also committed to artists working in the region around Maastricht. In the context of the research project proposals will be elaborated to develop new perspectives on ‘invisible collections’ for example by inviting guest curators.

The results of the project will be presented at COMCOL's annual conference in December 2014.



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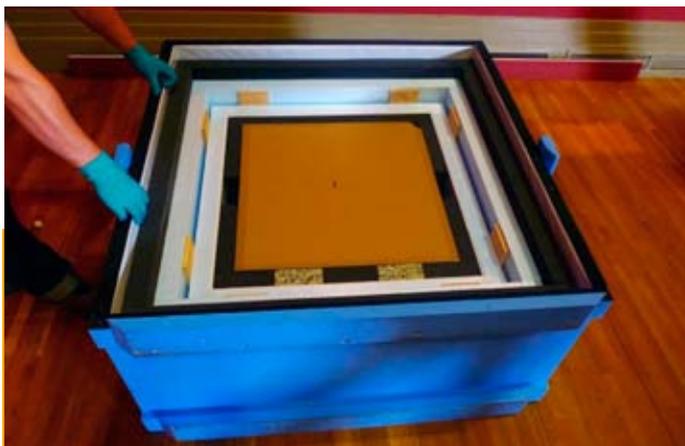


*Co-authors: Annosh Urbanke, Carlien Lammers, Rajiv Moese, Sarah van Ree, Charlotte den Hoed, Students, Bachelor programme, Reinwardt Academie, Amsterdam, Netherlands*

# *The future of Collections Mobility – an update from the expert meeting in Berlin*

*Kim Smit*

In June 2013 the Federal Government Commissioner of Culture and Media in cooperation with the Institute for Museum Research hosted an expert meeting on the “Mobility of Collections” at the Museum Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin. The group of participants was



Packing cases for loans of Gabriel Metsu exhibition at the National Gallery of Ireland  
Photo: Kim Smit.

made up of members of the European Commission OMC (Open Method of Communication) working groups and other stakeholders from the museum sector including NEMO representatives. The main purpose of this meeting was to regroup after the 2012 publication of the report and toolkit 'Practical ways to reduce the cost of lending and borrowing of cultural objects among member states of the European Union' and to discuss what (if any) developments had taken place in the area of Collections Mobility at Member State and professional level.

Presentations covered updates on areas like self-insurance, state indemnity and risk assessment and representatives from Spain and Romania discussed the impact of the financial crisis on museums and therefore, on lending and borrowing. Frank Bergevoet from the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage spoke about how they are monitoring quantitative data on lending and borrowing traffic in the Netherlands while Cornela Dümcke and Freda Matassa presented their study on the valuation of artworks. You can find a link to the reports on the COMCOL website.

The conference was also an opportunity for Germany to re-launch the website *www.lending-for-europe.eu* with an improved structure and new documents and information, maintaining its status as the central information point for all matters relating to Collections Mobility.

A brainstorming session was held discussing how progress can be made and further support from the European Commission can be secured to continue the work in this area. There was consensus at the meeting that there is a need for the Council of the European Union (Cultural Affairs Committee – CAC) and/or the European Commission to address the recommendation in the report through a standing committee of experts on the mobility of collections. This standing committee's brief would include; monitoring the implementation of the recommendations and use of the toolkit, publishing common standards and procedures, keeping information in the public domain up to date and funding permitting, organising international seminars.

One of the core recommendations in the report is 'to facilitate and encourage exchange programmes for museum professionals, in particular for registrars and other staff directly involved in loan management'. In relation to my own situation at the National Gallery



Moving a painting by Charles-Antoine Coppel  
at the National Gallery of Ireland  
Photo: Kim Smit.

of Ireland, I am happy to report that in August a colleague from the Ministry of Culture in Spain will join my office for one month to learn more about our work practices in the Registrar's Office and exchange ideas and expertise. We also continue to have a very active loans programme, lending both internationally and within Ireland, sharing our collection and bringing the cultural objects in our care to the attention of a wider audience.

In addition to the work at European Commission level, COMCOL will soon restart its own Collections Mobility working group, previously chaired by Susanna Pettersson. COMCOL is delighted that Hillary Bauer has accepted the position of chair of this group. Hillary has extensive experience in this area, having recently retired as Head of the Cultural Property Unit at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in the UK. She was also Chair of two European Commission OMC Groups and contributes

to the work of international cultural organisations such as Unesco. COMCOL's Collections Mobility working group will aim to bring EU discussions into the global arena, continue the development of international standards and best practice models in relation to mobility of collections and broaden the focus.

One important recommendation of the OMC group that kept coming up was 'encouraging museum professionals (as well as government officials) to establish and maintain personal contacts, because personal trust is one of the main factors in the successful lending and borrowing of collections'. We hope that through future discussions, publications and COMCOL conferences we can create networks that will encourage and aid this process. You will hear more about the CM working group from Hillary in our next Newsletter!



*Kim Smit, Registrar, National Gallery of Ireland & COMCOL board member*



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# COMCOL Working Group Contemporary Collecting

Arjen Kok

## Guideline for disposal of museum objects

At the last annual meeting of the Dutch museums association a revised Guideline for the deaccessioning of museum objects was unanimously adopted by the members. The revision was requested by the board of the museum association in 2012 after the Museum of Gouda had sold the painting 'Schoolboys' by Marlene Dumas. The sale was part of a deal that the museum had made with the local authorities to reduce the budget cut that was imposed on the museum from 50 to 25%. The revenues of the sale, about € 800.000, are managed as a fund for future acquisitions in three collecting domains of the museum: 15th and 16th century painting from Gouda, 19th century Dutch impressionist painting (The Hague School) and Gouda pottery.

Although the disposal of the Dumas painting was financially motivated – the museum felt it had to show the city council that it was willing to raise money by selling this top piece from its collection of modern and contemporary art – the controversy it caused among the members of the museum association had a different background. The fact that the museum had not informed its colleagues about the sale was the issue that really offended them. Dutch museum colleagues felt that they should have been consulted first, and given the possibility to raise the money to buy the Dumas and keep it in the domain of Dutch public collections. Several museum directors assured their colleagues at the special meeting in June 2012 that they could have arranged a deal with a private collector to buy the painting and get it on permanent loan.

Trust turned out to be the crucial factor. Museums must be able to trust each other in order to assure society that public collections are in good hands. Communication is crucial and the museum community would like to be first to know about any intention to deaccession an object from a museum collection. One of the main recommendations of the working group that revised

the Guideline for deaccessioning museum objects is to make the use of the deaccessioning database ([www.herplaatsingsdatabase.nl](http://www.herplaatsingsdatabase.nl)) compulsory for all members of the Museum Association. This way the Museum Association can organize, control and guarantee communication about any deaccessioning by registered museums. Trust requires transparency and the kind of open communication that allows and supports a peer reviewed collection policy.

Deaccessioning is closely related to collecting and collecting policies. There seems to be a development – stimulated by the brutal budget cuts that force museums to concentrate on their core collections, to deaccession any surplus collections or even to completely close their doors – of museums searching for new ways to cooperate and develop a collective responsibility for certain collection domains. The autonomous position of a museum in developing its collection and collection policy seems to be changing into a network structure in which mutual agreements determine new acquisitions and deaccessions.

In Newsletter 21, April 2013, I promised that the Working Group would present a concept for the Toolkit for Documenting the Present at the annual COMCOL conference in Rio de Janeiro. Well, that was a bit 'cocky', I am afraid. A lot of things happened at the annual conference, as one can gather from the last Newsletter, but no Toolkit was presented. That doesn't mean that the Working Group has given up on the project. On the contrary. Contemporary Collecting – or Documenting the Present as we defined it at the workshop at the Cape Town conference in 2012 – is as urgent a topic as ever. But we do need support and assistance to continue. If you would like to participate and contribute, let us know and you will be involved in the process of developing a Toolkit for Documenting the Present. Send me an e-mail at [a.kok@cultureelerfgoed.nl](mailto:a.kok@cultureelerfgoed.nl).

The Working Group on Contemporary collecting welcomes information on publications, events, developments, papers, research or other occasions relevant to the topic of the working group.



Arjen Kok, Senior researcher, Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands and chair of Contemporary Collecting Working Group



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# COMCOL Working group Resources

*Peter van Mensch*

The aim of the Working Group on Resources is, among others, to collect publications on collecting. On the Resources page of COMCOL's website, you can find some key references regarding collections plans, de-accessioning, collection mobility and ethics. A first analysis of the statistics show that this page ("Other bibliographic references") is frequently visited and the documents frequently downloaded. The impression is that students of museum and heritage studies courses (from all over the world!) are among the most frequent users. It is still less clear what the needs of museum practitioners are. During the 2014 Annual Meeting the working group will ask participants to give their opinion. In any case, the working group will continue to make this page more useful to a variety of stakeholders. The preparation of bibliographies in relation to the themes of COMCOL's conferences has as yet not been as successful as hoped for. The section "Bibliographies" on the Resources page shows a work in progress. COMCOL members are cordially invited to contribute to these bibliographies.



*Peter van Mensch, Professor of Museology, Vilnius University, Lithuania and chair of Resources Working Group*



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## EDITORIAL

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

**COMCOL** Newsletter provides a forum for developing the work of COMCOL and we welcome contributions from museum professionals and scholars 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 May 2014** to the editors, and contact us also if you wish to discuss a theme for publication.

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



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