

# COMCOL



## *International Committee for Collecting*

[www.comcol-icom.org](http://www.comcol-icom.org)

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 is a platform for professional exchange of views and experiences around collecting in the broadest sense. The mandate includes collecting and de-accessioning policies, contemporary collecting, restitution of cultural property and respectful practices that affect the role of collections now and in the future, from all types of museums and from all parts of the world. COMCOL's aims are to increase cooperation and collaboration across international boundaries, to foster innovation in museums and to encourage and support museum professionals in their work with 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 **15 March 2012** to the editors, and contact us also if you wish to discuss a theme for publication.

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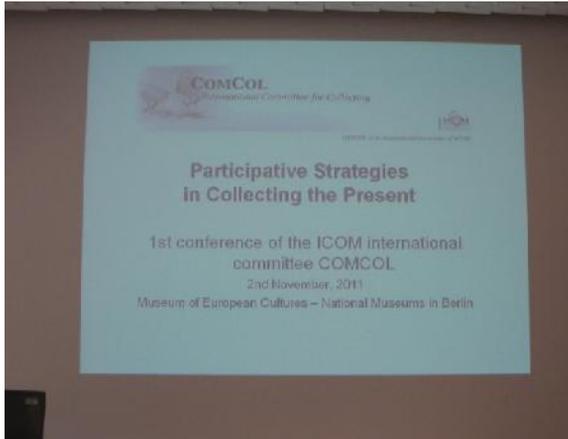
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## Images from COMCOL Annual Conference 2011

A few images from the COMCOL day 2 November and the excursion to Eisenhüttenstadt 3 November.  
Photo Eva Fägerborg.



## Statement from the Chair

### Thank you Berlin!

With our first annual meeting, we were in what is for me, the most layered and reflexive city in Europe. I had a dream that this first annual meeting of COMCOL situated in Berlin would be an inspiring one; that we, driven by the love for content would tackle, deconstruct and build discourses. That established professionals would meet young professionals and students and that we all would learn from each other. Knowing that it is vital in our sector to build a network, I hoped that during our conference already established museum colleagues would take up the role of mentor and help their younger colleagues. In this time of budget cuts, a genuinely felt responsibility towards a new generation of museum professionals is crucial and even an ethical necessity. We had a dream and this dream came true.

I hoped that there would be a genuine atmosphere of interest, even when contradictory views might be expressed, and that our annual meeting would serve as a contact zone, an annual meeting as heterotopia. I believe we succeeded in that.

I have a dream that COMCOL will always be in dialogue with others. That COMCOL wants to define itself through exchange with others and learn from other perspectives. That is why I am particularly happy that our annual meeting on Participative Strategies was a heterogeneous one and that our conference was a conference from and with three International Committees, COMCOL, CAMOC and ICOM-Europe; three committees that were so generously welcomed by ICOM-Germany and the Berliner museum context. Here I would like to thank especially the Staatliche Museen and most of all the Dahlem Museums and particularly the Museum for European Cultures for hosting us.

Because of this dream I am so grateful that with our next annual meeting in South Africa we will continue with this tradition and that we will have joined sessions with ICMAH. Here it is the Iziko Museums that have so generously invited us to come to Cape Town.

We are now making our website more accessible for Spanish and French speaking colleagues and our call for papers will I hope be posted soon. On the first of December a small delegation of COMCOL met in Stockholm with Elisabet Olofsson, director of Samp (see <http://www.samp.org/>). She shared very useful information concerning organization, contacts and possibilities for travel grants for African colleagues. I hope that our joint meeting in South Africa will be a meeting where museum colleagues especially from the whole African continent will be able to participate. I am already looking forward to that dialogue. I have a dream that although COMCOL's origin is very European, we will develop more and more into a genuine International Committee.

Finally, to return to Berlin: It is difficult to reflect so soon on the outcomes of the conference. I have the feeling that we just started. The continuation of thoughts and ideas is very crucial for the content development of COMCOL. The working group for Contemporary Collecting, with its new chair Arjen Kok will I think continue with this process. I have a dream that this joint annual conference will write ICOM history. Of course, this will be because of its content and yes, of course because of its catering and excellent organisation. And yes also because Berlin was especially interesting in the evenings. But most of all I had a dream that we all participated in making this joined meeting into a meeting of friends. Because friendship and museology, is as museology and love and those are so closely connected with each other. I believe we succeeded in that. I hope that in the year 2012 we as COMCOL and also as professionals and individuals continue to be dreamers...

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch*

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## Abstracts from COMCOL Annual Conference 2 November 2011

### Incorporating lay stakeholders in expert cultural value assessment

*Pina Cardia and Arjen Kok*

The Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE) is in the process of developing a new method for the assessment of cultural value of tangible cultural heritage. One of the greatest challenges is to enable and support the involvement of source communities and the public at large as stakeholders in cultural heritage. This requires a rigorous change in the dominant concept of cultural heritage influencing museum experts. In this presentation we review the RCE project and analyze the difficulties that an expert-driven organization such as the RCE has with the consequences of public involvement and lay values and valuation.

Contemporary heritage practice in the Netherlands is still dominated by the nineteenth century positivist values of the experts who lead the sector. All previous assessment methods, such as the Dutch Deltaplan criteria, that were developed twenty years ago, but also the more recent Australian method Significance 2.0, are based on expert knowledge and are expert centred. They all have a strong emphasis on the informational and material aspects of heritage with little attention paid to such values as experience and agency. The main objective of the RCE project is to produce a method that structures and standardises this expert generated value assessment, with the purpose of putting cultural value at the centre of all decisions about collections and cultural heritage.

However, the project has shown that the assessment of cultural value cannot be limited to scholarly practice alone but has to encompass the social process in which heritage is recreated in its contemporary significance as well. The method has to capture both expert and public values. This requires a radical change in the

concept and structure of the method and above all in the concept of cultural value and the theoretical framework that is used by the project team.



*Popular demand brought Van Gogh's Skull of a Skeleton with Burning Cigarette (1886) back on display this summer at the Van Gogh Museum, after curators had decided to leave the painting out of their selection of highlights. Public favorites have to be included in future exhibition proposals, says director Axel Ruger. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Stichting).*

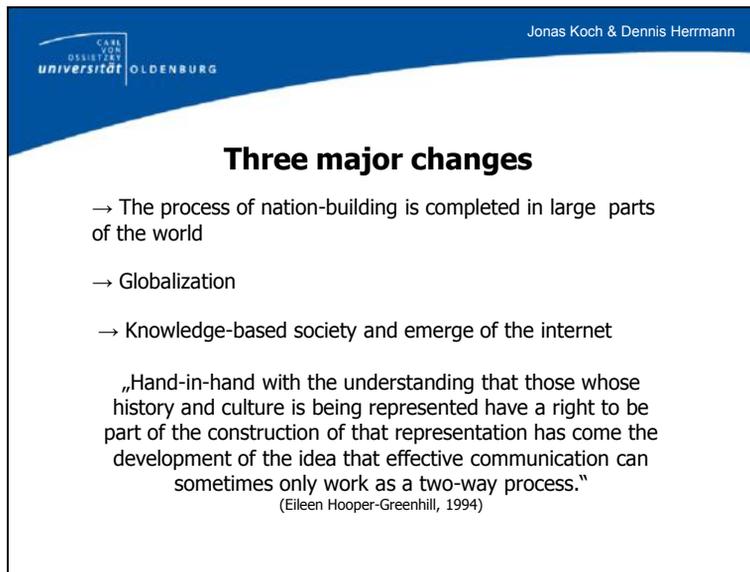
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## Changes, Challenges and Chances. Theoretical and practical reasons for on- and offline participation in museums

*Dennis Herrmann and Jonas Koch*



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Jonas Koch & Dennis Herrmann

### Three major changes

- The process of nation-building is completed in large parts of the world
- Globalization
- Knowledge-based society and emerge of the internet

„Hand-in-hand with the understanding that those whose history and culture is being represented have a right to be part of the construction of that representation has come the development of the idea that effective communication can sometimes only work as a two-way process.“  
(Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, 1994)

Fundamental societal changes due to ongoing processes of democratization and globalization are challenging museums. They are also challenged by the digital revolution that is notably promoted by the internet and its further development to Web 2.0. For the museum these developments are accompanied by the possibility of a radical accessibility for all (potential) visitors. How do museums cope with these central challenges and greater requirements of society? And how do they implement these new opportunities? What is the role of the museum in today's world and what could it be?

At the University of Oldenburg, we researched forms of participation in museums concerning aspects of online- and offline involvement. Jonas Koch focussed on (new) forms of participation in museums. Dennis Herrmann concentrated on participatory approaches of museums on the social web. They combined both approaches for a new theory of participation in museum.

The examples of the Museum of Broken Relationships (Zagreb), Museum Neukölln (Berlin), District Six Museum (Cape Town), a blog of the Australian Museum (Sydney), and

the Facebook site of the Computerspiele-museum (Berlin) demonstrate how opportunities of participation are already used. The research questioned representation in museums as well as the social relevance and social function(s) of the institution. Furthermore structural changes were analyzed and evaluated.

The analyses showed that different shades of openness range between forms of transparency and participation. These shades of openness are associated with changes in the everyday work of the museum's staff as well as the transformation of the institution itself.

Additionally, changing forms of appropriation of museums, (as forums, as spaces of dialogue rather than monologue and as spaces where cultural heritage is negotiated rather than spoon-fed) could be observed.

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## Afghanistan through the eyes and voice of a soldier

*Anna Fredholm*

I'm going to talk about a documenting project where we followed a Swedish soldier to Afghanistan in 2010. When making plans for the project we investigated how we could use new social media techniques in order to develop our participative strategies. We already knew that we wanted to interview "our" soldier to find out more about his inner feelings and thoughts, values and wishes connected to the mission. But to realize our purpose of documenting a mission in Afghanistan through the eyes and voice of one soldier we had to find a way for him to share his experiences in a more independent way.



*Photo Daniel Jansson/Armémuseum.*

The solution was to create a blog connected to the museum's website where the soldier could tell his story using his own words and pictures.

## Participative collecting at the Museu da Maré: an organic relationship

*Paula dos Santos and Antônio Carlos Pinto Vieira*

Museu da Maré, located in Rio de Janeiro, is the first Brazilian museum to be created in a *favela* (slum). The museum opened in 2006 and since then it has become a reference for work with the memories of *favela* inhabitants. It aims to value the experience of local residents as integral part of the city; experiences that have been historically neglected by the official history.

For the museum, unlocking memories and creative powers of the *favela* is a political act to create a more inclusive and culturally

[www.fredssoldater.se](http://www.fredssoldater.se) became a unique document in time consisting of more than 40 separate reports from Afghanistan. To inspire others to use the new social media techniques and to invite public participation in the work at the museum I wish to demonstrate this blog.

We also asked the soldier to help us find objects which, according to him, illustrated his time in Afghanistan. The acquired objects are now published at [www.digitaltmuseum.se](http://www.digitaltmuseum.se). This is a website with open access for all users to make searches within our entire collection, but also to share their private knowledge with us at the museum. This is a very important project because there are still many objects in the large collection, which appear to be rather anonymous for us today. I will demonstrate this website in order to explain how we use the new social media techniques as valuable tools for public involvement in the work of contextualising the items in our collection.

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diverse city. With this purpose, the museum invests first and foremost in an organic relationship with the local community, which permeates different aspects of the museum work including collecting and documentation practices. The museum maintains an extensive photographic archive and collects objects and stories.

In this presentation, we will explore how the relationship with the community is extended to the collections policy of the museum. As an example, the museum accepts every donation

by local inhabitants. Objects are donated, borrowed, collected in the streets or bought by an informal and active community of practice made-up of professionals, museum staff, neighbours and friends of the museum. Objects of almost mythological significance democratically coexist with anonymous objects.



*Museu da Maré. Photo Paula dos Santos.*

The museum also started a new approach, in which donors participate in the documentation procedures of their own objects. Sometimes, objects are also taken back home without any problem. Some of these practices might seem strange at first, however they generate a symbiosis with the community and produce a unique collection that is dynamic – and of great quality in providing a different account of the city and serving as a means for inhabitants to collectively negotiate their memories. Organisations such as the Ministry of Culture have recognised this innovative approach, granting the museum important prizes in the field of culture.

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Antônio Carlos Pinto Vieira (not present at the conference) is President of the Centre for Studies and Solidarity Actions of Maré (CEASM) and of the Brazilian Association of Museums (IBRAM). He is co-founder of the Museu da Maré.

## **Selection of cultural assets between research and plebiscite – three museological points dealing with “collecting 2.0”**

*Markus Walz*

While it might be easy to integrate the postulated involvement of the source community into the mission statement and the collection policy of museums, these documents frequently avoid a commitment to comparative socio-anthropological or historic research. But it is questionable how far the concrete acquisition or the rejection of an offer is processed in a participative manner.

Museological theory developed a universal model of “significance assessment”, that might be adopted to the different types of museums with their specific academic or scientific tendencies, in our case to the historic, the social or cultural anthropological point of view. This model follows the traditional opinion that museum work is academic: It accepts the high regard of society as one

dimension, as well as subjective impressions, (the “emotional value” of the asset), but no assessment is seen to be successful without an academic rationale; in particular the concerns of the “secondary criteria” cannot be substituted by “the wisdom of the crowd”. *The first point:* current practice requires a significance assessment (instead of “free choice”), and does not allow for a change over to “user generated collections”.

At least in Germany, the majority of the institutions called museums operate on the level of a hobby. By analysing these museums we know that they are less original representations of culture than reflections of older academic positions. *The second point:* Selective decisions of non-professionals might lead either to very authentic representations or

to quite useless mirrors of non-actual representations.

The model of significance assessment includes several criteria, which depend on their particular time; therefore, the durability of assessment decisions is limited – down to the point of lost significance. *The third point:* Ageing collections depend on an academic rationale for their validation as an academic source or a historic document – even if a museum completely shifts to “collecting 2.0”.

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## **One history – many perspectives; exhibiting cultures from Africa, Asia, America and Oceania in the future Humboldt Forum – examples from North America**

*Viola König*

The Humboldt-Forum, one of the most ambitious cultural building projects in Germany, will be dedicated to the cultures of the world. Due to its eminent historical significance and distinctive urban architecture, the Palace Square (Schlossplatz) is an outstanding location within the German capital. Thus the Humboldt-Forum on the Palace Square will not only be assigned a particularly sophisticated function, but also a task of international importance. The forum will complement the Museum Island, where European cultures and their roots in the Near East are exhibited. With respect to the manner in which cultures are presented, however, the Humboldt-Forum will differ fundamentally from the Museum Island. It aims to open new horizons to introduce the specific features of non-European cultures, as well as convey the mutual interaction between these cultures and Europe.

One of the concept’s basic principles for the Humboldt-Forum is the continuous and

simultaneous change of narrative perspectives: questions and answers in a dialogue with the objects, within the context of changes in the regions, times, and themes represented by the exhibits. Various voices will be heard, and among these, contemporary indigenous peoples, members of the so called “source communities”, will play a prominent role. In allowing for diverse, even contradictory, positions the Humboldt-Forum distinguishes itself from traditional museums and institutions. The change of narrative perspective is thus a distinctive, unique feature of the Humboldt-Forum. The paper discusses the concept with some examples from Native North America.

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## Sharing objects, co-curating knowledge and reframing the museum space

*Zoltán Fejős*



*Mobile exhibition van of Etnomobil 2.0 in front of the Hungarian National Museum.  
Photo Zsófia Frazon 2011.*

Hungarian museums involved in different projects of contemporary collecting and documenting have been energetically trying to

activate museum visitors or the broader circle of potential patrons to participate in amassing new valuable material about contemporary life. From the well known strategy of “Bring us one object!” to different collaborative efforts between museum experts and visitors, programmes have already followed in the mapping of meaningful areas of the contemporary culture. The paper will present and analyse three examples of participative strategies applied recently by the Museum of Ethnography in Budapest, including the broader interpretative context.

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## Participative strategies and the maritime cultural heritage

*Christine Fredriksen*

This is a presentation of participative strategies in documenting the present at the Regional museum of Bohuslän, Sweden. I will present the importance of the planning and design of projects, based on regional themes, in documenting and collecting at the museum. For certain aspects of the work at a regional Museum of cultural history, greater participation would ideally be needed from associations and from the population of the studied communities.

One of the three main areas profiled in the aims of the museum is the maritime cultural heritage. In several projects with a maritime orientation, the museum needs the involvement of local participants and volunteers, in order to be able to work with development of knowledge and with the preservation of the cultural heritage. Many associations and individuals in the communities of Bohuslän are engaged in the maritime cultural heritage and it

is of great value to involve these people in the work of the museum. I will present examples of projects within the maritime sphere of cultural heritage work, in which community members have participated as ‘external experts’.



*Maritime cultural heritage – the islands of Koster in the archipelago of Bohuslän.  
Photo Christine Fredriksen 2010.*

The choice of the design, the parties involved and cooperation with the public influences the accomplishment of the documentation project. This also affects the future use of the project outcomes, for instance in exhibitions at the museum. The question is whether cooperation with the public is relevant in all contexts. Are there projects in which this participation is a prerequisite for the accomplishment of the project? Is participative co-operation a useful

method in aiming to increase the social dimensions of the work of the museum?

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## **What to take and how to share? Challenges regarding establishing a Theatre Museum in 2011**

*Aleksandra Janus and Dorota Kawęcka*

The paper discusses the challenge that two young museologists faced recently when commissioned by the Theatre Institute in Poland to write a report for a soon-to-be-established Theatre Museum in Warsaw. This new cultural organization will result from a merger of a former Theatre Museum based at the Grand Theatre-National Opera and the Theatre Institute.

The collection owned by Grand Theatre gathers objects dating from as long ago as the 18th century. The future merger with Theatre Institute – an organization appointed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, responsible for documenting theatre life in Poland and running an archive – will pose a few difficulties regarding collections management. The main challenge results from different approaches towards collecting with Theatre Institute's main interest in the present and the Theatre's focus on the past, which would demand reworking of the existing collections policies.

Another issue to consider would be the dilemma between continuing the "institutional collection development" and introducing a more participative strategy. It would require the future museum to first decide on the stakeholders' role in their organization. This links with a more general problem of public perception of theatre as being elitist, implying

such a museum to be similarly exclusive and accessible only to passionate theatre-goers. In case of potential involvement of stakeholders, the question arises if contributing to managing a supposedly elitist collection would be of interest to a wider public. Would emphasizing the multifaceted profile of its collection – which also represents social history, history of design, history of music, history of literature and national history – help to anticipate such attitude?

The inherent relationship of national theatre with nationalistic discourse would inevitably pose a major problem: would the future Theatre Museum, established by the Ministry, preserving collections of great historical significance, be willing to share its authority to allow alternative voices? In the paper we will address these issues and argue why participative strategies might be a condition of sustainability of this new museum.

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## Behind the counter – the neighbourhood shop of the Amsterdam Museum

*Annemarie de Wildt*

The Neighbourhood shop project of the Amsterdam Museum (March-August 2011) was our first large-scale experiment with working outside the museum. We occupied two spaces in quarters of Amsterdam with a migrant-labour population, one in an empty shop in Amsterdam North, the other in a Turkish coffeehouse in the Eastern part of the city.

The aims of the projects were multiple: examining a seemingly ordinary aspect of daily life in the city – shopping and shop keeping – and by doing so exploring the economic and social aspects of neighbourhood shops; getting in touch with people who normally do not visit museums and adding to the collection (in)tangible heritage related to shops.



*Halal butcher Abderrahman El Bahja in Amsterdam.  
Photo Annemarie de Wildt.*

Our neighbourhood locations were run by ‘volunteers’ from the museum staff, so people who normally do not get into close contact with the public also had to talk to visitors and even write down their stories. In a sense the shopkeepers were the experts, the Amsterdam Museum wanted to document their businesses and compare them with shopkeepers in the past.

In my presentation I will, using examples from this experiment outside the museum, talk about what we learned from the neighbourhood shop experience, in what ways it enriched our collections and our thinking about the relevance of the museum for the city (and vice versa). Of course I will also talk about the obstacles we encountered.

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## The ‘Doner-Connection’ – collecting the present

*Elisabeth Tietmeyer*

With about 275,000 objects the ethnographic Museum of European Cultures houses one of the largest collections of everyday culture and popular art in Europe spanning the period from the 18th century to the present.

One of the major aspects of the museum’s profile is the emphasis given to cultural contacts, particularly within one’s own society. But the everlasting point of discussion in

Germany is the question: who belongs to society and who does not? Migrants and their descendants have always influenced the culture of the majority, and have in their turn been influenced. They are part of society, which is itself characterised by cultural diversity. The Museum of European Cultures sees it as one of its tasks to draw attention to this diversity, in order to achieve respect for people of differing cultures. This task can only be carried out with

the cooperation of the protagonists. The inclusive approach has been one of the basic principles of the museum ever since its founding – especially concerning its activities and collection policy. This will be exemplified by several exhibition projects of the museum.

One example for collecting the present is provided by the project *Doner, Delivery and Design*, where the curators, amongst other issues, focused on a typical facet of global ‘food culture’.



"Doner equipment" in the MEC collection, 2002.  
©Museum Europäischer Kulturen.  
Photo Ute Franz- Scarciglia.

Fast food predominantly produced, traded, advertised and sold by entrepreneurs with immigrant backgrounds, here exemplified by the doner kebab sandwich, a snack food that enjoys great popularity in Germany, was invented by a Turkish immigrant in Berlin, and is now rapidly conquering the whole of Europe. Items documenting the production, sale and promotion of doner kebabs were collected along with photographs, documents, stories, books and films. This all-embracing collection not only represents a typical fast food consumed by many people from the last quarter of the 20th century, but more importantly also documents the successful integration of an element of a largely foreign culture in Germany through the commitment of bi-cultural entrepreneurs.

But having such examples of good practice in mind two questions arise: How do visitors react seeing everyday objects in showcases? Where are the limits of participative collecting?

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## Post-Conference Reflections

*Svante Paulisch*

### “The present” as a field of research

An excellent first annual COMCOL-conference lies behind us. Warm-hearted hosts deserve our gratitude. We have returned home, enriched by ideas and experiences, able to reflect and exchange our thoughts via the newsletter. It has been pointed out several times during the conference already, that without doubt, COMCOL builds on the tradition and experience of the Swedish

museum network for contemporary collecting, called Samdok. And in fact the idea for COMCOL was born on its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary meeting. On our thrilling closing to our conference, the excursion to Eisenhüttenstadt (an industrial city, designed at the drawing board in the 1950s), Andreas Ludwig underscored that his museum was, due to political interests, already condemned from the beginning to be a historical museum, if not

even a monument to the buried everyday culture of the former GDR, while his own expectations and wishes, to serve as a general documentation centre for the present, could not be fulfilled. So the same question arose, as already formulated during the meeting of the COMCOL working group “contemporary collecting”, how to define “the present” as a field of research.

### **What could COMCOL learn from Samdok?**

Here we can learn from the Swedes, as Samdok dealt with this very question during its creation process, too. While creating a concept in the 1970s, the protagonists of Samdok became aware of what the documentation of “the present” should include. They saw it as an obligation to future generations to preserve “the present”:

*"Our society has an urge – which we have come to regard as a duty – to document itself, its conditions and its development for the benefit of future generations. This task is exacting particularly in times of quick change. If documentation is neglected, we run the risk of depriving coming generations of their history." (Rosander 1980:14).*

So, what does the term "present" in connection with contemporary collecting involve? Present time is always in the flow and includes the present, the past and the future, likewise. We now live in the present, but we did it two years ago, like we will do in two years time as well. The individual present of a person therefore includes all of his life. Since contemporary collecting is always contextual, the researcher's interest may as well include an event that lies before or after a person's lifespan. The Swedish present-day-research, could therefore be comprehended as some sort of biographical research, a “history of personal life” in analogy to the “history of things” and sometimes even as a meeting point of the two, because present-day-research, of course, always includes the material culture as well. This may lead to the presumption, that present-day-research is part of the *"histoire totale"* (Annales school, Philippe Ariès). (Paulisch 2008).

### **Beware of exoticism!**

Sten Rentzhog (Rentzhog 2002) pointed out the following issues, which might as well be

relevant or taken under consideration during our further discussions regarding “the present” as a field of research within COMCOL:

1. *Documentation can simply become a confirmation of what others already see, with a striking predominance of "political correctness". That includes the tendency to collect data that already exists elsewhere, outside of museums.*
2. *Samdok risks losing the idea of splitting up responsibly and duty.*
3. *How to compare results of investigations of different points in time, if they do not have the same starting point?*
4. *How should the investigation represent our time if one examines more and more special forms of our culture? (Rentzhog 2002, my translation).*

Remembering the flood of projects presented at our conference, which dealt with immigrants, we should be aware of Rentzhog's fourth issue in particular. Even if the arguments of easier funding for those kinds of projects are matchless, and research in this matter is very important for our society, they should not occupy more than a small fraction in the overall project “contemporary collecting”. Otherwise we may run the risk of being blinded by exoticism.

Rentzhog defines the museum staff as victims of a present "now-fixing". But in his opinion, the role of museums is to break this fixation by teaching the visitors to reflect on themselves in a long-range perspective. Rentzhog recommends a farsighted perspective to be included in the present-day-studies and loosen up on the immediate "now" to serve as a starting point, so Samdok gets the opportunity to in fact contribute essentials within the ongoing public debate about society. As Rentzhog reminds us, the goal of collection and documentation is to be designed to work in the long run, because the material collected today will be used primarily in the future exhibitions, teaching and research, representing our present in the future. The tasks of contemporary collecting are so to speak readily identifiable on the basis of three time perspectives:

*yesterday: bridge the gap between the existing collections and the present.*

*today: provide a historical perspective of the present.*

*tomorrow: provide knowledge about our time.*

Rentzhog misses the commitment to contemporary collecting throughout the entire museum sector. He encourages us to discuss the objectives of contemporary collecting even more. (Rentzhog 2002).

### **“The present” in a historic perspective**

A similar idea, to reflect our present in a historic perspective, can be found in the historian Maths Isacson's remarks. In his opinion, the “present” could be documented by us, but analysis and interpretation could only take place by using a historic perspective, which has been included in most Swedish present-day-studies already, usually in the form of background information. An example, given by Isacson, designates interviews with older generations, where they are usually referring to the present, as well as to the near and distant past. "At that time" is used in their narratives about their own lives, helping to understand and explain what happens and how to deal with the "now". Comparison is an aid in the ongoing interpretation and confirmation of our own existence in the "now". Field research usually follows several time levels, Isacson says, which are woven together and not always possible to be distinguished properly.

For him, history takes place in the present, but not as pure, easily identifiable historical documents, but as subliminal processes that are woven into people's language and interpretations. As with a clear boundary, he fears, we would ignore the fact that history also constitutes a part of our future, that we are cultural beings and that our civilization is shaped and changed by the daily actions and opinions of human beings (Isacson 1998). A simple, but maybe key-question arises: “How would we like our daily life to be seen in the time to come?”

### **A unique opportunity**

The fate of Eisenhüttenstadt is in some ways similar to that of the industry-settlement around the factory "Ohs Bruk" in Småland,

Sweden, which was the subject of one of the first Samdok-studies 1978-1980. It also shows parallels with the contemporaneous German village- and community-studies in Kiebingen by Utz Jeggle in 1977 and its following investigations. In a 10-year-rhythm residents were visited and interviewed. Each time there were different questions of interest which the field-researchers focussed on, according to the current scientific debate (Paulisch 2008). This might even be a possible orientation and starting point to develop a strategy for museums such as in Eisenhüttenstadt, maybe in cooperation with the Viadrina University in Frankfurt (Oder), to level up to a regional centre for contemporary collecting.

If COMCOL will be able to gain the same quality and possibilities as Samdok, remains to be seen. In order to support a positive outcome in this matter, continuity is needed, which in my opinion can only be accomplished through regular meetings and exchange within the COMCOL working groups. Since we learned from the Swedish network for contemporary collecting, the Samdok pools are the beating heart of its organization. Therefore we should consider if there is need to gather annually even at regional levels in the long run, since if we have to wait another four years until the next COLCOL meeting in Europe takes place, we might be doomed to lose connections and give up an unique opportunity.

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## Documentation and nostalgia in the former GDR

*Tiina Paavola*

On the last day of the conference COMCOL arranged a one-day tour for its members to Eisenhüttenstadt – a German word for 'Ironwork City'. Eisenhüttenstadt is known as a former 'socialist model city', located a hundred kilometres east from Berlin. The members of COMCOL familiarized themselves with the history and present day life of the town with a local guide. The most anticipated attraction of the tour was a visit to the Documentation Centre of Everyday Culture in the GDR (Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR), established in 1993. Documentation Centre is collecting and saving the cultural artefacts designed and made for everyday use in the former East Germany.

### **In the shadow of a steel mill**

In the 1950's, the socialistic party of the GDR decided to erect a steel mill, the Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost, together with an adjacent residential area. The residential area with 50,000 residents was given the name Stalinstadt. In 1961 the town was renamed Eisenhüttenstadt. This 'model city' was planned to work as a machine: the most important objective was trouble-free production at the steel mill, and all local activities promoted this goal. Homes of the residents were located in large residential neighbourhoods where everyday services were available: kindergartens, schools and grocery stores. Also public transportation served industrial purposes by transporting factory workers working in three shifts to the steel mill and back.

After the German reunification in 1990 the population of the town collapsed. Due to the increased competition from West German steel makers and the collapse of the markets in Eastern Europe the steel company had to lay off workers and close several blast furnaces. Privatisation of the steel mill in 1995 helped solve the main problems and depopulation was brought under control. Nowadays Eisenhüttenstadt has more than 30,000 residents.

### **Idyllic town – happy people?**

A walking tour in the current town centre feels like a time travel into the 1950's. Beautifully restored buildings with decorative details on the walls and a quiet atmosphere leads the visitor's thoughts to small town life in the 1950's. Large courtyards and wide boulevards tell about a time when there still was a lot of empty space in town centres and the number of cars wasn't a problem yet. When building Eisenhüttenstadt the state of the art knowledge and technological expertise was used: all apartments were equipped with water closet, running water and electricity and this was carried out in the 1950's when modern conveniences were by no means self-evident in European households.



*Eisenhüttenstadt. Photo Eva Fägerborg 2011.*

Moving into a modern town must have been a big change for many citizens of the GDR: in town there were jobs, good living conditions, nurseries and schools for children. It's ironic,

though, that these neighbourhoods which now seem like a small town idyll, were achievements of the totalitarian system. It's obvious that the idyll had downsides about which only those who lived in Eisenhüttenstadt under the rule of a totalitarian state could tell.

### **The origin of the Documentation Centre**

After the German reunification in 1990 the Germans wanted to get rid of objects reminding them of the socialist past. Rubbish containers all over the country were filled with East German products: home appliances, furniture, pots and pans, tableware, textiles. Andreas Ludwig, a museum professional in Berlin, noticed how the artifacts representing everyday culture of GDR began to disappear and he started collecting and saving them. Dr. Ludwig, director and father of the Documentation Centre, has now worked for twenty years accumulating and preserving the collections of the Documentation Centre of Everyday Culture in the GDR, a museum which has modest resources but is a very interesting place to visit.



*Andreas Ludwig. Photo Eva Fägerborg 2011.*

The Documentation Centre premises include large exhibition space situated in an old kindergarten and 3500m<sup>2</sup> storage facilities. The museum's collections include around 150,000 objects. Storage facilities are modest, and evidently better facilities will be necessary for saving the collections for future generations. Many artifacts are made of plastic, which is extra challenging for collection care. An obstacle for developing collections care and management is well-known to all persons

working in the museums: Local authorities don't favor further expenses. However, much can be done for the collections. Dr. Ludwig told us that an extensive catalogue of collections was published in 2011. According to COMCOL members, making Documentation Centre and its collections widely known abroad could be an excellent way to increase interest for the collections at local level too.

### **Role of industrial design in GDR**

Opinions on East German objects varied among COMCOL members. Some thought the objects represented typical, insipid East German culture and design, for some others the artifacts raised nostalgic feelings. Several East German home appliances – like vacuum cleaners and rotary beaters - were imported to Finland in the 1970's and that's why those objects seen in a museum raised nostalgic feeling among the Finnish representatives. Many visitors were also inspired by the bright colors used in everyday objects made in the GDR.

Many objects produced in GDR could probably be popular and expensive collectibles, if museums and researchers were able to provide more information about their background, designers etc. According to Dr. Ludwig it's difficult to do thorough research on East German industrially made objects. Although industrial designers of the GDR were pioneers in many ways, there is not much information available on designers or production processes, because those things were not appreciated in the socialist system. Thus it is also difficult to find out when a single object was in production and whether the object was very common or a unique artifact in its own time. Advertisements, posters of propaganda and stories told by ordinary citizens must be used as source material.

### **Toys, sweets and the famous Mr. Sandman**

The gift shop of the Documentation Centre, situated next to museum's exhibition premises, provides a good selection of publications, postcards, toys, sweets and funny copies of plastic and wooden toys of the 1970's. Even though the museum shop is small, the products are well selected, supporting the basic idea of

the Documentation Centre. The cute symbols of Eastern Europe, Mr. Sandman from the GDR and Mole, created by a Czech animator are well represented in many products. The merchandises of the shop were so interesting that many of the members of the COMCOL spent almost as much time in the museum shop as in the exhibition. The products of the

museum shop were amusing, reasonably priced and full of nostalgia: there's nothing we could ask for more.

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## Reports from COMCOL Working Groups

### COMCOL Working Group on Contemporary Collecting

At the first meeting of the COMCOL Working Group on Contemporary Collecting in Berlin, Leontine Meijer announced that she preferred to concentrate on her obligations as the chair of the COMCOL committee and that she would like to hand over the chair of the working group to another member. I volunteered and since everyone present agreed, it is my pleasure to write this short report and announcement as the new chair of the Working Group on Contemporary Collecting.

As Leontine Meijer wrote in the COMCOL Newsletter No 14 July 2011, COMCOL is deeply rooted in the Swedish Samdok project on documenting contemporary life. This working group wants to promote the cause and issue of contemporary collecting by presenting case studies, discussing strategies, ethical questions or practical problems, reviewing relevant publications or exchanging ideas as well as facts & figures on the topic.

I would like to invite everyone, both working group members and everyone else, to participate and contribute to our activities. The COMCOL Newsletter is a perfect medium to inform about new projects and experiences with contemporary collecting. We will certainly use it to share information and

exchange ideas. But perhaps there are other ways we can explore, ways that can help us to animate the discussion. Can we, as an example, use Delicious.com to collect websites with cases of or references to contemporary collecting? At the conference in Berlin we were invited to think about ways to improve the website of the committee and come up with ideas and suggestions. I would be very interested in any suggestion to give the working group an active part in this 'make-over' of the website.

In Berlin we talked about the preferences and expectations of the members of the working group that were present at the time. We would like to continue that conversation and discuss any topic that is related to contemporary collecting. Just to mention one example of a remarkable initiative on contemporary collecting, I would like to refer to the [Amsterdam Tattoo Museum](#). It has just opened and is definitely worth a visit.

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### COMCOL Working Group on Resources

Wednesday November 2nd 2011, COMCOL's Working Group on Resources met for the first time. The working group's main aim is to support the work of COMCOL by providing

bibliographies concerning the themes of the annual conferences. In addition, the working group aims to support a wider professional audience by providing guidelines for writing

collection plans and examples of such plans. Finally, the working group also aims to contribute to a wider ICOM discourse on terminology by reflecting on terms related to collection development.

First, members of the working group will

- 1) collect existing bibliographies (from articles, books, internet, etc.),
- 2) compile a bibliography on the themes raised during the Berlin conference,
- 3) collect handbooks and guidelines on writing collection plans,
- 4) make an inventory of collection related terms in dictionaries, encyclopedias and Wikipedia.

On the basis of the first inventory of bibliographies, a selective and annotated bibliography will be compiled, to be published on COMCOL's website.

The bibliography on participative strategies will be organized according the six key

concerns identified by me in my concluding remarks on Tuesday November 1<sup>st</sup>:

participation  
community  
professionalism  
authority and control  
acquisition  
sustainability

As general frame of reference for terminological issues François Mairesse & André Desvallées' *Dictionnaire encyclopédique de muséologie* (Armand Collin, Paris 2011), and ISO standard 5127 (2001) *Information and Documentation – Vocabulary* will be used.

For the time being, English will be the working language. The inventory of bibliographies, handbooks, and definitions of terms will be extended to other languages, preferably French, Spanish and German.

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