

COLLECTINGNET

An international museum network for collecting issues

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Collectingnet is an international museum network for collecting issues created at the conference *Connecting Collecting* at Nordiska Museet, Stockholm in November 2007. Collectingnet invites museum professionals and scholars to take part in developing the network into a vital association and mouthpiece of international cooperation. The Newsletter will be published four times a year. We welcome contributions with reflections, conference/seminar reports, project presentations, specific questions you wish to raise, literature tips, invitations to cooperation or other themes. Please send your contribution to the next issue by **1 April 2009** to collectingnet@nordiskamuseet.se. You can also contact the editors personally: catherinemarshall5@yahoo.com, eva.fagerborg@nordiskamuseet.se, lotta.hylten-cavallius@mkc.botkyrka.se

My body – my truth: A new project within contemporary documentation

or:

What could happen when you place an ad in the paper

Kathrin Pabst



Exhibition logotype. Vest-Agder-museet Kristiansand.

My body – my truth is Vest-Agder Museum's contribution to the Norwegian Year of Diversity 2008. 11% of South Norway's population has two parents born abroad and is defined as immigrant. These people are an important part of today's Norway and a natural part of this project. However,

diversity is found in many areas in addition to the cultural area. Among families who have been living in Norway for several generations, diversity is found at countless levels. It can be related to age, gender, predilection/sexual tendency, values, religion, education and financial status. Therefore, we have chosen a subject which includes *all* human beings and illustrates a diversity that goes across the mentioned areas.

Human beings have always been, and will always be, absorbed by their own body. This issue is as common and current as ever. Body is like life itself. We live only through and because of our body. Today the body's appearance is no longer considered to be determined by destiny, it is rather an object that can change according to one's own wishes and financial resources. Clothing and fashion play a major part, in addition to food intake, exercise and surgical procedures. Similar trends are also becoming more and more visible in non-Western countries.

By presenting randomly selected persons and letting them tell their own stories, we hoped that visitors would be inspired to reflect upon their own ideas of

“ideal” and “normal” and their personal prejudices relating to appearance. What is beauty really? What characterizes one’s ideas of the “ideal body”? How far will a person be willing to go to adjust his or her body to the ideal of beauty? And what lies behind the wish to conform or to stand out?

At the same time we wanted to try out new paths and we asked ourselves:

– Can a traditional cultural-historic museum reach out to people through a newspaper advertisement and invite *all* those who are interested into one of the museum’s projects?

– Can we present an exhibition on unknown terms, that is, not knowing who will be coming, what subjects will come up or what stories will be told, solely on the basis of our professional standing and provision of an exhibition arena?

Therefore, we placed an advertisement in the newspaper, looking for interested participants. Fourteen persons, aged 18 to 76 years, called us after the advertisement was published. Each of them was interviewed and photographed for about three hours at the museum and was asked whether he/she could consider taking part in an exhibition on this subject. Two were not interested. Since none of the other twelve participants had a non-Western background, we decided to contact three immigrants directly. All three wanted to participate in the exhibition.

The exhibition now presents these fifteen participants through photos, audios and text. We asked each of them what they thought of their body and what beauty meant to them. The answers revealed that all of them have an active relationship with their body and they use it as a form of expression. The answers also show that all of them have formed an opinion of today’s beauty ideal. Everyone places his or her body in relation to that, either through conscious conformity or conscious distancing.



Ingrid.
Photo Anita Nilsen.

As an example one can mention Ingrid, aged 24, who was bullied a lot by other children. Today she is satisfied with her body and one way of stressing this fact is that she lets the hair on her legs grow.

Ellen, aged 39, tells that in her childhood, the focus on not being too heavy came about early. She has been struggling with eating disorders since the age of 15. Today she has scars as a result of self-harm and a tattoo representing her protest against others’ interference with her looks. She no longer weighs herself and she has stopped thinking so much about food. Instead she relies on exercise.

A married couple, both 56 years of age, tell about a childhood when no one focused on body. The lady got breast cancer five years ago, but did not have much problem after having one breast removed. She had no wish to receive a breast implant. Today the couple consider themselves naturists. They are both happy in and with their bodies. For them it is very liberating to be naked sometimes within certain boundaries.



Marie.
Photo Heidi Voss-Nilsen.

Marie, aged 61, told us one of the strongest stories. Her childhood was dominated by poverty and an over-protective mother who used to stuff her with food so that she wouldn’t get sick and die. Children at school used to bully her for her looks and clothes and because she was so “stupid”. Marie cannot remember anyone saying anything positive to her. It was not until her late 40s that she realized that she abused food. By that time countless dieting courses over several decades had led to her “really getting fat”. She gradually started to accept herself as she was – her body could not take any more dieting. She is now very active in a local interest group for women with eating disorders and on some occasions she has acted as a model.

In addition to our aims of inclusivity and diversity, we present some of the topics touched by the participants of the project, namely naturism, eating disorders, bullying and tattooing, and relationship

with one's own body and nudity in old age. For more information and images, see www.vestagdermuseet.no, press "utstillinger".

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Museum collecting in the age of virtuality

Anne Britt Ylvisåker

Late in 2004 the West Norway Museum of Decorative Art was offered an art installation called "Lounge" made by the Norwegian artist group "Temp"¹. The installation was rather complex, containing several hundred objects from such widely different fields as furniture, ceramic unika made by the artists themselves, second hand books, sketches, newspapers, periodicals, cardboard boxes, broken china and left-over food.

Although we found the installation interesting as an art piece, the museum turned the offer down, and refused to make the installation a part of our collection. The installation was considered too volatile to be kept as a unit, unable to be communicated adequately in the future. The same installation, greatly appraised by the museum as art, did not have a corresponding value as a museum object, but was evaluated from two different perspectives. The offer generated fundamental and challenging questions regarding the museum's way of collecting.



Temp: "Lounge", installation exhibited at United Sardine Factory 2004. © Artists.

Collecting short-lived objects for eternity

Our museums' main task is to capture and retain relevant trends of contemporary art for the future.

¹ The group "Temp" was established 2000 by Heidi Bjørgan, Ruth Moen, Anne Helen Mydland and Anne Thomassen, all four of them ceramicists, who had recently graduated from Bergen National Academy of the Arts.



Temp: "Lounge", detail. © Artists.

Traditionally, decorative art has reflected craft and design related to a homely sphere, and we have so far met minor challenges related to the material substance of our collectables, representing a field characterised by solid materials and clever craftsmanship. But during the last years durable materials have been replaced by more short-lived ones, and simultaneously ideas and processes have advanced to be of greater importance than the final result.

If our museum collection is supposed to mirror the art scene, we evidently cannot ignore relevant objects just because they consist of unconventional substances challenging for the museum to keep. But how do we approach the difficulties indicated? Can *virtual* collections turn out to be a rational alternative, perceiving the objects as equivalent and valuable as the "real" objects already collected?

Scholarship from the Research Council of Norway, has recently given me the opportunity to bring this issue a step further². The following thoughts must therefore be considered only as a preliminary

² I am joining the project *Creating Artistic Value – a Research Project on Rubbish and Readymades, Art and Ceramics*, managed by the Bergen National Academy of the Arts. This is also a part of the Research Council of Norway's programme *Assigning Cultural Values*, running 2008 – 2012.

introduction to the theme of virtual collecting, just indicating some of the challenges.

Museum defined as collections

The idea of virtual collections is not easily embraced, and rather provokes reactions of scepticism and resistance from all of us claiming to believe museums are defined by holding collections of “real” objects. This definition was formerly supported by the original ICOMs Code of Professional Ethics. Do virtual collections necessarily alter this vision, or is it just a continuation of traditional collecting; only adjusting the outcome to changing external criterias?

Museum without collections

My motivation is intensified by my feeling that the idea of the collection as our *raison d'être* is under pressure: “The great collecting phase of museums is over”, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill proclaimed (Hooper-Greenhill 2001, paragraph 10), arguing that access and social benefit must be prioritised over the ideal task of further developing museum collections.

The Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority offered yet another challenge to traditional museum collecting in their presentation of two scenarios of the museum development from now to 2025 of great impact to the idea of museum collecting: Either a commercial, exclusive museum targeting a selective group, concentrating on the experience of *peculiar* objects, or a knowledge-based, mainly *virtual* museum with physical objects of minor importance (*Museene i 2025*).

This suggestion corresponds with the noticeable turn away from exclusively physical objects in the revised ICOMs Code of Ethics from 2004, making intangible inheritance equivalent. The idea of virtual collecting seems to be an adequate response to these contributions, as an attempt of reorientation and rejecting the accumulation of physical objects in the traditional manner. But what are the consequences?

Museum without walls

Ever since the access to Internet became common in the early 1990s, museums have investigated how this can be utilized for their benefit. So far the emphasis has been to attract visitors to the “real” museum through either digital “brochures”, digital overview of the collections, or didactic programmes adjusting different visitor targets.

None of these approaches suits my idea of virtual collecting. My desire is to create a genuine collection, leaning upon Werner Schweibenz’s definition of a virtual museum as: “a logically related collection of digital objects (with) **no real**

space” (Schweibenz 2004 p. 3, my bolds). He admits the idea is challenging, especially for art museums, to let the “real thing” with its inherited value go. But is this necessarily a problem? Simon Knell, another museum investigator advancing the idea of virtual collections, indicates a scientific perspective to be that: “the thing only becomes real when it is captured in a digital form and converted into information” (Knell 2003 p. 137). He presents different kinds of realities, equally “real”. An interesting comparison can be made with the “Second Life” phenomenon, and without stretching it this far, our familiarity with virtually visiting towns, exhibitions, shops and banks, is blurring the boundaries between realities. Can we imagine a virtual object represented in this alternative reality, holding the status and value originally ascribed to physical objects?

The value of objects

Prior to approve or deny the idea of virtual collections, we have to raise the awareness of what constitutes a significant collection, and how to define the boundary between object and documentation. If we understand value as an inherent quality of each object, an investigation is appropriate of what is gained and lost in a virtual collection.

An object has two identities, Gérard Genette proclaims, the material piece itself, and the awareness of its existence, experienced indirectly through: “everything that can provide more or less precise knowledge of a work, whenever the work itself is definitively or temporarily absent” (Genette 1997 p. 218, quotation from Daatland 2001 p. 82). This necessarily imperfect representation displays some, but not every characteristic of the original object. The extent of equivalence with the original will distinguish copy, reproduction and documentation, provoking various art experiences.

Benjamin evaluated the auratic “here and now experience” with its “unique appearance of distance” as substantial to our perception of authenticity and authority of objects, voluntarily guarded and enhanced by museums (Benjamin 1975 p. 37/41, my translations). In a virtual collection, both the distance and the materiality are non-existing, Line Daatland points out (Daatland 2001). On the other hand, a digital construction holds particular qualities, eliciting a new kind of experience far beyond Benjamin’s reproductions. Is auratic experience obviously superior to virtual?

The value of collections and collecting

Boris Groys emphasises the museum object’s distance to “real life” as a necessity for evolving an art scene not exclusively characterized by auratic

works of genius, but rather by the lack of visible differences from everyday life. In museums ordinary objects are promised a difference they do not enjoy in reality, referred to as “the difference beyond difference” (Groys 2002 p. 8). This leans upon what Susan M. Pearce marks as one of the characteristics of museum collections: some degree of belief that the whole is somehow more than the sum of its parts (Pearce 1992 p.7). An object is transformed by becoming a part of a collection, but is this attainable in a virtual collection?

In his rubbish theory Michael Thompson declares value as a quality ascribed to objects by those powered to do so (Thompson 1994). The quality is neither inherent, nor permanent, and is progressively defined – and redefined – by e.g. artists, collectors and museum curators.

If the value lies in the characteristics of the entity of the collection, or in the act of collecting, are these values really threatened or altered by collecting virtually?

My research

The previous debate is based on durable collectables. I will be testing its validity, using a virtual pilot collection of short-lived material as my case. Line Daatland and Michael Fehr both push the differentness of virtual collections, indicating the necessity of a new and different form of competence to evaluate this machine made aesthetic, named by Fehr as “Aesthechniques” (Fehr 1998 paragraph 12). In my research I will try to approach this new competence.

So far I am not able to draw any conclusions, but cyberspace has even now altered museums dramatically, and in my view the exploration of virtual collections is only a necessary next step. Although seeming like a menace, we cannot neglect potential opportunities opened by virtual collections.

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Teaching theory, practice and ethics of collecting at the Reinwardt Academie

Léontine Meijer & Peter van Mensch

The Reinwardt Academie is the Department of Heritage Studies of the Amsterdam School of the Arts (Amsterdam, Netherlands). Founded in 1976 it offers a full-time four year bachelor programme in heritage studies, and since 1994 an international master programme in museology. Both programmes seek a balance between theory, practice and ethics, aiming at training reflexive practitioners, to be employed in a wider heritage field.

The programmes are constructed around five perspectives: professional development, collection development, audience development, product development and sustainable development. All perspectives represent an integrative approach to heritage and heritage institutions. For example, collection development includes collecting, documenting, registering, conserving, restoring, and deaccessioning. In other words, collection development concerns the physical, administrative, and conceptual development of collections, as function of the role of heritage and heritage institutions in society.

As to the role of heritage and heritage institution in society we try to integrate the two traditions that have been labeled as “new museology”, i.e. the analytic deconstructivist approach which we noticed in many British/American publications and the synthetic activist stance which we found in countries such as France, Portugal and Brazil, referring to academic discussions on one hand and working with communities on the other. This means that the three aspects of “social inclusion” (access, participation, representation) are perceived as key to sustainable collection development.

In our view disposal (de-accessioning) is as important a tool for collection development as collecting (accessioning). Disposal has for many professionals still negative connotations, but for us both activities contribute to a useful collection profile. The Reinwardt Academie played – and plays – an important role in the (inter)national debate on theory, practice and ethics of deaccessioning. Lecturers and students are involved in projects that deal with implementing a national policy on deaccessioning (the *Netherlands guidelines for deaccessioning of museum objects*).

“Documenting the present” has always been a major focus point in the curriculum. In recent years students have been working on projects using the biographical method to document aspects of contemporary Dutch society, i.e. documenting

personal experiences via interviews instead of or as addition to collecting objects. In these projects the Reinwardt Academie works together with heritage institutions, such as the Amsterdam Historical Museum (AHM), the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy (NINSEE), and the Museum of Ceramics Princessehof.

In 2004 and 2005 students prepared proposals to the AHM to document certain aspects of life in Amsterdam by means of objects documenting personal experiences of people from a wide variety of communities within the city. In 2006 students worked on how slavery is still being remembered (or not) in culturally diverse groups within Dutch society as compared to how slavery plays a part in mainstream Dutch remembrance culture. Here again the biographical method was used. In 2007 students did various projects in preparation for an international conference on “New heritage” to be organized by the Foundation of Dutch Computer Heritage, the Netherlands for Heritage, the Institute of Cultural Heritage, and the Reinwardt Academie. In 2008 students did research on wedding china in preparation for an exhibition to be organized by the Princessehof. One of the aims of this research was to find out to what extent the tradition of wedding china is shared by various cultural groups within the Netherlands.

The focus on documenting the present is part of a wider debate on what heritage is and what infrastructure is needed. Documenting the present challenges traditional classifications and the increased fragmentation of heritage institutions. “New heritage” requires a new approach to collecting policies and perhaps even new types of institutions. Lecturers and students of the Reinwardt Academie participate in discussions that reflect on such new approaches. One notion that got much attention is the secondary role of museums in the preservation of “new heritage”. Owners/users and private collectors increasingly organize themselves in networks (“heritage communities”) sharing a museological responsibility towards heritage.

Behind teaching all subjects, collection development included, is the conviction that the process of attributing heritage values (“musealisation”) is not exclusively a responsibility of heritage professionals. It is primarily a responsibility of the “source community” itself. We see the role of the professional as facilitator rather than authority. In accordance with this conviction we train our students. As future professionals the students learn

to be open to new definitions of heritage and new institutional approaches for the care and communication of heritage. In short, they learn to work with the concept of “heritage 2.0”.

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Private collections and collectors in Flanders

Patrick Van den Nieuwenhof

Collecting. Everyone knows it, young and old. If you don't collect yourself, at least you know someone who is collecting. We look with curiosity and admiration at very different kinds of private collections. We can be sure of one thing: the phenomenon of collecting is omnipresent and part of our daily life. But what can we, as heritage professionals, do with these private collections, what is their value and how can we involve private collectors in our daily work?



Tanne collects everything about tattoos.

These questions and many more were the reasons for starting a project concerning private collectors and collections. The project was financed by the Flemish Government and was conducted with the cooperation of two organizations, Tapis Plein (an organization for contemporary culture) and the Flemish Folklore Organization. One of the main challenges of this project was to locate private collections and collectors. More than 400 private collections were traced (perhaps this is just the tip of the iceberg) and issued with a questionnaire. Indeed, some of the private collectors didn't want to give information because they were afraid of the use the information might be put to. Others reacted with enthusiasm because after so many years they were recognized and respected for what they were and are doing. The results of this questionnaire are brought

together in the website www.vlaanderenverzamelt.be. At this moment this website is only in Dutch. Some of the collectors and their collections illustrate this text.

The collections of private collectors are sometimes similar to those of museums. Often, these collections specialize in a certain kind of heritage. Sometimes, private collectors own additional objects, information and know how. On the other hand, many private collectors collect objects not yet collected by museums. One of the main questions is: how can private collections and collectors relate to the 'official' heritage community, like museums?



Wouter collects shopping lists.

This discussion has also implications for the way museums and curators see the objects they take care of and the way they develop a collection policy. A paradigm shift is indeed occurring in the context of heritage, which will grow in intensity in the new century and challenge how curators think and work. Museology discourse is shifting from static collections towards *dynamic collections*, from permanent collections towards collections renewal, and from keeping collections in a storage room towards collections mobility. By thinking in terms of a *dynamic collection*: heritage is not longer an end product, but a process in developing sources for creative thoughts and reflections. The role of a museum curator is now perhaps less one of keeping objects, but one of their vitalisation. In this paradigm

shift a very important role can be given to private collectors and collections. Good practices in this area must be identified or made more known.



Paul collects police hats.

In Flanders this led to the organization of a conference concerning the link between museums and private collectors. The conference took place on October 17th and the title was *Never Enough*. This title was chosen very consciously, because during the interviews with private collectors the main sentence was: “we cannot stop collecting because we have never enough of that collection theme”. The main purpose of the conference was to stimulate dialogue between private collectors and public museums. The conclusion of the conference was a call for collaboration between these ‘sectors’ for the development of good practices concerning:

- collecting policy
- the conservation of collections
- the registration of collections
- the presentation of collections to the public



Guy collects circus items.

Some of these problems, needs, questions, and practices cannot be solved or developed on a local, regional or national level alone. A discussion in an international forum is necessary. In the development of Collectingnet, it would be useful to examine the sector of private collectors and their possible added value for the ‘official’ heritage sector. Therefore, in this context it would be interesting to organise an international conference ‘Collecting connecting to private collectors’. Such a conference can work further on themes already mentioned in the Stockholm conference of 2007. Some key questions and perspectives can be:

- What are private collectors collecting?
- Why are they collecting?
- How are they collecting?
- Private collectors building their own museums
- The relationship between private collectors and public museums
- The history of private collections and collectors
- Are there good models of collecting practice?

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