Minutes Working Group Meeting

Saturday, June 19, 3 PM EEST

Participants: Lizette Graden, Hester Dibbits, Uta Karrer, Stefan Hartmann, Anete Karlsone

1) Report on Working Group Activities in 2020:

<u>Working Group Conference</u>:

"An ethnology lab on the workings of Covid-19 on museums a working group meeting in Amsterdam", in cooperation with COMCOL, ICOM International Committee for Collecting, on 8 and 9 October 2020

Conference aim:

Covid-19 has been (or still is) prompting many museums to keep their doors closed for weeks or even months. They have to cope with sudden loss of income, worries about the wellbeing of their staff and unforeseen challenges related to their buildings, sites, collections and exhibitions. At the same time, the Covid-19 virus has initiated new ways of public engagement. The crisis is sparking a boom of online activities ranging from art making to virtual museum tours. Many museums have started to post (participatory) calls to locally document this historic event and its effects on society.

For this working group meeting, we are wondering how you have been dealing with this difficult situation:

What are the emotional effects of Covid-19 on ourselves and our colleagues? How do we socially and culturally respond to what is happening? How to (re-)position ourselves? How do the functions and workings of museums as social places change as a result of Covid-19? How do or should we position ourselves in relation to public and private funding in times of coronavirus and in the aftermath? How does Covid-19 change the public perception of museums? Should museums collect and publicly discuss this phenomena? What are the ethical questions to go with? What are the effects on concepts of diversity and inclusivity within our work?

The aim of this two-day expert meeting is to reflect on these challenges and explore what our professional interventions (should) look like. We encourage members of the M&MC working group and COMCOL to focus on the following topics:

- Emotion management
- Collection development
- Information management
- Exhibition making
- Educational programming
- Governance
- Social Media
- Social Events

Conference Report

The programme was geared to address the challenges facing museums and cultural heritage institutions in the context of the COVID19 pandemic. In so doing, the organisers of the event set out to provide a virtual platform for museum professionals and academics alike to establish a dialogue with one another and explore matters of common concern. These included some of the transformative shifts observed in the collection dynamics of museological institutions, changes in the conception of participatory and inclusiveness strategies or the emergence of new possibilities for exhibiting and programming against the backdrop of uncertainty.

Prof. Dr. Hester Dibbits, Lector of Cultural Heritage and Director of the Reinwardt Academy's International Master's Programme in Applied Museum and Heritage Studies, inaugurated the programme by alluding to the Reinwardt Academy's ethos of professionalism—work in the museums and cultural heritage field ought to be driven by a combination of theory, ethics and practice-based approaches in order to bear a meaningful impact on society. With this principle in mind, and in hopes of forging new and long-lasting professional relationships between the (virtual) attendees, Dibbits gave the floor to the panellists.

Representatives of ethnographic museums, such as the Volkskundemuseum (Graz) or the Museum of Everyday Culture (Waldenbuch), presented their case studies regarding the collection of artefacts in times of crisis. References were made to the disruptions experienced by museum professionals in their line of work, such as the inability to engage physically with audiences to duly 'register' their lived experiences. Speakers also shed light over some of the new possibilities put forward by the advent of the digital realm. What arose is an exploration of the impact of new technologies in the streamlining of digital acquisition processes (as became evident, for instance, in the intensification of digital submissions via the museums' online channels), or the newfound representation of the experiences of youth—owing to their access to technology and dexterity on digital matters, and thus interaction with online initiatives. Could it be that the COVID19 pandemic—in pushing incumbent stakeholders to the edge—may force professionals and academics to reconsider (or perhaps even bolster) the social function of the museum?

Other panellists touched base on the domain of 'rapid response collecting', delving into the rapid heritagisation of objects representative of emergency, such as the ongoing public health situation. Representatives of the Museum of European Cultures (Berlin) or the City of Antwerp investigated the intricacies of preserving the historical dimension(s) of the disruption of everyday life that is COVID19. Mentions were made to the necessity of actualising collection frameworks to ensure greater transparency and dynamism in acquiring artefacts reflective of rapid social shifts. Attention was likewise drawn to the issues of conflating 'crowdsourcing' with 'inclusiveness', concluding that the most structurally disadvantaged segments of society may not have been appropriately integrated into current discussions surrounding COVID19 and cultural heritage. Whose objects ought to be collected? For which social groups is it necessary to commemorate the different stages of the pandemic, and what emotional responses may be triggered in so doing? The premise of 'multi-perspectivity', or the incorporation of different voices/perspectives onto ongoing conversations, hence emerges as a relevant benchmark in light of the pandemic.

Independent researchers and academics from the University of Belgrade and the Centre for Study in Cultural Development (Belgrade) likewise analysed the current circumstances through an academic prism. In expediting the process of giving (up) one's consent for the purpose of convenience, given the exceptional circumstances, how may the promotion of technology in museological work be compromising the 'alliances' between cultural institutions and society? How may the removal of our physical presence 'drift us away' from the social interactions that still ought to take place? At a time

where care and sensitivity have become an ever-so-present necessity, how may the cultural heritage domain circumnavigate 'inconvenience' to continue to perform its social and educational functions?

On the second day of sessions, panellists from diverse regions of the world discussed their individual case studies for attendees to become acquainted with the practical tribulations facing museums in times of COVID19. A general assessment of the situation testified to very tangible woes such as dramatic losses in revenue, delays in the provision of recovery subsidies by governments, or even restrictions in sponsorship (considering the hardship experienced not just by museums, but also by their traditional donors and partner organisations). In the context of a sector already embattled with fragility in financial terms, the pandemic has further jeopardised the prospects of overcoming precariousness in the field. This is reflected, for example, in the letting go of employees or in the scarcity of monetary resources to appropriately remunerate members of staff. The museum may, however, adopt a 'therapeutic' role in contributing to disseminate digitised resources, programme online activities to capture the public's interest, or organise professional workshops and seminar to retrain and continue to capacitate its staff. Despite the prevailing pessimism, the pandemic may well provide us with an opportunity to turn the museum into a space for resilience against the crisis.

Alongside these practical considerations, the attendees enjoyed the interventions of speakers from the Vogtland Open-Air Museum (Landwüst), the São Paulo Museum of Art (São Paulo) and the Yugoslav Film Archive (Belgrade). Some of the issues that were tackled included the (dis)continuation of special programmes for the disabled—granted the medical needs of special audiences against the danger of infection for high-risk groups. Other interventions focused instead on the difficulties of showcasing (interactive) performance art where the body cannot be present. Testimonies, however, attested to the possibility of engaging young publics with live social media broadcasts to emulate choreography and dance routines, somehow keeping the 'spirit' of performance art alive. Finally, participants were drawn to the cross-border intricacies of 'going online' with regards to ownership issues and the 'nationality' of audio-visual holdings in the archive. In exposing archival collections to the exterior (and thus reaching audiences beyond the confines of the state), whose cultural heritage is being disseminated online? Given the strin-gent circumstances of the pandemic and the burden of inflexible legal and financial frameworks, how may archives assert their autonomy while navigating the uncharted territory of the digital sphere?
(https://www.reinwardt.ahk.nl/en/news-and-events/news/article/artikel/2020/11/ethnology-lab-on-the-workings-of-covid-19-on-museums-1/

Conference Publication:

 Reinwardt Academy, Amsterdam University of the Arts (ed.): Ethnology Lab on the Workings of Covid-19 on Museums. 2021.
https://www.reinwardt.ahk.nl/media/rwa/docs/Lectoraat/Reinwardt-SIEF-Covid-19.pdf

Many thanks to Hester Dibbits and the Reinwardt Academy!

2) Election of chairs and secretary

Chairs:
Hester Dibbits (Reinwardt Academy)
Lizette Graden (Lund University)
Uta Karrer (Fränkisches Museum Feuchtwangen)

Secretary:
Stefan Hartmann (University of Augsburg)

3) Working Group Conference in 2022

In fall 2022 at Reinwardt Academy (Planned)

Preparatory meeting: In September 2021

Suggestions for topics: Museums and politics; Museums and Knowledge Exchange; gender in relation to traditional crafts and participation; revitalization and reconstruction of crafts, community building and museums