

Ethnology Lab
on the Workings
of Covid-19 on
Museums

Table of Contents

4 Introduction

Collecting during crises

- 7 Back to normality? Everyday life defies Corona
Janette Helm and Raffaella Sulzner - Museum of Everyday Culture Waldenbuch

- 18 Collecting, analyzing and exhibiting everyday experience during the Covid-19 pandemic
Birgit Johler and Christiane Rainer - Volkskundemuseum Graz

- 27 Systematic collecting or rapid response?
Judith Schühle and Jana Wittenzellner - Museum Europäischer Kulturen

- 40 Life in times of corona: Antwerp citizens, MAS and FelixArchief creating the corona-archives together
Sofie De Ruysser - Stad Antwerpen

Practical challenges

- 46 Covid-19 and the Inclusive Museum
Uta Karrer - Vogtland Open Air Museum

- 56 What happens to exhibitions about performance when the body cannot be present?
Caroline Spitzner - Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil

- 67 (De)accessioning nationality during Covid-19 pandemic
Milja Jelenic - Yugoslav Film Archive

Academic reflections

- 76 Urgency and alliances of convenience
Marija Đorđević - University of Belgrade

Policy reflections

- 81 In the times of Corona(virus): culture and museums
Masha Vukanovic - Center for Study in Cultural Development, Belgrade, Serbia



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Introduction

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On 8 and 9 October 2020, the Reinwardt Academy hosted the digital conference *Ethnology Lab on the Workings of Covid-19 on Museums*. The online gathering was coordinated in close collaboration with the Working Group on Museums and Material Culture of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF), as well as ICOM's International Committee for Collecting (COMCOL). The programme was geared to address the challenges faced by museums and cultural heritage institutions in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. With this the organisers set out to provide a virtual platform for museum professionals and academics to establish a dialogue with one another, and in so doing, explore matters of common concern. These included some of the transformative shifts observed recently in the collection dynamics of museal and archival institutions, changes in the conception of participatory and inclusiveness strategies, and the emergence of new possibilities for cultural programming and exhibiting against the backdrop of uncertainty.

Everyday practices are considered key in ethnology. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it were the firsthand experiences with the Covid-19 situation of ethnologist and museum director Uta Karrer that spearheaded the idea behind this conference. In line with the aims of SIEF's Working Group of Museums and Material Culture, that is, to connect and strengthen the fields of ethnology and museum work, the conference set out to discuss how the pandemic is impacting the ongoing and future work practices of researchers, ethnologists and museum professionals.

A theme brought in by organising partner COMCOL centred around contemporary collecting as well as rapid response collecting in relation to everyday life during the pandemic. Is it ethical for members of staff to be dispatched 'outdoors' at a time of deteriorating public health circumstances in the name of collecting, processing and showcasing firsthand

experiences pertaining to the pandemic? If so, how should employers proceed in order to keep their staff members safe as they navigate their ethnological/museum work? Which materials ought to be collected, and how may the choices that have been made impact broader questions of (digital) accessibility and inclusiveness in representation?


It is precisely these kinds of questions which the Reinwardt Academy considers crucial for future heritage professionals to discuss. In the current research programme special attention is paid to the issue of how heritage professionals and academics actively *make* heritage through their practice, and the different ways of dealing with emotions and knowledge of the stakeholders in the process of heritage-making. What role(s) do these (f)actors play in times of crisis? Future approaches to heritage-making can benefit by the ethnological and social anthropological reflections gathered by different stakeholders as they undergo the present pandemic.

Practical issues and ethical dilemmas proved to be a fruitful starting point by delving into the lived experiences of museum professionals. In the midst of a very uncertain time, we asked ourselves: *Are we doing the right thing(s)?* It was consoling for participants and organisers alike to have a space and a designated opportunity to share personal experiences and formulate concerns, without needing to come up with immediate answers or solutions. It was helpful to learn how others have dealt (or are dealing) with issues similar to those we may face. An aspect that proved to be valuable was the opportunity to gain a panoramic insight into the workings of different forms of organisations across varying settings in the museums and cultural heritage field: from moving image archives and open-air folklore museums to contemporary art establishments and municipal cultural policymaking bodies.

Based on actual observations in their respective organisations, participants weighed in the impact of museological and ethnological considerations. Their position as such helped them to abstract themselves from purely practical concerns, allowing them to focus on what is it that truly shapes a person's experience during a pandemic. This resulted in a broad variety of reflections on cultural management, everyday life as a museum professional, the meaning of (re)presentation and the intricacies of being situated in a particular living and working environment. This publication offers a selection of these reflections,

organised in four different themes: collecting during crises, practical challenges, academic reflections and policy reflections..

This conference would not have been possible without the help of numerous people whom we would like to thank for their indispensable contribution: Marit van Dijk and Jule Forth, who took up the role of organisers as one of their first assignments in the newly-established *Heritage Lab* of the Reinwardt Academy; alumni Camilla Michelini and Camilla Miorelli, who did a great job in moderating the online conference; our alumnus Juan Aguirre Fernández-Bravo, who took care of the conference report and edited the papers in this publication in collaboration with Camila Miorelli, and last but not least, the presenters from all over the world. We are grateful to all of you who shared your personal experiences in and of these complicated times.



Academic reflections

Urgency and Alliances of Convenience

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**Disclaimer: The coming paragraphs are a set of semi-structured thoughts aiming to stir a conversation and hopefully disagreement, leading to an agreement. The issues below were thought about and are now written while coming to terms with the new altered view of personal and collective action and responsibility. They are a reaction to a personal case of stepping away from what is felt as important, a reaction to a realization of different sorts of opportunistic or convenient actions and a way for figuring out if amends should be made. Read them with caution and, if provoked or even slightly interested, join me in a conversation: dordevicmarija86@gmail.com.*

A caption for the year 2020: “the seemingly unlimited possibilities of communication ‘meet’ the physical confinement and reduction of mobility”. One impact of this oxymoron is an altered comprehension of the present time. The present is equated with urgency: urgency of supplying, of adjusting limits, of communicating and of bettering later-to-be positions. Accompanied by a sense of solidarity and hospitality, the need for alliances resonated louder this time around. Alliances are by no means a product of the pandemic, or limited to the beginning and duration of social movements; they are always a faithful companion of uncertainty, precariousness and the imperative to stay afloat.

The act of ‘allying’ is in many ways a corporal and spatial phenomenon, as it is determined and conditioned by bodies coming together to express consensus on solidarity, content or discontent (Butler 2015). In this case, the issue of allying oneself is inextricable from the notion of consent, i.e. of giving or not giving permission to interact and, in so doing, instigating communication and its numerous consequences.

In a corporal sense, the pandemic has altered the physical present tense of communication. One of the common effects of the declared 'states of emergency' around the world has been the limiting of bodily participation within our community(ies), regardless of how we define it. This change of perceiving and sensing physicality is by no means a new occurrence. It has been here ever since the quiet takeover of the digital. In many ways, the heritage or museum fields and their people have already, more or less, successfully adapted their practice to digital/online demands.

However, this time around, the non-physical format was not a matter of choice, but an imposition. Diving into all-digital/online-available formats, the approach to building a community has radically changed. The sense of (or need for) belonging or participating has severely intensified. Alliances are built on each and every level, from constructing systems to provide supplies and disinfection to households, to supporting precarious health systems and, finally, to using solidarity within confinement in order to loudly confirm our physical existence to other bodies outside of the four walls of our homes: by singing or clapping, and in some places by expressing discontent with how the situation is approached by state apparatuses. This is what we, privileged people, do, as we can allow ourselves to stay safe, in literal terms.

As the circulation of work has not been paused but only rearranged (at the speed of light, one should add), the demand for achievement and, for young academics especially, of professional visibility required a new form of intervention. This sensation is probably as old as time, but on this occasion, due to the circumstances, the reflection on the reasons why we build alliances (or do not) was unavoidable. Professional, personal and above all individual self-reflection necessarily followed. Even when sheltered by existing protocols for the day-to-day operation of institutional settings and the tools that come with them (to adjust swiftly to the changing circumstances, such as rapid response collecting methods), the issues of institutional purposefulness and ethics come to the fore.

Without wishing to make a qualifying judgment of right versus wrong (especially in terms of professional choice and delivery), our research lens needs to turn to the issues of convenience and consent when thinking of alliances; to the morals of what we have chosen to be our "contribution" and why we made a particular choice; to the simple, but very pervasive,

question: what does one give their consent for? In terms of consent, it seems that 'giving it' is most effectively visible when two or more bodies are physically present—from explicitly vocalizing it, to providing a signature. However, in the present realm of 'altered physicality', the issue seems to rest on the mixing (up) of consent and convenience. The lack of an actual physical encounter when giving consent via online platforms means that this process often boils down to the issue of convenience; to the compulsory character of 'ticking the box' in order to proceed swiftly to enjoying the wanted services.

The same issue seems to appear in the pandemic-affected museum-related field (of course as seen from a screen, and within the unaltered physical relations between one's body and the couch, dining table or a balcony—when one is lucky to be based in a safe home). In the wave of urgency, numerous museum responses emerged. Some provided free-access to their digitized treasures, which very often does not occur in the non-pandemic reality. Some attempted to 'crisis collect' in numerous ways, from collecting contemporary objects to contemporary reflections on/of their own collection. However, the question is how these collections look like to those who are not involved, the observers of a reflective and sometimes critical kind. These appear as snippets coming from privileged people, since it is the communities managing to keep safe that have the time and means to digitally participate. If this assumption is true, the question is: what kind of a historical quote are we preparing to be inherited as the image of Covid-19? Why does it seem like we are perceiving these personalized additions to data and collections as newer and (in some cases) better historical material than the past archival materials on epidemics? Finally, why do we choose to showcase only one type of resilience, without touching upon the costs paid to provide security for some and not for all?

Some institutions were actually capable of breaking with this pattern and, in a state of urgency, modify their communication pathways. They became institutions for the benefit of their community, institutions taking an active role in building alliance systems or supply chains for the communities in one way or another impacted by the pandemic. Some took a good look at their means of communication and did their best to diversify the applicable media. Some made a commitment to their existing users (communities) to do their best to fulfill their side of the deal. Other institutions attempted to pause, take a wholesome look at the present, and transform it into analyzable material for the building of new relations and

tools to be applied in the future. Certain institutions also decided not to do too much at all, whenever the circumstances at hand allowed for this to be the case.

Regardless of the fact that each chosen path has its own justification and therefore can be exempt from harsh criticism, as not all institutions need to reach out and cater for their community in the same way (or at all, for that matter), the answer as to why certain approaches are applied and why specific pathways will be followed seems inconclusive.

What will be is yet to be seen, but the confrontation of saying 'yes' and 'no' that was made so visible in the past six months will be difficult to circumvent once we achieve the 'new' normality. The initial fear is turning into saturation, and what this 'overflow' brings can only be speculated for now. What we do have for the time being is a testimony of non-disclosure as to why we do the things we do, and why we give consent and act in certain ways. It seems like an effort was made to provide new kinds of documentation to explain our world to future imaginaries/generations, but it must be admitted that these efforts might have already failed to fulfill their intent as convenience took primacy over consent when alliances were made. Museums of the romantic West kept their position undisrupted and gave us what we already own, (un)intentionally remaining in a 'vacuum of silence' regarding what could be imagined as their sense of purpose.

References

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Colofon

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