

# THE MUSEUM AS FORUM AND ACTOR

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THE MUSEUM OF NATIONAL ANTIQUITIES, STOCKHOLM. STUDIES 15

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ILLUSTRATION ON BACK COVER

"Handcuffs. 2005, Zagreb, Croatia, Atam me..." One of the objects donated to The Museum of Broken Relationships. See Olinka Vištica's article in the book. Photo: Ana Opalic

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# DIFFICULT MATTERS

## MUSEUMS, MATERIALITY, MULTIVOCALITY

EVA SILVÉN

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This text introduces the Swedish museums' interest in contextualized, contemporary collecting. First it will discuss the impact of the topics of investigation: well-ordered everyday life, ethically problematic issues, and unforeseen catastrophes. Secondly, it deals with the meaning and materiality of objects. Finally, museum collecting and collections management are viewed as a public interface, with an as yet rather underexplored potential for multivocal and alternative interpretations.

### COLLECTING FOR AN UNKNOWN ADDRESSEE

Since the 1970s, and within the Samdok network for contemporary collecting, Swedish museums of cultural history have continuously conducted studies of contemporary, modern, everyday life and its changes. These studies constitute an extensive body of material – comprising objects, photographs, interviews, observations, field reports – for future knowledge of our time. However, museums do not only document what happens, they also create memory and meaning, through the processes of defining and selecting collective heritage. But what understanding of our society have museum professionals created? What has been included, and what has been marginalized? To explore this, critical examinations have been made, and in this context I will concentrate on two projects (for other reviews, see Silvé 2004, Silvé & Gudmundsson 2006).

In 1996, together with a colleague, I published a book called *Addressee unknown. Tomorrow's museum artefacts* (Björklund & Silvé-Garnert 1996). It contained contributions from 68 Swedish museums: one object and one narrative each, selected from their own collections to represent the period after the Second World War. Among the chosen objects were Benny Andersson's syn-

thesizer (from the group ABBA), a child's jogging dress, a city bus, musician's boots, waitress's shoes and a pint from a seaside restaurant, and a "Wettex miracle cloth". The media was surprised: What? Museums collecting our times? My dishcloth a museum artefact? Every workplace, every bar, every home a potential museum?

When we as editors had gathered all the contributions together, we found that they could be used not only to present and represent the museums' contemporary collecting but also for discussing museological issues concerning interpretation, categorization, and the multivocality of both objects and museums. In the scholarly field of "material culture studies" in the 1990s these aspects were favoured over earlier, more factual ways to research artefacts. In the introduction of the book, we referred to the American media scholar Neil Postman, who had declared that every single museum tries to formulate an answer to the fundamental question: *What does it mean to be a human being?*

"No museum I know of, not even the awesome British Museum, gives a complete answer to this question, and none can be expected to. Every museum, even an unpretentious one such as the Anne Frank House, gives only a partial answer. One might say, that there is a great conversation going on among the museums of the world. For each museum seems to make an assertion about the nature of humanity, sometimes supporting and enriching each other's claims but just as often contradicting each other" (Postman 1989).

That was precisely how the 68 contributions collected in the book worked. By bringing them together we were listening to a dialogue between 68 museums, 68 curators, and 68 objects, all discussing *What does it mean to be a human being?* For the Museum of Architecture, the human being was a house-builder; for the Transport Museum, a passenger on trams and buses; for the Museum of Work, she was a cleaner, and for the Army Museum, he was at war. Some museums and objects depicted people as social beings who sent Christmas cards and had love-lives. Others emphasized people at work – in the countryside, in factories, in offices. Several museums wanted to tell stories about active human beings on trains or in cars, with a satchel, a thermos, and a t-shirt. Some brought us into the home to show us family life, while others indicated a more problematic world, with politics, war, and migration.

Along the same multivocal line, we were also inspired by the French poet, linguist, encyclopaedist, etc. Raymond Queneau and his books *Cent mille milliards de poèmes / Hundred thousand billion poems* (1961) and *Exercices de style / 99 ways to tell a story* (1947). The first book led us to consider the 68 objects as having the potential for telling ever-new stories about modern men and

women. The helmet from the shipyard in the city of Landskrona, with the sticker from the local football team on it, could be one line in a sonnet about place identity – together with the t-shirt from the region Roslagen, the Sami bag from Västerbotten county, the sheepskin stool from Gotland, the bagpipes from Dalarna, and the brass candlestick from Västmanland. The helmet could also be a line in a sonnet about how people protect their bodies and safeguard their health and hygiene – together with the flameproof protective shoes, the Sami overall, the road worker's cap, the ergonomic cleaning trolley, the condom, the dialysis machine, and the bar of Lux soap. Or it could be a line in a sonnet about Swedish industry – this time together with the scaling machine from the Dannemora mines, the electronic callipers from the C. E. Johansson factory in the city of Eskilstuna, the engineering equipment from the workshop Meken in Lidköping, as well as cars, buses, and locomotives made by Volvo, Saab, and Asea.

Queneau's second book inspired us to read the texts from the museum curators as "exercises in style". The individual museum curators, with their differing temperaments, selection principles, interests, knowledge – and gender – made up a sample-card of a number of alternative ways to describe, collect, and display objects: personal, dramatic, emotional, technical, or in catalogue style. Learned expositions on origin, essays in cultural analysis, technical data, and phenomenological field experiences were blended with personal recollections and preferences. We encountered a multitude of voices and opinions, none of which was truer than any other; it was rather a question of choosing different angles and focusing on different properties of the objects.

But – in spite of these possibilities – we finished the book with some critical questions. We wondered whether there was a bias towards the rational, institutional, concrete, long-term, familiar, and well-organized. Did we get a description of post-war Sweden that was rich in nuances and contrasts; with both socially accepted and unaccepted things, and with both the bright and the dark sides of life? Or was it a Sunday-best portrait, or even a kind of invocation? Who saved objects that testified to the dark sides of life, to what was problematic, disgusting, or dangerous? Who dared to look for problems among quietly resting artefacts?

## DETECTING DIFFICULTY

So – with these reflections in mind we turned once again to our network, with a new appeal: choose a "difficult" artefact with a story. We didn't define "difficult" in the appeal, but on one hand we thought of objects explicitly associated with



Fig. 1. Alarm clock from M/S Estonia. Photo: Gunnel Ilonen, the Maritime Museum.

matters like taboo, unpleasantness, sorrow, loss, and intolerance and on the other hand of seemingly innocent things, where a narrative was needed to get a full understanding. In 2006, we finished a second book, *Difficult matters. Objects and narratives that disturb and affect* (Silvén & Björklund 2006). Compared to the first book the scope was broadened in three ways.

Firstly, the chosen object should be from the museum's collection but did not necessarily need to be contemporary. The idea was to stimulate the curators to take a deeper and more critical look at their holdings, and to search for ambiguities and alternative meanings among all kinds of artefacts.

Secondly, the work with the book was accompanied by a series of seminars, focusing on how museums had acted in relation to complicated political and ethical issues. At the seminar *When life falls apart* the discussion was about the museums' role in connection with major accidents and disasters, such as, for example when the M/S Estonia sank in the Baltic Sea in September, 1994, and 852 people drowned. A tiny alarm clock was acquired by the Maritime Museum from a surviving passenger (fig. 1), alongside interviews from other survivors and relatives of the dead. The museum also accessed the huge bow visor that most likely caused the collapse of the vessel (fig. 2). The interesting thing about the clock is its story, without which it would lose all relevance, and while to a greater extent the visor speaks for itself, it still perhaps is not enough. The physical artefact and its narrative are two inseparable parts of the same his-





Fig. 2. The bow visor from M/S Estonia. Photo: Gunnel Ilonen, the Maritime Museum.

torical document – one tangible, the other intangible. This was an aspect we developed more thoroughly within the second book.

Another seminar, *Good work and bad?*, explored how museums could go about painting a nuanced picture of contemporary working life; not just the enriching and worthy but also the harmful and discriminating. A third seminar, *In the diaspora*, asked whether museums had a tendency to favour stable and institutional phenomena, and posed the question of how they could approach those people who have lost a fixed point in life – as a result of migration, homelessness, and social marginalization. The final seminar, *Death and madness*, was geared to how museums handle ethically complex matters and objects, for example, the question of how human remains are treated in museums and exhibitions, or what stance do museums adopt on the issue of what is “normal” and what is “different”.

The third distinction between the two books was that the second one was accompanied by a travelling exhibition, or rather a field station, developed in collaboration with the Swedish Travelling Exhibitions, a public, national institution. The exhibition was built into a trailer, which travelled across Sweden for almost ten months. Inside there was room for 54 physical objects from the same number of museums, each with a text about its background and history. Some of them had an obvious problematic context, like the bullet-ridden sur-



Fig. 3. Inside the *Difficult Matters* trailer, September 2000. The museum objects in the show-cases, the accompanying texts in the folders. The visitors' contributions are seen along the walls. Photo: Maria Söderberg.

veillance camera from the robbery of a post office and the hand grenade from an aircraft hijacking. But there were also less obvious difficulties represented, such as the bottle of mineral water that people had had to buy when their wells had been destroyed by a tunnel project, the painting box that had fatally poisoned a one-year-old girl in 1871, and the little white stone that had calmed a man at a mental hospital, instead of an antipsychotic drug.

During the ten month period, the trailer stopped in 27 places – all of which were the cities of the participating museums – and visitors were invited to contribute their own difficult things to the exhibition (figs. 3 & 4). Two curators, both ethnologists, travelled with the exhibition, to discuss with people and they were joined by colleagues from the local museums. In all, narratives from just over 300 visitors were documented, ranging from long accounts connected to physical objects to short recollections and comments. The visitors' stories were successively presented on the inside walls of the trailer, and some were included in the book alongside the museums' objects. Both the visitors' and the museums' contributions were based on a common cultural definition of "difficulty", namely accidents and sudden death, Nazism and the Second



Fig. 4. The *Difficult Matters* trailer, December 1999. Photo: Mats Brunander.

World War, setbacks at work, rootlessness and migration, questions concerning health, the body, and sexuality. However, visitors talked more about personal shortcomings and the loss of close friends, belongings, and confidence rather than the larger societal issues. Their objects reflected this: a farewell gift from colleagues after a dismissal representing social and economic disaster, a dead bird as an expression of a young girl's sorrow, and an empty jewellery

box left after a burglary which signified a concrete violation of personal integrity. These were artefacts that people deliberately had kept and now brought to the trailer. Both inside and outside museums the material world is significant in the shaping of history, meaning and identity.

“Difficulty” is not just something that exists; it has to be detected and is contextually conditioned. But it is seldom a matter of a special history alongside the “ordinary” one. It is – or should be – an *aspect* of all historical contexts and representations, as the museum professional George Abungu put it in the epigraph to the book: “Maybe we should say that all objects are difficult until they prove they are not.” For the participating museums one dramatic effect of the process was that the discussion of artefacts as bearers of meaning acquired new energy. Using “difficulty” as both a trace element and a key, the value and awareness of ambiguity, sensibility, and emotional aspects in relation to objects, museums, and exhibitions increased (cf. Kavanagh 2002, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2002, Edwards, Gosden & Phillips 2006, Simon & Bonnell 2007).

There was also a lot of talk about artefacts that were difficult for the curators themselves, things that provoked and questioned the museums’ common order and routines. Refused, denied, and actively forgotten objects came up from desk drawers, where they had been hiding, like the small pornographic film *Belinda*, from the 1950s or 60s. New ethical considerations also played a part; for example when one museum decided not to let its chosen object follow the tour of the exhibition. This object was a skull from a named woman who had taken her own life in prison in 1882 while waiting for execution. The skull’s place in the trailer was left empty, as in the book, and so the issue of the museums’ treatment of human remains was introduced by the power of absence – a method often used by artists to represent hidden, untold, or dark parts of history, as in Christian Boltanski’s *The missing house* (Berlin 1990) and Antony Gormley’s *Site of remembrance* (Oslo 2000).

As editors we believed that museums, as public institutions, have a moral obligation to act in relation to contemporary processes, as well as special opportunities, through the authority and the serious purpose that is usually associated with them. Museums have a solid platform for involvement in complex events, for engaging in a critical duel with the problematic sides of history and taking responsibility for preserving individual people’s experiences of general societal processes. This responsibility also includes showing empathy and playing a part in society’s emotional crisis management and reconciliation on the basis of the museums’ specific abilities, such as offering a non-commercial, non-confessional place for reflection on existential matters in a historical

and cultural perspective. For example, this role has been realized in already existing and planned “Memorial & Museum” sites, paying honour to, among others, the victims of the Holocaust, of apartheid in South Africa, and of the attack on the World Trade Center in New York in September 2001.

## A PUBLIC INTERFACE

Ideas concerning collecting and collections management have changed radically during the last decades. Cultural heritage no longer stands primarily for a shared history or a positive identity construction. Instead, the term has become a possible tool for exposing conflicts and unequal power relations and for coming to terms with colonial experiences and other major traumas.

In the 1970s, the Swedish museum curator who wanted to be contemporary and oriented towards society took an interest in working life and industrial production, mainly from a bottom-up perspective. In the 1980s and 90s, questions concerning immigration, ethnicity, and gender began to appear on the agenda. Today, in the 21st century, there is a growing interest in minority and indigenous issues and in the global flow of people, ideas, and cultural expressions. New spheres of investigation have appeared beyond national boundaries (Isacson & Silvén 2006). Over the same time period, there has been a shift in the view of museum collections and collecting: from *artefacts*, objectively representing different physical settings, to *material culture*, with a growing emphasis on the social meaning of objects and their role in people’s construction of identity and memory, to today’s *materiality* (cf. Miller 2005). This last concept attempts to blur the borders between the material and the immaterial, between people and their things, between artefacts and conceptions. It stands for a phenomenologically influenced interest in people’s simultaneous experience of an object’s physical, tangible, sensual, and emotional qualities. It opens up for a performative view of the material world, and allows for consideration of both humans and artefacts as actors in power relations and other forms of social life. In doing this, it makes new approaches to the collections possible.

As a consequence of these changes, there has been a movement from collecting for an unknown future towards contemporary processes of self-reflection, identity making, and cultural understanding, together with an ambition to turn the public from objects of study to collaborators. Collecting, field research, and collections management have become a *public interface*, a channel whereby a museum can communicate with its users, and become an arena where they can meet in a joint quest for knowledge and multi-faceted under-

standings. In parallel, collecting and collections management have turned into *emancipatory tools* for groups who want to make their imprint onto the public creation of history, particularly indigenous peoples and minorities.

Thus, museum research and collecting is no longer based on the concept of an alien fieldworker heading out to find material to bring back to the museum to display and/or save for posterity. Today the question deals with what significance contemporary studies have for a museum's dialogue with the surrounding society and for satisfying the growing demands for diversity. Mutual research and collaborative approaches with affected "source communities" (or "descendent communities") have been developed, for example, in the way museums handle collections from aboriginal peoples, with the aim of building up trust and knowledge on the basis of sustainable and more symmetric relations. Not surprisingly, this dialogue will often include "difficult" matters and ethically multi-dimensional issues.

Collections of artefacts or photographs can work as "contact zones" as well as collaborative projects like exhibitions, archaeological excavations, and anthropological fieldwork (Simpson 1996/2001, Clifford 1999, Peers & Brown 2003, Brown & Peers 2006, Loring 2008). Other co-operative practices have been drawn up regarding repatriation and/or joint custody of heritage, including human remains as well as other culturally sensitive artefacts (cf. Gabriel & Dahl 2008). Questions also arise concerning the ways in which the collections are ordered, according to Western academic epistemologies and ontologies; and terms like "decolonizing methodologies" have been adopted with the purpose of legitimizing the source communities' own systems of value and meaning (cf. Smith 1999/2008; Loring 2008). Equally, the "new museology" has problematized the collectors' and the museums' categorizations and classificatory systems creating a discussion about possible alternative understandings of the source material (Stewart 1984/1993; Svanberg 2010). If combined, these perspectives may lead to interesting re-interpretations of museum collections, giving voice to a more in-depth multivocality than the curators' "exercises in style" and potentially giving birth to quite new topics and approaches.

All in all, collecting and collections management have become a part of the museums' democratic assignment and of their "outreach". Today, no museum can ignore questions such as: Which people and phenomena are represented in their collections, exhibitions, and other forms of cultural heritage? How can emotionally fraught issues be tackled? How can evil be involved – in particular the great crimes of history, both yesterday and today? It has become impossible to speak about cultural heritage without simultaneously asking the questions: Which heritage? Whose heritage?



Fig. 5. "Proud parents of homo/bi-sexual sons & daughters." Europride, Stockholm, July 2009. Photo: Eva Silvéen.

### MARCHING FOR THOSE WHO CAN'T

In conclusion, one last example. In the summer of 2008, I was part of a team from the museum doing fieldwork during the Europride week in Stockholm. For me, as an outsider, it was a professional and important assignment and an attempt to establish a new field of collecting. For others it was also an emancipatory act, bringing voices and traces from their own life circumstances into the collections. Our work resulted in field diaries, photographs, interviews, artefacts, and archive material (fig. 5). Among the 80 acquired objects were some attributes of the "Proud Parents" association as well as the gay club "Viking Bears". The flags, standards, and other rainbow-coloured accessories were objects which usually disappear over time; making contemporary collecting an urgent task for those who want the museums to represent the whole of society. Many museums were involved during the week, with special exhibitions and



Fig. 6. "Marching for those who can't." Europride, Stockholm, July 2009. Photo: Eva Silvéen.

public programmes, but no other collecting was conducted apart from ours. This is one way for museums to contribute, with their specific resources, to the fight for human rights. In their collections and exhibitions museums can allow different groups of people to speak for themselves, and make visible those who have been marginalized, silenced, or discriminated against. In 2009 the Pride Parade in Belgrade was cancelled by the police, with reference to the risk of disorder, which reminds us that the topic could be a far more difficult matter in other places than in Sweden. Accordingly, in a part of the parade in Stockholm the participants announced that they were "marching for those who can't".



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