SWICH Co-Collecting workshop

19 - 20 October 2015
Research Center for Material Culture, National Museum of World Cultures, Leiden

Museums have moral obligations to give communities the tools to give them the opportunity to present their culture in non-Western institutions. – **JOE HORSE CAPTURE**

Co-collecting means that we have to get closer to our communities. Leading but also listening. – **SEAN MALLON**

Co-collecting is about the establishment of relationships. – **MAUREEN MATTHEWS**

The workshop opened with a welcome by **Stijn Schoonderwoerd** (Stichting NMVW, Leiden) and **Laura Van Broekhoven** (Stichting NMVW, Leiden), expressing their hopes that the two days would contribute to developing future co-collecting policies for ethnographic museum. Such practices coincided with the National Museum of World Culture's new mission, which foregrounded the importance of collaboration as an important working method for the NMVW, and in fact for any museum of the 21 century.

In response to the focus on questions of heritage and citizenship as set out in the workshop description, the first session was dedicated to exploring the national contexts within which collaborative collecting happens. Keynote speaker **Joe Horse Capture** of the National Museum of the American Indians, Smithsonian Institution, signaled the importance for a rethinking of fixed notions of what a museum should be and how it should work. Traditional conceptions of museums, according to him, as authoritative institutions that collect, preserve and exhibit may be too limited for the 21st century. Museums need to find new models to work with native peoples, especially in ways that native people's find important, to undo historical wrongs, heal wounded relations and contribute to the reclamation lost histories. For Joe Horse Capture, thinking about co-collecting in this sense is not just about collecting together, but in ensuring that Native people's not only have access to the

collections that museums hold, but are also equipped to finding their own models for the preservation and interpretation of these collections. This, Joe Horse Capture suggested, could move beyond contemporary practices of consultation to include real partnerships with tribal museums, curatorial fellowships for native peoples and importantly educational activities for non-native people's on the proper forms of representation for native histories and cultures. The point of teaching non-native peoples about the issues related to representing native histories and cultural worlds, would be an important step in ensuring more sensitive and correct representation of native lifeworlds.

In the discussion that followed, moderated by **Ian Lilley** (Leiden University, Leiden), questions were raised about issues of funding choices in partnership and exhibitions. One question, which raised important responses, was whether current trends in ethnographic and world cultures museums towards thematic exhibitions rather than exhibitions about specific groups would lead to defused more universalists presentations, and whether such presentations could negatively affect the redressive possibilities that exhibitions can have or their impact in helping in recuperating silenced or lost histories. In response Joe Horse Capture suggested that both these practices were possible, but made a plea not to fall trap to presenting the view that all Native Americans (or any group) are the same. It was important for museums, in focusing on the specific of particular groups and their histories to contribute to agenda's that help rather than hinder their cause for historical redress and healing.

As a follow-up to the keynote, four case studies were presented, exploring best-practice examples for collaborative collecting within national contexts. **Denis Chevallier** (MuCEM, Marseille) focused on MuCEM's collecting campaigns, with special attention to the 2014 campaign *Economy of Waste*. These campaigns are linked to research/exhibition projects. With these collections projects the focus was not so much on collaborating with 'source community' experts, which have become one of the accepted method for many ethnographic museums, but with local academics. This suggestion raised the question if this could contribute to pushing the boundary of our practices towards more equal terms for collaboration? Could this suggestion of working with local academics demand that we think more critically about the power relations are implicit to some of the 'source community' work that are currently done by our museum?

Danielle Kuiyten (Imagine IC, Amsterdam) explained Imagine IC's recent experiments with collecting (online) stories to provide a stage for voices from postcolonial and labor migrant communities. Their practices foreground much of the contemporary museological developments around shared authority and participation. **Helen Mears** (Brighton Museum, Brighton) presented Brighton Museum's attempt to formulate strategies in response to the firmly established social turn in UK's museum practice, using the collaboration between the museum and a specific groups of citizens on their upcoming exhibition *African Fashion Cities*. For her, while these policies and practices have had tremendous benefits in pushing the museums towards more publicly accountable practices, we should question whether top down policy initiatives [whether from government or government agencies] are blinded to the real complexities of museum practices or whether, though well intentioned, they can account for, for example, the limits and possibilities that collections afford. How do we do collaborative work, while maintaining integrity in our work with collections. **Luit Mols** (Stichting NMVW, Leiden) talked about the practices of co-collecting attempted during the *Verlangen naar Mecca (Longing for Mecca)* exhibition, as well as the role of these collections for the exhibition and for building relationships with underrepresented communities to the museum.

The second session of the workshop was dedicated to looking at collaborative collecting practices within trans- or international citizenship regimes and practices of belonging. Keynote speaker **Sean Mallon** (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington) focused on the different histories of (co-) collecting in his museum, which he described as being underpinned by a core principle of Mana Taonga, which means the power of objects/treasures. Mallon explored the advantages of these practices, which, for him, included setting the framework for shared authority between the museum and different stakeholder groups about what should be collected/collectable, improving documentation of existing collections, as well as activating relationships between museums and their various communities. He also spoke about the challenges museum faced, which included the lack of institutional time and resources for real sustained relationship with communities. He suggested that museums should take a leading but listening role if they wish to be relevant places for the communities. What do different stakeholders want from us?

Subsequent questions moderated by **Wonu Veys** (Stichting NMVW, Leiden), handled issues of long-term cooperation and restitution.

Again, four case studies followed. **Nicholas Thomas** (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge) presented the project *The Power of Paper*, an exhibition about Australian, Canadian and South-African printmaking as a way of representing communities that are different, yet linked by empire and politics of decolonization. Additionally, he used the case of early boat models within the museum collection to ask whether our ideas about co-collecting could not be expanded to include earlier fieldwork practices where 'indigenous informants/knowledge holders were important to and had influence on what was collected within museum. This, could suggest the need to see various forms of collecting practices both in the past and present as forms of co-presence; collaborative practices in collections formation and therefore in forms of representation.

Martin Petersen (Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen) explained how the processes of working on the exhibition *Girl with Parasol* with stakeholder groups became a kind of collaborative representation of Japanese popular culture. **Claudia Augustat** (Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna) and **Laura Van Broekhoven** (Stichting NMVW, Leiden) together considered the pros (new acquisitions, contacts, European collaboration) and cons (planning & logistics, communication, questions of authority) of bringing Guapore indigenous peoples to Europe around collections based work. On their account, long-term partnerships can only be built and sustained when museums ensure that working with community groups can be done with respect, and also accounts for the interest of the community groups.

The last session of the day was dedicated to an exploration of the ways in which digital and new media technology are changing collecting practices. Keynote speaker **Maureen Matthews** (The Manitoba Museum, Winnipeg) argued that digitalization must be seen as an important tool in furthering the relationships established in the process of co-collecting practices. Digital tagging and the digitization of objects, photos and audio recordings, can be important to different communities as they can support the recovery or knowledge of family/community histories as well as support communities in their political struggle (for self determination) including for example, territorial claims. Museums, however, should not ignore the materiality and "personhood" of objects in this process.

Subsequent questions moderated by **Bart Barendregt** (Leiden University, Leiden) addressed issues of delegitimation, repatriation and categorization. He wondered about the ways in which contemporary work by scholars such as Michael Christie, who has been working on Indigenous friendly databases, have been taken up by museums. Implicit in this question was whether or not museums were taking on board some of the work that is being done within academia or whether there was enough of a relationship between the two. Barendregt also questioned the use of the term auto-ethnography, which he felt was being proffered too easily without accounting for the complexities of what such a practice means.

Best-practice examples were presented by **Cunera Buijs** (Stichting NMVW, Leiden) who spoke about the the *Roots2Share Project*, where different collaboration around collections were carried out: (travelling) exhibitions in the Netherlands and Greenland, collection study days with community experts and the development of multilingual database. She also used this example to speak about the different levels of ownership of collections. **Wonu Veys** (Stichting NMVW, Leiden) pointed out the issue of the 'scattered archive' and access to digital images in the context of the Alexander van Leeden photography project, and asked questions about the relevancy of these images today (connecting the past to the present and dusting off knowledge).

As a conclusion of the first day of the workshop, an active debate was stimulated among participants around the concepts of citizenship and belonging. The main theme explored was the impact of political regimes (national/transnational) on co-collecting and the role of digitization within this framework. One of the key questions was whether the digital democratize knowledge or restrict access? It was also suggested that future conversations about co-collecting could take up questions about collaborating in the framework of repatriation.

The second day of the workshop started with presentations by SWICH partner museums on current collection policies, collection practices and future collection plans. This included speeches by **Laura Van Broekhoven** (Stichting NMVW, Leiden), **Bettina Zorn** (Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna), **Bojana Rogelj Škafar** and **Marko Frelih** (Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana) **Denis Chevalier** (MuCEM, Marseille), **Rosa Anna Di Lella** (Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico «Luigi

Pigorini», Rome), **Chris Wingfield** (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge), **Guido Gryseels** (Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren), **Michel Lee** (Museum for Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm) and **Georg Noack** (Linden-Museum, Stuttgart). Overall, the key topics explored were: co-creation, methodology, active versus passive collecting, institutional changes, museum histories, ethics and ways of conceiving the future. While these presentations were important to foreground the similarities and differences of how museums dealt with their collections, it also begged the question to what extent do the desires for co-collecting practices currently influence the collections policies of museums? Moreover, what are the specific ways that ideas around co-collecting could have future impact on how these museums work with their collections. This will be one of the important questions for the coming years of the project.

A roundtable discussion, dedicated to exploring the challenges of co-collecting as a (self-) representational practice, concluded the workshop. Led by moderator **Lotten Gustafsson Reinius** (Etnografiskamuseet, Stockholm), the discussion focused on the following key questions: how should ethnographic museums establish and sustain healthy relationships with the communities? What balance of power should there be between the museum and communities in co-collecting? What is the politics of representation in the process of co-collecting? Who represents whom within these practices.

Overall, the workshop made clear that ethnographic museums are in an ongoing process of change. As every museum has its own way of working, it is important to keep reflecting on co-collaborative practices together. Therefore, the Research Center for Material Culture thanks all participants for their contributions to this fruitful, trans-disciplinary event.

The video of the entire workshop will be available on the websites of the SWICH project (http://www.swich-project.eu/) and the Research Center for Material Culture (http://www.materialculture.nl/).