

COMCOL ANNUAL CONFERENCE

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Celje | Slovenia

Conference Report

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The 4th Annual Conference of COMCOL was held between 3rd and 6th of December in Celje, Slovenia, under the name *Collecting and Collections in Times of War or political and Social Change*. The three-day-long conversations, learning and sharing of knowledge started with a cultural program at the City Kino Metropol in Celje. The inspiring video performances formulated a specific collection of sounds and views of Slovenian nature and landscape. With performance of a collection, the thinking of dynamics of collecting and making narratives was started.

On the 4th of December the official panel section of the program started with a key-note speech by Leontine Meijer van-Mensch. In her lecture she referred to the necessity of acknowledging collections' dynamics and the necessity of integrative thinking in making collecting policies. She strongly advocated for the importance of collections, their narratives and their active development. When addressing collection development, she pointed to its multiple natures, ranging from contemporary collecting to the reinterpretation of the old and even expired collections. The first key-note speech was followed by a lecture of Jože Hudales, dedicated to the development of collections and museum institutions in Slovenia, as a host of the 4th Annual Conference of COMCOL. In overview the program of the morning panel section of the conference was dedicated to the more theoretical approaches to issues of collecting, collections and museums as institutions housing the latter. The speakers, including myself, offered insights into the issue of contemporary-problematic collections, either in terms of their acquisition or in terms of the narrative they embody. The lecturers offered somehow provocative views on historical and ethnographical collections, largely contested from the position of contemporary *Zeitgeist*. Besides the issue of the faith some institutions are facing, and the meta-narrative of reinterpretation as a process, Rajko Muršič addressed a broader question of importance and ownership of heritage, in his lecture titled *Critical Overview of Basic Concepts and Policies: Cultural Heritage in Historical and Political perspective*. He opted for revisiting of the basic concepts and definitions of heritage, while strongly advocating for its communal nature and value. This idea of community in his opinion refers mainly to the ways of using heritage, and the actual agencies involved in this process. He concluded his lecture with reminding the participants of their role and responsibility as heritage professionals, stating that we do not own the imperative of good taste and truth. He reminded that when dealing with heritage, those entrusted with its care for the sake of humanity should abandon the issue of copy-right and start thinking in terms of copy-left. With this empowering word-play the morning section of the second conference day was concluded.

The [afternoon section](#) of the program consisted of several presentations of current museum practice. Speakers elaborated on their work, and issues they face in day-to-day practice, when confronted with the changing world. [Nazia Ali](#) from Birmingham Museum Trust, presented the new endower of creating a joint trust of Birmingham museums. In its scope and size- from the number of operational venues to the number of objects in the collections- this museum trust is the largest of its kind in UK. Currently, according to Ali, they are still within the adjustment phase, with basic processes not yet fully implemented. She pointed to the opportunities of the merging, especially regarding the collections themselves, while now they can start with re-evaluation of their significance. Ali emphasized that Birmingham Museums now have an opportunity to re-interpret their collections so they serve the need of the contemporary public. Furthermore, with a new collection policy, yet to be defined, significant room is left to ensure collection development following the same goal. On a similar note of rethinking the existing collection and investing resources in ensuring collection development, [Minna Srantola Weiss](#) from Helsinki City Museum, presented a specific collection of early urban ethnography, housed in the museum. The collection mainly consists from photographs of urban

areas as well as of private internal spaces within them. This collection as such does not pose a problem. However in the process of its acquisition, the documentation was not made in a satisfactory manner. The latter occurred due to the initial research character of the collecting process. The newly found relevance of named collection poses a challenge for the museum today. While the collection can be used in diverse manners, the authenticity of objects is still under dispute, setting under a question mark the possibility of its further development.

Within the afternoon section speakers addressed the issues of contemporary collecting, both in terms of enriching old collections, and of collecting the contemporary life in its all diverse shades. In these terms [Alenka Pirman](#), an artist and Ph.D. student from University of Ljubljana (Slovenia), presented an interesting case of collecting contemporary social movements. She discussed a specific socio-political event in Slovenia in 2012, and the attempts of museum institutions to gather documents, which would depict it, for both present and future audiences. Pirman used an interesting word-constellation of *competitive musealisation*, to describe the way in which museum approached a same phenomenon with different agenda of interpretation. She argued that in the case of a museum the question of agency is crucial, if narrative is to be understood. Further, she warned the participants on the possibility of viewing the power relations in act, while we are the contemporaries of the process. Additionally, she pointed to the parallels we might make with old collections at our disposal.

Within the same program section using of collections for building and reinforcing identities and identification was addressed, as well. In his lecture, [Marion Bultić](#) analyzed the application of folk instrument collections in reinforcing the regional identity of Istra. He elaborated in detail how the interpretation of a specific music instrument was utilized in the region, to build and promote the notion of being Istrian. Besides the development of the narrative and the commercial use of the object, Bultić bravely addressed the issues, he as a curator faces, while being employed in the institution solely funded by the state. Especially, he did so in regards to the issues of acceptable and less acceptable interpretations of objects, in national context.

The second day of the conference was ended by a music performance and Mayor Reception in the City Hall.

The third day of the conference on the [5th of December](#) was dedicated to the broader issue of contested or troubled histories. Presenters addressed a wide range of issues, from military and looting history, to sex slavery, while giving examples of burning issues and empowering potentials of collections and museums. Within the morning session issues of presenting and reading the objects of the Great War were tackled. The latter was done both through addressing existing collections and displays, and through challenges of the non-existing objects but necessary narratives. The first issue was well illustrated by [Alys Cundy](#) in her lecture on the Imperial War Museum in London. She elaborated on its collection and exhibition created in the aftermath of the WWI, as a way of remembering the recent past and of commemorating the fallen soldiers. She referred to the museum as a specific type of a memorial complex, used as scenery for then contemporary commemorations. However, Cundy remarked that the main issue of an institution of this type is the level of relevance it holds for the present time. Its memorial function is undisputable, but a question can justly be asked if it is a museum (in despite of the collection it houses). The issue of the validity of existing collection was addressed and confronted with the notion of missing collections. [Tone Kregar](#), the curator of the Museum of Recent History in Celje, addressed exactly this issue, while introducing a temporary exhibition on WWI in the museum. The exhibition itself could be perceived as traditional however the transparency of the museum, in telling the audience how and why the exhibition faces narrative gaps is worth of congratulating. In his lecture Kregar asked the question of missing sounds and should they be filled-in today. During the

discussion within the exhibition the stated question caused a fired debate. The main point of opinion-departure was placed on marking the filled-in gaps. Some participants found it unethical to create a picture according to the contemporary visions, without leaving a clear mark of gaps once being there. Further into a discussion the question of museum's neutrality was raised. This issue caused clear divisions among participants. While some firmly advocated for the objectivity of a museum as an only way to inclusivity, other disputed this possibility. They stated that each institution of the society by its nature takes a defined political stand, further claiming, that the notion of inclusivity is utopian, while each action of inclusion implies exclusion. On this highly theoretical note the morning section of the program was concluded.

The [afternoon section](#) was divided in two panels on the topic of post-socialist heritage of former Yugoslavia. This choice was understandable having in mind that the conference was held in Slovenia, and within the region still troubled by issues of unresolved and unwanted histories. Participants of the panel discussion came from the entire region, presenting institution which were formed in socialist times and now face all the challenges of reinterpretation of their collections, narratives and histories. Maybe the most interesting issue was proposed by [Alksandra Momčilović- Jovanović](#), curator of Museum of Yugoslav History in Belgrade. As she stated, the nature of museum's collection is not correlating to the actual name of the institution, which was fashioned in 1997. All the objects stored in the collection were directly connected to the former president Josip Broz Tito (they were either his personal belongings or presents he received as a state official from foreign statesman and the people). With the collection it is almost impossible to tell the story of Yugoslavia, from its beginning to its end. Momčilović-Jovanović further stated, that museum is now entering the demanding process of redefinition of its policies and of its institutional mission and vision. She claims, that regardless the fact that museum is today located in Belgrade (Serbia), this process should not be done only by Serbian professionals. Rather she opts for a joint venture of all the former republics in formulating at least the narrative of the institution, therefore creating a possibility for multilayered interpretations. The panel discussions were ended in somehow optimistic tone of the participants being willing to directly face the challenges, and despite potentially damaging daily political circumstances, create networks for exchange of both knowledge and collections.

The idea of sharing collections and therefore narratives and interpretations, was marked as one potential way for instigating and sustaining collection development. Having in mind the importance of the practical application of collection mobility [the fourth day](#) of the conference was assigned for presentation of Dutch example of putting this notion into practice. Furthermore, the [European Collections Mobility Project](#) provided a practical workshop for the participants. The workshop on collection mobility was held at Cultural Centre of European Space Technologies (KSEVT). Following the guided tour of the center and a discussion with its creators, BA students from Reinwardt Academy in Amsterdam presented a collections mobility project they were involved with, during their studies and as part of writing their thesis. They elaborated on the potentials and pitfalls of applying this tool within several modern art museums in the Netherlands. Additionally, the challenges they encountered were elaborated on in detail, giving a clear view on what issues are to be considered when starting with a project like this. The theoretical side of collection mobility as a method and a tool for instigating and sustaining collections mobility was followed by a practical workshop. Participants were divided in several groups and handed practical tasks. The tasks were formulated with a goal of experience and knowledge exchange among professionals of diverse backgrounds, facing sometimes utterly different issues in their day-to-day practice. As the final outcome of rather intense session, the differences among museum fields were detected. In certain aspects these differences may cause unbridgeable gaps between practices. The very apparent dichotomy between situations in different parts of the world, served as a strong lesson for all present. It is necessary to be both aware and understanding of specific contexts of

museums, when thinking of creating cooperation's. Furthermore it showed that creating of networks is an imperative for effective working of individual institutions. With the thought of importance of both differences and similarities, and maybe of the unsolvable issues, the 4th Annual Conference of COMCOL was concluded. The four days gave the participants plentiful topics to think about, it opened new views for grasping the business of museums and collecting and it showed the importance of cooperating and supporting one another.