'Uses and Audiences for the Heritage of Contemporary Science'
Evaluation of the 15 June 2018 workshop at Universeum Glasgow

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Evaluation Report compiled by RW and SJMMA, September 2018

Report contents

Workshop program

1. Introduction (SJMMA and RW)

2. Short presentations:

    a. The Risks and challenges of user / audience centred collecting (Nicky Reeves, Hunterian, University of Glasgow)

    b. The opportunities of contemporary collecting (SJMMA)

    c. Who are our audiences? (Clare Meakin, National Museums Scotland)

    d. Anticipating future uses and users (RW)

3. Group discussions:

    a. who uses recent scientific heritage?

    b. risks and challenges

    c. opportunities and futures

4. Summary and evaluation

Background

This was the sixth workshop of the working group on Recent Heritage of Science (RHS), after Trondheim (2012), Valencia (2013), Hamburg (2014), Athens (2015) and Utrecht (2016). We did not conduct a workshop at Belgrade, but at the 25th International Congress of History of Science and Technology 2017 in Rio de Janeiro, RW and SJMMA discussed reviving the working group by organising a workshop on users, uses and audiences for recent heritage of science for the Universeum meeting in Glasgow. We grouped our queries into four broad areas to motivate the discussion:

Who are/who will be the users/audiences of recent scientific heritage?

- Educators, scientists, general public, students, historians, etc.

- Is there anything specific about audiences of recent heritage compared to earlier periods?

- (How) should we reach out to audiences and users for our contemporary collections or connect to new audiences/users/?

Should contemporary collecting be audience/user driven?

- Should we make audiences/users participate (engage) in our collecting activities? how could this be done?

- Should we make collecting more relevant and more transparent to our audiences/users, and how could this be done?

- How do we balance competing interests of different audiences/users (scientists/historians/educators/general public) against each other?

- What, if anything is specific to contemporary collecting?

What are the dangers of user/audience-driven collecting?

- Maybe users/audiences should have no say in collecting at all. After all, conventional archiving is not driven by the users/audiences of archives either.

- What do we miss out if we only collect things for which we can identify users, uses or audiences?

- How can we justify collecting objects for which we cannot identify users, uses or audiences?

How can we anticipate future audiences, users and uses of contemporary heritage?

- Audiences, users and uses of collections have been rapidly changing.

- How can we make these part of our collecting activities?

- How can we collect for the future without being too stuck in our (arguably short-lived) present concerns and discourses?

Discussion

After short presentations (as listed in the programme above), participants split into three groups (see appendix below) for discussions prompted by the above questions.

Group 1
- Users of recent scientific heritage include physicists, internal students and staff: showing them how they work, the difficulties and the challenges; and showcasing a negative result!

- Making scientists and staff aware they are keepers of heritage- don't throw things away – call us! And connect them with the museum – the stuff in the museum are things your predecessors developed.

- Normally scientists and staff engage only with positive results and don't present negative results. They understand this as scientists but don't think that is what should be presented.

- We should let scientists work with the students in the store. Have to look at their successes and their failures. Beyond audiences, one of your tasks at the museum is to showcase failures. It is about the way you present it. Way to create audience empowerment (same way as patient empowerment). Getting to the same level of communication. There is also a knowledge gap – how do we bridge that?

- Timeframe – how do you choose what will be relevant in 20, 30,40 years?

- How do you select your contemporary objects? There has been a significant accumulation of large objects with progressive loss of information, now they must be reduced in size.

- Engagement: in order to engage with the objects you need to touch them. Why do you collect in the first place if people cannot touch/feel/smell it? You miss out a lot if you don't do it! If you don't have a fantastic collection just use it. There has been a change in museum visitor expectations - 20 years ago no one touched the objects in the museum. Now people unscrew barrels of telescopes! Do we want to change the attitudes of the public or do we want to adapt?

- The Science Museum is trying to engage the 'engaged adult'. Should we be doing that?

- Thought-provoking vs. controversial: is out intention to be provocative arrogant? If people want to have a reaction they will have a reaction. Give information but allowing people to make up their own mind.

- Students or general public as audiences: when students come they are able to follow a discourse, because they are doing that 5 hours per day just listening to someone. They get a little scared if they are met with emotional things which is unlike school where they are protected. Whereas with the general public do engage emotionally – 'I'm not as stupid as I thought'.

- Young people may be attracted by late opening –e.g. with university students. Mixing art and science, making exclusive, good DJ, good food and drink.

Group 2

- BIG GREY BOXES present challenges and opportunities. Contemporary scientific instruments are not shiny and fetishized; but then again, we *made* historic instruments shiny and fetishized.

- (How) can we use recent heritage to make science accessible and familiar? Museums have a social responsibility in this regard, and can engender wellbeing, social benefits, and value.

- What do we mean by audiences? Large university museums have as varied a user community as other museums, but smaller university collections have audiences comprised mostly of academic staff and students.

- University museums could/should have distinct collecting agendas to engage with their specific audiences.

- University museums can work with audiences in contemporary knowledge creation.

- There are differences in audiences for recent material and relationships with them between physical and natural sciences; between museums and galleries.

- Recent material can offer different ways to engage – not only visual but also kinaesthetic.

- Old equipment can be more legible, more tangible, more visible.

- The group discussed how and whether to collect an algorithm – as the epitome of the obscure uncollectable entity – and for whom?

- Scientists are of course a significant audience group.

- Whether to not collecting is user-driven, we collect according to the stories we tell, and for the future (whatever that is) – current visitors' children, and our own successors.

Group 3

- We had a number of historians of science in the group who are engaged with contemporary heritage mainly from the perspective of teaching and research; their concerns were, however; strikingly similar to those from the group members working with collections and exhibitions.

- The discussion about audiences changes whether one looks at the large museums like National Museums Scotland, which has a mandate to engage with the 'general public', and university collections which often cater to academic communities and students. Is there a division of labour concerning recent heritage of science?

- We discussed the importance of documentation and oral history for collecting contemporary heritage.

- Maybe we should not give any concern to audiences at all in our colleting efforts. After all, we are the experts and we have to take the decision what to collect and how to represent contemporary heritage. Leaving the decision to audiences means that we are not taking our mandate and our responsibility seriously.

Feedback

After the group discussions we came together again for a plenary discussion. We agreed that recent scientific heritage was more than the project of retired professors; that collecting should include contextual information, and metadata; and that a focus on future audiences should not inhibit us from acting *now*.

We discussed how the working group can be taken further. Workshop outcomes discussed included a multi-authored paper on audiences of recent heritage, and future workshops on documentation and/or oral history.

At the end of the workshop we passed around a question sheet for impressions, comments and feedback among the participants. Comments included those transcribed below.

Lessons learned

- 'Relationship management' of interesting experiences (successful and not) made in other universities. Diversity is important to the discussion

- Context is very important; we should collect intangible heritage together with objects

- The importance of differing between collecting and presenting / exhibit the objects. The two different focusses often need different stories

- Most interesting lesson was that my concerns - as an academic historian - are very similar to those of museum professionals, librarians and archivists. It was encouraging that there was a common awareness that, practically we <u>have</u> to supervene some kind of definite view on the plurality of audience positions

- The difference between the goals / values / professional practices & proficiencies of collectors, curators and teachers

- Oral histories / interviews are required by someone who asks the 'right questions' about what audiences are interested in; the levels of information on 'what is science?', 'what do scientists do?', 'what do scientists <u>really</u> do?'

- Identifying audiences is difficult, especially in universities; not just assume that students roam in, for instance. Co-construction and sharing knowledge and experience is essential

- Museum curators have little empathy with contemporary science heritage

- There are many ways of collecting, what is right is certainly individual, and that's OK. Human context is essential

- The discussion is still very object-focussed, exhibition organisers and archive organisers still don't work together as well as they could

Users of recent scientific heritage

- Very interesting discussion on 'future & present users', no final answers

- We don't have many users in our university yet, only some historians and some lecturers. We need to do something about that

- We need to think about the murkier social realities, about how general audiences use (or ignore) scientific heritage, e.g. the tendency to augment long-standing nationalist narratives using material that, to us, just doesn't fit these narratives

- Who pays, who supports space and resources, and why is it so important? But it seems to be assumed by Europeans who have a more robust sense of heritage as 'naturally' valuable

- Maybe practical thoughts on how future users might actually use the objects

- The difference between expert and non-expert 'audiences'

- Future generations are diverse; so we are catering to many stories

- Students starting their curriculum should / could be future users; travelling shows for outreach audience representing a certain discipline or institution

- Reflections on this big issue on future users seem to be at the beginning

Risks and challenges

- The impacts on collection policies' definitions, missions & responsibilities

- Long-term perspective is important

- Over-documenting Bourgeois totalism

- Putting off till tomorrow decisions about collecting / disposal

- Who are we to think on behalf of future generations? Will collections still exist? challenged modernity

- Significant things are not necessarily engaging

- Indecision for lack of structure and long-time overview; the object history doesn't stop at the museum doors - keep documenting!

- Size, cost, poisonous compounds

Opportunities and futures

- New ideas on how to frame present-day academics and non-academics

- I like the idea of using the collections in art projects to make different stories, not only the item's 'true story'

- New audiences because of new media

- I appreciate the values of including audiences and the citizenship idea

- One of the main advantages to contemporary science heritage is that the scientists / users / creators are still alive to give context but decisions must be made as to what information / object should be kept

- Data 'objects' is a huge future research topic for museology

- We cannot do it on our own; but together we have the material for the future; collaborate but don't be afraid to make choices

- Confining art, 'time capsules,' include designers, enactments, experiments

What was not addressed

- Funding typologies and their differences between universities; their relationship between academic departments

- We were very much focussed on 'what should our values / preferences be?' There is a willingness to push on to 'what can we do in practice?' which we did not really get into

- Whether collecting contemporary heritage of science & technology is really different

- Spatial implications: space availability in existing facilities (for large devices); Accessibility of university campuses and museum collections hidden in basements and attics

- Recent scientific heritage in teaching

- The university context was almost completely neglected

- AI / automation in decision making; the role of art / artists as key to tell stories of complex ideas / objects and for cultural relevance

What worked well

- The presenters' overview, covering theoretical tease (Nicky) as well as really specific case studies (oil rig flare top)

- The size of the group was good, it was a good mix of people from different countries and museums

- Small group format - good way to network and compare experience, leading off with plenary and reporting back afterwards - old faithful approach used well

- Some thoughts from a small group of speakers in the beginning to give food for thought, then split up in groups; good interaction / respect / equal distribution of intervention; good theoretical thinking

- Good discussions, floating conversations, interesting difference in views

- Critical points emerged easily

Could be better

- Unpack different types of collections (natural history, biology, life sciences)

- The difference between archives and collections could be thought of

- The workshop should be longer; choose practical examples to discuss / decide about.

- Better focus on discussions

- Discussing critical issues in a more structured way

- Exhibition visit / case study

Format of future sessions

- Some sort of practical exercise to work collectively on, since it seems to me that specific context, funding, logistics and human resources seem to be crucial to the discussion

- Maybe build in case study examples local to the conference venue?

- Good practice surveys

- We could have used objects or an object from the collection to be an 'example object,' maybe the tape in Nicky's paper

- Some theoretical structure / more general output

- Collection plans; education and teaching of curators

- Everybody could focus on a case study from her / his own experience which resorts to the questions, and present it to the others

Final thoughts

- Interesting to think about 'active collecting' practices

- 'Un-collecting', throwing away, would be helpful to know more about

- Maybe an elaborate report that could be co-edited and circulated across museums? I am aware that this requires time / means that are not necessarily there

- Interesting but nothing brand new or world-shocking

Appendix: workshop participants

Group 1, coordinated by Clare Meakin
Eugenio Bertozzi (University Museum Network, University of Bologna)
Lieselot Cornelis (Belgium)
Sophie Goggins (National Museums Scotland) - *notes*
Hans Hooijmaijers (Rijksmuseum Boerhaave)
Rolf ter Sluis (University of Groningen)
Sofia Talas (University of Padua)

Group 2, SJMMA
Kate Arnold-Forster (Museum of English Rural Life, Reading) - *chair*
Deborah Dubald (EUI, Florence)
Alicia Hughes (Glasgow)
Bjørn Vidar Johansen (Museum of University History, University of Oslo)
Maciej Kluza (Jagiellonian University Museum)
Catarina Madruga (CIUHCT - University of Lisbon)
Lizzie Muller (LifeSpace Science Art Research Gallery, Dundee)
Zoi Sakki (Criminology Museum, University of Athens)
Josep Simon (Universidad del Rosario, Colombia)

Group 3, RW
Katharine Anderson (York University, Toronto)
Sarah Cook (LifeSpace Science Art Research Gallery, Dundee)
Liselotte Neervoort (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)
Nicky Reeves (Hunterian, Glasgow) - *floated*
James Sumner (University of Manchester)
Geert Vanpaemel (KU Leuven, Belgium)
Jörg Zaum (TU Dresden)