

# Towards new relations between the museum and society

Kathrin Pabst, Eva D. Johansen and Merete Ipsen (ed.)



# TOWARDS NEW RELATIONS BETWEEN THE MUSEUM AND SOCIETY

ICOM Norway®

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## **Preface**

The ICOM Code of Ethics was written to provide a set of basic rules for museums and museum staff. Those rules are now recognised and accepted by museums across the world and are considered an indispensable reference in the museum sector. Many countries refer to the ICOM Code of Ethics in their national museum policy guidelines.

Museums are different and work with very dissimilar themes. A set of general rules that has been devised to be applicable for museums across the world can therefore not provide in-depth guidance on all the issues that museums deal with. This suggests a need for further exploration of museum ethics.

The evolving societal role of museums raises new ethical problems. Within ICOM Norway we have seen that this creates new challenges with respect to the contemporary documentation of controversial themes, especially when presenting the stories of individuals. In order to address these challenges, we have invited a group of authors to delve deeper into this theme. We have also asked employees of Norwegian museums about how they work with ethically fraught issues and what they have learnt from their experiences. The result is this publication.

I would like to direct special thanks to the project manager, Kathrin Pabst, whose tremendous capacity for work and great enthusiasm has been a driving force in this work. Her experience from working on a doctoral thesis, and the discussion of museum work on sensitive themes in the thesis itself, has provided an important professional foundation for the project. A big thank you also to the other two members of the editorial committee: board member in ICOM Norway, Eva D. Johansen, and the Executive Council's representative on ICOM's Ethics Committee, Merete Ipsen. I also wish to thank the authors, Roy Høibo, Nina Planting Mølmann, Mari Østhaug Møystad, Marianne A. Olsen, and Heidi Stenvold. Finally, I would like to say thank you to all who responded to the survey and thus contributed to insights about ethical challenges in Norwegian museums, as well as Hans Philip Einarsen and Mari S. Mathiesen, both of whom participated in the initial phase of the project.

ICOM Norway invites museum employees to use this publication in their work – and to continue the discussion about ethical challenges. We at ICOM Norway have selected one theme. Society is in constant change and this raises new issues for museums. It provides a foundation for new discussions – and perhaps also a need to revise and amplify the Code of Ethics.

Paal Mork  
Chairman  
ICOM Norway

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# Towards new relations between the museum and society

BY KATHRIN PABST, EVA D. JOHANSEN AND MERETE IPSEN

Museums today are increasingly dynamic actors that work to contribute to positive societal development. They ask critical questions about established truths, highlight current social challenges, and bring out voices that have been forgotten. Today's museum staff often work with their local communities, and see personal narratives from individuals as important contributions. This work is still new and demanding, in several ways. This publication presents issues experienced by museum employees, with particular attention to ethical challenges they have encountered in their work. We hope this book might contribute to a discussion of what is required to facilitate the everyday work of museum staff and professionalise their important work even further.

Originally, museums were places for beautiful and rare objects, collected by wealthy people or powerful institutions. Such collections were opened to visitors, who could marvel, amuse or delight themselves with what they saw. Along with the democratisation of society, the community – the nation, the town, the place – became interested in setting up collections that would reflect their own art, culture and nature. Over the years, museums have gradually developed from ornamental collections into something more, something greater, more diverse and complex. Collections have been framed by larger contexts, and the general population has been invited to contribute with information on background, usage and signification. This has gradually started to include personal narratives about living conditions, everyday customs, and cultural practices in a region.

Over the past 15 to 20 years we have seen a new shift in museums across the world. More and more institutions engage with current social topics that provoke debate, and policy guidelines encourage museums to become dynamic actors in society. Through raising critical questions about established truths and addressing current social challenges, museums are acquiring the capacity to contribute to a positive societal development, and help create a society where as many voices as possible can be heard.

This is particularly significant for museums in an increasingly globalized landscape, in which population groups move from place to place – from countryside to town, and from country to country. Social groups emerge when fellowships are formed on the basis of shared values. Individual narratives about social life have found their way to museums and are being documented. Belonging to a group reinforces identities by way of mutual mirroring, but it also involves positioning in terms of perceived differences from others. When museums invite personal narratives, they may also invite conflicts between groups into the space of the museum.

The social relevance of a museum depends on finding the best solutions for mirroring diversity in all its nuances. Yet current social themes might also be bound up with taboo-laden and controversial aspects of the local community that most people are loath to speak about or even acknowledge. Museum projects about war events, sexual abuse, practices within closed institutions, poverty, mental illness or alcohol abuse, might challenge the sense of identity of certain individuals or groups in a local community. Such themes therefore require special consideration and individual solutions.

Museums today want to and shall be active in the society of which they are a part. They desire to play a role in society and work together with the population.

***“It is an overarching objective that museums should reflect the society of which they are a part. Museums are important disseminators of assumptions in a modern democratic society and should have an engaged societal role.”***

This citation from the Norwegian Government White Paper No. 49, page 123, summarises policies, from the late 1990s, from political authorities to the Norwegian museums. In a framework memorandum about the societal role of museums from Arts Council Norway, *societal role* is defined as forms of innovative and pioneering engagement in terms of the museum’s core responsibilities.<sup>1</sup> By including groups that have been overlooked or forgotten, engaging in closer dialogue with the local population, questioning established truths, and highlighting challenges in today’s society, museums can and should contribute to a positive societal development.

After innovation follows investigation, and many Norwegian museums are in this phase today. An increasing number of exhibitions and publications now deal with sensitive and controversial themes, both in Norway and abroad.<sup>2</sup> The Norwegian Museum Association dedicated its annual meeting in 2014 to the theme “Ethics.” In 2015 this was followed by the concept of “Freedom,”

which was explored in lectures, workshops and a conference on the societal role of museums, under the auspices of Arts Council Norway. The BREAK-group, which used to address controversial themes and taboos has certainly been closed down, but Arts Council Norway has established a new program for the societal role of museums, which funds nearly 20 projects with the individual in focus. Those projects are inclusive, illuminate society’s forgotten aspects, and develop methods and strategies for museums to influence and participate in public discussions to a greater extent. Over 40 projects applied for funding in 2015, which shows that more and more museums are prioritising work on societally relevant subject matter. Museum work on human rights, social justice and democracy has intensified in many countries across the world, and a network of museums that want to work more with these themes has recently been established in Norway.

This publication is a contribution to this ongoing process. Becoming a dynamic societal actor requires substantial time and energy from the individual museum worker, but it can be tremendously rewarding to see the impact one’s work has on individuals as well as the museum’s area of expertise. Also, continuous reflection is essential for being able to decide which stories should be told, how to place them in a larger context, how to best communicate with visitors



and, not least, how to meet the different needs of the individuals one works with.

Such work involves both practical action and moral consideration. All work requires continual reflection on the values that should be foregrounded in order to contribute to a positive development in society. How can one preserve these values when working with individuals, and what educational strategies can make the audience reflect on them?

Ethical and moral reflections on values, and concrete choices of action, are essential elements of every museum employee's working day. Ethical guidance for museums – large and small, the world over – is given by ICOM, The International Council of Museums, whose Code of Ethics consists of basic guidelines for good museum practice. The Code gives general advice and promotes values such as well-being, social development, tolerance and respect, but provides less guidance in terms of many real challenges that have been brought by new, socially relevant museum practices. Until now the Code has broadly concerned the management of objects and collections; but in recent years, as museums have been challenged to become active societal institutions, they have had to deal with problems that are not directly covered by the existing Code. We therefore see a need for a better understanding of more recent museum practices,

and would like to encourage to pay particular attention to these problems.

Ethics is about dwelling in a field of possibilities, and desiring to do good. In the boundary area between the realms of law (that which one *shall not* or *cannot* do) and ethics (that which it is *desirable* and *possible* to do), and in the understanding of this difference, lies the opportunity for museums to contribute to change.<sup>3</sup>

### Challenges and possibilities in cooperation with individuals and groups

One of the methods museums have developed for work on social themes is to cooperate with individuals in order to present personal experience. While individual stories were previously mostly used as examples that could confirm a larger story, the objective today is often to promote alternative voices bearing witness to society's variety and complexity. Sometimes they create a conflict with the larger story; sometimes they lend it a degree of subtlety by adding experiences from everyday life. As museums wish to improve their social relevance, personal narratives can help bring forth aspects of contemporary and past society which have had and still have consequences for both individuals and groups.

Research demonstrates that it can be helpful for people who have been through difficult experiences, who have not been heard, or have been abused, to tell their story at a museum. Individuals who are well received by museum staff may feel uplifted and willing to help others by sharing their own story. Visitors, for their part, are able to learn more through hearing fellow human beings talk about their experiences – empathy can lead to greater learning.<sup>4</sup> As a mediator between individuals who tell their stories and the museum's audience who should learn from them, museum staff are responsible for making sure that many different needs are met.

This kind of work currently exposes museum employees to a number of moral challenges. Museum staff need to find the right balance between the needs of the individual and those of the visitor, between subjective and objective truth, between their own competence and external competence, between the use of personal judgement and established guidelines.<sup>5</sup>

What is the situation in Norwegian museums today? How widespread is the work on themes that are relevant, difficult, sensitive or controversial in contemporary society? How important are personal narratives in this context? What challenges do employees find the most difficult – and are the results worth their effort? In cooperation with Vest-Agder Museum, ICOM

Norway decided to assess the scope of this work, and produce an overview of the most common challenges from the point of view of museum staff. In late 2015, a comprehensive survey was conducted, and the results are presented in the next chapter.

In order to obtain a detailed picture of what the challenges encompass, we have invited five employees, from four museums, to write about the work at their own institution. The focus of each chapter is an actual project or series of projects with the same objective, placed in a larger context, and described in detail. How are a museum's "societal role" and being a societal actor interpreted by the museum? What did the staff experience, and what consequences did their experiences have for their work and subsequent projects? What was particularly demanding – and rewarding?

Marianne A. Olsen at Perspektivet Museum in Tromsø describes experiences from documentation and exhibition work with religious groups in the local community. What happens when something as personal as religious faith is brought into the exhibition space? And what is the best possible way to do this? She concludes that trust, good communication and good routines surrounding the approval of material are essential. It is also extremely important that management creates the appropriate environment to support this type of work.

Roy Høibo writes about the experiences of Ryfylke Museum, in Rogaland, which in the course of 20 years has documented the interactions between refugees and a small local community. The work began after the wave of refugees in the 1990s fleeing the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and resulted in many projects and even more reflection on terms such as “we” and “they.” The article underlines that refugees consist of groups that are as heterogeneous and have as many different attitudes as ethnic Norwegians. The museum’s experiences amply demonstrate the capacity of museums to function as catalysts for increased dialogue between ethnic groups, and the great importance of such work for integration.

The next chapter concerns experiences with archival material and ethical issues about making it accessible. Heidi Stenvoll and Nina Planting Mølmann, researchers at the *Gjenreisningsmuseum*, the Museum of Reconstruction in Hammerfest, examine the civil population during war and reconstruction. During their collection, analysis and utilisation of available written sources, and interview material from eyewitnesses, they encountered a number of ethical challenges. What material can be made public in a local community, where the majority know each other, and each other’s parents and grandparents? How close should the contact between informants be, and how far shall one go to meet their wishes? And not least, how shall

one cooperate with the media when disseminating new information while protecting the museum’s informants?

This is followed by reflections on work engaging one of Norway’s national minorities, the Norwegian Traveller people. In chapter four, Mari Ø. Møystad of Glomdal Museum writes about a long collaboration between representatives of the Travellers and museum employees, both on a permanent exhibition and various educational and interpretive activities. While the desire and ambition to collaborate and participate were mutual, the expectations about what this involved, in practice, turned out to be ambiguous, dissimilar and in perpetual change. The museum’s notion of a minority group as relatively homogenous was challenged, along with the assumption that the museum could be a neutral place that would refrain from presenting its own opinions or attitudes.

The publication concludes with an article discussing the background and content of ICOM’s Code of Ethics and the new museum ethics as they currently stand. This article is the most theoretical one, and considers the time delay between new regulations and the challenges that arise for a museum profession in continual change. Do we stand before something radically new in terms of our practice and thinking, or do the new trends in current museum ethics essentially follow the same mechanisms as before?

Our survey and detailed articles about work with the societal role at selected museums are a good indication of the breadth of experience museum staff have acquired. All the reflection, collegial discussion, exchange of information and debates at seminars and courses have created new knowledge which, in turn, has been tested, refined, adapted or changed. This experience and new knowledge should be made available to as many museum employees as possible, so that we can learn from each other, give each other constructive criticism along the way, and build new knowledge. Our objective must be to fulfil our roles as dynamic societal actors in the best possible way.

### **Toward further professionalisation**

Many studies and theories indicate that the experience acquired by members of a profession are the driving force behind the profession’s development. It is ultimately the actions of individuals that shape the profession from the inside, and therefore also play a key role in shaping the profession’s response to the political tasks given to it. In a longer perspective, the work routines developed by those who experience particular situations will become the practice and mentality of the profession itself, and this will influence how the political tasks are handled.<sup>6</sup>

This applies in the highest degree also for the museum profession. New policies have led to museums beginning to work more actively with the challenges one sees in contemporary society; challenges that influence people at a deeply personal level. After twenty years, many employees have acquired experience in the role of dynamic societal actor, which already influence our ordinary working day and that of others, as well as decisions that are made in future projects.

Our wish is that this publication can be a contribution on the way to further professionalisation. The survey and articles have revealed distinctive needs: for training, for greater internal integration of the work, and a greater understanding of how much time cooperative projects involve. Since they have also revealed how rewarding and useful this work is for museum staff, the museums they work at and the local community they work with, we hope that many of the suggestions for action will be implemented.

It is of course important to keep our focus on maintaining an acute moral awareness in this important work. Such awareness, however, appears to be present in the highest degree. A more urgent challenge might therefore be to make arrangements for a simpler ordinary working day for the staff working on this kind of project, where they function as mediators between



individuals who contribute personal narratives and the audience that will learn from them. The better the working environment is adapted to the capacity to act as dynamic societal actors, the more – and better – museum staff can carry out their work. In return, this will lead to museums becoming better able to fulfil their objective, to contribute more fully to a positive societal development.

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Notes

- 1. Holmesland, H. 2013.
- 2. For a short summary, see Pabst 2014: 36-47.
- 3. Marstine 2011:7.
- 4. For more information about this and references see Pabst 2014:77-86, 283-301, 319-339.
- 5. Pabst 2014.
- 6. See, for example, Lipsky 2010; Abbott 1988.

# Valuable, challenging and becoming established

Results from a survey

BY KATHRIN PABST

ICOM Norway has spent a long time reflecting on the new ethical problems that arise when museums assume an active role in society. In 2015, we had the opportunity to conduct a staff survey in Norwegian museums. In what follows, the account of their experiences in the survey is presented and discussed.

ICOM Norway had long wished to invite staff from Norwegian museums to share their experiences of socially oriented museum work, and compile them in a publication. Later, we had the idea of mapping the scope of such work within Norwegian museums, and producing an overview of the most common challenges from the perspective of museum staff. We wanted to understand the factors that appeared to influence the work most – in a positive or negative manner.

A related objective was to create a foundation for preparing a training program that could help museum employees become more aware of and confident in their own competence. In 2015, we were given the opportunity to conduct this survey in cooperation with Vest-Agder Museum. The timing has been perfect, in view of the intense activity in the field of ethics currently underway at Norwegian museums.<sup>1</sup>

The responses to the survey are presented in the following section. 40 museum employees, from 22 different institutions, including directors, department managers, conservators and educators, have taken the time to complete the extensive questionnaire. Some have given short answers, and others have been extremely detailed, using many extra pages to elaborate on their opinions.

## RESPONSES

### PART 1: Interpretation and the importance of work with the societal role

*The societal role of museums is a core concept in most documents concerning cultural policy, and museums are encouraged to be dynamic societal actors. The interpretation of what this actually involves is left to the discretion of individual museums. Relevant aspects which are highlighted in various documents are: dialogue with the surroundings, challenging visitors emotionally and intellectually, and promoting an understanding of a diverse society with different voices.*

The first questions in the survey attempted to determine what the individual saw as essential for work with the societal role, and how core concepts were interpreted.

#### ***What do you think the role of museums as dynamic societal actors involves?***

Around 80 percent of the respondents said that they addressed current themes in exhibitions, events and newspaper contributions. This involved a dialogue with and a focus on the surroundings, so that museums could be innovative when responding to the needs of the outside world, and as up-to-date and attentive to identity formation as possible. This also required a professional approach: “To provide

research based background material and give evidence for the selection of points of view.” Approximately 40 percent of the respondents indicated that all work in this field ought to be based on the special competence within the institution and above all on the museum’s collections. 20 percent of the respondents thought that only the institution’s own research results and collections should be used to illuminate current themes. This group argued that the focus on the particular institution’s core tasks was the basis of everything else, and that it is precisely this which *is* the societal role. Approximately 20 percent specifically linked the museum’s role as an engaged societal actor to work with sensitive and controversial themes, as well as its capacity to engage and challenge the public emotionally.

A few respondents problematised the difference between the terms societal role and societal actor directly:

“The societal role can be understood in terms of our traditional tasks: to collect, conserve, educate etc. As societal actors the museum can choose to use its power to work with silent groups, difficult themes – everything we learnt from the BREAK-project.”

Approximately 20 percent of the respondents stressed that museums must retain their character

of value-neutral meeting places which do not advance a position or put forward opinions of their own, beyond presenting different viewpoints and voices from the community.

#### ***Do you agree that it is important for museums to take on this role?***

Without exception, all respondents agreed that museums should be dynamic societal actors. Most argued that this was because museums are publicly financed and therefore have a duty to be up-to-date and relevant. One respondent said museums needed to “justify their existence,” and this represents the essence of what many pointed out. Several respondents suggested that museums should perform an internal evaluation of the roles it should have, and that it should be based on the museum’s core tasks:

“It is important that museums take on this role, but there are many ways to preserve the role of dynamic societal actor. Such a role ought to derive from the museum’s distinctive mandate, and not be made to fit definitions of societal relevance outside the institution. Even so, it is important to re-evaluate the museum’s mandate continuously.”

Many respondents used the occasion to underline that there are, as yet, too few museum employees that dare take on this role, even though they have a golden opportunity in terms of their position:

“Museum employees are some of the last free souls in this country. Many of us have safe and secure jobs. We ought to use our position much more actively.”

***How important are the concepts freedom of expression, responsibility to speak out, and self-censorship in this context, and how do you interpret them?***

All but two respondents thought that these were important concepts. The answers from the 38 respondents who believed the concepts were important, gave evidence of different understandings of their meaning. Several respondents argued that they are connected to a type of “editorial responsibility.” Most of them were familiar with **freedom of expression**. But the **responsibility to speak out** was interpreted either as a *responsibility to express oneself* or as *responsibility for what one says*. **Self-censorship** was interpreted as *negative* in the sense that we are too critical and therefore limit ourselves, and simultaneously as *positive* in that we comprehensively and critically evaluate what we do and why we choose to do something. Some respondents, however, understood the concepts in a totally different way, or wrote that they did not know what they meant. Several of them pointed

out that the concepts should be debated internally, so that a common understanding might inform discussions.

“The concepts are probably expressed implicitly rather than explicitly. Freedom of expression is perhaps obvious, and only becomes a theme when the limits are threatened. But from experience we can say that, in such cases, other aspects may be brought up instead of a lack of freedom of expression, such as financial limitations, doubt about sufficient audience support, a reliance established practices etc. I do not think that freedom of expression is either challenged or threatened at the museum. The responsibility to speak out is about reflecting critically on our educational activities and communication, so that we do not offend groups or individuals unnecessarily. This is an essential aspect of the museum’s thinking, and can perhaps lead to a measure of self-restraint. Responsibility to speak out can also reflect one’s own prejudices about supposedly “weak” or “marginalised” groups, that can carry a tinge of paternalism. Self-censorship is apparent when employees does not, for example, offer suggestions or state their opinion for fear of negative reactions or based on the experience that

‘it is no use’”. Personally I try not to censor myself, but elements of resignation exist.”

The other four questions in the first part of the survey dealt with how the work was embedded within the museum and who had the main responsibility for seeing to that it was carried out.

***How is your work with the societal role integrated in the organisation?***

Half of the 40 respondents answered that the work was well integrated, both in writing and verbally. Ten of them said that the work was slightly integrated, five that it was only indirectly present, and five that the work was not embedded in the organisation.

These answers suggest that it is first and foremost the employees in leadership roles who believe that the work with the societal role is solidly integrated within the organisation. Project staff pointed out more often that the internal integration was not good enough. Furthermore, the answers indicated that the process of integration has not necessarily come the farthest in the larger organisations.

***Who has the overall responsibility for how the role is executed (director/board/employee)?***

Most thought that the management committee or director had the overall responsibility, but in some cases it was argued that the individual

employee had the primary responsibility. The latter was particularly the case in smaller museums.

***Who should have the overall responsibility?***

Here, respondents mentioned “The management,” “the board and director,” “the director and management group” and “the manager in cooperation with the staff.” Many supplementary comments indicated that internal integration is a core issue, not least because of the responsibility that goes along with it:

“The overarching responsibility lies with the board, and subsequently with the director. This means that the museum board should assume a much more strategic position, that management must follow up and make this more concrete. Consequently, this is also a role that the individual employee must fill. But to get to that point, it must first be integrated, reinforced and influenced by the management.”

***Is the workplace organised in such a way that the staff can work with controversial or sensitive themes?***

Despite 50 percent indicating that the work was well integrated in the organisation, the responses to this question showed that this does not necessarily mean that the working environment

is organised so as to allow the individual staff member to work with these themes. 30 percent responded that it was well organised, especially with regard to the independence of action for the individual staff members. 30 percent responded that it was somewhat organised, and referred to internal discussions that had been helpful in that process. 20 percent of the informants said that it was not organised at all and that they felt that they did not receive any manner of support, while 20 percent specifically mentioned that they were completely dependent on the initiative, competence and personality of individual employees in terms of whether or how such themes could be explored.

Here it is possible to discern significant differences between large and small institutions. The more staff and the larger the professional technical environment at a museum's disposal, the greater the opportunities for training, follow up, organising the workplace, and team work:

“The employees must have great freedom to approach their tasks once the theme and issues to be explored have been agreed upon. However, work with controversial and sensitive subject matter requires a thorough discussion beforehand. The education/background of the museum's employees provides a good foundation for working with restricted material and gathering material of a sensitive nature.

It is important that the manager follows up employees who are to work with such topics, sees to it that they have sufficient competence and preferably experience with it, contributes to building up competence in that field, and ensures that there is the process is continuously followed up. Regulations, framework licences, agreements and contracts are established, but must be submitted to quality control and perhaps regularly adjusted and in relation to each project. The scope of the employee's freedom to act should be thoroughly discussed before a project of this nature is initiated, so that one is prepared for difficulties that can arise. One needs to have considered how these will be followed up. Is there an adequate administrative and professional system in place, to what extent should one be involved with informants, and how should difficult subjects be presented?”

The fear of negative reactions, internal and external, appears to create constraint in smaller institutions. For one respondent, the workplace is inadequately organised to support this work. Instead, there is

“a fear of giving offence and being too controversial. This is not just a management problem, but supported by a large part of the culture.”

***Who works with this/has this position, and with what type of work and responsibilities?***

Approximately 15 percent of the informants stated that no one works with controversial or sensitive subject matter in their own institution, while 25 percent said that this is the responsibility of a large, composite group of employees with different areas of competence. Museums who employ their own photographer and archivist tend to include them in groups who work with these matters. The management of collections and use of objects is further mentioned. More practical considerations such as availability and motivation also seem to influence who works with subjects of social relevance:

“We do not have a separate position connected to sensitive or controversial themes. Neither do I think we should have one, since the work with this type of subject matter is inextricably linked to the practice of the role of the museum in general. It is something the entire museum ought to work with.”

This is reiterated in the responses of the remaining 60 percent of informants – a group is formed for each project and is led by the one with the greatest competence, time and motivation. Usually these are the educators, conservators and managers. The smaller the institution, the more frequently the manager takes a leading role.

**PART 2:  
Work with sensitive themes in one's own museum**

*Cooperation with individuals and groups in the local community has been a natural part of the museum's work with contemporary documentation for several decades. In recent years, work on controversial or sensitive subjects has been more visibly promoted in and of itself, for example through Arts Council Norway's BREAK-project.*

*The objective is to challenge the audience to critically reflect on subjects that are unpleasant confront. In this work personal narratives are often used. The collection of material, the personal meeting with people who recount difficult memories, and not least the evaluation of how this material shall be communicated to a greater audience, can be demanding for everyone involved.*

This part asked respondents to outline and describe work on sensitive themes at their own institutions, both by way of introduction at a general level, and thereafter in more detail in the light of specific projects. The first questions were of a general nature.

***Do you see a difference between contemporary documentation and work on current social themes? If so, what?***

Two thirds of the respondent perceived a difference, one third did not. The majority, however, were aware that there was also a degree of overlap:

“Contemporary documentation can be an umbrella term that includes current social topics. And an exhibition can address a contemporary social topic without for that reason being contemporary documentation.”

“Contemporary documentation is often connected with current social themes, but it doesn’t need to be connected to the latest newspaper headlines. Contemporary documentation can also be done in order to find more sources for future research.”

When distinctions were made between the two concepts, this sometimes referred to the aim of the project, the time period, and the degree of reactions one could receive:

“Contemporary documentation is about documenting the present time. Current social topics can be about ethical dilemmas that are more independent of time and place.”

“The way I understand contemporary documentation is that it is more general, and can include everything from taking care of the archive of the shop on the street corner, to documenting the contemporaneity of one’s own institution. Current social themes are, in my view, connected to themes that can be political, that can end up in the media and create controversy.”

***To what extent does the work of your own museum include cooperation with the local inhabitants and/or individuals?***

This question was somewhat unclearly formulated since different cooperative partners are usually part of the local population, and since many forms of museum work are naturally based on extensive cooperation with different parties. Many individuals have remarked on this, and on the museums’ natural role as a dialogue institution that to a large degree focuses attention on the surroundings.

80 percent of the respondents mentioned extensive cooperation with different groups from the local community, such as institutions, individuals, professionals, social clubs, local history associations, or artists. Many also mentioned resource groups. More than 20 percent of the respondents said that there was little

general cooperation with the local inhabitants as a consequence of their national mandate to preserve a concrete theme or field of work.

Cooperation with regard to sensitive or controversial themes was, for many, too difficult to achieve. Some indicated that the local community was not receptive to themes that were perceived as so sensitive or controversial as to be almost taboo. 25 percent of the respondents said that there was little cooperation on such themes, 10 percent believed that there was some cooperation, and 15 percent that there was a great deal of cooperation, including on difficult topics. In this case, the size of the local community was a factor – the larger the town and the local community, the simpler it was to engage with difficult subjects.

**Additional information on each large project in the past five to ten years**

In order to protect the anonymity of respondents, neither the actual projects nor the key challenges are reported here. The challenges are nonetheless summarised in the following parts of the survey.

80 percent of the respondents described one or more projects in more detail; several dozens of projects in total. Several respondents stated that it was impossible to mention everyone they had worked with. The detailed project descriptions

provide insight into the complexity of the projects, and the connection between internal and external challenges.

**PART 3:  
Summary of the key challenges**

*National and international studies show that many museum employees face the same challenges in their work with sensitive themes. They are all related to the necessity of balancing the needs of different parties; the individual, community, owner, employee or oneself.*

*Examples of common challenges are: balancing the needs/wishes of the individual versus the public’s expectations that exhibitions should be fact-based; figuring out how subjective narratives can be incorporated into a broader frame of reference; assessing one’s own competence in comparison to the competence of others; and the need to have room for making one’s own decisions versus the imperative to follow guidelines.*

This part focussed on the challenges which had emerged, how the individual had experienced them, and how they had been met internally by the institution. A considerable number of different challenges and methods of handling them were mentioned. The key challenges and responses will be summarised below.



***What challenges appeared in your own work and what were the consequences for you, the museum and others who were involved?***

Most informants mentioned internal disagreement or criticism within the museum as their main challenge, followed by limited resources in terms of time, money or staffing, as well as challenges when collaborating with individuals and professionals. The latter referred both to individuals who put too high demands on them, or who gave them insufficient response. Other challenges including respondents having insufficient competence to fulfil a role, being met with a large degree of internal suspicion or being given too little attention, being too frightened, receiving too little support, or getting into conflicts with other parties.

“The greatest challenges were the critical voices within the museum. There were big debates and communication was not always good. (...) The feeling that in the organisation we are working behind each others’ backs, that we do not trust each other, do not openly ask critical questions to the project group, is not good.”

“In terms of (...) the project, it was in many ways demanding. It was partly difficult to be accepted as being neutral. There was a great deal of suspicion whether one supported the other party. In

some cases you would receive threats if you wrote this or that.”

Most respondents mentioned that the result of the project first and foremost depended on who worked on it and how its internal communication functioned. That answer was given by respondents regardless of their position or assignment.

“The decisive factor when addressing difficult themes is often the manner in which one approaches the questions. It is often necessary to have some experience, both in terms of the desire to raise such topics, and the ability to attend to the needs and feelings etc. of the participants. Such experience requires a degree of specialisation, and consequently people may think that some are better suited than others (despite having taken courses). This can potentially conflict with the principle of broad participation, democratisation etc.”

“I have often had the feeling that my own competence and experience are not entirely adequate, and a lot of time can be spent trying things out and making it up as you go along.”

“In some projects where several museums have cooperated in designing and mounting exhibitions, it has been a challenge when participants disagreed on the needs of the involved individuals/cooperative partners in terms of the extent to which they should be able to speak for themselves and to what extent the staff should direct or interpret what they wanted to convey.”

The last comment in particular refers to communication within the project group and how to solve possible disagreements.

***What do you believe is the main reason for these challenges?***

Most respondents cited inadequate internal organisation to support this type of work, inadequate leadership, insufficient competence and preparation, excessive fear about the reactions of others or underestimating resource requirements. As this is a core part of the survey, a number of quotations have been reproduced, which all demonstrate that the informants had a clear sense of the crucial factors. The quotations also reflect one of the survey’s unequivocal findings: that it is the employees who implement the projects who experience the challenges most deeply, and who are consequently the ones who have reflected most on their nature of them.

“I believe that it is our organisational culture which makes us distrust each other and fail to cooperate, which is our main challenge. (...) Discussions quickly become personal and often turn irrational.”

“Emotions are triggered. You aren’t prepared for the feelings and reactions that come up because of this.”

“Museum employees do not necessarily have the right qualifications for intimate meetings with people with personal problems. Challenges connected to cooperating with people who have another professional qualification happen because people have too little respect for each others’ disciplines.”

“One is working with extremely personal narratives, and the storyteller needs courage to tell them. Of course, this courage sometimes fails.”

“We have not (yet?) explored anything in depth. Our changing directors have not shown any interest in controversial themes.”

“Lack of a common strategy, fear of doing challenging things, and a general attitude about being “value neutral” and not being provocative/causing disagreement.”

***How were the challenges addressed?***

Answering the question of how the challenges were addressed, most respondents stated that this was done through reflection in the course of the project, as well as discussions and successive initiatives within the project group and institution. External competence was also sought, more resources were allocated to the project, hoped that things would get better with time, and tried to make aims and procedures made concrete.

“The actual criticism was handled by the use of focus groups, to ensure that we were speaking to the right audience in the right way, by contact with health professionals, by contact with the emergency telephone service for children etc. This criticism helped push the project in a positive direction. It was the more indirect, unspoken internal criticism that was difficult to get hold of and difficult to handle.”

***Was there internal agreement about the solution or were there different suggestions for addressing the issues?***

Most responded that there was no disagreement, or that one worked hard to find solutions together that everyone could agree on. But some stated that the disagreement could not be resolved, and that the project was then put on hold or cancelled:

“There was substantial internal disagreement and internal elements worked up until the last moment to have the exhibition removed from the program. But suggestions for a solution, other than it should not be shown, were not given.”

“There was no agreement, and probably different solutions. But this is unclear since there has been little focus on this problem.”

***Is it rewarding to work with sensitive themes? If so, how and to what extent?***

Most respondents thought the work was valuable. Half of them answered that it was enriching for their own development, that it was challenging in the positive sense of the word, as well as informative. 25 percent noted how important the projects were for participants and visitors, and 12.5 percent believed that it had a positive effect on the museum as an institution:

“Yes, because my own tolerance and opinion on the matter was challenged.”

“Yes, it is rewarding. It creates a better understanding for topical problem issues in our own time, and gives insight. And it inspires gratitude because one meets engaged, grateful and involved informants who are happy to have their voice heard.”

“Yes, it’s challenging, developing and enriching as a person. It creates greater understanding for the society one lives in and is a part of.”

“Yes, absolutely. There are many ordinary working days in traditional museum work – but the project work has been powerful, meaningful and has reminded us of what we were actually doing in museums. Very much so.”

“Yes, if I may be allowed to reformulate this slightly and include the social role of the museum in society, these projects teach you problematise the role of the museum in society.”

***Is it stressful to work with sensitive topics? How and to what extent?***

At the same time that the work was considered virtuous, important and enriching on several levels, 80 percent of the informants stated that it also involved certain stress factors. These were related to employee’s lacking competence and organisational “driving regulations,” internal conflicts and poor organisation in terms of laying a solid foundation for the work within the institution, a high workload, an excessive degree of unpredictability, and the powerful emotional impact of the stories told by participants. Some quotations may again clarify what is actually meant by this:

“It can be demanding to balance emotional involvement with the necessary distance to the individuals one involves/that the topic is concerned with.”

“It is emotionally taxing in itself, because they are difficult topics and stressful in terms of relationships, because you create a contact that should be preserved. If there is a lack of adequate recognition within the institution that this is important work which takes time, your stress increases.”

“It can be extremely stressful. As the project manager you often feel like the “middleman” between the informants and the museum. You feel a heavy responsibility for those you have involved, at the same time as it is important that you manage to put together a good exhibition. It is very complicated.”

“It was quite stressful to work with educational activities for school classes for those who did this. The attitudes which some of the individual students expressed were shocking – and we had daily debriefings for those involved.”

“It can be stressful, and those involved must sometimes weather the storm. This stress can be heavy and destructive if you feel that you stand alone. If the museum

is united, if there is a thought-out strategy and a leadership group that is involved, behind you, supportive and sometimes up front, the stress is of an entirely different nature. Then it might instead seem quite meaningful.”

The last quotation yet again underlines one of the main findings to which I will return in the conclusion: the organisation of an appropriate internal work environment to enable this work in the museum – which also includes support underway and from outside – is absolutely crucial in terms of how enriching or stressful this kind of work is considered to be.

**PART 4:  
Pitfalls and needs/requirements**

*Many respondents stated that what was required was a better cultural integration of this work within museums, training of the employees and possibly a reassessment of the applicable regulations in order to meet the challenges.*

Part IV was intended to map out the needs and corresponding measures that would assist and inspire the individual to tackle (even more) projects striving to fulfil the role of a dynamic societal actor. A key objective of the survey was to obtain a solid foundation for preparing a new training package for employees to promote work as a dynamic and fearless societal actor, and

again this is best demonstrated with the help of quotations.

***How do you evaluate the challenges related to sensitive themes – how demanding are they for the museum employees and museums as institutions?***

This question was intended to summarise the more in-depth questions of the previous part of the survey. 30 percent of the informants have summarised the work as “demanding.”

“The greatest challenges we had were internal. Even though management completely supported the project, there were many negative colleagues, who above all made the project invisible. We who worked on it received great support both nationally and from international circles (...). But within we felt the deafening silence – and comments to the effect that this was not something that a museum should be doing.”

40 percent of the respondents answered that it is obviously demanding, but that it becomes easier if one is sufficiently prepared. The key recommendations were to set aside enough time, to plan and organise thoroughly, and to have sufficient competence available.

“The museums should have a plan of action for meeting reactions and supporting co-workers, they should establish guidelines for how to work with such issues and create a support function for the institution itself and for co-workers.”

12.5 percent believed that the work was unproblematic and the challenges were overestimated:

“We see this as a natural part of our ordinary working day, and do not see these issues as challenges.”

“I believe that the challenges are often overestimated, and that the expectations that this is difficult are typically greater than the problems which might actually have arisen. It’s important no matter what to feel secure in the work of one’s own organisation.”

15 percent underlined the importance of the individual employee’s competence, personality and motivation:

“I believe (...) that a personal desire to complete the work (...) is crucial for a good result.”

“It requires personal involvement and commitment, which makes an awareness of both one’s own and the institution’s limitations extremely important.”

“It requires social intelligence, the ability to understand the life and history of others, patience, and the capacity to tolerate being corrected when you make a “mistake.” Put away the academic attitudes and terms, and speak so that people understand you. THEN after a long time you can gain their confidence and they show that they trust you.”

***What do you believe are the greatest pitfalls in this work?***

Around 50 percent consider insufficient preparation and resources to be the greatest pitfalls. 30 percent indicate internal factors, such as an inadequate integration of the work in the organisation, inadequate training, and inadequate follow up of the employees. The remaining 20 percent believe that either the institution or the employees are too timid or that the challenge lies in a fearful attitude, “thinking that there are huge pitfalls in this work.”

Many respondents mention the need for setting boundaries, being professional and getting internal support:

“That we go in too deep. It requires intimacy, trust and respect for all those involved, but the employees must also set boundaries in order to avoid too strong an emotional connection.”

“The pitfall is to become too personally engaged and to identify oneself with the material. One must remain professional and keep a certain distance.”

“The greatest pitfall is that individuals (project managers or others) end up alone with considerable responsibility, without anyone to provide help, advice and support. Even if one does not officially have the main responsibility, the responsibility for the individuals and the circles one has involved can nonetheless feel extremely heavy. It is important for the management to understand this.”

***Have you or your museum chosen not to implement projects with sensitive topics? If so, which ones and why?***

Half of those who responded to this question answered with “no,” half with “yes.” The latter largely gave the reason that a) the theme or the angle was considered to be too confrontational for the public or those involved or b) that one had received too little support, either a lack of financial support or in the form of a reluctance

in the local community. The latter was most frequent at smaller museums.

***What importance is given to reactions to the work of the museum? Is there a party whose feedback carries more weight than others?***

Most respondents emphasised that reactions and feedback were considered to be an important measure for how successful an exhibition had been. Feedback from visitors was mentioned here as being the most important of all (30 percent), followed by the individuals involved (25 percent), authorities allocating funds (20 percent), colleagues at other museums (20 percent) and the media (5 percent).

***What do you believe would be the most appropriate measures to promote museum work on sensitive topics?***

Rarely have the responses in this survey been so unambiguous: nearly all respondents saw internal integration and the organisation of a beneficial work environment as the most important measures (95 percent). This involved concrete measures are directed towards integrating this kind of work at the leadership level, embedding it within the internal culture of the institution, training staff, and organising the ordinary working day in such a way that the individual employee is able to dispose of both the competence and space to work with such a project.

“A more realistic view of the consequences, a greater readiness in the museum’s leadership/management to take part in public debates, an internal focussing of resources and will to highlight this work as a priority (if that’s what it is).”

Most answers supply several measures for promoting the museum’s work with sensitive subject matter. The most common were financial support for the implementation of projects (20 percent), exchanging experience with other museums and employees (20 percent) and collaborating with external professional experts who might contribute to developing the topic of the exhibition (10 percent).

***What type of help would you like to have received and would actually have used?***

This question was of particular relevance for one of the aims of the survey: the design of a training package that could be considered useful by as many museum staff as possible. Three kinds of help were mentioned by the majority of respondents, in the following order:

- Practical and theoretical training in the form of courses or workshops.

- Exchange of experiences with other museums or museum staff.
- An updated Code and/or expert competence that can be used when needed.

The exchange of experience with other museums can take place in different ways; respondents gave suggestions ranging from meetings and seminars to digital platforms.

As for the question of whether additional or more concrete guidelines were needed or not, the responses were diverse. Some feared guidelines could become limiting, citing the need to be able to act spontaneously and in response to the situation at hand. Others welcomed guidelines, as a way to receive suggestions for how challenges should be addressed. A crucial factor appears to be the unease about the extent to which such guidelines would be binding:

“Won’t “regulations” just work to extinguish good initiatives?  
Current social/sensitive topics can hardly be contained by a set of guidelines-the spontaneity and engagement can quickly be stifled. What we need are ethical standards for treating people and difficult themes in a good manner.”

“If it is possible to create a set of regulations, it would probably be good to have as support”

“Both theoretical and practical training would be welcome, a more thorough description of methods and experience from other projects would be useful, and an updated and unambiguous Code would be very positive. I would most likely have used them for my own sake, and to make it easier to involve others in the organisation in projects.”

### Key findings

Some results were unexpected and some were exceptionally clear.

- There was considerable agreement about the importance of the work as a dynamic societal actor, and that it is regarded as valuable in several ways.
- Even though all respondents agreed that museums should function as dynamic societal actors, many believed that this work should not be done at the expense of, for example, work with objects, which was held to be among the museum’s core responsibilities. This suggests that the work as a dynamic societal actor is

sometimes considered as an “extra,” which is not necessarily an equally natural or important part of the societal mission of museums.

- Several dozen projects were mentioned, and their descriptions as well as implementation dates clearly show that the scope of museums’ work as dynamic societal actors is on the increase, at the same time as the key challenges have largely remained the same. Internal conditions appear to be most important for addressing them, regardless of the museum’s size; the respondents who claimed there was no consensus on how to deal with challenges were from both large and small museums.
- It was clear that the result of a project depends on individuals. Not all museum staff are able to implement projects that require close cooperation with the local community or vulnerable individuals, independently of the professional competency of the employee.
- The most significant challenges brought up were directly related to a lack of internal organisation of the workplace for supporting this type of work, as well as deficient training (and subsequently competence), poor management, poor

preparation, and an underestimation of the resources required. It was clear that there was a high degree of frustration among project managers and co-workers, and that this was most often to do with internal conditions.<sup>2</sup>

- The response regarding the most important measures that would support greater professionalism in this kind of work was just as clear: 95 percent stated that the most important were to establish a solid foundation for this work in the organisation (internal integration), and a good organisation at the workplace (to support this type of work). This involves integration at the leadership/management level and in the institution’s internal culture, training employees, and ensuring that sufficient time is set aside for project work.

### About the survey

The survey was conducted in November and December 2015<sup>3</sup>, among museum employees who were accessible through the email lists of ICOM Norway, the Norwegian Museum Association and the Google group *Museumsnorge*. The questionnaire was prepared by an editorial committee, with input from the authors of the

articles in this publication, as well as employees from two additional museums.

It consisted of an introductory text explaining the background and objectives of the survey, followed by 23 questions, separated into four thematic parts. In addition, more detailed answers were requested with regard to completed projects. These were covered by five additional questions.

In the four parts, we requested information about: 1. the respondent’s interpretation and significance of work with the museum’s societal role; 2. work on sensitive subject matter at the respondent’s museum; 3. A summary of the key challenges, and; 4. pitfalls and requirements/needs. Each part began with a short introductory text clarifying what we wished to learn. We acknowledge that terms such as societal role, societal actor, sensitive or controversial, are open to interpretation, and that diverging interpretations within the museums and among the staff can lead to challenges.<sup>4</sup>

The word *sensitive* has been used throughout due to the significance of feelings in the projects discussed here; the feelings of individuals who contribute to the exhibition, the feelings of individual visitors, and the employee’s own feelings.<sup>5</sup>



## Who has responded?

The 40 museum employees who responded work in different positions. The majority are conservators/curators (15 people), and department managers or professional discipline managers (eight people). Several of the latter appear to have a background as conservators, so approximately half of the answers were from conservators, or managers with that professional background. The other groups were trained educators or those responsible for education (also eight people), directors (six people) and others (three people).<sup>6</sup>

We do not know for certain how many people are actually on the email lists that we used for recruitment, since many are on two or three lists, and some email addresses are out of date. The emails have been sent to several hundred museum employees. We can thus conclude that the response rate was relatively low. In some cases we heard that there were internal discussions at museum about which of the employees should respond, which means that a conscious choice was actually made for one person to respond on behalf of the entire institution.

The answers came from employees at 22 museums, and often from several divisions within these.<sup>7</sup> All of these, apart from one, are established museums with many employees and funding from the Ministry of Culture; toward the end of 2015 71 museums received operational support from the

Ministry of Culture, and staff members from 31 percent of them have responded to the survey.

## Feedback and critical evaluation of the survey

As mentioned, the meaning and scope of the questions were discussed thoroughly prior to the survey being distributed. A conscious choice was made to focus on quality rather than quantity, i.e. more on in depth information, formulated in the respondent's own words, rather than setting up responses that would have yielded higher numbers. It was also a conscious choice to send the survey to as many museum employees as possible, rather than selecting a few. Such a task has been partially undertaken before,<sup>8</sup> and we had never before had such a thorough overview of the challenges at both large and small institutions, or the possibility of putting them in a broader perspective. The responses were openly formulated, such that all had the opportunity to express possible dissatisfaction with the wording, which some respondents actually did.

A critical evaluation of the survey indicates that we could have sent out a shorter questionnaire, and that this would probably have increased the response rate. We could also have telephoned and interviewed those with a particularly relevant experience and suggestions. Several of the questions could be perceived as being so similar

that they might have been combined, whereas others should have been clarified or reformulated. It is not possible to find out more about why more employees did not respond, and the reasons for this will therefore remain unclear: the number of questions, or the way in which they were formulated are possibly only two of the reasons for the low response rate, and another can be the manner in which the survey was conducted: perhaps the response rate would have increased if the questionnaire had been sent out through other, or additional channels.

## Summary and the way forward

Even though the response rate for the survey was quite low, we have obtained a clear picture of the challenges within Norwegian museums which accompany the role of museums as dynamic societal actors. The core issues can be summarised as follows: if museums are to improve their workflow, they must address the challenges connected with a lack of internal integration of this type of work and the inadequate organisation of the work environment. Providing arenas where museums and museum staff can exchange experiences is important. Arts Council Norway's recently established program area concerns the role of museums in society, and paves the way for this type of project. One of the projects that has received financial support involves establishing a digital database with project descriptions,

experiences, relevant literature, information about seminars and useful tips.<sup>9</sup>

For several years, ICOM Norway has offered museum employees free training seminars on how to handle ethical challenges.<sup>10</sup> In these courses, participants consider different situations in which museum staff may find themselves that require an ethical evaluation of the appropriate course of action, with reference to the ICOM Code of Ethics. In the mid-1990s, Gary Edson introduced a similar method for reflecting on moral challenges. His book *Museum Ethics* builds on questions and answers, with cases discussed in the light of relevant ethical theory.<sup>11</sup> The Norwegian courses were run by ICOM's previous director, Eva Mæhre Lauritzen, who had developed a similar course program to familiarise museum employees with the ICOM Code of Ethics and heighten their awareness of ethical challenges.<sup>12</sup> Those courses were therefore in line with recommendations on how theory can be based on practice.<sup>13</sup> It is our hope this survey might suggest ways in which such courses can be updated and modified in order to respond to further challenges.

The question of whether ICOM Norway should offer suggestions to ICOM for updating the current general guidelines, or instead draw up its own more concrete "driving regulations," is an internal issue that must be debated thoroughly.<sup>14</sup>



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Notes

- See the introductory chapter. The survey was part of a cooperative project with several museums, on behalf of Vest-Agder Museum. The cooperative project “Societal actor in theory and practice” was supported by Arts Council Norway.
- This is probably applicable to project work in general, but seems to be particularly conspicuous in the work on controversial, difficult or sensitive subjects.
- The form was sent twice as a digital file, in November and December 2015. The accompanying email advised that it would take up to an hour to answer all the questions.
- Lewis & Staehler 2010: 221–225; Christoffersen 1999: 8–9 and 17–18; Vetlesen 2007: 104. When one meets and communicates with another person, one automatically assumes that the other structures their world in the same way as oneself, and that the other intends the same meaning in the phrases they use, as oneself. The previous experience one has, and the use of senses and intuition which unconsciously take place in every contact with the other, create expectations about the other’s reactions. One expects that the other will react as oneself would do, that the other experiences the same things as good or bad as one does oneself, and that the other feels the same as we do. Expectations are often not realised, since the other has different experiences. All involved adjust their experiences and their lifeworld in meetings with others, such that each contact between people provides the individual life worlds with new perspectives. See also Pabst 2014: 221-222.
- Some have reacted to the word “sensitive,” which does not appear to be broadly adopted in Norwegian museums. When it is nonetheless used, it tends to refer to international discussions. The focus in countries where museums have worked for a long time on such exhibitions, has gone from more general moral challenges to the significance of feelings in a work, see for example Kidd 2011: 247; Lehrer et al. 2011; Simon 2011a: 204-206. For a discussion of feelings that are provoked in a personal meeting between the museum

employee and individual see Løgstrup 1993: 17–23 and Christoffersen 1999: 22–26.

- Employee position titles can vary from institution to institution, including the use of the titles conservator or curator, or director or section leader for larger units. The division has therefore been made to the best of our ability, on the basis of information that was presented in the material.
- Consequently, one could operate with a higher number of institutions, providing one assumes that the scope of work as dynamic societal actor is decided by the individual sections. Since it is difficult to find enough information in the material to say something about how segregated and independently staff work in the individual sections, it is simply noted that the responses came from 22 institutions.
- See Pabst 2014. As is evident in chapter 2, there are several publications about the challenges that arose in connection with actual projects.
- The database will probably be operative from the summer of 2016. See [www.vestagdermuseet.no](http://www.vestagdermuseet.no)
- See Norendal 2010. In the period 2003–2010 between 20 and 30 courses have been held for museum employees, with a basis in the ICOM Code of Ethics.
- Edson 1997f.
- ICOM Code of Ethics 2011: 5.
- See Cossons 1994; Woollard 2006: 218; Simon 2011a. or Stark 2011: 38.
- For a discussion regarding the type of guidelines wich would be most suitable, see Pabst 2014: 391 - 392 and the last chapter in this book.

# “I don’t usually talk loudly about these things”

BY MARIANNE A. OLSEN

Religion is considered a personal and sensitive topic in Norway. What ethical dilemmas are created when religious topics are brought into the exhibition gallery, when the museum is to function as an arena for dialogue? This article presents experiences from the documentation and exhibition project Homo Religiosus at Perspektivet Museum in Tromsø. This work attempted to capture the religious life of the city “from below,” through the practice and reflection of individuals rather than theological doctrines. The method reveals a diversity of religions and beliefs, and gives a central role to personal stories. The paper focuses especially on ethical challenges and practical solutions surrounding the use of oral informants. Background on Perspektivet Museum.

Perspektivet Museum is a relatively young institution, established in 1996 as a regional museum for the Tromsø district. At its instigation, it consisted of two museums of cultural history; Troms Folk Museum and Tromsø Town Museum. The Museum hence administers large culture historical collections, while its purpose has always been to be an important voice in the ongoing public debate. Through the Museums’ particular medium, the exhibition, Perspektivet Museum seeks to provide alternative understandings and perspectives on life and community in the north.

Perspektivet Museum has no permanent exhibitions; the core activities are documentation and exhibition projects that respond to important contemporary topics. Data are often collected from a local context, but the intention is that the message should be considered relevant independently of where one is geographical situated. For instance, the exhibition *Flytende russisk* (“The Russian Current”), about Russian seamen in Tromsø today and in the historical Pomor period, was at the deepest level about the “pictures” that people of different ethnical backgrounds create of one another<sup>1</sup>.

Oral informants have been important in all of the large-scale documentation and exhibition projects that the Museum has conducted. This has not been to increase the pedagogical effect or to “soften up” the material, but has been

an important part of the philosophy and work method of the Museum, which aims to tell **histories** rather than history. In this way, the voices and perspectives of people we are not likely to encounter in the public sphere are seen and heard. Themes are never chosen because they are taboo or controversial, but because we have considered them important to showcase. Still, many interviews have become both emotionally sensitive and difficult, for instance in the project *Min drakt - Min historie* (“My costume – My Story”)<sup>2</sup>. The exhibition was displayed in 2005 as a celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Norway’s independence from Sweden. Thirty women in national or traditional costumes participated, and in addition to displaying their costumes at the exhibition, they were interviewed about their costumes and their story. Through highlighting their beautiful costumes, worn proudly by all the women, strong stories about racism, forced marriage, war and alienation emerged. The project articulated a variety of experiences related to ethics.

### ***Homo Religiosus in Tromsø***

In 2010, Perspektivet Museum prepared a documentation and exhibition project about religious communities in Tromsø. The perception that religion has increasingly become part of the public debate, often in a global context tainted by conflict and fear of terror, was an important



The exhibition *Min drakt - Min historie* was on display at Perspektivet Museum in 2005. The project provided a lot of experience of work with sensitive material. Photo: Adnan Icacig /PEM.

motivation for the project. The question was whether an exhibition could be set up based on local documentation material, with a focus on everyday religious practices rather than deviations.

Happenstance had it that, right after our opening, the region’s largest newspaper, *Nordlys*, ran an

article series called *Islam i Tromsø*, framed by global political and oriented toward issues of conflict and disunity. Not one of the six articles considered issues of faith and religious practice, and the readers were introduced to very few local muslims.<sup>3</sup> That coverage convinced us that there was a need for a different outlook on religion and religious conduct in Tromsø than such careless

and conflict-oriented writing in the daily press. This idea would take us on what turned out to be an exciting journey in our own city.

The documentation was directed by the author of this article, and took place across a period of three years. We never intended to cover overarching structures or theological doctrines, but aimed to capture some of the city’s religious

life from “below,” through actual practices and the reflection done by individuals. Qualitative interviews with 40 people about faith and practices were an important source. The areas of focus were determined in advance, but a high tolerance for changes in the topic of conversation underway was maintained throughout. Religion consists both of thought processes and sensory experiences; in order to capture the complexity



Qualitative interviews was an important part of the documentation concerning religious life in Tromsø. Here is project leader Marianne A. Olsen in conversation with father Agathangelos. Photo: Mari Hildung/PEM.

and enable a three dimensional display, different methods were used in addition to interviews; active observation, source studies, and sound and video recordings. Photography has played a prominent role throughout, and this has added another 6000 photos to the Museum’s photography collection. In addition to the undersigned, photographer Mari Hildung and musician Aggie Peterson (Frost) have figured

centrally in the work on documentation. In addition, three temporary project members have been involved.

The documentation provided background material for the exhibition *Homo Religiosus* where two artists were involved; musician Aggie Peterson and visual artist and scenographer Lawrence Malstaf. Director Astri Fremmerlid



All subjects were asked whether they possessed an object that carried significance for their religious lives. This brought out some objects that are often associated with religious life, but also, for instance, a coffee mug. At the level of individuals, categorisation within religion and belief becomes a complicated affair. Photo: Mari Hildung/PEM.





The documentation and exhibition projects at Perspektivet Museum take people living in Tromsø as their starting point. This makes it natural that both majorities and minorities are included. This demonstrates some of the religious diversity of the city. Photo: Mari Hildung/PEM.

maintained the overall responsibility for the production, and throughout our work we aimed to let art and knowledge merge and present itself as a unity. I will later describe the division of labour during the production and dissemination of the exhibition, but first I will present the ethical dilemmas emerging in the documentation phase.

## Ethical dilemmas in the documenting phase

### Choice of congregations and voices

In addition to *Homo Religiosus*, two major exhibitions about contemporary religion have been produced at museums of cultural history in Norway. These are "Våre hellige rom" ("Our Holy Rooms") at Oslo Museum, Department of Intercultural Museum (IKM)<sup>4</sup> and "Himmelen over Sørlandet" at the Vest-Agder Museum<sup>5</sup>. At IKM, the starting point was six minority religions, where the congregations counting the most members in Oslo were chosen and their ritual room was copied. In "Himmelen over Sørlandet," locals were encouraged to contribute through advertisements in the local press, and 30 contributions were presented. The exhibitions were very different in their respective focus on minorities vs. majorities and individuals vs. structure, but at both museums the selection could be justified by recourse to democratic

principles like quantity or personal initiative for participation. This was not the case in *Homo Religiosus*.

We based our documentation on eight religious communities. These were not selected on the basis of the number of members or a long history of presence at the location, but out of a wish to demonstrate diversity and variation, both within Christianity itself and between religions. Some communities had a long historical presence at the location, while others had arrived as a result of more recent immigration and societal change. Some had a three digit number of members, while others could congregate in small, private living rooms.

The selection was made after a pilot project, where for instance meetings with The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities was important, in addition to seeking out and talking to researchers in religion studies at the University of Tromsø. It soon became apparent that there was very little academic material published on minority religions in the North of Norway, and part of our work was therefore close to being pioneering, without this being planned. In retrospect, we realise that some choices were made on the basis of very limited knowledge, and that we would possibly have made different decisions today. An example is a minority religion that exists in two different congregations in Tromsø. In this case, we chose

after brief deliberation to focus on the one having a great ethical diversity, since this is a characteristic feature of a city the size of Tromsø. The city is large enough for many religions to be represented, but the population base does not always make it possible for different creeds to gather in a location of their own. Only later would we understand how different those two communities were, and that the congregation we chose not to focus on felt overlooked in the public sphere. One reason for this was that the congregation we chose had more Norwegian converts in its management, and was able to become strong voices in the public debate due to their linguistic and cultural knowledge.

While several communities took offence that they were not asked to participate, others found it a difficult request to answer. We were well received everywhere, but not everyone felt comfortable participating in a project that would result in an exhibition, a catalogue, and that was to be disseminated. The deliberations made us conscious of the complicated borderline area in which religion exists; between individual and community, private and public sphere, between norms inside the community and outside in the broader community. In several cases, we experienced a wish to crosscut prejudices and stigmas, at the same time as the insecurity tied to more visibility/attention was significant. One group decided, after initial conversations and interviews, that they would not participate after

all. Others spent, respectively, a half and one year to make a decision. In retrospect, it has felt like a great responsibility reassure communities that are rarely represented in the public sphere and to weight their need for control against society’s need for information. It has often been tempting to focus only on those that immediately expressed willingness to participate. At the same time, the project provided an insight into societies and ways of life that are likely to remain invisible or subject only to prejudiced presentation in the public sphere.

In religious life, individual and community are tied together in a special way, where choices are personal, but are given a meaning according to collective standards. Although the work on documentation has taken communities as its starting point, it has been important to understand spiritual life through the practices, quests and beliefs of the individual, rather than doctrines and dogmas. Oral informants have thus been central, and we have wanted them to speak as individuals and not only give voice to a religion or a creed. In many cases, the informants felt comfortable with this, partly because an individual makes a religious choice, but does not necessarily support all the practices and theologies of the group as a whole. Others have regarded it as highly important that everything they presented was a correct representation of the community and often referred to religious leaders or seniors for statements. In such cases, obtaining a



In the preparatory documentation for the exhibition *Untermensch* (1998) former prisoners of war and persons having memories of the camps were interviewed. In many cases, experienced were supplanted and the conversations made a strong impression. Photo: Mari Hildung/PEM.

representative impression could be challenging, and we constantly had to assess how much we should do in order to ensure that different voices were being heard.

A conversation about religious choices, the presence of God and contemplation demands

solid linguistic competence, and in some cases the informants’ competence with Norwegian and English was too limited to make satisfactory interviews possible and to allow for the signing of statements of consent. We discussed whether to use an interpreter, but decided against it due to large costs and the fact that it would



introduce an additional layer of interpretation to the conversation. Recently arrived immigrants are therefore not amply represented. As with *Min drakt – Min historie* it has also been hard to determine how good a person’s linguistic and cultural knowledge needs to be in order for them to participate. To obtain a representative sample and a variety of voices is certainly important, but making sure that participants understand what they are to take part of is of course even more so. It might be comfortable, in order to avoid this problem, to turn to those

who are well acquainted with the language and the culture, which might lead to Norwegians who have converted to minority religions being overrepresented. In *Verdens religioner i Norge (World Religions in Norway)*, Knut A. Jacobsen notes the very small national percentage of converts within minority religions, who often exceptional cases rather than signs of continuity.<sup>6</sup> In Tromsø, Scandinavian converts are prominent in several minority congregations, and some have acquired strong voices, but we have sought to use reports of other informants as a counterweight.

## Interlocutor and disseminator

At Perspektivet Museum, qualitative interviews have been a central element in all of the Museum’s documentation and exhibition projects. Some projects, like *Untermensch – russiske*

*krigsfanger under 2.verdenskrig i Balsfjord og Tromsø*<sup>7</sup>, have consulted historic witnesses. Like the authors of “Gråsoner og vrenge hjerter” (“Grey areas and hearts turned inside out”) we have experiences with the suppression of difficult memories and of powerful reactions when past experiences are brought back. In *Homo Religiosus*, we focused on the present; we did not seek to awaken forgotten memories, but rather to move into a sphere that many considered private and personal. Many subjects expressed the sentiment that faith is one’s dearest belonging, and some were therefore afraid to “expose themselves.” Others willingly recounted their stories, but found it difficult not to meet those they were talking to, i.e. the visitors at the Museum, face to face. Despite such objections, we were surprised that so many of them wished to share their thoughts and reflections about their spiritual life. Many of them said they were happy to talk about something that matters so much in their lives, but that one seldom speaks about in Norway.

In an interview, there will always be a delicate balance between making the informant relax and speak naturally and being aware of the context for their statements. In *Min drakt – Min historie*, I repeatedly experienced that many women “talked themselves warm” while discussing the pride they took in their costume, as cultural inheritance, as regional attachment, as a symbol, and as a piece of female craftsmanship. After that, we could

enter difficult subject areas such as alienation, loneliness, racism and forced marriage. The conversational situation was defined beforehand, and the declaration of consent was signed, but in some cases I nevertheless got a sense that the informant had forgotten that my role was that of a museum employee, not a friend or therapist. I also became conscious of similar situations in *Homo Religiosus*. Here, the informant’s enthusiasm for talking about something of such significance in their life could make them forget the purpose of the conversation. In such situations, it was important to take care of the informant afterwards, and only to use material that was ethically justifiable. The borderlines here can be difficult, and obtaining the interviewee’s approval of the transcribed interviews is therefore a good practice.

## To follow the participants on their journey

In the introduction to *Verdens levende religioner (The world’s live religions)*, Ingvild Sælid Gilhus and Lisbeth Mikaelsson argue that a religion is not a “thing,” but rather a social process where the formation of identity is central.<sup>8</sup> In an interview, it is important to be aware that religion is not something static to be “extracted,” but that each religious individual experiences a spiritual development through which forms of belonging and frames of interpretation can change. This

creates challenges for how we use and store our documentation material. One informant, for instance, was in the process of converting from Lutheranism to Catholicism at the time of the interview. She was willing to be portrayed, but felt uncertain about storage of the material, because she was not confident that she would be prepared to stand by her statements in the future. Many informants experienced drastic changes in the midst of the documenting phase, and in some cases this required a second round of interviews as well as changes to agreements. One of them was a young Muslim woman. All informants were asked whether they had an object that was significant in terms of their religious life; she right away chose the hijab, which was thoroughly justified. Some months later, however, she called the Museum and explained that she had changed from hijab to niqab, and it was therefore natural to arrange for another conversation. It transpired that the changes not only led to a novel style but also to another framework for interpretation, for instance of the ban against pictures within Islam; earlier on in the project she had let herself be photographed, but now she did not want pictures of her nor her family to figure in the exhibition. This change created challenges. In addition to being photographed at home, her family was very active in the local mosque and visible in many survey photos. We nevertheless agreed to her request, and the photographs were removed. After 1 ½ year wearing niqab, the women chose to return to wearing hijab, and concomitantly she

approved the use of photos. In retrospect, she described the period as a process of becoming mature, where as a young woman she sought to find a place and role for her religion in her life, and how it could be adapted to a non-Muslim society.

Other informants went through major changes as well, such as an Orthodox informant who changed congregation, name and costume twice during the period. In other cases, the changes were less significant, including new ways of approaching God through prayer and contemplation due to life crises or transition periods. In sum, the question concerning a second round of interviews, the storage, and at which time one considers the documentation completed required continuous and demanding deliberations.

The process of documenting religion in a city’s society has a great deal in common with field work in anthropology; we gradually worked our way into the religious community. First, we provided information about the museum, the methodology and the project. Then we engaged in active observation and conducted interviews. Some conversations were informal and have only been published as notes in the field work diary, while others are formal and are transcribed and analysed.<sup>9</sup> The big difference is that the museums’ documenting projects are not individual work resulting in research publications, but is a team effort where the goal

is public dissemination through exhibition, cataloguing and dialogue. As project leader one is thus often a “mediator” for other colleagues with competence within for instance photography, film and sound. This requires a lot of trust internally, as well as purposeful communication about ethical challenges and dilemmas. This is important especially when temporary employees in the project are involved.

At Perspektivet Museum, we regard it as important to create a strong degree of cohesion between documentation, the production of the exhibition and dissemination. The project leader will therefore be involved in all of these phases, which often feels reassuring for the informants. In *Min drakt – Min historie*, I conducted all interviews myself, but in *Homo Religiosus* the number of interviews was so large that three temporary employees had to be involved. In many cases, this made the informants insecure, which made it necessary for me to have a talk with them, before or after the interviews, in order to reassure them and answer questions about the project as a whole, and about dissemination and storage.

## Ethical dilemmas in the phase of production and dissemination

In 2014, Kathrin Pabst defended a dissertation on the moral challenges that employees at a museum face when addressing sensitive topics<sup>10</sup>. In the cases she examined, the academic expertise that had the final say in the production of exhibitions. Such experts were often employees hired specifically for the project, recruited from universities and university colleges with research competence on the topic. She writes: ” *Informants justify this with reference to to the credibility of the museum in society and the self-imposed requirement for museum employees to convey “facts” of high academic quality*”<sup>11</sup>.

In recent years, there has been a focus on museums of cultural history as agents in the public debate and as *institutions promoting dialogue*<sup>12</sup>. The museum should no longer conduct a monologue informing the general public, but give room for their own interpretations and a plurality of opinions. But is this possible when academic researchers, trained to express themselves in writing based on knowledge heavily anchored in their discipline, are to have the final say? Many may think that this is problematic, but could turning away from authoritative knowledge toward dialogue increase our capacity to protect informants and sensitive

material? Would this make us at odds with audience expectations about what an exhibition at a museum should offer?

In all our documentation and exhibition projects, Perspektivet Museum has tried out different forms of communication in exhibitions and dissemination. At the base, there is always a solid fundament of knowledge, partly assembled through our own investigations and the study of sources, but also through contact with external researchers and specialists. It has never been an option, however, to “let go of” our own overall responsibility either for the assembling of knowledge, production of exhibitions or dissemination.

Although all decisions are made internally at the museum, there will always be ethical dilemmas concerning the transmission of sensitive material. A core component of our work method is a close collaboration between the project leader, overseeing the documentation work, and the project director, who has the overall responsibility for the production of exhibitions. An advantage of this collaboration is that the dynamic interplay, through the entire process, between closeness and distance to the material, which enables deep knowledge and understanding, but also makes it easier to “get an overview” and to contemplate the meaning of our work at a higher, philosophical level. Such processes are central to our development of



Ethical dilemmas are not over when the exhibition has opened. In this picture, project leader Marianne A. Olsen talks to confirmants in *Homo Religiosus*. Photo: Mari Hildung/PEM.



Dialogue in an exhibition is not just about dialogue between the disseminator and the visitors, but also about dialogue between the visitors and the elements of the exhibition. This is from the exhibition *Homo Religiosus*. Photo: Mari Hildung/PEM.

exhibitions that promote dialogue, as our focus is not only knowledge, but also on communication. However, when two individuals get complete access to the documentation material, disagreements concerning usage, for instance of interviews, may certainly arise. At Perspektivet Museum, our work method has developed over many years, and presupposes a clear division of responsibilities and trust. Even so, written agreements can in some cases be useful.

We strongly believe that exhibitions promoting dialogue will be difficult to create purely on the basis of theoretical knowledge. Hence, in the exhibition *Homo Religiosus*, two artists were involved in the process, the thought being that art and knowledge should communicate rather than emerge as separate units. As the project leader, I would have regarded it as problematic if other participants were to access material from the interviews, but this was of course unnecessary. An overview of the documenting material could easily be presented both to artists and to others without necessitating such access.

There are many sides to being an institution promoting dialogue; is about the dialogue between the museum and informants/ contributors, about the internal dialogue at the museum in the process of making an exhibition, and the dialogue between the audience and the exhibition. I will now turn to describe the presentational context created when students

in schools and universities, as well as retired people or tourists enters the room. The Emeritus Professor of Pedagogics, Olga Dysthe, has authored several books and papers about teaching based on dialogue.<sup>13</sup> She emphasizes that a conversation where a teacher wishes to lead students towards an already determined answer is not a dialogue, but a monologue.<sup>14</sup> 'Dialogue' means 'through or between words,' and involves the possibility for novel, unrepeatable meanings to emerge between interlocutors. In the context of dissemination in museums, this requires that we make it possible to activate the visitors' own experiences by the exhibition and the museum guide, who should have the courage to open for communication to take novel and unexpected directions. Thus, if the project leader produces a prepared manuscript for a guided tour at an exhibition, it will be difficult to create real dialogue.

Perspektivet Museum has a small and flexible work environment, where the project leader in all of the large documentation and exhibition projects receives groups of visitors at the beginning of an exhibition period. This has been a good methodology to enable creative cooperation, the transfer of knowledge and an understanding of the dynamics between the audience, the elements of the exhibition and the disseminator. In this period, the basis for the dissemination arrangement is cultivated through a



process involving the audience, the disseminator and the project leader.

There is a great difference between dissemination arrangements promoting monologue and the execution of a proper method of dialogue. The transfer of material has required much care in all of PEM’s projects, but in *Homo Religiosus* it seemed particularly demanding. The key words are “religion viewed from below” and the safeguarding of informants, but also the awareness that religion often arouses strong feelings when it is discussed in the public sphere. In the context of dissemination, one meets individuals who have a strong faith and very clear opinions about “correct” and “incorrect” practices, and who criticize the topic being brought into the exhibition gallery. One meets children from religious homes, who scarcely acknowledge the family’s religion at school, as well as parents and teachers with categorical and prejudiced beliefs about faith and practice. Creating good forms of communication, that both shows respect and a will to enter into dialogue, requires a lot of confidence and competence in the mediator.

After *Homo Religiosus* opened, dealing with ethical challenges and finding solutions in the dissemination have been subject to an ongoing dialogue between the project leader and the mediator. We have agreed that a dissemination arrangement that emphasises the documented

material, focusing on diversity of religious practices in Tromsø, requires the mediators to have “integrated knowledge” of the mediators, which is difficult to acquire through transfer of knowledge and theory. Rather, such knowledge will be developed through visits to the ritual room, participation in practices and communication with people. A dissemination arrangement that is created on the basis of the more overarching themes of the exhibition, such as light/darkness, life/death, tradition/innovation, can be approached without “integrated knowledge.” With this in mind, the project leader and the mediator have split the groups of visitors between themselves for the time being. A solution for a later project could be to get the mediator involved already in the documentation phase. The challenges will of course be the extra demand on resources and that another person needs to be introduced to various communities, which can produce challenges with regard to creating trust. Another element that the mediator highlights is that deep insight and closeness to informants and communities may actually inhibit creative processes. She argues that a well-crafted catalogue where ethical considerations would already be can be equally useful as a basis. In addition, she argues, shorter visits at the different communities could produce a somewhat increased understanding and closeness.



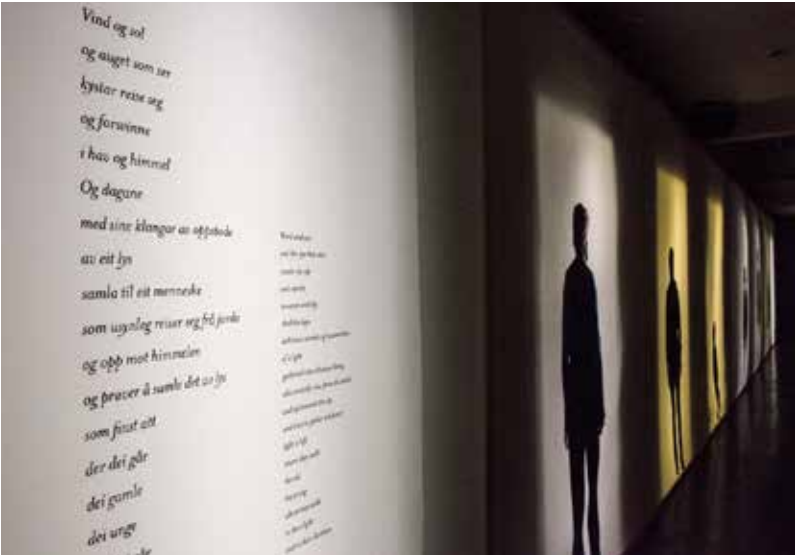
From the exhibition *Slipp gjenstanden fri!* (2007).  
Photo: Mari Hildung/PEM.



Collective work at the exhibition *Homo Religiosus*.  
Photo: Mari Hildung/PEM.



Visitors in the exhibition  
*Homo Religious*.  
Photo: Mari Hildung/PEM.



The exhibition *Homo Religious* presents several writings, here a poem by Jon Fosse from his poem collection “Auge og vind” (2003).  
Photo: Mari Hildung/PEM.



The exhibition *Homo Religious*. Photo: Mari Hildung/PEM.

### The expectations of visitors and informants

Like Kathrin Pabst’s informants state above, many visitors probably have particular expectations of what will meet them at a museum of cultural history. In 2007, Perspektivet Museum displayed the exhibition *Slipp gjenstanden fri!* (“Let the Object go!”). A range of objects from the museum’s collection were displayed without any categorisation, system or text – only some sounds of human societies were audible. Outside the delimited area, a chair hung in the air, accompanied by a range of texts about creation,

memory, furniture and source. The exhibition was, in part, a game, but it also raised a range of questions concerning a Museum’s usage of objects and about what is involved in the collections. No surveys were conducted among the audiences about *Slipp gjenstanden fri!*, but both through group visits and feedback at the reception desk we got the impression that many were positive. They found it exciting to explore the museum’s collection and to wonder about a floating chair and identical objects within and inside the exhibition area. Others reported that it was frustrating not to receive any facts, and in

the guest book we could read ”*There were many nice things here, but we miss having information about what the various things are, when they are from and who provided them.*”

Also in *Homo Religiosus*, Perspektivet Museum has chosen to produce an exhibition that is different from what many expect from a museum of cultural history. It has few texts, different religious and creeds are rarely presented separately, and art installations provide the visitors with more questions than authoritative answers. No audience surveys have been conducted here either, but the interest has been large during the first year, and both schools and university teachers come back with new classes. Reading in the guest books, however, one can see that there have been unsatisfied visitors too: “No, I think *Homo Religiosus* is too superficial. And, I suspect, confusing for many. Best wishes, religious person.” However, there is an overweight of enthusiastic comments. Many emphasise precisely the sensuous experience: ”*Thanks for a nice exhibition for the eyes, ears, soul and heart*” ”*Intense, overwhelming, hits a metaphysical nerve.*” We interpret this as a token that visitors do not merely wish to be taught through authoritative stories.

A documentation and exhibition project at Perspektivet Museum has a wide time frame. When the preparatory work starts, making selections and providing information about the

project, it is impossible to determine precisely how the exhibition will turn out. Hence, it is important to retain a good dialogue with communities and

informants throughout the project. At the same time, there will always be a desire for self-representation among those documented. This is especially relevant for religious topics, where missionary desires are not unusual. But on the condition that there is good communication that directives for research ethics are complied with, we think it important that the Museum retains control.

When informants and groups in the local society contribute in the work on the documentation, they are often invited to the pre-opening, meetings or exclusive tours of the exhibition. This is in part a token of gratitude for their contribution, but also an opportunity to receive feedback on how they experience the exhibition. I was quite nervous to receive many of the contributors of *Homo Religiosus*, but their feedback was mainly positive. In retrospect, I have asked myself whether I was almost too afraid to make mistakes when working on this project, because it was about something as sensitive as religion? Taking good care of communities and individuals who have contributed is of course essential. At the same time, an exaggerated fear of making mistakes may constrain our creative processes, and result in uninteresting exhibitions.

## Closing

For almost 20 years, I have worked on documentation and exhibition projects at Perspektivet Museum. Every time a larger work is completed, the report on documentation is written and the first dissemination arrangements are tried out, I think the same thing: this is the most interesting and demanding project I have ever been part of. This is also how it was with *Homo Religiosus*.

”*I don’t usually speak loudly about these things,*” said one of the informants. Even so, she took part in it with enthusiasm, and shared her thoughts about the most important thing in her life, her faith. The contribution was a great declaration of trust to our museum, and I believe that the core

of working with sensitive material is to be able to handle such trust.

It is a heavy responsibility to safeguard people who agree to contribute with highly personal stories at a museum of cultural history, and we should therefore formulate a common ethical framework. Still, I think that many of the dilemmas I have encountered cannot be met only by following rules. There are no objective solutions to them, and they will always require discretion. The most important thing for me through all of these years has been to avoid bearing the burden of ethical dilemmas alone, and that the management at the Museum has taken this seriously. This is how it ought to be at all museums.



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Notes

- For more information about the exhibition, see the Museum catalogue “Flytende russisk – Sjømenn fra øst møter Tromsø,” Perspektivet Museum 2007.
- The full title of the exhibition was “Min drakt – min historie. Kvinner i det internasjonale Tromsø” (“My costume – my history. Women in the international Tromsø”) (2005).
- For more information on the matter, see Døvigen and Kraft 2013 p. 149ff.
- The exhibition period has ended, but for more information about the work and its focus, see the Museum catalogue “Våre hellige rom,” Oslo Museum Dept. Intercultural Museum 2007.
- The exhibition period has ended, but for more information about the work, see the Museum catalogue “Himmelen over Sørlandet,” Vest-Agder Museum 2011.
- Jacobsen, Knut A. 2009 (2001) p. 23.
- This was the first documentation and exhibition project at Perspektivet Museum, and it opened in 1998.
- Gilhus and Mikaelsson (eds.) 2007 p. 13.
- Nilsen, Finn Sivert 1996.
- Pabst, Kathrin: Mange hensyn å ta – mange behov å avveie, UiA 2014
- Ibid. p. 240f.
- See e.g. “Det flestemminge klasserommet” 1995, “Dialog, samspill og læring” 2001 and “Dialogbasert Undervisning” 2012.
- Dysthe et. al 2012.

Islam in Bible group country

BY ROY HØIBO

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995) created the greatest influx of refugees into Europe since World War II. This refugee situation had actually been sought and devised on the background of the idea that people with different ethnic backgrounds could not live together; “To banish people has itself been the aim of the acts of war,” as The Norwegian People’s Aid put it<sup>1</sup>. About half of the population fled. Approximately 1.3 million fled internally to other parts of the country, while nearly 1 million escaped to countries in Europe or across the Atlantic to the United States of America. Some of them arrived in Suldal in Norway. This was the beginning of a longlasting engagement for Ryfylke museum.



The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was brutal and tragic. The scars of war are clearly visible on the border separating Serbian Orthodox and Muslim areas on the outskirts of Sarajevo.  
Photo: Roy Høibo.

Most refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina who came to Norway arrived in 1993 and 1994, and were granted temporary residence and work permits on a collective basis. By the close of 1995 more than 12,000 refugees had been granted protection. The Bosnians were also given the right to family reunion, which would eventually led to further immigration from Bosnia-Herzegovina. In Ryfylke, Suldal was the municipality that showed the greatest determination in making preparations for the settlement of refugees, and did everything required in the 1994 Norwegian Government resolution on the reception of refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina.

As for Ryfylke Museum it was the Nordic Museum Festival in Stavanger in 1998 that sparked our engagement with the refugee situation. Intending for the festival theme to be “Friends and Enemies,” Rogaland county announced there was funding for museums that wished to participate. So Ryfylke museum applied to fund a contribution about refugees from the former Yugoslavia in Suldal.

An important framework for this engagement was our friendship collaboration with Down County Museum in Downpatrick, Northern Ireland, which had been initiated some years earlier. At the time, we were greatly inspired by their work to build bridges between people with different political and religious beliefs, and the way they

attempted to make their museum into a “Common Ground.” This fit right in with how the role of museums in their communities is outlined by the Velure committee in the Norwegian Government Report on Museums,<sup>2</sup> where the museum’s role in providing a space for meetings and dialogue is crucial.

Eventually, the project was given the name *The Long Road*, which became the name of a booklet as well as an exhibition that opened at Sand, in Norway, on 24 October, 1998. The centerpiece of the exhibition was a labyrinth built of recycled chipboard, which displayed texts, photos, amateur art, and objects on loan from the refugees. It also included a simple slide show consisting of photographs we had taken on a study tour to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

At a conference on migration into the village community, held in connection with our exhibition, Alen Kusmic defined being a refugee as being a person without identity; it is to be a second-class human being, a nomad without a home. One does not choose to live like this. Likewise, other studies of refugees have concluded that life in exile entails ‘a continuous search for belonging.’ Such belonging means more than just having a place to live: it means belonging to a place where you are recognized for who you are.





Nenad Ignjatić, a Serb from the former Yugoslavia, has been an asset in the work with refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as a colourful individual in the local community. Photo: Lise Bjelland/Ryfylkemuseet.

The question of identity thus turned into a compelling and central concern for our project. A fundamental difficulty for the refugees was how to handle the gap between their own ideas about themselves and the identities ascribed to them. As a strongly heterogeneous group, refugees have different personalities shaped by differences in heredity and environment, values and interests, but as soon as they become refugees a ‘refugee

identity’ is attached to them. In addition, the refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina had recently been engaged in ascribing different identities to themselves; as Muslims, Serbs or Croats. All of this made their experience different from that of those of us who had lived far from any refugee situation, in a society that retained only faint recollections of the perilous journeys across the Northern Sea or to Sweden during World War II.

Seeing this, we believed the museum should further an understanding of such processes of self-identification, and we thought we could do this by creating interest in our own identity project, with both those who had arrived and those who had been here before in mind. Museums are capable of collecting, documenting and working with sources that help understand and transmit knowledge about cultural processes, and that is precisely what we wanted to accomplish with *The Long Road*.

### The Long Road

We were admittedly both naive and ignorant when we started our work, but this did not prevent us from having great ambitions. We wanted to accomplish the following:

- impart knowledge about those who had come to the district as refugees, and their meeting with the Norwegian local community.
- contribute to the development of the refugees’ own identity.
- provide an impulse for the development of the identity of the Norwegian inhabitants in the local community.
- create an improved foundation for participation and coexistence.

As a consequence, it became important to arrange for interaction between Norwegians and refugees from different groups, and we invited people to participate in a project group that would help prepare and design the project. The group consisted of three Norwegians in addition to the museum personnel, and three ex-Yugoslavs: one Serb, one Muslim and one Yugoslav. The latter was a man who refused to be pigeonholed along ethnic lines.<sup>3</sup> The museum personnel were, in the project’s initial phase, the author of this article and Gaute Berge Nilsen, who was employed as a consultant at Ryfylke museum. Other coworkers joined later. The “we” of this article most often refers to these staff members.

The result of the cooperation was in many ways successful, but there were also obstacles that we needed to overcome, that were most likely symptoms both of more general difficulties surrounding the integration of refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina into Norwegian society, as well as difficulties the refugee groups had in restoring a peaceful way of being together. As this was the first large project we implemented, it can be useful to describe some of the challenges we met in more detail.

## Ivo Andrić – the first stumbling block

Already in the first meeting of the project group, the question of Ivo Andrić arose. We wanted to discuss a preliminary outline for the implementation of the project, including the main idea for shaping an exhibition, collection of material, and forms for communication with the municipality's ex-Yugoslav milieu. One of the ideas was to make bridges a key concept in the exhibition work. The person who suggested this imagined bridges as a connection between the past and present, between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Norway, between refugee and permanent inhabitants, and between Serbs and Muslims. The bridge metaphor would also relate to Yugoslavia's most famous author, Ivo Andrić.

Ivo Andrić was born as a Catholic Croat but would later come to self-identify as a Serb. And in Norway in 1998, he was no longer just a great writer from the former Yugoslavia but a Serb, and could therefore no longer serve as a bridge builder, or even as an example that refugees came from a country that had a literary culture that they could be proud of..

We Norwegians found this difficult to understand, not least since it was hard to spot the controversial aspects of Andrić's authorship. Although we were admittedly not familiar with the bulk of his literary works, nothing related to obvious nationalistic traits in his writings actually

came up in our discussion. Despite this, the idea to include Andrić in our project provoked a very emotional debate, and we concluded it would be wise to scrap both the author and the thematic of bridges.

## A meeting format different from our own

The first meeting in the project group, and the Ivo Andrić discussion, revealed another phenomenon that often comes up when Norwegians and foreigners have to work together: meeting formats and decision processes are often different. Where Norwegians can be a bit taciturn, foreigners can be more verbose and assertive. Where we can tolerate that our opinion has not been accepted, foreigners often want to ensure that they have really been understood. In our first meeting it was thus not merely about being for or against Ivo Andrić, but it was equally important to make us Norwegians understand why ex-Yugoslavs had left their country, and how they understood their circumstances in life. These were large themes, and required a great deal of time.

It did not make matters easier that the negotiations had to occur in a language that half of the project group had only recently learnt. It is difficult enough to use a foreign language to negotiate everyday life, and even worse to

rely on it to explain complicated situations of a cultural or political nature. Thus, we had to confront a communication problem that was due to our inadequate foreknowledge of each other, insufficient language skills, and different traditions for holding meetings.

The easiest route was to see if we could agree on issues that could help us piece together an impression of their meeting with Norwegian society. But while we Norwegians were ready to draw critical attention to how we receive refugees, the ex-Yugoslavs were concerned that we present their reception in positive terms; we should under no circumstances criticise the municipality. Despite their despair and frustration they made it very clear, so that even the Norwegians understood, that there would be no room for a critique of the system.

The refugees were, moreover, concerned that we understand their history in context. They were not the only refugees in the world, and they were not the only immigrants in Suldal. This means they were not an isolated phenomenon, but shared their fate with many. This might be related to the fact that they were not particularly comfortable with their status as Bosnian refugees. Being a refugee is a position that hardly anyone would enjoy, and they did not all self-identify as Bosnians. The Muslims felt the most comfortable about being Bosnian, while the Serbs and Croats preferred to see themselves as ex-Yugoslavs,

or as refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina if necessary.

The difficult part was working out how to talk and what to say about the country they came from.

## The colour green – the second stumbling block

In the labyrinth, which was to illustrate the long road from their homeland to integration in a new country, we wanted to use different colours to communicate different voices, connected to different phases in the integration process. The last room in the labyrinth should communicate optimism, and the belief in a future after the escape from the homeland and the struggle to make oneself at home in the new country. In this room, we displayed photos of the refugees in different situations, where they were focused on work, hobbies, and other recreational activities. We exhibited examples of items they produced, and made a broad opening leading out of the labyrinth and into Norwegian society. The title of the room was taken from a dynamic staff development project in Suldal, "We will – we can – we dare." It was intended to suggest the capacity and determination of the refugees to give something back, that they were now ready to start contributing to the development of the rural community.



The ethnic dividing lines were more apparent in clothing customs after the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This photo is from Mostar in 1998. Photo: Roy Høibo/Ryfylkemuseet

It was a room for hope and joy and self-confidence, and the natural and incontestable choice of colour for those of us who were Norwegian, was green. Hope is light green. The associations brought by the optimistic photographs, the fine needlework, the broad opening onto the world, and the green colour would all merge into a greater unity of common understanding, common action, and common goals.

It had not occurred to us that that colour, and the juxtaposition of colours, can raise very different associations for different people. In Bosnia-Herzegovina green is the Muslims' colour; we had, moreover, settled precisely on that shade of green. For the Serbs, unfortunately, that green colour therefore did not signal the correct vision of the future, which meant that we had failed badly, and were yet again reminded how difficult intercultural communication can be. Even so, we did our very best to explain how most Norwegians would interpret the colour, and let it remain.

We also discovered that it was not a self-evidently good idea to exhibit hobby handiwork. Whereas here in Norway few things are more common exhibits than embroidered tablecloths, hand-knitted socks and rose-painted cupboards, some immigrants argued that it was not right to display work that was not at a professional level. We nevertheless did it the Norwegian way

and decided to exhibit the hobby handiwork, explaining that it would be of great interest to a Norwegian audience.

### The argument about the images

The refugees carried within them two images of the country they had left. One was a picture of a beautiful land and a happy life. This was a picture which was actively cultivated, and which became lovelier as time passed and the sense of loss grew.

The second was a picture of a war that had not just been burnt into their retinas, but which had caused difficult experiences, painful loss, and the dissolution of social relationships. The refugees were themselves aware of the mental health issues with which they struggled, but received little help to tackle. The project group did not provide a space for the refugees to help each other lift the lid on the war situation back home; the prehistory to war and the war events were most likely too close, too complicated, and too traumatic to discuss in our forum. Accordingly, the elements of the exhibition intended to explain the background to the refugee situation were considerably downplayed.

On our side, we tried to solve the problem by suggesting a smaller section which through some few photos could say something about what constituted war. In our interpretation, war was soldiers, refugees, prisoners, rape, victims and

destruction. When we ordered some photos from the Norwegian News Agency (NTB) to illustrate this, we caused the most serious crisis of the entire exhibition project.

The photos from NTB presented exactly what we wished to convey. The soldiers were in uniform, the women wore headscarfs, and the background was possible to identify for those with good local knowledge. The photo was consequently not neutral; it would not be possible to choose neutral photos of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Among some refugees the photos provoked such strong reactions that they threatened to boycott the entire arrangement. If that had happened, one of the aims of the project would have become obsolete, so we chose to avoid this and put the photos aside.

In other cases it was difficult to obtain precisely the photo we wanted, at short notice. This led, among other things, to us sitting there with a colour photo of a mosque and a black and white photo of a Catholic church. This was to test their confidence in us further; were we favouring one group more than another? Did we have dishonest intentions with the project?

The museum was also criticised for a series of photographs from the post-war period in Bosnia and Herzegovina, taken some weeks before the exhibition was to open. We showed them in a simple slide show called “100 pictures from



Bosnia-Herzegovina.” They comprised photos from Sarajevo, Zenica, Mostar, Kresevo, Granice near Busovaca, and Banja-Luka – consequently from the Muslim-Croat Federation, and from the Republic of Serbia. They were photos of things new and old, intact and destroyed, beautiful and ugly, but seen through the gaze of a Norwegian with a penchant for the exotic. Some argued that this was not the correct picture of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and that we did not need to show pictures of poor neighbourhoods and women who had taken up the tradition of wearing a headscarf.

We also invited a couple of the refugees to contribute to the exhibition with their own work. Some of this work could be interpreted. One of the pictures presented a man who could be associated with an American president, and the artist explained that the picture was a protest that great men, in countries far away, were allowed to intervene and dictate terms that divided, and destroyed, the land he had grown up in and loved. We accepted this explanation, and thought it was an interesting expression of the feelings among the refugees. But there were also people who interpreted the picture as an attack against Slobodan Milošević and Radovan Karadžić, especially because they knew who had made it, and we realised that the objections to the picture were too intense for us to include it.

The work with the pictorial material for the exhibition taught us a lesson about the eyes

that see. While the discussions were ongoing we asked ourselves whether our integrity as museum professionals was being threatened, and we became frustrated about the distrust and what we saw as a lack of tolerance among the refugees. Having undertaken a study tour to Bosnia-Herzegovina, we believed, moreover, that we had reason to believe that not all refugees were equally up-to-date on developments in the country they had left 4-5 years earlier. But since the exhibition was to be a contribution to the process of integration, we could not insist upon our ideas being adopted in their entirety, and we produced an exhibition that was in some ways different and less critical than we would have preferred.

### Could we have constructed another exhibition?

In a draft report about Norwegian museums and the multicultural challenges, Per B. Rekdal has discussed whether we could have put together an exhibition that conflicted with the opinions of the refugees.<sup>4</sup> He gives support for the solution we reached, pointing out that a museum in a small community is more constrained and has a heavier responsibility to the inhabitants than a museum in a larger community. A mistake in our context risked causing a setback the integration process, which was the exact opposite of what we aimed to do. Reversely, a successful cooperative venture

in a small local community may have greater chances of achieving a tangible result than a similar exhibition in a larger town community.

At Ryfylke museum we experienced that the initiative to consider the situation of the refugees was well received by the refugees themselves, and we succeeded in achieving cooperation across the dividing lines between groups of refugees. Therefore we believed that nearly everything was done, and were both surprised, disappointed and frustrated when we discovered that the relationship between the refugees themselves was nowhere near as good as we had thought. And even more distrust was directed towards us, because we operated with photo material that seemed unbalanced in terms of outward consistency, and presented the situation in an ambiguous manner. We became even more anxious when we understood that those who cooperated with us and with each other on our project were being blamed for being traitors to their own people.

Thus, we went through the most difficult situation we had experienced since we worked with the history of the war in Sand (1940-1945), but also understood that what we were doing had, for once, a deeper meaning for the community outside the museum premises. We did not want to risk the fragile cooperation we had created, and chose to reduce the presentation of the



Peter and Katinka were lifestyle immigrants from the Netherlands and came to Suldal with considerable energy and competence which could be used in the local community. Photo: Suldalsposten.

background to the refugee catastrophe in Bosnia and Herzegovina to a minimum.

The result of this decision led to “everyone” coming along when the exhibition was opened. Many also took part in the conference on immigration in the rural community, which was arranged while the exhibition was being shown. Consequently, we had succeeded with one of the important aims of the exhibition: that the project should contribute to the integration process. Even though we had not succeeded so well with imparting knowledge about the refugees to the Norwegian local community, nor contributed to greater understanding and tolerance among refugees, it would have been a lot worse if the work with the exhibition had led to greater distance between the refugees themselves, and between them and us as representatives of the Norwegian local community.

**The multicultural rural district**

Ryfylke museum was given the opportunity to conduct a broader inquiry into immigration, when Arts Council Norway supported a millenium project called *Document 2000*, instigated by the Norwegian Museum Association. We conducted interviews with representatives from three groups of immigrants in Suldal: immigrants with a western background, immigrants from Eastern Europe, and immigrants with another non-western background. The key challenge

of the investigation was to understand the rural district as a meeting place for a multicultural community. Our hypothesis was that different immigrant groups might experience the meeting with the district in different ways, and we thought that a closer examination of how these meetings occurred would tell us something about the underlying values of the rural community. The project was called “The Multicultural Rural District.”

The starting point was to document the district as a meeting place between immigrants and permanent inhabitants, and through this contribute to better knowledge about, and understanding of, important processes of change in the rural district. We also wanted to enable a broader understanding of history, where history belongs to all those who live in a place, not just those who have lived there for several generations. We saw such knowledge as essential for creating a good and secure community, where people from different cultures could live together. We also believed that that which took place in rural Norway should be a part of such knowledge.

Thus, our ambitions for the project were not very modest, and the optimism was great when we began, but he project would change along the way, as the basis for our sources turned out to be different from what we had planned; it was not as easy to obtain a good balance between

the immigrant groups as we had thought. Also, problems we had not thought about in advance occurred after we began to compile the available material. The most striking fact was that the attempt to capture something of the interactions, or lack of interactions, between immigrants and those who had always lived in the district, led us into a series of other areas where harmony was also not always conspicuous. Here are some of the main clashes:

Thus, understanding immigration in small communities may not first and foremost be about how immigrants from a foreign culture experience living in a stay-at-home rural district, but more about how those from these districts experience living in a changing world.

Farmer conservatism	against	radical feminism
Country people	against	sixty-eighters
Young	against	old
New residents	against	locally born
Municipality	against	state
The people	against	power
Immigrants	against	immigrants
Heimatt (home attachment)	against	new blood
Globalisation	against	localisation
Immigration department (UDI)	against	politicians in opposition





Women have played an essential role in establishing good integration processes. This photo is from the international café at Ryfylke museum, which has become a secular and alcohol-free meeting place across cultures, gender and age. Fatia, Hanna, Grete and Kadra invite guests to the generously-decked table. Photo: Jarle Lunde, Suldal foto/Ryfylkemuseet.

### Us and the others

When Magnus Hiim, at the public meeting on the establishment of an asylum seeker reception centre at Sand, called those who were positive about welcoming refugees, “parrots that had learnt to speak in 1968, and had not learnt anything else since,” he brought the educational community into the debate about

the development of the rural districts. Hiim was well formulated and well spoken, and clearly not lacking in book learning, even though he was attempting to exclude academics from the debate about how the district should develop. When Hiim criticised that the meeting was being held at a time when people were usually in the cowshed and barn, he attempted to exclude new local residents from the debate. The authentic and pure, those who really ought to have been heard,

were the district folk, those who were born there, whose roots went back several generations, and who did not show off by speaking in the manner of people who had been students some 30 years ago.

Magnus Hiim was not the only one with this opinion. There was no doubt that the petition that was organised brought a group of people together who were glad that someone took it upon himself to come forward, and it was perhaps not only a protest against an asylum seeker reception centre on “Gata” (the main street) in Sand. Perhaps one may also see this activism as a warning that “enough was almost enough” in terms of who should decide things in the district. In this way, the debate about the reception centre can be understood as a catalyst for underlying contradictions between new residents and academics on one side, and farmers and workers on the other.

Thus, the problem was most likely connected to the scope of co-determination. People prefer to be the master of their own house, and it is not hard to realise that it can be difficult to understand that new residents have taken over the municipal administration, politics, clubs and associations, and the most important institutions. But it is not so simple either, because it was not just the new residents that were positive about the immigrants.

The strongest engagement has come from women. It was the women who stood up with the most enthusiastic appeals when the reception centre was being debated, who took charge and did something when the asylum seekers did not have meeting places, and who gave vent to their fury when the Softić family was deported.<sup>5</sup> The women also cooperated regardless of differences in class, age, education and time of residence in the municipality, because it was about empathy, responsibility and engagement.

Consequently, the matter at hand was whether the district should take in asylum seekers, or if we had enough with our own issues. But underneath this arose the problem concerning who should make decisions, and this problem was not limited to the reception centre, but concerned everything from the national day program for 17 May, to the directions for development in the municipality. One can view the petition against the localisation of the reception centre as being just as much a petition against those in favour of the reception centre, a petition by the people against those governing. But it was not just directed against those elected to govern, but also against those who stood up, set the tone, were eloquent and positive in a forum where others dreaded to speak, for fear of being labelled as racists, or who simply were not there because they did not feel comfortable in such gatherings, or had work to do in the cowshed.

What was problematic was that the sixty-eighters, municipal bosses or women with poetic leanings did not feel comfortable with the situation either. In their understanding, the Directorate of Immigration (UDI) and the private initiative of HERO (reception centre and competence) had intervened over and above their right to self-determination, and in a matter that people agreed required more thorough preparation than the municipality had been allowed.

The people and the elite thus shared the same skepticism with the authorities and big finance, and basically had a common set of values with regard to the district and “the good life,” but still did not manage to create a basis for dialogue and common action. The conduct of the UDI also gradually reinforced the skepticism against those who had been positive; still, this was less a skepticism toward immigrants than against immigration policy.

Although we should not pretend that those who live in the rural districts share the same set of values about everything, there may be reason to ask oneself whether both the state and the municipality could have done more to create a better foundation for dialogue about the politics of immigration in the districts, and the integration of immigrants. One might, for example, have tried to show a greater understanding that this is chiefly about a meeting between people with

values, emotions, dreams and hopes, than simply about furniture, lodgings, and at best, a job.

## Clients and therapists

In a rural district people are not a grey mass that drifts past, but individuals with whom one maintains a relationship. If we do not manage to identify relatives, we at least want to know where people come from, with whom they belong, and what they do.

The district understood why the refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina came to Suldal. We had seen the images from the war on television, we understood why they had escaped, we felt sorry for them, and we wanted to help. They were not so very different from us either, or so we thought, and we knew about the good connection between Norway and Yugoslavia after World War II. We thought that perhaps all Yugoslavs had been on the same side as us during the war, and we felt sympathy for a country that was not as communist as other countries behind the Iron Curtain.

And so we were basically positive to helping the ex-Yugoslavs, and viewed it as completely unproblematic that they would have a place within the community as clients of the social security office. Yes, it was more than that: Suldal municipality had several times made requests to

take in refugees, and was allowed to receive 40 refugees in 1994.

The western immigrants were *literally* therapists: dentists, doctors and physiotherapists, well-educated people that filled important positions in schools and cultural life, and who have brought expertise, special skills and resources that the district sorely needed. Sometimes they came as marital partners to Norwegians. There were no reasonable grounds to start petitions to get such people to leave. They did not look any different, nor did they behave very differently.

No, it was the asylum seeker reception centre that triggered the protests. It was unclear where the asylum seekers came from, what grounds they had for coming here, what they did and what they wanted. Besides, they looked different, they asked the cooperative shop order food that district folk had only seen in exotic shops in the cities, and wandered aimlessly about in the town centre. People who wandered around aimlessly had not been unfamiliar to Sand, but one had always known where they belonged, where they came from, and where they were going.

The ex-Yugoslavs had a clear opinion that people were looked at differently, and that they were not as highly valued as others, whether other immigrants or Norwegians. They would even ponder whether they were ranked above or below the clientele at Hiimsmoen, a communal

home for the rehabilitation of drug addicts. Such ideas were, in all likelihood, coloured by how well individuals had succeeded in adjusting to the district community, but it was not difficult to elicit evidence from the ex-Yugoslavs about everyday racism. One must thus assume that the attitude of many Norwegians was indeed that the refugees were inferior.

Even immigrants from Western Europe can recount episodes, signals and practices that suggest that not even they can feel secure of being considered fully valued members of the district community. They have registered that there are different standards of value for district youth who return home and immigrants who have recently moved into the area. Any new residents in a Norwegian rural district will of course have to accept being an apprentice in matters of district culture for quite some time; and even if you think you have understood it all, it is not necessarily the same as being entitled to an opinion. But it is of course easier to put foreigners in their place. How can a foreigner, with newly acquired skills in the immigrant version of standard Norwegian, confront a native with generations of dialect development at their disposal?

The district can certainly regard the newcomers with interest and curiosity, and some will be enthusiastic about new foods and new thoughts. But many will view the newcomers as a threat to their own territory, cultural competence and





Project officer at Ryfylke museum Ann Kristin Ramstrøm celebrating Eid at Sand, together with the Bille family.  
Photo: Nenad Ignjatovic/Ryfylkemuseet.

social position. In our place, this was given concrete expression in disputes over women, which consequently led to physical altercations; that, however, is certainly not anything new to rural Norwegian culture.

### Examining immigration in the rural community

The material we had collected to examine how our district functioned as a meeting place between immigrants and ethnic Norwegians gave few clear answers. The picture was complex and

changed in the process of piecing it together. And it was not very easy to obtain the material in the first place. The Somalians dropped out before we really got started with interviewing them. Among the Bosnians there were people who wondered why they should support us in our work, when we did not support and help them in theirs. There were people among our Nordic neighbours who were too busy to talk to us. It is, of course, a voluntary matter to allow oneself to be interviewed by a museum, and there can be good reasons not to participate. Also, immigrants might have been through more than enough interviews, questionnaires and meetings with the Norwegian government.

We nonetheless believe that we have a reasonably good material for understanding how the immigrants have experienced their meeting with the district, even if we know too little about how the people of the district have experienced immigration. There are some easily available sources from the extreme points of view, but we lack the broad material that could give us a basis for more insightful conclusions. Neither do we know enough about how potential meeting places actually function as arenas for exchange of knowledge and interests.

The knowledge about immigration in the rural district community is at this stage mostly uncharted territory. We do not know very much, and those who are responsible for the placement

of asylum seekers and refugees in Norwegian rural communities appear to know even less. We think this is a serious problem; this is an important area where we are in dire need of more knowledge that should be communicated to those involved. We are troubled by the development of attitudes among people of different origins, if more resources are not assigned for work on the integration of immigrants into Norwegian society.

### Islam in Bible group country

In 2004-2005, after examining how refugees from the former Yugoslavia found their way on the long journey to Norway, and the subsequent study of immigrants from other countries as well, Ryfylke museum received support from ABM-development to undertake a project called “Islam in Bible group country.” The idea was to strive toward a better understanding of the meeting between people of different cultures and religions, in a district shaped by a strong influence of *lekmannsrørsle*, the layman’s religious movement. The initiative itself and the planning of the project was inspired by the increasing negativity in the immigration debate in the public sphere. At Ryfylke Museum we believed we had the prerequisites to contribute with a rural district-perspective on the situation. Our survey was conducted by Ann Kristin Ramstrøm. The main research material was an in-depth interview with 37 informants from different





Ryfylke museum tries to include children and youth in its activities. The photo is taken after an international café.  
Photo: Kjetil Brekke, Suldal foto/Ryfylkemuseet

municipalities in Ryfylke, both with immigrants, people who were close to the chapel/meeting house environment and others.

What we found was that faith and religion do not always have a large or important role for migrants. Migrants who are religious often state “that the faith is within me,” while everyday life to a greater degree is about adjusting to the district by learning the language and cultural

codes, finding a job and creating a social life. Whether one is a believer or not, the new everyday life is about adjusting to the new country. The religiosity of the migrants who were devout, was not particularly apparent for the majority in the district, partly because the religious rituals took place in the private sphere, at home.



Somalis also love their children deeply. Mohamed Ali with his son, little Ali. Mohamed has been a trainee and part-time employee at Ryfylke museum. He is now training to be an electrician. Photo: Grete Holmboe/Ryfylkemuseet.

Nonetheless, immigration to Norway is not dominated by people from distant lands with unfamiliar religions. The greatest growth in immigrants comes from Europe, many from the former Eastern-bloc countries such as Poland and Lithuania, but also from Scandinavia and not least from Germany and the Netherlands. There are in fact municipalities in Ryfylke that have actively recruited people from the Netherlands as new inhabitants. This aroused our interest,

and with support from the Culture Capital City Stavanger 2008, we have carried out a study of the reasons that people from Germany and the Netherlands left house and home, friends, relatives and family, to settle down in narrow fjords with bad weather. The answer is that they are looking for the “good life,” just like many migrants before them have done. The project was given the name “Common Ground,” strongly inspired by the inter-ethnic bridge-building work

at our friendship museum, the Down County Museum in Downpatrick, Northern Ireland. The results on display in an exhibition called “The Good Life,” which thus became the fourth of the series of projects connected to the development of cultural diversity in Ryfylke.

Norwegian society faces great challenges in the meeting with a reality that at an ever faster pace looks to become internationalised. Rural Norway is also confronted with these challenges, and in many places the process is not as peaceful as it appears to be in Ryfylke. Cultural institutions in the districts were ill-prepared for this, at the same time as they, and perhaps museums in particular, offer a unique possibility for establishing meeting places that allow for a cross-cultural dialogue. Small local and larger district museums, in rural areas, have been established and built in order to take care of and display the inheritance of our forefathers. Our tradition is to devote our attention to core groups in a bygone society. The burden of considerable maintenance and conservation tasks, preserving material from the 1700s and 1800s, means that interest in contemporary themes is limited, not to mention grappling with foreign cultures.

There lies a great danger in this. The national, national romantic or rural romantic ideas that have underpinned the establishment and development of museums can easily lead to the cultivation of static conceptions about our own

rural districts and our nation, which create a distance to others and exclude them from the community. On the other hand, if we are able to see museums as participants in a process where collections, knowledge and capabilities should serve to develop tolerance and cultural competence, museums can become important contributors to a dynamic development of a rural community with a broader horizon and greater resources for a positive future.

### Children in the rural district

So far, we had focused on adults. We had implemented a documentation project, as well as different types of communication and education measures, arranged seminars, actively participated in integration work through the intake of trainees and the employment of immigrants, organised an “international café” for 10 years, and developed the museum as an important meeting place and dialogue institution. This had given us many friends both among new Norwegians and rural people who were engaged with what was happening around us. But there were also some who had turned their backs on us and called us “parrots which learnt to speak in ‘68, and had not learnt anything else since.”

Since immigration in recent years has shifted from Europeans from former Yugoslavia to Africans and people from other distant places, the

problems have if anything become larger, and we have found that many conflicts revolve around the conditions in which children are brought up. It appears that the Child Welfare Service often approaches the problems with tools that make them escalate, rather solve them, which has turned the Child Welfare Service into a dreaded part of the refugee reception administrative system. For people that previous experiences have given little confidence in the governing authorities, it can appear that the Child Welfare Service is an accomplice in throwing away the opportunity, that may have been present at some point, to build trust.

At Ryfylke museum we have looked at immigration and the development of a multicultural society as a key challenge for society. In an attempt to define our societal role we have thought that this is a challenge which concerns us, and that the role we have developed through almost 20 years can be a foundation upon which to build. We also believe that immigrants face very different conditions in towns and rural communities.

For a long time there was less immigration in the rural districts, but with an increasing need to find homes for refugees and asylum seekers, the proportion of immigrants in the districts is rapidly rising. For better or worse, rural districts have different prerequisites for integration. At first sight, it might seem that the integration of

children in small communities may be easier than in large ones, but the conflicts we have observed mean that we question the manner in which challenges are being addressed. We believe that better knowledge can help improve the work on integration, and that the museum has certain qualities that enables it to contribute with such knowledge. On this background, we applied for funding to carry out a project aiming to create a better understanding of the conditions in which children were growing up in a multicultural rural community. We believe that more knowledge of different ways of conceiving childhood and child rearing can contribute to improvements in how immigrants are received. We also believe that the museum has some qualifications for establishing and communicating such knowledge.

Our knowledge base must be gathered through field work where we observe and interview all parties: the children, their parents and the public refugee reception and processing administration. This is admittedly not easy, and we understand that it will be necessary to spend time on building relations and confidence before expecting any result from our field work. We also see that there is a risk of failure, but we also believe that the foundation of confidence that we have already established provides us with better qualifications than anyone else. We wish to do the field work both in ethnic Norwegian families and in immigrant families, and to obtain updated knowledge on the conditions in which children

grow up in different environments. We will also look at whether it is possible to observe the children at kindergarten and school, and in organised recreational activities. Our starting point is our scholarly methods and cultural knowledge. Consequently, we will approach the field with other tools than those who have the public responsibility for the integration programme.

We assume that, from such a point of departure, we will be better able to document and understand the attitudes and actions we can observe or are told about, and that the results should be communicated both directly and verbally, in dialogue with those it concerns, both in the course of the project and when we finally conclude it. Also, this is a field where we should have the courage to participate in the public debate. One of the aims is therefore to take part in the public debates on how to solve the challenges of immigration in the rural community, especially with regard to children. In addition, we see it as both necessary and important to prepare a report on the project that makes the results publicly available, as far as this is compatible with the obligations of confidentiality to which we are bound.

Such a project we will make us enter an emotional landscape that has great importance for all those involved. It will therefore be necessary to maintain a continuous, internal process where

we reflect over what is true, for whom we have responsibility, who we recognise, who we can possibly offend, which feelings can arise for our own coworkers, and how professional we can be. But we think that the project can have an important side effect, both for us and for others, since it has a strong bearing on developing competence in handling ethical questions connected to sensitive themes. We believe this is worth communicating to others.

### Have we succeeded?

At Ryfylke museum we have nearly 20 years experience with what was first called “the multicultural challenge,” and which has since changed its name to “cultural diversity.” We had much to learn, and we will never finish learning. To the extent that we have succeeded this has largely been thanks to a common desire to understand the challenges brought by changes in our district community, and the great capacity of our coworkers at the museum to create trust and a foundation for good communication.

Our work with the stories of the new Norwegians, and to make our museum into a meeting place, have now become an integral part of the museum’s operations. It still happens that people question whether it is really worthwhile to prioritise this subject, and when they do, we respond with broad agreement that, yes, it is.

And we have had the pleasure of experiencing that immigrants mention us as one of the most important points of support for integration.

As we now embark upon another undertaking, delving into even more controversial problems, we have had to ask ourselves what our role in society really is. We have concluded that to document and communicate differences in our conceptions of childhood and how to raise children can be an important task for a museum.



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Notes

1. Norsk Folkehjelp: *Faktaark* u.å.
2. NOU 1996:7 Museum, mangfald, minne, Kulturdepartementet, 1996.
3. The nomenclature for the refugees was itself problematic. In writing Serbs, Croats, Muslims and therefore Yugoslavs, it expresses a need to categorise, both for the refugees themselves and among us who understood the background of the situation which created the refugee crisis, but which had little importance in the society which existed prior to the war.
4. Rekdal, Per B.: *Norske museer og den flerkulturelle utfordringen*, rapportkladd, NMU 1999
5. The Softić family, Delija and Mercia Softić with three children had come from Montenegro to Suldal in 2000. They lived in the refugee reception centre but later had their own house, participated in Norwegian language training and had some small jobs. In spring 2002, they received the second and final rejection of their application for residence in Norway. This led to strong engagement in the local community, but ended in deportation.

“Grey Zones” and  
“Hearts Turned Inside Out?”

Contemporary eyewitnesses and archival material as sources for historical research in the museum

BY HEIDI STENVOLD AND NINA PLANTING MØLMANN

This article discusses our museum and its role in society, and reflects on the methods we used in the research process. Starting from personal experience, it deals with problems involved in the collection of research material. It is based on a great number of interviews with contemporary eyewitnesses and a deep, multi-dimensional, exploration of the archives over many years, paying particular attention to ethical issues. Trying to do justice to how research is closely bound up with ways of communicating knowledge, we also discuss education and communication. Our research initially set out to find answers to questions from the public regarding the Second World War in North Norway, which had largely gone unaddressed.

Our workplace, the Museum of Reconstruction for Finnmark and Northern Troms, is a museum of cultural history located in Hammerfest, North Norway.<sup>1</sup> It was established with the ambition of becoming the national centre for documentation and communication of the history of World War II in Finnmark county, and Northern Troms county. We focus especially on the liberation of East Finnmark, the scorched-earth tactics in 1944, the forced evacuation of the population initiated by the German occupation forces, the gradual return of the refugees, and the long period of reconstruction. Our main exhibition presents these events by engaging our material surroundings, as well as in photos, sound effects, and film.

Our professional and technical competence is multifaceted. Five of our 11 employees have a master’s degree: in the conservation of museum objects, archival studies, history, social anthropology, visual cultural studies and fine arts communication. Two of our conservators are pursuing a doctoral degree on topics related to the museum’s main theme. Our educators are responsible for teaching at schools, designing exhibitions and books, and collaborative projects. The main responsibility for the collection and the repository lies with our object conservator, who also has an advisory function in relation to the other museums in the company.<sup>2</sup> We have also recently employed an archivist who will take care of all aspects of the management of the collection. The museum’s professional secretary facilitates

our work, gives suggestions to all employees, and works closely with the museum host, who is responsible for the reception desk and the daily operation of the public visiting area. We also employ a registrar in a 50% position.

In 2008, the Norwegian Government released its White Paper No. 49. called “The Museum of the Future: Administration, Research, Communication, Renewal.”<sup>3</sup> These four concepts became known as the museums’ four central “Fs” (since all begin with an “F” in Norwegian). From this point on, we made research a priority, and started looking actively for research environments where we could participate. The Museum of Reconstruction is the only museum in Finnmark with war and reconstruction as its theme, and this made it natural for us to look for partners outside the museums. We made contact with researchers at Finnmark University College (now merged with University of Tromsø - The Arctic University of Norway) and the Faculty of Health at the University of Tromsø. In 2010, this resulted in the research project “Living the War,” which studied the civilian population in the Barents region during the war and reconstruction periods.<sup>4</sup> This was the beginning of an active and vital research process resulting in considerable communicative and educational activities, and a research publication.<sup>5</sup> As part of the project, two of the museum’s conservators were accepted as PhD students at the UiT – The Arctic University of Norway.<sup>6</sup> Their research projects concern daily

life, health and resilience during the war and reconstruction. They get to spend 60 percent of all working hours, over five years, toward the completion of the PhD education.

## Research – important for the operation of the museum

It is difficult to make space for research in a busy working day at the museum, and our resources have to be used on administration, education and renewal as well. In our experience, it is essential for us to integrate our research into the museum’s daily operation. A PhD project takes many years to complete, and the waiting time will feel long indeed, if we have to wait until the thesis is published and defended before the work becomes accessible and possible to use. This might create a limbo in which the research seems like be a burden that steals time from other activities, and in order to prevent this we have to make the research process meaningful for the museum along the way. In our organisation, our long-term planning gives evidence that we give a high priority to research. The leadership and board support this, and provide the necessary funding to participate in seminars, networks and education associated with war and reconstruction. It is nonetheless up to the Museum of Reconstruction itself to set short and long term priorities for the smooth operation of the museum. Since there are no provisions for additional resources, such as new

positions or shorter projects, it is crucial that the research is well integrated in the museum. When employees are away, in connection with courses and research, the tasks of the museum’s daily operation fall on those who are left, which can be seen as unreasonable and unfair. This means it is important that employees are able to see that the research brings something unique to the museum. In our experience, this becomes possible when the research process is inclusive, open, and integrated with the daily operation. But this requires making priorities; we have consciously opted not to mark local historical events. This has freed up resources, in terms of working hours as well as production costs, and has helped us increase our competence in our own subject matter, war and reconstruction.

Even though we do not mark events in local history, our research has clearly boosted our total educational activity, especially in terms of education outside the walls of the museum itself. We have discovered a significant demand for education about the war and reconstruction, and not just in our own region, but nationally. Having prioritised communication and education in the research process, we can now see that they have become an integral part of our methodology. Our research results have been put to educational use right away: in lectures, guided tours, exhibitions, articles and media coverage.



Wishing to create new knowledge, we continuously look for historical sources that might give new perspectives on historical events of great interest for the general public. Our dialogue with the public has become even more important for our research; in fact, our understanding is to a significant degree shaped by our continual communication and educational activities. Meeting the public gives birth to discussions and new questions that, because we have found them relevant, become part of our research. In addition, we are tipped off about contemporary eyewitnesses and archival material that might lead to further insights. Thus, an open and inclusive research process in relation to the public has put us in an exceptional position. When people get to know what we work with, they are able to give suggestions and tips about sources that we would otherwise not discover, private archives and contemporary eyewitnesses in particular. In our experience, our museum background makes people aware of the value of objects, archives and informants that connect us to the past. The public also seems to have developed a sense of ownership with regard to our research, since we are part of what they have come to see as “their” museum. All this makes us want to continue to maintain an open and inclusive research process in the future.

The usefulness of our current collection grows along with our professional development. Our collection from the post-war reconstruction period can be seen in an ever broader context;

without that context the objects remain silent. A more cohesive professional focus creates a stronger profile for the museum. The media, and others with an interest in history, know what we can contribute with, and we feel that we have something to offer beyond citing other historians or referring to experts. Our research-based educational activity has now increased to a size that we can measure in visitor numbers and is also in evidence in our exhibitions and lectures, as we explain in our annual report to the Ministry of Culture. What we do also accords with several imperatives of the national research ethics committees on the communication of research for the social sciences, humanities, law and theology, such as point 42: *“specialised research environments shall ensure that scientific knowledge is communicated to a broad public audience outside the research environment.”*<sup>7</sup>

### Triangulation of methods

Our practice of triangulating different research methods has resulted in a rich and balanced source material. On a general level, it includes oral sources, objects and archival material. Our archival material is broadly divided into different levels of public decision-making - the military, the county, the municipal and private sector – and different kinds of sources – private archives, literature and historical photography, at the same time as the research process is strongly bound up with

communication and contact with the public. Such a variety in our source material and approach provides us with a more detailed picture of the story that we interpret and narrate. For example, seeing our oral sources in the context of relevant archival material may create a symbiotic relationship between them. In the aftermath of an interview, we are often left to grapple with questions that eyewitnesses have been unable to answer, which compels us to go back to the archives. At the same time, our archival research enables us to ask better questions to the historical eyewitnesses, since our own knowledge has increased.

### A heart turned inside out?

Eyewitnesses to history have been an important part of the professional museum work at the Museum of Reconstruction. They have carried many memories with them through the seven decades since the Second World War ended, and it can be difficult for them to call them forth. Most eyewitnesses were happy to talk as soon as they understood they would remain anonymous,<sup>8</sup> and we eventually established a complete “self-sufficient eco system” of eyewitnesses attached to the museum. We made contact in different ways. In several media reports the museum announced that we wished to get in touch with eyewitnesses, and when our 70 year marking of the forced evacuation appeared in the media we received many enquiries from eyewitnesses<sup>9</sup> who

wanted to be interviewed. We received tips about eyewitnesses from others, and got in touch with them directly, and there were many volunteers connected to the museum who were eyewitnesses or knew people who were. They knew what eyewitnesses had experienced and who might be interesting to talk to about certain issues. The youngest eyewitnesses were born during the war and the oldest had been young adults towards the end of it. We preferred to meet the eyewitnesses in a quiet environment, and usually set up interviews in the homes of the elderly, in safe and comfortable surroundings.

According to the “International Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research involving Human Subjects” (Geneva: 2002) the elderly are in themselves a vulnerable group.<sup>10</sup> But human vulnerability does not just affect the elderly; there are many groups that can be considered vulnerable, such as the critically ill, prisoners, disabled and individuals with financial problems. They have in common that they are exposed individuals who can find it especially difficult to give voluntary and well-informed consent for research to be carried out on them.<sup>11</sup> Also, the elderly are a complex group, as not all of them can be considered vulnerable; only those who require health and care services, such as those who are suffering from illness or dementia. We have not interviewed people in this category, but for a researcher specialising in dementia it could perhaps be interesting to look at the connection

between war memories and dementia.

However, our eyewitnesses might be vulnerable in yet another way. In several instances it was as though they were reliving the events from the war; some broke down in tears when recalling how their livestock had been burnt alive, or how they had to abandon their dolls. And we could not know for sure how the interview would affect the eyewitnesses after we left them. Were we simply opening up mental wounds without helping to heal them again? The following exchange might exemplify the challenge of speaking about traumatic memories.

Extract from an interview with a female eyewitness in 2013:

“Is there anything else you would like to talk about?” She answered: “I think I have *turned my heart, liver and kidneys and a bit of everything inside out now. I don’t know what that would be, to be honest.*”

Her parents were members of the Norwegian national socialist party Nasjonal Samling (NS) during the war, after which her father was arrested by the Norwegian authorities.

Interviewer: *You said that this business with NS was a trauma for you. Can you say more about that?*

Woman: “*The strange thing is that I haven’t thought about it, before you asked me about it. We never suspected. It didn’t occur to me that it was a crime... So it was a huge shock when my father was arrested in ‘45, and I’m impressed that I remember that he was. But exactly that [the event itself] I don’t recall. I suppose that [the fact of not remembering] is called repression. I only remember that he came home again.*”

The woman had spent many years trying to understand why her father had done what he had done. It was not until after his death that she and her mother could work through these events together. When she talked about this, many feelings and thoughts came up again. At the same time it enabled her to consider new aspects with what had happened.

The interview made us think. What is it like to be an eyewitness? Had it been uncomfortable for her? Did she tell us more than she wanted to? The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) states that the person who collects data should have the competence to do this in such a way that it is as small a burden for the participant as possible. Exactly what this competence involves, however, is open to interpretation.<sup>12</sup> Should we for example have had special qualifications in mental health for the elderly? At this stage we will let that question remain unanswered, and instead turn to our interactions with eyewitnesses.

It is important to allow the informants to talk freely, allowing them to own their story, and instead ask questions where it is relevant. We must show understanding by listening, nodding and accepting the stories, in order to encourage the informants. A researcher needs to have a strong presence, and one has to give a great deal of oneself. The researcher is likely to become an important person for the eyewitnesses, as one sits listening to them, often for hours, acknowledging that their story is important. It seems that many informants mature from this experience. They say that even though it was hard to talk, they felt more light-hearted afterwards. We do not know how things have gone with all the eyewitnesses since the interviews, but quite a few say that the interview was useful to them in working through what had happened. This is not just something they say in passing, out of mere politeness; over the years, many of the eyewitnesses have been involved in the museum’s projects, so we have come to know them as individuals in a small, local community. We also usually arrange a follow-up conversation with the person concerned, whether they live locally or in another place, to give them the opportunity to “finish talking.”<sup>13</sup> In retrospect, many of them greatly appreciate a conversation on the telephone, or an informal visit in their own home.

### Those who are “able to walk and are clear-headed”

A downside to our work is that we are not likely to have met those who have “suffered” most in the aftermath, who became alcoholics or suffered mental illness. Many of those who suffered the most did not survive long enough to tell their story. We have also chosen to exclude the sick and those with dementia, since we do not have professional qualifications in these areas. Instead, we have encountered the most resourceful elderly through our work, those who locals describe as “able to walk and clear-headed.” Many of them live at home, are in good physical shape, and say that they are happy with life and feel young on the inside.

It is also important to remember that tears and other reactions need not be a barometer for vulnerability. It can be a confrontational experience to have the attention directed to one’s own life. Both tears and laughter will appear when the story of a long life is told; when one remembers so much at one time, a flood of feelings may well up. Certain episodes can be especially emotional to remember, such as a relationship with a person who made a deep impression. The best we can do is to provide human fellowship and be there for the person talking.

## The declaration of consent

The declaration of consent is indispensable for protecting the eyewitnesses from possible abuse of their stories, and we never pressure anyone to sign. In this respect, David G. Scherer<sup>14</sup> calls attention to three points. Firstly, the researcher must give sufficient information so that the participant knows what he or she is signing up for. Secondly, the person who gives consent must have the capacity to do so. Lastly, the consent must be given voluntarily and not under duress. We usually ask the informants to keep the declaration of consent together with the printout of the transcribed interview, so that they know to what they have given consent to, what is kept at the museum, and that they will have the right to withdraw the material if they wish. This is a legal right given to all of our eyewitnesses, but so far none has made use of it, possibly because they always receive the transcribed interview for reading, and may cross out parts of it that they do not wish to have included. Eyewitnesses cross out very little, but when they have it has primarily been information naming people who were members of Nasjonal Samling, the German occupier’s political party. We nevertheless choose to maintain the possibility of withdrawing the interview, in order to give eyewitness a sense of security: they know that if they have any regrets, they have the opportunity to withdraw the interview. This probably makes the process appear less intimidating, and makes more of them

agree to be interviewed. Thus, the declaration of consent is not just a piece of paper, but functions as a protection for the informant. The entire research process thrives on trust between the researcher and eyewitness/informant.<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, problems can occur when the interviews are later used by other researchers. Most eyewitnesses have consented to other researchers, related to the research we do, getting access to the material. Eyewitnesses can indicate in the declaration of consent to indicate whether they agree to this or not. But even though other researchers are equally bound by a vow of confidentiality when using material in research and for education, to the same extent as our employees, there is a significant difference between the interviewer making use of the material, and when other researchers do it. Eyewitnesses are happy to tell particular details in confidence which they do not wish to emerge in any context, even though individuals and place names are anonymous. They perceive the interview situation as a one-on-one situation, and do not manage to envisage that the interview can be used in many contexts. If they had known, they may not have agreed to be interviewed or might possibly have told less than they did. They understand that they are telling a story in confidence to one person. We do not believe that this is because they are not sufficiently informed. Instead, the setting in which the interview takes place can be a part of the explanation.<sup>16</sup> a safe

and quiet setting with an interviewer who listens, and takes great interest in one as a person, encourages saying more than they might have in other social situations. We believe, therefore, that eyewitnesses ought always to be contacted for as long as they are alive, to get renewed permission to use the interview and approve the content it refers to. For an eyewitness it can be uncomfortable to discover that their stories, especially vulnerable parts of their narrative, have been used. This is the case even though the presentation stays anonymous, unless otherwise agreed. In a project (now concluded), where we previously interviewed eyewitnesses, their stories were to be included in a book project written by an external institution. The author of the book initially used parts of our eyewitnesses’ stories that did not make it into the final text, since they had been told in confidence, and were not intended for the general public. Our eyewitnesses requested that these be removed when they received the manuscripts for review, and they were not included in the final version.

## Eyewitnesses and the media

NSD recommends that the request for an interview by the media should be communicated by someone with natural access to contact information,<sup>17</sup> which is something that we have. This gives us something of an intermediary position between eyewitnesses and the media.

The museum depends on both eyewitnesses and the media for the collection of information and for making our research visible in the community.

Journalists and reporters work with tight deadlines and want us to provide them with strong eyewitnesses on short notice. Brian C. Martinson<sup>18</sup> writes about “scientists behaving badly” and mentions a series of unethical research practices, from the falsification of data to stealing the work of others. One problem we have encountered are “journalists behaving badly,” who will gladly contact “our” eyewitnesses and publish their stories. The museum also finds that some journalists over-emphasizes personal issues and that which is horrible. Sensationalist stories focusing on individuals make great headlines and sells newspapers. Good memories are often under-communicated in the media. Life was not just black and white, but contains many nuances back then, just as it does now; and that grey area is vast. For some, life as a forced evacuee was the best year of their life.<sup>19</sup> One woman taught herself to cycle, ride, swim and milk cows. To do the informants justice it is important that the diversity is shown in the communication, and the informants often wish not to be presented as victims.

We are responsible for protecting the eyewitnesses, and have chosen to address this in two ways. Firstly, the museum emphasises the general characteristics in the story in the meeting

with the media. We never give the media direct access to our interviews, even though we have helped them make contact with eyewitnesses. We do this by contacting the appropriate eyewitnesses and hearing if they would agree to participate in an interview with the media. The eyewitnesses are different: some are very happy to do it, but others wish not to, and we respect this. We often know from previous contacts who might wish to have their story known and who does not want this. Those who initially contacted the museum and wished to be interviewed will in general be happy to have their story made public. There might be different reasons for this, but it often seems to be a wish that the past must not be forgotten. “Then I have not lived in vain” said one of our eyewitnesses after her story came out in the media. As a rule, we have contacted them afterwards to hear how the interview went, irrespective of whether they live in the local community or another place. Further follow-up has not been prioritised. Our impression is that one request has often led to several requests and that whether this desirable or undesirable, they should set the boundaries themselves.

### “Now I understand much more about what happened”

Should museum researchers avoid interviewing eyewitnesses that have strong memories about bad experiences?<sup>20</sup> Kathryn A. Becker-Blease<sup>21</sup>

has discussed similar issues in relation to children and abuse, but emphasises that it is important to research traumatised children. If the researcher refrains from it, the consequences can be too great. When the research does not occur, the researchers must make decisions based on their own convictions. Her opinion is that this is not satisfactory. Can her view on researching traumatic memories be applied to the museum’s research? What if the museum refrained from interviewing war witnesses? Should we perhaps have had special qualifications, for example, when it comes to mental health for the elderly? We believe that we cannot refrain from interviewing eyewitnesses, simply because then this knowledge would be lost. We now have a unique chance to document events in the life of eyewitnesses from the actual period about which the museum imparts knowledge. The best feedback on this that we obtain is from the eyewitnesses themselves. They have communicated this both directly to us and indirectly via others who have talked to them. They say that the museum has given them new information, of which they were not previously aware, through a series of lectures and a temporary exhibition.<sup>22</sup> It is important for them to gain more insight into a significant period in their life. We engage in educational activities about this history through lectures, exhibitions, and written publications. The positive feedback that we get means a great deal, and in particular when it comes from the museum’s eyewitnesses. It is

satisfying to be able to give something in return. One man said: *“You know, we were children, there was a lot we didn’t know and didn’t get to know. Now I understand much more about what happened.”*

Others say that they have wanted to talk about their experiences, but did not believe that their story could be relevant because they could not remember all dates, names, etc. They were very happy when they learnt that their experience was important.

### From eyewitness to archive

Eyewitnesses provided us with our initial approach to the stories about the war and reconstruction. They could tell vivid stories about everyday life, such as when they burnt their tongues on the crystallose that was used as a replacement for sugar, and that every morning the family lined up to use the toilet next to the German soldiers who lived in the house. Such information has been valuable for the educational work at the museum. Eyewitnesses provided many stories about life that gave a greater understanding of the period of time about which we impart knowledge.

Nonetheless, the stories of eyewitnesses cannot stand alone. We discovered that there was something missing, that there are possible pitfalls

with using eyewitnesses as stand-alone sources in our museum work. Firstly, this is about the nature of memory. A memory that is activated is changed every time it is used.<sup>23</sup> Memory is active, and we recall different memories in different phases of life, and perhaps we embellish changes and our stories themselves.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, our eyewitnesses were to a large degree children at the time. This means they lived in another world of experience than the adults, and that their memories are characterised by this.<sup>25</sup> Neither were they familiar with the politics of the authorities and guidelines which their parents had to relate to. Eyewitnesses could not explain why their family had to move so many times, when they were forcibly evacuated, to parts of the country further south. This information was something we had to look for in the archives.

Memory accounts from the war are also a valuable contribution to historic storytelling and are published every week by various publishers and local historical journals.<sup>26</sup> The desire to tell these stories and the demand for them seem endless, but the context of such individual stories is generally missing; for example, what existing public subsidy policies were there for those who were evacuated, and what was required of them to be able to go home again? We found the answers to this in the archives. Next, we turn to the ethical problems involved in using the archives.



### Archives in the “the grey zone”

Archival studies give a different perspective on history than our meetings with the eyewitnesses. One meets many people and fates through the archives but they are documented in letters, numbers and pictures. One does not sit at home with them in the living room, and look them in the eye across a cup of coffee. Neither do they have a say in what is presented from the fragments of their life. Are there any guidelines for how to use archival material to say something about a life that has been lived? It is just about someone’s role in a community?

There is an endless variety of archives, but they can be broadly divided into two categories:

- 1 Publicly available archives to which everyone has unrestricted access
- 2 Restricted material where one must apply for access. The criteria for access can vary.

The use of restricted archival material is subject to the Public Administration Act paragraph 13 b, 13 d, 13 e<sup>27</sup> and the Public Administration Act regulation no. 1456 av 15.12.2006.<sup>28</sup> The National Archives require one to sign a declaration of confidentiality, which emphasises that confidential information is not to be used to a greater extent than necessary. This is open to interpretation and judgement, and is likely to

vary. As far as we are concerned, the information must provide a new insight, and not simply create sensational headlines. We are responsible for ensuring that information from the archival material remains unavailable to others. The information is used in such a way that it can offend or hurt an identifiable person, and one is not permitted to contact individuals one becomes familiar with through the restricted material,<sup>29</sup> and it is necessary to acquaint oneself with the applicable laws and regulations. Some of the regulations from the National Archives are general, and open to interpretation.

### Ethical guidelines for the archivist

Professional ethical guidelines for archivists can be found on the website of the National Archives. The first guideline states that “*Archivists should protect the integrity of the archive material in all contexts, and thus ensure that in the future they can also be a reliable source of knowledge about the past.*” The last point emphasises cooperation between professions: “*Archivists should work to preserve and use our communal heritage of archive material through cooperation with members of their own and other professions.*”<sup>30</sup> There is an obvious connection between administrators and users of an archive, and a common understanding of the significance and value of the source material is essential. The responsibility is bipartite, and as a user of an

archive one should be aware of this. What does one do if one comes across archival material that is incorrectly placed in terms of content or restrictions?

In our work so far, we have used archival material from the National Archives of Norway, the Regional State Archives in Tromsø, the Inter-municipal Archive for Finnmark, in addition to private archives from the Museum of Reconstruction and the Norwegian Resistance Museum. Most of the material is publicly available. The archives operate according to the current regulations about which material is to be made available. At times, one gets access to material that has not been opened since it was packed away decades ago, which means that the material does not necessarily have the content it was expected to have. The documents may have been packed incorrectly, or marked incorrectly, and might contain information that should not have been made available. In concrete terms, archives from the war can be about children with a Norwegian mother and German father, and may for example include an adoption case with details about the childhood of the child. As experienced users of archives, we believe we have an ethical obligation to make the archival institution aware of this when the situation arises, and when it quite clearly concerns information at the level of an individual person. One should then also treat such material as restricted, with the conditions that entails. In accordance with the guidelines

from the national research ethics committees one should strive for respect, good consequences, justice and integrity. Being careful with the use of source material in publicly available archival material, one shows respect and integrity as a researcher, and unfortunate consequences can be avoided. Sensitive information can have a newsworthiness that might create a stir, but which does not necessarily provide new insights. To a certain degree, this is about weighing the right to publish simply because one can, against good reasons for not doing so?

Sometimes, however, archival material that ought to have been publicly available has ended up in archive boxes with restricted material. We experienced this when we sorted through the medical records from the regional doctors in Finnmark. In between these records lay the medical reports of the chief county medical officer for Finnmark for the years 1941, 1942 and 1943. We requested these reports from the National Archives, and were advised that they had been lost. When we found them, we advised the National Archives that they had turned up in the box of restricted material. As researchers who wish to look at the health situation in Finnmark during the war, these medical reports are important documents of basic relevance that should absolutely be available for all who wish to study them. It can perhaps in particular cases be tempting to hold material back for several reasons, but we believe that as an archive user,

one is ethically committed to ensure that such errors are corrected when one discovers them. Good cooperation between archivists and archive users is necessary to optimise access to sources for all.

Publicly available archival material contains to a very large degree information connected to individuals. In principle, one can make public the information one finds, independent of content and context. Archives from the World War II have been sensitive, as they may contain information connected to shame, such as nationalistic leanings. This can also have to do with issues of behaviour and statements, and how the creator of the archive creator has understood a moment in its historical context, which may not have been a correct or complete interpretation. Is it ethically correct to name individuals, and does it serve our understanding of the past? As a researcher one should continuously evaluate the material according to the kind of communication or educational activity it will be engaged in. Respect for the reputation of the deceased should be treated with caution in accordance with ethical guidelines for the social sciences, the humanities, theology and law.<sup>31</sup> The deceased have no opportunity for self-defence and cannot comment on information about themselves.

Our notion of the war in Finnmark is to a large degree characterized by silence, secrecy and suppression. An important book about the forced

evacuation is entitled *Silenced Past*.<sup>32</sup> The silencing is that of the collective and personal suffering in a particular part of the country. The forced evacuation inflicted great suffering on all, and this has marked several generations. In the archive one finds many sources that support and describe the suffering, without necessarily providing new understanding. Instead, we have emphasised material that sheds light on aspects of the forced evacuation that have not previously been discussed. It has been important for us to understand the framing conditions of people’s lives and the choices they made. There are members of our audience who wish to have their understanding of history confirmed, and who may be angered by our focus, feeling that we are keeping silent about something they expect us to emphasize. As researchers, however, we are committed to presenting the perspectives that appear before us in the archival material, without considering whether these might clash with people’s identity as shaped by their own understanding of history.

## Conclusion

Our work is primarily based on archival material and eyewitnesses: a single document might change a view or an understanding, and eyewitness accounts might lead us in new directions. This is not without its problems: sensitive information constantly emerges and

must be treated with caution, and we must retain our critical vigilance in the process of communication and education.

The vow of confidentiality is important in many disciplines. Hope describes how far the obligation of confidentiality extends within medicine in order to take care of the patient’s right to privacy.<sup>33</sup> When one gains access to people’s lives through archives, one should be cautious to assess the ethical aspects carefully, before to making information about individuals public. When it comes to restricted material one signs a declaration of confidentiality, but the same does not apply for publicly available archives, where it is up to each individual how to sources, and how much to communicate to the world at large. It would be appropriate to evaluate whether the information will provide society with new understanding. As researchers at a museum one is interested in providing new knowledge to a broad public audience. An important task for us is to communicate insights that can give a fresh view on established myths about history, which means that we should work toward making people aware of a “grey areas” in their historical understanding. We believe that such areas often consist of that which exists outside the extreme events that attract attention, and instead lies with that which concerns most people in their daily lives.

The same applies in relation to eyewitnesses. NSD is of the opinion that the pressure to which

the informants are subjected must be reasonable in relation to the social and scientific use of the actual study. Witnesses of war are not necessarily a vulnerable informant group in themselves; they are different just like others, and we have met many resourceful eyewitnesses. We believe that all humans contain many rooms within themselves; some good and some full of pain. We start from an assumption that witnesses take responsibility for their own narratives. The eyewitnesses themselves decide how much they wants to reveal, and if they lose control of themselves because the situation has become very emotional, they can withdraw the information. We want to avoid a heart-wrenching interview for the eyewitness. Our aim is to listen and be there for the informants, and to communicate their stories in a dignified manner! “*What’s in it for me?*” For most of informants, receiving a printout of the transcribed interview, which can then be included in their family history, is a form of payback. Our experience is that the documentation of family history connected to the war is important for many, both eyewitnesses and their families. The personal gain in the form of a manuscript is thus an important acquisition.

We see it as our responsibility to the community we work in to collect personal stories and to get an overview of the archives from the actual period. Even though many witnesses are still alive, there will be considerably fewer left in a few years. It is therefore urgent to document the

multitude of stories and experience that exists. These will be deposited and can also be used as background material for future generations. In connection with archives it is important to contribute to an orderly archive so that it is possible for new users to find their way. In other words, it is important to treat documents in accordance with the applicable guidelines, and that one advises the archivist about material which has been incorrectly deposited. Theft of archival material from the archives also takes place, but this is a criminal act that does not require further discussion.

Archival material that is in good order and available is a prerequisite for renewing our understanding of history.

In our experience, it has been valuable to cooperate with other disciplines and making use of the knowledge of others in the research

process; professional isolation can lead to stagnation. It does not make sense to start afresh when there is already expert competence that one can make use of. In this regard, we can mention two issues in particular. Firstly, research involves several disciplines, and it is necessary to familiarise oneself with the ethical imperatives of the professions one collaborates closely with. Secondly, while working on a research project it can be difficult to share one’s results, because one wants to hold back the data until it is published. Even so, the ethical research committees emphasise that one shall also communicate research to an audience that is outside of research environment. It might actually be that greater openness about one’s research will have good consequences for it, creating debate, enabling an exchange of ideas, and providing new insights.

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# “Latjo drom” - the good journey?

The Glomdal Museum’s engagement with  
the culture and history of Romani/Travellers

BY MARI ØSTHAUG MØYSTAD

How can we accomplish an ethically defensible representation of an exposed group? In 2006, the Glomdal Museum opened the permanent exhibition on the culture and history of Romani/Travellers, entitled “Latjo drom.” The exhibition and subsequent responsibility for dissemination and documentation of the culture and history of Romani/Travellers has led to various cultural events and activities in collaboration with the Travellers themselves.

The collaboration with the Norwegian Travellers is at the core of the museum’s engagements. It was initiated by the Traveller community’s own demand to be involved in both the planning and realization when their culture was to be represented at the museum.<sup>1</sup> This is also enshrined in the European Council’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, which states that Travellers have a comprehensive right to participation in society, especially in projects that concern them<sup>2 3</sup> There is also, last but not least, a professional and ethical imperative for museums to involve affected and vulnerable groups when something that concerns them is presented.

Even so, this would prove difficult. The relationship between the Travellers and the museum has sometimes been characterized by suspicion rather than trust, boycott instead of cooperation, and there have even been threats. Why did things turn out this way?

The museum’s work on creating a section on the culture and history of the Romani/Travellers was undertaken in response to two different Government reports highlighting the social role of museums.<sup>4</sup> It was made clear early on that the project was to be an integral part of the museum’s activity, and that it should strive to counteract the assimilation policies that the Travellers have been subjected to. In particular, it was to address the

damaging effect this has had on their culture.<sup>5</sup>

This change in the museum’s social role was in many ways conceived as a move toward cultural democratization and more diversity and inclusion, as well as a process of professionalization of our activity. The museum was also expected to reflect a diversity of perspectives and realities.

The collaboration of the museum and the Travellers is an example of how a museum can represent the history of groups that have been made invisible, marginalized and subjected to prejudice and discrimination. At the same time, it displays many of the challenges that come with a close collaboration between an institution and a group that has concrete rights and clear demands. Although various documents cultural and museum policy have long emphasised that museums should reflect historical and cultural diversity, and that museums should be arenas for dialogue and participation, there are actually few examples of how this can be achieved in practice. It is ultimately up to the museum itself to define the roles played by the museum and a minority group respectively.

## About the Glomdal Museum and the responsibility for multicultural dissemination

The Glomdal Museum is a museum of the cultural history of the Glomma valley and is the third largest open air museum in Norway, after the Norwegian Folk Museum and Maihaugen. In addition to the national responsibility for disseminating and documenting Traveller culture and history, we have a regional responsibility for multicultural dissemination through our Centre for Multicultural Knowledge and Competence, supported financially by Hedmark County. The museum has 30 permanent employees, and since 2010 it has been part of Anno Museum, which incorporates eight different museums in Hedmark County, counting 100 employees in total.

Over the last 50 years, the museum’s activity has included both the Forest-Finn culture and the South Sámi culture. This means that collaboration with external groups and the focus on cultural diversity were not new to the museum when it made contact with the organisations of Travellers in 1997. In spite of this,

the museum’s experience of minority politics was insufficient to foresee the many challenges that would arise.

Like other museums of cultural history, the museum has had a long-lasting collaboration with volunteers in the local friend trust. The museum’s Friend Trust mainly includes retired people with the same background as the museum staff, has traditionally either had the task of running projects that the museum has given to them, or formulating their own projects to gather financial support for the museum. Any internal dispute in the Friend Trust is usually solved internally and only rarely becomes the concern of the Museum.

By contrast, the collaboration with the Travellers was based on a mutual project between the Travellers and the museum. There was no agreement on made in advance on how to proceed and about the limits of the competence and responsibility. Nor was there any clarifying discussion in advance concerning who would have ownership of the project.

## “Traveller - Milla’s” House

It all began in 1997. The National Organization of the Travellers (Taternes Landsforening) and Våler County, one of the counties that own the museum and the first to provide financial support to the National Trust of the Travellers<sup>6</sup>, asked whether the museum would be interested to have a building moved to the museum’s open air section. The house had belonged to ”Tater-Milla,”



From the Latjo drom exhibition. Photo: The Glomdal Museum.

a central and unifying figure of Traveller descent from the South-Eastern part of Norway. She was one of the daughters of a leader of one of the most respected Traveller families in the region.<sup>7</sup>

The Museum was generally positive to the initiative to create a cultural presentation on the

Travellers, and also to the idea about ”Tater-Millas’s“ house. This would make it possible to represent the Traveller culture as a natural part of Norwegian cultural history and make it an element in the activities of the open air section. The idea of relocating the house was nevertheless abandoned when the Directorate of

Cultural Heritage (er dette korrekt oversettelse av Riksantikaren?) decided that it should be preserved in its original location.

This first initiative was followed by a seminar at the museum, organised by The Art Council of Norway and the National Trust of the Travellers. (Her stod det ABM-utvikling- bør settes inn en note som sier følgende: The Museum division in the Art Council of Norway was formerly called ABM- development and was an independent division) There was agreement about the need for a broad presentation of the cultural history of the Travellers, intended to balance the prejudices that have haunted this minority group to the this day.

What was originally a plan to move a small ”Traveller cottage” to the museum developed into a plan to create a whole new department about the cultural and history of the Romani/Travellers. As the project grew, questions arose concerning financial grants, participation, ownership, responsibilities and room allocations. The questions were significant and unresolved, and the group was unable to agree on how to resolve them. Many Travellers started doubting that they could support the project. The Travellers is no homogenous group and there were diverging opinions and wishes within the group.

Partly, the scepticism of the Romanis/Travellers at the time can be understood if we consider

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the political process of establishing what was to become The Department of the Culture and History of Romani/Travellers at the Glomdal Museum. Hence, we will look at the political processes and arguments that led to its instigation.

## The Role of the Government and the background of the Romani/Traveller

The first official apology for the national politics inflicted on Romani/Travellers was given in February in 1998. It was repeated in 2000 in the first Government report on national minorities, which announced that a new centre for the culture and history of the Romani was to be established at the Glomdal Museum. <sup>8</sup> The initiative aimed to strengthen the culture of Romani/ Travellers which could (...)”be seen as a sort of compensation for the political control and attempt at one-sided integration that the Travellers have been subjected to, especially the impairing effects this has had on their culture.” <sup>9</sup> It was also decided that the centre would be organized as an integrated part at the Glomdal Museum, and that the cultural content should be the main focus, with less emphasis placed on the historical atrocities towards the group.

These strong political guidelines caused a variety of concerns to emerge, especially surrounding





A family taking a break, about 1950 around Elverum. Photo: Private.

the requirement that the museums were to keep the Government administration at an arm's length, but also when it came to which functions a museum may have. The planned project was directly tied to Government policies and the need for reparation, most likely in order to make Parliament understand the need for the initiative more easily.<sup>10</sup> The Travellers, on their

part, worried that the project at the Glomdal Museum was to take the place of their individual compensations.

Later on, several measures were taken in order to address these problems and facilitate the museum's work. In 2004, the government announced that a cultural fund of 75 million

NOK for Romani/Travellers was to be established, to support projects promoting the culture, language and history of the Romani/Travellers, or help pay for legal aid. In 2005, the government established simple rules for gratia payments, i.e. minimum compensation under the amount of 200,000 NOK, to cover abuse such as bullying and harassment.

The Traveller's own organisations, fronted by the National Trust for the Traveller, had long asked for an investigation into the policies that had affected them. Although a longer research project documenting the results of these policies had been completed in 2000, they argued that there was a need for a more complete investigation leading up to the present day. A committee was appointed in 2011 and delivered its report in June 2015. The report clarifies that the Romani/Travellers were subject to heavy-handed assimilation policies by Norwegian authorities. These policies were expressed through laws and legislative decrees that had partly discriminatory purposes and a clear discriminatory effect.<sup>11</sup> The last project carried out with to revitalize Traveller culture was the instigation of The Centre for the Romani/Travellers.

### The Romani/Traveller in Norway

Those who are called Norwegian Travellers today are assumed to be descendants of the

first Gypsies that arrived in Norway in the 1500s. Since then, Travellers have blended with the locals, and have developed identities and characteristics as Norwegian Romani/Travellers. Although it is assumed that the Travellers have the same origin as the Norwegian Gypsies arriving in the 1800s, and that they have a nomadic way of life in common, the Gypsies and Romani/Travellers in Norway are classified as different national minorities with their own culture and language.

What first and foremost characterises the Travellers is a nomadic way of life. They travelled both in the highlands and in the coastal parts, aiming to sell their services as travelling merchants and craftsmen. Since the late 1880s, the traditional occupation of the Travellers have been tied to craftsmanship, horses and sale. Today, the Travellers have occupations just like other Norwegians, but many are still involved with handicraft and sale.

Although many still travel in the summer, all Travellers now have a permanent residence.

The Traveller's attitude towards their own nomadic life is ambivalent. Travelling has been regarded as one of the foremost characteristics of the group, while it also was a result of the majority population's exclusion of the group. "We didn't travel, we were chased," many Travellers say. Their subsistence was based on





Photo of a family at Svanviken.  
Photo: The Archive of Norwegian Mission among the Homeless, the National Archives of Norway.

good relations with the permanent residents in the countryside, and most Traveller families traded with the same particular farms. There were also Travellers in the cities, where many of them came to trade with large wholesalers, while others settled in the cities on a more or less permanent basis.<sup>12</sup> In the cities it could also be easier to conceal one's ethnic identity. In the countryside, there could be a strong resistance against the Traveller way of life, which often made them distinguish between "good" and "bad" villages. Not only trade was bad in the bad villages; Travellers could also be met by locals who reported them to the local police, or who chased them out of the village. In the good villages, trade was good, and the Traveller had places where they could lodge both short term and long term.

### Oppression and prosecution

The history of the Travellers is one of 500 years of oppression. It started with the Reformation, just a few years after they arrived in Norway. The Travellers were then declared unwanted and were to be sent out of the country, later they were declared outlaws, and after a while they were also unwanted by the Church. No priest was allowed to baptise, give confirmation, marry or bury people of Traveller heritage.

The Travellers are today mainly affected by the policy of the Norwegian State in together with

the organisation The Norwegian Mission among the Homeless,<sup>13</sup> that was put into practice at the start of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and lasted until 1988. In this period, the Norwegian Mission functioned as a kind of state Traveller Directorate in charge of implement this state policy, chiefly in two areas: child care work, which often consisted in separating children from their parents and placing them in orphanages or foster care, and efforts to make adults and their families to leave their travelling life and become sedentary residents.<sup>14</sup> Partly, these policies was made possible because of the resistance against the Travellers by most municipalities, trying to prevent Travellers to settle in their communities.<sup>15</sup>

Prior to the work of the Norwegian Mission, several laws were passed to make this work possible. The Social Guardianship Act from 1896 made it legal to take children away from their parents, while The Vagrant Act enabled the authorities to force permanent residency. With reference to these laws, 1500 children of Traveller heritage were taken from their parents in the period between 1900 until about 1970, while 990 adults and children stayed at the working colony Svanviken where they were to learn to become permanent residents, in the period between 1908 until 1986.<sup>16</sup>

Today, the Travellers are not a homogenous group, but one thing they have in common is this history of forced assimilation. The prejudice and

discrimination they have been subjected to has in many ways contributed to perpetuating the ethnic divisions between Travellers and non-Travellers. The history of discrimination and assimilation is also the reason for the unwritten rule among Travellers never to mention in public that someone else is of Traveller descent unless that person has chosen to do so. Similarly, it is up to each individual where and when such an ethnical identity is to be used. Despite the ethnical revitalisation in recent years and the newfound pride in Traveller identity, many people treat their ethnic identity in a similar way to how Harald Eidheim described the Sea Sámi people in 1969,<sup>17</sup> their ethnical identity being so heavily stigmatized that they only display it in the private sphere.

### **The collaboration between the Government, the Museum, and the minority**

The Glomdal Museum discovered early on that the Travellers and their representatives were very much aware of their rights and had a clear wish to control both the process and content of the exhibition. The minority's own demands to control the presentation can be interpreted as a reaction to their history of cultural representation, where minorities have largely been viewed from the point of view of the majority.<sup>18</sup> This has largely been reformulated as a question

about rights, and the idea of representation being ”nothing about us without us” has become common currency. The right of minorities to participate in the preservation and representation of their own culture has been a common concern for indigenous peoples and national minorities all over the world. The same demand has also been raised

In the Nordic countries, both with regard to dissemination of Sámi culture and the culture of our own national minorities. Giving voice to minorities has been thought of as a question of ”(...) abolishing abuse and giving underrepresented groups the opportunity to take control over the dissemination of their own culture.”<sup>19</sup>

This raises a series of important questions of principle: Who owns cultural institutions? Who possesses knowledge about what? Who might be the correct representative of a minority group? Who has the right to speak critically against the majority interests internal to a minority group?<sup>20</sup>

As regards the dissemination activities at the Glomdal Museum, the Travellers' right for control was voiced early on, without this being anticipated by the museum, and concerned both the work with the exhibition and the dissemination in schools. In 2003, the Museum started a school project, without involving the National Trust of the Travellers in the planning



Photo of the work group in April 2016 in front to the boat in the Latjo drom exhibition. Photo: The Glomdal Museum

process. Even though several project employees were of Traveller descent and were to be involved in presentation, the project had to be suspended because of resistance from parents descending from Traveller families at the project schools.<sup>21</sup> Had the project involved the National Trust of the

Traveller in the planning, it could have entered into dialogue with the parents in advance and received their feedback before the project started. This may have resulted in acceptance from the parents after some changes had been made, or could at least have made it possible for the



museum to put the project on hold.

With regard to the collaboration about the exhibition, the Travellers’ own direct participation was taken for granted by the museum, both because they had a legal right to participate laid down in the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, and because they were instigators of the project. The National Trust of the Travellers was therefore rapidly included in a reference group, and signed an agreement of collaboration with the museum.

The question about this organisation’s representativity, and whether the museum could include both unorganized individuals or members of other organisation was, however, rather momentous. One of the strengths of a museum is that it is viewed as a neutral place where everyone is welcome; because we feared that only collaborating with one organisation might give the impression of bias, we sought for a broader base for collaboration with the Travellers. With this in mind, the museum called a large meeting for both organised and unorganized Travellers. The result, however, was a gathering at such a high conflict level that the museum felt it could not guarantee the safety of everyone involved. Having asked for advice at the Ministry, we were recommended to collaborate with the organisations that received financial support from the Government, which initially

included only the National Trust of the Travellers. In 2004, when the National Foundation for the Romani were also granted financial support, this organisation was also included.

After the National Foundation for the Romani entered the collaboration, a new agreement of collaboration was signed, which responded to the insistence of the organisations that it be explicitly stated that no further organisation would be invited into the collaboration without the consent of all parties. The museum was at first concerned that this addition might cause future problems, but agreed to include it. Having included both the organisations that the Ministry approved of, the project now completely fulfilled the requirements of the Framework Convention concerning participation, and had also secured a fair regional representation: the representatives from the National Trust of the Traveller were mainly from East Norway, and those from the National Foundation of the Romani came from the Southern and Western part.

In recent years, two new organisations have been established, and one of them have asked to be included in the museum’s project group. But The National Trust of the Travellers and the National Foundation of the Romani have rejected their application, because they considered the leader of this organisation as impossible to work with. As a consequence, the Glomdal Museum was reported to the Ministry of Local Government

and Modernisation as non-neutral, but biased towards the National Trust of the Travellers. As a consequence, the Ministry chose to not to use the Glomdal Museum for the hearing of NOU 2015:7, Assimilation and resistance. According to the Ministry, the Glomdal Museum could not be considered a neutral location. What exactly was involved in the notion of neutrality was not made clear, but the suggestion of bias can be understood as a clear criticism of the museum’s handling of its collaboration with the Traveller organisations.

How this problem is to be handled by the museum is an ongoing discussion. Establishing an advisory unit where all organisations are represented, while keeping the work group as it is today, could be a solution. Collaborating with the newly founded Centre of the Traveller/Romani has also been discussed. Given that all the organisations are represented at this centre, such a collaborative project would enable all organisations to become involved with the collaborative projects at the museum.

## Democracy for all?

Modern museology emphasises democratization; but museums are not merely to be a place where everyone can feel at home, but should also contribute to social justice.<sup>22</sup> They should be agents of social change and create so much

enthusiasm and meaning that can help change people’s lives.<sup>23</sup> Another requirement is that museums must collaborate with interest groups that share the museum’s view of social justice, while working on creating internal structures that prevent discriminating behaviour on behalf of their own employees.<sup>24</sup>

All of this sounds great, but while a museum’s internal structures is something that a capable museum leader has both the authority and opportunity to change, this is not the case for the organisations they need to collaborate with.

As a public institution, a museum clearly needs to operate at a different standard of ethical awareness as compared to private organisations. Although museums may dislike this fact, it is difficult for them to criticize undemocratic structures; among the Travellers, nepotism and a lopsided gender balance is a challenge, as a male-dominated culture that is also to a larger extent than traditional Norwegian culture based on families. This becomes especially salient within organisations, that are often controlled by one or two families, with different positions distributed among close relatives, and a low percentage of women in leading positions.

The museum’s collaboration partners among the Travellers are also active in other fields of minority politics and maintain close connections with political power centres. It is not always

the case that the connection to the museum is prioritized or even mentioned when other more financially rewarding projects appear. This has occasionally led to rather lukewarm participation by Travellers and a lack of loyalty when the Museum needs their support.

### Challenges and rewards of extensive participation

Ever since the museum started its work on the exhibition Latjo drom, a work group was appointed where the organisations of the Travellers were represented. During the first years, the group met twice a term, but it has had more frequent meetings in the last few years, when the needs have been the greatest. The function of the work group in relation to the big Latjo drom exhibition opening in summer 2006, was to discuss, do quality control, and approve the form, theme and content of the exhibition, as well as assist in the collection of objects and photographs.

The Glomdal Museum repeatedly tried to engage the work group more directly in the contract work and not just to act as formal representatives at the work group meetings. At the end of 2004, for instance, several theme groups were started, where the members of the work group could enlist. Every group was led by a conservator and a project employee. The groups also had a budget covering for instance travel costs. After some

time, the National Foundation of the Romani made a series of maps over landing places for travellers by boat, as well as copies of several newspaper cut-outs.<sup>25</sup> Nothing came from the National Trust of the Travellers, not even after months of requests, phone calls and repeated questions.

The inactivity of the National Foundation of the Travellers must be seen in light of their first initiative to collaboration at the museum. The organisation at first requested what they themselves called ”the house of the Travellers.” They wanted a house for a multitude of purposes, which was not merely to disseminate Traveller culture, but that could serve as a meeting place where they were in control. At the initial stages of the project, it looked like they might get what they wanted; when the first building connected to the future project at the Glomdal Museum was drawn up, an old dancing restaurant at the museum area was converted into a hall for exhibitions, assemblies, offices and workshops for exercise of handicraft. When this project was rejected by the Norwegian Directorate for Public Construction and Property and the Directorate for Cultural Heritage, the museum’s own buildings were expanded to facilitate the project, and it became clear that the project was turning into an extension of the museum’s own building, and not a place that the Travellers could use as their own. With this as the backdrop, the National Trust of the Travellers probably thought that if the

museum was to get the whole project they could do the work themselves.

A couple of years after the opening of the exhibition, it became evident that the enthusiasm of the Travellers grew when they got to be involved throughout the whole project and have more influence. When the museum put up a wanderer’s exhibition in 2008-2009, the work group was involved in every decision, all the way from the idea for the project to its execution. This created an enthusiasm that gave the organisations a sense of ownership of the exhibition. When the exhibition was completed they each received a copy of it, and subsequently used it actively to disseminate their own culture.

The museum has by and by arranged particular activity days about the culture of the Travellers that are initiated, planned and executed by the Travellers themselves. These activities have created enthusiasm and a strong sense of ownership, and has made several Travellers claim that the Glomdal Museum is a place where the Travellers can come “and be themselves.”

### Permanent employment at the museum: a solution?

That the Travellers themselves had to be represented at the museum was decided early on, and in 1998 a project employee of

Traveller descent was hired full time at the museum. The employee was a member of the National Foundation of the Travellers and was recommended by their leader, who was also a member of the museum’s work group. The new employee’s main tasks was to develop the museum’s network to include the Romani, assist the conservator in her academic work, and to participate in collection and documentation work associated with the museum’s work on the culture and history of the Romani/Travellers.

Although the employee had been recommended by the National Foundation for the Travellers, his work was soon criticized. The dissatisfaction started when he opted to leave the National Foundation for the Travellers, which he did because both himself and the museum wanted him to be neutral, and not tied to the National Foundation for the Travellers as an organization. What no one predicted, however, was that the National Foundation for the Travellers lost its trust in him. He had, after all, been their candidate, and got the job because of this. That he now became independent was regarded as a betrayal, and as a sign that he did not wish to work for the people, but only to pursue his own interests. They also felt that they had little nor no information from the project employee and that they had little insight into his work. The fact that he had been given the responsibility for the procurement of objects also created mistrust, and



led to the accusation that we was only buying objects from his own family and that he inflated the price of the objects bought from people close to him. After the museum had changed its procurement policies, so that they were always made in collaboration with a conservator and the director, this flood of rumours ceased.

Even so the project employee never regained the trust from his own people, which contributing to him subsequently being on sick leave and ultimately leaving his position. Part of what made his work less functional was that he was hired strictly on the basis of his cultural competence, his direct knowledge about his own culture. The Travellers themselves refer to this as being “wet on one’s feet,” being directly familiar with the many challenges of a nomadic lifestyle, not least the physical ones. Ultimately, this is about being of true Traveller descent.

But apart from these cultural and experienced based qualifications, the project employee had no formal competence that made him suitable for work at the museum. Having a formal education or thorough training could have helped him cope with his assignments in a more professional manner, and would also make him less vulnerable to criticism from his own people.

Subsequent project employees, hired in 2008 and 2010 respectively, have had a different starting point. They have both received more

thorough supervision from a conservator and have been recruited by the Diversity Network, which is one of our national museum networks. As participants in a recruitment project, they have received training in museum work and have become acquainted with museum work in a broader context. The conservator at Glomdal Museum have been central in the design of this project, which was intended to increase the knowledge and competence of the minorities in museum work and to recruit persons with a minority background to the museums. A key idea for this project was that the Norwegian museum landscape needed to be strengthened through the participation of minorities.<sup>26</sup> In addition to this training, both project employees have earlier and over several years participated in dissemination work in collaboration with Queen Maud University College, which has provided them with a competence in dissemination that the Glomdal Museum could build on and where competences related to their own experience has been important. By letting the Travellers themselves contribute with this competence, which concerns knowledge of their own culture and their own lives, students at school and others experience a dissemination that creates both enthusiasm and afterthought.

## One step ahead and two backwards?

Up until now, I have sketched a positive development. However, in the spring of 2016 new developments have reminded the museum that the relationship to the Travellers and the work on dissemination of their culture is likely to have both ups and downs, or might be seen as circular rather than linear. Also, we have been reminded that the collaboration with the Travellers also depends on political processes where the Museum has a merely peripheral or indirect role.

Every time a new, large project is in progress, or is about to be completed, campaigns are started both with and against alliances among the Travellers themselves, focusing on what they think about the relevant projects and on who is to have influence and access to the resources that are made available. The means for expressing disagreement are relatively dramatic, accusations of financial defaults is part of the picture, and harassment and threats of violence are not unusual. In connection with the selection work completed in June 2015 and NOU 2015:7 that was on a hearing during spring 2016, the conflict peaked in March and April.

After a meeting in Elverum, where the museum is situated, a Facebook group claiming to be against all dissemination was started, emphasizing that they wanted neither the Museum nor other to

approach the schools and disseminate Traveller culture, and argued that any dissemination of the Traveller culture to schools should be done by the parents. It was to happen at home, and children who were not Travellers ought not to learn about the Traveller culture. This concerned the private sphere of the Traveller people. That the culture and history of the Travellers also is our mutual history was claimed not to be the case. Despite this, many of them found it all right that the students came to the museum to see the exhibition Latjo drom; that was clearly viewed as less dangerous than being visited by disseminators at the school.

Although the protests at first concerned resistance to dissemination in schools, the campaign eventually came to be about any project running aiming to strengthen Traveller culture or to compensate for earlier abuse. This change in orientation occurred when the campaign was taken over by the ex-leader of the organisation that a few years earlier has applied to join the museum’s work group. In the meantime, he has, despite warnings both from persons belonging to his own people and others, become the leader of a resource group functioning as councillors for the committee responsible for the NOU 2015:7.

It thus transpired that the National Foundation of the Travellers and the National Foundation of the Romani were right to claim that this man was difficult to work with. His campaign now targeted

everyone who had been involved in projects aiming at strengthening the Travellers culture, and both the conservator and the project employee at the Glomdal Museum received severe criticism. The conservator was especially vulnerable, because she had been on leave from her position at the Museum for two and a half years in order to function as a councillor and researcher in the committee responsible for the NOU 2015:7. While the conservator was accused of stealing material from the National Archives of Norway, the dissemination that the project employee was involved was described as child abuse. The whole thing evolved into a search for guilty actors, and the project employee received serious threats from local Travellers in connection with an event organised by the museum. Shortly after this, the psychological strain on the project employee became too hand she had a sick leave.

### **Time witnesses, a strength**

Some of the stories told here are about the realities that museum employees and others working with exposed groups can encounter. If the museum is to function as a meeting place, a place of contact and as agents of social change, it has to be a place where everyone can feel safe and where the museum’s central tasks are what is being cared for.<sup>28</sup> This means that everyone should have the same rights and obligations, regardless of their cultural background, and that crimes should be reported to the police.

Despite a turbulent spring, the museum is now continuing its work on renewing the ten year old Latjo drom exhibition. The work group has just had a peaceful and constructive meeting where many good ideas have been presented; the worst conflicts are hopefully behind us for the time being.

But the dissemination in schools has been put on hold. In spite of this, the museum has over the last few years really understood that what the Travellers themselves present their own culture is a big asset for us. The Travellers function as “time witnesses,” using their experience based competence in our presentations. It is very moving when Anna, a mature women, talks about the travellers life in the old days, and when Mariann speaks of how she and her siblings were bullied at school because they Travellers, or when then they talk about close relatives who cannot find work or are not permitted to rent a house, because someone ”knows who they belong to,” i.e. that they come from a Traveller family.

Part of the challenge of disseminating one’s own culture is the awareness of the limits of one’s own competence. Being raised a Traveller does not necessarily mean that you are an expert on all topics concerning this culture. While some possess a lot of knowledge of handicraft, others are more competent linguistically, and others have music as their speciality. Personally, I am born and raised in Elverum, but I cannot, for all

that, take anyone for a tour of the city. What I can tell you about is my journey to school through the centre of Elverum in the 1970s and the stories of what could happen there. Analogously, a person of Traveller descent has to learn about the history of the Travellers in order to present the exhibition Latjo drom at the Glomdal Museum. In order to tell stories about one’s own lived life, however, one needs no concrete knowledge, only good memory, an ability to present and a willingness to share one’s story.

When it comes to challenges associated with the Travellers’ conflicts and internal strife, we seem to have to accept that it may take time, perhaps generations, to change them. They have a short history as an organised people, and a collective history shaped by the history of forced assimilation, which has created internal diversion and external distrust. Let us hope that, in one or two generations, most wounds are healed and that diverse aspects and experiences of the culture and history of the Travellers can be discussed without fear of negative consequences for those who do this.

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Notes

- With regard to the name of this national minority, there is an ongoing discussion as to whether the group is to be called Romani or Traveller, others, especially elders, think that nomads is the correct name of the group. However, there is agreement that the names to signify them used by the locals, such as "fark," "fant," "splint" og "fuss" are wholly negative and can be considered to be pejoratives. In this paper, the name Traveller is used, because this is the name that is most common in the South-Eastern parts of Norway where the Glomdal Museum is situated, and because it is a name that many wish to become positively laden. The word Romani is also in use.
- Government Report No. 80 (1997-1998).
- The convention, which is the first legally binding multilateral agreement about public protection of national minorities emphasises the importance of the ethnical, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of the national minorities being respected, and that conditions should be put in place to enable these persons to express, retain and develop their identity. Cf. St. melding 15.
- Government Report No. 22 (1999-2000). Kjelder til kunnskap og oppleving, and Government Report No. 15 (200: 2000-2001) Nasjonale minoriteter i Noreg. Om statleg politikk overfor jødar, kvener, rom, romanifolket og skogfinnar.

- Ibid.
- The National Trust of the Travellers was up until 2005 called the National Foundation of the Romani. In order to avoid misunderstandings I use the current name of the organization, The National Trust of the Travellers in this paper.
- Milla lived from 1886 until 1976 and was the daughter of the legendary "Big Johan." Milla was a central and unifying figure for her people in the 18th century. She was also known among the "buroene" after Dagfinn Grønset's bok in 1974: Tater Milla, Stor Johans datter.
- Government Report No. 15 (2000-2001) nasjonale minoritetar i Noreg- Om statleg politikk overfor jødar, kvener, rom, romanifolket og skogfinnar. Det kongelige kommunal og regionaldepartement.
- Ibid: 44.
- Halvorsen 2004: taternes arbeid for oppreising og anerkjennelse i Norge. Trondheim. Tapir Akademiske Forlag.
- NOU 2015: 7. Assimilering og motstand. Norsk politikk overfor taterne/romanifolket fra 1850 til i dag.
- For instance, Kai Samuel Vigard has documented the life of the travellers in the town Tobias, Tidsskrift for Oslohistorie 2012:3.
- Oscar Lyngstad writes in the book "Landeveiens folk i Norge. Kort oversikt over omstreifernes historie og Norsk Misjon blant hjemløse 1897-1947," the following about the name of the Norwegian Mission: The Norwegian Mission among the homeless was instigated in 1897 under the name Foreningen til omstreifervesenets motarbeidelse (the Society for the Obstruction of Nomads), at its 25th anniversary this was changed to Den norske omstreifermisjon (the Norwegian Mission for Nomads). In 1935, the name was changed to the Norwegian Mission among the Homeless.
- Møystad, Mari Østhaug 2015. "Strenghet og mildhet må gå hånd i hånd." Norsk misjon blant hjemløses bosettingspolitikk overfor familier av omstreiferslekt i perioden 1907-1988. Appendix 13 to NOU 2015:7. Assimilering og motstand.
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- Ibid: Rekdal, Per Bjørn 2005 (ed.): 34. "Kompetansebygging for et multikulturelt normalsamfunn. Oslo. ABM Script.
- Opcit.
- Lahn 2006.
- See for instance the papers by Richard Sandell and David Fleming in Museums, Equality and Social Justice. Richard Sandell and E. Nightingale, Routledge 2012.
- Ibid.
- D. Fleming 2012: Museums for social justice, i Equality and Social Justice. Richard Sandell and E. Nightingale, Routledge 2012.
- The travellers, or the Romani, who travelled along the coast in boats. They called themselves boat travelers or sea travelers. Locals often called them «fant» or «splint,» which are considered perjoratives.
- Mangfold i museene. En rapport fra et rekrutteringsprosjekt. om; interkulturelt museum.
- The selection work lasted from May 2011 until June 2015. The conservator at Glomdal Mseum was on leave from his position during the first part of the Committee's operative period from June 2011 until Descember 2013.
- James Clifford, in his paper from 1997, uses the notion "Contact zones." Simona Bodo's notion "Intercultural spaces" from 2012 can be regarded as a further develop-ment of this concept.

# From the ICOM Code of Ethics towards a new museum ethics?

BY KATHRIN PABST

The ICOM Code of Ethics is a relatively static document intended to apply to as many museums as possible by drawing attention to basic challenges. At the same time, the museums and communities of which they are a part are in continual change, something which cannot be captured by abstract guidelines that can never be completely up to date. Is there today a new, more flexible kind of museum ethics, or does it follow the same principles that underpinned the work on the ICOM Code?



The last articles have exemplified the multitude of challenges faced by museum employees. Most of them go unaddressed by the more general guidelines summarized in the ICOM Code of Ethics. Theorists and practitioners have started to discuss what might be required by museums in the processes of change, and how those requirements can be addressed in the best possible way. Do the new trends in discussions about museum ethics constitute a change in comparison with earlier practice, or are they merely stages in a natural process of development that has always taken place?<sup>1</sup>

My article will examine four aspects of this issue, which together might suggest an answer to this question: First, I describe ICOM, the background to its Code of Ethics, and what it contains in concrete terms. Next, I turn to the new museum ethics and what is actually meant by the concept today, followed by a comparison between the two forms of ethics. I conclude by attempting to answer whether this really is about a change in practice and mode of thinking, or not.

International literature refers to broad and comprehensive trends and contexts in the work on museum ethics. The same trends and tendencies are emphasised in recent Norwegian publications, and emerge in Norwegian discussions about what museum ethics is and should be. A great deal is happening in this field, and it seems likely that this work will intensify further in the years ahead.

## What is ICOM, what is the background to the ICOM Code of Ethics, and what does it actually contain?

ICOM – the International Council of Museums – is considered the most important international organisation for museums and museum staff. By the end of 2015, ICOM had approximately 35,000 members, institutions as well as individual employees, in 136 countries. It operates through 30 thematically organized international committees and 118 national committees consisting of one country’s member institutions. The Norwegian committee, ICOM Norway, has around 700 individual members, mostly museum staff, and around 70 member institutions, mostly museums.

The international committees gather experts within different museological fields, and have names such as “International Committee for Management,” “International Committee for Exhibition Exchange” or “International Committee for Conservation.” The international committees are considered to be “global think tanks on museums. (...) They define the museum professional’s standards, share scientific information, establish partnerships with other organisations and develop recommendations for ICOM members.”<sup>2</sup>

ICOM has a corresponding fundament, since the museum profession consists of academically trained specialists with different backgrounds in education, knowledge and experience, who are jointly charged with the task to carry out the responsibilities which the community has entrusted to museums. The areas of work of the professional staff are summarised in ICOM’s definition of a museum as

“a permanent, non-profit institution that shall serve the community and its development and be open to the public; which collects, preserves/conserves, conducts research, educates and exhibits material and immaterial (cultural) heritage about people and their surroundings, for the purposes of research, education and entertainment.”<sup>3</sup>

Museums are recognised, complex and public institutions with a political mandate that entails commitments to different community groups.

ICOM was founded in 1946 by and for museum staff. A short review of the academic literature concerning museums suggests the presence of a desire to professionalise the discipline as far back as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A number of guidelines have been prepared since ICOM’s founding, both in individual countries and in organisations that have represented museums of cultural history from all over the world.

A focus on ethics started to appear within ICOM around 1970, in response an increase in the illicit trafficking of cultural artefacts. There was an obvious need to establish guidelines with a view to protect the cultural heritage of particular countries by exerting greater control of import and export.

The ICOM Code of Ethics was first prepared in 1986 and has been revised twice, in 2001 and 2004, taking new professional areas into account, e.g. contemporary documentation, and the work with immaterial cultural heritage. The six year revision period, 1998 - 2004, resulted in a document in two parts: one directed at museum staff as professionals and one concerning museums as institutions. This also gave evidence of a novel focus and orientation with respect to the target group: it was no longer only the employees or the institutions that should be able to make use of the regulations, the world at large should also be informed about the professional, ethical and personal standards one could expect to be upheld by museums as institutions and museum staff as professionals. What values should museums and museum staff strive for in all their work and at all levels of the organisation? What should the profession stand for and embody externally?

The Code of Ethics applies to all members of ICOM, whether via the institution in which they are employed or through individual membership.<sup>4</sup>

“Ethics and museum professionals’ exemplary practices are essential for ICOM. ICOM Code of Ethics (...) establishes **the values and principles** shared by ICOM and the international museum community. It is a reference tool translated to 37 languages and it sets **minimum standards** of professional practice and performance for **museums and their staff**. By joining ICOM, each member commits to respect this code.”<sup>5</sup>

The ICOM Code of Ethics lists eight fundamental ethical principles,<sup>6</sup> each of which contains several points accompanied by detailed specifications. Most of the principles address the management of objects and collections, clearly one of the most important areas of work for museums, and the one that distinguishes museums from other organisations and professions that also work with our communal history.

The first principle, *Museums preserve, interpret and promote the natural and cultural inheritance of humanity*, addresses the objectives and responsibilities of the museum, including the institution’s governing bodies and material and financial resources. This principle emphasises the important responsibility of the museum management to ensure that institutional operations are ethically justifiable, and it also includes personnel policy. It stresses the importance of relevant education, professional

development and competence for all staff, and that the organisation must act in compliance with any “national law” and/or “specialist code of ethics.”

The second principle, that *Museums that maintain collections hold them in trust for the benefit of society and its development*, concerns first and foremost the collection, documentation and preservation of objects.

The third principle, that *Museums hold primary evidence for establishing and furthering knowledge* makes clear that field work should be conducted in accordance with guidelines that comply with academic standards and relevant national and international laws. All research shall be conducted in accordance with “established legal, ethical and academic practices” and preferably in collaboration with “institutes of higher education.”

The fourth principle, that *Museums provide opportunities for the appreciation, understanding and promotion of the natural and cultural heritage*, refers to the interaction with the community of which the museum is part, and the museum’s “public educational role.” The employees should carefully consider the consequences of their actions in advance, “taking into account the interests and beliefs of members of the community” and sensitive materials “must

be presented with great tact and respect for the feelings of human dignity held by all peoples.”

The fifth principle, *Museums hold resources that provide opportunities for other public services and benefits*, entails that museums can and shall make services and knowledge about their collections, or other objects, available to the public.

The sixth principle, that *Museums work in close collaboration with the communities from which their collections originate as well as those they serve*, emphasises that museums shall manage their collections in agreement with the interests of the community and with consideration for individuals who may be affected by the manner in which collections are managed and presented. The use of objects and collections should support the diversity within the community.

The seventh principle, that *Museums operate in a legal manner*, specifies yet again that the museum must comply with all relevant legislation and treaty obligations, and assumes that all museum staff are familiar with the body of international, national and local legislation which is relevant to the museum operation.

The eighth and final principle, that *Museums operate in a professional manner*, is in my opinion particularly relevant: it focuses on

professional practice and the professionalism of the individual museum employee. The section about professional practice contains 11 points that discuss, in greater detail, issues including professional responsibility, professional conduct, academic and scientific responsibilities, and confidentiality.

### A new museum ethics: what does the concept mean today?

Janet Marstine, Academic Director of the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, Great Britain, has edited two important recent publications on museum ethics: *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics* (2011), and *New Directions in Museum Ethics* (2013). She examines several key concepts that are important for museums today, such as “radical transparency,” “social responsibility,” and “institutional morality.” “Radical transparency,” a strengthening of the term “transparency,” is the requirement for internal clarification and external communication of the values that guide the decision-making processes in all spheres of museum work. “Social responsibility” refers to the social responsibility held by museums and museum staff with respect to individuals, minorities or the public. The concept of “institutional morality” was first used by the American philosopher Hilde Hein, and alludes to morality as an essential fundament for an

institution’s interactions with its external environment. To an extent, it is the museum staff that embody the morals of an institution through their moral behaviour. But the idea of “institutional morality” goes beyond the individual employee’s professionalism. More broadly, it refers to an institution’s moral development over time, due to the synergistic effects that occur when professionals collaborate with colleagues in the museum as well as people outside it, in constantly changing surroundings.

Marstine discusses the implications of such an “institutional morality”:

“Twenty-first century museum ethics acknowledges the moral agency of museums, the concept that museum ethics is more than the personal and professional ethics of individuals and concerns the capacity of institutions to create social change.”<sup>8</sup>

To promote or contribute to “social change” is an important aspect of the museum’s role as a dynamic societal actor. Before discussing this in detail, I will discuss an additional element that is important with regard to contemporary museum ethics: that the engagement of museums with a society in constant change requires a new way of thinking about ethics.

In *New Directions in Museum Ethics*, Marstine concludes that

“the new museum ethics (...) is a **social practice**. Through debate among diverse stakeholders, ethical issues are identified, considered and acted upon. The contingent nature of the new museum ethics – its inherent changeability – suggests that the discourse be integrated across the museums sector and engaged on a **consistent basis**.”<sup>9</sup>

She further underlines that “*museum ethics today is not defined by codes*,” and she adds several reasons for why guidelines are too static to be of use in today’s creative and dynamic interaction with the external world. Instead, this situation requires a continuous discussion of ethical aspects, beyond the revision of the ethical guidelines, continual training of staff, and constant strategic work to adapt museums to a society in change.

In sum, Marstine raises two recurrent themes in today’s international literature on museum ethics. One relates to the more recent role of museums as dynamic societal actors that should focus to a significant degree on the external world and its needs, and the other is connected with how professionals think and “live” ethics. Both are contingent on each other and therefore closely connected.

*The first main theme* encompasses the terms “transparency,” “social responsibility” and “institutional morality.” The desire to cater for all segments of the population in a transparent manner is closely related to the growing awareness at museums of their role as an important agent within society, and one that can and shall influence the development of society. The process began in Great Britain and the USA in the early 1980s, gained impetus in the 1990s, and started in Norway around 1995/1996.<sup>10</sup> Over the years, different strategies have been drawn up to direct the daily activities towards as many groups within the community as possible, in particular those that have been forgotten.<sup>11</sup> In presenting individual groups or persons that have been forgotten or exposed to an injustice by the majority, museums attempt to contribute to a more just society – and a better representation of our communal history. The concept of *social inclusion* builds on the assumption that inclusion presupposes recognition of one’s own thoughts, and elements that contribute to the development of the personal identity, in the museum’s educational and interpretive activities.

Among the most prolific writers on the subject are Gaynor Kavanagh and Richard Sandell, English professor in Museum Studies at the University of Leicester. In the Nordic countries, Swedish museum staff and researchers have long stood out as particularly active in this field. In the wake of a seminar series and international

conference 15 years ago, a comprehensive publication entitled *Museum 2000*, systematically examined new fields of work within museums and challenges connected with these.<sup>12</sup> The diversity of the articles in *Museum 2000* itself underlines common traits in the new professional fields: to be open to contemporary community structures and new population groups, adapting museum work to new needs and ways of thinking.<sup>13</sup> In recent years, a growing number of publications address these issues, also in Norway, in keeping with the international trends I have outlined. Norway has also made its mark through the so-called BREAK project, which ran from 2003 to 2014 under the direction of Arts Council Norway. This project was originally intended to contribute to embedding new modes of thinking and working in museum practice, and engaged with topics considered “unpleasant, taboo, marginal, invisible, controversial”<sup>14</sup> and explored how these can be communicated “critically.” In this context, critical communication should be understood as “an interpretation that asks questions without giving answers, that presents a theme from different and new angles, that shows processes and complex connections and invites the audience to reflect.”<sup>15</sup> The project has led to many museums and museum staff experimenting with approaches to working with such themes, and this commitment is in line with national policies and international trends toward presenting a greater diversity of people and stories in museums.

Consequently, museums wish to be inclusive of as many people as possible in their work. Important measures to achieve this include greater transparency about the museum's objectives, values and work methods, and more collaboration with the local population. In 2014 and 2015, The Museums Association, the British sister organisation of the Museum Association of Norway, included local community members in their work to formulate standardized ethical guidelines applying to all English museums. The guidelines – or “the standard” – is intended to be user-friendly and easy to understand for most people, and has the question of how museums can and should adapt to the new digital working day as a central concern. Museum staff, and all other interested parties, were encouraged to offer suggestions. The guidelines would also consider how museums should address the increasing demands for self-financing and sponsorship, something which is becoming increasingly relevant for museums in Norway.

This is also related to the *second main theme*, which concerns how museums and museum staff should approach and “live” or “think” ethics. The ideas of “transparency,” “social responsibility” and “institutional morality” are to the highest degree about how museums as institutions and museum staff as professionals approach ethics and morals in their daily activities and practice. There is not much literature about this in Norway, but a significant amount exists abroad;

Marstine summarises and describes trends and perspectives that have emerged internationally over several decades. This body of literature addresses museum staff as professionals<sup>16</sup> as well as museums as socially responsible institutions.<sup>17</sup> Some central topics of concern are the moral challenges connected to the public requirement for greater “transparency,” how to achieve optimal management in museums and exhibitions, and the audience's role in exhibitions, but studies also discuss marketing, collecting, use of technology in educational activities, and the collaboration with external partners.<sup>18</sup>

Some scholars distinguish themselves as extremely central within the work on current, socially relevant themes and interaction with the population. Apart from Janet Marstine and Richard Sandell from Great Britain, one should mention Erika Lehrer, Professor of History and Anthropology from Canada, as well as Judith Stark and Gary Edson, American professors in History and Museum Sciences respectively. Edson has drawn attention to the most central moral challenges that museums and museum staff should consider, in several articles in his well-known Museum Ethics from 1987,<sup>19</sup> which contains many interesting perspectives, first and foremost in terms of the management of objects. Judith Stark's article “*The art of ethics: Theories and applications to museum practice*” is one of very few that address how ethical theories can be

used when museum staff meet moral challenges in a society in flux, where museums shall act as dynamic societal actors. Stark examines, among other things, different ethical perspectives - the ethics of consistency, duty and virtue – <sup>20</sup> and underlines the need to intensify ethical evaluation in step with the expanded focus on the present day and the societal role.<sup>21</sup> Edson and Stark also argue, with Marstine, that museum staff first and foremost need knowledge about how to use guidelines in everyday life and how ethical thinking can be embedded in everyday life, beyond the use of guidelines.

My own study of moral challenges for museum staff dealing with sensitive themes<sup>22</sup> and the survey conducted with Norwegian museum staff,<sup>23</sup> have drawn attention to a professional area that is closely bound up with the museum's role as a dynamic societal actor: the work on phenomena that most people are unfamiliar with, or do not wish to relate to, precisely those areas of work that are the focus of the BREAK-initiative in Norway. The study and questionnaire demonstrate that such work demands a great deal of the museum staff as they try to take the needs of as many parties as possible – individuals, professional consultants, colleagues, employers or clients – into consideration. Those studies also propose that the institutions themselves have an important role to play in the effort to make ethical thinking and argumentation better embedded in the Norwegian museum sector.

## The ICOM Code of Ethics in the light of the new museum ethics - common features and differences

As mentioned, the ICOM Code of Ethics makes explicit that the principles which are identified are minimum standards that apply to all member institutions. National committees and specialists within specific areas of professional expertise are encouraged to define the principles in accordance with their own needs. Many countries have complied with these challenges. A few examples of how the new museum ethics has been further developed with a basis in the ICOM Code of Ethics should be mentioned.

- “ICOM's Code of Ethics for Natural History Museums,” published in 2005 after many years' work by ICOM's Natural History International Committee, i.e. professionals that work with a particular type of cultural historical material.
- The International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art (one of ICOM's 31 international committees) prepared in 2009 and revised in 2011 their “Principles of Deaccession” as a “complement to the ICOM Code of Ethics. They specifically address issues relevant to the selling of art from museum collections in greater depth than is possible in the general ICOM Code.”



The U.S.A., Great Britain and Germany are among the countries that have prepared their own guidelines on the basis of the ICOM Code of Ethics. The U.S.A. have had its own guidelines for American museums since 2000, and Great Britain’s Museums’ Association adopted the standards that would apply to museums across the country in 2002, currently subject to revision by the Museums Association. In Germany, the “Deutsche Museumsforbund” has since 2006 had a “Standard für Museen,” which is clearly designed to meet not just the challenges connected to object and collection management, but also the new requirements and wishes for transparency in all aspects and at all levels: the excellent German word “Leitsatz” or “Leitbild” refers here to

“leitende Werte und gesellschaftliche Funktionen des Museums. Gemeinsame Überzeugungen des Trägers, der Mitarbeiter/innen sowie der Freunde und Förderer des Museums werden formuliert. Dieser Konsens wirkt gleichermaßen identitätsstiftend und richtungsweisend.”<sup>24</sup>

It is further emphasised that this “Leitbild” is formulated in such a way that museums can at any time adapt themselves “dynamically” to new trends in society. It also emerges clearly that such a “Leitbild” refers to *values* the institution wishes to protect, that they are directed internally

at the employees, and externally at the public or owners.

As for Norway, the ICOM Code of Ethics has been used to prepare internal guidelines for institutions about how to handle moral challenges.<sup>25</sup> It is far more common to develop an institutional moral platform in other countries, including at museums in the U.S.A., but there is also an example of this in Norway. The Henie Onstad Kunstsenter redefined the individual points of the ICOM Code of Ethics in the light of all the relevant statutes, management documents and collaborative agreements, and brought in the norms and values they wished to embody. Their preface explains that the new guidelines have been formulate to help staff “to develop a practice that ensures that we act correctly when we find ourselves in situations where the boundaries are unclear (...) to make us aware of our actions and to clarify what is right and wrong in a given situation”<sup>26</sup>

In other words, the ICOM Code of Ethics has not just been revised twice since 1986, but in addition has been continuously used to specify and develop how museum staff and museums as institutions should relate to the ethical challenges of interacting with a society in constant change. Even though the Code, in my opinion, remains too narrowly focused on the management of objects or collections, it provides scope for further

work with the guidelines in accordance with individual/institutional needs – an opportunity that international committees, countries and institutions are diligently making use of.

An important common feature of both the ICOM Code of Ethics and today’s museum ethics are the values they are designed to safeguard. In the ICOM Code of Ethics many of the values which Gary Edson summarises in the book “Museum Ethics” are present. Some of the central values are *Caring, Honesty, Accountability, Promise Keeping, Pursuit of Excellence, Loyalty, Fairness, Integrity, Respect for Others* and *Responsible Citizenship*.

The same concepts of value can be found in the literature about the new museum ethics, although they have been expanded and made more specific in some areas. *Promise Keeping* and *Responsible Citizenship* imply *transparency*. *Caring, Promise Keeping, Integrity* and *Responsible Citizenship* must be present to make *social responsibility possible, and Institutional morality* is not possible without *Pursuit of Excellence* or *Accountability*.

They also correspond to the values that countries, specialists or institutions have taken as their starting point when they have developed their own guidelines from the ICOM Code of Ethics.

*An evident difference* between the ICOM Code of Ethics and the new museum ethics resides in the discrepancy between the static nature of coded regulations, and context-responsive ethical thinking that has to make constant adjustments to an institution’s internal and external needs, requirements, and the changing expectations from a society in flux. When Marstine defines the new museum ethics in terms of “*social practice*,” she argues that important ethical dilemmas should identified through discussions with colleagues, the local population or agents in the wider community:

“the new museum ethics (...) (as) a **social practice**. Through debate among diverse stakeholders, ethical issues are identified, considered and acted upon.”<sup>27</sup>

The importance of these processes has emerged even more clearly in the most recent literature on museum ethics.

### A change in practice and mode of thinking, or more of the same?

In conclusion, it is difficult to provide an unambiguous answer to the question of whether a change in practice or mode of thinking has actually taken place.

The ICOM Code of Ethics has long been in continuous use as a basis for meeting new moral challenges in museum work, and has been revised twice. This would suggest that a change in practice and mode of thinking has not occurred; instead, processes of concretisation have been undertaken when required – and this has been a possibility from the beginning. That the Code is sometimes regarded as too static and unhelpful in the face of new challenges lies to a certain degree in the “nature of the matter” – revising it or making it more specific can be a lengthy process, and when it is finally concluded society has changed again, in new ways.

The ICOM Code of Ethics has been drawn up by and for museum staff in the mid-1980s, because the professionals themselves saw an acute need to protect the cultural heritage of particular countries by controlling the import and export of artefacts through guidelines. When new needs arose and the areas of museum work were expanded to include the work with immaterial cultural heritage, and then the role as a dynamic societal actor, the revisions of the minimum standards were undertaken. That the Code was drawn up by museum staff thus indicates the important role that staff have in such processes – and thereby in the development of the museum profession.

That development is in a dialectical relation to the development of society. Changes in society generate new policy guidelines and focus areas

for museums, at the same time as museums try to influence society through their work directed at different groups within the population. In this case, it is the individual employee who is the direct link between the museum and the population, and it is therefore here that the need first becomes apparent. When policies or the expectations of society change, a profession with a politically defined social task must adapt to these changes. The individual museum employee – the professionals – have a key role in such processes: when traditional modes of working are no longer adequate for work on new political tasks, professionals might feel that they are losing their foothold.<sup>28</sup> In order to regain it, they will begin to try out new modes of working, and might produce case studies to chart the new challenges. After a time, if the need remains, new guidelines for daily practice will be worked out: such guidelines will then be integrated into other museums that can in this way learn from the experiences of other professionals. When those guidelines are finally prepared, the process begins anew – in relation to new challenges.

Everything indicates that we are yet again at a stage in the process where the need to have more concrete policies about how to work with sensitive themes has become very clear. Now we need to decide whether the needs are so great and widespread that we should concretise the existing guidelines, and if yes, who in that case should

do this: the institution, public authorities or the specialists?

To a certain extent, however, the question as to whether a change in practice and modes of thinking has occurred can actually be answered with a “yes” – if we consider the imperative that “*the new museum ethics is a social practice*” which through “*debate among diverse stakeholders*” shall continuously identify “*ethical issues.*”<sup>29</sup> For it is precisely such a practice that has become increasingly important in recent years. There has been an “opening” to the outside world and external actors, which has resulted in museums inviting others to voice their opinion on what values the museum should represent, and what values should guide the work of its employees.

The answer to the question *A change in practice and mode of thinking, or more of the same?* will thus be *more of the same*. The reason for this resides in the nature of the process itself – the dialectical interaction between museums and the external world, with museum workers as central actors.

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Notes

1. The article is based upon a trial lecture with the same title held prior to the defense of my PhD thesis in December 2014. The thesis title was “Mange hensyn å ta – mange behov å avveie. Moralske utfordringer museumsansatte møter i arbeidet med følsomme tema.” [Many considerations to make – many needs to consider. On moral challenges that museum staff meet in their work on sensitive topics].

2. Cf. Pabst 2014. 2 <http://icom.museum/the-committees/international-committees/>.

3. ICOM statutes, article 2, paragraph 1.

4. In my opinion, the translation of the English term “Code of Ethics” with the Norwegian “museumsetiske retningslinjer” [“ethical guidelines for museums”] is somewhat misleading since document consists more of a standard or overarching code than concrete guidelines.

5. <http://icom.museum/the-organisation/icom-statutes/>. My emphasis.

6. ICOM Code of Ethics 2011.

7. Marstine 2011a: 5.

8. Marstine 2011b: xxiii.

9. Marstine 2013: 20. My emphasis.

10. The discussion of the role of museums in society in the U.S.A. has gone on since the beginning of the 1980s, but has gained new intensity as the awareness has become more concretely directed at forgotten communities. See for example Boyd 1991/2012. The discussion has also included the question of the extent to which museums should open for new population groups, to follow the development one sees at other public institutions, as well as the need for increased income, that is, what are the reasons for changes within museums. See for

example, Ross 2004: 99–103. For more recent Nordic publications about the role museums can play as active moral agents in society, see for example Cameron & Kelly 2010; Svanberg 2010. See also Tøndberg 2013: 4-7 and Pabst 2014: 42-43.

11. Sandell 2002a. There is a comprehensive body of literature on “social inclusion,” first and foremost from Great Britain, but also from other countries. See for example articles and literature lists in Sandell 2002b. In an English master thesis which compared the treatment by English and Norwegian museums of diversity in society, it was concluded that the museums in Great Britain in the last ten years have worked more effectively and inclusively with minorities than in Norway – among other reasons because there are more immigrant groups which have lived in the country for a longer period of time. Otherwise, there are many similarities between the work of English and Norwegian museums. See Folåsen 2008. The ICOM Code of Ethics has since 2000 also been used by AAM, The American Association of Museums, now called The American Alliance of Museums, and Phelan 2006/2012 summarises similarities in ethical approaches. The conclusion that American and Norwegian museums have a quite similar starting point in relation to social tasks and state control, is suggested by various sources, including the article by Boyd 1991/2012.

12. Ågren 2001b; Ågren 2001a.

13. At international conferences and seminars on these themes, Norway is also usually represented, see for example. Intercom, a subgroup of ICOM which in September 2011 arranged a four day conference on “Museums and Politics” in Copenhagen. The speakers raised the question, among others, of what role museums should have in society and how we can handle difficult themes or human rights.

14. The following examples were given: war, victims and perpetrators, closed institutions’ history or human rights, but also a critical view of the starting points and premises/assumptions for work with museums. Brudd: om det ubehagelige, tabubelagte, marginale, usynlige, kontroversielle [Break: on the unpleasant, taboo,

marginal, invisible, controversial] 2006: 14.

15. Brudd: om det ubehagelige, tabubelagte, marginale, usynlige, kontroversielle [Break: on the unpleasant, taboo, marginal, invisible, controversial] 2006: 10.

16. See Kavanagh 1990; Kavanagh 1991; Fleming, Paine & Rhodes 1993; Kavanagh 1994. In Kavanagh 1996 there is an overview of relevant publications for separate areas of work, although only up until 1995.

17. See, for example Sandell 2011; Marstine 2006; Knell, McLeod & Watson 2007; Lindqvist 2001.

18. See Edson 1997f; Marstine 2011a; Marstine 2011b: xxiii; Marstine, Bauer & Haines 2013a; Marstine 2011c; Ocello 2011. One of the seminars at the end of 2012 was about the question of how actively museums should look after their social role, see M Museums, Ethics and Social Justice 2012.

19. Edson 1997d; Edson 1997b; Edson 1997a; Edson 1997e; Edson 1997c.

20. Stark 2011: 28–29. See also Edson 1997f.

21. Stark 2011: 28.

22. Pabst 2014.

23. See Chapter 2 in this publication on the survey results.

24. Translated to English: “Leitbild” refers here to guiding values and the museum’s functions in the community. Common convictions of the museum’s owners, managers, staff and friends are formulated. Consensus appears both as identity-forming and indicative of trends/directions.”

25. Henie Onstad Kunstsenter 2008. As is made explicit in the document’s preface there is a difference between an art centre (kunstsenter) and museum, yet at the same time many of the challenges are similar. In the USA and Canada many institutions have their own ethical guidelines, see for example, American Alliance of Museums 2012: 8-9.

26. Henie Onstad Kunstsenter 2008: 2.

27. Marstine 2011a: 20. My emphasis.

28. Abbott 1988: 215.

29. Marstine 2011a: 20.



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Museums today are increasingly dynamic actors that work to contribute to positive societal development. They ask critical questions about established truths, highlight current social challenges, and bring out voices that have been forgotten. Today's museum staff often work with their local communities, and see personal narratives from individuals as important contributions. This work is still new and demanding, in several ways. This publication presents issues experienced by museum employees, with particular attention to ethical challenges they have encountered in their work.

We hope our book might contribute to a discussion of what is required to facilitate the everyday work of museum staff and professionalise their important work even further.



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