

Using Emotion to Breathe Life into Museum Collections

Journalist and storyteller Wana Udobang reflects on her conversations with fellows and staff about the approach and the potential of the NEO Lab fellowship. Wana's work exists in writing, poetry, performance, filmmaking, and curatorial projects.¹

For centuries, museums have been a treasure trove of memories, cartographers of histories, and curators of heirlooms. Throughout this process, our relationships to these cultural institutions have often been one of reverence and power. They dictated the stories being told, the importance of the objects, and determined value through their collections.

Over time we have watched how these spaces, their objects, and collections have kept some in and left others lurking outside their gates. Museums have often reinforced this gatekeeping by speaking to themselves and working with those who dwell within their already fortified walls. But the MK&G, through its NEO Lab fellowship, intends to better serve the needs of its communities and the users of its digital collections.

¹ This article was previously published on the NEO Collections project blog: Wana Udobang, "Using emotion to breathe life into museum collections," *Medium* (NEO Collections blog), December 7, 2022, <https://medium.com/neocollections/using-emotion-to-breathe-life-into-museum-collections-7c0d5677f71b>.

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An invitation to experiment

The online fellowship is a platform for multidisciplinary practitioners to work on questions and provocations. Five teams were selected and then paired with colleagues in different departments to develop concepts that would turn into prototypes. Through a series of workshops, the fellowship is an invitation to experiment with new ideas and methodologies. By working with communities both internally and outside of museum culture, it aims to transform storytelling and how collections are conceived and experienced.

Rethinking collections collectively

The curator of the musical instruments collection at MK&G, Olaf Kirsch, explains that discussing the fellows' different access points to a museum's collection from their different perspectives was an inspiring and view-widening experience. He adds further that "in our discussion we reflected on the crucial importance to offer points of contact to different user groups, connecting their life experience to the historical objects and issues present in the museum's collections."

By proposing a series of provocations around accessibility, emotional connection, relevance, and participatory storytelling, teams of multidisciplinary artists, researchers, designers, and activists responded to an open call with a variety of concepts and ideas to stimulate newer kinds of interactions with the MK&G's digital collections. Concepts ranged from the exploration of friendship and audio stories to accessibility toolkits, spatial integration, and even rethinking design. One thing has been clear: underscoring all the concepts is emotional language, connectivity, and belonging.

These ideas and methodologies are using emotion as a point of departure to breathe life into the often static and stoic nature of the collections. By imbuing them with living memories and histories and inviting the audience to participate in the storytelling process, we move from casually looking to seeing. Hearing to listening. Making the passive more active, enabling a vital exchange between audiences and objects. Fostering community is at the center of these provocations, and community, as we know, is where belonging resides.

The view from outside

Many of the fellows come from outside of the museum ecosystem—a welcome departure from the systems of the old guard. Something that many of the fellows allude to is the intimidation that comes with working with a museum. Artist and animator Azam Masoumzadeh aptly describes this kind of intimidation as "intellectual shame." It describes

how both the language and user experiences of museums can make us feel like we don't have the right credentials to engage with objects and spaces, essentially leaving us with a feeling of inadequacy or rejection.

Olaf believes that the experience of non-museum professionals has been essential to being able to address different groups of users and visitors, as well as avoiding the redundant discourse within the institutions. A thing that can serve as a blueprint for other museums to follow.

Artists, researchers, designers, and activists were invited to play and tinker with ideas, easing the pressure of coming up with a solution but rather a plurality of concepts that could be further deconstructed. This freedom to create is something many fellows have applauded and intend to incorporate into their own practice.

Placing humanity back into the museum

For fellows like Janine Georg and Calum Perrin, who live with invisible illnesses, much of this work of connection and belonging is about placing humanity back into the museum, and for them much of that lies in the other side of the room within the programming.

Antonia Stergiou also reflects similar ideas, stating that making a safe space is crucial to how art is created. In her concept with Konstantina Bousmpoura, they are integrating the Freiraum, MK&G's open project and meeting space, with the museum and its digital collections. They bring in QR codes to make the experience of digital collections contemporary and to connect the digital space with the physical.

Konstantina Bousmpoura says, "I think the MK&G is creating a new way of participating in the museum, a way of seeing people not only as visitors but also as users and content creators."

The NEO Collections project has been as much about the objects as it has been about reframing a practice and making meaning. It is taking what is often seen as ordinary and giving communities a visceral experience, saying to them that they belong here now and always.

Wana Udobang

Sebastian Haiss, fellow

“It is about how to bring everyone in, not just who has a museum background and knows how to come in.”





Janine Georg, fellow

“For me, it was a lot about understanding what museums are as spaces and who has a right to these places to claim them for themselves. What could be structural issues, and how could we rewrite them without having to other ourselves and other people in the context of that space? I think, with a playful approach that helps people challenge their ideas of who they are in that space.”

— ABER
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Azam Masoumzadeh, fellow

“When I get out of the museum, I have this sort of intellectual shame that I always think I received so much information, and I know sooner or later I am going to forget about it.”

— SHAME