

Welcoming speech Suay Aksoy, President ICOM

Dear Colleagues,

It is my pleasure and privilege to be with you here today in the delightful city of Helsingborg. I thank you for your kind invitation and extend warm greetings to all participants who have made the effort to gather here from near and far for this important joint International Conference of the ICOM Committees of Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Germany.

Since early May I have attended a good number of conferences, all over the world from Kyoto to Calgary to Copenhagen and the theme of the conferences and consequently of my talks was one way or another the theme of the International Museum Day 2017 as it is here today. And, I have at least one more meeting to participate around the same theme before the end of the year. Initially I thought this was happening to me because I was the president but then gradually I started to understand why I have been so much in demand with this theme. Knowing where I come from, you wanted to hear the first-hand experience of not being able to speak the unspeakable. But I may surprise you with the strength of museums anywhere in the world.

On the 5th of July this year, a group of 10 human rights activists attending a meeting on the Princes' Islands in Istanbul were taken into custody and 6 of them were arrested on the 18th of July. Among them was Peter Steudner, a German citizen who was only an educator of human rights with no special relationship to Turkey or the Turkish chapter of the Human Rights International and he had not spoken a word at that meeting.

A week after this, there was a meeting the venue of which was again the same island of the Princes' Islands, this time though on the premises of the Museum of the Islands to discuss the strategy for cultural activities of the Islands' Municipality for 2018 as well as the exhibition programme of the museum. I was invited because I have been involved with this small city museum since the day of its inception.

The meeting gave us the opportunity to visit the temporary outdoor exhibition at the museum entitled *Caiques of Exile* (Boats of Exile), created and curated by a textile artist who collected and restored old castaway boats for

the occasion, dressed them up with new sails and dedicated to each one of them the story of a person who either came to the island or was sent away, either way to live in exile. Among them were some notables like for example Trotsky who was exiled from Stalin's Soviet Union and spent time there writing and fishing. There was also a boat dedicated to a musician, Gomidas Vartabed, an Armenian resident of the island. On this boat's label was first a quote from a book written by a survivor of the so-called journey and then a short note on history. The note said,

On Saturday, 4th of April, 1915 Armenian intellectuals, among them reporters, artists, politicians, lawyers, doctors and reverends, were arrested and sent on a long journey by train from Haydarpaşa – from which most did not return. Gomidas Vartabed who had devoted all his energy to music since his childhood, was among those whose door was knocked in that night.

It is not easy to find such eloquently told, short but crystal clear stories of what happened in 1915 and with such impact. This is how museums work, how they make memory. This is in fact what makes museums relevant in a most fundamental way.

There have not been many such exhibitions in Turkey talking about the difficult pages of the country's history. And, when there was one it was not developed by a museum but by a civil societal organisation like the exhibition entitled *Never Again! Facing the Past and Apology* in 2013 which however did not have the so-called Armenian deportations as one of the cases it tackled. But the introductory panel and the introduction of the accompanying book almost overtly referred to it, overt enough to inspire the current President, then Prime Minister, to issue a statement of condolences in April the following year.

As another recent example I am thinking of the civil war in Bosnia Herzegovina and the so-called ethnic cleansing in the 1990s. Not even in 2008 the museums from the Balkan states were ready to touch on this topic when they had a meeting in Belgrade to investigate the question of reconciliation through museum work. Perhaps not enough time had passed to tackle such a painful experience.

One wonders how long a time must pass before parties are ready or strong enough to say what they have done or experienced? Does it take a bulky group of victims in order to feel free and unashamed to express one's agony and say the unspeakable?

It is worth mentioning that it was ICOM who stepped in, with UNESCO's support, to provide expertise and start-up funding for a travelling exhibition project about the Balkan region that was to be realised jointly with the national and history museums from the states of former Yugoslavia with also support from the neighbouring countries. The exhibition *Imagining the Balkans* was then opened in Slovenia by the General Director of UNESCO and the President of ICOM in April 2013.

Reconciliation appears as a post-trauma action that takes place only after decades have passed. It takes time to prepare the communities for reconciliation. So, the earlier the efforts start, the earlier the peace is instituted.

Then it is justified to ask, can we not do something when things are in the making, when they are happening. Why are museums able to talk about trauma only decades after it occurs? Is this era too fast for museums? Could it be that the format of our structures and their mode of operation require updating? But then... how much is this a matter of relevance for museums, how much does it serve their relevance?

In fact, cultural organisations like biennales and festivals of periodic or temporary nature or art and cultural centres have probably been more prompt in responding to developments in our world. Have they been perhaps more sensitive and also more practical as far as innovative installations and narratives are concerned? Recently I read a review about *documenta 14*, the fourteenth edition of the exhibition of contemporary art which takes place every five years in Kassel, Germany, which just ended several days ago. The title said "The most important thing at the *documenta 14* was not an artwork. It is evidence." And in the subtitle, it was written, "An analysis of a neo-Nazi murder investigation redefines the limits of what art is for."

The so-called evidence was a video that presented the results of the collaborative work accomplished by the research agency Forensic Architecture together with the Society of Friends of Halit, the 21-year old victim. The London-based research agency formed at Goldsmiths had previously investigated war crimes in Gaza, former Yugoslavia, and Syria.

It is very interesting to see a piece, in an art exhibition, being described with terminology that is much more pertinent to the museum vernacular than to art: evidence!... If art organisations can borrow ideas from museums, then can we not borrow ideas and methods from them?

But there are also museums that speak loudly through their temporary exhibitions if not through the permanent ones. In this respect, city museums have done some remarkable work. In their quest for collecting the

contemporary and serving as a forum, a discussion platform for their respective citizens, they have tackled many a burning issue ranging from old age to urban regeneration and to migration. The ICOM International Committee on City Museums, CAMOC, has also been working on the topic of migration for several years now and currently spreading its efforts with a regional approach partnering with another ICOM Committee, ICR, the one about regional museums. City museums in Sweden, Germany and Netherlands, to name a few, have started looking into the current migration phenomenon but the refugee crisis has not so much entered the museums yet.

Having said this, I was happy to read on the blog of the Helsingborg conference about the prospective establishment of an international refugee museum in Denmark. It said “the museum will tell the story of the 250,000 German refugees who arrived in the German-occupied Denmark after having fled from their homes due to the progress of the Red Army at the end of World War Two.” So, after about seven decades there is this museum project. It is a challenging but also a useful story, as they stated in the blog, especially in a time when Europe faces huge challenges regarding refugees, which also will be included in the museum.

There is perhaps something about the format and operational mode of museums that does not allow them to react and act in the face of new developments as promptly as they could or devise innovative ways of saying the unspeakable. This may be worthwhile to investigate for museums to serve society better.

Museums can be versatile and they may have a myriad of creative ways to convey a message. This is a trait we must treasure and nourish also. It has a lot to do with being relevant... But then there is also the question, how far can and must museums go to prove themselves relevant? Isn't the unsurpassed authenticity of their collections or their educational power sufficient to prove this? Here we face a practical and ethical question at the same time. But I will bypass this debate here, and leave it to the proper committees. Instead, I will move to ICOM's relevance beyond that of the individual museums. I will reiterate an often-cited quote from Bernice Murphy:

While continuing to be a strong organisation of members, and promoting professional training, programmes and co-operation among museums internationally, ICOM has a much greater potential to realise. ICOM needs to think of itself not merely as a facilitator of professional activities but also as an organisation that itself addresses and serves society and its development.

So, she is talking about ICOM's relevance and this has a lot to do with the work of our National, International, Regional and Standing Committees. From the mail exchanges and talks we have amongst colleagues, members, committee chairs, different layers of ICOM governance and with potential recruits, as well as from our own observations, one easily detects it is high time to rethink the functionality of our structure to secure an ongoing relevance for ICOM.

Do our International Committees cater to the new themes and concerns that dominate our museums and the world today? Being preoccupied by climate change or economic crisis, migration or the disabled, do we have a committee on sustainability or one on diversity? UNESCO talks about sites when cultural property protection is the issue, do we have any committee addressing the site museums without which there would be no proper documentation of the site and its holdings? What about experimental, underwater or industrial archaeology, or for that matter modern history, do they get the attention they deserve? Or are there leakages to other organisations in search of such attention? Are the structures and themes of our committees in line with the times? Do they do any self-assessment or are they assessed in any way?

There is luckily a bottom-up process in ICOM that has become more vocal recently. Hence, we had the recommendation from the International Committees at the ICOM Advisory meetings last June that advised the forming a Working Group to explore and discuss the future, the prospects for the International Committees, and it is on its way. Our International Committees are densely populated and chaired by the members of the National Committees of ICOM NORD and Germany. So, it is likely some pertinent discussions on the current relevance and formulation of the International Committees will be taking place here in Helsingborg parallel to the discussions around the conference theme. I believe this will certainly inform and inspire the mentioned Working Group on the future of the ICs.

All these are sure to raise our collective awareness on the wealth of difficult issues at stake concerning the relevance of museums and of organs of ICOM. But then is this not one of the reasons why we long to come together every year?

I wish all of you a successful conference and thank you once again for your invitation to be here, and for your attention!