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Collecting outside the comfort zone – some examples from the field

Abstract How can museums – regulated and influenced by public discourse, politics and their own history – find ways of defining and handling difficult issues? We argue that both defining difficult issues and the ways of coping with those can be approached by a museum's clearly formulated, open-minded vision. Initially, we will show how and what Sörmlands museum is collecting, how it is presenting its collections, and in what respect collecting and presenting are results of the museum's vision. Secondly, taking the vision as a starting point, we will introduce some of the 'difficult'¹ social topics, sub-topics and objects the museum decided to discuss, collect, present and preserve. However, here we will merely give a descriptive outline of some of the cases which we have been working on in the field and not place the examples within a wider theoretical frame.

The different difficult topics that we are working on include(d), among others, displacement, migration, and exile. The documentations and stories are new at the museum in different ways and in some aspects they have never been told or collected before. Finally, returning to the museum's vision, we will argue for a mindset that focuses more on (individual's) narratives than on objects themselves.

Keywords museum collections, narrating, field-work, minorities, migration, ethics

1 With 'difficult' we mean issues or topics that pose moral/ethical questions, and/or have risen from or might raise political debates, and/or are on – at least until recently – rather unusual 'territory' for museums, and/or should be approached by personal with pedagogical and/or ethnographic experience.

Sörmlands museum – its visible and narrating storages and its vision

Sörmlands museum is a regional museum of cultural history situated in Nyköping, a coastal city one hour south of Stockholm. The bulk of our collections are from the 19th and 20th century with focus on the everyday life of all social classes. We also have archeological material and several hundred objects of art. We are working with a holistic approach to defining our collections, i.e. the documents in our archives and our photographic collection are just as much part of the whole collections as are our three dimensional objects.

Since 2017, we are in the process of installing a new museum in Nyköping which will house both offices, exhibition halls, and our complete collections. The main part of the collections will be displayed in visible storage. However – and this is its main characteristic – not organized along material or object categories but around the people and their personal stories that we have collected. We will reunite sub-collections that once arrived (and still regularly arrive) at the museum as a unit of several different objects (including documents and photographs) telling the story of (a) concrete individual(s), but were separated because of their different material aspects or forms. Our aim is not to present ‘dead’ and isolated objects taken out of their historical and/or social context, but to show that museum collections are, in the end, always about humans and human conditions rather than about the objects themselves. The visible storage will therefore be presented as a hybrid between storage facility and exhibition.

In the process of re-organizing our collections we were also able to ‘discover’ objects and narratives that we were missing in our collections. Being field-oriented, we could quickly send out our ethnologists/anthropologists to do interviews and to collect these stories and objects.

We mention this new approach to organizing and displaying museum collections because it reflects our museums vision and characteristics. The museum’s vision is the polar star in all our projects. To be more concrete, here are some excerpts from Sörmlands museums vision and enterprise-idea:

- » To widen views and to inspire to commitment.
- » Sörmlands museum always has human beings in focus and is active in the center of our society. That means that we make people visible and that we ourselves are visible.
- » Everything we do as a museum (from exhibitions to collecting to pedagogical programs) should contribute to an individual’s potential to

influence society and their own life-situation. The museum should give people perspectives on history and the future, on how it is, has been and will be to be a human being.

- » The museum can contribute to sympathy and empathy for and between (different) people.
- » Today's matters of course and habitual ideas, norms, values and behaviors are to be analyzed and not to be taken for granted.
- » We have a certain knowledge and expertise for which we must take responsibility. Therefore, “we see it as our responsibility to antagonize and to question stereotypes and oversimplified images of history as well as the exclusivity of interpreting history.”²

With this vision in mind we can always focus our attention to new issues and are not locked within a collections directory that primarily focuses on what kind of objects to collect. Rather we are able focus on human stories, independent of what kind of objects they might contribute with to the museum collections.

Moving outside the comfort zone – some examples

In order to collect these stories and to live up to our vision, we not only *should* but *have* to face difficult issues. Therefore, we have to move outside the area which “armchair-museologists” might consider as a comfort zone. We cannot passively wait until things come into our storage. We have to actively identify current issues in society, confront, and document them. What we are doing might not only be ‘uncomfortable’ for museum curators but also for society at large. Topics as immigration have become so controversial that they are either debated aggressively or avoided completely. Therefore, museums as public institutions play an important role in researching and displaying facts that reach beyond emotionally steered debates.

Of course, work in the field, as anthropologists call it, is not uncomplicated. Depending on which persons or group you will face you have different challenges to meet. The first challenge is how to approach your subjects, the second is how to establish trust, and the third is how to collect narratives

² Translation by the authors, for the Swedish original, see <https://sormlandsmuseum.se/om-oss/vision-och-kannetecken>.

and objects. In all three phases we have not only to face others, probably unknown persons, but also ourselves, and not seldom we are confronted with ethical issues.

Alexandro's blanket

We have chosen a few examples from the field which we will present on the following pages. The first one is our documentation of the life of EU migrants³ living and begging on the streets of the cities of Nyköping and Oxelösund (situated 20km east of Nyköping). Over the course of the last two years the presence of EU migrants begging in front different supermarkets and in the streets has been highly visible. This elevated a debate in Sweden about whether or not begging should be forbidden. But although everyone was and is conscious of the presence of begging EU migrants and meets them almost daily – which in most cases one observes is either a meeting of silently ignoring them or one of tossing them a few coins – we know surprisingly little about their lives, about who they are, what they feel and think, and how they came to be living in or travelling through this area under difficult circumstances.

That is why we decided to do a documentation of their experience, including interviews, taking photos, and collecting objects. We encountered many difficult questions, including how we approach possible interviewees and how we can explain what we are doing, considering possible language barriers in terms of our work-context⁴. How can we ask for an object from someone who has very few possessions, and how do we solve bureaucratic things like signing contracts with someone who probably cannot read the language which the forms are written in? What do we do if the interviewee tells us about activities that are illegal? And what if the story that we get told is contradictory or differs from the things we observe? What reactions will we meet?

3 The term 'EU migrants' is an unofficial umbrella term in Sweden commonly referring to migrants mostly coming from Bulgaria and Romania to earn money outside 'usual' forms of employment. Already the definition and usage of the term is a difficult issue.

4 Our (and our colleagues') experience from previous collecting-projects was that not everyone has a clear idea of what a museum of cultural history actually is or does. A common understanding is that it displays art and 'old things'. The idea that it is interested in 'common individuals' stories' seems to many rather unusual.



Fig. 1: Homeless Alexandro and curator Hanna Aili exchanging blankets ©P. Ostritsch, 2017

We started with two parallel approaches: one was to contact official institutions in the city which supported EU migrants. The other was to directly approach several EU migrants. Finally, we established contact with an EU migrant from Bulgaria called Alexandro (fig. 1), as well as with his twin brother and his sister-in-law. Mixing English with Swedish, we were able to have longer discussions with Alexandro. His open-mindedness and willingness to speak to us were just as important as his language-skills.

We⁵ came into contact with Alexandro by mistaking him for being his brother. But as soon as we started talking to each other we became aware of the confusion and started laughing. Although not intended, this was an effective ice-breaker. Alexandro sat cross-legged on layers of different textiles and folded cardboard with a blanket over his legs. In front of him stood a box made out of old cardboard partly wrapped in gift wrap paper which served as a kind of desk for him. On the front side of the box there was an

⁵ In this case Hanna Aili, curator at Sörmlands Museum, and Peter Ostritsch. Hanna Aili wrote extensive field-notes which are accessible at Sörmlands Museum archive.

enlarged photograph of his relatives in Bulgaria: four children and two adults sitting on the floor of a stark house with brick-lined walls. Above the picture was a note in printed letters serving as information about Alexandro's situation. Beside the explanation were two small notes saying "God bless you" in Swedish. On top of the box was a used paper-cup from McDonald's serving as collection-receptacle. The cup was taped several times and was connected directly with the interior of the box which served as storage for the money.

We crouched in front of Alexandro and explained that we came from Sörmlands museum and asked if it was OK for him if we asked him some questions. He nodded and insinuated that he understood. He started by telling us that he has several children at home, that he was sick with diabetes, and that he has suffered from severe back problems. He had been sitting in front of the supermarket for almost three months. Although it was hard to be away from his family this was the only way for him to support them. Soon he would have to return because as an EU citizen he could only stay there for three months.

We asked him what his days look like and if there are many people putting something into his cup. "Some persons are nice, others are not as nice", he said. "Friends give more money, but most just give one or two kronor." During our whole conversation Alexandro looked up and greeted people entering and leaving the store. A lot of customers seemed to recognize him and greeted back. It did not become clear how often Alexandro had returned to Sweden and to that supermarket, but as far as he wanted to inform us his migration forth and back dated back at least two years. His work-days were from 8 until 21, i.e. the time-span between the opening and closing of the supermarket.

We offered him to buy a cup of coffee or tea, and to share a pizza later on. He accepted the tea but gave us only a vague answer about eating together in the evening.

How should we explain what we are doing at the museum, and what the museum is about? We decided to show him some prove and something concrete. We pulled out our mobile phones and searched for the museum website and showed him pictures of the new museum building and objects from our collections. We explained once more that we are collecting different narratives and stories in order to widen our collections and to reflect many different aspects of our society. Alexandro understood and was very open to our wish to interview him, although he first wanted to make sure that we were not news reporters abusing his story. It was also his idea to contribute to our

collection with one of his blankets, namely the blanket he was using the first time he came to Sweden. We thanked him and agreed to return three days later.

On our way back we were asking ourselves if he really had understood what we wanted and if he would be there on the day we agreed upon to meet him again. It was also self-evident for us that we could not accept his blanket as a gift without giving him something in return. Cash was out of the questions since he did not want to sign any receipt that would have been necessary for us to buy something with means from our official budget. So instead we bought him a new blanket which he gladly accepted and exchanged for his own blanket that he had washed on the weekend after our first meeting.

Finally, we returned in order to show him the pictures of him we had taken and photographs of his blanket in our online-database. This would not have been necessary from a mere practical point of view. However, it was absolutely necessary from a moral point of view: collecting life-stories from people who are in an unequal power-position in relation to the museum as an official institution depends on establishing trust. And that is not something that is done within a single meeting. Establishing trust presumes both time, patience, and open-mindedness. A final issue was how we should proceed with the usual signing of a contract which we use when receiving objects and information (and take pictures) to assure that we have the ownership, use of the material in exhibitions, and ability to publish it online or in publications. Alexandro did not want to sign any written contracts because he did neither really understand the written text nor did he trust any official institutions so far as to sign a document. To find an official translator was too complicated and expensive in our case. Instead we came to an oral agreement with Alexandro. Of course, there is still a moral and a judicial issue whether or not we can/should use and publish the material. In the end, we decided to publish Alexandro's story because we came to the conclusion that this is what he wanted and that this makes it possible for the stories of underrepresented, marginalized individuals and groups to make their way into a major narrative of our society – and not in a shortchanged/selfish way nor in a paternalistic one.

Two other examples of collecting outside the comfort zone regarding refugees are from one of the projects called *Displacement, Migration and Exile*. They are presented in summarized form below under the headlines 'Diana's rosary' and 'Starter kit from the Swedish Migration Board'.

During 2015 Europe and Sweden experienced something that became synonymous with 'The Refugee Crisis'. About 160,000 people sought asylum in

Sweden during that year, mostly from Syria.⁶ The train stations in Stockholm and Malmö were filled with men, women, and children, exhausted from their long journeys in flight. The news was covered with stories about refugees and the struggle in communities to cope with the challenges of this immediate need for housing and caring for all these people in need.

In the project, we wanted to contribute with more knowledge and understanding about migration in Sörmland County, Sweden. We have conducted approximately 90 interviews with refugees, newcomers, and people working with migration, like the Migration Board of Sweden, the local municipalities of Sörmland county, and local political parties. We were documenting important parts of Swedish history; therefore, it was imperative for us to have a clear scientific purpose and focus.

How did migration and displacement become a difficult issue in Sweden? One part of the answer is that this field is under represented in the collections at museums in Sweden. Modern objects are missing and so are stories that contain life conditions for people who have migrated to Sweden. The second part of the answer is the portrayal of the people. Often, the portrayals tend to end up in stereotypical stories, events, and description of the individuals.

Diana's rosary

So how do you collect stories or objects from people that have lost everything? Diana is one of the persons we interviewed for the project. She fled with her husband from Afghanistan in 2008. Her story contains everything about being in flight and eventually reaching Sweden, that came to be their final destination. In addition, she also tells about her initial time in her new home in Sweden; how the stressful long wait for a decision from the Migration Board affected her, and the difficulties of the lack of family and friends. During her flight, Diana was pregnant and in many parts of the flight they were hidden in different ways by smugglers. For over a month, they were hidden in the basement of a house in Turkey, sharing the small space with cattle and 18 other people in refuge. It was a small limited area to be in and the only access to food and water was through the smugglers.

6 www.migrationsverket.se/Om-Migrationsverket/Statistik/Oversikter-och-statistik-fran-tidigare-ar/2015.html



Fig. 2: Diana's rosary ©Karin Andersson, 2017

Because Diana was pregnant, the smugglers sometimes granted her some extra dates and milk. She told us that her husband managed to find a way to heat some water and make her a cup of tea to go with the dates and she tells how she was reminded of how happy she was to be married to him. She began to save the kernels from the dates, which she then began to rub against the floor and an old rug. This to make the kernels smooth and shape them in a way to enable her to tie them together into a rosary (fig. 2). For her, this became a way of staying occupied and at the same time something to, literally, attach her faith to. The rosary is now in our collection as a symbol and an example of one of many strategies people use to keep up hope of survival under very difficult conditions.

Diana's story gives us a glance into the cruel and harsh environment of being in refuge, being in the hands of smugglers and not knowing how the flight will end. This type of interview wouldn't be possible if we were not able to build a mutual trust between the institution, the interviewer, and the respondent. By doing this kind of work and leaving the typical comfort zones of the museum, we are not only gathering more understanding, but we are also able to give voices to the persons who usually never get the chance to tell their stories in their own words.

Starter kit from the Swedish Migration Board

Asylum seekers arriving at the city of Flen all receive a basic set of household items in connection with the enrollment. Accommodation officers hand over the room-keys and a white plastic bucket with kitchenware, as this is a typical Swedish 'home starter kit'. Similar basic equipment is handed out to asylum seekers in other parts of Sweden as well and is considered a loan to operate during the asylum period.

Objects tell us many things about their contemporary society and the objects never exist independently of their contexts and from the people who created and used them. The objects are, for most parts, meaning-bearing and therefore important to study in themselves. Amongst other things, the starter kits contain a potato peeler, a kitchen tool that is commonly used only in the Nordic countries. As most of the asylum seekers are from countries outside of the Nordics, and also often outside of Europe, for many, the peeler becomes a symbol of 'Swedishness'. We have collected and studied a similar kit from the Swedish Migration Board from ten years earlier and could easily spot the similarities in the kits from then and now.

Conclusion

We have shown different stories and objects we collect at Sörmlands Museum. Museums and the institutions have considerable amount of power in collecting and sharing stories. Therefore, it is imperative to carefully weigh what kind of stories you collect and don't collect. We always need to thoroughly discuss which subjects to engage into and why. Our collection policy does not revolve around what kind of objects to collect but which stories to collect and what kind of questions to ask.

The point we want to make with these examples is the following: there is nothing wrong with collecting *inside* the usual museum zone, but it is only when you step *outside* of that comfort zone that you get close to many of the difficult issues our society is facing today. As a foundation, museums of cultural history need a clearly formulated vision that goes beyond the questions of which kind of objects to collect. It is the vision which paves the way out of our comfort zones.