

The

activist

museum

Practice, theories
and actors

Edited by

LOUISE FABIAN

JULIE ROKKJÆR BIRCH



KØN

VELUX FONDEN



Contents

- 5** Editorial Introduction –
Museum Activism in Theory and in Practice
LOUISE FABIAN & JULIE ROKKJÆR BIRCH
- 10** **SECTION 1**
Contributions on the subject of museum activism by researchers
and museumprofessionals in both Denmark and abroad
- 12** The History of the Activist Museum
LOUISE FABIAN
- 29** Dialogs on museum resilience
ANNESOFIE NORN, DIANE DRUBAY & SANDRO DEBONO
- 49** Labour Cultural Heritage as Social Innovation –
Two Canadian Studies
CHRISTOPHER GUNTER & JANELLE ANGLIN
- 61** Girl Museum – Activism Through Girl-Centered
Museum Practice
ASHLEY E. REMER
- 71** The Creation of FLUGT
STINA TROLDTOFT ANDRESEN, CLAUS KJELD JENSEN,
ANNE SOFIE VEMMELUND CHRISTENSEN, TRINE JUST HANSEN,
MALENE FROSCHE LANGVAD, LOUISE THUESEN & HELLE ØLGAARD
- 87** The Activist Potential of Feminist Art – Artworks as
Agile Objects in Museum Communication
CAMILLA SKOVBJERG PALDAM
- 101** History of the Women's Museum – A Museum
Created by Women About Women
MERETE IPSEN

- 120** **SECTION 2**
Testimonies of people and activists involved in the work of
the museum across the years
- 136** **SECTION 3**
The toolkit of the activist museum
- 138** BODY and SEX in a Museum – Activist, Discussion-
based, Norm-critical Sex Education in a Museum
of Cultural History
ANNA KATHRINE SVENNING
- 152** They See Us Rollin' –
Mobile Museum from Vision to Reality
SARAH BRADLEY
- 160** Everyday Life, Nuances and Representation – An
Exhibit About and By Muslim Women in Denmark
LOUISE ROGNLIEN
- 168** **LITTERATURE**

DIALOGS ON MUSEUM RESILIENCE

ANNESOFIE NORN

Curator at the Museum for the United Nations – UN Live (Denmark)

DIANE DRUBAY

Founder of We Are Museums (France)

SANDRO DEBONO

Academic at the University of Malta (Malta)

Bidragydere:

MILENA JOKANOVIĆ

Research-associate at the University of Belgrade, and associate of the Museum of Yugoslavia (Serbia)

JULIE DECKER

Director/CEO of the Anchorage Museum in Alaska (United States)

CRISTINA LLERAS

Independent curator currently working for the Museum of Bogotá (Colombia)

JULIE ROKKJÆR BIRCH

Former director of KØN – Gender Museum Denmark

DOCTOR KRISTIN ALFORD

Director of MOD. at the University of South Australia (Australia)

PROFESSOR LINDSEY MCEWEN

Director of the Centre for Water, Communities and Resilience, University of the West of England (United Kingdom)

INTRODUCTION

Genuinely pivotal moments are rare.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led humanity to experience an unprecedented sense of collective grief across the world. The vulnerability of our bodies and of our economic and social systems were then exposed and tested to the core. But, as the world was then closing down, we also got the chance to prepare for what would come next. As Alessandra Morelli, the UNHCR Representative in Niger noted back then: “It may feel like our lives are on hold right now. But with resilience we can start building for the future.” (Morreli 2023)

We know that museums are coming to terms with their pivotal role in this new decade, shifting their mission towards their social and cultural responsibility, understanding their impact on local communities and engaging in key social debates. This type of leadership requires substantial innovation, boldness, honesty and, as Robert R. Janes (founder of the Coalition of Museums for Climate Justice) adds, “unprecedented cooperation” (Janes 2019). We also know that many voices are still left out of mainstream networks. This is one good reason for rallying and synergizing the global museum community to come together in new conversations, and set the example of a new solidarity model of exchange within the global museum sector that can contribute towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

We need to understand what actions our institutions can and should take to help communities rise stronger and become more resilient. This is not just necessary for the post-COVID-19 world, but also, and even more so, in the face of the much bigger planetary emergency we are also facing.

One thing the year 2020 taught us is how we are all intrinsically connected.

From May 2020 to February 2021, We Are Museums and the Museum for the United Nations – UN Live convened an ongoing conversation on the basis of online dialogs between networks of museums for the purpose of fo-

stering collective wisdom and strategic know-how. Museums with recent experience of rebuilding and transforming collective stories of trauma through cultural programs can help us all find our way in this changing world.

Through this series we wanted to find a form of conversation and dialog that could illustrate our connectedness: how one insight, shared with one person, will have a ripple effect on conversations happening in 2nd, 3rd and 4th degrees. Like a relay race, the conversation was set between two people, representing different points of view on the subject of resilience and supporting a great variety of perspectives. Each participant joined conversations, first as the interviewee and then as the interviewer.

This series of online dialogs took place on the We Are Museums online community, a global neutral space that rethinks and reshapes museums. In parallel, the guests have been contributing to this collaborative reflection inspired and influenced by their online interactions.³

OVERVIEW

This series of conversations may hopefully serve the purpose of a compass with which museums can take the bearings of resilience. From Alaska to Aarhus, Belgrade to Bogotá, participants sought to discover the meaning of resilience for museums through stories told and experiences lived within the global museum ecosystem. One guiding question keeps all conversations in focus: how can we build new habits of resilience as the museum ecosystem equips and prepares itself for a post-COVID-19 world? The resilience presented in these conversations is elastic and agile, creative and active. Here, we explore museum thinking that does not emerge from the stereotypical but comes from beyond.

The conversations started by exploring how the politics of post-war territories can incubate meaningful resilience. The practice of collecting by artists active in the former Republic of Yugoslavia brought into focus a particular type of resilience informed by alternative narratives. By collecting disowned and rejected objects, actions and stories, these artists sought to inspire the world around us. These conversations also presented new ways of remapping our perspective and thinking. What we regard as the peripheries of our world, society and culture can be seen as resourceful places where we can learn resilience. The challenges may be much bigger and more complex for the Anchorage Museum in Alaska, but the lack of an institutionalized tradition or established museological practice made meaningful changes easier to

foster. Peripheries could be the places where post-COVID-19 museums can understand and assimilate resilience.

The seeds of resilience can also be found in activism, particularly when directed towards rethinking narratives informed by anticipated futures. Experiences of museum activism presented during these encounters came from Bogotá in Colombia and the city of Aarhus in Denmark. When a museum chooses to become an activist, resilience becomes a necessary skill. The greater the challenge, the greater the need to persevere and the more that need increases over time. Resilience is certainly required to navigate the uncertainties of the present, but the desired ambition that these conversations explore is much more about the long-term. The pivotal role museums have today involves envisaging the future and reflecting on the past, constructing alternative narratives of the future and offering possibilities, not just visions of catastrophes. Regardless of its collections, themes, size and place, no museum can ignore the upheaval we are living through. The call to activism has never been so pronounced. It is up to museums to incubate that spark to become something bigger over the long term. This is a time when much can be questioned. That too is what resilience stands for.

In their call to activism, museums can also become the voice of their communities. Our conversations also tracked a community-driven type of resilience, which may also rethink the use of museum collections as testimony to the past and tools for the future. When collective action is required in the face of crisis, museums can become beacons of hope. Resilience may be about having the courage to change course and lead that change on behalf of communities. Museums are certainly not neutral, and in times of crisis the call to action is akin to an obligation. It is naive to think that we can proceed in this complex world doing business as usual. Resilience can empower museums with the courage to move forward.

Nevertheless, when all is said and done, resilience can best be learned through first-hand experiences. We might consider that to be a learning-by-doing approach too. Taking the plunge may not be an option for some museums but these case studies can certainly provide the missing spark to set things in motion, hopefully for the long-term ambition of fostering better futures.

Dialog #1

BUILD COLLECTIVE CULTURAL RESILIENCE THROUGH CREATIVE COLLECTING

Dialog between **Milena Jokanović (MJ)**, research-associate at the University of Belgrade, and associate of the Museum of Yugoslavia (Serbia) and **Annesofie Norn (AN)**, Lead curator at the Museum for the United Nations – UN Live (Denmark)

The recorded version of this dialog was broadcast on the We Are Museums online platform on May 27, 2020.

AN Heritage values can create a strong sensation of a shared “we”, provide support and help communities build resilience to absorb disturbances. At the same time, the sensation of shared identity has also featured prominently in national campaigns to “take back control” of Britain through Brexit and “America first” with Donald Trump.

I enter these dialogs in the hope that we can use the global crisis we are facing to move beyond national identity paradigms and instead build new collective understandings and resources informing heritage values based on the ideals of a “global we”.

Never before have we been so globally connected. Never before have we experienced a global crisis on such a scale. By bringing different voices together in dialog on the topic of resilience, we will explore the tensions, synergies and creative opportunities from past, present and future experiences of the crisis.

The first dialog with Milena Jokanović will explore the lessons we can learn from memories and archives from the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

MJ Quite a few terms come to my mind when reflecting on the museum and arts sector in general during the current pandemic. Resilience, solidarity, creativity and collecting processes are some of those I choose when contemplating potential strategies to overcome this turbulent period. Very important, I believe, is the process of creative collecting as a response to the crisis. Moreover, COLLECTION (collecting process) and CREATIVITY (art), make us RESILIENT. These three words frame my thoughts and reflections.

The International Committee of Museums’ report on COVID-19 published in April 2020 a list of steps for museums to address resilience.



"3D Wallpaper for Children's Room: Mickey Mouse Pattern" and "Tricolor (Flag of Yugoslavia)" by Vladimir Perić. Property of the Museum of Childhood Art Project.

The sixth step is particularly telling: "Consider the possibility of rapid response collecting and documenting the crisis and its impact, and promise to come back to it afterwards." (ICOM 2020).

Equally important to collecting is, as I argued, creativity, so we could turn to UNESCO's action: "RESILIART Artists and Creativity beyond Crisis, with a subtitle: "Because art and creativity make us resilient." (UNESCO 2020).

One has to keep in mind that: "The system of art is resilient and art is now responsible for change. Artists are the people who provide material for imagining a different future." (Eno & Varoufakis 2020). Coming from Serbia, and researching contemporary art practice that often uses memory as raw material for further work, I recognized powerful personal memories represented with objects and strong emotional responses being built in artworks.

The 1990s were very turbulent times for the Balkans. The dissolution of Yugoslavia was followed by socio-economic instabilities and shifts in political ideology, cultural policy and public memory. A thriving cultural sector was one of the victims. The museum institutions of the region failed to agree on how best to communicate the crisis and how to represent the (lost) identity, including individual destinies. Artists stepped in spontaneously and took on the role of preservers of memories. Their activities resulted in a parallel, independent art scene. Finally, they created not only ready-made installations, but also entire artists' museums, such as the Museum of Childhood as well as The Inner Museum (Museum of Kitsch).

Walking through bankrupted factories, abandoned houses and flea markets, artists picked up the material culture of Yugoslavia's socialist times, using it as raw material to reinterpret and transform into works of art. Trash was the material to use in an economic crisis, but it also served as a social critique by preserving individual memories and consequently stimulating discussion. The flea market from which artists picked their material culture, can be understood as a symbolical, valueless and timeless limbo, from which chosen objects were recontextualized and transformed into important carriers of memories. The above-mentioned artists' museums, therefore, captured collective memories, even including public monuments, which were frequently removed or even cut in times of crisis. Some of these collections were later acquired by museum institutions.

AN It is, indeed, fascinating how the most mundane objects and personal stories became a material culture for artists' collections during the dissolution of Yugoslavia. At a historic time when museums were closed and collections no longer accessible, discarded property, objects and personal memories came to represent the (hi)story. Today these collections have an essential role to play in supporting a new collective identity and shared heritage values for the region. In Serbia, these responses helped communities see the world from a different angle and to look forward.

In a sense, today we are in a similar interim period, in the midst of a crisis, with our institutions closed. Milena sees this as an opportunity to build new collections of "micro-memories" to be used as raw material for re-imagining who we are. These creative responses to turbulence are important strategies with which to build resilience. By collecting a diversity of personal testimonies, we can help give our communities more solidarity and inclusiveness.

AUDIENCE REACTION

The first phase of this dialog created strong emotions within the audience and many participants could relate to what Milena shared, even if the context, time or causes were fundamentally different. Very quickly, the question of relevance became central in the discussion.

Afterwards, it broached the lack of distance to history that might distort our choice of collecting and the fact that collectors need to be conscious of biases towards one story more than others. Today, as during the dissolution, we need to create inclusive collections aimed at a shared issue, acknowledging deviant viewpoints and experiences.

These comments highlighted vulnerable communities as they often lack the capacity to collect their memories. If we want to create collections that build inclusiveness, then we need to be aware of the inequalities that make some people's memories less resilient. Although we are now in a moment where we all have shared memory, we will see it presented very differently in the future, depending on who is the owner of the (hi)story and their agency of building resilience.

MJ I argue that collecting and creativity as an immediate response to the crisis are strategies for resilience. Moreover, these processes give us the potential for imagining the world and all of us in this world differently. So, maybe the crisis of this scale, when every individual, as well as all humankind, is vulnerable, is the right moment to rethink that "global identity" with all the new, real and virtual, spaces of its embodiment.

It is invaluable when people get inspired with the crisis and have a strong creative response to the state of fear, loneliness due to isolation and sadness or rage. This is why I think that museums, artists and cultural workers should use this momentum to create comfort and connection through culture.

In the next dialog with Julie Decker I want to explore further how one museum institution succeeds in constantly evolving and engaging the community, tending to finally construct the image of a more positive world in the future.

Dialog #2

CREATIVITY BEYOND CRISIS – EXPANDING PERSPECTIVES AND ENCOURAGING GLOBAL Dialog

Dialog between **Julie Decker (JD)**, Director/CEO of the Anchorage Museum in Alaska (United States) and **Milena Jokanović (MJ)**, research-associate at the University of Belgrade and associate of the Museum of Yugoslavia (Serbia)

The recorded version of this dialog was broadcast on the We Are Museums online platform on July 9, 2020.

MJ How can a museum serve its community? What is the social role of this institution? How are we engaging audiences, listening to different voices, representing a variety of cultures? How are we interpreting and extending museum collections to make them stay relevant? Finally, what are the steps museums can take to stay resilient in a time of crisis and how can it help us transcend the trauma?

Just as turbulent circumstances are the result of different factors such as economy, health issues, conflicts, climate change and many more, there are also many different examples of museum resilience. However, the common ground for each initiative is creativity. Not just the artistic creativity, which is enabling us to envisage the image of the world and new horizons in it, but also the creativity of a museum as a social institution.

Preparing for the conversation with Julie Decker and researching the activities of the Anchorage Museum of which she is director, I was stunned by how optimistic museological theory is coming to life in this institution. Our dialog is based on the idea of a museum as a changing, engaging, constantly learning and open institution that is using its important resources smartly and that is created to see, act and be beyond crisis.

JD The Anchorage Museum exists in a Northern place long colonized by European explorers and, like many museums, in conception was a symbol of colonial European colonization. It is from here that we think about the ways climate change colonizes and how we need to decolonize to respond.

In 2015, we installed 'Chin'an Gu Ninyu' on our façade – or "Welcome, You Came Here" in the language of the Dena'ina, the Indigenous people of Anchorage.

The most common map views of the world feature the Mediterranean at the center. Alaska is at the edge, squished out of scale and at the periphery. Maps of the United States show Alaska decapitated, floating around by the equator with Hawaii. But we suggest that periphery and center are relative to your point of view.

The Arctic has long been considered remote, vast, empty, white and unpopulated. Pristine and now precarious. Colonizers brought disease, religion and rape. Alaska was sold from Russia to the United States, and referred to as a folly. President Trump wants Greenland. A decolonized view suggests a story of Indigenous people who have survived for millennia in the place. The reality television series that portrays Alaska resists decolonization. It places ideas of the periphery – people at the edge of both place and norms.

Today's global climate crisis affects the most vulnerable people and places. The coastline of Alaska is eroding. Our edges are crumbling, but our edge is that we have been responding and adapting first. Being an ally and forming alliances require a deep understanding of deep time and a deep connection between people and landscape – at the core of Indigenous knowledge.

Climate change has brought new economies, curiosity seekers and art, science and environment tourists – a sort of last-chance tourism – and tourism has long colonized Northern places and other places considered peripheral. We need a radical shift in thinking.

The sustainable architecture, design and technology of the North can be found in everyday Indigenous knowledge. The periphery is not simply a place of catastrophe, disconnected from its future. Perhaps our centers are behind.

The periphery is the front line of colonization, extraction and climate – and as a result, it is a place of activism, of strong Indigenous voices, who react, and respond, who remind us of our nature and our human nature, and who ask us to listen in new ways. We are interested not in a frontier past or a wild west, but an acknowledgement of language and values, of people and landscape in a reciprocal relationship. We are marked by our histories. We search for a collective way forward. People of peripheries are not silent, but visible. In our urban places, we need to recognize the places and people beyond, who are witnessing change.

Climate change is one of the most pressing social and environmental issues and will require radical, innovative thinking to understand its complexity, and to respond. Climate knowledge is distributed differently and has been consistently negotiated at the edges – in places considered peripheral. The power to respond to the greatest global experiment is in knowledge centers rather than economic centers. Knowledge exists in the places that have responded for millennia, that have not lost connection to the natural world. Peripheries are created through geographies, economies and politics. These places have been forced to exhibit a different kind of resilience and invention than is found at our global cores.



At the Anchorage Museum, we seek radically new modes of thinking and responding. We develop projects that are about invention and iteration, about response and overreaction. We explore action beyond social action and beyond current academic definitions, proposing a new kind of discipline in response. The North is a compelling place to explore these ideas, as the North is changing more rapidly than any other place on Earth and must respond first – making it a place of radical invention. To grasp a global response, we have to put the peripheries at the center.

MJ Julie's inspiring attitude teaches us that resilience is based on the point of view of the world and in the language we use to name the things around us. Having a vision of a more positive future and finding ways to look forward constitute a strategy to overcome the crisis.

As she argues, we should not see our world through economic centers, but rather through learning centers. With this attitude, we could be capable of inventing a new kind of resilience that is on our global course, to be more connected to the natural world, to involve and represent a variety of voices, and to rethink our identity with all its alternatives and differences.

To base response over reaction, action beyond the social action and current academic disciplines. To build a new discipline in response!

AUDIENCE REACTION

Julie's presentation inspired a very dynamic conversation, in which participants were intrigued by the idea of flipping the standard map and thinking of a place as an important point of departure for the function of a museum. It was also seen as a strategy for rethinking traditional models of a museum institution: exhibition-making, image building and knowledge perception. So, Julie explained how the Anchorage Museum is, on the one hand, training its staff to use new media for expression and move out of museum buildings and, on the other, inviting Indigenous people to raise their voices and artists to work long term within the institution to tackle relevant problems.

Questioning the role of the museum in the context of local as well as global identity-building led the discussion further to broach the issues of a particular museum's uniqueness and response to the needs of the multicultural local community on one hand, and relevance on a global scale, on the other. We stressed the potential of a pandemic situation in creating a sense of togetherness in solving a global problem.

Finally, the discussion turned to the issue of the sustainability of the museum, which is changing and moving beyond traditional frames. Concluding that the Anchorage Museum used the opportunity of not being the most popular institution considering its location and collection to experiment with programs and formats, we could understand how the relevance is based on the idea, responsibility and social role of the museum, but also how this approach eventually proves to be transformative for the economic state as well.

JD Museums need radical change and need to be part of that change. They need to move from theory to practice.

As museums, the imperative is to play a role in finding new ways of telling the story of our place, and what our place might mean for the rest of the world. As the world faces the unprecedented climate crisis and pandemics, museums are more important than ever for facilitating essential human connection and making meaning. As a result of these crises, human ways of life and ecosystems will be changed, and the impacts will vary over time and with the ability of different societal and environmental systems to mitigate or adapt. Museums have a role to play in helping people imagine and contemplate that future.

DIALOG #3

SHIFTED NARRATIVES – THE RELEVANCE OF PAST AND FUTURE

Dialog between **Cristina Lleras (CL)**, independent curator currently working for the Museum of Bogotá (Colombia) and **Julie Decker (JD)**, Director/CEO of the Anchorage Museum in Alaska (United States).

The recorded version of this dialog was broadcast on the We Are Museums online platform on August 11, 2020.

JD Museums have often thought about permanent galleries, permanent histories and linear historical narratives. They have often looked to the past. We examine the ideas of permanence and relevance, suggesting that the most pivotal role of museums may be to envisage the future in addition to reflecting on the past. We must learn to complexify the narratives, include multiple perspectives and forums, and move away from the idea of the authoritative voice and the known. We should be part of telling stories of lived experience and part of imagining a better future for all.

CL The COVID-19 pandemic is yet another sign of the need to change gear and transform our relationships with the human and non-human world. The coronavirus can be understood as a big red sign alerting us to take the climate and social crises seriously. Museums have an important role to play in stepping up to the challenges societies face all around the globe.

During the lockdown of early 2020, the team at the Museo de Bogotá –a small scale museum in Colombia’s capital – developed a collaborative digital exhibition on Instagram (@museodebogota) to reflect upon the local impact of the 1918 influenza epidemic. This experiment – a means of responding quickly to the changing context – enabled us to think about relevance as museum professionals and what the Museum could offer its audiences amidst such uncertainty. From the engagements and what users shared with us, we learned that the past, the traumatic events of 1918, can not only shed light on the possibility of overcoming present-day circumstances, but also highlight the challenges that remain.

Elaine Heumann Gurian calls this “timeliness”, a means to describe rapid responses to the unpredictable and unexpected (Gurian 2003).

Being relevant and responsive is not only about choosing exhibition topics but also being able to offer services to affected communities that might not fit the museological canon. Giving up programming to become a space for solace, for instance.

How do we collectively overcome the impact of a pandemic? The virus and its consequences have locked us not only in our homes (if we have the privilege), but also in time. Suddenly every day was Groundhog Day. Daily tasks and screens became the measure of our days. After looking at the past, my proposal is that we suspend this present, as overwhelming as it is, to be able to imagine a future that is not "normal" (in the sense of going back to where we were before), but where we can redefine notions of care and solidarity. This does not mean ignoring the crisis, but putting it on hold in our minds.

In this scenario, museums can construct alternative narratives of the future that offer possibilities – not only catastrophes. No museum, regardless of its collections, themes, size or place, can ignore the upheaval we are living through. Even if they are not in the realm of the natural sciences, museums can learn from science to find pathways of dialog and change. We need transformations, not only in terms of how we engage with audiences in debates about the future, but also in terms of how museums see themselves and their role in the capitalistic system.

At first, I resisted the idea of reopening the physical space of the Museo de Bogotá, because I did not find that the permanent exhibition (inaugurated in June 2019) responded coherently to the present. I found myself wanting to suspend the exhibition to create projects outside of the building, going out to communities and providing opportunities for people to connect. Making the museum a platform. This was a chance to rethink the museum, once again, in terms of what it can do for others, as opposed to creating exhibitions as final products for consumption.

JD Museums have long been about their buildings, exhibitions and collections. But what if those "assets" prevent museums from truly serving audiences and from being relevant? How do we break away from colonial ideas of collecting and representation and embrace more nimble and agile ideas and definitions of what a museum is? Collections should be about storytelling – relevant to now and the future, to the broadest range of audiences. If the stories are not relevant, neither are we.

CL These are some of the ideas that I take away from the conversation.

These times of crisis provide an opportunity to rethink our practice. We can question everything: collecting, exhibitions, buildings and communities. We can also reconsider the time about which we are able to tell stories: the past, the present, the future.

The past is meaningless if the museum's collections are not read in the light of the needs of the present and future. It becomes a burden if it is fetishized and if all resources are put into this exercise. We briefly

mentioned the museum as a hoarder, much in tune with the capitalist logic of accumulation, as a practice that needs to be transformed. As an alternative, we can think about learning a language rather than an object-based practice.

Museums also need to think about the narratives we believe will be of use to future generations. Can we create a language that accurately reflects the lessons we derive from the pandemic? Can we collect the future to transform present-day practices?

What effective role can museums play in this crisis? Can museums be sites for transformation? We don't need to think about the climate and social crisis in the same way, but we do need to think about them at the same time.

Even though as professionals we have been talking about community participation for decades, the notion of the museum as a listener to experiences of resilience rather than as a talker still a practice needs to be further developed. Can we create new methodologies?

What does it mean to be a museum professional during the present-day social and climate crisis? There is no easy or single answer to this question. I think its importance implies that we continue to debate the possibilities.

Dialog #4

TAKING A STAND – POLITICS, RESILIENCE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Dialog between **Julie Rokkjaer Birch (JRB)**, former Director of KØN – Gender Museum Denmark and **Cristina Lleras (CL)**, independent curator currently working for the Museum of Bogotá (Colombia)

The recorded version of this dialog was broadcast on the We Are Museums online platform on September 22, 2020

CL Museums have been thought of (and some still are) as “neutral” and objective, interpreted by some as disengaged from the political and social upheavals of our time. Museums take different stands towards the changing world. One way we have approached this role of museums in societies is through the term “activism”. What does it mean to be an “activist” museum? There is not one sole definition. One way is by looking at the past and the material collections that testify to the past and read, talk and share them in light of urgent, present-day issues. In this context, resilience is the result of collective action in the face of social and climate crises. A collective project involving resilience and survival is the result of the museum workers who make this possible. When we talk about activism, transformations and resilience, it is the people who believe in such things as possible that have to be touched and transformed first.

JRB In times of crisis – museums are more relevant than ever. Having a big mission and being unafraid to be political (not party-political) can transform not only you as a museum worker but also the audience.

Museums are the most trustworthy institutions in society. Much more than the media and politicians (perhaps not surprisingly). Maybe this trust is rooted in a conception of museums as neutral, objective institutions. But nothing is neutral – not even museums. Museums should be very much aware and explicit about that, and about their beliefs and mission in society.

The reaction of the Gender Museum to the lockdown was very immediate. How could we be a museum with neither a building nor physical objects? The notion of a museum as a public media platform for dialog was enhanced by Corona.

An activist museum is an agile museum. During the spring lockdown in 2020, the Gender Museum collected stories about lockdown-related gender issues. For instance, we collected reports of gender-based violence, a gender-divided workforce, gender differences related to

COVID-19 casualties. The museum organized a "Museum Takeaway", which brought history and knowledge to the people and started a debate on the street.

For the Gender Museum, resilience is always about trying to push the limits of concepts – to try to be more than a museum. It is not naive to want to change the world. It is naive to think that we can go on in this complex world doing business as usual.

- CL** Julie highlighted how the COVID-19 experience was transformative in itself for museums, because it forced these institutions to push the needs it had previously identified and to question their boundaries. This poses an interesting challenge. When does a museum stop being a museum to become something else – for example, an advocacy group or an NGO? The nexus with the past, its collections and the women's movement in the 1980s makes up the structure for the museum's present. What does such a museum look like in the present and future? Should it be renamed to speak a language that is understood by present-day generations? Should it honor its foundation? All these questions are relevant because they speak to the museum's capacity to question its very being in response to society's needs. Museums are more relevant than ever because they are our common homes, and how we interact with others in such spaces or programs can determine how we find togetherness. Taking Julie's words, we need more organisms and fewer organizations.

DOCTOR KRISTIN ALFORD

Director of MOD. at the University of South Australia
(Australia)

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Community resilience as a capability to be nurtured is embedded where I live in Adelaide, South Australia, and provides a useful framework for museums and their communities.

In late 2000, South Australia launched an initiative known as Thinkers-in-Residence . International experts were invited to spend extended periods of time applying their domains of knowledge to big questions in the hope of creating local innovation and social change.

In 2012–2013, the Thinker-in-Residence⁵ was Professor Martin Seligman, known for founding the positive psychology movement. His project saw partnerships from industry, education and the health sector come together in pursuit of a "State of Wellbeing": that is, how might we enable wellbeing at scale? Out of his residency, the Wellbeing and Resilience Centre was established to develop these strategies and interventions further, including the championing of PERMA+⁶.

PERMA+ outlines components that support mental and physical wellbeing, which in turn provide the foundation for being able to bounce back; to be resilient to challenging events. The components of PERMA+ are Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment plus Physical Activity, Nutrition, Sleep and Optimism.

I share this, as museums are well-positioned to provide wellbeing at scale for their communities. In examining the components for PERMA+ museums provide Positive Emotion through visitor experience and Engagement with multitudes of stories through collections, artworks and immersive experiences. The stories museums share provide a sense of Meaning and even Optimism to the community as they negotiate histories, perspectives and hopes. In the pursuit of more



Foto from "Seahabilitation", which was part of the exhibition "IT'S COMPLICATED" at Museum of Discovery - MOD. © Sia Duff / MOD.

participatory experiences through co-design, museums also provide support for the aspects of Relationships and Accomplishment.

In the current context, museum professionals under stress may also find the pursuit of these aspects of PERMA+ useful for their own personal wellbeing and source of resilience, in undertaking activities that build community wellbeing, but also in being supported to find avenues for Physical Activity, Nutrition and Sleep to ensure physical wellbeing.

The useful thing about this model is that it recognizes that wellbeing and resilience are not necessarily about avoiding crisis, hardship or trauma. It enables us to build support structures so that we can

respond effectively, hopefully, "bouncing back". Though also, sometimes the way we respond to crisis enables us to "bounce forward", being strengthened by the challenge to ultimately thrive.

PROFESSOR LINDSEY MCEWEN

Director of the Centre for Water, Communities and Resilience, University of the West of England (England)

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

On reflecting upon the foregoing stimulating dialog, and after personally mulling over how museums might play a distinctive 'building' role in long-term resilience in civil society, I ask a few questions and share some thoughts. As a precursor point, "community" and "resilience" are well-recognized "weasel words". Practitioners in risk and resilience are asking how communities can extend beyond the local for social learning in developing their capital for resilience and solidarity. They are also questioning how local resilience thinking can shift from engineering ideas of resistance or rhetoric of "bounce back" to more fluid, evolutionary adaptation and transformation for more resilient states. Understanding the varied dimensions of both concepts is critical in exploring the territory and opportunities for how museums and communities might interact for mutual resilience. What struck me in engaging with the dialog so far is how your conversations form a mirror to those that are already taking place within the research and practice of "developing community resilience" around the roles of the arts and humanities as disciplines and GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Museums and Archives) as a professional sector. How can local museums and other creative organizations work together with their communities for synergetic local resilience? What characteristics, values and worldviews are needed in both? What understanding of self as an individual or organization, and relationships with others in a place and beyond place?

In my contribution to "Dialogs on Museum Resilience", I mooted possibilities – characteristics of an embedded museum that has a synergetic relationship with its communities – for mutual resilience. This involves imagining a museum that is engaged and aware of the compound, overlaid or cascading risks – extreme weather, civil, technological – within its locale. That is a learning and knowledge institution that is community-embedded, inclusive in the voices it captures and brokers. A museum that is well networked, collaborative and creative, inventive and resourceful. To be resilient in a socio-ecological sense involves being flexible, flippable and adaptable within the resilience cycle, with evolving practices and connections. It requires thinking creatively within and outside the intensity of actual events and social stresses, and the sensitivities of their recovery. Learning for resilience at levels scaling upwards from the individual museum professional or community member predicates ways of working that require awareness of self and others in emotive learning domains. Managing uncertainty and working within complexity require

creative thinking and envisaging with room for dreams and fears.

The climate crisis provides opportunities to reconstruct resilience-building far beyond traditional agencies with statutory responsibility for dealing with risk and resilience. However, this requires more oblique and emergent thinking about which and how other organizations could contribute to developing community resilience as an evolving creative space. In Dialog #1, we explore how museums, through their creative collecting, can facilitate connection with past lessons from memories and archives. Here the museum is a creative collector supporting the local building of "collective cultural resilience". Dialog #2 considers the idea of the museum as "changing, engaging, open and always learning", integrated with valuable collective learning from those already living at the edge or margins. Connecting with such places in global dialog for mutual learning about living at the margins provides unique opportunities. In Dialog #3, we reflect on the unique potential of a museum as a pivot between the past and the creative imagining of possible futures, while in Dialog #4, we capture the potential value of the museum and society in activist space. While these dialogs provoke thought as individual entities, collectively they articulate the (re)inventive opportunities of an agile positioning of the museum sector in the ferment of present and future cultures of resilience as creativity. This is a particular opportunity in pandemic recovery and narratives of reset.

As we see from the preceding dialogs, such engagements require "higher rung" participation with a strong sense of co-creation, and attention to engaging and valuing hidden, marginal and multiple voices. This is aligned with agendas of environmental and social justice within the climate crisis. Such an approach fuels a sharing of diverse capital for new cross-cultural behavioral insights and solidarity. This work involves grit, persistence and risk-taking – a willingness to work at the edges or boundaries, in liminal spaces and zones of transition. It requires strong attention to "local", but within a multi-web of global connections. In their creative collecting and curation of artefacts, and their ability to pivot thinking about past and future resilience, museums have distinctive opportunities to contribute. This is in the way they collaborate, what and how they value, and in their development of cultural networks within the global museum sector, building out from the local places and relationships.

Such reflections on the distinctiveness of the museum sector as a setting for future thinking through creative solidarity are timely and potentially transformative. Making space and time for ongoing international dialog between museums and communities for intercultural 'learning for resilience' is a key part of the weave. International dialog initiatives like this one – that explore museum-community symbiosis across climatic zones and demographic settings – are potentially in a unique position in sharing embedded practices for resilience within and beyond place. This increases the likelihood that museums can co-create a crucible for the exploration of dreams and fears about possible futures within and outside their distinctive communities. As a researcher working in "community resilience", I encourage you to open up this reflective dialog as an ongoing practice for mutual capacity building across the museum sector. There are also important opportunities for explorations with other sectors navigating the challenging territory of how to co-create future resilience with civil society.

3
The full-length conversations can be seen at <https://wearemuseums.com/dialoguesonmuseumresilience>

4
"Culture in Urgency", www.cultureinurgency.com [March 29th 2021]

5
Thinkers in Residence is a program in Adelaide, South Australia, designed to bring leaders in their fields to work with the South Australian community and government in developing new ideas and approaches to problem-solving, and to promote South Australia.

6
PERMA+: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment +Optimism, Physical Activity, Nutrition and Sleep.

THE ACTIVIST MUSEUM
Practice, theories and actors

© KØN – Gender Museum Denmark

Editorial team: Louise Fabian, Julie Rokkjær Birch and
Signe Uldbjerg

Translation and proofreading: CultureBites.dk

Design: Kim Lange

Paper: Munken Lynx

Print/Repro: Narayana Press

ISBN: 978-87-88923-10-0

Published with support from The Velux Foundation

