Dissolving orphan collections in the commons

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Biography

Marina Valle Noronha is an independent curator and doctoral researcher at Aalto University, Finland where she investigates curatorial theory and ethics of care within museum collections development. In her work, Marina puts forward different ways to look at art that leads to new forms of engagement with objects. Through extensive curatorial research and collaborations with collecting institutions, she explores the relationships between permanent collections and temporary exhibitions, including display methods that experiment with environmental features. Marina has an MA in curatorial studies from Bard College, USA and a B. Sc. (Honours) in architecture from UFMG, Brazil.

Abstract

Starting from the alarming fact that nearly 13 percent of museums worldwide, affected by the pandemic crisis, may never reopen their doors (UNESCO, 2020; ICOM, 2020), I speculate on what happens if the orphan items in collections worldwide are dissolved within societies. This is a speculative study based on extensive desktop research on the modes of usage in museum collections management and collections mobility amidst the state of emergency in museums' environment. In this paper, I explore what a shift toward usership instead of authorship and ownership means to orphan collections. Through

feminist theory, I argue that the concepts of usership (Wright, 2007, 2013), ethics of care (Agostinho, 2019), and networks of care (Dekker, 2018) promote an expanded notion of accessibility for the institutions, objects, and stakeholders. Collections have through the centuries been influenced by social and political changes. How the times we live in are going to shape the next moves? The Covid-19 pandemic, energy crisis, and Black Lives Matter protests create momentum for reflection and re-thinking. The conclusions of the study offer perspectives that promote other (new) forms of developing and disseminating collections. They recall freedom, imagine other ways of collecting and establish some fresh ground for the unknown times we face.

Keywords

Modes of usership, Ethics and networks of care, Orphan collections, Counter accumulation, Museum commons

Introduction

Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices [that] can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need [those] who can remember freedom, realists of a larger reality.

(Le Guin, 2014, p. n.a.)

To create a ground for this paper, I will first go through a short literature review on the development of collections and their relationship to the commons. Commons here is understood largely as Hardt and Negri (2009, p. viii) defined the term, focusing "on the practices of interaction, care, and cohabitation, in a common world." Within the posthuman communing, the commons is a collective phenomenon in a posthuman ecology, as Bruncevic (2018) ex-

plained, it "is formed by revealing the in-between, the middle, that connects ownership, space and persons" (p. 137). More precisely, the commons is "an atmosphere of society in which such phenomena as activism or cooperative communes can also be included" (p. 145). This perspective puts forward the importance of social-political events in shaping the collections policies and best practices and emphasizes the educational role of collecting institutions in a world where there is no clear distinction between the human and non-human. Following the introduction, I highlight a couple of points from public statements from museum regulating bodies that reinforce the pressing need to respond to the current state of emergency that collecting institutions face. Based on feminist theory's perspective on developing collections through practices of commoning, I speculate on what it means to, instead of transferring the 13 percent potential orphan collections from museums that might not reopen, disseminate the items by offering them to the museums' stakeholders (not only shareholders), including customers, suppliers, employees, shareholders and local communities.

Museums as we know

A review of the literature on the development of collections and their strategies makes it clear that collections have always been dynamic. As Pettersson, Hagedorn-Saupe, Jyrkkiö and Weij (2010) point out, the history of collections highlights dedication and endless curiosity.

Crossing the history of collection development starting from the collections of the 18th century until the Museum 2.0 in the early 21st century, Meijer-van Mensch and Mensch (2010) argued that though dynamic, until today, however, they are still highly institutionalized. As they transitioned from princely collections to public museums, including the spread of museums in the Western world, and becoming more accountable for internal edits and rationalization, collecting institutions progressed from being 'open to the public' into 'public ownership'. Cocreation and co-curatorship have been increasingly present in defining museums' agendas since

the participatory turn and critical museology of the 2000s. The reshaping of collections and institutions have followed social and political agendas (revolutions, wars, legislations). However, the logic of collecting did not change much since the nineteenth century.

As argued by Pettersson, Hagedorn-Saupe, Jyrkkiö and Weij (2010), rather than reinforcing the same old patterns based on eternal growth museums have to build strategies grounded in current issues. This way museums respond to the socio-political and economic needs of societies they engage with.

The concept of an 'integrated museum', proposed in 1972 during the UNESCO Development and the Role of Museums in the Contemporary World, refers to the integration of the museum and its community (Meijer-van Mensch and Mensch, 2010). The notion of integration guided a significant development toward a more critical, reflective, and politically engaged museology. Meijer-van Mensch and Mensch highlighted the importance of making items in a collection available instead of inaccessible in storage spaces; they also highlighted the notion of a shared responsibility and respect towards previous ownership. It becomes clear that the integrated museum is about the establishment and maintenance of relationships between people, their heritage, and the environment. A path to a more committed engagement happens from within the museum.

In the 1980s, according to Gammon (2018), museum collection growth over time starts to be acknowledged as a problem—a museum collection that keeps growing indefinitely while at the same time tries to preserve items for posterity will soon reach a limit. As a response, there are attempts in the museum collection discourse to tackle collection quality over quantity, which creates awareness of the practice of deaccessioning. The act of collecting is replaced by the act of developing collections in contemporary museology. Countering the accumulation of objects, rather than displaying and keeping, museums build value by emphasizing the educational and social role of the institution (Bennett, 1995).

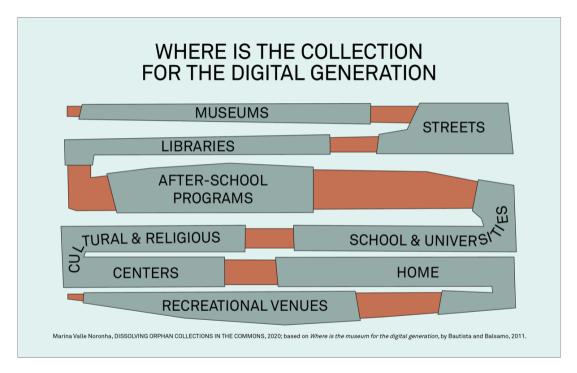


Figure 1. Position of the museum collection for the digital generation.

While in the 18th and 19th centuries, museums had their functions and identities deeply connected to their physical structure (Bautista and Balsamo, 2013), museums have evolved into a more dispersed institution. Over the decades they have become mobile, including off-site programs in schools, libraries and community centres, in addition to the (now) satellite space, as argued by Bautista and Balsamo (Figure 1). They conclude also that more recently the mobile museum has developed into a distributed museum, adapting its traditional way of operating to the digital age, and including novel perspectives to education.

The 1990s gave birth to the internet, which opened a portal to new forms of participation. And since then, it is no longer possible to make clear distinctions between users and producers on the internet, according to Meijer-van Mensch and Mensch (2010). Museums of today are seen as distributed, dispersed, and decentred, opening the precedent for museology also to adapt into the digital culture of a dispersed and nonlinear structure. Streets, libraries, after-

school programs, schools and universities, home, cultural and religious centres, recreational and entertainment venues are sites that constitute the distributed museum. Hence, experiencing the museum as a whole is also a nonlinear, dispersed activity.

Toward a more sustainable approach, collections management discourse welcomed terms like guardianship, as described by Marstine (2011), and living heritage, as introduced by Meijervan Mensch (2015). Both put forward forms of shared ownership, where the use of heritage (including artworks) is granted to stakeholders (including users), who share also responsibility towards the objects. Both Marstine and Meijer-van Mensch make a case for the use of heritage also extended beyond the museum context.

Such thinking is also highlighted by term 'new collecting', that according to Kok (2009, p. 55) manifests in three main forms: "(a) the museum does not collect objects, but interactions; (b) The museum participates as an equal within a heritage community; (c) the museum acts as a platform for individuals and groups to collect their own heritage." New collecting highlights the role of communities. It carries projects intended to give opportunity for communities and institutions to share and expand participation.

As dynamic as the collection is the ethics discourse (Marstine, 2011). Called new museum ethics, the ethics discourse has adapted into more inclusive and sustainable forms, following the trends in the past decade. The new museum ethics tries to address some of the changes in how museums and collections operate. According to Marstine, "central to the project of museum ethics is the sharing of ethical challenges and opportunities with diverse stakeholders to understand and address larger patterns of behavior" (p. 6). Museum ethics is contingent: its discourse is conditional and relational; it is dependent upon social, political, technological and economic factors. Progress in ethics marks visionary and proactive leadership.

Museums in a state of emergency

The need to re-think and reconfigure lifestyles, social dynamics and policy making has recently appeared strongly as a response to recent socio-political and economic events. A world awakening has emerged in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the energy crisis, and Black Lives Matter protests. Art professionals and scholars have argued the necessity to re-imagine the role of art, collections, art structures and, moreover, the ways art collecting institutions operate (Farkas, 2020). This awareness of the lived environment raises political, epistemological and ethical challenges that need to be addressed, urgently, in response to the current state of emergency.

A few recent public statements emphasize the state of emergency in museums. The first, a joint statement by the International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2020) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020) published in May 2020, alerted that nearly 13 percent of museums worldwide might never reopen after the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. If 13 percent of museums worldwide will not reopen, this means that 13% of the museum collections might enter a limbo and as a consequence, not be accessible at all. The 13 percent creates a sort of void (Figure 2, Figure 3). It conforms a suspended, parallel collection zone where there is room for imagination.

Secondly, in response to Black Lives Matter movement, museum and heritage sector organizations issued a joint statement of intent in June 2020 (Andrew, 2020). Amongst others, the document reads two points in the anti-discrimination debate I want to highlight: (a) anti-discrimination debate and discussion in the care of and access to heritage collections, and (b) asking questions and challenging practices that support racism in all of its forms.

To conclude, back in 2007, the British Museum (2007) in its *Policy on Sustainable Development*, recognizes that "its activities impact on society and on the environment at local, regional and global levels through the energy and water used, the waste it produces, the travel

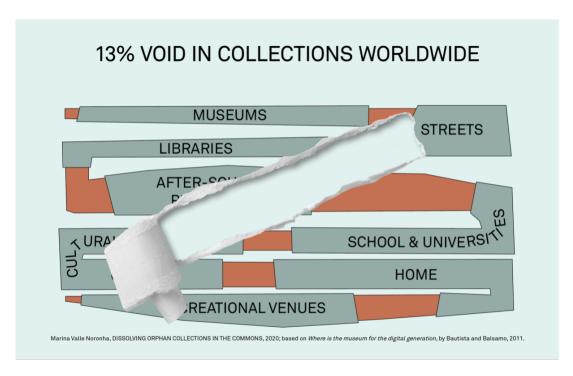


Figure 2. 13 percent void in collections worldwide.

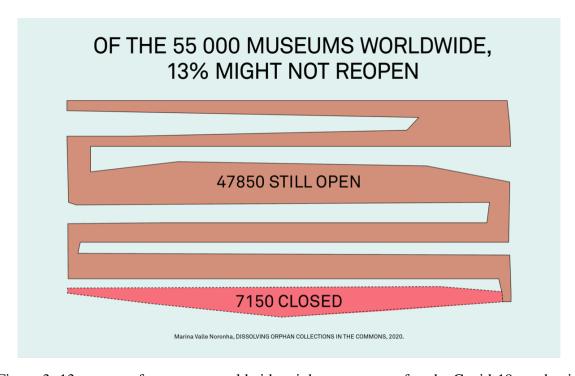


Figure 3. 13 percent of museums worldwide might not reopen after the Covid-19 pandemic.

and work patterns it encourages amongst its staff and the products it buys" (para. 1.1). Along the same lines, the Museums Association (2008), in *Sustainability and museums* stated that museums should, amongst other things, "respond to changing political, social, environmental and economic contexts and have a clear long-term purpose that reflects society's expectations of museums" (p. 6), and "acknowledge the legacy contributed by previous generations and pass on a better legacy of collections, information and knowledge to the next generation" (p. 6). The commitment to a sustainable development is of increased concern to museums and their collections.

That said, I take the combined points from those statements to speculate what happens to the 13 percent of collections worldwide of museums that might not reopen, having in mind how notions of care and access can constructively challenge collecting practices in museums. I try to envision ways in which the dynamism in the (new) collecting and ethics discourse foster a more inclusive and distributed museum. Because museums are institutions with moral agency and should respond to the changing needs of contemporary societies, the legacy they pave must also adapt to our changing world.

How will museums meet the pressing needs of society in the current social-political, economic, and environmental contexts? A leadership with strong commitment, transparency and inclusiveness is more important than ever.

In order to do so, I use ethics of care to recontextualize the museum from a feminist theoretical perspective in order to foster a ground for a constructive development of collections
management. A perspective that replaces possession with participation. There could not be a
better time to address challenges. Crises are also an opportunity to learn, develop and adapt.
Marstine (2011) argued that "when museums meet the needs of society, they meet the needs of
objects in the process" (p. 7). Societies are moving quickly in the commitment to equality and
institutions have then no other option than to follow. Together, they make room for a revised

notion of collection development that accounts for more inclusive (and 'usological') terms and helps arts professionals to ask better questions in the future.

Modes of usership and care

Usership, then, names not just a form of opportunity-depend—ent relationality, but a self-regulating mode of engagement and operation.

(Wright, 2013, p. 68)

In 'Users and Usership of Art: Challenging Expert Culture', Wright (2013) proposes the retirement of terms such as authorship and ownership in order to make room for emergent concepts under the scope of modes of usership. Usership highlights a shared notion of usage and responsibility. It is neither revolutionary nor submissive. "It's hand-on, task specific, proximate, and self-regulating" (2007, p. 66). It uncovers a confluence of actions that shift away from a single authorship. According to Wright, "turning away from pursuing art's aesthetic function, many practitioners are redefining their engagement with art, less in terms of authorship than as users of artistic competence, insisting that art foster more robust use values and gain more bite in the real" (2007, p. 1). Wright argued that the past decades have witnessed the formation of a political collective subjectivity—a category of usership that emphasizes use value and rights of usage. Usership represents a challenge to spectatorship, expert culture, ownership.

Earlier in 2020, the 50th World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos (WEF), called *Stakeholders for a Cohesive and Sustainable World*, focused on the notion of stakeholder capitalism. Stakeholder capitalism attends to the interests of all stakeholders (not only shareholders), including local communities, customers, suppliers, employees and shareholders, by creating long-term value instead of maximize profit—a more sensible and ethical business decision choice. Though still undertheorized, the concept of usership expands notions of usage that are also referred to by feminist theory in the collection management discourse.

Marstine (2010) referred back to feminist theory to set up a precedent for a renewed museum ethics. Notions of impermanence and contingencies shape the discourse. Marstine argued that "feminism, post-colonial theory and digital heritage studies have all contributed to the construction of a more fluid and contingent relationship between objects and experiences in the museum" (p. 17). Feminism makes room for a changeable, less fixed understanding of collections.

Through the lens of feminism, usage in collection management is connected to guardianship, living heritage, and shared heritage and ownership. Marstine defended guardianship instead of possession: "guardianship is a means towards the dynamic, experiential and contingent quality of heritage towards sharing in new ways the rights and responsibilities to this heritage" (p. 17). Through this practice, multiple stakeholders are taking into account, enriching the engagement between objects and public. To conclude the concept, Marstine stressed that "guardianship inspires consortiums, collaboratives, merges and hubs to pool and distribute resources in ways to promote public access to collections" (p. 19). Moreover, guardianship is socially inclusive. It emphasizes a shared experimentation and dynamism in a museum collection, leading to new thinking and access.

Marstine's progressive line of thought is complemented by other scholars. Bautista and Balsamo (2013) described the distributed museum, which is "the form that the museum takes as it is part of the creation and movement among new spaces that comprise contemporary networked learning environments" (p. 55). The distributed nature of museology is also addressed by Agostinho (2019) through the ethics of care. Agostinho argued that feminist ethics is necessary to rethink collecting and archival processes through dispossession and access. Similarly, in *Redressing the Museum in Feminist Theory*, Hein (2007) proposed the dissolution of boundaries and participation in process instead of possession and consumption. With a feminist grounding for collections, it is easier to think in terms of redistribution and reintegration.

Dekker (2018) argues for "the potential of networks as collaborative practices that work towards the realization of projects" (p. 89). The practice of those who come together under a shared goal is emphasized "by building strong ties among dispersed individuals" (p. 89). Stressing the visionary collectivity in networks of care, Dekker added that "it is not uncommon for such networks to form around artworks that are not collected by museums, large institutes or private collections" (p. 89). Networked, community-driven initiatives where "a collection of individuals and small organizations gather to form foundations that look after an artist's legacy" (p. 89) lay out the ground for new developments in museum collections.

Though for Dekker networks of care are directly connected to net art, here I use the notion for orphaned items, regardless of their medium specificity. In this network of users, or "the distributed network of caretakers" (2018, p. 90), I want to build upon Dekker's notion of networks of care, these social formations in a post-human world, to promote the dissolution of orphan items in the commons.

Dissolving collections

In *Museums, Collections, and Sustainability*, Meijer-van Mensch (2015, para. 3) emphasized the growing awareness in the field that "museums should adopt an activist attitude towards key social issues." In order to move further, supported by the feminist strategy on the ethics of care and usership (Bautista and Balsamo; Agostinho; Hein; Wright) and the call for an activist approach (Mensch), I propose a reverse logic that responds to the state of emergency in museums.

Museums bear responsibility to promote other (new) forms of collecting, aligned with the positioning on social-economic changes that societies undergo. Lonnie Bunch, the leader of the world's largest museum and research complex, said in an interview that "museums have a social justice role to play" (Bunch, 2020). The process of being able to respond to social-political

events, according to Marstine (2011), "empowers museums to change because it builds public trust through democracy, transparency and relevance" (p. 5). The contingency of times we live in ask for other forms of engagement—they ask for letting go of the ideal collection.

To take a step further, I propose that rather than transferring the orphan objects to other museum collections, what if instead they were dispersed amongst the museum stakeholders, in the commons? To be (in the) commons means, according to Hyde (2010) in "Enduring Commons", section "Governing the Commons" (para. 31) "that control cannot belong to any single sphere; it must be diffused among us." This is a call for a dispossession, distribution and reintegration of objects in collections — a dissolution of (parts) of collections in the commons. As a thought experiment, I suggest that you imagine 13% of collections worldwide being distributed amongst different populations.

There are over 55,000 museums in 202 countries (Museums Associations Indices, 2019), of which around 30,000 are in the USA (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2018, Table 1). To give a sense of the scale of museum collections worldwide, the 10 largest museums in the world (in area) host, together, close to 10 million items (Figure 4).

Though the total number of items in museum collections is not known, one can deduce that it belongs to the category of large numbers and follows the law of large numbers (LLN). An immediate deduction of the LLN and the law of inertia of large numbers is that it is not necessary to know the exact number in question to be able to perform experiments with it. I bring this up because some national institutes and scholars have published such annual figures. Figure 5 below shows these figures for each of the countries in question. Thought on the conservative side, the sum of these figures already adds up to a very large number: 1,2+ billion items. This given fact allows me to proceed with the thought experiment, despite the fact that the illustrative sample used here includes figures from only five countries.

In another 'conservative' attempt to extrapolate the total number of items in museum col-

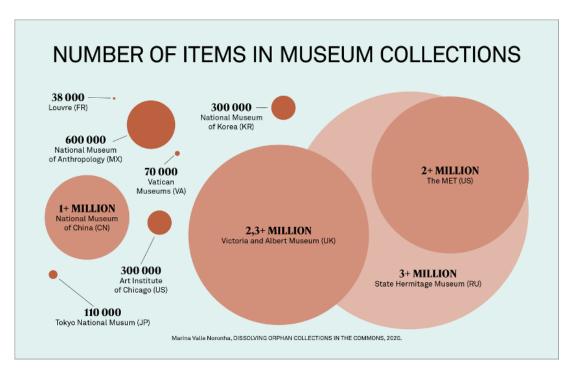


Figure 4. Number of items in the 10 largest museum collections.

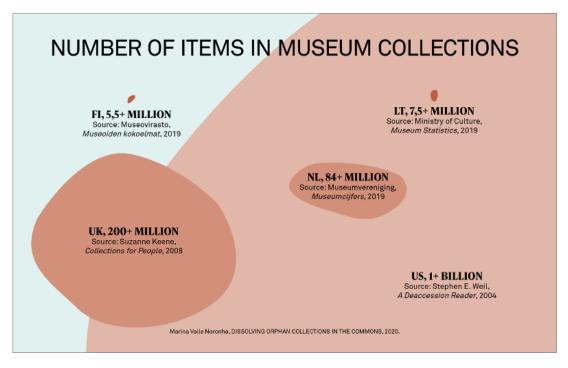


Figure 5. Number of items in museum collections.

lections, using the UK as a reference, if each of the 55000 museums in the world hosted 50,000 objects,² there would be 2,75 billion items in the world. When 13 percent of museums may not reopen, it means 7150 museums will close their doors, leaving then 350 million orphaned items (Figure 6).

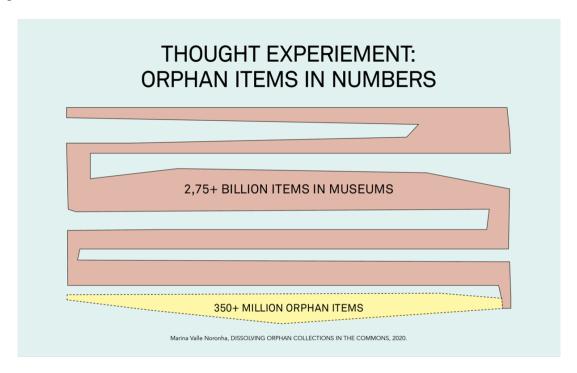


Figure 6. A thought experiment on the number of orphan items in museum collections.

Since the population worldwide is 7,8 billion (Population Reference Bureau, 2020) this would result in an object for every group of 22 persons. Let us round it to 25, because 25 persons is a reasonable number e.g. a school class, an association, an office, a large extended family, or a residential building.

Museums show in average between 2 and 4 percent of a collection (Fabrikant, 2009, March 12). In other words, up to 98 percent of a collection might stay crated in the storage room. Though still focused on expansion and accumulation, museums have already over-accumulated objects without being able to properly create conditions for research, display and engagement.

Why exactly redistribute the collection items to other museums? Instead of contributing to the crated life of objects, the offer and dissolution of orphan collections to the population seems a good fit.

The term "distributed museum" (Bautista and Balsamo, 2013, p. 55) acknowledges the extended presence of the museum that includes online environments and transient spaces, made possible through practices and technologies. Though not new, the idea of taking items from museum collections is still seen with scepticism from more conservative sectors. But the idea of redistribution and access becomes even more crucial when thinking of orphan objects purchased with tax money.

To contextualize, Mauriès (2002, p. 38) noted that when collector Manfredo Settala (1600-1680) died "his coffin was followed by a convoy carrying the most curious items from his collection". This early dissemination of part of a collection is symbolic because of the evident flexibility in how objects in a collection can be used.

A well-known precedent on the notion of distributed collections are art lending libraries,³ where users can borrow artworks home in a similar manner that you would check out books from libraries. The n.b.k. Artothek, founded in 1970 in Berlin, manages an average of 11000 loans every year. For only a 3€ fee, residents in the city can chose from 4000 artworks from the n.b.k. collection and have an artwork at home from up to 3 months. At the MIT, in Massachusetts, students on campus take part in a lottery system to check out artworks from the MIT Student Loan Art Program. The tradition, which started in 1966, allows students to borrow artworks from the MIT List Visual Arts Center collection for the period of one academic year. Other examples in the US are the Student Print Rental Program from Harvard Art Museums, and Weisman Art Museum Art Rental, student-only Homework art rental collection.

On a different perspective, the Onterfd Goed (Foundation of Disinherited Goods)⁴ in Eindhoven, manages the dismantling of orphan public collections in accordance with guidelines for

national deaccessioning of museum objects and international code of ethics of museums. The initiative started in 2012 as a response to cuts in cultural funds in the Netherlands. Since its initial project, the dissolution of the Scryption Collection, items from public and private museums as well as artists estates are made available to the public for affordable prices (Marchand, 2014; Otten, personal communication, December 7, 2020).

Conclusion: Museums as We Do Not Know, A Sense of Continuity

Shaken, the reality that used to ground us has opened up some room for other than "normal demands" in archival and collecting practices. Agostinho (2019, p. 163) articulated that "attending to the unthought is also part of undoing colonial legacies that continue to structure our encounters with colonial archives. Perhaps the most powerful element of an archival imagination for the digital times lies herein—in making room for the unthought to be articulated and heard." To make room for this larger reality it is paramount to attend to the imagination of stakeholders (not only shareholders) through a fluid, impermanent and contingent process of exchange.

The concept of a "living or breathing ethics code," that emerged from the new museum ethics code at the Curators Committee of the American Alliance of Museums (Marstine, 2011, p. 16) is helpful here. With emphasis on the process, it does not seek consensus amongst the stakeholders. Instead, conflicting opinions are welcomed. A collection that breathes (is alive) is a reversed logic to the emergency state museums face. Like Marstine argued, the "contemporary museum ethics reimagines the responsibilities to the collections in the museum" (p. 17). By disseminating items in and out of the collection, within communities, a different kind of museum also emerge. One that is better equipped to respond to a changed / ing world.

If a collection is dispersed, it does not necessarily mean the meaning and purpose of the collection is lost. A sense of legacy and continuity is also achievable through dispossession,

redistribution and integration. The collection management discourse needs to arrive at a point where modes of usership are possible to be vastly implemented. The idea of guardianship, dispersed in the commons, gives way to an advanced stage in the collection life. Orphan objects in collection might find guardianship in the homes, streets, libraries, after-school programs, school and universities, cultural and religious centres, recreational venues (Figure 1), but also e.g. from classrooms to offices to care homes.

The notion of dissolving collections refers also to involving the public in collections' discussion and a commitment to increased transparency and from the institution part. The activist group Art + Museum Transparency, amongst others, uses transparency (Greenberger, 2020) to advocate for change in the arts field. Transparency comes also in involving the local communities in the decision making. In *Farewell to Growth*, Latouche (2009) urged institutions to re-localize themselves in terms of decision making, arguing "that all economic, political and cultural decisions that can be made at the local level must be made at that level" (p. 38), whenever decisions can be made that way.

Regardless of what comes in the aftermath of the hard times museum face, a strong commitment, made possible because of the modes of usership in the distributed museum, can offer support. Dekker (2018) conceptualizes the term 'networks of care,' responsible in my view for giving purpose and continuity to artworks, collections, and museums lifecycle. For Dekker, museums' networks—understood here as Bautista and Balsamo's distributed museum that includes streets, libraries, after-school programs, schools and universities, home, cultural and religious centres, recreational and entertainment venues—evolve into networks of care. The network "maintains or conserves (parts of) an artwork and consists of a combination of experts and non-specialists and introduces knowledge from a variety of fields and backgrounds" (Dekker, 2018, p. 14). The 'incompleteness' of a collection is balanced by fostering and maintaining social information and relationships.

Even if, as Preciado speculated (2020, para. 4), the unpredictable restrictions imposed because of the Covid-19 pandemic become part of a long-term reality, and "everything would be set in stone", establishing and nurturing networks of care offer potential to the evolving process of (orphan) collections. One could argue that, along the same lines, the ICOM — despite indefinitely postponing a vote on an updated, collective definition of museums during the 2019 Extraordinary General Assembly in Kyoto, Japan (Noce, 2019)—already promotes the importance of collective action in its slogan that reads "museums have no border, they have a network" (ICOM, 2020, n.a.).

Through welcoming different perspectives, and different notions of collecting, art professionals are able to fine tune a balance, a compromise between the activist and the normative perspectives. It has to be possible for museums to find a compromise where the categories of usership engagement alongside ethics and networks of care, contribute to the larger reality this paper envisions. This supportive structure of care brings freedom and reorients the hard times.

Acknowledgements

Some of the issues raised in this paper came from discussion with my colleagues Agnieszka Wielocha, Annet Dekker, Claudia Roeck, Dusan Barok, Gloria Lauterbach, Hannah Bosma, Katie Lenanton, Ksenia Kaverina, Lozana Rossenova, and Marie Mollins. I would like to thank them for bringing inspiration and open mindedness into my research. Motivation for this study was also found in a statement by Zhilyaev (2020), about the museum in a state of emergency.

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Interviews

Interview with J. Otten. Interview by M. Valle Noronha. Via Zoom. December 7, 2020.

Notes

¹This notion was brought up by Suzanne Keene in an email conversation in October 2020.

²Average of items in 25% of museum collections in the UK, according to a study by Suzanne Keene, Collections for People, 2008. 15% of the museums in the country hold up to 500,000 items, and a few hold significantly even more.

³For examples of art lending libraries, see: https://www.nbk.org/en/artothek/, https://listart.mit.edu/collections/student-lending-art-program, https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.harvardartmuseums.org/assets/files/HAM-Student-Print-Rental-Program-FAQ-2019-07-12.pdf, and http://wam.umn.edu/education/students/art-rental/.

⁴See https://www.onterfdgoed.nl/.