The new professional: Underdog or Expert?
New Museology in the 21th century
Wilke Heijnen

For a long time, museum's form and function were impregnated with social exclusion, only accessible for a prosperous and educated minority. It held the monopoly on the past and therefore in a way on the present and the future. However times have changed and different perspectives on museum practices have been taken.

In 1989 the British Peter Vergo mentioned as quoted below, a number of possible museologies, including a 'new', and therefore presumably an 'old' type of museology:

"At the simplest level I would define it, as a state of widespread dissatisfaction with the 'old' museology, both within and outside the museum profession; and though the reader may object that such a definition is not merely negative, but circular, I would retort that what is wrong with the 'old' museology is that it is too much about museum methods, and too little about purposes of museums; that museology has in the past only frequently been seen, if it has been seen at all, as a theoretical and humanistic discipline." (Vergo, 1989)

This concept can be denoted as the 'British New Museology'. Simultaneously there is the Latin school of thoughts on new museum practices, that is likewise engaged with the purposes of a museum, applied for social development.

While both visions are abandoning the traditional museology where a collection based institute is the core business, the British and Latin versions have their own range of view. Vergo's theory is about an awareness based institute. Where

opening up the museum to a broader audience; access, participation and social inclusion are the focus points. The Latin school of thoughts is more involved with the idea of development: heritage as a tool for empowerment.

One could say that the Latin New Museology has a social political point of view, where a bottom up approach is fundamental. Whilst the British variant is aiming at a balanced and socially inclusive society and a top down path in this sense is more common.

Both perceive museums' functions as a vehicle for improvement, but their basic thoughts differ. The Latin version carries a strong intrinsic desire for progression while the British is motivated more extrinsically.

These thoughts on New Museology are materialized in two ways: Firstly the existence of new types of museums like ecomuseums, neighborhood museums, community museums, etc. Secondly in the idea of including a wide audience with a more active role. Here access, participation, representation and social inclusion are the keywords.[1]

Regardless of the different schools of New Museology, more and more people become aware of the social accountability of the museum and its possibilities within the public domain. Heritage as a tool for social development and the museum in the role of the facilitator. Some people do refer to these shifts as the third museum revolution[2]. Undeniably, there are some changes in our contemporary museum field, that will be explored in this essay and referred to as a new museology in a more holistic sense.

Questions that need to be answered are: Why should the museum 'suddenly' fulfill this role of social accountability? And

---

[1] As discussed in the Workshop 'Professionalism' by Paula Assunção dos Santos; 3 november 2009, Reinwardt Academy.
[2] The first museum revolution took place around the year 1900 where the museum institutionalized and became more professional. The second revolution happened in the 1970's where the function based museum was replacing the collection based museum. (Van Mensch, 1992)

in extension to this why should heritage be used as a tool? What are the preferred roles of the stakeholders and what are the pitfalls? I shall illustrate these questions with some case studies and conclude with some thoughts on the third museum revolution. What turn will it take and how far can we go with this participation paradigm?

The museum as a humanistic discipline
Social accountability on a professional level is not a new theory. As we were heading towards the twenty first century in all sorts of social and economical branches there was a growing sense of wanting to be relevant and human, expressed in sustainable enterprising.
But even before, during the second museum revolution, started a process of engaging with society on different levels. The emphasis came to lie on the educational and public function of the museum. Here one can already speak of a raised awareness of the status of the museum and its obligations towards society. Clearly these institutes hold the capacity to create meaning as they physically and metaphorically operate in the public realm.
Gradually the educational accent shifted towards a broader understanding of interaction with heritage and source communities. Involving them in the decision making process of displaying and interpreting their heritage, is now more widely accepted as a moral responsibility. "Source community members have come to be defined as authorities on their own cultural heritage." (Peers and Brown, 2002)
 As Edmund Barry Gaither writes:
"Museums have obligations as both educational and social institutions to participate in and contribute towards the restoration of wholeness in the communities of our country. They ought to increase understanding within and between cultural groups in the matrix of lives in which we exist. They ought to help to give substance, correction and reality to the often incomplete and distorted stories we hear about art and

social history. They should not dodge the controversy that often arises from the reappraisal of our common and overlapping pasts. If our museums cannot muster the courage to tackle these considerations in ways appropriate to their various missions and scales then concern must be raised for how they justify the receipt of support from the public." (1992)[3]

As Gaither states, the relationship between a museum and the public is a two way street. When the museum decides to stay in their ivory tower and not to use their means for social development, how can this be justified? Could we say it is ethically correct not to use the given means for the benefit of the public? And should this choice merely be made by the museum?

Many questions arise when we discuss the role of the museum within the new school of thoughts on participation and social development. Here we should keep in mind that there are three sorts of participation all with their own power structures:

1) The grassroots initiative: Where a Community of Practice[4] has a shared intrinsic motivation for development. For example The Ninsee (National institute Dutch slavery past and heritage) in Amsterdam. This organization is raised from a grassroots movement that stood up and claimed a place for remembrance, which they succeeded in the year 2002. Later the movement evolved into a steady institute for research, education, documentation, representation and facilitation.

---

[3] From the article: "Hey! That's mine: Thoughts on Pluralism and America", written for the 1992 publication 'Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture, edited by Ivan Karp, Christine Mullem Kreamer and Steven D. Lavine. Reprinted in Reinventing the Museum, historical and contemporary perspectives on the paradigm shift.

[4] Called into existence by Etienne Wenger. A Community of Practice holds a number of individuals who share a domain of interest. The members interact and learn together. But also develop a set of tools to address recurring obstacles.

2) The top down approach: Where museums head to the public and try to get them involved. Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA)has since 2006 a contemporary art and human rights program 'Blind Faith'. This integrated program of exhibitions, outreach projects, educational events and activities was called into existence to raise awareness and understanding of sectarianism and its related issues which has a high priority issue for Scotland and particularly Glasgow. It focuses on identity, neighbourhood and nation. As the GoMA states 'the power of contemporary art has been proved to raise awareness of difficult social issues'.[5]

In REBELLAND part of GoMA's Blind Faith: writer Magi Gibson and artist Anthony Schrag have been working with several youth groups around Glasgow on matters of sectarianism and its related subjects. The exhibition held in 2007 explored some of the artworks and writings the groups had produced, exposing dated notions around perceived issues of sectarianism.

3) The museum as a steward: An innovative and somewhat paradoxal approach where the museum wants to be in the role of a steward without or marginally being the initiator. The museum is strongly aware of the strength of the bottom up path and positions itself to trigger a similar initiative. The AHM (the Amsterdam Historical Museum) is at the moment involved in such a project. This organization asked students from The Reinwardt Academy to explore the possibilities of a Community of Practice within the Dapper neighbourhood in Amsterdam. The Dapper project (part of the Neighbourhood shops project of the AHM) invites shopkeepers and customers to participate in a Community of Practice. This community could present in the near future a landmark such as a street

---

[5] Website GoMA: http://www.glasgowmuseums.com

presentation or an event with the theme 'Neighbourhood shops'. The first type of participation, where the initiative exists within a grassroots movement is typical to the Latin New Museology. The second type to the British school of thoughts. And the last approach is a product of our time or so to say of the 'Third museum revolution'. It could not have evolved without the other two. The relationship between institute and community is different in all of these categories, in terms of power.

Whereas the museum functions in the first category as a facilitator for grassroots initiatives, it plays a more active role in the second category. Here the institute is consciously trying to involve the public or source communities into projects for the benefit of development. In the last category, it is the museum's wish to work with communities based on the first type of participation. In contradiction the institute applies (as already implied by the word) the principles of the top down approach. Only time will tell if this path is sustainable.

In the above mentioned categories different parties or stakeholders are involved. They all have their own motivation to participate. In one way or the other a museum cannot exist alone, visitors and source communities are needed. Moreover a community of practice can more easily reach their goals with input from the museum.

This cooperation between the traditional power structured museum and a community, does work but only under certain conditions. Both bring in their characteristics. The art of participation is primarily that all stakeholders should be open upon their objectives. Secondarily to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of all parties and to apply these in a constructive and accountable way. Additionally a genuine believe in, and motivation for improvement is necessary, both from the community and the museum. The intentions of the museum should be more than attracting new visitors and certainly more than ticking 'the participation box' in the funding request. Where skeptics do question the integrity of the

museum within the participation paradigm, we all need to be aware of this pitfall. Open-heartedness from all parties is required for a prosperous cooperation.

The input of a source community is mainly about opening up their (conceptual) territory to the world, on a physical and spiritual level. However a willingness to cooperate with the authorized museum and being truly motivated are just as important. Their expertise and enthusiasm, their network and having the gift of being unbiased are extremely valuable.

Museums in turn offer know how on the collection, education, exhibiting and hold a wide network as well. They are familiar with organizational and political aspects and know their way around in the economical realm. But more importantly, these institutes make heritage accessible, in both a tangible as an intangible way. However since the core functions and the curatorial authority of the museum have become questionable, the resulting precipitation on the institute should not be underestimated.

As seen above, sharing mutual knowledge in an atmosphere of partnership is crucial in this process.

The power of heritage[6]

What about heritage that for instance 'can increase understanding within and between cultural groups'?(Gaither, 1992) The traditional discourse on heritage is one dimensional and strongly embedded with caring for the material past. (Smith, 2006) Obviously cultural legacy is much more than the physical expression of an individual, a community or a nation. It conveys stories on different levels and in a variety of timelines. When we work with the concept of heritage it is important to be aware of the plurality of the layers it holds. This multilayeredness, I would like to contextualize within the semantic approach Peter van Mensch denotes in his article

---

[6] Respectfully referring to Manuel Castell's The Power of identity, The information age: economy, society and culture.

'The object as a data carrier'. He uses the term *identity* to express a state of being of the object. These states are synchronically the structural identity of an object, its functional identity and its contextual identity. Where these levels of identity, respectively carry certain information on the physical characteristics of the object, information referring to its use and referring to the physical and conceptual environment of the object. This model is completed with a diachronic set of characteristics which reflects the information gain and loss during the process of invention, realisation and use of the object. (Van Mensch, 1984)

Where Peter van Mensch formulated thoughts on the identity of an object, I would like to refer to the identity of the individual. Identity as a personal essence of an individual human being.

Identity of a person is, as in 'The object as a data carrier' model certainly not one dimensional. We all are carrying synchronically different identities on various levels. Like our personal biography, genetic identity, social identity, cultural identity, national identity and possibly even online identity.

Heritage conveys the stories of (multiple) individuals, communities, cultures, or nations. And again must be seen within the idea of the multilayeredness. Heritage is as such, more powerful than identity, which is less concrete. There is always a dialogue between the multilayeredness of heritage and the plurality of identity. It can be a resource in challenging cultural and/or social values; and is used to construct, reconstruct, contest, reject and maintain identity. (Smith, 2006)

As Manuel Castell writes:

"By identity, as it refers to social actors, I understand the process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or a related set of cultural attributes, that is given priority over other sources of meaning. For a given individual, or for a collective actor, there may be a plurality of identities. [.....] Identities are sources of meaning for the actors themselves, and by themselves, constructed through a process of individuation."

And:
"The construction of identities uses building materials from history, from geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory and from personal fantasies, from power apparatuses and religious revelations. But individuals, social groups, and societies process all these materials, and rearrange their meaning, according to social determinations and cultural projects that are rooted in their social structure, and in their space/time framework. I propose, as a hypothesis, that in general terms, who constructs collective identity, and what for, largely determines the symbolic content of this identity, and its meaning for those identifying with or placing themselves outside of it."(1997)
Both Castell and Smith underline the significance of heritage in constructing identity and in providing meaning to human existence. As a consequence the importance and power of the 'who' in who is constructing. Heritage can be used as a tool to open up a dialogue on complex issues, or to built a sense of belonging and to create relationships.

The new professional
Apart from the various roles the new professional could play, along the earlier mentioned three sorts of participation; the grassroots initiative, the top down approach and the museum as a facilitator, a point of democratization has been reached. Inevitably we should consider if there still is a role left for the museum professional.
The participation paradigm is engaged in changing relations of power, between source community and the museum. The museum used to control the meaning and value of heritage and therefore in a way identity and the past. Nowadays the exclusive right to deal with man's heritage is not only in hands of the institute anymore.

Through new media people are getting more used to the idea of participation. The museum professional acknowledges the significance and possibilities of these developments.

Many museums started to use the wide scope and accessibility of internet to gain information directly from their source communities and other (semi-)specialists.

For example the Brooklyn Museum in New York asks their virtual visitors to apply keywords to images to aid with searches in the collection database. They even created a whole community around it where taggers can 'play tag' with other so called 'posse'-members.

And at last some cases that seem to exclude the professional. Web 2.0 plays a meaningful role in the idea of democratization. It empowers people disregarding gender, class, age and background to form opinions on what they think is important. On websites like 'Youtube' and 'Flickr' people are stimulated to collect, select and interpret videos and photos (homemade or other) by their own values. More than that, the web and other new media question who the knowledge holds (for instance the non-professional: 'Wikipedia') and additionally where the power of decision making lies. The Canadian initiative '[murmur]' created by artists, shows the present alteration in control. This oral history project (2002) collects and makes accessible people's personal histories and anecdotes about specific geographic locations. In each of these locations throughout a city a '[murmur]' sign is installed showing a telephone number. Anyone can call and listen to a narration while standing in that exact spot, and engaging in the physical experience of being right there, where the story took place. All members of a community are encouraged to participate in giving voice to a city's biography. The stories are archived on a website.[7] Again it is the non-professional who decides what counts.

Perhaps the new museum professional should be personified in a culture scout/mentor. With a sense for valuable initiatives

---

[7] Website initiative: http://murmurtoronto.ca

the museum expert could guide and facilitate sustainable projects. She (or he) can actively offer a collection based expertise and knows her way around in the organizational, political and in the economical realm. The concept of a mentor promotes knowledge sharing and prevents a needless waste of energy, time and money that communities of practices would have used without consultancy. Henceforth the probability of survival of interesting initiatives will be enlarged.
As earlier mentioned the museum holds a certain accountability towards public and the object. Yet the institute could be likewise responsible for a healthy, innovative and divers cultural climate, or so to say towards future heritage.
Nevertheless, I am not suggesting that the museum should stop practicing its main functions as we know it. We ought to nourish our museum professionals and the skillful way in which they care for our materialized past and its accessibility. I do make a plea for tearing down those ivory walls and opening up the museum. Let the museum be a breeding place where a dialogue between heritage and society can be established.

Literature:

Castells, Manuel. The Power of identity, The information age: economy, society and culture. 1997, 2004, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Crooke, Elizabeth. Museums and community. In: Macdonald, Sharon [ed.] A Companion to museum studies. 2006, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Gaither, Edmund Barry. Hey! That's mine: Thoughts on Pluralism and America. In: Anderson, Gail [ed.] Reinventing the Museum, Historical and contemporary perspectives on the paradigm shift. 2004, Oxford, Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group Inc.

Mensch, Peter van. Museology and the object as data carrier. 1984, Leiden, Reinwardt Academy.

Mensch, Peter van. Towards a methodology of museology. 1992, Zagreb, University of Zagreb.

Peers, Laura and Brown, Alison K. [ed.] Museums and source communities: a Routledge reader. 2003, London, Routledge.

Sandell, Richard [ed.] Museums, society, inequality. 2002, London, Routledge.

Santos, Paula Assunção dos Santos. Museology and community development in the XXI century. 2007, Lisbon, Edições Universitárias Lusófonas.

Smith, Laurajane. Uses of Heritage. 2006, London, Routledge.

 Vergo, Peter. The New Museology. 1989, London, Reaktion Books.

About the author:
After having studied the art of Sculpture and Multimedia followed by Art History, Wilke worked as an independent artist and was involved in organizing art projects and exhibitions. Other activities in the cultural field included the collection management department and the educational team. Currently as part of her Master study at the Reinwardt Academy she is doing research into the concept of public engagement at the Dundee Contemporary Arts in Scotland.