

CODART ELF congress: Workshop 4

Alone or together: the value of collaborating

Chair: Manfred Sellink, Artistic director, Musea Brugge, Bruges

Secretary: Jennifer Cardona, CODART, The Hague

Introduction

We all know and realize the value of collaborating and sharing experiences – indeed CODART itself exists for this very reason. Strangely enough, collaboration between museums has not been the subject of a workshop, although it has, of course, been touched upon in many workshops themes. This workshop will focus on one important, but seemingly difficult aspect of collaboration: not the more common, but often incidental working together on research projects and exhibitions or the more informal collaboration of colleagues who get along well, but a structural and long-standing collaboration between institutions. In all of our museums staff, time and funds are limited. Why should we invest these scarce goods in structural collaboration – often a time and energy consuming process? What are the conditions that make such an effort worthwhile? What constitutes good practice? What are the pitfalls and when is it better to stop trying? How do you choose your partners: is institutional size important, is it the scope of the collections, or the mentality of the staff? Are there areas (such as research or sharing collections) in which museums can work more easily together than others? To what extent is institutional collaboration, too, dependent on individuals? Is collaboration easier if it is instituted from the bottom-up rather than when it comes top-down? And what is the role of directors, and that of curators? All these are points of discussion, using first-hand experiences of speakers and inviting all participants actively to engage in discussing a topic that is at the very core of CODART's existence.

Speaker 1: Taco Dibbits, Head of department of paintings, sculpture and applied arts, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

In order to keep the collection of the Rijksmuseum visible and accessible to the public during the extensive renovation of the Museum, a structural collaboration through loans gave way to “satellite” museums. Now 4 years later since the endeavor began, there have been mostly positive experiences and reactions from this collaboration; however, difficulties and struggles have also been encountered. One such issue is that not only has the collection itself been put under great strain from such a continuous mobility, but this in turn has also put the staff and curators under great pressure. Furthermore, as the collection was dispersed between different satellites, it was difficult to then use it for other shows. It was also important for the Rijksmuseum that the collection on loan should complement the satellite museum's existing collection, as well as that it be shown together, preferably in one area of the satellite where the Rijksmuseum could be represented. A good example of where the collaboration has been successful is with the Rijksmuseum on the Maas in collaboration with the Bonnefantenmuseum Maastricht. In this project the pieces on loan, which were previously in storage, were shown in an adequate context

and were able to be allocated in a few rooms of the Bonnefantemuseum. In conclusion, Taco Dibbits points out that it is difficult to establish a long term collaboration with other museums. In most cases, curators are too busy with their own collections to be able to study another museum's collections whilst it is on loan. Also, in many cases it is more of an exchange of knowledge, such as for a catalogue or a one-time exchange which establishes new relations with the network of other museums and most importantly, creates trust between the two institutions.

Speaker 2: Geert Souvereyns, Coordinator, Vlaamse Kunstcollectie (Flemish Art Collections), Ghent

The institutional collaboration between the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp, the Ghent Museum of Fine Arts and the Groeninge Museum in Bruges began in the end of 2001 in an effort to increase the museums' international potential and to strengthen the development of their collection research and management. They originally also intended to re-organize their collections, whereby each museum would hold a specific time period, such as the Old masters in Antwerp and the modern collection in Ghent. Furthermore, the collection shared between the three institutions played an important and unifying factor. Together, they could represent a collection of Flemish cultural heritage of world importance located in three historical cities where the artists lived and worked. Therefore, it was important to bridge the gap between their differences in local governments, institutional sizes and organization, with one similar ambition.

The online collection catalogue was an important tool to serve their purpose of collaboration. It enabled them to show three collections in one catalogue, visibilizing works which were in storage and serving as a marketing strategy to promote the museums. Furthermore, the museums established common standards in security and a centralized method of evaluation. They established a unique insurance for liability of loans between them which would only make the museums liable for restoration of the art work and not for complete loss or theft. In the end it was however decided to not allocate each museum with a separate art period, but rather to respect how the collections were originally established. Instead it was decided to fill smaller gaps between each museum's collection rather than making a complete redistribution.

Finally, Geert Souvereyns suggests that it is important for a museum to formulate plans and to convince governments for funding. Also that it is necessary for curators to be as passionate as they are in researching, as in organizing and collaborating. And that by collaborating, institutions are able to change the idea of competing and keeping knowledge and experience to themselves, and instead focus on the benefits of learning from each other.

Speaker 3: Bernard Vermet, Associate, Foundation for Cultural Inventory, Amsterdam

Collaboration is a key element that museums with small Dutch and Flemish art collections, can use to strengthen their museum as an institution. In order to make themselves heard, it is important to collaborate especially with larger institutions. Furthermore it is important to establish a position inside a city or country and to get more visibility by combining forces. The museums must also make their presence known in the sector as well as show what context their collection is in and what makes them special. By collaborating with bigger museums, an organization can receive more attention as well as safeguard their position by combining forces with a group. Finally, digitalizing a museum's collection on the internet not only provides more visibility and

marketing for the museum, but can also open new funding channels and sponsoring for the institution.

Report on the discussion

What is the reason for collaborating?

Taco Dibbits proposes the example of the Rijksmuseum's loan for an exhibition in Australia which received 250,000 visitors. The idea was to access a public that probably would not have otherwise traveled to the Netherlands to visit the Rijksmuseum. Therefore, the exhibition was seen as a very important opportunity for cultural exchange. Cultural projects can often cross borders to reach inaccessible places and publics, and in many cases, collaborations are not about lending to receive something in return. Finally, although it is important to reach these normally inaccessible publics, it is also important that an institution determine how worthwhile it is to move the collection and not have it visible for tourists in their own country who expect to be able to visit the museum and see the majority of the collection. Another risk which must be evaluated is that the collection becomes too mobile and dispersed, making it difficult to know and control where all the pieces are.

Can we speak about “genuine” collaboration to really achieve what we want?

Although it is clear that structural, institutional or even one-time collaborations and exchanges between institutions bring a wide range of benefits to the parties involved, does it achieve their common goals? From the perspective of the Vlaamse Kunstcollectie (Flemish Art Collections) project, the added value of bringing the three collections of the museums together under one umbrella institution in order to accentuate its international importance, was a clear way of achieving their common interest. Other participants add that collaboration between one or more institutions is sometimes more of a necessity than a genuine desire to collaborate. The problem is not the mutual will to collaborate between institutions, but the problem lies more with finding funds. Sometimes it is not possible to act separately.

Do large museums have a responsibility to smaller museums when collaborating?

When it comes to sharing research expertise and building knowledge, larger museums do have a responsibility towards smaller institutions. However, it should never become a relationship where the larger museum controls the project and takes the stance of, “this is how we're going to do it” suggests Taco Dibbits.

Should museums share collection mobility costs?

In thinking of ways in which museums can collaborate, is sharing couriers and combining transports a way to easily save costs? Most participants agree that although this is not often practiced, it is in fact a simple way to cut costs by sharing couriers. Some say that curators should refrain from a wish to travel and instead exercise a wish to collaborate: by doubling up transports large costs can be avoided. However, some participants voice that it is also a sensitive issue of traveling with a collection not your own and being responsible for it. Furthermore,

couriership as a cultural exchange is not really a cultural matter but rather a practical one. In conclusion, once trust is established between the institutions and similar standards are set between them, sharing transport costs can be more easily facilitated.

Can CODART facilitate the exchange of curators between museums through its vast network and website?

In an effort to build relationships, share research, expertise and resources, it may be very interesting for curators, from smaller museums for example, to be able to work for a period in another museum. Is this possible and practical?

Taco Dibbits provides the example of the more common and feasible exchange of conservators, who can be 'on loan' at a different museum whilst working on a specific restoration project. However, the exchange of curators becomes more complex as the museum must be able to cope without the curator for the period of the exchange (usually a minimum of 6 months). Thus this depends greatly on the size of the institution and the resources it has at hand to deal with the temporary relocation of its staff.

Conclusion

It is obvious that there is a greater advantage in working together than alone, and that the value of collaborating can range from a greater chance at international recognition, to the necessity of grouping together resources to make a project possible. When it comes to structural collaborations and creating a long-standing relationship between institutions, the new possibilities which arise from the collaboration seem to outweigh the difficulties of working together. One is that institutions grouped together or smaller institutions working with larger ones can be a strategy for more visibility, receiving more recognition and establishing a position in the sector, which can in turn open new funding channels and possibilities. Another is saving costs: by centralizing libraries, security and restoration departments, for example, institutions can not only bring down costs but also enhance the quality of the overall management of the museum.

However there do exist certain aspects which should be taken into consideration and which can lead to a more successful effort. One is that it is easiest to start small and from within the context of your museum's collection. Also it is important to weigh the benefits and consequences of how mobile a collection can become and what audiences can be reached without neglecting your own public. Finally, a good answer to the title of our workshop, *Alone or together?*, is best summed up by Geert Souvereyns' comment on if it was necessary to come together as the Flemish Art Collection. Geert responded, no, but that in the end they wanted to make each other better and stronger, and that the most important benefit they have received has been learning from each other.

Participants in this workshop were:

- 1 Ben van Beneden, Curator, Musea Antwerpen – Rubenshuis, Antwerp
- 2 Jennifer Cardona, Office Manager, CODART, The Hague
- 3 Remmelt Daalder, Curator, Nederlands Scheepvaartmuseum Amsterdam, Amsterdam
- 4 Lloyd DeWitt, Assistant curator of the John G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

- 5 Taco Dibbits, Head of department of paintings, sculpture and applied arts, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
- 6 Felice Geurdes, MA curatorial studies, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Amsterdam
- 7 Saskia van Haaren, Chief curator, Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht
- 8 Valérie Herremans, Research curator, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp
- 9 Guus van den Hout, Curator, Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht
- 10 Jan Kosten, Curator of Dutch and Flemish historical paintings and Flemish portraits, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie The Hague
- 11 Catalina Macovei, Head of department of prints and drawings, Romanian Academy Library, Bucharest
- 12 Sanda Marta, Curator, National Brukenthal Museum, Sibiu
- 13 Hans Nieuwdorp, Chief curator, Musea Antwerpen - Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp
- 14 Ivan Rusina, Curator, Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava
- 15 Manfred Sellink, Artistic director, Musea Brugge, Bruges
- 16 Gert Jan van der Sman, Scientific employee, Nederlands Interuniversitair Kunsthistorisch Instituut (Dutch University Institute for Art History), Florence
- 17 Irina Sokolova, Head of department of Dutch paintings, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg
- 18 Geert Souvereyns, Coordinator, Vlaamsekunstcollectie, Ghent
- 19 Svitlana Stets, Curator of European art of 14th-18th centuries, Lviv Art Gallery, Lviv
- 20 Joanna A. Tomicka, Curator of European prints, National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw
- 21 Bernard Vermet, Associate, Foundation for Cultural Inventory, Amsterdam
- 22 Gerdien Verschoor, Director, CODART, The Hague
- 23 Danièle Wagener, Curator, Villa Vauban - Musée d'art de la Ville de Luxembourg, Luxembourg