

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, Edith Franke and Ramona Jelinek-Menke*

**“We don’t collect objects, we collect relationships.”**  
**An Interview with Léontine Meijer-van Mensch about**  
***Liquid Museums, Implicated Communities, and the***  
***Shared Stewardship of Religious Objects***

*Edith Franke:* Léontine, as director of the GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde, you are responsible for a large and diverse ethnological collection, including numerous religious objects. In our research network REDIM, we have been exploring how museums contribute to the social perception of religion and religious diversity. We would like to talk to you about the social function and obligations of museums in terms of their responsibility for the musealisation and presentation of religious objects and religion. We are particularly interested in learning about your experiences as the director of a museum that plays an important role in the way religion is perceived by society.

*Ramona Jelinek-Menke:* Today, the GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde has around 200,000 objects from all continents. Since these objects are no longer in use in the places they originate from, would you say that museums are places for dead things?

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch:* Death and uselessness are metaphors that are often used to criticise museums and encourage them to change. I like working with metaphors, but, of course, they are only true in part. The argument is often made that certain museum objects are ‘dead’, but it very much depends on what kind of objects we are talking about. Nobody would describe a painting by Rembrandt as a dead object. The discourse surrounding museum objects being dead focusses mainly on objects that are related to kinds of performativity, use or social function that are sort of lost in a museum context, religious objects being one such example. I think that in contemporary museum practice we need to find appropriate ways to respect this performativity, use or social function when we are displaying objects, when we use them in an educational setting, when we restore them, and even when we keep them in storage. This involves questioning the traditional approach to materiality taken in the museum profession. I am intrigued by alternatives to this traditional approach, moving away from the centrality of materiality, and accepting dynamism. If we want to move beyond the metaphor

of the museum as a place for dead things, we must rethink all of our museum practices. For museum professionals, this involves thinking about the community or communities behind the objects, including their perspectives, and accepting a sense of ownership of the objects that lies outside the museum. I think that is what the concept of *new museology*<sup>1</sup> is all about. If we rethink our museum expertise – or relearn it – and include the perspectives of the community where these objects have a significance, then I think the objects gain new layers and significances as museum objects, which ultimately enhances the relevance of the museum context.

*Edith Franke:* We are talking about a museum that is open to community perspectives and in contact with the social reality around it. In *new museology*, there is a debate about the concept of the *liquid museum*, and you have talked about the museum as a place of belonging, or a place of encounters and social relations.<sup>2</sup> What are the consequences of understanding a museum in this way, and what difficulties do you see?

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch:* I see difficulties in the sense that it clashes with some of the traditional core values of museum professionals, but personally, I am convinced that there is a world to gain for museums, especially with regard to their relevance. I see museums as places of encounter. I really like Homi Bhabha's concept of *third space*, which is, of course, a rather theoretical concept and not entirely uncontroversial, but I think it is important to think about the museum in such a way.<sup>3</sup> A bit more concrete than Homi Bhabha's *third space* is the concept of *third place*. Our home is *first place* and our work *second place*. The *third place* is where we negotiate things, where we gather, in a café, or around the coffee machine. It is the old *agora*. We very much need such places in civil society, but how can museums achieve this role? Here the concept of the *liquid museum* comes in very beautifully because it goes beyond the physical structure of the museum. The concept refers to the museum as space rather than as place. The *liquid museum* is a network that connects with all kinds of people and communities. It tackles issues that are in conflict, and may also try to give voices to the dissonant, including when it is hurtful. In short, the museum is a space for negotiation. For me, the concept of *liquid museum* is very much connected with the issues of

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1 Pierre Mayrand, "The New Museology Proclaimed, Museum International," *Museum International* 66, no. 1–4 (2014): 115–18.

2 Fiona Cameron, "The Liquid Museum: New Institutional Ontologies for a Complex, Uncertain World," in *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, Vol. 1: Museum Theory, ed. Andrea Witcomb and Kylie Message (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 354–61.

3 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge 2008).

ownership and belonging. There are many forms of ownership and many ways in which the sense of belonging manifests itself. How does this relate to the places where objects are physically kept? Can a museum object which is part of my collection simultaneously be an object which evokes a sense of belonging elsewhere? This is an interesting question in the context of religious heritage, especially when you relate this to the question of performativity. I am very interested in making it possible for a religious object to still be part of the museum collection while functioning in a specific context which is not the museum. This might not necessarily be an issue of legal ownership, but it does challenge the concepts of intellectual ownership, authority, and expertise. I like that the concept of *liquid museum* questions basic principles of how to do museums that I've always wanted to question myself. I don't want to work in a museum context with lots of dead objects; I prefer the liquid context of living objects, i.e. acknowledging the performative power of objects in a variety of contexts and not just as exhibits in a showcase.

*Edith Franke:* I would like to refer once again to Homi Bhabha's reflections on hybrid, 'in-between' spaces: could a museum function as a *third place* or *third space*? Can it mediate between the different spheres of religion, society, and science? Or should the museum be a clearly secular space?

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch:* It can be an in-between place or, at least, it can shift more easily according to the specific role it needs to play in a specific context. It can sometimes be an in-between place, and sometimes be a secular place. By 'secular space', perhaps you mean a very academic space. I think sometimes it can also be a more religious space. So, it is a sort of shape shifter; it can adjust its shape according to what it needs to be at a specific moment. I like this idea a lot, but of course, it is at odds with the rules and regulations of German public services; administrations struggle to deal with the agile, the unexpected; they think in fixed structures. All of a museum's functions are constantly present, but sometimes one function (and one space) is more important than the others. Who says that a museum always is and should be an academic space? Shapeshifting is part of the liquidity of the concept of museum. We have already spoken of the issue of ownership and authority. We also see it in the architecture of museums. Museums that are being built now have a different look and feel than those built previously. They embrace the outside world more and are more open in both their architecture and their approach. They are not the inward-looking buildings of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In that sense, I think museum architecture has embraced a lot of the liquidity parameters already.

*Ramona Jelinek-Menke*: I would like to turn now to the objects, and to the contexts that these objects originate from. You spoke in a lecture about *communities of implication*.<sup>4</sup> What is meant by *communities of implication*?

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch*: Maybe I can start by sharing my growing uncertainty about the concept of *source community*. Who is a *source community*? Who belongs to a *source community*? Who doesn't belong? When I was working at the Jewish Museum Berlin, the concept of *source community* didn't feel right. It raised the question of who speaks for the *source community* – a political voice or a religious voice? I felt that the whole concept was too narrow. Of course, in an ethnological museum the concept of *source community* is important, but still here, I feel that it has something about it that doesn't feel right, at least not to me. The museum is a political space and a space where agency is an important concept. For me, Erica Lehrer's concept of *community of implication* is so much more open because it is about people who are implicated by a certain history. In her case, this is very much about memory culture and Shoah. She talks about Jewish heritage in post-Shoah Poland. Lots of people are implicated and have a stake, and I think that this being implicated from different angles and different perspectives is a very interesting concept that brings us further when we talk about the relevance and significance of cultural heritage. But at the same time, the notion that objects may have multiple owners or that they speak many languages, that there is multivocality or polyphony, may make people uncomfortable. The concept of implicated community goes beyond that of *identity*, which I don't think is as valid anymore. I'm not saying that I have rejected the concept of *source community*, but that it is too narrow, and that it can be instrumentalised and serve as fodder for identity politics. We have to be careful about that. We shouldn't be naive about the concept of *source community*. All things considered, I am certainly very intrigued by the concept of *community of implication* because it is much more inclusive, much more heterogeneous.

*Edith Franke*: When we talk about the polyphony of objects, and the diversity of interpretations and relationships involving objects that are part of a museum collection, we are quite close to the concept of *shared stewardship* and the idea of a *participatory museum*. This extends the idea of liquidity, of the fluidity of the museum even further and invites others, such as believers, to be curators of an exhibition about religion. I think this is a very interesting concept. But isn't it also

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4 Erica Lehrer, "Material Kin: 'Communities of Implication' in Post-Colonial, Post-Holocaust Polish Ethnographic Collections," in *Across Anthropology: Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial*, ed. Margareta von Oswald and Jonas Tinius (Leuven University Press, 2020), 289–322.

very complicated? How do you deal with different ideas, interpretations, and intentions when you design an exhibition? Surely there will also be contradictions.

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch:* Definitely. Unfortunately, visitor research has shown again and again that most museum visitors don't want that.<sup>5</sup> They don't want ambiguity; they don't want this multifocality. They want museum experts telling them how things are and what they are. This is something I constantly feel uncertain about and find frustrating. Lots of museum visitors have a rather old-fashioned idea of what a museum is. This has also been my own personal experience with participatory projects. It's difficult. To answer your various questions, I think it all boils down to some basic principles that should be central to museum communication. Museums need to be very transparent about this ambiguity and this polyphony. They need to help people to make their own significance and story lines. It's about embracing the role of mediator or facilitator.

*Ramona Jelinek-Menke:* You say that many museum visitors want an expert to speak for the objects. When we talk about the polyphony of objects, we often mean that there are different points of view concerning the objects and that these should be given a voice in the museum context. In each case, people are speaking about or for the objects, rather than the objects speaking themselves. Maybe that's not so different from this 'old-fashioned idea' that visitors have about museums? In the museum context – even if the polyphony is taken into account – artifact still appear as mere objects. But what about the objects' own voice? For some people, artifact are active subjects. Indeed, this may particularly be the case in the religious context, and some scholars speak about the *agency* of the artefacts in this case.<sup>6</sup> This is increasingly being considered in research. It's the same in the study of religions. How can a museum deal with such "living artifact"?

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch:* Well, maybe you don't put them on museum shelves but let them be museum objects within a certain setting outside the museum's walls. This brings us to the interesting question of whether museums should document more or whether we should continue to collect. I think museums should be spaces where we document, and that we should not collect as much anymore. This is an interesting paradigm shift in general, but it is particularly interesting

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5 For example: "Public Perceptions of – and Attitude to – the Purpose of Museums in Society: A report Prepared by BritainThinks for Museums Association," March 2013, <https://www.museum-sassociation.org/app/uploads/2020/06/03042013-britain-thinks.pdf>.

6 Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

when dealing with religion. Going back to the basic assumption that a museum is a museum for all, how does that interact with the idea of respecting expressions of religious culture? Does it work? I think that most of the time it does work and can come together but, of course, it can also create opposing dynamics of division, anger, or rejection, for example. Again, I think it is possible for museums to abandon their position as a secular space and be much more a space where religion is being practised at certain moments, and that they can then go back to being an open space advocating a meta-perspective, and contextualising the event with film, photos or text, or probably a combination of all three. This shifting between perspectives is again part of the *liquid museum* model. But it would mean that sometimes spaces might not be open to everybody. Can we do that? Can we be a space that sometimes is not open to everybody because a specific group wants to perform certain rituals within that space? I think we can as long as we are very transparent and explain that we find it very important for a museum to be open to a group performing rituals, that sometimes we do something other than providing a meta-perspective.

*Ramona Jelinek-Menke:* Is the meta-perspective necessarily the same as the secular perspective? Or to put it another way: Is religious practice necessarily exclusive, while a secular museum constitutes inclusive practice?

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch:* No, but sometimes the performativity of certain rituals that need to be done, for example, in the process of repatriation, are so holy that only certain people can participate, and it needs to be intimate. Is a secular space the same as a meta-space? No, I think it's something different. I am not always sure where the difference lies and maybe that is also something that you can be very transparent about. Museums can say that they don't know how it works and where the boundaries are but that they are trying to work this out and would like help with doing so. I think we can do that within an ethnological space, especially because we have objects that need such an approach. The framing is different from that in a very academic, epistemic approach.

*Edith Franke:* I also think that it is difficult to deal with these issues. Apart from the question of whether a museum accepts the agency of objects, there is also the question of how to deal with the ritual purposes or uses of religious objects: does a museum have to take into account and respect the ritual and religious prescriptions that were once connected to an object, or is a museum allowed, even obliged, to emancipate itself from this? I like your idea, Léontine, that a museum should be a transparent, open place. But wouldn't it be a better solution to reject ambitions to perform rituals in a museum? There are so many different religious



Figure 1: Cleansing ceremony led by Ngarrindjeri elder Major Summer (left) on the occasion of the transfer of the remains of ancestors from the GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde to the aboriginal communities of origin on 28 November 2019. Museum director Léontine Meijer-van Mensch (right) participated in the ceremony. Photo: Andreas Wünschirs, © GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig

beliefs and ritual practices. How could one decide what is allowed for whom and what is not?

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch:* Yes, and who speaks for whom? Who do you give the authority to speak? What kind of expertise do you build on when deciding? There are so many contested voices and in all of them there is something of value. Ultimately, one person has to take responsibility and that’s me, as the director. But again, the liquid museum model comes in, in that we make the decision-making process more transparent and make it clear that there are different ways of looking at objects in relation to a museum context. I know that this is not the end of the story but at least it is very processual. I probably leave lots of people with lots of questions. They want expert knowledge or an expert opinion, and I am not giving that to them. It helps of course if you say in your mission statement that

you want to be a site of dialogue but whatever you do, you will never do it right. At the same time, that also gives you a lot of freedom.

*Ramona Jelinek-Menke:* You mentioned the important topic of repatriation. Everybody is talking about restitution or repatriation now, and scholars like Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy are calling for full restitution of museum objects.<sup>7</sup> In relation to this, I remember a photo you showed during a lecture, which showed an empty showcase in a museum about Native American culture. In the photo, there was a sign explaining that, as a result of discussions with members of the Native American community, some sacred and sensitive objects had been removed from the exhibition. Objects are returned or should not be exhibited for several reasons. Can there be a museum without objects? Or are we facing the end of the museum as we know it?

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch:* To answer this question, one must first clarify what an object is. Do you need objects for a museum? Yes, I think you need objects for a museum. But the question is: What are objects? And can we rethink the way we define an object? And does an object need to be an object in our collection in our space in order to be our object? I like the opinion that we should rethink collecting because we don't collect objects, we collect relationships. And if we collect relationships, it is also easier to repatriate or to return because we only gain more relationships and deepen our relationships with communities. Museum colleagues and experts all say the same thing: restitution and repatriation don't result in losses, but in gains. If we really embrace that idea, then museums will not become obsolete. Also, I don't think that we will end up with an empty museum if we return lots of objects. Here at the GRASSI museum in Leipzig, we are responsible for a large collection but more than 90% of the collection is not on display. If we continue the process of restitution, we will still have many objects, but we will have also gained numerous new relationships. Moreover, large-scale restitution is not what communities want. They want museums in the global north to tell their stories.

*Ramona Jelinek-Menke:* But how does one stage relationships? A museum is not only about collecting but also about staging, isn't it?

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch:* But wouldn't it be interesting if we started staging these relational aspects – and thus also the relational ethics – in the sense of co-ownership or co-custodianship? That's what I really like. We are thinking

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7 Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *Zurückgeben. Über die Restitution afrikanischer Kulturgüter* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2019).



Figure 2: The wedding of the musician Daniel Kahn and dancer Yeva Lapsker in the Jewish Museum Berlin, September 2018. Photo: Stephan Pramme, © Jüdisches Museum Berlin, with the permission of Daniel and Yeva Lapsker Kahn.

about this a lot at the GRASSI because we want to develop as a network museum. The concept of *network museum* connects very much with the concept of *community of implication*.<sup>8</sup> If you show that, and make the relations or the relational aspects visible, then the objects are not dead. For me, it’s about showing the process of opening up perspectives and layeredness that goes beyond expert knowledge of the object. Then the object can have agency, then it is a living thing and not a dead thing anymore.

*Edith Franke:* I find it appealing that we are returning to the initial question of whether a museum is a cemetery of ‘dead things’ given that we are in the middle

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8 The conceptualisation of museums as networks is very much influenced by Manuel Castells’ *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996). Castells wrote about museums as networks himself in Manuel Castells, “Museums in the Information Era: Cultural Connections of Time and Space,” in *Museums in a Digital Age*, edited by Ross Parry, 427–34. London: Routledge, 2009. A second source on the idea of network museum is Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory.



Figure 3: The letter 'Kuf' is used to display photos of and information about the wedding in the exhibition "A wie Jüdisch – in 22 Buchstaben durch die Gegenwart" (A is for Jewish – Journeys Through Now in 22 Letters), Jewish Museum Berlin, 26 November 2018 – 19 April 2020. Photo: Yves Sucksdorff, © Jüdisches Museum Berlin.

of discussing how a museum can be a very lively place of encounter and relationships.

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch:* I'd like to mention the wedding we hosted at the Jewish Museum Berlin. I said yes to the wedding because I wanted to show that there are still Jews in Germany, and that Jews still marry and do other things. Hosting the wedding was about embracing the here and now, which I think is enormously important in a German post-Holocaust context. It's not always about Shoah and the Holocaust; it's also about embracing life and showing life and a hopeful future. For me, that was enormously important while I was making the exhibition on contemporary Jewish life. I mean, we could also have documented a funeral and shown Jewish funeral customs, but I preferred the option of a wedding. I understand that maybe some people felt insecure about this. And yes, you could argue that people put their life on display or that it was a sort of 'living Jewish zoo'. I would never have asked people to get married at the Jewish Museum but this couple wanted to get married there. So I think there is an ethical difference. This couple really wanted to get married in the place where they fell in love and that was in the museum.

For them, the Jewish Museum is a sort of secular Jewish space and not a religious space. But it still is a religious space in a way. This is easier in Judaism because you can read the Torah anywhere that you have a Torah and ten people present.

Equally, a Jewish wedding can take place anywhere. This makes it easier than, for example, in Christianity where maybe the church is a different space altogether or the performance pays tribute to a setting in some way. The same goes for the repatriation ceremonies we did in the GRASSI museum. The communities that did the ceremonies in 2019 wanted to do some of them with guests. For them, that was very, very important and who am I to say no? However, film footage of the ceremonies was subsequently used in a documentary, and a few people that saw the documentary had negative connotations of the exploitation of the picturesque 'destination culture'. So, maybe I should be more careful with footage that is being used afterwards in another setting and therefore gaining another layer of meaning. We certainly need to be very transparent about who wants to perform the ceremonies and why.

*Edith Franke:* Could you imagine there being a request to perform a ritual in your museum which you would refuse because of the content or the intention of the ritual?

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch:* In general, I would say yes to rituals, but there are limitations. When a religious ritual goes against values that we stand for as a museum or is against German law, then I would not want it to be performed. This is why it is enormously important to have a mission statement. Museums are not neutral, and the GRASSI is no exception. A mission statement makes clear what we stand for. The same applies to participatory projects. All contributions are important provided the contributors accept the legal and ethical framework that we have chosen to work within. This also applies to visitors. All visitors are welcome, but we have our principles. If people don't behave appropriately when visiting the galleries or during our museum programmes, they are kindly asked to leave the building.

*Edith Franke:* Thank you, Léontine. It has become very clear that the task of dealing with religious objects and the topic of religion in a museum context is a highly dynamic, complex, and challenging matter.

*Ramona Jelinek-Menke:* You show very nicely that museums do work with theoretical concepts, but that while we as scholars can sit back and say that we are here to analyse and describe, and to develop some concepts, you as museum directors and curators have the challenge of putting it all into practice, while considering ethical issues, the public and practical matters. I think this is very interesting and also a major challenge, and I would like to express my respect in that regard. Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us.

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch:* And of course, I fail every day, as you can imagine. Ethical museum practice is very much about negotiation,<sup>9</sup> being a process with various uncertainties and an unknown outcome. Is it always the *source community* or first owner of the object who is right? And to what extent might that conflict with the fact that as museum director, I am also responsible for my employees and for the museum's funders. I like this new ethics of negotiation because it's so multi-layered and multi-faceted.

*Ramona Jelinek-Menke:* Through your work in all of this, and the way in which you weigh up all of these different interests, you show that the museum is very much a living place.

*Léontine Meijer-van Mensch:* And not a place of death!

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9 Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, "New Challenges, New Priorities: Analyzing Ethical Dilemmas from a Stakeholder's Perspective in the Netherlands," in *New Directions in Museum Ethics*, ed. Janeth Marstine, Alexander A. Bauer, and Chelsea Haines (London: Routledge, 2013), 40–55.

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