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THE ICOM MUSEUM DEFINITION: ICOM GERMANY BETWEEN FUNCTIONARIES, MEMBERS, AND ACTIVISTS

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Traditional committee work

The ICOM standing committee tasked with drafting a proposed definition since 2017, signalled seeing a larger context with its name, “*Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials*” (MDPP). Its president, Jette Sandahl, promoted that a museum definition must acknowledge and critically reflect the “legacy” and continued presence of social inequality, the asymmetries of power and wealth.¹ Sandahl left open how something can be defined and at the same time another matter can be “recognised”. Two opportunities were offered to transport thoughts directly to the international level: to organise an expert discussion on trends and challenges of the near future and to send in draft definitions. ICOM Germany did not make use of either option, but 12 members (including the author) sent in their own draft definitions.²

In 2018, a joint conference of the three German-speaking ICOM national committees on the minimum requirement of the museum definition made it clear that not all museums fulfil the

current ICOM museum definition: Some museums do not have the opportunity to acquire further collection items (because they already have everything available), other museums do not generate any new knowledge themselves, although collection research is one of the core tasks.³ One conclusion would be to shorten the current ICOM museum definition.

A summary of the conference results was sent to ICOM International. No reaction was noticeable; the same was true of the 269 definition proposals sent in. Only the Kyoto resolution proposal activated the board of ICOM Germany. A memorandum to the president of the world association dated 6 August 2019 pointed out deficiencies in the wording, including the lack of a definition of the museum as a permanent institution. Together with 33 other ICOM committees, Germany supported the successful motion of ICOM Europe in Kyoto on 7 September 2019 to postpone the resolution and to discuss it further in the framework of the Advisory Council.⁴

Participation demands from outside, more internal communication

After Kyoto, there was a prolonged standstill at ICOM International. During this period, public criticism of ICOM Germany’s conduct was voiced through an open letter, which was offered for co-signature on an internet platform as of 7 November 2019.⁵ This text achieved 294 signatures, including nine from abroad; of the 245 non-anonymised signatures, only 75 came from ICOM members – on the internet, every person is allowed to have a say. This open letter accused ICOM Germany of a lack of appreciation for participation, inclusion, diversity and social justice and wished for greater consideration of societal changes in the debate. Decolonisation, empowerment for self-representation, diversification of knowledge and images of history and overcoming national-centred thinking were listed.

In order to clarify the position, the board of ICOM Germany used a survey by the International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM) from November 2019 to all national and

1 SANDAHL, Jette. Addressing societal responsibilities through core museum functions and methods: the museum definition, prospects and potentials. *Museum International*, 2019, vol. 71, no. 281–282, pp. IV–V.

2 Where no footnote is inserted below, the presentation is based (as it is here) on the annual reports in ICOM Germany’s members’ journal “Mitteilungen”: 2020, vol. 27 = issue 42, pp. 5–8; 2021, vol. 28 = issue 43, pp. 28–29.

3 WALZ, Markus (ed.). *Museum: ausreichend. Die „untere Grenze“ der Museumsdefinition. Internationales Bodensee-Symposium von ICOM Schweiz, ICOM Österreich und ICOM Deutschland, 21.–23.06.2018 in Friedrichshafen*. [online]. Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net, 2020 [accessed 2022-01-31]. Available from www: <<https://books.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/arthistoricum/catalog/book/565>>.

4 The document was available on the ICOM Europe website. This website has been unavailable

for the last few months (January and September 2022).

5 Offener Brief an die Vertreter*innen von ICOM Deutschland. In *OpenPetition* [online]. [accessed 2022-01-31]. Available from www: <<https://www.openpetition.de/petition/online/offener-brief-an-die-vertreterinnen-von-icom-deutschland/#petition-main>>.

international committees on how they and their members assessed the current museum definition and the Kyoto resolution proposal; in addition, they were asked about any “key concepts” that might be missing. ICOM Germany developed this into an online survey of its members in December 2019, which yielded 302 responses (4.6 % of the 6,501 members). 80.8 % rated the current definition as a good museum definition or one that could only be slightly improved, while 47.4 % attributed this character to the Kyoto resolution proposal. The individual text modules of the current definition were rated as “important” by at least 66.3 and at most 98 %, while the range for the Kyoto decision proposal was between 26.5 and 72.8 %. ICOM Switzerland realised an identical members’ survey with very similar results. There was no international response due to lack of participation: ICOFOM received only 13 submissions apart from ICOM Germany’s report.⁶

In parallel, the German organisation of public museum advisory bodies (KMBL) was informed about the definition process and asked for a statement. These advisory bodies accompany renewal processes in museums and influence state funding for museums; they prepare expert opinions on museum projects (or on non-museums) in various contexts. The KMBL expressed a conservative opinion: the current ICOM museum definition “*is in its short form precise and generally understandable for the public, sponsors, funders and museum stakeholders. The standards for practical museum work can be derived from this. KMBL is open to an adaptation and further development of the definition, as long*

as it can be clearly distinguished from a mission statement.”⁷

Together with ICOM Europe and ICOFOM, ICOM Germany was a cooperation partner of the *Journée des Comités 2020* initiated by ICOM France. This bilingual event, held on 10 March 2020 at the *Muséum nationale de l’Histoire naturelle*, Paris, aimed to promote the international exchange of ideas on museum definition. 41 committees participated through sent-in media or personal representations, and ICOM France subsequently published all the conference papers.⁸ As a result of the *Journée des Comités 2020*, recommendations were presented to the Executive Committee and Board on 23 April 2020. These required that there be at least two definition proposals and that the committees be given twelve months to form an opinion before making a decision, e.g. by consulting their members.

As a continuation of the communication with the members of ICOM Germany, it was planned to follow up a conference on 20 March 2020 with a members’ forum. Due to the restrictions of the COVID pandemic, the members’ forum was cancelled at short notice and held online on 18 June 2020; around eighty members took part. Three subgroups discussed the definition work and reported in the final plenary. The planning of the members’ forum was based on guidelines from December 2019. The then President of ICOM International had invited all

7 FREISE, Oliver and Hans LOCHMANN. Konferenz der öffentlichen Museumsberatung. Tagung 2020 in der Welterbestadt Quedlinburg. *Museumszeit. Mitteilungsblatt* [Museumsverband Niedersachsen und Bremen e.V.] 2020, no. 77, p. 37.

8 RAOUL-DUVAL, Juliette (ed.). *What definition do museums need? Proceedings of the ICOM committees’ day. Paris, Grande galerie de l’évolution (MNHN), March 10, 2020* [online]. Paris: ICOM France, 2020 [accessed 2022-01-31]. Available from www: <<https://www.icom-musees.fr/ressources/what-definition-do-museums-need>>.

ICOM committees to send in new definition proposals in the course of 2020.

New agenda, new activism

On 10 December 2020, the new agenda was presented, now all ICOM’s constituent units were to develop the vocabulary of the definition in multiple consultations with their members. Shortly afterwards, on 21 December 2020, the second open letter reached ICOM Germany. It achieved 210 signatures (199 from Germany)⁹ and demanded “*open discussion spaces for a long overdue new museum definition*” and “*a democratic and transparent discussion about the upcoming new socio-political and social demands on museums*”. In contrast to the first, the second open letter was anonymous. When asked via the website’s contact form, the initiator described herself or himself as an “*initiative that claims to represent the breadth of society and museum discourse. We therefore act exclusively as a group and anonymously, in order to correspond to the necessarily society-wide discussion about a new museum definition also in our structure*”. On its website, ICOM Germany expressed its surprise that a group that claims to consist of museum professionals wants to lead a discussion but does not want to be recognised in the process.

For “Consultation 1” of the new international agenda, ICOM Germany sent in the evaluation report of the 2019 member survey. The submission of twenty key terms or key concepts requested in “Consultation 2” suggested a second members’ forum. What was meant by key concepts remained undefined. An additional

6 GUIRAGOSSIAN, Olivia and Marion BERTIN. ICOFOM survey on the new museum definition. *ICOFOM Study Series*, 2020, vol. 48, no. 2, p. 275.

9 *OpenPetition* [online]. [accessed 2022-01-31]. Available from www: <<https://www.openpetition.de/petition/unterzeichner/icom-change#petition-main>>.

20 key concepts of ICOM Germany:	20 isolated terms out of the 20 key concepts:	key words of the Young Professionals Network:
information and documentation facility	Documentation	
cultural institution	Culture	
collection-centred institution	Collections	
a part of the research infrastructure	research*; science*	research*
an instrument of science communication	science*; communication*	
non-profit		
conserving / preserving ¹	Preserves	Preserve
researching ¹	[investigates]; research*	research*
exhibiting ¹	Presents	Exhibit
		Curate
mediating / interpreting / communicating ¹	interprets; communication*	
		educate*
		Impart
handing down to posterity ¹		
		enable analogue and digital accesses
tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment ²	heritage*; humanity; environment	
material natural and cultural heritage ²	material; nature*; culture*; heritage*	
evidence (documents) of nature and culture ²	nature*; culture*	
in the service of society	Society	
in the service of future generations	Future	
open to the public	Public	
for the purpose of education		educate*
for the purpose of study	Studies	
	Learning	
as an agency of knowledge		
<i>Marked terms¹ are grammatically connected with marked terms² like predicate and object.</i>		<i>The other proposed terms do not have an analogy in the parallel lists.</i>

Tab. 1: Methodological-analytical differences in key concepts and terms

problem was that the ICOFOM survey of 2019 already asked for key concepts; consequently, there could be no contradictions with the member survey of 2019. Therefore, the twenty highest-rated text elements were taken from it and shortened to twenty key words. The basic idea was that individual words can be connected to different schools of thought in the museum sector and can therefore be broadly consensual. In a preliminary online

survey, the members were able to assess this approach; 82 % agreed.

The online members' forum on 24 March 2021 linked different perspectives. Among other contributions, the "Young Professionals Network" presented its own twenty key concepts. More than half of this list evidenced certain intellectual attitudes in museum work (handle collections critically; reduce

barriers; sustainable; critical to/of discrimination; transparent; divers; multi-perspective; self-reflective; inclusive; willingness to change; related to the present; participation; taking a postcolonial perspective). In the closing plenary it became clear that the list of words proposed by the board of ICOM Germany was disliked, without any alternative being favoured. In the follow-up, the board decided that not the criticised twenty words but

their starting point, the broadly accepted key concepts from the 2019 membership survey, would be submitted.

The final procedural steps provoked another public protest. On 15 June 2021, 22 museum professionals, including several directors of renowned museums and two former presidents of ICOM Germany, published a “*plea for an essential museum definition of the world association ICOM*“. The first two principles are: “*The ICOM museum definition must name the unchanging core tasks of the museum: collecting, preserving, researching, presenting and communicating. The ICOM museum definition must include all museums worldwide – museums of every size, every genre, in every social and cultural environment. This can only be achieved if the definition focuses on the above mentioned fundamental aspects.*”¹⁰

Table 1 (see page 51) illustrates the methodological-analytical differences at this stage of development. It compares the key concepts with the highest approval ratings in 2019 with the terms selected as a discussion impulse for the 2021 members’ forum and the terms developed by the Young Professionals Network. It becomes clear that reducing concepts to terms opens up indeterminacies. Several terms can be placed in different contexts of meaning (marked with an asterisk * in the table). In addition, essential museological ideas disappear from view.

ICOM International’s subsequent analysis switched to considering only individual words, so that ICOM Germany’s submission went

through the same editing process at international level that had previously failed in Germany. At the author’s request, the ICOM Define Co-Chairs explained that the disaggregation of wording was done according to the rationale presented in the “Consultation 2” submissions. They also referred to “*the need of ICOM Define to know which terms are desired by committees to be concluded in a proposed museum definition*”.¹¹

For “Consultation 3”, ICOM Germany decided to submit the selection lists of ICOM Define to the members unchanged as an online survey. It was accessible until 15 September 2021 and yielded 322 valid contributions. Analogous to the template, the individual words were assigned to umbrella terms. As in the global survey, these umbrella terms were not open for evaluation.

The international requirement that a certain number of terms could be entered per category (umbrella term) meant that terms with significantly lower approval ratings were nevertheless listed. The following table uses the umbrella terms specified by ICOM Define and compares the twenty key concepts identified by ICOM Germany on the basis of the 2019 member survey with the terms favoured in Germany in 2021 – the submitted terms in normal font, the terms not submitted crossed out. The degree of approval from the respective survey is given in brackets.

Only a few statements were rated similarly in both surveys (“open to the public”; “researching”), even the much-cited core functions of museums suffered losses. If the placement in the context of the current or also the pre-

2007 museum definition was recognisable, the appreciation was mostly greater than it was the case with isolated terms. The special German opinion was reflected in the fact that in the worldwide evaluation, only in one category did all the terms fall short of the quorum of 66.6 % required for changes to ICOM’s statutes (“experience”); in Germany, this was also the case for “social values”.

Impressions at the halfway point of the second definition process

The suppression of key concepts and the introduction of obligatory umbrella terms had a lasting effect on the response behaviour of the members of ICOM Germany. Since the option of shaping the definition via a *genus proximum* was not offered, many formulations valued in Germany were no longer available for choice. The decomposition of “concepts” into individual words apparently led to the situation that words that were only familiar in a certain constellation received few votes, whereas the constellation had previously been highly valued (e.g. “evidence / documents of nature and culture”). Words that only concern a minority of museums disappeared from the vocabulary (“nature”), while the breakdown into word groups under umbrella terms placed words as generally accepted that received only moderate approval (e.g. in the German “expertise”, 32 %; in the international result “discovery / curiosity”, 35 %). For a definition text, it is to be expected that mentioning terms under several umbrella terms is excluded; if the given set of terms per umbrella term remains the same, even fewer accepted terms move up (e.g. in

¹⁰ Plädoyer für eine essenzielle Museumsdefinition des Weltverbands ICOM. In *Embassy of Culture* [online]. 15 June 2021 [accessed 2022-01-31]. Available from [www: <https://embassy-of-culture.com/project/mp4md_icom/>](https://embassy-of-culture.com/project/mp4md_icom/).

¹¹ BONILLA-MERCHAV, Laurant and Bruno BRULON SOARES. *E-mail to the author*. 28 July 2021.

20 key concepts of ICOM Germany:	German contribution to "Consultation 3":
the entity:	
institution (67 %)	institution (67 %)
information and documentation facility (87 %)	
cultural institution (83 %)	
collection-centred institution (81 %)	
a part of the research infrastructure (87 %)	
an instrument of science communication (82 %)	
the entity qualifier:	
non-profit (68 %)	non-profit (44 %)
open to the public* (98 %)	open to the public* (80 %)
	professional (48 %)
permanent (75 %)	permanent (44 %)
	expertise (32 %)
the key functions:	
	collects (71 %)
conserving/preserving (95 %)	preserves (54 %); conserves (48 %)
researching (93 %)	researches (83 %)
exhibiting (95 %)	displays/exhibits (79 %)
mediating (98 %)	communicates (45 %); interprets (23 %)
	educates* (63 %)
handing down to posterity (86 %)	
the museum's objects/subjects:	
tangible (96 %) and intangible (80 %) heritage of humanity and its environment	tangible and intangible (33 %); heritage* (67 %); environment (2 %)
material natural and cultural heritage (93 %)	nature/natural (10 %); culture/cultural (53 %); heritage* (67 %)
evidence (documents) of nature and culture (86 %)	evidence/documents (17 %)
	collection (52 %); knowledge* (44 %); memory (40 %)
experiences/targets:	
as an agency of knowledge (78 %)	knowledge* (49 %)
	reflection (49 %)
for the purpose of education (95 %)	education* (42 %)
for the purpose of study (82 %)	
	inspiration (41 %)
enjoyment (68 %)	enjoyment/entertainment (37 %)
social values:	
in the service of society (91 %)	service to society (54 %)
	respect (49 %)
	diversity (46 %)
	accessibility (45 %)
	sustainability (41 %)
	authenticity (40 %)
target & relationship:	
in the service of future generations (71 %)	
open to the public* (98 %)	open to the public* (90 %)
	community/society (70 %)
	audience/visitors (61 %)
	humanity (36 %)

Tab. 2: ICOM Germany key concepts and German contribution to "Consultation 3"

the international result “learning”, 25 %).¹²

The international as well as the German lists of terms are not entirely plausible: collections cannot be collected, knowledge cannot be restored, memory can perhaps be educated, but not exhibited. If the process had already ended with “Consultation 3” and only those terms were used in the ICOM museum definition that achieved the ICOM-typical quorum of at least 66.6 % internationally, the definition (excluding duplicate uses of terms) would read: “A museum is an inclusive and accessible institution open to the public that researches and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage and uses it for education in the service of society / community / the public.”

Accepting the umbrella terms established by ICOM Define, and assuming that the maximum set of terms per category specified in “Consultation 3” expresses a design intent of ICOM Define, the definition would read: “A museum is a permanent, professional, socially responsible, non-profit institution open to the public, governed by inclusivity, accessibility, sustainability, diversity, authenticity and ethics, which collects, conserves, researches, exhibits and communicates knowledge / tangible and intangible cultural heritage / memory, and uses this for education in the service of society / community / public / museum audience / active participants to enable enjoyment, reflection, discovery, experience and learning.”

Not only the deviations from the discussion results within ICOM Germany, but obvious

contradictions in these constructed texts and contrasts to traditional museum practice show that there is still much textual work to be done. A particular problem is hidden in the fact that “Consultation 3” asked not only about appreciation of terms, but also about legal or bureaucratic difficulties in using each term. However, these difficulties cannot be agreed upon by the majority. A single vote is sufficient to name these obstacles (if that vote has sufficient legal expertise).

Regardless of the outcome, the overlong preoccupation with the ICOM museum definition has brought about considerable changes in ICOM Germany. On this occasion, the first ever online member survey took place in 2019, and by 2021 this process seemed almost commonplace. The topic of the museum definition was used by outsiders as a vehicle to call for more activity from ICOM Germany. Among the members, differences of opinion emerged publicly for the first time in the form of informal groupings. The board felt compelled to clarify the association’s relationship with the “Young Professionals Network”.

In 2019, the German Museums Association, the KMBL and ICOM Germany jointly began updating the German document “Standards for Museums”. It was first published in 2006 and derived from the ICOM museum definition; it serves as a benchmark in museum consulting, but also in the certifications of museums for regional “seals of quality”. In the event that the revision of the ICOM museum definition takes longer than the work on the standards, it was agreed to use the 2007 text version, which will survive as the UNESCO museum definition,¹³ as

a basis. Perhaps the relevance of the ICOM museum definition has already passed its peak?

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¹² *The museum: second report on the ICOM member feedback for a new museum definition* (9 November 2021) [online]. [accessed 2022-01-31]. Available from www, only in the member space of <<https://www.icom.museum>>.

¹³ See No. 4, *UNESCO recommendation concerning the protection and promotion of museums and*

collections, their diversity and their role in society [online]. Paris, 17 November 2015 [accessed 2022-01-31]. Available from www: <<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246331>>.

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