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Transforming legacies, habits and futures: reshaping the collection at the Museum of European Cultures

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ABSTRACT

Collection development presents a major challenge for contemporary museums as part of wider efforts to address their changing societal role. This article considers what could be learned from a Berlin-based museum's attempts to rethink its collection as part of an institutional self-reflection. On its twentieth anniversary, the Museum of European Cultures (MEK) considered the blank spots within the collection. Focusing on how the MEK seeks to reshape the collection through creating a new policy and acquisition practice, the article demonstrates that collection development is enmeshed in complex institutional legacies, habits and future orientations. As numerous museums experience similar challenges regarding collection legacies, this article calls for making future-oriented collection development explicit. First, this includes a reflexive practice of accounting for the implicit futures incorporated within long-standing collection plotlines and institutional habits. Secondly, it necessitates reframing collection development as a bold, prefigurative practice, rather than just a form of corrective, preventative or anticipatory action. By developing prefigurative curatorial practice, museums could advance new approaches instead of being pushed and pulled by the past and the future. Learning to inhabit the future could transform the museums' social role and their capacity for actively shaping desirable outcomes.

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Introduction

In June 2019, the Museum of European Cultures (Museum Europäischer Kulturen, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, hereafter the MEK) hosted a conference entitled *What's Missing? Collecting and Exhibiting Europe*. The participating curators, educators and researchers debated the blank spots 'in the mission of reflexive and critical Europeanization'. The event was organised as part of the MEK's twentieth anniversary, celebrating the establishment of the museum in its current form. For the MEK organisational team, 'the museum has just come out of puberty, which is always a time of overt self-awareness and self-criticism, and of struggling to find one's own path' (Edenheiser 2020, 15).

The conference focused on museums, which just like the MEK have shifted their focus away from the collections of folklore and folk art. In the light of this wider transformation of former folkloric museums into Europeanised, post-national institutions (Rosenberg 2018), the event critically probed the museum 'blanks spots' or

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objects, narratives, methods and actors which have not received any (or enough) attention, and are missing from our museum practices and reflections on contemporary daily lives and societies in Europe (Edenheiser 2020, 15)

For the MEK organisers, the question of ‘what’s missing’ in these museums has gained a key importance. In the light of current heated disputes about heritage and identity in Europe, the role of folklore and folk art museums seemed unclear (2020, 16). The conference discussions suggested that the blank spots within the historical or folkloric collections might be the cause of such puzzle. Although the perceived blank spots might differ from institution to institution, their common feature is that the folkloric collections ‘miss’ the diversity of people, objects and narratives in a changing Europe today. With the glaring omissions, the museums might have a reduced capacity to tell stories about an ever-changing Europe. At a critical juncture of the European project, the museums with their collection blank spots might risk fading into obscurity.

This article explores the ways in which the MEK team currently seeks to address its own blank spots through collection development practice. The first section examines the historically constructed collection plotlines and the corresponding omissions. The second part focuses on emerging institutional policies and habits designed to grow the collection and address the gaps. By examining how the MEK as a museum straight ‘out of puberty’ aims to reshape its collection in everyday curatorial work, the article raises wider questions about how the collection development initiatives perpetuate or transgress institutional legacies and habits. Finally, the article offers potential ways forward for reshaping collections in the MEK and beyond. It argues for an inclusion of prefigurative collection development, one that both addresses *What’s Missing* and seeks to transform the museum’s societal role by learning to inhabit desired futures.

Research Methods

The article draws on the archival and ethnographic research undertaken at the MEK between March 2019 and February 2021. As part of a wider anthropological study exploring the MEK’s collections, I spent thirteen months in the museum’s library and archive, attended the staff Collection Concept workshop, the anniversary conference and the regular curatorial meetings (Wissenschaftliches Kolleg, hereafter WiKo). The WiKos concerned current curatorial tasks and included group discussions about exhibition plans and potential acquisitions.

With a growing interest in the MEK’s emergent collecting practice, I conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews with the past and present curatorial and educational team, including the employees of the MEK’s East and West German predecessor institutions. The analysis used interview recordings, fieldwork notes and transcripts, images taken during fieldwork as well as museum publications, including exhibition catalogues, annual reports, grey literature and the collection policy. The curatorial team was given an opportunity to comment on the first draft of this paper and several members of the MEK’s staff provided additional context about historical developments and the identified challenges. In the course of the conversations, the majority of respondents reflected on the tensions within its collection. Before exploring the historical roots of these tensions, the next section explores the current scholarly debates on curatorial dilemmas, as well as their different dimensions related to everyday life and temporality.

Collections, institutional habits and future orientations

Museums are often imagined as time capsules, launching objects into the future (Durrans 2003; Knell 2004; Gosden, Larson, and Petch 2007). Scholars critically explore how collections and heritage forms grow with time, carrying the sediments of the past processes of acquisition selection, documentation, classification and valuation (Pearce 1995; Macdonald 2006; Harrison 2015; Lähdesmäki 2016; Bennett et al. 2017; Urdea 2018). The traces of selectivity and historical conventions of ordering and knowledge production continue to taint collections (McCarthy 2007; Kros 2014; Gibson 2020; Turner 2020).

As museum professionals are increasingly aware of the legacies of their predecessors and their value judgements, contemporary collection development causes growing curatorial uncertainties (Clifford 2011; Morgan and Macdonald 2020). Contemporary collecting becomes a challenging sphere of negotiations about collection focus and future value (Were and King 2012). Several studies highlight these curatorial dilemmas regarding balancing historical worth and representativeness (Macdonald and Morgan 2018; Ho 2019). Acquiring objects for museums not only poses problems of selection but also points to anxieties about curatorial mistakes that might foreclose futures or inadequately address endangerment and loss (Elsner and Cardinal 1994; DeSilvey and Harrison 2020). The growing research on curatorial dilemmas provides limited insight into the specific institutional contexts of collection development or how they might feed into the particular balancing acts. As this article will demonstrate, the institutional context plays an important role in the curatorial choices, tensions on the ground and fears about the future.

With curatorial choice under focus, recent museum scholarship also sheds light on the strong potential of curating to affect change, and enact a vision of a better future (Lee 2003; Janes and Sandell 2019; Chipangura and Mataga 2021). Collecting emerges as a potentially transformative social practice, requiring an engagement with the contemporary issues and public debates (Leontine 2013; Hart and Chilton 2015; Vlachou 2019). As collections might become active players in public debates and social justice struggles, working with objects emerges as an experimental act of engagement with history and society. This necessitates a commitment to joint production, participation, interdisciplinarity, dialogue and exchange (Förster 2008; Chui Fan and Ting 2019). In order to understand how curatorial choices enable or hinder the future potential of collections, we need to develop an insight into the day-to-day curatorial practice and the wider context of decision-making, including the role of the historically constructed blank spots.

Discussing the ways in which past experience infiltrates what lies ahead, the anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup (2005) argues that all social practice is undertaken within a plot. Everyday actions are emplotted 'within a moral horizon and within a social context that we interpret and project forward as we go along' (Hastrup 2005, 11). The plot is the thread integrating individual action within a vision of a social world, linking the past with an imaginatively acted upon future. The plot marks a line of development, continuously connecting the past to the hereafter. It also constitutes a representation of the whole action, in which the future emerges as its anticipated realisation. Hastrup's research enables us to pay attention to how long-standing plots and everyday actions affect the future. The plot then acts as an orienting device, giving meaning to everyday curatorial practice.

Bryant and Knight (2019) reflect on the role of orientation in examining the interrelations between the future and everyday practice. The future saturates the present in the form of orientations such as anticipation, expectation, speculation, uncertainty, potentiality, hope, and destiny. These orientations inform the ways in which we navigate everyday life, some demanding urgency, engaging imagination or improvisation, others causing exhaustion, disillusion or fatigue (2019, 19). They are performative and habitual, depending on long-standing commitments, repetitive performances, bodies, processes, decisions and path dependencies. Sara Ahmed (2007) explores how

orientations intersect with everyday action within institutions. Institutions, Ahmed argues, are shaped by those who inhabit them and as such work to reproduce habits. This way, institutions act as orientation devices.

Both Ahmed's (2007) and Bryant and Knight's (2019) work shed light on the how everyday action becomes enmeshed with orientations, be it pointing to the future or particular, established institutional habits. This raises the question of the extent to which habits implicitly or explicitly shape the future. In heritage studies, Borck (2019) recently used the concept of prefiguration to explore how desired futures could be performed and enacted in the present (see also in Yates 2015; Holtorf 2020). Here, means are seen as having a potential to create the ends, from constructing experimental social arrangements to embodying values in order to ensure their future relevance. For example, prefigurative practice in archival work involves a range of pedagogical tools, outreach programmes and open-access policies to enact more equitable futures (Lobo 2019, 79). Prefigurative practice is an exploration of the potential of everyday practice, not only as enmeshed with future orientations but also as inhabiting the future in the present. Drawing on the above research, this article seeks to explore the interrelated plots, habits and future orientations involved in the reshaping of the collection with the institution. This requires an understanding of the museum's complex history, the ways in which it had shaped the collection threads and gaps and how this influences current curatorial practice.

Shaping the MEK's collection

The collection and its perceived blank spots, as debated during the *What's Missing* conference, were shaped by the MEK's institutional past. The originating MEK acquisitions derive from two collections of the former Museum of German Costume and Household Products and the Royal Prussian Art Collection, later developed as the European Department of the Museum of Ethnology in Berlin (hereafter EM). The core collection of costume and household products aimed to salvage disappearing forms of rural life. Collecting was driven by fear of irreversible changes in the countryside that might be caused by the homogenising effects of industrialisation (Tietmeyer 2013). The museum aimed to salvage cultural landscapes (Jahn 1889), imagined as soon-to-vanish rural localities with distinct vernacular material culture. The curators felt that 'tangible folklore' was neglected area of research (Jahn 1889, 336). They tried to demonstrate its value, arguing that collections could be a folklore archive for future researchers, providing an insight into local points of view (1889, 336). This plotline imagined objects within bounded, local cultural space and the moral horizon of an extinct German countryside.

This rural collection gained prominence in the 1930s, albeit within a new, nationalistic plotline. In the paradigm of the Nazi Germany folklore, the objects were mobilised to represent ethnic nationhood. As the catalogue of the 1935 German Folk Art exhibition illustrates, the plot has radically changed. Within the national focus, objects on display were mobilised for a new narrative on 'race and space, folk art and people's morals' (Ausstellung Deutsche Bauernkunst 1935, 9). As the rural collection became reevaluated as symbols of the nation, the collection plotline worked to evidence the ongoing 2000-year settlement area of the Germanic people across Europe.

The chaos of Second World War brought dramatic disruption to the collection, leading to the loss of up to 80% of the objects (Pretzell 1962, 108). Post-1945, in Cold War-era Berlin, the remaining artefacts were stored and displayed in separate folklore museums. To add to the confusion, most pre-war documentation remained in East Berlin. Both museums of folklore in the Eastern and Western parts of the city tried to make up for missing objects by seeking private donations or purchasing objects on flea markets. However, many of these replacement artefacts lacked provenance data, creating information blank spots. This missing documentation poses significant challenges to curatorial work today.

In the 1980s, collecting practice shifted on both two sides of the Iron Curtain towards mass-produced material culture and a focus on documenting urban life (Neuland-Kitzerow 2005, 156). In East Berlin, this new urban-focused plotline was driven by a policy alignment to GDR politics. The curators aimed to address the absence of objects related to urban working classes, identified as a glaring blank spot in the predominantly rural collection (Hauptaufgaben der Museen der DDR bis 1978). The fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification opened a new chapter in the collection's history. In 1992, the formerly East and West Berlin folklore museums were reunited and integrated with the European section of the Ethnological Museum. Based in the former West Berlin, the EM collection focused on Europe as composed of distinct ethnic, national and regional entities (Figure 1). In this plot, objects indicated bundles of territory-community-culture (Cesari 2017), such as the 'English', the 'Italians' or the 'Sami'.

In light of the heated debates about folklore in the 1990s, institutional pasts became a political and conceptual burden. Several museums began to relabel their folklore and folk art collections as examples of everyday practice. The reformed museums, many of which were represented during the *What's Missing* conference, reinterpreted the collection through a Europeanised lens (Früh 2014). The MEK's post-Cold War institutional transformation was dominated by this move to reinvent national ethnographic museums (Kaiser, Krankenhagen and Poelhs 2014, 30). In 1999, the newly merged institution was renamed as the Museum of European Cultures, becoming part of the reunited State Museums of Berlin (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) and the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz). The museum's vision was an idea that 'Europe's shape is the result of different cultural contacts' (Karasek and Tietmeyer 1999, 19). In the new institutional plotline, objects that had marked cultural landscapes or ethnic cultures were reframed as the local expressions of a diverse, newly unified Europe. Within this Europeanised plotline, every artefact could be treated as an 'object cosmos' (Tietmeyer 2008, 9), a microcosm capable of unlocking rich historical and social narratives about interconnected Europe.

Rosenberg (2018) suggested that the MEK opted for a 'quantitative' integration, presenting Europe, as a neutral platform for cultural contact (2018, 28). This form of connecting discrepant collections embodied a wider museological tendency of representing multiculturalism as a possession (Bennett 2006). Implicit in this new plot is a perceived boundary between European and 'non-European cultures' (Karasek and Tietmeyer 1999, 31). As de Cesari observed, this strategic European reframing:

did not fully purge the collection of its built-in biases—in particular, the enduring legacy of nineteenth-century academic and museum practices (...) as well as by the distinct cultural-geographic understanding of "Europe" embedded in the collection itself (2017, 28).

This way, the MEK's new plot of a seemingly neutral, multicultural Europe, imagined as intertwined through cultural contacts, risked generating new blind spots and reinforcing boundaries between the 'European' and the 'non-European' collections.

The potted history of the MEK demonstrates that the plotlines in the museum were changing through time. Each plotline involves different curatorial choices and produces a set of distinct blank spots in the collection. For example, the initial collections of rural salvage objects were emplotted in an anticipated decline of rural life in industrialising Germany. In the 1930s, the collection plotline shifted to fulfil a nationalistic narrative linking people, race, and territory with the political myth of Germanic Europe. Each of these collection changes resulted in idiosyncrasies, duplications and blank spots. The plotline of rural, cultural landscapes closes off acquisitions capturing the changing life of the countryside. The 1930s plot produces absent people in collections, as it denies value of material culture rendered as outside of the nation. The double-life of the post-war museum on both sides of the Iron Curtain is now materialised through collection duplications and significant omissions in the dispersed documentation. The enduring collection legacies and their respective



Figure 1. A set of objects from the former Ethnological Museum collection representing the ‘English’, now in the MEK stores. Photograph by Magdalena Buchczyk.

blank spots, as the *What’s Missing* conference highlighted, remain a curatorial challenge today. The next section focuses on the ways in which the MEK’s curatorial team aims to address this issue and reshape the collection for the future.

Reconceptualising the collection

Since 1999, as the MEK became Europeanised, the museum required a new approach to collection development. Over the past twenty years, the curatorial team has advanced a range of novel practices of contemporary, problem-oriented and participative collecting (e.g. Leontine 2013). This working knowledge has recently been theorised and developed through the MEK’s collection policy (hereafter: the Collection Concept). The process of writing the Collection Concept became part of wider institutional reflection on the collection’s constitution, its gaps, biases and potential.

In practice, as one curator argued, the Collection Concept acts as a resource for the current team and its successors, helping them in the head-scratching task of understanding the rationale of past acquisitions. As one of the curators explained, future staff would not need to speculate about the intentions of their forerunners but:

Could look at what the Collection Concept was and say, “Aha, that’s why we do not have these things because we have such a form, or we have a concept, and we know why these things were collected”

The Collection Concept aims to render curatorial choices visible and to make underlying acquisition values explicit. This way, it works to ensure transparency and provide future curators with information about past decision-making processes and mechanisms that have shaped the collection.

The policy also plays an important role in day-to-day work with the collection through aligned collection development procedures, acting as a roadmap that sets out future directions for collection development. The document construes the MEK collection as a memory bank of material and immaterial culture ‘in which the diversity of European cultures and ways of life in the past and the present can be preserved for posterity’ (Collection Concept 2019, 6). Additionally, the Collection Concept identifies the role of the MEK collection as a driver of social processes through participation, inclusion and stakeholder dialogue. Finally, it outlines that the objects need to be part of ongoing evaluation to ensure the collection’s historical and contemporary relevance.

In order to ensure relevance of the acquisitions, any proposed new object becomes part of a collection review. One consideration for acquisitions relates to ‘closing gaps’, a principle that poses questions about what is seen as a gap and what is perceived as missing in key collection areas. For example, much of the collection includes craft objects and the museum intends to develop this collection thread to document how intangible cultural heritage changes over time. Within the collection review process, the Collection Concept also asks if a potential acquisition constitutes a significant ‘leap’ within the plotline. The ‘leap’ is a means of dealing with profusion (Macdonald and Morgan 2018), designed to put a brake on collecting an overly-large series of objects. For example, in the collection thread of everyday drinking vessels, the museum would not collect each type of container but would acquire the first recyclable coffee cup as an indication of a leap into a new, more sustainable practice.

In addition to the considerations about collection leaps and gaps, the Concept sets out a list of concrete criteria for proposed acquisitions. The first set of indicators relates to the potential object’s fit with the vision of the Concept. Secondly, the acquisition benchmarks concern the object’s material conditions and the implications in terms of conservation and institutional costs. Thirdly, the museum requires from potential collection candidates that documentation would include sufficient provenance data as well as supplementary object-biographical information. Finally, yet importantly, the criteria stipulate that key stakeholders should be actively engaged in collecting. This aims to develop a participatory model of acquisitions and prevent the creation of collections by specialised curators exercising their passions.

In light of its historical collections, the MEK’s current acquisition practice links to past thematic areas such as work and trade, religion, belief and ritual or visual culture. At the same time, the team has identified new themes to reflect pressing social issues. These new priorities include processes of identity formation, Europe within a global context, sustainability and the increasing understanding of the correlation between culture and nature. The new objects, therefore, need to either correspond with the existing key categories or advance the new selected areas of interest. Through these criteria, the Concept acts as a framing device for the collection history and its future development, defining the parameters of a future museum plot.

Hastrup (2005) highlights how decision-making processes are part of a plot, stretching between the past and the anticipated future. Collection development, codified in the Concept, operates within the plot. It embodies, in this way, the fundamental ambiguity of relating and distancing the current museum from its existing plotlines. On the one hand, the collection is supposed to be spring-boarded by the object leaps. Within the framework of the Concept, objects should be forward-facing, moving through the threads of collection groups, making jumps and responding to changing social contexts. On the other, the Concept is embedded in the existing collections with their information infrastructure, epistemic categories and internal logics. Looking for collection gaps might strengthen long-standing threads.

This way, although the Concept acts as a mechanism of future-proofing the collection by making it more transparent and relevant, the plotlines could haul the object in certain directions. They could situate the collection candidates at the centre of the plot while pushing others to the margins. As each potential object needs to be cross-checked across a number of criteria to pass a test of becoming a legitimate museum candidate, the framework significantly limits the types of artefacts that qualify for a place in the collections. As a result, although the Concept is envisioned as a device for collection development, it can potentially close access for objects that do not adhere to its categories or to existing matrix of plotlines. To illustrate these dynamics in the process of reshaping collections, the next section discusses the acquisition of new objects in practice, reflecting on how this might transgress or reinforce certain institutional habits.

Developing the collection through acquisitions

The MEK Collection Concept plays an important role in reshaping the collection through a new acquisition practice. As one of the curators explained:

Every acquired object is now presented and discussed in our scientific circle. And then we say, yes, okay, we can acquire this. It's very important that it cannot work any other way as that's a criterion. Of course, even trivial criteria play a role, as one needs to consider whether we can provide space for an object.

The curator emphasised that this collective decision-making was a way to reframe collection development as a more consistent and transparent practice. To explore this practice in action, this section uses an example of the WiKo curatorial meeting.

The collection review takes place during WiKos when the team members propose objects for the collection. During the spring 2019 session, the curators suggested a number of possible collection candidates. The discussion began with two donations – sketches made by a famous illustrator and a commemorative coffee set. These were accepted as part of the collection threads – the sketches complemented the existing graphic and advertising collection. According to the Collection Concept, the coffee set was considered a developmental leap – it represented the everyday material culture of WWI commemoration. From these two artefacts, the team proceeded to a discussion of Brexit-related merchandise including a T-Shirt. The objects were accepted as they captured both the ordinary and the commercial facets of the Brexit public debate. The objects were considered a good fit with a collection thread linked to contested ideas of Europe, and supplemented a growing Brexit-related section of the collection.

Following these accepted acquisitions, a team member put forward Kraftwerk's Trans-Europe Express music album. The curator argued that the object indicated the ways in which European nations were connected through transport infrastructure. For the proposer, Kraftwerk's music captured an emerging idea of Europe as a travelled space. Through train or cheap flight connections, Europe became a packaged visitor experience. The curator later mentioned in a private conversation that her candidate was inspired by a conversation she had with a journalist. The media team visited MEK to take photographs and conduct interviews based on a 'European' object. The museum team's object choices disappointed the journalist as none of the collection examples selected summarised the idea of Europe adequately. The Kraftwerk album was an attempt to have such an iconic, recognisable object at hand to represent these ideas.

In contrast to the Brexit object or the war commemoration set, the album's candidacy caused controversy and sparked a discussion about the object's potential.

Following a debate, it was decided that the album did not pass the MEK admission test as it seemed to have failed on both the criteria of 'everydayness' and 'Europeanness'. Most importantly, it was not clear how the object would fit in the existing collection and how could it be used in future exhibitions. As the group enumerated and debated different examples of European items, the discussion turned away from the controversial Kraftwerk case to another potential acquisition.

The object was absent in the meeting but well known to the participants. The proposed dress (Figure 2) was part of the 'Wedding Dreams' exhibition and appeared on display between 28 September 2018 and 28 July 2019. This silk wedding gown with a large bow on the chest and a long train became one of the centrepieces of the show. Initially displayed at the Berlin's Museum of Decorative Arts (Kunstgewerbemuseum), it was considered a legendary collaboration between a high-street fashion retailer (H&M) and an Amsterdam fashion house (Viktor & Rolf). Within the MEK, the dress was not acquired as a design object but as an indication of European experience, migration and global connectedness. For the proposing curator, the European value was demonstrated by its unique story. The piece was bought by a French woman, living in London, for a wedding that took place in Las Vegas. Manufactured in Bangladesh for a Dutch designer and Swedish clothing brand, the object materialised the global supply chain network of European fast fashion.



Figure 2. Wedding dress on display at the MEK. Photograph by Magdalena Buchczyk.

The curator suggested that the dress stood out not only for its unique, affective story, but also documented how wedding rituals intersect with popular culture. As ideas of dream weddings have evolved over time, the dress is part of these ever-changing patterns in the material culture and ways in which the market came to influence them. Situated at the intersection of design and high street, it pointed to wedding dreams as status aspirations and ideas of gender normativity. In this light, the object gained additional value as a key 'leap' within the collection group of wedding attire. The object has met the key criteria of the Concept such as documented provenance, object biography and good material condition. It spoke to the predefined collection themes of global Europe, (lack of) sustainability and identity formation. The group agreed that the applicant dress met the requirements for acquisition, and raised their hands in favour.

Rather than analysing the intricacies of the WiKo discussions, I want to investigate the collection candidates (the wedding dress and the Kraftwerk album) to explore how collection futures might be imagined at the point of acquisition. In the Kraftwerk case, the group felt that it was not clear what plotlines about Europeanness the album was supposed to follow. The object had no imagined future. In contrast, the dress was accepted as it could tell more than one story and be used in multiple potential exhibitions. Unfolding the dress in the museum store was envisioned as a discovery of multiple possible contexts. At the same time, the successful candidate object needed to demonstrate clear connections with the historical collection. The dress occupied a clear place in the Concept plot as sitting within the existing wedding dress collection group and lending itself to potential exhibition futures.

The new Collection Concept and the WiKo decision-making process of the curatorial circle aim to create new concepts and approaches to collection development. This way, the goal is to develop new institutional habits. These two objects highlight the challenges and opportunities of putting new approaches into practice. The introduction of acquisition by collective approval within the WiKo team aims to move acquisitions away from individual curatorial judgment. The deliberation on collection candidates aims to prevent the creation of collections reflecting specific curatorial passions. The curatorial team acts as a forum for asserting an object's value and ensuring that the acquisition is in line with the wider strategic horizon of the Collection Concept. As the fieldwork vignette from the WiKo demonstrated, collection development through the discussions of the scientific circle shift in the direction of a consensus-driven practice.

Bennett (2006, 67) questioned the potential of intellectual efforts to transgress long-standing habits. Through the WiKo scientific circle framework, the acquisition process depends on rhetoric and story-telling capacity of the person putting forward the candidate. Collection development might risk becoming an intellectual matter in which curators deploy certain rhetorical devices to tell compelling stories to their colleagues and superiors. Through persuasion, the acquired objects might establish a fuzzy middle ground rather than change ‘mainstream museum work’ (Edenheiser 2020, 16). Considerate and agreed choices, rather than disrupting the established epistemic categories, addressing gaps or setting new agendas, could reinforce the dominant plotlines. As objects hit many buttons of the Collection Concept to be accepted, they might become likely approximations of many things. Consensus-driven acquisitions might also risk perpetuating particular versions of Europeanness and multiculturalism (Cesari 2017; Bennett 2006). This way, rather than strong statements about a debated social and cultural issue, they might risk becoming polite diplomats trying not to cause trouble, complain, disagree or make a stink.

As consensus-led collection development sits in the WiKo balance, it might lead to the acquisitions marking a particular common ground. Consensual agreement might depend on a sense of familiarity or implicit knowledge about the world that the WiKo team collectively inhabits (Ahmed 2007, 155). Such acquisitions might take the museum where it is already heading rather than challenge the direction or put the course of action in doubt. Rather than developing and reshaping the collection, the objects might just slightly diverge from habitual ways of doing things. This way, the new habits of deliberation and acquisition practice, might paradoxically perpetuate institutional habits, risk moving along well-trodden institutional paths or orienting things to keep them in place (Ahmed 2007, 158).

From future orientations to refigurative collection development

we make cultural history for the future. What do you call that . . . Anticipatory collecting? We have to be clear about that. Of course, we will address questions of the present in the exhibitions. Sure, but the collection is for the future

As the MEK is coming of age, as one of the MEK curators remarked, collection development works to anticipate the museum’s future. If future orientations inform the ways in which the curators navigate everyday practice (Bryant and Knight 2019), what perspectives on the future could be found among the MEK team?

Discussing prospective institutional development triggered a range of hopes and fears about potential transformations. One curator aspired to removing Europe from the museum’s name and refocusing on global social entanglements within the collection. She felt that the distinction between European and non-European cultures was artificial and dispensable. Another curator asserted that given a history of various museum changes, renaming and institutional reshuffling, it is possible that the future collection serves an entirely different museum. For example, the curator reflected, the MEK could become a women’s museum, because of the predominantly female-oriented historical material culture, the profile of the curatorial team and the gender-specific audience. Rather than thinking about challenging the current implicit boundaries, this curator proposed that the future museum could realistically address its core collection and visitor profile.

During the interviews, a further team member started to present a potential worst-case scenario:

a development towards a museum for German folklore, which is then politically instrumentalised, because there are nationalist aspirations all over Europe and the basic idea of the museum is a very nationalist one. It would really be the nightmare if the political tides turned in such a way, that someone would again come up with the idea to understand the costumes and objects as a mark of German identity. But I really don’t think that I am ready for a future, I think that we are still at the beginning of the museum of European cultures that we are still like a butterfly that has emerged from the caterpillar

Although the metaphor of a museum ready to spread its wings might indicate a hopeful development, the curator's narrative signalled profound anxiety about unsettling developments. The seeds of a future that could be a haunting return of the past lie in the collection of folklore as certain objects could potentially be misused.

Concern for the future is expressed in a frustrated glance at the museum store with its stacks of unusable objects, it weaves itself into the feeling of novelty at the sight of a promising collection candidate or the puzzlement at the discovery of an object file with lacking provenance information. It turns acquisition choices into seeds of possibilities. During informal conversations, the curators indicated that undesired futures are part of collection plotlines, performing possible worlds into being, signalling directions and gaining considerable weight in certain scenarios.

Collection development often works to reorient the museum's future through corrective, preventative and anticipatory means. This reorientation practice focuses on what could be missing in the existing collection that might be needed for posterity. In this context, acquisitions aspire to be corrective tools, attempts to fix past mistakes and patch up gaps. This is expressed in adding objects representing marginalised groups who had no place within the past museum plotlines. They also act as preventative measures, working to put a stop to exclusion and epistemic violence directed towards people and cultural phenomena that had been missing in collections.

The principle of anticipatory collecting might address the challenge of capturing contemporary social phenomena. Anticipatory collecting might lead to establishing new collection groups. For example, the MEK acquired a set of objects related to the Covid-19 to capture the pandemic moment in Europe. Anticipatory collecting can also be exemplified through the themes of the Collection Concept. The MEK curators identified the themes of sustainability and global Europe, and collect objects capturing these perceived current topics. The curators anticipate as that these themes will play a more significant role in the future, and the groups are designed to follow these shifts. However, as the MEK's past illustrates, the future might outlast and outwit the museum, exceeding the wildest expectations. Reshaping collections tainted by a complex past and unpredictable future might require action beyond preventative, corrective or even anticipatory tools. To make history for the future, collection development might instead require explicit pulling of desirable futures into the present.

This article thus calls for collection development to be considered as a prefigurative practice. Originally used in the context of social movements and radical politics, prefiguration was seen as embodying 'forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal' (Boggs 1977). Rather than responding and expecting, prefigurative practice in heritage could use collection decision-making and heritage management for the active shaping of future outcomes (Holtorf 2020, 3). If collections are made for posterity, prefigurative approaches to collections would focus on planting the seeds of the future into the collections of today.

Outcome-oriented, prefigurative collection development could move curatorial work away from some of the dilemmas concerning missing objects, profusion of material culture or loss. Instead, it could help reimagine collection development as an area of experimentation, creation of alternatives and mobilising everyday practice for future relevance (Yates 2015).

Prefigurative collection development could unmoor the collection from existing plotlines and their epistemic burden. Instead of identifying the blank spots within a problematic plot, this could mean reimaging the material beyond existing knowledge categories. For example, collection development could suspend or abandon the reliance on dominant collection groups to embrace the collection's social justice potential in order to create a more equitable, sustainable and inclusive future (Jeffrey and Dyson 2021). This moving beyond the established knowledge formats could drive acquisitions against some of the historical plotlines to help prevent the unsettling scenarios implied by the pre-existing collection (e.g. material culture that might lend itself to instrumentalisation by national socialist or racist politics).

Countering residual plotlines could involve developing new routines of disposal and de-growth (Förster 2008; Morgan and Macdonald 2020), improving with a range of acquisition formats and opening the collection to become an active resource for social action. Rather than identifying future themes, it could focus on embodying values and enacting institutional practices to ensure their future relevance. Such work would embrace active intervention into the collected material, the creation of new norms and the establishment of sharing practices to make prefigurative methods sustainable.

Beyond patching up blank spots, prefigurative collection development would take the notion of repair seriously. This would supersede existing methods of adding missing components to expand on and add to long-standing plotlines. Attending to gaps should instead help to build up areas of counterpower and capability to enact social change (Chui Fan and Ting 2019, 201). Considering the various social and economic effects of repair, prefigurative collection practice would work through areas of marginalisation and exclusion in collections. This would open collection development to the ethos of repair as care, social care, improvisation and co-production of knowledge (Morse 2020).

For Graeber (2009, 235), prefigurative action involves the creation and elaboration of new kinds of institutions and interactions. Prefigurative collection development would question the existing underpinning institutional arrangements. It would critically address the effects of decision-making habits to help develop new forms of learning and practice (Lobo 2019). Collection development could play a social role not as a facilitator of participation or inclusion but as an entry point for ongoing institutional change, challenging the established ways in which habitual bodies come to be inscribed within institutions (Ahmed 2007). This way, collection development could play an active part in transforming these habits and the museum itself.

By developing new avenues of prefigurative collection development (beyond the corrective, preventative or anticipatory approaches) for institutional renewal, the collection could be capable of actively making a history for the future. In a time of multiple curatorial dilemmas, prefigurative institutions would seek to 'invent a new future for themselves and their communities, or at least help create an image of a desirable future' (Janes and Sandell 2019, 17). Rather than sleepwalking into the future, museums could reorient themselves, nurture experimentation and even perhaps effect the desired outcome.

Conclusion

The MEK's coming of age has prompted significant reflection. This involved steps for developing the collection through the articulation of the Collection Concept and new acquisition practice. This also included asking broader questions about 'missing' things and people in the collection, and connecting the museum's past with the contemporary moment. As the recent scholarship on such curatorial dilemmas illustrates, many museums face similar challenges regarding the collection's role in society. These encompass complex questions of value, representation or ways of adequately addressing the challenge of profusion, extinction and loss. Amidst uncertain futures and difficult decisions, museums once again face the choice of continuing on an established path or leaving safe collecting behind and moving beyond approaches that turned them into 'unmanageable time capsules' (Were and King 2012, 4).

Reflecting on the MEK's collection development, I hope to have demonstrated that grasping how the future orients the present involves more than acknowledging the potential value or prospective uses of the objects. All acquisitions are enmeshed in temporal threads, connecting the collection's past, present and future. The practice of bringing new objects into collections sits at the intersection of pre-existing plotlines, established habits and powerful future orientations ranging from hopes and fears, to anticipation and expectation.

Collection development, as the MEK curatorial narratives show, marks the ways in which the museum future awakens the present. The curators routinely anticipate different potential uses of the collection, fear the return of a nationalist folkloric agenda, and speculate about forthcoming institutional changes. They also acknowledge the unknown, potential shapes of the future museum – could it be gender-specific or more global in scope? Beyond individual curatorial dilemmas, this article calls for an explicit acknowledgement of the future-oriented capabilities of collections. These considerations need to move beyond questioning persistent accumulation or considering how to mitigate gaps or prevent loss. Thinking about sustainable heritage and the social role of museums necessitates productive engagement with different institutional modes of relating to the future. As the post-folkloric museums are at a critical juncture of reevaluating their social role as collecting institutions, refiguration can help them unsettle the persistent institutional habits, inviting new improvisatory practices in what institutions might be and what they could do (Cooper 2020). Prefigurative collection development could be part of a new set of transformative actions aimed at pulling desirable futures into the present. As Janes and Sandell (2019) reminded us, posterity has arrived and more unanticipated futures might be yet to come. Museums need to learn new ways of actively shaping and inhabiting the future rather than falling into it.

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