Rapid Response Collecting: A Curatorial Strategy for Museums to Promote Notions of Democracy and Social Equality

A thesis presented by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

In the subject of

Arts and Society

Utrecht University

Utrecht, The Netherlands

June 12, 2020

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Abstract

We live in a museum age, Steven Conn writes. Indeed, since the turn of the 21st-century museums are taking a more central role in society as more and more people visit them each year. At the same time, an increasing amount of voices in the art world are calling for a more politically and socially engaged cultural sphere. This demand strengthens the urgency for the establishment of new forms of curating which will cater to this necessity for museums to be more involved with society through political and societal engagement.

In this thesis I suggest Rapid Response Collecting (RRC) as a strategy for museums to increase their social engagement. RRC is a new and developing method of curating that responds to recent societal, political, and cultural events by selecting, acquiring, and presenting artifacts that reflect on these events. It is increasing the position of the museum as a socially engaged institution and elevates it into a key player in crucial societal debates. Furthermore, RRC encourages curators to develop participatory curating methods together with the institution's immediate community. Perhaps most importantly, RRC puts a spin on the fundamental question about the relevance of museums today, challenging the role museums and curators currently play in society.

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1. Introduction

"We live in a museum age", Steven Conn writes in his book *Do Museums Still Need Objects?*.[1] Indeed, as he continues to explain, since the turn of the 21st-century museums are taking a more central role in the cultural field as more and more people visit them each year. This turns museums into institutions with great economic potential and an even greater capacity for shaping the public mind. At the same time, we are more exposed to news now than ever before. It is becoming increasingly difficult to avoid politics as social media regularly floods our feed with news articles and political commentary when we scroll through it daily. A question worth contemplating rises: how can curators and museum-directors harness both this increased political and societal awareness and the hightend interest in museums and turn them into valuable discussions and learning experiences? As voices in the art world are calling for a more politically and socially engaged cultural sphere, new initiatives within museums are pushing these institutions towards establishing socially and politically engaged agendas.

1.1 Political and Societal Engagement Within Museums

Politics play a role in museums ever since their establishment. These institutions have always carried a social and political meaning that directly affects their visitors and those that have a connection to the presented artifacts.[2] However, an explicit manifestation of political and social objectives in museums has only begun in recent years.[3] In 2013, Kieran Long, a senior curator of contemporary architecture, design and digital at the Victoria & Albert Museum between the years 2013-2017, said about

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[1] Conn, Steven. *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. P.1

[2] Ames, Michael M. "Biculturalism in Exhibitions". *Museum Anthropology* 15, no. 2, 1991.

[3] Meta Bauer, Ute. "Easy Looking – Curatorial Practice in a Neo-Liberal Society. Ute Meta Bauer in an Interview with Marius Babias." *Oncurating*, no. 9, November 2011. 72-78.

the role of curators in society that they "have as much in common with investigative journalists as they do with university academics."[4]

A few years later, in 2019, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) set out to rework their definition of museums. ICOM is a non-governmental organization that works closely with UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and collaborates with other global, cultural organizations. Through this collaborative work, ICOM fights against the trafficking of cultural goods, determines codes of ethics for museums, and is invested in the "research, conservation, continuation and communication to society of the world's natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible."[5] The first definition of a museum was composed by ICOM in 1946 and became a guidepost for the establishment of museums.

Since its establishment in 1946, ICOM updated the definition to accommodate social, cultural, and political changes that occurred throughout the years. In 2019 ICOM published its latest definition. The main change that was made to the latest version (from 2007) is the crucial, central role that political involvement, social equality, justice, and sustainability should now play in a museum:

> Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artifacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums

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[4] Long, Kieran. "Opinion: Kieran Long on 95 Theses for Contemporary Museum Curation". Dezeen. September 13, 2013.

[5] "Missions and Objectives." ICOM. April 5, 2018.

are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality, and planetary wellbeing.[6]

This new definition caused controversy among different museum directors and art professionals.[7] François Mairesse, a professor at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, claimed that "a definition is a simple and precise sentence characterizing an object, and this is not a definition but a statement of fashionable values, much too complicated and partly aberrant."[8] However, the new definition was published and is now getting into effect in museums worldwide.

ICOM's 2019 updated museum definition can be understood as a direct continuance of the political and cultural changes that are currently occurring in society. These changes challenge the traditional, somewhat neutral position museums usually take, and ask them to reevaluate how their institutional practices reflect upon our time. The newly adopted social approach, which is evident in ICOM's 2019 definition, highlights the importance of equal representation, among other essential values, while criticizing traditional approaches in museology. The call for museums to be more socially oriented strengthens the urgency for the establishment of new forms of curating, which will cater to this necessity for museums to be more involved with society through political and societal engagement.

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[6] "Museum Definition". ICOM, 2019

[7] Haynes, Suyin. "Why a Plan to Redefine the Meaning of 'Museum' Is Stirring Up Controversy." Time. September 9, 2019.

[8] Noce, Vincent. "What Exactly is a Museum? Icom Comes to Blows over New Definition". The Art Newspaper - International Art News and Events. August 27, 2019.

1.2 Rapid Response Collecting

Rapid Response Collecting (RRC) is a new and developing method of curating that responds to recent societal, political, and cultural events by selecting, acquiring, and presenting artifacts that reflect on these events. From a pair of pants that represent the effects of the increased demand for fast fashion to the Pussyhat which was worn at the Women's March in Washington in 2017, the objects of RRC tell the overlooked stories of communities which are usually silenced.[9] RRC centers around artifacts that remind and reminisce on social and political events that occur on a global level and keeps these events relevant. It embodies a newfound curatorial role and can be understood as both an outcome and a catalyzer of the transformation museums are currently going through.

Given the interest RRC sparks in global issues, increased representation and exposure to marginal themes are, without a doubt, some of RRC's most powerful contributions to contemporary museology and social curating. Furthermore, another significant aspect of this form of curating is that it invites a critical re-evaluation of what should be (and perhaps more crucially, what is currently not) presented in western museums. As both case studies in this thesis demonstrate, another improvement that can be achieved in museums through the adoption and implementation of RRC, is the enabling of a channel of communication between a museum and its visitors. This is a result of the great participatory potential this type of curating holds, as curators who are collecting artifacts in this way are encouraged to turn to their communities and give space for people to control the way they are depicted.

RRC is increasing the position of the museum as a socially engaged institution as it exposes and helps to commemorate political events that might be reported in the news but will soon be forgotten from public discourse. It elevates the museum into a

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[9] "V&A · Rapid Response Collecting." Victoria and Albert Museum Website.

key player in crucial societal debates and encourages curators to develop participatory curating methods together with the institution's immediate community. Perhaps most importantly, RRC puts another spin on the fundamental question about the relevance of museums today - what is the role museums and curators play in society and current political and societal discourses?

1.3 The Examination of Rapid Response Collecting - Case Studies and Interviews

In this thesis, I analyse the relationship between museums and society and the way this relationship is being expressed through museums' engagement with current political and societal issues. I also examine how RRC can promote a reinvestigation of the role museums and curators play in society. This direction of examination has led me to formulate the following research question: How can rapid response collecting be used by museums as a curatorial strategy to promote notions of democracy and social equality in society?

Through this research question, I am exploring the role of museums in society and examining how this relationship can evolve through the implementation of RRC as a curating method. I am answering the research question by studying cases and analyzing interviews I conducted. These ground my research and add a crucial practical aspect to enhance the theoretical material I gathered and expand on how RRC can be used by museums to increase social engagement. Connecting the interviews with the case studies establishes a more in-depth perspective on current curatorial debates, as these will demonstrate the policies that are being regulated in museums to promote a more socially inclusive approach in their way of work.

1.4.1 Case study: The Tropenmuseum

The Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam is the main case I analyze in this thesis. This museum is rooted in the former Colonial Museum, which resided at the same building the Tropenmuseum is found in, today.[10] The colonial past, not only of the museum but, on a more general level, of the Netherlands, sheds a distinct, hierarchical light on the collected artifacts, which stems from systematic oppression. However, in recent years, there has been a significant change in the museum's operation in the ways its curators exhibit its rich permanent collections, which consists mostly of artifacts that were brought to the Netherlands from its colonies. This change comprises of the reorganization of the museum's permanent collections, the arranging of lectures, symposiums, and workshops which are being held as a means of collaboration with indigenous communities, and the production of new publications that discuss the role of museums in society.

The first interview I conducted was with Martin Berger, a junior curator, and researcher at the National Museums of World Cultures (NMVW), which the Tropenmuseum is a part of. In 2017, Berger curated an exhibition for the Tropenmuseum, "The Afterlives of Slavery", in which he used RRC as a curating method. Furthermore, in the process of creating this exhibition, Berger worked with activist groups such as "decolonize museums" which assisted him in writing the texts that accompanied the exhibition. In this interview, I talked with Berger about the implementation of activists' voices to an exhibition at a state-funded institution, as well as his decision to use RRC as a form of curating.

I conducted another interview with Willemijn van Noord, a junior conservator and junior curator who specializes in China, and Daan van Dartel, a curator of fashion and popular culture, both work at the Tropenmuseum. The two are currently working on an exhibition that portrays the recent demonstrations in Hong Kong. As both curators

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[10] The name of the museum officially changed in 1950.

started using RRC in their practice fairly recently, the interview focuses on museum policies and the Tropenmuseum's willingness to incorporate RRC in their future exhibitions. We also discussed the role politics play in museum exhibitions and the effect ICOM's new definition has on museums in the Netherlands.

I discuss the case of the Tropenmuseum in two chapters in this thesis. First, in the chapter referring to the political and societal engagement of museums I look into both interviews (with Berger and Van Noord, and Van Dartel) to expand on the Tropenmuseum's colonial past as well as its relation to the present and the future state of the museum. The interviews also provide me with a look into curators' contemporary work as they implement political and societal stances in their exhibitions. In the chapter that discusses the use of RRC, I analyze the interview I conducted with Van Noord and Van Dartel who are actively trying to establish RRC as a form of curating at the Tropenmuseum. By looking into one exhibition which was curated using this method, I am trying to answer the research question of this thesis and comprehend the practicability of RRC within museums.

1.4.2 Interview: Susanne Boersma

Susanne Boersma is a curator at the Museum Europäischer Kulturen in Berlin and a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Hamburg. Boersma's research focuses on participatory practices of museums concerning migration and social integration. In the interview with Boersma, we mainly talked about the role politics play in culture and, more specifically, in museum exhibitions and how this relates to current societal issues. Part of the interview was also dedicated to exploring different methods of curating and the way the work of the curator directly affects the narrative of the presented community. Furthermore, we talked about ICOM's redefinition of the museum as well as the representation of flight migrants in museums and the way this has influenced her research. I analyze this interview mainly in the chapter about social and political engagement in museums.

1.4.3 Case study: Museums' Response to COVID-19

The state of the world at the time of writing this thesis has been heavily influenced by the Coronavirus. This pandemic greatly transforms the economic and societal landscape as many parts of the world shut down to prevent the spread of the virus, forcing people to remain at home for most of the time. Museums are being asked by professionals to respond to this crisis on two main levels: (1) institutional; (2) social.[11] The first level refers to the capacity museums have in documenting the crisis from different angles, while the second level, which concerns the social aspect of the museum, suggests museums to strengthen the connection with their visitors and be a support system for their communities.

As this case study will show, many museums have found RRC a useful form of curating for this matter and a way to accomplish both levels, given its responsive nature and participatory potential. As the two levels are intertwined, museums can support their communities by asking its members to join forces and help the museum by co-curating an RRC exhibition that will document the changes the pandemic has caused them. Though this is mainly evident in the United States and seeing as this is not necessarily a political cause, this wave of interest in RRC proves the necessity for a new form of curating that encourages museums to get socially involved. This case is studied in the chapter that discusses the practicability of RRC in museums.

1.5 Thesis' Structure

The structure of this thesis is based on the two main fields of research. The next chapter will introduce the research method I use and will be dedicated to the explanation of the theoretical framework which will accompany this thesis. The

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[11] "Museums and COVID-19: 8 Steps to Support Community Resilience". ICOM. April 29, 2020.

following chapters will lay the grounds for the exploration of the research question. The third chapter explores the relationship between museums and society and will begin with a historical examination of the way museums engaged with political and societal causes. I will then analyze the case of the Tropenmuseum and the interviews I conducted with curators and other professionals. The fourth and last chapter will discuss the implementation of RRC in museums. In this chapter, I will continue to study the case of the Tropenmuseum, specifically the museum's involvement with RRC. Additionally, I will analyze the second case regarding museums' response to the recent COVID-19 pandemic through the use of RRC. I will directly discuss the research question in the last sub-chapter of this part of the thesis by examining the practicability of RRC in museums. Finally, in the conclusion I will examine the results of the research and whether my methodology and theoretical framework proved to be successful.

2. Methodology and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Methodology: Critical Curatorial Analysis

My research question requires a multi-disciplinary approach that will be productive for both the analysis of the varied types of data I assembled (interviews, case studies, institutional examination) as well as the different conclusions I wish to draw. For this purpose, I introduce an exploratory research method - *Critical Curatorial Analysis* (CCA). In short, this method uses a form of discourse analysis from a Cultural Analysis perspective. It stands at an intersection of institutional examination with Cultural Analysis at the core of the concept, through which I will examine the discourse of curating. The choice to use Cultural Analysis as a cornerstone for this methodology derives from its interdisciplinary nature that complies with this thesis.

Cultural Analysis refers to the concept rooted in the three meanings of the verb "to expose": exposition; expose; and exposure, as Mieke Bal referred to in her book *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation:*

> The verb refers to 'making a public presentation' or to 'publicly demonstrating'; it can be combined with a noun meaning opinions or judgments and refer to the public presentation of someone's views; and it can refer to the performing of those deeds that deserve to be made public.[12]

As I discuss the presentation of objects and the representation of people through the act of curating, in this thesis I adopt Bal's dissection of the verb "to expose". I use *exposition* to analyze the way RRC is being used in museums to encourage politically and socially aware debates. Furthermore, this thesis also *exposes* institutional policies

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[12] Bal, Mieke and Gonzales, Bryan. *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1999. P. 5

that were made to enhance or hinder museums' relationship with society. Other than that, and encouraged by Bal's writing on Cultural Analysis, I am using different concepts that guide the development of the institutional and curatorial examination I conduct in this thesis, as "no concept is meaningful for cultural analysis unless it helps us to understand the object better on its - the object's - own terms."[13]

First, the institutional examination will be conducted with the identification of museums as *Contact Zones*.[14] This will serve me as a way to acknowledge the colonial way in which western museums are currently working and the impact this has on exhibitions that are being produced as well as on their audience. The concept of *Responsiveness*[15], due to its direct relation to RRC, will function as a possible approach that museums can take as a means to reassess the way in which they are currently working. Thus, these two concepts refer to institutional critique and will assist me in the analysis of the material I gathered through interviews with curators. To this, I will be also adding Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a methodology to analyze texts I have been reading on this matter. As RRC works on the seam between the political and the cultural and promotes a more social approach in cultural institutions, CDA performs as a great analytical tool that examines how hierarchies are linguistically internalized.

The concepts *Curatorial Activism* and *Critical Curating* operate as the perspective through which I study the cases and are, thus, relating directly to the act of curating. The discussed themes in the exhibitions I will be looking into and which were curated by using RRC, are undeniably an outcome of *Curatorial Activism*.[16] This concept is, therefore, critical for this thesis as it is an integral part of RRC. Implementing a

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[13] Bal, Mieke, and Marx-MacDonald, Sherry. *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002. P. 8

[14] View part 2.2.1 in this thesis.

[15] View part 2.2.2 in this thesis.

[16] View part 2.2.3 in this thesis.

Critical Curating[17] approach to the examination of the curatorial and institutional efforts to become more socially engaged will shift the focus from the institutional relationship between the artist and the curator to a more socially conscious relationship between what is presented and the public.[18]

This social approach leads me to another key aspect in CCA: the acknowledgment of exhibitions and curatorial practice as a form of discourse. This is crucial not only for this methodology but for the thesis as a whole, since I wish to focus on the messages that curators convey on an institutional and social level and how these influence not only the cultural field but also the public one. This approach is inspired by Mieke Bal's book *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation,* in which she recognizes culture as a form of communication:

> My searchlight for the analysis of this discourse called 'culture' is the notion that gestures of showing can be considered discursive acts, best considered as (or analogous to) specific speech acts.[19]

I further developed this specific outlook and examination of cultural work as a form of discourse after reading the article "Museums as Contexts for Transformative Experiences and Identity Development", written by Joanna Garner, Avi Kaplan, and Kevin Pugh. This article explores the relation between the museum visitor's sense of self and the artifact which is presented at the museum and the potential museums possess as informal learning environments. By adopting this approach, I am considering museums to be not only cultural institutions but also educational ones.

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[17] View part 2.2.4 in this thesis.

[18] Richter, Dorothee and Drabble Barnaby. "Curating Critique – An Introduction". *Oncurating,* no. 9, 2011. P.7

[19] Bal, Mieke and Gonzales, Bryan. *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation.* 1999. P. 7

This inherently implies that the work curators do directly affects museum visitors. i.e., society.[20]

Critical Curatorial Analysis examines the connection between museums and society by focusing on the curator's work as a means for the museum to communicate the importance of certain social and political issues. By conducting institutional critique and combining this in the process of analysis, I present the curator's work as a highly impactful aspect of culture and examine its connection to the public. Acknowledging the inseparability of the museum, the curator, and the message that is being conveyed, allows for a critical examination of the way museums communicate with society through engaging with political and social themes.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

For a full implementation of Critical Curatorial Analysis as the methodology for this thesis and considering its development from the concept of Cultural Analysis, a framework of concepts must be defined. In this sub-chapter, I sketch the conceptual foundation for this thesis and position it within the critical paradigm of the practices I am analyzing. This framework defines concepts that are crucial for my analysis and also provides the basis on which I formulate analytical questions that will help me answer the main research question.

2.2.1 Contact Zones

Contact Zones is a concept which was conceived by Mary Louise-Pratt, an American author and professor of Spanish and Portuguese languages, and literature, to describe "[...] social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or

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[20] Garner, Joanna K., Kaplan, Avi, and Pugh, Kevin. "Museums as Contexts for Transformative Experiences and Identity Development". *Journal of Museum Education* 41, no. 4, 2016. P. 341

their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today."[21] In her essay "Arts of the Contact Zone" from 1991, Pratt uses this terminology to discuss the creative and artistic outcome of colonialization which represents the internalization of the oppression the colonized community suffers from. Pratt's main focal points in this essay are autoethnographic texts, through which she explains the effects contact zones have on the production of art.

The autoethnographic texts in Pratt's essay were created by members of the Incan tribe after the Spanish colonized their land. This type of texts demonstrates how a colonized community internalizes "ways that engage with representations others have made of them."[22] Pratt frames autoethnographic texts in a hierarchical paradigm. By doing so, she acknowledges that these texts are an outcome of the fusion of a few, otherwise unrelated cultures. The way this concept of contact zones challenges the academic and cultural perception of marginal communities and cultures is its most important aspect, as Pratt states in the text:

> The idea of the contact zone is intended in part to contrast with ideas of community that underlie much of the thinking about language, communication, and culture that gets done in the academy.[23]

Deciphering museums as contact zones allows me to discern the white, western, imperialist approach many museums stem from and the colonialist narrative they perpetuate. The choice to use the Tropenmuseum as a prominent example in this thesis derives from the fact that this institution is explicitly grounded on Dutch colonialist propaganda and was established as the continuance of the colonial

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[21] Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone". *Profession*, 1991. P. 34
[22] Ibid., 35
[23] Ibid., 37

museum. By employing the concept of contact zones to my research, I position museums as institutions that embody hierarchical systems. Through this I examine how museums affect and shape public and individual identity and reframe the objects which are being exhibited as outcomes of different contact zones.

This concept is also directly related to RRC as the latter, much like the concept of contact zones, challenges established hierarchies in cultural institutions. RRC encourages its curators to initiate participatory methods of curating and to join forces with the museum's immediate community. This form of curating is actively changing the western narrative that is being perpetually told in cultural institutions and advocates for museums to establish a broader spectrum of representation, namely one that includes the depicted community, by enabling them to tell their own story. To conclude, the two concepts - RRC and Contact Zones - meet in the way they reexamine the relationship between the museum, the artifacts it presents, and the way its visitors identify with these.

2.2.2 Responsiveness

The *rapid* aspect in R*apid Response Collecting* promotes a journalistic outlook on curating, calling for curators to stay updated in current societal and political realities and translating them to an artifact which narrates the event from a materialistic perspective. The r*esponsiveness* this practice entails gives space for acts of social equality and democracy by establishing a connection with the museum's community and initiating debates regarding the portrayed event. Both of these add new layers to the curatorial work which is done in museums and increase museums' engagement with society. However, it is the ability to *respond* to these events that transforms museums and other cultural institutions from a passive establishment that enshrines art into spaces for debate, the development and transfer of knowledge, and the formation of individual and public identity.

Donna Haraway also discussed the possible strength involved in the act of responding by coining the term "Response-ability" in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. As defined by Haraway, Response-ability is "[...] about both absence and presence, killing and nurturing, living and dying—and remembering who lives and who dies and how in the string figures of naturalcultural history."[24] In other words, response-ability is not only the full acknowledgment of the effect which our actions have but more profoundly, it is the base of an ecology of practices.[25] Developing a collective response-ability would mean that we understand our entanglement with one another and thus the responsibilities we share.[26]

Rapid response collecting, I want to suggest, requires us to stay with the trouble and develop response-ability through acts of social justice as they are embodied in the increased political and societal engagement in cultural institutions. Response-ability and the responsibility to respond to political and societal events is, thus, translated into RRC as this new way of curating and exhibiting promotes museums' ability to respond to current events that affect our lives and the lives of members of other communities.

2.2.3 Curatorial Activism

Seeing as RRC is rooted in activism, the concept of *Curatorial Activism* is central to the conception of RRC. Curatorial activism embodies the connection between a call for action and the act of curating and tends to focus on burning issues within society and responds directly to them. It focuses on the institution of curatorship and the way museums function on a social level. Curatorial activism is based on the assumption

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[24] Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. 28

[25] Ibid., 42

[26] Ibid., 116

that western art museums operate as contact zones and are based on- and designated for a white, male gaze. Curatorial activists call to change this institutionalized discrimination through transforming curatorial practices as well as exposing standardized biases in these institutions. This type of activism calls for museums to undergo a reflexive process, as Maura Reilly wrote in the 2011 essay "Toward a Curatorial Activism":

> [A]s we venture forward into this new century, it is imperative that art institutions examine not only their putative subjects, but their ideological biases as well. This will involve rethinking methodologies and iconographies for what they say, and do not say, about the constructions of race, gender, class, and nation. In such cases, critical theory is not enough; we must re-examine cultural objects and social practices to understand the patterns of everyday life that shape the past and inevitably imprint the future.[27]

In her work, Maura Reilly, a curator-activist and arts writer, curates exhibitions and writes about gender, race, sexuality, and feminism in the art world and aims to expose inequalities in the representation of 'other' (non-male, non-white) artists. Reilly writes about break-through artists and exhibitions that work towards changing the well-established, unbalanced circumstances in the field. Reilly explained what curatorial activism is in an interview in 2018:

> [A] practice that commits itself to counter-hegemonic initiatives that give voice to those who have been historically silenced or omitted altogether—and,

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[27] Reilly, Maura. "Toward a Curatorial Activism". *Cairns Indigenous Art Fair*, 2011. P. 22

as such, focuses almost exclusively on work produced by women, artists of colour, non-Euro-Americans, and/or queer artists.[28]

While Reilly works against this system from within – as both a scholar and curator - other groups work to abolish institutionalized injustices in a more 'underground' manner, such as the American activist group *Guerrilla Girls*. Much like Reilly, this group also focuses on increasing feminist voices within museums. However, Guerrilla Girls take their fight to the streets through acts of non-violent protest such as hanging signs and creating graffiti-art, through which they are exposing how major, mainstream museums are embodying misogynistic narratives. Guerilla Girls elevate these institutional malfunctions into a societal problem which points out to a bigger issue within society.

Curatorial activists such as Guerrilla Girls and Maura Reilly are initiating institutional or non-institutional acts of resistance and are looking to change the general narrative which is currently being told in museums and which is overlooking marginal yet major players in the art world. These activists challenge hegemonic ways of controlling the art world by asking a valuable question that Reilly formulated in her essay "Toward a Curatorial Activism":

> What can each of us do, as curators, artists, educators, gallerists and museum directors, to difference the art historical canon, and to offer a more just and fair representation of global artistic production?[29]

2.2.4 Critical Curating

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[28] Reilly, Maura. "Maura Reilly in an Interview - Towards a Just Art World". By Elena Martinique. Widewalls.ch. January 16, 2018.

[29] Reilly, Maura. "Toward a Curatorial Activism". 2011. P. 22

Critical Curating is a term which was coined in the late 1960s and much like the previous concept is an exploration of the connection between social and political causes and curating. This concept embodies "the expanded role of exhibition-makers" which "involves, at some level, an engagement with activism or social justice work."[30] A central approach within critical curating is the recognition of the curator (or anyone who is producing an exhibition) as a "cultural agent of social change."[31] Critical curating is, thus, a matter of agency. Which agency do curators have and what are the agencies they are promoting through their work?

Critical curating is a reflexive process that requires curators to look into curating as an institution and a form of discourse and examine how they work within it. While curatorial activism revolves around *what* is being curated, critical curating challenges *who* are curating, and *how*, as Haema Sivanesan wrote in "What Is Critical Curating" in 2018*:*

> I am interested in the question of whether it is possible to curate critically from inside the institution – that is, to subject the institution to processes of systemic inquiry that reveal its biases and blind spots – and through this process unsettle, trouble, or complicate the various structures of the institution. [32]

Critical curators' work functions, in many cases, as activism as they work to rewrite colonialist narratives that still shape museum practices today. Their work revolves around social and political issues through which they rethink the impact of the

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[30] Fraser, Marie, and Ming Wai Jim, Alice. "What is Critical Curating?" *RACAR Revue D'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review 43, no. 2 (2018)*. Page 5.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Sivanesan, Haema. "What Is Critical Curating? / Qu'est-ce Que Le Commissariat Engagé?" *RACAR: Revue D'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 43, no. 2, 2018. P. 104

curator on society. The connection between critical curating and RRC is prominent. RRC is actively reshaping the curator's scope of responsibilities and adds journalistic elements to it while, at the same time, redefining what should be presented at the museum and who should collect it. Critical curating was a catalyzer to the formation of RRC, as it promotes institutional and individual engagement with political and societal causes and institutional self-reflexivity.

3. Political and Social Engagement of Museums

The question of museums and political engagement is a long-contested one. Since their establishment, museums are constantly transforming their shape and societal purpose.[33] From the *Wunderkamers*, which arose in the mid-sixteenth-century in Europe, to mostly ethnographic shrines of unusual objects and new technologies that perpetuated colonial accomplishments in the 18th Century, to elitist institutions of the 20th century that display authoritative practices on cultural and social levels, to more refined, socially aware organizations, which some museums are transforming into.[34] The recent extensive regard to the issue of political and social engagement in museums is just one of the many transformations this institution is going through in the last four decades. The change which we are currently seeing in some (western) museums and on which I will expand in this section of the thesis, derives not necessarily from the museum itself, but from a sweeping interest in the increased representation of usually marginal voices in the cultural sector.

The connection between the museum and its visitors has always been on the seam between approachable and condescending, between active and passive, political and neutral, and between the private and the public. It is not without a reason that the Louvre is one of the most prominent symbols of the French revolution. For those who resisted the monarchy in 1791, turning the palace, which was the epitome of monarchy, into a public museum, was not a metaphor or merely anarchism, but an act of social justice.[35] This brought forth discussions about accessible education and culture, the virtues of democracy, and raised a valuable question regarding the role art and art museums play in society.

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[33] Dr. Rodini, Elizabeth " The Changing Social Functions of Art Museums." Smarthistory.

[34] Dr. Rodini, Elizabeth. "A Brief History of the Art Museum." Khan Academy.

[35] Dr. Rodini, Elizabeth. "Museums and Politics: The Louvre, Paris." Khan Academy.

These discussions and debates are still being held. Duncan Cameron, a Canadian museologist, museum director, and one of the greatest advocates for the social awakening of museums and the recognition of these as public spaces, wrote about the social role museums have in his essay from 1971, "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum". The most important theory to be taken from this text is the crucial distinction Cameron made between the two stances regarding the museum: the classic stance that views the museum as a temple; and the more modern, socially engaged approach of the museum as a forum.

Cameron, much like other museologists who research the missions and goals of museums in our times, focused his research on how museums respond to social, political, and economic shifts and transformations that are occurring in society. His stance is that museums should adjust themselves to the time and not the other way around. But, perhaps, more importantly, Cameron believes that museums should evolve to serve the public and not simply stick to traditions:

> The objective here is neither to neutralize nor to contain that which questions the established order. It is to ensure that the new and challenging perceptions of reality - the new values and their expressions - can be seen and heard by all. To ignore or suppress the innovation or the proposal for change is as mindless as to accept that which is new because it is novel.[36]

Cameron's essay was written at a time of great social change, after living through the exciting 1960s and experiencing first-hand the effects of social justice movements on culture and politics.[37] Therefore, these ideas fit the spirit of that time and reflect upon

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[36] Cameron, Duncan F. "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum". *The Journal of World History* 14, no. 1, 1972. P.23

[37] "Liberation Movements of the 1970s". Khan Academy.

it. However, Cameron's societal involvement does not necessarily indicate a comprehensive shift that occurred in museums towards becoming more socially active. To gain a better understanding of the way museums engage with society, it is crucial to examine if and how museums officially adjust their practice according to social and political changes.

3.1 ICOM's Museum Definition as an Indication for Socio-Cultural Developments Within Museums

In 2019, ICOM (the International Council of Museums) reformulated their position towards the goal and purpose of the museum in their renowned museum definition, as I presented in the introduction. Seeing as the definition functions as a signpost for museums and as ICOM's backbone, the reformulation of the definition marks a significant change in the cultural field.[38] For this reason, and as I mentioned in the introduction, ICOM's profound attention to social equality and political engagement in the recent definition provoked many museum directors who believe that museums should not get involved with politics.[39]

Tracking the changes ICOM made in its definition since its establishment in 1946 allows me to measure not only shifts in the role and goals of museums, but, more importantly, to see if and how these institutions adapted their practice according to social and political changes. Section one of article three in ICOM's statute defines what a museum is. This section stated in 1946 that:

The word 'museums' includes all collections open to the public, of artistic, technical, scientific, historical or archaeological material, including zoos and

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[38] Sandahl, Jette. "The Museum Definition as the Backbone of ICOM". *Museum International*. 2019.

[39] Noce, Vincent. "What Exactly is a Museum? Icom Comes to Blows over New Definition". August 27, 2019.

botanical gardens, but excluding libraries, except in so far as they maintain permanent exhibition rooms.[40]

Five years later, ICOM added the educational potential which these permanent establishments obtain as well as a greater emphasis on the public's right for museums - though it is not defined to which public this definition refers to. In 1974 an important shift can be read in the definition of the museum when, for the first time, museums were defined as "[...] a non-profit making, permanent institution [...]". More importantly, this definition stated that museums are institutions "[...] in the service of the society and its development, and open to the public [...]"[41]. This was written three years after the publication of Cameron's influential article "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum" and seems to be aligned with the spirit of the time.

However, a more socially inclusive approach was only included in 2007 when the committee added that a museum "[...] exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity [...]."[42] *Humanity* is a keyword in the newer formulation of the definition and replaces the former use of the word *people.* Though this seems like a small difference, it conceals a crucial adjustment in ICOM's perception regarding who is to be presented and represented in a museum - *humanity* describes "all people in the world as a whole"[43], while *people* refers to "the group that you are speaking to".[44]

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[40] "Development of the Museum Definition According to ICOM Statutes (1946 - 2001)". ICOM Website Archives. 2009.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] "HUMANITY | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary". Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus.

[44] "PEOPLE | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary". Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus.

2016 marks the beginning of the development of the current social approach which is articulated in the 2019 definition. At the general assembly in 2016, it was decided that a new standing committee will take charge of the matter of defining museums - the Museum Definition, Prospects, and Potentials committee (MDPP). This committee was designated to exploring the shared and also dissimilar conditions, objectives, and practices of museums in different societies.[45] In 2018, the committee concluded that a new definition must be written:

> [...] a definition which recognises the dissimilar conditions and practices of museums in diverse and rapidly changing societies and supports museums in developing and adopting new scientific paradigms and addressing more adequately the complexities of the 21st century.[46]

In 2019, as a response to the MDPP report, the new definition was released. Though the committee did draw inspiration from the 2007 version, the new definition was noticeably more politically and socially oriented. A prominent aspect of the newer version is the implementation of notions of democracy within it. The MDPP explains the importance of democracy for the readjustment of museums to the 21st century in their report:

> Democracy – if that word or concept will survive much longer in the 21st century – is ideally about empowerment of individuals and communities as well as about processes for peacefully negotiating and mediating differences and divergent points of view. [...] a future museum definition must, inevitably, define, reflect and support these broad democratic purposes as an overarching

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[45] "Report and Recommendations Adopted by the MDPP". ICOM, 2018.
[46] Ibid.

framework for museums, their purposes and functions as well as for their professions and governance.[47]

Another noticeable aspect of the new definition is the incorporation of concepts of social justice and equality. This, unlike the reference to democracy, relates more profoundly to the issue of increased and inclusive representation within museums. The MDPP explains:

> While ICOM has, for decades, assumed a position of advocacy around museum collections, historic monuments and even cultural landscapes, there seems to be a need for a framework of value-based advocacy or activist positions relative to people, to human rights and social justice, as well as to nature as the – increasingly threatened – source of life.[48]

Comparing the current version to that which was disclosed in 1946, or even in 2007, the 2019 definition is unmistakably more elaborate and calculated. It criticizes the way some museums function and draws a clear picture of how they should operate by responding to societal and political shifts that occur in society. The 2019 definition acknowledges the potential museums have in shaping public identity and the prominent role these institutions can play in society. With the help of the MDPP (which was removed in 2019) ICOM's new definition encourages museums and cultural institutions to be more socially active.

However, ICOM's 2019 museum definition, though it is more humanistic, seems to be problematic even to the most progressive museum workers. On the one hand, it seems

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

as though the definition is perceived more as a statement rather than the beginning of a meaningful process. The fact that it is characterized as a *definition* already suggests that it comes to describe the situation as it currently is, which some museum professionals claim may not be the case. In an interview I held on April 6th, 2020 with Susanne Boersma, a curator, and museologist, she said about the new definition:

It's not what museums currently are. It's what museum professionals want museums to be and that's completely fine, but I feel like it shouldn't be called a definition, it should be called a mission and they should talk about how museums can actively work towards that, rather than just say this is what museums are right now. […] I think there are not so many conversations about how we are going to achieve that, and maybe that should happen in museums individually, but I think it could also be discussed more generally […][49]

On the other hand, in an interview I held on March 13th, 2020, with Daan van Dartel and Willemijn van Noord, two curators who work at the Tropenmuseum, I learned that the 2019 definition is the result of crucial steps museums have already taken in the attempt to be more socially and politically engaged. In Van Dartel's opinion, ICOM recognized the shifts that were occurring in museums and reacted to them and not the other way around. It thus seems as though ICOM's 2019 museum definition is only an addition to a process of becoming more politically involved which was already taking place in museums. According to Van Dartel:

[…] since the Dutch museum world was ordered by the government in funding to be more focused on diversity, suddenly all museums in the Netherlands for the past three, four or five years, are organizing exhibitions on slavery, on black presence in art, redefining their target groups or writing books about

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[49] Boersma, Susanne. Skype Interview. Amsterdam, April 6, 2020.

what language to use and that has been quite recent in political engagement in museums.[50]

It is clear that ICOM's museum definitions developed throughout the years. These developments can be perceived as inclinations towards establishing socially involved museums. However, as seen in many cases (in the definitions from 1974 and 2007, for example), the definition followed a line of changes that were already taking place in cultural institutions. Therefore, some museum professionals argue that the definitions are mostly outdated and do not serve a real purpose. ICOM's 2019 museum definition is the definition that changed the most from its latest version and the content and notions which were implemented in it are progressive and democratically oriented. It challenges current hierarchical systems in museums and encourages a more inclusive curatorial approach, which might explain museum directors' disapproval of it. To fully comprehend the changes the 2019 definition calls for, we must first analyze the current position curators have in the cultural field.

3.2 Curating as an Authoritative Practice

The increased attention the MDPP has dedicated to democracy in its report can be perceived as the urgency for museums to be more inclusive and attentive to the communities which they represent. As this refers directly to current curatorial work, this issue can be translated to *authority*. Simply, this means that the premise of increasing democracy within museums can be challenging for the authoritative figures who currently control the means of exhibiting. As Ivan Karp mentioned in his 2012 essay "Culture and Representation": "The struggle is not only over what is to be represented but also over who will control the means of representing."[51]

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[50] Dartel, Daan van. Skype Interview. Amsterdam, March 13, 2020.

[51] Karp, Ivan. "Culture and Representation". *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. New York: Smithsonian Institution, 2012. P.15

This matter of authority in museums is based on the fact that museums were founded on- and still are operating according to a hierarchical model that is rooted in colonialism. This heavily shapes the narrative that western museums carry out. Mieke Bal stressed the importance of the narrative as she defined culture as being the space between the presented artifact (thing) and what is written about it (statement).[52] Thus, it is within this space that a predetermined narrative takes place which tells about the presented object from a certain perspective and shapes an opinion among the (western) museum visitor.

As curators are the ones who tell the narrative of the *thing*, it is crucial, for this thesis, to refer to- and acknowledge the curator as an authoritative figure. Of course, the curator is subject to bigger forces that come into play in the museum such as the institution's source of funding, museum's boards and directors, and the museum's mission statement. However, and as the following will prove, curators have an immense influence over a museum's public appearance as they realize the museum's political and social agenda in exhibitions.

I discussed the topic of authority within museums in the interview with Susanne Boersma. In her work, Susanne makes the crucial differentiation between participatory and authoritative curating methods. A museum's selected method reveals much about the institution, its objectives, its curators, and the message these wish to transmit. I found Boersma's definition of authoritative practices and the differentiation she makes between these and participatory practices to be one of the key changes that are occurring within museums as a response to the urgency to be more socially engaged:

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[52] Bal, Mieke and Gonzales, Bryan. *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation*. 1999. P.8

> In a sense, (participatory practices) are [...] what the museum says and does, as it thinks on its own, without input from the outside [...]. And this is still being done and is still very prominent in western museums. And that is happening due to lack of time and lack of funds [...]. I don't think a museum would ever call it (participatory practice) because it's just the traditional practice.[53]

Authoritative practices are, in the case of ethnographic museums such as the Tropenmuseum, the colonialization process of non-western artifacts and their narrative by western curators. The result is museums functioning as contact zones from two main points of view: (1) the museum's exclusionary process of curating and; (2) the perpetuation of a western narrative. These affect how the represented community sees itself and builds its own identity from a western perspective, forming a transcultural identity and what Mary Loise Pratt referred to as *autoethnographic.* One way to eradicate authoritative practices is, as Boersma suggests, the implementation of participatory methods of curating in museums:

> I think [...] museums should start thinking about methods in which they can, more sustainably, reach out to different people to get their opinions on things and to create a kind of network or relationship or partnerships on which they can base their practices and who they can ask for help when they're setting up a new project [...].[54]

Boersma's stance regarding the importance of participatory methods of curating as a way to get museums more socially inclusive is commonly agreed upon within the field of *new museology.* This field, according to the essay "Museums, Politics and

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[53] Boersma, Susanne. Skype Interview. Amsterdam, April 6, 2020.
54 Boersma, Susanne. Skype Interview. Amsterdam, April 6, 2020.

Representation" by Anita Herle, is focused on "the ideological and political agendas inherent in museum display."[55] Furthermore, Herle claims that: "Collaborative projects involving collection, interpretation, and representation have strengthened the museum as an important site for ongoing research and education."[56] Participatory practices and collaborative projects are already being initiated in museums. In the Netherlands, the Tropenmuseums has transformed its practices to be more inclusive and participatory, as the next case will show.

3.3 Case Study: The Tropenmuseum – From a Colonialist Museum to a Socially Engaged Institution

Ethnographic museums face an ownership problem when coming to exhibit objects which were looted in colonial times. The people that the museum wishes to work with are, generally, the local and indigenous communities that produced the objects. However, the people who claim the objects and the people the museums are forced by law to work with, are the state institutions, who, in many cases, suppress local, indigenous voices. This is according to Martin Berger, a curator at the Tropenmuseum with whom I talked on January 8th, 2020. This is an innate problem in ethnographic museums that creates a clash between two distinct interests, that of the represented, indigenous community to be better understood and represented; and that of the western institution, which wants to control the narrative.

In the interview I conducted on March 13th, 2020, with Daan van Dartel and Willemijn van Noord, we talked extensively about the representation of the 'other' in ethnographic museums and the problematic aspects that come with it. One of the more inclusive approaches which seek to abolish the perpetuation of the western narrative is the inclusion of multiple voices in the process of creating an exhibition.

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[55] Herle, Anita. "Museums, Politics and Representation". *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 9, May 1997. P.65

[56] Ibid., 75

According to the two curators, the Tropenmuseum has been at the forefront of implementing the voices of marginal communities in their exhibitions for many years now. Van Dartel said:

> I know, at least for the Tropenmuseum, that we have been working with community groups for a long time already, at least since I started working there, which is almost 20 years ago. So that is not that new.[57]

Though this method has been used for many years, the Tropenmuseum has recently gone through some substantial changes in the way its curators tend to non-western, marginal topics. One of the main changes that were made was a shift in the curatorial approach towards a self-reflective one. Van Dartel explained about this shift in the interview:

> Some years ago […] the ethnographic museum world has realized that the only way to not become obsolete is self-criticality and self-reflectivity. And that is the only way for a colonial embedded museum institution to survive […]. It doesn't mean that we practice this in all the things that we do. But, at least from a curatorial perspective, the main theme that we are working on is this self-criticality towards ourselves and our status and role in society […].[58]

This self-reflective approach and the Tropenmuseum's participatory curating tendencies are evident in some of the museum's permanent exhibitions, such as *Afterlives of Slavery.* This exhibition examines the effects of slavery on modern Dutch society. Martin Berger, one of the curators of this exhibition, explained that *Afterlives*

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[57] Dartel, Daan van. Skype Interview. Amsterdam, March 13, 2020.
[58] Ibid.

of Slavery tries to narrate the story of the Dutch colonial past from the perspective of people who were enslaved and their descendants. Being a white, Dutch individual, Berger understood that he cannot tell this story. Thus, the curating process and the realization of this exhibition was made in partnership with a few groups who are external to the Tropenmuseum. Berger explained the way he worked with these groups:

[…] we had a long session with a group called 'Decolonize Museums', who are very active in mostly ethnographic museums. […] we sat down with them and read all the texts that we wrote for the exhibition, and they commented on them and we changed them accordingly. […] we had these expert-groups of five people, one of whom was […] both an academic and activist who was a part of creating the narrative and the storyline of the exhibition […], hammering down this perspective of […] if you want to say a certain thing, you have to say it in a certain way.[59]

According to Berger, this curating experience was eye-opening and enabled him to see how the way he writes texts for exhibitions perpetuates a colonialist narrative. Through this way of working, Berger and other curators at the Tropenmuseum attempt to change the notion of diversity in museums and society, as well as the way they practice curatorship. Berger stated:

I think the Dutch notion of diversity is very limited. […] you're going to have a white person and a black person and a Moroccan person and a gay person, and then you are diverse, which I don't think is a very fair representation of what diversity actually is. Having sort of a token person for anything isn't really changing your own practice. So I guess that's what we're trying to do - having

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[59] Berger, Martin. Personal Interview. Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, January 8, 2020.

a practice in which we share authority, in which we share decision making power, and in which we try to include the voices of people that maybe don't agree with us, or that have different visions on what we're trying to do here.[60]

The Tropenmuseum's objectives have substantially changed since its establishment. From an institution that is rooted in Dutch colonialism, this museum has transformed itself into an ethnographical museum whose workers and curators are developing more collaborative, democratic methods to a balanced and educated representation of the 'other'. The self-reflective approach many of the curators in this institution are adopting is a crucial step for the Tropnemuseum not to distance itself from its colonial past, but to learn from it, negate its exclusive, biased nature, and become an institution to which all people can come to learn about different cultures. As a museum that presents many artifacts from diverse communities, it is important for the Tropenmuseum to accurately portray the story of indigenous communities in a way that facilitates understanding as well as recognition of one's and others' history and roots.

3.4 The Role of The Museum in the Formation of Public and Individual Identity

The matter of museums engaging with politics seems to be directly linked to power struggles that affect the narratives museums choose to tell. Museums and exhibitions serve as a medium of and platform for representation. [61] Thus, we must critically look at the way museums and gallery spaces construct their exhibitions. Ivan Karp also referred to this in his essay "Culture and Representation" included in the book *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*:

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[60] Ibid.

[61] Karp, Ivan. "Culture and Representation". 2012. P.12

What is at stake in struggles for control over objects and the modes of exhibiting them, finally, is the articulation of identity. Exhibitions represent identity, either directly, through assertion, or indirectly, by implication. When cultural *others* are implicated, exhibitions tell us who we are and, perhaps most significant, who we are not. Exhibitions are privileged arenas for presenting images of self and *others*.[62]

Indeed, museums are perceived by many museologists to be not only cultural institutions but also educational ones, places where people can learn about their own and others' cultures and see themselves both in what is- and what is not presented. ICOM's 2019 definition, as well as steps such as the self-reflective process which curators at the Tropenmuseum are taking, are crucial for the transformation of museums into places for personal development. Of course, ethnographic museums play a large role in the formation of public identity, but one cannot forget about the impact art and design have on our impression of the world. For this reason, in this section, I will refer to museums in general and not only ethnographic ones.

Joanna Garner, Avi Kaplan, and Kevin Pugh wrote about the role of museums in the formation of public and individual identity in their article "Museums as Contexts for Transformative Experiences and Identity Development". This article explores the relationship between one's sense of self and the artifact which is presented at the museum. As the authors of this article believe that "artifacts can be leveraged to promote self-exploration and understanding,"[63] Garner, Kaplan, and Pugh stress the immense potential museums and exhibitions have in being "environments for visitors' personal development [...]".[64]

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[62] Ibid., 15

[63] Garner, Joanna K., Avi Kaplan, and Kevin Pugh. "Museums as Contexts for Transformative Experiences and Identity Development". Journal of Museum Education 41, no. 4, 2016. P. 342

[64] Ibid., 341

Through the transformation of the exhibition space and, more specifically, the way the presented artifacts tell a story and the story they tell, Garner, Kaplan, and Pugh are aiming at what they define "developmental engagement". According to the authors, this engagement is intended to enhance the "visitor's self-concept and worldview, regardless of age."[65] They are basing their newfound understanding of the *exhibition space* based on visitors' feedback:

> According to visitor feedback, museum visits allow for exploration of content, facilitation of others' experiences, learning and solace from everyday life. Visits also contribute to the ongoing work of constructing and refining one's identity, including one's membership in particular social groups, and one's commitment to particular ideas, goals, beliefs and self-perception.[66]

Considering the museum as an influential factor in the construct of identity, the issue of representation receives an even higher degree of importance. For communities to build a stronger image of themselves, the way they are represented must be done in an accurate manner which tells a complete story. According to what Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine wrote in the introduction for *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, dedication to a broader spectrum of representation in museums can enhance not only a community's sense of self but also build connections between communities. The two further explain that the way museums choose to present cultures "reflect deeper judgment of power and authority" and thus have an immense influence on "what a nation is or ought to be, as well as how citizens should relate to one another."[67]

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[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid., 348

[67] Lavine, Steven, and Karp, Ivan. "Introduction: Museums and Multiculturalism". *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. New York: Smithsonian Institution, 2012. P.2

The demand for museums to engage more with politics derives from a deeper need for people to be heard. This demand refers, therefore, not only to the future of museums but, as Karp and Lavine mention, to the way museum professionals shape our mutual future. The two explain the inherent connection between museums and society and between representation and politics and mention that museums must adjust their practices to the global spirit of our times:

> These debates – which are, after all, about how we will live in the future – echo in the precincts of the museum. If the museum community continues to explore this multicultural and intercultural terrain consciously and deliberately, in spite of the snares that may await, it can play a role in reflecting and mediating the claims of various groups, and perhaps help construct a new idea of ourselves [...].[68]

There is no doubt that implementing democratic notions to museum practices will enhance cultural diversity, promote the application of participatory practices, and make room for pluralistic debates. These will also, inevitably, result in museums engaging more with political and societal issues and, as a result with society. All of these are crucial for the construction of one's identity and relation to others and impact our shared future as a global community. One method of curating which applies democracy and is currently being examined in a few western museums is Rapid Response Collecting. In the next chapter, I examine if and how Rapid Response Collecting can serve as a strategy for museums to promote political and societal causes in society.

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[68] Ibid., 8

4. The Implementation of Rapid Response Collecting in Museums

As the previous chapter shows, museums have been dealing with politics since their very beginning. At a time when museums are adapting to ICOM's new museum definition, modern, more democratic approaches to- and ways of curating must be established. For this purpose, in this chapter I will suggest Rapid Response Collecting (RRC) as a curating method for museums to enhance their political and societal involvement and be more socially engaged.

Anita Herle, in her essay "Museums, Politics and Representation", wrote about how curating and exhibition design can respond to the need for museums to increase their range of representation and engage more with politics. One of the prominent changes that curators must undergo, Herle states, is a shift towards "tactically mixed approaches" which will abolish "the familiar distinction between art and artifact, aesthetic versus scientific form of representation, which has been enshrined by art galleries and museums [...]."[69] RRC, a term which I have introduced in the first part of this thesis, is a mixed approach to curating which is paving the way for museums to be more inclusive and aware of the way they affect the public and how their public affects them. It combines curatorial practices with journalistic elements and allows for museums to initiate participatory methods.

RRC is revolutionary first and foremost given the responsive aspect it carries, which was adopted from the journalistic field. Responsiveness encourages curators to stay updated about global and local events and respond to them by establishing debates about them. Thus, responsiveness is a window for museums to transform into forums - in the words of Duncan Cameron, public spaces for debates, education, and the establishment of communities. However, it is not easy to implement this type of curating within museums, and, as progressive as RRC might be, using it does not

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[69] Herle, Anita. "Museums, Politics and Representation". May 1997. P.69

demonstrate a museum's willingness to implement notions of democracy and social equality.

As RRC is a new and developing form of curating, there isn't much academic material that was written about this topic. Thus, I decided to research this chapter, which discusses the implementation of RRC in museums, by studying two cases I previously introduced. For the first case, I will be analysing the interview I conducted with curators at the Tropenmuseum, through which I learned about their experience trying to implement RRC in their institution. The second case is compiled of recent articles I found, which I combined with the writings of prominent scholars. Through these, I wish to comprehend better the benefits a museum can gain by using RRC, the disadvantages this type of curating has, and, ultimately, try to answer my research question – can RRC be used by museums as a strategy to promote notions of democracy and social equality?

4.1 Case Study: The Implementation of RRC in The Tropenmuseum

In recent years, curators at the Tropenmuseum began introducing RRC as a curating method in their permanent and temporary exhibitions. As I have previously mentioned, curators from this museum are transforming their practice by undergoing a self-reflective process that affects not only their job but the entire institutional agenda. The implementation of RRC is yet another step curators at the Tropenmuseum are taking towards practicing critical curating.[70] This, unlike curatorial activism and as I have discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, focuses on how the curator's work challenges institutional biases and archaic hierarchical systems within the museum.

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[70] See part 2.2.4

Tropenmuseum's curators Daan van Dartel and Willemijn van Noord are currently working on an exhibition about the Hong Kong demonstrations, which is being curated through the use of RRC. In the interview I held with them on March 13th, 2020, they shared with me the process of establishing such an exhibition and the hardships they encountered thus far. In this case, I will analyze the experience Van Dartel and Van Noord had while trying to implement RRC in the process of making an exhibition, as they shared it with me. I will be doing so by using direct quotes from the interview and elaborating on those.

Upon beginning the curating process of the Hong Kong exhibition, Van Dartel and Van Noord were not sure where and how to start, commenting that they "ran it kind of like a headless chicken". As they wished to curate objects from events that took place far away, their first step was to contact a previous Tropenmuseum employee who is native to- and currently lives in Hong Kong. This allowed them to be sure that the artifacts that were being collected told the narrative from a local person's perspective, rather than that of a western scholar who learns about the happenings from afar, according to Van Dartel:

> […] we knew somebody who is from Hong Kong originally. She was at that place at that moment. So, we asked her to see if there would be something for the museum to collect and what would be interesting. And it all started rolling very quickly. […] we asked her to collect things that were going around during the protests like flyers, newspapers, advertisements, these kinds of things.[71]

The use of RRC as a curating method for this exhibition and the fact that the two curators worked with a local who was at the scene at the time, enabled them to present artifacts that are relevant for citizens who experienced the demonstrations. Though

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[71] Ibid.

their contact-person was politically resistant to the Beijing government, Van Dartel and Van Noord found it crucial to "represent different sides of the story, or to tell the different sides of the story."[72] For this purpose, they requested their contact-person to collect flyers and paraphernalia that do not represent her political tendencies. By showing willingness to present multiple narratives in their exhibition, the two curators are adopting all that RRC has to offer and are transforming the institution's role in society through presenting a complete picture and working with locals.

Though they seem to have had a clear agenda for this project, the two curators faced a great difficulty when their contact-person in Hong Kong disappeared due to her high emotional attachment to the situation. Her emotional attachment was also evident in her aimless, unfiltered way of collecting artifacts from the field, a fact that made Van Noord and Van Dartel's work much harder than they thought, seeing as, from a museum's perspective, "we cannot collect everything".[73] All these factors made professionals at the Tropenmuseum rethink RRC as a feasible curating method.

The museum's hesitance regarding RRC is evident in the mixed reactions to this exhibition at the institution's different departments, as Van Dartel told me:

> The response from mine and Willemijn's department was "wait a minute, how are we going to do this? Who will do the collecting? Who will choose what to collect? How do you approach this kind of thing?" So, there was some carefulness from the department of the curators, I should say. The exhibitions department and also, obviously, the marketing department wants us to put in things that are happening now immediately in exhibitions because they can use that for their strategies. But I don't think that the concept of rapid response

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[72] Noord, Willemijn van. Skype Interview. Amsterdam, March 13, 2020.
[73] Dartel, Daan van. Skype Interview. Amsterdam, March 13, 2020.

collecting is already a very broad and understood term in the whole of the museum.[74]

According to Van Noord and Van Dartel, one main problem curators encounter when using RRC is the rapidness it entails. Many face problems when collecting artifacts that might still be needed or used, and institutions are struggling to regulate policies that will allow for a rapid presentation of rapidly acquired artifacts. As an ethnographic museum, curatorial processes at the Tropenmuseum are normally very slow and extremely bureaucratic, according to Van Dartel:

> [...] that's something that is not easy to do, in our organization, to be sure that what you collect comes in an exhibition pretty soon [...]. We're quite a large and massive bureaucratic organization. It takes a long time before exhibition plans are approved.[75]

The Tropenmuseum's staff revises the institution's collecting policy every four years. The current policy is that each acquisition that is made must be revised and discussed by all curators. Van Dartel mentioned that this process slows down the rapidness which is crucial for the existence of RRC in a museum:

> [...] the structure of the museum and the way it's structured in that so many people have something to say about stuff, prevents the rapid response in a way. [...] I would say that implementing rapid response collecting is not even the most difficult issue in the museum - It's getting it displayed.[76]

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[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid.

Recent global events have brought the Hong Kong exhibition to a halt, but it was also the skeptical and diverse reactions the curators received from the museum which made the curating process slow down. As a possible solution to the museum's hesitant reaction to RRC, the Research Center for Material Culture (RCMC), which is also a part of the NMVW together with the Tropenmuseum, is planning to hold a symposium about RRC. In the symposium they will raise important questions regarding RRC's place at the Tropenmuseum. Van Dartel and Van Noord plan on using their own experience from the Hong Kong exhibition as a case study in this symposium for the museum to learn from.

Furthermore, the two curators are already thinking about new RRC projects to propose to the museum. Currently, they are joining a long line of curators and museums, mostly in North America, which plan to use RRC as a means to respond to the global changes we are facing in light of COVID-19. Van Dartel shared with me an idea she had that got rejected by the museum's board:

> I thought I would collect high fashion designers, like Yves Saint Laurent, who are now designing the mouth protection masks. This is a capitalization of this pandemic. So, what does this say about humanity, Right? So, I thought that would be interesting. But one person (in the museum) said: "I don't know if that would be interesting, this large company that wants to capitalize on this large crisis which is going on now." So sometimes it's difficult to respond rapidly.[77]

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[77] Ibid.

It was difficult for Van Noord and Van Dartel to say whether or not RRC would soon be fully implemented at the Tropenmuseum. However, the two curators are positive and eager to further explore the potential RRC has in modernizing the museum and actualizing democratic policies which will facilitate other curators' experience with collecting artifacts of immediate significance. Current events are forcing museums and curators to re-examine their practice as well as to redefine their role in society and more museums in the world are currently looking into ways of implementing RRC, as seen by the next case study.

4.2 Case Study: Response to COVID-19 In Museums Through the Use of RRC

One of the strongest points that lie in the responsiveness of RRC, together with the fact that it stimulates debates and provokes reflexive inspection, is that it promotes cooperation between museums and communities. This can be interpreted as participation in debates, perceiving the museum as a place for contemplation and knowledge production, or in an active partnership in the curating process. The last reshapes the role of the curator not only within the museum but in society. The very recent COVID-19 pandemic and the major changes it brought about on society provides me with a case that shows the potential RRC has in modernizing museums and keeping them in touch with their audience.

On April 29th, 2020, ICOM published an article titled "Museums and COVID-19: 8 steps to support community resilience". As the name suggests, this article advises museums to support their communities through their curatorial practice and to constitute as an island in these turbulent times. Furthermore, ICOM encourages museum professionals to contemplate how their work can affect the documentation process of this pandemic in ways that are constructive both to the museum and to its visitors. Item six in this article advocates for the use of RRC to collect valuable documentation that will upgrade museums' collections, for the strengthening of the community itself, and its connection to the museum:

Documenting and exhibiting the crisis, its impact, and the various ways people are coping with trauma may enrich your collections and give them a new meaning, while also preserving knowledge and memories for future generations. See if existing strategies of contemporary and rapid response collecting [...] could be used without harming the safety of your staff and others or compromising your more demanding responsibilities. [...] It may help them (members of the community) to better cope with trauma by sharing their worries, thoughts, needs, and emotions.[78]

Many museums, mostly in North America, recently adopted RRC and began implementing it as a way of documenting the crisis and working with their local communities. These institutions are collecting homemade masks, testimonies from locals who share how the pandemic affected their lives, and photographs citizens took.[79] For example, a statement from the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, DC, declared the assembly of an RRC task force:

The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History has formed a Rapid Response Collecting Task Force to address the COVID-19 pandemic. This task force will allow the museum to react quickly to assess and document the scientific and medical events, as well as the effects and responses in the areas of business, work, politics, and culture. Curators will look at the impact on individuals, institutions, and communities as they document the diverse perspectives and experiences related to this historic moment.[80]

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[78] "Museums and COVID-19: 8 Steps to Support Community Resilience". ICOM. April 29, 2020.

[79] Cascone, Sarah. "Museums Are Urgently Collecting Homemade Masks and Other Ephemera from the Pandemic to Document History as It Unfolds". Artnet News. April 9, 2020.

[80] "STATEMENT: National Museum of American History Implements Collecting Strategy in Response to COVID-19 Pandemic". National Museum of American History. Last modified April 20, 2020.

Other museums choose a different collecting strategy to materialistically memorialize the pandemic, as is seen outside the United States, at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). The V&A is a pioneering institution when it comes to the full implementation of RRC. It was the first in Europe to establish an RRC collection and have even allocated a section in the museum to the presentation of RRC artifacts. The more accepting approach of the V&A towards RRC and the difference between this approach and that of other museums, such as the Tropenmuseum, stems from V&A's focus on the design aspect of objects. Thus, artifacts in this museum that are curated through the use of RRC tell a certain story through their design or the way they are manufactured.

In an interview, Corinna Gardner, a senior curator at the V&A, mentioned that the museum is interested in the varied medical equipment which was developed and designed as a response to the pandemic. In the interview, Gardner explained that in her opinion, RRC "is about bringing objects into the museum that through their design articulate the bigger questions of contemporary society".[81] One item the V&A wishes to add to their RRC collection was designed by an Italian 3D printing company and transforms one of Decathlon's most popular snorkelling masks into a ventilator mask for Corona patients. These masks, according to Gardner, "reach beyond an idea and demonstrate an ability to generate impact and change, that have real traction in the field."[82]

As is evident in the case of the Tropenmuseum, practicing RRC proves to be challenging in any case simply because it is still not fully realized and, therefore, does not always comply with museums' acquisition policies. The pandemic brings new

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[81] Cascone, Sarah. "Museums Are Urgently Collecting Homemade Masks and Other Ephemera From the Pandemic to Document History As It Unfolds". April 9, 2020.
[82] Ibid.

struggles to this form of collecting which curators do not normally face. First, museums are closed and with no workers physically present, much of the curators' work is done online.[83] Second, the fact that museums are currently closed might mean that the artifacts will be presented after they have lost their relevance or public interest. Lastly, museums do not want to collect an object which might still be needed for medical use such as homemade masks or any other medical equipment.[84]

The way museums were asked by professionals to respond to the pandemic further proves the public's as well as the institutional necessity for museums to be socially and politically active. RRC provides a way for museums to engage with their communities by creating civilian task forces that collect homemade paraphernalia and document themselves during the pandemic. If museums' reactions to COVID-19 through the use of RRC will prove to be fruitful, this can be a gateway for institutions to further develop RRC and transform it from a vague concept into a well-established form of curating.

4.3 The Practicability of RRC as a Curatorial Strategy

To come back to my main research question, this thesis examines whether RRC can be a strategy for museums to promote notions of democracy and social equality. After presenting this form of curating and analysing the two cases, I will devote the last part of this chapter to the examination of the practicability of RRC in museums. RRC responds to what Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine defined in the introduction to the book *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display,* the three arenas in which the museum world needs movement:

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[83] This was written on May 19ᵗʰ, 2020 and refers to articles written prior to this date.

[84] Cascone, Sarah. "Museums Are Urgently Collecting Homemade Masks and Other Ephemera From the Pandemic to Document History As It Unfolds". April 9, 2020.

[...] (1) the strengthening of institutions that give populations a chance to exert control over the way they are presented in museums; (2) the expansion of the expertise of established museums in the presentation of non-Western cultures and minority cultures [...]; (3) experiments with exhibition design that will allow museums to offer multiple perspectives or to reveal the tendentiousness of the approach taken.[85]

The first arena that requires change in museums concerns the issue of authority, which I have presented in the previous chapter. Karp and Lavine identified the initial problem within museums to be that of unbalanced domination on the means of presentation. This indicates an inaccurate depiction of a marginal community's narrative, as this community does not control its own representation. By implementing a few major changes to the traditional form of curating, some of which are rooted in the concepts of curatorial activism and critical curating, RRC is challenging authority by re-examining the role of the curator in a museum, as is evident by the case of museums that are responding to COVID-19 through the use of RRC. This re-examination is the first step for a community to seek back the control over the way it is being represented and the narrative through which its history is being told.

Steven Conn further stresses the need to change hierarchical systems in museums in his book *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* Conn claims that certain museums in multicultural societies have purposefully silenced their increasingly diverse visitors.[86] According to Conn, one solution to the issue of authority is making acute changes in museums' objectives:

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[85] Karp, Ivan, and Lavine, Steven. "Introduction: Museums and Multiculturalism". 2012. P.6

[86] Conn, Steven. *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* 2010. P.9

[...] One solution to this problem has been to broaden the museum's appeal, to target new audiences and to shed the museum's traditional goal of timelessness and universalism, replacing it with a notion of contemporary relevance that responds to the particular concerns of those committed to difference above and beyond commonality.[87]

This leads me to the second arena to be changed, according to Karp and Lavine, that refers to the need for museums to broaden their spectrum of representation, or as Conn refers to it - a commitment to difference. Karp further explains the importance of representation in museums, claiming that museums are "morally neutral in principle, but in practice always make moral statements". The statements museums make through their "alleged innate neutrality", speaks louder than a clear assertion of a political stance. This 'neutrality' according to Karp, "is the very quality that enables them to become instruments of power as well as instruments of education and experience."[88]

Many museums who use RRC avoid, whether intentionally or not, neutrality, as it is fairly impossible for an institution to be political and neutral at the same time. What I have come to learn through the case of the Tropenmuseum, is that when using RRC, neutrality can be replaced with a fair narration that represents both sides of the story, thus allowing the visitor to comprehend the full story. Furthermore, RRC is a modern way to approach representation in museums as it documents moments in modern history that communities – both globally and locally – are experiencing. RRC's participatory nature and the response it promotes to global and local events, increase the factor of representation within museums.

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[87] Ibid.

[88] Karp, Ivan. *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. New York: Smithsonian Institution, 2012. P.14

The last arena to be mentioned by Karp and Lavine touches upon museums' biases and the need for curators to undergo a self-reflective process that will expose institutional flaws. This demand for museums to contemplate on how their practice directly affects society is also encouraged in professional circles such as ICOM, as is evident in the 2019 museum definition which calls for the promotion of democracy in cultural institutions. As RRC stems from the concept and practice of critical curating, it is in its nature to promote self-reflectivity. Furthermore, RRC is an unconventional form of curating and its implementation in museums requires a fundamental reconsideration of an institution's structure and policies.

However, RRC also entails problematic aspects that might make it unappealing for museums. The problem begins when the objects are being curated from a western point of view, telling the story of marginal communities from the same colonial narrative that rules over all other artifacts in the museum. This is possibly the biggest issue museums and curators who venture to use RRC are facing, as practicing RRC does not automatically establish notions of democracy and social equality in museums and could easily circle back into being an authoritative method of curating.

Additionally, though this form of curating holds tremendous participatory potential within it, implementing participatory elements to the process of curating requires a great deal of effort from institutions. It is far easier for museums to work with professionals who know and understand the process of curating, as the case study of the Tropenmuseum shows. Of course, this does not encourage a fundamental change within cultural institutions or an examination of the institution's biases but rather favours the status quo. By continuing to work solely with museum-professionals, museums who use RRC in this manner are not fully utilizing RRC's full potential to revolutionize museum practices and challenge the notion of the museum as a colonialist institution.

Regarding the question of exhibition design, RRC poses an obstacle for its curators, as is evident in the RRC collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The institution allocated a room for this collection in which the curators present different, unrelated objects – a pair of jeans from Primark, the first-ever 3D printed gun, the pink pussy hat, etc., all of which tell valuable stories of otherwise silenced communities and encourage critical debates. To explain why each object was curated and to describe its background and cultural implication, each object must be accompanied by a text. Thus, a major struggle for curators who choose to present artifacts curated through RRC is to not turn the exhibition space into a book. The artifact must also stand for its own. [89]

Perhaps more than the question of *how* to exhibit these objects, an even more crucial question to be asked is *which* objects should the museum collect? Which object will depict the event in the clearest way? Crucial yet extremely difficult questions which, as seen in the case of the Tropenmuseum, present problems both for the institution and the curator. The artifacts that are being curated through the use of RRC are of great importance as they can elevate museums into places for modern heritage, preserving pivotal moments in non-western history which might otherwise be overlooked.

However, it is not the artifacts but the people who should stand in the center of an RRC exhibition, since it promotes increased representation and enables museums to communicate with their immediate communities. Museums that venture to use RRC as a curating method must be willing to undergo a self-reflective process that will fundamentally affect the way they work. It is because of this that some museums are reluctant to implement this RRC, as seen in the case of the Tropenmuseum. Thus,

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[89] Conn, Steven. *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* 2010. P.7

RRC should not be realized as a conventional curating method and should be understood by museum professionals to be not only a museum practice, but also a social one.

5. Conclusions

5.1 The Case of the Tropenmuseum And the Case of Museums Reacting to COVID-19 Through the Use of Rapid Response Collecting

The choice to use interviews and case studies as a predominant source of information for this thesis derived from the lack of written material that directly refers to RRC. However, this practical data turned out to be extremely useful when conducting the research and writing the thesis. As RRC is a new and developing form of curating, analyzing the different cases and learning first-hand from curators about the process of using RRC provided me with information I would not have otherwise found.

The case of the Tropenmuseum stands as a model for other, state-funded museums. Through this case study, I wanted to discuss the institutional hardships that might occur when curators attempt to implement RRC in already well-established, government-funded institutions. The interviews I held with the three curators at this museum were of great help when coming to evaluate the Tropenmuseum's inclination (or lack thereof, as some curators have experienced it) to consider adding RRC to their repertoire. The first interview I conducted, with Martin Berger, was my initial introduction to the Tropenmuseum's inclusive approach to creating an exhibition that combines traditional curating methods with the active participation of indigenous communities and political groups. The second interview, with Willemijn van Noord and Daan van Dartel, continued to explore the museum's engagement with politics and directly discussed the way the two curators are trying to implement RRC in the museum.

The second case of museums' response to COVID-19 through the use of RRC, proved to be helpful given its relevance during the time of writing this thesis. Since the Corona crisis began only after I started writing this thesis, this case was added later in the process. In a sense, I found myself using RRC in my thesis, as I researched and

wrote about museums' response to the COVID-19 at the time when the pandemic and the reactions to it occurred. Furthermore, it was important for me to include this case as many believe that this pandemic will be documented as a historic moment in modern history. Therefore, I believe that the way museums respond to this crisis will also be a crucial moment in the history of museology and will prove itself to be a case study for later implementation of RRC.

The museums I refer to in this thesis are an example of the institutional recognition RRC is gaining as a valuable form of curating. In the two cases I chose to study, I presented institutional policies and analyzed their curatorial as well as political and societal worth. This enabled me to continue and frame the question of the practicability of RRC as a strategy for museums to be socially involved through engaging with political and societal causes. The two cases work well together in the frame of this thesis giving that they both demonstrate museums' attempts to implement this developing form of curating, thus serve my line of research which explores RRC as a curatorial strategy.

5.2 Critical Curatorial Analysis and the Theoretical Framework

At the beginning of this process, I wanted to research the nature of RRC and how it is being realized in museums. The revolutionary character of this form of curating, given the institutional debate revolving it, was fascinating to me, as well as its inherently political tendencies. This, however, turned out to be problematic since there isn't much academic debate around RRC for me to base my thesis on. Therefore, I decided to frame RRC around the question of the role of museums in society. This approach stemmed from RRC's political nature and has contributed to my exploration of this form of curating.

Given the multidisciplinary essence of the research topic, as I wanted to explore institutional and curatorial themes, and of the data I gathered, I needed to conceive of a research method that will suit my needs. Therefore, I formulated *Critical Curatorial Analysis* (CCA). This method proved itself to be constructive for my research on different levels. First, the idea of developing a research method derived from the need I had in multiple approaches of research to accommodate the qualities of my thesis. CCA is a combination of the different research methods that I initially deemed as useful for my research, and is, thus, customized for this thesis.

Second, the basis of this method, Cultural Analysis, calls to define concepts that will anchor my research. Therefore, the theoretical framework I presented in the second chapter is a crucial part of the research method and the thesis itself. Defining a clear conceptual framework has greatly assisted me throughout the research as a source to which I can continuously refer back to. Therefore, it was beneficial to use CCA throughout the writing process of the body of the thesis as well as for the research component. However, the concepts I used in the analysis process of the cases and interviews differ in their level of relevance.

First, the concept of *Contact Zones*, though it is very interesting in itself, did not prove to be an integral part of this thesis. Pratt's approach towards the artistic outcome of colonialism did not contribute to my process of analyzing museums as an institution and their role in society, though I was very influenced by her academic debate on the connection between colonialism and art. On the other hand, *Responsiveness*, the second concept I presented, was crucial for the analysis of RRC as a possible method of curating for museums to become more socially engaged. I can attribute that to the fact that responsiveness is an essential component in RRC. Focusing on the responsive aspect within this curating method facilitated the implementation of a social context in the research.

The two concepts that directly discuss curating: *Curatorial Activism* and *Critical Curating,* were extremely beneficial for the research on RRC. By learning and reading about these two concepts I got a better understanding of the role museums and curators play in society and the power their work has in transforming museums to public spaces that serve society. However, Curatorial Activism and Critical Curating do not take a prominent place in this thesis as the previous concept of responsiveness does. It was difficult for me to weave these two concepts into the thesis during the process of writing. This, however, does not reflect on the importance of Curatorial Activism and Critical Curating in the research.

Though Critical Curatorial Analysis is still unfolding as a research method, it proved to be successful for the analysis of the material I gathered and as a coordinator between the different fields of research I incorporated in this thesis. The theoretical framework I sketched for the analysis of the cases and interviews, is not as constructive for the writing process as it is for the research I conducted. The framework needs to be reconsidered to fully accommodate the entire thesis and facilitate a better understanding of the research topic for the reader.

5.3 Rapid Response Collecting as a Curating Strategy for Museums to Promote Notions of Democracy and Social Equality

Considering the political nature of RRC, the decision to base the research question for this thesis on the role of museums in society through museums' political and societal engagement contributed to the examination process of this form of curating. The focus on museums' political tendencies exposed institutional biases and uncertainty towards engaging with political and societal causes. I chose to use ICOM and its museum definitions throughout the years as a way to discuss the institutional debate about the controversial topic of the neutrality of museums. As ICOM is a force in the cultural arena, I was expecting the definition to play a key role in the current politicization of museums.

However, as I have learned from the interviews I conducted, ICOM's museum definition is not a clear reflection of the process museums are undergoing. The curators I talked with are independently inclined to introduce delicate societal issues to their institutions and are actively changing the way they execute their curatorial work, as is evident in the case of the Tropenmuseum. Furthermore, some museum professionals consider ICOM's museum definitions to be unrealistic since these discuss new goals for museums without suggesting a framework for achieving them. Thus, the need for curators to engage with societal and political causes does not derive from institutional policies but rather from their own will to challenge the neutrality of museums and examine the role these play in society.

RRC was recently introduced to the museum world. Therefore, curators and other museum professionals are still exploring the institutional practicability of this method and are finding ways to realize it. The potential in this form of curating is greatly recognized and, at the same time, challenged by the curators with whom I talked. Furthermore, there seems to be a consensus that RRC is, above all, an aesthetic expression of societal events; of events that cause considerable changes to communities and are of great historical value. Unlike traditional forms of curating, RRC does not position the object at the center of an exhibition but rather focuses on those who have gone through an experience which the object represents. It is through these objects that RRC stimulates debates that revolve around societal and political causes.

To refer back to my research question, RRC might be a useful strategy for museum professionals to implement notions of democracy and social equality in their institutions and reconsider the role of museums in society. After talking with curators, the greatest risk when using RRC is for museums to use this form of curating in a colonialist manner, perpetuating western narrative on non-western artifacts. The

strength in this form of curating is that it encourages curators to work together with their communities and through that, transform their practice into a collaborative one, which will benefit both them and their visitors.

In conclusion, what I have come to learn from the research I conducted, is that RRC is becoming more acceptable and popular amongst curators in western cultural institutions. It is, therefore, clear that more research must be done on the practicability of RRC within museums, especially regarding museum policies. A clear outline that will define the changes museums need to undergo in order to implement RRC must be defined. As it is clear that curators are interested to work with RRC, further research should include a greater focus on institutional biases that hinder a full implementation of this form of curating and, more generally, museums' refusal to become more socially active.

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