

À quoi sert une définition des musées pour / par l'ICOM ?

Intervention : Markus Walz

1) The addressees of the ICOM museum definition

The acceptance or non-acceptance of membership applications is no longer the main purpose of the ICOM museum definition because since 2007, article 3 section 2 of the ICOM statutes declares the unlimited exception of recognizing any institution as an accepted ICOM member.

The ICOM museum definition is the best known and worldwide spread text of ICOM. A lot of encyclopaedias around the world accepted it as the central reference formula.

At least in Germany, the following sentences are true: Other museum organisations use the ICOM museum definition for their selection of members. Museum registration schemes use it as their basic text. Authorities for museum consulting and for deciding museum subsidies use the ICOM museum definition for describing their clients. Some private corporations do the same for their funding of museums.

If these independent secondary users of the ICOM museum definition do not follow the renovation of the definition, a unique landmark in the worldwide variety of the museum system will get lost.

2) Evolution of the definition—or a harsh break?

A definition must be changed if a distinguishing mark has lost its separating quality or is newly recognised. If the museums of today have nothing in common with the museums of 2007, the museum definition of 2007 must be replaced by a new one. In other words: If distinguishing marks of 2007 still separate museums and non-museums, it makes no sense to replace these marks today.

A definition is not a fashionable wording; in fact the fundamental terms of a definition connect the past with the contemporary. The French art historian Bénédicte Savoy explained that German princely galleries of the 18th century fulfilled the main aspects of the current museum definition.

3) The essential elements of a definition

A term is an essential part of a definition if it neither paraphrases another part of the definition nor follows from such a part. Different perspectives outside the core of the group are the best test if a term is useful as part of a definition. A definition has not only to fit for well financed institutions with a respectable number of professional staff; it must include small, weak, or highly specialised phenomena of the same category.

I really doubt that an artist-curator loves to cooperate with “diverse communities” for creating a “polyphonic space”. Ask DEMHIST if they accept the term “acquiring”; ask CIDOC why “researching” is part of the definition, why “documenting” is not.

Each element of a definition means more exclusion; the longer a definition is the smaller is the number of the defined elements. The actual ICOM museum definition (English version) has 45 words; the MDPP proposal has 100 words.