

Introduction

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The International Council of Museums and the Controversy about a New Museum Definition – A Conversation with Lauran Bonilla-Merchav, Bruno Brulon Soares, Lonnie G. Bunch III, Bernice Murphy, and Michèle Rivet

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Abstract: In 2019, an Extraordinary General Assembly International Council of Museums (ICOM) met in Kyoto, Japan to vote on a new museum definition. Among other things, the controversial proposal described museums as “democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures” that should also aim “to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.” The motion to postpone the vote, which was supported by a large majority in Kyoto, caused a crisis in the most important international organization for museums and museum professionals. In the years since, ICOM Define led an elaborate consultation process resulting in a newly revised museum definition to be voted on at ICOM’s Extraordinary General Assembly in Prague in August 2022. In this conversation, several prominent members of ICOM who have been deeply involved in the debates about a new museum definition take a critical look at the consultation process before Kyoto, the reasons for postponing the vote, the work of ICOM Define, and also share their expectations for Prague.

Keywords: International Council of Museums, ICOM, museums, museum definition

In August 2020, the *New York Times* wrote that “museums are having an identity crisis.”¹ Already a year before, *The Art Newspaper* had spoken about a “feud” and “quarrels” inside of the museum world.² And in March 2021, the *Museums Journal* stated that there was “warfare” between reformers and conservatives.³ What they fought about was the question: what is a museum? or, more specifically, about a new museum definition to be adopted by the International Council of Museums (ICOM).

ICOM, which was founded in 1947, is the most important international organization for museums and museum professionals in the global community with nearly 50,000 members from over 138 countries. ICOM has 123 national committees from Albania to Zambia and seven regional alliances (Arab, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin American and the Caribbean, West Africa, Northern Europe, and South-East Europe). There are also 32 international committees focusing on specific fields of interest such as costumes, conservation, historic house museums, memorial museums, natural history, and ethical dilemmas. Within the organization there are four working groups and eight standing

1 Alex Marshall, “What Is a Museum? A Dispute Erupts Over a New Definition: An international effort to update the definition of what museums are has been met with resignations and political intrigue,” *New York Times*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/06/arts/what-is-a-museum.html>.

2 Vincent Noce, “What exactly is a museum? Icom comes to blows over new definition,” *The Art Newspaper*, August 19, 2019, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/08/19/what-exactly-is-a-museum-icom-comes-to-blows-over-new-definition>, <https://icom.museum/en/news/museum-definition-process-the-two-final-proposals/>.

3 Geraldine Kendall Adams, “Ideological rift persists as Icom restarts museum definition consultation: ‘Warfare’ between reformers and conservatives has not subsided since Kyoto conference,” *Museums Journal*, March 2, 2021, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/03/ideological-rift-persists-as-icom-restarts-museum-definition-consultation/>.

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committees, including the Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP) responsible for the discussion of a new museum definition which is at the heart of the conversation that follows.

At ICOM's General Assembly in Vienna, Austria in 2007, the following definition of a museum was adopted:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.⁴

In the years following, there was a growing concern that this definition no longer fully represented museums in the contemporary world, and in 2016, the MDPP was created to re-examine the definition in light of “new conditions, obligations and possibilities for museums.”⁵ The committee proposed a new definition which was put before the Extraordinary General Assembly in Kyoto, Japan in 2019:

Museums are democratising, 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 artefacts 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 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

Before this radical revision was put to the vote, however, a motion was brought forward by ICOM Europe, supported by ICOM Canada and many others to postpone the vote. Despite opposition from national committees such as ICOM Australia and ICOM United States, the motion to postpone the vote prevailed by 396 votes to 157, with two abstentions and seven no votes.⁷

Many reasons for the decision were voiced: dissatisfaction over the process, objection to complex academic vocabulary, statements that seemed to impose obligations which would be unrealizable in certain countries, and that

the proposed wording was more like a mission statement and call to action than a definition.⁸ It was clear that those supporting the motion to postpone would vote against the new definition if they were forced to cast a vote. For some ICOM members, and to many outsiders, it seemed that ICOM had chosen to take a political stance, rejecting a definition that addressed contemporary concerns in favor of a very traditional one. This was a view shared by both editors of *International Public History*, Andreas Etges and David Dean, respectively also members of ICOM Germany and ICOM Canada.

The decision caused significant resignations and the initiation of a new consultative process, led by ICOM Define. We are now coming to an end of three years of intense activity at the international, regional, and national levels. This led to the creation of a shortlist of definitions of which two were announced in May 2022:

Proposal A

A museum is a permanent, not-for-profit institution, accessible to the public and of service to society. It researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible cultural and natural heritage in a professional, ethical and sustainable manner for education, reflection and enjoyment. It operates and communicates in inclusive, diverse and participatory ways with communities and the public.

Proposal B

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.⁹

The votes are now in: Proposal B will be put to the vote at ICOM's Extraordinary General Assembly in Prague in August 2022.

We felt that the time was right to offer readers a conversational article about the process and politics of ICOM's discussion over defining a museum in the contemporary world. This is not just an issue for museums, but for anyone interested in history, heritage, and culture. It is of vital concern to all public historians. We invited several prominent members of ICOM, some of whom were in favor of the new definition proposed in Kyoto and some who were not, to join us in a conversation. We would like to thank them once again for their readiness to do so.

⁴ <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>.

⁵ <https://icom.museum/en/news/the-extraordinary-general-conference-postpones-the-vote-on-a-new-museum-definition/>.

⁶ <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/>.

⁷ The debate can be followed on the twitter feed of University of Leiden's Dr. Csilla Ariese beginning with her post on September 6, 2019: <https://twitter.com/CsillaAriese/status/1170161521814458368>. The voting results were captured by her in a post on September 7, 2019.

⁸ <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2019/10/01102019-definition-just-start-of-conversation/#>.

⁹ <https://icom.museum/en/news/museum-definition-process-the-two-final-proposals/>.

1 The Participants



Luran Bonilla-Merchav holds a doctoral degree in art history. With national and international experience, she is a lecturer, researcher, curator, and consultant of art, culture, museums, and heritage. Currently she is adjunct professor at both the University of Costa Rica and the National University of Costa Rica, and serves on the board of the Museum of Costa Rican art. She has published on modern and contemporary Costa Rican art, as well as on topics of museology. Luran is treasurer of ICOM Costa Rica and also treasurer of the Regional Alliance of ICOM LAC (Latin America and the Caribbean). She currently co-chairs the ICOM Standing Committee for the Museum Definition.



Bruno Brulon Soares is a museologist and anthropologist based in Brazil, professor of museology at the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), and professor in the Post-Graduate Program in Museology and Heritage (UNIRIO/MAST). He coordinates the Laboratory of Experimental Museology at this university, working closely with community-based museums and with several projects at the grassroots level involving cultural heritage and museums. Currently he is chair of the ICOM International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM) and co-chair of the Standing Committee for the Museum Definition (ICOM Define). He is the author and editor of several publications on Museology and Heritage, including the series of books “Decolonising museology” (ICOFOM/ICOM). His research currently focuses on museums decolonisation, community action, and the political uses of museums and cultural heritage.



Lonnie G. Bunch III is the 14th Secretary of the Smithsonian. He assumed his position June 16, 2019. As Secretary, he oversees 21 museums, 21 libraries, the National Zoo, numerous research centers, and several education units and centers. Two new museums – the National Museum of the American Latino and the Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum – are in development. Bunch was the founding director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture and is the first historian to be Secretary of the Institution. In 2021, he received France’s highest award, The Legion of Honor.



Bernice Murphy served nine years as a member of the Executive Board of ICOM, Paris (six years as Vice-President, 1998–2004), then chaired ICOM Ethics Committee Chair for seven years (until 2011). She is an Honorary Life Member of ICOM (Paris) and the Australian Museums and Galleries Association (Canberra). She has curated international and Australian exhibitions of contemporary art; published books and essays on art, artists, architecture, museology, and museums, while having a long-standing commitment (since 1978) to advancing indigenous artists and First Nations’ self-representation in museums. She coordinated (for ICOM’s 70th anniversary celebration, in Milan, 2016) a volume of essays on ethics and museums: Bernice L. Murphy (ed.), *Museums, Ethics and Cultural Heritage* (Routledge, UK, and ICOM, Paris, 2016).



Michèle Rivet is, since 2019, Vice-Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. She is also a Board member of ICOM-Canada (International Council of Museums, Canadian Committee) and ICOFOM (International Council of Museums, International Committee on Museology). She obtained a master's degree in museology from the University of Montreal in 2015. During her studies, she particularly focused on the relationships between First Peoples and Museums. Now a lawyer of the Barreau du Québec, she was the first judge-president of the Quebec Human Rights Tribunal in 1990, a position she held until 2010. Previously she had been Commissioner of the Law Reform Commission of Canada from 1987 to 1990 and a judge of Quebec's Youth Court from 1981 to 1987. Michèle Rivet was Vice-President of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) in Geneva from 2010 to 2017. In 2005, the University of Ottawa awarded her an honorary doctorate for her involvement in the promotion for human rights both in Canada and internationally. In 2011, the Quebec Court awarded her a gold merit for her entire career in the judiciary. In 2015, she received the Merit and the title *Advocatus Emeritus* from the Quebec Bar. Michèle Rivet was invested, as Member, into the Order of Canada in 2018. She is also an honorary member of the *Société Québécoise de droit international*.

2 The Conversation¹⁰

IPH: *You all have been very active in the museum world and of course in ICOM. Do you have a special childhood memory of going to museums or a particular moment that triggered your interest and curiosity in museums? When did museums become important to you?*

LBM: I was always very involved in the cultural world because my mom is a theater person. And here in Costa Rica most of the arts are funded by the Ministry of Culture. And so it is kind of a tight knit community, and I was aware

that there was always great support for the performing arts in Costa Rica, especially music. The museums were definitely not getting enough support. I was probably in high school when I noticed this and I don't know why because I didn't go to museums that often. I was definitely at the theater all the time, dance music, theater, but not so much museums. But I myself was an artist and then went to college and thought I was going to study architecture and then went the route of art history and ended up getting a doctorate in art history. And so, of course, the kind of second set of flash memories that came to my mind when I heard this question was: I was fortunate enough to study both my undergrad and grad degree in New York City. And so that was a fantastic place to study art and being at those museums and having flash moments of museum grandeur in my mind of just personal moments standing in front of works of art or having the opportunity, for example, of studying a medieval manuscript. It was just like, my goodness, what is this? So that's definitely my thoughts on museums.

LB: I think my earliest memory of museums and my involvement was probably sixth grade as a 12-year-old. We went to the Cloisters in New York on a school trip and I couldn't believe there were suits of armor. I didn't know I was not supposed to touch them, and I knocked one over. And we all got thrown out of the museum. The next day the principal yelled at us: how dare you embarrass our elementary school? I remember thinking, this stuff must be really important if we just got in trouble for it. And it just led me to consciously go back to museums, where I came to recognize that it was our collective memory. Ultimately, as a scholar and at the Smithsonian, where I've spent most of my career, I realized that in some ways you had the biggest canvas to paint on. I thought that to tackle the issues that we cared about, issues of fairness or inclusivity, that it should be on the biggest canvas. So for me, it was an opportunity to say I was sorry for knocking over that suit of armor and also to paint on a bigger canvas.

BM: I grew up in Melbourne, which had a remarkable art collection. My first encounter with that collection was an occasional event often called "a rainy day outing" in one's childhood. In Melbourne, it was quite normal for families of all classes or backgrounds at some stage to take children to the museum, which in most cases was co-located with the impressive State Library. Melbourne's Library had an extraordinary Reading Room, with high bookshelves surrounding you from all directions, but also receding because it was a huge, cavernous space. From that space, you went up some stairs leading towards the natural history museum (in the same building). But at the top of the stairs was a taxidermied, monumental

¹⁰ The conversation was recorded via Zoom and was edited for clarity and brevity.

presentation of the most famous racehorse in Australia, called Phar Lap, which was heroized like a person in many people's imagination. And from Phar Lap, leading away from the natural history collections and further up another staircase was the state's art collection. And there were extraordinary "old master" works of art to be found up there. So my first encounter with the museum world was one which interconnected the worlds of learning – books with natural history – rocks, fossils – and then this world of art opening beyond in really a conversational experience. What I maybe project back onto that experience was the interconnection of natural history, the history of the world of art, of the imaginative life, and the world of learning.

BB: Actually, there are many, many possible answers to this question, but I'm going to try to give the most honest one. As a kid, most of us used to go to the National Museum in Rio, which is where most of us first got our experience with the museum. Unfortunately, we don't have it anymore [the National Museum was destroyed by fire in 2018]. It is being rebuilt. Which made this even more emotional because I usually ask this question to my students at the beginning of the semester, and the most of them usually referred to the National Museum. So it is a big reference to me. But also, I come from a city actually outside of Rio, which is a smaller city that has an indigenous name: Niterói. In my childhood, there was no museum in my own town, so we had to go to Rio, which was like traveling. It is not very far, it is like two hours away. But for us, as a kid, it was traveling to another universe and especially to go to the big city where the museums were. And so the school trips to Rio were like the biggest discovery for us, and there was this sense of finding something new. My family was not very cultural, but I think in a way I found in the art world a way to exist as an individual. I used to paint and to work with art, though I have never worked with art museums, surprisingly. So my first visit that I really recall triggering my interest for the museum world was when I visited the fine art museums in Rio, which is like a big museum very inspired by European museums of art. And for me, it was a shock coming from a small town to see that so close to me there was such a huge institution with so many works of art and something that really inspired me. But I think what made me want to become a museologist was, I think, a little bit like what Bernice was saying, the possibilities of discovering different things. When I was a teenager, I first traveled to Europe and visited the Natural History Museum in London. I always considered that moment the biggest discovery because we didn't have science museums like that in Brazil. And so for me, it was like, wow, a museum can also be that, it can be the art museum, but it

can also be this. So for me, it was the possibility of working with completely different things like having the artwork but also having the natural history in my own field of practice.

MR: My first career was in law. I was the Chief Justice of the Quebec Human Rights Tribunal presided for 20 years till 2010. And when I retired, I decided to go back to my first love – and my first love was museums. As a law student in Paris doing a PhD, I had the opportunity of taking some courses in Egyptology at the Louvre. So I went back to university with much younger people than me, and I got a master degree in museology 2015. I linked human rights with museology. Put the focus on the Aboriginal people, First Nations. This is my new life. I'm quite old, but a new museologist. And I'm very privileged to be with ICOM Canada, with ICOFOM [International Committee for Museology], and also to be the vice chair of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. Now it is time for me just to go with my passion, and my passion is really museums. Museums have a very important social role to play and museums could be and should be actors of social change, as courts could be. But I'm sure that museums can play that role.

IPH: *Bernice, what was behind that drive to start a reform commission on a new museum definition in 2015? And could you share with us your views on the proposed new definition that came up for discussion in Kyoto and also the debate that took place around it?*

BM: Discussion of ICOM's "museum" definition began as far back as 1998–99. It was a critical moment in ICOM at that time, when forces were urgently clustering around the need for change. Museums people were projecting ideas forward into a new century and agitated about ways in which museums needed to change how they functioned. And this brought attention to ICOM itself and how it functioned. I had just been elected Vice-President of ICOM and was asked by the President and Board if I would chair a Reform Task Force to look at the whole organization of ICOM – which became known as the ICOM Reform Task Force (ICOM-RTF). The only sort of *ex cathedra* [on my own authority] decision I made was early on: I decided, We're not going to spend time on the Statutes or we'll never get anything important done about organizational functions. I also found that the Statutes permitted far more liberty for action and reform than people imagined. There was almost nothing in the Statutes that restrained museum people and ICOM from action for change.

A crucial Statutes statement was the definition of a museum, which looked old and a bit rusty. But I realized that we could not focus on that because it would require a statutory change that would lead us into long formal

processes of debate, while it was important to get on with urgent reform work. RTF worked and consulted widely over a year, and developed concrete proposals for change that I compiled in an extensive report (adopted in April 2000) which analyzed the whole organization. (How did each part function? What were its key purposes? How could it change to be fit for a new century).

Colleagues and all international Chairs of committees had almost a year to consider the 57 Reform Proposals and their reasons; so that when it finally came to voting at the General Assembly in Barcelona (6 July 2001), the reforms had been discussed through ICOM's plenary sessions many times. There'd been work also with the Executive Board to formulate the first-ever *Mission* and *Values* statements for ICOM, and the organization's first triennial Strategic Plan (all contained in the Reform Task Force's Report). As a result, 57 organizational reforms were passed unanimously, without abstention.

That process forms the basis of my belief that ICOM is not a body that is resistant to change; it is always possible to propose new ideas and achieve change in ICOM. But if you go through a process where you are seeking to reform or change something substantial in ICOM, it is extremely important to be clear, to consult, and to establish a precise methodology.

The ICOM "Museum" definition reform was deferred because it was in the Statutes, and required a separate, further process. I wrote about the definition in ICOM News in 2004 and said then that it seemed to me like an old carpet that's been stitched many times and repaired, but it had become worn out; it really needed to be deaccessioned as a museological artifact. But in my view, it is a precise technical task to work on something like a new museum definition, which also has legal implications. This is not a task that can be led usefully by completely open plenary series of meetings without any methodology. I think it was incredibly ill-advised to go out to the whole of ICOM (2016–2019) asking for opinions about museums, raising such a level of interaction in all of the National Committees, International Committees, Regional Alliances, all parts of ICOM, *without a methodology*, without any clear way to bring all of that interaction progressively into some disciplined format. So when just a few weeks before the General Assembly in Kyoto (2019), a single definition was circulated without comment after three years' work, it should not have been surprising to people that it caused such dismay among many circles.

However, since Kyoto, Bruno and Lauran have gone through exactly the rigorous kind of process, and it is been ICOM-wide, that's needed to gain careful consultation which ultimately will bring you down to perhaps two

sentences (no more), that are precise, clearly understandable, and can be used as a reference worldwide, including in legal documents or cultural policies.

IPH: *You are implying that the process was the major problem. Lonnie, you were in Kyoto too and were involved. Do you want to respond?*

LB: I just have a very different view. My sense is that the process may have been flawed, but the political issues got in the way of the real conversation. For me, this was a clarion call for museums to think and a way to reimagine themselves and to reimagine relationships. My notion was that in Kyoto, for the definition, I might not have used "polyphonic" and terms like that. But I think that the notion of suggesting that museums have to rethink their value proposition, the notion that museums have a contemporary resonance was very, very powerful to me. My concern in Kyoto was simply that I really thought that, whether the process was flawed or not, you either gave the definition an up or down vote. I didn't like postponing, even though probably it turned out to be the better solution. I thought it really went against what I expected to happen in Kyoto, and I was disappointed, candidly. So much of the conversation there made me think about a profession that was much less bold and creative than I wanted it to be.

LBM: The group of us in the Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials committee (MDPP) really did begin very substantial work that led to precisely what Lonnie is talking about: the ability to come forward with a good basis and with good reason. Yes, in fact, museums have changed. I think what needed to happen was continued consultation within that process. What you, Bernice and Lonnie said, makes it very clear that the process was flawed. Perhaps not the whole process, but it was drawn to a close too soon. Three years was not enough time to come up with a drastically changed definition because of the fact that, as Bernice says, it is like a worn-out carpet. It is just been stitched and mended. I love the metaphor.

One of the things that has united Bruno and me, what enabled us to work so well together, was our perception that in Kyoto members were generally happy with the direction MDPP was going, but that they wanted to be consulted. But it became so political and people were saying, Oh no, it is bad or no, it is good.

IPH: *Some outside critics focused on the difficult language of polyphonic spaces, which was a sort of academic language. The notion of museums being democratizing museums, being inclusive, being spaces for critical dialogue, was more accessible. Outsiders looking in on that debate struggled with the notion why museums should not be democratizing. Why they should not be inclusive and why not*

spaces for critical dialogue. In the media, this was sometimes portrayed as a result of that postponement. So were those things at stake or was it mostly the process?

LB: Michelle's point about social justice is very important to me. While I saw a lot of what was about process, I also heard this real debate about whether museum institutions are forward-meaning, about social justice, or more inclusive. From what I heard, it wasn't simply a process issue. It really created a fundamental debate. As an academic, I love those debates. We just didn't have the right mechanism to actually frame those debates and wrestle with that. If you were from the outside and you were just taking notes, you would say that this is really about those who want change and those who don't. And that may be simplistic, but that's the way it seemed at that moment. What I want to know is, how much of this is simply a process-driven failure or how much of it is about altering visions of the roles and possibilities of museums.

MR: I was in Kyoto and it was an absolutely fantastic week. It was a momentum that may never happen again. Right: it was about the process. Right: it was about the content. It also was about the fact that there are words that don't have the same meaning for four, ten people sitting in a room. I really applaud the vitality of members of ICOM. And I think it is really a promise for the future.

It was much more about the process, but it was, and the process was completely unacceptable. I remember that we got the new proposal, when many people were on holiday in July, so it was nearly impossible even to consult our members. This is the reason why we in Canada were the first country outside of Europe to ask for a postponement with ICOM. But I found the vitality of ICOM members in Kyoto absolutely fantastic, and the museum definition was talked about at breakfast, at lunchtime, and even when having a drink in the evening.

BB: Listening to all of you, I keep thinking that there is an aspect of this process that is definitely political. I very much see the museum definition as our intangible cultural heritage. It is something that we have had for so long, and even the debate is part of this heritage. As a member of the Committee for Museology (ICOFOM) I participated in my first session in 2006 in Argentina, and it was about the museum definition. This was all that people wanted to discuss. And in a way, in the end, we were a little bit frustrated because there was not such a great change in 2007 and we stayed basically with the definition that we had. But I think the fact that we have had this definition for so long, it has become part of our heritage. We know it is very difficult and very political to change heritage.

We don't know if whatever we are going to propose in this next stage in the next few months is going to be approved, because there is such a high resistance against

change. I consider it natural in a way, but at the same time problematic, because museums are changing. There is another aspect that I would like to bring attention to, which is how ICOM itself has changed. It now has 45,000 members. The fact that we have so many more members and so many more diverse members from different places makes this process much more complex than when the current definition was discussed. So I think it is natural when you are trying to change something that is so traditional and so rooted in the organization, it is difficult to accomplish such a change. But at the same time, the ICOM that we have today cannot be the same and cannot still value the museum the same way as it was valued in the 70s.

BM: My view was that the process of examining the museum definition was opening up so many important questions and issues that in my own life I have fought for since I first went to Tasmania in my twenties, teaching art history in an art school there, and learned what happened in the Black War [fought between Aboriginal peoples and British colonists from the mid-1820s to 1832]. (That fundamentally altered my life thereafter as a person.) So what worried me about there not being a clear MD process was that, on the one hand, there were so many energies to be opened up, liberated, and carried forward in the reimagining of museums. At the same time, I knew quite well that quite a number of national committees would become agitated because the definition was in their law. ICOM Italy had fought for years to get the ICOM definition accepted legally so that it could provide protection against governmental moves that were made to privatize museums, for example.

IPH: *Bruno and Lauran, you were put in charge of the group that restructured the process [a second time, after the Kyoto General Assembly in 2019]. Can you briefly describe that new process and also the experiences you've had? Do you still see a rift along some of the lines that we have discussed or has this process, in spite of the failings of Kyoto, led to something that you think will reinvigorate ICOM?*

LBM: In the time between Kyoto and the crisis of resignations [nine members of ICOM's council and executive board resigned in the months following Kyoto, including president Suay Aksoy and chair of the museum definition committee, Jette Sandhal] there was a struggle within ICOM. Suddenly we had no president, and the MDPP2 group didn't really even know if we were going to continue working. As ICOM moved on, MDPP2 regrouped, but Bruno and myself were not chairing it at that point. We led a group of people that we called the methodology subcommittee to come up with a completely new methodology. The methodology subcommittee was tremendously challenging because there was this political rift. There were figures within the subcommittee and within ICOM who were very

staunchly in favor of staying with the status quo, rather than just understanding that we'd been tasked to move forward and make it work. We managed to come up with a methodology that enabled a process that left some room for flexibility. I think it was very successful. The fact that the methodology was crafted by members within ICOM who in a sense represented the two supposed groups helped. The rift didn't really exist within ICOM before. Somehow, the politicization of the definition process led to there being this sense of two groups.

So the work that we did was tremendously challenging and we had to incorporate both of those supposed groups. The experiences Bruno and I have had in the last several months, taking part in webinars and such, made us aware that there are more progressive committees, regions, countries, national committees, international committees, and more conservative ones. This is something that the results also show, but I think that's just the nature of the spectrum of museum work at present. We're finding what seems to be a sort of middle ground.

BB: Our greatest difficulty throughout this process was dealing with differences of opinion. But I would not call it a real rift and not even a polarization. It was very difficult to find a consensus among 20 people inside this committee with many different points of view, but I can say that both of us are very proud of this work, because it was only possible to get to the point where we are now because we really were able to involve everyone in this process.

We recently launched several rounds of consultations, also as a way to measure the level of diversity and the potential conflicts within the organization. And we were honestly expecting much more conflict and much more polarization, and what we found was really different voices trying to engage in dialogue. The problem of cultural translation is a very active one, because we have a definition that's never going to be universal, but it is used as a universal tool. In our last consultation, we proposed five definitions, five proposals and at least four of them had a high number of votes. And I think that's a great statement to the fact that Kyoto was not as simple as the media wanted to paint the picture. It was much more complex.

IPH: *So are you confident of success in Prague?*

BB: Not at all, because it is a huge process. We are always wondering, are we there yet? Are we not there yet? We're not sure. But we know that we have enough material for this next round of concrete proposals. But at the same time, we also know that it is a bureaucratic process and a political process. It is impossible to please everyone, but the definition needs to have two thirds of the votes. So, we are not sure that it is going to pass. But what we would like to be sure of is that we did everything we could.

LBM: To keep the current definition, only one third of the of the voting members need to say we don't want a change and that's enough not to change, because we need two thirds to make a change. That's just the way it is. But if a new definition does not pass in Prague, I don't know what the organization's going to do. It would be a situation where it is like, now what happens? Because we tried many different ways, we consulted and consulted and consulted to the point of exhaustion. And we've done it as objectively within a field that is so tremendously subjective.

LB: I want to applaud Bruno and Laura for the great work that you're doing. I think the question in my mind is: this process not only explored the diversity of museums; I think it explored the fissures that separate us. So, one of the questions in my mind is how do we heal, regardless of whether it passes or not? What are the steps to heal as an organization? Because I think there are a lot of people that I talked to at ICOM-US and others, who say it is beyond the definition now. It is now a question of, is this an organization that can embrace the totality of who we are? So, the question for me is, what do we put in place to heal, regardless of the one third of the two thirds?

LBM: It makes me think of the very recent external review document that offers some ideas of how the organization can heal. It'll be interesting to see if people embrace the new proposed definition or not. Possibly, just possibly, if it is embraced, then people will also embrace the process and the changes that went about with this process. So it is really interesting for us to hear, for me to hear Bernice talk about 1999 and periods of crisis and the great amount of consensus that was reached within two years. But I don't believe we would in any way in 2022 have that general sense of everybody voting in the same direction as it used to be. I remember going to previous meetings and everybody just voted yea about everything that was recommended. And in 2019 it was like, wow, this is exciting. Something's happening. And so I think that it is possible that we will be able to embrace the opening up of the process has been tremendously multi-vocal all along the way, participatory in ways that ICOM has never been before. We could probably improve methods of participation and so on. Many things are going to be necessary to restore faith in our organization. But maybe, if a new definition is approved, it can kind of help start that healing process.

BM: I have every confidence in the world that a new definition will go through in Prague. I first confronted the sometimes-extraordinary culture of those meetings many years ago (when I first attended an ICOM meeting in Paris, in 1994) and someone said that if students were admitted to ICOM, he would leave. And I remember suddenly finding

myself on my feet, which I never intended to be, standing up and being given the microphone to say: “In my opinion, an organization that did not think about its young members was an organization that didn’t care about its future!”

But you see it all comes back to careful consultation and process. One of the 57 organizational reforms that were adopted in 2001 (in Barcelona) was that there would be a percentage of student members admitted to ICOM – again, without objection. I’m turning to speak now with extraordinary admiration and huge confidence: that the results of the work that Bruno and Lauran have carried through so thoroughly since 2019 have every chance of producing a new ICOM museum definition that will be accepted (in Prague, August 2022).

By the way, ICOM does not need to seek a definition to sit *on top of* other definitional documents in the museums world, but to provide an anchoring definition in its organization and Statutes, connecting to other core documents. That gives us a baseline for all of these collective and varied definitional efforts worldwide – not sitting on top but *beneath them*; not repressing other efforts, but in fact welcoming them and reinforcing cultural diversity, inclusiveness, and comparative achievements across the world of museums. There will be other documents that may be much more ambitious, go much further and offer much more detail on specific issues that are emerging and will continue to emerge.

My point comes back to picking up all of those innovative energies and carrying them forward. Creating an International Observatory for progressive museum developments as a dedicated body within ICOM could be part of ICOM’s ongoing work to support innovation and promote museums’ social impact. No single idea would be imposed on any members or Committees; instead you would be harvesting multiple ideas, programs, initiatives from different contexts across the whole organization; and that would have an irrigation effect for ICOM’s work as a global body.

MR: As others, I just want to applaud the fantastic work that was done for the last three years by ICOM Define and the consultations that took place. My only question is about strategy. Do you have plans for Prague? The strategy for a meeting is almost as important as the content for that meeting.

BB: The reason why we had four rounds of consultation was to allow the most committees to participate. So far, we have had responses from 116 committees. It is between 70 and 80 percent of the whole organization, which is a mark that we never really reached before in other consultations. But we did not only want most of the committees to participate, we wanted a broad geographic distribution.

The two North American committees participated, and in the second place was Latin America, with 68 percent participating, which was a higher percentage than in Europe. But it was in consultation 2 that we realized that there were less African committees participating and so we organized webinars involving African committees and also tried to identify why they were having difficulty in participating. Some committees are still establishing themselves, or have very few members, and it was especially difficult during the pandemic. We had a higher rate of participation from Africa in the following consultation thanks to all these processes involved. So it has been a learning curve for us to really know how the different committees work. We’re now going to work on the two top definitions, the two top proposals from the five, and we are going to consider all the comments, everything that was collected during consultations four to present to the ICOM Advisory Council for a final decision on which definition is to be voted. In the end will arrive at one final definition to present in Prague.

LBM: It wasn’t difficult to get the Europeans to participate. They feel like the biggest stake holders, whereas perhaps in other parts of the world, people had been a bit more reluctant to participate. So we did an extraordinary amount of webinars throughout a year and a half where we were invited by committees who asked us to come talk to them about this process because you know, you get the email, but the email is just so dry. Having it presented made committees feel more embraced and so they took part. The African example was just probably the most evident, but this happened in different regions around the world. With ICOM Arab it was other ICOM Define members from the region who made an effort and held an activity there. The intention has always been to try to get as much as we can from around the world and to make everybody participate and feel invited to this consultation process.

We are proposing a definition for 2022, but it can’t really stop there. One of the things that was really interesting throughout this process has been to witness how enriching the conversations have been. Many of them within committees themselves. They never held webinars to just talk about what museums are about. And now they were, and they were seeing colleagues with different mindsets and how you can learn from each other. That’s really an important lesson from this entire process. And also how important it is to give more emphasis on regional work within ICOM: strengthening the regional alliances and having people feel that they have spaces to discuss closer to home and then take part in the global conversation.

Bernice, I love your optimism about it. We are very cautiously optimistic about the results.