

Collecting with(in) the city

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**CAMOC & COMCOL
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Guided tour in Amsterdam Museum
Photo: Francoise Boleschowski



Guided tour in Amsterdam Museum by Marysa Otte
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Collecting Activism

From history museum to city museum: Integrating art collection into a project

Xavier de la Selle & Cécile Gotterand

Biography

Xavier de la Selle has been Director of Gadagne (Lyon History Museum and Puppet Arts Museum) since 2015. He is also responsible for Lyon's history and society museums, which include the Musée de l'imprimerie et de la communication graphique and the Musée de l'automobile Henri-Malartre. He began his career in the archive sector. A graduate of the Ecole Nationale des Chartes, he worked as an archivist. In 2008, he took charge of the Rize, centre mémoires et société, a new cultural venue opened in Villeurbanne in 2008. In 2022, he was elected Chairman of the Fédération des écomusées et musées de société.

Cécile Gotterand is curator in charge of the collections of the Lyon city museum, scientific referent for the history of Lyon.

Introduction

The history museum of Lyon opened its doors to the public in 1921. It was part of the city museum movement, and inspired by the example of the Musée Carnavalet, the history museum of Paris. However, the Musée de Lyon subsequently moved away from this model, concentrating its collections on decorative arts, without ever embarking on a contemporary collecting policy.

In the 2000s, the museum underwent a major renovation of both its building and museography before reopening its doors to the public in 2009. During this period, the museum began to undertake a number of collecting projects, mainly in the industrial field, but these were not initially incorporated into the museum's collections on a permanent basis.

More recently, within the framework of a complete overhaul of its permanent exhibition, and more generally of its scientific and cultural project formalised in 2022, the history museum has fully redefined its collecting strategy, so as to enrich its collections by giving greater importance to objects and to the words of witnesses of contemporary urban history, as well as to themes that are rarely present in the museum (Tim Marshall, 2023; Coudroy de Lille, Coquery, 2024).

The process of renewing the permanent tour, spread over five years (2019-2023), has provided an opportunity to move forward with the organisation of this collection, working on a theme basis. The new tour is divided into four thematic exhibitions. The last one, entitled *Lyonnaises, Lyonnais*, deals with the political history of the city, evoking the history of power and militant commitments [See figure 1]. It is a collection dealing with feminist activists, compiled by the museum staff in 2023, which will be used as an example to raise a series of questions of technical and professional nature, as well as ethical and political.

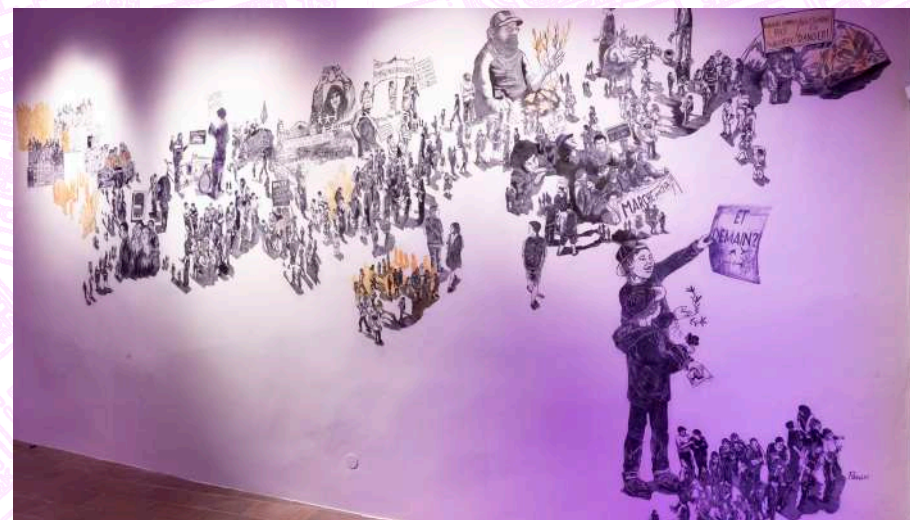


Figure 1: Exhibition view 'Lyonnaises, Lyonnais' (2023). Credits: Paroldi Schwebel

Collecting for an exhibition: a double-edged sword

One might wonder about the singularities of collecting for a permanent exhibition. This is the situation the staff of the Musée d'histoire de Lyon had to deal with when preparing the thematic tour entitled: *Lyonnaises, Lyonnais, pouvoirs et engagements dans la cité (Lyonnais(f/m), powers and commitments in the city)*. Willing to move away from an object-focused museography to reach an idea-focused one, the plan was to create new rooms to show three forms of activism deeply rooted in current social and societal debates: the fight for the living environment and for the climate, the defence of the rights of foreigners and people of immigrant background, and the fight against domination systems, especially by women's rights activists. These three citizens' movements have a long history in Lyon, or at least a long history of local support. [See figure 2]



Figure 2: Exhibition view 'Lyonnaises, Lyonnais' (2023). Credits: Paroldi Schwebel

While many Lyonnais have heard of the *Ovalistes*, silk workers led by Philomène Rozan in 1869 in the first major women's strike in Europe, the museum's collections hold no trace of this history. Nor is there any tangible or intangible evidence of the occupation of the Saint-Nizier church by prostitutes in June 1975 (a landmark in the history of sex workers recognition), or of the actions of the French Women's Liberation Movement (MLF i.e. Mouvement de Libération des Femmes), which was very active in Lyon in the 1970s. There is even fewer elements on contemporary forms of activism.

It was therefore necessary to take a proactive approach and to gather information from those who had witnessed this history. The prospect of exhibiting the results of this collection in the permanent exhibition in the very near future proved particularly stimulating at first, both for the museum teams, the collectors, and for those we collected from: people, groups, associations, individuals – although there were a number of pitfalls and difficulties that we had not necessarily anticipated.

The museum's approach first implied defining the content of the exhibition before going out to meet people so as to collect objects. Therefore it is easy to imagine the different biases induced by this reversed acquisition and exhibition process, all the more so since limits of budget, exhibition space, deadlines and scenography entered the equation.

In order to evoke feminist struggles, finding the 'right' objects was a great temptation: neither too small nor too large and easy to understand, and inevitably corresponding to the representations the members of the museum staff had on what feminist movements are or would be. So posters, leaflets, pins, photos and placards seemed the ideal way to evoke this form of activism, perhaps with the risk of remaining caricatural or incomplete.

During the initial discussions with the associations and groups we met (*Mouvement français pour le Planning Familial du Rhône ie MFPF, Collectif NousToutes Rhône, Cercle Flora Tristan*), the museum staff insisted on presenting the project in full details, without hiding anything about the limits or the museum's guarantees to exhibit the entire collection. The preliminary interview, led in a place chosen by the interviewees, usually their homes, quickly focused on the objects or documents that best embodied their struggles.

Relationships, negotiations or transactions?

During initial discussions with one of the activists from the *NousToutes Rhône* collective, she soon suggested the megaphone used by her collective during their actions: an amplified megaphone, adorned with stickers, enabling the demonstrators to make their voices heard, and therefore an object with a very strong symbolic value.

This item seemed perfect: the collective was prepared to give theirs to the museum, if the museum was able to replace it. The market value of a second-hand megaphone would not have allowed the collective to buy a new one, so it was decided that the museum should buy one to donate in return. It may seem a surprising negotiation, but otherwise such an acquisition to document feminist activism in 21st-century Lyon would not have been possible. But what do you do when the objects do not exist, have disappeared or only ever existed in the minds of the collectors? [See figure 3]



Figure 3: 'Féminisme Lachas', Megaphone, stickers and protest signs by Rhône collective

From the kitchen to the shop window

Any professional who designs exhibitions knows that the profusion of paper documents can seem off-putting to visitors. Set designers and museum staff alike dream of ‘beautiful’ objects which are ‘strong’ and symbolic, and sometimes have very different or even contradictory ideas of what these terms mean. Since the beginning of the project to overhaul our permanent tour, there has already been a number of debates between the design team and members of the museum staff about where to include a particular object in the tour. Should objects with strong aesthetic potential be given priority over less visually appealing ones??

When we met an activist from the *Cercle Flora*, an MLF group in Lyon in the 1970s and 1980s (*Masclat, 2018*), who is also an active supporter of the French Movement for the Liberation of Abortion and Contraception (MLAC ie *Mouvement de Libération de l'avortement et de la contraception*), the question of what could be donated or loaned to the museum came up very quickly. This activist had some paper archives and photographs, which she did not wish to donate, and no other material evidence of her commitment.

This is when the collection manager’s power of suggestion kicked in. We imagined the objects we would like to see in glass cases, those that would conjure up in our collective imagination the struggles for abortion rights: a coat hanger? A catheter? No, this type of medical equipment could offend the viewer and is nowhere to be found anyway. During our discussions, we came up with the idea of a casserole. It is a simple stainless steel pot bought in the 1970s to sterilise the utensils used by MLAC activists during abortions in the flat she lent then. An ordinary stainless steel casserole that she has kept in her kitchen cupboard ever since, without ever revealing anything other than the banality of its use.

This ordinary object, now on display in a showcase, was born from the dialogue between the collector and the collected, and has become both a veritable relic for younger generations of activists and a ‘sordid’ object for the exhibition’s detractors, proving the evocative power of the museum and the exhibition.

‘Wild’ collection: an ethical approach?

Activism is characterised by the ephemeral nature of its actions and resources, sometimes leaving little trace other than photographs or videos if any at all. For instance, this is the case of demonstrations, where wooden or cardboard placards are often destroyed or recycled at the end of the event. Hoping to collect a few examples, the museum staff opted for a ‘live’ collecting action, taking part in the procession on 8th March 2023, International Women’s Rights Day, on *Place Bellecour*, Lyon’s most symbolic landmark and both starting and finishing points for many demonstrations in the city. Of course, it was not possible to collect all the hundreds of placards waved that day, and even a sampling seemed difficult. The museum staff therefore carried out a scouting operation in the middle of a forest of signs raised in front of the statue of Louis XIV. The aim was to find signs with slogans the general public could understand, and with attractive

visuals, all before the demonstration got under way. In retrospect, we may wonder whether there was a form of self-censorship expressed by the collectors, as a certain number of signs were rejected because some slogans or visuals appeared too provocative to be displayed. The next step was to approach the demonstrators and to explain the process, then hoping to obtain the placards while people had not yet started demonstrating.

After leaving our contact details to the owners of the proposed objects, there was a great risk none of them would follow up, but the museum staff were pleasantly surprised to acquire two placards as a result of this operation. However, the donors did not wish to submit their testimonies along with their creations, explaining their commitment was not long-standing enough and therefore their words did not seem legitimate to be collected by the museum. [See figure 4]

So the museum will need to better document this object before integrating them into its collection. Improving collecting methods will be one of the museum’s priorities in its next scientific and cultural project for the years 2026-2032.

A predatory museum?

Throughout the project, some of the activists we met seemed very interested in the museum’s approach, but a little overwhelmed by the current enthusiasm for feminist struggles, especially



Figure 4: ‘Choulet’, Exhibition View

considering some of them have been active for several decades. Where have museums been previously? What would happen once the trend had passed?

Others had already been approached by other cultural institutions (archives, museums) or by academics recently working on these subjects. Some had even been disappointed by projects for which they had loaned documents and objects that had never been returned.

What could be done to win their trust when deadlines were tight and scenographers were waiting for a list of pieces? How could we avoid giving the impression that we were forcing people's hand, in an asymmetrical relationship between a cultural institution and private individuals and groups? How could we reconcile the respect for individuals, the ethics of acquisitions and the constraints of an exhibition? It is hard not to appear as a 'predatory' institution, especially when most activists we met were reluctant to put themselves forward while neglecting others, or felt illegitimate because of their inexperience. These questions fit well within the context of reflections on ethnographic data collection, such as those of Julien Bondaz on "data collection as a predatory activity" (Bondaz, 2014).

We tried to solve the problem by offering some of them the chance to combine the donation of objects with a personal interview and a film of a discussion between activists of different generations. This video is now on display in the museum's permanent exhibition alongside the objects collected.

The positive experience of this collection on feminism shows the stimulating effect of a short-term exhibition. But under the combined effects of pressure of deadlines, exhibition space and the obligation to achieve results, it also leads to ethical and methodological choices that can raise questions.

The success of this experiment also seems to be closely linked to the targeted group: committed women, keen to have their struggles recognised, well informed about their rights, socially recognised and, for the most part, economically established. Would it have been the same with other types of targeted groups? It is not certain.

Can a museum be neutral?

Just after the opening of the *Lyonnaises Lyonnais: pouvoirs et engagements dans la cité* exhibition in December 2023, the museum was criticised from all sides by several right-wing media journalists. The institution was accused of promoting 'wokist' ideology, and of being instrumentalised by the municipal authorities (an environmentalist municipality was elected in 2020).

One criticism was that the exhibition did not represent right-wing political movements. As we worked with historians specialised in social movements (Mathieu, 2004; Porhel, 2023), we stated that right-wing militancy did not really exist as such, and that right-wing demonstrations were

occasional moments when people expressed their discontent, without being organised activists. Another explanation could be that commitment to right-wing ideas is more commonly expressed through joining a political party, voting during election campaigns or signing petitions, and therefore less in the public space, whereas left-wing activism is easier to collect, perhaps simply because it is more visible outside and produces more material objects (posters, banners...).

The last question the museum asked itself deals with extreme right-wing activists, who are well organised in small groups, with equipment, firearms and so on (Mathieu, 2002). If we would decide to go to a demonstration, we would have to find out who they are. And if we decide to go and meet them to collect traces of their violent actions, this raises the question of the museum's responsibility to give them visibility. It is true that we did not meet activists from the numerous extreme right-wing groups, some of which are based in the area just around the museum; nor did we talk about certain events, such as those organised in Lyon and other cities to demonstrate against the law authorising gay marriage in France. It was quite difficult to clearly respond to these accusations, but in the coming years, the museum plans to update certain rooms in the exhibition and will then be able to incorporate this subject as a supplement.

When we as museum staff and management embarked on a policy of collecting activism, we faced questions that were both methodological and ethical. But the current political context, stressing on polarisation and harsher debates, has led the institution into a political territory that really raises the question of the museum neutrality and the boundary that needs to be drawn between professional stance and civic commitment.

During this turbulent period, the museum was supported by the municipality and the professional community, particularly the City History Museums and Research Network of Europe. The museum team will continue its collecting activities, drawing on the lessons learned from this experience.

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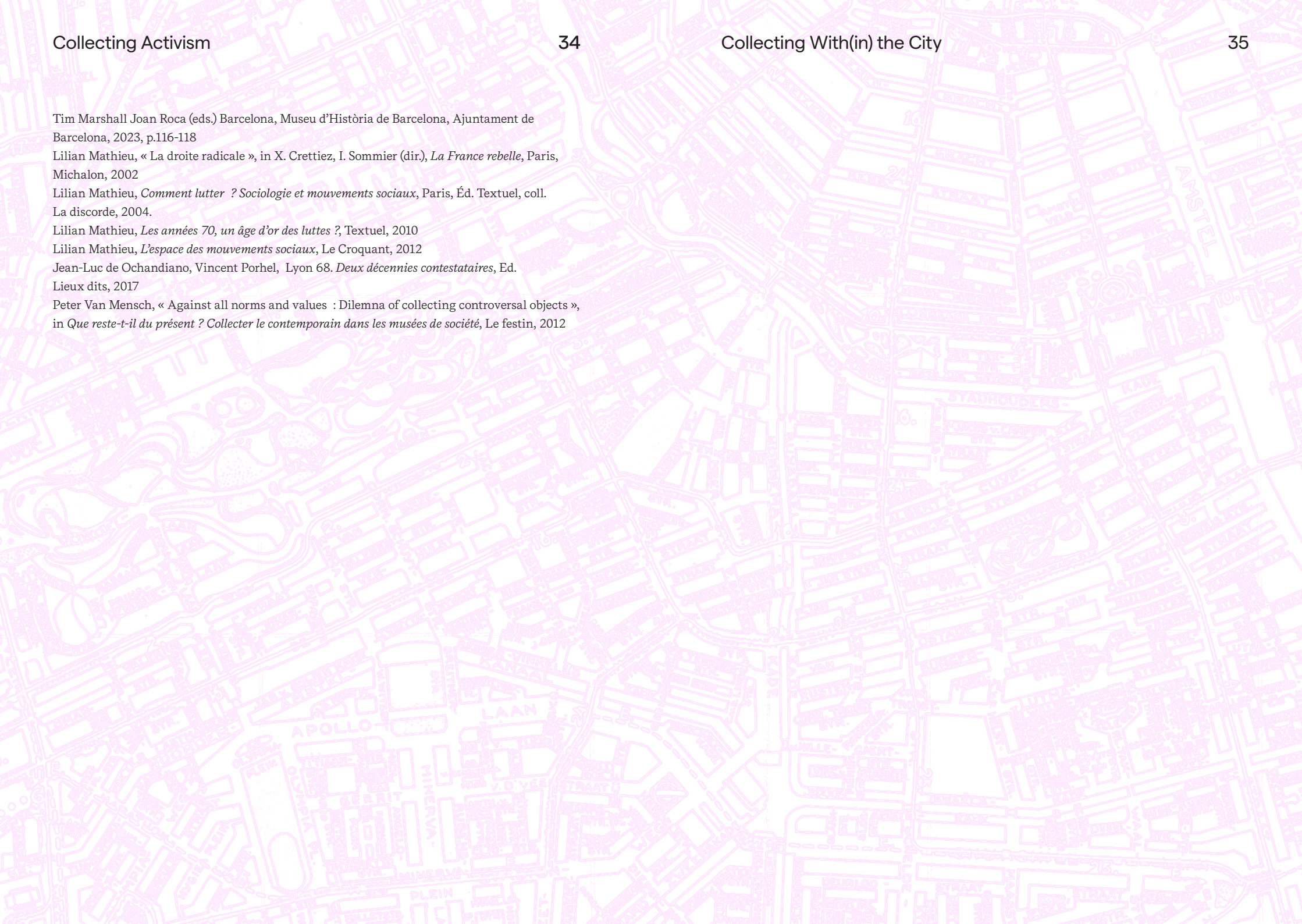
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Collecting Activism

Project Amsterdams Stadsjournaal Collecting activism and activist films

Bert Dingerink

Biography

Bert Dingerink is a parttime student of Art History at University of Amsterdam. He was an intern and now volunteer at Eye Filmmuseum for the Project Amsterdams Stadsjournaal (and other politically activating film collectives from the 1960's to 1980's in the Netherlands). Bert contributed to the article Archives for Change: Political Films and the City – The Case of the Amsterdams Stadsjournaal (1974–1984), written by the group Political Film Archives (Eye Filmmuseum, Amsterdam City Archives, Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image at UvA). (<https://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2024/06/archives-for-change/>)

Bert is also a retired sociologist. During his sociology study in the 1970's, he was an intern at Amsterdams Stadsjournaal. His professional career was in occupational rehabilitation in psychiatry and special employment mediation of people with disabilities and social disadvantage.

Project Amsterdams Stadsjournaal, collecting activism and activist films from the seventies

Project Amsterdams Stadsjournaal collects, preserves, discloses and presents politically activating films from the 1970s and 1980s in the Netherlands and Amsterdam in particular. Our venture is a collaboration between Eye Filmmuseum, Amsterdam City Archives and the University of Amsterdam. We research and present the work of political film collectives. Sometimes this means rediscovery of (almost) forgotten films on 16 mm. Often we watch audiovisual analyses or comments on social problems and calls for social change. We are collecting and presenting audiovisual material on socio political actions and the desire for change that marked the seventies and eighties. We work in consultation with Sound and Vision (Beeld en Geluid), a major institute in the Netherlands for collecting and disclosing media and media culture.

This contribution focuses on the film collective Amsterdams Stadsjournaal, or Amsterdam City Newsreel. The text is based on the article Archives for Change: *Political Films and the City – The Case of the Amsterdams Stadsjournaal (1974–1984)* written by the collective 'Political Film Archives' (2024), with members from Eye Filmmuseum, Amsterdam City Archives, and University of Amsterdam (UvA).

Characteristics of Amsterdams Stadsjournaal (Amsterdam City Newsreel)

Amsterdams Stadsjournaal (short ASJ) existed from 1974 until 1984, produced 36 films on 16 mm and one on super 8 (Heijs 1984). They promoted distribution of their films, and stimulated users of the films to organise screenings followed by discussions to activate audiences. This practice was multi-sited, stimulating people who experienced themes first-hand, to become agents of change in their situation. Addressed issues are still relevant, including problems of housing, urban development, gentrification and squatting, feminism and gender, exploitation, unemployment, migration and education. The films have also regained interest because of their modes of production and exhibition, focused on collaboration between filmmakers and the population, as well as activation of the public to propel social change.

Amsterdams Stadsjournaal was a leftist and activist film collective. But unlike most other collectives, its members were professionals educated at the Netherlands Film Academy, who had classic film training, from Russian and German film history, to British workers films and American newsreels. They were proponents of experiments with language, aesthetics and iconography of film.

The collective started by producing a few films analyzing social issues from an explicit Marxist perspective. After these first three more or less experimental and analytical films, the collective found it important during the next four years to aim at reaching so-called 'target groups' within the general public. Some films are militant, e.g. on housing troubles from the perspective of local inhabitants, calling for social action, or from the perspective of migrant workers, fighting for better labour conditions.

Quite a few films ended with film shootings of demonstrations against injustice and for improvement. Target groups were not only victims of the issues the films raised, but also a larger audience, which was to be addressed and activated to tackle the problems. They were also sparring partners for the collective in analysing the social issues at hand, the preparation of production of films, and in proposing desired action for change.

Theories and praxis of political education were other sources of inspiration. A stencilled report (Van Amerongen 1976) has been preserved on film as a means of political education by Amsterdams Stadsjournaal, De Rode Lantaarn (Red Lantern) and the Boerengroep (Farmers Group). Red Lantern was a mainly student driven collective with roots in the then Sociological Institute of the University of Utrecht. The also student run Farmers Group was based at Wageningen University & Research (then Landbouwhogeschool Wageningen) and rooted in advocating farmers interests. Their cooperation was an attempt to implement political education theory in militant film practice, thus aiming at political schooling of farmer audiences.

Bringing film to the people: growth and development of Amsterdams Stadsjournaal

The first seven editions of Amsterdams Stadsjournaal ran as cinema newsreels (film journals) during a month after their premiere in the Amsterdam arthouse The Movies. This was excellent for publicity. Press releases invited film critics, who then published in the national press (Stichting Amsterdams Stadsjournaal 1976).

But this was not the main pursued screening practice. ASJ aimed at bringing film outside traditional cinemas, in education- and community-centres, action committees, screening for audiences who were affected in their daily lives by the problems shown in the films. ASJ wanted to promote discussion and activate the public in these relatively small screening situations.

Early in the history of ASJ, members assisted screenings of the films themselves, especially when in Amsterdam. Some of these screenings and the discussions are documented (Stichting Amsterdams Stadsjournaal 1976), showing how members of the collective with Marxist ideas and new film language sometimes almost clashed with the public. The collective's analyses were assessed to be more or less correct by the public, but the films didn't show any solution or way out. The public didn't so much want to analyse problems as to discuss how to tackle them.

Following this criticism, the production of films for target audiences in cooperation with representatives from these groups came on the agenda. Amsterdams Stadsjournaal number four, *Werkloosheid (Unemployment)*, was made in cooperation with an unemployment committee and presented opinions on the matter and a perspective for targeted audiences to organise themselves to promote actions in their interests.

“ASJ decided to collaborate with residents, and began to make films for specific target groups. It meant important changes in conception, form and approach: film is no longer a tool to educate in an abstract way, but to help people achieve their aims, by showing examples and giving them the opportunity to speak for themselves. It marks the start of the collective's second stage.” (Political Film Archives 2024)

As the collective grew, new members joined, including students. As the number of screenings increased, it was impossible for the collective to attend all of them. Halfway in the 1970s this task was done mostly by interns from study programs for education and political formation, who were interested in the practice of political film.

Early in 1976 Amsterdams Stadsjournaal presented its report *Een poging om film weer onder de mensen te brengen (An attempt to bring film back to the people)*. ASJ didn't only conceive itself as a producer of quality activist films, but also considered distribution, screening and production inseparable. An address file of 9,000 potentially interested film screeners was built, consisting of action groups, community organisations, social movements, schools, political training centres, and so on. All 9,000 were periodically mailed with information on the films and their usage possibilities.

In later years, the films from ASJ became more contemplative, less explicitly focused on socialist perspective, more open, stimulating new insights, reflection and critical thinking on social and cultural themes. But they kept promoting social progress and searching for appropriate forms and film aesthetics. ASJ stood for social change by means of aesthetically innovative film, for a socialist perspective and solutions for dire social problems.

Private Property and Crime

At the session *Collecting Activism* we showed parts of *Private Property and Crime*, an early Marxist example from 1974 [See figure 1]. The collective at that time presented in film political analyses combined with experiments in imagination. It built film images from Marxist concepts on contradictions of capitalist society. The film is about financial speculation with private property, homes and buildings. In the first part we see historical photos on the housing problem and here a spoken text on the role of private property and labour in capital goods. The second part offers a mime play by two actors on the extraction of labour-generated value. The last part is a feature on antisocial acts of owners, who illegally set property on fire in order to raise profits on these pieces of land. The film's conclusion: capital goods produced by labour of all should not benefit solely from speculation by a few capitalist owners.



Figure 1: Overloop - Sloop / Overflow - Demolition (ASJ 1, 1974) Film still: representers of capital divide the city. Collection: Eye Filmmuseum.

For a healthy city

Around 1977, some students who interned with the ASJ carried out and researched screening practices, as a matter of ‘political education’. At that time from September 1977 until 1979, as a student of sociology with a minor in education, I promoted the use of the documentary *Lijf en Leden, Gezondheidszorg in de Wijken (Body and Limbs: Healthcare in the Neighbourhoods)*, ASJ 16. I accompanied screenings for different groups at different locations, in cities and the countryside and moderated and analysed audience discussions.

Although *Lijf and Leden* is considered one of the weaker films of ASJ, it is revealing for how film can be understood in the political context of the mid 1970s, when it served a practical purpose and aimed for social change [See figure 2]. *Lijf en leden* promotes the development of community-based health care centres as opposed to individually operating care workers. The centres promoted multidisciplinary approaches through cooperation, enabled understanding of health issues from different angles in a socioeconomic context, and were sometimes promoted through citizen participation and grassroots initiatives. The film presents a centre in Amsterdam North, as an example of social action in a film, and an example for other neighbourhoods, how to advocate changes in care.

Screening of *Lijf en leden* led to lively and animated discussions among residents, women groups, and even students in architecture concerned with design of care facilities. People were certainly involved in health care and had ideas about how it could be done differently. I wrote an instruction brochure (Dingerink 1979) to accompany the film. This brochure provides background information about the ASJ and primary healthcare. It contains instructions and practical advice on how to use the film effectively, in combination with other communication tools in different situations.



Figure 2: *Lijf en Leden / Body and Limbs* (ASJ 16, 1977) – Recording a meeting of residents about health centres. Collection: Eye Filmmuseum

ASJ through a practice turn towards differentiation

ASJ developed from educational but rather abstract and experimental films, through films to help target groups to articulate and achieve their interests, towards a more free and contemplative form of filming. In these multifarious and creative films not only the political orientation of the collective was apparent, but also the individual style and perspectives of the makers. The collective moved from Marxist films and target groups to freer films. An example of the latter is *Chaos in de Rechtsstaat (Chaos in the Rule of Law)*, which shows life and actions of a community of young squatters in so called Huize Chaos (House of Chaos) from an inside perspective of the residents, and with the film crew close on their actions.

How can this development towards freer, longer and more nuanced films be explained? In the organisation of *Amsterdams Stadsjournaal* – as well as in other leftist film collectives (Weijers 2024) – there were developments to more professionalisation, specialisation and increased value of individual contributions and perspectives. Secondly there was a development in the leftist movement to loosen strict Marxist ideological frameworks and pass through a ‘practice turn’ (Leezenberg 2017), directed at practical social impact, for ASJ by means of quality films, with a possible multitude of forms and narratives. Last, but maybe not least – the film budgets grew which gave space for time and work on more differentiated films.



Figure 3: *Chaos in de Rechtsstaat / Chaos in the Rule of Law* (ASJ 28, 1981) House of Chaos. Collection: Eye Filmmuseum.

Challenges of collecting and disclosing activist films

How relevant are these activist films today? How can these collections be collected, managed and presented? This poses challenges to heritage institutions like Eye Filmmuseum and Amsterdam City Archives. The films and related records may not have been included in main archives or collections, they may have got dispersed, or neglected altogether. How can these films be retrieved, archived, contextualized, and brought into the present, given their original intention and their 16mm format?

There is a tension between museums, collecting and disclosing on the one hand, and activist practice on the other. Museums are not neutral. They are confronted with their own positioning. Besides historical, aesthetic and artistic considerations, collecting and disclosing activist films and related practices is a political choice.

Political films also need to be understood in the social context of their time, which requires documentation and a special archival approach. Activist films are semi-finished products that only become complete in the activist practice (Political Film Archives 2024). Activation aims and multi-sited circulation demand records on exhibition practices. It is necessary to also collect and disclose the practice and data of distribution and screening. Because of this broad conception of tasks – and because collections and archives are often spread over different places – it is necessary to build cooperation and partnerships.

Activist films are not simply documents from the past. The films and related practices can inform contemporary activist practice, by showing them within debates, and providing references for new film productions and their social applications. A way to recycle old activist films is to screen them today. But contemporary makers may also take knowledge of the past, use and recycle this heritage, and come to new activist products. Through the efforts of *Project Amsterdams Stadsjournaal* contemporary makers may take note of and get inspired by this heritage and old activist films may inform and inspire presentday activism.

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