

## Care رعاية Sorge

By Linnéa Steegmüller

I firmly believe that the essence of museums lies predominantly in their connection to people, rather than being centred solely around objects. In Western societies, museums have been traditionally seen as institutions in service of the protection of objects and artefacts, symbolic of the arts and culture. They have been curated and displayed at exhibitions with the aim of educating visitors about social norms, hierarchies, and power relations (Krasny & Perry 2023, S. 3). Museums should go beyond the usual focus on tangible heritage in the world of cultural institutions. The concept of CARE challenges the traditional emphasis on preservation by stressing the social purpose of museums. CARE is a way of resisting historically grown practices of curation and sees museums as servants of societies. CARE is about more than the mere potential of museums. It extends to making concrete measures for social justice and evoking change (Krasny & Perry 2023, S.4).

Museums need to be defined and esteemed in terms of their expression of social responsibility. This call is encapsulated in the concept of CARE. It specifically means that museums should use their resources and structures differently to create societal value, support communities, represent diverse identities, and genuinely address the physical and intellectual needs of visitors.

My vision is rooted in the belief that museums should unfold as dynamic social platforms, constantly evolving to remain relevant, fair, and ethical. I advocate for a new way of collecting, curating, and governing in museums – one that prioritises care, placing people, their stories, concerns, values, and problems at the forefront. In this narrative, museums shift from passive repositories of the past to proactive agents caring for and shaping the present and future. By doing so, they can prove themselves and the society to be democracy-empowering institutions of the future.

This way of thinking about museums is not new. Since the 1970s, there has been an increasing demand for museums to play an active role in society. Since the turn of the millennium in particular, the idea of social responsibility has become very widespread in the museum world (Meijer-van Mensch 2012, p. 86). New Museology was central to a paradigm shift in the field. At the heart of the New Museology is the assumption that the museum is neither a research centre, a "neutral" exhibition venue, nor primarily a collection institution. New Museology criticises current museological practices and calls for a renewal of the discipline with a focus on societal obligations and social justice. The questions of representation and the critical reflection of knowledge production in the context of social and political conditions were particularly important here (Marstine 2011, S.10).

Richard Sandell has always been a very inspiring and thought-provoking figure in my studies. His style of writing and his ideas have deeply influenced my view of the social purpose and power that museums hold: *“Museums can contribute towards social inclusion at individual, community, and societal levels. At an individual or personal level, engagement with museums can deliver positive outcomes such as enhanced self-esteem, confidence, and creativity. At a community level, museums can act as a catalyst for social regeneration, empowering communities to increase their self-determination and develop the confidence and skills to take greater control over their lives and the development of the neighbourhoods in which they live. Lastly, museums, through the representation of inclusive communities within collections and displays, have the potential to promote tolerance, inter-community respect and to challenge stereotypes.”* (Sandell 2003, S. 45)

The fundamental concept of CARE will become a guiding principle for museum practices. It applies to every area of museum work and summarises the above-mentioned ideas about the social responsibility of museums.

It encapsulates the imperative for democratisation within these institutions. In my vision, museums are not neutral places of display and preservation, they are

spaces dedicated to caring for narratives, objects, and diverse perspectives. They extend their concern to the people they represent, the stories they collect, and the history they preserve. Museums conscientiously consider who is represented, how stories are articulated, and actively share their influence, enabling a spectrum of individuals to participate as curators and mediators. In the ethos of CARE, museums are attuned to power dynamics, continuously reflecting upon and addressing the historical legacies that their institutions embody. Museums that practise CARE consider their visitors and aspire to inspire, provoke, educate, and entertain them. They become spaces attuned to diverse needs, fostering an inclusive environment that accommodates various perspectives. They bear a responsibility to care because they have the power and the potential to achieve greatness.

To illuminate these ideas, I would like to share my favourite cultural spaces in Berlin—each emblematic of the different facets of CARE. These cultural spaces exemplify a genuine concern for their mission:

### 1. Care for different needs

**Anne Frank Zentrum** - A museum I deeply appreciate for its ambition to care for visitors with different needs. The Anne Frank Zentrum in Berlin is the German partner organisation of the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam. Anne Frank, a Jewish girl, went into hiding in 1942 to evade the Nazis during the occupation of the Netherlands. Two years later, she was discovered and died in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945. Her posthumously published diary, known as "The Diary of Anne Frank," provides a factual account of her experiences.

Through its exhibitions and educational programs, the museum commemorates Anne Frank and her diary. The museum instils a sense of social responsibility, encouraging individuals to advocate for freedom, equality, and democracy. One of the notable aspects of the Anne Frank Zentrum is its dedication to breaking down barriers for visitors.

To ensure accessibility, the exhibition features a floor guidance system, tactile objects, audio descriptions, and guided tours specifically designed for blind and visually impaired individuals. The inclusion of a floor guidance system, tactile copies, and audio descriptions enhances the overall experience. Moreover, the centre regularly organises public and free guided tours for blind and visually impaired individuals, with up-to-date information available on its website. For those with mobility challenges, the exhibition spaces are equipped with an elevator, and the architectural design allows for wheelchair manoeuvrability. The commitment to inclusivity extends to providing a free wheelchair rental service within the exhibition. The building entrance is equipped with an intercom system, and staff members are available to assist visitors by guiding them to the elevator. The exhibition materials, including the flyer, are designed to be accessible, with all texts and descriptions presented in “Leichte Sprache” (‘easy language’), which is a specific way of simplifying language and sentences to serve accessibility. Furthermore, the Anne Frank Zentrum offers regular and complimentary public tours with sign language interpreters, ensuring that individuals with hearing impairments can fully engage with the content.

In essence, the Anne Frank Zentrum goes beyond commemorating history; it actively demonstrates a commitment to care by creating an inclusive environment where all visitors, regardless of their abilities, can engage meaningfully with the exhibits and educational offerings.



Anne Frank Zentrum, Berlin 2023

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## 2. Care for representation and empowerment

**Schwules Museum** - I would also like to share one of my favourite museums in Berlin, which is from my point of view quite underrated. Schwules Museum is in its core and history a caring institution that originated from a grassroots movement and remains a civil society project sustained by the voluntary commitment of numerous contributors. Today, the Schwules Museum (SMU) in Berlin has evolved into the world's foremost centre for researching, preserving, and presenting the culture and history of queer communities, embracing sexual and gender diversity.

The museum pioneers innovative, queer, or queer-influencing museum formats that go beyond mere representation and knowledge transmission, aiming to facilitate social interactions. The term "queer" at SMU extends beyond being a mere umbrella term for sexual and gender identities (LGBTIQ\*+); instead, it embodies a critical practice that challenges all forms of discrimination and exclusion.

The mission of the SMU is to strengthen the individual and collective self-awareness and agency of queer individuals through exhibitions, events, and collection practices, providing a space for self-understanding, exchange, and encounters within the LGBTQ+ communities. The SMU actively seeks recognition for queer lifestyles in mainstream society and advocates for the integration of queer culture and history as essential elements of collective memory. The museum is committed not only to opposing discrimination and exclusion of queer individuals in most of society but also to implementing equality in its own program and collection policies. From personal experience as a visitor, the museum deeply cares about developing fair narratives of queer history and culture that present diverse experiences, stories, struggles, and perspectives, acknowledging their complexity and occasional contradictions. The Schwules Museum Berlin exemplifies care for representation by actively challenging and expanding the narratives surrounding queer histories and identities that have often been overlooked or marginalised in traditional museum spaces.



Schwules  
Museum,  
Berlin 2023  
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### 3. Care for local communities

**FHXB Museum** - Finally, I would like to talk about museums in Berlin which also often stand in the shadow of financially better-endowed, big institutions. I very much enjoy visiting the district museums in Berlin. Each district in Berlin has its own small museum that cares for the themes and stories of the people who live in the neighbourhood, documenting and exhibiting the district's stories. The museums serve the local communities and work closely with the people on the ground. For example, the FHXB Museum, the district museum of the diverse Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg neighbourhood, sees itself as a forum and memory of the district and aims to be a public, social place for all people in the area.

The museum focuses on social movements, urban development, and the migration history of the district. Notably, it places a strong emphasis on highlighting marginalised perspectives and bringing to light the stories of individuals who have experienced discrimination.

The museum is dedicated to evolving its approach continually, introducing innovative methods and formats to foster collaborations with district residents and maintain active social engagement.

A noteworthy example is the "Ortsgespräche" exhibition, born out of a participatory project involving residents of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg. "Ortsgespräche" showcases the diversity of the district and emphasises that city history is also and always has served as migration history. On the exhibition floor, visitors can explore a district map and listen to interviews with locals, providing a personal and immersive experience. Visitors are personally guided through the district by neighbours and learn about their memories and experiences. The exhibitions make it clear that they are not merely speaking about people but rather engaging in dialogue with them. By not only presenting information but actively incorporating the voices and stories of the people, a deeper connection is forged between the institution and the people from the area. In doing so, the museum manages to become a social space for local communities, addressing relevant and current issues within the district. These methods of museological work encapsulate the concept of CARE.



FHXB Museum,  
Berlin 2023

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As I reflect on my favourite cultural institutions in Berlin, I am grateful for the presence of museums that have consistently inspired me through their exhibitions, formats, and working methods.

These museums bring me hope, suggesting that museum work can offer more than mere documentation and preservation, surpassing the collection of artefacts and objects, and extending beyond aesthetics and style. Museums are about taking on social responsibility and creating added value for society.

This commitment, encapsulated by the concept of CARE, has become a guiding principle and ethos in my engagement with museums. This perspective prompts me to approach my work with a heightened understanding of the transformative potential museums possess. It is a call to action, urging us museum professionals to play an integral role in fostering inclusivity and social responsibility.

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