

## Avant-Garde & Status Quo

The FeliXart Museum and its Paradoxical Legacy

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The FeliXart Museum, located in a little municipality bordering the metropolitan capital of Brussels, wishes to reconcile artistic and the ecological aspects because both are inseparable in the figure of Felix De Boeck (1898-1995), who charms by his authenticity as an artist-farmer. He was a soft anarchist who preferred the rhythm of nature to profitability and an avant-gardist who was at the cradle of a new pictorial language.

It seems paradoxical that De Boeck's conservative reflex, the bequest to preserve an oeuvre and a life, is at the heart of a new museological impetus. The type of legal protection enjoyed by De Boeck's farm and orchard has given rise to fears that a 'bell jar', a metaphor for the preservation of heritage, is being maintained. The conservation of a place enforces the 'status quo', yet it enables at the same time the activation of the 'spirit' of what caused the artist to donate it to the community. If the protection took place without questioning the



Figure 1. Felix De Boeck. Photo: Archives of the FeliXart Museum

(potential) users, today the ambition is to build a future exploitation that will be all the more participatory.

The further development of the two-track policy of the museum focuses, on the one hand, on the Interbellum and Felix's contemporaries who fall under abstract modernism: an inspiring period and movement that advocates human, social, and ecological values through revolutionary new imagery. On the other hand, further attention will be paid to local history and all possible forms of intangible cultural heritage, to create more local and regional involvement, inclusiveness, and greater socio-cultural engagement. The ambition of the museum is to link these seemingly opposing values: both to be faithful to the original values of the foundation of the museum, and to justify its existence today with the local community, the subsidizing powers, the international museum and scientific community, which is increasingly committed to the path of inclusion and the social dimension.

The search for 'core' museum values now coincides with the, often polemical, question about the 'essence' of museums. Is sticking to an internal logic, growing from a constraining donation, combinable with a truly participatory and even activist path bridging existing social and communitarian problems? Can preservation be the fundament of social accountability and sustainability? The future will tell how far the one will influence the other, but both can gain pace based on one inspiring legacy.

## **A UFO with specific expertise**

The FeliXart Museum is a small regional museum run by a staff of five, supported by fifteen volunteers. There is need for more connection or embeddedness with the inhabitants of the municipality of Drogenbos where the museum is located. The museum has long been regarded almost like a UFO within the social texture of the small village. To understand the origin of this, we need to look at the history of how the museum came about: a combination of artistic and political opportunism.<sup>1</sup>

In 1969, on the occasion of the official opening of the renovated town hall, the municipality of Drogenbos took the initiative to dedicate an entire hall for three weeks to the work of the artist Felix De Boeck, living in Drogenbos. This temporary exhibition in the attic of the town hall was a huge success and steps were taken to give a continuous character to the exhibition. When Felix De Boeck donated an important part of his artistic oeuvre to the Flemish Community in 1992, this was under the condition that the Flemish Community would exhibit the artist's work permanently in Drogenbos. The Flemish Community accepted the donation and undertook to contribute to the construction of a museum in

1 The following historic overview of the FeliXart Museum contains excerpts published in: S. Servellón, 'Case FeliXart Museum. Een sui generis-vzw van overheden', *faro | tijdschrift over cultureel erfgoed* 11:2, 2018, p. 44-47.

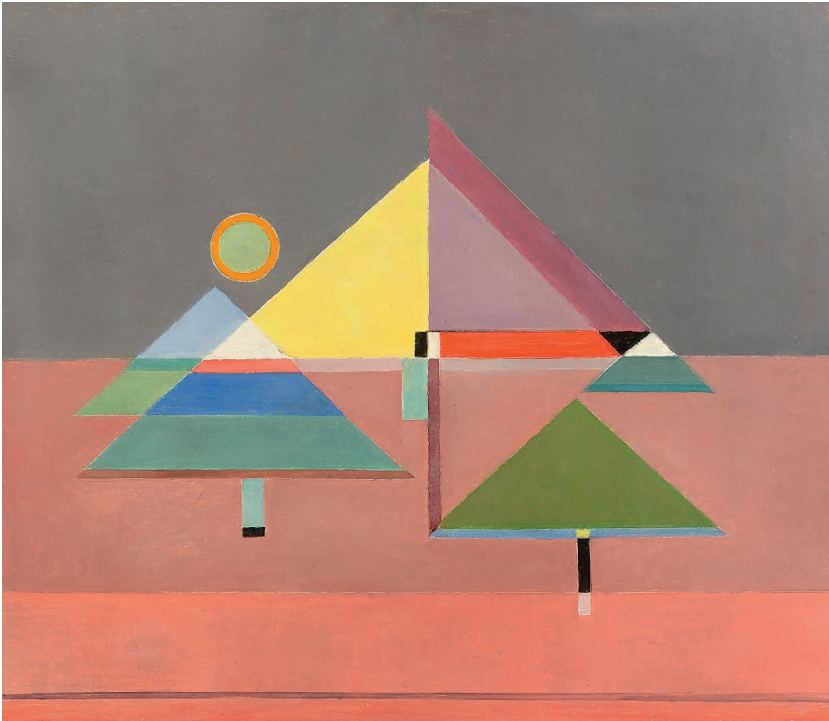


Figure 2. Felix De Boeck, *Abstract landschap* [Abstract Landscape], 1959. Coll. Vlaamse Gemeenschap – FeliXart Museum.

1996.<sup>2</sup> Its modern architecture, with the obligatory stairs at the entrance, was clearly there to radiate prestige and seriousness.

The construction fitted in a political project: built in the Flemish region, the building represents – in origin – an affirmation of ‘Flemish culture’ in a predominately French-speaking municipality. With its protected farm and orchard, it can also be seen as part of the Green Belt (*Groene Gordel*) strategy to preserve the ‘green’ character of Flanders and thus contain the growth of the Brussels metropolitan agglomeration and more specific the ‘Frenchification’ of the region.<sup>3</sup>

The legacy that the FeliXart Museum manages includes the totality of the artist’s life and work. Felix De Boeck, the artist and farmer from Drogenbos, was aware of the idiosyncratic heritage he left behind: in his will he let it be

2 As a purely municipal initiative, the museum faced structural problems from the outset. To find a solution for the continuity of the museum’s operation, the municipality of Drogenbos, the province of Flemish Brabant, and the ‘de Rand’ (the latter acting on behalf of the Flemish Community) set up the ‘vzw Museum Felix De Boeck’ in 2003. Since then, this new not-for-profit organization has been responsible for the policy, management, and operation of the museum.

3 For this policy, see *Green Belt*, <https://www.docu.vlaamserand.be/node/12973?language=en> (06/07/2020).

known that in addition to a new museum building where his work was to be on permanent display, his house and adjoining grounds also needed to be given a museological context. The latter was intended to keep his life and the values behind his environment alive. It was based on this dual relationship, connecting the artist and the farmer, that a twin-track policy on art and ecology emerged. For a long time, the restoration of the farmstead was an obstacle toward expanding the 'second track': the ecological part of the museum's strategy. Now that the restoration is near completion, the question becomes poignant: how do we define and activate the 'values' of De Boeck's legacy?

Felix De Boeck was part of what he called "the spontaneous generation of the 1920s" in Belgium.<sup>4</sup> What we now know as 'constructivism' in art history is a combination of not only a new kind of art, abstraction, but also the vision of a revolutionary new society. Abstract art based on proportion and geometry was due to bring a "rational, objective art". Art that was anonymized as it was not the individual, but the social framework that mattered.<sup>5</sup> De Boeck was part of what was called the Pure Plasticism movement, an art that self-referred itself as Community Art (*Gemeenschapskunst*). His contribution to the historical avant-garde as one of the first abstract artists in Belgium went hand in hand with that special attitude of those groups in which cooperative action and anti-capitalism were very characteristic features.<sup>6</sup> De Boeck remained faithful to most principles from his youth. After the bursting of the modernist bubble with the stock market crash of 1929, De Boeck persisted in rejecting too much commerce in his activities. He rarely worked for galleries, for instance, and in his farming practice, he would continue to focus on contentment and meditation rather than on efficiency and profit. De Boeck, for example, kept his high-stemmed fruit trees, while the entire Zenne region switched to the easier to pick and more profitable low-stemmed trees. This state of mind was determined in his youth where a different way of life was favored after the disastrous destructiveness of the Great War. A war, that according to the progressive youth, had been the result of individualistic capitalism.

Until 2004, the museum focused on the management, conservation, and presentation of De Boeck's collection. The classification as a 'recognized' museum by the Flemish government was questioned by the expert's committees because of the strict monographic policy. Sustainability was considered fragile in the first place due to the diminishing reputation of the artist and the

4 J. Florquin, 'Felix De Boeck, Grote Baan 379, Drogenbos', in: J. Florquin, *Ten Huize van...* 1. Leuven, 1968, p. 192.

5 J. De Smet, 'Voorbij de mimesis: wegen naar een autonome kunst in België (1917-1930)', in: J. De Smet, *Modernisme. Belgische abstracte kunst en Europa*. Gent, 2013, p. 64-76.

6 The Brussels group and magazine *7 Arts*, to which De Boeck was very close arouse together with many other cooperatives like the professional association *Belgische Maatschappij van de Modernistische Urbanisten en Architecten* (Belgian Society of Modernist Urban Planners and Architects), or the cooperative publishing association *L'Equerre (Société coopérative d'Édition et de Propagande intellectuelle)*. The Centre d'Art for instance included an exhibition hall and several facilities, intended in part for the sale of artist supplies. See: S. Servellón, "The "buffer state" from 1925 to 1959: sandwiched between the historic and the neo-avant-garde", in: G. Van Broekhoven and S. Servellón, *Modern art from the interbellum: collection of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp*. Kontich, 2016, p. 27-39.

paradigm shift that started to take place within the heritage sector. Although there were some plans for the integration of the museum into a museum site grouping the new museum building, the 18th century farmhouse and the 'protected' orchard, conservative management and an unclear strategy made it difficult to materialize this idea. But the elements were there, and so was the potential.

De Boeck's values and ideologies, both in his art and in his way of life, are still very much alive today: they are reactivated by the work of FeliXart Museum. A first theoretical exercise consisted of a 'cross-grid of oppositions' where on the one hand art and ecology were thematically opposed to each other and on the other hand, an 'elitist' museological service and 'popular' accessibility were positioned against each other. The center of all these contrasting forces should be the base for a new museum identity. It soon became clear that, if we wanted to set up a fully-fledged operation, we would have to carry out an in-depth study of both the object-oriented museum and the value-driven second track around the farmstead and the orchard.

## Intangible avant-garde

Just as we benefit of the research of the avant-garde for our exhibition policy, with ever new perspectives on the cultural-historical importance of abstract art and constructivism, showcasing the generation of De Boeck and other generations from the neo-avant-garde of the 1950s to more contemporary uses of abstraction, the period of the 1920s might inspire us to create a research-driven approach to the ecological track.

Various idealistic movements, initially inspired by the *Lebensreform* practices and theories from Germany, affected young people in Flanders just after the First World War. Anarchist, socially driven, feminist, naturalist, and theosophical movements as well as folkloristic practices such as 'folk dance' flourished.<sup>7</sup> At the end of the 19th century, Frederik Van Eeden published *De kleine Johannes*, an allegorical fairy tale that symbolized the authors' 'coming of age'. Van Eeden strongly inspired young Dutch speaking people with his account of the contrast between city life and a return to a 'different' way of life, in nature.

Huig Hofman, a contemporary of De Boeck, who organized the naturist-community *De Spar*, directly inspired by Frederik van Eeden, summarised the state of mind of the youth movements: the slogans "we must live simply and naturally" and "back to nature", anti-militarism, total abstinence, and even vegetarianism were the recipes for a new world. Opposing the city life, activities such as hiking, trekking, and camping were promoted as a counterbalance

7 For an insight on these idealistic movements see: E. Peeters, *De Beloften Van Het Lichaam, Lebensreform in België 1890-1940*. Leuven, 2007.



to cinemas and dance halls.<sup>8</sup> Van Eeden went so far as to establish a utopian commune, *Walden*, on an estate in the Dutch town of Bossum. This commune, based on the then-growing socialist model, wanted to bring together intellectuals and working people in a collectivist spirit.

It would be too far-reaching to claim that De Boeck created a commune on his own. But what is certain is that all these ideals from his youth were influential in his choices later in life. After the decline of the avant-garde, from the mid-1920s onwards, De Boeck retreated to his farm where he would earn his living as a farmer for the next decades. In the meantime, he continued to receive contemporaries and new friends in what was mythically called a “magical place”.<sup>9</sup> He kept his activities small-scale and although mainly focused on self-supply, during difficult times he made his land available to his neighbors for allotments. Self-reliance and social commitment, small scale, and local production: these are current ‘hot topics’ that we can distill from the period when De Boeck made his most important abstract works.

### **Practical elaboration of an ideal: ‘I FeliX – We FeliX’**

From 2005 on, the museum opted for an evolution rather than a revolution. There was no choice but to take into account the various traditional stakeholders ranging from the subsidizing authorities, foundations, and rights holders of all kinds. In the wrangling around which path to take, there was an option on the table: turn the museum as such into a cultural center. Within the Flemish context, however, this meant that ‘museum’ protection of the patrimony would not be the main task and that the institution could primarily serve as infrastructure for all kinds of cultural activities. The biggest obstacle for this scenario was the legal aspect of the donation. Instead of using a museum as an excuse, for example by linking a small biographical museum to a cultural center, we opted to gradually open up the concept of the museum in terms of content. This way, a parallel plan arose: while the museum was immersing itself in the historical avant-garde in Belgium, the restoration of the farmstead, the unification of all the surrounding land, and the growth of the donor’s reputation were systematically continued.

At a certain moment, the FeliXart Museum created a prestigious new infrastructural plan for a building that would not only literally bridge the museum and the farm but also would create multifunctional spaces for meetings, concerts, and other receptive functions. The force of these kinds

8 H. Hofman, ‘Een schema voor ons gesprek met een jeugdleider uit de jaren ’20’, in: Ministerie van Nationale Opvoeding en Cultuur, Nationale Dienst voor de Jeugd, *Het leven in de jaren ’20*. (Documentatiebrochure, NDJ Stage voor gevorderden te Genval, 20-29 augustus 1963), Brussel, 1963, p. H1.

9 At this moment David Veltman is finishing a PhD research with a biography of Felix De Boeck at the Biography Institute of the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, The Netherlands.

of visionary plans cannot be underestimated.<sup>10</sup> The museum indeed was able to find at least two thirds of the needed funding. While it was a good thing that political stakeholders embraced our project, it was clear that this superstructure would possibly create an even greater alienation. We first had to work on relations with the inhabitants; making the museum part of the local community and include the inhabitants in our museum community. It was a whole process to come to terms with the fact that this was also a way to stay in 'tune' with our ecological ambition. It would have made us part of the problem: a materialistic view on growth focusing on more space and more income.

What was initially mostly a facilities operation enters a new phase: we have laid the foundations on how to give substance and, above all, 'meaning' to the overall project. To give an example. The original 2.5-hectare orchard was suddenly doubled in a biodiversity project for the benefit of the population with the realization of *Het Moeras* (The Swamp) developed together with the *Regionaal Landschap Pajottenland en Zennevallei*. But what does the public that comes for a walk with a dog, to pick apples, to relax or enjoy themselves know about the reasons for the existence of this little green oasis in Drogenbos? In what way can we, whether or not 'educating' them about Felix De Boeck and his generation, convert the value of the estate to the reality of the inhabitants? The value of a historical orchard must therefore somehow be linked to the needs of an already existing public. Once again we have to move in the opposite direction from 'something that exists' to 'something that can be useful'.

The question remains on how to integrate these opportunities into our daily operations. As a first task, we translated the aforementioned challenge by defining the objectives of our ecology track into 'local anchoring' and 'regional embedding of the institution'. In other words: to organize activities and make use of our facilities in such a way that they enable social justification. Under the title of 'I FeliX – We FeliX' the two-track policy is taking a more practical turn. With the campaign we want to show that the FeliX site belongs to, is made by and exists for everyone. This means that, again in parallel, next to an 'elitist' research-driven art museum, a community museum is being set up around the farm as a place where schools, social services, or associations feel at home and can organize activities. In this trajectory, the contribution of the local population is not only limited to their own story, but it is our ambition to create meta-reflections on contemporary forms of living and propel community building together. It could show how participation can be an important instrument to implement the museum's mission and have an impact on the future of the local inhabitants.

We consider the diversity in a municipality such as Drogenbos to be the greatest asset, even if we could consider Drogenbos not to be an 'easy' municipality. Anyone passing by will not expect to find a museum of fine arts here. A large part of the municipality is occupied by companies and department stores with large surface areas. The municipality is perceived as a

10 This is described as one of the persistent 'vanities' of museums: 'The edifice Complex'. R. Janes and R. Sandell, 'Posterity has arrived. The necessary emergence of museum activism', in: R. Janes and R. Sandell (eds.), *Museum Activism*. London and New York, 2019, p. 9.



Figure 3. Every first Sunday of the month (from March to October) a participatory workshop takes place in the herb garden. People take care of the different plants. Each time the focus gets placed on two types of herbs. Sometimes – when culinary applications are possible - Felix' old furnace even gets used. The initiative is supported by volunteers and is part of the larger participatory project in and around the domain surrounding the farm. It's a biodiversity project for and by residents of Drogenbos. Photo: Leen Van de Weghe – FeliXart Museum.



'dormitory' municipality for commuters to the capital. A few figures show that this is a community with a population with a rather vulnerable social profile.<sup>11</sup> Studies on museum visitors suggest that the majority of the people living in Drogenbos are diametral opposed to the traditional museum visitor. It is now up to us to pick up the signals and the dynamics of the residents of Drogenbos and to include them in the policy plan of the future.

We are listening to various groups, residents, individual visitors to the museum, active associations, involved administrators, etc. In short, people who know the museum from far and near and who would like to contribute to the development of the FeliX site. In concrete terms, this means that we will make visits in Drogenbos, and organize surveys and consultation moments. A policy plan outlining the broad goals will externally be consulted and proposed so that suggestions, ideas, and questions can be discussed and coordinated. Our 'second track' is set up as an independent entity, with its budget and a new commission with an extensive decision-making mandate.

But to be successful in all these participatory efforts we need to be able to inspire with a value-driven framework. Even though the objects, the stones, and the land, thus both movable and immovable heritage seem to have been the foundation for the creation of a museum, the intangible aspects now come to the forefront and they even appear to be what enables us not only museology-wise, but also managerially, to create a coherent and qualitative growth. Projects can include social work, educational, economical and environmental goals. Is this also a shift to a more active but perhaps ephemeral "cultural memory bank"<sup>12</sup> that directly refers to the location of the museum? These reflections yielded new perspectives on what our 'collection' is: a mix of tangible and intangible items, all based on the legacy of De Boeck. The recreation of the farming activities brought for instance the idea of a petting zoo or the placing of cows in the orchard. These interactions can be of use on different levels. It could purely enhance an immersive feeling of a visitor wanting to see how Felix De Boeck lived. At the same time, there is this awareness of the location where we are, with orchards possibly dating back to Roman times, agricultural and industrial heritage (with the nearby paper mill Catala) that rub against each other on the edge of a capital region.<sup>13</sup> The apple

11 Drogenbos counts 5.456 inhabitants of which 50.3% are of foreign origin, which makes Drogenbos particularly multicultural in comparison with the rest of Flanders with an average of 20.5%. The number of shelter places for toddlers is far below the national average, as well as school results in primary schools and average income tax returns. There is more unemployment and more registered thefts and violent crimes than in similar municipalities. Source: data from 2018: *Gemeente- en Stadsmonitor van het Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur en Statistiek Vlaanderen, Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur (ABB), Statistiek Vlaanderen (SV), Statbel, Kruispuntbank Sociale Zekerheid, Departement Onderwijs & Vorming, Kind en Gezin, Steunpunt Werk, POD Maatschappelijke Integratie, VITO, Agentschap Zorg en Gezondheid, Federale Politie.*

12 Janes and Sandell, *Posterity*, p. 11.

13 A historical map analysis and environmental analysis was carried out for the policy plan of the FeliXart Museum 2019-2023. See: L. Van de Weghe, 'Syntheserapport ontwikkeling strategische visie en actieplan voor lokale verankering, regionale inbedding en landelijke uitstraling Felixsite', in: *Aangepast beleidsplan 2019-2023. Drogenbos, 2020, appendix 4.*

is possibly a symbol of a region that for a long time was called the “vegetable and fruit garden” of Brussels. A value that could now be converted into the facilitation of knowledge about small-scale vegetable cultivation, evolving, for instance, to the sale of seeds and materials for apartment residents in the capital. Such initiatives are evident from a management vision: ecology not only sells a beautiful image; it certainly fills a need. Meanwhile, you also have a setting that is different from just another bio-shop: there is a story that can inspire, a discovery that can be made.

But there is more: from the very beginning, the Swamp site was to be included by the historic archers’ guild of Saint Sebastian, an almost lost tradition in Drogenbos. Folklore has not yet been able to digest or go with the flow of the growing diversity of Drogenbos’ demography: it is now almost a symbol of Flemish identity. The museum can be a mediator in this respect to start a potential new, diverse, tradition. Success strongly will depend on the composition of our structure and the decision-making processes we can set up. Maybe we could shape our model into a cooperative one, something that can breathe new life into the ‘friends of museum’ service? Ecology in this broad perspective, as in ‘alternative way of living’, can thus be directly linked to the first steps in that direction, the experiments of a generation in the 1920s. It has been correctly analyzed that activation of participatory values have nothing to do with business-rhetoric of revenue and visitor growth, but rather express the internal motivation and justification of the museum and museum work itself.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, we can bridge expertise and the call for social accountability. It makes it possible to use the historical context of De Boeck as the ‘material’ to embody historical consciousness needed to inspire solutions or attitudes to confront the social and climate change challenges we are experiencing.

### **Recent Flemish Cultural Heritage Policy: a top-bottom experiment for creating grassroots initiatives?**

The new Flemish Cultural Heritage Decree of 2017, which in a sense is the prolongation of the earlier ‘participatory’ decree, offers us more opportunities for our overall project, for example through the role it gives to intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in the work of museums. Participation remains one of the points of attention and the new decree motivates the sector to include, in addition to the objects, the values, and contexts associated with it as the whole of cultural heritage. At this moment museums in Flanders are working and trying to accommodate this new paradigm into their functioning. Interpreting the decree to the reality of every museum is mandatory if you want to profit the most from the financial possibilities. ICH somehow is being perceived equal to the call for participation and inclusive target audience’s policy. And while it is true that opening up your collection to ICH can broaden up your ‘stakeholders’ group, it also means that you have to get in a ‘messy’ field.

14 Janes and Sandell, *Posterity*, p. 12: “Values are enduring beliefs and guiding beacons about the purpose of the museum and how it will conduct itself, as well as how it will treat others.”

One of the main problems for art museums to work with ICH is the fact that strictly speaking there are not many ICH practices that can be ‘naturally’ involved when starting from your collection. Even for the FeliXart Museum, all the topics found connected to our ‘heritage’ like fruit cultivation, vegetable garden culture, (heritage) bread baking, cheese and butter trade, cooperative work, etc. don’t automatically or always comply with an important stipulation of the UNESCO definition, namely that ICH practices have to be “traditional, contemporary and living at the same time”.<sup>15</sup> Nor are these “community based”. In a sense, all the FeliX site can do is sensitize and mediate with these old and forgotten traditions to try and create a new ‘community’ feeling.

At the moment, only the archers’ guild is more or less active. But our site has also provided space for a group of volunteers who have set up a garden where the medicinal aspects of herbs are emphasized. It is in this sense that we do believe that an institution, even though it starts from a ‘collection’, creates possibilities for bottom-up projects.

## **A question of identity**

The process that led to the new decree was not an uncontested one. It is arguably so that many of the forces pleading for a new critical approach to heritage were able to lobby effectively to broaden the scope of museum policy. A new nomenclature for the definition of museums was imprinted in the decree, at the expense of the previous copy-paste of the ICOM definition.<sup>16</sup> One could argue that with this Flanders regionalized the definition of museums. At the same time, the question about the function of museums has become a global one, with fierce debate on what the right (and righteous) way is for museums. It is in this sense that the FeliXart Museum could be seen as a case where two forms of cultural heritage management are included in its mission. Without the changes in the decrees, the institution would have struggled to finance the costs of the transformation as some elements of the operation fall outside the classical framework of art-care. Now we can include many more aspects into our model as being part of the collections we collect, protect, research, and disseminate. Other parts will remain difficult, in particular the maintenance of green spaces, playground operation. The work around the socio-cultural cohesion will however be at the core of the different top-down and bottom-up efforts.

Together with all the users and stakeholders, the old and new ones, we are raising awareness and try to set ambitions based on their different needs and possibilities. Surviving, adapting, or confronting any sort of paradigm shifts

15 *What is intangible cultural heritage?*, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003> (06/07/2020).

16 Prof. dr. Marc Jacobs, then the director of FARO, the parastatal support center for cultural heritage, used the presentation of the new decree by the Flemish administration to predict the liberation from the ‘straitjacket’ of the ICOM definition. The new basic five museum functions that integrated ICH notions in the new decree are: recognize and collect, maintain and secure, investigate, presentation and guidance, and participative approach.

can only be met when your content, your own identity as an institution, is clear. In this sense, we remain true to the 'old school' of museum work. Meanwhile, recent evolutions, with for instance the battle of the different heritage ideologies, have created opportunities to enlarge our commitment towards our collection, our users and visitors, and society in general. Defining what the social goal is of the collections is something that can only be part of a cycle that starts from an internal logic to the end-user and back again. Keeping close to your core is the only sure way to remain in the course between opportunity and opportunism.