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HEAR, WE GO AGAIN OF MOMUS MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART: CHALLENGES AND REFLECTIONS

Christina Mavini*, VillyPolyzouli*, Effie Skylitsi*

ABSTRACT

On the occasion of its participation in the research program SMOOTH-EDUCATIONAL SPACES and prioritizing elimination of inequalities and enhancement of accessibility to modern-day museums, MOMus – Museum of Contemporary Art worked with a group of adolescent students who attend a local school for the deaf and hard of hearing. Inevitably a number of special and interesting challenges emerged. These seemed to stem from a combination of factors including bureaucratic constraints, time limitations and the sensory particularities of the target group.

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* **Christina Mavini**, Curator of Education, MOMus – Museum of Contemporary Art, christina.mavini@momus.gr

* **Vasiliki Polizouli**, Curator of Education, MOMus – Museum of Contemporary Art, vassiliki.polizouli@momus.gr

* **Effie Skylitsi,** Art historian, Visual Artist, MOMus – Museum of Contemporary Art, eskylitsi@gmail.com

This contribution seeks to show case part of the opportunities and challenges which became apparent within the Case Study titled 'Hear, we go again' of MOMus – Museum of Contemporary Art. It also aims at demonstrating the ways in which contemporary artworks, creative visual-arts activity, involvement in physical forms of expression, interdisciplinary approach, as well as the museum itself as an atypical learning environment and a polyvalent action field, helped to address the aforementioned particularities and became a source of inspiration and a trigger for the commoning procedures of co-decision and co-creation.

Keywords: Inclusion, museum learning, contemporary art, hearing-impaired participants

Introduction

In recent decades museums have been awakened to the reality that their typical visitors represent only a fraction of their local communities, leaving many groups underrepresented (Black, 2005). This awareness has driven museums to take proactive measures against social exclusion. Disciplines such as sociology, cultural studies and anthropology have begun to recognize the vital role of museums in shaping societal perspectives rather than just reflecting them.

At the community level, museums can serve as catalysts for social regeneration, empowering communities to enhance self-determination, self-confidence and the skills to control their lives (Sandell, 2003). As cornerstones of diversity and education within their communities, museums bear a social responsibility to ensure public access to culture. This entails breaking down barriers, be they related to cost, geographical location, or education levels, that might otherwise prevent individuals from engaging in cultural experiences (Reeve &Wollard, 2006).

Contemporary art museums, known for their often exclusive and enigmatic nature, face unique challenges in making their educational and cultural offerings accessible (Reeve & Woolard, 2006). Nevertheless, many contemporary art institutions worldwide have undertaken substantial efforts to enhance inclusivity in their educational initiatives.

The MOMus - Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki was among the pioneers in Greece to incorporate aesthetic appreciation through education and democratization of knowledge as fundamental components of the museum's mission (Scaltsa, 2009).

The initiation of the *SMOOTH Educational Spaces, passing through enclosures and reversing inequalities through educational commons* program in 2020 found MOMus - MCA already well-versed in managing large-scale co-funded projects, alongside a wealth of best practices for smaller-scale efforts. These endeavors have targeted various vulnerable social groups.

Participating in the SMOOTH program presented a unique opportunity for the museum to expand its focus beyond reception processes, delving into cultural production's influence and its role in addressing exclusion (Sandell, 2007). The program's design was rooted in the nascent theory of the 'Commons', a value-driven framework that fosters democracy, equality,

creativity and sustainable human-nature relationships (Bawens et al., 2019). This theory extends to intangible resources such as formal and non-formal educational spaces (Pechtelidis, 2022). It champions free access to knowledge within educational communities, promotes inclusive practices, encourages intercultural dialogue and cultivates the skills required for political democratization (Pechtelidis, 2018; Pechtelidis&Kioupkiolis, 2020).

The 'Hear, We Go Again' Initiative

The 'Hear, we go again' initiative took place within the expansive walls of the MOMus - Museum of Contemporary Art, as part of the SMOOTH program, which is fundamentally grounded in the educational concept of Commons. 'Commons' are frequently linked to spaces or realms where resources are collectively owned, held, and managed (Bruncevic, 2014). This vision strongly resonates with the museum's core mission, encompassing its physical spaces, collections andefforts to foster openness and inclusivity. Museums, as guardians of culture and knowledge, have long been committed to the principles of accessibility and open access, a dedication reaffirmed by the recent ICOM definition, which explicitly incorporates inclusion as a central objective (https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/).

The SMOOTH program's subtitle, 'reversing inequalities', harmoniously aligns with the institution's overarching commitment to inclusiveness and the reinforcement of its bonds with specific communities. The 'Hear, we go again' program collaborated with the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Special Middle School-EAE of Thessaloniki, engaging a group of students aged 14-17 (corresponding to junior high and high school).

The initiatives attempted were strengthening the presence of the deaf &hard of hearing community within the museum's dynamic landscape, connecting the contemporary museum with a disability support school, involving the target group in the process of interpreting works of art in their own unique wayand offering to the participants the chance to form their own educational experiences aligning with the concept of Commons.

The program unfolded across twelve meetings during the spring and autumn of 2022. These sessions were split between the familiar confines of the school and the new, enriching environment of the museum. Here, participants encountered the collections through personalized journeys and collaborative activities, expanding their artistic horizons. Additional measures were undertaken to accommodate the target group, including

enhanced lighting, permissions to tactually explore specific exhibits-particularly those featuring vibrations and sounds such as Oppenheim's 'Earthquake'-and the mitigation of ambient sound disruptions (RNID 2001) (Nikolaraizi, 2017).

The composition of the student group varied significantly, reflecting the diverse nature of their hearing impairments. These students communicated using a combination of spoken language, Greek sign language and lip-reading, necessitating the presence of a dedicated sign language interpreter to facilitate communication between the participants, the program's facilitators and the researcher.

The facilitation teams from both the school and the museum were multifaceted, intended to provide holistic support to the student participants. The school's team included the school's philologist, the art teacher who was deaf himself, the school's choir conductor who also had hearing impairments and the computer science teacher. Complementing this, the museum's team included two curators of education, a visual artist and a choreographer-performer. Together these professionals enhanced the range of artistic expressions and experiences. Techniques such as body percussion, employed in most meetings, played a significant rolenot only in preparing participants for engagement but also in opening up their creativity and establishing a channel for communication with the target group, experimenting with bodily sounds that augmented their kinesthetic experiences. The focus also extended to various forms of visual expression, exposing participants to a variety of mediums and techniques prevalent in contemporary art. The goal was to cultivate diverse individual and group skills, thereby broadening the horizons of the participants.

Meetings were planned in an adaptable way with the cooperation of the museum's team, the sign language interpreter and the researcher, with invaluable input and guidance from the school teachers involved. The participants actively engaged in a process of collaboration and learning, during which an array of practices was introduced:
• Visual Documentation: A transcribing technique, including mind maps to chart participants' needs and preferences, post-it notes and roll paper for sharing their impressions of museum artworks (Tsinakos & Balafoutis, (2009) Katz & Chard, (1989); Fried-Booth, 2002).
• A range of artistic activities including interpreting original artworks through visual representations, collage and individual / group silhouettes that acquainted participants with the three-dimensional nature of art, space, self and their peers.

- A variety of physical and kinesthetic practices, with or without elements of sign language, including specific exercises derived from Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed' in order to explore demanding processes of team building (Boal, 1992).
- Media Exploration: Through photos, videos and other applications, participants delved into the visual worldoften using their mobile phones as a means of expression, catering to the unique sensory needs of the group.

Through all these activities as well as the assemblies, a practice closely aligned with the philosophy of the Educational Commons, two complex games employing the museum's collections were devised.

The first game resembled a creative form of hide-and-seek, allowing participants to interpret specific artworks. They would hide near or next to the chosen artwork, later revealing their thought processes, interpretations and personal narratives, using a mix of verbal language, sign language, visual expression, movementor video.

The second game transformed into a treasure hunt, offering an interactive experience for future visitors. The students were responsible for designing puzzles and quizzes, which they later incorporated into an exciting adventure. Throughout this learning journey, verbal and nonverbal codes, sign language gestures, artistically created images and photographs, enriched the visitors' encounters with art. The game evolved into a digital version and the puzzles were transformed into QR codes that were placed in the actual exhibition space, right next to the artwork captions.

Challenges

Bureaucratic Constraints and Time Limitations: The educational system's bureaucratic constraints and time limitations posed significant challenges. The school staff and students faced issues such as mobility restrictions, obstacles in organizing excursions and difficulties in coordinating projects. For instance, the creative project inspired by Pavlos Dionysopoulos' 'Wings' took place at the school, limiting direct interaction with the museum's artwork. An extended time commitment yielded more successful results.

Changes in Team Composition: Throughout the program, both the target team (students) and the implementation team (facilitators) experienced changes in their composition and numbers due to, among other factors, the pandemic and demanding curriculum schedules. This had a direct impact on the collaborative dynamics of the program. The structure of the student

group was not consistently stable, requiring team members to remain open and adaptable to new circumstances. This flexibility was essential to ensure the continuity and progression of the program.

Communication Barriers: One of the notable challenges encountered involved adapting to the diverse communication needs of the target group, which included individuals with varying degrees of hearing impairments. These adaptations were influenced by the unique sensory characteristics and individual communication preferences of each student. To facilitate effective communication, a range of tools were employed, such as written materials, kinesthetic activities, art expression, digital media and symbols for visualization. The presence of the interpreter (hard of hearing himself) was vital in overcoming communication barriers and offered valuable insights for the deaf and hard of hearing community.

The Implementation of Assemblies: The commoners initially had rather limited experience with the democratic decision-making process, despite their involvement in student councils. This condition emphasized the observations made by Pechtelidis regarding the ineffectiveness of traditional methods in representing children from an adult perspective (Pechtelidis, 2022). Thus, active student partaking in democratic decision-making processes, including the realization of assemblies, posed several challenges. As aptly expressed by our interpreter 'this endeavor aimed to empower students who were accustomed to a more instructional approach'.

Achieving this transition was a process that required time, ideal circumstances and a gradual acclimatization. As the program extended, the first successful assemblies began to take place. To provide a more comfortable environment for the students during these later meetings, the facilitators were purposefully absent from the gathering room (with the exception of the researcher and interpreter). This adjustment stimulated the students' growing confidence in joining participatory processes. Without assuming an interventionist role, adults encouraged the teenagers to engage with their own knowledge, think independently and take action.
The above-mentioned challenges underscored the complexities of implementing the educational commons concept in a real-world educational setting, particularly for students with sensory variances.

Conclusions / Findings

Program Duration: The initially allocated program timeframe revealed its limitations in achieving specific objectives, necessitating an extension.

Working withcommons within an atypical environment with disabled teenagers highlights the requirement for time to allow the program to fully evolve. The inflexible and somewhat rigid nature of the Greek school systemwith its mandatory confinement to a predefined space, does not seem to align seamlessly with the principles of commoning (Pechtelidis, 2015).

Museum's Role in A typical Education: Museums, as cultural institutions, serve as fertile grounds for advancing the theory of the commons. Contemporary art, digital media and diverse creative forms, encourage self-expression that transcends language barriers. Alternative modes of expressionsuch as bodily gestures, visual arts, music and digital tools, empower individuals to select their preferred means of communication. Students have successfully challenged traditional museum norms, reinforcing the concept of museums as public, shared spaces for all.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Atypical education in the museum fosters interdisciplinary collaboration, providing room for diverse artistic approaches. The cooperation among museum educators, choreographers, visual artists, interpreters, school teachers and the deaf community has facilitated a multisensory approach, enhancing accessibility and inclusivity.

Role of Educators: The educators involved played pivotal roles as facilitators within an open framework for co-creation and change. Their adaptability, willingness to embrace non-predefined outcomes and ability to 'step back', were crucial for the implementation of the initiative. This commons approach, as discussed by Pechtelidis (Pechtelidiset al., 2015), aligns with the perspectives of Ranciere (Ranciere, 2008) and, simultaneously, corresponds to the modern role of the museum educator as a facilitator (Hubard, 2015).

Empowering the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community: The program established a bidirectional communication channel between the museum and the school, fostering continued projects and effectively empowering the deaf and hard of hearing community. All the activities have stimulated imagination and creativity, nurturing dialogue around personal perspectives on the artworks. The students' co-designed museum educational activities which promoted inclusion for both deaf and non-deaf visitors. This engagement has expanded to involve a broader network of individuals participating in a collaborative community.

Epilogue

In the pursuit of implementing commoning within an atypical contemporary museum environment and collaborating with teenagers experiencing varying degrees of hearing impairments, the 'Hear, we go again' initiative has proven to be a fruitful effort operating within the philosophy and ethical framework of commons-based democratic education. It aligns closely with the 'Heteropolitics' logic introduced by Kioupkiolis and Pechtelidis in 2017. The deaf participants have gradually taken control of their education, experiencing an open cultural environment devoid of physical constraints and actively shaping the rules of their collaboration.

As the project neared its conclusion and the design of an application for all museum visitors was completed, the young participants emerged as 'social actors', actively contributing to knowledge production and becoming more visible (Kioupkiolis & Pechtelidis, 2017). In this light, the 'Hear, we go again' Case Study represents a valuable addition to the repository of museum inclusion practices and the trajectory of the MOMus- Museum of Contemporary Art. Its content addresses the concerns of contemporary museum organizations regarding inclusion, offering a unique case study within the realm of research on the application of commons principles in informal education with a particular focus on individuals with sensory particularities.

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