

## 'Together We Curate': Cultural Participation and Collective Curation

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### Abstract

In the frame of the museums' reflexive and participatory turn and given that curation has rarely been used as an inclusive practice, the co-curating project "Together We Curate" initiated by the MOMus-Experimental Center for the Arts (Thessaloniki, Greece) after the first lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic has served as an attempt to break with established theory and practice. The paper discusses the participatory experience of a co-curating exhibition and critically examines if and how such an approach enables curating to become a collective and inclusive practice contributing to the democratization of culture. Via a practice-led research methodology, the paper reflects on how a shift in the institution's received practices can serve as a vehicle for togetherness, enabling participants to become active agents. Furthermore it discusses issues of sharing authorship, re-negotiation of institutional authority and power relations through participatory actions, possibly opening new spaces for thought and action in the process of democratizing art and culture.

**Keywords:** participation, art institutions, co-curating, communities, togetherness, democratization

### Introduction

Although during the pandemic cultural institutions seem to have responded successfully to the challenge to engage their public through distanced and online activities<sup>1</sup>, the loss of face-to-face communication was experienced as a restriction for both sides. That is why, right after the re-opening of cultural institutions, the Experimental Center for the Arts (ECA)<sup>2</sup> in Thessaloniki, Greece, decided to base its first exhibition after the lockdown on co-curation. This participatory project, entitled 'Together We Curate' (TWC), aimed to bring people together, responding to the pressing need for connectivity, face-to-face communication and interaction after a long period of self-isolation. However, as participatory projects require a high level of visitor involvement and engagement, this project posed several challenges for the institution, both organizational and other. Experimenting with new ways to connect with audiences, issues of shared authorship and re-negotiation of institutional authority emerged as important themes.

Aiming to strengthen the connections with local communities through giving to non-professionals the power to co-curate an exhibition in the space of the institution, the project is one of the first co-curating attempts in the Greek cultural sector.

Furthermore, the aim of this paper is to discuss this project in terms of critical approaches to participatory actions in cultural institutions, their possibilities and difficulties, to multiply the voices of the decision-making cultural actors.

### **Research framework**

ECA collaborated with the Museum Education and Research Laboratory of the University of Thessaly<sup>3</sup>. A member of the Laboratory (Niki Nikonanou) acted as a 'critical friend', observed, discussed and evaluated the procedure, in collaboration with the curator and acting Director of ECA (Thouli Misirloglou), who implemented the project.

The research procedure included participatory observation, reflective conversations after the meetings, and focus groups interviews after the implementation by the researcher. Research questions, formed by the facilitator, who represented the institution, and the research partner focused on the participants' experience of communication, collaboration, sharing and caring, shared authorship, power relations and their possible shifts. Twenty (20) of a total of twenty-three (23) participants took part in the focus groups interviews.

### **Theoretical framework: participatory actions in cultural institutions**

Participation – a rather overused term that has functioned as a slogan – promises a range of extraordinary experiences in the sector of cultural industries, institutions, arts, mediation, and education. It is a 'catch-all term' (Black 2018) referring to a wide spectrum of cultural activities, characterized by different levels of visitor engagement with varied aspects of culture and involvement in institutional decision-making that aims for cultural democracy.

Cultural democracy has been a key concept in this discussion. As Matarasso (2019: 77) has argued, 'Cultural democracy is the right and capability to participate fully, freely and equally in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and create, publish and distribute artistic work'. The 'participatory turn' in museology but also, in the broader field of arts, artists' radical expansion of the boundaries of their practice and their decision to engage in socially-oriented projects, have brought issues of cultural democracy into prominent focus. As a result, the need to reframe notions of curating in the context of the quest for democratizing culture demanded a strengthening of institutions' relationship with different communities (Gesser at al. 2012; Kreps 2013; Jaschke and Sternfeld 2015; Birchall 2017). Labelling a cultural activity as participatory, as a part of a strategy for upholding the social role of institutions, became an effective way for institutions to attract a wider public and, at the same time, to respond to challenges for public accountability and financial survival (Meijer-van Mensch 2012; Pointek 2017).

### **Context of participatory actions**

It should be noted that participation in museums is intimately connected with a media-based context, making use of innovative ways of communication through new technologies (Negri 2013; Klindt 2017; Black 2018). As Simon (2010) points out, participation is linked with the changes brought about by the expanded use of new media and the new dimensions and practices that have emerged from their use. These changes have deeply transformed the communication habits of the public, which is no longer satisfied with simple modes of interaction but is expecting to interpret, evaluate, share and create content.

According to Klindt (2017), participation can be more thoroughly understood by bringing into the picture two further contexts: (a) a commercialization and market-oriented context and (b) a cultural educational context. The neoliberal colonization of both private and public cultural institutions (Kanellopoulos and Barahanou 2020) has resulted in their increased commercialization. As Dewdney (2018: 438) has pointed out, 'Over the last decade there has been a marked shift in the conception of the museum audience from that of the public to that of consumers'. In this context, participation is understood as the 'key to the experience economy' (Klindt 2017: 44), an important issue for museums in the increasingly competitive field of cultural institutions and industries. Thus, marketing strategies are heavily employed so as to enhance visibility, to reach different visitor groups, and to provide evidence of cultural institutions' social impact (Gielen 2013; Kundu and Kalin 2015; Sternfeld 2018; Beitzl et al. 2019). Therefore, when examining issues of community involvement in participatory projects, it is crucial to consider the extent to which commercialization and market-oriented contexts

are dominant in defining goals and practices, leading to their instrumentalization in order to achieve hidden institutional goals imposed by market demands. In other words, it is crucial to examine the extent to which participation is framed as a marketing strategy that renders notions of democratization, inclusion, and social responsibility as mere rhetorical devices.

The cultural-educational context refers to the democratization strategies of the institution which approach participation as an issue 'central to democratic theories, discourses and debates on inclusion of citizens in decision making processes' (Klindt 2017: 37-8) and is realized through actions aiming to improve visitor and community engagement and enrich inclusion practices. This presupposes that the institutions are willing to renounce part of their authority. In this context, participatory activities can play a differentiated role for the visitor and for the museum itself (Gesser et al. 2012), creating the much-advertised sense of community, and contributing to the democratization of culture. This marks a significant shift: 'Instead of being "about" something or "for" someone, participatory institutions are created and managed "with" visitors' (Simon 2010: iii).

It should be pointed out that, often, these three different contexts cannot be sharply distinguished; most participatory projects refer to more than one context (Klindt 2017). However, it is important to stress the value of the last one – the cultural-educational context – for a critical examination of participatory practices and their contribution to the democratization of culture and the institution itself.

### ***Levels of participation***

As already mentioned, a wide range of different activities claim to be participatory, but not all of them serve the democratization of culture. Theoretical discussions on participatory strategies and practices evolve around the question of classifying the different activities under the umbrella-term 'participation' (Simon 2010; Radice 2015; Piontek 2017). There have been attempts to categorize the different participatory actions according to the intensity of public engagement. In all approaches, the categories of participation refer to an increasing level of visitor empowerment and could be linked with democratization initiatives. Nina Simon is reluctant to create a hierarchy of the different levels of participation, arguing that each of them addresses different individual preferences and attracts different visitor groups, increasing visitor numbers (Piontek 2017: 179). However, as Black (2018) critically points on this, Simon focuses on the outcome and not on the process.

Classification of participatory actions focusing on a cultural educational context, in a context of cultural democracy, place at the higher-level projects of co-creating such as TWC, because they employ procedures that can ensure a sharing of decision-making and power transition from the institution to the public. Piontek (2017) has presented a specialized model for examining co-creating projects, defining eight different dimensions that determine the procedure: the art of taking part; those who take part; the theme of the exhibition; space; duration; communication-interaction; aims; and self-perception<sup>4</sup>. Special attention is given to the interaction between these dimensions, offering a holistic analytic approach, especially for co-curated exhibitions.

### ***Co-curating projects as a laboratory for democracy***

Co-curating projects are expected to be co-creating programs, reaching a high level of visitor engagement and institutional authority sharing (Gesser et al. 2012; Mandel 2016; Mörsch et al. 2017). Their role is not effectively to increase visitor numbers: they need resources, museum personnel, time and space to experiment; they value face to face communication; and focus on stable groups of visitors for a long period in order to share with 'specialists of everyday life' (Kreps 2013: 87) the practices of collecting, researching, and exhibiting (Piontek 2017).

Co-creating projects presume a direct social engagement. As Radice argues, participants act as 'creators... they typically serve as active partners in the creation of institutional projects, for example working together with institutional staff members in the co-creation of programs based on community interests, often through the use of participatory design techniques' (Radice 2015: 254). That was the case of TWC, bringing together the institution – through its Director, who acted as facilitator of the project – and the members of

the local community, who formed the co-curating team.

Exhibitions are the field of production of curatorial, scientific, and institutional authority. That is why collaborating with members of a local community on an equal level presupposes questioning the canon and existing hierarchies in knowledge production. Co-creating projects require the contributions and the shared authorship of all participants, thereby challenging power hierarchies.

Communities can collaborate in all the main museum functions – collecting, researching, interpreting, exhibiting, mediating – and institutions have to share the knowledge production process, trusting participants as content-producers (Meijer-van Mensch 2012). Sharing knowledge production between visitors, staff, external researchers, artists, and designers tends to dissolve 'the dichotomy between user created and curated content' (Radice 2015: 259). For this to happen, institutions need to initiate practices that operate 'beyond the social division between the production and reproduction of knowledge' (Sternfeld 2016: 3).

Dialogue is a core means for achieving a democratic process of collaboration. But it should be emphasized that institutions should 'not be simply listening to other forms of knowledge but also allowing and enabling the existing order of knowledge to be fundamentally questioned, seized and changed' (Sternfeld 2013: 3). In this way, the museum becomes a space for negotiating, for staging conflicts; it becomes a laboratory for democracy, and a forum, an arena of political action, moving beyond practices and discourses that focus on the visitors' needs for consumption, trying 'on a basis of dialogue, to address potential users who are motivated by the content of the museums and transform itself to enable a process of co-creation' (Sachs 2017: 16).

Therefore, co-curating projects need to adopt an open-ended perspective with regard to visitors' involvement, sharing with the participants the responsibility for defining the content, process, and end product of their collective work, allowing them to set the 'rules of the game' (Sternfeld 2012), creating space for mistakes and misunderstandings. This open space becomes a 'space of possibilities that are not foreseen but shaped together with the visitors, probabilities where unexpected and extraordinary encounters can take place through performative actions, creating new forms of relations between society and the museum' (Nikonanou 2015: 15). Flexibility to embrace and productively pursue unforeseen incidents emerges as a *sine qua non* of a participatory project (Piontek 2017).

### ***Participatory actions: a challenge to change***

Participation procedures may be a challenge for participants to leave their comfort zone and accept museums and galleries as 'spaces where collectively produced representations meet debates, antagonisms, and actions' (Mörsch 2012: 9). In this sense, disagreement, conflict and debate are to be seen as valuable aspects of the democratic dialogic process and therefore should not be silenced. In this process the role of the enablers-mediators is crucial, as they have to switch 'from being provider of content and designer of experience to becoming facilitator of experiences around content...' (Radice 2015: 252). Focusing on the process instead of the outcome/product is a fertile ground to give cultural democracy a chance.

Critical approaches to participatory projects not only discuss issues of instrumentalization in the realm of commercialization but also criticize the reproduction of the hegemonic status of cultural institutions and their reluctance to question the canon and the institutional authority. From a radical democratic standpoint, participation is seen as an empty word, as a mere rhetorical device, because it is used not as an emancipatory but as an institutional hegemonic strategy (Jaschke and Sternfeld 2015). Those taking part accept power relations as given, perform roles and adopt identities that do not lead to institutional transformation (Sternfeld 2012) nor to the construction of alternative discourses that subvert authoritarian discourses. They do not lead to 'counter-hegemonic' spaces of contestation in which resistance can be performed, and they do not question 'whether and how the symbolic capital of museums and galleries could be deployed in a social struggle for increased equality' (Mörsch 2017).

As Sternfeld points out 'If we understand art institutions as public spaces that are

not only open to everyone but also strive to be sites that belong to everyone, then we are dealing with the question of the possibility of change' (Sternfeld 2013: 4). Participatory projects should be seen as opportunities for learning both for the public and the institutions and for 'unlearning' of dominant forms of knowledge and knowing (Nikonanou et al. 2020) beyond the hegemonic nature of conventional pedagogical relations and the operative authority of the museum (Sternfeld 2012; Jaschke and Sternfeld 2015). Furthermore, participatory projects allow for the approaching of museums and their collections as commons, leading to an 'Open-Source-Museum, that would be to the benefit of all' (Sternfeld 2020: 83). Co-curating projects are important in that respect, as they can be seen as practices of commoning, practices 'of making and managing a collective good in a manner of openness, equality, co-activity, plurality and sustainability' (Kioupiolis 2019: 122), providing 'tangible alternatives' (Gielen 2018: 84) that enhance practices of participation in cultural institutions.

In researching aspects of the TWC participatory project, we have taken into account the theoretical discussions presented. In what follows, we shall present data from this project. Our aim is not to present this project as a best practice example, but to highlight problems and difficulties that participants and institutions are facing in participatory projects. These problems and difficulties are, as Terkessidis (2019) mentions, crucially important for improving practice and the deepening theoretical discussion on participation.

### **'Together We Curate': data and issues**

Following the dimension model developed by Piontek (2017) for co-curating exhibitions with the public, in this section of the paper we focus on the characteristics of the TWC project such as aims, members taking part, theme/content of the exhibition, time-duration-space, and the process of implementation.

#### ***Aims***

TWC was motivated by a vision to experiment with the process of co-curating an exhibition together with members of a local (broadly defined) community, who did not share specific characteristics. ECA had been addressing different communities in its previous activity; however, no co-curating project had been part of its program until then. The aim was to examine the impact that participatory co-curating projects have in strengthening connections with the local communities, trusting the public in co-creating content, and sharing the exhibition authority with them.

#### ***Members taking part***

An open call with no specific background or experience criteria was disseminated through the institution's social media accounts, inviting the public to this co-curating project. There was an immediate and broad public response: 100 applications were submitted during the first day of the open call; the first 30 were accepted on a first come first served basis and finally, after several practical problems that prevented seven people from taking part, a group of 23 members together with the curator and deputy director of the Center formed the co-curating team. The participants were of different backgrounds, professions, experiences, and ages, although they all shared an interest in art curating.

With the exception of three team members who lived in other cities and were either travelling for the in-situ meetings or taking part via video conference, members came from the Thessaloniki district. All of them declared a special interest in museums, art institutions, and cultural activities: eight of them in close connection with their field of studies (museology, archeology, art history), five of them because of their profession (artists) and ten of them because of their leisure time activities, hobbies, etc. Their motivations included the wish of having a learning experience in exhibition-making, an interest in enriching their studies and professional activity, and their love for the arts. Furthermore, crucial for their participation – especially after the experience of physical distancing due to the pandemic – was the opportunity to meet and share views and opinions with people with similar interests, the need for personal contact, and the desire to collaborate with people in real-time and space. As one participant mentioned:

The motivation for me was that I would meet other people. I did not know anyone there... I decided to join the group without knowing what I would face... the whole experience surprised me extremely positively, at all stages (mp).

In accordance with other co-curating projects, the TWC employed a diverse group of audience members and a long-term collaboration procedure, in which the institution shared its authority with non-professionals in all phases of the exhibition-making process: selection of exhibits, interpretation, exhibition design, web-based publicity, etc. It is important to note that participants were not treated as volunteers/helpers in a specific institutional function but played an active part in all phases of the exhibition development.

Regarding the institution itself, the acting Director of ECA acted more as a facilitator, providing space for cultural experience and smooth guidance by defining different conceptual and organizational possibilities.

### ***Theme/content***

Since a core ECA mission is to build and maintain strong links with the life of citizens on the basis of cultural relevance, the institution proposed to work on a theme that has played a central role in the lives of the people in the last two years: the covid-19 pandemic and its shared experience. The content was already available: 460 creative responses by members of the public, which moved around the unexpected reality of the lockdown and had been collected earlier through a digital participatory action titled 'So Far So Close' in spring 2020. These responses were available on an institutional online platform<sup>5</sup>, which provided the core of the artworks to be integrated into the co-curated exhibition.

### ***Time-duration-space***

TWC was the first initiative after the lockdown that tried to bring visitors into the physical space of the Center during September and October 2020 (16 September – 20 October), combining distanced and face-to-face communication forms. Having no exhibition on display in this period, all group meetings could take place in the real space of the exhibition to come. A flexible timetable was agreed with the participants, including some distanced meetings in the beginning and many more face-to-face during the next phases of the project, depending on the special health regulations, the availability of group members, and other special requirements of each exhibition-planning stage.

### ***Process of implementation***

The first two meetings included self-presentations by the participants, discussion with the facilitator on curating practices in contemporary art, sharing positive and negative personal experiences of exhibitions, ideas, as well as discussing expectations for the specific project. These first contacts were followed by the formation of smaller groups to discuss and propose an exhibition concept. Later on, the group members were invited to choose a different team according to their special preferences, in order to be engaged in a more precise task: a. Investigation of artworks, b. Architectural design and c. Interpretation strategies, so as to organize the process of exhibition-making, a division proposed by the facilitator. During the weeks prior to the opening of the exhibition, the group worked in teams and as a whole, discussing and making decisions on every aspect of the exhibition: selection of exhibits, museography, interpretation texts. The final week before the opening, all of them worked together in collaboration with technical personnel of the institution for the realization of the exhibition in the physical space of the ECA.

From the start it became apparent that the participants were looking to get answers about what their specific roles on the project were going to be and did not show interest in general discussions on curating practices. This somehow surprised us. They were enthusiastic and at the same time rather anxious to learn about the responsibilities they had to take,



perhaps because they had to fit the project requirements to their sometimes pressing daily and professional schedule. Interestingly, although Piontek (2017: 213) argues that in co-curating projects, it is the institution's curators that tend to focus on the end product rather than the procedure, in this case, it was more or less the opposite: the importance of the final product was imposed by the participants themselves.

The theme of the exhibition addressed a common experience for all participants. The works of art created by the public during the quarantine and collected by the ECA were open to multiple interpretations and individualized approaches – something that, of course, is true for artworks in general (Piontek 2017: 209). Furthermore, in this case, the creations by the public were easily released from the pressure of following a curatorial canon in their selection and interpretation and were consequently more open to multiple approaches. In addition, the profile of the institution made this approach possible, proving that, in contrast to traditional art galleries, which do not often welcome visitors' creative contributions because 'the authoritativeness of the source is considered essential to validate the interpretation of contents' (Radice 2015: 258), an experimental art center can undertake innovative actions based on openness. In the TWC project participants had to take a lot of decisions: selecting artworks, labelling them, organizing the exhibition setting. In this process, the ECA had to share its authority in order to free them and give them a real space to make decisions on the basis of democratic procedures.

Co-curatorial projects usually focus more on interpretations than on the real exhibit, moving away from the artifact to the individual (Piontek 2017: 219). However, that was not the case with TWC. Participants experienced the selection of artworks as the major task during their involvement, as we can assume from their intense emotions when seeing the real artworks (not only the photographs available on the platform). They also showed great interest in communicating with the creators, a task they actually undertook, and were careful to avoid discrimination, trying to treat all contributions with a sense of equality and respect. Naturally, certain disagreements and conflicts emerged during the selection of exhibits; this could be seen as an inevitable aspect of democratic decision-making processes.

### ***The exhibition***

The co-curated exhibition organized in the space of the ECA was museographically structured around the notion of the house. The central space was selected to represent the 'heart' of a house, while a stickers' installation on the floor was arranged in order to indicate a plan of the house. The lateral corridors around the central space of the exhibition represented the external environment, basically the urban environment. On the first floor of the ECA, more symbolic works were installed, which referred to the more subjective or abstract reception of art and life.

The co-curating team chose not to write new texts that would accompany the different sections of the exhibition. Apart from a central introductory text that explained the team's concept and aspirations, every other text was selected from a big array of literary texts, which connected other similar fictional or non-fictional pandemic experiences with the recent one. Other features of the final outcome were a long podcast of texts read by members of the group, provided on headphones, as well as a 'visitors' evaluation corner', in order to provoke interaction with the audience, a parameter about which the team showed great concern.

### **Experiencing participation**

Data analysis of the participants' views yielded interesting results on matters of cultural educational experience and challenges to change (expectations and emotions, togetherness and otherness), as well as on matters of participation as a laboratory for democracy (decision making and shared authorship). Data examples relate to how the participants experienced the co-curating process and the levels of participation, as well as the interaction between the group members of the co-curation team.

***Expectations and emotions: 'I got richer from this experience and I am very proud***

***to be part of this team' (ms).***

Regarding participation experience, this project succeeded beyond expectation. The participants did not expect that the project would be such a great event, nor did they expect to take an active part in all stages of the exhibition development. In particular, they highlighted that they had gained knowledge and skills, a deeper understanding of art and museums, and a very positive experience of meeting and collaborating with other people. They described their satisfaction in contributing to the final product and their pleasure of working with the group.

...I felt that I was given a chance to create, to create together [with others], to make decisions... I didn't feel that there was an already decided context in which I should fit. No, that was different. We were trusted... we were given space; we were given the chance to make decisions... (mp)

Additionally, the participants mentioned a shift in their attitudes and views about cultural institutions and curatorial projects, participatory practices, and collective procedures. 'Such [participatory] exhibitions are more interesting... they take a risk, they can be interesting and successful, but they can also be a complete failure. This depends on the quality of interaction between the group members' (dg).

Time management emerged as a problem for some of the participants and gave them a feeling of limited contribution and control on decisions. '...We needed more time to understand what we were holding in our hands... to understand the art works... Some art works are overestimated' (nk).

Others were annoyed by the lack of time regarding the organization of the project implementation. 'Time was a problem for me, I was running to the exhibition [and] back to work... I would like to have some more time for the setting [up of the exhibition]. We are "last minute"' (dg).

Finally, the participants expressed feelings of familiarity with the ECA, describing it as a 'second home' (mt), feeling that this may be the beginning of a long-lasting relationship. 'The place is familiar, there is no such feeling anymore that I'll enter a space which is the temple of art. This sense of familiarity will stay with me for a long time' (lg).

***Togetherness and otherness: 'The confinement that came as a result of the pandemic is not normal... the need for being together with other people was strongly felt' throughout the project (lg).***

Many participants mentioned the need for nearness with other people in a real space as crucial for their experience, especially after their recent isolation due to the pandemic.

'Together with the [co-curating] procedure itself, it was also the theme that was very important for us at this moment; it freed us from our introversion... we became more extrovert. We worked on a subject that matters to all of us... and this brought us closer to each other' (fp).

This common field of collaborating, sharing and acting together was extremely important for building a sense of togetherness. Participants stated that they became friends with other members of the team and that they wish to remain in contact with them in the future: 'I had a great time... I met wonderful people...' (fp).

Collaborating in real space and face-to-face communication was one of the strongest experiences for all participants. Some participants also noticed the effectiveness of digital media and networks for communication in small groups or for participants who were not able to be present<sup>6</sup>. 'I liked contact... I didn't like "zoom"... when you work in real space the whole thing takes on another dimension' (df).

Being together, sharing and collaborating with people with different backgrounds, not friends or colleagues, was both challenging and attractive for the participants. The initial scepticism about the group size vanished rather quickly: 'I liked us being from different backgrounds...' (st). 'I was sceptical about having 23 people to work together... It proved to be not simply easy but very creative. It was very pluralistic... each of us complemented the ideas of the others' (mt).

Participants followed their own interests in choosing the working group with specific



responsibilities in the exhibition-making process: exhibits, labels, space. They adopted roles within the groups depending on their character, personal circumstances, or dynamics developed in each group. In some instances, quieter participants tolerated more hegemonic roles taken on by some group members, either because of their organizational skills and flexible schedule or their expertise in certain aspects of the exhibition process. For some of them, having some kind of guidance proved to be reassuring, in the absence of no previous experience in co-deciding and sharing responsibilities. In addition, the age of the participants and internal balance in the group dynamic influenced the power-relations in each group. 'I felt really safe that she was guiding [us], she has important leadership skills, but at the same time all ideas were heard' (oe).

***Decision-making and shared authorship: 'Everyone had a voice within all subgroups' (df).***

According to Pointek (2017), participants' communication and interaction with each other and the institution are fundamental in determining the character of collaboration in a participatory project, varying from authoritative to democratic. Participants in TWC experienced the procedure as democratic and inclusive regarding meaning-making, their choices and decisions in all stages of exhibition development.

Moreover, they valued the teamwork, the kindness and openness of their discussions, and the fact that different views were accepted and included when possible. They described a feeling of democracy, equality and inclusiveness. 'Expressing your opinion, you got the feeling that everybody would respect it and that others would kindly add to it or propose changes so that a final product could be arrived at' (ag).

Collaboration in the groups was also reported as positive, with decisions taken in the groups after discussing each issue with all members: 'The way we worked was to discuss first of all as a group and then every one of us to do what he was assigned, and then meet once more to discuss again... with great respect...' (mt).

Final decisions were taken with majority votes, but in many cases more inclusive strategies were followed, recognizing minority opinions. It was a common concern of the participants for all voices to be heard and this was recognized as crucial for collective curating: 'It was a democratic way of decision-making, all ideas were in the file... we chose photographs together... not the majority... inclusive' (ms).

The participants' interaction with the curator/facilitator was crucial in creating these feelings and emotions. She was described as supportive and not paternalistic, being 'a leader without intervening' (ns), listening to the participants' thoughts and opinions, being open to discussions, and letting them imagine the exhibition without restrictions. Besides this, she was always there providing resources and solutions to practical issues. Participants enjoyed the openness of the procedure and characterized it as democratic, although some of them felt disappointed by the lack of some kind of instruction regarding the approach to the artworks and organization of the exhibition development.

On some occasions disagreements arose, but these may be seen as a part of any democratic procedure and often induced long discussions. Choosing the artworks and writing the introductory text of the exhibition proved to be the more challenging moments of co-curating. 'I was worried how we make the choice [of artworks]... it could have been better... Some artworks may not have been treated in a fair manner' (ns); 'For me it was very difficult to [co-] compose a single curatorial text...' (mp).

For some, even discussing proved to be hard: 'I was at some point tired of always having to discuss things' (ar). Some of them mentioned that the final product did not meet their personal preferences. 'If I was doing the exhibition by myself or with five others, I would not have done this particular exhibition, [I would] not have these artworks, but it doesn't matter...' (nk); 'Every one of us has a different point of view, a different aesthetic... I didn't like some choices made... I expressed my opinion; some were accepted, some not... but it is OK' (ar).

The particular process of decision-making somehow emerged spontaneously, and some participants perceived this as a problem: '...We should have come to an agreement on how we chose the artworks right from the start... there should have been a different selection

process in place' (lg).

## Discussion

Research findings provide interesting insights into the experiences of the participants, on decision-making and collaboration, roles and relationships, debates and misunderstandings, and togetherness and sharing, and raised questions about the transformative power of collective procedures within the institution.

Participants' experiences showed that togetherness, physical nearness, and face-to-face communication were crucial, especially after the experience of the covid-19 pandemic. It was extremely important for them to collaborate, to gain a sense of community, to be and act together, to come near, share and care for each other. The formation of a group without considering their expertise and without previous connection with each other was experienced as a challenge in the beginning and as a strength of the project at the end. The different backgrounds of the participants and sharing of different views were appreciated as sources of enrichment. Personal skills and professionalism gave rise to special roles within the groups and influenced the sharing of responsibilities, in some cases reproducing hierarchical relationships among the participants that probably prevented the desired equality. On this, further research is needed. The encounter of participants with different backgrounds was a way of expanding traditional curatorial concepts, enriching the participants' views on curating. The feeling that authorship of the end product was shared was an important factor for cultivating a sense of familiarization with the institution, leading the participants to develop a sense of belonging, hopefully with lasting results.

Availability according to personal time schedules and project duration proved to be an important factor in implementing participatory projects and envisioning democratic procedures through dialogue, equality and decision-making. Additionally, many participants mentioned the need for more time so as to gain an overview of the project and to manage debates, avoid misunderstandings, and negotiate different viewpoints.

TWC participants had strong and positive experiences of sharing a common goal, of responsive and emotional connection, of a feeling of being connected to the other participants and of a sense of belonging. The role of the curator/facilitator proved to be crucial for this experience: openness, dialogue – sometimes exhausting – and listening to the participants' views with the intention of equality were some of the characteristics that had a positive impact on the democratization of the procedure. This was reinforced by the nature of the content to be exhibited. The art pieces created by the public made an open curatorial approach possible, beyond restrictions imposed by the canon and institutional authority.

Participants, however, occasionally hesitated in articulating ideas and proposing interventions concerning the procedure itself; or, to use Nora Sternfeld's formulation, participants were hesitant to set the 'rules of the game' (Sternfeld 2012). Taking into account that co-deciding procedures are so rare in cultural institutions, we might argue that it was quite understandable that participants did not even think of a more interventional action regarding the procedure itself; they were not even aware of the large field of decisions they would have to take during the project. The fact that the participants sought more direct guidance shows how difficult it is to unlearn attitudes, practices and habits. Moreover, although the participants' experience in decision-making was described as a democratic procedure, findings reveal the need for a collectively predefined procedure. That the project did not cater for this need may be seen as a shortcoming.

An approach of the theory of commons and commoning may enhance participatory practices in cultural institutions, proposing 'a collaborative mode of living, acting and organizing in terms of collective autonomy, equal freedom, creativity, diversity, sharing and participation, eschewing top-down, centralizing logics of the state and a profit-driven individualism of neoliberal markets' (Kioupkiolis 2019: 113). Such an approach could offer an alternative to co-curating projects and reinforce the desired engagement of participants, equality and democracy in future attempts.

## Conclusions

TWC was developed with a *cultural-educational context* of participation in mind, and aimed for democratization, moving from the individual to the community, emphasizing the need to move from a visitor-centered museum to a museum managed with individuals as a collective.

According to the *levels of participation*, TWC was a co-creating project based on collaboration and local community sharing. Participation was not limited to content contribution. Rather, it promoted a 'working with' (Mitarbeit) and 'working together' (Zusammenarbeit) among the members (Piontek 2017). The stable group collaborating from the beginning of the exhibition development – the concept, the scenario, the interpretation, and exhibition setting – with repetitive, mostly face-to-face meetings during one month confirmed the value of a 'working together' approach to participation, and this despite the short duration of the project and the fact that the exhibition material available was predefined by a previous public project.

In terms of achieving equality within the co-curating group, participants appreciated the role of the curator/facilitator and experienced the procedures as democratic and inclusive, allowing the project to become a *laboratory for democracy*. We may also argue that a high level of the participants' engagement in terms of decision-making and their influence in the final product was achieved, and that a high level of shared authorship within a cultural institution is indeed possible.

Without any intention to diminish the value of the TWC project, questions on addressing *challenges to change*, its emancipatory potential and transformative power may be raised. Participatory projects are usually prompted by institutions themselves and, often, they pre-define and reproduce more or less fixed roles. Thus, the role of host and that of the visitor usually imply the existence of a (sometimes well hidden) hierarchy that is not easily overturned (Piontek 2017: 86-7). The fact that participants in TWC were excited, pleased, and motivated by the openness and the wide range of activities and responsibilities offered in this project is a success, even if it did not manage to subvert hierarchies.

There is no doubt that the project proved transformative with regard to the participants' experience, their sense of the self and their views about curating and mediating. We could not easily argue, though, that it transformed the organization itself; however, it did provide a context for action in this direction: collaborating with participants in a reciprocal way was at the heart of the institutional functioning for over a month. It was a new way to connect with local communities, work together and question mono-dimensional approaches to authorship, to authority and to power relations. Institutional authority may not have been reversed but in many ways it was certainly 'softened'. TWC created a space for all participants to speak openly and be listened to. Equality between institution and the public is not easily achieved, but an important step was made towards the ethical change in the organization in terms of a more contingent social practice: a process of open debate on the basis of mutual respect was ever-present and, acknowledging the complexities of the contemporary institutional art context, uncertainty was embraced. The participants were seen as active agents and, most importantly, they considered themselves as active agents and interlocutors of the institution. Their final curatorial text clearly emphasized the notion of togetherness, with regard to both their internal collaboration and how they addressed the audience of the exhibition.

The cultivation of openness, equality, sharing and solidarity is a core target at the heart of participatory projects aiming at the democratization of culture. The experience of the TWC project showed that museums and art institutions should be encouraged to embrace such initiatives more systematically, taking up the promising challenges posed.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> NEMO, 'Initiatives and Actions of the Museums in the Corona Crisis', 6 April 2020. [https://www.ne-mo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/NEMO\\_documents/Initiatives\\_of\\_museums\\_in\\_times\\_of\\_corona\\_4\\_20.pdf](https://www.ne-mo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/NEMO_documents/Initiatives_of_museums_in_times_of_corona_4_20.pdf), accessed 16 November 2022.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.momus.gr/en/momus/experimental>

<sup>3</sup> <http://museumedulab.ece.uth.gr/main/en>

<sup>4</sup> The model leaves an open dimension to be completed by future researchers.

<sup>5</sup> <https://res.momus.gr/el/>

<sup>6</sup> It was an initiative of the participants to organize zoom meetings for those who could not attend the face-to-face meetings in person, providing a collaborative spirit and a sense of community – though they did not have any previous contact between them – and eventually recognizing the benefits of inclusive participation.

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