

“Never enough, never perfect”: Participatory activist practice in the museum

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Abstract Recent outbursts of activist interventions in museums have put a spotlight on the difficult relationship of cultural spaces with activism as they aspire to be forums, sites for civil, social, and cultural participation (Black, 2005; Byrne, 2018; Janes & Sandell, 2019; Pegno, 2021). On the one hand, museums want to be engaged and relevant, taking part in social dialogue as “agents of change” (Mouffe, 2016; Sandell, 2003). On the other, they often have complex relationships with the activists themselves, especially in the framework of participatory practices (Coffee, 2008; Lorente, 2015). This article focuses on the process of co-creation of an exhibition about the social history of AIDS at the Museum of Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean (the Mucem) in Marseille, France, and explores how this participatory project involving activists can help us better understand the challenges of museum activism. The core question this article addresses is: how did activists experience the co-creation participatory process, and what can the museum learn from it to inform their practice of museum activism?

Keywords museum activism, activists in the museum, participatory practice, co-creation, empowerment

“We lived a moment of sharing of stories.” (int. 5)

Recent activist interventions in museums have put a spotlight on the difficult relationship that cultural spaces have with activism. Museums are often torn between their own and civil society’s social aspirations and the call – often from conservative and/or academic fronts – for so-called neutrality. As institutions of knowledge, they are asked to present information in a balanced and dispassionate way. As institutions representing and engaged with society, they are asked to take sides, give voices to the unheard, and be a space where we can debate and discuss interpretations of history and culture.

The second of these two functions has been identified as “museum activism,” defined by Janes and Sandell as a “museum practice, shaped out of ethically-informed values, that is intended to bring about political, social and environmental change” (2019, p.37). In this role, museums want to be engaged and relevant, as well as partake in social dialogue as “agents of change” (Mouffe, 2016; Sandell, 2003; Sandell & Nightingale, 2012). They aspire to be forums, sites for civil, social, and cultural participation (Black, 2005; Byrne, 2018; Janes & Sandell, 2019; Pegno, 2021). It is this role of societal representation and engagement that turns museums into “sites of struggles” (Borg & Mayo, 2010, p. 37). We have seen urgent calls across academic literature for museums to become engaged and polyvocal (Golding & Modest, 2013). But how to apply “museum activism” in practice is still unclear, and institutions are left struggling. Whose role is it to tell stories? How is authority and power to be negotiated? What resources and new skills are needed for museum activism to be enacted?

It is important to distinguish here between *museum activism* and *activists in the museums*. Activists’ actions in the museum can take many forms. They can be rebellious and demonstrative (as with the current wave of gluing hands on artworks to protest the lack of climate action). They can also be part of knowledge-production processes. The complex relationship between the museum and the activists themselves is especially visible in the framework of institutional financing,¹ but also in the context – my focus in this article – of participatory practices (Coffee, 2008; Lorente, 2015)

¹ On this topic see Yasmin (2021).

Indeed, participatory practices involving activists have been perceived as a possible way to enact – or at a minimum, to help enact – museum activism. Participatory practices have been much discussed in the museology field. Their definitions, their (not always successful) implementations, the challenges attached to them, have been the subject of much scholarship (Sandell, 1998; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Shirky, 2008; Simon, 2010; Lynch, 2011; Pollock & Sharp, 2012; Golding & Modest, 2013; McSweeney & Kavanagh, 2016; Elffers & Sitzia, 2016; Eriksson, Stage, & Valtysson, 2019; Rausch, Benschop & al. 2022, Ferloni & Sitzia, 2022 to name a few). Yet there are very few studies grounded in fieldwork that explore the impact of such practices on the participants themselves. There are even fewer that explore the participatory relationship between activists in the museum and museum activism. The aim of this article is to fill this gap. My goal is not to be exhaustive, as there are many different strategies that have emerged in practice to tackle this issue. Rather, working from a specific case, I want to extract common issues made visible in the experiences of activists in the museum, to analyze them, and to consider the potential application to other institutions. In short, I want to explore what knowledge and general principles can be transferred from specific activists' participation to the field of museum activism in general.

Furthermore, within such participatory practices that involve work with activists, there is often a sense of disappointment. Interviews with curators, institutional representatives, activists, and other participants across many participatory projects I have researched over the last ten years reveal that within such participatory frameworks, expectations on all sides are rarely met and that the results are perceived as less than satisfactory. There is a sense that such projects are what we might call “never enough, and never perfect,” as a member of staff at the Museum of Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean expressed it. I propose to turn this sense of disappointment around and see this “never enough, never perfect” as a productive aspect: that is, as an opportunity for learning and cross-pollinating between activists' actions and museums' practices.

To do so, this article will focus on the process of co-creation of an exhibition about the social history of AIDS. This exhibition had the particularity to have sought the participation of a broad range of ‘concerned’ individuals, including a number of activists. Held at the Museum of Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean (the Mucem) in Marseille, France, the exhibition “VIH / Sida, l'épidémie n'est pas finie! (HIV/AIDS, the epidemic is not over!)” ran from December 15, 2021 to May 2, 2022. The ethnographic observation of the project took place between 2019 and 2022 in the form of participant observation of events and meetings of the group of participants. This was followed in spring 2020 by forty semi-structured interviews with all of the participants to give insight into the participants' perceptions of this process. In this paper, I use the term ‘activist-participant’ to distinguish these from other participants. I define activist-participants as participants who currently have or have had an activist practice (that is, a history of political, social, and/or associative engagement) and who self-identified as such during the interviews. These activist-participants represented about half of the interviewees. In practice, both activist- and non-activist-participants worked together as one group throughout the project. In this paper I chose to focus on the activist-participants' experience, but used data from the non-activist-participants when they enlightened a group dynamic or postures among the activist-participants that informed the topic. All interviews were held in French, and were audio-recorded and transcribed. All quotations in the text are translations by the author. The research process in its entirety was approved by ethical committees in the researchers' institutions. The interviews were conducted by phone (due to Covid-19 restrictions) and lasted between 25 and 105 minutes. The questions were semi-structured, allowing for elaboration on the part of the interviewee.²

² The interviews were split between three interviewers: Florent Molle, Lorenzo Jacques, and Emilie Sitzia. All three researchers used the results for their research.

This case study, exploring a participatory project involving activists, can help us better understand the challenges that museums working with activists face as well as question what museum activism might entail. The core question this article addresses is: How did activists experience the co-creative participatory process, and what can the museum learn from it?

The article first presents the exhibition project and the specific systems that were put in place to facilitate work with various groups that had been directly impacted by the social history of HIV/AIDS (including activists).³ Indeed, the participatory systems established around the project's structure, the collecting of objects and stories, and more generally the work process and environment all contributed to the smooth running of the project. These participatory processes are then analyzed specifically through the lens of the activists' experiences. What difficulties were experienced? How was conflict made productive? How was polyvocality negotiated? Was the experience one of emancipation, empowerment, or of exclusion? After exploring both the difficulties and the positive aspects of the project, I analyze the lessons that can be learned to reconcile and enhance museum activism and activists in the museum. What can museums learn from activist practices and their experience of participatory projects? What exhibition strategies can be implemented to reflect that experience? And how can we translate them into broader museum practices?

PARTICIPATORY WORK WITH ACTIVISTS: THE CASE OF AN EXHIBITION ON THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF HIV/AIDS

As a national "society museum,"⁴ the Mucem looks to engage with societal issues. Since its opening in 2013, exhibitions at the Mucem have tackled topics as varied as football, marine exploration, languages, trash, food, and anti-racism. These "society" exhibitions are often (but not always) based on the Mucem's existing collections, artistic interventions, and on a practice called 'enquête-collecte' (collated survey).⁵ Over the last few years the museum has increasingly experimented with participatory practices (Ferloni & Sitzia, 2019).

The exhibition "VIH/SIDA l'épidémie n'est pas finie" was built on material from several sources and collected in several waves.⁶ An existing collection inherited from the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires around the theme "Histories and memories of the fight against AIDS," collected between 2002 and 2006 by Stéphane Abriol and Françoise Loux, formed a solid basis for the exhibition project. In 2013, a new curator of health at the Mucem, Florent Molle, continued the collecting work and reflected with Loux on ways to promote and complement the documentation concerning that collection.

At this time, the collection also attracted the attention of the activist world. For example, the activist photographer Tom Craig offered to donate 3,000 photographs related to the social history of AIDS (Craig & Molle, 2021), while in 2016, the Mucem was gifted a significant number of objects linked to the association ACT UP Paris,⁷ organized with the help of Yves Grenu, their archivist and a member of the activist group Les Balayeuses archivistiques LGBT (Molle & Chenu, 2020). It is in this context that in 2017 the idea of an exhibition foregrounding the social history of AIDS emerged.

3 It is beyond the scope of this article to give specific attention to the theme of HIV/AIDS within museum institutions or in relation to art practice. There is an abundance of literature on the subject from the domains of sociology, ethnography, LGBTQ+ studies, museology, and art history.

4 The "society museum" is a form of ecomuseum. See the special issue of *Culture & Musées* – n° 39 from 2022.

5 This process aims at constructing the museum's material: ethnographic surveys are commissioned to observe a social fact, material and immaterial testimonies are collected (in the form of filmed interviews, photographs, or objects), and this material is then systematically analyzed before entering the museum's collection.

6 An extensive description and analysis of the process was published (in French) in Molle & Sitzia (2022).

7 ACT UP is an international grassroots activist and political group using direct action, research, and advocacy to end the AIDS pandemic.

The first working group was created with the two researchers of the original collection (Abriol and Loux), the Mucem curator and collection manager (Molle and Caroline Chenu), two academics (Sandrine Musso and Christophe Broqua), a researcher at the association Sidaction (Vincent Douris), a doctoral candidate researching the project (Renaud Chantaine), and an intern (Lorenzo Jacques). This group, already a mix of museum experts, engaged academics, and activists, became the exhibition's 'Comité de pilotage' (that is, the core curatorial team).⁸

It quickly became apparent to the group that, to address polyvocality and legitimacy, it was important to bring in various groups impacted by the epidemic that could share their lived experience. This was also consistent with the history of the fight against AIDS: those touched by the epidemic wanted to be associated with the decision processes that impacted them directly. A second group was then created using the so-called "snowball effect," that is, using networks of associations, institutions, groups, and individuals to gradually grow the number of potential participants reached. The Comité de pilotage sent out a public invitation letter starting from their existing networks, and through that method, the invitation was spread far and wide. Participants then self-selected to be part of the working group.⁹ This fluid group of about forty people (individuals were free to join or leave as they pleased) became the 'Comité de suivi.' This group was a mix of activists, association representatives, artists, impacted people, professionals from the medical field, researchers, and people living with HIV. It is important to note that no differences were drawn between activist-participants and others through the entire duration of the project. Those involved worked together in mixed groups (sometimes with the full group, sometimes in smaller groups, as described below). During our research, we interviewed all the participants. It was during the analysis of the interviews that the distinction between the activists and other non-activist-participants became clear.¹⁰

This two-tier structure (Comité de pilotage and Comité de suivi) allowed for a co-creation process. The role of the Comité de suivi was to co-create content for the exhibition by discussing and enriching its messages, identifying essential topics, discussing objects, and approving the final choices of the Comité de pilotage. The work of the Comité de pilotage was to organize the working days and meetings of the Comité de suivi, to research and deepen the exhibition narrative, and to pilot the writing and choice of objects with the Comité de suivi. It is important to note that the structures and participatory systems were exploratory, and that ongoing reflection on the process took place alongside the project (Molle & Sitzia, 2022; Molle, 2023).

Specific strategies were put in place to facilitate the work with various groups that had been directly impacted by the social history of HIV/AIDS (with all participants working together, including activists). A first introductory meeting in June 2017 presented the existing Mucem collection and its history and made clear the expectations of the co-creation process. It clarified the intentions of the Comité de pilotage: that is, their desire to integrate multiple perspectives on the social history of HIV/AIDS into the exhibition and to strengthen the link with the (in particular local) source communities while at the same time opening up broader reflection on memory(ies) of the epidemic and its portrayal in an institutional environment (the Mucem is, after all, a national museum).

Between 2017 and 2019, thematic study days were organized, each followed by an informal meeting between the two committees held the following day. The meetings were used, for example, to debrief and to extract the important elements discussed or talk about potential exhibition objects. These meetings took place outside of working hours and were organized as convivial gatherings. Within the study days, roundtable discussions were employed to make visible the multiplicity of viewpoints as well as individual interventions intended to share individual expertise and experience.

8 The activists in the Comité de pilotage were not interviewed or taken into consideration in this study, as they were not considered as participants by the institution.

9 On the limitations of that method of participant recruitments, see Molle & Sitzia (2022).

10 Especially as participants self-identified as activists (or not) during the interview process.

From the third study day onward, participants were invited to bring objects to materialize their narrative, in what might be considered a “pre-musealization” process, especially given that some of these objects were later donated to the institution. Alternating presentations, debates, and discussions in both small and large groups facilitated the communication processes. Smaller group discussions were particularly appreciated, as noted by several interview participants (int. 1, 17, 18), with one mentioning, “you created the small groups and I found my place” (int. 17). During these days, narratives were collected, collection objects discussed, and objects (from the secondary collection) touched to stimulate memories and storytelling.

Further to this, informal events such as film screenings were organized to support the creation of a common culture and moments of unstructured reflection. A particularly striking event was the use of a symbolic mourning ritual. In May 2019, a patchwork donated by the Dutch association Namenproject, gifted in 2018, was unfolded in the courtyard of the museum by the participants, revealing the names of people who had died during the epidemic.¹¹ This intense emotional sharing event cemented the role of the institution as holder of an affective memory. The Covid-19 pandemic interrupted such events, which were replaced by online formats to continue and complete the work. This was a difficult transition, and many participants drastically reduced their participation in this last phase of the exhibition.

During my ethnographic observations of these meetings, it became clear that the activist-participants had many roles. Sometimes they were integrated in the institutional structure and discourse, sometimes they contributed to the institutionalization of memory. They were sometimes the voice of dissent. That became visible in the construction of the exhibition narrative, as they wanted to avoid a consensus narrative and regularly reminded the group of facts and figures, giving diverse lived examples. Other times, they were questioning the institution and whether a national museum was really the place for such an exhibition, considering the position of the French state during these historic events. They were sometimes eager to build a permanent memory of the history of HIV/AIDS, while at the same time questioning the institutions holding that memory. Additionally, activist-participants sometimes expressed a will to push the institution to open up to alternative collaborations and spaces (many of which did not materialize). As a result, activists diverted meetings from their organized structure and opened the floor for emotional and political discourse. They often made the institution’s representatives feel uncomfortable and consistently held them accountable, but this discomfort was always productive and respectful. As one of the non-activist-participants explained, “it’s very hard to talk with activists, it’s normal, they carry a message” (int. 9).

THE ACTIVISTS IN THE MUSEUM: THE EXPERIENCED PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

I will focus here on two key aspects of the experience as relayed by activist-participants: first, by examining what difficulties were experienced, and second, by assessing whether the experience was one of emancipation, empowerment, or one of exclusion.

What difficulties were experienced?

The main difficulty that was experienced by the activist-participants was the negotiation of power. Because of the political nature of the topic, there was an extreme awareness in the participant group of power dynamics: of the risk of the institution flattening their discourses and hoarding their stories. This risk was often mentioned to the Mucem curator by members of the Comité de pilotage. In the

¹¹ Based on the American Names Project (1987), the Dutch Namenproject (1993) led to the making of about thirty patchworks that constitute a memorial quilt. See de Hann (nd) and Molle (2019).

Comité de suivi, it sometimes created vigorous discussions in the meetings, which nevertheless stayed positive as activist-participants did not hesitate to challenge the institution and established or perceived authority.

One reason the conflict and tension were rendered productive may relate to an observation made by one of the activist-participants, who suggested that activists have “a history of conflict and of managing conflict”: between various activist associations, between themselves, with the state, and between individuals. This conflict then “exists but it is not scary, and it is not detrimental” (int. 15). This familiarity meant that conflict was received in group discussions as an opportunity to expand and share (sometimes radical) points of view. Furthermore, this same activist-participant insisted that “conflict is not abuse,”¹² which meant that despite (sometimes significant) disagreement, the dialogue stayed respectful and open to a variety of viewpoints. Thus, the activist-participants’ experience meant they were more able to speak their minds, but also to listen to the other participants. As one of the activist-participants explained, “it’s all in the dialogue, [...] listening to each other. If you are in the dialogue just to give your point of view without listening to the other, this has no value” (int. 1). The activist-participants’ experience of conflict management and openness of dialogue thus allowed for a smoother power negotiation.

A second, related difficulty stemmed from the constant negotiation between singular individual stories and social history (which is still being written). Polyvocality is known as a difficult practice as, to increase fairness and social justice, it calls for a reassessment of silent histories and a multiplication of narratives and perspectives (Sitzia, 2023). Because a large part of the process of co-creation of the exhibition was the writing of its narrative, participants were invited into the project so that they could share their lived experience of the social history of HIV/AIDS. Although these lived experiences were deeply individual and thus formed rather diverse narratives, the activist-participants’ history with activism and associative practice helped the negotiation. When asked about their feelings on that aspect of the exhibition, activist-participants underlined the importance of leaving space for new voices and for new stories to emerge. One interviewee mentioned that he “think[s] that what is important is that [the exhibition] is interesting to the public and that they discover things that we have never seen in the media” (int. 1).

This interest by the activist-participants in individual, often invisible stories was coupled with a sharp awareness of the interest of the collective. One activist-participant noted that they were not there to give their individual stories; rather, “the answer is not individual as such, the answer, it has to be collective” (int. 2). For many of the activist-participants, there was a sense that a collective history can be reached through the sharing of individual stories. As one activist-participant put it, “it must reflect the whole story, not just mine. I am a moment in this story, because I am a witness” (int. 3). In activist practices there is a porosity between the private and the collective, with personal engagement (often significant in terms of both time and emotional weight) connected to collective endeavors. As one activist-participant noted, activists “already have this interaction between the personal dimension and collective perception” (int. 18). This led the group to be very aware of the need to get personal stories and social history to stand side by side (int. 1). This awareness allowed for a rather smooth implementation of polyvocality during the participatory meetings of the preparation phase and also in the exhibition design itself.

A connected challenge was balancing a larger coherent exhibition narrative with alternative individual experiences. Consensus was often not looked for in the participatory group’s discussions, as the activist-participants in particular aimed to give voice and respect to individual lived experiences. Outlying voices were given space to be expressed freely, as noted by many participants. Allowing for multiple memories and giving visibility to dissonant heritage implies a

¹² The interviewee recommended the 2017 book *Conflict is not abuse: Overstating harm, community responsibility, and the duty of repair* by Sarah Schulman.

freedom of expression on the part of the participants, as this heritage “fulfills several inherently opposing uses and carries conflicting meanings simultaneously” (Graham et al., 2016, p. 3). This freedom of expression was protected and encouraged during the participatory meetings. However, a broader “big picture” exhibition narrative, necessary in the construction of a coherent exhibition, was maintained throughout the process by the Comité de pilotage. The Comité de pilotage wanted multiple points of view to enter the exhibition space, but moderated the overall process. They ensured that a coherent narrative whole was maintained, but always in consultation with and with the validation of the participants. One of the activist-participants compared this approach to that of “a documentary that talks about an individual story to talk about History. It is called having a point of view” (int. 6). One activist-participant explained they perceived their role as “a corrector or a ‘revelator’ but it’s factual. I am not defending an opinion. For opinions and felt experiences, each person can have a lived experience that is valid in terms of the position they occupied during the AIDS crisis” (int. 1). Activist-participants felt “co-responsible” (int. 3) for the overall narrative. This sense of responsibility among the activist-participants and the process respecting and involving the participants’ points of view at every step (in the collection of stories, in building the overall exhibition narrative, in the choice of objects, in the label-writing) certainly facilitated the ability of the institution to construct a polyvocal yet unified discourse.

Nevertheless, despite this shared co-responsibility, a fourth difficulty lay in the feeling expressed by many participants that the institution (or at the very least the Comité de pilotage) would have the last word on the selection of objects and narratives, meaning that many felt no sense of control over the exhibition’s content (int. 1, 2, 3, 15). This was mitigated by the fact that the activists perceived the museum as a neutral space where many activist associations are represented but no one can unduly over-represent their own association or cause. An equivalence between collectivity and neutrality was made by the activist-participants, as one interviewee mentioned: “it’s collective [...] it’s neutral” (int. 12). They also perceived the institution as a keeper of quality and fairness. As one activist-participant highlighted, “what I liked was the quality of the discourse, that we are in an approach that takes into account the voice of everyone, to make sure this is shared, [and] the precision of the words and that everyone had agreed to work this way” (int. 18). This shows that the Mucem in this instance was acting as an agonist space: that is, as a forum foregrounding social and political conflict yet, at the same time, removing the use of moral categories and instead contextualizing social history and complicating relationships between individuals, associations and institutions (Mouffe, 2016; Sitzia, 2023). The activist-participants’ history with activism meant that, in their agonist approach, they prioritized mutual respect and listening. The museum and the participants applied to some measure what Basu calls the “pluriversal museum,” which calls for museums to no longer focus on finding one common story (as in the universal model) but rather to focus on combining our collective stories (Basu, 2021).

In this regard, trust was essential, because, as Zask highlights, by participating, citizens validate the institutional message (2011, p. 8). By lending their stories and voices to the exhibition, the participants gave the overall exhibition narrative credibility and associated their individual experiences with whatever the institution presented in the final exhibition. This calls for trust on both sides. Most activist-participants were happy with this situation and trusted the Comité de pilotage - in particular, the museum representatives. This trust was built gradually. The moments of knowledge exchange during the study days were key. Such moments created an atmosphere of openness and dialogue (int. 16). In such instances the respectful attitude of the group and of the institution were made visible. This atmosphere of trust and respect contributed towards a balance between academic knowledge and lived experience.¹³

¹³ Molle deepened the analysis of this process of balancing the two in his PhD thesis (Molle, 2023).

Was the experience of activist-participants one of emancipation, empowerment, or exclusion?

First, it is important to note that neither in theory nor practice is there a direct link between empowerment, emancipation, and participation (Arnstein, 1969; Lynch, 2011). Emancipation in the museum setting is still mostly thought of in terms of the impact of museum discourse on spectators, rather than on participants co-creating exhibitions (Jung, 2010; Sitzia, 2017). However, there is an important distinction between the emancipation of the visitor/consumer of the discourse presented and the emancipation of the participant/co-creator of a discourse that directly concerns them. In this regard, Nathalie Heinich puts forward a theoretical distinction between three moments of identity: “designation (by others), presentation (for others) [and] self-perception (from self to self)” (2018, p. 68; my translation). She stresses the importance of aligning these three moments of identity. The visitor/consumer of the discourse presented by the museum will not necessarily recognize themselves in the image presented by the museum, creating a problem of alignment of self-perception with designation and presentation. Whereas the co-creating participant of a museum discourse, engaged in active self-representation, will (ideally) align the three moments of their identity and will find themselves to some extent emancipated.

The tension between the individual and the collective adds to this issue. Emancipation is generally conceptualized as an individual process rather than a collective act (Rancière, 1987). Yet the museum, by virtue of its history and structure, is the site of an ‘I-collective’ – that is, the ‘I’ of a curator that is meant to represent the collective history/heritage/taste/etc. – and that ‘I-collective’ shows itself and asserts itself through the exhibition. How, then, are we to think about the emancipation of co-creating participants, when several ‘I’s’ are involved in the creation process?

The concept of empowerment, defined as the process of acquiring power, helps us to clarify the relationship between the individual and the collective in a museum context. Indeed, empowerment is both an individual and a collective phenomenon, as it focuses on the ability to act directly upon the world (whether as an individual or as a community). As Cornwall (2008) points out, empowerment implies a critical awareness that contributes to changing power balances in a sustainable way, something that certainly was the aim of some of the activist-participants in the HIV/AIDS project.

The activist-participants saw it as their responsibility to make their voices heard in the context of the exhibition creation. One activist-participant insisted that “I feel responsible that what brought me in this process is heard” (int. 15). This participant joined the project to make sure that silenced voices would be heard, and also to be sure that an antiracist message would be included, as he thought it his role to convince other participants and the institution that this was a story worth including in the grand narrative created for the exhibition. Indeed, many activist-participants, rather than seeing themselves as sources, saw themselves as active co-creators whose duty it was to convince. The sentiment of empowerment went hand in hand with narrative negotiation. As one activist-participant noted, “I feel legitimated. I feel free to offer ideas” (int. 17); or as another put it, “we’re always responsible if we participate” (int. 26).

From the perspective of the activist-participants working with the associations, the exhibition was seen as complementary work (int. 15 & 18). This means that while the exhibition arguments were central to the discussions, there was an acute awareness in the group that the exhibition was a chance to reach the public in another way and that the work needed to be a collective endeavor. This sentiment of belonging to a group working together towards a common goal was expressed by many activist-participants: “I brought my stone to the building [...] I feel implicated. I feel active in the construction process. I think the choice of object is done collectively” (int. 21).

This was a particularly delicate process for some from under-represented and traditionally ‘silenced’ groups. A self-identified representative of the ‘drug users’ noted:

At first [...] I was a bit afraid of not being understood, of being seen as the 'obligatory drug addict.' I feared being stigmatized as representative of drug addicts. But by participating [...] I understood that everyone can have a space [in the exhibition making process] and that I can give something. (int. 24)

This feeling of being heard and having a voice was echoed by the activist-participant who self-identified as a representative of migrants living with HIV: "I like the process, usually we can't talk... people talk for us, there we can talk directly" (int. 25). The combination of respect for individual agency and discourse, the construction of the collective narrative, and the responsabilization of the participants for the exhibition discourse created a combination of emancipation and empowerment while avoiding the trap of 'exclusion through inclusion' (where a group feels more excluded because of its 'obligatory inclusion').

This ongoing collective negotiation process created a certain social cohesion among participants that several activist-participants noted, observing that "as the meetings progress, we recognize the other, we recognize ourselves... we can't ask that everyone agrees" (int. 26, and extensively developed in int. 18). However, most interviewees were hesitant (and some were strongly opposed) to the idea of the exhibition being a way to give a voice to a so-called "AIDS/HIV community." Mostly they thought such a community did not exist and was rather constituted of various smaller groups. In this way, the experience recounted by participants provides a test case for the concepts of "bonding and bridging" that have been used to understand such practices (Eriksson, 2023; Otte, 2019). Indeed, drawing on Otte (2019, p. 2), Eriksson explains that the "crucial distinction between bonding and bridging is thus between an *internal* social cohesion based on coherence, homogeneity and consensus, and a more *external* social cohesion based on heterogeneity, shared dissensus and mutual understanding between different (groups of) people" (Eriksson, 2023, p. 29). In her own case studies, Eriksson finds that one needs to go beyond a binary understanding of these processes, which are not mutually exclusive, and that one needs to adopt a more dialectical understanding of bonding and bridging "whereby bridging often builds on already existing bonding and can lead to new bonding relations" (2023, p. 27). This was also evident in this case study, where the bridging between different groups led to bonding that in return facilitated the bridging process.

Overall, the experience of activist-participants was a mixture of emancipation and empowerment: a mixture that avoided the 'exclusion through inclusion' of under-represented communities. This experience was facilitated by the museum by promoting a variety of participatory formats that stimulated both bonding and bridging processes.

WHAT CAN MUSEUMS LEARN FROM ACTIVIST PRACTICES AND ACTIVISTS' EXPERIENCE OF PARTICIPATORY PROJECTS?

Understanding the position of activist-participants and participants more generally

The participants' position in the process of exhibition creation is traditionally perceived as a relatively passive one in a French context. As Jacques Hainard puts it, the institution must "squeeze the lemon" (Hainard & Le Mao, 2016): that is, extract from the participant knowledge to nourish the exhibition. This is the first important element that work with activist-participants brings to the institution: a renewed understanding of the position of the participants. Rather than being a source that needs to be mediated (a lemon to be squeezed), participants in this project were the human connection to a very embodied history. Their "situated knowledge" (Haraway, 1988) was precisely what the museum was interested in exhibiting and collecting. The activist-participants were (and perceived themselves as) "a bridge" between people and historical and contemporary times

(int. 1). Within the project, their lived expertise became as valuable as academic knowledge, with one activist-participant noting that “what I bring is my position as expert-patient” (int. 21).

Furthermore, such participatory experiences highlight the active and impactful aspect of participatory practice. Participants are being changed and learn throughout that museum experience. As an activist-participant suggested, “it’s a practice [...] to be confronted with situations that are never the same [...] to be pushed around in your beliefs” (int. 2).

Finally, activist-participants in the context of (re)writing social history have to be political, presenting positions and calling out people and institutions on what does not work (int. 2). Their engagement with what can be called an agonist form of exhibition (Mouffe, 2016) is itself a form of political engagement. One activist-participant noted that they came to the Mucem and to this participatory process exactly for the same reasons they had signed up for ACT UP: that is, to democratize the right to speak (int. 15). The activist-participants were acutely aware of this political aspect of their participation in the exhibition process, explaining that “participatory practice is to me a political action, which engages a democratic positioning; that is to say, a dialogue, a confrontation, a contradiction, that allows us to arrive at the most objective, the most precise possible result” (int. 26). With this activist participatory practice, the institution gains a new understanding of participants as embodied, situated, active, and political agents.

The importance of communication

The second aspect that participatory projects with activists brings to institutions is an emphasis on the importance of communication: that is, open dialogue, listening, and time. Through their activist practices, activist-participants understand the effect of respect for each other’s words and what it takes to implement such a respectful environment. This was very visible in the group dynamics during the participatory meetings, where a great deal of attention was given to respectful listening by the activist-participants. These aspects of open dialogue, listening, and taking the time were also put forward in the interviews by one activist-participant as key elements to a fruitful participation (int. 4). This certainly reflects findings from other research on the challenges of participatory practices, where time, education, expertise, and segmentation are often seen as core issues to overcome (Ferloni & Sitzia, 2022). The Mucem, as they wanted to respect various types of knowledge and experiences, learned through this participatory practice with activist-participants. First, they learned to “ask the right questions,” as mentioned by one of the activist-participants (int. 3). But they also learned about the importance of open dialogue, as mentioned in the interview of a non-activist-participant who also works at the Mucem, who stated that “communication, exchange and listening” were key to a productive participation (int 6).

In this regard, the role of the museum curator is paramount. In the Mucem project, Florent Molle, a museum curator, was the main museum contact and institutional representative and thus played an important role as an “identifiable reference person” from the museum, as one activist-participant put it (int. 12). Besides being a curator at the Mucem, however, Molle also worked on the project as a researcher for his own PhD. He also acted as the main moderator/mediator in the collective discussions and attended all the meetings of the Comité de suivi, but was also a member of the Comité de pilotage.¹⁴ Interestingly, Molle did not, as a curator, take an elevated hierarchical position. In my ethnographic observation, I noted his insistence on the use of ‘we’ in all communications during and around the project. This was also noted by one of the activist-participants, who observed that “Florent is not there as a technical person who comes and picks and chooses what he wants for the exhibition. He doesn’t help himself in a catalogue. He is really listening. He is able to adapt. [...] the overall atmosphere is very respectful” (int. 1). Another activist-participant explained that they perceived Molle’s role as more that of a community manager than a curator, insisting on “a collective

¹⁴ For more on the complexity of his position, see Molle (2023).

construction, [...] to build something and that the object cannot be too defined from the start" (int. 7) in order to make people understand the importance of negotiation. Molle insisted on the importance of dialogue going both ways between institution and participants.

Another activist-participant highlighted the importance of understanding institutions and their "obligations and limitations" (int. 11). This was expressed by others as the importance of the institution knowing "when to shut up" (int. 16) and of cultivating an atmosphere of "not feeling censored" (int. 17) while avoiding "flatten[ing] the discourse" (int. 28). These responses suggest new roles and qualities that museum professionals must master in the context of participatory practices in general, and involving activists in particular.

Another important aspect that needs to be integrated into communication within such practices is transparency and conviviality. This was noted by several of the activist-participants (int. 2, 4, 15). The project's particularly long building time allowed for a "slow relationship" to be built and for transparent communication. Ideas were proposed and examined, but also confronted with the practical possibilities of the institution. The use of convivial moments allowed for more fluid, non-hierarchical exchanges between the participants and the institution.

The use of affect

A final element that the Mucem experience brought to the fore is the use of affect in the narrative-building and knowledge creation process. As one activist-participant noted, institutions must ask the right questions for the individual participants to "unveil themselves" (int. 3). The moments of story sharing, especially in the context of such an emotionally loaded exhibition, are delicate. There is a danger of timidity getting in the way of the sharing. As one medical staff representative noted, "I think self-consciousness (*pudeur*) prevents us from wanting to share it all" (int. 14). As such, stories shared must be respected by the process and in the presentation of the result. An activist-participant highlighted that "we are making history with lots of little stories... Stories are powerful and strong. There is the fear that it might get betrayed, so it's normal that there are tensions" (int. 16).

Furthermore, the institution must learn to deal with issues of extreme emotions and the dangers of re-traumatization. The "emotionally charged meetings" (int. 26) were noted by numerous participants. One expressed that asking for personal stories also "shakes hard memories" (int. 3), while another noted, "some people have lived through this in their flesh with a lot of hardship [...] so they have radical positions and a hard time hearing someone has lived through this differently" (int. 7). This means that emotions are part and parcel of the delicate negotiation process. They need to be acknowledged as valid and as productive in terms of storytelling, especially in terms of building empathy with future visitors within the narrative-building process. The challenge, however, is that this can lead to controversial approaches that are not unanimously validated by the participants. For example, the patchwork ceremony, seen as cathartic by some participants, was seen as emotionally violent by others. One participant noted that "I am against this type of commemoration: I want to talk about life, we buried our dead, it's enough" (int. 26).

Because the institution is dealing with emotions and lived experiences, it thus needs to accept emotion, dissent, and conflict as part of the process. As mentioned above, this need not be violent, but rather a respectful acknowledgment of the varied ways in which participants lived emotionally through events and processes, while being mindful of each individual participant's emotional safety and wish to avoid re-traumatization. While the Mucem may not have completely resolved how to use affect in the building of an exhibition narrative and knowledge creation process, emotions were seen as productive and were integrated in the process by the participants and the museum. As an activist-participant noted: "we had strong emotional approaches, that need to be recognized and reactivated [...] There is a need to reactivate memories." (int. 18). Such issues are complicated by the fact that museums often do not have the support of ethical committees in designing their

participatory processes. This means that the responsibility of dealing with emotions, affect, and their impact on participants falls on curators who are rarely trained for such challenges.

What issues did not get resolved?

The first issue that remains unresolved has to do with who participated and under what conditions. Some activist associations and individuals were offended not to have been asked to participate or not to be represented in the exhibition. Great attention had been given to keeping the Comité de suivi open throughout the process to ensure that new additions were always possible. However, there were some issues in relation to (self-)selection of participants and reaching the less visible associations. Time and the limited compensation – some transport costs were paid and some Mucem goods given, but this remained very limited – played a role in this issue.¹⁵

Furthermore, group mentality meant that it was sometimes hard to get activist associations to work together (especially because historically some groups had been more supported than others). The perceived “omnipresence of certain pressure groups” (int. 2) was seen by participants as an issue. This also implied a limited representation for less structured or time-rich groups, which was problematic in terms of representational diversity. A non-activist interviewee noted, “I didn’t dip into that [activism/associations], but I still have a right to speak” (int. 9). One participant noted that the institution needed to try harder to include more of those people traditionally excluded, such as drug users, sex workers, undocumented migrants (int. 5, 2020). For that, new participant support structures need to be put in place, especially in terms of financial support.

The second unresolved issue has to do with institutional limitations. An activist-participant noted that “there is a lot of hierarchy. Mucem is the state. So we can offer, we can say what we want to say, we can make propositions but in the end it is the state that decides” (int. 25). While this is not necessarily true (as decisions were mainly validated by the Comité de pilotage), this was a very persistent idea in the group. Institutions need to work on their image and ensure that processes are respectful of participants’ agency.

Most projects of this sort require work across several museum departments. This particular museum, however, was initially perceived as a singular and monolithic institution. Participants discovered, as the project progressed, the internal agency of various individuals/departments within Mucem, and that services are very “compartmentalized” (int. 1). For example, it was a surprise to them that neither the audience nor the publication department were involved in every step, and that not all departments were enthusiastic about or willing to engage in the participatory aspect of the project. The activist-participants recognized that such a project “asks for agility on the part of the institution. Such a group is super fluid whereas the institution is fixed [...] we must break all the walls” (int. 16).

As one activist-participant mentions, museums should not lose sight of how valuable such projects are, despite the difficulties: “I feel you have no idea how liberating and beautiful this [process] is!” (int. 18). One cannot understate the importance of museum and cultural institutions learning from activist practices, and of translating this into broader activist museum practices. Indeed, this study shows how activist participation can be a bridge towards museum activism: by working with participant activists to reassess the position of participants in the exhibition projects, by enhancing museums’ communication framework, and by museums ethically using affect and disagreement in a productive manner. Whether it is about inclusive history or climate action, such principles can be transferred to many cultural institutions and socially engaged contexts. In particular, this study has shown that there is a need for a place for memories to be re-activated, recognized, and reconciled – and a museum can be that place, with the ability to start processes of repair and redress. As such, museums are indeed potential agents of change.

¹⁵ On the topic of compensation see Ferloni, Maggiore & Molle (2022).

Yet perhaps the main lesson to be taken from the Mucem's engagement of activists in participatory practice relates to *letting go* of control and accepting the process and the resulting exhibition, as imperfect as they might seem. As one of the activist-participants mentioned, "the exhibition does what it wants" (int. 27). I strongly believe that it is fine if it is "never enough, never perfect" – as long as it is always engaged.

AUTHOR BIO

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