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Uncomfortable Revelations: can citizen curation widen access to museums?

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Can citizen curation facilitate diverse participation in museums? Through their contribution to the European Union Horizon 2020 SPICE Project, IMMA and The Open University are developing a case study which uses digital technologies to support communities to select and interpret works of art and share their perspectives. Reflecting on workshops with underrepresented communities, this article outlines the concept of citizen curation and argues for the potential of Slow Looking as a means of promoting active participation.

Introduction

Bringing about change can often feel uncomfortable. This is because you need to face difficult topics, have difficult conversations and hear about the experiences of others which may be unpleasant. However, without this discomfort change would never happen.

Black and Irish citizen curation script, November 2021.

Renewed debates on decolonisation and cultural democracy challenge museums to radically re-imagine themselves, and to be re-imagined.¹ These are not easy conversations to have, as they force a confrontation not only with the colonial legacies and historical roles of museums but also with their present function and composition.

At their heart, these debates are about what a museum is and who it is for; and that museum visitors are highly unrepresentative of the public at large is an uncomfortable fact. In 2016, a visitor profiling report commissioned by the Northern Ireland Museums Council found that independent visitors to six local museums were most likely to be classed as ‘well-off’, ‘high-earning’, and ‘affluent’.² In 2015, in addition to reporting that UK residents from higher socio-economic groups accounted for 87% of museum visitors, The Warwick Commission found that “the gap in participation between the white and BAME population is widening”. The challenge was not moreover only one of accessibility, but also of relevance: “low engagement is … the effect of a mismatch between the public’s taste and the publicly funded cultural offer”.³

In the EU Horizon 2020-funded SPICE Project,⁴ the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) and Open University are using citizen curation to democratise participation in meaning-making, to assist communities in finding relevance in the collections for themselves. This article outlines a case study in which IMMA is developing methods and digital tools to support people from a range of backgrounds to establish personal meaning in works of art. Central to this approach is the articulation of two distinct processes: interpretation, in which participants share personal responses about artworks, and mediation, in which they develop a set of questions and reflections, in the form of an activity or script, to guide the interpretations of others.⁵ Together, these processes open a way for the museum to support multiple voices around their objects, in which people not only interpret objects but also mediate how others understand and experience them.

Citizen curation
“Citizen curation” can be defined as individuals and groups from outside the museum sector actively engaging in curatorial activities – such as the selection and interpretation of artworks – to communicate ideas and stories. Recalling citizen science and citizen journalism, in this case study we use ‘citizen’ to refer to an active mode of civic engagement rather than the legal right to belong to a particular country..

Elsewhere, “citizen curation” has been used to describe the process of training members of the public in professional curatorial methods. It was deployed for example by Barry Mauer with participants who responded through an exhibition to the 2016 Orlando Florida Pulse Nightclub shooting which targeted Latin and LGBTQ communities. Mauer defines citizen curation as a form of writing, which is accessible to many, but which requires commitment and dedication:

“a pencil is probably the cheapest technology but the most expensive to learn to use effectively. The literacy required for becoming a professional writer takes years of practice and hard work to attain.”

As part of a further University of Central Florida research initiative, supported by Mauer and developed by Amanda Hill and others, students, likened to the amateur curators of the surrealists who challenged the “ways institutions like museums and galleries dominated and dictated the conversation”, were invited to create a digital exhibit. In the SPICE Project, we are developing the concept of citizen curation to explore how meaningful elements of curatorial practice can be employed by underrepresented communities to share their perspectives through the creation of digital activities. Crucially, this requires a lower time commitment than that needed to design a physical exhibition, making meaningful participation more accessible to hard-to-reach groups.

**Slow Looking**

“Slow looking” is a key engagement method used in this case study in relation to visual art. Not unique to curatorial practice, the term has been defined as “taking the time to carefully observe more than meets the eye at first glance”, and as “a mode of learning, a means of gaining knowledge through observation.” Slow Looking aims to encourage more profound ways of looking at and experiencing art, providing guided forms of interpretation that focus not on acquiring domain knowledge, but on sharing subjective and personal experiences as a legitimate response, and for supporting visitors to interpret works for themselves.

From 2019-20, as part of its Art and Ageing Programme for older people, IMMA’s Visitor Engagement Team developed a series of Slow Looking Art videos. Taking one artwork each, these start by reminding the viewer to make sure they are comfortable and inviting them to let their eyes wander over the work. Initial questions, introduced to prompt the viewer to think about what they see (for example, “what is our attention drawn to first?”), are followed by contextual information. Posing questions similar to those that may be asked during a group tour at the museum, this process is individualised through video, while social media platforms like YouTube do not always provide a safe space for viewers to share their responses, and to access those of others.
The success of the video series led us to ask whether Slow Looking could be mediated by participants from outside the museum; and could provide a scalable means of encouraging people from underrepresented groups to author narratives about visual art that both centred their own perspectives and shared them with others. To achieve this ambition, we designed Viewpoints, a web application with a data infrastructure that could efficiently manage an online collection of over 3,000 IMMA artworks. Low on technical requirements and compatible with multiple platforms (smartphone, tablet, laptop), the app helped us to maximise accessibility to target groups, including asylum seekers living in Direct Provision. The use of the app brought with it ethical concerns surrounding privacy, surveillance, exclusion, and digital rights. Typically, social media platforms retain the licence to use, change and profit from user content. In our project, citizen contributions are recallable, so that participants retain the indefinite right to withdraw their consent for the use of their content by the museum. To ensure an empowering process, help legitimise contributions and support participants’ dialogue with one another, in an “Other People” section of the app, we designed-in the ability of participants to explore the responses of others.

A prototype of Viewpoints was first used as part of the IMMA Outdoors programme in July 2021. Focussing on a selection of eight outdoor artworks, it encouraged visitors to respond to a set of randomly selected prompts modelled on the IMMA Slow Looking video series. These included questions (fig. 3) that were both observational (e.g., “What is going on in this sculpture?”), and imaginative (“How might you recreate this piece using materials around your own home?”) Responses were insightful and interesting: Gary Hume’s playful bronze sculpture Back of a Snowman for example reminded participants of “a ten-pin bowling skittle”, “an ice-cream sundae”, and “a magnetic desk toy”; while Bernar Venet’s 217 5° Arc x 12 was described as “outstretched arms”, “a shipwreck”, “hands reaching out to touch”, and “part of the roof”. Emotional responses to standing next to the artworks were also captured: visitors responded that they felt “happy and relaxed”, “hopefulness”, “sadness”, and “oppression”.

Fig. 1. Screenshot from an IMMA Slow Looking Art video. Image credit: IMMA
While the Viewpoints prototype enabled visitors to engage in autonomous Slow Looking, it was not without its limitations. Firstly, the random prompts necessarily limited the longer-form engagement that Slow Looking is intended to provide. Secondly, the site-based way in which the prototype was used engaged existing audiences rather than broadening access. Finally, while the question-led format enabled users to share their perspectives and explore those of others, the questions themselves had come from museum staff.

Deep Viewpoints was the app we developed to tackle these problems. Designed to be used with groups rather than individual visitors, this aimed to support communities through sequential thematic ‘scripts’ of questions, reflections, and stories. Directed at connecting participants with IMMA collections through universal concerns (e.g., ‘family’, ‘home’ and ‘activism’), Deep Viewpoints retained the ‘Other People’ section to continue to enable them to connect with one another’s responses.

Citizen curation in practice at IMMA

From November 2021 to March 2022, asylum seekers, Black and LGBTQ participants, migrants, and young people in detention, engaged through workshops with The Narrow Gate of the Here-and-Now, a museum-wide IMMA exhibition showcasing the history of the Museum since 1991. The focus for most workshops was the first chapter of this exhibition, ‘Queer Embodiment’, which explores representation, oppression, resistance, HIV/AIDS,
bodily autonomy, domestic violence, and the experiences of Traveller, migrant and refugee communities.

The three-part structure of the workshops included an exhibition tour; Slow Looking with an IMMA mediator; and engagement with the Deep Viewpoints app. Selecting themes that caught their interest, participants located artworks and worked through the existing ‘scripts’. After reflecting on their responses and those of others, they then decided on a theme to explore as a group, added artworks to their collection, and built a sequence of stages to develop an interactive script of their own.

**New perspectives**

Black and Irish\(^2\) is an activist and advocacy organisation for Black and mixed-race communities in Ireland. Representatives of this group created an activity, ‘Necessary discomfort’, with the following sub-heading: ‘Bringing about change can often feel uncomfortable. This is because you need to face difficult topics, have difficult conversations, and hear about the experiences of others, which may be unpleasant. However, without this discomfort change would never happen.’ They opened their activity with a reflection:

“The Black and Irish team were really struck by a number of pieces in this exhibition. Part of our work is having honest discussions around race and racism in Ireland. At times these conversations can bring about a level of discomfort. We found that while some of these pieces were uncomfortable to look at. We found that their message is what's necessary to create change.”

Their activity focused on four artworks, posing a series of questions such as “What uncomfortable aspect of the human experience is revealed here?”, “What does opening up and speaking about your experiences do to help others?”, and “How would you feel living under constant surveillance?” The Black and Irish script was subsequently used by other communities to guide them through the exhibition. The ‘Other People’ section of the app, displays how different communities have responded to the questions Black and Irish posed: a group of participants from Direct Provision wrote that it made them “think about family and how people separate”, another answered that they felt “Vulnerability, displacement and longing”.

New and unexpected interpretations of artworks emerged during the workshops. A group of participants from Migrant Women - Opportunities for Work (Mi-WOW),\textsuperscript{13} showed the potential for revitalising museum objects by contributing new layers of meaning. One of the works they included in their script was Alice Maher’s \textit{Berry Dress}. A child’s dress decorated with berries that have withered and dried over time, this was first introduced to the group through a script authored by IMMA that framed the work in terms of temporality, focussing on the passage of time and the loss of childhood innocence – “What happens to berries over time?”. However, the participants took a different view on its significance. The questions they posed focussed on the meaning not of the dried berries on the outside of the dress, but on the needles within; for Mi-WOW, these pointed to bodily, uterine pain. “Look inside the dress at the needles and describe how you feel.” Choosing the theme of ‘Activism’, their script reframed the work as political and feminist, and their questions opened discussions of bodily autonomy and reproductive rights (fig.4-5).
Fig. 4. A participant from the Mi-WOW group takes part in a citizen curation activity at IMMA, November 2021. Credit: Louis Haugh

Figure 1. Screenshot, Mi-WOW citizen curation script. Image credit: IMMA/OU
A group of Afghan refugees living in the Mosney Direct Provision Centre used the lens of war and peace to mediate an exhibition with an ostensibly different set of concerns. Exploring ‘Chapter 2: the Anthropocene’ that examines human impacts on the planet, their script invited visitors on a “short tour of four pieces that look at different feelings of peace”. One artwork on which they focused was John Kindness’ *Dulce et Decorum est*... in which homeless Vietnam veterans are pictured on the yellow bonnet of a New York City taxi. Their script drew attention though not to the representations of the veterans, but to the taxi bonnet, which they likened to soldiers and civilians on the front line of war who are the first to feel its impact.

‘Queer Reflections’, a script authored by Dublin-based Black Queer Book Club, included an artwork from an artist outside the IMMA Collection as a suggested corrective to their perceived lack of representation of ‘queer joy’ within it. This connects with the call from Museum Detox\(^\text{14}\) for ‘Outsider Activists’ – people who are free to be critical by virtue of their position outside museum hierarchies and who are not dependent on them for their salary; and who therefore as co-curators can help to decolonise museums.\(^\text{15}\)

![Image](https://example.com/image)

**Fig 2.** Black Queer Book Club citizen curation script. Credit: IMMA/OU

In Oberstown Children Detention Campus, citizen curation was used to facilitate engagement with the IMMA Collection for a group of young people who lack physical access to the museum. SPICE tools and methods helped the young people articulate and share their perspectives, both on their own paintings, and works they had selected from the museum’s collection. Their selections and perspectives, captured over a series of workshops
in Oberstown, formed the basis for a physical exhibition of the young people’s work at IMMA, *The Ride Away from the Storm*, which opened in May 2022.\textsuperscript{16}

Fig 7. *Ride Away from the Storm*. Credit: Denis Mortell

Reflections

The interpretations of citizen curators in these workshops helped us to understand how people experience collections in distinct ways; and have led to ongoing work at IMMA as we develop further these tools and methods. While each intervention captures ideas and perspectives at a particular point in time, it is clear that citizen curation projects must be open-ended to allow their possibilities for the enrichment of creative experiences to take shape.

Citizen curation is a channel through which people can share their perspectives. It can help people to make museums more relevant to them, by mediating engagements with collections for themselves and for others. It is also a means for museums to learn, and to become more polyphonic and democratic spaces. While not always an easy process, “without this discomfort, change would never happen”.

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1 These debates are not new. For example, as early as 1970 Ghanaian filmmaker Nii Kwate Owoo produced You Hide Me, in which he presented the case for the restitution of African art in the British Museum.


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5 The notion of scripts has been used in science education, as a method by which educators can specify a scientific inquiry for students by selecting and instantiating a sequence of stages related, for example, to hypothesis formulation and data collection. See Sharples M, Scanlon E, Ainsworth S, et al. (2015) Personal inquiry: Orchestrating science investigations within and beyond the classroom. Journal of the Learning Sciences 24(2): 308–341.


10 IMMA’s participation in the Museum Technology Working Group has been crucial in helping to articulate these ethical concerns. The Working Group consists of museums and cultural centres across Ireland and is supported by the IMA and Irish Museums Trust.

11 Between November 2021 and March 2022, the following groups and organisations took part in citizen curation workshops as part of the SPICE Project: Migrant Women - Opportunities for Work (Mi-WOW) via New Communities Partnership, Black and Irish, Black Queer Book Club, asylum seekers and staff and students from Dublin City University as part of the MELLIE Programme, and young people at Oberstown Children Detention Campus.


13 This group is part of the umbrella migrant support network, New Communities Partnership.

