

Platforms as bridging digitally enabled participation with exhibitions

Web 2.0 and social media have developed in parallel with a shift towards two-way communication and the participatory turn in museums, often leading to broad assumptions that the digital fosters participation.¹ ‘Participation’ we acknowledge and will discuss further, is a loaded term, having been used in so many ways that its definition has become ambiguous within the noise of academic literature. In this article, we challenge a generalised “promise of the digital”² as critical friends to contribute more nuanced perspectives on distinctive forms of digitally enabled participation and the underlying structures that enable or hinder their connection to socio-political goals.

The structures we examine in this context are understood as platforms, a concept which curator and media theorist Kathleen Adams uses to reframe museum exhibitions as mediated meaning-making spaces. We follow her perspective of media being constitutive of the museum to expand the metaphor of platform to encompass the in-gallery and online infrastructures that it overlaps with and “lives comfortably within”.³ As such, we focus not only on ‘branded’ digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, but also on other digital platforms. Three museum projects serve as examples to illuminate different uses of platforms: *Decoding Inequality* by the Glasgow Women’s Library, *Getty Unshuttered* by the J. Paul Getty Museum, and *Der Balkon, eine Baustelle* by the Haus der Geschichte Österreich. Based on project descriptions by these museums and

1 Cf. Nina Simon: *The Participatory Museum*, Santa Cruz, California 2010; Susana Smith Bautista: *Museums in the Digital Age: Changing Meanings of Place, Community, and Culture*, Lanham 2014.

2 Jenny Kidd: *Public Heritage and the Promise of the Digital*, in: Angela M. Labrador, Neil Asher Silberman (Eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of Public Heritage Theory and Practice*, New York 2018, pp. 197–208, p. 197.

3 Kathleen Pirrie Adams: *Assets, Platforms and Affordances. The Constitutive Role of Media in the Museum*, in: Kirsten Drotner, Vince Dziekan, Ross Parry, Kim Schröder (Eds.): *The Routledge Handbook of Museums, Media and Communication*, Abingdon, Oxon/New York 2019, pp. 290–305, p. 300.

an analysis of their online platforms we critically reflect on their potential to foster social values and strengthen a “participatory democratic culture”.⁴ Thus, underpinning our analysis are pivotal questions which ask if platform-thinking might push museums to think beyond the “traditional curation of objects, to address social curation that includes social interaction, connection and collaboration as part of curatorial and educational thinking”.⁵ In doing so, we take on the understanding that “materiality (technology), practice, and politics are essentially entangled”.⁶

Following, we will firstly define the notion of the exhibition as platform and relate it to media participation. Secondly, we will introduce our examples and analyse the role of these platforms as enablers for distinct forms of collaboration. In the final discussion we will reflect on the relation between platform, intensity of participation and socio-political impact.

Exhibitions as Platforms and Digitally Enabled Participation

In this chapter we use the term ‘platform’ to highlight the continuity of in-gallery and online infrastructures in today’s “Kultur der Digitalität”.⁷ Following this idea of an encompassing digital condition in which museums, as well as any other sphere of public and private life, are impacted by the digital and vice versa, Adams suggests to look at exhibitions as platforms.⁸ She is building on the notion of the postdigital museum⁹ and within this new normativity she considers the benefits of merging museology and media theory. Adams proposes:

“Imagined as a ‘platform’, the exhibition evokes new associations with shared space, multimodality, multi-media and non-monopolistic agency. It helps reveal the symbolic forms and social bonds that constitute the underlying structures of the exhibition, but it does not erase the sense of the exhibition as a site of staged display.”¹⁰

4 Henry Jenkins, Nico Carpentier: *Theorizing Participatory Intensities: A Conversation about Participation and Politics*, in: *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 19.3 (2013), pp. 265–286, p. 271.

5 Dagny Stuedahl: *Participation in Design and Changing Practices of Museum Development*, in: Drotner, Dziekan, Parry, Schröder: *The Routledge Handbook of Museums*, pp. 219–231, p. 219.

6 Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, Kirsten A. Foot: *Introduction*, in: Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, Kirsten A. Foot (Eds.): *Media Technologies*, Cambridge 2014, pp. 1–20, p. 3.

7 Felix Stalder: *Kultur der Digitalität*, Berlin 2016.

8 Adams: *Assets, Platforms and Affordances*.

9 Cf. Ross Parry: *The End of the Beginning: normativity in the Postdigital Museum*, in: *Museum Worlds* 1.1 (2013), pp. 24–39.

10 Adams: *Assets, Platforms and Affordances*, p. 300.

The term platform foregrounds activity over traditional exhibitions and sheds light on the structures which are framing and facilitating museum communication and participation. Consequently, it calls centralised authority into question and promotes shared and multimodal meaning making. In this text, we build on three examples to make these theoretical assumptions tangible and explore how such a platform-thinking could digitally enable or hinder participation.

The discussion of digitally enabled participation in museums has gained a lot from Mia Ridge's work on crowdsourcing which she understands as:

“a powerful platform for audience engagement with museums, offering truly deep and valuable connection with cultural heritage through online collaboration around shared goals or resources.”¹¹

In this vein, our examples range between crowdsourcing and user-generated content projects and make use of digital platforms to engage online audiences in collecting, creating, sharing and discussing.

An in-depth analysis of the term participation and the variety of ways it has been used in and out of the GLAM (short for galleries, libraries, archives, museums) sector is beyond the scope of this text. However, we acknowledge that participation is commonly understood as having a bottom-up aspect, in which diverse voices come together to contribute to an activity that has an intended social output or the process in itself, is envisioned as socially empowering.¹² As Nico Carpentier has pointed out, careful considerations of power relations and decision-making are central to avoid diluting and undermining the political dimension of participation. Thus, he introduces the access-interaction-participation model (AIP) to draw a (theoretically) clear line between these terms:

“Access and interaction do matter for participatory processes in the media – they are actually its conditions of possibility – but they are also very distinct from participation because of their less explicit emphasis on power dynamics and decision-making.”¹³

Following Carpentier's thinking we consider how museum platforms that span across in-gallery and online dimensions are allowing more people to access and interact in “socio-communicative relationships”.¹⁴ For the participatory intensity we are specifically considering the projects' contextualisation within different shaping structures and its relevance for social goals.

11 Mia Ridge: From Tagging to Theorizing: Deepening Engagement with Cultural Heritage through Crowdsourcing, in: Curator: The Museum Journal 56.4 (2013), pp. 435–450, p. 435.

12 Jennie C. Schellenbacher: Museums, Activism and Social Media (or, how Twitter challenges and changes museum practice), in: Robert R. Janes, Richard Sandell (Eds.): Museum Activism, London/New York 2019, pp. 380–387.

13 Nico Carpentier: Media and Participation: A Site of Ideological-Democratic Struggle, Bristol 2011, p. 69.

14 Ibid., p. 130.

Crowdsourcing Shared Experiences: *Decoding Inequality* (Glasgow Women's Library, UK)

*Decoding Inequality*¹⁵ is a project that Glasgow Women's Library (GWL) conducted in 2019 to develop a feminist approach to object interpretation. It consisted of a temporary exhibition, learning programme, outreach activities and a sectoral event where resources and learnings were shared with museum and archive practitioners. The project aimed to

“support visitors to consider the social history of objects relating to women's history, illustrating their historical and contemporary inequality – and linking interpretation with political campaigns for reform such as reproductive rights, domestic abuse, maternity leave, equal pay, women's suffrage, sexual harassment, and sexual violence.”¹⁶

With this social and political mission, the institution asked for personal experiences with certain objects (or themes encoded in these objects) to enrich their interpretation.¹⁷



Fig. 1: GWL twitter thread for the *Decoding inequality* exhibition, 2018, source: <https://twitter.com/womenslibrary/status/1064513707768770560> (last access: 12.08.2021).

15 See the exhibition here which was published after this text was written: <https://womenslibrary.org.uk/discover-our-projects/decoding-inequality/decoding-inequality-online-exhibition/> (accessed on: 10.08.2021).

16 Glasgow Women's Library: *Decoding Inequality*. <https://womenslibrary.org.uk/discover-our-projects/decoding-inequality/> (accessed on: 02.12.2019).

17 Rachel Thain-Gray: *Decoding Inequality: Analysing narratives of Inequality in Objects*. Glasgow Women's Library, Glasgow 2019.

The main platform used was GWL's social media channel – an active Twitter account with 32,9 K followers.¹⁸ On Twitter, GWL created one long thread in which 30 objects were introduced. Every tweet by GWL followed the same structure: object number, object name and some metadata, object photo, #decodinginequality and the question “Do they stir any memories, emotions or stories that you'd like to share?”¹⁹

The aim of this approach was to “gather memories, stories and emotions from people to provide interpretation that was a balance of political analysis and experience”.²⁰ The project team collected all responses and following user consent, added them to the in-venue exhibition's object labels and marked as user stories. This initiative is a typical form of crowdsourcing in that it is pursuing a shared goal and inviting the public to contribute to a clearly defined task.²¹ The dynamic is facilitated by a clear structure on how to interact with content which makes use of Twitter's tools such as threads and hashtags. Tapping into their well-established Twitter community, GWL brought their questions to where their users already were. This way of combining branded platforms with in-gallery exhibitions is a fruitful way to expand access and interaction and indicates a more substantial impact of this crowdsourcing process by combining multiple platforms to stage participant's voices. However, using social media poses other challenges: dealing with terms and conditions of the social network and questioning how content and social context can be easily saved and copied to the collection management system.

Taken together *Decoding Inequality* deploys platform-thinking by leveraging both, exhibition and Twitter to connect user's voices with social concerns which is rooted in GWL's inherent logic as a grassroots museum. Power dynamics and the fight against inequalities are at the heart of the project itself which turns the Twitter thread into an amplifier and invitation to join GWL's activism. In that sense interacting with the Twitter thread enabled participation in a political struggle for more equality, albeit, very closely scaffolded by the platform's affordances and the museum's call to action.

A Safe Place for Youth Photography: *Getty Unshuttered* (J. Paul Getty Museum, US)

This example directly opposes the underlying structures of branded social media platforms such as Instagram which can limit participatory projects and their connection to social value by using an alternative digital platform. In 2018 the

18 As of 4 June 2020.

19 Glasgow Women's Library: Twitter Post. <https://twitter.com/womenslibrary/status/1064513707768770560> (accessed on: 02.12.2019).

20 Rachel Thain-Gray: *Decoding Inequality*, p. 5.

21 Mia Ridge: *From Tagging to Theorizing*.

J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles created an app called *Getty Unshuttered* which is described on the Google Play store as “... a positive community for teen photographers like you to share your unique view of the world, grow your skills, and build your portfolio”.²² The app was created under the assumption that art can initiate social change by connecting people to each other, to emotions and to new ideas.²³ The app grew out of a larger museum programme called *Unshuttered* which served as a launch pad for 23 young artists from underserved communities in Los Angeles, by facilitating their growth and providing them with resources such as mentors, curators and art. These young artists through storytelling and photography workshops, created their own photo narratives, which were on display in an exhibit called *LA#Unshuttered* until summer 2020. Through their art they address important social issues such as sexual assault and homelessness and thus, through production of media they contributed their voice and perspective on social issues. In doing so, their participation was contextualised by the institution as connecting to both a democratic and a social value.

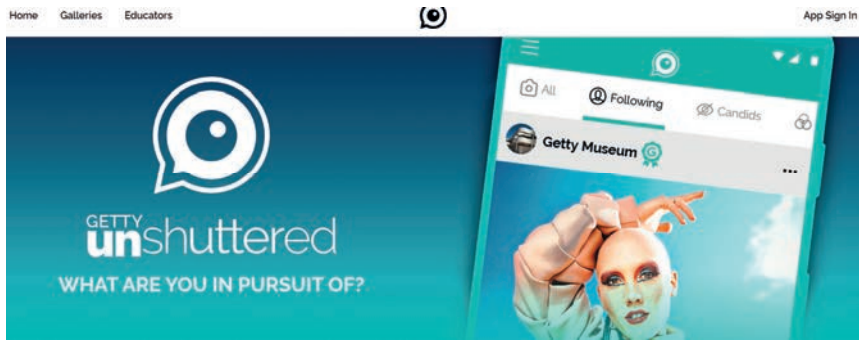


Fig. 2: Screenshot of *Getty Unshuttered* app, updated 2021, source: <https://www.unshuttered.org/> (last access: 12.08.2021).

The app is intended to continue this participatory learning experience by widening the call for contribution to other young artists who want to share their work, learn from the museum and share ideas. The app, like the in-venue programme educates users by providing short videos on photography tips or lessons. The museum emphasises its success, in that “[t]housands of teens continue to answer the call with images from their own lives shared in the app’s positive, artistic, online community.”²⁴ However, their focus on positivity and safety

22 J. Paul Getty Trust: *Getty Unshuttered*. <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=edu.getty.android.unshuttered> (accessed on: 02.12.2019).

23 MW19: *Museums and the Web 2019*. *Getty Unshuttered*. <https://mw19.mwconf.org/glami/getty-unshuttered/> (accessed on: 02.12.2019).

24 *Ibid*.

which makes the platform unique from Instagram, does create limitations. While the platform is intended to let youths share their perspectives which may include social justice issues, as it did with the original 23 participants – their photography ‘lessons’ seem to be focused on aesthetics, such as light, perspective and colour, and base photography skills, perhaps over message. Further, commenting is not a part of the social platform. Such restrictions inhibit hateful commentary and create a unique safe space for youth expression; however, this limits communication and in turn, the connections between users. In comparison to the in-venue programme, communication between participants and the museum on the app may be hindered and may lead to a greater power asymmetry between the users and institution. This could negatively impact participants’ media production but also the connection between their participation and intended social value. That being said, by using multiple platforms (app, in-venue programme, exhibit) and a scaffolded approach to the *Unshuttered* project, the Getty provided a unique opportunity for participants to exert agency in connecting their voices to social issues in safe spaces.

Reflecting Collective Memory: *Der Balkon, eine Baustelle* (Haus der Geschichte Österreich, AT)

In 2018, the Haus der Geschichte Österreich (hdgö) opened aiming to be a forum for negotiation and discussion of the ambiguous history of Austria. In this context, the web platform²⁵ of the museum was developed as an independent space with two functions. Firstly, serving as a tool for education, the website offers orientation and resources to navigate Austrian history. Secondly, as a forum for negotiation the platform invites users to interact with each other and participate in thematic discussions with user-generated content.²⁶ Exemplary for this forum function, the project *Der Balkon, eine Baustelle*²⁷ is introduced here. It addresses the issue of Heldenplatz – the square where hdgö is located and Hitler held a speech prefacing Austria’s annexation by the German National Socialist regime in 1938. The so called ‘Hitler-balcony’ belongs to the institution’s exhibition space and during guided tours the question was raised how this biased site should be used. This visitor-initiated discussion led to the project that is

25 Haus der Geschichte Österreich. <https://www.hdgoe.at/> (accessed on: 02.12.2019).

26 Mia Ridge: Sharing Authorship and Authority: User Generated Content and the Cultural Heritage Sector. <http://www.miaridge.com/projects/usergeneratedcontentinculturalheritagesector.html> (accessed on: 05.06.2020).

27 Haus der Geschichte Österreich: *Der Balkon, eine Baustelle*. <https://heldenplatz.hdgoe.at/> (accessed on: 02.12.2019).

consequently conceptualised as a co-creative open process. On their web platform hdgö invites users to state their opinion asking:

“Wenn dieser Ort öffentlich zugänglich wäre, wie sollte er Ihrer Meinung nach genutzt werden? Auch wenn kein Bauprojekt unmittelbar geplant ist, ist es der Auftrag des Hauses der Geschichte Österreich, Diskussionen zum Umgang mit der Vergangenheit anzustoßen. Stimmen Sie hier über Vorschläge ab oder tragen Sie Ihre eigene Idee bei!”²⁸

To take part in the discussion, different activities are offered: users can upload visual drafts that propose a reuse of the balcony (this can also be done on paper templates in the exhibition pictured below) or they can vote for the best idea – as of 4 June 2020 the top idea is “Verwaldung” and has 934 votes. These platform functions structure different layers of contribution ranging from creative expressions to a simple click and enable a basic interaction between users.

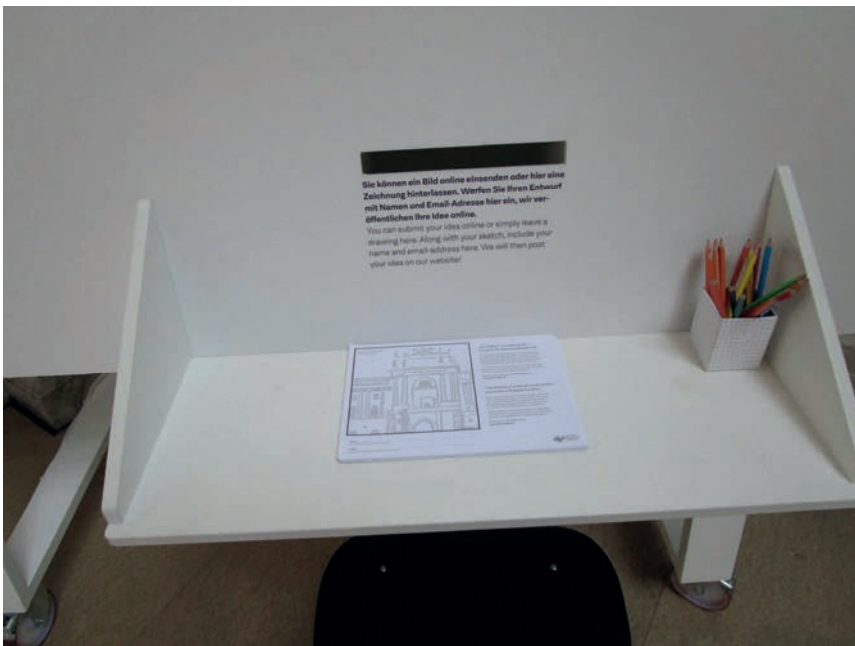


Fig. 3: In-gallery participatory station, Haus der Geschichte Österreich in Vienna, Foto: Guido Fackler, 2020.

Since the project was launched a gallery of ideas has been co-created which displays artistic, ironic or political comments on the issue. As pointed out in hdgö’s statement, the actual repurposing of the balcony is not going to happen in the near future which reduces the impact of the user-generated content on the actual

²⁸ Haus der Geschichte Österreich: Der Balkon, eine Baustelle.

exhibition site. Yet, the platform catalyses potential ways of dealing with difficult heritage, such as the politically charged Heldenplatz, and constructively calls into question a part of Austria's collective memory. Instead of implementing one idea, hdgö displays a variety of user perspectives on screens in their physical gallery spaces and organises events to discuss the balcony proposals. This way of connecting different platforms potentially opens access and mobilises multiple perspectives towards a larger goal, that is reflecting on past and present approaches to identities and injustices through multi-perspectivity and discussion.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this text we shed a light on different museum projects which use digital platforms to enable access, interaction and participation in curatorial practices. As Nico Carpentier points out four areas play a role when thinking about participation and media: content, technology, people and organisations.²⁹ In every project they became manifest in different relational patterns, which shaped the possibilities of participation. Generally, all projects shared a focus on the creation of content by users to increase multi-perspectivity in their in-gallery exhibitions. For instance, GWL used Twitter contributions to co-create knowledge which informed a physical exhibition, the *Getty Unshuttered* App intersected with an in-venue exhibit and a teen programme broadening conversations around social issues, while hdgö collated contributions into their exhibitions and enabled conversations around contentious heritage which frames the museum's interpretation. In terms of the technology, all digital platforms used, offered access implying "the opportunity for people to have their voices heard".³⁰ However, while all projects were openly accessible, they implicitly defined and addressed certain user groups, which became tangible in the chosen digital tools. Platforms were ranging from a purpose-built website for user-generated content, to an app for photography and a social network for discussion. Interaction as a socio-communicative relationship between people and organisations was often realised not only on the digital platform – as in some instances the technological features were very limited in this respect – but rather in conjunction with in-gallery workshops, events or exhibitions. The limitations are evident by a need for human mediators, conveying potential value for participants through invitations and the uncontrollable sometimes 'dangerous' context of digital platforms. However, this also led to a strong role of the organisation as in each project the sharing of power and decision-making between museum and users was not

29 Nico Carpentier: *Media and Participation*, p. 130.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

structurally reflected. Yet, all projects involved users in the curatorial process on the content level which following Nico Carpentier can be defined as content-related participation.

Using digital platforms allowed more people to join the conversation and opened up internal processes to create content together. Platform-thinking helps to connect cultural heritage with many different users across in-gallery and online spaces. Digital forms of communication have the potential to tie in with changing user expectations as a report by the UK government lately stated:

“Digital experiences are transforming how audiences engage with culture and are driving new forms of cultural participation and practice. As technology advances, so do the behaviours of audiences, especially younger audiences. We are no longer passive receivers of culture; increasingly we expect instant access to all forms of digital content, to interact and give rapid feedback. Audiences are creating, adapting, and manipulating, as well as appreciating art and culture.”³¹

Due to the projects’ contextualisation within a socio-political sphere, there is an indication that the co-created outputs have value beyond digital platforms. This active partnership with larger social aims may speak to successful participatory projects. Importantly, having clear social aims may also extend online participation in the museum sector from being perceived mainly as quantitative outputs such as likes, comments, shares, and numbers of contributions³² to re-centre the meaning-making experiences of users and their relevance for shared social goals. Such an approach is indicative of an increasingly important part of museum work in addressing social issues through participatory projects since as George Hein describes, museums can fulfill their social role and strengthen democracy by focusing on the skills of visitors which enable them to learn and act as critical thinkers.³³ Opening up possibilities of sharing control and decision-making further between museum and users could potentially bring ‘participation’ closer to the intended social goals, and requires further critical attention. In this context, digital platforms as part of a larger ‘ecology’ of museum exhibitions, bridged the gap between museums and their users, in turn amplifying user voices to achieve social goals.

31 Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport: Culture Is Digital. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/687519/TT_v4.pdf (accessed on: 30.09.2018).

32 Sebastian Chan: Towards New Metrics of Success, in: Jennifer Trant, David Bearman (Eds.): *Museums and the Web 2008: Proceedings*, Toronto 2008. <https://www.archimuse.com/mw2008/papers/chan-metrics/chan-metrics.html> (accessed on: 29.08.2021).

33 George E. Hein: John Dewey’s “Wholly Original Philosophy” and Its Significance for Museums, in: *Curator: The Museum Journal* 49.2 (2006), pp. 181–203, p. 199.