A Participatory Design Approach with Visually Impaired People for the Design of an Art Exhibition

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ABSTRACT
This article describes the participatory design (PD) approach adopted in systematically involving visually impaired people in the design of an art exhibition adapted to their needs. This exhibition will be the outcome of a publicly-funded research project aimed at making visual art accessible to everyone: specifically (but not exclusively) to visually impaired people, in an objective of social inclusion. This article presents the research done to elicit, capture, and analyse the needs of visually impaired people who are the active actors of this research. The aim of the article is to trigger discussion about both the necessity and difficulty of elaborating relevant techniques in this empirical and open-ended approach, and what is meant by participation in this particular setting.

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION
The aim of the SmartArt project is to design and organize an art exhibition that is adapted, and makes sense, to visually impaired people (VIP), and to everyone. In allowing access to art and culture to persons usually excluded from visual art practices, the idea is to reduce inequalities. Even if handicap is an important form of exclusion, it is far from being the only one. Indeed, according to official statistics, 50% of the French population do not have access to cultural practices. Informed observers’ opinion is that this number is even higher: 80% do not have access to living arts, nearly 100% never went to the opera (Le Monde, 2017). Each year, less than one out of four French citizens pushes the door of museums. Higher socio-professional categories and elder persons are four times more present in exhibition halls than working class and young people. The latter go less and less to museums. The current situation in France is that less than one out of two children has access to artistic and cultural education.

Most museums have to cope with a decreasing attendance, at best with a stagnation in the number of their visitors. The “everyday” and traditional visit reveals to be less and less attractive, and some museums are trying to adapt. Some attempts have been made to take advantage of digital tools as a development factor (France Inter, 2017). Despite mitigated results, sometimes these tools allow a different experience – like children or young people, e.g., in terms of active participation – which otherwise would not have been possible. Augmented reality allows access to medieval places and characters in a much vivid manner than a written text. Also, digital tools allow a better artistic

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education before and after the visit, including the use of pedagogical content online or available on the smartphone (France Inter, 2017).

However, the question of access to art and culture is neither a technological nor a financial issue, but for sure, a question of social inclusion. This observation was unanimously agreed upon by the participants - the new Minister of Culture and artists - to the recent debate “How to reach/touch the culturally excluded?” as part of Le Monde Festival (Le Monde, September 26, 2017). Exclusion can take several forms: at a more political level, like geographical imbalance (Paris in particular, and more generally large cities v/s the rest of France), prestigious institutions being privileged at the detriment of local culture; or at an individual level, where people do not have the means to be “consumers” of cultural practices, or suffer a kind of inferiority complex which prevents them from taking advantage of even free events. Agreement is also about the role of culture as being a vector of emancipation and social ties. However, the result of the debate is that this issue being more complex than just a question of financial means, it requires a global reflection among all the actors concerned. These two recent media articles / events, proves, if ever needed, that this reflection around social inclusion linked to access to art and culture, is a relevantly contemporary one – raised also by museums themselves, artists and public authorities in France – and to which the participatory research done in SmartArt presented in this paper aims at bringing a contribution.

To come back to the pun about the polysemy of the French verb “toucher” in the debate question (infra), the authors’ research questions after this first empirical needs analysis phase is: what if, in order to “touch” people - both to give them access to art and to stir them emotionally - they were rightly allowed to “touch” the works of art? Indeed, one aspect of accessibility researched in SmartArt is 3D modelisation to reproduce/represent the paintings. The other important aspect is the role of emotions, and the research hypothesis that one key element of the relationship with art, is the emotional resonance of art with the Self. So, if instead of the current “museum 2.0” trend with gadgets and other apps (France Inter, 2017), reinventing the museum and revolutionizing culture was based on a new museum experience organized around emotions? What if we (re)discovered works of art other than by sight, perceiving them by our other senses? And if, rather than being perceived as boring, or a solitary moment – potentially stuck to one’s smartphone – the museum visit was to become a moment of discovery, social interaction and shared pleasure?

More than just a wish, this is the goal to achieve for SmartArt, which emerged out of the needs analysis the authors made using a participatory design approach. This paper presents the practical actions made during the first six months of this research project, to analyze the needs: focus groups, interviews and observations of museum visits’ practices. The insights produced give the tracks for understanding what makes sense and what is important for people, as well as interesting ideas / proposals for informing the design of this exhibition. New ways of making art accessible are explored, examining not only innovative ways of presenting artwork in a manner that can be appreciated through senses other than sight – in particular touch and hearing - but also emphasizing what people value when visiting a museum. Linked to the pragmatic perspective of “appropriate design” – based on correctly understanding needs, perceptions and values – the political dimension of mobilizing PD as a means of ‘empowering’ visually impaired people, as active actors of research and decision makers of an art exhibit, is also reflected upon. This reflection at this stage of the project must be understood in context of the scope focused on the needs analysis, and is likely to deepen reflexively as the project, organized in iterative steps, goes forward.

The paper is organized as follows. The participatory design approach having inspired this research, and the methodological approach and research questions of SmartArt are presented. The second part presents the methodological reflection guiding this research, so as to adapt relevantly to the participants’ profiles and the research questions. In the third part, the methods used and the insights produced are developed. Finally, the main recommendations for the organization and design of the exhibition, informed by the needs analysis are discussed.
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