

Brussels Museums

"Publics" Recommendations



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disclaimers

I would like to thank everyone who has participated in this reflection process. I would like to clarify that these recommendations are not representational of individual beliefs of any one participant. They are a combination of ideas brought by the Think Tank experts, which were then used as a base of discussion for the participating museum during our co-reflection sessions.

It is important that these ideas are seen as starting points for discussions around inclusion, diversity, accessibility, and equity. In the future, the ideas presented here will need to be reflected upon and questioned from a place of empathy. While reading this document, if you have any commentary to share or questions to ask, please feel free to contact me at mary@brusselsmuseums.be.

form change

This document presents a change in how the recommendations are presented. In the "Personnel Recommendations" preceding this document, the advice from the Think Tank, the museums, and Open Museum was presented in a combined form. Following the creation of this document, the Think Tank members requested a more transparent form by presenting the parties' ideas separately.

Therefore, this document will be separated into two sections. First, the advice from the Think Tank members, as written by the members. Then, the ideas formulated during the co-reflection session with the museums.

inclusive writing

To have a more just representation of our society, Brussels Museums has established a Charter of Inclusive Language. In this document, I have followed the rules established and approved by our Board of Advisors. A first step in a more inclusive direction, this charter still presents a binary perspective on gender. I see the complications in having an "inclusive" language that still does not visibilize certain people and I look forward to future evolutions of this charter. We are conscious of the limits and the binary standings in the Charter of Inclusive Language, and I invite you to share your thoughts with me on the topic at mary@brusselsmuseums.be.



Mary Peterson
Project Coordination of Open Museum
Brussels Museums

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introduction

With Open Museum, we wanted to be a pioneer in raising our member museums' awareness around diversity and inclusion.* In 2019, Brussels Museums created the Open Museum initiative with the ambition to provide support to Brussels' museums on their journey as they become more inclusive spaces better representing and welcoming the people of our beautiful city. A series of discussions with museums and with activists are planned from May 2021 to June 2022, from which we will give recommendations to bring to light challenges and solutions to common problems.

To this end, Open Museum organized an open call to people working on anti-discrimination projects in the city. From our discussions, we developed a set of axes on which museums can concentrate on as they become more inclusive spaces. The five domains developed with the help of our Think Tank are: Personnel, Public, Partnerships, Place, and Programming. For each theme, there is a meeting with the activists, where the attendees can express themselves freely

*We use this controversial even though it implies the invitation of *another* party to the discussion/participation table, when the problem is actually the table, itself. We will use it, while we look for another word that better suits our real desires to rethink the museal space.





and give their proposals for more representational museums. Afterwards, museums are invited to participate in a co-reflection meeting on the same topic.

Following these sessions, recommendations are formed from the concerns and solutions presented by both parties. These recommendations are meant as a starting point for museums – a safe place to question their practices and adjust their vision of the future.

They are intended to provoke thought and to aid in the deconstruction of exclusionary practices.

participants

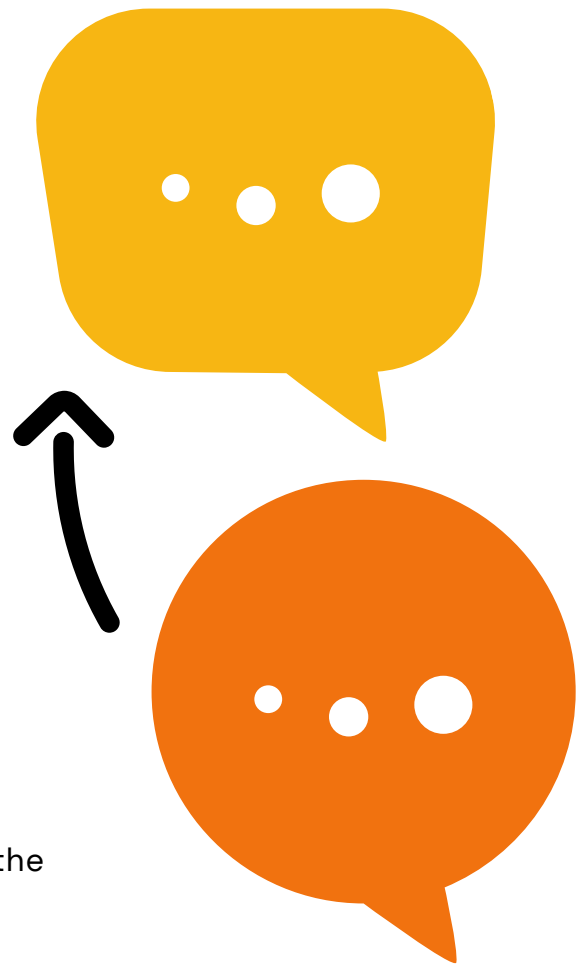
Think Tank*

- Apolline Vranken (she/her)
- Ichraf Nasri (she/her)
- Nour Outojane (they/she)
- Samuel Hus (he/him)
- Vanessa Vovor (she/her)

*See biographies at the end of this document.


Museums

- Kris Vlaeminck, Belgian Train Museum
- Aurélie Cerf, BELvue Museum
- Rémi Foulon, Brussels City Museum
- Mey Reinke, CIVA
- Chloé Peretti, Maison des Arts of Schaerbeek
- Géraldine Machal, ISELP (Higher Institute for the Study of Plastic Language)
- Anna Loporaco, KANAL – Centre Pompidou
- Julie Bouniton, KBR (Royal Library of Belgium)
- Stéphanie Masuy, Museum of Ixelles
- Isabel Vermote, Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium
- Christine Willemen, Royal Museums of Art and History
- Nisrin El Haili, visit.brussels





process



In September and October 2021, Open Museum organized brainstorming sessions around the second of the five P's: Publics. The Think Tank met at the MigratieMuseumMigration on September 9th and we were joined by Céline Galopin (she/her), a cultural mediator from Article 27. They discussed problems and potential solutions they see in museums when it comes to how museums interact with their publics. What kind of activities are proposed? Who does the mediation serve? What audiences can be better served and how? The MigratieMuseumMigration was chosen as a backdrop to this conversation because of their approach to participatory heritage.

The co-reflection session with the museum participants took place online on October 14th. The following people were present at this meeting. The discussion revolved around which publics museums already serve, which groups they would like to better serve and what they could do to better serve their publics.

"publics" introduction

When it comes to inclusion and diversity work, what is most important is to understand the context in which you live. These groups missing from museums are often those having faced exclusion and oppression in any given culture. Looking at the geographic situation can be useful to more easily show cultural oppression. If you're in New York State, for example, an important group of people to include in discussions of inclusion and diversity would be the cultures in the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (known as the Iroquois Confederacy by the French, and the League of Five Nations by the English), descendants of the original communities in this area prior to the arrival of Europeans. In Europe, one could bring forward the situation in Scandinavia with the Samis people. Looking at examples of two (or more) cultures meeting, where one of them forces their way of life on the other, can be easier to see than the oppressions that happen within the same culture – in particular, when it is our own culture.

In western, European societies, some of the identity groups that have seen oppression in the past few centuries include: women, people of color, people with physical or mental disabilities, people in the LGBTQAI+ communities, people without university degrees,





people from working class families, people with immigration background (in particular those from former European colonies).... The list is quite long and yet by no means exhaustive.

What's more, identity is a complex issue; each person within these groups lives at the intersection of many other identities. No group should not be reduced to stereotypes, especially as these are usually remnants of racist/sexist/ableist mentalities passed down through the generations (often even as "jokes")

Further in this document we will do a demographic breakdown of what some of these groups look like within the Belgian context, so that we can better orient the discussion in Brussels' museums.

think tank discussion

The September 27th discussion with the Think Tank took place at the MigratieMuseumMigration.

MigratieMuseumMigration

Opened in 2019, the MigratieMuseumMigration presents stories of people having migrated to Brussels – in their own words. In a series of showcases, visitors can read stories about individuals' migrations. Each participant decides what story to tell, how to tell it, and can do so in the language of their choice. The work is translated and the donors can choose to donate (permanently or temporarily) objects from their lives. If, at any point, the donor would like to make changes to their story or to exchange or reclaim items, the museum makes it possible. The museum both approaches donors and gives space to visitors who would like to share their own stories.

The MigratieMuseumMigration works to be an empathic, participatory, informative, hospitable, and ecological museum.





Think Tank

The discussion with the Think Tank focused on how the museum mediation could work to improve their interactions with the many publics they would like to include in their museum.

After the meeting at the MigratieMuseumMigration, the Think Tank members spent time writing the following recommendations to nourish the discussion process in museums; they represent the ideas and opinions of the members as they have chosen to put them forward in a collective manner.

I. Question artistic practice and its accessibility to different audiences.

1. Develop partnerships and collaboration with local communities and associations, collectives, platforms, schools, etc. that reach the museum's targeted audiences.
2. Create a strategic hiring plan

Questioning the standards and paradigms established in museums:
Behaviors, codes, etc.

II. Make the museum space accessible both in mobility (physical space, architecture, and infrastructure) and in the services offered.

Questions to ask yourself:
This list is indicative and not exhaustive.

- **People with physical disabilities**

Can people with a wheelchair, crutches, technical or mechanical support of all types move around the museum? Are the toilets equipped for people with reduced mobility? Is there an elevator or escalators? Is there a wide space for them to easily navigate the exhibit? Are there spaces dedicated to rest throughout the exhibitions (dedicated chairs or armchairs, etc.)?

- **People who are blind or visually impaired**

Are the works described in audio? Are signs, instructions and labels available in braille/audio? Are the typographies used clear, are the spaces between the lines sufficient? Can they navigate the museum using a guide dog or cane?

- **People who are deaf or have hearing problems**

Are there subtitles in the videos? Is there a written description of the sound works? Are there guides who speak sign language?

- **People who are neuro divergent**

Is there a place where they can retreat and be quiet? Are there specific time slots for them?

- The elderly
- Children

- **Other services**

- Are museum staff trained to help people who may have difficulty communicating in the official language of the country?
- Can the staff take care of showing people who are unaccompanied and need help getting around?
- Are there instructions that are clear, easy to read and with universal pictograms that help with orientation?
- Is there a childcare service with specific hours for parents? And/or activities planned for the public children allowing a time of visit for the parents in parallel?
- Is there multi-gender communication? non-binary toilets?

— Do not infantilize —

Good intentions are not enough, action is needed!

- Multiplication of ticket sales channels: online, in municipalities, schools, through associations.

III. The exhibition must respond flexibly to the expectations of the public in order to offer an experience adapted to each visitor.

- Adaptation and personalization of communication mediums on the works: which may include the use of QR codes, drawings, movement, tactile experiences, sound experiences, visual maps, etc.
- Get out of an elitist and formal language that can impress certain audiences
- Offer guided tours or audioguides with several languages

- Pay particular attention to welcoming each visitor, particularly those who are further from the museum's usual audiences. An example could be to do a personal introduction to the museum (e.g. MigratieMuseumMigration)
- Through educational activities, invite the public to make active co-creations. Museums are not only art museums, places of exhibition, it is also all that revolves around, all the activities, the workshops
- Transform the storytelling and mediation process by promoting participatory art.
- **The audience and the proposed programming are intrinsically linked**

Museums were designed to tell storIES about the world. We need to get out of the Euro-centric gaze in order to give historically marginalized groups the means to tell their own stories in museums.

We invite museums to rethink the profile of their public and put it at the heart of its programming.

- In order to meet the needs of people living with sensory hypersensitivity (to sound, light, for example) and/or for whom overcrowded spaces represent a barrier to accessibility, we propose to:
 - Make sure to make the museum spaces as accessible as possible to all (check the acoustics, brightness, dedicated space, etc.)
 - Propose time slots where accessibility would be adjusted to meet their needs (for example: reduced brightness, music and other sounds of this type cut off, silent visit time, etc.)
- Provoke the meeting of different audiences and initiate the debate around social themes in connection with the exhibitions

- Transparency in financial reports
 - Consider the digital divide and the difficulty for some people, particularly undocumented migrants, to pay by card.
 - --- make available options to facilitate the purchase of products.
 - Also, need for financial transparency (pro-active)
- We invite museums to rethink their audience profile and put it at the heart of its programming. In keeping with the goal of expanding the museum's audience, we invite questions about the methods used to reach target audiences. A crucial step is to ensure that staff are able to connect with these target groups and establish partnerships in a long-term, healthy, and transparent manner, allowing for more organic outreach to these networks.

museum discussion

The online meeting with the museums on October 14th started with a presentation on inclusive design and a look at the demographic situation in Belgium. Before the session, everyone was asked to watch a video conference by Alexia Jacques-Casanova on design thinking and inclusion at the Fondation Bibliomedia Suisse in the form of universal design. During the co-reflection session, her ideas around inclusive design. By designing spaces, expositions, mediation tools, etc. for “extreme users,”[1] institutions can create solutions that benefit the many, while still serving the people with distinctive needs. An example of this design practice? Using simplified language (in a larger font) and audio support with a combination of images or illustrations. This will also facilitate understanding for younger audiences, for people who prefer to go through museums at a quicker pace, for people who have a basic language understanding, for those who are limited vision, etc.

In the co-reflection session, the museums were then asked about the publics that already frequent them. In a short time, we saw what is often called

[1] People with more specific needs. Ex. Wheelchair users; elderly visitors; people who have difficulties with written texts; ...





the “classic” audience. In the Brussels context, this means people who are usually 25–45 years of age, white, university educated and Belgian. These are generally university students, families and schools, as well as a series of loyal visitors who are already knowledgeable about the museums’ collections. Tourists are also, of course, quite common at the larger institutions. The BELvue museum related that they tend to have a slightly younger audience, probably due to their communication strategy.

What these details represent, though, is the fact that a large part of the population is not in the museum. In the overall scope of the Brussels and Belgian populations, the people visiting museums currently only represent a very narrow portion of the population. So, who are the missing groups? How do they fit into the overall population?

On the following page, we'll look at the Belgian population and some identities that this entails. When discussing why inclusion and diversity work is important in museums, it might be helpful to remember that these groups of identities do not represent “margins” of society, but rather overlapping and large portions of it. So, institutions that are meant to

serve the general public, should always be keeping the IDEA mentality at the forefront of all their strategies.

Population of Belgium \approx 11.560.00		
Belgian with foreign origin [2]	2.386.304	20,6 %
Non-Belgian living in Belgium [3]	1.482.752	12,8 %
People without university degree (15–89) [4]	7.413.760	64,0 %
LGBTQAI+ [5]	2.108.288	18,2 %
People with disabilities [6]	2.316.800	20,0 %
<i>Blind or visually impaired [7]</i>	<i>127.424</i>	<i>1,1 %</i>
<i>Deaf or Hard of hearing [8]</i>	<i>1.853.440</i>	<i>16 %</i>

In Brussels itself, 3/4 of the population had migration backgrounds. [9]

These numbers are meant to serve as a reminder that if museums are currently restricted to heteronormative, university educated, able-bodied individuals, then it is in fact the majority of the population that they are not serving. This means a strategy change would not only align with modern values of inclusion, diversity, accessibility, and equity but would also signify a better cultural relevancy and a financial boost for these institutions.

With all this in mind, let me present to you some of the talking points brought up during the museum discussion session. Museums did not form formal recommendations, so the ideas presented here represent only areas of interest for other museums to explore.

[2, 3, 9] Diversity according to origin in Belgium. (2022). Statbel.Belgian Federal Government.

[4] Level of education (2022). Statbel. Belgian Federal Government.

[5] 2 – 3 % trans, 1,7 % intersex – Genres Pluriels, 14,5 % non-hetero – French Institute of Public Opinion

[6] Accessible Website Toolkit (2022). European Disability Forum.

[7] World Health Organisation

[8] Fédération Francophone des Sourds de Belgique

I. How can museums reach out to targeted publics not (or under-) present at their institution?

Develop focus groups so you can meet your audiences and understand who is visiting (or not) your institution: what kind of vision do they have of your museum? Of your collection? Of the narrative put forward?

Don't just wait for the publics to come to your institution. Do research on the events that interest them and attend these events. Discover more about the perspectives to learn how to better serve these people.

Develop partnerships with local associations or businesses who are already in contact with the audience you'd like to see more frequently in your museum.

When trying to reach out to the local community, schools can be essential levers ([École des devoirs](#)).

II. How can museums design public mediation tools to be more accessible and equitable?

Every person has their own needs and preferences, so it is fundamental that we recognize visitors as individuals. This should be done in the desire to create a universally accessible design, where anyone, regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities can use it. It is, of course, best that projects be conceived at the base from an inclusive viewpoint, to avoid difficulties in adapting.

This doesn't mean that exclusive practices should remain the same. The museums suggested that in renewing practices, it would be useful to have more mixed media and multisensorial projects, as well as to incorporate storytelling techniques to ensure thorough communication in an accessible way.

Still, activities should still be proposed for specific audiences, such as for families or for people who are blind or visually impaired, so those who prefer more personalized contact can receive it. Some of these same visitors may prefer unaccompanied visits, so it remains important that these people can experience the museum on their own. It's not always about having the exact same offer for every person, it's about equity in terms of accessibility.

Working with experts to co-construct with specific audiences can lead to interesting and innovative outcomes.

An institutionalized language should be avoided. Museums, rather, should have shorter descriptions and use language that is not too formal or elitist. Sometimes it can be as simple as using the term 'museum walk' instead of 'guided visit', maybe even starting these activities outside of the museum itself.

It was brought up during this meeting that questions of socio-economic publics should be brought in (though it should be remembered that free and lowered admissions do not lead to more diversified audiences). For younger audiences in particular, questions of gender and feminism are important.

As always, it is fundamental that museum staff are informed on social issues and it is therefore suggested that they receive trainings, with a focus on expanding these towards front desk and direction positions, who are infrequently present. For more information, please read the Open Museum Personnel Recommendations.

think tank

biographies

ICHRAF NASRI

Ichraf Nasri (she/her) is a Tunisian visual artist based in Brussels. Holder of a Master's degree in Plastic Arts from the School of Fine Arts in Sousse, Tunisia, she complimented this curriculum with a Master's degree in Photography at ENSAV la Cambre in Brussels. After this, she trained as a teacher and received her certification in 2018. Ichraf has taught photography and worked as a journalist during the 2011 Arab uprisings, where she published articles and interviews on Astrolabe TV. A decolonial feminist and committed artist, she has been a part of the FemmesProd association since its inception. In October 2019, she founded Xeno-, an artistic platform and a research laboratory on intersectional feminist issues. Xeno- supports, promotes, and gives visibility to emerging national and international artists. She is the curator of Xeno- in partnership with artist Mélanie Peduzzi.

VANESSA VOVOR

Vanessa Vovor (she/her) is a European project coordinator and freelance consultant on race equity issues.

Her experience in intergovernmental organizations and NGOs has covered issues such as climate and energy policies, gender equality, and disability rights. Her various positions have led her to specialize in capacity building on these issues for different audiences. Vanessa currently works for the German Development Agency. She is also a freelance trainer and consultant on anti-racism and intersectionality issues, where she accompanies organizations and companies in their understanding of systemic racism and their approach to diversity and inclusion.

NOUR OUTOJANE

Nour Outojane (they/she) is a graduate of Maastricht University, where they studied an interdisciplinary course in gender studies, cultural studies, and sociology. Next to these academic studies, they have used artistic expression to create new imaginaries and question our current realities. Their work includes a documentary about four older women and their relationship to their bodies as well as a short film in which they explored their own relationship to their hair. They have also co-organized a queer and feminist festival and worked briefly for the Bonnenfantenmuseum as a video artist.

Currently, they work as a researcher and facilitator at BePax, where they are developing a pedagogical tool on the communication of institutions, such as museums, and on how it may carry subtle (and sometimes more overt) racism.

SAMUEL HUS

Samuel Hus (he/him) is a bilingual Brussels native with a huge passion for his city. He studied politics at the VUB and was actively involved in the study circle VrijOnderzoek. To continue this socially critical reflection, he joined the Museum of Capitalism. He helped to develop this travelling exhibition, which is an attempt to question this complex system that nevertheless structures our lives.

In addition, Samuel is fighting for more climate and social justice. He does this through his involvement in the organization of the Belgian Climate Justice Camp.

His museological affinity lies with Wunderkammer museums and old crafts.

APOLLINE VRANKEN

Since 2014, Apolline Vranken (she/her) has been involved in the Cercle Féministes de l'ULB and is passionate about issues of gender relations in space and urban equality. She investigated these themes in her final work "From Beguinages to Feminist Architecture," published by the University of Women in 2018. Apolline Vranken graduated in architecture in 2017 and worked for more than two years as a project manager for the non-profit organization L'Ilot-Sortir du sans-abrisme and as an architect.

Today, she is a FNRS doctoral researcher at the Faculty of Architecture at La Cambre-Horta ULB. With the platform L'Architecture qui dégenre, she is also at the initiative of the Belgian edition of the Matrimony Days.

acknowledgements

Over the next year, Open Museum will continue to meet with museums and people working on projects that address discrimination. The goal: to discuss transforming museums into more inclusive institutions through the 5 Ps: People, Publics, Partnerships, Place, and Programming.

We would like to thank all the Think Tank experts and museum staff for their interesting discussion topics, insights, and recommendations. As mentioned, the process of becoming safer spaces is one that will require a lot of work and continual re-analysis. In revisiting our institutions and reimagining them to include traditionally overlooked persons, we can rebuild stronger museums with more complete knowledge bases.

This report was written by the Coordinator of Open Museum, Mary Peterson.

If you have any insights you would like to share, reach out to us at mary@brusselsmuseums.be.

