How to Feel the World and Share it With Others

Magda-Raluca Oprea-Minoiu
National Museum of Romanian Peasant, Romania

Sociologist by training, Magda-Raluca Oprea-Minoiu has been working for more than 20 years in the field of writing and implementing projects for non-governmental organizations and state institutions. The projects had a broad theme and focused on the fields of education, arts, and publishing. Magda-Raluca contributed to these projects as a trainer, project manager, assistant, advisor, and curator. In 2016, she completed her long-term training as a therapist through play and drama therapy and developed therapeutic group activities for children and adults, applied storytelling sessions, and performance storytelling activities. Recently, Magda-Raluca has focused on themes of inclusion and equal opportunities, developing projects to create exhibitions and workshops for blind, hearing-impaired, and neurodiverse people. She combines museum education techniques with methods from psychotherapy and storytelling.

Correspondence: atelieruldecreativitate@gmail.com

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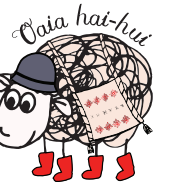
ABSTRACT

In October 2022, the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant (NMRP) will start writing an annual project, *Shepherding 2.1. The Wandering Sheep.* Colleagues from the Creativity Office, Museum Education section, contributed to the design of museum education activities that made a thematic exhibition accessible to both children and blind people. The article describes this first experience to make accessible an exhibition at the NMRP and captures the main problems identified and the solutions found to these problems, as well as the importance of transdisciplinary approaches and teamwork.

KEYWORDS

Accessibility; vision impairment; volunteers; sensory trails/ tracks; storytelling; workshops..



"The world has changed." This is the way the presentation of the *Shepherding 2.1. The Wandering Sheep* project begins. What a truism, we would be tempted to say. But if we had made a film of the events, from October 2022 when the project was being written until now, in 2024, we could have captured how some small worlds do change, sometimes unexpectedly: the world of the teenage volunteers at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, the world of blind people, and the world of the museum workers, including researchers, ethnologists, project managers, curators, supervisors, and museum educators who constitute the project team of the *Shepherding 2.1. The Wandering Sheep* project. These three worlds came together and created an inclusive experience, full of empathy and knowledge, and full of "Ahas" from all sides. People organically appropriated this experience into their way of thinking and doing projects.

It all started with the challenge launched by my colleagues from the Ethnological Studies Section and the Documentation and Valorization Section who wanted to apply for funding with a project on contemporary shepherding. At the Creativity Office of the Museum Education Section, we had to come up with ideas of activities that would make the project theme accessible to children. This was not an easy task, considering that the project examined the results of a long-term research of more than 10 years organised in themes such as the way environmental, economic, social, and political changes have influenced the cultural traditions of shepherds in Romania. Now, when addressing children—at least those from urban places—we recognize they have no direct or indirect experience with shepherding, whether traditional or contemporary, or with the rural world in general. In our meetings with children, we often start by defining the concept of a peasant. For some children, this concept is similar to a fairy tale character. Workshop activities carried out as part of thematic exhibitions are efficient methods to capture the dynamics of a phenomenon and to bring a totally unknown subject into the immediate experience of children. The objective is to make such subjects and "worlds" meaningful and accessible to children.

Therefore, we proposed the organization of ten thematic workshops dedicated to different age groups and coordinated by artists—including a musician, a visual artist, a puppet artist, and a storyteller—and museum educators. At the center of the workshops, we placed an object as a symbol of pastoral life and a story to represent the word and the custom. During workshops, participants interacted with various objects, smells, and sounds related to shepherd life and created their own art installations starting from "humble" everyday objects shepherds use and using contemporary objects, such as small wool fabrics, reinterpreted peasant belts (*brâie*), and pillows. The shadow theatre used these objects to bring different shepherd stories to life. Children listened to shepherd pipes and stories and created their own stories drawing them on canvas or in the form of comic strips.

The idea to take a theme related to shepherding and adapt it for children excited me because of the simple fact that the universe of shepherding can be illustrated sensorially and experienced as such in very complex ways. From a psychological perspective, knowledge begins with touch, smell, taste, and kinesthetic and auditory sensations. From birth, we experience through these senses. We use these senses to develop neural networks and complex structures such as memory, thinking, and imagination.

All our senses are correlated with emotions. These emotions are "established" in the body and are activated unconsciously whenever we encounter a specific stimulus. A new stimulus adds another layer of "knowing" the world. This type of knowledge is relatively more present in children and blind people. Therefore, we proposed that the exhibition should contain props that can offer multiple sensory experiences to be explored in sensory workshops. Next step was to make the exhibition accessible for blind people. The initiators of the project immediately embraced the idea and attracted the Bucharest branch of the Association of the Blind in Romania as a project partner.

But how do you reconcile the standards of education and protection of tangible cultural heritage, knowledge, and heritage with the need to explore objects, including by using the sense of touch? The answer was not straightforward. It took many meetings between the curator, researchers, the museum educator, and the project coordinator to discover the ways in which an exhibition with a lot of visual elements, with museum objects that cannot be touched, with a theme based on stories that are presented in workbooks and small documentary films can be made accessible to the blind public.

Regarding accessibility, the idea was not simply to create a sensory corner or a sensory box, but rather to allow blind people access the entire content of the exhibition, that is, the entire curatorial concept. This posed

Photo credit: AMAIS Association (Association of Alternative Methods for Social Integration; https://amais.ro), photographer Marius Lupu, 2023.

questions regarding the physical accessibility to objects that had to be within reach, to create traffic flows, and to signal the places where visitors could listen to stories. All these elements allowed blind people to visit the exhibition unaccompanied and access its complex content.

However, in the initial project this level of accessibility was thought at the level of specific activities, such as workshops and sensory trails. Then, the project team re-evaluated all the elements that assured a full accessibility and implemented only those elements that were included in the initial curatorial concept and in the budget.

Therefore, the objects that illustrated the curatorial theme and the concept of the exhibition belong to two categories. First, objects that were considered cultural goods were protected by means of display. These objects were displayed either in display cabinets or high above the floor so they could only be seen. Visitors had access to these objects through stories. Second, object- props were not simply thought as "accessories" of the exhibition, but rather integrated into the exhibition as elements that bring information and build knowledge. Props also bring aesthetic value to the exhibition, being an important part of the visiting experience.

An example of an object-prop was the shepherd's coat (*șubă*). The tactile, olfactory, and kinesthetic exploration of the shepherd's coat led to multiple experiences. Some ideas that emerged after its exploration where that the coat is really heavy but at the same time really warm, it denotes safety, containment, home, longing (*dor*) for mother. Some people confirmed they would wear the coat out in the bad world because it drives out fear and loneliness and it protects against evil. Other object-props displayed are shepherd pipes, battery-operated radios, sheep bells (*tălăngi*), spinning wheels (*vârtelnițe*), wool in all its stages—from wool fleece to finished wool objects, lines used to measure milk, storage containers for milk, bales of grass and bales of hay, spinning wheels, rock salt, clothes and shoes currently worn by shepherds, toys with a pastoral theme, and food products (cheese and sausages).

The stories provided additional insights beyond the information conveyed by the objects themselves. Volunteers told the stories. As early as February 2023, when the project team was working on the exhibition concept, five of the nineteen teenage volunteers from Gh. Șincai High School decided to work with me to make the exhibition accessible for blind people. For ten weeks, we met each Saturday to discuss, made guides, and study the materials made available by the colleagues researchers, which included written materials, photos, and documentary films. We laughed when we discovered names of puppies and sheep, we sighed when we could not figure out how a spinning machine worked, and we got scared when we read technical information about the use of wool in construction. We kept asking ourselves: how do we put the information together? The work was made considerably easier when we followed the curatorial conceptual lines. Several stories resulted and each volunteer designed his own exhibition trail.

But object-props and stories were only a part of the exhibition. The young volunteers had no experience of public speaking and working with blind people. Therefore, one Saturday, we all did a sensory workshop. I had experienced this type of workshop during my training as a psychotherapist specialized in play and drama therapy. At the time, this experience had been revelatory for me because it allowed knowing the world through senses other than sight. I prepared the workshop with volunteers using all kinds of materials to stimulate the senses, including pieces of felt, silk, objects to make wind, objects to generate heat, water, aromatic oils, flowers, coffee, raspberries, cocoa, bread, flour, kinetic sand, and bells. We split in teams of two and we made confidence building exercises in which and one blindfolded team member was led by their colleague through the sensory "maze." Then, the two team members switched roles.

The volunteers learned how long it took to explore an object. Initially, the blindfolded volunteers were quite frustrated that they were led from one object to the next far too quickly. They experienced what it's like to have no control and to be accompanied through an unknown space. They realized that objects have to be arranged at a certain height and that they have to offer very clear explanations in order to allow someone to explore an object placed on the floor. For example, volunteers found it very difficult to touch an object without knowing anything about that object. Volunteers also realized how difficult it is to talk about an object without using words that belong to the visual sphere and rather appeal to the brain's ability to experience synaesthesia. They discovered that objects have many qualities and offer a wide range of sensations, emotions, and representations they had not been aware of before the workshop.

In June, the first blind visitors came to the exhibition. It was a group organized by the Bucharest branch of the Romanian Blind Association. On this occasion, five teenage volunteers spent more than two hours with an

enthusiastic group of visually impaired or blind adults aged between 30 and 55. They were Romanian language teachers, social workers educated in England, engineers, and counselors.

> [T]hen the blind were introduced to the volunteers assigned to assist them in the guided tour of the exhibition—five kind, patient, and friendly teenagers who provided information, gave explanations, moved objects from one place to another, and tried to provide a comprehensive picture of the life of shepherds from the past and from the present.
> As in a real shepherd's household, the exhibition displays tools used to process wool, traditional clothing items, vessels of all kinds, and many other things they [the visitors] have heard about, read about, but that many of blind people never touched. (Excerpt from a report posted by the Association of the Blind in Romania on its Facebook page)[1]

I have never heard so many "Ahas" and I have never seen a group so happy to touch, smell, listen, and taste. I have never heard so many questions. We were expecting to present the exhibition in no more than 45 minutes. Instead, the visit turned into an experience of more than a couple of hours.

When volunteers went on holiday, I had to rethink the visitor flow in the exhibition. I contacted the AMAIS Association (Association of Alternative Methods for Social Integration) via Facebook. The association aims to create an inclusive society by applying the principles of inclusive design in architecture, technology, and social projects. In a very short time, I met three people from this association—one of them was blind—and we unfolded the story of current shepherding. They introduced the exhibition as part of their Urban Mobility Club (CMU 6) project, which enabled blind individuals and wheelchair users to visit the museum with assistance from the association and two museum colleagues.

> We were happy to see the impact the more inclusive cultural spaces have and how much joy these spaces can bring, even if only by addressing a more diverse audience.
> We ended the CMU 6 project with a visit to the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, where I took part in one of the few exhibitions in Bucharest where people can interact with objects using all their senses.
> We thank Raluca, Magda, Ilinca, and the entire team for making the "Oaia hai-hui" exhibition accessible to people with disabilities, for sharing the stories behind the displayed objects, and for presenting the current state of shepherding and its transformations in a unique way. They did this in a sensitive and well-documented way that effectively accommodated the new, smells, sounds, and textures.
> At the end of the exhibition, we ended the 6th year of CMU with a spontaneous pipe and voice concert held by our participants, with a tasting of cheese, curd, sheep sausages, and a "Happy Birthday" song. (Excerpt of a report AMAIS Association posted on its Facebook page)[2]

This is how the world changed. We will soon start working on making the Hall of Image and Sound accessible to a diverse audience. This Hall is part of the museum's permanent exhibition. I am scared and excited as it seems very difficult to translate something that is predominantly visual into a world of stories and a few props. However, I know that I am not alone. We are already a team comprised of fellow researchers, curators, museum educators, and volunteers. Some of the volunteers are blind and eager to create accessible content and methods for accessing this content. Others are psychology graduates. However, we have all discovered how easy it is to feel the world and share those experiences with others.

NOTES

1. Online at: https://www.facebook.com/AsociatiaNevazatorilorRomania/posts/pfbid0duhbtdtcKE7JCcgW4Vus79Rzvj1UuCNAvMf5mJoYczrTv3nbrMr8Loxy VXwUCyPvl. Accessed 8 October 2024.

2. Online at: https://www.facebook.com/CMUSenseability/posts/pfbid031NUd4f6kHBpQz6JE73YZKZCtxp2uHBPz74xX6YS2RfZbS68BPcEe5Xebni7prE1l Accessed 8 October 2024.

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