

Socially engaged art and global challenges

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The artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) developed his concept of 'social sculpture' in the 1970s to describe the politically transformative potential of creative work in everyday actions (Harlan, 2004). While other artistic movements in the twentieth century like Dada and Fluxus also worked to blur traditional distinctions between art and life, Beuys focused on more explicitly political questions about the moulding of democracy and societies through cooperative, creative action (Gyorody, 2014). The influence of Beuys' belief in human creativity and his expanded definition of art has been felt in various fields: from the field of art education and creative pedagogies (Buschkühle, 2020) to the Occupy movement in North America (Biddle, 2013) and social practice in the work of artists like Suzanne Lacy and Rick Lowe in the United States (Jordan, 2013). In particular, the importance of socially engaged artistic practices in pushing the remit of art education in directions that encourage interventions in spaces characterised by social injustices has been noted by many scholars in the fields of contemporary art practice and art education (Naidus, 2009; Helguera, 2011; Schlemmer et al., 2017).

Since individuals still face discrimination as a consequence of stigmatisation that is often based on a person's ethnic origin, religious beliefs, gender and age, the EU-funded research project 'Acting on the Margins: Arts as Social Sculpture' (AMASS) seeks to study such societal challenges and the potential impact of the arts in exploring new forms of community engagement and pedagogical work. When work on AMASS began in earnest in early 2020, the world was on the cusp of a new health crisis that would influence the lives of

hundreds of millions of people. This crisis affected academic work and research just like it created obstacles for workers in all areas of employment and leisure. Needless to say, it particularly affected individuals and communities that were already facing difficulties due to various other issues associated with health, unemployment, and various forms of discrimination. Cultural practitioners working in all fields of the arts were also strongly affected by new COVID pandemic regulations. Suddenly, AMASS became more relevant than ever. The project's focus on geopolitical challenges in different parts of Europe made the planned research more urgent than before.

With the support of other specialised organisations and stakeholders like NGOs, AMASS is expected to help generate research outcomes and policy recommendations that could address the needs of various communities by engaging in innovative artistic projects and design thinking strategies. The project's goal of 'sculpting' society during these difficult times was addressed directly through collaborations with culturally marginalised and underprivileged groups, simultaneously offering new experiences and challenges to artists. This project tests arts-based methods to find new ways of tackling exclusion and promoting the creative potential of many different individuals and non-professional groups.

This Special Issue of MRER brings together several scholars and artists involved in explorations and the promotion of socially engaged arts, who contributed studies that revolve around three areas that are central to AMASS research: arts-based research with persons affected by discrimination in daily life and/or educational contexts, as well as by cultural policies insufficiently sensitive to challenges of marginalised members of society. All the articles were written by researchers involved in the Europe-wide AMASS project.

The first three articles discuss AMASS studies in three different contexts: Finland, Malta and Portugal. They describe and analyse the role of participants in arts-based research, artistic processes engaged in and evidence of research outcomes. The article by Mirja Hiltunen, Pieta Koskenniemi and Melanie Sarantou from the University of Lapland presents the work of researchers, artists and art educators involved in promoting different forms of dialogue and interaction amongst people living in Rovaniemi. While restrictions caused by the pandemic challenged the possibility of developing many physical connections and planned 'blind dates' among neighbours, the article describes various musical and other collaborative activities that still managed to support

research strategies in the circumstances and provide researchers with very relevant data about participants' meaning-making and other intercultural impacts.

The article by Isabelle Gatt, Milosh Raykov and Raphael Vella presents some data emerging from the University of Malta's AMASS pilot study, which focused on misinformation and stigma affecting persons living with HIV. A script and play about HIV in Malta produced by the creative enterprise Culture Venture on the basis of semi-structured interviews with people living with HIV provide this article with the basis of its study of the relationship between societal challenges and artistic creation in the context of a pandemic that highlighted the vulnerability of persons affected by a health crisis on various levels.

Similar changes to research plans resulting from the lockdown are referenced in the article by Ângela Saldanha, Teresa Eça, Célia Ferreira and Raquel Balsa on an AMASS pilot study conducted by the teachers' association APECV in Portugal. Their article asks how researchers in the arts and education can develop collaborative projects and other interventions with marginalised communities. Working with a specialised NGO with extensive experience in working with persons with multiple disabilities, APECV employed various methods including person-centred planning, gentle teaching and Photovoice to facilitate participation, feelings of social inclusion, a sense of belonging and other values and attitudes amongst project participants. Inspired by Freire's ideas about popular education, APECV's research develops new ways of understanding learning encounters.

The fourth article by Zsófia Somogyi-Rohonczy and Andrea Kárpáti (Ludwig Museum Budapest and ELTE Doctoral School of Education, and Corvinus University Budapest, respectively) presents methods used to mentor art educators working with socially disadvantaged children and youth who rarely visit art exhibitions and cultural institutions. Using democratic inquiry processes, E-learning and blended training modes that became inevitable during the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing measures, the article discusses mixed methods research in the context of an in-service teacher training course that introduces art educators to innovative pedagogies and approaches to contemporary art in order to develop students' interpretations of artworks in a museum setting.

The last three articles present different perspectives on generating cultural policy recommendations, particularly during workshops with stakeholders involved in the field of culture, social work and the arts. Research on the possible impact of arts-based research on policy is one of the central goals of AMASS, and the research project's multilateral approach to combining literature, good practice and policy documents is reflected in these articles. Melanie Sarantou and Mira Alhonsuo (both from the University of Lapland) and Carolina Gutierrez Novoa, and Silvia Remotti (both members of PACO Design Collaborative in Italy) write about the generation of data about policymaking during stakeholder workshops that made use of participatory service design. They employed the Miro platform to enable online participant communication and collaboration among different AMASS project partners and found that well-designed and experimental stakeholder workshops can provide researchers with an effective approach to policymaking.

Making use of the online platforms designed by the authors of the previous article, Raphael Vella and Karsten Xuereb first introduce Malta's new national cultural policy (2021) and underline references to inclusion and other challenges associated with discrimination within a broad theoretical framework informed by intersectionality. Their article then presents a bottom-up approach that engages stakeholders directly in online workshops in which opportunities for cultural inclusion and specific challenges are discussed. Given the difficulties of organising face-to-face meetings during the pandemic, online digital platforms like Zoom and Miro were employed instead to offer opportunities to create dialogues and capture important data related to possible changes to local cultural policy.

Finally, Karsten Xuereb's article also analyses Malta's cultural policy, focusing on issues of diversity, sustainable development and investments in research that can inform cultural policy. The article addresses social change through cultural enterprise, notions of progress and its relationship with economic development, the value of heritage, cultural tourism and social entrepreneurship. It indicates the central role that cross-curricular education and skills development play in supporting researchers and academics in exploring new directions in cultural enterprise in Malta and beyond.

This is the first Special Issue of MRER that focuses exclusively on artists involved in socially engaged arts, with submissions that examine outcomes and barriers to socially engaged arts and art-based research. The invitation to

submit articles also encouraged submissions that use existing physical and other restrictions in 2020 as a springboard for the development of innovative research approaches and relationships between artists, marginalised communities and various stakeholders.

All AMASS pilot studies included in this Special Issue were conducted during a health crisis and present experiences that can serve as a unique opportunity to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of traditional research methods and the impact that restrictions may have on artistic production, researchers' and participants' positionality and consequently research outcomes. The contributions included in this Special Issue explore new possibilities of community engagement in the margins, different approaches to the mediation of knowledge and empowerment, the meanings of heritage and memory in times like these or the effects of digital technologies on arts-based research. The papers refer to the role of participants in testbed studies, as well as arts practitioners' relationship with their audiences by focusing on the research objectives defined in the AMASS project.

The main objectives of the AMASS project are:

- Developing multidisciplinary methods for capturing, assessing and harnessing the societal impact of the arts
- Reducing isolation amongst women, children and minority groups from peripheral EU regions through various forms of participation in the arts
- Educating women and children through various educational models and philosophies of participation that are informed by arts-based approaches
- Evaluate and develop new policy frameworks for using arts to overcome societal challenges
- Valuing and learning through alternative knowledge systems with the purpose of decolonising institutions, enabling communication and implementing policies

The central problem AMASS addresses is still insufficiently explored, and it is important for researchers and others involved in socially engaged arts and arts education to understand better the possibilities of harnessing the power of the arts to address societal challenges through comparative and Europe-wide action. The challenges addressed by AMASS are geopolitically oriented: the

future of work in creative, cultural and other sectors; radical ideologies and extremism; societal polarisation and stratification; lack of civil society participation; populism; migration.

The aims of this Special Issue are to contribute to the exploration, analysis and discussion of the underpinning structures, educational practices and policies that influence social engagement in the arts. This Special Issue examines and evaluates some innovative artistic productions, experiments and case studies from the perspective and position of European countries "on the margins". In addition to the contribution of the much-needed evidence base about the possibilities and effects of socially engaged arts, this Special Issue also provides some policy recommendations that are expected to foster inclusive, innovative and reflective societies.

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