

TOOLKIT

INTERNATIONAL  
RED CROSS  
AND RED CRESCENT  
MUSEUM



# 10 ideas for co-construction in museums

By Mathieu Menghini  
with the support of the Museum's staff

## Foreword

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- This toolkit is the culmination of a six-month-long reflective process on “co-construction”, the focus of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum’s thematic cycle for 2025. It also builds on our personal experiences, research and wider reading.
- Many of the broad observations, ideas and practical measures contained in these pages will likely be of interest to museums of all kinds, while others relate more specifically to our institution and to the humanitarian sector more generally.
- This is very much a hybrid resource. It targets a broad and diverse readership, varies in tone, and draws inspiration from a wide range of disciplines: history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, political science, art, literature, cinema and more. Readers will likely encounter content that *reaffirms* their existing ideas and beliefs. But they may find some proposals and perspectives *unsettling*, which, in itself, is a valuable experience.

## Foreword

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To engage in co-construction is to accept that we do not have all the answers. It implies creating a safe space for everyone – experts and those with lived experience alike – to share their perspectives and learn together.

For humanitarians, co-construction means listening to communities in crisis and acknowledging their agency in shaping the decisions that will affect their lives. For museums, it means thinking about when and how we engage with our partners and the wider public, listening to their views with a humble ear, and involving them in our work right from the design stage, rather than as an afterthought.

The ideas contained in this toolkit, presented with clarity and conviction by Mathieu Menghini, build on a series of conversations held at the Museum. Designed and guided by Mathieu in collaboration with Valérie Gorin, these sessions aimed to explore what our sector could learn from the kinds of co-construction models that humanitarians use in their work. We are extremely grateful to everyone who took part.

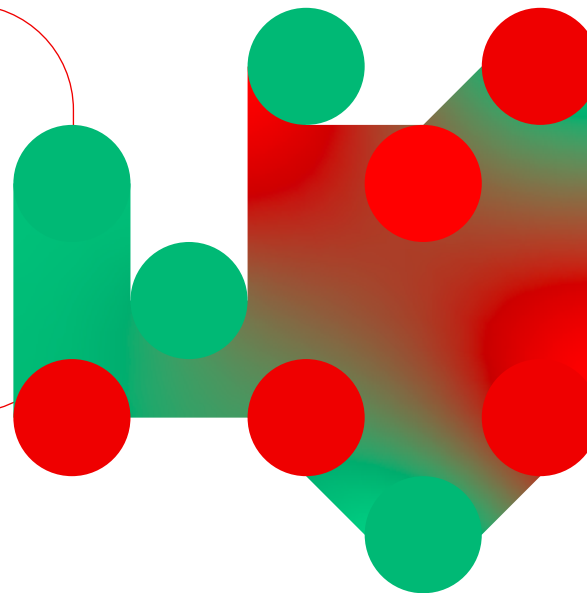
This toolkit is the latest in a series launched in 2022. Like previous editions, its aim is simple: to transform knowledge into action and to offer guidance applicable both to our work as museum professionals and to our everyday lives.

This resource is not intended to be prescriptive. Rather, it invites us to reflect on the lessons from our 2025 thematic cycle and, perhaps, consider new ways of working. Because a museum that intentionally brings audiences into the creative process is a learning museum: one that listens, adapts and connects. And, importantly, it is a museum that recognizes its gaps and blind spots and faces the unknown with courage and clarity of purpose.

Pascal Hufschmid, August 2025

# Idea 1

## Be a participatory museum



### FACT / OBSERVATION

Co-construction is not a new topic of interest – neither for humanitarians nor for museums addressing this and other social issues.

Co-construction is sometimes employed as a way to correct the very democratic deficit that required humanitarian action in the first place, seeking to restore agency to those made vulnerable. At other times, it informs how humanitarian organizations themselves carry out their work and make decisions.

In museums, co-construction is closely tied to participation. But for all its ambition, it is by no means the most involved form of participation.

One way to understand participation is as a spectrum of practices ranging from the least to the most involved: *information, consultation, contribution, collaboration, co-creation, co-decision-making* and, at the very highest level, *autonomous action and decision-making*.

Within this spectrum, co-construction likely sits somewhere between co-creation, co-decision-making and autonomous action and decision-making. Some degree of clarification is needed: Will participants merely be involved in deciding how to achieve goals set from the top down? Or will they actually participate in setting the goals themselves?

## Idea 1 Be a participatory museum

Co-construction can engage audiences already familiar with the museum. But, as a practice, it is even more valuable when it reaches groups who have never participated before.

It is also important to recognize that not all audience groups are capable of participating at the very highest end of the spectrum – i.e. autonomous action and decision-making – at all times and in all circumstances. For instance, some people may find it difficult to engage at particular points on our scale because they are living with a particular type of disability. Similarly, professionals involved in participatory projects may face scheduling constraints that prevent them from engaging in in-depth discussion and genuine co-construction.

### IDEA

People should engage in participatory processes voluntarily and enthusiastically. Their involvement should not be exploited for ulterior motives, and their perspectives should not be invalidated. They should be treated not as mere customers

“consuming” a product, but instead as stakeholders in the museum’s work.

With this mindset, participation becomes a process of genuine exchange. In the words of Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor, it gives everyone a “seat at the give and take table”.

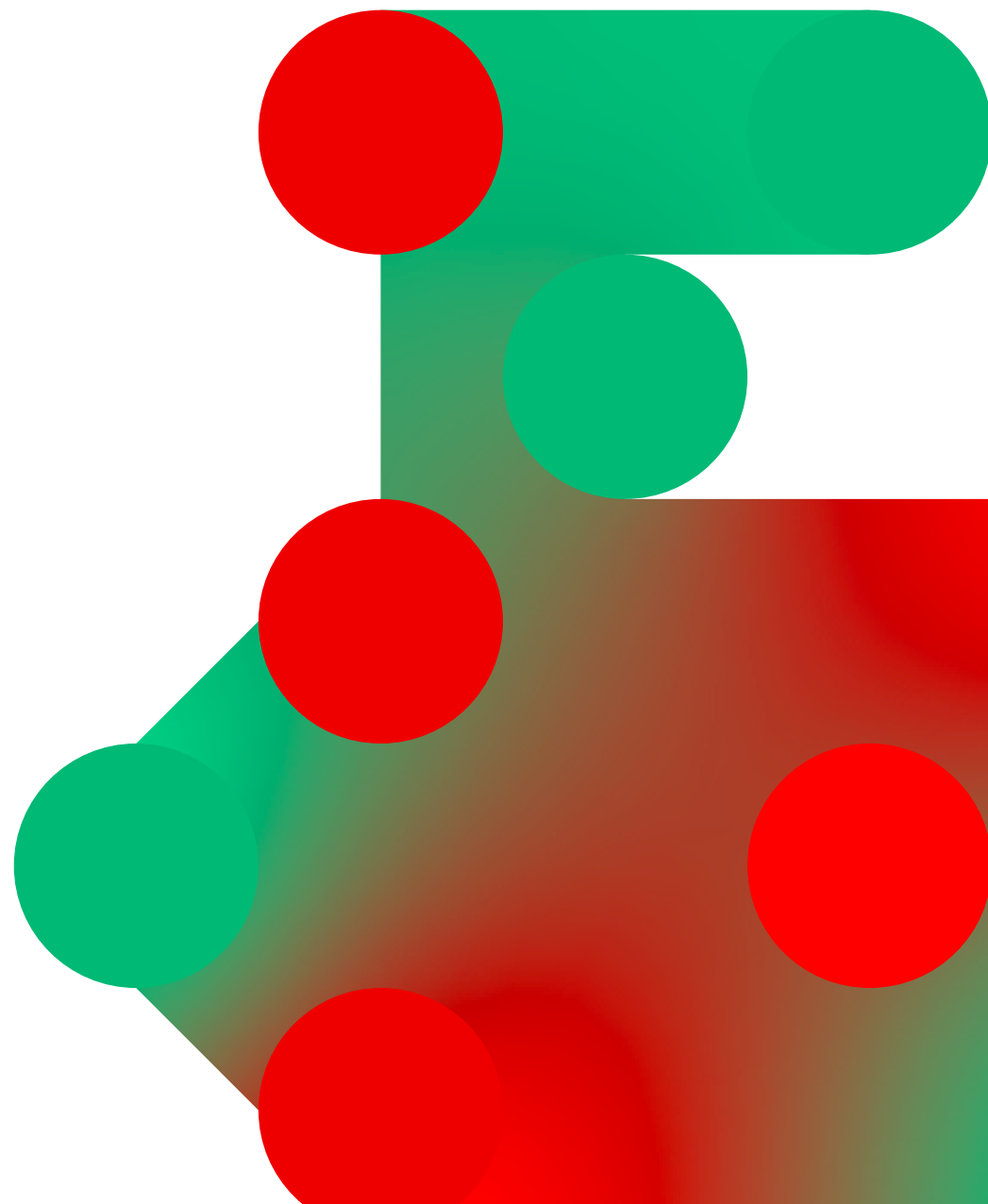
As we discussed earlier, co-construction processes should involve both “regular audiences” and “non-audiences”, as well as curators and any invited scientists or guest artists. Bringing artists into such processes is especially important, as they are expected to offer a creative, unconventional or provocative perspective on the theme of an exhibition.

One example of successful co-construction with scientists is *Be Gentle with Your Heart*, a book published by the Museum that was developed in conjunction with psychologists from the Swiss Centre for Affective Sciences at the University of Geneva, with input from 5,000 visitors.

## Idea 1 Be a participatory museum

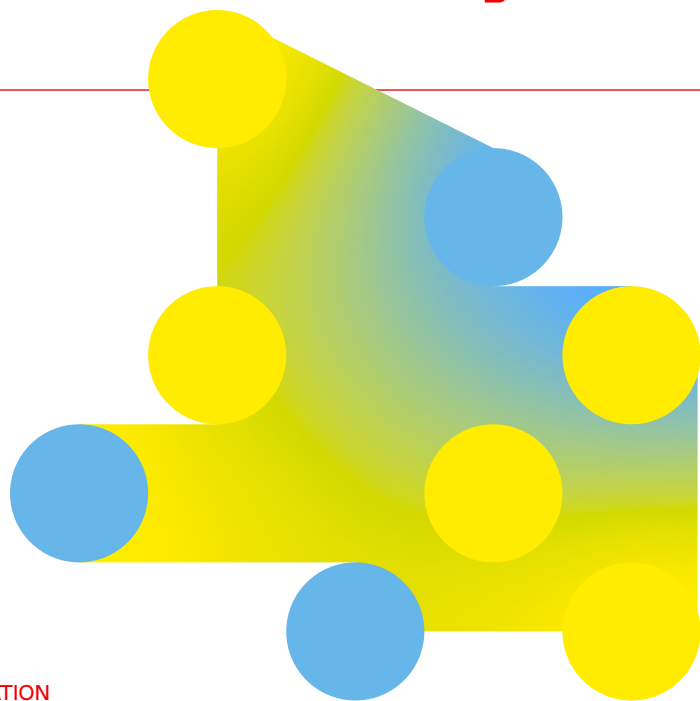
### PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Be clear upfront about the level of participation you hope to achieve, and plan accordingly.
- Decide which audience groups you want to bring on board, and explore their wishes, capabilities and untapped potential.
- Think creatively and inclusively when determining who your museum's "stakeholders" are. Do not overlook groups such as cleaning staff, gallery attendants, security personnel and grounds maintenance teams.
- Build some flexibility into your approach: co-construction often entails uncertainty, especially for non-professionals and groups you may be unaccustomed to working with, who may have doubts about how the process works, what is involved and what the outcomes will be. Negotiate with the individuals or entities to which the organization is accountable, and with relevant sectors, to gain as much latitude and freedom as you can.



## Idea 2

# Treat all as subjects



### FACT / OBSERVATION

Our second idea owes much to Henry Dunant's book *A Memory of Solferino* – and more specifically to the slogan “*Tutti fratelli!*” (“All are brothers”), coined by the Italian women who joined the Swiss humanitarian on the battlefield, tending to their wounded compatriots as well as to injured French and Austrian soldiers.

The idea of treating what Dostoevsky called the “humiliated and insulted” as subjects may seem incongruous, especially if we follow French political scientist Frédéric Thomas's assertion that “humanitarian action is both a result and a vector of depoliticization”. In this view, depoliticization stems from our collective capitulation in the face of the deeply political causes of humanitarian tragedies, and from the fact that we treat affected people as victims rather than political subjects.

But in today's evolving museum landscape, there is a strong case in favour of a shift in thinking on this point.

In a paper published in the journal *L'Observatoire* (no. 40, summer 2012), Olivier Cogne wrote: “Today, audiences are increasingly consulted and brought into participatory processes, often to share their views and perspectives ahead of an exhibition.” Yet these same audiences are rarely, if ever, involved in shaping an exhibition from the outset or defining its purpose.

The symbolic prestige conferred upon cultural – and scientific – institutions can cause them, knowingly or otherwise, to approach audiences that do not normally engage with culture and the arts from a position of superiority. Co-construction, by contrast, involves engaging generously with others and treating

## Idea 2 Treat all as subjects

them as equal partners, even before the finer details of the process have been ironed out.

As Wendy Brown reminds us in *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2018), “while inclusion and participation are certainly important elements of democracy, to be more than empty signifiers, they must be accompanied by modest control over setting parameters and constraints and by the capacity to decide fundamental values and directions. Absent these, they cannot be said to be democratic”.

### IDEA

Museums would do well to pursue the dual, albeit challenging, aims of *cultural democracy* and *epistemic democracy* – in other words, they should seek to decolonize the production of knowledge by dismantling what Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has termed “epistemic privilege”. Those traditionally considered as voiceless “victims” (Jacques Rancière) with no part to play in society are, above all, those whose voices go unheard (Erri De Luca). These groups should have a meaningful place in our democracies, with the power to speak up, not just be spoken about.

We should avoid seeing *paucity* where there are abundant *resources*. But we should also guard against the equally dangerous but opposing pitfalls of naivety and demagoguery.

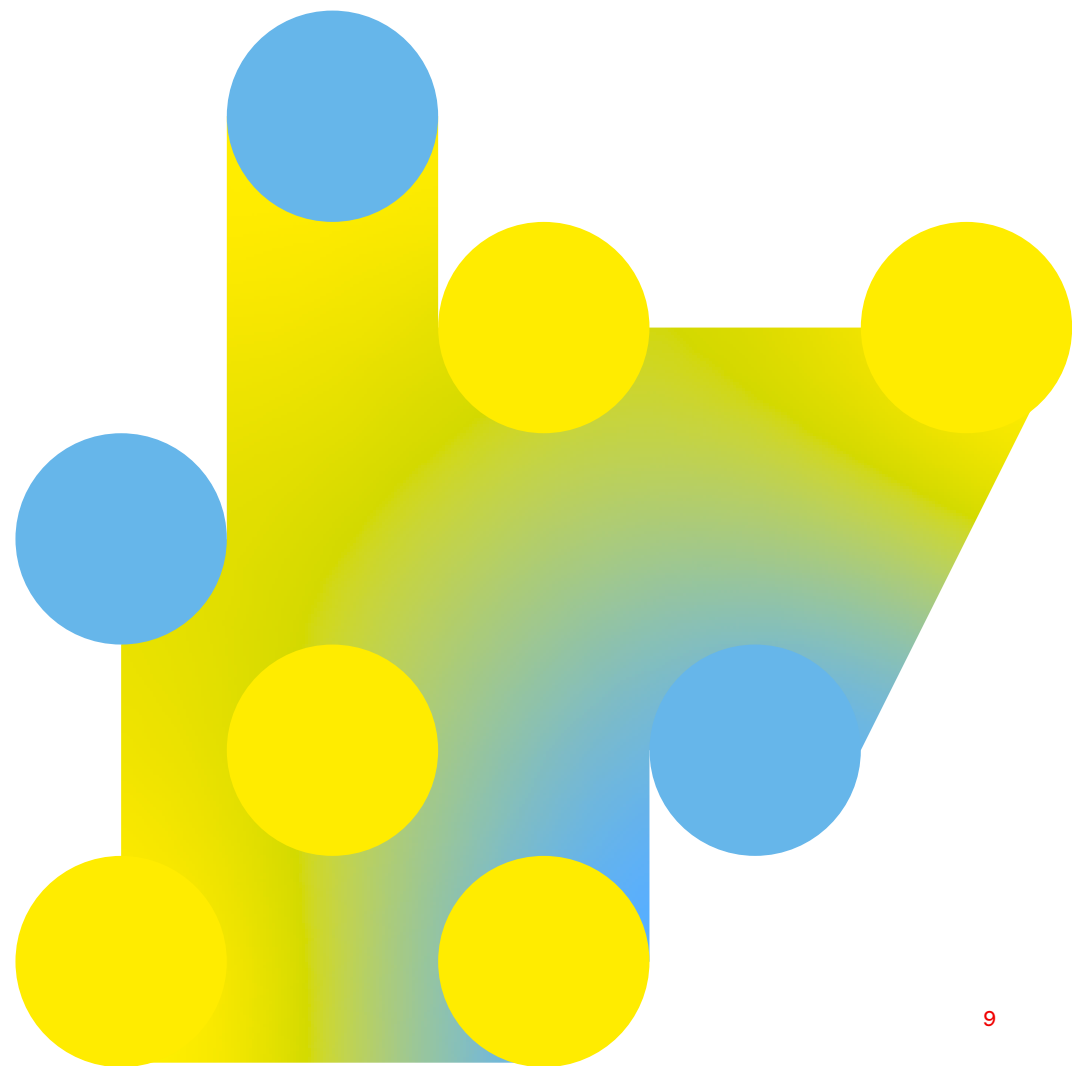
Personal accounts – even those gathered from jailers and torturers, as Nelson Mandela and Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh did – can help people reconnect with their inner consciousness and find meaning. And in some cases, they can also support the grieving process. While not always objective, stories like these offer a reliable account of people's lived experience, adding substance to an exhibition.

Personal accounts are an especially powerful way of imparting information because they rely on human connection, helping audiences engage with exhibits not just at the *intellectual* level, but also at the *personal* and *empathic* levels – and, in turn, potentially challenging the museum's traditional role as the authoritative source of knowledge. By the same token, it is important to remember that witnesses are no substitute for scientists and professionals. Because when it comes to deciding what an exhibition will include and how the material will be presented, the museum – as a research institution with its own interpretive lens – will typically have the final say.

## Idea 2 Treat all as subjects

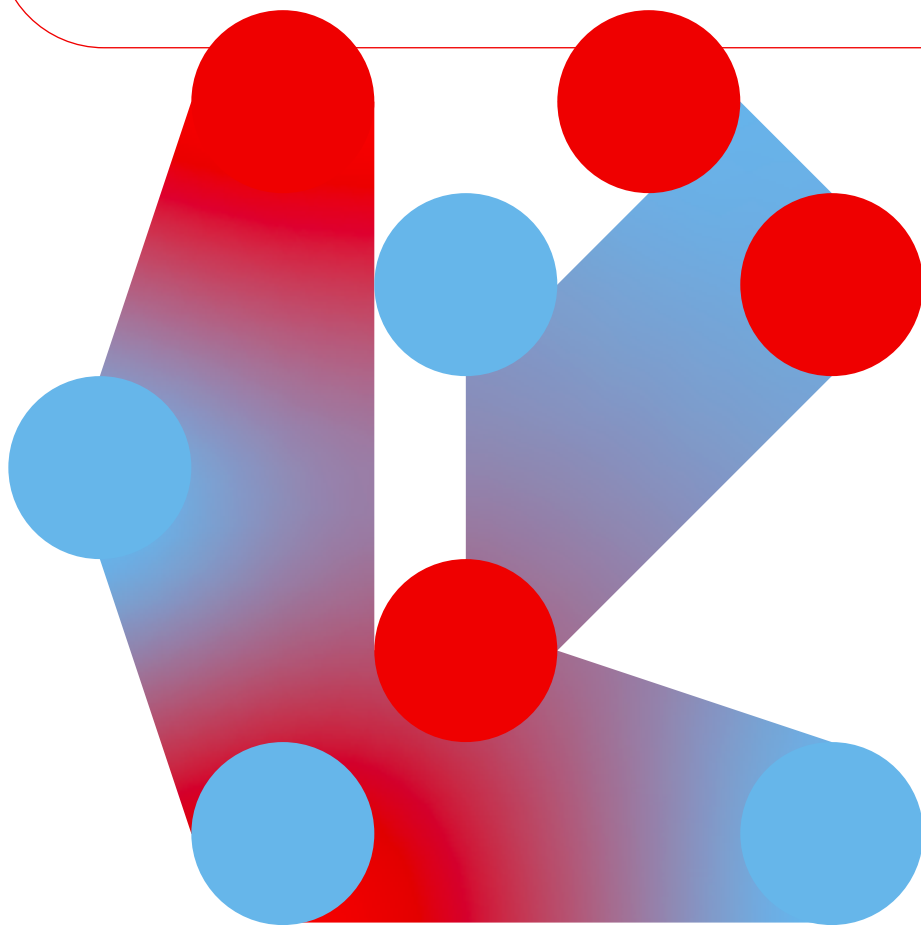
### PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Aim to strike a balance between *thinking* and *feeling*, between *critical distance* and *affective immersion*. Understanding is both a cognitive and emotional process.
- Make more room for the stories, memories, views and aspirations of the people affected by the subject of your exhibition (in our case, humanitarian action).
- Treat personal accounts with the dignity and respect they deserve. Present them thoughtfully and avoid any temptation to sensationalize, ensuring visitors have the time and background information they need to engage meaningfully and, if they wish, interactively.
- Include personal accounts not just in exhibitions but also in your museum's publications.
- Wherever possible, invite everyone working at the museum – employees, guests, temporary workers and other contributors – to events such as staff parties, season-specific presentations and exhibition openings, and organize special tours for family members.



## Idea 3

# Be an experiential museum



### FACT/OBSERVATION

German art historian and iconography expert Erwin Panofsky argued that “the eye’s relationship with the world” is, in reality, “the *mind’s* relationship with the world of the eye”. Yet we often overlook the prism through which we observe our surroundings.

The opening scene of Japanese director Akira Kurosawa’s 1950 film *Scandal* perfectly illustrates this point.

A man riding a motorbike with a throbbing engine pulls up somewhere in the middle of the countryside. There is a mountain in the distance. The man is carrying an easel, suggesting he is a painter. In the second scene, he is joined by three woodcutters. A fascinating conversation ensues.

One of the woodcutters observes that Mount Kumotori appears to be dancing on the canvas, to which the painter replies: “Yes, mountains move!”

These “simple” men have likely been familiar with this particular mountain for years – perhaps even their entire lives. For them, it is part of the “scenery”. The painter, on the other hand, is a newcomer. But his attentive, artistic eye reveals things that the locals are blind to: the interplay between light and

### Idea 3 Be an experiential museum

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shadow, a flock of birds taking flight, a breath of wind through the trees on the mountain's lower slopes. Subtle movements like these make the landscape – including its inanimate features – appear to “dance”. In an instant, the artist shatters everything these men thought to be fixed and immutable about the landscape before them.

This episode is a prime example of German playwright Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect) in action: making the familiar strange.

The sense of unfamiliarity and astonishment builds with the arrival of a new protagonist: a woman dressed in city attire who, believing herself to be alone, starts singing “Do You Know the Land?”, an aria from Ambroise Thomas's opera *Mignon*. This question, posed by pure chance, is especially poignant, given that the three local men and the newly arrived artist are already contemplating their relationship with the “land” before them.

After the woman stops singing, the woodcutters turn their attention back to the canvas, arguing with the artist and among themselves.

When one of them criticizes the mountain for being “too red”, the artist replies that he painted it by dipping his knife into the fire of his heart, prompting the woodcutter to consider how spirit and bile inhabit the world of the eye. The artist seems to suggest that, in one movement, he has painted a landscape that is both external and internal. Could the same not be said of the woodcutters' remarks? Are they not commenting on themselves as much as the objects they are describing?

The scene ends with the woman asking how to get to the town of Kaminoge. “Is it far?” she asks, with a hint of worry in her voice. “No,” replies one of the locals, pointing the way. The painter intervenes again, offering his own interpretation: “Not far” still means “a good five kilometres away”.

This final exchange underscores the relativity of perception and judgement. For the woodcutters, who are accustomed to navigating this rocky terrain, five kilometres is a trivial distance. But for the visitor from the city, who is wearing heels, the same distance likely poses a far greater challenge.

## Idea 3 Be an experiential museum

### IDEA

This vignette provides a clear lesson for museums, especially when addressing humanitarian issues of all kinds, from local natural disasters to famines on the opposite side of the world. And the lesson is this: museums should offer an instructive visitor experience that embraces opposition and contrast, endeavouring to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar.

By making the familiar strange, museums guard against the risk of ethnocentrism. And by making the strange familiar – “holding fast to the Same” (Alain Badiou) – they reinforce the notion of our shared humanity.

Museums that adopt such an approach are much more likely to speak *to us*, *about us* and *about others* – in other words, to speak about humanity in all its myriad yet universal facets.

### PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Present and interpret exhibits in ways that reflect both visitors’ circumstances and the contexts in question (in our case, humanitarian contexts). The “disruptive” techniques pioneered by Jacques Hainard during his tenure as director of the Museum of Ethnography of Neuchâtel are an excellent example to follow.
- Explore the concepts of assistance, aid, benevolence, charity and humanitarian action from an anthropological perspective.
- Provide historical context to demonstrate how the concept of “humanity” has changed in scope over time, and to show how humanitarian action is rooted in the social, cultural and political circumstances of its time.

It goes without saying that the above recommendations do not apply exclusively to humanitarian museums. Every institution has a duty to consider the situation and circumstances of its audience, taking social, cultural, historical and other factors into account.

## Idea 4

# Be an accessible museum

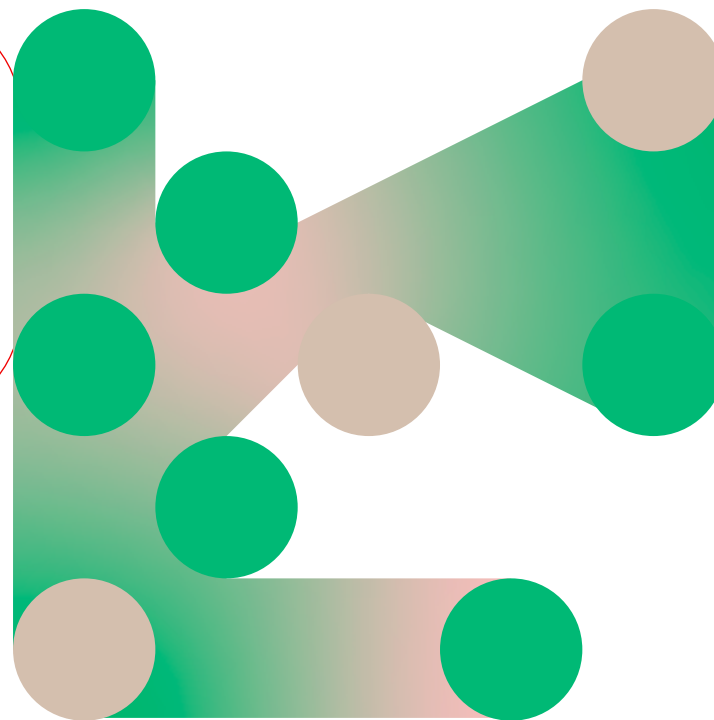
### FACT / OBSERVATION

French novelist André Malraux famously argued that geography and money were the only real obstacles to engaging with art. But this approach to cultural democratization has well and truly run its course.

Decentralization initiatives – such as the raft of municipal cultural venues that have opened in Switzerland – and reduced admission prices have no doubt gone some way to widening access to the arts. But they have done little to attract more socially diverse audiences.

There are two main factors at play here. The first is fierce competition from the leisure industry, which has succeeded in appealing to the masses, effectively crowding out public cultural services. The second is

the failure of the first wave of democratization (of the type championed by Malraux) to recognize a whole series of subtler, more insidious obstacles to engaging with art: inequalities in free time; physical and psychological barriers such as fatigue and disability; the long-term neglect of prisoners and other groups in closed institutions; language barriers; and, perhaps most importantly of all, symbolic and cognitive barriers (i.e. those linked to differences in taste, personal experience, worldviews and cultural codes), as well as psychological and social inhibitions.



## Idea 4 Be an accessible museum

### IDEA

These barriers align closely with the thinking of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who argued that large sections of society feel inadequate and unworthy when it comes to engaging with culture and the arts.

“Cultural mediation”, as it is understood in museum circles, targets precisely these two feelings. In that sense, it could perhaps be the driving force behind a new wave of cultural democratization.

Overcoming barriers to access is thus not simply a matter of communication. It is also a matter of turning museums into spaces where people who would not normally engage with “conventional” or “official” cultural offerings feel welcome and at ease. And, above all, it is a matter of outreach.

### PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Develop a fair and inclusive pricing policy, and ensure that your museum is physically accessible to all visitors (including wheelchair users, those with other physical disabilities, and visitors with visual or hearing impairments).
- Be creative about how you design your exhibitions. Consider factors such as exhibit

- heights, typefaces and font sizes. Keep the goal of universal accessibility in mind at all times.
- Think carefully about language. Translations should be not only linguistically but also culturally appropriate for the target audience. You may also wish to provide texts in easy-read formats (but take care not to oversimplify the content).
- In both official communications and targeted outreach, make sure to provide details of all public transport options serving the museum.
- Take deliberate steps to address the most powerful barriers to access: feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness.
- Plan shorter, partial tours for groups who are less accustomed to visiting museums. These tours could include a break for visitors to relax and socialize – perhaps in the museum’s collaborative creative space (if there is a session running that day), or in the café or rest area. This suggestion, like many others, applies to museums of all kinds.
- Consider building a more diverse workforce. Apply universal design principles – such as installing sockets at a standard height and having lighting of the same brightness in all spaces – to make your museum accessible to employees with what Jean-François Malherbe termed “extraordinary limits”.

## Idea 5

# Make the museum a space for debate

### FACT / OBSERVATION

The collapse of the Soviet Union, US economist Francis Fukuyama's pronouncement of the "end of history", and Margaret Thatcher's slogan "There is no alternative" prompted many commentators to claim that we had entered a *post-political* era.

Yet when it comes to our shared humanity and our place and purpose in the world, there is still plenty of room for debate. And it likely falls to cultural spaces – especially those engaged with humanitarian, public-health and socio-cultural issues – to sustain this debate in an informed and sympathetic way.

Today, human beings are all too often viewed solely through the lens of biopsychology, or as "sensitive animals" rather than as "political animals" (in the



Aristotelian sense). In line with ideas 2 and 6 in this toolkit, we believe museums can turn the tide by helping citizens reclaim their rightful role as subjects, not objects.

Canadian sociologist Benoît Coutu argues that this process of subjectivation implies "dis-identification and [...] the creation of a space that allows [the people concerned] to emerge from their position of victims and become subjects, to be heard as 'voices that count', and thus gain the power to participate in a process of exposure, recognition and reparation for the harm they have suffered".

## Idea 5 Make the museum a space for debate

### IDEA

It is the very essence of a democracy that all sections of society should contribute their knowledge, perspectives and feelings to public debate. Cultural participation can help democratize democracy itself.

For a museum to serve as a forum for public debate is an inherently political – although not partisan – act: no topic is off limits, no matter how controversial, but the conversation is honest and informed, and all perspectives are welcomed.

Fostering this kind of healthy, open discussion means creating meaningful opportunities for debate between intellectuals – from different disciplines – and the wider public. The collective intelligence such an approach engenders will help us better understand the world around us, enabling the emergence of “complex thought” of the kind proposed by French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin.

### PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Hold thematic symposiums, conferences and panel discussions to make clear that your museum advocates for the scientific method (as defined by Karl Popper) and that its interpretations are open to challenge.
- Do not restrict participation in these events to policymakers. Also include representatives of charities, non-profits and other civil society organizations.
- Invite contributions from non-experts whose lived experience brings valuable insights, and open up participation to children and young people where relevant.
- Keep documented records of these events for future reference and publication on your museum’s website.
- Organize virtual debates bringing together relevant subject-matter experts from around the world. Online events of this kind can drive higher levels of participation – although digital illiteracy remains a widespread problem.

## Idea 6

# Consider how visitors receive the museum's output

### FACT/OBSERVATION

Museums, once conceived as places for conservation and study, now face the same audience attraction, place marketing and branding pressures as any other organization. They can no longer concern themselves with *supply* alone. *Demand*, which itself influences supply, has become an equally important consideration.

If museums must give weight to demand, does this mean they can no longer be prescriptive? Should there be some agreed standard on how visitors receive an exhibition or contemplate a work?

Scottish philosopher David Hume argued that “taste”, as he defined it, stems from a “mind free from all prejudice”, from “delicacy of imagination” (i.e. the ability to feel and discern the tenderest of emotions), from a well-honed aptitude to “form comparisons”, which in turn strengthens judgement, and from the use of reason, which enables us to “perceive every ingredient in the composition” (in our case, a work or an exhibition).

Staying on this philosophical tangent, we argue that there are two ways to think about how audiences *receive* a museum's output. The first is to consider

## Idea 6 Consider how visitors receive the museum's output

that every viewer possesses the faculties described by Hume and is able – or at least should be able – to appreciate “conventional” cultural offerings. The second, which aligns with the notion of *cultural democratization* we advocated for earlier, is to acknowledge and embrace diverse tastes, lived experiences and worldviews. After all, ethnology teaches us that difference is not an indicator of inferiority.

It could be argued that these two diametrically opposing approaches reflect two distinct visions of democracy itself: republicanism, with its belief in a common frame of reference, and liberalism, with its emphasis on individual freedom.

The true path to self-cultivation likely lies in a constant process of push-and-pull between self-affirmation and self-transcendence – a gruelling and dizzying cycle of detachment, disinterest and dispossession that perhaps, as we touch on in idea 7, can only be sustained collectively.

### IDEA

Museums should actively document how visitors receive their output, using feedback from cultural mediation and other work to enrich their exhibitions. This calls for curators and cultural mediation officers to work closely together.

Set designers, too, should think long and hard about how they serve their audience. Having visitors activate a pre-programmed mechanism by flicking a switch is nothing more than participation as illusion – a childish gimmick. Real participation implies bringing audiences into the creative process as co-producers: what Jean-Paul Sartre might have termed “an act of the second degree”. In other words, it should be an exercise in genuine freedom, not a soothing distraction.

## Idea 6 Consider how visitors receive the museum's output

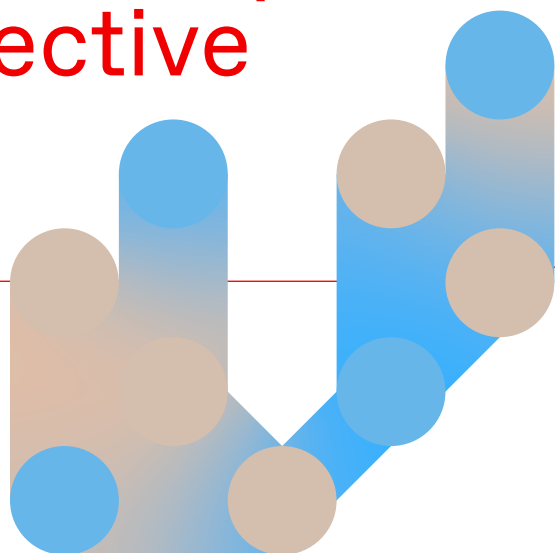
### PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Document the various ways in which visitors receive your museum's output and publish your findings (in print or digital formats, or even within your exhibition space if appropriate).
- Record not only visitors' feedback on exhibitions they have seen, but also their views on the themes of upcoming shows to form what German academic Hans Robert Jauss termed a "horizon of expectation".
- Provide a traditional guestbook (and read the comments carefully and regularly to draw out useful insights), set up a booth where visitors can record verbal feedback, and use frequent interviews, focus group discussions and surveys as a way to gather quantitative and qualitative information.
- Develop audio-guides that present contrasting perspectives (from experts, witnesses, casual and regular visitors, etc.) to encourage audiences to view your exhibitions through fresh eyes.



## Idea 7

# Envisage reception as a collective practice



### FACT / OBSERVATION

Cultural artefacts do not possess innate meaning and value just waiting to be deciphered. On the contrary, meaning and value are always open to interpretation.

In an essay about art, American philosopher Jerrold Levinson (as cited by Aline Caillet) asserts the following: “The pleasure of experiencing an art work is ... typically a pleasure in doing something – listening, viewing, attending, organizing, projecting,

conjecturing, imagining, speculating, hypothesizing, etc. – rather than just allowing things to happen to one on a sensory plane.”

“Meaning”, in the sense we are using it here, is an inexhaustible resource because the “representational activity exercised on an object” (to borrow from French philosopher Jean-Marie Schaeffer) varies according to the social, historical and cultural context in which the receivers find themselves and in which the aesthetic experience takes place. This is precisely why it is so important to address the symbolic, psychological and social barriers that prevent people from accessing art, which in turn helps draw in more socially diverse audiences.

When meaning is worked out collectively, we become more open to multiple, diverse perspectives – and more likely to inflect our thoughts, feelings and interpretations in one direction or another.

Group mediation, therefore, is an inherently social exercise that hinges on authentic human relationships. As French sociologist Antoine Hennion (cited by Marie Thonon) put it, there is nothing more important to share than the act of sharing itself – than a group of human beings connecting and finding *common ground* around an object.

## Idea 7 Envisage reception as a collective practice

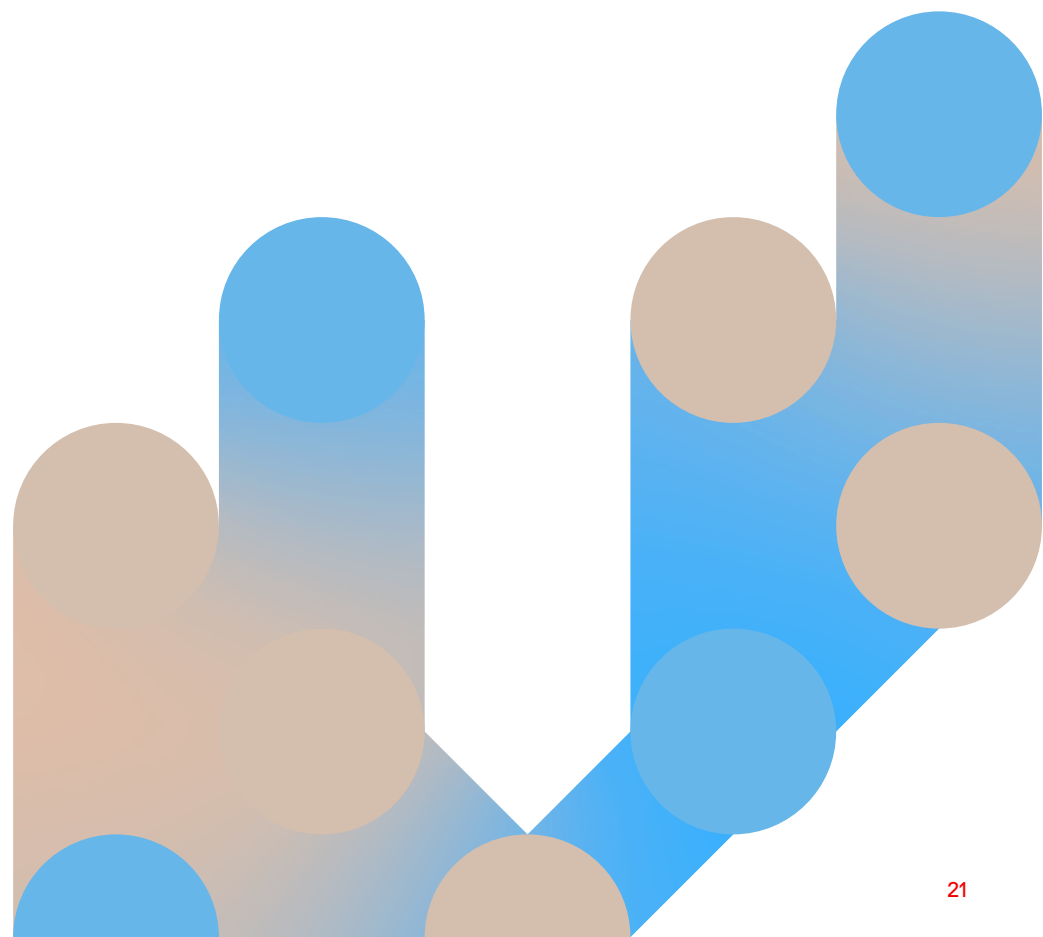
### IDEA

Envisaging reception as a collective practice is about recognizing all participants as “equals”, affirming their perspectives and debating them openly, fostering deeper engagement with the exhibition. But it is also about citizenship and empowerment, allowing participants, as *subjects*, to break free from the inertia that today’s consumer society – and, at times, political society itself – tends to encourage.

German philosopher Jürgen Habermas traced the emergence of the “public sphere” – a forum for citizens to debate affairs of common interest – back to the literary salons of the 18th century. As museums, when we empower participants to become “co-authors” of the works we exhibit, we also empower them to play that same role in wider society.

But what do we mean, exactly, when we talk about a “group”? And how big should a group be (if we have a say in the matter)? Group dynamics theory tells us that when we do something on our own or as part of a large and indistinct crowd, the experience tends to be less stimulating. Conversely, people are more likely

to participate, and to express themselves freely and with confidence, in relatively small circles of between seven and 15 people with similar social and cultural backgrounds.



## Idea 7 Envisage reception as a collective practice

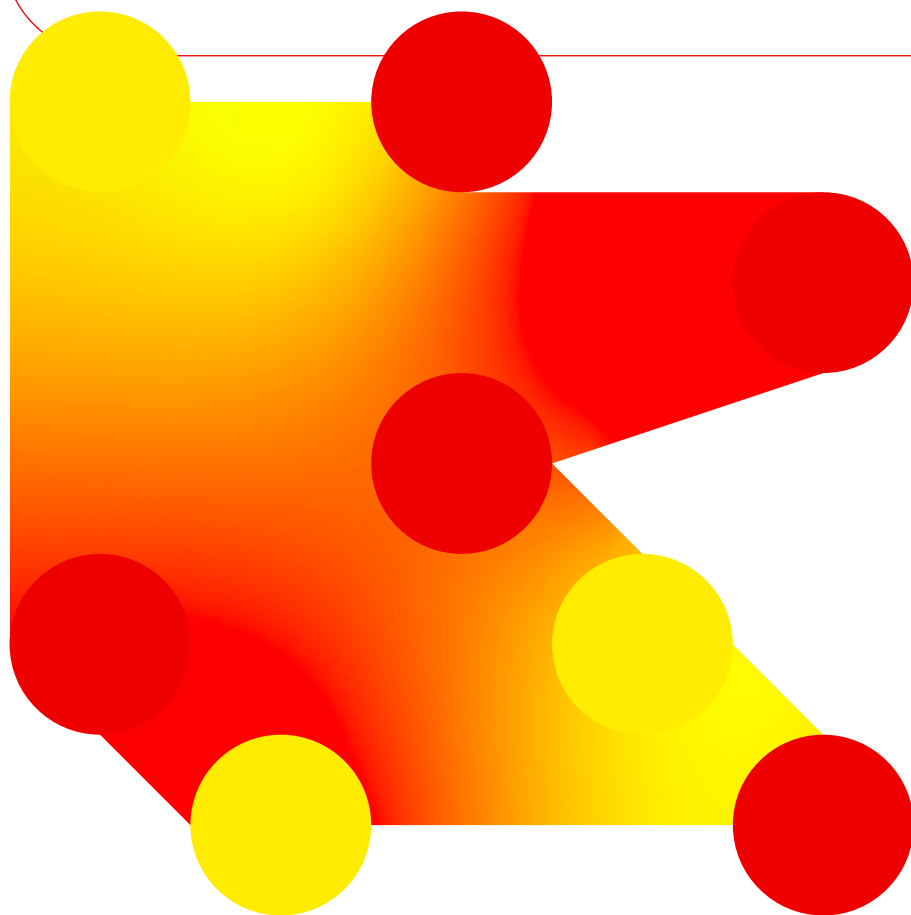
### PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Tailor your communication to specific audiences (school groups, certain sections of society and people in different occupational groups).
- Make sure to involve any leaders or coordinators who enjoy the trust of these groups.
- Reach out to the social services sector, and run on-site events and activities such as virtual tours, presentations and film screenings in prisons and hospitals (where people are confined and cannot therefore come to your museum in person).
- Where appropriate, share visitors' perspectives and feedback with the organizations or groups they belong to. Doing so can reveal untapped potential and energize communities.



## Idea 8

# Fight the battle for audience attention



### FACT/OBSERVATION

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many observers predicted the demise of bricks-and-mortar cultural spaces, citing the ability of the internet, unconstrained by geography, to reach vast audiences.

Does this imply that museums should throw in the towel?

What is really going on here?

While admittedly vast, online audiences tend to be distracted, distant, mercurial and dispersed (or, at best, superficially connected) – and to approach content with a consumer mindset. This kind of fragmentation risks society drifting towards depoliticization, the social fabric thinning and community bonds dissolving.

At its very first meeting, held in Florence in 2002, the European Social Forum adopted a resolution that struck a clear note of concern: “... occupying a large part of the symbolic field with works supposedly catering to all the world’s consumers, works that blur memory and historical perspective, that show no attachment to a particular place, that prize instant gratification over analysis and critical distance, the cultural industries are laying the groundwork for tragedies on a historical scale.”

## Idea 8 Fight the battle for audience attention

This damning indictment is by no means isolated: countless thinkers and critics have railed against the commodification of culture and people, the relentless assault of advertising on our minds and senses, and the hijacking of our imaginations by a handful of corporate giants – developments they claim erode freedom and democracy. French poet Bernard Noël, for instance, wrote of “mental castration”, while French philosopher Bernard Stiegler alluded to “symbolic misery”.

For museums, capturing and holding our attention is a challenge that touches on what it means to be human.

### IDEA

Throughout this toolkit, we have understood museums as places of production, representation and assembly. Restoring meaning to these institutions would seem to imply fundamentally rethinking their purpose and rebalancing their functions: making them places that champion collective interpretation, co-creation and long-term, sympathetic debate.

It is also important to recognize that these processes – capturing attention and engaging in genuine co-construction – operate according to their own, *organic* time scales.

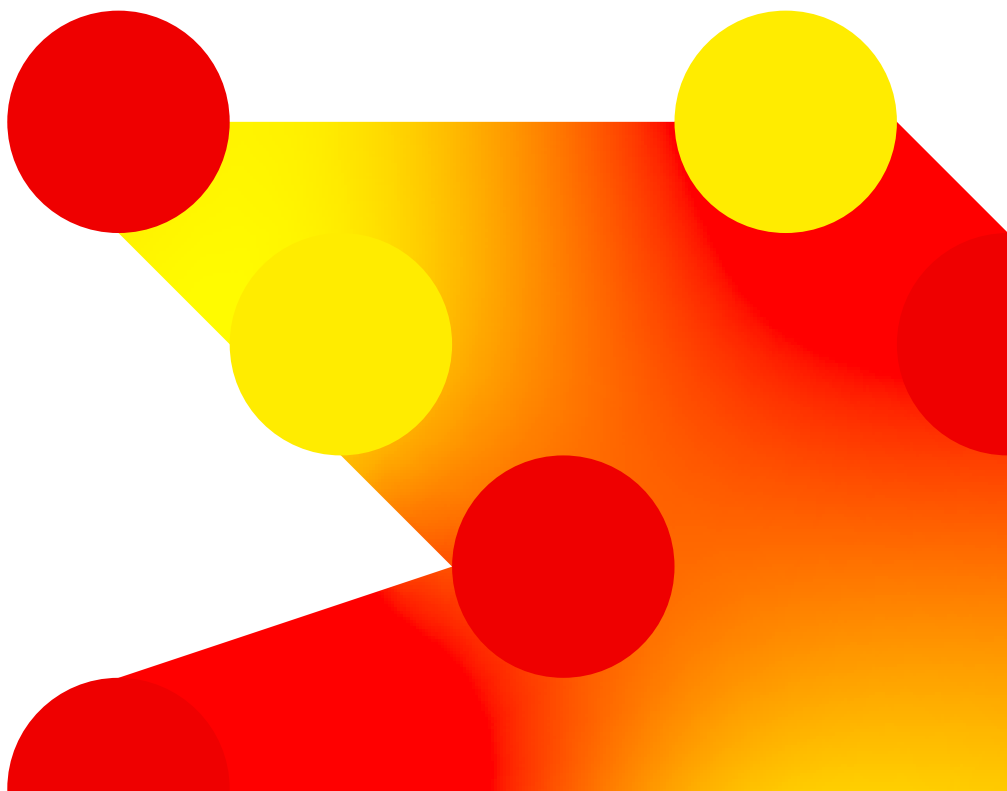
Participatory processes, both internal and external, take longer than conventional museum programming and management exercises. But the extra investment in time is worth it, because they reveal countless blind spots and sharpen our awareness of our own biases.

## Idea 8 Fight the battle for audience attention

### PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Be patient and accept that these things take time.
- Remember that life outside cultural spheres tends to move at a slower pace. Imposing your own time scales on the wider public undermines co-construction and may even be perceived as a form of violence.
- Trial gathering and documenting visitors' feedback not just in the moment, but also a week, a month or even a year after their visit. You may well find that those immediate, often superficial thoughts mature with time into deeper, more elusive or more subjective interpretations (following a process of "innutrition", as the poets of the Pléiade would put it).
- Consider bringing in outside experts, humanitarian workers (field and headquarters), members of the public and museum employees.
- Build diversity into senior management teams and loosen rigid divisions of labour. Establish long-term partnerships with social, cultural and minority-rights organizations, invite their members to tour the museum

and attend events and activities, and let them use your facilities for their own general meetings, celebratory occasions and other important events. Ideally, these arrangements should last for at least three years, which we feel is enough time for outside partners to familiarize themselves with the museum and its staff, uncover previously unknown needs and discover inhibitions they might not have been attuned to.



## Idea 9

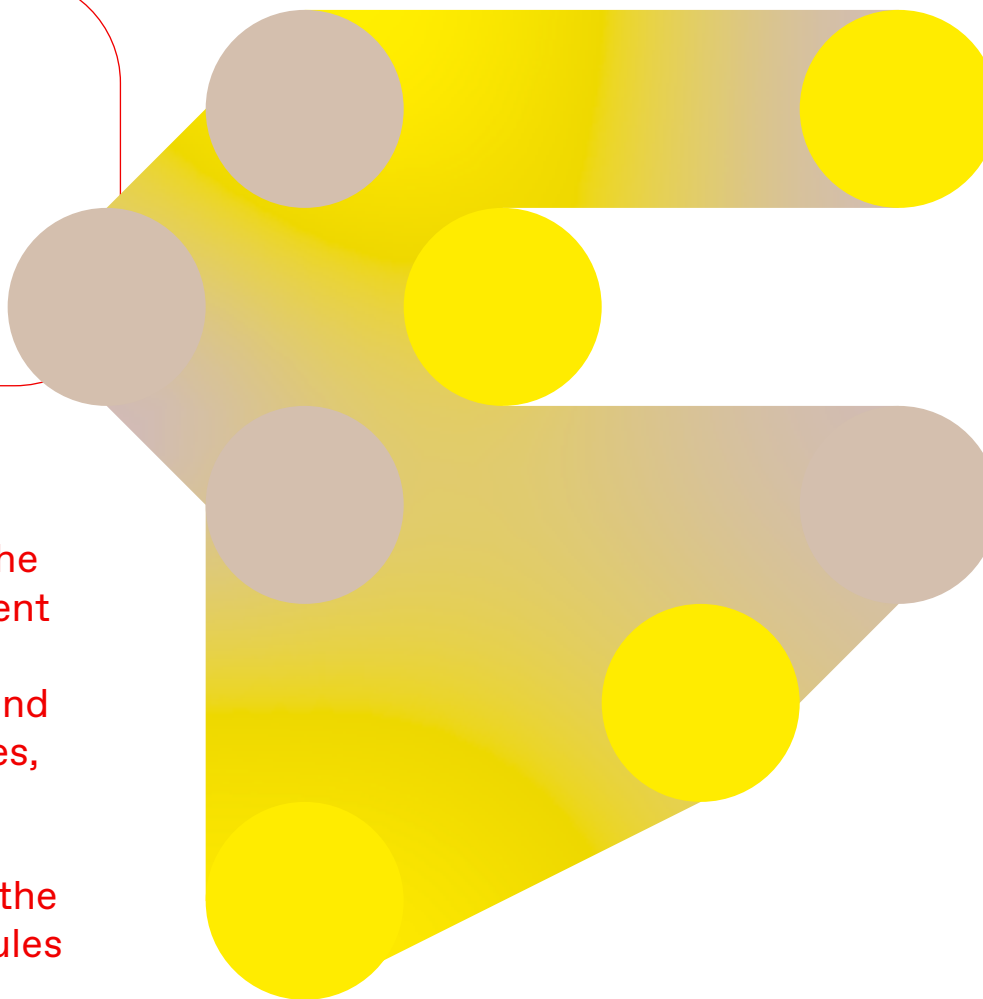
# Be a collaborative museum

### FACT / OBSERVATION

The trend towards artists involving the public in the creative process is among the most welcome recent developments in cultural practice. But this shift does not negate the fact that elitism is still alive and well in the art market, perpetuated by inside forces, prescriptive institutions and some sections of the media. The simple fact is that the art world is far from the broad church some claim it to be. Quite the opposite: it remains a social clique governed by rules designed to exclude those who do not fit socially.

For cultural venues, especially those in the public sector, the call is clear: become spaces for public debate, serving as a bridge between art, democracy, community and symbolic life; invite excluded and

disadvantaged groups to participate in artistic projects as fully fledged co-creators; and engage with outsiders not as a tokenistic, performative gesture but as a genuine act of care.



## Idea 9 Be a collaborative museum

### IDEA

Our collaboration with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum coincided with the artist residency of Zahrasadat Hakim, winner of the Red Cross and HEAD – Genève Art and Humanity Prize. For her residency, Hakim ran two initiatives in parallel: a series of culinary workshops and a participatory tapestry project.

Collaborative art is one possible way of putting the ideal of co-construction into action, connecting art – and the artist – to the wider public. The tapestry project was a particularly poignant example of “asynchronous” co-construction, as in June one participant continued the work started by another in March.

The culinary workshops similarly embodied the artist’s philosophy, blending creative endeavour with generous hospitality: participants sat down to enjoy the meal they had prepared together at the end of the session, creating an opportunity for cultural – and social – mediation.

Let us make some assumptions about art: that art is imagination, an exercise in representing what is and what could be; that art is self-realization, the process

of unlocking one’s full potential through creation; and that art is an inherently social pursuit, the very essence of who we are as citizens and human beings. If all of these assertions hold true, then there can be no justification for art to remain a siloed occupation in our traditional division of labour.

Critical theory teaches us that a dearth of cultural “taste” is, by and large, shaped by social factors and, therefore, not a fixed quantity. It therefore falls to each and every one of us to tap into our creative side to the extent desired – and to reject the notion that art is for the few, not the many.

The claim that “everyone is an artist”, as made by figures such as Rousseau, Marx and Dubuffet, is a call to arms against the debasing of human existence. In heeding this call, we should set ourselves a loftier ambition: not merely to reach out to traditionally excluded groups, but to bring culture into our everyday and our everywhere.

Making participatory creative practice the norm would be an excellent starting point.

## Idea 9 Be a collaborative museum

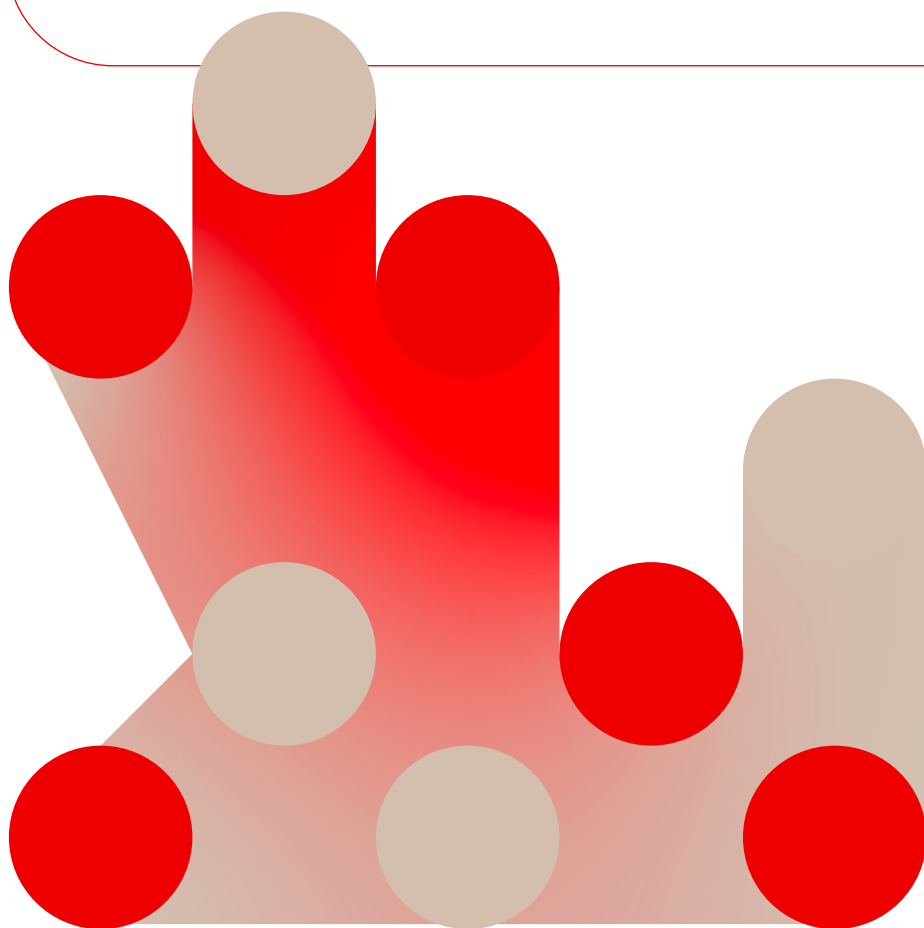
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### PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Invite input from artists across disciplines.
- Give invited artists, groups and organizations all the time they need.
- Document participatory creative processes.
- Make collaborative initiatives a cornerstone of your museum's cultural mediation work.

## Idea 10

# Re-establish local roots



### FACT / OBSERVATION

Hugues de Varine and Jean-Michel Montfort have argued that the goal of cultural action is to assist local communities in gaining greater freedom and control over their lives, and in interpreting and making sense of the world around them – in other words, in developing a clearer sense of what they collectively value.

When museums connect their work to the places they belong to, they strengthen democratic life and help communities build a distinctive sense of self (an idea that helped inspire Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Letter to M. d'Alembert*).

Our call for museums to re-establish local roots ties in with the idea of socializing cultural output – something we have touched on at various points in this toolkit.

Importantly, this is not a call for museums to narrow their horizons or retreat into parochialism because, as Portuguese poet Miguel Torga wrote, “the universal is the local without walls”. Rather, it is a call for museums to acknowledge the historical context in which they exist and to expose the relative and transient nature of our way of life – an exercise that, in the words of French historian Gérard Noiriel, “strengthens the critical faculties of our fellow citizens by helping them step outside themselves”.

## Idea 10 Re-establish local roots

### IDEA

In today's globalized capitalist system, there is a strong temptation to view the world in Newtonian terms, as a uniform whole. But the truth is otherwise, because our worldview is influenced by the time and space we inhabit.

When museums re-establish local roots, connecting their work to considerations of history, heritage and geography, we might call this process “cultural ecology”. And to borrow a term from elsewhere, we might call the outcome of this process a museum's “civic footprint”.

Cultural institutions exist within a local ecosystem. And while such institutions face stiffer competition for audience attention, these ecosystems should be treated as organic, and ideally mutually supportive, wholes.

Collaboration between cultural venues should therefore be encouraged.

Museums should likewise work with, and give a voice to, civil society groups and organizations in their local area.

A sense of local belonging emerges when people feel that their lived experiences are heard and valued. Only then can we achieve consensus around our (own) place in the world – and build a freer and more equal society.

### PRACTICAL MEASURES

- Involve local institutions and organizations in community activities such as season-specific presentations, annual celebrations and open-door events.
- As relevant, build collaborative partnerships with organizations (officially and unofficially) representing the countries featured in your exhibitions.
- Recognize that schools and universities, both public and private, are microcosms of your local community. Reach out to and engage with them.
- Consider how other venues in your area might host multidisciplinary events connected to the themes of your exhibitions.

## Biography

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### Mathieu Menghini

Mathieu Menghini is a former theatre director in Neuchâtel, Geneva and Valais and previously featured as a commentator on the cultural radio station RTS Espace 2. In his current role as a cultural historian, theorist and practitioner, he works at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland (Geneva) and La Manufacture (Lausanne), as well as in Lyon and Paris.

Menghini is the creative force behind the adult education initiative La Marmite, a dramaturgy adviser for the La Colline theatre in Paris, a columnist for Swiss newspaper *Le Courrier* and a member of the editorial board of French periodical *Cause commune*. As an expert in public cultural policy, he has also worked with organizations including the new Comédie de Genève, the Théâtre du Jura and fOrum culture, as well as on municipal initiatives in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Veveyse and elsewhere.

He was the winner of the 2019 Leenaards Foundation Cultural Prize.

## Event contributors during the Museum's Year of Co-construction (2024–2025)

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- **Eugen Brand**, representative, International Movement ATD Fourth World
- **Alexandre Budry**, urban planner and wood worker, atelier MOP A
- **Aurélie Carré**, representative, Fédération des écomusées et musées de société
- **Sarah Gamblin**, communication and partner relations officer, Association Découvrir
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- **Katarzyna Grabska**, anthropologist and lecturer, Geneva Centre of Humanitarian Studies, University of Geneva
- **Zahrasadat Hakim**, resident artist, International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum
- **Pascal Hufschmid**, executive director, International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum
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- **Nour Khadam**, delegate, International Committee of the Red Cross
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- **Mathieu Menghini**, cultural historian and theorist
- **Marta Pawlak**, former delegate, International Committee of the Red Cross
- **Sophie Wobmann**, architect and urban planner, atelier MOP A

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone involved in putting together this toolkit, no matter how big or small their contribution. We are especially grateful to the following people for agreeing to share their time and expertise: Tammam Aloudat, Eugen Brand, Alexandre Budry, Aurélie Carré, Sarah Gamblin, Valérie Gorin, Katarzyna Grabska, Zahrasadat Hakim, Pascal Hufschmid, Jean-Luc Imhof, Nour Khadam, Marine Malledan, Mathieu Menghini, Marta Pawlak and Sophie Wobmann.

We are also indebted to the staff of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum for their hard work and dedication. Our thanks go to Barbara Angelini, Alice Baronnet, Annabel Bernardon, Marie-Laure Berthier, Camille Bovet, Patricia Bourceret, Jonas Chereau, Carole Chiappinelli, Marcela Cizmar, Mariagrazia Gisella Cicciu, Emanuele Ceraso, Maria Contreras Gutiérrez, Cécile Crassier-Mokdad, Graziella De Vecchi, Tanja Devetak, Myriam Doré, Marco Domingues, Rama Dwiyan Putera, Danica Gautier, Manon Gérard, Nalini Gouri-Burci, Nicole-Eva Grunder, André Hamelin, Patrizia Hilbrow, Steve Herman Nyagua, Michito Kawasaki, Justine Langlois, Estelle Lligona, Tiffany-Jane Madden, Andressa Marques, Gail Messenger, Caroline Minder, Valentin Moreau, Peace Mury, Méloée Piaget, Carolyn Polhill, Pierre-Antoine Possa, Doris Riva, Anita Robert, Christine Ruchat, Elisa Rusca, Luz Maria Serrano Estrada, Benjamin Senften, Susanne Staub, Ivano Tonutti, Anook Vary, Lisa Widmer and Anita Zwerner.

Last but not least, we would like to thank the Museum's Foundation Board and its chair, Isabel Rochat, as well as the Association of Friends of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum and its president, Yves Daccord.

Menghini, M., *10 ideas for co-construction in museums*

International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum, 2025

Published by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum,  
17 Avenue de la Paix, 1202, Geneva, Switzerland.

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The Museum benefits from the valuable support of



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft  
Confédération suisse  
Confederazione Svizzera  
Confederaziun svizra

Département fédéral des  
affaires étrangères DFAE



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ET CANTON  
DE GENEVE

POST TENERIAS LUX



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