

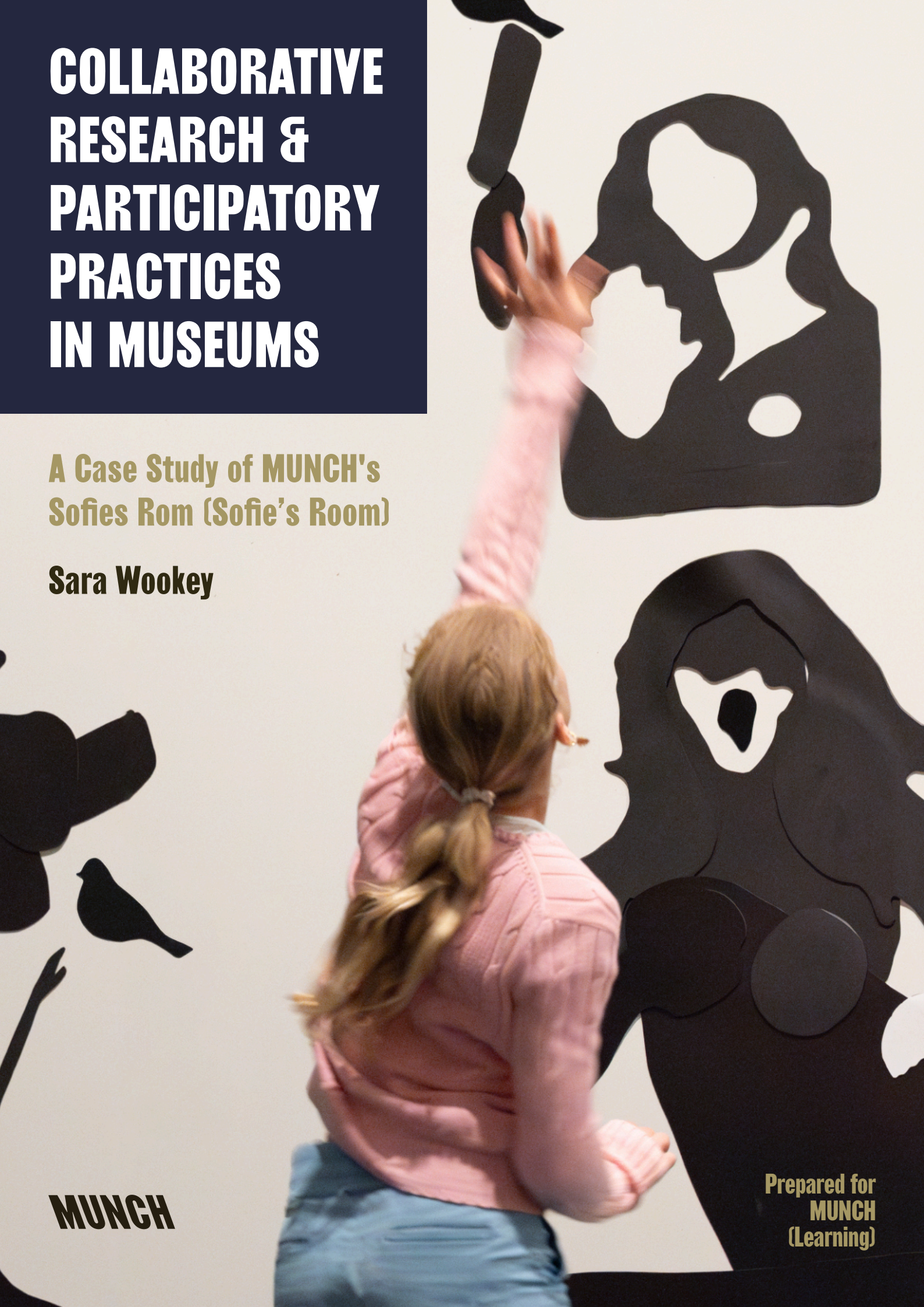
COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH & PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES IN MUSEUMS

**A Case Study of MUNCH's
Sofies Rom (Sofie's Room)**

Sara Wookey

MUNCH

Prepared for
MUNCH
(Learning)



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Introduction

THIS PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH project was conducted to critically examine the collaborative research practices employed in the context of MUNCH's 'Kom Tenk med Oss!' / 'Come Think with Us!' (CTWU) series, specifically focusing on the third installation in the series titled *Sofies Rom / Sofie's Room* (22.03.2024 – 11.08.2024).¹ The research contributes to our understanding of participatory practices within museum settings by analysing the dynamics among various stakeholders, including artists, curators, educators, and visitors.

Sofie's Room

Sofie's Room is an interactive installation created for children. It is also a space where participants of all ages are invited to engage with large organically shaped magnets inspired by Edvard Munch's paintings, creating their own black-and-white images on the gallery's walls. There are lights that highlight certain areas of the space, similar to spotlights on a stage, and a sound score by Gao Kacirek. The sequence of light and sound lasts approximately 40 minutes, with a long silence between the sets. The floor of the space is a black soft rubber like the material found in gyms or playgrounds. The spotlights come on and off, continually shifting and moving to highlight different areas of the space. There is a noticeable scent in the room, like rubber, that comes from the flooring. This scent was unintentional, but it is worth mentioning as it was a frequent topic of comments by the participants and featured as part of their sensory experience of the space. The commissioned artists **Roza Moshanghi** (b. 1985), a choreographer and dancer; and her sister, the visual artist **Ronak Moshtaghi** (b. 1987), were born in Tehran and currently live in Oslo and Berlin.

¹ The first two installations were *Chamber of Chaos* (Fredrik Floen, 2023) and *Brain Maze* (Jennie Bringaker, 2022).

Sofie's Room is an interactive installation created for children.

It is also a space where participants of all ages are invited to engage with large organically shaped magnets inspired by Edvard Munch's paintings, creating their own black-and-white images on the gallery's walls.

About the Author

My research asks pressing questions about the nature of human interaction and has led to researching participatory projects in museums in the United Kingdom (Tate Modern), in Europe (Van Abbemuseum), as well as in theatres (National Theatre and Young Vic). I am interested in how dance and expanded choreography, as relational and site-based practices, can change the human imaginary of relationships in ways that can be more inclusive, diverse, equitable, and sustainable. My work shows that personal ways of knowing are negotiated through embodied social-spatial experiences (i.e., 'lived experience') and I advocate for such consideration in cultural institutions and other public-sector spaces. This way of thinking is directly connected to my training in Post-Modern dance in the United States, expanded choreographic practices, and practice-based research on dance in museums, which was influenced by my studies with the urbanist Edward Soja, training with the choreographer Yvonne Rainer, and research collaboration with Emily Pringle.

I am a mid-career, Caucasian female practitioner-researcher with dual citizenship (United States/Britain), currently based in East England. My perspectives are shaped by the knowledge and experiences I have gained as an artist practitioner and researcher in a Western contemporary context. The role I played in producing this research and reflection piece was as an external practice-based researcher commissioned by MUNCH to investigate and critically examine the collaborative research practices employed in the context of MUNCH's 'Kom Tenk med Oss!' / 'Come Think with Us!' series, specifically focusing on the installation titled *Sofie's Room* (Roza Moshtaghi & Ronak Moshtaghi, 2024). My lens, therefore, is as an external practitioner researcher in residence at MUNCH.

Research Project

This project contributes to our understanding of participatory practices within museum settings, analysing the dynamics among various stakeholders, including artists, curators, educators, and visitors. It contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding participatory practices in museums, while also testing the feasibility of collaborative research methods within a museum context. While the work focuses on MUNCH's 'Kom Tenk med Oss!' series, specifically *Sofie's Room*, the project seeks to generate broadly applicable knowledge that can inform future museum practices and engagements.

Aims & Objectives

- ▶ Contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding participatory practices in museum settings.
- ▶ Communicate with colleagues, museum experts and other stakeholders on the value of practice-based research for this case study and for the wider 'Come Think with Us!' series.
- ▶ Build bridges with practitioners in other fields of interest who are also doing research in and outside of the museum.
- ▶ Test the feasibility of collaborative practice-based research methods within a museum context.
- ▶ Generate new knowledge and methods that can inform future museum practices and engagements.
- ▶ Investigate forms and methods of documentation as tools for research (capturing, analysing, and interpreting insights) within the context of participatory practices in museums.
- ▶ Generate new knowledge about reflective and practice-based research within Learning at MUNCH.
- ▶ Test methods and processes for collaborating with an external researcher as part of the participatory practices at MUNCH.

Research Questions

The research began with two questions:

1

How might the concept of 'social choreography' and the artists' intention of *Sofie's Room* be applied as a lens or research framework to understand audience participation and experience?

2

How does a collaborative practice-based research approach enhance our understanding of these audience dynamics?



▲ Interior of *Sofie's Room* with school group participants

Key Terms

Social Choreography

The term 'social choreography' was frequently referenced in my discussions with the *Sofie's Room* team, including Christin Fonn Tømte, Øystein Rafoss, Tove Aadland Sørvåg and the Moshtaghi sisters, during the research period. There was interest and intention on the part of the artists and staff during the development of the exhibition to use a social choreographic approach. It was not entirely clear when the term was first introduced but Aadland Sørvåg remembered it coming up in the initial conversations to describe the interests of the artists. Some team members felt that they did not entirely understand the concept, and thus it became a point of interest and curiosity in the evolution and implementation of the project.

The term 'social choreography' was coined by Andrew Hewitt, a professor of Germanic Languages and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Los Angeles, in his 2005 book, *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement*. Hewitt asserted that social choreography is not merely a metaphor but a tangible and embodied practice that reveals underlying social relations and patterns, which he termed the 'choreography of the social'. Hewitt wrote that, "if the body I dance with and the body I work and walk with are one and the same, I must, when dancing, necessarily entertain the suspicion that all of the body's movements are, to a greater or lesser extent, choreographed" (Hewitt, 2005:17).

The concept of social choreography allows us to examine the dynamics of human movement, encouraging us to perceive choreography not just as a representation of social relations within modernity, but as a 'blueprint' for

understanding and influencing modern social organisation. Hewitt further specified that, "I use the term social choreography to denote a tradition of thinking about social order that derives its ideal from the aesthetic realm and seeks to instil that order directly at the level of the body" (Hewitt, 2005:3). Referencing dance history and critical theory, Hewitt demonstrated that ideas can be comprehended through embodiment and practice, rather than as an abstract form of consciousness. He also emphasised the issue of space between people, noting that:

The 'return to the body' in cultural studies bypasses dance because dance locates the social energumen not in bodies but in the dynamic spaces that separate and link those bodies, in dialectical 'movement' rather than in brute soma. (Hewitt, 2005: 8)

By linking dance, the aesthetics of everyday movements, such as walking, and physical space to historical concepts of social order, Hewitt presented a compelling argument about the relationship between ideology and aesthetics. He engaged with dancers, social theorists, and writers from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries to shift our understanding of human movement.²

Collaboration

In collaborative practice, the objective is to preserve specialised knowledge while recognising and valuing the expertise of others. In practice-based research museum professionals seek to transcend the confines of their individual disciplines, engaging in cross-disciplinary and collaborative work. Such practice facilitates learning and growth through interaction with others. During this process it is crucial to acknowledge and challenge epistemological hierarchies that may impede equitable collaborations.

Ideally practice-based research can foster intellectual synergy between institutions, individuals and the public. As Emily Pringle asserted in her book, *Rethinking Research in the Art Museum* (2019), practice-based research is a dynamic process of generating new knowledge through and about practice, grounded in dialogue and a 'generosity of spirit' (Pringle, 2019:62). This approach emphasises the significance of enquiry and a cooperative, experiential method of knowledge creation. By intertwining practice with theory and prioritising reflection and learning, research findings can drive impactful change (Pringle, 2019:84).

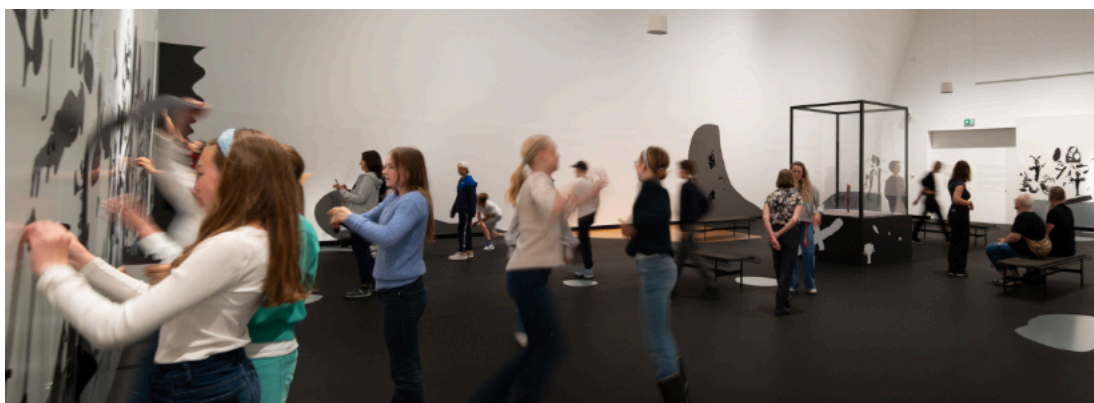
² The primary dancers, social theorists, and writers with whom Hewitt engages are from Germany, Britain, France, and the United States and include Friedrich Schiller, Isadora Duncan, Rudolf Nijinsky, Tiller Girls, Theodor Adorno, Hans Brandenburg, Ernst Bloch, and Siegfried Kracauer.



▲ In collaboration with Aadland Sørvåg in *Sofie's Room* before invited participants arrive

Participation

Developments in sociological studies such as the 'new institutionalism'³ and the 'post-museum' have been influential to the ways that museums now consider their offerings. Participatory programmes have become a significant component of these changes – addressing both the participation of audiences and the participation of museum staff, artists and researchers. Participatory exhibitions expand the object by putting it into play within the discursive system of a museum. Participatory exhibitions can challenge traditional museum systems in which exhibitions make a one-directional discursive point that audiences receive and instead it invites participants to feel that they are in a space of engagement, innovation, and experimentation.



▲ School group participants engage with the exhibit.

³ The new institutionalist approach emerged in the early to mid-1980s. American political scientist James G. March and Norwegian political scientist Johan P. Olsen are often considered two of the leading founders of this movement.

Methodology

The methods used in this project included observation, critical analysis and reflection with the goal of obtaining new insights and understandings that can be applied to broader museum contexts. The research employed purposeful artistic practice as a method that generates and integrates ways of knowing through developing evaluative judgements and expanding knowledge. The project was conducted in a spirit of ongoing questioning and reflection on practice and creative problem-solving. It foregrounded questioning and learning through collaboration with others and by acknowledging the specific expertise of practitioners within the institution.

In suggesting a participatory research framework I ask for a reconsideration of what research is and what it can do in a museum. More precisely, my research calls for us to consider exhibitions that have a participatory component, such as *Sofie's Room*, as ones that can be studied with the concept of practice as the centre of that study. A practice-based method can help us to understand what is at play in a participatory artwork – creating a bridge between what is being presented to audiences and the way in which we as researchers analyse that project. This points to the participatory thing itself, the exhibition, as the focus of research. For the purposes of this study, then, the research included a consideration of how the exhibition was constructed but also a direct participatory engagement with the social activities that emerged in the exhibit space. A summary of the methods used is listed below; more details are provided in the addendum to this document.

COLLABORATING WITH MUSEUM STAFF, PARTICIPANTS AND ARTISTS was a vital aspect of the research method. Charles McClintock (2004) has highlighted the approach to collaboration that practitioner researchers take: “Scholar practitioners are committed to the well-being of clients and colleagues, to learning new ways of being effective, and to conceptualising their work in relation to broader organisational, community, political, and cultural contexts” (McClintock 2004 in Pringle 2019:64).

INTERVIEWS WERE CONDUCTED with nine museum staff members including those with expertise in curation, mediation, research, and production, as well as interviews with front-of-house staff and mini-interviews with visiting children and invited guests.

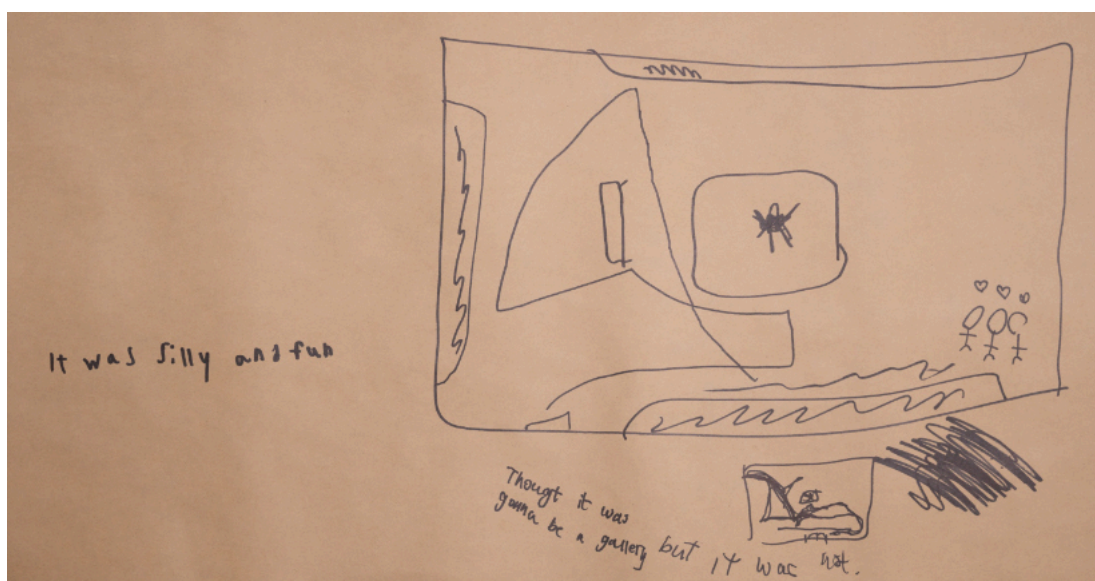


▲ In dialogue with Aadland Sørvåg, the Curator for the CTWU series

SITE OBSERVATION AND PARTICIPATION were conducted during two in-person visits.

DRAWING AND MAPPING were used as tools for understanding experiences of the exhibit, including those of researchers, visitor participants and museum professionals.

DATA MAPPING was conducted as an extension from the drawing and mapping approach. It was used as a tool for my collaborator, Aadland Sørvåg from MUNCH, and me to begin looking for connections of meaning between the images (photo documentation of the exhibition) and the drawings (made by participants).



▲ Sketches and maps from school group participants as part of a collective scroll

PHOTOGRAPHY was used as a tool for documenting the research project; this brought in another type of creative practice as a method of understanding experiences of the exhibit.

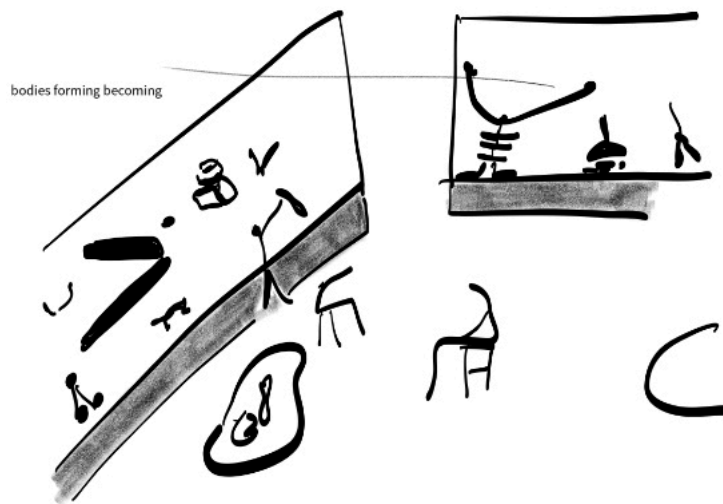
READING AND WRITING accompanied the other experiential aspects of the research. The key texts for the project were Emily Pringle's writing on practice as research and Andrew Hewitt's writing on social choreography.



▲ Co-participating in moving the magnets with invited guest participants inside *Sofie's Room*



▲ Mapping practice with Aadland Sørvåg in the MUNCH office



▲ Sketch of Sofie's Room activity by Sara Wookey



▲ Inviting participant to draw and map their experience



▲ Response to prompt to draw the movement trajectory inside of *Sofie's Room*

Outcomes

FIVE THEMES AND THREE SALIENT CONCEPTS emerged from the research process. Each of these is discussed in turn in the following sections, incorporating material drawn from the study's interviews, readings, observations, and direct participation.

Emergent Themes

The five themes that emerged during the research process are key elements needed for a project such as *Sofie's Room* to be collaborative and participatory. These key elements are:

1. **THINKING** with the artist as part of the commissioning process.
2. **QUESTIONING** terms such as 'mediation' and 'exhibition'.
3. **ENCOURAGING** embodied exploration and intuitive participation among visitors.
4. **INVITING** critical thinking about participation and who the project is for.
5. **STRETCHING** the concept of the museum within an exhibition space.

THINKING WITH THE ARTIST

The development of *Sofie's Room* benefited tremendously from the careful involvement of museum staff members in terms of *thinking with the artist*. Øystein Rafoss, who served as the project manager for *Sofie's Room*, explained in my interview with him that there was a strongly collaborative 'thinking-through process between artist and museum staff'. In discussing how artists are selected for the CTWU series, Rafoss explained that the museum staff did not want to simply say, 'come here artists, please do this'; instead, they wanted it to be a joint process. Another way of articulating that outlook, according to Aadland Sørvåg, was to be 'alongside' the artists and to appreciate their collaborative efforts and expertise in the disciplines of visual art, dance, and choreography.

The collaborative theme extended to the MUNCH staff members. In a joint interview with Rafoss, Aadland Sørvåg, and Fonn Tømte (the head of learning and co-curator of *Sofie's Room*), there was an emphasis on the importance of collaboration from the project's inception. Rafoss noted that, 'We have this great team of technicians who are very important to the project. They were invited on board to process and came up with solutions to build everything'. Aadland Sørvåg added, 'the one big difference with this project and other contemporary art exhibitions is that, with other contemporary art exhibitions, the artist has a vision and explains it to technicians and architects.'

My impression when observing such values and listening to these dialogues among museum experts who are part of the commissioning and implementation processes is that what the CTWU series did was to complicate a one-way dialogue, including certain innate hierarchies of museums and to allow a productive entanglement between the artists and the museum team when it came to decision making. This produced a sense of 'with-ness' rather than a distinct line of vertical hierarchy extended from managers to artists and technicians. This form of commissioning artists and implementing a project demonstrates a willingness to attend to the expertise of others. It requires humility and an acceptance of risk and might serve as an example for other ways of positioning people within a production process in museums that can contribute to equality, inclusion, and participation.

Collaboration across all aspects of participatory programming is important not only for bringing together an event that includes different departments but also for effective research and audience engagement. The spirit of co-creation that

is inherent in collaborative projects supports methods of participation that can extend into the final product. In other words, the offer of co-creation is extended not only to museum audiences as participants but also within the experience of the staff of the museum and external researchers as a means of working together. It is a process and product enhanced by multiple knowledges, inviting ecological and holistic ways of producing and experiencing art.

QUESTIONING TERMS

One issue that came up frequently during the research was the use of terminology when considering what to call *Sofie's Room*. Is it a 'mediation', an 'exhibition', or something else? It was important for some members of the team that the project be called a mediation project and not an 'exhibition'. In my interview with Aadland Sørvalg she stated that:

I argued against calling it an exhibition because I felt that the framework in the traditional exhibition facilitates the artistic vision rather than it being a distinctly collaborative endeavour. The arms-length space given to an artist doing an exhibition isn't there to the same degree in a mediation project.

I find this argument against the use of the word 'exhibition' important. The comment suggests that the term 'exhibition' represents the way in which the artist was commissioned and how the project implementation was carried out (as discussed in the first element above) rather than how it is received by museum participants. It prompted me to consider how much the use of wording affects those who are experiencing the project. Even in this report I wonder about the selection of the word 'project' over 'artwork' or, perhaps, 'exhibition' to describe this work.

The concern that emerged among the team was that calling it an 'exhibition' would negate elements of collaboration within the process of making *Sofie's Room*. In considering such dilemmas it is useful to turn the question around to ask, 'what does this terminology do (or not do) for the museum participant's experience of it?' We might also ask, 'who are terms for and what individuals are considered when deciding on them?'. In this way we can begin to get a more wholistic picture of what language does in the museum. As these reflections on my part have surfaced late in the research process, I have not been in a place to ask this question directly to other participants, so it feels necessary, here, to include.



I argued against calling it an exhibition because I felt that the framework in the traditional exhibition facilitates the artistic vision rather than it being a distinctly collaborative endeavour.

Tove Aadland Sørvåg, Curator for the CTWU series and Concept Developer

Asking questions about the language associated with *Sofie's Room* can support the ongoing process of trying on different terminologies with future iterations of the CTWU series. In doing so it is important to consider the meaning and impact for the multitudes of people who collaborate to co-create it and who experience it in its final stage. Terminology is a concern both for a museum and for its publics, and it has a role in shaping the broader identity of a museum. It feels important to get terminology right.

My experience as an external researcher and visitor to the museum was that, despite these staff concerns, the term 'mediation' was far less prevalent than the word 'exhibition' both in the marketing of *Sofie's Room* and in conversations about it. The argument for the 'mediation' nomenclature did not seem to be influential enough to shift the default or contrasting perspectives that saw it as an 'exhibition'. The exact reasons for this remain unclear to me, and I expect that it will continue to be a concern as MUNCH moves forward in its marketing efforts and seeks to decide upon the terminology of their programming.

When leaving my first site visit to MUNCH as part of my research on *Sofie's Room* I was struck with how performative the space of the exhibition/mediation felt to me. Some of that response was influenced by my perspective as a dance artist and scholar, for whom the conspicuous use of open space, lights, music, and moveable objects – all synchronised in time – point to a performance space. The mediation or exhibition, as it may be, was shaped by its artists, both involved in dance and performance, which brings up the further question of what role the artists should have in deciding the terminology used by the museum. The discussions that the team had regarding the term 'social choreography' may offer an alternative direction for what to call projects such as *Sofie's Room* in the future. In any case, the discussion of these terms should be careful and ongoing, and the those involved in deciding on terminology should look carefully at their meaning and what they do for the project, keeping in mind multiple stakeholders across disciplines, experiences, and expertise.

ENCOURAGING EMBODIED EXPLORATION

Sofie's Room invites participants to freely explore a space laid out for them where they can engage with, touch, move in, and play creatively at their leisure. One of the goals of the space is to encourage participants to engage in physical movements as part of creative thinking. The invitation to move, play, interact, make sounds, and change the environment with one's physical presence is at the heart of this participatory project and of the CTWU series. The element of embodied engagement is a key inclusion.

Dance scholars often argue for a physical, practice-based way of being in the world as a form of knowledge. *Sofie's Room* is likewise grounded in this approach, using the phenomenon of embodiment to stretch our understanding of museum gallery spaces as a world to explore with and through our bodies. Ways of relating to the world that are body-based, through action and movement, and that occur in physically shared spaces, can contribute to changing the conditions of a museum as well as our broader world.

A phenomenological approach that argues for the corporeal knowledge of the world that is attained through embodied experience is also mirrored in the writing of Vivian Sobchack (2004). In claiming that our experience emerges through our body and, innately, our senses, Sobchack argued for the body as the realm of sense-making and not just as a visual subject (p. 24). What *Sofie's Room* encourages in its visitors is being aware of one's body or, as Sobchack described it, being 'housed in our bodies' (p. 183). Sobchack goes on to further articulate her argument for the body within the experience of the world by saying:

It seems imperative that we move from merely thinking about 'the' body (that is, about bodies always posited in their objective mode, always seen from the position of another) to also feeling what it is to be 'my' body (lived by me uniquely from my side of it, even as it is always also simultaneously available to and lived by others on their side of it). (2004:187)

As a film specialist, Sobchack is unexpectedly critical of visual culture. She writes,

I want to foreground the way in which our culture's reduction of vision to the merely visible constitutes our epistemological relation to our own bodies and the bodies of others as impoverished, alienated, and two-dimensional – and, conversely, I want to explore those structures that constitute our ontological relation to our bodies as rich, ambiguous, and multidimensional' (p.182).

This concept of a physically engaged and collaborative epistemology supports my own interest in articulating the ways in which an awareness of embodiment encourages new ways of relating with oneself, the site, and other individuals.

In my interview with Aadland Sørvåg at MUNCH she expressed what embodiment meant to her in relation to the space of the museum by saying,

I wanted to create a museum space that when you entered you let your shoulders drop, that you could breathe a little bit more and just be in another way and not be so uptight, where you are told 'don't touch' and 'don't talk too loud'. I wanted to create a space where, when you entered, you immediately understood that this is your space and you were not going to do anything wrong in this space.

This emphasis on a sense of agency and of allowance associated with physicality led to the term 'intuitive participation,' which Sørvåg used to describe engagement that can happen without the audience feeling a need to analyse or understand – they can just enter and start doing. She further explained:

For CTWU I would like to show or establish that in this space you have other knowledges. Or other things that are important. So, the knowledge that is valued in CTWU is about how you take up space, how you use your body, how you interact with someone else. It is not about knowing, 'in the 1960s...'. This is a comment on that [need to know]. It is not that. Being able to use other competences. That is where I come to the 'intuitive participation' where I feel that points to the fact that you already inherent a lot of knowledge, you do not have to go out and learn. It is a way of using a space where they [participants] don't have to learn some kind of measurable knowledge to start doing. It has to do with a bodily way of knowing.



▲ A school group participant engaging with the magnets in *Sofie's Room*

Embodiment and intuition become key sources of knowledge that *Sofie's Room* not only encourages but asks for, by first recognising that museum visitors have a body, and they bring their entire body, not only their eyes, with them to the museum; and secondly, by recognizing that those bodies are intelligent and intuitive and knowledgeable.

Roza Moshtanghi, one of the artists responsible for *Sofie's Room*, explained that participants are encouraged to enter with their whole body, not just their eyes:

When they [participants] know that they can touch things and they can move around, even though the wall looks like this spectacular work of art in a way, the frame is big, things are contrasted . . . then you tell them 'You can touch this' . . . you kind of destroy the contract of the museum.

One 'destroys the contract' of the museum not only through the displacement of objects and inviting modes of play, but by acknowledging the body of the visitor and encouraging and celebrating those bodies as generators of knowledge.

During my site visits and discussions with staff and participants, I witnessed the remarkable range of possibilities that a project like *Sofie's Room* offers to museum visitors, both for children and adults. The two school groups I observed actively engaged with the exhibition materials, forming collaborative

Embodiment and intuition become key sources of knowledge that Sofie's Room not only encourages but asks for, by first recognising that museum visitors have a body, and they bring their entire body, not only their eyes, with them to the museum.

social groups. These groupings were sometimes exclusive spaces where only certain participants were welcome. At times, this engagement included rowdy moments of pleasure and provoking acts of testing boundaries.

The invitation to bring one's whole self to *Sofie's Room* and the allowance of new modes of being and behaving in the otherwise constrained space of museums is significant. It begins to change the rules of the contemporary art museum from one in which we are to behave 'properly' to one where a form of 'misbehaving' might be welcome. This invitation also comes with questions around boundaries in terms of what is allowed, or not allowed, when it comes to preserving the integrity of the artworks and museum and enforcing respect for other people. These issues may provoke discomfort within a trial-and-error approach to the new. What *Sofie's Room* does is serve as an incubation or experimental space to try out levels of allowance and to learn from them for future participatory programming.

INVITING CRITICAL THINKING

A common theme in the interviews was the need for consideration and reflection about whom participatory programmes serve. A central issue was the need to take the participants and their experience seriously and not view it as something, to quote one of the staff members, that is 'over there, with the kids'. There was some discrepancy among the museum staff regarding the appropriate age groups for projects such as *Sofie's Room* – some indicated



▲ A school group participant engaging with the magnets in *Sofie's Room*

that it should be for all ages while others argued that it was more appropriate and worked best for children under a certain age. These conversations often emerged from moments when participants were behaving in a way that caused concern on the part of museum staff who were overseeing the space as part of their job. My experience working alongside the MUNCH team during this research was that there was a general agreement that all participants and their responses and interactions within the space should be welcome. However, this stance was tested when participants began to engage in behaviours such as throwing the magnets, climbing on each other's shoulders, or creating offensive images and words on the wall.

In speaking with an anonymous gallery host, who was clearly frustrated, it was shared that a group of 7th graders had used the magnets to spell out profanities and racist language. Similar issues happened frequently enough to exasperate the attendants, putting pressure on them to know when or when not to mediate. Similarly, the onus on teachers, parents, and/or guardians of the children to promote or restrain certain behaviours may not be clear in the context of spaces such as *Sofie's Room*. However, these situations give rise to an opportunity to think together on what participation allows for in a museum, what behaviours are considered unacceptable, and how to respond to such actions.

Transparency when such issues arise as well as an established response protocol for such potential behaviour is important. These innate tensions are part of the process of creating participatory exhibitions within a museum space. What this conversation signalled was not so much if such behaviour exists but, rather, how to use the platform of participatory exhibitions to work through responses to foster spaces that are both safe and open.

An expansion on this issue came from Mathias Ørland, the shift coordinator of *Sofie's Room*, who stated in our interview that:

It's supposed to feel free, to give some kind of freedom to express yourself within the room. Something about cooperation. That the audience or participants feel that they are actively engaging with the space. We want people to express themselves and to be curious. We want it to be interesting. Obviously, we are a museum. So, you have to toe this line between giving people, how shall we say, a co-creation and interactive space while at the same time giving them an art experience.



It's supposed to feel free, to give some kind of freedom to express yourself within the room. Something about cooperation. That the audience or participants feel that they are actively engaging with the space.

Mathias Ørland, Shift Coordinator



▲ *Sofie's Room* school group participant engaging with the magnets

What Ørland is revealing is a productive tension between aspects of such projects that involve spaces that offer freedom, cooperation, engagement, expression, curiosity, and interest while also being an 'art experience'. There are certain social expectations for participating in an 'art experience', but some participants may push up against those boundaries and, possibly, go even further into offensive, destructive, bullying, or dangerous behaviour. Where, then, is the line between participation and allowance? And who are such projects for? These questions are ones that museums can actively engage with, and will most likely need to engage with if they want to explore the potentials of participatory programmes.

Sofie's Room revealed many of the challenging and complicated ways in which participatory art projects can intersect with power dynamics, hierarchies inherent in museums, the politics of social organisations, and the expectations of audiences. The project also highlights where power lies within a space and how the activities within are affected by that power. One of the staff members referred to *Sofie's Room* as a 'kernel' of potential understanding and learning for the museum that can provide fertile ground for growth and development. Museum staff and artists can use such kernels to better understand participatory spaces and learn how to engage with and employ such potential.

The CTWU series aims to be seen as a critical project in the museum. There is a committed attempt to succeed with the series and a willingness to learn through reflection and analysis on the part of its creators – a key component of practice as research. The project's creators firmly believe that the CTWU series brings with it an opportunity to examine the meaning of 'participation' as a concept and a tool in museum contexts.

STRETCHING THE CONCEPT OF THE MUSEUM

In my interview with Tominga O'Donnell, the senior curator of contemporary art at MUNCH, they emphasized that the tenth-floor exhibition space where *Sofie's Room* is installed is a space that is flexible in how it is used. The space is at the top of the museum, where the building bends, forming what O'Donnell described as a 'queerness built into the structure of the museum'. The gallery space has a different feel to it than other parts of the museum due to its high, angled ceiling, and it is viewed by the staff as being malleable and able to support a large variety of exhibitions. Due to the pedigree of the shows produced there, it is also deemed as an important space in the museum. Considering these features highlights the importance of how participatory projects such as *Sofie's Room* are positioned within an overall museum, both physically and socially.

This room has a history of contemporary art programming, including the work of the internationally recognised visual artists Tracey Emin and Sandra Mujinga. Such associations can affect the ways in which regular audiences perceive other exhibits in the same space. When creating *Sofie's Room*, the artists wanted to stretch the concept of the museum, but only far enough to invite questions and curiosity. It was important for the project's creators that participants should not entirely forget that they are in a museum. Roza Moshtanghi explained:

We cut out some of the floor to remind the audience that this is part of a museum, it is not something else. It is a museum. Even the way we put the benches; everything reminds you of the museum. You do not think you are somewhere else. But, at the same time, there is something wrong. I mean museums do not have a fountain in the middle. That is also something I hear a lot from children when I am in the room, 'but how is that [fountain] allowed, I couldn't bring my water bottle inside. How is this possible?'.

There is something significant in the artists wanting to stretch the museum space to give the participants the experience of something being 'wrong'. In this wrongness there is the possibility for a novel type of experience; and such wrongness would not exist if the space were not a museum. This tug between the recognisable and the unrecognisable is where opportunity is found for interacting directly (through touch and movement) with the space, for testing the boundaries of normative behaviour, and for finding out what is possible within such a space.

With *Sofie's Room* the artists were very conscious about making an installation by 'using the museum's logic' and referencing that through shape and form. For example, the fountain in the centre of the exhibition is framed by a box that, according to the artists, represents the box-like shape of the gallery and of the overall museum. Roza Moshtanghi explained that such design features were intended to create a sense of contradiction:

It looks like a museum; it doesn't look like the playground. That was also something for us that was important – that it does not look like something else. It looks like a work of art in the museum, specifically; but you can touch it, but it has their [the audience] way of behaving. And the floor, I think, is welcoming for being more relaxed in the room or for movement to come out, just because it is a little softer because it reminds you of the floors that are made for movement.

Sofie's Room is intended to be both contemplative and playful. Being quiet, playful, and chaotic are all welcomed in this space. This approach highlights how the CTWU series pushes the boundaries of existing conventions/norms by welcoming a diversity of uses, thereby stretching our concept of a museum gallery. The results of such provocations, which is to say, how participants behave in that space, invite a curiosity about what boundaries (if any) might surround the invitation of new behaviours in the gallery spaces of a contemporary art museum. *Sofie's Room* was a testing ground in a longer and larger process of understanding what participatory projects do in museums and what level of tolerance museums have for their outcomes.

Emergent Concepts

The commissioning of a choreographer and a visual artist engaged in performance to work as a collaborating artistic team for *Sofie's Room* is significant. The team emphasized the use of the term 'social choreography' for their endeavour. In using this term, they provided an invitation for social-spatial-temporal insights about the project's outcomes. The collaborating artists discussed topics such as observing people perform, 'getting people to move', and their deep interest in the human outcomes of their provocations. In my interview with Roza and Ronak Moshtanghi, they discussed the social component of the performing arts which, in their estimation, includes the act of watching. The focus of this gaze is not on the artwork per se, but on people. For example, Roza stated that, 'most of the time we work on who is watching who, when I am sitting watching this'. The artists' interest in 'watching people doing something' creates a performative situation where the act of participants engaging with materials – in this case magnets – to create, recreate, and deconstruct images, as well as walking, sitting, lying down, playing, and engaging socially in the space, becomes a performance understood as social choreography.

This co-making of place through participation demonstrates that there are many ways to experience a gallery or museum through a social form of participation. Projects such as *Sofie's Room* expand these possibilities. The 'social' part of social choreography is where artists get to explore multiple modes of engagement, including order and disorder and their relevant effects. Roza Moshtanghi elaborates on this understanding of 'choreography' as a collaborative social exercise by saying:

The most interesting thing happening inside the room, for me, in case of choreography – or if you think of it as a choreography – is when things become collaborative, when children start to work with each other and passing the object. Normally they send one person out to look because the frame is too big so they cannot work close, so, if they are a group working there is one going out to look and coming back. I find this very interesting.

This observation suggests that *Sofie's Room* was a space of designed but spontaneous collaboration, where participants engaged in co-creation and the supportive sharing of perspectives. Choreographic methods and the shaping of spaces that encourage such interactions (with the room and with



The most interesting thing happening inside the room, for me, in case of choreography – or if you think of it as a choreography – is when things become collaborative, when children start to work with each other and passing the object.

Roza Moshtanghi, collaborating artist of Sofie's Room

other participants) amplifies emerging behavioural patterns and social relations, a concept that has been referred to as the "choreography of the social" (Hewitt 2005:2). The artists' intention to invite movement and interaction in the space supported participation, experience, and interaction, but also inspired collaborative gestures and collectivity.

CHOREOGRAPHING PLACE

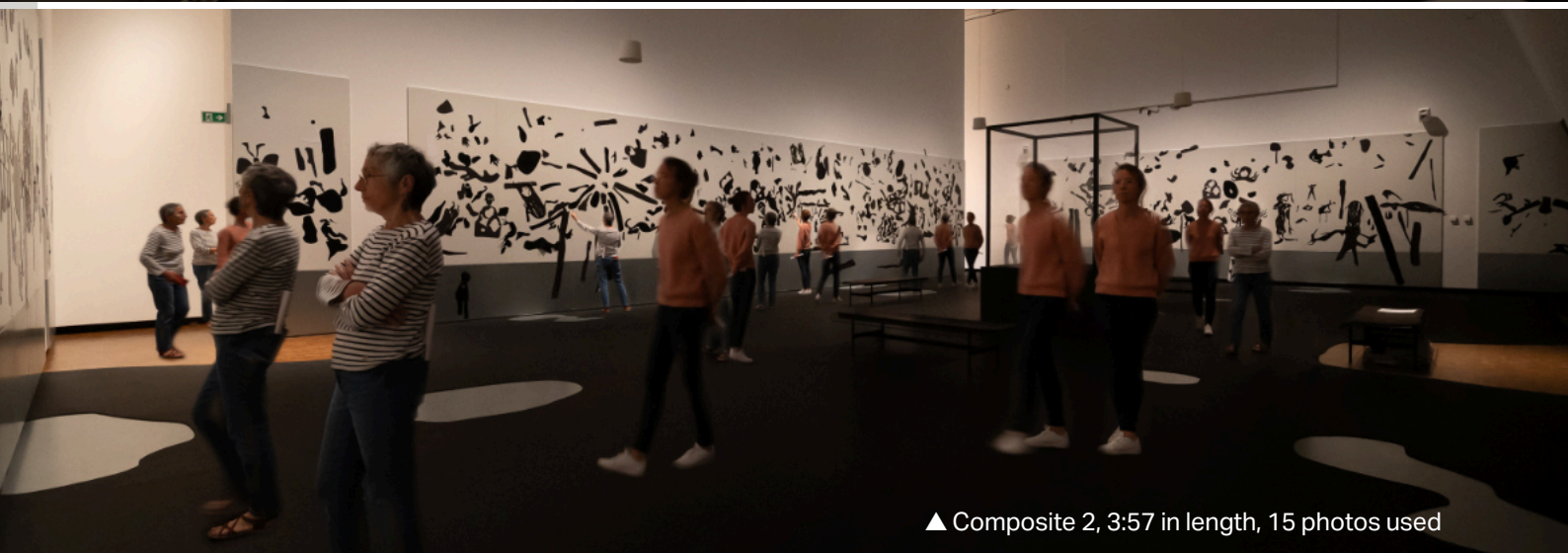
Below are four 'composite' images created as part of the research. The composites draw from multiple photographs, focusing on one or more individuals and tracking their pathway over time by removing all other people from the images before merging them. The captions show the time frame and number of images that the composite covers. The people may have been in the space longer, as not all photos that were taken were used for the composites. These images show the ways in which movement patterns emerged in the space of *Sofie's Room*.

What I was looking for in these images was how the participants co-created the environment through their socio-spatial-temporal activities. I was interested in where they went, how long they stayed there, and how they positioned themselves in the space in relation to the features of the room and to each other. The patterns that are revealed can enhance our understanding of how these participants co-created and co-choreographed their social space. Below I speak to conclusions drawn from the composites that are specific to this particular social context of participants. The project would have to be researched in other contexts to support broader generalisations and, yet, for the purpose of this study they prove helpful to understanding audience experience, practice as research methods and the notion of social choreography as a lens in which to employ in the research.

What we see in composite 1 is one participant moving from the beginning to end of the space, selecting where to engage (in this case, the walls of magnets) and, along the way, they (together with the other participant) step back to see what has been created. This suggests a reflective space in which such visitors can have an experience of engagement with the site and each other. The two participants in composite 2 choose, upon entering, to go left, then circle back to read the wall text. In other moments both visitors take part in moving magnets on the wall, touching the objects and interacting with the exhibition.



▲ Composite 1, 5:12 in length, 17 photos used



▲ Composite 2, 3:57 in length, 15 photos used



▲ Composite 3, 30:56 in length, 26 photos used



▲ Composite 4, 5:20 in length, 12 photos used

In composite 3 two young children interact in the space along the peripheral wall, working with the magnets and at the height of the wall in which they can reach. They are active at the edges of the room, with no engagement with the wall text (written for adults) and little use of the centre of the gallery or interaction with the fountain. This image suggests that where there is something to touch, play with, engage in (i.e. the wall and magnets) is where the interest is for many of the participants in these images. We see, in composite 4, a group of four adults. There is little to no interaction in the space to the right of the fountain and the group tends to stay near each other in proximity. Here we see the varied offerings the space gives to a group and how the open-ended, non-directed space gives them the opportunity, as with the participants, the freedom to roam in the space either alone or with others.

As we are only seeing fragments of the movements in the space and without the full number of participants in the space (as some people have been removed from the image for the sake of reading individual and group movements) we cannot assume these composites tell us everything. But what the images might reveal to us is what *Sofie's Room* allowed for, and is amplified in the composites, and that is choice. The choice of moving through a space with little to no direction of where to go when and in what order. In this way the participants co-create multiple lines of possibility in which a choreography of human movement and engagement emerges. We also see the way in which the social is more than human-to-human and includes human-to-object and how the space of *Sofie's Room* becomes a collaborator with the visitors in this dance of being with (the artwork and each other).

BEING WITH

Insights from dance can be applied more broadly to works such as *Sofie's Room* that take an interest in social choreography. These forms of art reveal that relationality as well as the spaces between people are embodied experiences that are crucial to understand and interrogate. Museums can contribute to this endeavour by becoming spaces not only for 'thinking with' but for rehearsing sociality that celebrates and encourages 'being with' that includes everyone. In this way a more holistic approach to the 'with-ness' of the project can emerge as a means of creating not only new experiences and new knowledge but new and better ways of being together.

The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy wrote a book called *Être singulier pluriel* (translated as 'Being Singular Plural') (1995), which I have found to be helpful in my reflection on the ways in which people tend to position themselves alone and together in museum spaces. Nancy's theories have been referenced by Anne Cooper Albright (2018) in her discussion of the choreographic works of Alain Platel, and they can also be usefully applied to the social choreography that I observed in *Sofie's Room*. Albright clarifies that Nancy's work 'displaces the traditional philosophical take on consciousness as the foundation for selfhood (Descartes's infamous Cogito, ergo sum) and instead posits our being in the world as a being with one another in the world' (Albright 2018:82). In other words, Nancy encourages us to recognize how our relations to other people contribute to our own sense of self.

My observations of *Sofie's Room* indicate that such 'with-ness' can be found between participants who share the museum space, as well as in participants' relation to the objects in that space. Concepts discussed by Albright such as the 'space between people', our 'mutual proximity', and the 'labour of crossing over' (2018:82) are not simply metaphors; they can be seen in the physical relations of the above composite images. This understanding tells us that today's museum is not only about the individual and their relation to art objects but, rather, about the human-to-human relations that emerge when there is a space in which we can look for it.

In the case of participatory projects in museums, there is a potential to understand such works not only as relational spaces, but also as a place to rehearse more collaborative, equitable, and democratic spatial relational practices. Positions of power may be diluted in a space in which visitors/participants can more fully choose their own experiences, unhindered by the typical codes of behaviour of contemporary art spaces. There is, however, the risk (as mentioned earlier in this document) that spaces intended to be inclusive and participatory can also lead to becoming spaces of social in-group dynamics, hierarchies and/or conformism. Collaborative projects can invite participation for all, and they can also lead to less room for autonomy, difference, innovation, self-expression and honest relations. It is pertinent for museums wanting to produce participatory projects to address possible tensions that arise between what is intended and what emerges. While *Sofie's Room* invites a 'thinking together' and, from my observations, promotes a 'being with' there is also an opportunity to think critically about what those mean and what they produce.

These concerns raise crucial questions, including:

- ▶ **How can museums serve as spaces for practicing positive social relations?**
- ▶ **What qualities of participatory projects support the kinds of democratising relational practices that museums are aiming for and its visitors might be wanting?**

The future of museum's participatory programming depends on answering these questions and *Sofie's Room* is an important case to study in this concern. I want to commend the MUNCH on their ability and willingness to be innovate, to try out new things (including bringing me in as their first external practice-based researcher) and the willingness to self-reflect. My experiences of researching participatory projects in museums have taught me that there are multiple ways to produce participatory projects and museums that open to looking at what worked, what was challenging and what was learned is essential to growth. The MUNCH took on all three areas of enquiry and in collaboration. It is that spirit that made this document possible.

Conclusion

TO CONCLUDE I WILL PROPOSE answers to the initial research questions in turn, as informed by my practice-based research and I will suggest ways in which these findings can inform future museum projects. The questions that were laid out to guide this study were:

1

How might the concept of 'social choreography' and the artists' intention of *Sofie's Room* be applied as a lens or research framework to understand audience participation and experience?

2

How does a collaborative practice-based research approach enhance our understanding of these audience dynamics?

Social Choreography as a Lens or Research Framework

Social choreography, a tangible practice that elicits social relations and patterns, serves as a compelling lens through which to examine *Sofie's Room*. My research suggests that by using the lens of social choreography we can come to understand the potentialities and significance of live social interaction and organisation in museums, centring participants' experiences and recognising a dialogue between people in these spaces. We therefore come to better understand the issues around audience participation and the impact of the audience's participation on the museum.

The research revealed that the artists' intention was to choreograph visitors within the space, leading to a diverse array of behavioural and social interactions amongst the participants (with themselves, the site, and each other). However, from my observations I witnessed a space that was less about, 'choreographing the audience' and more the other way around – **the participants were actively shaping, co-creating, and co-choreographing** the environment through their actions and movements. The objects (magnets, fountain, and benches) served as the tools or props with which participants engaged in this choreographing. We might then look curiously at social choreography and ask from where the choreography is emerging. In this case, I speculate that it is coming as much from the actions of the participants as from the hands and minds of the artists.

Yet, the artists of *Sofie's Room* set the stage and props and made the invitation to visitors that made this co-choreography possible.

Viewing and experiencing *Sofie's Room* through the lens of social choreography reveals that **participation is more than engagement with art**; it underscores the significance of live, social interaction, and the construction of social organisation. Social choreography can help us to understand audience impact through a centring of people's experience. This must include physical bodies as well as the spaces between them.

In the case of *Sofie's Room*, the space in-between bodies reveals that **a dialogue of bodies**, not the individual body itself, is what determines the social. We have seen that the artists' intention was to create a dynamic space that invited dialogical movement of bodies across space and time. The dynamics that we are left with to consider are:

1. The performative elements of the project that were about looking and co-creating together – a collaborative and collective becoming in and of the space.
2. The museum's codes of behaviour that interrupted through participant activities of socio-spatial-temporal actions.

In considering these points we can begin to see that museums have opportunities to programme participatory projects in which the participants play a key role in the museum's coming into being through place-making activities. Testing expected modes of being in the museum can productively challenge our expectations of the social, relational dynamics of its visitors.

Collaborative Practice-Based Research Enhances Understanding

A collaborative practice-based research approach enhances our understanding of the dynamics of participatory programmes such as *Sofie's Room*. The nature of the exhibition, in which two artists worked together alongside museum staff, invites co-creative possibilities with audiences and is highly suitable for the kind of collaborative reflective response that is at the heart of practice-based research. This approach emphasises value within the making, implementing, and evaluating processes as a collaborative venture rather than a solitary or autonomous endeavour. Close collaborative relationships have been a part of this research and essential in establishing a dialogical space from the beginning through to the end of the project. For this reason, it has been important in the research and subsequent document to represent the voices of key collaborators to provide evidence and insight into a multiplicity of voices, rather than the singular voice of the named external researcher.

Several important points emerge from this process:

Collaborative research dynamics emulate the values of participatory projects by inviting into the process multiple stakeholders who have helped to shape the exhibition, the gallery space, and its social dynamics.

Practice-based research invites democratic participation, where everyone is included as an agent of change. In this approach, all participants are actively involved in the co-creation, implementation, and research of the project. The community of participants provide the project with its purpose. For example, in the research, the results are influenced and impacted by multiple voices insisting that there are various knowledges that contribute to a guided (by the external researcher) piece of research. This means no one individual dominates the discourse. Similarly, *Sofie's Room* participants shape and choreograph the space rather than being choreographed by it.

The collaborative method emphasises the value of sustained relationships with stakeholders grounded in dialogue. This also means that the sharing of knowledge through co-creation that is found in the object of study (the participatory exhibition) is mirrored (through collaborative practice) in the method of research used to understand it. These collaborative relationships foster new learning experiences for participants, staff, and museum leaders.

Recognising the intellectual mutuality between the institution and the public, especially by acknowledging what children know and integrating that knowledge to improve experiences, can help the institution to reinforce the idea that everyone has valuable knowledge and that the museum is, in essence, a co-creation. By allowing for audience-led and audience-fed content, as well as embracing the uncertainties of research, a discourse emerges that validates collaborative and action-oriented research practices.

The CTWU theme of ‘thinking’ refers not only to thinking with the artist, but also to thinking with the audience, signaling an intention to include audience perspectives. While the collaboration has been between the museum and the artists, there should also be a dialogue with the audience. This is not a perfectly equal triangle, but more realistically and more rewardingly a complex organic relation in which different people with different skills, experience, and perspectives are included at different times and in different ways.

Therefore, there are shifting dynamics between the museum, artist, and audience; these relations are about ‘thinking with’, but such thinking is not static. It is embodied as a mobile, shared, and ever evolving aspect. It is also important to note that the artists selected for the CTWU series all have a background in the performing arts or adjacent fields. Working in theatre practices, these artists are familiar with an artistic field in which collaborative and reflexive thinking with

stakeholders, including audiences, is an essential part of the working process and the success of the project.

There is a difference between contemporary art exhibitions and the CTWU series, since with CTWU, the artists collaborate with museum professionals in collective decisions rather than the artist giving directorial instructions to museum staff. This type of collaboration can be seen in the way that museum staff work with artists, the artists’ work with audiences, and researchers work with stakeholders. It is a way of working with and thinking with people as equals.

Incorporating knowledge from the two previous CTWU exhibitions into *Sofie’s Room* was effective and shows a willingness on the part of the museum to learn from and embrace participant knowledge, integrating that information in an evolutionary way. An example is the data collected from children who discussed experiencing the museum as a whole rather than differentiating the space of individual exhibits. This knowledge-gathering led to the video animation outside of *Sofie’s Room* that demonstrated a route of a young child entering the museum, visiting its galleries, riding the escalator up to the top floor and into the exhibition. This video welcomed visitors outside the gallery and replaced the expected wall text that would typically appear in that location. This gesture recognised the ways of being in the museum from the children’s perspective and honoured their needs and experiences.

As a space for multiple knowledges to inform development, the CTWU series suggests an inclusive approach to epistemology in the museum, meaning that all visitors, including children, hold knowledge that is beneficial for the growth of the museum. CTWU can therefore be a valuable resource for better understanding and improving participatory programmes in the future.

The recognition of children's knowledge of the museum based on their lived experience, and incorporating insights from children into the third iteration of CTWU, is an example of respecting the know-how and needs of museum-goers. In this case children were seen as key contributors to collaboratively creating the offer of *Sofie's Room*. The focus of the newly developed materials was on introducing, not explaining, the exhibition, thereby making it more effective and accessible for this audience.

I conclude this section with a quote from social anthropologist Tim Ingold in his book *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge, and Description*. Discussing the ways in which people can shape their environment, he says:

It appears that people, in their daily lives, merely skim the surface of a world that has been previously mapped out and constructed for them to occupy, rather than contributing through their movements to its ongoing formation. (Ingold 2011:44)

Participatory programmes such as *Sofie's Room* and the CTWU series can challenge this situation, by providing opportunities for everyone (artists, staff, audiences, and researchers of all kinds) to contribute, through their movements and experiences, to the ongoing formation of a museum. The museum should strive to create further spaces of opportunity in and beyond mediation and learning in the museum. The goal is to influence other areas of practice within the walls of the institution and extend the knowledge that is gained to other cultural institutions and audiences.

Informing the Future Museum

Sofie's Room and the CTWU series can inform future participatory museum programmes both within and outside of MUNCH. Programmes such as CTWU are already producing what the **International Council of Museums (ICOM)** statement asks for from museums in terms of participation and communities. The statement (quoted below) emphasises the need for and value of participatory programmes. Such programming is part of the process by which museums are changing, expanding, and evolving to meet the needs of the current era. Recognising a need to renew their statement on museums, ICOM re-wrote their museum definition in 2022 as follows:

Museums are democratising, inclusive, and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing (ICOM n.d.).

The introduction of the word 'participatory' and 'active partnership with and for diverse communities' opens a much larger field of consideration of participation and its potential for those engaging with and working in the museum. It positions the CTWU series and a project such as *Sofie's Room* as examples of how museums can be participatory with their communities, and it supports the value of such programming in 21st-century museums. In her interview for the current research project, Aadland Sørvåg addressed this topic, stating that:

I think it [the ICOM definition] is not just pointing to a future for the museum, but more stating a change that has already happened in the museum. Because what they are pointing to is in, many ways, the arrival of participation in museums. I think an argument for keeping the CTWU series, or something similar to that, is to be this space where you research, collaborate, and invite diverse communities in for participation. It is smart to have a project that analyses how one can do that. And I also think a lot about a critique of audience members as participatory objects in an artwork [and] how to make sure, in one way or another, that it [the participatory project] is emancipatory and not just extractive.

This prompting to make sure that participatory projects are 'emancipatory' might be a jumping off point for improving their implementation. In this point of consideration, museums must remain vigilant in their interest to be inclusive spaces that give people incentives and opportunities while retaining creative opportunities for participants that have integrity and are safe and forward-looking. Part of the solution may be offering different types of exhibits and experiences for different types of people with different needs and in different locations, with a choice of what people want to engage with. What can become a concern is that institutional or choreographic projects, even ones that aspire to be emancipatory and/or inclusive, might subsume people into systems and frameworks, visions and social dynamics that don't always provide agency and wellbeing for the participants. In part because satisfying everyone is an ambitious and often hard to reach goal. If, however, you have a diversity or pluralism of available projects with different characteristics then the goal of diverse and inclusive participation becomes more likely.

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Biography

Sara Wookey (PhD, MFA, BFA)

Sara works across the arts, culture and academic sectors in the UK, US, EU, and SE Asia exploring how dance and performance participate in the evolving project of the contemporary art and heritage museums. Her research extends to include embodied methods of archiving, presenting, collecting, and conserving dance and live performance in museums, an approach that has been influenced by her work as one of seven dancers certified to transmit the repertoire of seminal choreographer and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer. She is also an artist making work for museums including the collaborative works with landscape architect Rennie Tang and has a work in the permanent collection of the Van Abbemuseum.

Sara has served as an Associate Researcher at Tate Modern and Tate Britain (2017–2018), as the curator of young people's performance at Tate St. Ives (2015), and as an associate researcher at the University of New South Wales on the project *Precarious Movements: Choreography and the Museum* (2022–2024). Her practice research has been published by Valiz Press, Routledge, and Art Review; and her upcoming monograph *Dance and the Museum: Relational Matters* will be published by Bloomsbury in 2026. Currently an Affiliate Researcher at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities at the University of Cambridge, Sara continues to explore themes of embodied knowledge, human relation, and equity. She is a trained Relational Dynamics coach and advisor to artists, cultural leaders and arts organisations worldwide. www.sarawookey.com

Wookey
Works

Addendum

Timetable and Activities

Stage 1: Relation (Spring)

Duration: 15th – 17th April

Activities:

- ▶ Literature review on collaborative practices in museum settings.
- ▶ Site visits to observe and document the exhibition space.
- ▶ Practice-based research through immersive engagement with Sofie's Room.
- ▶ Interviews with key stakeholders involved in the project.
- ▶ Reflection sessions to capture immediate insights and observations.

Informal 20–30 minute interviews with the following individuals:

Tominga O'Donnell, Senior Curator of Contemporary Art

Birgitte Cathrine Aga, Head of Innovation and Research

Mathias Ørland, Shift Coordinator

Øystein Rafoss, Project Manager

Christin Fonn Tømte, Head of Learning

Tove Aadland Sørvåg, Concept Developer Learning

Gustav Jørgen Pedersen, Head of Research

Stage 2: Documentation (Summer)

Duration: May 29th – 1st June

Activities:

- ▶ Continued observation and documentation of Sofie's Room.
- ▶ Collaboration with a photographer to visually capture the experience of the exhibition.
- ▶ Drawing, mapping, and other creative methods to document the exhibition's spatial and experiential aspects.
- ▶ Interviews with visitors to gather feedback and insights.
- ▶ Reflection sessions to analyse collected data and refine the research focus.

Stage 3: Response (Autumn)

Duration: 1st - 3rd August

Activities:

- ▶ Hybrid reflection sessions combining in-person meetings and virtual discussions.
- ▶ Analysis of data collected throughout the project.
- ▶ Development of reflective, practice-based outputs to show the value of the research.
- ▶ Preparation of a seminar to disseminate findings and engage with the broader academic and museum community.

Detailed Methodology

COLLABORATING

Through my close collaborative research exchange with one of the MUNCH staff members I learned about the approach of mediation in the museum. I reflected with and encouraged her in her research, while also being guided by her in-house expertise. It was through this collaborative relationship and other similar engagements that knowledge exchange, openness to learning, and mutual respect for multiple ways of knowing and of individual lived experiences could be recognised and practiced as part of this research project.

Engaging in a practice-based research approach involved closely collaborating with interlocutors in MUNCH's departments of curation, research, and learning. This collaboration was facilitated through a series of online conversations, e-mail correspondence, interviews, site analysis, drawing, mapping, writing, reading, and reflection. I worked with the MUNCH team and an invited external photographer to document the research project in the museum, establishing collaborations with those who have visual expertise and artistic practice as a method of documentation.

My collaboration with the MUNCH team included collectively developing research questions, setting a timeline, tracking milestones, and engaging in numerous exchanges during the development and finalisation of this reflective piece. I also approached my research with audiences as a collaborative engagement, focusing on discussion and learning rather than imparting

knowledge and being mindful of my physical positioning in relation to those I engaged with during the research. I tried to be responsive to body language and engage in dialogue from the perspective of a collaborator in conversation.

INTERVIEWING

Museum experts that I interviewed include Birgitte Cathrine Aga, Head of Innovation and Research; Tominga O'Donnell, Senior Curator of Contemporary Art; Christin Fonn Tømte, Head of learning and co-curator Sofie's Room; and Aadland Sørvåg, Curator for the CTWU series and Concept Developer, I also interviewed stakeholders and staff working closely to the Sofie's Room project and the CTWU series including Roza and Ronak Moshtaghi, the artists of Sofie's Room; Mathias Ørland, Shift Coordinator; and Øystein Rafoss, Project Manager for Sofie's Room.

It was exciting to witness the experiences and generosity within the interviews that were exploratory, honest, and insightful. These interviews revealed a deep commitment to and ambition for the CTWU series and to Sofie's Room. There was an overall sense of expansive thinking, sharing, care, and knowledge. This investment at times led to concerns about certain components of the project, for example, initial ideas of the artists that needed to be reconsidered due to the COVID 19 pandemic. Yet, those issues seemed to have offered more time and space for exploration, collaboration, and testing of the project. There were considerations of participatory works and productive interests that arose in the conversations, such as how these works are commissioned and brought into the museum, ways they challenge the ecology of museum, issues related to cross-departmental activities, and how the works might have an afterlife in the museum as part of its archive.

The interviews with museum professionals focused on approaches and attitudes towards participatory projects and practice as research. I conducted nine interviews during my site visits and remotely with MUNCH leadership, staff members, and selected artists. The interviews with staff lasted between 20–90 minutes, and were conducted in-person or online. These were recorded interviews in which I asked a series of questions regarding the respondent's roles and associations with practice-based research, collaboration, and participatory practices.

These interviews revealed a deep commitment to and ambition for the CTWU series and to Sofie's Room. There was an overall sense of expansive thinking, sharing, care, and knowledge.

Mini-interviews with children from two school groups and invited guests were conducted in the exhibition space and directly outside of it. These mini-interviews were informal conversations and were conducted with students from 7A and 7B Svendstuen school and local residents/museum-goers based in Oslo. The conversations included asking questions as I sat or moved alongside the participant, engaging with the site in a collaborative way. Ethical procedures were in place with necessary waivers and safeguarding. With museum participants, I was interested in their embodied experience and reflection on their spatial, social, and temporal interactions in the exhibition. Some of the responses from the participants during my site visits are presented below and reflect a critical-friend approach to the questions.

I asked participants, 'What was it like when you entered Sofie's Room?' and answers from the school group ranged from 'relaxing' and 'fun' to 'weird' and 'smelly'. Others expressed it being 'interact-able', 'dark' and 'traumatic'. Answers from family groups included, 'a lot of pictures' and the perspective that 'they [the artists and/or museum] are trying to make it scary'. When I asked, 'What is your favourite part?', answers ranged from 'fountain' and 'it is funny to take the magnets and put them up'. One response was, 'there is only one thing to do here, and it is very funny'. When asking, 'is there anything you wish were different?' the general answer was 'no'. When asking, 'Do you feel free to do anything here?' or, 'Are there rules or anything not allowed?', some of the responses were, 'it might feel a bit free, not completely sure' and 'I believe there are rules. Don't break anything.' One participant responded, 'I think I can throw anything'.

SITE OBSERVATION AND PARTICIPATION

It was important to visit the site on two different occasions to first, learn about the project through the museum's point of view by interviewing stakeholders (museum staff and artists) and second, to engage with visitors and understand the project from the perspective of some of the participants and document their experiences.

Taking part in the exhibition offer as a practitioner researcher included engaging with Sofie's Room and its key elements. Taking part in playing with the materials and with other participants, walking through the space, sitting, looking, listening, and lying on the benches and on the floor to sense the space allowed for reflecting on my own experience as a visitor to the museum

and to this exhibition. In this way I embodied the experience through my movements within the exhibition, influenced by the movements of others, and practiced learning through being and doing to better understand the exhibition.

DRAWING AND MAPPING

The invitation (both for myself and others) to engage in creative and exploratory processes to think and co-create together was important. These methods resonated with the approach of the artists of Sofie's Room who proposed participation in the form of co-creation. Drawing and mapping provided an intriguing avenue for considering what the exhibition produces and how it directly links to the human imaginary.

Part of the practice research was to employ drawing and mapping on my personal Apple iPad as a means of understanding experience in non-verbal ways. I produced a series of sketches during a visit to the space and sat along the edge of the gallery drawing what I saw. What these brief sketches encouraged was to bring in creative practices to engage with the exhibit. In this way, I was no longer the named 'researcher' in the room, standing by the sidelines, observing with pen and paper. Rather, I was a participant engaged in similar acts of creativity as the other visitors in the space. Together, we were co-creating the space through acts of drawing, re-arranging shapes on walls and on screens.

I took the opportunity to further invite other visitors into drawing and mapping activities (both in the gallery and outside of it) on my second site visit. Two school groups and a group of local families consented to allowing me to engage with them and their children. I asked questions such as, 'Draw the pathway, as you remember it – the one that you took from when you entered the gallery space to where you exited'; and 'Draw what you recall engaging with in the space'. I also asked more open-ended questions in such as, 'What was it like when you first entered the room?'. Part of the gathering of insights from the participants was to invite them to draw and map on a shared scroll of paper as another way of responding to the prompts.

MAPPING DATA

I also invited my main MUNCH team collaborator, Aadland Sørvåg, to work with me on another mapping exercise, using the produced drawings of participants and professional photographs to identify themes and relationships. This practice of co-creating connections on the page allowed us to consider our research questions as we positioned ourselves (both mentally and physically) alongside the documentation. We stayed creatively curious about ways that visual documentation can give rise to new combinations of knowing, discovering, thinking, and analysis. Moving our bodies (sitting, crouching, pinning things on the wall, and gesturing) was a way to embody analytical thought processes, jog memories, and challenge assumptions of what research looks and feels like.

What we found was that our interactions with the materials were another kind of co-creating. The exercise was less focused on what happened and more focused on engaging new processes of collaborative thinking. We asked how our instinctual gestures of pairing imagery might encourage new readings and memories of the activities observed in Sofie's Room, and how they might align with ways in which the participants we had observed and worked with experienced the space.

Rather than becoming fixated behind screens and data, we actively engaged with materials collected in the research, touched them, moved them around, re-arranged them, and encouraged multiple readings of information. We sought to honour a way of knowing through the body and hands-on reflective process that was open-ended, experiential, and fluid. In other words, we were concerned less with an actual outcome of fact-finding and more with a slippery curiosity that refused to land on any conclusions. Allowing for this space of play felt meaningful in the process. This reflective and active moment, post data collection, felt necessary. In place of it producing 'results' in a more traditional sense, this light touch, collaborative practice-based research enquiry reflected an important aspect of practice research in the museum – engaging creative practice and experience as a means of knowing through doing.

In reflecting back on our collective insights, Aadland Sørvåg and I consider such research as an experiment to decipher how mapping with the audience could be a way of understanding and documenting. What we came to understand was that our consideration of multiple ways of experiencing a particip-

atory event can be reflected in the myriad ways that research can take place. What we learned is that such participatory research methods can be strengthened by accompanying discussions and possibly informal interviewing as conversation. For example, the questions being asked out loud while mapping with another person, talking and discussing the content, can lead to important questions and insights that can be more robustly evaluated at a later time. We recognise that such experiments lead to knowledge that is influenced both by the data and by our own subjective responses to it. Our intention was not to arrive at quantitative results but, rather, to recognize lived experience – of participants and researchers – as contributing to qualitative analysis. Perhaps these epistemological processes lean towards the performative gesture rather than the intellectual act and, in doing so, challenge what constitutes a legitimate research approach, highlighting knowledge generation as a co-production (in this case with audiences, museum staff, and researchers) and collaborative knowledge generation through co-creation. Perhaps these approaches are not that far off from other modes of research in the museum, but they are noted here as a prompt for considering such methods of research both for those already familiar with it and for those who may not have experienced such forms of enquiry.

PHOTOGRAPHING

Inviting a photographer, Christian Kipp, to visually record the exhibition and the research process brought in another creative practice to engage with the material and provided documentation of the process. Creating images of the exhibition provided material to be considered as part of our data collection and the images of the process opened access to research activities that often go unseen. Engaging with the images as part of the research and having images of the research process is important as it recognises the synergies and influences between them and gives value to the ways in which practice as research unfolds.

As part of his approach with digital photography, Kipp created time-lapse images with an ultra-wide-angle lens set up in a corner of the gallery where Sofie's Room was installed. The interval was set to automatically photograph every eight seconds. Having this interval between the photos made it possible to create composites that showed the movements and trajectories of individual and small groups of people through the space over time. When the

same person appears multiple times, their placement reflects physical aspects of their journey and experience. This way of documenting the gallery pace brought forth new ways of considering the experience of the participants based on their spatial patterns and choices of where to go, what to do, and how to position their bodies. My interest in space, object, and body-relations benefits greatly from these composites as they serve as a document to better understand these phenomena. Sofie's Room provided a space for exploration in which the participant had a choice of where to go in the room – not unlike an improvised dance performance in which the direction of travel is left up to the spontaneous movements of the dancer. In such contexts unpredictability is embraced and surprise is welcome.

READING AND WRITING

Writing for note-taking and reflection played an important role during my somewhat condensed site visits. Due to the scope and timeline of this research project and the interest in practice as research I was mindful of balancing theoretical reading and input, as framed by traditional academic research, against my focus on the everyday lived experience of people across the museum as they contributed to generating new knowledge. Close readings of theoretical materials related to the themes of the project were an important part of grounding my thinking and cross-referencing emerging themes. Texts also provided a grounding of ideas related to practice-based research in museums and underpinned emergent concepts of social choreography, collaboration, and participation.

The process of note-taking can help to flesh out thinking, revealing iterative patterns and themes and capturing of-the-moment thoughts to be digested and analysed later. It was particularly helpful within the somewhat fast-paced site visits where interviews were back-to-back at times and there was little space between activities to reflect but enough time to jot things down on the go and in the moments of engagement.

Research Team

External (MUNCH) Research Team:

- ▶ Sara Wookey (External Researcher)
- ▶ Christian Kipp (Photographer)

Internal (MUNCH) Research Team:

- ▶ Tove Aadland Sørvåg
- ▶ Christin Fonn Tømte

Artists:

- ▶ Roza Moshtaghi and Ronak Moshtaghi

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