EJPAE

Commoning the teaching of art in a museum context:
SMOOTH reflections

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Abstract

Drawing on the experience of a series of multi-art education workshops run in a museum of modern art with the participation of a group of upper secondary school students, this paper reflects on how the philosophy of educational commons might help us rethink the role of the educator in museum-based art-education initiatives. By focusing on the transformations, the challenges, the failures and the openings experienced by the educators of this program in their attempt to work on the basis of the philosophy of educational commons, we arrive at an articulation of what might be referred to as patterns of *commoning teacher agency*. More specifically, based of an ecological model of teacher agency that Priestley et al. (2015) proposed on the basis on the work of Emirbayer & Mische (1998) we identify patterns of *commoning museum educators' agency* that operated on an iterational, a practical-evaluative and a projective dimension. On the iterational dimension, a commoning approach to teaching led museum educators to re-evaluate past experiences, received ideas, and cherished practices, inducing a process of unlearning. On the practical-evaluative dimension, it enabled museum educators to implement new ways of working and relating to students and their worlds, and to come up with ideas and tools that expand "The social, structural and material 'here and now' of possible agency" (Philpott & Spruce 2021, 290) and its distribution. On the projective dimension it enabled museum educators to imagine alternative ways of exercising agency, envisioning a way of commoning the museum. The resultant reorientation of the role of the teacher in museum-based, commons-derived creative art-education practices might be seen as providing a much needed alternative to the pervading neoliberal colonisation of education initiatives in cultural institutions.

Keywords: museum education, music education, educational commons, creative arts education, teacher agency, unlearning

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I.Introduction

In this paper we ask the question: How might the philosophy of educational commons enable us to reframe museum-based art-education practices? We ask this question by drawing on the experience of a series of art-education workshops run in an art museum with the participation of a group of upper secondary school students. More specifically, our theoretical reflection on the collected data aims at inquiring on the possible core constituents of a framework for a commons-based creative museum education, highlighting some of the challenges presented and the shifts needed with regard to the role of museum educators. We

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thus look at the transformations, the challenges, the failures and the openings experienced by the educators in their attempt to work on the basis of the philosophy of commons. On this basis we then attempt to articulate what might be referred to as patterns of commoning teacher agency. The resultant reorientation of the role of the teacher in museum-based, commons-derived creative art-education practices might be seen as providing alternatives to the pervading neoliberal colonisation of education initiatives in cultural institutions (Kanellopoulos & Barahanou 2020)

Setting the scene

Museums and other cultural spaces wish to play an increasing role in taming young people's free time by assuming as one of their prime responsibilities the design and implementation of non-formal educational programs (Beane & Pope 2002; Burton & Scott 2007; Pegno 2019; Roberson 2010; Yellis 2012; Gigerl et.al. 2022; Holdgaard & Boritz 2022). Museums, libraries, music and/or art centers are increasingly seen as "important agencies in new learning societies" with an "educative and educational" role to play, so that they are able to meet the present generation's "need for continuous learning in order to acquire new skills constantly" (Thinesse-Demel 2005, 1; also Bélanger 2004). Time is not to be 'lost'; it should be turned into profitable time (Pinto & Blue 2021). "The organizing forces of neoliberal capitalism" (Räber 2023, 4) lead to a self-imposed urgency to 'exploit time', to participate in activities that combine enjoyment with 'self-development'. Responding to such calls, teaching artists and cultural education workers began "cramming the galleries with art trolleys and other educational paraphernalia" (Kaitavuori 2013, xiii).

Cultural institutions' emphasis on education has been a core aspect of a perceived need for their transformation into 'participatory' institutions. Cultural institutions' participatory turn reflects the need for democratisation (Sternfeld 2018), encouraging content contribution and co-curation (Pointek 2017; Nikonanou & Misirloglou

2023), and upholding the merits of participatory design (Pierroux et.al. 2020). Such efforts to encourage "people to actively engage as cultural participants, not passive consumers" (Simon 2010, ii), occur at the same time as calls for museum de-colonisation gain momentum (Oswald & Tinius 2020; Ariese & Wróblewska 2022). Emphasis on participation has been met with sentiments of optimism and hope (Simon 2010; see also Walmsley 2019; Shettel 2008). Voices of critique have, however, attended to the numerous and subtle ways in which institutional power impedes participation, capitalizing on its rhetorical effects rather than on its empowering potential (Lynch, 2011; Kreps 2013; Klindt 2017). Emphasis on the superficial merits of participation seems to be the rule rather than the exception. For example, reporting on Have a Seat: Mexican chair design today exhibition held at the Denver Art Museum, U.S, journalist Mark Rinaldi celebrates its innovative design as one that "lets visitors experience museum fare as more than just pretty objects". The article's heading reads as follows: "You can sit there. Really" (the New York Times, April 28, 2024)[2].

Attention should be also paid to the imposed obligations on cultural institutions to prove that their work has a clearly measurable impact (Janes & Sandell 2007; Mörsch 2013). Museum education initiatives are asked to play a pivotal role in this race for impact increase in the face of accountability pressures. This goes hand in hand with the vast increase of museum's "reliance on corporate funding" (Wray 2019, 320), while, at same time, the fact "that accepting corporate funding is not a neutral act" (Wray 2019, 320) is artfully masked. As Kaitavuori (2013) has poignantly argued "[a] lot of educational work is [...] funded on social terms to follow local or national governmental agendas" (p. xvii). These developments lead museum education to assume a central role in the advancement of the entrepreneurial museum (Kalin 2018;

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2   https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/23/arts/design/denver-art-museum-mexican-chairs.html

EJPAE: 01 2024 8
*Nikonanou, Kanellopoulos, Moraitopoulou,Viseri; Commoning the teaching
of art in a museum context*

Sternfeld 2018; Kalyva, 2024). Kundu & Kalin (2015) provide a well-grounded critique of "art museum education's reliance on learning and management theories" (2015, 49) that "places art museum education as a space to reflect, deal with open-ended activity, think critically, transgress, and ask unanswered questions—under threat" (ibid., 44). Similarly Kaitavuori has argued that museum education easily falls into the trap of "pleasing audience expectations at any price, because within the institution, education is often accountable in quantitative terms for attendance and media success" (Kaitavuori 2013, xvii). In the context of these concerns, this paper examines the possibility of shaping more open, inclusive and egalitarian approaches to participatory art education initiatives in cultural institutions, based on the *philosophy of educational commons.*

II. Commons in (museum) education

Commons - a wider view

In its earliest use, the notion of commons denotes land that is undivided; land, that together with other natural resources belong to a local community as a whole (Sumner 2017). The philosophy of commons has inspired and at the same time has been shaped by a number of initiatives in areas as diverse as economy (Ostrom 1990), digital technologies (Bollier 2008), political philosophy (Federici 2012; Kioupkiolis 2020), the arts (Sollfrank, Stalder & Niederberger 2020; Kioupkiolis 2019; Tan 2018), culture and cultural heritage (Bertacchini et.al. 2012; Lekakis 2020; Graham 2017) and education (Means, Ford & Slater 2017; Pechtelidis 2018; Pechtelidis & Kioupkiolis 2020). As Stalder & Sollfrank (2020) have put it, "the commons re-emerged, in the English-speaking world, as a major theoretical, political and cultural horizon during the 1990s, and have been articulated within a number of larger perspectives that often refer to one another" (p. 13). Pivotal in this respect is the need for advancing visions

and practices of sustainability, countering the inherent unsustainability of contemporary capitalism, and "building and maintaining cooperative human constructs that protect and/or enable universal access to *economic life goods*" (Sumner 2017, 202).

From a political philosophy perspective, Hardt and Negri (2009) have emphasised that the notion of the commons needs to be expanded to include all "those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledge, languages, codes, information, affects" (p. viii). A core imperative of the philosophy of the commons has been the active engagement with practices of sharing that are based on autonomy, freedom, diversity and equal participation "eschewing top-down, centralizing logics of the state and a profit-driven individualism of neoliberal markets" (Kioupkiolis 2019, 113).

Commons – education

In a certain (Arendtian) sense, education can be seen as a practice of sustainment and renewal of a common world (Arendt 2006/1968; Gordon 2001). Yet, education often produces and reproduces power relationships, perpetuates privileges and hierarchies, performs exclusions (Apple 2007; Giroux 2019) and creates epistemic and aesthetic injustices (Zembylas 2022; Medina 2013; Means 2013). In the face of this, educators that seek to promote educational practices on the basis of the commons need to enter a process of rethinking the role of education and also, to unlearn persistent and sometimes much cherished modes of teaching practice. As Stalder & Sollfrank (2020) have argued, "Unlearning, first of all, requires an understanding of the historicity of all subject positions—which implies that they have been 'made' and thus could also be 'unmade'" (p. 29). Educators that regard their role as masters of knowledge and practices that need to be transmitted assume a position of privilege that may need to be re-considered: "unlearning one's privileges is not just a gesture, and it is only possible

through critical thinking and acting that involves the risk of challenging one's own position" (Stalder & Sollfrank, 2020, 30).

One should certainly acknowledge that often non-formal educational contexts have encouraged the adoption of teaching practices that move away from traditional notions the teacher-as-transmitter, encouraging 'facilitation' or 'mediation' of learning, as well as attention to 'learners' needs'. But one might also point out that the realm of non-formal education has often promoted approaches to learning as an individualistic struggle for accumulating cultural and knowledge capital as one more asset in the race for "the construction of flexible and self-responsible subjectivities with specific predetermined skills and competencies" (Tiainen, Leiviskä & Brunila 2019, 647) that have market-oriented use-value and are taught without any concern for, let alone critique of, the ends served. Thus, to talk, today, about placing students 'needs' at the centre of education may be an invocation of an old and much cherished progressive educational ideal, but it can at the same time be leading us (unintentionally, perhaps) to lend support to discourses that turn "student into a customer whose 'wants' (rather than needs) deserve to be satisfied, without asking 'difficult' questions" (Biesta 2022, 341; Charteris, Smardon & Kemmis 2022).

To look at education from the perspective of the commons may be seen as a different way forward, beyond the modernist-progressivist discourse, and at the same time beyond the neoliberal mis-appropriation of this discourse in the service of market-based logics of learner's 'needs'. To look at education from the perspective of the commons signifies a shift away from "both private appropriation and public central control" (Snir 2016, 121, based on Hardt and Negri 2009). It signifies an important shift from the individual to the collective, a new relationship with knowledge, and also the initiation of egalitarian processes of decision-making. As Means, Ford & Slater (2017) have put it, "[r]ather than the pseudo-reality and mono- chromatic

world of unending commodification constructed by neoliberal common sense, the commons are in fact rich in variation and possibility" (p. 3).

On a general level, the 'commons' induce a constellation of practices that simultaneously operate on three distinct but interrelated levels: that of a) *resources*, (b) *practices*, and (c) *communities*. Thus, common resources/goods are being used, produced and transformed on the basis of commoning processes of collective governance on the basis of freedom, equality and care as manifested through the active and creative participation of the commoners (Kioupkiolis 2019, 116; see also Dellenbaugh et al. 2015, 13; Bollier & Helfrich 2015, 3). Educational commons go well beyond "a mere technical management of resources" (Velicu & Gustavo 2018, 55). The implementation of educational initiatives based on the philosophy of commons induce the initiation of activities that enable everyone involved to contest relationships of domination and to blur distinctions between professionals and amateurs, leaders and led, experts and non-experts. Thus, the philosophy of educational commons may help us actively counter appropriations of education as a de-politicised race for acquiring skills appropriate for the markets of tomorrow, going against learning "as pure process" (Straume 2011, 256-257) devoid of socio-political significations related to wider educational objectives (emancipation, judgement, intellectual dignity, longing for plurality and openness). The commons offer the possibility of a re-politicisation of education through the cultivation of what Snir calls 'a new kind of politics': "Education in common is education without sharp distinction between teachers and learners, one in which all take active part. Such education is therefore far from de-politicization, for it allows learning to be part of a new kind of politics of broad participation in community life" (Snir 2016, 121).

Commons – museum education

The philosophy of educational commons emerge as a particularly fertile perspective through which we could rethink educational work in museums and arts-based cultural institutions. Not least because museums' traditional emphasis on the 'preservation' of the so-called 'common heritage'. There is an ironic twist in this invocation, given the colonialist roots of the civilising and elitist discourse that historically have permeated traditional museum practices (see Ariese 2022) – as Nkiru Nzegwu has aptly shown, the "racial system of knowledge" that underpins western art museums has functioned as "a structural foundation that racially organizes epistemological, social, political, and economic data and interactions along vertical lines that entrench white superiority and dominance" (2019, 369-370; based on Bonilla-Silva 1997). The philosophy of commons moves way beyond this line of thought, suspending vertical lines from a 'primitive' past to a [white] 'civilised' present.

But it also problematises traditional conceptions of museums as public institutions: "if we understand art institutions as public spaces that are not only open to everyone but also strive to be sites that belong to everyone, then we are dealing with the question of the possibility of change" (Sternfeld 2013, 4). The role of museum education initiatives on the basis of the philosophy of commons might be seen as pivotal in this respect, as notions of outcome, benefits, skills, value, participation and creativity, become explicitly re-politicised in a context of participation in decision-making on the basis of equity.

III. Into 'in-and-out-of-sync'

'In-and-out-of-sync': creative dialogues between Russian Avant-garde art and teenagers is an inter-artistic museum education project developed and implemented at the

Museum of Modern Art-Costakis Collection (part of MOMus[3] - Metropolitan Organisation of Museums of Visual Arts of Thessaloniki, Greece).[4]

Twenty five students, 15 to 18 years old, from a vocational high school participated in the program. Accompanied by two of their school-teachers, the students participated in nine three-hour-long weekly meetings, held at the the Museum of Modern Art-Costakis Collection over a period of three months. The program brought together three museum educators, a musician-music educator (hereafter referred to the educators) and a research team (two academics specialising in museum and music education and a researcher responsible for data collection).

Throughout the program participants experimented with approaches to museum space and contents, with modes of teaching, with practices of artistic creation, and with the development of participatory frameworks that are rooted in philosophy of the commons. The program's design was co-created as each meeting constituted the basis of each next step; collective decision-making processes involving both the students and the educators, using tools/processes such as pedagogical documentation, self-reflection, and youth councils.

In-and-out-of-sync invited young people as co-creators inside the museum, encouraging creative visual art experimentations (jagodzinski 2017; Atkinson 2011) together with creative music making that centered on free improvisation and noise music practices (Woods 2019, 2020; Kanellopoulos & Stefanou 2015). Moreover, it sought to find ways of linking this work with the museum collection, and more spe-

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3 https://www.momus.gr/en/momus

4 This project was developed in the context of SMOOTH (2020) Educational Common Spaces. Passing through enclosures and reversing inequalities, 2021–2024, funded by the European Union's Research and Innovation Programme (Horizon 2020), https://smooth-ecs.eu/

EJPAE: 01 2024 8
*Nikonanou, Kanellopoulos, Moraitopoulou,Viseri; Commoning the teaching
of art in a museum context*

cifically with the exhibition "Ivan Kliun. Transcendental landscapes. Flying sculptures. Light spheres" that showcased works by Russian avant-garde artist Ivan Kliun.[5]

The nine meetings built up to the creation of a multimodal installation that used a variety of means to explore different perceptions of 'war and non-peace' – a theme that emerged as a result of collective decision-making processes and created a context for vivid sharing of thoughts and experiences among the participants. The collectively made artwork bore the imprint of these discussions and was exhibited in the so-called 'dark room' in the context of International Museum Day, 2022. The 'dark room' was situated in ground floor of the museum and was granted exclusively to the young participants throughout the program. That room, which the participants later on started calling it their 'headquarters', was intentionally left empty at the beginning of the program, and the educators invited the students to 'make it theirs' by bringing their own personal objects to decorate it over the meetings. It is notable that 'the dark room' continued to host for several months the exhibition of the multimodal artwork created by the students.

Our focus in this paper lies with the role of the teacher. Our main questions, as already stated at the start of the paper, are: which are the challenges presented and the shifts needed with regard to the role of museum educators in the context of a museum education program that operates on the basis of the philosophy of educational commons? How might this re-consideration of the educators' role, allow for a re-articulation of teacher agency? Our analysis will be grounded in a series of short stories based on our field notes, as well as on interview/focus group excerpts. In crafting these stories our intention was to vividly capture the nuances and the complexities of the experience of teaching in this project.[6] The stories attempt to provide a synthesis

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5   https://arthive.com/exhibitions/5790

6   The stories have been shared and discussed via e-mail with the museum educators that
     implemented the program. This serves as a means for member check for accuracy, also

of our discoveries that can then be theoretically probed, allowing us to address the question of the educators' agency in educational commons.

Therefore, the following snapshots from museum educators' engagement in a common-based inter-artistic education program in a museum setting provide a glimpse to the challenges, the failures, the ambiguities and the transformations experienced in the process of this work. In their dedicated effort to implement this program, the educators faced unexpected obstacles, encountered resistances, pushed and negotiated boundaries, explored new ways of sharing and ultimately posed the question of how to think anew the notion of teacher agency; an ever-present sense of vividness, passion and joy has been integral in all this - this has by no means been an academic exercise.

Casting:
Anna, Ilektra, Vaso: museum educators
Mak: music educator
Fani, Alexandra: school-teachers
Joe, Kari, Bachman: Students

"offering participants opportunities to check how their data are used in the context of reporting" (Simons 2014, 460; also Trent and Cho 2014). Headline text in inverted commas comes for our interview data.

1. "Let's not make it look like a classroom this time": initial negotiations around the teachers' role

This is our first meeting. Ilektra, one of the museum educators, tries to be clear right from the start that "we'd like this to be something different [...] we do not want it to be just a school visit to a museum. [...] But we do not really know how all this is going to look like. We are expecting, or rather, we need you [the students] to tell us how. And we have this 'hot' concept: educational commons".

One may say that here, Ilektra directly confronts her identity as a museum educator, renouncing the authority that comes with it. In retrospect, however, we feel that this 'programmatic declaration' may have been a sign of the insecurity that the museum educator is feeling. Calling educational commons a 'hot concept' somehow seems to betray her puzzlement. After many years of experience in museum education programs that are clearly designed, delivered and evaluated, here she is, bewildered, in front of something uneasy and unknown: 'we do not know ... we need you to tell us how".

The two school-teachers that accompany the students to the museum perceive this as going against their very definition of what it is to be a teacher: "It would help us a lot if you could give us some details about the program", Alexandra says. Ilektra provocatively answers: "But that is exactly the point. We have not programmed a set of activities; we are here to decide on this together". Negotiating resistances has been an ongoing process, as the school-teachers' fear of the possibility of failure of the project was to be evident in subsequent meetings as well. Fani, the other school-teacher: "It's the framework that we are mostly in need of. Otherwise students feel lost". Their worries amplify the concerns that museum educators had anyway: "I felt their [the school-teachers'] gaze on my back like X-rays; it was as if they were telling me: 'come on, take up your role!'" (Anna).

Collective decision making about how the group might begin creative work and at the same finding their way into the museum spaces has not been easy. In the third session the students decided that they would like to see the museum exhibition - everyone gathered in one of the large exhibition rooms; an intense discussion begins as to the adoption of a guided-tour format, or, conversely, of a free-floating individual take. There are voices that insist that the absence of a guide will induce disorientation, while others say that "walking through the exhibition on our own does not equal 'chaos'". One of the school-teachers turns to the museum educators and says, once again: "could you please explain to us the logic of the exhibition?" The museum educators prefer to avoid answering: "maybe it is better if you take your time, walk through the exhibition and discuss its logic when you come back?", says Vaso. The logic of 'explanation' and the logic of 'exploration' seem irreconcilable.

Figure 1: Copying artworks

2.   Is time lost a lost time?: creating space

"Whenever they [the students] are left on their own, they basically do nothing. Propensity to do nothing seems deeply ingrained in their DNA", says one of the school-teachers. The museum educators are often reminded that their duty is that time does not get lost, and that they should provide concrete guidance. "Shall we set your poems into music?" the same school-teacher adds - she refers to poems written by the students on their first visit to the museum, prompted by exhibition print-outs handed by the museum educators. This, of course, reveals that the museum educat-ors frequently *did* indeed give concrete suggestions to the group. It seems that un-do-ing much-cherished practices was easier said than done.

Collective decision making takes time. At times there is a feeling that endless dis-cussions lead nowhere. Ilektra complains: "I am sorry but I can't hear anything in this mess" Fani says. Anna: "Shall we all say what it is we'd like to do?". She adds: "I do not feel that in our last session we managed to hear everyone's voices". At this point one, Alexandra decides to intervene: "We are losing our time, talking over and over again about the same things".

Fani adds: "I suggest that the students work in groups, making up different pieces of music that are based on the idea of 'the cycle', or on that of 'the line', and then pro-ceed to put them together". Alexandra adds: "Let's decide on creating a project. I do not think we have enough time". Her point is quite clear: let's not lose time in end-less discussions.

Fani, brings up another issue: "I cannot see the connection between the work of the different groups. I felt quite uncomfortable in our last meeting, as we really did not know who was doing what".

EJPAE: 01 2024 8
*Nikonanou, Kanellopoulos, Moraitopoulou,Viseri; Commoning the teaching
of art in a museum context*

In the midst of all this Vaso comments: "I feel that the time we are spending today may actually prove very useful, for it allows us to shape ideas for next time, and to mould the dynamic of our group as a whole. However, I feel that If we had designated one of us as coordinator, maybe this would have saved us from coming back to the same things again and again". Later on, during reflection time, Ilektra would add: "It is actually great that this sense of discomfort came up so clearly, for this puts some pressure on all of us to find ways to coordinate".

Figure 2: 'Dark room' discussions

3.   The burden of outcome-oriented logics

We are already in the midst of our seventh meeting. Nothing has been easy; and although all sorts of doubts and ambivalences are still with us, a certain climate of trust and commitment has been established.

The museum educators have prepared the space so that creative work may proceed - the students are in the midst of preparing their 'war and peace' materials that will find their place in the collective spiral construction on which we have agreed upon. The three student groups ('war'-group, 'peace'-group, and 'music'-group) get down to work on their ideas - a sense of creative joy prevails. The educators are walking in the various rooms of the museum, observing, and/or engaging in brief interactions with the student groups.

Finally the museum feels less like an impersonal place of highbrow art exhibits - it is impossible not to sense that something good is happening there. Yet, at some point one of the school-teachers says: "we somehow need to show to the school that we have been doing something [worthwhile] here". The teacher needs to deliver something – to show that the time spent at the museum did lead to a creation of some kind.

Figure 3: Preparing 'war and peace' materials

EJPAE: 01 2024 8
*Nikonanou, Kanellopoulos, Moraitopoulou,Viseri; Commoning the teaching
of art in a museum context*

4.   Providing headways

The group meets in the dark room. There is quite a vivid talking among the students, but the museum educators feel somewhat reluctant to begin talking. Discussion commences, finally, with the museum educators trying to pose open questions that would lead students to suggest possible ways forward. At some point, one of the students says: "What do you mean by 'let's decide what we want to do? 'Are you expecting us to tell you what we should do? Give us some choices so that we can choose from." Which leads us to ask, once again: What would it mean for a teacher to refrain from taking on the role of the leader?

A few weeks later: we are in our 8th meeting; spread around in the dark room are the artworks made by the students in the context of the workshop. The group moves around the room, vividly exchanging comments about their work. At some point one of the educators utters the question whether they would like to proceed by making some music to add to their final installation. One of the students says: "But only if we want to, right?", at which point another says: "Only if we want to, haven't you got this yet? This is what we keep saying since the beginning of this all: 'only if we want to'". Letting the students feel that they indeed could express desire in the process of a museum education program, has not been easy.

Figure 4: Sharing proposals

5.   "Can I do nothing?"

A group meeting commences in the dark room. Noisy conversations; some of the students begin to share candies with each other - candies are thrown in the air, all over the room, a noiseless response to the request for silence that was just been made? Ilektra outlines the museum educators' suggestions about what to do next: "1. Conducted improvisation 2. Copying works shown in the exhibition ('Yeah', some students yell), 3. Copying in pairs 4. Your suggestions". Most prefer to work on copying, individually or in pairs, so they begin to spread around the exhibition rooms. Kari stays behind and asks Mak: "can I do nothing?" Mak responds "indeed you can". This exchange is overheard by one of the school-teachers who some weeks later, and on a different occasion, would say: "When this program is over, I will certainly need to remind them that sloppiness may be ok in this context, but is not something that can be tolerated at school. Oh, God, these kids have been born idle."

Figure 5: A glimpse through the curtains: hanging out/playing around

EJPAE: 01 2024 8
Nikonanou, Kanellopoulos, Moraitopoulou,Viseri; Commoning the teaching
of art in a museum context

6. A non-judgmental approach

Two of the students, together with Mak, our music-educator, are just about to initiate their first free music improvisation. Bachman says: "I'm a bit shy to play in front of other people. I'll make mistakes, and this makes me nervous". Mak responds: "How could we create a context for playing where the notion of 'mistake' does not exist? Are there mistakes in improvisation?"

In one of the focus groups after the end of the program, one of the students, Kari, would direct our attention to the following: "In school, our teacher is also the one who's grading our artwork, and maybe this also gives her the impression that she 'owns' our artwork too, to put it that way. I mean, the fact that we're preparing work that she is then asked to put a grade on, entitles her to ask us to do it in her way. [...] Here [in the museum], she had no such power, because it's none of her business, because the notebook on which we do our artwork is o-u-r-s and she will give no grade to it, and also because you [the museum educators] were here too and she felt ashamed to do that".

Despite the difficulties, it can be said that the openness with which creative experimentation was approached led to a unique feeling: "No one judges you [here] [...]We accepted one another, and this is something that you only rarely come across nowadays", Kari added.
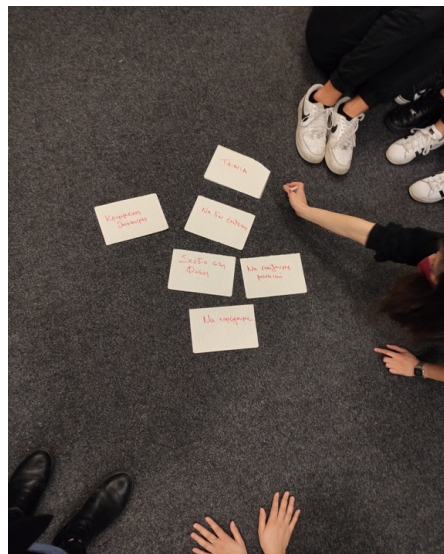

Figure 6: Dropping ideas

7.   Awakenings

The school-teachers, slowly but reluctantly began to acknowledge that their students' visits to the museum may not have been a waste of time. It was now impossible not to be taken by the intensity and the care with which their students worked in different areas of the museum, preparing their collective installation. Yet, some of their concerns keep returning. One of them comments regretfully: "at the school they still believe that we are just messing around here. And back at school there are many who are ready to pick on anything, however unimportant, just to prove that all this has been a failure."

Contrary to what many might think back at school, Alexandra confirmed that through their work at program "they [the students] have finally become a team", adding that "students who were usually left backstage, who had ideas but were too shy to share them, [here] they found space! They participated! […] After the compliments-game, Joe was transformed!", she says with enthusiasm: "he began leaning on others, lying horizontally in the middle of the room!". She then comes back to her worry that back at school the value of this project may not be recognized: "we need to show to the school that we've achieved something here". When our conversation ends, she goes back to another exhibition room on the ground floor where a group of students perform a free musical improvisation. She picks a glassy object and a metallic beater, for, as she said: "oh, this might fit with the sound of this piece" – that she allows herself to be carried away by the immersive atmosphere her students have created, might be seen as an indication that as the program moved near completion, her scepticism receded.

8.   The hard path to unlearning (a)

In trying to refrain from their traditional role as workshop leaders in museum education programs, in trying to be as open as possible, and at the same time to be as creative as possible, the group of educators often experienced:

- Doubts:

    "I feel that today I had some peak moments and at the same time some really dull ones. So, I am not sure…" (Vaso)

- A sense that they are of no use:

    Anna: "I felt quite awkward; I did enjoy some moments but generally I had the feeling that my presence was superfluous. I did not feel that I was needed there, nor that I had a role to play, an interest, so I really do not know. I then thought that this is neither good nor bad, rather, it is something new, a new role may be: the role of the 'no-role'.

- A need to get back to tried and tested solutions:

    Ilektra: "Today I came to the meeting having decided that if I face once again that sense of insecurity [that results from struggling to 'implement the commons'], I will just do what I know. This may sound a bit selfish, and it may make me go back to my traditional role as a leader […] I must say that this issue of the educator's role is something that troubles me a lot, from the very start of our meetings, and even before this, from the day I began diving into the theory of the commons… I [however] still believe that I need to offer starting points [that open pathways]…. So, to have to abolish that role, this was something very very difficult for me".

- A feeling that although they set out to work on the basis of a non-interventionist approach, that has been merely rhetorical:

> Vaso: "In our emphasis on making sure that the creative participatory process would yield interesting and tangible results, and in our care to offer as many starting points as possible, we fell into the trap of channelling and controlling the process, rather too much I would say. [...] The difficult question is whether we are equal to the students or not, and how one may keep invoking the commons and the idea of collective decision making in the context of a relationship that is not equal".

> Anna: "This relationship can never be equal"

9.   The hard path to unlearning (b)

The struggle with doing away with a traditional role of museum educator seems to have been em-bodied, occupying their thoughts, inviting them to imagine possible ways forward:

> Anna: "I do remember very vividly that all four of us were just so very tired after the sessions".

> Ilektra: "Oh God, I was just knackered. To have to unlearn your role (as a museum educator). That was so difficult. I now think three times before each time I have to speak. And this whole thing consumes my thinking throughout the week, not only on the day of the workshops".

> Mak: "And this is what makes us feel so exhausted".

> Anna: "This is so very new to us, so challenging, and it interests us so very much. It is not just that we carry out the workshop and then just leave it behind us. It whirls in our minds during the rest of the week".

Figure 7: Students' final installation

IV. Teaching and the commons: commoning agency

Our hope is that that the above vignettes from the life of '*in-and-out-of-sync'* museum education program, provide a window through which one can glimpse at the challenges, the failures and the openings experienced by the educators. It seems to us that the themes that emerge from those vignettes testify to an ongoing struggle that swipes between two poles on two different axes that might be referred to as (a) the teacher role axis, and (b) the school-museum axis.

On the teacher role axis (a), at one end we have the teacher who explains, transmits, dictates and controls; at the other end we have a less-directive approach to teaching that attempts to shape a mode of teaching practice that aligns with the philosophy of commons: sharing the decision making process, allowing students to take the time to suggest ways forward, and providing the time for them to pursue those ways forward.

On the school-museum axis (b) we may say that at one end we have the museum as a cultural institution that has the potential to function as an other space away from school, a space that suspends and sometimes threatens the dominant school logic (constant evaluation, clear evaluative criteria, knowledge based work, timed activities, clear end-products), and at the other, a perceived need to function as a traditional, outcome-based, educational venue. In the struggle along both axes that was evidenced through the continual friction between museum educators' and school teachers' perceptions, what was at stake seemed to be the question: what exactly is a teacher?

Thus, we would like to suggest that the 'programmatic' declaration, "let's not make it look like a classroom this time" goes beyond the oft-heard calls for joyful experiential learning employed by museums in their effort to widen audience participation; rather, it points towards a possible re-definition of the role of teacher agency. Agency, understood as the power to affect matters that relate to one's own work, maintains firm links with the notion of 'being in control'. But in the stories presented above, one encounters a constant tension between, on the one hand, a perceived need to take control over the educational process, and repeated attempts to find ways to distribute control on the other. The museum educators explored ways of sharing authority, ways of enabling the group of students to experiment with sharing control over the processes of decision making and the direction of creative work. The schoolteachers emerged as 'guardians' of the traditional order. Both the museum educators and the school teachers had moments of opening up to experimentation with letting control go, and moments of ambivalence, insecurity and/or dismissiveness.

In this paper we have found it useful to theorise on how the educators experienced agency in the context of *in-and-out-of-sync* through the lens of the 'ecological' model of teacher agency that Priestley et al. (2015) elaborated based on the pioneering work of Emirbayer & Mische (1998) (see also Philpott & Spruce 2021). This frame-

work introduces three distinct but closely interrelated "dimensions that impact upon a teacher's capacity for the exercise of agency, particularly at the micro-level" (Philpott & Spruce 2021, 290). The first dimension is the *Iterational*: the nexus of past experiences, received ideas, and cherished habits that impact upon the 'now' of teaching practice: "wrapped up in the iterational dimension is a set of identity-forming, explicit, and implicit personal beliefs and values" (Philpott & Spruce 2021, 290). The second is *the Projective dimension*: the willingness and the ability to imagine alternative approaches to how teaching is to be thought and practised: "Projectivity encompasses the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future" (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, 971). The iterational and the projective dimensions relate to the 'past' and the 'future' respectively. Both the 'past' and the 'future' feed into the moment of the now. Therefore, the third dimension concerns how both the iterational and the projective are feeding into the 'now' of teaching, into the dynamic exercise of situated judgement, negotiation, failure, insecurity, and ambivalence that are ever-present in the shaping of teacher's agentic role in day to day practice: this is referred to as *the Practical Evaluative Dimension*. As Emirbayer & Mische (1998) put it, the practical evaluative dimension "entails the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations" (p. 971).

In the context of *in-and-out-of-synch*, this has not been an easy and straightforward process: patterns of action that have been developed over time, defining these museum educators' teaching identity may function as a source of resistance to change. Anna, Ilektra, and Vaso are experienced museum educators. And a crucial aspect of their experience relates to the demand to intervene creatively, and also to the development of an apparatus that allows them to find creative ways to present mu-

seum exhibits to their audience. Their teaching habitus is largely framed by what Mörsch (2009) refers to as affirmative and reproductive discourses of gallery education. In this program, their wish was to work in a different way, but, as our stories show, resistances and ambivalences were constantly present, and were eloquently expressed through the invention of an ambiguous term: "the no-role" role.

Is the 'no-role' role an empty role? Sometimes our data show that the educators felt this way. One can certainly say that this new role rendered them vulnerable – remember their comment on having felt the school-teachers' gaze "like X-rays". Refraining from exercising their traditional teaching authority that knows how to show the way rendered them vulnerable to criticisms. These criticisms posed a direct threat to their identity as educators: "come on, take up your role and teach". Which means: act by adhering to the logic that underpins affirmative and reproductive discourses. In the face of this pressure, it is not surprising that the museum educators felt so strongly that there were times when they would prefer to get back to tried and tested solutions, "to what they know".

To refuse to bow to these expectations, preferring to insistently remain faithful to the unspectacural effort to consistently open up a space for students to find out what is this that they want to pursue and to forge a voice and be clearly heard, is a tedious process that challenges educators – at times it even overwhelms them. As Kaija Kaitavuori (2013) has put it "the professional positioning of educators with the audience—the "other", the non-professional— puts them in a disadvantaged position in a field that defines its value as a specialised field of expertise" (p. xiv). The educators chose to distance themselves from their role as mediators between the lay students and the high status that has been conferred upon the exhibits of the museum. The privilege that stems from assuming the role to lead the way, the privilege that stems from being considered an expert: this is what here is being un-learned. What the educators involved in this program began to glimpse to, is a future-oriented re-shaping of

their role by - and here it is highly appropriate to use Spivak's formulation - "[u]nlearning one's privilege [the privilege to be in control] as one's loss" (Landry & MacLean, 1996, 4). It is this that the school-teachers were mostly afraid of: the loss of control, was to their eyes, a loss of the role of the teacher.

In this paper we suggest that the practices of commoning implemented by the educators of this program may be seen as experimenting with the idea that "there is a dimension of agency in its very uncontrollability. Because when there is only space for the necessary, change is impossible" (Sternfeld 2010, 5). When there is only space for the *predictable,* control thrives but ironically, *agency fades away.*

Pursuing the possibility of distributing control among students and educators may not be seen as entailing the abolition of educational responsibility. Rather, it may mean finding the courage to support the participants in the process of learning to make decisions. Instead of pigeonholing them as 'born-idle', this sharing of responsibility might be seen an honest effort on the part of the educators to look for what it is that they students might want to say, what it is that they might want to express. Common-based educational and creative artistic practices may be seen as a dedicated attempt to materialise a conception of teaching that creates a space for sharing, but also for defining what is to be shared, a conception of teaching that allows for expression of ideas and desires, but also creates a space for interrogating into and critically engaging with these ideas.

The museum educators in this program clearly tried to refrain from just offering their students an array of possibilities from which they could choose. For the most part, they seemed also to have refused to choose in advance in the name of their students. Rather, they attempted to create a context in which the students could engage in a number of artistic practices - sketching and copying, collage, installation, free improvisation using found objects – and through them, to search for what they want

and for what it might be that they want to express. This practice refuses to consent to the misleading "assumption that learners come to education with a clear understanding of what their needs are" (Biesta 2005, 59). At the same time, it explicitly rejects authoritarianism, which assumes that "the task of the educator or teacher to decide for the one being educated what right, good and correct ways of thinking and being were" (Biesta 2018, 149).

Our stories testify to the ambivalences that relate to the notion of creative 'product'. The program programmatically refused to operate on a product-oriented logic. If there was a 'product' sought after, that has been the experience of the openings, the failures and the difficulties of art-based educational commons. In such a context no-one 'owns our artwork', no-one creates in accordance to somebody else's agenda, 'no-one judges you', and yet, making, sharing and discussing art and art-making is intensely present. This brings us to the ideal of transforming the museum into a 'safe space', a space "where people can be themselves, spaces that are free from judgement and prejudice and where people can talk freely" (Morse 2021, 136). Yet, the final installation was exhibited in the museum space, and was treated as a 'tool' for legitimation in the eyes of the school.

Central to the process of abolishing control and redefining responsibility seems to have been the issue of controlling time. In *in-and-out-of-synch*, issues of time were hotly debated through various lenses: for the school-teachers that accompanied the students to the museum, time away from school was to be used for the creation of a final product that can be shown to the school, so as the whole program attains legitimacy in the eyes of the other teachers there. That the museum educators employed commoning practices that distributed control over the management of time was perceived by the school-teachers as unproductive, as a scandalous waste of time, to be tolerated only as an exception: "I will certainly need to remind them that sloppiness may be ok in this context, but is not something that can be tolerated at school".

The right to choose not to do something, to choose to do something at one's own pace, and the right to decide when it is the most appropriate time to do something, are all distinctive aspects of a process of commoning time. The notion of commoning time may be seen as referring both to processes where discussion, negotiation and debate take centre-stage and also to a conception of time that goes beyond productivism (Räber 2023). It is to this latter conception of time that Räber (2023) refers to "as the practice of refusal via taking time: the self-determined arrangement of the nexus of time, action and utility that begins with the a-synchronous insertion of un-productive time into the synchronous horizontal time of productivism" (Räber 2023, 1).

Both aspects of this process of commoning time are crucial manifestations of the common's commitment to equality. Räber invokes Rancière's (2013) thesis that time is a means for dividing and excluding "and, equally, for establishing identity and commonality" (Räber 2023, 6). The ways in which one uses one's time also defines what is permissible and what it is not, what is of value and what is useless, what is possible and what is not. The time we create so as to form and share ideas on equal terms (a), and the act of taking time not to do something, to move away from something (b), are both aspects of the political dimension of time. Räber (2023) holds that this second use of time is central to democracy via "its indifference to authority's powers to deactivate and suppress the capacity of citizens to determine the utility of actions and events in time" (p. 3). In this sense *in-and-out-of-sync* may be seen as glimpsing at a future possibility for museum education work that moves away from productivism, away from marketing time and the emphasis on exploiting free time in order to gain access to certain privileges. It also moves away from product-oriented logics of school-time.

As such, common-based museum education may be seen as forging a pathway informed by what Mörsch (2009) refers to as transformative discourse, delineating a

EJPAE: 01 2024 8
Nikonanou, Kanellopoulos, Moraitopoulou,Viseri; Commoning the teaching
of art in a museum context

perspective that apprehends gallery education as taking up "the task of expanding the exhibiting institution and to politically constitute it as an agent of societal change" (p. 10).

In the light of this analysis, *in-and-out-of-sync* may be seen as a local, small scale attempt to materialise a transformative museum education practice via an intense and radical reworking of the notion of teacher agency that brought teaching close to core aspects of the philosophy of commons:

- On the iterational dimension, it enabled museum educators to rethink, re-work and critique aspects of their agentic practice, via a process of unlearning.

- On the practical-evaluative dimension, it enabled museum educators to implement new ways of working and relating to students and their worlds, and to come up with ideas and tools that expand "The social, structural and material 'here and now' of possible agency" (Philpott & Spruce 2021, 290) and its distribution.

- On the projective dimension it enabled museum educators to imagine alternative ways of exercising agency, envisioning a way of commoning the museum.

This process can be summarised in the following figure that, based on the model of Emirbayer & Mische (1998), aims to concisely capture the transformational dimensions of agency that may result from commoning education acts.

Figure 1 The transformative potential of commoning teacher agency:		
Iterational dimension	→	Reflecting on past practices: Unlearning
Practical-evaluative dimension	→	Negotiating resistances, and creating openings via the distribution of agency
Projective dimension	→	Envisioning the commoning of the museum

It can be argued that the philosophy of commons enabled the museum educators of *in-and-out-of-sync* to engage into a process of commoning agency, prioritising collective creative acts of their students as the prime means of initiating a dialogue between students and 'the past' - art museums, after all, purport to be agents of treasured aspects of art's 'past'. Extending a formulation that has been put forward by music education philosopher Randall Allsup (2013), this commoning of agency can be seen as effecting a radical change as it leads the world of the museum to be seen and felt not as a master but as a guest, and the students-participants not as a admirers of the museum's heritage but as active hosts of aspects of this heritage, a heritage that is creatively re-appropriated through commoning the museum education process. Which brings us close to an important question asked by Nora Sternfeld (2013): "What if educators were no longer the ones with knowledge and visitors no longer those in need of knowledge? What if mediation processes were conceived as spaces of collective agency, in which to engage with different forms of knowledge?" (p. 4).

The resultant reorientation of the role of the teacher in museum-based, commons-derived creative art-education practices might be seen as allowing us to envision and shape alternatives to the pervading neoliberal colonisation of education initiatives in cultural institutions (Kanellopoulos & Barahanou 2020), and the emphasis on increased measurable impact, and their market-derived approaches to participation (Kundu and Kalin 2015; Katsaridou 2024). The commoning of teacher agency that has been addressed through *in-and-out-of-sync* attempted to bring students *in* synchrony with each other and with their teachers through collective decision making, and permitted them to be *out of* synchrony when this was felt necessary. On a different level, in-and-out-of-sync attempted to create a local museum education approach that is *out of* synchrony with museums' entrepreneurial turn (Kalyva, 2024), but in synchrony with a transformative vision of museum education.

EJPAE: 01 2024 8
Nikonanou, Kanellopoulos, Moraitopoulou,Viseri; Commoning the teaching
of art in a museum context

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