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# Opening the doors: inclusive creative projects and community engagement in Spanish museums

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Participation in culture is a human right. Close collaboration between social, educational and cultural institutions can facilitate access for all members of the community and open new social and educational spaces for those whose right to participate in cultural life has been violated. As part of a European project to promote social inclusion through the arts, this article describes and analyzes two Inclusive Creative Projects (ICP) carried out by social, educational and cultural centers. These collaborative projects were created with the objective of analyzing the key elements to promote inclusion through art and artistic creation in museums. Students from primary and special education schools ( $n = 74$ ) and adults with intellectual disabilities ( $n = 12$ ) participated in the two projects. Additionally, staff from arts institutions ( $n = 12$ ) and socio-educational centers ( $n = 10$ ), creating spaces for dialogue, reflection and learning in an inclusive context. Qualitative and ethnographic techniques were used to document the process of designing and implementing the projects. Through the field diaries, which included field notes and photographs, the set of visual and creative techniques used to explore personal experiences and the development of the ICPs were recorded. The findings underscore the need to create projects that recognize diversity as an intrinsic characteristic of any human group. They also open avenues for collaboration based on respect and recognition of different skills, experiences and professional trajectories. The projects created spaces for dialogue and learning from and with personal experience, emphasizing processes rather than outcomes. They highlight the need to promote the use of different artistic languages in the creation of inclusive artistic projects, as well as real accessibility. Although implementing the project was complex, collaboration between institutions facilitated the creation of networks that promote professional development and contribute to the development of fairer and more equitable communities.

## KEYWORDS

inclusive museums, disabilities, artistic languages, collaboration, community participation

## 1 Introduction

Museums face significant challenges beyond UNESCO preserving and communicating cultural heritage to the public. These include promoting a better understanding of diversity in a globalized world and removing the barriers that some groups face in accessing and enjoying this heritage (Gigerl et al., 2022). According to the new definition of a museum (ICOM, 2022).

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets, and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity, and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge sharing.

From this perspective, cultural institutions constitute social spaces where not only compliance with the rules of coexistence is required, but also a constant adaptation to contemporary social transformations. A systematic review by [González-Herrera et al. \(2023\)](#) shows the need to rethink the accessibility of these spaces, not only from a physical perspective, but also from a broad vision of inclusion. What is truly significant is to understand their potential as educational scenarios, which requires moving toward management models that promote the active participation of all citizens, overcoming approaches focused solely on people with specific needs. In this sense, we propose the creation of inclusive cultural spaces that respond to the diversity of audiences and that are aligned with the social, technological and educational changes of the present. Museums are ethically obliged to support inclusive access to quality education and the democratization of knowledge for all people, creating participatory and accessible environments that ensure comprehensive physical, intellectual, attitudinal, and communicational inclusion ([Rocha et al., 2020](#)). This implies redefining institutional functions, objectives and strategies, eliminating both material, and ideological barriers that hinder equitable access to the cultural experience ([Esteban and Ballesteros, 2020](#)). Specifically, it is necessary to review institutional cultures, policies and practices ([Booth and Ainscow, 2011](#)) to understand the values and attitudes that shape the essence of the institutions, their organization and management, as well as the quality of the experiences that visit them ([Rojas-Pernia et al., 2022](#)).

In this context, the participatory initiatives that museums have developed in recent years provide a continuum of good practice. They help to bring exhibitions closer to the public and to traditionally excluded groups. However, according to [Cerdan and Jiménez-Zarco \(2021\)](#), these initiatives require a greater awareness of the access requirements of universal design, improved access to information resources, and attention to the affective dimension of visitors to realize successful cultural experiences. Overall, these are museum-led initiatives that target groups, institutions or communities with the aim of bringing visitors and museums closer together and strengthening the relationship between them, as well as introducing changes to traditional power relations in the museum context ([Bunning et al., 2015](#); [Vermeulen et al., 2019](#); [Linn et al., 2024](#); [Runnel et al., 2024](#)).

On the other hand, networking museums with other educational institutions helps reinforce their role in the local community and their role as cultural and educational institutions. In the same way that it is said that an inclusive school is a school open to its environment, where two-way exchanges take place with the ultimate intention of improving schools for all students ([Susinos et al., 2024](#)), it is possible to say that an inclusive museum is an institution open to its environment

that works and collaborates with other social and educational institutions. We assume that inclusive education is a dynamic process aimed at identifying and removing barriers to the presence, participation and academic achievement of all learners ([Ainscow, 2020](#)). This perspective aligns with the definition proposed by [UNESCO \(2017\)](#), which posits inclusion as the guiding principle for addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increased participation in learning, culture and communities, and reduced exclusion. Promoting structured and participatory spaces for deliberation around these principles can also contribute significantly to a deeper and more shared understanding of the inclusive paradigm. Such processes should involve all relevant social actors as part of a democratic and community co-responsibility for building more equitable social systems.

From this perspective, it is possible to envision initiatives that are developed in collaboration with museums based on institutional co-responsibility. The participation of museums in these local projects, at the suggestion of other educational institutions, broadens and enriches the existing body of good practices initiated by museums. Indeed, the combination of different professional perspectives and skills allows for the development of more effective and personalized methodological strategies that are more responsive to diversity ([Miquel et al., 2024](#)). For [Scott and Twyman \(2018\)](#), collaboration between professionals from different institutions offers numerous benefits to both the educators and technicians as well as the participants involved: more personalized education, access to unique resources and experiences, interdisciplinary learning opportunities, development of social and emotional skills, and a deepening of cultural knowledge.

This article is the result of the European project *Fostering social inclusion for all through artistic education: developing support for students with disabilities - INARTdis*, co-funded by the Erasmus+ program (European Erasmus+ project 621441-EPP-1-2020-1-ES-EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN awarded by EACEA for the period 2020–2023). The overall objective of the educational research project was to promote social inclusion for all through art. To this end, it was sought to establish a network of partnerships between social, educational, and cultural institutions through the implementation of inclusive creative projects (ICP) in five countries (Portugal, Germany, Austria, North Macedonia, and Spain). The nine projects (case studies) developed were the result of the exchange of knowledge and experiences between different institutions and professionals, the use of a variety of artistic languages and the dialogue between the participants (children, young people, and adults with and without intellectual disabilities). In this article we present two of the nine ICP implemented in Spain.

Likewise, we see these spaces for interaction as essential spaces for dialogue to align shared meanings. The collaborative design and development of each project was conceived as an opportunity to exchange ideas and concepts about the meanings of educational inclusion. Each project was conceived as an opportunity to challenge misconceptions or oversimplifications of the educational inclusion model ([Ainscow and Miles, 2008](#); [Rojas-Pernia et al., 2022](#)). Specifically, the process of working between institutions was articulated around six central concepts: a rights-based approach (all people, without exception, have the right to culture, but also

to creation); an inquisitive attitude (museums are institutions that observe, learn and question their role as facilitators or barriers to participation); confronting exclusion (and recognizing that the content and dynamics were traditionally designed for a particular type of visitor, which has privileged some people or groups and alienated others); barriers and levers to inclusion (i.e., identifying the elements or conditions that facilitate or limit each person's ability to have a rich and valuable cultural experience, with the intention of maintaining or changing them, which implies improving the museum); participation (and the recognition of the public as subjects with rights, concerns and extremely rich, diverse and complex realities of life); and social justice (by creating conditions in museums that enable all people to acquire competences and skills and to use them successfully in socially valued areas). These concepts emerged organically throughout the process as a result of collective decision-making by institutions, professionals, and participants.

The article highlights the importance of the processes that museums undertake to enhance the principles and values that respect human diversity and underpin their institutional policies and practices. Specifically, it examines how museums reflect on ways to make their content, structures, services, and valued actions more accessible to the public (Rieger et al., 2022).

## 2 Methodology

This qualitative, participatory research employs a case study design (Creswell and Poth, 2016), and the process of designing and implementing the Inclusive Creative Projects (ICP) was meticulously documented by the researchers. A total of nine Inclusive Creative Projects (ICP) were designed and implemented in the five participating countries. This article presents two of the ICP carried out in Spain between September 2022 and June 2023: *(Dis)connected bodies* (Project 1) and *Get excited about sharing* (Project 2). The case studies analyzed in the article were selected on the basis of the fulfillment of preliminary criteria established by the authors, such as the fact that they were developed in the national context of the authors of the article (and therefore in which they were involved) and the complexity of the projects due to the number of participants.

### 2.1 Participants

The selection of participants was done through a convenience sampling. Each inclusive creative project involved at least one primary or secondary school, one special education school or association, one museum or art space, and one university. Each institution proposed the participants who would take part in the project, considering the objective of the project. Their participation was voluntary.

A total of 74 students from primary and special education schools (aged 11–16) and 12 adults with intellectual disabilities participated in the two projects. Additionally, 22 professionals participated: 12 from arts institutions and 10 from socio-educational centers. The professionals from the artistic institutions

were educators or managers in the education department of their institution.

Specifically in Project 1 *(Dis)connected bodies*, a total of 80 people participated: 41 children (aged 11–12), 12 adults with intellectual disabilities, 5 institutionalized artists with intellectual disabilities, and support staff (4 from artistic institutions and 5 from socio-educational centers) participated in the project. They came from a primary school Manuel Llano, two institutions supporting people with intellectual disabilities (Obra San Martín and CAD Sierrallana), Naves de Gamazo art exhibition center and the University of Cantabria.

In the case of Project 2 *Get excited about sharing*, the participants were 3 professionals from the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (MNAC), 2 professionals from the Casa de la Dansa-Mercat de les Flors, 3 teachers and 26 students from the Escola del Mar (regular school) and 2 teachers, 7 students from the Escola Rel (school specialized in autism spectrum disorders) and the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

### 2.2 Instruments

Field diaries were kept, comprising field notes and photographs documenting the working sessions with participants (children, adolescents, and adults with and without intellectual disabilities). The diaries also recorded the set of visual and creative techniques employed to explore personal experiences, narrow down the choice of topics and develop the ICP. Additionally, all sessions were videotaped, expanding the field diaries.

### 2.3 Data analysis

A categorization and coding system (Table 1) was established for data analysis and the qualitative analysis program Nvivo (Nvivo 13 version) was used. The coordinating university of the INARTdis project elaborated a proposal of categories and subcategories, which were peer-reviewed by each partner research team in the INARTdis project consortium. Finally, the coordinating university incorporated the relevant modifications and suggestions for the data analysis. The dimensions and categories followed a mixed deductive-inductive approach, incorporating emerging categories from the field research into the matrix.

### 2.4 Ethical considerations

Participants were provided with an information sheet and informed consent form specifying the objectives of the project and the ethical conditions of the research. Ethical issues have been present during the development of the ICP. The research project received approval from the Ethical Committee for Animal and Human Experimentation of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (ref. CEEAH-5990) and the Ethical Committee for

TABLE 1 Example of categories of analysis.

| Categories             | Codes  |
|------------------------|--|
| Project design         | Generating proposals/activities<br>Collaboration<br>Participation<br>Expectations, barriers and opportunities                      |
| Project implementation | Activities implementation<br>Inclusive methodologies<br>Collaboration<br>Participation<br>Expectations, barriers and opportunities |

| Example of categories of analysis |                         |                          |               |   |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|---------------|---|
| Categories                        | Codes                   | Subcodes                 | Nvivo Codes   | Description   |
| Project design                    | Barriers                | Personals                | Dis_Barr_Per  | Informants' statements in which they attribute to themselves (lack of training, skills...) the obstacles and limitations to be part of some actions or activities.  |
|                                   |                         | Socials                  | Dis_Barr_Soc  | Informants' statements on attitudes, behaviors and norms of environments that may limit the development of participatory actions or activities.                     |
|                                   |                         | Economic                 | Dis_Barr_Econ | Informants' statements on limited resources or lack of means for the development of participatory actions or activities.  |
|                                   |                         | Physical                 | Dis_Barr_Fís  | Informants' statements on accessibility conditions (physical spaces, materials, transport, etc.) that limit the development of participatory actions or activities. |
| Project Implementation            | Inclusive methodologies | Group training           | Implem_Grupo  | Statements by participants on the contribution of the artistic languages used to group building and sense of belonging to the group.                                |
|                                   |                         | Recognition of diversity | Implem_Diver  | Statements by participants on the value of the multiple artistic languages used in the recognition of human differences.  |
|                                   |                         | Artistic languages       | Implem_Leng   | Participants' assessments of the possibilities of multiple languages in the different activities  |

Research Projects at the University of Cantabria (ref. CEPI-14-2021).

### 3 Results

Inclusive Creative Projects promote artistic expression and awareness of the people involved and social inclusion through the arts. They are based on a fundamental premise: the active and collaborative participation of professionals and students (with and without disabilities) in their design, implementation and evaluation. They are essentially relational projects: with others, with ourselves and with the world and its matter (Kara et al., 2021). From a methodological point of view and following Alvarez et al. (2021), the projects start from: (i) seek learning based on experience and inquiry in different educational contexts; (ii) are based on accessible, flexible and dialogical practices, where participants are free and do not feel judged; and (iii) where emphasis is placed on processes, where the adult has the role of facilitator.

#### 3.1 Project 1. (Dis)connected bodies

##### 3.1.1 Project design

This project is the result of a collaboration between a primary school, two institutions supporting people with intellectual

disabilities, the university and the Naves de Gamazo art exhibition center. Initially, professionals from each institution -hereafter referred to as the Leading Group (LG1) (Figure 1) met in the exhibition space for three sessions (between September 2024 and January 2025) to reflect together on the project's central theme and the key conditions for its development. Additionally, Padlet, a collaborative digital tool, was selected to facilitate information sharing and group discussions.

The LG1 raised socially relevant issues, such as climate change, forced migration, food, and the body. The latter would be the theme chosen for the project because, as the LG1 argued, it concerns us all and allows us to reflect on what people share and need. It also invites discussion on the beliefs, processes and practices rooted in values and skills that systematically deny access and participation to bodies socially defined as non-normative.

The theme of the body emerges as a universal issue, regardless of our support needs or circumstances. We all have bodies, we can all work from our bodies, even if some bodies do not seem to exist, even if some bodies are largely invisible or only made visible for extreme exploitation. (Field notes\_Cantabria\_2022\_10\_13).

(Dis)connected bodies explores the idea that we exist as bodies in relation to others, shaping and discovering both ourselves and those around us. The body allows us to be aware of the





FIGURE 1

Photo of one of the work meetings in the ENAIRE Foundation's Naves de Gamazo, Santander.

world (or the world I have had the opportunity to know) and those who inhabit it. But we also re-inhabit spaces with our bodies and re-signify those spaces. In contrast to the view of the body as a sometimes perfect, sometimes imperfect container (Hughes and Paterson, 1997) and its unique normative function, the experience of the lived body acknowledges the complexity of each person's identity. The choice of theme also coincided with the arrival of the artist Pablo Serrano's artwork, *Sculpture as a Living Object*. In this way, part of the artist's work was presented as a vehicle for our experiences and for what (dis)connects us to other people.

### 3.1.2 Project development

The Inclusive Creative Project (ICP) took place in five joint sessions (between February 2025 and June 2025), three held at the art center and two at the primary school. In addition to what each institution explained to the participants and their families, all meetings in the school and in the art center were always marked by a time at the beginning of the session to introduce the meaning of the activities and a time at the end of the session to evaluate the meeting and to anticipate when the next one would take place.

For the LG1, getting to know each other was one of the necessary conditions for the development of the ICP. Therefore, during the first session at the primary school, activities were carried out with a double purpose: to facilitate exchanges between all the participants and to explore the body in relation to others.

A whole-group introductory activity was followed by 3 interactive play stations, each designed for heterogeneous groups

comprising children and adults with and without intellectual disabilities, from diverse personal and professional backgrounds. In this first session, the art center professionals moved to the primary school. Through these 4 activities, in which the body played a leading role (see Figure 2), children and adults, with and without disabilities, met other people for the first time.

Student 1: The activities brought us closer because, when we did it in teams or groups, we had to get closer to the people.

Student 2: When we had to get dressed, it was my turn with Violeta and Ángel, and when they dressed me, I thought: Why do they say he has a disability? I saw a person just like us, I didn't see anything. He was the same as us, but older, so they were the same.

Teacher 1: But why were we a bit more worried about them at the beginning when they arrived and then we weren't?

Student 3: Because before we didn't know them well and we didn't know their history and we didn't trust them. And then we got closer to the people and got to know their tastes and so on. And in the end, we kind of fit in. (Field notes\_Cantabria\_2023\_2\_3)

Using different artistic languages (photography or theater of the image), the participants reflected together on what brings us closer to others or distances us from them.

Thus, in social contexts where urgency, technology or indifference push us to look the other way, the participants demanded more shared time and space.



FIGURE 2

Snapshots of the different activities carried out at Manuel Llano primary school (Santander). Source: Inartdis Project 2020–2023.

Student 4: I put up a black and white picture where there were blurred people talking to each other and in the distance, there was a girl in the foreground. And she was looking at them sadly. And I wrote that the person was sad, and no one was comforting her... as if she didn't exist. And one of the boys in the group seemed to want to help her, but he didn't want to look bad in front of his friends. And then I painted the tree, because there was a little tree, and I said, "Give color to life." (Field notes\_Cantabria\_2023\_2\_3)

With this first meeting, the photographic project (*Dis*)connected bodies began to take shape. The following two meetings were held at the Naves de Gamazo Art Center. During two mornings, organized in heterogeneous groups, the participants reflected on the need of active listening to others and the importance of other people in our lives. They approached the sculptural work of Pablo Serrano through three corners ("Vaults," "Creating together," and "Geometric sculptures") created inside and outside the exhibition space (see Figure 3). The activities were led by professionals from Naves de Gamazo.

(Researcher) proposes to go around with the names of the participants, although he assures that he will not be able to remember all the names. He explains what the activity consists of: building a collective sculpture, doing something together. He points out that we are going to work with an idea that was important to Pablo Serrano and that we will see in the exhibition: different materials, the refuge, the shelter (...).

He distributes a group of sticks to each participant. There are two instructions for making the sculpture: it has to be done by everyone, we all have to contribute something; and the box has to end up surrounded by sticks, and then we have to take the box out to see the idea of emptiness, of refuge, that worried Pablo Serrano.

We take a deep breath before we start...

One of the students leads the group. She proposes a strategy, which consists of putting a stick on each of us. (...)

They take turns placing them in silence. (Field notes\_Cantabria\_2023\_3\_16)

After completing the three activities, we all came together to learn more about Pablo Serrano's artistic work. Key pieces of the artist's work were selected, establishing connections between the sculpture to the previous activities and to the project we were undertaking. Each of the works was explored from different angles and revisited with some questions, sometimes asked by the cultural mediator, sometimes by the participants, which helped us to continue thinking about what unites us and what separates us (Figure 4).

Academic researchers analyzed the field diaries to identify elements that participants described as (dis)connecting them from others. The analysis was first conducted individually and then in a group. Many ideas and themes emerged from this review process, which were analyzed and discussed in the group in order to identify different themes. The selection was intended to be inclusive of all participants.





FIGURE 3

Vaults, Creating together and Geometric sculptures in Naves de Gamazo (Santander). Source: Inartdis Project 2020–2023.



FIGURE 4

Find out more about Pablo Serrano's artistic work. Source: Inartdis Project 2020–2023.

Instructions for the next session. It connects us:

Art allows us to express ourselves, it tells us who we are, who we want to be, how we imagine ourselves and others, the world around us.

Mottos: “Art...,” “Art to discover,” “Art to discover ourselves,” “Art to discover others.” (Field notes\_Cantabria\_2023\_4\_27)

The following session was led by the researchers and developed in the primary school. Based on the emerging themes, the use of different types of materials and image theater as a tool, the participants will create sculptural compositions about what (dis)connects us (see Figure 5).

### 3.1.3 Project evaluation

The opening of the *(Dis)connected bodies* exhibition took place in the Art Center. The exhibition was located parallel to the entrance to the Naves de Gamazo (see Figure 6). It featured images created by the participants through image theater on the themes they had identified about what (dis)connects us and the working process of the whole project. The images invited people to enter the Art Centre to see a short audiovisual projection about the project and the work of the artist Pablo Serrano.

The images of what distances us turned their backs on the artistic space, because art and Naves de Gamazo had united us.

This project has given me the opportunity to dialogue and work closely with professionals from other fields through common goals. It therefore provides a future interdisciplinary vision in my work and a circle of collaboration with different ideas and points of view, which enriches all of us participants. (Field notes\_Cantabria\_2023\_6\_2\_Professional cultural space\_1)

The photo exhibition was conceived as a resource for dialogue engaging visitors through a visitor's book placed alongside the display.

The exhibition was then taken to the primary school. Some of the participants in the project took part in its assembly. The school wanted to introduce the *(Dis)connected Bodies* project and share it with the entire school community.

The project was a valuable opportunity for participants to collaborate with other people and institutions, recognizing the diversity of concerns and realities.

My name is C. and I want to come back. (Field notes\_Cantabria\_2023\_6\_2\_Person with intellectual disability)

For us it was fantastic to be part of this project and to work with so many other people like we did. Hopefully this will be the start of other projects that will come later and we hope to be part of them. (Field notes\_Cantabria\_2023\_6\_2\_Professional center for people with intellectual disabilities\_2)

In addition, the use of multiple languages throughout the project allowed everyone, without exception, to create, share, and connect through the activities and content.

(I would have liked) To be able to do things with more materials, to have more possibilities to create. (Field notes\_Cantabria\_2023\_6\_2\_Primary School Student\_4)

## 3.2 Project 2. Get excited about sharing

### 3.2.1 Project design

In order to design the project, a working group (hereafter referred to as the Leading Group-LG2) was set up, comprising professionals from the artistic institutions, the schools and two university researchers. The LG2 met five times between September 2022 and February 2023. Two students from the Escola del Mar and one from the Escola Rel participated in one of the meetings to explore and share the typology of activities to be developed. The project planning process faced four key challenges. The first was identifying barriers to learning and participation of students in arts centers: “taking into account that students with autism need more time to do the activities and physical spaces that are easy to control, that are not very large spaces” (Field notes\_Barcelona\_2022\_11\_2, Escola Rel teacher). The educational centers also produced a document outlining methodological considerations related to the needs of their students.

Selecting a theme that would reflect the students' motivations and interests posed another challenge. Considering the artistic institutions involved (exponents of visual and body language) and the schools' curricula, it was decided to present the students with several cross-cutting themes including friendship, weather, water, social relationships, emotions, family, and body movement. From these, they selected social relationships and emotions as the central themes.

Another challenge was the organization and planning of the sessions, adapting them to the circumstances of the institutions. Cultural institutions are undoubtedly complex organizations from the point of view of management, therefore integrating the project activities into their own planning required a very structured work plan. We should not lose sight of the fact that the seven sessions developed during the implementation of the project were carried out in both schools and in the artistic institutions.

Finally, one of the most rewarding challenges was integrating body and visual art into the activity planning process. The Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (MNAC) proposed 11 artworks, which were analyzed by the LG2, considering their relationship with emotions and the possibility of incorporating body language in the implementation of the activities. These works were later shared with the students, who selected *El Desconsol* by Josep Llimona and *El hombre cactus* by Julio González (Figure 7).

Based on this selection, the project design began with the aim of creating experiences around artistic expressions (plastic and physical) that would strengthen social relationships between the students at the schools. The project design was the result of a collaborative process between the institutions. The design phase specified the number and schedule of sessions, required spaces and materials, and participating professionals. However, to better support students' discovery learning, the plan was designed to be flexible.





FIGURE 5  
Art as a refuge. Source: Inartdis Project 2020–2023.



FIGURE 6  
Photographic exhibition at Naves de Gamazo. Source: Inartdis Project 2020–2023.

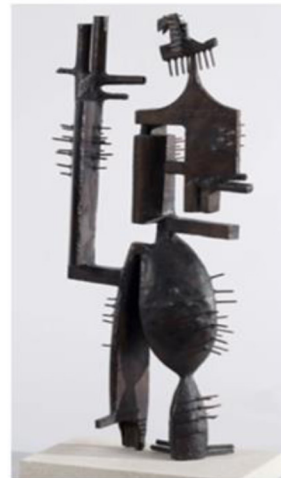


FIGURE 7

Artworks selected by participants: *El Desconsol* de Josep Llimona y *El hombre cactus* de Julio González. Source: Inartdis Project 2020–2023.

### 3.2.2 Project development

Before implementing the project, the schools decided to organize a series of activities to help the two groups of pupils to get to know each other better and to strengthen their social relations. These activities and games were designed collaboratively by teachers and students (Figure 8).

The implementation phase took place between February and June 2023, with a total of 7 sessions lasting 2 to 3 h: one at each of the schools, two at the Casa de la Dansa-Mercat de les Flors and three at the MNAC. Professionals from the artistic institutions, teachers and students actively participated in all activities. For the professionals, this meant immersing themselves in cultural and educational environments that were little known to them, allowing them to generate and adapt the knowledge and experience they already had. For the students, it meant making new connections in different contexts.

In all sessions, time was allocated to introduce the planned activities, even though the teachers in the schools had already explained it in their centers. At the end of each session, spaces for dialogue and reflection were created, allowing professionals and students to exchange assessments of the activities conducted and proposed improvements for the next session.

Heterogeneous groups were formed with students from both schools, focusing the educational action on the students' potential. During the first session at the special school, the students discovered and shared the emotions evoked by the two selected artworks (Figure 9). The students were divided into groups of 4–6, “avoiding pairs so as not to encourage imitation.” (Field notes\_Barcelona\_2023\_2\_6, Escola del Mar teacher)

During the activities carried out later at the MNAC (see Figure 10), students from the Escola del Mar and the Escola Rel were divided into two heterogeneous groups. In both groups, the students looked at the works from different perspectives (materials used, techniques used, characteristics, etc.). Following

this discussion on emotions conveyed in the artworks, students collaborated to create their own group sculptures.

Sitting on the floor, students worked individually on the sculptural composition they were building. Students were given the freedom to group themselves as they wished. They all used clay and shared the tools to make their “work.” The teacher only guided the activity, allowing the students to play a more active role. At the end, all the pupils shared their “works” and expressed the emotions they represented. (Field notes\_Barcelona\_2023\_3\_24)

Throughout the activities, the process was highlighted. In this sense, for example, it was the students themselves who requested that other works from the museum to be included in the initial proposals to work on emotions: *The Great Dancer* by Pablo Gargallo and *The First Colds* by Miquel Blay.

The incorporation of body language into the *Get excited about sharing* project began with a *Ditdit* workshop at the Escola del Mar, led by the company Condegali B.L. (Figure 11). Created by Jaime Conde-Salazar and Aimar Pérez Galí, *Ditdit* (in English, finger-finger) is a activity that, based on a show followed by a workshop, uses small actions adapted to everyone to practice and discover forms of direct relationship with the world and with others through the skin and tactile exploration.

I really enjoyed the *Ditdit* session. I didn't know we could do so many things with our bodies. I discovered different ways of touching and being touched. (Field notes\_Barcelona\_2023\_3\_3, Escola del Mar student)

It's surprising how freely the students with autism participated in this activity. Some touched each other more, others less. I was pleasantly surprised. (Field notes\_Barcelona\_2023\_3\_3, Escola Rel teacher)





FIGURE 8  
Activities at the Escola del Mar. Source: Inartdis Project 2020–2023.

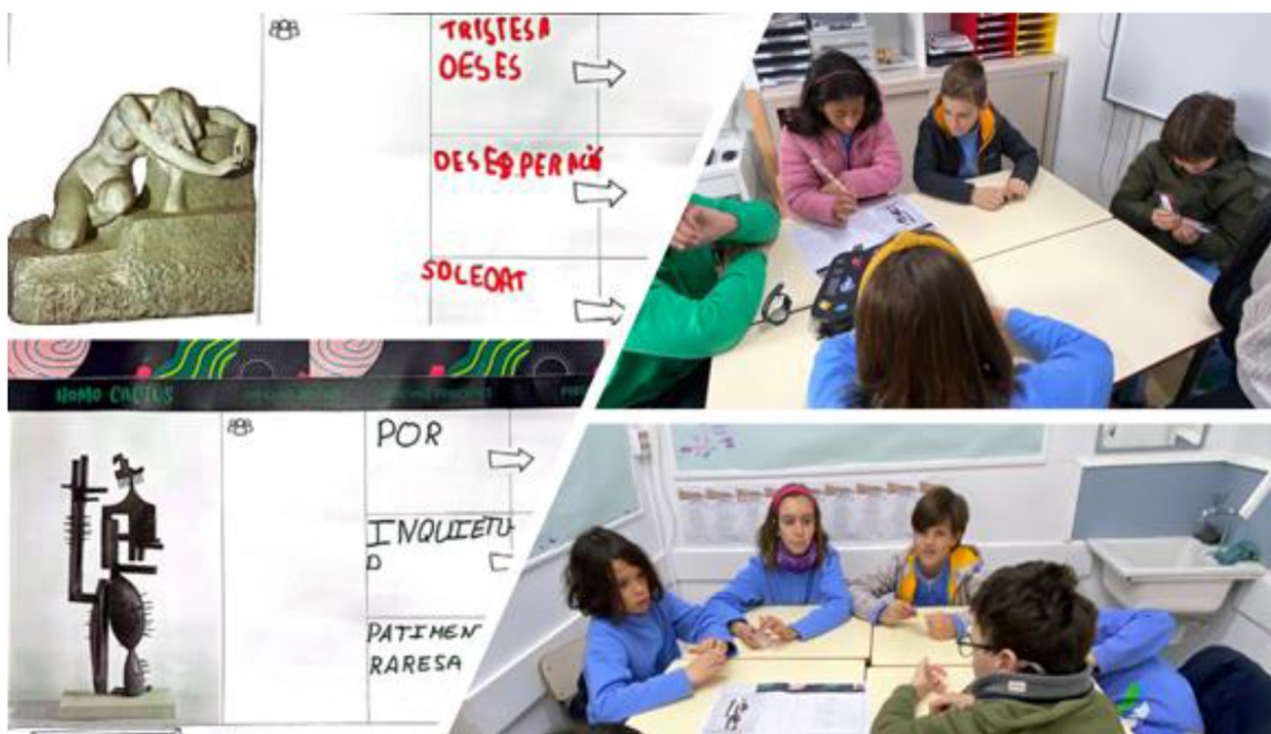


FIGURE 9  
Exploring emotions through art. Source: Inartdis Project 2020–2023.





FIGURE 10  
Activities developed in MNAC. Source: Inartdis Project 2020–2023.

Finally, through an active and participatory methodology, activities were carried out in the Mercat de les Flors, where four spaces were created: reflection, movement, dance and plastic expression (Figure 12). The students, in mixed groups, carried out the activities in each of the spaces. In the reflection room, the students expressed through drawings how they felt about the global project and the activities they had carried out. In the movement space, the students expressed how they felt through the “spider web,” the “tubes,” and the “sheet.” In the dance space, the body was expressed accompanied by music. In the plastic expression space, the students made drawings or sculptures based on the chosen work of art and incorporated body language.

They were aesthetic spaces, of freedom, open to dialogue and silence. During the activities, any member of the group was allowed to disconnect, and adjustments in pacing were incorporated in these activities in such a way as to facilitate an anchor for the reconnection of the students through multisensory activities.

### 3.2.3 Project evaluation

The implementation of the activities was accompanied by a continuous evaluation process. This considered the level of satisfaction, the participation of all, the transfer of learning and the removal of barriers to learning and participation.

In June 2023, a final meeting was held with the professionals to evaluate the *Get excited about sharing* project. The professionals from the arts institutions and schools agreed on the importance of flexibility as a characteristic: in the planning of activities, in the

collaboration between professionals and in the active participation of students.

Working with all of you (staff) has been very enriching for the project and for my work. I think we have shared experiences and knowledge, and this has made me think about many things that I could do in my daily life. Seeing different perspectives, different ways of approaching a learning situation, different materials and strategies has made me grow professionally and personally. (Field notes\_Barcelona\_2023\_4\_26, Escola del Mar teacher)

To do a project of this kind, you need to be able to be flexible in the activities. For example, understanding that it is not a space for students to rest when you go from one work to another, or introducing spaces where students can do what they want and everyone has their own pace, is fundamental. I remember that Hugo (pupil) did not like modeling clay, and I had to look for other materials. (Field notes\_Barcelona\_2023\_3\_24, MNAC staff)

Among other things, the sessions were an opportunity to learn about the diversity of emotions and human relationships (how to express and recognize them), and about the materials and techniques of sculpture and body language through the selected works.

I have learned a lot of things... how to move, things about sculptures... I really liked it when we went into the warehouse



FIGURE 11  
Ditdit session in Escola del Mar. Source: Inartdis Project 2020–2023.



FIGURE 12  
Activities in Mercat de les Flors. Source: Inartdis Project 2020–2023.



to see El hombre cactus. I didn't know there was an underground space where they keep things that aren't on display... El hombre cactus was very small and made of iron! (Field notes\_Barcelona\_2023\_5\_8, Escola Rel student)

Finally, the project has changed the way students and professionals view disability and human diversity, reinforcing values of equity and social justice and breaking down stereotypes.

I have to say that I was a little scared of these diverse groups. Working with autism is complex, but I realized that I was the one who had a number of prejudices and stereotypes. (Field notes\_Barcelona\_2023\_4\_26, Mercat de les Flors staff)

I liked working together... with the students from Rel school... I taught them many things and we did this together... (Interview\_Barcelona\_2023\_5\_8, Escola del Mar student)

## 4 Discussion and conclusion

In the prolog *The Participatory Museum* (Simon, 2010), the author highlighted some of the comments with which visitors expressed their dissatisfaction with museums. In general, they referred to spaces designed for a general idea of the person-visitor. They are spaces where it is hardly possible to establish relations with other people and only the privileged voices are of interest. These statements are the antithesis of an inclusive museum.

Embracing inclusion as a defining principle of the museum institution requires the acknowledgment that human beings are shaped by a multitude of social determinants, including gender, ability, culture, socioeconomic status, and social background. Consequently, the one-size-fits-all notion of the visitor becomes an obstacle to inclusion (Calderón-Almendros et al., 2016). It is a fallacy to assume that any human being can be explained by reference to a single social organizer. Recognizing complexity as an intrinsic characteristic of human beings and their interactions has profound implications for the development of museum practices.

From this position, art institutions acquire a fundamental role in generating cultural value that can have a significant impact on disadvantaged audiences, especially people with disabilities (Waldschmidt, 2018). Therefore, it is necessary that the construction of participatory, integrated and inclusive visitor experiences not only improves the quality of cultural interaction for people in vulnerable situations but also enriches the experience of all visitors (Villaespesa and Álvarez, 2019). In this sense, Iodice and Bifulco (2024) stress the need to design accessible and participatory museum environments, where inclusion is not conceived as an add-on, but as a structural principle that favors cultural democratization.

In the INARTdis project and in the ICP, a key issue was the creation of heterogeneous groups: children and adults, of different ages, with different personal and professional backgrounds, with and without intellectual disabilities, regular or first-time museum visitors, and participants from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. It was important to start from reality—the inherent diversity that defines any human group—to imagine together a

project for everyone. This meant that the professionals involved in the Leading Groups sat down together to think about activities or actions that, through art, would make it possible to build more inclusive cultural spaces. Therefore, and knowing that “difference is irreducible, that there will always be a mystery in the other that makes him/her different forever (...) the best guide is the knowledge that allows us to reflect on what we have lived” (Pérez de Lara, 2008, p. 25).

As the two case studies have shown, it is possible to organize heterogeneous and intergenerational groups from which to approach artworks and museums and make them part of a personal and meaningful experience. The inclusive transformation of museums—and other cultural spaces—challenges the normative idea of humanity that seems to guide the choices made in some museum spaces (Santacana et al., 2016) and, consequently, the organization of activities by groups or “types” of people. On this basis, it is essential to initiate processes that guarantee universal access, participation and experience of every person in museums. As Cerdan and Jiménez-Zarco (2021, p. 11) note,

Museum managers could be aware of the most relevant elements in the shaping of inclusive experiences for visitors with disabilities: lack of adapted information provision (communication encounter), the importance of universal design (usage encounter), and the importance of providing visitors with disabilities with a hospitality service (service encounter).

This approach increases the value of situated proposals, as opposed to actions that are mainly designed and directed toward concrete or specific groups of visitors (Benente and Minucciani, 2020; Hutchinson and Eardley, 2021).

Therefore, rather than designing actions and activities for a presumed homogeneous group, inclusion requires recognizing diversity as a fundamental value, in the design and implementation of any initiative. This approach ensures that educational, cultural, and training initiatives are not only respectful of individual differences but also structured with the aim to foster a sense of belonging within the community.

the goal of having an inclusive classroom is not to homogenize those differences, pretending that they aren't there or don't have impact on students or their lives. The goal is to acknowledge those differences and create a classroom community that works with those differences (and sometimes around those differences) so that every student can feel a sense of connection and belonging (Sapon-Shevin, 2010, p. 90).

In INARTdis, selecting a theme relevant to the participants served as a vehicle for the relationships in the two projects and between the groups. In one case, the body, and in the other, emotions, served as a link for us all and allowed us to build a personal but also a group story. According to Santacana et al. (2016),

(...) All heritage and all heritage objects only acquire meaning when they are wrapped in a story. A heritage that is not



inclusive runs the risk of becoming useless, obsolete. Of all the messages that objects can convey, there is perhaps one set that is more important than others: we are talking about messages of an emotional nature. The most effective legacy is that which has the capacity to emote. This forces us to think about the emotions that objects “from the past” can convey. In addition to the capacity or power of emotion that authentic objects have, there is another capacity that deserves to be highlighted: objects can be triggers for reflections of a logical type that arise in a chain and that are simply related to the power that certain objects have to make us think, to provoke ideas (Santacana et al., 2016, p. 19).

Likewise, the diversity of artistic languages and works were the common elements that allowed us to enter a relationship. The use of the theater-image, gestural language, photographic image, or sculpture were the companions in a journey in which we thought about the refuge or emptiness that the artist Pablo Serrano spoke of. Without neglecting verbal language, other languages accompanied the subjective stories and a shared narrative that took shape through the photographic project (*Dis*)connected bodies.

The development of projects like those presented here is undoubtedly an important challenge for the institutions involved, also for museums, which have to take into account in a broader context, the number of visitors they receive and whose growth can be conditioned by it. In addition, it is necessary to break down existing barriers in these institutions related to accessibility (physical, sensory, and cognitive), discriminatory attitudes and collaboration with schools, beyond what is established in the school curriculum, according to Zakaria (2023). Nor can we ignore the fact that those involved were educators, cultural mediators, or area coordinators, which calls into question the sustainability of projects such as those described. As Asensio (2016) noted,

In many cases, the problem is the level at which awareness of inclusive policies is located in the institutional organization chart. It does not go beyond the level of certain technicians or, at most, certain technical managers of certain departments (generally education and communication), but it does not reach the powerful departments (research and conservation of collections, temporary exhibitions) or management positions. A good illustration of this problem is that it is rare to find inclusive approaches in permanent or major temporary exhibitions, which are limited to public or educational programs, to certain communication actions, or at most to minor temporary exhibitions (Asensio, 2016, p. 7).

Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that museums serve as pivotal elements within a broader cultural ecosystem, playing a key role in the formation of pluralistic societies that embrace respect for human diversity. It is thus imperative that other institutions view museums as cultural enclaves capable of amplifying the voices of traditionally silenced or invisible communities. The culture of inclusion requires a consensus among the stakeholders of social, educational, and cultural institutions at the national, district, and community levels regarding a set of shared assumptions and beliefs (Ainscow

et al., 2020). In its most recent report, the European Agency for Special Needs Inclusive Education (2022) recommends a collaborative approach, whereby all educational professionals, including teachers, school leaders, support staff, and educators from other cultural and social entities, engage in shared professional learning. This framework aims to establish a comprehensive approach to inclusion, ensuring that all stakeholders receive training and are equipped to effectively support the inclusion process.

The INARTdis project is a university-led research initiative, in which ICP were conducted collaboratively between institutions of different nature. These practices permeated the institutions. During the different phases of the project, professionals shared a common vision of the role of art in inclusion processes: art promotes the creation of spaces for social inclusion where people are free and do not feel judged. It was also an opportunity to tune in to meanings and to review the construct of inclusive museums. Relationships and networks within and outside schools facilitated the sharing of knowledge, resources and support among professionals, which impacts on their students, and promotes professional development (Hands, 2023; Hausburg, 2020). Networking and collaboration is important at all levels but for vulnerable populations or those at risk of exclusion, and the institutions that serve them, it is essential. Establishing relationships between the different institutions in the community promotes mutual recognition of all professionals (from educational and arts institutions) and facilitates dialogue between them. This would be moving toward Subban et al. (2024) idea of “village mentality” where different actors are prepared to analyze their own contexts, identify barriers and facilitators and plan effective strategies to monitor inclusion in education and culture.

The project presented expands the repertoire of proposals that have appeared in museums in recent years and allows us to think about a range of practices, from greater to lesser organizational complexity, that can be developed with other social and educational entities. These initiatives may be museum-led or co-developed, all with the overarching aim of fostering institutional change through an inclusive approach.

As opposed to an ideal state or situation that has been achieved, the construct of inclusive museums refers to museums that continuously review the ways in which they are organized to welcome every visitor and to address the situations of exclusion to which some groups or collectives have traditionally been subjected. This review concerns the whole institution, from heritage to research, and is linked to the values that sustain it and on which it operates. In this way, museum spaces are conceived as living spaces that continually question their policies and practices, to ensure that they are inclusive institutions for all citizens.

This ongoing review process should be embedded within the institutional framework of each organization. However, this journey can be shared with other institutions and professionals, to the undoubted benefit of all. It is possible to think of evolving practices that, while difficult to replicate, define the important conditions under which they should be developed. Flexible and creative approaches are needed to respond to the wide variety of interests and social demands, to serve an increasingly diverse potential public, which brings with it extremely rich and varied life experiences, and in which culture and the arts play a leading role.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Ethical Committee for Animal and Human Experimentation of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (ref. CEEAH-5990) and the Ethical Committee for Research Projects at the University of Cantabria (ref. CEPI-14-2021). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s), and minor(s)' legal guardian/next of kin, for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

## Author contributions

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## Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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