# 5. The Museum as a 'Safe Space'

Participatory projects are often intended as a way of creating a 'safe space' within the museum, or as a means of transforming the museum itself into a 'safe space'. As such, one of the goals of participatory projects is reflective of the museum's self-awareness of its nature as a site of exclusion, despite its role as a public institution. Elaine Heumann Gurian was the first to introduce the possibility of museums becoming "safe, neutral congregant spaces in our communities" (1995, 15). In this piece, Heumann Gurian proposes that the museum requires radical change for it to serve as such a space, highlighting the importance of the accessibility of the spaces, as well as the relationships between staff members (1995, 15). In recent years, this notion has gained prominence as museums have shifted their roles to become sites of activism and social justice (Chynoweth et al. 2021; Janes and Sandell 2019; Sternfeld 2018). Grounded in 'new museology' (see the introduction to this book), museums apply participatory practices to become democratic forums (Cameron 1971), social spaces (Benson and Cremin 2020) or 'contact zones' (Bayer et al. 2017; Boast 2011; Clifford 1997). In light of this, the role of the museum in society is crucial for its potential to serve as a 'safe space'. According to Morse, 'safe spaces' are "spaces where people can be themselves, spaces that are free from judgement and prejudice and where people can talk freely" (2021, 136). Creating 'safe spaces' for participatory museum work is necessary for developing a *care-full* practice (Zwart et al. 2021).

During our conversations about the projects, several practitioners mentioned the need for a 'safe space'. However, the participants were also asked to describe moments in which they had not felt safe. This was particularly prevalent when discussing their relationships with the museum practitioners, and their uncomfortable encounters with visitors and the press. As described by Lynch, the 'shared space' of museums is deeply political, especially when working with migrants on the topic of migration, and this

should be acknowledged from the start of the process (2017a, 228). Once participants enter the museum's spaces to work on a project about their own highly politicised experiences, they move into unknown territory and are likely to become part of ongoing political debates. Under these circumstances, institutional spaces might come to function as 'safe spaces', particularly through the facilitation, information and care provided by practitioners. They should, according to Morse, recognise that "outputs (so central to the logic of contribution) do not always matter in that moment" (2021, 138).

This chapter outlines the very first steps for the museum on the path to becoming an inclusive institution through its potential 'safe spaces'. I study the practices in, and experiences of, the museum's spaces, both on-site and online, during the participatory project. Drawing a connection between what took place inside the museum and what happened online will help review the differentiation between these 'spaces' and assess the potential for an online continuation of on-site work. This chapter focuses on the projects' 'internal' aspects (with the museum and the participants) as well as the public aspects (which include press, visitors and online users). As such, it also addresses the impact of the museum's public role on the potential safety of its spaces for project participants; looking at how both the encounters with practitioners and with people from outside the museum shaped participants' experiences of these spaces. 'Safe spaces' are necessary for ethical participatory work, and are integral to the museum's changed role.

## 5.1 Creating a 'safe space'

Museums are rarely part of the everyday lives of the participants they engage with through participatory work (Morse 2021, 134). In the case of recently arrived forced migrants, the museum is not likely to be the first place they visit upon arrival, especially because museums have relatively little to offer in response to more immediate needs. However, by becoming an institution that is attuned to the needs and interests of participants, it might gain a more relevant and urgent role. Morse describes three interconnected dimensions involved in museums becoming inclusive institutions, responsive to the needs and interests of participants; museums, according to Morse, should become welcoming, safe, and inclusive spaces (2021, 134). I will refer to the need for the museum to become a 'safe space', which does not only refer to the dimension of feeling safe inside a museum space, but also considers the dimensions

of the museum being welcoming (removing barriers to access) and inclusive (making people feel included and heard). The following sections will show how these dimensions are connected with one another.

However, before moving on, I would like to underline the potential outcome that can be generated when the museum comes to function as a 'safe space'. Once a participatory project comes to an end, "it is hoped that museums more generally are now places where they [the participants] feel welcome" (Morse 2021, 136). Morse discusses the time investment required for creating a 'safe space'. As Zetterstorm-Sharp and Wingfield (2019) point out, however, it is important that the practitioners' work is not solely focused on building relations and communicating with participants, but also includes action that responds to collaborative outcomes or findings. The extent to which museums are able to create 'safe spaces' that constitute more than "saying the right things while being able to do very little" (Zetterstorm-Sharp and Wingfield 2019, 17) is restricted by organisational structures and institutional practices embedded in the museum. For the museum, becoming a 'safe space' in itself could be a sustainable project outcome, yet only if practitioners manage to maintain this space beyond the project's timeline.

In creating and maintaining 'safe spaces', practitioners face various difficulties, as described by Morse (2021), but less is known about how the spaces are experienced by the participants. This sub-chapter will look into how these experiences were affected by the practices of the museum. It first outlines the museum's potential to become a welcoming space, discussing physical thresholds, such as the accessibility of the spaces and ticket prices for entering the museum; and emotional thresholds, such as feelings of insecurity about entering the museum due to uncertainties about how to behave and engage with the artefacts on display. The following section builds on ideas proposed in the previous chapter, highlighting the ways in which recognition can transform the museum into an inclusive space. This process requires a critical perspective, however, as the importance of being acknowledged by the museum as described by participants emphasises the museum's central societal position (as touched upon in Chapter 1). The third section discusses the relational aspect of creating a 'safe space'; addressing the relationships between practitioners and participants, and highlighting how conflicts contribute to the museum functioning as an 'unsafe space'. It does not yet look into the museum's public function, but rather outlines the nature of the practices before the projects 'went public'.

### 5.1.1 'This big white thing'

In her chapter on museums' mission-driven activism, Vlachou states that "museums define themselves as places of knowledge, encounter and dialogue" (2019, 47). In keeping with this, ICOM's proposed museum definition of 2019 described the museum as an institution that serves everyone (ICOM 2019). Yet not everyone feels welcome in a museum, or is even interested in visiting one. As Ahmed describes, institutional spaces can be experienced as exclusive, making the visitors feel like "space invaders" (Ahmed 2012, 13). She borrows the concept of 'space invaders' from Nirmal Puwar (2004), who discusses the ways in which people can be treated as such upon entering a space that is not meant for them. The perception of the museum as an exclusive space, the much-discussed museum thresholds and the behavioural rules for engagement within museum spaces are central to this section.

Some of the participants who took part in the projects may have been regular museum visitors, but many of the participants had never visited a museum before, often because they have no clear idea of what a museum has to offer. In the conversation with the workshop facilitator who assisted with *Museum Takeover*, they referred to the museum as "this big white thing" that people walked past all the time but did not recognise as a place they could visit or contribute to (LM-MT04). The museum community engagement officer at the Leicester Museum & Art Gallery acknowledged that for most people, "it was their first visit to the museum, because obviously they didn't know it was there, they didn't know it was free, they didn't know what would be expected if they went in" (LM-MT02). In outlining what may have kept the participants out of the museum before the start of the project, the community engagement officer described very important aspects that define the exclusive museum: its financial and social thresholds (Heumann Gurian 2005). Morse referred to this by describing "a shared sense that these cultural spaces are not for them, not welcoming of them" (2021, 134). This feeling was not shared by all participants across the studied projects, of course, as some of them had visited museums before, or were already familiar with the host institution.

The museum educator from Museum Friedland pointed out that few of the people based at the transit camp want to go to a museum. "When I tell them 'let's go to the museum', no one will come" (MF-S02). Rather than inviting people into the museum directly, the museum educator spends three afternoons a week having lunch in the transit camp and inviting people to the Nissenhütte. The Nissenhütte serves as a small exhibition space and

the project meeting point (MF-S02), about which the museum educator remarked:

> Of course, we don't call it the Nissenhütte as refugees. We call it 'The Green Hut'. Okay, because it looks green and for them it is a green hut. And sometimes they think that it is a shop or a store. When it is closed and they don't see what it is, they think that they can buy things from it, because it looks like, for them, actually even for me when I saw it for the first time, I thought 'what is this hut, what is it doing in the middle of this camp? (MF-S02)

The Nissenhütte is a more accessible space than the museum. The building is not at all intimidating, and with its green colour, it stands out from the other buildings in the camp; sparking curiosity, if anything. The outputs – the exhibition boards with the participants' photographs – gave the space an extra layer, but did not make it more intimidating. The project curator pointed out that it might have a lot more to offer in terms of inviting engagement than the permanent exhibition and the main museum building, which are more demanding and less accessible than the space and stories situated within the camp itself (MF-S01). The boards featured the stories and image descriptions in the respective languages of the former participants, meaning that new arrivals could come in and immediately find their own language on one of the boards. This became a starting point for conversations, and served as a tool for further engagement (MF-S02). The museum educator described that ideally the outcome of their engagement work would be that people from the camp felt comfortable going to the museum; that through their work in a more welcoming space, they contribute to the idea of the museum as a 'safe space' which participants would then happily visit after leaving Friedland as well.

The museum's barriers to access are not only a reflection of how the museum is perceived from the outside, but are also the product of the implied rules and behavioural expectations that apply to a museum visit. The visit to the Leicester Museum & Art Gallery as part of *Museum Takeover* led to amusing incidents, as discussed by the museum's community engagement officer. With sincere amusement, they described the visit as follows:

> There was a large group that came down to the museum, there must have been over twenty refugees and asylum seekers being taken around, so as people do, the line of people spread out and I was shimmying along people

> at the back to catch up with the people near the front [laughs] and I went into a gallery where we just got a little bit, a little corner of the gallery, some stuff with low barriers and we got two gorillas, actually out in the open, not caged, within that space, it was just a small temporary exhibition, went in to find one of the asylum seekers laying on the floor in front of the, inside the barrier, in front of the gorillas to, you know, hand-propped, propped up on his elbow, laying down on the floor for a photograph [laughs], so I had to encourage him out saying, "you're not supposed to go past the barriers", but you know, people hadn't been to the museum before. (LM-MT02)

These experiences underscore the difficulties of understanding the unwritten rules and guidelines that prescribe the permissible ways of engaging with the museum and the museum objects. If participants do not feel confident about how they are expected to behave, they might not feel comfortable going in by themselves. Seen in this way, the museum does not immediately seem to be a safe space at all.

However, for the participatory work in the museum, the institutions had to soften their rules. For the *daHEIM* project, for example, the project facilitator described that through their work, "the museum space would be treated in a completely un-museum-like way, lived by us; that is, I think, something that makes this project really, really special" (MEK-D03). The participants in this project took charge of the space, they inhabited the spaces and broke some inherent museum rules. The museum director of the MEK explained that there are rules about how to behave in a museum, such as: "that you are not allowed to walk barefoot, that you are not allowed to just make coffee in the exhibitions, even if you are installing them, and so on, that's all forbidden" (MEK-D01). These rules were immediately broken once the spaces were 'occupied' by the participants: the facilitator described how, once the project started, the smell of coffee was constantly present in the museum's spaces (MEK-D03), and a participant mentioned how they had set off an alarm whilst working in the museum (MEK-D04). The educational assistant from the Tropenmuseum also addressed the museum's rules, as they expressed frustration with the limitations these caused for facilitating participatory work. One of the rules is that no food or drinks can be consumed inside the museum, including in the workshop room in which the museum receives school groups and people they want to work with (T-A03). They did not break this rule, but the education team considered this a limitation on their work throughout the process.

If the museum allows for these rules to be broken for a participatory project, or comes up with a different set of rules, this immediately changes the nature of the space and how it is experienced by the participants. It becomes more like a 'home' (MEK-D03), or even a space that motivates participants to share stories and socialise (MEK-D08), and as such, it starts to feel like a 'safe space' for the participants, at least for the duration of the project.

### 5.1.2 Being included

Lois H. Silverman has described the museum as "a relatively safe, trustworthy, respected, and even esteemed environment in which people can come together" (2010, 145). In her description, she connects the status of a 'safe space' with the understanding of museums as respected institutions. The participants also felt this connection, pointing out that being included by the museum was important to them. This process of inclusion is the focus of this section, proposing different ways in which this takes shape in museums.

One of the participants in the project at the Tropenmuseum referred to the museum as a place they recognised from home and from visits to other countries (T-A04). Their experiences of visiting museums made the opportunity valuable in a different way, as they acknowledged a barrier, a discrepancy, between the museum's authority and their own potential to contribute. This notion, however, added value to their experience of the project, which they described as very special "because so many people really come to see your stuff and hear stories about your stuff" (T-A04). It gave them, they said, an extraordinary feeling (T-A04). For the participant, the museum functions as a stage for their culture to be shown, described and explained. The head of exhibitions at the Tropenmuseum confirmed that this sentiment was widely shared amongst the participants, observing that visitors were interested in the place and the people, which made it especially nice for the participants to 'have a stage' to share their culture. "That's the most ideal thing you want in an ethnographic museum, isn't it?" she continued (T-A06).

A participant in the project at the Leicester Museum & Art Gallery mentioned that the ability to contribute to "the big museum" made them very happy (LM-MT05). They found this so great because it gave them a chance to tell people about Kurdistan, which they described as their home country (LM-MT05). They added: "I saw many countries in the museum but I didn't see my culture. That's what I'm writing this for" (LM-MT05). Another participant described how they understood the project – for which the participants added

labels and corrected existing interpretations of objects in the permanent exhibition – as an opportunity for them to be part of the museum. They noted:

> all of my life, I thought it is the museum people's responsibility to decorate, and what will be where, they will think of everything. Not outsider people, you know? Not outside anyone can [be] involve[d] with that. But that thinking changed when we were involved [in the project]. (LM-MT06)

During the interview, they repeatedly stated that it was kind of the museum practitioners to involve them, and that they were grateful for the chance to be part of this project (LM-MT06). The workshop facilitator mentioned that some of the participants had needed a bit of encouragement, because they did not feel comfortable writing in English, and because they did not feel like it was their place to add to the museum exhibition (LM-MT04). Like the aforementioned participant in the project at the Tropenmuseum, the participants considered the opportunity to see their contribution presented in the museum an honour, which emphasises their understanding of the museum as a respected and slightly daunting institution, similar to Silverman's assessment (2010). They looked up to the museum and its authority, but this perspective changed because of the project. They felt they had become part of the institution in a way: "before, it was like an isolated something, but now I can [get] involved with something, I can make something there" (LM-MT06). The participatory project had changed their understanding of the museum as an intimidating institution.

The project curator at Museum Friedland described having seen that one of the participants had been very proud during the opening of the exhibition. The participant "was really impressed, and posted a lot of photos of themselves in the exhibition on Facebook afterwards, and wrote how great they thought it was" (MF-S01). They were one of the few participants who had come to the exhibition opening, but their response helped the project curator see the value of the project and its outputs (MF-S01). The lack of interest after the project was something the museum educator also spoke about (MF-S02). The photographs taken by the participants were part of the exhibition and appeared in the museum's catalogue, about which they said: "I thought they would be so happy, [but] it is for them *egal* [all the same]" (MF-S02). The museum educator addressed the assumption that people are keen to see their contributions presented in an institutional setting (MF-S02). Even though the participants were happy to take part in the project, they did not really care about the outcomes in (and for) the museum. The project started

from a logic of contribution, and, despite it tapping into a potential interest of the participants, its outputs would serve the museum rather than the participants. The museum educator clarified that despite their initial surprise towards this disinterest, speaking from their own experiences, they could say that the participants have other things to worry about (MF-S02). With these projects and those that followed, many museums attempted to create spaces that are more inclusive.

### 5.1.3 Safe interactions with practitioners

The previous sections already stressed that a 'safe space' is not just about the museum building itself, but that 'safe spaces' are dependent on the perception of the institution, which is partially shaped by their relationships with staff. The approach employed by practitioners is vital for creating a 'safe space' (Morse 2021; Silverman 2010). "Stated simply, if staff members care for each other, visitors believe that the staff will care for them. Safety and equity begin at home" (Heumann Gurian 1995, 15). Following Heumann Gurian, the relationships between staff members as well as those between staff and participants can make the museum feel safe (or unsafe). I discussed these relationships and their potential to lead to friendships or other networks back in Chapter 3; this section, however, explores the ways in which practitioners facilitated or hindered the creation of 'safe spaces'. According to Morse, "creating safe spaces is about the ordinary, everyday actions and attitudes towards participants" (2021, 137). Such actions and attitudes were described by practitioners – outlining how they attempted to make participants feel safe – and by participants, who also described when they did not feel particularly safe.

One way in which practitioners ensured the comfort of the participants was by offering support during the project in their native languages. Some museums, like the MEK and Museum Friedland, worked with interpreters for specific parts of the project. One of the co-curators of the project at the MEK, however, could also support with language if necessary. At the Tropenmuseum, one of the staff members spoke Arabic, but they were not able to join the project regularly. The *Aleppo* project and *Museum Takeover* relied on the participants' knowledge of the national language (Dutch and English respectively). *Museum Takeover* started from a creative writing workshop to help participants become more confident using the English language. However, the workshop facilitator explained that they did have assistance

from forced migrants who were able to help people with their writing process in their own languages. The assistant facilitators were not always present at the workshop sessions, but provided occasional help, speaking with the participants in their own language (LM-MT04). The practitioners tried to make sure that the participants in each of the projects could speak to at least one person in their mother tongue.

In line with this, a 'safe space' might be developed through shared experiences of forced migration. The *daHEIM* project was led by one participant co-curator with similar experiences, and a co-curator who had migrated to Germany several years before the project started. The latter mentioned that this had eased the connections with the participants. "I came to Germany ten years ago. And of course, they have more questions for me than for [the project facilitator], because I am already here, and I have got some experience in this country" (MEK-D05). The experience of arriving in a new country also informed the work of the museum educator at Museum Friedland. From an interest in how the people in the transit camp experience Friedland, the museum's educator aimed to focus on the idea of arrival as a process rather than a destination. In contrast to what the project curator described as being at the forefront of peoples' lives, they spoke about this process from their own experiences of arriving in Friedland:

> So most of my work is to let the refugees understand that this is a transit camp. This is like a honeymoon. In the honeymoon you will enjoy your time, you will relax, you will know now that this is a time to get information, to relax, to start the arrival and the new beginning. So this is my main concern, that's why most of my work focused on these things. (MF-S02)

The project, therefore, did not intend to address the urgent matters people were facing at the time in their everyday lives, but rather provided the time to acknowledge this process of arrival and to relax. The limited timeframe of the workshop provided the opportunity to engage with the museum in a fun way, and to learn a bit about photography in the meantime.

Yet the engagement between participants and practitioners was not all positive. In some cases, these interactions or the museum's choices disrupted the 'safe space', or prevented the museum from becoming a 'safe space' in the first place. The everyday actions and attitudes of the practitioners, as described by Morse (2021), did not facilitate a 'safe space' but made participants uncomfortable. In the project at the Tropenmuseum, this was the result of the photographs that were selected for the exhibition by the curator.

As pointed out in the previous chapter, many of the participants commented on certain photographs, which they felt were not representative of the Aleppo they had known (see section 4.2.1). The museum took one photograph out, but this was not sufficient for all of the participants. One participant expressed that they did not feel comfortable being confronted with the selected images on a weekly basis (T-A01). They were not the only one upset by the images; two or three people became very angry, the museum educator explained (T-A01). The practitioners did not want to cut further images from the exhibition, which ultimately led the aforementioned participant to quit the project (T-A01). Reflecting on the uncomfortable parts of the project, the museum educator quoted the former participant's response: "I don't want this, I don't want to walk through this" (T-A01). The images of war and destruction along with the museum's stand on the matter had made them uncomfortable enough to leave the project. Overall, participants had a positive experience of the project, however, the practitioners were not able to create a 'safe space' for everyone involved.

With the *daHEIM* project, these conflicts took shape over a longer period and continuously affected the participants' experiences of the project. One participant stated that most conflicts took place within the leadership team, between the project facilitator, the co-curator and the participant co-curator (MEK-D08). Much like what was outlined by Heumann Gurian (1995), the perceived hierarchies between the facilitators in this project revealed a carelessness to the participants. From the participant's description of this conflict, it becomes clear how it affected the process and the spaces in which participants felt safe. They said:

> You know, we are having a nice and lovely day during spring and it was sunny and everything. And we eat, we drink some beer, we work and we laugh. And then there were some conflicts or something happening which to me was, I was afraid of that actually, you know, communicating in a way or language that was really different than how we're supposed to work and communicate in this space. So I felt a bit like a child, that – I don't know what is happening there. Or does it have something to do with me, or with my work or what I'm doing, my existence there? (MEK-D08)

Participants often experienced these arguments without knowing exactly what was going on and what this meant for the project. Five years after the completion of the project, a conflict between the participant co-curator and the project facilitator remains unresolved despite ongoing

conversations (MEK-D04). The facilitator also mentioned these conflicts, stating: "unfortunately, we are going through a conflict at the moment that apparently we cannot easily resolve. That is, of course, really a very sad story" (MEK-D03). In conversation about the *daHEIM* project, the museum director addressed the conflict between the project facilitator and the participants as a reason for reconsidering the museum's role in the participatory process. The director stated:

> I think we should have had a larger role in it. And there were probably some problems between [project facilitator] and the participants, at least some of them. I don't know if we should have interfered or not. (MEK-D01)

Throughout the participatory process, the museum took a back seat while conflicts unfolded inside the museum building; in line with what was agreed on beforehand, the museum was not responsible for the participatory process. In hindsight, however, the director acknowledged that this may have been a mistake (MEK-D01). One of the participants remarked that both KUNSTASYL and the museum should be held responsible for the conflicts (MEK-D08). At least, the participant claimed, they should have been more aware of their role and of the changing relationships within the collaborative process (MEK-D08). The museum has now become involved in the process to resolve the ongoing conflict, possibly playing a role in finding a solution for those affected by it.

As this section has pointed out, 'safe spaces' are only partially hindered by the limitations of the museum. They are more likely to be compromised by uncomfortable processes between or with practitioners. Angela Jannelli notes that the museum should be a place of resonance that provides a mixture between being open and closed. Her understanding of a closed setting is described as "a group which is offered a protected setting" (Jannelli 2020, 59). Such a protected setting is dependent on the museum practitioners, and it might not be able to be maintained when the project 'opens up'. The different sections highlighted many ways in which practitioners can actively contribute to creating a space where participants feel welcome during the process, and perhaps continue to do so when the process gains a public aspect.

## 5.2 Maintaining a 'safe space'

Morse refers to several studies that reflect on the museum's potential to function as a 'safe space', describing museums as "nearly always non-stigmatising environments" (2021, 136). The first part of this chapter, however, underlined some of the stigmas present within museum spaces, and we have not yet looked at the potential stigmas that arise when projects 'open up' their processes or outputs to address the public. However, museums no longer solely exist in their physical spaces, but must also occupy and engage with 'online spaces' in order to present their projects and appeal to different audiences. The next steps in the participatory processes in the museum spaces were marked by encounters. As the projects gained a public aspect through an exhibition opening, public tours, or online engagement on social media, the museum space changed into a space that may no longer have been experienced as a 'safe space'.

This sub-chapter sheds light on the question of whether the museum can continue to offer a 'safe space' in its 'traditional', public role. In the following sections, I address the different encounters in the museum's 'open setting' by drawing on participant experiences. The first section focuses on encounters with visitors to the museum, as well as the post-colonial perception of such encounters. These are discussed through some of the participants' elaborate descriptions of the situations, and the way these affected their experiences of the museum space. Taking a similar approach, the second section describes what the encounters with the press meant for the participants; highlighting not only what went wrong in these encounters, but also suggesting how practitioners could have played a larger role in facilitating these encounters. The third section analyses encounters with marketing teams about public-facing products for social media spaces and the website. It also discusses the ways in which the participants engaged with these online spaces themselves, if at all, and how they experienced this aspect of the project.

### 5.2.1 Meeting museum visitors

The different forms of participatory work and presentation formats that came out of them – such as exhibitions, events, tours or object labels – naturally led to a range of different encounters with museum visitors. The museums created a space for encounter between museum visitors and the participants, sometimes through their voices being represented in objects or

texts, and sometimes through their physical presence and opportunities for dialogue. The latter was especially influential in affecting how the participants experienced the space.

One example of this was the format of a personal tour, such as the one organised by the Tropenmuseum, which led to particularly interesting moments of informal interaction after the tours themselves. Every person who was involved with the project on the days the tours took place – project organisers and participants alike – referred to the moment after the tour as a relevant part of the project. The tour always ended in the café of the museum, which then provided a moment for less formal interaction between guides and visitors. The museum educator stated that the moment of conversation after the tour resembled the experience of chatting "after a theatre show" (T-A01). This exchange was considered a welcome conclusion to the tour, but the museum educator added that it sometimes went on for too long, taking up a lot of everyone's time (T-A01). One of the participants described the dialogue as a way to share other stories and engage with visitors by asking them about their own experiences and stories (T-A04). The participant also reflected on these informal exchanges as a way to meet new people and make friends, by starting a conversation with the visitors (T-A04). Some of the participants were asked to join different projects during these conversations after the tour. As such, the job presented an ideal networking opportunity for the participants, who had recently arrived in the Netherlands (T-A01). During an interview with one of the participants, they explained how the museum became a site of encounters, as they accidentally ran into their neighbour from Aleppo, and they built friendships with visitors of the tour (T-A04).

According to this participant, these encounters were the most important part of the tour, and it was particularly interesting to allow for these encounters in the museum. But the participant also described a negative encounter with a visitor of the tour and exhibition. They explained that the tour was disrupted by a visitor who claimed that the stories about the Armenian genocide were untrue (T-A04). They described this encounter and explained how the woman had continued to claim that:

> It was just [part of] the World War [I], so, then I acted properly. I said "Madam, you can now consider my role, which implies it is my story to share. Do you want to share your story? Maybe you should just take on a project and you can share your own story there." And then she did indeed leave [laughs] and that's the only way I could indeed stop her and, because I find it . . . I told

> everything true to what really happened and what I at least also heard from my grandparents – they themselves had fled from the whole genocide, so it couldn't be that it wasn't true . . . but yes, that was actually the only thing that happened with guests that was annoying. (T-A04)

The participant explained the conflict as a rare occurrence, probably caused by the lack of political recognition of the genocide. They described that, until a few years ago, the Armenian genocide had not been acknowledged as a genocide by the Dutch government, due to its problematic implications for Turkish people in the Netherlands (T-A04).[1] Upon asking the museum educator, they stated that politics and religion formed difficult subjects that had led to uncomfortable situations over the course of the project. For example, one of the guides was wearing a headscarf, and visitors would occasionally ask her about her religion. Another question that regularly came up was about which political side the guides were on, whether they supported the government or the rebellion. The museum education team had prepared the guides for such questions; they had prepared answers, such as: 'I don't think that's a question for now as part of this tour', or: 'I'd rather not talk about that' (T-A01).

The exhibitions manager likewise referred to the project as a successful site of dialogue, describing some of the encounters with visitors during the project. They mentioned that the visitors were generally very interested in what had happened in Aleppo, and especially in hearing what it meant for the participants (T-A06). They continued: "it was less of a 'come and look', and more of an exchange and of very sincere interest in what is going on and what we can do for each other. I had the impression that from both sides that was an exchange of experiences and also of culture" (T-A06). The exhibitions manager referred to former practices to emphasise how these contemporary practices are different, not merely perpetuating colonial practices in a 'novel format', as they stated:

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1 It was not until 22 January 2018 that the Dutch government acknowledged the murders in Turkey as the Armenian genocide. The vote states this also includes the Assyrians, the Pontic Greeks, and the Arameans, as they were also victims of the genocide (Vote no. 56, February 2018). The genocide was already addressed in 2004, but the official acknowledgement was put on hold due to negotiations with Turkey (Vote no. 270, December 2004).

> What was done in the past, in the '80s and '90s, in the Afrikamuseum, that for a period of time people from Africa or Ghana, for example, would come and do something or talk about their culture. And that really feels like putting people on a stage and saying: "come everyone, now is the chance [to learn about this foreign culture]". But this is also – the Syrian refugees felt like fellow citizens, you know, they are here and they, well, they might not be able to do anything different, but we have to move on together. So we as Dutch people have to offer a place, and consider how we will do this together. (T-A06)

They described museum practices that are not that old, and juxtaposed them with what happened in the *Aleppo* project. But what is unclear is whether the museum's practices have changed drastically, or if it is more a change in the visitors that leads to different types of encounters between the two 'groups', which are differentiated by their respective roles in the project.

The *daHEIM* project allowed for a very different set of encounters, as the visitors were able to have a look at the process that took place in the lead-up to the exhibition opening, which consisted of five months of collaboration in the museum spaces. Not unlike the tours – though perhaps in an even more complex way – these encounters could be understood as problematic due to their resemblance to the concept of 'human zoos'. One participant stated: "I didn't know it's a thing for people to consume, to come and consume and see and read and experience where we do all of this" (MEK-D08). This was reiterated by another participant in their description of the visitors who came to have a look during the participatory process. They noted that there were two types of visitors: "the people who are coming there […] to see how it is and what we look like. But also, of course, other people came to see the process, what we are working on and how we work" (MEK-D04). The participant mentioned that this created quite a complicated situation, in which they did not always feel comfortable. At the same time, this part of the process was important, as it made the practices transparent, providing the opportunity to come and look at what was going on at any time in the process. When I asked the participant if the safe space was affected by the continuous accessibility provided to visitors, they stated: "it wasn't like 'open', that everybody can come in, in the museum. Some people were just coming in and saying: 'ah, we see this is not an exhibition yet'" (MEK-D08). These participants felt particularly conflicted about how the project and the process were framed, but they also mentioned that it sometimes led to pleasant interactions.

In the different projects, museums created 'safe spaces', but they were not always able to maintain this sense of 'safety' when visitors entered these spaces. The *daHEIM* project showed that inviting people in while the participants are at work can complicate the relationships and make participants feel watched. Though this provided a certain transparency for the visitors, it was not necessarily best for the participants. This openness would have been more effective if the participants had been provided with the tools to engage with visitors in a way that ensured that they felt safe. Such tools were provided by the museum educators at the Tropenmuseum, and put to use when visitors confronted participants during the public programme. Museum practitioners should take the impact of 'opening up' the space into account, and take measures to ensure that participants continue to feel safe throughout. This is also essential when press engages with participants, as outlined in the next section.

### 5.2.2 Encounters with the press

Most of the museum projects evaluated for this study received a large amount of press attention. As described earlier, the projects served as a means of demonstrating the inclusivity of the institution. Even if the practices were not as participatory as imagined, a project of such political relevance would still gain sufficient media attention. Museums sent out press releases, which many journalists interpreted as an invitation to speak to the participants about their experiences. However, these encounters with the press often took place on-site in the museum, where the participants had now come to feel relatively safe. This section outlines the role of the media and press attention in transforming a 'safe space' into one that is perceived as unsafe. In particular, it addresses the role museums should play in these circumstances in order to maintain a 'safe space'.

Two of the case studies gained a lot of media attention in response to their participatory project and the focus of their exhibitions. Wanting to promote the exhibition or project, museums are naturally happy to receive such press attention, especially as it strengthens their image among the general public and funders alike. The Tropenmuseum and the MEK received significant attention for their work, and provided press with the opportunity to speak with the participants about these projects. The other two cases, in Leicester and Friedland, had a lower profile, and could not and did not introduce journalists to the participatory process. Though this may have

been the result of limited media interest in the projects, it also facilitated a process of 'safekeeping'. The ways in which these exchanges between press and participants were handled varies between the projects and press outlets, yet several participants I spoke with mentioned the interaction with the journalists and photographers when reflecting on the project. The experiences with the media were mostly negative, due to unpleasant encounters with journalists within the museum spaces, and due to the fact that their testimonies were edited for publication in a way that they felt misrepresented what they had said.

The *daHEIM* project, for example, led to an incredible media response, as was mentioned by the project facilitator. In an interview with them, while addressing the expectations and the response to the project, they recounted: "I will never forget that we had a 45-minute-long telephone interview with Radio Bogotá. As in, we are actually speaking about South America. The exhibition was going around the world, and with all the accompanying excitement, it actually seems a bit strange, as it was not really clear to me what was so extraordinary about it that it would happen like this" (MEK-D03). The significant press attention was also noticed by the project co-curator, who described the contact with the press as a big part of the work they did within the museum space. As such, the space really became part of the public sphere through the media attention that the project received. "We had much to do with the press during the work in the museum. Really a lot, a lot, a lot" (MEK-D05). They stated that the involvement of the press in the project was necessary to show what was going on inside the museum, and to demonstrate the goal and purpose of the project (MEK-D05).

A participant from the *Aleppo* project described feeling disillusioned after their encounter with the press (T-A04). They expressed disappointment and disbelief, because their words were twisted and cut, misrepresenting their intentions and opinions. They elaborated: "they cut and edited parts that eventually . . . it was like I was talking about something completely different, I said a couple of negative things about Syria, etcetera, but I wasn't actually, I was just answering their questions, but the way they edited everything, it was kind of weird" (T-A04). The engagement with the press thus led to a faulty representation of the views of the participants. At the same time, the press used these misrepresentations for further reporting, continuing to distort the stories once shared by the participants of this museum project. These statements often contained political opinions, as if the museum had become a place to speak with forced migrants in order to find out their position on

the war in Syria, or about whether they intended to return to Syria or stay in the Netherlands. The participant reflected that now they know how the press works, they have a different approach, and always ask to see any footage or writing before it is published (T-A04). "I'm happy to share my story, but only in my own way" (T-A04).

One of the participants of the *daHEIM* project in Berlin recounted having experienced something similar when discussing how the press labelled them, despite their explanations about how they would like to be represented (MEK-D04). The conversation, they said, was shaped by what the press had decided it wanted to hear (MEK-D04). By pressing certain lines of questioning, the participant eventually felt tricked into saying something, explaining: "so they actually, through this talking, they, let's say, they shaped the content of what I said . . . this is very terrible to be honest" (MEK-D04). The encounters with the press recounted by this participant reveal a gap in the work that the museum does and the framework it provides for the participants. It demonstrates that participants were not informed about their rights when speaking to the press and not supported during their conversations with journalists who showed an interest in the project. The participant referred to this as a lack of a 'safe space' during the collaborative process, stating:

> So even with the project we did, it was [considered] successful also through media, but reflecting on that also, for me as a Person of Colour, is a very, a very, very hard situation, because there were no safe spaces for none of us. This means, no safe space in the structures of the project of how we work, no safe space from the media, so the press, when they come, they do what they want. (MEK-D04)

The participant refers explicitly to the concept of a safe space, which is often one of the stated aims of museums in their participatory work. That the project did not ultimately offer such a protected setting becomes clear in the comments of another participant. This participant did feel that this safe space existed during the project, offering a place in which the participants could share stories about their home country and their journeys, and to connect with each other through these exchanges (MEK-D08). Their experience of this safe space was positive until the participant realised that they were being excluded from a large part of the conversations and processes behind the project. Though the shared space itself felt safe at the time, they were being excluded from the extent of the conversation that was going on, and were

therefore unaware of the need for a so-called 'safe space' to begin with. They questioned this situation, explaining:

> Because it is not about that, it's not about creating a safe space – for what do I need a safe space? Maybe if I know the kind of like, the reality, the reality of the society, of the institutions, of arts, of the difficulties and the challenges that immigrants and brown bodies are going through, or are facing . . . that's the reality actually, that's the fact. And they are there to create this – for a limited time to create this safe space, and for some specific people also, of course, this is not going very long actually. (MEK-D08)

The museum had felt like a place of sanctuary until it was opened up to the press, which made the participants aware of the ongoing debates their lives were part of. The concept of a safe space was used, but at the time, the participant was not aware of why they would require such a space, and what that space should mean or include. They referred to the shortcomings of the safe space in relation to the press, as access to this (formerly) safe space was provided to journalists who wanted to talk to the people involved. They would come into the space and "document and shoot and publish and do interviews with us" (MEK-D08). When I described these difficulties with the press to the aforementioned project co-curator, they stated:

> That some […] felt bothered or harassed by the press – I don't perceive it that way. I was there with everyone else. With or without a camera. Or, when it was only a newspaper or something. I found the questions justified, or, I thought how they formulated it was justified. We are there to answer those questions. And how we see it, how they mean it, that's up to them to decide. I really didn't find it bad. (MEK-D05)

Although this perspective is relevant, it is not up to the curator to decide whether participants should have been okay with the press attention. From both of these cases, and through conversations with practitioners, it is evident that museum practitioners approach these projects and engagement with the press from their own position. They are aware that the media freely interprets and cuts information to fit a particular narrative, but they did not share this knowledge with the participants before inviting journalists into the museum spaces. As with the process of 'opening up' the museum to visitors, museum practitioners need to provide the participants with the right tools and information to enable them to deal with the press in a manner that they feel most comfortable with, and that produces output that they wish to share.

### 5.2.3 Online encounters and (potential) engagement

Many of the projects studied were extended to include engagement with visitors and non-visitors in the online realm. The use of online spaces might compromise the creation of 'safe spaces' for participants, due to social media and online communication platforms "not necessarily [being] ready-made for outreach" (Kist 2022, 2). Digital forms of engagement were added to the projects ad hoc. It created further content for the exhibition and made it available to different audiences, but also remained the most visible and accessible aspect of the projects after they had come to an end. This section highlights how museums engaged the participants to contribute to these online spaces. It looks at the interactions that were part of the content creation, but also at the material produced by the museum's online marketing practices. These practices extended to the museum's online presence, but the participants did not necessarily consider these channels 'safe' extensions of the museum spaces.

The MEK invited an external company to handle the communication and PR of the project, which meant that this company was responsible for the concept and content of the social media communication during the project. Their initial presentation to the museum outlining their concept and approach suggests that the company planned to involve the participants by sharing portraits of them on Facebook and Instagram. The pictures of the forced migrants were to be accompanied by a poignant or provocative quote (MEK (External marketing-team) 2016). As such, the company intended to create additional content focusing on the personal aspect of the exhibition; which made sense, since it was a project involving many different people. Alongside the focus on the people behind the exhibition, the company proposed including objects that people had brought with them as they fled (such as those included in the display at the Tropenmuseum). They also wanted to dedicate several posts to the historical narrative of the exhibition (as addressed in the following chapter). Additionally, five different videos of the curators, co-curators and project facilitator would discuss various aspects of the exhibition. The external company proposed that they would use the social media platforms to invite forced migrants themselves to contribute a picture of an object they brought with them to Germany. These ideas reflect an understanding of social media as playing a supporting role for the museum's work inside its spaces. It offers an opportunity to develop new content to elaborate on the project, but this should only really provide further

background information to museum visitors. At the same time, however, the conversations on social media and the requests for input from forced migrants on these platforms initiate an interaction between what goes on online and what happens on-site.

The involvement of an external company further complicated the integration of these otherwise separate practices, and limited the museum's sense of responsibility for the processes of content creation. According to the company's plans, interaction with the participants was a necessary step in the process, but there were no guidelines on how to go about this. One of the participants described this encounter as uncomfortable, recounting:

> There was a company they hired, and this company was doing the advertisement for the exhibition, but this was – I was aware of that, but even that was, I'm sorry, but I feel very sorry that when I remember this . . . how even those individual persons filming me with the spotlight on me, because they actually brought me to – they made me say what they want to hear, for those advertisements. (MEK-D04)

It becomes evident that despite a desire to blur the lines between the physical spaces of the museum and its online presence, there was no intention to extend an ethical participatory process into these realms. The company that created the content for the online spaces did not seem to consider the participants as equals in their intention to have them pose for pictures or speak about the project on camera. A little more feedback was possible in the written posts that were shared on social media, as the same participant commented:

> With the Facebook posts, like, there were some [things] I would know about, some, like I even talked to the team, we changed them and so on, but it always took a long time, because they have to always communicate with the State Museums and then we can know what can be there and what not. (MEK-D04)

The external company, in this case, seemed to take on a more collaborative approach, while the museum and its complicated institutional infrastructure limited the possibilities of participation within these two 'museum spaces'. The infrastructural division between these spaces made the extension of the participatory process beyond the physical space nearly impossible. For the museum, the online and on-site spaces were occupied and utilised separately, and in different ways. These processes did not require feedback from the

participants, and the museum did not support them in preparation for these interactions.

At Museum Friedland and the Leicester Museum & Art Gallery, online engagement did not make up a big part of the project, and it was only through limited social media posts that the organisers tried to draw attention to the process. For the project in Leicester, this communication was mostly done through the private channels of the project organisers. Museum Friedland did promote the project through their official social media channels, posting pictures of the workshop and the installation of the exhibition (on 1 February 2017 and 15 March, respectively). It is clear that in this case, social media was merely seen as a marketing tool. The posts did not involve the participants, nor did it foster communication about the content of the exhibition in the online space. Social media was deployed for promotion of the project and exhibition, in the lead-up to the opening. Afterwards, the project no longer actively appeared on the museum's social media channels. The engagement with the participants to create this content was minimal. The participants did not reflect on these components as part of their experiences of the project, nor did they feature in much of the museums' online content.

When it comes to the online spaces themselves, it is important to note that different rules apply here (Parry 2011, 321). The use of social media did not only impact the audiences and the ways they could engage with the topics addressed in either of the spaces, but also opened up the possibility for participants to take part in conversations from their personal social media accounts. This intersection between the museum's spaces and the personal spaces of the participants was particularly visible in the *Aleppo* project. The museum's in-house marketer managed the project's social media engagement. They had been able to get to know the participants through the preparatory sessions and during the tours at the museum (T-A02). Various participants were tagged in the museum's posts on Facebook, but the participant I spoke to did not mention this as a problem. As opposed to the encounters with the press, they were happy about how the content for social media was produced and felt in control over what was posted. They clarified that they did one interview in which they were asked about "their opinion of the exhibition and why they [took] part in the exhibition" (T-A04), and referred to the fact that this was still available online today. "That was really well done, of course" (T-A04).

The content on social media mostly received very positive responses. When I asked the museum's communications manager about this, they said

that it was very likely that they deleted any negative responses at the time (T-A02).

> Hurtful things or offensive language, if that's used, I immediately block it. I block it and delete it. If someone, you know, from a place of fear, expresses a view that is not my own but they are happy to talk about it, then I would always engage in a conversation. (T-A02)

It helped a lot that the communications manager is specialised in conveying inclusive narratives, and focuses on this in their role as a freelance communications manager today. Complex, political and sensitive content needs to be handled carefully, as they demonstrated through their approach and reflection (T-A02). The extension into online spaces complicated the potential of remaining a 'safe space' for participants, especially when participants were involved in ways they did not agree with.

## 5.3 Conclusion

Working across physical and virtual spaces increases the complexity of the potential for museums to become and maintain 'safe spaces'. Participants might not be familiar with museums and their work, and feel uncomfortable and intimidated by the institution. Those who were familiar with museums and museum work generally viewed the museum as a source of authority. Being included by the museum made participants feel appreciated and generated a sense of 'ownership' over the space; they felt like the museum was theirs, or at least felt at home at the museum. This was usually a result of the participants' relationships with the practitioners. These relationships can make or break the museum's role as a 'safe space' for participants.

Based on preliminary collaborative work, 'safe spaces' are commonly constructed as part of the internal phases of a project. When these projects gain a public role, leading to encounters with visitors, press, communications staff and social media users, the maintenance of these spaces became much more complex. However, what the projects studied here make clear is that the 'safety' of the spaces relied heavily on the museum practitioners; they must provide the right tools for the respective encounters and consider the participants' position in these encounters. If they achieve this, participants may continue to perceive this public institution as a 'safe space'.