

Object handling as a meaningful activity?

Research into the meaning of and preconditions associated with wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions.

2024

Tina Goethals, Hanne Dewinter & Litse Depuydt

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Introduction

In early 2021 three Ghent based heritage institutions, Museum Dr. Guislain, Huis van Alijn and Erfgoedhuis Zusters van Liefde, decided to join forces to enhance and expand their heritage and wellbeing related expertise. Using the name 'ErfGoedVoelen', they submitted a project proposal to the Flemish Government via the Cultural Heritage Decree to investigate and facilitate interventions involving cultural heritage together with partners from the care, research and education sectors. The original question relating to the impact of cultural heritage interventions on participants' wellbeing gradually developed into a focus on giving meaning.

This report reflects the first two stages of the ErfGoedVoelen project, during which four pilot projects were set up, each addressing a different target group using different heritage methodologies. This report aims to provide an insight into the significant role that these projects can play for participants and professionals. The ultimate goal of the ErfGoedVoelen project is to create a sound scientific basis to integrate wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions¹ in a structural manner into the wider sphere of operations of museums and within care and welfare organisations.

The report is composed of several sections. Following the literature study and problem statement (1), which includes a description of the shift from impact to meaning, the research questions (2) are formulated. This is followed by a brief description of the progress of the various pilot projects (3) and an explanation of the research methods used (4). The subsequent section (5) outlines the research findings on the basis of a number of overarching themes. Initially the meaning for participants and professionals is discussed in more detail, followed by the structural integration of wellbeing-focused heritage activities using a number of preconditions and areas of conflict. Finally, we have included a general closing statement (6). In addition, two post qualitative interludes provide an opportunity to find out more about several subtle but meaningful moments within wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities. These interludes not only illustrate the themes discussed earlier, but also invite us to explore and appreciate the complexity and significance of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities.

¹ In Flanders, the term 'wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions' refers to projects and policy measures that use cultural heritage to promote the wellbeing of individuals and communities. Although the term 'intervention' usually has a medical connotation, in this case it refers to purposeful actions in the field of cultural heritage. For further reflection on this term and the purposeful focus on wellbeing within this context, please refer to the results section and closing statement of this report.

Literature study and problem statement

Social role of museums and cultural heritage institutions

In recent decades museums and heritage institutions have increasingly faced questions concerning their social relevance. Starting in the 1980s and 1990s, under the influence of a new generation of artists, the idea that museums do not have an autonomous basis took hold (Carroll La, 2012). In other words, they are no longer considered neutral conduits of objective knowledge about the past. On the contrary, museums and heritage organisations are socially embedded institutions that reflect a specific vision of the past, according to Bennett (1995). As a result, the idea of museum spaces being considered a kind of neutral, white cube used to show artwork and heritage objects to the public in the purest sense possible, which took off from the beginning of the 20th century, fades into the background (Permentier, 2017). According to authors such as Weil (1999), a collection can no longer be the *raison d'être* of a museum. Following a century of detachment focused mainly on the study of objects, De Backer & Elias (2020) argue that, from the beginning of the 21st century there has been a need to better understand visitors and develop public activities.

The repercussions of this shift in the relationship with the public are felt across the entire cultural heritage landscape. 'Cultural heritage' is the common denominator used in Flanders for, among others, museums and heritage organisations and refers to a broad spectrum of small and larger organisations that are governed and funded in different ways (De Backer & Elias, 2020). Gradually, the idea is establishing itself that the value of art and heritage coincides with the significant role they can play in the life plan of individuals (Elias, 2011, 2015). Or: "*cultural heritage exists only in the mind of an observer, where it may or may not be well preserved.*" (De Backer & Elias, 2020, page 51). In this way, cultural heritage organisations are increasingly shifting their activities towards the community. Under the heading 'the agonistic museum' FARO, the Flemish support centre for cultural heritage, published a contribution in 2020 about the role of heritage organisations in social debate (Van Oost, 2020). In it, five leading museums reflect on their current social role. The evolution of the museum definition of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), originally formulated in 1946, also reflects the shift from a primarily collection driven, via an exhibiting and curating function, to a social purpose. The inclusion of 'intangible heritage' (i.e. the customs, expressions, knowledge and skills that communities collectively identify and value) in the 2007 definition was specifically intended to highlight the social role of museums, as laboratories for dialogue, around both tangible and intangible heritage (Van der Zeijden & Elpers, 2018). The revised 2022 definition further reinforces this social emphasis with the inclusion of elements such as diversity, sustainability and collaboration with communities (International Council of Museums, 2022).

Cultural heritage and wellbeing

Against this background, the relationship between cultural heritage and wellbeing has also increasingly gained interest. In the recently published 'Art on Prescription' (2022), haematologist Tessa Kerre makes a case for the inclusion of arts into healthcare. Conversely, more and more museums and heritage institutions are stepping outside the box to seek a connection with the healthcare sector (Ander et al., 2011, 2013; Chatterjee & Noble, 2016; De Nil, 2019; Thomson & Chatterjee, 2014, 2015). They express a growing belief in the use of cultural heritage collections as a connection to wellbeing and social inclusion. Although the use of cultural heritage interventions in the health and welfare sector is part of a wider range of artistic interventions within the care sector, they include a specific heritage element such as museum objects or works of art, historic buildings and heritage sites (Paddon et al., 2014).

As yet, the existing literature on the relationship between heritage and wellbeing is limited. Most of the literature is mainly found within the Anglo-Saxon context (e.g. Ander et al. 2011, 2013; Camic & Chatterjee, 2013; Chatterjee & Noble, 2009, 2016) and concentrates on the methodology of object handling or the discussion and manipulation of museum objects (Kador & Chatterjee, 2020), whereby the main focus appears to be on research with a quantitative approach, probing for impact. For example, in their study into object handling with cancer patients, Thomson and colleagues (2012) noted significant improvements in patients' self-reported psychological wellbeing and feelings of happiness. In turn, Thomson and Chatterjee (2014, 2015) developed a toolkit to measure the wellbeing of adults participating in museum, arts and heritage activities. Other authors put forward a mixed method design as the method of choice to evaluate wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions (see, for example, Paddon et al., 2014). Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, Chatterjee and Noble (2009) report, for example, a positive impact of working with museum objects on the daily lives of hospital patients. Another striking aspect, however, is that even research with a qualitative approach primarily emphasises the impact of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions (see, for example, Ander et al., 2011; Davenport & Thomson, 2018; Lanceley et al., 2012; Sayer, 2018), whereby the question relating to effectiveness or 'what works' takes precedence over signification and lived experiences by and of participants and/or facilitators.

The impact issue is closely related to the neoliberal approach adopted by governments with respect to the culture sector (Permentier, 2017). In their work concerning the social role of the arts, Belfiore & Bennett (2009, 2010) describe a European trend in which the demand for measurable impact becomes a means to legitimise public investment in the arts and culture sector. In exchange for subsidies, art institutions and cultural organisations are expected to deliver a 'return on investment', with attendance and ticket sales as key parameters (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007). This development in which utility and profitability are paramount also has an inevitable impact on museums and heritage institutions and their struggle with the importance of participation (Jancovich, 2017). In recent years, the sector has been increasingly focusing on outreach programmes to involve more vulnerable groups in society in their operations. Such initiatives play a mediating role in the complex dynamic between the museum as an institution and the surrounding community (Canas, 2011). The starting point of outreach programmes mainly tends to be situated in the social environment of those involved, revealing the potential of cultural heritage outside traditional museum operations (Huis van Alijn, 2019). Bearing in mind the demand for measurable impact, however, such outreach activities risk becoming exceedingly instrumental, with questions such as 'who participates' and 'how can we involve as many (groups of) participants as possible' becoming more important than the question addressing the grounds for an intervention (Rutten et al., 2019). Or: why certain interventions are made and what they mean for specific participants (Cousseé, 2006).

(Under) exposed (target) groups

The vast majority of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions described in literature focus on an older target audience (Lackoi et al., 2016). These include people over the age of 60, elderly people living in isolation or seclusion (see, for example, Todd et al., 2017) and vulnerable older people residing in residential care facilities (see, for example, Thomson & Chatterjee, 2016). A second distinctive population, which partly overlaps with the first, consists of people with a (suspected) diagnosis of dementia. This includes both people with dementia residing in a residential facility (see, for example, Morse & Chatterjee, 2018) or living at home (see, for example, Camic et al., 2017, 2021; Van Pellicom, 2019).

Older people are frequently confronted with prejudice and stereotypes. As early as 1969, Butler described the phenomenon of ageism, referring to a social structure which systematically portrays older people in a negative and even stigmatising way (Baert & Duppen, 2020). Despite the fact that there is no such thing as an ‘elderly’ group, they are often presented as one homogeneous, grey mass. In 2021, the UN released a report on the dangers of ageism or discrimination based on age, because although the term is primarily used in reference to older age groups, it also covers discrimination toward young people. Ageism not only has a negative impact on the psychological wellbeing and health of individuals, according to the UN report, but it also has a bearing on and reinforces other forms of exclusion such as sexism, racism or discrimination based on disability and illness (UN, 2021). For example, people with dementia often face a double stigma, with stereotypes about age augmented by beliefs about dementia. Although age is the main risk factor for dementia, certain negative beliefs about dementia may be perpetuated by the erroneous belief that dementia is caused by the natural aging process (Hassan, 2021). Moreover, physicians, neurologists and other experts are often primarily interested in physiopathology and possible treatment perspectives (De Ru & Lazet, 2018). Much less is known about the behaviour of people with dementia in their homes and the challenges that family carers face on a daily basis. This not only creates an attitude of detachment and control-seeking, but also makes it harder for family carers to remain focused on what the person in need of care is still able to do (De Ru & Lazet, 2018). Moreover, communication also becomes more difficult. The more advanced the disease, the less people with dementia are able to express themselves (Olofsen & Oskam, 2006).

A third important target group in terms of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions, consists of people with psychiatric vulnerabilities (see, for example, Solway et al., 2015). Unlike the previous target groups, the focus of the interventions is less often on reminiscence or conscious memory retrieval, but more frequently on experimenting with other heritage methodologies such as object handling or creative processes (Lackoi et al., 2016). Moreover, children and young people with psychiatric vulnerabilities appear to be notably absent from literature concerning wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions. However, children and young adults grow up amidst boundary setting practices and normative discourses that pose potential risks of exclusion (De Schauwer et al., 2021) in which their voices have historically not been considered equal to those of adults, including in research (Hickey-Moody et al., 2021). This is all the more true for children or young people with mental health vulnerabilities who have already experienced many conflicts and care related situations in their lives. This is why their views and perspectives must be taken into account in this project and research.

From impact to meaning

As a result of the increasing demand for accountability, the exploration of the impact of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions or heritage methodologies that “work” is not surprising. This search, in parallel with a similar trend in other sectors, is part of a broader debate about the further professionalisation of the sector and the training of competent heritage workers (FARO, 2009). However, the risks associated with the current push for evidence-based practices and demonstrable impact is that they are tested on the basis of selective criteria drawn from “hard” scientific sectors (Harzing, 2022), which are not easily compatible with social or “softer” sectors such as culture and wellbeing. Moreover, figures reflect an assumed objective ‘reality’, but are actually the result of preconceived moral choices about what is measured and how (Verhaeghe, 2015). How do we determine impact? On the basis of which ideal? How do we define and measure wellbeing? Each definition of and approach to this produces different numerical results and leads to different assumed ‘objective’ outcomes. Lorenz (2012) considers it important, therefore, to complement the dominant positivist approach with its emphasis on measurable impact with methodological approaches that focus on the importance of intersubjectivity and communication in the social sphere. In social sectors, including heritage and wellbeing, he argues, the question of impact is only justified if it is linked to a normative and ethical framework. An ethical perspective of this nature - which imposes limits on what may be possible from a technical/scientific point of view, but not always ethically justified - presupposes a complementary methodology that is mindful of “*how people give meaning and thus construct ‘facts’*” (Lorenz, 2012, page 497). Starting from this perspective, we aim to widen the question about the impact of cultural heritage interventions in this research by focusing on the lived experiences of participants and strive to return to the essence of culture: *the meaning*.

Moreover, in the search for meaning, we also rely on the work of Hannah Arendt. In ‘The Human Condition’ (1958), the philosopher distinguishes between three human activities that make up the *vita activa* or active life: i.e. labour, work and action. According to Arendt, these three activities are closely related to the most general condition of human existence - namely, natality or being born - and in that sense provide an answer to the question of what it means to ‘be human’ (Arendt, 1958). Whereas for centuries the philosophical tradition has focused primarily on mental activity and theoretical issues (*vita contemplativa*), Arendt’s *vita activa* puts action and worldliness at the forefront (Voice, 2014). Humans are beings who take action and this trait, according to the philosopher, determines our existence at least as much as our thinking. Labour is the most basic human activity and is situated at the very bottom of the *vita activa*. Labour, according to Arendt, satisfies our bodily needs and includes all the processes necessary to stay alive (e.g. eating, sleeping, physical care). It is, in other words, the activity that we as humans have in common with animals. Work, on the other hand, is always about creating something. It concerns the urge of humans to build artificial things, a material world (Arendt, 1958). The activity of working relates to the devices, tools, objects that surround us and continue to exist in the world when the work is done (Buckingham, 2021). With work we not only sustain our existence, Arendt argues, but we change the world into a world in which people are able to exist. This is how we mark the boundary between nature and humanity (Arendt, 1958). Finally, action is that which takes place between people. Action leads to human relationships. People’s dealings with each other are about action rather than labour or work. “*When taking action people truly demonstrate who they are, actively revealing their unique, personal identity and thus making their entrance into the human world.*” (Arendt, 1958, p. 179). According to Arendt taking action constitutes the essence of being human and lends infinite vitality to the world. Whereas labour is necessary and work is useful, action is meaningful and helps to promote freedom. Through our actions we can reshape, imagine and reinvent our shared world. In that sense action is driven by meaningfulness rather than usefulness (Arendt, 1958).

Research questions

Although the cultural heritage sector is increasingly committed to developing its outreach efforts whereby heritage collections are used to promote wellbeing, little is known about the giving of meaning of and by those involved. In order to ensure lasting integration, the perspective of these stakeholders is in fact crucial, which is why this study focuses on three research questions:

RQ1: *Which significant role can wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions play for different groups of participants?*

RQ2: *Which significant role can wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions play for different professionals?*

RQ3: *What are the preconditions to permanently integrate wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions into the operations of cultural heritage and health and welfare organisations?*

Whereas the focus of the first two research questions is on the allocation of meaning by the participants and professionals in question and how they experience interventions with cultural heritage objects, the third research question focuses on actual needs and recommendations with a view to improving the (micro, meso and macro) context within which wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions take place. Moreover, with this report we also hope to tap into an ethical-methodological research layer and to provide useful insights regarding the (research and heritage) methods used and regarding the implementation of wellbeing-focused heritage work among hard-to-reach (research) groups.

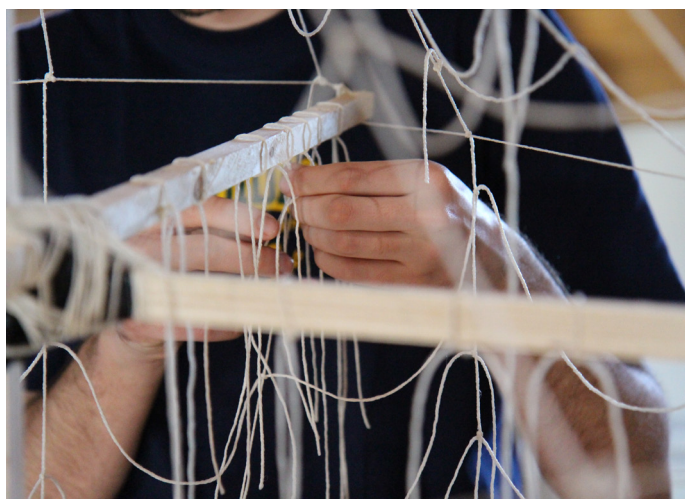
ErfGoedVoelen project description

The research findings described in this report are based on the first two stages of the ErfGoedVoelen project. In ErfGoedVoelen, Museum Dr. Guislain, Huis van Alijn and Erfgoedhuis Zusters van Liefde examine the ways in which cultural heritage can play a significant role to promote people's wellbeing. Using four pilot projects, ErfGoedVoelen addresses different groups: children and young adults receiving support from a psychiatric facility, adults living at home with (young onset) dementia and their family carers, and people over the age of 55 living at home and looking for social contact. Various heritage methodologies were employed during weekly meetings at the museums. By focusing specifically on children and young people in two of the four pilot projects, ErfGoedVoelen targets a group that for the time being remains underexposed in literature.

In what follows, we provide a brief description of the introduction, participant profile and drop-out, collaborations with partners and other organisations, progress of the sessions, heritage methodologies used and aftercare² for each project.

Pilot Project 1: The Fioretti Vitrine - We Shape Fioretti

For the first pilot project, *The Fioretti Vitrine*, Museum Dr. Guislain acted as the initiating heritage institution. The project focused on young people with complex mental health issues who resided at Fioretti, a psychiatric institution for children and adolescents. More specifically, these were children and adolescents aged between 12 and 16 with mild intellectual disabilities and additional mental health problems. This delineation in terms of age coincides with the age groups Fioretti works with. The collaboration between Museum Dr. Guislain and Fioretti did not come about entirely by accident but is part of the quest to establish a longer term structural exchange. Indeed, in May 2023, just after the completion of the first project, the unit moved from the De Deyne site in Zwijnaarde to the site of P.C. Dr. Guislain, where the museum is also located. For this project the introduction of the young people was managed by the carers at Fioretti, obviously in consultation with the young people themselves.



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YEAR 1: FEBRUARY - APRIL 2023

The six 1.5 hour sessions - with one exception - always took place on Tuesday mornings, at a time when the youngsters usually received cultural therapy. Leading up to the first session, the project team member and researcher attended the cultural therapy sessions several times in order to get to know the young people. The first two sessions (1-2) were held with the community at Fioretti, the subsequent four

² To maintain clarity, we stick to the sequence of the pilot projects as described in the grant application. However, the numbering of the pilot projects does not correspond to the sequence in which the pilot projects actually took place.

(3-6) sessions in the studio of Museum Dr. Guislain. Before the start of each session counsellors asked the young people whether they were interested in joining. However, youngsters who had been admitted for a short period (14 days) for emergency reasons could not join because the strict emergency admission schedule left little room for outside activities. On the eve of the third session the youngsters were shown a short video with a tour of the museum. Fioretti's minibus was used to transport people to sessions that took place at the museum. The researcher accompanied the young people during both trips (there and back) to ensure that a familiar face from the museum was present both before and after each session. The museum café, where the young people were served drinks at the start of the session, provided a warm welcome.

Fioretti's open approach with ample opportunity for participation meant that it was not always easy to predict how many and which young people would join each session. Sometimes the sessions also coincided with other extraordinary activities such as rehearsals for a stage production. The number of young people participating in each session varied between two and four. In order to maintain a balance, both counsellors and researchers acted as participants. The same applied to the museum staff member and Literature and Care student(s) (UGent) who joined from the third session as part of their master's internship.

Whereas the first sessions focused on object handling and promoting familiarity with the objects in the museum collection, the focus shifted to co-creation and 'composition' as a heritage methodology during later sessions. To this end the artist Karolien Soete joined and collaborated with the project from the third session. All participants selected the object that had most appealed to them during the initial sessions from *The Fioretti Vitrine*, which occupied a central position in the studio, and created something new based on this object. Karolien supported and encouraged them in their creative process. The final session concluded with a public display at the Dr. Guislain Museum. Parents, grandparents, counsellors, museum staff, the other youngsters and the group of children from Fioretti were all among the invited guests. A brief reception in the garden was followed by a tour of part of the museum where the participants' artwork had been given a place in the permanent exhibition.

Session	Time	Location	Participants	Other participants
1	TUE AM 14/02	Fioretti community	2	Project assistant, researcher, Fioretti counsellors
2	TUE PM 18/02	Fioretti community	3	Project assistant, researcher, Fioretti counsellors
3	TUE AM 07/03	Museum café, museum studio	2	Project assistant, researcher, artist, Fioretti counsellors, student, museum staff member
4	TUE AM 14/03	Museum café, museum studio	3	Project assistant, researcher, artist, Fioretti counsellors, student, museum staff member
5	TUE AM 28/03	Museum café, museum studio	4	Project assistant, researcher, artist, Fioretti counsellors, student, museum staff member
6	TUE AM 04/04	Museum café, museum studio	3	Project assistant, researcher, artist, Fioretti counsellors, student, museum staff member

YEAR 2: JANUARY – APRIL 2024

During the second year the project was extended to eight weeks, consisting of two hour sessions. Following Fioretti's move to the P.C. Dr. Guislain site the travelling time was reduced, leaving more time for the actual sessions. The change of location also meant that participants could easily return to their community if necessary. Each week's session started in the museum café, where museum staff and the artist welcomed the youngsters and their counsellors. During this informal reception, everyone was given the opportunity to choose a snack and a drink. Community participants and counsellors gradually started arriving from 10.00 hrs onwards. This year's project also took place during cultural therapy sessions on Tuesday mornings.

After approximately thirty minutes, the group proceeded to the studio in the attic. Stickers were handed out at the museum's reception desk and we walked through the permanent exhibition to our space on the second floor. During the first session we arranged the attic space together. Project staff had provided furniture, sheets, pillows, lamps and garlands in advance to be used freely by participants. During this first session the space was already dedicated to different purposes; i.e. a cinema, clothing store, reading corner and sitting area were created. One participant also took advantage of the materials to create her own space where she could work without being disturbed.

The second session focused on heritage objects. The project assistant, in collaboration with the museum curator, had made a selection of objects that we could use during the project. Each participant and counsellor selected an object that they wanted to work with over the next few weeks. During this second stage of the pilot project little to no further reference was made to heritage methodologies. We adopted an approach based on unconditional openness and safety whereby young people used their imagination to engage in a creative process. This was also reflected in the project results: while some participants used their heritage object as a basis, others took inspiration from other aspects of the museum or project, such as the museum café crisps, works from the permanent exhibition, light, Fioretti and even the space itself. We mainly worked on an individual basis but, where necessary, young people were guided by the artist or museum staff. Afterwards we walked back to the community in small groups, where we said goodbye to the participants and counsellors. After each session museum staff, the artist and therapist briefly compared notes in the museum café.

A total of five different young people participated in the project. One participant only attended the first four sessions because her admission was terminated. Two young people participated in all eight sessions and the display event. Another participant also joined the sessions and display event, but was absent during the spring break. The fifth youngster participated from the third session and continued until the eighth session, but was not present at the display event. The project ended with a display event and exhibition. The attic space we had used as a studio for eight weeks was refurbished and opened to the public. The display event, to which family members, museum staff and volunteers and Fioretti employees were invited, took place on a Friday afternoon. Participants compiled a list of supplies needed for the reception, served visitors at the outdoor bar and volunteered to provide more details to people when needed. The objects also remained on display at the museum for several weeks and attracted a large number of visitors. We chose the name "We Shape Fioretti" because a participant introduced our project in this way to the trainee who attended the fifth session. The construction of the exhibition took place during the eighth session.

Session	Time	Location	Participants	Other participants
1	TUE AM 16/01	Museum café, museum studio	4	Project assistant, researcher, teacher, therapist, student, artist, museum staff member
2	TUE AM 23/01	Museum café, museum studio	4	Project assistant, researcher, teacher, therapist, student, artist, museum staff member
3	TUE AM 30/01	Museum café, museum studio	5	Project assistant, researcher, teacher, therapist, artist, museum staff member
4	TUE AM 06/02	Museum café, museum studio	5	Project assistant, researcher, teacher, therapist, artist, museum staff member
5	TUE AM 13/02	Museum café, museum studio	3	Project assistant, researcher, teacher, therapist, artist, museum staff member
6	TUE AM 20/02	Museum café, museum studio	4	Project assistant, researcher, teacher, therapist, artist, museum staff member
7	TUE AM 27/02	Museum café, museum studio	4	Project assistant, researcher, teacher, therapist, artist, museum staff member
8	TUE AM 05/03	Museum café, museum studio	4	Project assistant, researcher, teacher, therapist, artist, museum staff member
9	FRI AM 08/03	Courtyard garden, museum studio	3	Project assistant, researcher, Fioretti counsellors, artist, museum staff member

Pilot Project 2: Vreemd en Vertrouwd (Strange and Familiar)

The second pilot project, *Vreemd en Vertrouwd*, was initiated by the Huis van Alijn outreach lab and aimed at pairs of (young onset) dementia sufferers living at home and their family carers. With *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* the sessions mainly focused on object handling, involving unfamiliar objects or objects from museum collections the origin or use of which were not immediately clear. What is special about this methodology is that it creates a natural equality between family carers and people with dementia, who are able to express their imagination in an equally valid way. Each session ended with coffee and cake giving participants the opportunity for a chat.

YEAR 1: MAY 2023

When initiating this project, the Huis van Alijn outreach lab requested the cooperation of KóMee vzw, an organisation which promotes intergenerational and meaningful contacts between students and people with (young onset) dementia in home substitute situations. A letter of introduction was drafted in consultation with a staff member of the non-profit organisation and distributed via the organisation's network. As a result, the project assistant and researchers had little control over the initiation process and it left little time to look for potential participants when the expected response failed to materialise. During the weeks leading up to the start of the first session the introduction letter was sent to several other Ghent based organisations, including the Paradox expertise centre, (young onset) dementia family groups, associations for family carers, dementia chat cafés, local service centres (LDC), community health centres (WGC), family care and day care centres. This ultimately resulted in four registered pairs before the start of the first session.

The sessions took place on Tuesday afternoons from 14.30 to 16.00 hrs in the Katharinazaal (former chapel) of the Huis van Alijn. Even before the start of the first session one of the pairs had to withdraw for medical reasons. The KóMee vzw staff member, who was to attend all the sessions, also had to pull out due to prolonged illness. At the start of session 1 the group consisted of three pairs of people with (young onset) dementia and their family carers, the project assistant, a museum staff member and two researchers. Following further withdrawals after sessions 1 and 3, only one pair eventually remained. After the fourth session, the *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* project was consequently terminated early. One reason for the withdrawals was the group composition. One of the participants had aphasia, which inhibited his communication. The other participants with dementia were still in the early stages and felt the need to talk at length, also about difficult topics such as the evolution of the disease, euthanasia, etc. Moreover, the prominent presence of some family carers led to other participants perceiving the sessions as too hectic.

Due to these withdrawals the third and



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fourth sessions were rearranged. The third session started in the museum café and consisted of a visit to the permanent collection at Huis van Alijn. During the fourth and final session a photographer, Michiel Devijver, was invited to capture the remaining pair in a portrait photograph.

Session	Time	Location	Participants	Other participants
1	TUE PM 02/05	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	6	Project assistant, researchers, museum staff member
2	TUE PM 09/05	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	4	Project assistant, researchers, museum staff member
3	TUE PM 16/05	Museum café Tour of the permanent collection	2	Project assistant, researchers, museum staff member
4	TUE PM 23/05	Tour of the permanent collection	2	Project assistant, researchers, museum staff member, photographer

YEAR 2: APRIL - MAY 2024

Because of the difficult initiation process and withdrawals during the first stage of the project a different approach was adopted during the second year. A few months before the invitation was distributed, a consultation meeting was organised with staff members from Ghent based organisations and experts (UZ Ghent Geriatrics, the City of Ghent, the researcher Julie Moorkens, ECD Paradox and UZ Ghent Neurology) during which we discussed the difficulties encountered during the first year (group composition, initiation, objective & expectations and the role of family carers) and what could be changed during the second year. The ‘object handling’ heritage methodology was also tested to give partners a better insight into the project.

The consultation resulted in several adjustments to the second stage of the project. Prior to the first session the researchers and project assistant visited the homes of interested participants for an exploratory meeting to discuss expectations, concerns and other questions. At the end of the project participants indicated that this home visit was of great value. It ensured that registered participants were not strangers when we started the first session, unlike what happened during the first year. As the project progressed participants were called by one of the researchers every Tuesday, asking them about their experiences, thresholds, questions etc. These interim feedback opportunities enabled us to move quickly when problems arose, which strengthened the bond and sense of trust between participants and researchers. For example, after the first session one carer asked that images be provided of the objects as this was necessary for her partner to engage in conversation about the session at home. During the second session and thereafter a soundproof stage curtain was installed, as several participants found it virtually impossible to follow all the conversations due to the poor acoustics in the room.

Four pairs signed up for the project and one family carer whose partner was already deceased also joined, which meant that the project had a full complement of 9 participants. As of the third session, one pair had to leave the project due to hospitalisation. The sessions always took place on Thursday afternoons in the Katharinazaal at Huis van Alijn. The first session ran from 14.30 to 16.00 hrs but from the second week this was brought forward to 14.00 hrs. Participants were welcomed with coffee/tea and cake at the end of each session.

This pilot project focused specifically on heritage objects. During the initial sessions we concentrated on traditional object handling, but as we got to know the participants better, we increasingly moved away from pre-structured methodologies and responded to what was going on in the group. During the third session participants brought in their own objects in addition to the museum objects, thereby reversing the role of knowing - not knowing in a playful way and allowing participants to freely share something from their own background. During the fourth session the topic of photography, an interest shared by most participants, was combined with a museum visit. Following conversations at the museum during the fourth session, part of the fifth session was devoted to the topic of washing and providing care, whereby new, environmentally friendly/zero waste products acted as a starting point for the conversation. The last session was entirely devoted to Ghent's culinary heritage and local specialties, as food and culinary tips were often a common theme throughout the sessions, allowing us to conclude in a festive manner.

Session	Time	Location	Participants	Other participants
1	THURS PM 18/04	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	9	Project assistant, researchers, volunteer
2	THURS PM 25/04	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	9	Project assistant, researchers, volunteer
3	THURS PM 02/05	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	7	Project assistant, researchers
4	THURS PM 17/05	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	7	Project assistant, researchers, volunteer
5	THURS PM 23/05	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	7	Project assistant, researchers, volunteer
6	THURS PM 30/05	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	7	Project assistant, researchers, museum staff member, photographer



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Pilot Project 3: Kapers op Kunst (Privateers of Art)

The third pilot project entitled *Kapers op Kunst* was the result of a collaboration between Erfgoedhuis Zusters van Liefde en De Kaap, a psychiatric institution providing residential care for children and adolescents. This project mainly focused on primary school children between the ages of 6 and 12 who resided in community number 1 of this facility. A letter of introduction was drafted in conjunction with the counsellors at De Kaap. Introductions were entirely managed in-house at De Kaap, in consultation with the children, the parents and the relevant psychiatrist.

YEAR 1: MARCH - APRIL 2023

During the first year the entire community group participated in the sessions along with their regular counsellors. The number of children participating varied between six and seven because some children had to occasionally attend school at the time of the sessions. One participant dropped out from the third session because he was having a difficult time and the project became too demanding. The project leader and researcher paid him another visit to listen to what he had to say and give him a nice send off.

The six one and a half hour sessions all took place on Thursday afternoons at Erfgoedhuis. The sessions were preceded by an introductory session with the community group at De Kaap, which focused on object handling and provided scope for introductions and the presentation of the project, research and project staff. During subsequent sessions the focus was on a combination of object handling and object storytelling, concentrating on making stop-motion film clips together in which the children's favourite objects played a part. Whereas sessions 1 to 3 focused primarily on exploring the Erfgoedhuis collection, sessions 4 and 5 were used to develop a stop-motion film clip created by the participants themselves in collaboration with the director Koen Vromman and editor Fjodor Hoornaert. During the sixth session a public display event was organised at De Kaap where the children could show their homemade videos to family and other children residing at De Kaap.

Each session provided a warm welcome, including a welcome speech, a brief tour, drinks and a review of the schedule and agreements. Afterwards the children worked in groups or on an individual basis in the various rooms of the Erfgoedhuis. The counsellor of De Kaap, trainee, museum staff member and researcher provided support but also took part as participants sharing all the tasks. Fall-back opportunities were provided for children who needed to take a quick break, including a craft corner and research corner.



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Session	Time	Location	Participating young people	Other participants
0	MON AM 27/02	Leefgroep De Kaap	7	Project assistant, researcher, De Kaap counsellors
1	THURS PM 02/03	Erfgoedhuis	7	Project assistant, researcher, De Kaap counsellors, museum staff member, director, trainee
2	THURS PM 09/03	Erfgoedhuis	7	Project assistant, researcher, De Kaap counsellors, museum staff member
3	THURS PM 16/03	Erfgoedhuis	6	Project assistant, researcher, De Kaap counsellors, museum staff member, technician
4	THURS PM 23/03	Erfgoedhuis	6	Project assistant, researcher, De Kaap counsellors, museum staff member, technician
5	THURS PM 30/03	Erfgoedhuis	6	Project assistant, researcher, De Kaap counsellors, museum staff member, technician
6	THURS PM 20/04	Karus De Kaap	6	Project assistant, researchers, more extensive De Kaap support, museum staff member, family and friends, children from other community groups

YEAR 2: FEBRUARY - MARCH 2024

The second *Kapers op Kunst* project again started with an introductory session with De Kaap's community group, with the project assistant and researcher visiting the children with a case full of Erfgoedhuis objects. This provided an opportunity to get acquainted with the objects and methodology of object handling, and above all to establish a mutual connection between the children and project staff, laying the foundation for a relationship of trust and an interest in further participation. The same introduction process was used as last year and once again the entire community group participated in all sessions. However, there was a high turnover in counsellors from De Kaap and amongst participating children. This was related to the duration of children's admission to De Kaap, their personal trajectories and school commitments. These factors caused the composition of the group and supervision to change frequently, bringing both challenges and new dynamics to the project.

A decision was made to organise eight rather than six sessions at Erfgoedhuis for this project, and to add an additional half hour per session. This decision was made to give the children more scope and time to explore the methodologies and objects provided in more detail and to focus more intensively on the content of the project. We also collaborated with a resident artist, Emilie Lauwers, who provided her expertise and creative insights to the project. Emilie's involvement promoted continuity and a deepening artistic perspective throughout the project.

As with the first project, the initial sessions focused primarily on getting to know the Erfgoedhuis and attendees, the multitude of objects, and methodologies such as object handling and object storytelling. During these sessions, the children were encouraged to choose a personal favourite object using various methodologies. Unlike last year, the children did not use iPads to photograph their favourite objects but adopted a non-digital approach instead as the use of digital tools caused a lot of distraction. Moreover, it was decided not to make all the Erfgoedhuis storage areas available to the children, following feedback received from children who participated in the previous project. They indicated that some spaces at Erfgoedhuis were rather overwhelming and scary. In order to provide a more focused and comfortable experience, only those

areas that were interesting and accessible to the children were selected. This made the children feel safer and more at ease during the sessions, which benefited their commitment and creativity. This adjustment to the programme also gave the sessions more structure and focus. The children were able to explore the selected objects at a leisurely pace and had more time to develop their own stories and creative projects.

Once each child had chosen his or her favourite object, they worked with the artist to develop a personal creative approach to this object. The children were given the freedom to let their creativity run wild, resulting in a variety of art projects. Unlike last year, which involved working as a group on a stop-motion video, this year focused on individual projects. Some children made up a picture book, others a stop-motion film clip, some decided to explore acting, and others crafted a football field or produced drawings.

Like last year, the sessions were attended by many counsellors because one-on-one support was needed. This personal guidance ensured that each child received the attention and assistance they needed to bring their creative vision to life.

Session	Time	Location	Participants	Other participants
0	THURS PM 01/02	Leefgroep De Kaap	7	Project assistant, researcher, De Kaap counsellors
1	THURS PM 08/02	Erfgoedhuis	7	Project assistant, researcher, artist, De Kaap counsellors, museum staff members
2	THURS PM 15/02	Erfgoedhuis	6	Project assistant, researcher, artist, De Kaap counsellors, museum staff members
3	THURS PM 22/02	Erfgoedhuis	7	Project assistant, researcher, artist, De Kaap counsellors, museum staff members
4	THURS PM 29/02	Erfgoedhuis	7	Project assistant, researcher, artist, De Kaap counsellors, museum staff members
5	THURS PM 07/03	Erfgoedhuis	8	Project assistant, researcher, artist, De Kaap counsellors, museum staff members
6	THURS PM 14/03	Erfgoedhuis	8	Project assistant, researcher, artist, De Kaap counsellors, museum staff members
7	THURS PM 21/03	Erfgoedhuis	7	Project assistant, researcher, artist, De Kaap counsellors, museum staff members
8	FRI PM 29/03	Karus De Kaap	7	Project assistant, researcher, artist, De Kaap counsellors and management, museum staff members, the children's family and friends, children from other community groups

Pilot Project 4: Levenskunst (The Art of Living)

The fourth pilot project, Levenskunst, was a collaboration between the Huis van Alijn's outreach lab and the Rabot, De Sleep and 't Vlot community health centres. These community health centres identified an increasing number of people facing loneliness and social isolation. The project consequently focused on providing a welcoming environment to people aged 65 and over living at home in three neighbourhoods in Ghent (Rabot, Tolhuis-Sluzeken-Ham, Muide-Meulestede-Afrikalaan) looking for social contact and meaningful activities.

Introductions were managed by the three health promoters, the wider team within the community health centres and the relevant local service centres. A flyer was prepared focusing on the idea of - togetherness with others - (re)discovering old and new interests and “a little bit of happiness”, using the Huis van Alijn museum collection. Afterwards, the health promoters made home visits to all potential participants to listen to their questions and expectations. Participants also received regular calls from the health promoters associated with the neighbourhood in which they lived.

YEAR 1: NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2022

Six weekly sessions involving 5 to 10 participants were organised on Tuesday mornings at Huis van Alijn. The number varied depending on the health, medical appointments or other planned outings of/by participants. One participant permanently dropped out after the second session because the group format and engaging in dialogue were perceived as too challenging. Ideally, she just wanted to have coffee together and stay in the background.

Each session started with a warm welcome with coffee, cake and an ‘icebreaker’. Participants then used objects from the Huis van Alijn as a tool to help them consider and talk about values, interests and ex-



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periences. The focus was mainly on object handling. Each session concluded with the completion of a personal diary using text, photos or drawings, and a hot meal. During the fifth session organisations stopped by to introduce themselves (Vier het Leven, BlinkOut and a psychologist from the local service centre). During the final two sessions the artist Sassafras De Bruyn created a live illustration as a visual interpretation of the spirit of the project. The press and aldermen also visited the project. The museum staff member and health promoters continue to organise monthly ‘return events’ at Huis van Alijn.

Session	Time	Location	Participants	Other participants
1	TUE AM 08/11	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	10	Project assistant, researcher, museum staff member, health promoters
2	TUE AM 15/11	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	8	Project assistant, researcher, museum staff member, health promoters
3	TUE AM 22/11	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	9	Project assistant, researcher, museum staff member, health promoters
4	TUE AM 29/11	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	8	Project assistant, researcher, museum staff member, health promoters
5	TUE AM 06/12	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	5	Project assistant, researcher, museum staff member, health promoters, external organisations, artist, press and aldermen
6	TUE AM 13/12	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	9	Project assistant, researcher, museum staff member, health promoters, external organisations, artist

YEAR 2: SEPTEMBER - NOVEMBER 2023

The second Levenskunst project year was different from the first year in a number of ways. The introduction process remained the same, but the photo and video material gathered the previous year could be used to provide a better insight into what the project entailed, resulting in a more seamless introduction process. Once again health promoters made home visits to potential participants.

An introductory session was organised at Huis van Alijn attended by a participant from the previous year to welcome the new participants and to serve coffee. This session introduced participants to each other, to the site and to a number of heritage methodologies. Expectations with respect to the project were also clearly explained.

The target audience was expanded to 55+ instead of 65+ to appeal to a wider audience. The six sessions took place bi-weekly instead of weekly, which allowed more time for preparation. It enabled the team to spend one week preparing and the other week conducting the sessions. While this approach made it possible to effectively prepare for and execute the sessions, it also resulted in a longer familiarisation phase. As a result, initial progress was often limited to relationship building and exploring participants’ needs, and actual substantive sessions and more intensive interaction happened somewhat later.

Hot meals were no longer served at each session, but a communal meal was organised at a social restaurant in Ghent. Some participants dropped out for health reasons, and a number of methodologies were modified, such as scrapping the diary. Cake and coffee continued to be served and external organisations were invited similar to the previous year, tailored to the needs of the participants. Transport was also

arranged as before, including both bicycle and regular taxis. The artist Sassafras De Bruyn joined the fifth and sixth sessions again this year to create a live illustration and capture the spirit of the sessions through her drawing. Monthly shared return meetings continue to be organised by the museum staff member and health promoters for participants of both projects.

Session	Time	Location	Participants	Other participants
0	TUE PM 29/08	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	8	Project assistant, researchers, museum staff member, 3 health promoters
1	TUE PM 12/09	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	7	Project assistant, researchers, museum staff member, 3 health promoters
2	TUE PM 26/09	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	8	Project assistant, researchers, museum staff member, 3 health promoters
3	TUE PM 10/10	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	9	Project assistant, researchers, museum staff member, 3 health promoters
4	TUE PM 24/10	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	8	Project assistant, researchers, museum staff member, 3 health promoters
5	TUE PM 07/11	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	7	Project assistant, researcher, museum staff member, 3 health promoters, artist
6	TUE PM 21/11	Katharinazaal, Huis van Alijn	8	Project assistant, researcher, museum staff member, 3 health promoters, artist, photographer

Research methods

Interpretive research design

Using an interpretive research design, we ask participants and professionals about their experiences and the significant role that cultural heritage interventions (could) play for them. We also try to gain an insight into the preconditions associated with the structural integration of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions into museum operations and into care or welfare institutions. The research is exploratory by nature, in the sense that little research literature on the relationship between cultural heritage and wellbeing is available in Flanders. Existing research, as indicated in the literature study, is mainly situated within an Anglo-Saxon context and often has a quantitative approach. Since both the pilot projects and associated research are pioneering in Flanders, the research was repeated during the second stage on the basis of the results and insights gained in year one. The second stage also included additional scope for the organisation of focus groups for the professionals in question.

A number of post-qualitative interludes intersect the structure of this report and delve deeper into small-scale aspects of significance that have no place in the traditional research configuration. We aim to give the reader an insight into the special uniqueness and value of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities by also providing scope in this report for small-scale intra-active moments and encounters (Barad, 2007) that seem unimportant at first glance but have touched us as researchers and often reveal an abundance and complexity of what heritage work can really signify.

Data collection

Participant observation (Musante & DeWalt, 2010) was used as a research method for all four pilot projects, i.e. at least one of the two researchers was present during all sessions to engage in methodical observation. The focus was on the practicality of the various heritage interventions and methodologies, the interactions among participants and between participants and the objects. Striking observations were recorded by the researchers in the form of field notes during and immediately after the sessions. Other research methods that were used varied for each pilot project.



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Pilot Project 1: The Fioretti Vitrine – We Shape Fioretti

YEAR 1: FEBRUARY – APRIL 2023

During the first pilot project, *The Fioretti Vitrine*, young people were picked up from the third session in a minibus for the transfer to Museum Dr. Guislain. The bus ride was used to conduct an informal interview with the attending young people. For example, before and after each session they were asked about their expectations, motivation and experiences regarding the session whilst travelling in the minibus. The researcher also attended the evaluation and preparation of each session, and informal interim discussions took place with all stakeholders (project assistant, Fioretti counsellors, museum staff member, artist). At the start of the third session a research corner was set up in the studio in the museum where young people could reflect on the content of the sessions and the way in which they preferred to be questioned (drawings, post-its, mailbox, etc.). Their direct involvement through their role as ‘research advisers’ represented an attempt to move beyond the traditional ‘researcher/respondent’ dichotomy within research (Lundy et al., 2011). During the final session the researcher asked how young people had perceived the sessions using Dixit cards. The sessions and public display were followed by another joint evaluation involving all stakeholders (project assistant, Fioretti counsellors, museum staff member, artist and researcher).

All informal interviews and the concluding evaluation interview were recorded using a dictaphone and transcribed word for word. This also applied to the initial sessions which focused on object handling. The recordings of the sessions that focused on co-creation and ‘composition’ as a heritage methodology served as additional research material. Prior to the start of the study all young people received a newsletter about the research, supplemented by oral information with an opportunity for questions and comments. The Fioretti family counsellor also delivered the newsletter to parents. The research was conducted subject to informed consent from both the adolescents and the parents.

YEAR 2: JANUARY – APRIL 2024

So as not to interrupt the creative process and to give young people the necessary space, the emphasis was on participant observation during the second year. The researcher participated in all sessions and worked on their own artwork, noting and later processing their observations. After each session the Fioretti counsellors, project assistant, artist, museum staff member and researcher took time to reflect and complement the research material.

At the end of the project the young participants gathered at the museum café and exhibition. An interview was conducted with support from a film maker during which the young people talked about the project and their own work. It was an ideal method for the youngsters to collect data as the making of the video served as a third focal point via which the conversation about the project could be approached in a safe environment. This meant that there was less pressure on the young people to answer questions and the researcher and participants had a common goal. The actual production process was recorded using a dictaphone and transcribed word for word.

Upon completion the researchers also conducted two interviews in pairs: one with the two Fioretti counsellors and one with the artists (Karolien Soete, who collaborated with the project with Fioretti, and Emilie Lauwers, who collaborated with the project with De Kaap). The interviews enquired about their experiences during the projects and their views on wellbeing-focused heritage activities. These duo interviews were also recorded using a dictaphone and transcribed word for word.

Pilot Project 2: Vreemd en Vertrouwd (Strange and Familiar)

YEAR 1: MAY 2023

The second pilot project, *Vreemd en Vertrouwd*, was terminated earlier than planned due to people dropping out. The first two sessions were recorded using a dictaphone and transcribed word for word. During the second session the participating pairs were asked to take a few photographs of meaningful moments with a Polaroid camera. Indeed, existing research involving people with dementia previously indicated the usefulness of photovoice as a research method, provided that the time between taking the picture and talking about it is limited (Genoe & Dupuis, 2013). Since we could only test the research method during one session, the photographs are merely considered additional research material.

After the first session all participating pairs were contacted and asked what they thought of the session, what could be improved, etc. The pairs who dropped out after sessions 1 and 3 were contacted by telephone to get a better idea of the reasons for their dropping out. In each case, this contact was managed via the family carer, which meant that the responses may have been slightly biased.

Because of the specific disease profile of people with dementia, we opted to use informed assent in the research for this pilot project, which means that, as a researcher, you do not ask for consent just once but constantly coordinate with the respondents throughout the entire process (Cocks, 2006). The consent of the participating pairs was recorded using a dictaphone at the beginning of each session.

YEAR 2: APRIL - MAY 2024

During the second year, upon consultation with the external researcher and dementia expert Prof. A. Swinnen (Maastricht University), the focus in terms of methodology was on participant observation. At least one researcher was present during each session and all observations were recorded and completed together afterwards. By participating fully in each session as a researcher it was also possible to pick up micro-interactions. A brief moment of reflection was held with all professionals involved after each session, during which the events of the day were discussed. The researchers also attended weekly team meetings with all relevant professionals, during which the sessions were evaluated and prepared, and observations shared.

Every week participants were called or contacted by e-mail by one of the researchers who enquired about their experience of the session, whether they perceived any barriers and to look ahead to the upcoming session. Sometimes observations were shared during this conversation to shed further light on what was observed by the researchers during the sessions. These interim feedback moments created a relationship of trust between the researchers and the participating pairs. This level of closeness also made it possible to act quickly in the event of potential problems. The telephone conversations were summarised and serve as additional research material.

Pilot Project 3: Kapers op Kunst

YEAR 1: MARCH - APRIL 2023

During the third pilot project, *Kapers op Kunst*, the researcher attended every session to make methodical observations and through informal interviews ask the children about their motivation, expectations and experiences concerning the project. The researcher also attended the evaluation and preparation of each session, and informal interim discussions took place with all stakeholders (project assistant, De Kaap counsellors, museum staff member, trainee). All sessions, informal interviews and the evaluation interviews were recorded using a dictaphone and transcribed word for word. The recordings of the sessions that focused on co-creation and the 'composition' of the stop motion film clips as a heritage methodology served as additional research material.

The children were asked how they perceived the research and in what way they preferred to share their opinions and experiences with the researcher. We tried to incorporate moments of reflection in each session. Moreover, starting from the second session, a research corner (with mailbox, typewriter, post-its, craft materials, a clothesline, etc.) was set up where the children could reflect on the content and format of the sessions. At the end of the sessions, the researcher was able to question four children in the community group about how they had experienced the sessions, using Dixit cards.

Both the children and parents/guardians were notified of the study via a newsletter tailored to their specific needs which was also orally explained by the De Kaap psychiatrist. The research was conducted subject to informed consent from both the children and parents/guardians. There was always an opportunity for questions and comments.

YEAR 2: FEBRUARY - MARCH 2024

Similar to the first year of *Kapers op Kunst*, the researcher also attended all sessions during the second year making participant observations and using informal interviews to ask the children about their motivation, expectations and experiences with the project. The researcher also attended the evaluation and preparation of each session and interim discussions took place with all stakeholders, including the project assistant, De Kaap counsellors, museum staff member and trainee. All observations were meticulously documented and shared with stakeholders as needed in order to provide new insights.

A moment of reflection was incorporated into the sessions by having the children write postcards to each other, the counsellors or a person of their choice, detailing their experiences of the project. At the end of the sessions the researcher interviewed the children in the community group about their experience of the project, which included the use of Dixit cards and shared craft activities. The introduction process was identical to that of the first year.

Pilot Project 4: Levenskunst

YEAR 1: NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2022

During the fourth pilot project, Levenskunst, methodological observations were carried out during each session and informal conversations were held with participants to ask about their motivation, expectations and experiences regarding the project. During the sessions, participants were asked to keep a diary to be used purely as additional research material. After the third session the researcher telephoned all participants to enquire how they felt about the sessions, what their expectations were and whether they had already been met, how they felt about the group and the methodologies, etc. They also asked which other needs the participants might still have with respect to future sessions.

The researcher also attended the evaluation and preparation of each session, and informal interim discussions took place with all stakeholders (project assistant, health promoters, museum staff member).

Upon completion of the six sessions all participants were invited to a semi-structured in-depth interview at a location of their choice. This interview addressed what the project meant to the participants, in order to identify ways in which heritage (collections) can play a meaningful role and asked the participants about their experiences with the project and any factors they perceived as inhibiting or disruptive. During the second part of the interview specific points of view were discussed using the elicitation technique (Barton, 2015; Johnson & Weller, 2002). This indirect elicitation technique is a bespoke visual questioning method that was used in this case to find out what the project did or did not extend to participants, specifically in terms of those aspects that do not feature in direct targeted interview questions. External statements (derived from literature) were written down on cards, and the interviewee was asked to rank these statements in terms of ‘applicable to my experiences’, ‘not applicable to my experiences’ and ‘somewhere in between’. The purpose of this technique is to elicit more ‘tacit’ responses, ideas or perspectives and to avoid socially desirable responses. The interviews were recorded using a dictaphone and transcribed word for word. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and the corresponding phases were employed to identify, analyse and report topics from the research data.

All participants received a newsletter about the research, supplemented by oral information with an opportunity for questions and comments. Informed consent was provided for research purposes.

YEAR 2: SEPTEMBER - NOVEMBER 2023

During the second project year of Levenskunst participant observation was conducted during each session, similar to the first year. Informal interviews were used to gauge participants’ motivation, expectations and experiences concerning the project. Participants’ needs for future sessions were also explored. Participants had the opportunity to meet the researcher during the introductory session. Similar to the first year, participants were provided with a newsletter and informed consent details about the study, which was explained in more detail orally and included an opportunity for questions and comments.

The researcher also attended the preparation and evaluation of each session and conducted interim interviews with all stakeholders, including the project assistant, health promoters and museum staff. Upon completion of the six sessions all participants were invited to a semi-structured in-depth interview at a location of their choice. These interviews focused in more detail on the meaning of the project for participants and also included the use of the elicitation technique. The interviews were recorded using a dictaphone, transcribed word for word and subsequently topically analysed.

Focus groups with professionals

Focus groups were organised and implemented in January and February 2024 by a student completing a master's thesis, Levita Camerlinck (UGent), in collaboration with the project research team. These focus groups targeted professionals working for partners involved in the ErfGoedVoelen project. The participating heritage institutions included the Museum Dr. Guislain, Huis van Alijn and Erfgoedhuis Zusters van Liefde. Welfare institutions included De Kaap, Fioretti and 't Vlot, Rabot and De Sleep community health centres. The focus groups addressed different profiles working in the heritage and welfare sector.

A total of 22 respondents participated in the focus groups. Participants included 12 representatives from the heritage sector, seven from the welfare sector, two artists and the project assistant. Thirteen professionals were also directly involved in the project, partly responsible for the organisation and supervision of activities. The remaining nine professionals were indirectly involved; their work was affected by the project, but they bore no direct responsibility for the organisation and supervision of the sessions themselves.

Participant recruitment led to the organisation of seven focus groups, each consisting of two to four participants. The decision to limit the number of participants per focus group was due to certain recruitment challenges. Some of those invited questioned their contribution to the topic and others indicated that they were very busy. It was decided, therefore, to set up smaller groups and be flexible in terms of location (campus of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences UGent and Museum Dr. Guislain).

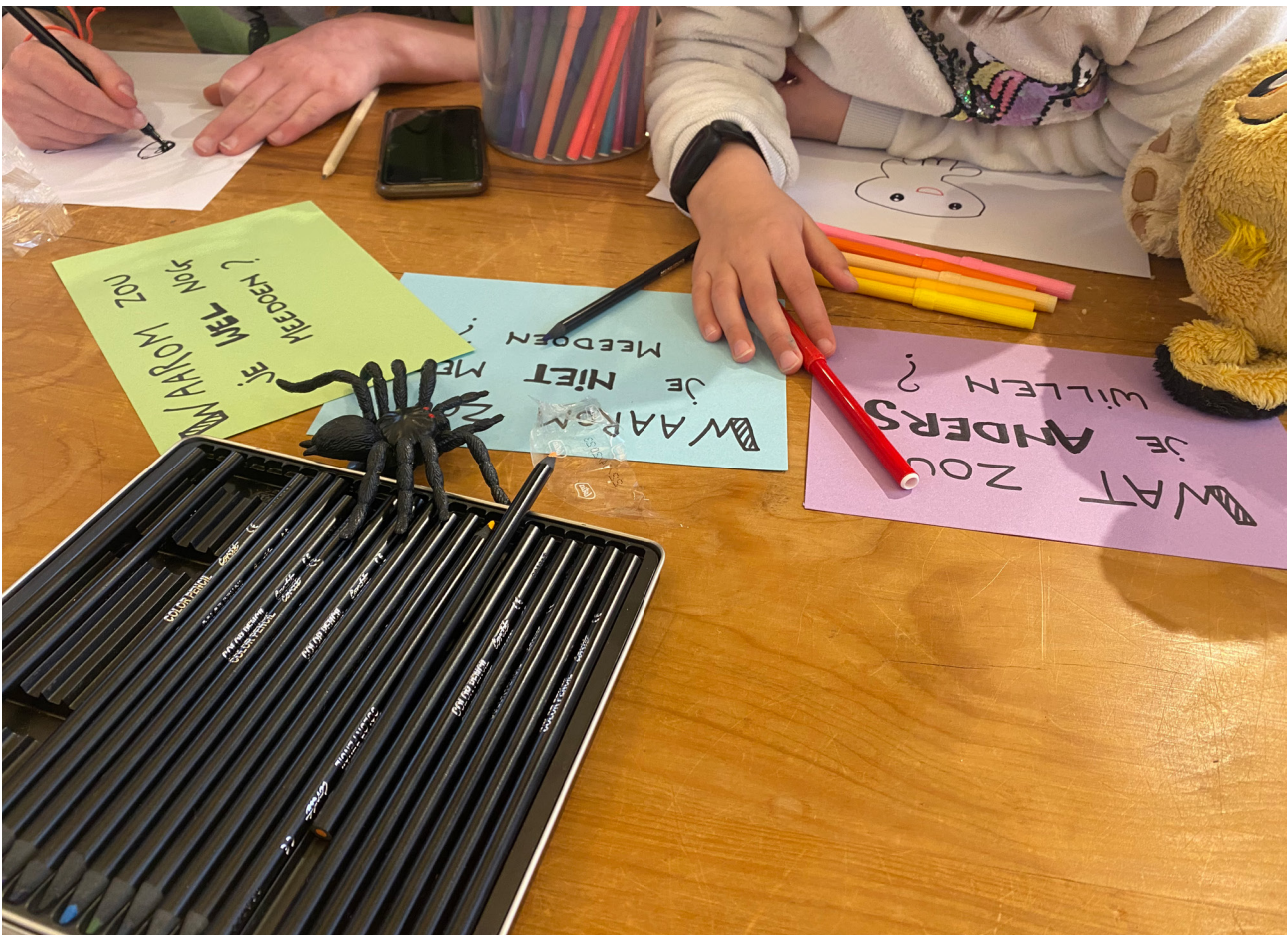
Micro-ethics and reflexivity

Inevitably, the search for the meaning and preconditions of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions also has an ethical dimension. Guillemin & Gillam (2004) identify two main ethical dimensions in qualitative research: procedural ethics and living ethics. Procedural ethics refer to any professional codes of conduct and obligations, such as informed consent, the right to privacy and confidentiality that researchers uphold as moral principles. Living ethics, on the other hand, refer to the everyday ethical issues that arise when conducting research. Komesaroff (1995) refers to micro-ethics within this context. He originally used the notion to describe the complex dynamics between doctor and patient in clinical practice, but micro-ethics can be applied equally well to the complex dynamics between researcher and participants. Where procedural ethics fail to cover all ethical aspects of qualitative research, Guillemin & Gillam (2004) put forward micro-ethics as a key discursive tool to articulate and understand the ethical issues that researchers are confronted with on a day to day basis. Micro-ethics, however, does not provide a framework to actually address these ethical challenges. This is why the authors emphasise the importance of reflexivity, i.e. that researchers “recognise and are sensitive to the micro-ethical dimensions of research practice, being alert to and prepared for ways to deal with the ethical challenges that arise” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, page 277). Whereas the procedural ethics of the research have already been addressed above, the living ethics are part of the research findings as detailed later in this report.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis and its corresponding phases were used to identify, analyse and report topics from the research data (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). Inductive reasoning, rather than starting from existing literature, was used to establish the topics. Initial coding involved researcher triangulation, in the sense that both researchers coded the transcripts independently (Verhoeven, 2018). These codes were then combined, discussed and restructured, by mutual consultation, on the basis of a number of striking categories and subcategories, which eventually resulted in a number of overarching topics.

Moreover, two interludes with a post-qualitative approach were included to focus on and leave scope for unexpected and non-linear influences within the research process. In this respect the boundaries of traditional methods of analysis and the thematic framework were deliberately pursued and exceeded (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013).



INTERLUDE:

Popping potato crisp packets

During our first meeting in the museum café the youngsters from Fioretti hesitatingly chose something from the menu. “Can we really order crisps?” Elisa asked “it’s only ten o’clock”. “At the museum the rules are slightly different”, the museum staff member replied. With a slight grin several packets of crisps were ordered at the counter. When Noor tried to open her packet, the crisps popped out of the bottom of the packet and fell onto her lap and onto the floor. “Erm” Noor said nervously “my crisps have exploded”, making everyone at the table laugh and setting the mood for the coming weeks. On the way from the museum café to the attic, Stijn demonstrated how to pop empty crisp packets. You could hear Fien’s laughter reverberating between the old museum walls after every bang. The exploding crisp packets kept being referred to throughout the project. To outsiders, crisps may not appear to be the essence of the Fioretti project, but to those who were present during the sessions there was no denying their importance.

Play, humour and connection

The project involving the Fioretti youngsters was defined by play and humour as an element of connection. The exploding crisp packets are a typical example of this. During week two Stijn showed anyone who was interested the technique used to explode empty packets. This technique was passed on and acquired within the group so that the popping of empty packets became a regular weekly activity in the corridors leading from the museum café to the attic.

Having something to eat and drink together in the café before we moved on to the attic turned out



to be much more than just “having something to eat and drink”. It was also an opportunity to connect with one another in a relaxed atmosphere and it gently introduced us to our work. In the museum café stories were related from the previous week and we talked about the upcoming session. Those who wanted to do so could show their drawing pad or explain their creative plans for the day. Taking orders and distributing drinks, familiar topics of conversation and lots of laughs meant that this predictable starting moment introduced a sense of calm and routine during our weeks together.

Maja left the Fioretti unit during the course of the project and a farewell event was organised for her in the museum café. Elisa and Noor had rehearsed a dance and a big packet of party-mix crisps was handed out. Crisps were also an important element during the opening of the exhibition. During the reception guests had the opportunity to taste spicy blue crisps and the event included an official ‘popping of the packet’ stunt.

Inspiration

The (exploding) crisp packets not only triggered conversation, facilitating a connection and meeting, but were also a significant source of inspiration for creative activities. Noor, for example, collected the empty packets in the museum café and used them to make a crisp garland that was used as a display in the exhibition. Thomas and Stijn worked together to record the sound of the popping packets and used it as an auditory element during the exhibition. Fien produced a drawing of a packet of crisps which she displayed above her other creations and the empty packet of Takis crisps, which was popped during the opening event, also gained a place in her artwork.

The archive objects were the starting point of a creative journey, but other objects, spaces, statements or personal stories also became a point of departure for new creations alongside the crisp packets. Everyone was given the freedom to give it a go, experiment, collaborate, work in isolation, stop and restart. The results consequently consist of a diversity of personal stories based on numerous creative techniques. Although the creations were seemingly very different, they also revealed aspects that were typical for this project.

Several people set to work with a mask from the museum archive. The colours of the blue, white and red mask are reflected in Louis’ large wooden swing which actually also represents a mask. Noor’s home-made duck mask was taken to Fioretti where it was given new meaning and interpretation. It became a safe screen and guardian of secrets.

The museum stickers that were handed out during each session were treasured by some and kept in a notebook. Others stuck them as high as possible on the walls of the building. The different colours were a trigger point for conversation and the distribution of the stickers a moment of connection. The sticker sheet displayed on the wall during the exhibition was not an artistic choice but was deliberately left in place when it opened. It symbolised the attic space where ordinary rules did not apply and mischief was considered a strength. Humour was a common theme throughout the project. ‘Research corner’ was permuted into ‘find the corner’ and the red seat has yet to dry. In her oeuvre in which museum text was turned into poems, Sarah invited visitors to help (re)write this story.

Several works played with light and shadow. When Fien walked past the window in her sparkly sweater, the entire hallway was adorned with glowing lights, which prompted Louis to install a disco ball in the stairwell. The latter was also an inspiration for other creations during the project. A flash camera in a dark room and torches were used to find out how the play of light from the mirror ball could be captured on film. Several photographs and creations focus on this disco ball. The spotlights on the white ropes of Stijn’s artwork cast shadow lines on the wall and floor. Fien used broken CDs lit up from above with a spotlight and glued mirror pieces to play with light and reflection.

Fioretti itself was an inspiration several times during the project. The exhibition included, among other things, a model of Fioretti with an underground parking area. Elisa created a response to a video by

Simon Allemeersch which is on display in the permanent exhibition. Due to the move from Fioretti to the Guislain site, the video in the permanent collection was no longer up to date, which was a decisive reason for Elisa to recreate it with an up to date story.

Pop culture is an important part of the participants' lives. The sessions featured music by artists such as Pommeliers Thijs and Camille. Those who attended the opening event were able to enjoy full-blast pop music during the reception, and it is also used as background music in the video about Fioretti. At the opening of the exhibition Aaron Blommaert sent a video message that was projected onto the wall and met with great enthusiasm.

“We Shape Fioretti” was a journey focused on slowing down and connecting, discovering one's own talents and experimenting with techniques. It was a place where we could engage with each other with an open mind. This project was not based on a hierarchy of art forms or stories that could or could not be told. In the attic plopping crisp packets were just as inspiring and connecting as fragile archive objects.



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Research results

Meaning of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities for participants and professionals

The power of objects: meaning and resonance

Both the presence of, and working with, heritage objects played a significant role for the participants during the project. Objects can resonate in different ways. These meanings are conveyed in many forms, depending on the context, the individual and the objects.

Firstly, heritage objects are often conveyors of prolific narratives and memories. They help recall these **memories** and give participants the opportunity to tell their own stories about the topic. This narrative element in objects serves as a catalyst for sharing personal stories, which results in greater interaction, recognition and connection with others.

Leona pointed to the doll of Snow White. She related to the group that her father had painted a large painting depicting Snow White and the Witch for her and her sisters on the iron oil boiler in the courtyard of their home. She added that she realised only now that he must have spent a lot of time and energy creating it. She described how beautiful she found it as a child. She said the little doll made her feel a bit like she did in the old days.

(Levenskunst J1)

Heritage objects also invite us to **associate and metaphorize**. A specific object can evoke diverse meanings in different participants, revealing the rich symbolic and emotional layering of a particular object. Objects have expressiveness and convey in their own way concepts such as security or threat, joy or disappointment, moderation or luxury. They offer different participants the opportunity to delve more deeply into the communication ability of these objects, leave impressions and are associated with certain moods or certain ideas of happiness. Similar to our childhood being evoked by a particular scent, a functional object such as a food mill can be an abstract expression of certain life themes or values that are important to us:

Suzy (looking at the food mill on the table): To me that feels like... You enter as one but emerge in pieces. Not unlike my back and surgery, your whole body is churned through the mill but you emerge at the other end crushed. I associate it with what I experienced.

(Levenskunst J1)

Heritage objects also act as powerful tools for reflection on certain life values, morality and ethics, themes such as identity, culture, historical contexts, justice or the broader meaning of heritage. Such as the touching of small ivory figurines by several children of *Kapers of Kunst* resulted in reflection on the usefulness of certain aspects of heritage and themes such as justice:

Stan (looking at small ivory figurines): So, they killed all these elephants first and then made figurines like this out of them? And then they just got rid of these figurines? So the elephant was killed for nothing?

Mira: I agree. If it's already happened anyway, it might be better to keep the figurines instead of getting rid of them?

Stan: Throwing this in the bin? Because some people might like this, and then they just throw it away?

Odiel: No, that's not acceptable. My grandmother has a similar figurine but she bought it, she didn't go and hunt the elephants herself.

Mira: *Yes, fortunately.*

Odiel: *I love animals. I vote for animals!*

Mira: *Me too!*

...

Odiel: *My grandmother also has such a long tooth (points to ivory tusk)*

Kaat: *Yes, people used to do that a lot. But it's not allowed anymore now. Look and then they made these little objects with it (points to ivory figurines). Look, monkeys, camels, elephants...*

Stan: *Even an elephant!*

Riley: *An elephant made from an elephant!*

Odiel: *You could actually just let the real elephant live and you end up with: an elephant!*

(Kapers op Kunst J1)

Objects also have a **sensory role**. Objects are held, turned, shaken, sniffed ... and their shape, weight, material, roughness, softness, temperature, etc. stimulates the senses of many participants, thus creating meaningful experiences. For example, an old book provides various sensory experiences such as the visual details of the worn cover and old writing, the tactile experience of flipping through old pages, the smell of aged paper, the crinkling of pages.

Hazel let her fingers slide over the letters in the old Braille script and exclaimed: *'Oh my goodness! I feel a tingling across my shoulders when I touch that!*

(Kapers op Kunst J1)

Rosalie (looking intently at an old chess board): *I think it's so cool that it incorporates so many different shapes. Here, for example, you can distinguish many varied shapes. You perceive different things (looks at the board close up). It looks as if it will feel very rough, but actually it's all very smooth (she strokes the board). Look, this appears to be rough, but it's actually super smooth.*

Tina: *Yes, you're right (touching the board). And it's really cold, can you feel that?*

Rosalie: *Yes.*

Heleen: *Yes, quite cool (touching the board).*

Tina: *On a hot day...*

Rosalie: *I'm going to cool my head before playing chess (putting her head on the board as if it was a pillow and laughing)*

(Kapers op Kunst J1)

Objects are also not considered merely visual or sensory, but related to concepts that we can analyse and evaluate on the basis of their beauty or repulsiveness. Participants from the various pilot projects discussed the **aesthetics** of certain objects and expressed their preferences. The objects acquire a specific meaning purely on the basis of their attractiveness or beauty.

When I opened the cupboard, the reaction was...wow, that's beautiful! Similar to finding treasure.

(Odiel, Kapers op Kunst J1)

Heritage objects also stimulate **curiosity**. Participants are curious about an object's function, material and origin, and this provokes a lot of interaction. Moreover, when object handling everyone is equally ignorant about an object, resulting in a perception of equivalence and interaction. Even participants who, for various reasons, speak differently or with difficulty put forward ideas or theories once they handle an object. Participants listen, complement each other, or build on each other's ideas about a particular object. Whenever objects are presented participants express their curiosity, pose many questions and speculate extensively about possible answers.

Odiel removed his favourite Erfgoedhuis object from his box and showed it to the other children.

The object was passed around.

Hazel: *What is this anyway?*
 Rosalie: *It is marked with a different language (looking very closely at the object)*
 Thomas: *Which language could it be? Do you think it's our language?*
 Odiel: *It's Natsu language.*
 Rosalie: *It is also very graceful.*
 Odiel: *It's Chinese (looking closely at the object)*
 Thomas: *Chinese? Natsu? Where do the Natsu people live?*
 Rosalie: *In Natsia?*
 Odiel: *It is a symbol of peace over there.*
 Thomas: *Would you guys like to touch it? Do you think it will be heavy?*
 Hazel: *I do like it, but it is feather light. I like the symbol but not what it's attached to.*
 Stan: *Why would someone have made such a symbol of peace?*
 Odiel: *Perhaps because they lived in a country where fighting and bullying was commonplace and they decided to create a symbol of peace?*
 (Kapers op Kunst J1)

In line with this, many participants mentioned the powerful **educational impact** of working with heritage objects during the project. They indicated that they had learnt a lot by discovering new objects they had never seen before, or by finding out more about the origin, function and meaning of certain objects.

For me Levenskunst presented an opportunity to talk to people and learn. It appealed to me and my sense of curiosity and it was always fun to do.
 (Suzy, Levenskunst J1)

Many objects were new and special items that I had never seen before.
 (Rosalie, Kapers op Kunst J1)

Another striking aspect of working with heritage objects is how they spark **play and imagination**, whereby traditional meanings or functions of objects give way to imaginative new meanings³. Sometimes this manifested itself in real fantasy games, e.g. when Odiel (Kapers op Kunst J1) grabbed an object and pretended it was a magic wand, then cast a spell whereby he transformed the others into frogs, and Rob, Riley and Nora started croaking and hopping around. On another occasion this resulted in fantasising about the function or origin of an object:

An old portable immersion heater was passed around and one by one we looked at this strange object. No one knew what it was.
 Goedele: *That's something from the olden days, I don't think you will find it now...*
 Dirk: *Maybe in a junk shop you might come across it.*
 Goedele: *You sometimes see them at flea markets.*
 Thomas: *Would you still be able to use it now?*
 Goedele: *Of course, you can always use it. For lack of anything better. It's an antique vibrator! (laughter)*
 (Vreemd en Vertrouwd J1)

Heritage objects can also serve as a **'third element'** that, in addition to yourself (the first element) and the other (the second element), offers a common middle ground for interaction. Having a shared goal or shared interest takes pressure off one-on-one interaction moments and allows participants to engage in conversation from a position of safety. Louis, a youngster at Fioretti, used the wooden swing he made as a means of connection, e.g. he asked for materials, talked about the mask he was inspired by and about his younger sister for whom he was making the swing. With *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* some

3 For a more in-depth exploration of how heritage objects can act as agentic playmates through play and imagination, also refer to the second interlude in this report.

participants mentioned how the objects steered the conversation away from dementia to provide scope for other topics of discussion.

René: *I did like the concept. It's a bit like going back in time.*

Nicole: *Yes, because there has to be something to guide you. Because otherwise we would be here without 'something' to talk about (pointing to objects on the table) and would still be talking [about dementia] wouldn't we.*

(Vreemd en Vertrouwd J2)

Finally, we noted that certain participants acquired a sense of connection with certain objects throughout the sessions, ranging from Nora (*Kapers op Kunst J1*) who really wanted to show a picture of her favourite object to her mum at home, to Hazel (*Kapers op Kunst J1*) who opened a cupboard in Erfgoedhuis and exclaimed: *"This is my favourite cupboard (opening the cupboard)! Ta-da! With the little animals!"*, following which Nora moved alongside her and exclaimed: *"That's my favourite cupboard too!"*. We also noted that participants in *Levenskunst* and *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* spontaneously brought in meaningful or interesting objects from home to show others, or led an object handling mini-session for the group themselves. We also frequently noticed that objects associated with play and imagination were not perceived as inanimate matter, but as an active partner and lively presence; subject and object entered into in a dynamic and reciprocal relationship⁴. Through these ways of connecting with the objects the entire heritage experience takes on a dynamic and personal meaning.

To a deeper connection: from sharing life stories to a sense of connection

Several participants felt that being able to share one's life story introduced significant added value to the projects, irrespective of the objects. Older participants in particular appeared to draw comfort from other people's life stories. They found out how others deal with a difficult past and felt *admiration and/or emotional* about their project:

Testimonies of all the people who were present. Everyone tried to explain details about their own life so that participants found out from one another how they went about things or what they sadly had to go through, and despite what they had experienced they still maintained that 'we need to persevere'. Not dwelling on misery but trying to look ahead to the future.

(Leona, *Levenskunst J1*)

Conversely, participants indicated that they felt safe enough to share their own grief, precisely because of a sense of not being the only one. Moreover, one of the participants indicated that by sharing his own vulnerabilities he felt useful and consequently inspired others:

I think I also to some extent related this to the group, the fact that I also have a history of alcohol abuse [...] In the past I would never have admitted this, but I have learnt that people appreciate you doing this and have consequently learnt from experience that this helps, i.e. that you can help other people with it.

(Hugo, *Levenskunst J1*)

On the other hand, participants were also proud of their past. With both the *Levenskunst* and *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* projects, participants spontaneously started to bring in objects after the first session. Using a photo album, old coins or a thesis they wrote themselves about the Red Cross, they talked about the old days. At times, sharing life stories also resulted in **reflection on one's own life situation**, either in a posi-

4 See interlude.

tive sense - *'I'm actually still in good health'* - or equally in a negative sense. For participants in the *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* project suffering from dementia, for example, the confrontation with other participants already at a more advanced stage of dementia was difficult. One of the participants even wondered aloud if *'he would end up like that too?'* In this same group, 'sharing' certain aspects was also not always desirable. While it was not necessarily the focal point of the sessions, certain participants felt a strong need to address challenging topics such as euthanasia. Other participants, on the other hand, perceived it as particularly confrontational.

Younger participants appear to be considerably less interested in sharing their life stories. During the *Fioretti Vitrine* pilot project young people were rather more **reluctant** to share personal stories with the group. Amber, one of the participants, literally indicated that she *'didn't always enjoy all the chatting'*. During *Kapers op Kunst* short anecdotes were more frequently shared rather than feeling the need to share life stories.

An old anaesthesia mask was passed around the group of children, followed by a discussion about the origin and function of the mask.

Hazel: *I've had surgery before.*

Odiel: *And did you vomit immediately after?*

Hazel: *No. No I was .. I actually thought: where am I?*

Thomas: *Yes, something like that can make you feel totally confused.*

Nora: *My sister also vomited once when her tooth was being extracted. Because another tooth was already growing beneath it, which makes it very difficult to extract a tooth and she consequently needed anaesthesia.*

Hazel: *That happened to me too.*

(Kapers op Kunst J1)

Short stories were also shared at *Fioretti*, especially at the start in the museum café. Participants regularly talked about the future and their dreams, as well as things they were currently focusing on.



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Maja: *What do you dream about? My dream is to become a football player, joining a new team.*
Fien: *I am the table tennis world champion.*
(Fioretti J2)

Some participants felt that the meaning of the pilot projects transcended merely sharing life stories and was really about a sense of connection. On a personal level this appears to be mainly related to a **sense of recognition or appreciation** by others in the group. Older participants in particular considered “being allowed to be who you are” and “being seen and heard” as an important element:

First and foremost, being among people every so often and being allowed to be who you are now. That was a great experience for me.
(Suzy, Levenskunst J1)

I felt for the first time in a long time that people were listening to me.
(Willy, Levenskunst J2)

In addition to an **atmosphere of respect**⁵ in which participants are given opportunity to contribute something of their own and people listen to each other, the first part of the quote reveals something else too. Underlying the sense of connection is also a social dimension which has more to do with a kind of group feeling or the idea of belonging to something:

Well, I thought that the fact that it was all very sociable was a good thing. Everyone there was sociable. You felt that you belonged. People immediately struck up conversations ... That's what I really remember. In fact, I said: 'There are still people who know how to get along'
(Lutgarde, Levenskunst J1).

Levenskunst meant something to me because I saw that people still listen and I have learnt a lot. Yes, the fact that I was nevertheless accepted being considered “a back street kid’.
(Pol, Levenskunst J2)

In terms of the *Levenskunst* project, two participants specifically mentioned that the project helped them to venture **out** more often at other times, something they previously found difficult. They stated that they felt less disconnected from the outside world. Lucien (*Levenskunst* J2) confirmed:

I was actually quite withdrawn and *Levenskunst* helped me to become more outgoing. I also join my wife more often when she ventures out.

Two other participants added that the connection they felt throughout the project helped them **get back on their feet**:

It actually made me feel a lot better, joining you and sitting around chatting, so much so that I said: 'Well, well, these people are actually talking to me'
(Lutgarde, Levenskunst J1).

5 The perceived atmosphere of kindness and respect requires some context. A distinct tendency towards compliance and denial of one's own needs was noted in a significant number of the older participants in *Levenskunst*. This was highlighted in various statements such as “my opinion is not important” or “I don't want to be a burden,” in apologising all the time or in not daring to take up much ‘space’ during the sessions. Also noteworthy were several statements during the interviews such as Mia's comment (*Levenskunst* J2): “I am easy, it doesn't matter. The people were all so friendly.” Anna (*Levenskunst* J2) commented: “But they are all friendly, I think it's ideal,” or: “As far as I am concerned it's all ok... we can't complain, really.” These responses suggest a pattern of negative self-assessment and low self-worth, possibly as a result of internalised structural inequalities, in which older people, especially women, have learnt to minimise their own needs and opinions in a society that has historically valued their voices less. This can lead to a distorted view of the true meaning of the sessions for these participants, as they tend to ignore or downplay negative experiences or unmet needs. It consequently highlights the need for professionals to look beyond superficial satisfaction and actively seek ways to address participants' deeper needs and concerns. Our study addressed this by including both explicit feedback and implicit behaviours and attitudes of the participants and by working with elicitation techniques during the interviews.

Whether this sense of connection leads to close friendships is different for each participant. Some participants alluded to more temporary experiences such as “being happy to see people open up” or “getting to know people you wouldn’t otherwise get to know”. Other participants developed a close bond throughout the project which continued outside the sessions by, for example, going cycling together. Whereas sharing life stories was perceived as less important in projects involving children and young people, the experience associated with connection was different. With *Kapers op Kunst* one of the younger participants also alluded to the emergence of new friendships:

Tina: *What did you like most of all?*

Hazel: *Making the film clips.*

Tina: *What did you like about it?*

Hazel: *Working with children I didn’t know that well. Because I never played with them. I got to know them better and we became very good friends. I now have a brilliant relationship with Odriel.*

Tina: *That’s great! By making the video together?*

Hazel: *Yes. Otherwise, I would still only be playing with Nora and Rosalie.*

(Kapers op Kunst J1)

For people with dementia and their family carers, the sense of connection also plays out at another level, namely in the connection with fellow sufferers. That’s what one of the participants in the first session of *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* immediately said he was looking for:

I have another question. Do we know who is already suffering from or developing dementia so that we can take this into account? For example, I want to be first. I have Alzheimer’s and that is also one of the reasons why I would still like to interact with other people.

(Geert, Vreemd en Vertrouwd J1)

Participants in *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* also indicated that it was nice to occasionally “venture out” together and feel **welcome** somewhere where, unlike in family groups, support groups or dementia cafés, dementia was not always the topic of conversation.

You briefly forget what ails you. That’s what I think. You tend to mull it over all the time whilst sitting at home. Here, on the other hand, you are part of a group, you are involved in something, playing guessing games, talking to each other. And that is something quite different. I can’t wait for Thursday so that we can come here.

(Etienne, Vreemd en Vertrouwd J2)

Creating **something together** gave the youngsters at Fioretti and the children of De Kaap a sense of belonging. During conversations in the minibus after the sessions, the Fioretti youngsters indicated that “after all the talk about objects, they enjoyed making or crafting something together”. This became even more evident when Amber excitedly got into the minibus eager to join the next session with a bag full of her own craft materials. During the *Kapers op Kunst* project the children worked on their own creations with similar enthusiasm. During the public display event a shared pride was palpable in both groups.

Shifting perspectives: cultural heritage as an impetus for learning and development

It became clear throughout the sessions that wellbeing-focused heritage projects can be a powerful stimulus for learning and personal development. Participants reported being stimulated to consider things differently. Their perspective of their environment was approached in a different way, leading to the re-evaluation or rediscovery of certain aspects of their context. This manifested itself in both the rekindling

or **rediscovery of old interests** and in “**little pleasures**” in everyday life being cherished. These moments of happiness, as illustrated quite beautifully by one participant in the quote below, are often still there but sometimes the sense of awe about them has to some extent been lost:

For example, when we had to talk about our hobbies - one of the topics that were covered - I obviously immediately thought of my own hobbies and realised what they actually meant to me. They are very important to us but we don't really appreciate this. I mean, we're so used to playing the piano or guitar, to listening to music, to looking at the stars, that we take it for granted.
(Hugo, Levenskunst J1)

During the *Kapers op Kunst* and *Fioretti Vitrine* sessions the meaning was not so much associated with revaluation or rediscovery for children and young people but both concepts were significant in a different way. For this young generation discovery is mostly about the feeling of being able to make or create something that they own. The public display event where their creations were exhibited was associated with a sense of pride and self-esteem for them.

I quite like it that people come to take a look. Yes, I know my video is cool.
(Elisa, Fioretti J2)

With *Levenskunst* the rediscovery of old interests also appeared to have an impact in a different way as participants gradually **took on various roles** during the project, potentially inspired by a role they previously used to play. Hugo spontaneously became the group photographer, Cécile took on a caring role, Suzy took pleasure in baking a cake for the other participants every week:

Hey Thomas, it's the feast of St Nicholas tomorrow, been busy in the kitchen, hopefully it won't be too slippery tomorrow ... and the cakes won't get soggy ... A little taste, spoons or plates at the ready at Huis van Alijn?
(personal communication, Suzy, Levenskunst)



In other pilot projects too, we noticed how participants took on various roles as the sessions progressed. For example, during *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* Etienne took charge of the weekly coffee tasting and Yvonne and René were always on hand to clear the dishes after each meeting. At one point, Rosa brought objects from home that we were not familiar with and referred to the object handling methodology by asking questions of her own, such as: “What does the object feel like?”, “Which country might it originate from?” and “What does it smell like?”. With *The Fioretti Vitrine*, Fien provided music during the sessions and Elisa took on the role of museum guide, catering manager and event manager at the display event.

Having adopted this role in the group, participants also began to inspire and **stimulate each other**. They went cycling or hiking together, exchanged recipes, agreed to visit the museum together. Old and new interests thus merged and stimulated enthusiasm. Several examples illustrate the feeling of “looking forward to something again”. For example, one of the participants clearly started to make more of an effort to put make up on as the sessions progressed. Another participant specifically indicated that they felt more cheerful or happy:

It made me feel much better, I no longer feel so sad.
(Lutgarde, Levenskunst J1)

Participants in *Levenskunst* and *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* valued the **educational aspect of the sessions**, referring not only to the objects, but also to the wider integration of the sessions. Examples they quoted included museum visits, learning about external organisations, becoming familiar with different heritage methodologies, as well as learning how to deal with group dynamics or different opinions and personalities. One of the participants in *Levenskunst* related that she found the bicycle taxi and visit to a social restaurant an eye-opener:

And using those bikes was also an experience. Going by bike for something to eat to - where did we go, ah yes, Oude Houtlei. That was an interesting experience too.
(Leona, Levenskunst J1)

Several participants specifically emphasised the generational difference between the participants in *Levenskunst* and considered the project team an important educational asset, which ensured that learning worked in both directions. Precisely because of the age difference, participants were able to assume the role of an expert at certain times and provide more details about objects from the past. This resulted in a kind of shift in the power dynamics between counsellors and participants:

And Thomas also said: ‘we also learnt from you didn’t we’. It’s great this kind of synergy, you know what I mean? And then things we didn’t know, but he knew ... Because I knew that in days gone by it was called the Kinders Alijns Hospital, when we were little, and then he [Thomas] said: ‘in that case I will check its history’ ... Cécile said: ‘if I’d had a history teacher like that I would have known about it’.
(Suzy, Levenskunst J1)

Strikingly, the younger participants referred to a far lesser extent to the educational aspect, although some participants did mention it. On the other hand, being able to create and shape something **together** proved particularly meaningful for the children and young people of *Kapers op Kunst* and *The Fioretti Vitrine*.

My drawings are very (important) to me and I really love drawing. What exactly it all means, I don’t know yet.
(Noor, Fioretti J2)

As the projects progressed, we noted that several participants began to exert a kind of ownership of the project, site or objects. During the project with Fioretti, Noor created her own corner to work in, other youngsters put up homemade invitations in the Fioretti building, and in the weeks following the

project Elisa regularly walked into the museum and spent a lot of time at the exhibition. This ownership is a valuable goal, but it is important not to mask existing power dynamics. Participants never ‘own’ the location or project on an equal basis; but we can try to allow it as much as possible so that the museum can become a shared location where people feel at home.

Finally, professionals noted that discovering heritage objects together, engaging in conversation and creating things, ensure that they get to know **people in a different way**. Healthcare workers reported that they saw the people they worked with in a different light than during their daily routine activities and that this had a positive effect on their relationship of trust.

I perceived them quite differently because a classroom situation is usually somewhere they don't want to be and would prefer to get away from. You had a different kind of contact there; they were more open minded and easy to talk to during a casual chat. Something that doesn't usually happen in a classroom. You also see them develop and you discover their talents in different areas.

(Care worker)

Outreach projects also frequently offer a new way of working to museum staff, requiring much closer contact than during regular museum activities. They also indicated that this in-depth way of working ensures that you get to know people in a different, more worthwhile way.

Watching these people at work, and I don't know, to some extent transcending who they were when they arrived, because after all I don't know them in any other way. They don't know me. And there you are and the location and those objects bring you closer together. That sense of connection, it really makes you feel good.

(Museum staff member)

Scope for play and pleasure: the value of the non-utilitarian

What is striking during activities involving heritage and wellbeing is how the non-utilitarian comes to the fore, whereby activities do not revolve around their practical usefulness or functionality but are perceived as particularly valuable and meaningful because of the pleasure and enjoyment they bring. For example, **humour and fun** proved to be a remarkable constant in all four pilot projects. Some children and adolescents actually took on a different character during each session. From *Stiribood Maastrio* via *Rap Queen* to *Rose* from the Titanic, they all featured one way or another. The *Levenskunst* and *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* projects also generated a lot of laughter. Sometimes as a result of a dressing up session, another time because one of the participants absolutely wanted to test one of the objects - a portable immersion heater.

Leona: *Actually, I also dressed up using my bright red hat.*

Tina: *Yes, I remember.*

Leona: *Yes, we need to introduce a bit of fun too. That's what I think anyway.*

(Levenskunst J1)

Several participants also indicated that they really enjoyed **taking a gamble and guessing** the purpose and origin of objects:

I think that's a devil doll and it's pointing to you, Thomas!

(Marie, Fioretti Vitrine J1)

Participants in *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* also felt that taking a gamble and guessing created a **sense of**

equality between the person suffering from dementia and the family carer. The fact that neither had any idea about the purpose or origin of the object and could let their imagination run wild, allowed them to briefly forget about the focus on support within the relationship. This often led to memorable as well as funny moments:

Dirk: *To warm up your bed or pillow?*

Thomas: *Ah, you would put it in your bed, what for ... perhaps if you have cold feet.*

Els: *I think your bed has had it.*

[laughter]

Thomas: *Putting it in your bed doesn't seem too safe to me either.*

...

Geert: *I have found a remedy for it. I found Goedele and that keeps me warm*

Hanne: *Nice.*

Liesa: *And you don't have to plug her in either!*

Goedele: *Not yet!*

(Vreemd en Vertrouwd J1)

It is also very interesting and enjoyable for family carers. In fact, everyone is in the same position, we all don't know.

(Nicole, Vreemd en Vertrouwd J2)

What is striking is that the above examples are about being able to express one's individuality and interact with others rather than about usefulness or functionality. Humour and fun don't necessarily have a higher purpose here, but they do ensure that participants are satisfied with the content of the sessions. In other words, guessing the origin of objects together is not a useful activity, but it is perceived as meaningful by the participants.

Not only heritage objects can be a meaningful element of these projects. During the project with Fioretti popping a packet of crisps during the first gathering resulted in crisp packets becoming a common thread throughout the project. Moreover, some participants were not necessarily stimulated by heritage objects but derived their ideas from **other objects**. For example, Elisa produced a new video of 'Fioretti because she noticed that the video shown in the museum's permanent exhibition was shot at the old location. Louis, Fien and the cultural therapist worked independently with light, reflection and shadow, mainly because Fien walked through sunrays wearing a sparkly sweater, which created a beautiful effect on the walls of the stairwell.



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6 Also refer to the first interlude of this report

This scope for the non-utilitarian was also reflected in another way during the projects, namely through **art and poetry**. Participants themselves injected a sense of playfulness and aesthetics into the sessions at different times. Children and young people did this throughout all sessions, especially during their creative endeavours with the relevant artists. With *Levenskunst* and *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* some participants spontaneously read a text they had written themselves or brought along homemade snacks or music. For example, following a session of object handling involving a witch's orb, Geert proclaimed a poem he wrote about a witch.

Geert: May I present something? I have written a piece about a kind of witch. Can I read it? It's only short. (Geert stood up, the others remained seated and looked at him)

Thomas: Now? I don't mind. Of course.

(Vreemd en Vertrouwd J1)



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Structural integration of wellbeing-focused heritage activities

Preconditions for wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities

Wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities clearly offer added value to participants, museums, heritage institutions and care facilities. Yet setting up and maintaining such projects in a sustainable way is not straightforward. The preconditions outlined below will facilitate the integration of outreach projects. To do so, we used focus groups to talk to employees of all the relevant organisations. The preconditions are divided into three levels. The micro-level relates to everything that happens within a single project, the meso-level is situated within the organisations that implement the project, and the macro-level refers to the policy level and society at large.

Micro-level

Flexibility and demand driven activities

To set up heritage projects in a sustainable way, you need to be flexible and adopt a demand driven approach. Demand driven operations involve identifying what is actually needed and shaping a project on the basis of **requirements** and **tailoring it to** participants' needs. Museum staff indicate that a predetermined course, without leaving scope for participants' individuality, can sometimes actually have negative consequences. In that sense wellbeing-focused heritage activities always involve a search and a bespoke solution. There are no roadmaps or specific instructions, it is about creating a space in which things become feasible.

I consider this extremely valuable, but it always means that when you're part of a group, no matter how well you know your methodology, you also need to be able to let it go.
(Museum staff member)

The focus groups and pilot projects repeatedly highlighted the importance of members of staff having the courage to adapt the project to participants and their needs. To make these adjustments you have to be flexible throughout the entire project and also be prepared to question the process **itself**. Sometimes you may have to abandon what you had in mind beforehand in function of the participants.

Being able to let go, I think that's what it's all about. Having the courage to question the way of working we are familiar with. I also think that when you promote yourself as a museum this question will emerge, i.e. to adapt your own position, and also critically assessing the role of your museum and opening it up in order to gradually adapt.
(Museum staff member)

Wellbeing-focused heritage work implies that your objective is to improve the wellbeing of your participants. However, the focus groups showed that it is important to let go of this **singleness of purpose**. Firstly, wellbeing is perceived differently by everyone and cannot easily be incorporated into specific frameworks.

I think everyone perceives their sense of wellbeing differently. Everyone will benefit from a different method or approach. I consequently think that this is highly individual, different from person to person.
(Care worker)

Moreover, according to some professionals the focus on improving wellbeing implies a degree of deficit thinking. Instead of looking at what has not happened (yet), you should look at what has happened and how you can put it to good use.

It reminds me of what they sometimes refer to when using the term ‘therapy’, i.e. to heal someone, to focus on recovery. Gosh, I don’t know about that. We’ll look at what’s happening first and then reflect on what we can do with it. We’ll first check which Lego blocks we already have and then establish what we can build with them, and whether they want to build it.

(Care worker)

The focus is on participants and as an organisation you try to create a safe space where people are allowed to be themselves unconditionally. In this case ‘being’ takes precedence over ‘wellbeing’. Participating in the sessions and pursuing equality in the relationship between participants and professionals is a lever here, although professionals should also not ignore the existing power dynamics between themselves and the participants.

Creating that safe space, where people are allowed to ‘be’ and take up ‘space’, requires constant **elimination of barriers**. As a professional you need to be constantly on alert and in close proximity. It’s not something you can check off on a checklist; it’s about getting to know one another in the process and having the opportunity to experiment with the removal of these barriers.

Museum staff member: *You actually have to factor all this in beforehand. And obviously with a lot of experience.*

Museum Director: *That’s a tough one.*

Museum staff member: *It is also by doing these things that you learn.*

Museum Director: *Yes, you have to learn it. You either adapt or find a different approach.*

Thresholds are different for everyone; they can shift over time and take on different forms. We learnt a lot about potential barriers during the four pilot projects. For example, the multitude of rooms and objects in the Erfgoedhuis proved a stumbling block for the children of *Kapers op Kunst*. The open depot concept in particular proved to be too overwhelming for them. Incorporating fall-back opportunities during the sessions, such as unwinding in the research corner or pausing with a drink, can provide a remedy in such cases. On the other hand, the presence of sugar and sweets caused too much distraction for some little children. Whereas providing coffee and biscuits for older participants introduced a degree of calm into the sessions, it quickly became clear that for younger participants it was better to limit this to a pre-arranged break time. Whilst the use of Polaroid cameras during *Levenskunst* and *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* introduced a degree of playfulness into the sessions, the presence of iPads and cameras caused too much distraction for the younger participants of *Kapers op Kunst* or *The Fioretti Vitrine*. By taking the time to discuss thresholds and make any necessary adjustments we managed to generate successful interactions and everyone gained a valuable place.

I felt that we were able to identify and point out thresholds, and work with them. For example, in the case of Louis who was subsequently able to join or Elisa who still clashed with the group in terms of dynamics, but was eventually included by Sarah.

(Care worker)

Professionalisation

Certain members of staff in the focus groups repeatedly indicated that they would benefit from a degree of **professionalisation**. They felt that they lacked certain skills necessary to successfully organise or supervise a heritage project. Some care workers wanted to learn more about heritage methodologies:

I really appreciate this further training in methodologies. Even if it only provides a basis. Yes, what is

actually available? How do you go about it? What are the areas of interest? Because eventually you do get caught up in the project. You're there. You also have to participate. So it makes sense that you know a little bit about it and its purpose.

(Care worker)

Some museum staff members, on the other hand, felt that they needed a basic understanding of healthcare or psychiatry so as to join a project with the right approach.

Nevertheless, museum staff members need to enhance their level of professionalism. I remember, when I started - knowing very little - that it could potentially be made somewhat easier. If you had undergone some training on the subject.

(Museum Director)

On the other hand, not being familiar with the therapeutic background can be an actual strength when starting a project with psychiatric back up. In that case a **non-therapeutic** meeting with museum staff makes a nice change from the daily routine and facilitates new kinds of interaction. Some staff members emphasised that professionalisation should be limited and that having the right attitude is essential when initiating a project. Creating a **safe environment, giving and taking up space**, being flexible and above all relating to participants with genuine openness are not aspects you can learn during training.

I don't think so, professionalisation in social care skills, not really. Because we approach it on the basis of cultural skills. And we must be open to others primarily in our own individual way.

(Museum Director)

Several professionals also stressed that a degree of **goodwill** is vital. For a project to succeed, you must above all be committed to making it successful.

I think a lot depends on the enthusiasm of the people who participate in it. If you feel as if you are making your annual mandatory contribution and yes, we'll just do it, that's a very different approach to actually being really enthusiastic to get going with it. Yes, I think a lot does depend on that as well.

(Museum staff member)



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Acquired skills or methodologies can provide some guidance, especially when people are new to it, but they should not be the overriding factor. For a heritage project to be successful, a basic level of professionalism combined with an open and empathetic attitude appears to be the ideal mix.

I do think you have to adopt a more professional approach in certain areas but I don't know if it's necessary to really be fully trained for this position. I think a balance is needed. Yes, I realise that you need the necessary skills and that you need training and support, but I am not sure whether it should be purely from that angle, that it can only be that, because I think you will then lose its uniqueness.
(Museum staff member)

Accessibility

A necessary precondition for the success of the pilot projects was commitment to all aspects of accessibility. To fully address this, it was regularly discussed quite specifically with the participants before, during and after the sessions, e.g. via intermediate phone calls.

Firstly, integral *physical accessibility*, giving participants access to buildings and services, is a must. Collecting participants with (bicycle) taxis, helping them upstairs, giving them the opportunity to move around, rest or lie down, checking public transport timetables together, exploring museum areas at one's own pace, safely parking participants' bicycles, checking optimum times and frequencies for the sessions, etc. are all examples focusing on physical accessibility. For *Levenskunst* and *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* in particular extra attention needed to be paid to physical accessibility.

No one questioned the requirements for me to participate, from: 'if you want to walk around you can, if you want to lie down...'. Thomas had even provided pillows separately. I did bring my own things but didn't have to use them. I was able to move around and yes, with my chair it was possible. And I maintain: once a week was feasible for me. I wouldn't be able to do it every day. I would be interested, but... I would have to lie down and get there in my chair but would then miss out on that feeling of togetherness. The table is also important, right, because you have eye-to-eye contact, you know what I mean?
(Suzy, *Levenskunst* J1)

Secondly, the **accessibility of information should be addressed**. An introduction letter, leaflet or home visit tailored to participants, explaining and visualising the schedule and dates, slowing down the pace, alternating between linguistic and non-linguistic heritage methodologies, repeating a question in a different way, etc. also makes it easier and more interesting for all participants to continue taking part in the projects.

Thirdly, we put great store by the importance of **relational accessibility**, seeking a safe and welcoming place where reciprocity is key and the presence and diverse involvement of everyone is valued. For example, each session included an extended welcome, taking as much time as needed. Often drinks, desserts or sometimes even a hot meal would follow. Some children from *Kapers op Kunst* spontaneously brought their cuddly toy to each session and were given the time to attach a name sticker and introduce their toy to the group. A lot of time was spent decorating the venues in order to create the right ambiance, with appropriate rest areas. All the sessions included regular breaks or finished on time. Where possible and desirable the planning was formulated together, observed and clearly communicated. If participants did not feel comfortable with a particular assignment or activity, alternatives were provided or they could leave the session or project at their own discretion. It was also clearly communicated each time that it was not obligatory to share things with the group. A balance between active and more passive moments was sought whenever possible, such as asking participants for input and then listening to a story. This included interactions between participants and project staff sharing personal stories. Moreover, it was made clear that there were several equally valid ways to participate in the sessions, such as actively participating in heritage methodologies, taking videos or photographs, choosing and touching objects, watching how oth-

ers did it, having a coffee together, etc. Participants were free to choose how they wanted to participate at all times. The method was also regularly adapted to the interests and questions of the participants. Participants reported that they often felt well cared for and cited the friendly atmosphere, commitment and reassurance that there were people there to help them when needed. Ample time was devoted to listening to personal stories and experiences, and overly tight schedules were often abandoned to make room for relational aspects. Leona (*Levenskunst J1*) related:

Leona: *I felt good with this gang of people. Everyone was friendly and people listened to each other, the spontaneity. You felt at home there I thought... Yes, I definitely felt at home there.*

Tina: *And do you remember what made you feel at home there?*

Leona: *Because people listened to each other. They made time to listen to certain people and yes, we felt grateful and appreciated each other. It was more of a social group, not so detached, one person saying one thing but another person saying nothing. Everyone sort of explained their problems or positive experiences in their own way.*

Meso-level

Introduction and aftercare

First and foremost, the importance of a successful **introduction**, with attention to and care for potential participants even before the start of the project, can hardly be overestimated. With the *Levenskunst* project the introduction of participants was managed via the health promoters in the various neighbourhoods. Although the health promoters had an extensive network and spent a lot of time calling and visiting potential participants at home, this also meant that the project team had a **somewhat limited overview** of the progress of the introduction process:

Yes, you must have received an invitation? I don't quite remember, I can't answer it just now. How come I went there? Ah yes, perhaps Thuishaven, it might have happened that way ... I think it came via Thuishaven, I am not sure but I think so.

(Leona, *Levenskunst J1*).

In addition to this limited insight into the information received and the original motivations or expectations of participants, there was also a lack of clarity during the first project year of *Levenskunst* about the **implicit eligibility criteria**. For instance, the - rather subjective - description of the target group “people aged 55 and above living in isolation” caused confusion for a lot of advisers, also because “possessing sufficient social skills” was also included in the conditions. Indeed, the applied heritage methodologies presuppose that participants are able to engage in dialogue with others. At the same time, this potentially results in the most vulnerable group not being reached. Moreover, the fact that the sessions were solely held in Dutch also resulted in participants from other cultural backgrounds remaining absent. An additional consideration was to promote a diverse composition of the group in terms of age and gender. The health promoters also suggested that there should be a specific focus on a positive approach during the introduction process. Putting the emphasis on “little pleasures in life” is more appealing than a taboo word such as “loneliness”. Successful **dialogue and cooperation with the advisers** from neighbourhood health centres and local service centres is an important condition to be able to deal with all these challenges.

With *The Fioretti Vitrine* and *Kapers op Kunst*, the introductions were made entirely without input from the project team. Although this was deliberately mitigated to some extent by having the first sessions in the community groups to break the ice, build trust and get to know the group dynamics, we were also dealing with a **blind spot** here. What kind of information did the children and young people receive about the project? What was their motivation or inspiration when the sessions were simply part of the day pro-

gramme on offer? Finally, the arduous introduction procedure for *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* points to the importance of a **clear division of roles** between the project team and partner organisations.

Secondly, **aftercare** and a well-organised introduction process are important prerequisites when setting up heritage projects. For example, the interviews with participants in *Levenskunst* specifically highlighted a desire to meet with other participants in the future. The monthly **return events** at Huis van Alijn quite clearly respond to this need.

We will always keep in touch with people and that's what I like about the project, the aftercare. The fact that it is part of it. It's not the ultimate objective but something we consider important.
(Care worker)

Inviting **external organisations** such as BlinkOut, Vier het Leven (Celebrate Life) or the psychologist from the local service centre, which participants can contact even after the sessions, can also be considered a form of aftercare. Although participants stated that they found it very interesting to learn about these organisations, the question remains as to whether they would subsequently actually engage with them.

Another example of aftercare is the provision of a memento that participants can take home. During the final session of *Levenskunst* the artist Sassafras was invited to create a drawing of the project. Participants were also given a personalised New Year's letter to take home. The last session of *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* was attended by the photographer Michiel Devijver who took portrait photographs. Participants in *Kapers op Kunst* and *The Fioretti Vitrine* all received a badge stating 'I am a Heritage Artist' during the display event. Their creations were still on display at the facility or at the museum after the project ended and could subsequently be taken home.

Another aspect that needs monitoring with aftercare is the **follow-up of participants who drop out**. This specifically applied to the sessions of *Vreemd en Vertrouwd*, *Levenskunst* and *Kapers op Kunst*, whereby we also stayed in touch with participants who dropped out in order to identify thresholds and action points.

Aftercare was provided differently for each of the four pilot projects. In view of the fact that participants in *Levenskunst* and *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* were introduced in different ways, aftercare was also somewhat **fragmented**. Pairing a participant with a specific confidant (e.g. someone from the community health centre, local service centre or an outside person) was an interesting approach in this respect. Due to the institutional context, the aftercare for *Kapers op Kunst* and *The Fioretti Vitrine* was mainly provided without input from the project team. Nevertheless, we tried to approach this on a more **individual** basis. For example, *Kapers op Kunst* hosted an individual return event for Rob, who no longer wanted to participate in the project because of sensory overload. We also joined the Fioretti youngsters as a project team at a farewell party for one of the young people and one of them was also involved in the study day we organised.

In conclusion it is safe to say that aftercare is crucial, but an important consideration here is the extent to which the aftercare provided can continue to exist and whether heritage and care institutions can make time and space available for it in the long term. It should never be the intention to offer participants an **unrealistic platform** or create hopeful expectations that cannot be met.

In that case integration is key, not merely setting up a project. Because you can actually cause more harm than you have to if subsequently you end up in a mess, without aftercare, with no contact and no network.
(Museum Director)

Professionals and wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities: their role and place within the organisation

In line with introduction and aftercare, a question also arises concerning the role or position of the project team (in this case: a project assistant and two researchers) throughout the entire project. Active **participation** in the sessions (in terms of humour, play, sharing life stories, creating, etc.) benefited all pilot projects. However, this assumes that the position of researcher is clearly explained from the start. In all four projects it was clear to the participants that we would not only actively contribute to the sessions, but would also observe and listen to them, hoping to learn something about the meaning of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions.

A crucial aspect was that the project team **should not offer therapy**. This does not imply that we deny participants' emotional and/or psychological backgrounds, but rather that we seek a balance. There is room for upsetting stories, but at the same time we try to adopt a light-hearted approach. After all, the fact that we are not therapists also means that we cannot guarantee sufficient aftercare in this respect. The evaluation interviews of *The Fioretti Vitrine* and *Kapers op Kunst* showed that a significant precondition was concealed within the role of "external party" to the healthcare institution. After all, being an "outsider" makes it possible to interact with the children and young people with a degree of open-mindedness. On the other hand, the fact that we don't understand their specific issues or context creates a kind of trust among young people:

Closeness can be advantageous but at the same time you have to make sure the project remains on the outside. Outside should really mean outside. Being someone from the outside, who doesn't know the department all that well, that's how it should stay. The youngsters will then act more as a guide. If you become too much a part of Fioretti, something valuable will be lost. A sense of unfamiliarity must remain.
(Care worker)

Fortunately, you guys are not involved in the treatment. You came and went again. Sometimes there are conflicts, but the fact that you were not part of them and did not play that role either was a bonus. The young people really had a break for half a day.
(Care worker)

In addition to project leader and researcher there is of course also the **role of the extended project team**, consisting of the museum staff or collection managers, the health promoters, the care facility counselors, the relevant artists, the partner organisations etc. It is important in this instance to coordinate successfully between the parties, in terms of both mutual expectations and role divisions. You need a solid 'team' to incorporate heritage projects into an organisation in a sustainable way. Implementation involves several professional roles with relevant expertise and it is precisely this cross-fertilisation that adds significant value. It is also important that tasks are evenly distributed within a team. A project of this nature cannot be maintained by one person on their own. This also requires frequent and structural internal communication,

which has to be supported by the team, otherwise it won't work or won't last. Otherwise it might just be a one-off. I don't think that this should be the responsibility of a single person.
(Museum staff member)

Wellbeing-focused cultural heritage projects succeed or fail depending on the **commitment of colleagues**, on both the care facility and heritage facility side. With ErfGoedVoelen this commitment was evident in various forms, ranging from assistance with setting up the studio space and supplying materials from the sawmill, to providing last minute transport for participants, taking photographs and editing videos. These are obviously a lot of extras for a small team, leaving small museums in a more vulnerable position when it comes to sustainably integrating such projects into their mainstream operations.

Team support and involvement within the museum requires the cooperation of the entire museum team. Wellbeing-focused cultural heritage projects should not be a separate part of the operations but should be **integrated into the broader activities** of the museum and team. Even within healthcare institutions, successful projects are currently still largely dependent on the goodwill of the management.

Time and space, in my case, depends upon team support. It is particularly important that I should have the opportunity to exchange feedback with the team. In our case, with Levenskunst, what this meant for the participants. I do have to account for the time I dedicate to this.
(Care worker)

Connection to neighbourhood and context

Wellbeing-focused heritage projects are tailored to requirements. That is why it is an important prerequisite that projects should be organised in function of or in collaboration with the neighbourhood or local organisations, taking into account the specific historical contexts, location and available collection. This ensures that the projects match the specific needs and wishes of the local community and are more responsive to **local conditions**, which promotes the engagement and sustainability of the initiatives.

Huis van Alijn checked which Ghent neighbourhoods were in the area and contacted the relevant neighbourhood health centres. This local collaboration helped shape *Levenskunst* and *Vreemd en Vertrouwd*. The Fioretti project took shape following the move of the Fioretti unit to the P.C. Dr. Guislain site, which also houses the museum. *Kapers op Kunst* was initiated by a volunteer from Erfgoedhuis who used to work at De Kaap and was consequently familiar with both operations and needs.

I think you should work with the neighbourhoods in the vicinity of HvA. I really like the idea of working with the people near to the museum.
(Museum staff member)

What is important here is that a successful project in one museum cannot simply be copied to another museum with a different collection, location and history.

In my view starting from the neighbourhood is very important, to not just mimic what other museums are doing, but really focus on what is going on locally.
(Museum staff member)

Several museum staff members also emphasised the **added value** of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities because it gives an insight into the society in which the museum operates:

Learning more about the community around you, in which your museum operates. The people living around and next to you. And in our case that works two ways, we are the museum of daily life, but the people around us all have their day to day lives and you frequently come into contact and interact with them.
(Museum staff member)



Taking and giving time

The success of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities requires an appropriate, **slower pace** without an overly busy schedule. During the sessions slowing down is often a way to engage in more meaningful interactions.

For me looking at it from the heritage side, I think time really is the key word. The more time you can invest, the more meaningful your activity or project can be. The slower the pace, the more you can hold up or almost stop time, the more interesting it becomes.

(Museum staff member)

Organising wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities is also **time consuming** and it is not always a given that the schedule can be adapted to the needs of all participants and professionals. In terms of timing, we frequently came up against thresholds during the pilot projects. In terms of frequency, a weekly meeting during the *Levenskunst* project proved too intensive for the relevant neighbourhood health centres, which were jointly responsible for the content and practical organisation. However, the bi-weekly meetings resulted in a longer introduction phase with the participants. In terms of timing, consideration had to be given to scheduled appointments with professionals (i.e. cleaning services, family support, therapy, doctor's visits, etc.), the medical needs of participants, school commitments, getting to and from the location safely, the availability of counsellors, etc. This always has to be planned in close consultation with the participants and other stakeholders.

Although weekly **consultations** with the extended project team are time consuming for all parties, they do increase commitment and trust. Moreover, they are also necessary with a view to permanently integrating projects of this nature into mainstream care and museum operations. Being flexible as regards scheduling and deliberately making room for necessary consultations with professionals and contact with participants are key requirements. When sufficient time is taken, collaborations run more smoothly and projects gain greater depth.

Consultation, followed by evaluation, adjustment. Yes, I think this is important and we clearly act accordingly.

(Museum Director)

Scope for experimentation

Since wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities are always tailored to requirements and dependent upon the participants, there is no foolproof roadmap available to follow when setting up a project. Throughout the sessions, a project can change shape and/or content, or suddenly move in a different direction. Professionals feel the need to be able to continually adapt and refine their approach, to be able to learn and experiment and occasionally change course. It is, therefore, a prerequisite that there should be opportunities for professionals to **learn, experiment and develop** within a safe and supportive working environment. The initial part of *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* coming to a standstill, for example, served as a useful learning opportunity with respect to our introduction process.

And failures and mistakes do happen, but that is not a crisis. Providing you are aware of it, adapt it and do it better or differently next time. You just have to be willing to learn as an organisation.

(Museum Director)

We're at an exploratory stage, which means that it is becoming more familiar and you can do more things with it and experiment more.

(Care worker)

Macro level

Policy support and recognition

The focus groups that include care and heritage sector staff are specifically asking for more structural policy support. Too much time is currently being spent on devising, writing and submitting project proposals.

As a museum staff member, I think this is a very important investment. And I find it quite annoying that you have to devote time to make up dossiers in order to obtain the funds to do something like this. It should really be a societal given.

(Museum staff member)

When a project is approved a lot is possible but initiating it without resources is not straightforward. An outreach project is associated with minor and major expenditure and is also a major expense for the organiser(s) in terms of staffing.

Time and resources are both part of it. Being able to recruit people to manage it successfully, operating costs. Now we also have to include this, transport costs. Yes, there are a lot of costs involved in a project.

(Care worker)

Structurally adding wellbeing-focused heritage activities to the undertaking and subsidisation of museums and heritage institutions would be a major step forward in this regard.

It should just be part of the subsidy that is actually allocated to this, similar to subsidies currently being allocated to collection operations, but well...

(Museum staff member)

Also with regard to the care sector, wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities should be recognised as a key element. Policy makers could incorporate cultural heritage into the more extensive health and welfare policy frameworks to promote its integration into society. Guidelines could be integrated within care policies to create scope in the care sector for cultural activities, encouraging care providers to include these activities as an essential element of the support provided to people.

Cooperation between the cultural and care sectors in particular is essential for the structural integration of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities. There is a need for policy measures that promote cooperation between care and cultural institutions at both a local and supra-local level.

I think it is imperative that at policy level it should be recognised that the culture sector and health-care are closely linked. And that this should not be managed by individual ministers, for example. In my view there could be two, but they would have to work together. Jan Jambon and Hilde Crevits should get together for a coffee sometime.

(Museum staff member)

Structural interdisciplinary collaborations

Structural and interdisciplinary collaborations among cultural partners, but certainly also with the health and welfare sector, are not a given. Museum staff indicate that there is still too little communication between museums and that they tend to see each other as competitors rather than collaborative partners.

“I really think museums are far too competitive. In this case we are working on a project together, but that doesn’t happen very often... It is unfortunate that there is so little genuine exchange.”
(Museum Director)

Establishing sustainable interdisciplinary collaboration is a demanding task. The cultural and healthcare sectors do not always speak the same language, employ different work rhythms and have different interests. Finding a satisfactory partner consequently requires you to continue to search and make every effort to get to know and find one another. Successful collaboration more than merits these efforts because being able to pool expertise and resources is a major advantage.

We are indeed moving forward in this together and jointly gaining expertise, which results in your partnership becoming much more sustainable in the long term, as opposed to completing such an undertaking just once and then parting ways again. I like the fact that you are actually going through a process with your partners too.
(Museum staff member)

Perception and promoting awareness

It is not always clear to outsiders what wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities can entail and what their value and meaning may be. Even at the macro level, wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities are largely an unknown quantity. This lack of visibility means that professionals often have to repeatedly justify and explain their work as ambassadors. However, greater awareness and visibility are crucial for the further development of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities. This can be achieved through knowledge sharing, raising awareness, research, study days, training and exchanges. A culture in which the integration of wellbeing and heritage is widely recognised and supported by society is essential to the success and growth of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities.

It would be nice if people were more familiar with it, so that you don’t have to convince them of its importance time and again. The natural environment or a walk in the forest are indeed considered things that are good for our mental wellbeing. But with heritage you still have to convince people that it can be of value. If people are more familiar with it, it can also be an even better basis from which to start projects together.
(Care worker)

There is so much potential. I think there is a need for it to be more visible to demonstrate what can happen when the two sectors come together.
(Care worker)

Balancing between areas of conflict: wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities in practice

After two project years of ErfGoedVoelen, we can now fairly clearly identify certain areas of conflict and barriers that inhibit participation in wellbeing-focused cultural heritage projects or the organisation of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities in a sustainable way. One of the most challenging aspects of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities is consequently trying to balance these different areas of conflict, which are inextricably linked to what happens in practice and are related to questions such as: What do wellbeing and heritage entail? What do we aim to achieve? Who or what do we want to change? How do we position ourselves? Why, and with respect to whom, do we intervene? These areas of conflict also frequently reflect the unintended contradictions between our intentions and the impact of our actions.

The best intentions can have undesirable results and it is crucial to recognise and address these effects. It is not always necessary to make a choice between the areas of conflict, but rather to find a way to deal with this tension in a deliberate, flexible and transparent manner.

Whilst we are aware of the fact that some things are still taken for granted and unwritten norms and expectations are hidden within the operations that represent a potential barrier for certain participants or professionals, we also try to provide an overview of the challenges we encountered during the ErfGoed-Voelen project. Moreover, not all barriers are perceived in the same way by everyone. Removing barriers consequently requires individual customisation combined with continuous dialogue. We also want to emphasise that removing barriers and providing access does not equate to a sense of belonging and being able to participate successfully.

Conservation and/or use

Obviously, a degree of institutional logic comes into play as far as the heritage institutions are concerned. Besides collecting and researching, conservation is one of the most important functions of a museum or heritage institution. Finding a balance between conservation and heritage methodologies that facilitate the handling of collection pieces is challenging in this respect.

During the first session of *The Fioretti Vitrine* we brought several museum objects to the community group. We gathered around a puppet used in traditional Chinese medicine that patients could use to indicate where they were in pain.

Marie: *That's Manneken Pis. On both sides. One is a girl, the other a boy.*

Sarah: *It reminds me of the Stromae video - Tous les mêmes in which he is also a boy on one side and a girl on the other side.*

Nova: *Maybe that's to do with gender reveal - will it be a boy or a girl?*

Marie: *Yes!*

The girls immediately toss the doll in the air with great enthusiasm to see which side the puppet will fall on.

(The Fioretti Vitrine J1)

The conflict between preserving and protecting cultural heritage and actively using it for wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities demands deliberate choices, influences collection policy and involves risk. The question of how to weigh up the conservation of heritage assets against the desire to use them for educational and welfare purposes received a lot of attention during discussions in the focus groups with professionals. This dilemma requires careful consideration and a clear vision to ensure that a heritage institution can fulfil its traditional role and respond to societal needs.

We work with real artwork and so on and if you are involved in conservation and management, yes, the temperature has to be stable, best to keep it in the dark as long as possible. So everything actually revolves around this precious heritage. And then we actually consider removing it from that position and giving it to people to work with ... that obviously creates a conflict, i.e. how do you make sure that the object is preserved but is also made available to people?

(Museum staff member)

To address this area of conflict, some museums are considering creating a special user collection consisting of objects that are less vulnerable to manipulation or specifically selected for educational and wellbeing-focused purposes. A user collection would increase public accessibility and engagement but comes with risks such as damage and loss of authenticity. The regular collection safeguards prestige and historical value but may limit direct public interaction.

During the pilot projects at Huis van Alijn (*Vreemd en Vertrouwd, Levenskunst*) we were able to con-

sult the museum's collection library. Whilst this level of clarity created a degree of freedom for the project staff and the curator or collection manager did not have to be consulted every time, it limited the availability of collection items. For the projects run in collaboration with Museum Dr. Guislain and the Erfgoedhuis Zusters van Liefde, a more extensive collection could be accessed but this required close consultation and coordination with the curator or collection manager, and often needed museum staff to be in closer proximity. It was further complicated by the fact that the project staff were external and not permanently employed by the museum or heritage institution, which resulted in less freedom and project implementation delays.

Institutional logic is also reflected to some extent in the nature of the collections. Whereas the Huis van Alijn collection shows an evolution and includes objects that were previously used on a day to day basis, these objects are part of the museum collection now and cannot be touched or handled. Part of the Dr. Guislain Museum collection consists of medical instruments once used in psychiatry. The fact that precisely these instruments are now being used in outreach programmes with, among others, young people living in psychiatric institutions raises the inevitable question: who determines what is cultural heritage and who has control over it?

Process and/or outcome

Wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities often generate a conflict between the process and the outcome. The process, which focuses on creating a safe place, on working together, engaging people, sharing stories, etc. requires a delayed approach, patience and an openness to build lasting relationships and gain people's trust. On the other hand, the focus is on results: creating tangible outcomes such as a display event or exhibition, an artistic creation, a 'finalised' project. These outcomes often serve as measurable evidence of success and can contribute to the visibility and frequently asked impact question associated with wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities.

The conflict between process and outcome can be challenging. Overemphasis on results can come at the expense of the in-depth process of people's engagement and valuable interactions. It is essential, therefore, to continuously reflect, evaluate and adapt in order to ensure that the process involving wellbeing-focused heritage activities remains genuine and meaningful for all those involved.

Museum staff member: *I think you have to be willing to also consider the process itself as an entity and not be too focused on results. Because then you might be disappointed.*

...

Museum Director: *If you are so totally focused on the end result, end result. There should now be a book of artwork that they have created, yes, but then I think you are going to hit a brick wall.*

The conflict between process and outcome is closely linked to the conflict between quality and quantity. Neoliberal economic principles within the healthcare and culture sectors bring about considerable pressure in these sectors, insisting that 'success' should be measured in terms of numbers: the number of visitors in a museum, the number of cases settled in healthcare, or the number of participants reached within a project. This quantitative paradigm forces institutions to focus on measurable outcomes to justify funding and ensure their existence.

This conflict meant that the professionals involved in the ErfGoedVoelen project often had to compromise. For example, they had to justify to managers why they were choosing to commit to a project that reached only a limited number of participants. Moreover, the sessions with children and adolescents from psychiatric facilities had to be fitted into the care facility's weekly schedule, which left little room for flexibility. Due to a lack of time, personnel and resources in healthcare there were frequent staff changes. Most of the professionals involved in the project also had to free up additional time and opportunity to commit to the project. This was necessary because the project was not part of their reg-

ular duties and they had to carry it out as an additional task, since wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities are not currently integrated into the organisational functioning of both the care and heritage institutions in question.

The external location as a bonus and/or threshold

The use of an external location, such as a museum or heritage institution, offers significant advantages in wellbeing-focused heritage activities. Because it is separate from the home or therapeutic context (for participants from a residential setting), it was mentioned several times that the setting was often **less fraught** and offered numerous opportunities. The new, open-minded environment helped participants to start from scratch, helping them to be more detached from the usual structures and expectations. This freedom not only stimulated personal exploration, but also encouraged new social interactions.

The space at Fioretti was already associated with certain experiences that were also related to some form of conflict. Now it is a new space which could be considered a fresh start, literally a new slate. It is not related to anything as yet. Whilst I can well imagine that in certain locations the youngsters did not have good experiences, that specifically. Something new, something free, something open.
(Care worker)

Moreover, the **transition** between home or care facility on the one hand, and the external location on the other hand, also proved to be significant. These physical transitions gave participants the opportunity to mentally prepare and process experiences. During these transitions, they often collectively looked ahead to what was to come and reflectively wrapped up what they had experienced.

The external location at a museum or heritage institution also frequently exudes a certain **prestige or authority** which can instil a sense of pride and honour in the participants. The children of *Kapers op Kunst* were elated to be allowed to walk through the impressive depots of the Erfgoedhuis. The young people from *The Fioretti Vitrine* felt proud and taken seriously as their work was given a place in Museum Dr. Guislain. Participants in *Levenskunst* and *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* felt privileged because they got to know museum staff and were able to question them directly about the special location. Some participants even emerged as ambassadors of the museum:

I told the taxi driver who came to me at the last meeting: 'This is Huis van Alijn.' 'Gosh,' he said in his Ghent accent - which I'm not going to try to copy here [laughs] - 'I thought touring the Huis van Alijn was something just for tourists'. I replied: 'Yes, no doubt tourists will come here too, but I'm not a tourist' and I continued: 'the people present here are all from Ghent ... Ah he replied: 'so it is also open to the locals from Ghent?' I replied: 'Yes, of course, you're always welcome here, but it might be advisable to make an appointment, because I don't know whether it's open every day, maybe at certain times...'
(Leona, Levenskunst J1)

However, this sense of prestige **should not be overrated**; it is important to remember that not everyone attaches the same value to the location. Walking through the permanent collection during the fourth session of *The Fioretti Vitrine* (J1) the youngsters didn't seem all that impressed. One of them literally asked at some point why we were making "this detour": "Isn't there a shortcut to the studio in the attic?" Some participants will also associate the locations with a particular atmosphere. For example, the children of *Kapers op Kunst* considered the creaking building and some of the rooms in Erfgoedhuis as rather eerie:

Nora: *It's quite scary when you're down there on your own. In an ancient building.*
Mira: *Yes, I understand. It's rather a large building too, isn't it.*
Nora: *It feels as if there are ghosts here.*
Mira: *Haha. I think I might also be a bit scared here at night. Being on my own.*

Nora: Yes.

Hazel: *For us during the day, though, it's still fun.*

Mira: *During the day yes, I agree.*

(Kapers op kunst J1)

Creating an atmosphere of closeness, introducing the necessary playfulness and sociability (e.g. by building a cinema and providing popcorn at *Kapers op Kunst*), did make participants feel safe. It also highlighted the importance of providing fall-back options, such as the option to return to a room at Fioretti, using a separate quiet room, or participating in another activity. This ensures that not everyone is obliged to participate and that there is room for individual preferences and needs.

Although there are many advantages, external locations can also present considerable **thresholds**. Besides the fact that certain participants in *Kapers op Kunst* indicated that the location was overwhelming or even frightening at times, physical accessibility also proved to be a huge challenge. Certain locations proved difficult to reach for those who relied on public transport or people with limited mobility. With projects such as *Kapers op Kunst* and *The Fioretti Vitrine* participating children and youngsters were transported by minibus, which was not a problem. With other projects such as *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* and *Levenskunst* participants could use free (bicycle) taxis if necessary, but this often proved challenging. The cost and effort of changing location relative to the actual experience played a part in this. For example, some had to walk long distances in cold weather, take several trams, wait a long time for a (bicycle) taxi, or spend hours in traffic jams. When it comes to the buildings and rooms themselves, it is essential that they are both physically and practically accessible to all participants. Despite efforts to improve accessibility, for example by installing ramps and using canvas to improve acoustics, some aspects such as stairs, rooms, entrances and exits and cobblestones in and around buildings remained challenging. Even though the locations where the projects took place were often intriguing, these challenges posed particularly significant obstacles for certain participants. The inaccessibility of the location was also a reason for an interested pair to not participate in *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* after all.



© Participant Fioretti

An external location is consequently not always the only or best option. For some participants external locations may present too great a barrier because of physical or mental limitations. In such cases it is essential to be flexible and **to come to people**, e.g. by organising activities within the home context, in local service centres, nursing homes, schools or other accessible locations. After all, the point is to create an environment where participants feel comfortable and where they can approach heritage activities with an open mind, without the location itself being a barrier.

Methodology as an end and/or a means

The practice of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities also encompasses a conflict between the use of methodologies as an end in itself and methodologies as a means to achieve certain goals. Methodologies can provide valuable **guidance** for professionals. Surprisingly, some care workers felt anxious and uncertain about developing heritage activities independently in the future, and indicated a desire to fully master the methodologies:

I think it's a bit of a leap of faith. Because I am not so familiar with it, it makes me wonder where this will take me. It's the participatory aspect of it. You're going to create something together with a group, but you don't really know where it will take you. What is the group aiming for? Where is the group taking us? I think my current job gives me significant control, preparation, planning, etc. And suddenly you have to let go of this not knowing where you will end up. I think that's slightly disconcerting too. It is nice, yet also a little unnerving.

(Care worker)

However, methodologies can also have an inhibiting or even oppressive effect. When too much emphasis is placed on adhering to a specific methodology, the unique needs and contexts of the participants may remain underexposed. For example, many heritage methodologies are very much language based. Bruno, for example, one of the participants in *Vreemd en Vertrouwd*, whose dementia is accompanied by aphasia, sometimes had great difficulty expressing himself. At *The Fioretti Vitrine*, one of the youngsters had difficulty reading and writing which made her feel inhibited at times, but the other youths also preferred to adopt a passive, listening role during the sessions rather than speaking up themselves. With *Levenskunst* the methodology using scents did not seem to catch on because many had a limited sense of smell. Moreover, it was noticeable that creative heritage methodologies were clearly preferred by children and young people, whilst some participants in *Levenskunst* struggled with these methodologies, e.g. because of the level of abstraction or because they felt that there was a right and wrong answer. For both older and younger participants creating something should not become a source of stress. For example, participants in *Levenskunst* had very mixed feelings about the diary method. A number of participants wrote with great enthusiasm whilst others perceived the expectation to write something down as a kind of pressure. Working to create a product can also cause a degree of tension for children and adolescents. A public display event can be a great finale, but participants should always feel that they are able to remain in the background if that is what they want.

Either way, finding the most appropriate methodology remains an ongoing search and does not appear to be 'target group specific'. It is often assumed that we know which methods and type of heritage best suit specific 'groups' of people. However, by not automatically sticking to preconceived ideas about what works for certain 'target groups' more meaningful moments could be created that better matched the diverse needs and expectations of participants. During the first *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* project stage, for example, the specific group composition made the methodology of object handling progress very quickly for some participants, while other participants soon seemed to be bored with this methodology. Or as described earlier, some participants were not necessarily stimulated by the heritage objects from the collection but drew inspiration from other objects such as a packet of crisps from the museum café. The question is also to what extent all barriers can be eliminated for all participants. For example, engaging in dialogue,

opening up as a group, eating together, etc. were all thresholds that resulted in Simone from *Levenskunst* dropping out. Ideally, she just wanted to have a coffee together and stay in the background.

In any case, a methodical-instrumental approach, which focuses on the implementation of predetermined methodologies by professionals, often assumes externally defined problem statements and goals, without sufficient input from the communities involved and not always consistent with the complex realities of the participants.

Yes, I see the methodology as a form of preparation. It is a tool, something to work with. Once you initiate it you can refer back to it if you need to, but the group dynamic takes precedence. If you rigidly stick to your methodology you can actually destroy quite a lot and lose a lot. Creativity and inspiration from people you merely push aside because you say no, that's the next step. We are going to do it this way now. Just a little further now. And then you may just fail to empower people. It should not become frenetic. You cannot be rigid with such a methodology.

(Museum staff member)

However, if we critically examine our definition of social problems and question how we respond to them, then heritage projects and museums can leverage meaningful heritage work and more profound social change. This requires the admission of professional doubt, and the courage to continually question and dare to let go of guidelines and methodologies. Only by addressing this complexity can we arrive at meaningful and transformative heritage activities that actually contribute to the wellbeing of those involved.

Individual and/or collective

Participation in the ErfGoedVoelen project takes place within a social context, which creates an inherent conflict between working with the group and working with individual participants. Whereas group sessions offer certain benefits, such as the promotion of social interaction and a sense of belonging, we find that they can also create barriers for some participants.

A first inhibiting factor is a **fear of speaking** and (possibly) failing in a group. The size of the group certainly plays a part here. In that sense, it is necessary to respect the maximum group size and divide the group where necessary. Some participants specifically refer to this threshold:

I don't really feel at home in a group for the first fifteen minutes. After that it's ok. 'Arthur, you shouldn't be shy, is what's going through my mind. You won't notice it but that's the way my brain works. After half an hour it's ok.

(Arthur, Levenskunst J1)

Other participants faltered when they wanted to say something as part of the group or when too much attention was focused on them. They tried to avoid these kinds of situations:

Hanne: *Which card most closely matches how you felt during the sessions here at the museum?*

Amber: *The card with the sun.*

Hanne: *Which one? This one? And why is that?*

Hanne: *Erm, because I felt like a ray of sunshine here ... but I'm not going to tell everyone later [during the session] though.*

(The Fioretti Vitrine J1)

Obviously, the **size of the group also had an impact** in this case. The larger the group, the more quickly participants felt pressurised by it. This not only applied to young participants. With *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* one of the participants who suffered from dementia emphasised that because of his illness it

was very difficult to keep up with conversations in a large group. With *Levenskunst* some participants also reported being very tired after the sessions. Limiting group sizes and finding a satisfactory balance between group work and one-on-one work are key concerns in this respect.

A second factor is fear of not being accepted by the group. One participant specifically mentioned this barrier, but thanks to reassurance provided by the community health centre's health promoter, she participated anyway:

I must say I had my doubts about how they would react. It's always a case of: 'How do people deal with what is affecting you', because you don't see anything and then you are confronted with things that are not particularly uplifting because people don't understand [emotionally] and I know they don't understand but it still hurts. But Joline said: 'that's not going to happen' or 'we will keep an eye on it'. I was a little apprehensive about it, but actually it all turned out very well.

(Suzy, *Levenskunst* J1)

A third factor relates to the **group composition**. The *Kapers op Kunst* project included an example of how social peer pressure from group members made it difficult to make one's own choice among heritage objects. Having to deal with members of the group with whom you don't have particularly good contact can also present a major obstacle. Some participants expressed irritation with others because of personality clashes, conflicting opinions or different (political) beliefs. The children involved in *Kapers op Kunst* regularly expressed a desire to change the group composition and tensions that had nothing to do with the project also sometimes emerged among the Fioretti youngsters, e.g. the arrival of a new boy in the community group. Finally, some participants in *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* indicated that being confronted with group members at a more advanced stage of dementia represented a barrier.

Although group sessions are often a way to share stories, collaborate, and connect with others, we found that it was often necessary to switch to a more individual approach. With the *Kapers op Kunst* project in particular one-on-one support was necessary. With Fioretti also it quickly became clear that by giving young people the opportunity to engage in a creative process as individuals, tensions will disappear. Because this was a group of young people who already lived, ate and existed together anyway, breaking up the group into individuals was actually a pleasant break from their routine. This conflict between collective and individual work requires the professionals in charge of these projects to be flexible and swiftly adaptable.

In addition to establishing a balance between group and individual approaches, there is also a noticeable conflict between **the pursuit of individual wellbeing and the quest for structural social change**. With the ErfGoedVoelen project the emphasis was primarily on the individual wellbeing of the participants. What was striking here was that several museum staff members involved in the project expressed the expectation that individual wellbeing-focused activities would automatically have an impact at a social level. However, this optimistic trickle down approach could not be confirmed with the present study, and it also seems risky to us to claim this without further nuance. Such reasoning, along with a focus on individual wellbeing, runs the risk of leaving broader structural inequalities and social issues unnoticed and unaddressed. There is a danger that by focusing on the wellbeing of individuals, the deeper roots of social problems, such as institutional racism, ageism, ableism, economic inequality or inadequate policies - all issues that we as researchers have identified during this project - may be overlooked and even perpetuated in part as a result. A balanced approach consequently requires a focus not only on individual wellbeing, but also on addressing structural barriers that limit access to culture and wellbeing for specific groups. This includes politicising cultural heritage activities by exposing systemic inequities, getting participants to actively shape their own heritage experiences, and actively promoting more wide ranging social change. In this way cultural heritage activities can become a powerful tool for both individual empowerment and collective social transformation.

Transience and/or sustainability

The transience of wellbeing projects, including the ErfGoedVoelen project, automatically raises questions about the need for continuity and long term integration. This conflict between transience and/or sustainability entails specific ethical issues that require careful consideration and organisation.

Temporary projects can play a valuable role in exploration and experimentation (as described earlier under preconditions) and in addressing specific needs within communities. Because of their temporary and flexible nature, they make it possible to respond quickly to changing circumstances and have the disruptive potential to challenge and overcome conventional institutional systems and structures.

On the other hand, the temporary nature of a project can lead to an approach in which participants are involved only for the duration of the project, without considering their long term needs and wishes. This risks participants being seen as objects of care and intervention, rather than as active partners who can help shape the process. Transience also inhibits successful aftercare and continuity of support. It is essential, therefore, that professionals should proactively plan continuity in support - taking into account that needs may change over time - and where possible seek structural solutions that will continue to have an effect even after the termination of the project. With *Levenskunst* and *Vreemd en Vertrouwd* this meant in some cases a referral to other organisations, organising return events at the museum and considering together with participants which needs and requirements needed to be addressed following completion of the project and what kind of impactful role the museum could play with respect to this. With *Fioretti* and *Kapers op Kunst* further arrangements were made with the healthcare institutions in question regarding the ongoing monitoring of participants during and after the project.



An important consideration here is to what extent the aftercare provided can be continued and whether care and heritage institutions can free up the necessary time and scope to do so in the long term. Transparency with respect to the temporary nature of projects and their limitations is essential here to avoid giving participants unrealistic expectations that ultimately cannot be met. In line with this, we also noticed that a number of professionals involved in the ErfGoedVoelen project struggled when it came to setting boundaries and creating clarity for participants, whilst at the same time wanting to be close to them:

Care worker: *Do they get attached to you? That's the challenge, first you want them to get attached to you, and then.*

Care worker: *And to the group. But they also actually remain attached to the professional. And that's such a fine line, i.e. where do you draw the line? That's a bit hit and miss at times.*

The financial aspect of temporary projects can also present certain ethical dilemmas. When a project's budget comes to an end, funding for key services or for (sometimes temporarily hired) staff often disappears too. This can lead to a situation in which the basic needs of (potential) participants can no longer be met, as was the case with Levenskunst when, upon completion of the project, we had to figure out how we would fund the bicycle taxis or public transport for participants attending the return events. It is important to factor this risk into project planning and consider alternative funding sources or partnerships that can ensure continuity.

We would like to emphasise here that the ErfGoedVoelen project had a budget available to pay for an outside artist, a photographer, hot meals, etc. Whilst these contributions were particularly valuable, they did involve considerable costs. However, even without these external contributions, or with a limited budget, a project can be of great value.

INTERLUDE:

Lisa's hat and the hungry phone as agentic playmates

Together with a small group of children and adults, we gathered in a room at the Erfgoedhuis. Everyone carried a box hiding their favourite object from the depot. Tension rose as we took turns opening our boxes and revealing our treasures. Mats was first up and pulled out an old Bakelite phone. The children curiously observed what he was doing.

“What’s that?” Lisa exclaimed in surprise. “A telephone! Shall we call the pizzeria? Hm, that’s a funny cable, it’s half broken!”

Johan looked on smiling and asked: “Is a telephone like that still used nowadays?”

Lisa replied: “Maybe by the nuns. Do nuns actually still have a phone?”

Heleen encouraged Mats: “Turn the dial.” The children turned the dial and watched in fascination how it worked. Johan patiently explained what Bakelite is and talked about the difference between this old phone and a modern smartphone.

I asked: “Would you like to have a phone like that? Who would you call?”, to which Lisa exclaimed: “The pizzeria! And the king!”



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Then it was Heleen’s turn. She removed a small hat from her box and put it on. Lisa couldn’t resist and put the hat on too. “Hello, hello,” Lisa started to play. “Hey, we can hook this up!” she and Mats took the broken loose wire from Mats’ old phone and attached it on top of the hat that Lisa was wearing. “Hey, now we can call! Do you want to call, Mats? Hello, hello!” Mats enthusiastically grabbed the receiver of his phone, which was now connected to the wire on Lisa’s hat. Lisa and Mats then had a phone conversation while the rest of the group watched in amusement. Mats related that the phone was hungry and wanted to go to a restaurant.

Lisa, Mats, the phone, the wire and the hat came together here in an active mutual relationship in which they constantly influenced and shaped one another. They were not separate, stable entities but took shape because of their relationships and interactions. Barad refers to this as intra-action: “Intra-action recognises that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action” (Barad, 2007, page 33). The hat and the old telephone are not perceived here as inanimate matter but as active partners and vibrant presences. We can think of this set-up as a dynamic entity that emerges from the relationship and connections between different elements, such as bodies, objects, spaces, time and other things (Chadwick, 2020). It is more than just a phone, a hat and two children. It is a new entity with endless possibilities and meanings; much more than the sum of its parts.

In this case matter is not passive or inert, but given agency or *Thing-Power*: “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (Bennett, 2010, page 6). These lively and active features of objects emerge when the linguistic, categorical explanation of the object’s nature or function fades into the background. Bakelite or not, this matters little. Hat and phone activate a non-categorical imagination, which is constantly reshaped. Each element contributes to the emergence of the other elements and the set-up as a whole. Together the children and the objects create other meanings, and this set-up opens up new avenues in terms of thinking and being. They all take on new roles: lines of flight are created in the endless possibilities offered by the child-phone-hat set-up (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Lisa orders a pizza, the hat takes on a changing function because of the way it is worn, the wire on the phone connects technology to human interaction and is a tangible connection between all elements, the hat acts as a physical anchor point, Lisa and Mats change because of their interaction with each other and with the objects around them, their conversations via the wire and hat change and deepen their relationship.

This continuous process of constant change and transformation, from *becoming* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), takes shape through the interactions and relationships within the set-up. However, object and subject often become fixed, bound by time and space. The becoming process, on the other hand, challenges us to transcend the traditional boundaries of objects and their functions. Instead of seeing the telephone merely as a means of communication and the hat as an accessory, as passive and uniform objects that we as subjects can control, use or displace unimpeded, we can ask questions about the nature of objects and the flexibility of their meanings. Can objects be more than what they appear to be at first glance? And can we create new meanings by connecting objects in unexpected ways?

This process of becoming also challenges us to focus on the child’s potential and possibilities rather than holding on to fixed identities, labels or diagnoses. How do children present themselves, how are they present? How do they present themselves as active participants in the set-up between human and non-human entities? How can we see their agency and ownership, and how do they show us - if we look closely - a multitude of identities and roles? Instead of reducing them to an essentialist group, such as “children of psychiatry,” intra-active encounters of this nature invite them to become who they want to be, independent of preconceived categories.

But this set-up also invites us to reflect on the nature of communication itself. We continually see connecting interactions between Lisa and Mats and all the elements around them. Lisa and Mats being able to talk to each other via this unusual set-up highlights the power of human creativity and the many ways in which we can connect, even in the most unlikely situations. It reminds us of the normative aspects of how we relate to language and communication. It invites us to engage in *emergent listening* (Davies, 2014), where we try to look beyond *data, methods, researcher and participants*, and decentralise and welcome the changes that emerge during these intra-active moments.

The moment does not leave us unaffected and makes us reflect on what becomes important when working with children in vulnerable situations, when working with heritage objects and when conducting research. It makes us think about the roles and positions of both the children and subject matter, in relation to our own roles and positions. How can we contribute to the emergence of intra-active encounters between human and non-human actors? How can we see children and all the elements around them as constantly evolving and full of potential? How can we break away from the disciplining boundaries we have constructed, and be open to all elements in play in a non-categorical way? How can we get close and pay tribute to all these connecting movements? Can we resist the urge to understand or exploit human and object; and allow ourselves to be guided by the always changing, the always evolving; isn’t this a particular potential of object handling?

Closing statement

Following two years of ErfGoedVoelen, this research report aims to describe the meaning and pre-conditions associated with wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions. Remarkably, the research findings do not easily lend themselves to functional logic. The sharing of life stories, the sense of connection, the opportunity for humour and fun, the importance of relational accessibility ... highlight experiences that are less tangible precisely because they transcend the perspective of individual survival or comfort and bear witness to a common world we share with others. This takes us back to Arendt's view of the talking and acting human being, for whom not everything must be useful, but who maintains a meaningful relationship with the world (Arendt, 1958, page 158). In answer to the increasing questioning of the impact of wellbeing-focused cultural heritage interventions, we would therefore argue that such projects should at least also be approached from the point of view of their meaningfulness for participants. Indeed, for Arendt, culture - and consequently cultural heritage - refers to *"all the things, but also the words and deeds, that we consider worth preserving, not only as artefacts, but as actual building blocks of our shared experience, of our common world, which in that sense is always a cultural world."* (Arendt in Gerber, 2023).

What is special about wellbeing-focused cultural heritage activities is their distinct transdisciplinary potential. At the interface between cultural heritage, care and welfare, the necessary scope is created in which different fields of knowledge merge, disciplinary boundaries are crossed, and there is room for experimentation and elaboration. The concept of entanglement (Barad, 2007), whereby everything and everyone involved in this joint project (both human and non-human entities; such as bodies, objects, spaces, time ...) constantly mutually affect and transform each other, fits in well with this. To take full advantage of this considerable potential, it is essential to take into account the multitude of meanings that heritage activities may or may not offer to different individuals and communities. Each individual derives a different meaning from it and benefits from a different approach, which implies that we need to keep exploring what we can mean for people and *whether*, and *how*, this is desirable. Moreover, it is necessary to question the obviousness of 'wellbeing orientation', which implies that we want to purposefully improve the wellbeing of participants through heritage work. The focus on wellbeing fits within the broader *wellbeing turn* in museums (Lynch, 2017; Parry et al., 2020) and the growing debate about the social role of museums and heritage institutions (Sandell, 2007). 'Greater wellbeing' is often considered key evidence for grant providers, which frequently goes hand in hand with a specific focus on impact measurement. Nonetheless, this goal-oriented emphasis on wellbeing puts participants in the role of passive beneficiaries and also entails a kind of deficit thinking, whereby we assume that wellbeing must be purposefully enhanced because it is not yet at the desired level. Moreover, overemphasis on personal wellbeing can lead to wider structural and societal issues being overlooked, which in fact perpetuates systems of injustice and inequality (Lynch, 2020). This is why this research report advocates a being-oriented rather than a wellbeing-focused approach to heritage activities. This approach enables us to do greater justice to the specific uniqueness of each individual and provides scope for people to be unconditionally themselves, take on different active roles and exercise ownership. Target group thinking and pre-structured methodologies are tools, but a being-oriented approach is shaped primarily by actively diving in and moving ahead on the basis of the interactions in, and interests of, the group. Being-oriented heritage activities are inherently activist and can be a powerful tool for achieving social and political change, not only for the people involved, but also for the heritage and care community.

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