On the importance of objects in our project (by Gohar Sharoyan)

In the book Evocative Objects: Things We Think With edited by Turkle (2011), the authors describe their rich connection to objects that played special roles in both their lives and intellectual practices. These were objects of transition and passage, mourning and memory, objects of desire and discipline, etc. In this vein, Turkle states that some objects get to be experienced as part of the self and, therefore, they gain a special status in the owner's life. Ultimately, objects are active life presences (Turkle, 2011) that bring together thought and feeling. With this in mind, we decided to give a substantial and important part of our workshops to the process of sharing objects that we asked participants to choose and bring with them to the workshop.

Each participant was welcomed to present themselves by means of the first object which could signify a certain experience, express a memory, or simply be cherished for a certain reason. The second object participants were asked to bring was meant to help talking about a certain experience, episode or incident in their life that would be related to the topic of our project and subject of workshop discussions – discrimination, racism or togetherness. Often, it was an object that spoke best for that specific experience a participant wanted to share either because it had been part of the event itself or revoked a memory or strong metaphorical connection to it.

> *"Wannste puer Objet'en beienee setzt, kannste eng ganz Geschicht zielen, daat ass eppes waat ganz vill Lait vergiessen. Dowéinsder, vläit ass een vläit méi hesitant sech mat sou Saachen auserneen ze setzen, vläit ass een net pret sou Saachen ze benotzen"*

In fact, objects do serve as facilitators enabling the sharing of individual experiences. Throughout the project, we often noticed how they could break the ice at the beginning of a workshop, permitting, perhaps, the first essential contact between the participants.

In the same spirit, Budach and Sharoyan (2020:8) explore the interaction between humans, objects and digital technology in animation making and the particular role of objects in it, which they describe as "carrying stories and enabling new spaces for storytelling, for sharing, listening, and as spaces for sustaining and creating new communities".

This is when mutual trust and confidence is established - by means of sharing intimate stories and hearing those of others. Participants in our workshops stated:

> *"I also found that part of the workshop very interesting because every participant brought one or more objects with them. And then there was a story behind each object. And so these were very small objects again, and then each one had a story of an at the end there was so much information, just put up with the small material thing. And it was nice to see how people had memories and stories attached to these things."*

"Maer haaten jo Aapel an Tomaten, weeste datt een einfach gesäit voilà een Objet kann eng ganz Geschicht erzielen kann (9:46). An ech fannen daat ass flott."

The process of sharing the objects in our workshops took place as part of a conversation during which everyone was seated in a circle. This included not only the participants, but also us, the workshop leaders. We took part as equals and shared our experiences like everyone else. The fact that we also brought objects and told our stories helped to make participants feel more comfortable, safe and at ease to express themselves. This established what Davis calls an "affective bond between individuals" (Davis, 1996:2). Instead of simply claiming access and intruding into other participants' life events, we tried to create a mutually empathetic, respectful and caring atmosphere. Sharing our objects and personal stories was crucial to build confidence in others to share theirs. However, we need to mention that some of the stories people shared could be and sometimes were quite demanding and emotionally challenging to hear and take in. This is certainly something which needs special and careful consideration and that is not always easy to deal with, we found. Each of us needed to find our personal way to deal with it. However, the group was always there to support Also, we had previously discussed and agreed that we would not try to suppress the feelings that these stories evoked in us. In other words, we surrendered to these emotions however tough and heavy they were and let ourselves feel and experience them. During the team meeting aimed at debriefings what had happened during the workshops, we made sure to take the time to discuss and express how we felt about the workshops, what emotions they created in us and how we were dealing with them. While objects helped and facilitated the sharing of stories and emotions, we became also aware of the emotional impact object-based methods can generate and learnt how to deal with the consequences they cause. This is important to consider whenever this methodology is used, and in particular if potentially emotionally charged or painful memories are likely to be evoked.

References:

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