Democratic Participation in the Art Encounter

By Lise Sattrup

Informed by Jacques Rancière’s understanding of democracy, the article analyses the democratic participation of children in educational activities at the art museum, as well as in general museum communication. On the basis of a series of cases and participant observation, it argues for a shift from an understanding of participation as something to be learned to the assumption that everyone can participate.

Participation is associated with democracy, but the issue is not only how we understand and practise participation, but also how we understand democracy. I start this article by exploring the scope for children’s democratic participation in educational contexts at art museums, before moving on to the potential for addressing democratic participation not only in a teaching context, but also at the of more general level of exhibition communication. Inspired by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, I see democracy not as a system of government or way of life, but as something sporadic that happens and emerges in specific situations where dominant understandings of who can participate and how they should participate are challenged. I subscribe to Rancière’s broad concept
of participation, which includes not only doing, but also sensing. As a result, I argue that when – and if – the goal is democracy, a shift from teaching children and others to participate to assuming that everyone can participate is key. I begin with a short description of a teaching situation at ARKEN Museum of Modern Art, which raises some fundamental issues about the ways we understand and practise democratic participation at art museums. These are issues I elaborate on using a second case incorporating Jacques Rancière’s thinking on democracy and participation. I conclude with some perspectives on a specific communication strategy at ARKEN that develops some of the potential offered in educational contexts.

A Teaching Situation

After looking at some other artworks, we (the 5th grade pupils, their teacher and I) are positioned in front of a video work. The work is hanging on a small hook at ARKEN, and in front of it is a bench with space for about 6 children. The rest of us sit on the floor around the bench. The museum educator asks us to watch the screen for a few minutes. The video work Mirror by Elina Brotherus is playing on the small screen.

On the screen we see a woman in a bathroom. We see her from behind as she looks at herself in a mirror. We can see her wet shoulders and blond, bobbed hair. The lighting is cold, like strip lighting. The mirror is steamy, but slowly the steam evaporates and the mirror image of the woman’s upper body and face appear. She looks blankly into the mirror. Breathing calmly and deeply so her shoulders rise and fall. It’s almost as if I
can hear her breathing, but the work has no sound. Maybe it feels that way because I’m standing so close to her? Does she know that I’m standing here looking at her? Is it ok that I’m standing here? Slowly it changes, and now she’s the one looking, but what is she looking for? Is she looking at me? Who is the viewer – her or me?

Shortly after we’ve sat down to watch the work, one of the boys in the class asks: “What should we look for?” Shortly afterwards he asks again, this time slightly louder: “But what should we look for?” Total silence. Nobody reacts. Neither children nor adults. Which seems strange, because I think it’s a good question. Because what should we look for? What does the museum educator or their teacher want us to see? And what does the artist want? What’s the right thing to see? Is there any ‘right’ thing to see? Or does the situation basically challenge the way we usually see? Maybe because we’re so close to her that it feels intimidating? Maybe because she’s staring at us? Maybe because she’s naked and we’re sitting here with the whole class? Maybe because the video disrupts the pace and narrative structure we know from films based on a Hollywood model? Nothing much happens here, there are no edits, and it’s really slow. It’s not like watching a film, so how should we watch it? It’s not like looking at a photograph either, because we can see her breathing, see the steam slowly disappearing. These signs of life, of time, intensify the situation for me. There’s also something about her gaze. What’s she thinking about? What’s she looking for? The boy asks a third time, now more irritated and insistent: “But what should we look for?” Still no reaction or response. His never gets an answer to his question. Afterwards, there’s a short dialogue where the museum educator asks what we experienced, and contributes by linking the video work to the theme of identity. So maybe ‘identity’ was what we should have been looking for? The question “What should we look for?” is not addressed. But it’s left hanging in the air … The teacher catches me on our way to the next artwork and says: “Sorry, he has Asperger’s.”

The boy’s question can be understood in several ways. If we read it as wanting help and advice on how he should look, then the task of art museums could be to teach children and the uninitiated how to look. If we read the boy’s question as asking whether all ways of looking are recognised, the question can challenge the ‘master’ interpretations of artworks by art museums. I do not see the boy’s question as being based on lack of competence or the art museum’s interpretations of the work, but as a critical reflection on how we look or should look. I have chosen
to start this article here, because for me the situation challenges the view that children and others should be taught how to participate, as well as pointing to the possibilities for democratic participation in the art encounter.

The account above is part of the empirical material produced during my Ph.D. The field of my research was educational programmes at art museums that focus on participation strategies in planning educational programmes and developing exhibitions.

Inspired by the Danish childhood researcher Hanne Warming, I studied the educational programmes as a participant observer from the constructed position of ‘least-possible adult’.

This methodological approach made it possible for me to see something different than I usually see from a teaching perspective. The method helped me to see that from a child’s perspective educational activities do not only take place when a museum educator stops at specific artworks or conducts specific workshops, but also take place between ‘stops’ (gaps) or in situations when the children do something unexpected that challenges the teaching (cracks).

Teaching as Stops, Gaps and Cracks

On the basis of participant observation, in my thesis I developed the three empirically generated concepts of stops, gaps and cracks to show how from a child’s perspective educational programmes can be seen as three different kinds of situations that make different forms of participation possible.

1) Stops I limit to situations where children are gathered around an artwork or an educational activity, i.e. situations that are seen as educational from the perspective of the teacher.

2) Gaps, on the other hand, are characterised as being transitory and social, as well as taking place in the movement between stops.

3) Cracks are specific situations during stops when children do something unexpected but not intentionally disruptive.
The diagram shows educational activities as taking place in the interaction between stops and gaps, and that cracks can emerge during the stops. I see gaps and cracks as being as central as stops in understanding the scope children have to participate democratically during educational activities. In an art educational context, this understanding is a direct extension of the visual culture theorist Irit Rogoff’s emphasis on not seeing formal teaching situations solely as learning situations, as well as the educational philosopher Gert Biesta’s focus on ‘democracy learning’ as not being limited to teaching activities.

The Opportunities for Participation during Stops, Gaps and Cracks

To investigate the opportunities children have to participate during stops, gaps and cracks, I used a case that provides a good example of how stops, gaps and cracks make different forms of participation possible. The case is not presented as being representative of museum teaching in general or the activities any museum in particular, nor used to provide an analysis of either. What it can, however, show is the relationship between different situations in a teaching activity (stops, gaps and cracks) and the different opportunities they give children to participate.

The case involves a third-grade class and Nikolaj Recke’s video installation *Looking for 4-Leaf Clovers* (1998). The case is reconstructed using the data gathered during my participant observation: field notes, transcribed sound recordings of the group activity, and photographs.
The museum educator Hanne introduces the work with the words: “And then we’re going to go in and look at this artwork with all our senses.”

The first thing that happens when me and the children enter the installation is that several of them immediately start to interact with the work, touching the clover leaves and experimenting with how the projections hit their bodies and form new images. Hanne tells the children that they can sit around the work. They sit down and several of them immediately start using their hands and bend over the work. They are told to sit up. So they can sit around the artwork and look, but not touch.

Since Looking for 4-Leaf Clovers is a video projection made to be touched, the situation is not about teaching children not to touch the art, but maybe more about teaching them how art should be experienced? And maybe about teaching children to see with all their senses? Hanne clarifies this special way of looking as follows: “The exercise now is to look at this artwork and try to imagine what it’s like to be in this field. Can you hear something, smell something …?”

So the children are to see the artwork as an illusion of a field of clover, and then imagine what they would experience with senses other than sight. A little later Hanne says: “Now you can come in three at a time and lie here for a minute. We’ll start with you …”

Three of the children lie inside the installation, and the following exchange takes place between them and Hanne:

Hanne: What does it feel like, lying in there?
William: *Normal, like lying on the floor.*
Hanne: *So it’s not soft?*
Emilie: *No, there should be a duvet and mattress.*
Frida: *I think I thought it would be soft.*
Hanne: *Does it make you think anything?*
William: *Yes, it hurts.*

**How to Participate**

There are three different situations that make three different ways of participating possible:

1. **A bodily exploration of the work** (where the children explore the work with all their senses).
2. **A visual investigation** (where the children see the work from a given position).
3. **An abstract investigation of the work** (where the children do not look directly at the work, since they’re lying on their backs).

The first situation, where the children explore the work and in doing so open up for the use of all their senses, occurs in the gap. In my field notes I describe how several of them use the gap to investigate the work through touch, but also by experimenting with how the projection hits their bodies, creating new images. This is another way of participating than that made possible by the stop, where the children first sit around the work and look at it, and then lie on it.
Participation as Sensing
But is it about the difference between participating physically and looking? Or about something else? By identifying seeing or hearing as actions, Jacques Rancière eliminates the distinction between sensing and doing: “The spectator is active, just like the student or the scientist: He observes, he selects, he compares, he interprets. He connects what he observes with many other things he has observed on other stages, in other spaces.” Rancière challenges the idea that knowing precedes seeing by pointing out that equality is not created by teaching people to see, but by presuming that they can see. His point is that to see is to interpret, and thereby also to generate change. As he writes:

“Emancipation starts from the principle of equality. It begins when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting and understand that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection. It starts when we realize that looking is also an action that confirms or modifies that distribution, and that “interpreting the world” is already a means of transforming it, of reconfiguring it.”

Thus for Rancière, looking is an action that either validates or challenges established understandings of who can participate and how they should participate.
Following Rancière’s line of thought means we cannot restrict specific realms of knowledge to a given field (like art history, for example) but only to former experiences. Being able to choose what to look for (cf. the boy I started with) and compare it with something else and interpret what we see requires previous experiences, something we all have, so in that sense we are all equal. But only if we give equal status to the different kinds of experience that can provide a basis to participate at art museums. Rancière connects participation to democracy by showing how our ways of participating are subject to established understandings of who can participate and how they should participate. Rancière rejects the idea that democracy is a system or system of government, seeing it instead as something sporadic that occurs in the moment when an ac-
tion challenges established understandings of who can participate and how they should participate. For Rancière, it is breaking with the idea of dividing people into those that can and those that cannot that constitutes democracy: ”It does not simply presuppose the rupture of the ’normal’ distribution of positions between those who exercise power and the one subject to it. It also requires a rupture in the idea that there are dispositions ’proper’ to such classifications.”

**Democratic Participation in Stops, Gaps or Cracks?**

The situation in the gap (situation 1) shows how the children explore the work in different ways. It also shows that participation is not limited to something children cannot see until they have been taught how. When the children experiment with their own shadows, I see it as a way of producing new images and possible new meanings, meanings that are not based on any kind of ‘right’ way of looking at art.

The example shows that the stop, on the other hand, is directed at teaching the children to ‘see with all senses’ as a more ‘correct’ way of participating where the sense of sight takes precedence, and where art is seen as the illusionary form of something else – in this case a landscape. It is this illusion (the landscape) that the children are subsequently invited to experience using different senses. So even though the artwork is a video installation that the children can enter and experience using multiple senses, a traditional work/spectator position that reduces the artwork to a passive object is established. The children are to look at the video projection and then imagine how they can feel, hear and smell the field of clover.

The example also shows how cracks can challenge the ways children learn how to participate. When William says “Normal, like lying on the floor” he punctures the illusion of the work as a field of clover, and thereby also the ‘right’ way of participating that the class are being taught.

**Conclusions of the Case**

During the analysis above I have identified the educational activity as being comprised of three different kinds of situations (stops, gaps and cracks), as well as how all three of them make different kinds of participation possible. The stop was based on the assumption that you have to know how
to participate before you can participate, and was therefore focused on the children learning the ‘right’ way to participate: from a distanced position and prioritising vision to see the work as an image of something else. The gaps, on the other hand, made it possible to participate without having to be taught how first, and the cracks provided an opening for ruptures in the ‘right’ way of participating. It is in these gaps and cracks that the opportunity for democratic participation arises, since it is here that established understandings of how to participate and who can participate are challenged (cracks) or circumvented (gaps).

In this example, the crack emerged due to the invitation to participate and through a paradoxical understanding of knowledge and art: paradoxical because the children were invited to interact with the work by lying on it, but at the same time with an understanding of art as something to be approached through looking and from an objective distance. The paradox emerged when the children were invited to participate without their participation having any impact on the view of knowledge and art. The case shows how the possibility of democratic participation emerged in the crack, but also how democratic participation can be shut down by established ideas of what art is and what children can do. Even in an educational activity developed with a focus on participation and democracy, the conditions for democratic participation are challenged. In the described case this is due to narrow understandings of what art is and what children can – for example that art is an illusion of a landscape, or that children can have to learn how to participate before they can participate. I therefore propose a shift from ideas of what art is to what art does.

Art is Learning to participate

Art does Learning from participation
This is a shift with implications for how we work with participation, because it does not claim that there are any ‘right’ ways to participate. It is the shift from focusing on teaching children and others how to participate, to seeing everyone as capable of participating and learning from that. In this broad understanding of participation, which also includes the use of the senses, participation is not only currently a condition of society, but also a key concept in creating a framework for art encounters. This thinking also challenges the distinctions between participation in an art discourse and participation in a democracy discourse delineated in the introduction to this publication, since using Rancière’s links between sensory perception and democracy participation is simultaneously connected to both art and democracy.

Instead, this understanding of democratic participation critiques participation practises at art museums that are based on any segmentation of visitors based on ‘giving the people what they want’. This kind of understanding of democratic participation is not about creating relevance through any kind of ‘representative’ logic, but about challenging that logic and therefore being open to diversity.

Creating the space for democratic participation at art museums means basing them on equality. In other words, we need to abandon the idea that selected population groups do not, for example, have the right cultural capital and therefore cannot participate until they have developed it. In my analysis, I seek to disrupt the inclusion and communication strategies of art museums that are based on social and psychological differentiations between people with the goal of making the work of museums relevant, since these participation strategies reproduce ideas of who can participate and how participation should take place.

**Perspectives**

The analysis points to the possible scope for democratic participation in educational situations, but also offers perspectives on other museum contexts, like exhibitions. But how can a shift in focus from what art is to what art does make exhibitions at art museums more open to democratic participation? This became a concrete challenge during the development of the
communication strategy for ARKEN’s 2016 outdoor exhibition *Art in Sunshine.* The curator Camilla Jalving and I decided to conceptualise communication of the exhibition so that the different formats used did not, as is usually the case, form a single overall ‘story’. Instead, we worked explicitly with how an exhibition folder, for example, complemented an art walk or workshop. At the time of writing, I do not know how the communication materials functioned in practise, so will instead conclude with some reflections on the challenges that arose and the choices we made. I will use two specific communication forms as examples – a museum folder and an ‘art hunt’. At several levels the folder can be compared to the wall texts in exhibitions, since it also provides an introduction and texts about the artworks. This is how it starts:

“This guide tells you what’s on and where the art is. But apart from that, this is not your usual guide. Instead of explaining the works and describing what they are about, it makes suggestions of other ‘works’ – a poem, a picture, a dictionary entry – that maybe have the same theme, but use it in another way. Maybe. That’s up to you to decide. The only thing for certain is that the art is here – ready to be explored, connected and brought into play. There’s no recipe to follow, but don’t forget to add a healthy portion of curiosity.”

What the folder articulates is a shift from explaining the works and telling visitors what they are about, to providing a perspective on them through the use of other ‘works’. The point of this shift is to break with an understanding of artworks as having inherent meaning. We chose a broad range of illustrations and texts (poems, dictionary entries, models and documentary photographs) that we related to the artworks. This broad range was an important way of supporting the thesis that experiencing art does not demand any specific kind of knowledge, and that new juxtapositions can generate new meanings. But in choosing to juxtapose the artworks with other ‘works’, how do we avoid being explanatory? And can an artwork ever be juxtaposed with something else without that juxtaposition becoming an explanation of the artwork? I actually see it as a way of shifting focus from what Irit Rogoff calls ‘the good eye’ to ‘the
curious eye’, i.e. a shift from the idea of there being a ‘right’ way to look at art to an exploratory approach to art, but where the direction of the exploration is shaped by materiality.

We were the ones who chose the texts and images for the works, which represents a break with participation practises where user involvement is seen as the key to developing something relevant, and where focus groups are identified to represent a given group’s tastes or interests. The juxtapositions are not intended to ‘represent’ anyone, but to present a wide range of perspectives that can maybe open up for different and new ways to explore the works. By making the selection of texts and images ourselves, we step forward as a museum with the intention of shifting focus from the good eye to the curious eye. But what happens when we at the museum shift the gaze? Does the curious eye then become the ‘new’ good eye? It is a possibility that cannot be ruled out, but I would claim that the curious eye is essentially different to the good eye, since it encourages an exploratory approach with more openness as its starting point than any single ‘right’ way, like seeing, for example.

The other communication format I will present is an ‘art hunt’, which via close-ups of the artworks provides a basis for seeing the works from new angles or in new ways.

Whereas in the folder another kind of work has the potential to introduce something new, in the art hunt it is a detail or a particular perspec-
tive on the same work. In the following I use Antony Gormley’s sculpture Another Time V (2007) as an example of museum communication using the two formats.

The two examples can be seen as two different kinds of stop at the same artwork. Where one of the stops is framed with the words “Gormley’s man is cast in iron. Solid. Inviolable. Alone,” and a poem by Katrine Marie Guldager,33 the other stop is framed by a close-up of the sculpture. The art hunt encourages a visual investigation of the materiality and details of the work, whereas the folder encourages a thematic and multimodal reading in which the text has an influence on the artwork and the artwork has an influence on the text. The work is thus activated through two different juxtapositions, and may in turn impact on them. And it is precisely the simultaneity of the two approaches to communication that can maybe create the basis for a ‘crack’. 34 The communication strategy was intended to challenge the dominant view that art has an inherent meaning that can be explained by knowledge of the artist, for example. We wanted to focus on what the work does rather than what it is, to return to the distinction I raised earlier. In this way the different formats – like the cracks in the educational activity – have the potential to challenge established understandings of who can participate and how people participate at art museums, and in doing so can momentarily create openings for democratic participation.

Lise Sattrup

Head of ARKEN EDUCATION and visiting assistant professor at Aarhus University’s School of Educational Theory and Curriculum Studies (Material Culture). She has a PhD on the democratic role of art museums from Roskilde University. At ARKEN she is responsible for the development of the museum’s educational activities, as well as communication for all age groups. She was a project manager and researcher for the Danish cross-institutional exhibition and research project ‘Museums and Cultural Institutions as Spaces for Citizenship’, where she also co-edited the anthology Rum for medborgerskab [‘Spaces for Citizenship’, 2014].
NOTES


4 Inspired by the childhood researcher Hanne Warming, I chose to investigate children’s perspectives on educational activities through participant observation from a hypothetical position. I use the pronoun ‘we’ to underline my participatory role in the activity.

5 The educational activities were an integrated part of a larger cross-museum development project researching the creation of space for citizenship via participation, polyphony and self-reflection.


7 Lise Sattrup, pp. 164-166.


10 According to Bent Flyvbjerg, case studies are useful in researching connections – here the connections between different situations and the possibilities children have to participate. See Bent Flyvbjerg, *Samfundsvidenskab der virker*, Copenhagen: Akademisk forlag, 2009.

11 I chose an extreme and paradigmatic case. Extreme cases are, according to Bent Flyvbjerg cited above, useful in generating more information about a given phenomenon, in this case how children’s opportunities to participate differ in the three situations. In addition, the case is paradigmatic and therefore useful in showing how children’s opportunities to participate are limited during stops.

12 Transcribed sound recording, 29.11.2013.

13 Transcribed sound recording, 29.11.2013.


For Rancière, representative democracy is undemocratic because it is based on the inequality of some people being chosen to represent others.

Rancière uses the concept of ‘le partage du sensible’ (most often translated as ‘the distribution of the sensible’) to describe the system that defines what is visible and what is not.


This critique of the ‘right’ ways of participating at art museums is based on that put forward by Carol Duncan in Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums, London: Routledge, 1995.


Art in Sunshine is a recurrent project at ARKEN and in 2016 consisted of nine works from the museum’s collection that were placed in the area surrounding ARKEN for the summer.


The poem ‘Rødt’ from the poetry collection *Styrt*, 1995.

http://www.arken.dk/udstilling/kunst-i-sollys/