The Art Museum Today: Participation as a Strategic Tool

By Stine Høholt

The article provides an overview of the broad field of participation. Drawing on the 2014 exhibition *The Model* at ARKEN, it outlines the different ways participation and the participant are formed in relationship to the museum as a cultural institution, public institution and economic institution.

I sit at the computer ready to write my article on the increased interest in participation at art institutions, but it is Friday, still summer and the weekend awaits … Here on the second-last weekend of August my Facebook feed tempts me with a veritable flood of the kind of participatory events I am about to write about. ¹ Kunsthall Charlottenborg is hosting *Chart*, an art fair that brings the Nordic gallery scene together and that is also arranging *Chart Social*, a Nordic performance programme taking place in different parts of the city. Another cultural initiative, *Copenhagen Art Week*, is hosting a performative canal tour where people are blindfolded. The celebrity curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist is joining an informal conversation about contemporary art in a private apartment, but I could also choose to spend my evening with the young culture vultures
at *SMK Fridays*, what Denmark’s national gallery call their ‘intelligent get-together’ with talks, beer, a burger bar and a boat trip. Then again, I could head into town and experience sensory art on a grand scale when the new bridge connecting the inner city with Christianshavn opens as a Copenhagen event with the artist Olafur Eliasson as a guest. And beyond the capital I could participate in the big open-air meeting on the island of Mors, where Denmark’s politicians have invited citizens to join a dialogue on the conditions for art and culture today.

This impressive range of events on a single weekend in August tells me that the participatory format has definitely arrived in the world of arts and culture. Participation has become ‘so ein Ding’, a trend so powerful it warrants the name ‘participationism’, and a phenomenon so striking that it needs further examination, luring as it does cultural producers and consumers alike. Has it become an uncritically followed dogma, or is it a
realm of future possibility? It is clearly a broad concept, where the boundaries between participating and experiencing can be hard to draw. The events listed above can be placed on a kind of participation scale, with participation as a public, democratic dialogue (like the open-air meeting on Mors, where participation is part of a political process) at one end, and the blindfolded canal tour, which is closer to an experience-based event at the other. Here participation is more about interaction and inclusion (anyone can take part), two key ways for museums to practise participation. But not all participants in these events are active participants: some are spectators, guests, friends or commercial partners, and only a small portion are co-producers, ‘prosumers’ or co-creators.

This article addresses the broad field of participation as a format, strategic museum tool, and realm of possibility. My approach to the relationship between the art museum and participation is museological, charting how participation has come to the fore as a principle of cultural consumption and production in a museum context over the past 15 years. The aim of the article is to examine the ways cultural institutions can approach the public, in order to clarify our understanding of visitors to cultural institutions and the ways participation is structured and facilitated.
by those institutions. The thesis of the article is that the key to the future success of cultural institutions lies in increased visitor orientation, and that participation is central to this orientation. I argue that a thorough understanding of the phenomenon of participation is a prerequisite for cultural institutions to continue to be successful in terms of audience development, visitor engagement, and curation.

The Role of Participation in Cultural Production

It might well be that many museum professionals work with national heritage, art treasures and listed buildings, but the past 30 years have taught us museums themselves are no longer a ‘listed’ category. Museums are no longer seen as essential to society, but as a tax-financed amenity everyone should find relevant. Politicians emphasise the role of the museum as a key social motor, local lever, democratic binder, and driving force for innovation and experiences. The challenge the Danish Cultural Agency’s director Jesper Hermansen issued to cultural institutions shortly after being appointed was: “It is important that all cultural institutions ask themselves this question … How do we become accessible to everyone?” The transformation the category of ‘museum’ has undergone since the early 1980s has been a steadily rising wave that has apparently reached its peak (at least so far) today. Museums have fundamentally changed their focus from objects to visitors. The current situation should be seen in the light of a series of radical changes to society over the past three decades. Many of them have been made possible by technological developments in computing, telecommunication, etc., which with digitalisation have resulted in an increased democratisation of cultural institutions, which has in turn contributed to an increased visitor orientation based on both communication and commercialisation. The communication researchers Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Pille Runnel summarise these developments as follows:

“The development and spread of the many variations of the democratic worldview along with new technological facilities has also affected museums, influencing them to become more communicative. Two core processes in museums, digitization and democratization,
lead museums to focus on the dialogue with its audiences – providing more information is no longer considered sufficient.”

During recent years, museums have gained a lot of experience with audience development, visitor involvement, and participation. Shifting our gaze from museum objects to museum visitors has increased understanding of the surrounding society, and at the same time working with visitors has challenged the same institutions professionally, structurally and organisationally. One shared lesson is that it is only possible to commit whole-heartedly to the audience agenda if people are willing to be challenged in their core competence, their own self-perception, their priorities, and their concept of quality. In addition, digital developments have had a rapidly increasing impact on museums as an extension of the increasing digital ‘disruption’ of society at large.

Utility Value, Relevance and Participation
I would now like to turn to some of the expectations of museums in the 21st century, and the ways almost all of these expectations are related to the idea of increased participation. Museums were originally defined as national treasuries of cultural historical and art objects. Their culture-preserving function is still intact, but today they have to do more than just conserve culture, they have to create culture, i.e. function as a driver of cultural and social development. Museums are to be meeting places for communities and accessible to everyone (physically, financially, intellectually and culturally). They are to be relevant to society as a whole, and thereby have a significant social effect. They are to support cultural diversity, create social cohesion, and increase the cultural capital of society. There is a political expectation that museums contribute to social, ethnic and educational inclusion, just as there is an expectation that they actively support the local area and contribute to urban regeneration. Parallel to this, one of the main tasks of museums today is to cultivate new audiences. Museums in Denmark are an important resource for structured learning, and are an integrated part of the educational and school system. On top of which, in the 21st century museums have become key tourist attractions that contribute to city identity, just as
the Louvre – on an equal footing with the Eiffel Tower – does in Paris. Alongside the cultural, social and public-oriented expectations of museums, there is also a range of economic expectations. Contrary to the past, museums today are expected to generate income, and the money earned is expected to adhere to the International Council of Museum’s guidelines, but also give the public value for money and a high level of visitor service.

According to the museum researcher Graham Black, the above expectations are the most explicit demands made on the institution of the museum in the 21st century. They make clear that today’s museum is a broad-spectrum institution that serves many purposes in complex interaction with numerous different spheres, including the public, the professional, the artistic, the economic, the political, the legal and the communicative. Whereas in the past museums primarily served one (ideological) purpose, i.e. nation building, today the focus is on utility value, relevance and participation – resulting in a more citizen-oriented instrumentalisation of cultural institutions. Today it is no longer the nation museums are ‘building’, but the citizen. Our expectations of Western museums in the 21st century almost all imply that museums take a participatory approach. Today the primary interest of the arts and culture industry and politicians is how to get the public involved in the museum, and how the museum can serve the public interest. This approach to museums was founded with ‘the experience economy’, which became the buzzword of the 2000s and is a good match for what I would call the market-oriented museum. There are clear political, societal and philanthropic expectations of utility value connected to the market-oriented museum, which is often seen as a lever for ‘something else’ beyond the pure contemplation of art, be it health, urban renewal, education, cultural tourism or regional branding. Cultural policies for museums have focused on the market-oriented museum throughout the 2000s, with a focus on more visitors, more funding by private foundations, and more collaboration with the private sector. During the 2010s a new buzzword has been added, i.e. ‘participation’, which with a focus on co-creation and outreach links to a more public-oriented museum with an explicit demand of relevance.
In Denmark – a country with a population of only five million – museums have sixteen million visitors a year. This represents an increase of 65% over the past 30 years. This increase alone is a sign that participation plays an increasing role for visitors. People want to participate in cultural events, and therefore seek out the cultural events offered by museums. We meet an increasing number of visitors at museums themselves, but also in the mediated reality of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. These new social media have, also for cultural institutions, been a key game changer. Interaction and expressing opinions are natural behaviour on social platforms, and the opportunity to like, Tweet, share and organise that they provide creates new expectations and habits, also among museum visitors. At the same time, social media encourage an emphasis on the styling of everyday life: the museum selfie has rapidly become a genre of its own with an annual day to celebrate it, and today we see exhibitions, like Louisiana Museum of Modern Art’s 2015 exhibition *Yayoi Kusama – In Infinity*, where for many visitors social media start to dictate an authoritative, photo-based exhibition experience, a development in which the museum selfie becomes not only a feature, but the ultimate goal of a museum visit.

People have become accustomed to being the editors of their own life through photos, updates, links and tips, and they are equally accustomed to getting their news and information elsewhere than through traditional channels. These social platforms are heavily visual. At the same time, there is a cultural, commercial development with an increasing over-all design focusing on sensory and symbolic value. Not that this is new. According to the cultural journalist Virginia Postrel, writing in 2003, it is a defining feature of post-industrial society that all products, spaces and surfaces are designed with a highly sensory appeal. From user surveys we know that visitors expect sensory experiences, and if we look at the Danish museum landscape, it is striking how fast art exhibitions have changed to become increasingly theatrical with a focus on design appeal, the senses, and an immersive exhibition experience. This can be seen in Louisiana Museum of Modern Art’s recent exhibitions with *Olafur Eliasson* (2014), *Arctic* (2014) and *Yayoi Kusama – In Infinity* (2015).
true of ARKEN’s exhibitions with Bjørn Wiinblad (2015) and Niki de Saint Phalle (2016), as well as Aarhus Art Museum ARoS’ exhibition Monet – Lost in Translation (2015). Internationally the same trend has been visible at the V&A’s exhibitions David Bowie Is and Tomorrow in London (both 2013), as well as the exhibition Proportio at Palazzo Fortuny in Venice (2015), which invited visitors to delve into a sensual, immersive exhibition experience.

In his book The Engaging Museum, museum researcher Graham Black describes young visitors (35 and under) as a group with higher quality standards than previous generations looking for active and sensory museum experiences. They live hectic lives and are ”cash rich, time poor”, as Black describes them in his book. Personal involvement, individual service, individualisation and customisation are some of the demands they have, because they want to see themselves reflected in the world of the museum, and expect the museum to deliver user-generated content.

In other words, they expect to be central to museum communication, and even to be given the opportunity to influence the museum at a more fundamental level, for example in programming. New kinds of visitors and a participatory agenda can prove a challenge for the classical exhibition format and for art that is characterised as going beyond the individual to present a ‘wider view’. Elitist art practises, complex art theories, radical political currents, ‘art for art’s sake’, the concept of the sublime, etc., are all phenomena and movements that can be a difficult fit with the desire for a democratic approach to art, a broad relevance criteria, and an invitation to everyone to participate or even see themselves reflected in the work of the museum. As a result, these new visitors raise a number of issues in terms of cultural production, because how does the museum retain its role as transcendent of everyday life as the same time as meeting people at eye level? How do we combine the original educational and cultural ideals with this new group of self-exhibitionists who would rather see themselves centre stage? And does the category of spectator still exist in an era when everyone would apparently rather create the spectacle than look at it?

**Three Museums in One**
The goals and manifestations of participation can also change depending on which view of the museum we operate with. We could posit three

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26
views of the museum: 1) The museum as a *cultural institution* that collects, conserves, interprets and communicates cultural heritage; 2) The museum as a *public institution*, i.e. as a professional agent in society that contributes to cultural development and serves a democratic, educational purpose; and 3) The museum as an *economic institution*, i.e. as part of the creative industries operating on the terms of the free market and located in the broad field of leisure activities.  

Seeing the museum as either a cultural, an economic or a public institution implies three different frameworks for what we mean by ‘participation’ and the meaning we attribute to ‘participation’ – and there is often an inbuilt conflict between the different views of participation in all three.

To stand in front of Leonardo da Vinci’s painting of Mona Lisa at the Louvre is a very bodily experience of the conflict between the views of participation attributed to each ‘type’ of museum. Whilst a high number of visitors (and thereby a high level of accessibility – one extreme of participation) might be a goal for the museum as an economic institution, it can be inconvenient or even a real risk for the museum as a cultural institution. Crowds of people, who see a museum visit as a consumer choice where they breathe on, flash their cameras at, and want to get closer and closer to vulnerable artworks, pose a challenge to museum security, conservation, any classical contemplation of art or any ambition of an actual learning process taking place. Month-long exposure to light and humidity destroys delicate works, and transporting them is a critical risk factor. The risk of damage or theft requires a large number of guards and security measures, which in turn limits the public’s opportunity to interact with the works. Anyone who has stood in front of the Mona Lisa knows the feeling of hardly being able to see the woman with her enigmatic smile behind the thick armoured glass and crowds of visitors.

One consequence of these different types of museum is the different ways museum visitors are framed depending on the lens they are seen through. The visitors we have in our online and off-line museum environments can be divided into multiple categories that are not solely limited to market segments, but include ‘visitors’, ‘users’, ‘citizens’, ‘co-creators’, ‘consumers’ and ‘prosumers’ who are either the buyers or co-producers of a series of products or services (tickets, food and refresh-
ments, a product, events, an exhibition experience, a seminar, a workshop, etc.). From a public-oriented point of view, however, they are also citizens to be educated and empowered. A central form of participation takes place when the museum uses a relational, participatory artwork to invite the visitor to join in as a citizen and co-creator – the form of participation I introduce briefly in what follows.

The Potential of Participatory Art

Based on the definition of the museum visitor as a citizen and co-creator, and of participation as active participation in an artwork, in 2014 ARKEN invited the artist Palle Nielsen to ‘re-enact’ his vast, interactive artwork The Model, which was originally created for Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 1968. As an art museum we wanted to show one of the earliest examples of relational art – what Palle Nielsen himself called ‘social aesthetics’ – and to interact with our visitors in new ways on the basis of his artistic vision that the creativity of children be given better and different opportunities for development, and his political vision of creating an anti-capitalist zone in the art museum. The exhibition, which ran for ten months, and where the artist requested that the price of entry was halved for adults (the exhibition was free for children) had many repeat visitors. One child came eleven times, a record number of visits per person. During the same period, we received a flood of letters from children and adults expressing their thanks and pleasure in experiencing The Model. The exhibition was constantly staffed by five to seven ‘play hosts’, who supported the children’s creative development and the communities that were formed in the 1,500m² artwork. Both the artist and museum had numerous positive experiences with the exhibition, including: 1) That the interactive work made the museum more inclusive, made art more accessible, and made visitors feel more welcome; 2) That the experience was so significant for our visitors that they subsequently (without the intervention of the museum) continued to work with and develop the pedagogical vision of the exhibition. In one case, a kindergarten transformed an entire section of their institution with inspiration from The Model because they were so convinced by the results they had seen with children visiting the exhibition. As the nursery school teacher said:
“Last year we’d taken some of the children on a trip to the art museum ARKEN. Here they encountered the work of the Danish artist Palle Nielsen, who had made an art exhibition where ‘children were allowed to do everything’ [...] It was, quite simply, a fantastic experience for the children, so we went home then took another group of children to the exhibition [...] We saw how the children flourished. So we decided to try to follow the same concept back in the kindergarten.”

The Model is an example of an artwork aimed at raising the awareness of its visitors and exercising an anti-capitalist critique of society. Judging the extent to which the work was successful in fulfilling these ambitions is not my task here. But using The Model as an example provides proof that the museum can be a driver of new communities that continue the visions of an artwork beyond the confines of the museum itself. It shows that participatory contemporary art can be a realm of possibility where participation – understood as a pedagogical, social-political process – can evolve, and is an example of the museum practitioner Nina Simon’s idea of a participatory format that continues, also without the museum or artist as an active partner. At the same time, the example also makes clear that there are differences depending on who issues the call for participation. Whereas the artist might use participation as a way to engage in social criticism, for the museum the participatory work or exhibition format is often part of a strategy to make
the museum more open, to be accessible to everyone, and to empower museum visitors. Here the question that arises is whether these two strategies for participation can co-exist, or whether the one excludes the other. ARKEN’s experience shows that the two strategies can be compatible. The work is a radically different place than the society outside, a critical space that due to both context and content is very different to a play area in a shopping centre, for example. At the same time, it was accessible and open to everyone in almost every way.

**For a Better Understanding of Participation**

What have we learnt? We have learnt that the participatory behaviour of museum visitors is generated by technological, societal developments, and therefore unlikely to be a passing craze. We have also learnt that ‘participation’ and ‘the participant’ are not clear-cut categories, which makes a nuanced approach to participation key to the continuing success of art museums. Museums should be open to everyone, and inclusion is an important aspect of participation. Here the success criterion for museums is not that everyone participates. What is crucial is that museums work with how accessible their institutions are so everyone has the opportunity to take part, and that they work with different participation formats so that those who might not be interested in participation still encounter a museum they find relevant. The participatory format represents an opportunity for cultural institutions to have a greater impact at a time when the demand for relevance is greater than before, and when many individual citizens have an increasing amount of leisure time, an increasing level of education, and when an increasing number of them live longer. Does this make participation the new *raison d’être* for museums? Hardly, because not everyone wants to participate, and not all art is made to involve visitors. Participation is, however, one of several tools to realise the *raison d’être* of museums as either cultural institutions, economic enterprises or public institutions. The participation paradigm does not necessarily express a new democratic culture, because the participation paradigm we see today is the product of technological, social developments created within communicative capitalism. As such, as the Danish art historian
Mikkel Bolt points out, participation is “always ‘formatted’ in advance and only enables the production and circulation of a relatively narrow spectrum of opinions. The possibility of tampering with the system is minimal, and all opinions that circulate in the system validate the system.”

A pretty dogmatic statement we might add, since we can never know what actually ‘happens’ in the minds of our visitors, let alone what the long-term effect of an active art encounter might be. However, Mikkel Bolt’s perspective should be taken into account as an inbuilt challenge to the participation paradigm, at the same time as holding on to participation – especially in its broadest form, where the museum increases its inclusiveness, increases its accessibility and increases its general interaction with visitors – because of the possibilities it offers art museums in the current political, cultural and artistic situation. Participation is first and foremost a way for us – as art museums in a democratic, capitalist system – to create a space for generating meaning, empowerment and change for the benefit of the people we share society with.

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MA and PhD in Art History, is chief curator and Head of the Art Department at ARKEN, where she draws on her professional experience in exhibition programming, curatoring, leadership and project development. She also serves as a board member of New Carlsberg Foundation, and is a member of the Panel for Museum Research in Denmark. She has written articles on art and culture for a wide range of journals, anthologies and exhibition catalogues. Her PhD thesis ‘Easier Living? Amerikansk Streamline-design og den friktionsløse hverdag, 1930-1960’ ['Easier Living? American Streamline Design and Frictionless Everyday Life, 1930-1960'] was published in 2006. She is co-editor of the book Utopia & Contemporary Art (Hatje Cantz, 2012), and has recently published articles on Abdoulaye Konaté and Elmgreen & Dragset, as well as interviews with Palle Nielsen and Julie Nord.
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The concept of ‘prosumer’ (a contraction of ‘producer’ and ‘consumer’) was used by Camilla Mordhorst, Vice Director of the National Museum of Denmark, at the seminar *Deltagerisme: Seminar om kunst, subjektivitet og viden i en deltagelseskultur* ['Participationism: Art, Subjectivity and Knowledge in a Participatory Culture'] at ARKEN Museum of Modern Art on June 19th, 2015. The term comes from the futurologist Alvin Toffler’s 1980 book *The Third Wave*, where he used it to predict the combination of the role of producer and consumer in the future.


Cf. cultural communicator Niels Righolt’s presentation at the seminar *Deltagerisme: Seminar om kunst, subjektivitet og viden i en deltagelseskultur* ['Participationism: Art, Subjectivity and Knowledge in a Participatory Culture'] at ARKEN Museum of Modern Art on June 19th, 2015.


The capacity to change, update, adapt and develop processes and products has become increasingly central to the success of companies, corporations and industries. The concept of ‘disruption’ has become particularly widespread in describing companies’ capacity for innovation – or lack thereof – and is a concept that has been heavily debated in recent years, especially in the context of management theory and the significance of digitalisation in social development. The concept was introduced by Bower, J. L., and C. M. Christensen, ‘Disruptive Technologies: Catching the Wave’, *Harvard Business Review* 73, no. 1 (January–February 1995): pp. 43–53.


11 One example of this was a conference arranged by the Danish online newspaper *Altinget* at Designmuseum Danmark on October 19th, 2015 to discuss the distribution of arts and culture funding and the parameters for its allocation. One of the contributors was Professor Christian Hjorth-Andersen, a cultural economics expert at the University of Copenhagen’s Department of Economics. In his conference paper he asked: “How do we organise funding so it is of greatest benefit for society? What can culture contribute to local areas, and what economic role does it play in our society?”


14 In 2014, January 21st was appointed ‘International Museum Selfie Day’ during which museums visitors and art professionals worldwide take photos of themselves with their favourite work and share it on Instagram and Twitter. According to CNN, it was London–based Mar Dixon who invented the viral, user-driven campaign with her daughter after they had visited a series of museums and wanted to register their experiences. As Mar Dixon explained to CNN: “My goal with my daughter when we go to the museum is to learn one new thing. It doesn’t have to be about art though. It can be that the museum sells good carrot cake (...) The hashtag is about the museum, but it’s really about the people who are going to the museum. You took that picture, and you will remember that picture.” Jareen Imam, ‘Selfies turn museums into playgrounds for a day’, CNN, 21.01.2015.


17 Black, p. 38

18 Black, p. 38

19 Black, p. 38

20 For a Danish discussion of this issue see Rune Lykkeberg, *Alle har ret – demokrati som princip og problem*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2012

21 Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel, p. 165.


24 Dorthe Brandborg, ‘Her får børnene frit spil’, Brønshøj-Husum Avis, 23.06.2015, p. 9
