Participation as political practice
On the rationalities of participation at cultural institutions

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Abstract

I danske kulturinstitutioner er borgerinddragelse og -deltagelse aktuelle temaer, relateret til besøgstal, publikums-udvikling og institutionel relevans. Selvom de fleste taler for deltagelse, er det stadig svært at sætte ord på de alt-afgørende spørgsmål *for hvem, hvordan og hvorfor*. I denne artikel skal jeg adressere disse spørgsmål. Først præsen-terer jeg to deltagelses-baserede projekter ved Københavns Museum, hvor deltagelsen både er fokuseret på selve deltagerne og på udvikling af institutionen, og hvor fokus er på deltagelsens "hvem". Derefter giver jeg et bud på et praksisorienteret afsæt i form af et community-perspektiv på deltagelse og åbner en værktøjskasse med konkre-te tilgange til at iværksætte deltagelses-orienterede projekter. Dette vedrører deltagelsens "hvordan". Afslutnings-vis præsenterer jeg to rationaler i arbejdet med deltagelses-orienterede aktiviteter; et samfundsorienteret og et medborger-orienteret rationale. Dette vedrører deltagelsens "hvorfor".

Participation and civic engagement are highly actual themes in cultural institutions and among cultural educa-tors. The themes are related to numbers of visitors, audience development and the relevance of the institution. However, it is still difficult to answer the core question of *for whom, how and why*. This article addresses these questions and is accordingly divided into three sections. First, I present two projects from Museum of Copenha-gen which were based on participation and which represent the "for whom". Second, I advocate a practice-oriented approach and a community-perspective on participation in order to provide a set of concrete tools to initiate participatory projects and answer the "how". Finally, I set up both a societal and a citizenship-oriented rationality of participation in order to address the "why" from these two perspectives.

The participatory agenda

For the past five years I have worked with different manifestations of participation, civic engagement and citizen involvement at various cultural institutions. Preparing for my actual research project (Ph.D. titled "We can be actors, not just spectators", 2014-2017) my conception of participation has changed from a merely technical to a mainly political concept relating to issues of citizenship, development and democracy. This article is a preliminary presentation of such a perspective on participation, based on the case of Museum of Co-penhagen and two participatory projects I have done research on as a part of my Ph.D.-project. Since the empiri-cal part has not yet been completed, this article presents preliminary reflections on rather than an analysis of the case.

The French philosopher, Jean-Luc Nancy states that "the gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world, (…) is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community" (in Bishop 2006: 54). This is a challenge that is felt in the present-day museum, which struggles to be a resource to the local community as well as of relevance to society at large. In this article I focus on participatory practices at a specific cultural institution, Museum of Copenhagen, in order to make it an example of this struggle and to tackle the issues of who, how and why. It is my premise in working with participation that participatory practices and involvement of citizens can contribute to a reversal of the dissolution, dislocation and conflagration that Nancy refers to. It is my thesis that by creating long term participatory projects, museums can both establish a stronger affiliation between the institution and its audience and between citizens and their respective communities.

By directing more attention towards local communities, cultural institutions can widen their audience appeal and become a significant actor of social transformation while improving their visitor numbers[1]. As Mikkel Bogh, director of The National Gallery of Denmark, has stated in an interview, "The museums must be made relevant, actual and present for all of the Danish population. (…) The National Gallery of Denmark has to become like a train station" (Bogh 2014).[2] While most institutions have the intention of involving citizens and creating participatory projects, it is however most often based on rather short project-based activities. In this article I present tools for involving citizens over a longer period of time[3] as well as two different rationalities in the institutional work on participation.

In 2015, the Danish Agency for Culture released a report on *Museums. Citizens and sustainable solutions* (2015). The report is built around the annual museum survey involving almost 90 museums and 300,000 survey answers collected over four years. It supplies statistics on the museum visitors; who they are (age, sex, education), why they visit the museum, what they expect, etc. In addition to the statistics, the report presents a range of articles concerning different aspects of the museum and its visitors: what the role of the institutions is, how the institutions can evolve, the relationship between institution and visitor, and more. The report represents governmental input regarding the actual situation as well as the future landscape of Danish museums. The report identifies two major challenges. The first one is that visitors between 14 and 29 years old are massively under-represented compared to their representation in the Danish population. The second is that citizens with a lower secondary school education or vocational education are similarly under-represented, whereas citizens with a long higher education are over-represented.[4] Both of these challenges are relevant in terms of participatory practices.

In the first section of this article, I present two outreach projects at Museum of Copenhagen: *Outreach Nørrebro* (2008-2010) and *Take a look at Sydhavn* (2011-2012)[5]. I ask in what sense they can be considered participatory and what the political and societal implication might be. In the second section, I present the practice-sensitive community perspective as relevant in developing participatory projects in cultural institutions, not least in terms of the challenge to include the above-mentioned so-called "non-users". The third and final section is a presentation of two rationalities in scholarship on participation: the societal and the citizenship-oriented, respectively. These two rationalities will finally be related to the previous sections.

Reaching out to local communities: Museum of Copenhagen

Museum of Copenhagen is a rather traditional culture-historical museum. Today[6], however, the exhibitions are thematically oriented rather than chronological walkthroughs of the physical, social and demographic development of the city. Actual exhibitions are: "Becoming a Copenhagener", which focuses on the transitional state between national and urban belonging. "Urban Nature" presents the historical development of parks and gardens, and connects the development of the city to the contemporary issue of gardening in urban environments. "Kid City" disseminates the life of kids in Copenhagen through a collection of personal objects from second to

fifth grade classes. "Søren Kierkegaard: objects of love, works of love" examines the famous 19th century philosopher Kierkegaard's understanding of love and its manifestations in modern city life. This exhibition strategy presents a deliberate rethinking of exhibition design and an ambition to engage citizens in the planning of exhibitions. The museum wants to involve the citizens as providers of content and knowledge in order to increase their affiliation with the institution. However, it is faced with a range of challenges, not least a potential dilemma of initiating 'participation for the sake of participation'. Participation for the sake of participation often occurs when the participatory element stands alone without any significant connection to the institution or exhibition. In the exhibition "Becoming a Copenhagener" Museum of Copenhagen has created a prime example of this tendency. In the furthest end of the exhibition, in a small hallway between the exhibition room and a stairway to the basement, there is a post-it wall where the audience can describe their thoughts on the subject of becoming a Copenhagener. The post-its are not used in the exhibition; they are collected and stored in the museum, and not used further. This project bares similarities to Sherry Arnstein's rung of manipulation which creates an "illusory form of "participation"" (Arnstein 1969:218). The audience can share their thoughts, but not engage in any "genuine level of participation" (Arnstein 1969:218).

Beside exhibitions, the museum has a tradition of initiating different activities and programs which either relates to an exhibition or to general issues in Copenhagen[7]. The two outreach projects, which are my main point of interest in this section, are examples of this practice. The two outreach projects attempted to reach new audiences and be of relevance to the local communities of Nørrebro and Sydhavn respectively. When the two outreach projects finished, the former director of the museum, Jette Sandahl, recognized:

> "In Denmark we have cultural policies which state that the goal of cultural institutions is for
> all citizens to have equal access to cultural offers. However, all recent research and surveys
> show that this is an obligation we don't live up to. It bothers me that there is a large group of
> citizens we can't reach. (…). You can't reach a new audience without making basic changes
> in the institution." (Museum of Copenhagen 2013:1).[8]

Five years earlier, the museum had started working with the two outreach projects. Via several application rounds they found ten young people to take charge of each project. The participants represented the diversity of citizens in the two communities respectively, thereby involving people with different social, cultural, economic and religious backgrounds. During a project-period of approximately one year Museum of Copenhagen held workshops and helped the participants to map activities in the communities. The aim was to actualize the institution to citizens "(…) who feel marginalized and left out of Danish society. By relating their individual stories, opinions, interpretations and abilities to a common story about the capital, they can feel valuable, recognized and included." (Museum of Copenhagen 2013: 1)[9].

Additionally the two projects were meant as an opportunity to collect artefacts and stories relating to communities and parts of the population which are traditionally difficult to reach for the museum. Participant Alaa Mohsen highlighted the challenge that the museum faced before the outreach project as well as the effects of involving local citizens. He stated: "before I joined the project, I had never visited the museum. I don't even think I ever heard of it. (…) now I feel a part of the museum, and I have developed a sense of loyalty towards it."[10] (Museum of Copenhagen 2013: 1). The fact that Mohsen felt a sense of belonging or loyalty towards the museum emphasizes what can happen when museums provide an opportunity for citizens to engage and influence the institution. In the outreach projects, the participant's task was to gather and present stories from and with their respective communities. They were given classes in how to handle video and regular cameras, taught

how to edit both video and images, and given inspiration on how to communicate such content. Building knowledge, connections, and a relationship of trust were central issues in the two projects, and the museum hoped to establish a long-time connection to the participants and their communities.

The two projects turned out to be very different in content as well as form. In the Nørrebro-project some told stories about Nørrebro being labelled a war zone. Following the murder of a 19-year-old, some presented their favourite graffiti pieces, while others took a more personal approach, telling stories about family members or the religious celebration of the Eid. When the projects finished, the groups arranged exhibitions about their respective communities. The Nørrebro project was shown at the museum, while Take a look at Sydhavn was exhibited at a local venue in an attempt to bring the museum to the community instead of the other way around. In addition to both exhibitions and as an inherent part of the process, the participants were asked to upload images, videos and stories to the separate museum-project *Væggen* [The Wall] – a digital platform where users can share and comment on the content, all related to the city of Copenhagen.

Dustin Growick (2014) has suggested five questions, which participants as well as museum employees ought to bear in mind in order to make successful participatory projects. Even if developed in a quite different context, namely the Museum Hack Tours at American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York, I find them generally useful when working on participation:

1. Why should my audience care about [insert content]
2. How does [insert content] relate to their lives and their interests?
3. What are the tangible points of relevancy that will engage my learners on a personal level?
4. Am I giving people the tools necessary to curate their own museum experience during repeat visits?
5. What is my "ask" of my audience? What are their "next steps"? (Growick 2014: 3)

Growicks questions direct the way he prepares for tours at AMNH, but they can be applied to the practice of Museum of Copenhagen during the outreach projects as well. The participants created content that was relevant for them in conveying their everyday lives, their community and their city. It was part of the agenda that the projects should initiate the museum's relevance to new communities, initiate community engagement and facilitate "citizenship" (Museum of Copenhagen 2014: 1)[11]. However, as mentioned earlier, the projects ended when the exhibitions were set up and they did not lead to a steady relation between the museum and the participants. A few of the participants were hired as student workers, but those who were not lost the connection to the museum. As I will elaborate later on, this was mainly due to the fact that lasting affiliation requires long-term engagement from the institution.

Participation as community building

For decades, community building has been a practice used to mobilize citizens to take part and engage in any given cause. Events such as the bus boycott in Montgomery in the 50's, the student activism in the 60's and actual movements such as Occupy, Citizens UK and Purpose.org organize citizens and whole communities in order to create social change. Today, museums and cultural institutions face the challenge of engaging citizens at their institutions. They struggle to be visible and be part of the local communities as well as the mind-set of the citizens.

In this section I present the community perspective as a way of reaching and engaging citizens. A central element in the community perspective is that the participants are provided with power to influence the institutional practice. Building citizen power is an idea, which is 1) closely linked to participation, but 2) often black-

boxed in everyday life at cultural institutions in favour of a mere pragmatic conception of participatory culture. Creating change and challenging the status quo are essential elements of a community perspective. Many will argue that it is not an agenda of cultural institutions, the purpose of which is to collect, register, conserve, research, and disseminate artistic and/or historical content.[12] However, I see the community perspective as an essential aspect of cultural institutions, too. It is a perspective that is developed to engage citizens in participatory processes and provide a set of tools to help cope with actual, societal challenges. The community perspective is distinguished by focusing on immaterial values and on a trust-based relationship, in this case between the museum and the local citizens.

The first set of tools focuses on *how* and *why* citizens should be involved, or, as Saul Alinsky (1971) has said, it is necessary to diagnose "the world as it is", both within the institution and in society in general, so as to get an idea of the challenges and desires of target groups as well as of the institution itself. Without knowing "the world as it is", it is impossible to create any significant engagement or mobilization of citizens. Knowing "the world as it is" is a way of generating in-depth knowledge of citizens and communities before engaging them. As Alinsky states: "(…) it is necessary to begin where the world is if we are going to change it to what we think it should be" (Alinsky 1971: xix). This claim adheres to what museum director at Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History in USA Nina Simon (2010) has stated: that in order to engage a local community in the museum, you have to focus on the *needs* and *assets* of the people you want to reach. When you understand the needs and assets, you can develop the relationship to the community and strengthen the relevance of the institution.

The second set of tools is concerned with storytelling, which is "a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now". The act of telling stories is already part of the DNA of museums and culture, in short it is what they do. The hard part, however, is to create stories which are relevant to the citizens and which tell their reality and everyday life. According to Ganz, a story of self communicates the values that call one into action. A story of us communicates the values shared by those in action. A story of now communicates an urgent challenge to those values that demand action now (Ganz 2010: 14). The current challenge for many institutions is the lacking awareness of and identification with the institution. Storytelling serves as a tool for presenting the urgency of the institution and it encourages the institution to connect its own practice to the reality of the citizens and the communities on issue.

Many additional tools can be listed as means to be transferred from community organizing to cultural institution, of which I shall mention one: the necessity of ongoing mobilization of participants, communities and the institutions themselves. As is the case with the two outreach projects at Museum of Copenhagen, the participatory initiatives are often project-based and therefore temporary. The temporary nature of participatory projects, also in my case, becomes a serious challenge and possible pit-fall. According to Alinsky, it is a premise for successful engagement that it is an ongoing process: "One never reaches the horizon; it is always just beyond; ever beckoning onwards" (Alinsky 1971: 14). When outreach projects end, the relevance of the institution easily disappears and the institution easily loses hold of the connection established with the local community. The reason for this is an immediate pressure of ever-changing exhibitions, a project-based focus, limited finances[13] and an insistence on innovation. In this situation, addressing participatory practice from a community building point of view can contribute to developing new more reliable ways of cultural action.

Rationalities of participation

In the following I address two rationalities in working with participation: the citizenship / empowerment vs societal transformation rationale. They are represented by art historian Claire Bishop (2006) and her three *agendas* and media researcher Nico Carpentier (2011) and his five *fields* of participation, respectively. Bishop's three

agendas each determine a reason and a form or modus. She claims that participation in the field of arts is allied to at least one of the following:

1. Activation, which "(…) concerns the desire to create an active subject, one who will be empowered by the experience of physical or symbolic participation."
2. Authorship, which concerns the distinction between singular and shared production; "collaborative creativity is therefore understood both to emerge from, and to produce, a more positive and non-hierarchical social model."
3. Crisis in community and collective responsibility; "One of the main impetuses behind participatory art has therefore been a restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning." (Bishop 2006: 12)

Bishop's three agendas help pinpoint the *how* and *why* of participation at cultural institutions. The agendas of "Activation" and "Authorship", respectively, are concerned with building citizen agency and with co-production as part hereof, while "Crisis in community and collective responsibility" stands as an analysis of "the world as it is" and furthermore an answer to why citizens should take part in participatory projects in terms of a call for re-creation of social bonds.

Nico Carpentier, on his side, states that "the concept of participation features in a surprising variety of frameworks, which have been transformed through an almost infinite number of materializations," and claims that there is a "social need for participation" (Carpentier 2011: 16). He connects participation to a broad, societal framework and divides it into: 1) democracy, 2) spatial planning, 3) development, 4) arts and museums, and 5) communications. I argue that all of them are relevant to museums. Whereas Bishop's 'agendas' are about means of citizen agency and express a rationale of citizenship as initiating social bonding and community-building, Carpentier's 'fields' are about the broader social context and a broader societal rationale. Whereas Bishop's 'agendas' demonstrate the challenges of participation, Carpentier's 'fields' contextualize them. Following another of Carpentier's definitions, the two rationalities can be said to relate to the distinction between micro- and macro-participation (Carpentier 2011: 17). Whereas the former is oriented towards subjectivities, social bonding and local communities, the latter is oriented towards broader societal issues and perspectives. Micro-participation bares similarities with the citizenship-oriented rationality, whereas macro-participation relates to participation on a larger scale –as a national democratic and social transformative project.

Even though participation has become a buzzword[14] and a must it also expresses an ambition on behalf of the museum/the cultural institution to be relevant to all groups of citizens and to the local communities. Good examples abroad are: the civil alliance, Citizens UK in London, who work towards a development of "(…) the capacity of the people to participate in the public life, enabling them to be involved in the decisions that affect them and those they love" (Citizens UK 2014: 3), or a movement-oriented organization such as Purpose.org[15], which focuses on participatory practices and community building at an international level. Both organizations focus on engagement and mobilization in a macro-participatory perspective. As Bishop argues, participation serves as a response to crisis in community, and the participatory element can create "a restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning" (Bishop 2006: 12). In this respect, participation benefits the development of local communities as well as the society at large besides creating a possibility to connect to new audiences. The project manager of Outreach Nørrebro, Sidsel Risted Staun, describes it the following way: "Museum of Copenhagen wishes to become an active, critical and reflexive mirror for citizens. Reaching out to the local communities will allow us to take part in creating a strong identity and sense of belonging for the citizens of

Copenhagen and Nørrebro" (Museum of Copenhagen 2013: 1).[16] In Outreach Nørrebro, the participant Havva Kocbay used his engagement to process the identity of Nørrebro and its citizens following the media coverage of the shooting of 19-year-old Osman Nuri Dogan in 2008, which led to Nørrebro being labelled as a warzone. In this context the museum's outreach enabled a minority group living in a stigmatized part of Copenhagen to make their voices heard, a role that is otherwise often held by social- and street-workers, thereby serving a purpose which transcends Museum of Copenhagen's goal of 'only' being "a well-known and respected authority on the history of the capital" (www.copenhagen.dk). Furthermore, through Kocbay's attempt to frame the community in a new way, he challenged the public view of the local community as a warzone and created a window through which the audience could view the community as more than that. Through the outreach projects and the community perspective, Museum of Copenhagen became spokesperson for a stigmatized community and thereby promoted citizenship as well as social development, I will argue. As the case demonstrates, the rationalities of participation here interweave and supplement each other as interdependent rationalities.

Citizenship is often understood as "membership of a legally constituted political community" (Delanty 2000: 4). Even though the term citizenship cannot be separated from its formal and legal origin, the kind of citizenship that is entailed through participatory practice is oriented towards active engagement, deliberative democracy and empowerment of citizens. For Bishop, empowerment and collective creativity are two methods of engendering participation. During the outreach projects, the empowerment aspect was present in the sense that the participants decided the relevance and significance of the content. This opened up both new challenges and new opportunities at the museum. New opinions and voices were involved in forging a development of the institution itself and creating space for "the story of self" as well as "the story of us". The outreach projects led to storytelling about "the self, us and now" on behalf of the participants and allowed them to narrate stories of "the world as it is" (Alinsky 1971: xix). Part of Outreach Nørrebro was a sub-project called "Meet your Neighbour" where local citizens shared stories about themselves, "the story of me", and about their relationship with their neighbours and community, "the story of us", providing an insight into the daily life, routines and networks of citizens, and it connected the stories to the larger community of Copenhagen and Danish society.

Seen from the community-perspective, the outreach projects gave the participants a common interest in communicating, and through their participation they each contributed to developing their community (Alinsky 1971: 120). The diversity of the participants led to diversity of content: an insight into religious celebrations, street art, and the life of a managing director of a bank are related to "(…) an acknowledgement of the fact, that the cohesion of civil society is not determined by its institutions but also by the extent to which the inhabitants perceive themselves as citizens rather than counter-citizens" (Korsgaard and Haas 2003: 6)[17]. By giving citizens an opportunity to express their perspective on e.g. Nørrebro as a warzone, the museum assists in creating a different discourse on subject, community and society. They can be said to transform their output from a strictly museological to a combination of museological and societal. The two exhibitions presented more diverse content than the museum would be able to find and expose on its own, which in turn opened up a different perspective on otherwise stigmatized communities. The participant's stories presented "stories of self", which where actualized through the community "story of us" as well as the "story of now".

Conclusion

In this article I have highlighted rationalities of and arguments in favour of engaging in participatory practices: a citizenship-oriented and a society-oriented. The two rationalities are connected to a determination to rethink the role of the modern cultural institution. Not in an imperative way, but rethinking the institution's potential in terms of local communities as well as broader societal issues. Institutions such as Museum of Copenhagen strive

to become more relevant to their audience and provide a space for civic engagement.[18] They aspire to become institutions *for* and *about* citizens to be developed *with* citizens. The odds are stacked against by the project-based reality of present-day public institutions, and I have introduced the community perspective as a transformative instrument. A perspective that has already been partly taken up by Museum of Copenhagen and in the two outreach projects. I suggest that the community perspective can be taken further to enable cultural institutions to acquire a more active, political role without overruling traditional museum practice or the necessity of economic and quantitative guidelines.

Bionotes
Johan Kjærulff Rasmussen, MA in Aesthetics & Culture, is currently engaged in a joint Ph.D.-project on participatory culture at cultural institutions (2014-2017). The project is a result of collaboration between Aesthetics & Culture at Aarhus University and Museum of Copenhagen.

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[1] This point is associated to institutional benefits of participation, which I will only describe superficially in this article.

[2] Author's translation.

[3] Both for visitors and institutions short-term projects are just as relevant as long term, but they invite other considerations and approaches than those in focus in this article. As Nina Simon points out, (museum) audiences seek different experiences: some are creators while others prefer critics, collectors, joiners, spectators or inactives. It is not my intention to rank long term engagement above a short tem project with the possibility of a quick exit.

[4] Currently people with an academic education make up/comprise only 8% of the population, yet representing more than 30% of museum visitors.

[5] The two projects were conducted before I started the Ph.D. Therefore the empirical data is gathered from the museums data and interviews with participants and project leaders.

[6] The article was written before the temporary closure of the museum. Museum of Copenhagen is currently preparing to move to a new address at the center of Copenhagen. Scheduled opening is spring 2018.

[7] E.g. the program *GrowFlow,* which is an educational program and collaboration between five elementary schools, Gastro-Science students from Copenhagen Hospitality Collage and Museum of Copenhagen, arose from the exhibition "Urban Nature".

[8] Author's translation.

[9] Author's translation.

[10] Author's translation.

[11] Solei Aydin describes it in the following way in his book on angry, young men: "Citizenship can be turned to counter-citizenship through a variety of factors such as a lack of education, negative expectations and stigmatisation by living in communities which are generally labelled as a problem in the public debate" (Aydin 2011: 11).

[12] According to the Danish Museum Act §2.

[13] Music festivals are one of the few generic exceptions in the Danish cultural landscape. Their existence is often based on voluntary engagement, inclusion of the audience, recurring events, and one (or at least very few) yearly events.

[14] A tendency which, among many other publications, reveals itself through publications such as: Museums. Citizens and Sustainable Solutions (Lundgaard & Jensen 2015) and Museer –viden, demokrati og transformation (Lundgaard & Jensen 2014).

[15] Purpose.org aims to tackle some of the world's big problems, and among their approaches, they state, "We believe that lasting change doesn't start at the top – it begins when everyday people, acting together, gain a sense of their own agency." (www.purpose.org).

[16] Author's translation.

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[17] Author's translation.

[18] As public opinion often is regarding culture-historical museums.