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# Editorial: Experiencing participation

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While participation unfolds as an object of study in its own right across a variety of social practices, sectors, and disciplines, its experiential dimensions are underexplored. This is the case both when we understand the concept 'experience' as a demarcated intense and sensuous state/rupture and when we use it to designate the various ways that humans perceive and make sense of the world around them. Since the influential work by Sherry Arnstein (1969) and Carole Pateman (1979), much of the research on participation has dealt with how democratic *values* or *motivations* are met (or not met) in participatory initiatives within fields like public services, policy, digital media, and cultural institutions. Here we find categorizations like full/partial or true/fake participation, as well as critiques of participation for being either symbolic, tokenistic, or manipulative – or, as in Nico Carpentier's distinction between access, interaction, and participation, not qualifying as participation at all (2012). Much of the research has developed conceptual frameworks on the different spaces, power imbalances, and framings of citizens in participatory *processes* (White, 1996; Cornwall, 2008; Kelty et al., 2015), or more practical guidelines on how to facilitate these processes in ways that pay attention to citizens' interests and voices (Simon, 2010, 2016; Blanche, 2014). Alongside these investigations, some studies have focused on the *outcomes* of participation: the transformation of traditional institutional practices and discourses, and the challenge of established distinctions between professional and citizen, or between expert and lay knowledge (Byrne & Morgan, 2018; Eriksson, Stage & Valtysson, 2020).

Processes and outcomes, as well as consensual or dissensual values, are of course also experienced by the people who face, produce, and/or facilitate them. But much research is based on the point of view – and, to whatever extent they are realized, the participatory intentions – of institutions, organizers, experts, and professionals rather than on the perspective of citizen participants. Theories and empirical studies rarely explore the complex interplay between participation and experience. We therefore know little about, for instance, the differences between the experience of participating in a concert audience or crowd and the experience of a shift in power balance and influence – or between the experience of top-down facilitated and bottom-up self-organized participation. We also have limited knowledge of how the experience of participation changes over time, or of how various experiences of participation link to one another. Does repeated experience of participation, for instance, create expert participants? And what are the differences between participatory experiences that take place in museums, political movements, local neighborhoods, or social media publics?

This special issue of *Conjunctions* focuses on these experiential dimensions of participation. A major inspiration here is Christopher Kelty's book, *The Participant* (2019). Kelty emphasizes that participation requires individuals who are freely choosing to take part in meaningful collectives whose sum is greater than their parts and whose "power is expected to be greater than that of its members" (Kelty, 2019, p. 17). In that respect, participation relies on autonomous individuals, even

though the "experience of participation is immediate, affective, emotional and more than (or other than) individual" (Kelty, 2019, p. 18). To be experienced as meaningful, therefore, participation cannot follow a script or a set design, but requires "a feeling of something like ownership or belonging – not merely to be part of a collective, but to be that collective, or more precisely, to be an instance of a collective" (Kelty, 2019, p. 19).

From a different, mainly empirical, angle, Ellie Brodie et al. (2011) contributed research on how and why people participate. Working from the perspective of individuals and exploring how and why their participation begins, continues, or ends, Brodie et al. argue that sustained participation depends on the quality of the experience of participation, including the extent to which participants "feel they are making a difference and having an impact, whether they feel their contribution is valued, and the quality of the social bonds with other participants" (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 6).

In a similar vein, Kelty explains the sense of belonging and ownership and meaningfulness as follows:

> The experience of participation must include the sense not only of having spoken, but of *having been heard*. It must include the feeling not only of having voted, but of seeing the collective of those who voted with you emerge as an entity; it must include not only the moment of deciding, but the deep, affective sense that the decision is recognized by everyone involved as having been made, and legitimately so; it must emerge from a moment of radical equality, not from the dictates and commands of another (Kelty, 2019, p. 18).

One does not need to study contemporary participatory practices for very long to realize that this experience of participation does not always happen. In our context, however, this sense of meaningful belonging can be used to outline how we delimit the experience of participation. In line with Kelty, we understand it first as voluntary. Having your data extracted on social media platforms is thus not (an experience of) participation, as it is not voluntary and can happen behind your back. Second, we understand it as depending on individuals who feel they have become part of a collectivity or a connectivity. Going to a concert can be experienced as deeply affective and meaningful participation if one feels connected to the other audience members in an entity that influences both one's own feeling of taking part and the concert as a whole; but it can also make one feel lonely, disconnected from the others on and off stage. Third, the emphasis on collectivity does not, however, imply that experiences of collective connectedness automatically foster experiences of participation. Inspired by Kelty, we assert that participation is ambiguously individual and collective *at the same time*, and thus also entails the experience of having a voice and of being heard. Here it is important to highlight the difference between intentions and experiences of participation. Even when a process is organized with the best intention of involving users or citizens as full participants, the experience of participation may be absent or poor if one or more individuals (feel that they) are not listened to or recognized as equal parts of the collective.

Summing up, the experience of participation is characterized by being at the same time *voluntary*, *collective,* and *political* in the sense that the individual can influence the participatory process that he or she has chosen to engage with.

## DIMENSIONS OF THE PARTICIPATORY EXPERIENCE

The articles in this special issue explore different dimensions and nuances of how participation is experienced. Here, we briefly outline the most important of these dimensions and how the articles approach them. Our focus will be on how participatory experiences involve *temporalities*,

*spaces/materialities*, *subjects*, *intentions/expectations*, *affective qualities*, *sociopolitical aspects, and organization*. These seven dimensions are, we suggest, important foci for an analysis of experiences of participation.

***1. The temporalities of the participatory experience***

As we explore the experience of participation, it can be important to clarify its temporal organization. To what extent do experiences lead to or overlap with a participatory process, or be as the outcome of a participatory process? Does an experience trigger a desire for participation? Is participation the experience itself? How do experiences of processes and outcomes relate to each other? An aspect of this can also be how the temporal duration of participation affects the experience of being involved. In the special issue this question is investigated in Holm's article on the tensions between different temporal frameworks (duration vs. project) in the creation of participatory art projects.

***2. The spaces and materialities of the participatory experience***

An experiential analysis can include a focus on how spaces and materialities are arranged and used in ways that – intended or not – set off or block specific experiences. Participatory theory often focuses on relations between subjects (e.g. between participants, or between facilitators/ institutions and participating citizens). The spatial and material situatedness of a participatory process can, however, be a crucial element in shaping participatory experiences. This is the case with Trapholt Museum's craft-based participatory practice, where exhibiting at the museum is very important to the participants (Eriksson & Sørensen, 2023) and where the participatory experience is also about connecting with and being moved by the artistic dogmas and the material intensities and embodied experiences of stitching (see Sørensen's article). The issues of location and material tools for participation also figure importantly in Hope and Mulhall's article, where the authors use a card game to evaluate the experiences of participation in a variety of geographically and culturally diverse locations, and where a limited time and budget for evaluation affect both process and outcome. A further aspect in understanding the importance of materialities in the experience of participation is to explore how the use of particular technologies can in itself shape experiences: for instance, when gaining access to participatory processes involves a task that is demanding because it relies on high levels of cultural and economic capital (see Liddell's article on DAO technologies). In that respect, technologies can block or challenge the democratic potentials of specific types of audience experience.

***3. The subjects of the participatory experience***

Another fundamental question is to account for the actual experiential subjects in relation to a participatory process – and perhaps also to account for how different subjects (e.g. facilitators vs. users) can have very different, but also sometimes shared experiences. This poses two important methodological questions: whose experiences are we exploring as researchers, and how? One alternative (taken by Gigante in her article) is to focus on the experiences of the museum directors and public programmers, and through interviews gain a rich understanding of institutional approaches, visions, and tactics, but omit the experiences of the local communities. Another (taken by Sørensen in her article) is to base the analysis on observations, interviews with participants, and creative participatory productions to gain deep and nuanced insight into the experiences of the participants while neglecting those of other subjects such as the artist and the museum professionals. Yet another (as with Hope and Mulhall) is to try to cover participants, artists, and staff in the cultural institutions in a participatory evaluation of participation, but end up limiting the range in other ways. A further relevant question here is whether and how to include the experiences of people who at some point in the process chose not to participate.

***4. The intended vs. expected participatory experience***

Another approach to experiential analysis of participation is to focus on the overlaps and/or mismatches between the experiences that participants and facilitators hope to have or create and the experiences that are actually produced in relation to the processes or outcomes of participation. This aspect is particularly important if intentions/expectations differ within or between organizers and participants (see White, 1996) – or if participants expect and want vertical participation, but only have the possibility of horizontal participation (see below and Eriksson, Reestorff & Stage, 2018). The intended experience is, however, not necessarily a simple thing to define. Different stakeholders can easily disagree about the aim of a participatory process, and the experience is therefore often the result of negotiations that take place at the intersection between conflicting intentions and frameworks (see e.g. Holm's article on how expectations of funders, institutions, and artists can differ).

A specific question addressed in Særkjær's article is to what extent these negotiations happen or decisions are taken without involving all the stakeholders. In Særkjær's case study, museum users were invited to participate by choosing and describing an artwork from the museum collection that meant something special to them. Some of the responses and personal descriptions were then displayed, thereby creating a more polyphonic exhibition space. But the users who participated were neither involved in nor aware of this decision, and as Særkjær does, one can ask whether it makes sense to talk about participation when it is not experienced as such by its participants.

***5. The affective qualities of the participatory experience***

Important in an analysis of participation as experience is also the qualities of the experience in question, and how these might change or evolve during a process. Is the experience positive or negative, intense and all-encompassing or quick and fleeting? Does it move from enthusiasm to boredom or anger, is the experience saturated with cynicism or hope? The felt, embodied, and sensuous experiences of participation in a specific participatory art project are the focus of Sørensen's article, which also calls on the theoretical level for a more embodied, material, and affective understanding of participation. From a different angle, Sitzia's article points out the importance of institutions recognizing and dealing with dissent and affect in processes of co-creation. When participants are brought together to create and negotiate an exhibition narrative, as they were in the *VIH / Sida, l'épidémie n'est pas finie!* exhibition at the Mucem in Marseille, emotion, dissent, and conflict are part of the process (see Sitzia's article).

Moreover, some participatory projects try to change how participants feel about particular aspects of the world – their neighborhood, the climate, minorities. The attempt to challenge and modulate affective attachments is therefore an interesting starting point for an experiential analysis: do participants sense and relate affectively to the world in new ways? Is the experience of being creative in a collective transformative in any way, and does it produce a new sense of belonging and ownership? How are changes brought about in the process? An experiential analysis of affective attachment can, however, also focus on how participatory processes can end up reproducing existing affective logics (e.g. the feeling that authorities are only superficially interested in the opinion of citizens).

***6. The sociopolitical aspects of the participatory experience***

Some participatory processes focus primarily on building collectives, offering (horizontal) experiences of being part of communities and creating bonds and bridges between individuals and group. Other participatory initiatives gather people to create more explicitly political (vertical) experiences of co-decision, protest, and citizen control. An experiential approach to participation can therefore also focus on how vertical and horizontal forms of participation respond to and

enact different experiences. Such an analysis can, as with Sitzia's contribution, focus on vertical experiences of participation, such as emancipation and empowerment when activists are invited into museums to co-create an exhibition. Depending on the nature of the participatory projects, it can thus make sense to focus on one of the dimensions in the analysis; but it will often be relevant to explore both horizontal and vertical experiences, and the intermingling between the two, in a participatory process.

***7. The organization in relation to the participatory experience***

A final analytical focus could be on the experiential implications of different forms of organization and participatory formats. A specific question here regards the difference between the experience of facilitated participation and more spontaneous or self-organized forms of participation. While research suggests that facilitated participation may be experienced as less significant or important than self-organized forms (Cornwall, 2004), it is however a widespread form of participation. This is for instance the case in the cultural sector, and how this affects experiences is relevant in the context of socially engaged or activist practices whereby some museums try to avoid or actively challenge the traditional hierarchies between facilitator and participant (see Sitzia's and Gigante's contributions). In Gigante's case study of three neighborhood assemblies, the museums dealt with this by co-authoring the local cultural environment as one among many fellow cultural citizens.

## ARTICLES IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The seven articles presented here explore diverse aspects of experiential dimensions of participation, drawing on different methodological approaches and theoretical and empirical foundations. The first and second articles examine the participatory experiences of the institution and the invited participants, respectively, within the context of community-engaged museum work. Similarly, articles three and four center on museum participation, exploring how the use of participatory formats and methods – namely a dialogical approach, and new technologies such as blockchain and DAOs – can potentially challenge institutional authority. The fifth and sixth articles examine experiential aspects of participatory art practices, focusing on the affective and temporal dimensions, respectively. The seventh and final article discusses specific challenges related to researching the meanings and experiences of participation using participatory methods.

The first article – "'Never enough, never perfect': Participatory activist practice in the museum" by Emilie Sitzia – explores a participatory project involving activists at the Museum of Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean (the Mucem) in Marseille. Analyzing the activist participants' experiences of co-creating the exhibition *VIH / Sida, l'épidémie n'est pas finie!* [HIV/AIDS, the epidemic is not over!], the article asks what museums can learn from involving and working with activist participants in a co-creational setting. A particular focus is the political dimension of this participatory experience. By posing analytical questions concerning the experience of polyvocality, conflict, emancipation, empowerment, and also exclusion, the article gives insight into the challenges museums face when working with activists, as well as what 'museum activism' might entail.

In the second article, "The neighborhood assembly in the art museum: Practicing cultural citizenship," Lucrezia Gigante asks how art museums can participate politically in their local surroundings through neighborhood assemblies. She investigates three examples of museum-based neighborhood assemblies: the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Spain), the Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende (Chile), and Whitechapel Gallery (UK). Based on interviews with the directors and public programmers of these museums, she analyzes the experience of participation in the assemblies from the institutional perspective, addressing both the strategic

vision underpinning the assemblies and what happens to institutional hierarchies when the museum seeks to enter an experience of participation as a fellow cultural citizen. Discussing the democratic potential and the limitations of the assemblies, Gigante argues that they can function as a practice of participatory cultural citizenship.

The third article, by Christiane Særkjær – "Visitor voices in the museum space: Sharing art experiences as a dialogic mode in museum communication" – explores dialogue as a form of participation that can lead to a polyphonic museum experience. The article analyzes and discusses an experiment conducted at Randers Art Museum, Denmark, where museum visitors were asked to comment on their experiences of artworks from the museum's collection. These comments were subsequently shared by the museum in the exhibition space. Særkjær analyzes how these visitors' alternative descriptions of artworks had the potential to challenge an authoritative museum voice when shared in the exhibition space, but she also discusses the participatory limitations of the experiment. Based on the analysis, the article offers concrete recommendations to enhance visitor-oriented and dialogical strategies in museum communication.

In the fourth article, "Tokenistic behavior? Exploring blockchain and DAOs as a participatory practice in museums," Frances Liddell explores if/how new digital technologies including blockchains, smart contracts, and decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs), can change and support audience participation and democratization experiments in the museum sector. The article investigates the democratic possibilities these technologies offer in decentering institutional and curatorial authority and creating more inclusive and open processes of audience participation. DAO technologies have been presented as informing a more autonomous, self-managing, transparent, and more efficient online organization that could shape how users participate, communicate with one another, and experience decision-making processes; but Liddell argues that these technologies also complicate issues of democracy, access, and shared authority. Engagement with DAO technologies demands a high level of technological interest/knowledge and attracts certain (rather specialized) audiences; they also sometimes rely on participants being willing to pay for memberships. The paper concludes that these technologies are capable of offering more evidence-based participation, but that they also struggle with high cultural and economic barriers to access.

The fifth article – "Participation and affect intertwined: Linking participatory experiences and affective intensities in a collaborative craft-based art project" by Tina Louise Hove Sørensen – investigates the collaborative craft-based art project *Data Mirror* at Trapholt Museum of Art and Design in Denmark. Based on interviews, observations, and creative participatory productions, she analyzes how the textile making practice and the materials in the *Data Mirror* project affected the participatory experience. The article addresses both theoretical and analytical levels by linking theories of affect and participation. In a close analysis of (1) material intensities and embodied experiences of stitching and (2) felt potential and creative capacity, Sørensen calls for a more embodied, material, and affective understanding of the horizontal and vertical dimensions of participation. She concludes by suggesting three possible ways to approach the material and affective dimensions of participatory processes: being attentive to *participatory intensity*, approaching horizontal participation as both human and nonhuman relations, and recognizing affective agency as a dimension of vertical participation.

In the sixth article – "Out of time: The experience of contrasting temporal frameworks in participatory art" – Ditte Vilstrup Holm argues that participatory art is underscored by two contrasting temporal frameworks. The first of these is the long-term, durational approaches that are internalized by artists as an ethical and political obligation toward participants; the second is the short-term, temporary framework that typically comes with project funding, and that steers the project toward delivery of target outcomes. To show the tensions to which these contrasting temporal frameworks

can give rise, Holm analyzes the development of a participatory art project in Copenhagen's South Harbor. The article emphasizes how tensions arose in response to delimitations of some aspects of the project, such as who constituted the creative team, what the task was before them, and what was the contribution the project was expected to make to the community. By emphasizing the tensions arising from contrasting temporal frameworks, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the experience of creating participatory art, and to problematizing the question of time for participatory art.

In the final article of this issue, "Cards on the Table: Critical reflections on a participatory research method," Sophie Hope and Henry Mulhall critically reflect on the limitations and challenges of using *Cards on the Table* (COTT), a participatory research method used to evaluate the experiences of participation in art projects. The empirical focus of the article is the use of COTT in the evaluation of a Creative Europe program, BE PART (2019–2023). The evaluation aimed to understand the experiences and meanings of participation from the perspectives of the citizens, the artists, and the staff. Drawing on their own experiences of applying COTT in multiple locations and contexts, the authors discuss specific challenges in researching the meanings and experiences of participation using participatory methods. They particularly highlight the tensions between their desire to use participatory, action-oriented methods and the reality of implementing those methods within a geographically dispersed network with limited time and budget.

With this special issue we aim to train our focus on and offer new approaches to understanding the experiential dimensions of participation, which have often languished in the shadows of scholarly inquiry. Our hope is that the articles in this issue will inspire practitioners, researchers, and institutions to reflect on and explore how different participatory formats and settings can create different kinds of experiences — with diverse and varying degrees of potential to transform how we sense, perceive, and engage with the world around us.

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