

Visitor voices in the museum space: sharing art experiences as a dialogic mode in museum communication

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Abstract The article takes its point of departure in an experiment conducted at Randers Art Museum, Denmark, in which museum visitors were asked to comment on their experiences with artworks from the museum's collection. Their comments that were subsequently shared by the museum in the exhibition space.

By examining dialogue as a form of participation, the author analyses and discusses how this particular participatory experiment created a dialogical and polyphonic museum experience in which the institutional voice was complemented and even challenged.

The article contributes to the field of research on participation by connecting theoretical and practical levels through an experimental methodological approach. It presents concrete recommendations for enhancing visitor-oriented and dialogical strategies in museum communication. Moreover, it demonstrates that the experimental approach can be very useful for both researchers and museum professionals, as long as they reflect on both the limitations and the possibilities of specific experiments like this one.

Keywords Dialogue, participation, museology, experimental approach, visitor experience.

INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to democratise museums and make them more inclusive and relevant both for the individual and to the surrounding society, a growing interest in dialogue, engagement, and participation has been observed in recent decades (e.g., Simon, 2010, 2016; Black, 2012; McSweeney and Kavanagh, 2016; Eriksson et al., 2019). Part of the 'participatory agenda' in museums has been an increasing focus on incorporating visitors' experiences, opinions, and reactions into exhibition design (Nashashibi, 2003; McLean, 2003; McLean and Pollock, 2007; Black, 2012; Hill et al., 2016).¹ Even though it is possible to identify a shift towards more visitor-oriented approaches in museums and their communication (Rasmussen, 2016), such approaches are typically formulated at the cultural, political, or strategic level (Kortbæk et al., 2016, p. 6) and often tend to be short-term (Lynch, 2011). This presents challenges when it comes to actual implementation and long-term impact, just as it means that not all voices find representation (Jancovich, 2015, p. 3).

The question of voices and representation is central to this article, which takes its point of departure in an experiment conducted at Randers Art Museum, Denmark. In the experiment, museum visitors were asked to comment on their experiences with artworks from the museum's collection, and their comments were subsequently shared by the museum in the exhibition space. The aim of the article is to analyse and discuss how this participatory experiment, involving the integration of visitor voices in the exhibition, created a dialogical and polyphonic museum experience in which the institutional voice was complemented, even challenged.

Following a brief presentation of the experiment and an outline of the experimental approach, I analyse the experiment using Bakhtin's framework, viewing it as a form of dialogue in which meaning

emerges in the encounter between voices. Drawing on Dysthe and Kelty, I then illustrate how this dialogue constitutes a form of participation that on the one hand fostered a more dynamic and dialogical form of museum communication, but on the other hand was also influenced by power structures, as argued by Carpentier and Sternfeld.

Subsequently, I discuss some of the possibilities and limitations inherent in the experimental method underpinning the experiment. The discussion culminates in three concrete recommendations for more visitor-oriented strategies and further development, emphasising that the insights presented here have only been made possible by the unique interplay between reflection and action inherent in the experimental method. Through this approach, the article thus contributes to the field of research on participation by connecting theoretical and practical levels.

EXPERIMENT AND EXPERIMENTAL METHODOLOGY

The experiment with visitor voices analysed and discussed in this article was part of my PhD project (Særkjær, 2021),² during which I was affiliated with Randers Art Museum (Randers Kunstmuseum), a small museum in Jutland, central Denmark. In collaboration with the museum, I developed and tried out a series of communication experiments between 2017 and 2019, with particular focus on forms of participation within the museum space and how these might contribute to cultural citizenship and affect the relationship between visitors, the institution, and the artworks (for more details, see Særkjær, 2021). One of the experiments was a small popup art museum curated for a week in August 2017, in which I developed a ‘ballot’ encouraging visitors to vote (anonymously) for an artwork from the museum collection that meant something special to them.

The ballot contained the following text: “Which artwork at Randers Art Museum means the most to you? Why? Tell us why you think this work is special? Does it put you in a very special mood? Do you think of a particular story? Write or draw and share it with us!” (One visitor’s response to the ballot is illustrated below and translated in the endnotes³).

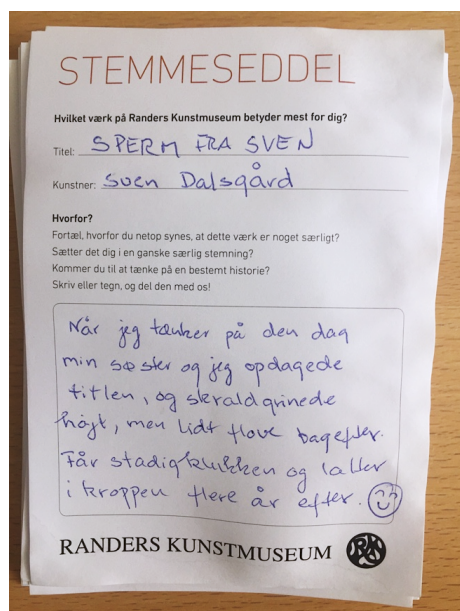


Fig. 1. Example of a ballot. Photo: Særkjær

The idea behind the ballot was to gain knowledge about the visitors' experiences of the museum collection, and to activate the visitors and strengthen their sense of ownership of the museum's collection of artworks (Hill et al., 2016, p. 536). The ballot box turned out to be a popular activity in the popup museum and was therefore continued in the museum afterwards. As of April 26, 2019, 222 people had voted for an artwork and more than 80 percent had taken up the invitation to attach a comment or a drawing to their vote, thus offering a glimpse of the considerations behind their experiences and choices. Based on this, the museum and I decided to use the inputs as an element in the museum's communication. In April 2019, I therefore picked out a small selection of comments to hang in the exhibition space next to the works they referred to.⁴ The aim in sharing the comments was to integrate a broader range of voices in the museum's communication than that of the institution alone, and to invite visitors into a more dialogic, inclusive, and reflective museum experience.

The intervention was inspired by an experimental methodological approach. The research design was created through an iterative process in which the institutional context acted as a framework that was disturbed by my research interventions, which in turn were affected by the participating visitors. This approach is closely related to experimental and design-oriented anthropology (Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Roepstorff, 2011; Gunn et al., 2013),⁵ which includes more interventional forms of fieldwork that operate through "iterative cycles of reflection and action (...)" (Gunn et al., 2013, p. 11) and in which uncertainty and different relations play an essential role in both process and outcome (Roepstorff, 2011, p. 139, p. 146). A key aspect of experimentation as a methodological approach is to acknowledge and reflect on limitations, successes, and failures, and later in the article I will analyse and discuss these in relation to the experiment at Randers Art Museum, just as I will reflect on how my specific approach impacted the participatory potentials of the experiment.

An experimental approach can also be linked to new movements within museology, where fields within curation and *exhibitions as research* in particular have used the term *experiment* (Macdonald and Basu, 2007; Coombes and Phillips, 2015; Bjerregaard, 2020). As researchers in museum studies Annie Coombes and Ruth Phillips write in their introduction to *Museum Transformations* (2015):

(...) we can think of museum exhibitions as 'laboratories' for experimentation and the development of new practices. Both in institutions inherited from the heyday of Western imperial power and in more recent institutions that adapt the museum model to new and socially activist projects, this culture of experimentation is expanding older definitions of 'the museum' (Coombes and Phillips, 2015, p. 35).

This connection of the experimental with new ways of understanding and developing the museum and its practices aligns well with the intention of the experiment presented here.

THE DIALOGIC MUSEUM SPACE

The concept of dialogue is often used in relation to museums and their efforts to be inclusive and relevant for their visitors and society, both in relation to museum communication and to educational practices (e.g., Dysthe, 2003, 2012; McKay and Monteverde, 2003; Rung, 2013; Rasmussen, 2016). The concept of dialogue also features in larger museological discussions on representation, inclusion, and diversity (e.g., Lynch and Alberti, 2010).

In this article, I draw on philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogue. Particularly in a Scandinavian museum context, as introduced by learning theorist Olga Dysthe, Bakhtin serves as an inspiration for museum communication. Randers Art Museum already employed the concept of dialogue in various communication and educational formats, and it is

explicitly mentioned in their strategy (Særkjær, 2021, p. 36), which was another reason why it was interesting to explore further.

According to Bakhtin, dialogue is both a very broad and a very complex concept, since it covers both oral and written dialogue, as well as inner dialogue and dialogic relationships between texts (intertextuality) (Dysthe, 2003, p. 20). In that sense, Bakhtin understands all communication as being dialogical and fundamental to human existence (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293).

To define a speaker, Bakhtin uses the term *voice* in both a concrete and an abstract sense. The individual's voice is an essential part of a dialogue, stemming as it does not only from the individual's thoughts, but from the entire personality (Ibid.). When a voice 'speaks,' the individual gets the opportunity to test their version, based on their point of view and characterised by cultural and personal experiences (Dysthe, 2012, p. 60).

Bakhtin's interpretation of dialogue differs from the classic communication model in that here meaning is not simply 'transmitted.' Rather, it constantly fluctuates between what is said and what will be said (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 280), a characteristic that makes the Bakhtinian notion of dialogue particularly relevant to more engaging forms of museum communication. The dialogue becomes the constitutive element between the self and *the other* (Dysthe, 2012: 58), a place where meaning does not pre-exist, but emerges in an ongoing interaction between listening and responding (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 119f). The development of a dialogue takes place through meaningful negotiations between divergent voices, through which the potential for new knowledge emerges. In Bakhtin's concept of dialogue there is accordingly a focus on the polyphonic and the heterogeneous, on tensions and dissent, and the ideal of the dialogue is therefore not necessarily consensus. For Bakhtin, it is important to problematise the monological and the authoritative (Bakhtin, 1984, p. xxii). Within an authoritative discourse there is less room to challenge the framework and to be creative (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 343). This can result in a static state, an absence of the development that is a prerequisite for a true, living dialogue.

On the basis of these arguments, I consider dialogue as conceptualised by Bakhtin to be an important aspect of participation. The dialogic interaction between different voices and the acknowledgment of dissensus closely parallel the ideals that see participation in museums as inviting, diverse, and democratic (Simon, 2010; McSweeney and Kavanagh, 2016). In my analysis, I therefore refer to aspects of Bakhtin's concept of dialogue, specifically those related to polyphony and the challenge to an authoritative discourse.

Turning to the experiment analysed in this article, I will argue that several different forms of dialogue can be identified and that these distinct forms were discernible on both individual, institutional, and social levels. The individual level was strongly linked to a personal aesthetic experience (Eriksson, 2019): in Hill et al.'s words, the activation of a visitor in an artwork (2016, p. 236). The institutional and social levels were activated through sharing, offering not only an aesthetic experience but also potentially engagement with *others*, as the visitor comments were now rendered visible and displayed next to the artworks they referred to. In the following paragraphs I will mainly focus on the institutional and the social levels, as their collective aspects are especially relevant for the focus of this article on polyphonic dialogue as a form of participation.

Polyphonic museum walls?

One reason why the impact of more polyphonic wall texts in exhibition design is important to test is that wall texts represent the museum as a learning institution (Nashashibi, 2003, p. 21); they also, however, co-define the narratives that a museum wants to pass on to visitors. Communication researchers Palmyre Pierroux and Anne Qvale write that texts in exhibition spaces usually belong to the domain of the institution. Their permanent presence is "part of the aesthetic, scholarly and contextual experience of exhibition rooms, whether the public chooses to read them or not" (2019,

p. 40). Wall texts, as curator Salwa Mikdadi Nashashibi points out, are the single “disembodied voice of the museum” (Nashashibi, 2003, p. 21). Museum practitioner Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett similarly describes them as surrogates for an absent guide (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 32).

When the comments from the ballots were put up in the exhibition space, something happened with the ever-present institutional voice. For the visitors, the institutional voice no longer appeared exclusively monological. Compared to the existing wall texts in the exhibition space at Randers Art Museum, the visitors’ responses to the ballots presented a range of different perspectives on the artworks. They spanned interpretation/analysis, (quality) judgments, technical references, bodily impressions, personal memories, and stories related to something social or individual. Rather than presenting the larger (art) historical or technical context and narrative, as did the museum’s own wall texts, the comments highlighted the individual artworks. The ballots were also written in quite different language: many of them were much more informal and reflective than the institutional texts, demonstrating creativity and thus challenging a more authoritative discourse (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 343). The content of the ballots thus not only offered perspectives on possible ‘readings’ of the artworks in Randers Art Museum: they also showed how the voters, through various different forms of reflection, adding completely new meanings and references to the artworks. Displayed side by side, the comments by the museum visitors engaged in a written dialogue with the institutional voice, potentially drawing a further visitor viewing the artwork into a conversation.

The ballot comments indicated that the museum visitors were experiencing and articulating themselves differently from the written communication they encountered in the museum, but also that they had come with various different interests and motivations (Falk, 2009, p. 89). In her PhD thesis (2013), museum practitioner Mette Houlberg Rung examined museum visitors’ conversations about artworks as they walked around in the exhibition spaces at the National Gallery of Denmark (SMK). Rung found that it was usually personal or private associations that started a conversation about a specific artwork, and that visitors frequently focused on a single work rather than the overall narrative presented in the wall texts at SMK (Rung, 2013, p. 189). The content of the ballots in the Randers Art Museum experiment supports both Rung’s observations and Bakhtin’s idea of voice, as the comments showed that the voters were bringing their own narratives and personalities to the encounter. Every comment was individual, and in writing their comment, the voters got the opportunity to test their experience and start a dialogue both with the chosen artwork and with the museum narratives.

Please remove the visitor comments!

While the analysis above addressed the dialogues between the voters, the artworks, and the institution, this section will focus on the dialogue among the visitors. With the comments shared in the exhibition space, the visitors were invited to become part of a broader dialogue between different voices. A part of this took the form of an *indirect* encounter between a previous and a present visitor: as in a teaching situation, it became possible to use someone else’s speech as a tool for reflection and a starting point for new thoughts of one’s own (Larsen and Løssing, 2011, p. 190). Once the ballot comments were on display in the exhibition space, it was no longer only the institution that was aware of multiple and potentially diverging interpretations of the artworks. In the resultant polyphony, new visitors themselves could connect different voices by reading the wall texts and the comments and relating them to (or distancing them from) their own reflections, thus entering into new dialogues. They became active participants in creating meaning, situated in the space between listening and responding. It was in this moment that the voice of the curator could become one of *several* voices, instead of being the only sender of *a* message. Equally, the visitor was invited to change from being a recipient to being one of the partners in the dialogue. But how did the visitors experience it?

Something interesting caught my eye in the Danish national user survey for Randers Art Museum 2019.⁶ In response to the question: “How could the museum make your museum experience better?” one of the respondents wrote [my translation]:

If the museum removed the public statements written in red⁷ around the artworks. They disturb my experience and the possibility of immersion. On the other hand, the introductory theme texts in each room are exemplary: short and clear!

This comment is interesting for several reasons. From a museum experience perspective, it underlines the point that museum visits are influenced by individual preferences and expectations (Falk, 2009). This visitor clearly appreciated the opportunity for personal immersion and for accessing professional knowledge about art. From a dialogical perspective, it emphasises how comments can disrupt a visitor’s experience, and how other voices than one’s own and that of the institution could cause disagreement. While it is unfortunate that the respondent disliked the comments, it could be argued that this comment pointed to the success of the aim of raising awareness of other voices. Perhaps, with Bakhtin, it could even be argued that the statement makes a form of dissent visible and that this is important for a living dialogue.

Museum visits are often made in someone else’s company, typically with someone you already know (Danish Ministry of Culture, 2019), whose preferences and attitudes you might to some extent share. Making other voices visible through a display of visitor comments then becomes a way of expanding the dialogue so that it transcends institutional wall texts or the person you know. It then becomes an encounter with a stranger who cannot be immediately identified. A visitor comment might even be a prompt for wonder, given that people are unlikely to experience a given artwork in the same way. Thus, the visibility of visitor voices potentially creates awareness of diversity.

Bakhtin argues that words are always connected to meanings from previous conversations and utterances (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 291f), as language contains culturally conditioned components (Ibid., p. 290f). Visiting a museum potentially involves encountering an ‘unknown’ language, which you must be able to interpret into your own context. On this view, the visitors’ background will affect the way they experience not only the museum communication, but also the participation itself (Høffding et al., 2020). Polyvocality can thus be a way of making room for cultural and linguistic diversity, which to some extent manifests itself in the various dialogues that the sharing of the ballots to a wider audience creates. It thus has the potential to initiate new processes of recognition, a subject to which I will return below.

According to Olga Dysthe, for voices simply to exist at the same time is not enough to constitute dialogue (Dysthe, 2012, p. 61). Dialogue comes truly into being when ideas are tested in the confrontation *between* voices. In the context of the experiment in Randers Art Museum, it is a matter for discussion whether this confrontation was clear enough. It was also a methodological limitation of the experiment that data was never gathered in the exhibition space on visitors’ experience of the ballot comments.

SHARING ART EXPERIENCES AS PARTICIPATION... BUT NOT EXPERIENCING IT?

In the foregoing, I have presented various perspectives on dialogue within the experiment in Randers Art Museum; drawing on Bakhtin, I have argued that dialogue can be seen as a form of participation. In the following I will discuss the experiment in relation to more specific theories of participation. In so doing, I will strengthen the links between the concepts of dialogue and participation, but also add new perspectives and gain a deeper understanding of the participatory limitations and failures inherent in the experiment.

Participation and institutional power

In showing how the voters' alternative descriptions of artworks could challenge an authoritative museum voice once they were shared in the exhibition space, I have already touched upon the relation between dialogue and power. Challenging such power structures is a central aspect of participation, according to Nico Carpentier, researcher in media studies. Inspired by democratic theories on participation and power (Arnstein, 1969; Pateman, 1970), Carpentier distinguishes between access, interaction, and participation: for him, the difference between access and interaction on the one hand and participation on the other is related to whether there are equal positions of power among the actors and whether the process in which the actors are taking part involves shared decision-making (Carpentier, 2015, p. 20). The three forms often exist side by side and are overlapping, demonstrating the complexity of participatory processes (Ibid.).

Curator and art historian Nora Sternfeld also links power and participation but takes a more radical position. For her, participation is "not simply about joining the game, it is also about having the possibility to question the rules of the game" (Sternfeld, 2013, p. 4). She argues that it is difficult to influence institutional structures, and that participation is often used to maintain existing power structures rather than change them (Ibid., p. 3).

With these positions in mind, it is relevant to question the degree of participation within the experiment, as the participants were not given any direct power as Carpentier and Sternfeld understand it. The sharing of comments in the exhibition space was not contextualised by an introduction, which made it difficult for the visitors to know what they were participating in, and therefore also what power structures the experiment was potentially challenging. It is therefore a valid subject for discussion whether the experiment simply ended up being a 'nice' communication initiative that had more to do with *access* and *interaction* than with participation.

Darlene Clover, researcher in learning and management, points out that institutional power is exercised through the choices made about which stories are told, as well as through control over representation (Clover, 2017, p. 85). In continuation of this, it is of course important to mention that the voters' comments were shaped by a question formulated by the museum and me, and that it was I (in collaboration with the museum) who decided which comments should be hung in the exhibition space. My selection criteria were based on the idea that the comments should focus on personal (as opposed to private), affective and reflective qualities of the artworks – both to contrast with the existing communication and as a 'hook' to trigger new dialogues. These elements of control are critical in discussions on participation as power or decision-making.

In continuation of this discussion, it is also crucial to emphasise that the voters were not informed about *how* their comments were to be used, and thus were not provided with any direct form of influence. This can clearly be regarded as a failure (Jancovich and Robertson, 2020) in the experiment, one that could have been avoided by a longer-term thinking as it was developed.

In spite of these reflections, I argue that the balance of power was indeed slightly tipped in so far as the museum was integrating other voices into the exhibition space. As the museologist Christopher Whitehead writes on inclusionary practices and that different views can cohabit within one institution: "It reflects new institutional desires to suggest that there are different power relations – or different possibilities of power relations – between the museum and the visitors" (Whitehead, 2012, p. 90). Randers Art Museum continued to exercise its overall authoritative voice, but through allowing other voices in, the institution was able to appear slightly more open. This raises an interesting question in relation to power: How much power is the institution able to and/or willing to hand over? But it also feeds into a broader discussion on whether art museums should be visitor-centred or art-centred. For museum practitioners Hill et al., this is an active choice that one must make (2016, p. 547). Working with including visitor voices is a balancing act: a museum whose duty is stipulated (as it is in the Danish Museum Act) must both allow space yet also maintain

its own voice in order to achieve professionalism (Achiam, 2016). This tension is something that the comment from the visitor in the survey also is an example of.

From individual to collective?

Since dialogue is not just a question of power relations, but also concerns identity and relations with other human beings, a further relevant perspective to the discussion of dialogue as participation is that of Christopher Kelty, working in the field of information studies. Rather than being interested primarily in power as the only motivation for participation, Kelty takes a multifaceted approach that also addresses the collective dimensions of participation (Kelty, 2019). For him, the important question to ask when it comes to participation is:

Participation in what – that’s the question people ask. And the question we always should ask. The power of participation, at its best, is to reveal ethical intuitions, make sense of different collective forms of life, and produce an experience beyond that of individual opinion, interest, or responsibility (Ibid., p. 1).

As mentioned above, the design of the experiment in Randers Art Museum contributed to the fact that the participants (the voters) did not directly experience what they were participating in, or at least not what it led to. Filling in a ballot was primarily a personal, individual act. When the visitor comments were shared later in the process, they were anonymised, and the participants were unaware of the sharing. The original voters, in other words, did not experience participating in something collective.

Applying Kelty’s more social understanding of participation, however, it can be argued that the experiment does contain certain collective dimensions. As I have elaborated above, the visitors who read the comments potentially experienced polyphony and gained a participatory experience *beyond that of individual opinion*, as Kelty writes. ‘Museum language’ can be difficult and may feel alienating to certain visitors (Høffding et al., 2019). Here, the ballot comments had the potential to foster recognition. This recognition could enhance both the confidence of non-professionals in discussing art (Nashashibi, 2003, p. 24) and a feeling of belonging (Kelty, 2019, p. 19), as the comments reveal various interpretations.

Further, making other voices visible underlines visually the fact that the experience of art can differ. It reminds us that we are part of a collective, where one’s own experience is just one among others. Curatorial control could in this case have a positive effect because it enabled the selection of comments that were relevant to a broader audience. Potentially, therefore, it was contributing to a form of participation that was “(...) neither simply personal, nor simply collective, but a blurring of both” (Ibid., p. 19).

Kelty also links the experience of participation to the notion of voice which is closely related to both Carpentier’s and Sternfeld’s interpretations. He writes:

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 (...) (Ibid., p. 18).

While both Bakhtin and Kelty are focused on meaningful negotiations between divergent voices, the quotation above also sheds light on the limited degree to which the experiment succeeded. Ideally, a voice gets the opportunity both to ‘speak back’ and to ‘be heard’ in order to influence an outcome (Kelty et al., 2015, p. 476). This opportunity was not offered in any concrete form either to the voters or to the readers of the comments. It was offered in a more abstract way, which made divergent voices visible to visitors and implicitly invited them to join the dialogue.

I would argue that if the 'participation in *what*' had been clear from the beginning, or if the museum had chosen to use the knowledge gained from the ballots and the process as a tool to develop their future communication practices (or will do it later), then the voices of the voters as participants would truly have been heard. On the other hand, whether the comments functioned as an invitation to other conversations or as a contribution to a more diverse audience feeling in which visitors in the exhibition space could feel more at home in a less monological institutional setting still needs to be researched.⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON AN EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH

Through the article, I have examined various theoretical and analytical perspectives on collecting and sharing visitor voices. But it is important to emphasise that the potential of the experiment does not lie solely in the design tested. Instead, it lies in the knowledge I have gained through it and through my subsequent reflections, which characterises an experimental approach. As anthropologist Andreas Roepstorff writes [my translation]: "Only when the experiment is thoroughly analysed will one know how it should have been designed" (Roepstorff, 2011, p. 140).

In the following, I therefore, present three recommendations for ways to expand or rethink participation for an experiment 2.0 and a more dialogic museum practice, based on my experiences and reflections.

1. The first recommendation is related to communication and the experimental approach. To enhance the dialogic potentials, the purpose of the experiment should be communicated clearly to the visitors, both in the design phase and once shared. Bearing in mind Carpentier's and Sternfeld's perspectives, it is particularly crucial that the voters are informed of the possibility that their voices might end up on a museum wall.

Communication is also important when it comes to being part of something collective, as Kelty mentions. If the particular purpose is more explicitly communicated in the exhibition space, the participants will likely be better prepared for the dialogue. This might even contribute to an enhanced experience of participation and a stronger sense of being part of a collective. In other words, both voters and visitors need to know *what* they are participating in.

However, communication also involves the museum, which controls it. According to Carpentier, if participation as a concept is to make sense, it should not mean everything, as this could result in overlooking unequal power dynamics (Carpentier, 2015, p. 24). The institution's communication should therefore be informed by an awareness of their own position and how it forms the conditions for dialogue.

2. The second recommendation entails enhancing inclusion and representation, both of which are also closely related to the idea of being part of a collective. It is possible to improve the dynamics of polyphony and dissensus by replacing the visitor voices in the exhibition space on an ongoing basis and thereby showing the cultural and linguistic diversity that is central to the Bakhtinian dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 290f). This could for instance be done with digital labels, to which visitors on any subsequent occasion could add new experiences and narratives.⁹ The danger otherwise is that the voices could become too static and monological, like the existing wall texts.

Another option could be a 'dialogue wall' on which voices are made visible, voluntarily, to everyone instantly, as opposed to a closed ballot box. This would more effectively foster the feeling of contributing to something collective and invite to participation. On the other hand, it would also make the dialogue between the artwork and comments less explicit, as they are not placed side by side.

Sharing more of the experiences of artworks would also contribute to a greater degree of recognition, especially for museum visitors who find 'museum language' difficult. This practice might enhance museums becoming "safe spaces for unsafe ideas" (Gurian, 2006, in Hill et al., 2016, p. 558) rather than places of alienation (Høffding et al., 2019). To further strengthen representation and polyphony in the sense of divergent voices, inviting voices that have never entered the museum could be considered.

3. The third recommendation addresses how to improve a more dialogic museum practice. Here the central questions are: How can the voices of the visitors truly be heard? And what should the role of the museum be? One response could be for the museum to integrate the visitor voices as much as possible and move into the background. However, as the analysis has demonstrated in *this* context – acknowledging that it might be different in other museums – one cannot ignore the existence of unequal power dynamics between the museum and the visitors. Therefore, drawing on Bakhtin, one can argue that a dialogic museum practice is not merely about giving the visitors a voice, but also necessitates an active museum voice. Rather than being confined to a static and monologic wall text, as was mainly the case in this experiment, the institution should, like in a teaching situation, actively strive to encourage and facilitate different forms of dialogue. This could involve commenting on the visitors' utterances and inviting them to respond or facilitating dialogues among them. It is about being open and making room for the potential conflicts that can arise in a dialogue. Being an active dialogue partner would likely contribute to a more equal conversation.

These recommendations could only emerge through an experimental approach whose methodological process involves iterative cycles of reflection and action (Gunn et al., 2013, p. 11), in which both the material being examined and the ideas informing the interpretation are put into play at the same time (Roepstorff, 2011, p. 144). These processes can create uncertainty, and it is important to understand and navigate this in order to see connections that go beyond the experiment itself (Ibid., p. 139).

In this case, the uncertainty inherent in the experimental approach required efforts both from me as researcher and from the institution. During the process, I have become even more aware of the significance of my own role in shaping the experiment and navigating within an institutional framework. Could I have challenged the institution even more? Would the museum have welcomed more of a challenge? Simultaneously, it is also this uncertainty that potentially makes this approach less suited to participation – *unless* it is explicitly stated that participation occurs on those terms: that the researcher, the institution, and the participants are on uncertain ground *together*.

According to Leila Jancovich and David Stevenson, editors of the volume *Cultural participation: Stories of success, histories of failure* (2020), evaluations of participatory projects in cultural organisations often focus too much on successes and too little on failures, resulting in a failure to learn (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2020, p. 3). Further, they write:

(...) we encourage the reader to consider not only what the criteria for success and failure are but also who decides on these criteria and whose voices are heard in the narratives in order to address what Howlett (2012) suggests are the fundamental questions for policy analysis: Who learns? Learns what? To what effect? (Ibid., p. 4).

In the experiment analysed here, those who learned something or experienced participation to the fullest were not the original voters, but rather the visitors who read the comments, the museum, and myself as a researcher.

Neither failures nor successes are absolute – they are complex. And so is the experiment. Writing this article and revisiting the experiment from a different angle outside the context of my dissertation has made me aware of the ‘failures’ of the (participatory) process, revealed new perspectives, and raised new questions. Why did I not tell the participants what they were participating in? Why did I not ask the visitors how they had experienced the experiment and the participation? The easy answer to these questions is that I did not know my specific focus from the beginning, or how the experiment would end. With this article I have tried to demonstrate both that there are *no easy* answers and that imperfect experiments can lead to successful insights and reflections. Experiments, in other words, can challenge and move us forward.

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Endnotes

- 1 The idea of incorporating visitor voices is not entirely new. Museum practitioner Kathleen McLean mentions that the first documented collection of visitor votes took place as early as 1937, while it really started to take off from the 1970s (McLean, 2003, p. 4).
- 2 The project was part of the national Danish research and development program *Our Museum*, which ran from 2016 to 2021: <https://ourmuseum.dk> (visited January 16, 2024).
- 3 The voter's comment says, in English: "When I think of the day my sister and I discovered the title [Sperm from: Sven (situaSDtion)] and laughed out loud, but a little embarrassed afterwards. Still getting chuckles and laughter in the body several years later." In this example, the positive experience of an artwork is linked to something outside the artwork itself – in this case a memory in the form of a social event which also affects the voter bodily.
- 4 From August 2018 to May 2010, I worked part time on my PhD and part time as a museum professional at Randers Art Museum. It was a maternity cover, with primary tasks within social media, press, and external communication. This also means that the various initiatives functioned both as museum work and as research.
- 5 These approaches in anthropology arose as part of the so-called 'representation crisis' in the 1980s, when researchers began to question scientific objectivity and the ability to represent the 'foreign.' Field notes, e.g., are a construction based on the researcher's experiences and values, and this calls for transparency (Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Macdonald and Basu, 2007, p. 6f).
- 6 The survey was conducted by Rambøll for the Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces. The survey was mainly a quantitative questionnaire, but it was possible to make comments.
- 7 To mark the difference between the museum's own communication texts and the comments from the ballots, the latter were written in red, rather than black like the other wall texts.
- 8 It is important to mention that the participants in the experiment did not necessarily have any ambition or desire to change anything, simply 'just' to engage with and experience an artwork.
- 9 Leicester Museum and Art Gallery does something similar and has recently experimented with visitor comment labels: <https://advisor.museumsandheritage.com/news/leicester-museum-art-gallery-makes-digital-visitor-comments-labels-permanent/> (visited January 16, 2024).