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RETHINKING PARTICIPATION AND RE-ENACTING ITS DILEMMAS?

— AARHUS 2017 AND “THE PLAYFUL SOCIETY”

BIRGIT ERIKSSON AND
JAN LØHMANN STEPHENSEN

*Corresponding author: Birgit Eriksson. School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University. Lange-
landsgade 139, building 1580/348, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark. aekbe@dac.au.dk*

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ABSTRACT

In 2012 the Danish city of Aarhus was appointed European Capital of Culture for 2017. The appointment was based on an ambitious programme that – under the headline Rethink – tried to set an agenda of societal transformation, mainly by seeking to increase the impact of art and culture, and to enhance civic participation at all levels of society. In this article we examine one of the first attempts of Aarhus 2017 to realize these grand ambitions: ‘The Playful Society’, a series of micro grants aimed at enabling young people to make their own art/culture projects and participate in the overall Rethink project. Informed by theoretical distinctions between different forms of participation, and the diverse interests invested in participatory processes, we investigate how the young cultural entrepreneurs and the artistic administrators of Aarhus 2017 separately, in conjunction, and sometimes even in opposition to each other, translated these overall ambitions into practice. We argue that they illuminate some of the dilemmas of contemporary cultural participation, including the importance of questioning who participates in what, how they do it, and in what context.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Birgit Eriksson is PhD and associate professor in Aesthetics and Culture at Aarhus University. Her current research focuses on participatory art and culture; changing patterns of cultural taste and consumption; social identities and citizenship; and aesthetics and politics. She is the author of numerous articles in Danish and English and has written, co-written or edited Umberto Eco (1995), Patos? (1998), Smagskulturer og formidlingsformer (2006), Spændvidder: om kunst og kunstopolitik (2010), Æstetisering (2012), and Moderne Dannelse. Goethes Wilhelm Meister og dannelsesromanens aktualitet (2013).

Jan Løhmann Stephensen is postdoc at the Aarhus University IDEAS Pilot Centre, The Democratic Public Sphere. His main research interests are cultures and practices of participation, democracy and the public sphere, as well as creativity and its diffusion into non-art related spheres like work life, economics, policy-making, university research agendas, new media technologies, etc. He is co-editor of Conjunctions — Transdisciplinary Journal of Cultural Participation. Recent publications include: “(In) tangible Arguments about Play, Creativity, and the Political Economy of 3D Printing: The Free Universal Construction Kit” (co-authored with Lone Koefoed Hansen), in TripleC, 2015, 13(1), “Talking the Creative Economy into Being: Performative Economics, Knowledge, and Creativity”, in Mikkel Thorup (ed.), Profitting from Words: the intellectual history of economic normativity, Palgrave (in press), “Re-negotiating data ecologies through trees, soil, and pigs’ lungs”, Spheres vol. 2 (in press), and “V-v-Vertov R-r-Re-made: From Avant-Garde Documentary to Participatory Culture — the Digital Journey of Man With a Movie Camera” (co-authored with Peter Ole Pedersen), Acta Univ. Sapientiae, Film And media Studies 9, 2014.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS: CHANGING THE FUTURE WITH ART AND CULTURE?

“Can art change the world? Perhaps not, but art can certainly change the future.” These are the concluding words in the foreword of the city of Aarhus’ successful application to be appointed European Capital of Culture in 2017 (Aarhus 2017, 2012: 3). The explicit intentions of Aarhus 2017 are grounded in a fundamental confidence in the positive impact of art and culture. Under the headline *Rethink*, Aarhus 2017 will seek to “maximise artistic and cultural potential,” and to create “a European laboratory” where art, culture and the creative sector can address and take part in the solution of large-scale general problems like climate change, economic crisis, social exclusion, rising unemployment, and issues related to an ageing population (ibid.: 3-7).

Aarhus is not the only European Capital of Culture with ambitions regarding the impact of art and culture. The Aarhus bid rather reinforces a development among the European Capitals of Culture whose ambitions increasingly go beyond delivery of cultural activity (in the narrower sense of the cultural industries). Since the beginning of 1985, the most common objectives of the Cultural Capitals has been to raise the internal capacity and ambition of the host city’s cultural offer and thereby also to improve the external city branding (Garcia and Cox, 2013: 53). Positive impact has thus often been articulated as a reinforcement of the cultural sector and the city image. These objectives and impacts have, however, gradually been supplemented with an ambition for the Cultural Capital to be a ‘catalyst’ for change in various other areas as well: first in tourism and economic regeneration, then increasingly in ‘post-industrial’, creative industries and in social engagement and cohesion (ibid.: 58–61). The Aarhus 2017 bid is part of this trend, but has a particularly strong focus on promoting creative rethinking and local ownership across diverse stakeholders in the city and region. While the broad-engagement of stakeholders is identified as one of the main challenges of the Cultural Capitals, Aarhus’ winning bid “was presented as a collective effort, revealing a recognised need for Aarhus to further involve the citizens, students, artists and cultural operators in the long-term development of the city” (ibid.: 64). By involving a broad variety of public and private stakeholders in continuous experiments with new ideas, art forms, urban developments, social processes, and so on, the whole population should work together in the rethink ‘laboratory’ — a concept which in recent bids “seems particularly popular” (ibid.: 61).

The above linking of art and culture to the solution of social, economic and political challenges is not limited to European Capitals of Culture. The grand visions concerning the impact of art and culture do, in fact, bring to mind Jean-Joseph Goux’ claim that art has been “the unanimous utopia of modernity,” in which “everything was demanded of art. [...] Not from one or other particular work of art as such, but from art as the very paradigm of the highest creative human activity [...] the great model of desirable human activity” (Goux 1996: 57-65). In the same vein it also echoes Yves Michaud’s (1998) par-

allel notion of the “Utopia of Art” (as one of three Modern utopias, the others being the utopias of labour and of citizenship), which entails the belief that art contains a promise of a better world through its intersubjective, communicative and thus civilizational potential. This utopia might of late seem rather faded, because in Michaud’s view the “aesthetic community,” which was to be the promise of a better sociality — a “cultural communism” among “equal citizens, civilized by their experience with art” — has itself turned out to be nothing but “skirmish and strife” (ibid.: 146, 151). If the art world is nothing but perpetually unresolved conflict, how can it then be an inspiring model of behaviour to other realms of society?

Still, writing off this utopia completely might turn out to have been a bit premature; a fact to which the Aarhus 2017 bid also testifies. Rather, this utopia seems to have re-emerged in new constellations: either through the linking of a generalized or ‘democratized’ notion of creativity to the societal agenda of innovation, which comes both in the shape of a new creative work ethic, and as a new paradigm of policy-making (Stephensen, 2008 and 2010); or through the so-called ‘social turn’ that in recent decades has flourished within the contemporary art scene (Thomson, 2012; Bishop, 2012; Eriksson, 2014).

With the contemporary discourse on *participation* these expectations increasingly seem to have been moved away from the temples of art and its clergy, and much closer to individual citizens than ever before — a tendency that also entails that these great expectations no longer just hinge on culture in the narrow sense of the word (Art with a capital A), but now rather on culture in a much broader, almost anthropological sense that goes way beyond the realms of art alone; for example, in the ‘laboratories’ of Aarhus 2017. So much now seems to depend on the creative activities and interventions of citizens — both individually, but especially in concert; within the confines of art, but also beyond. All tendencies that the *Rethink* application confirms by explicitly aiming to ‘outsource’ the processes of rethinking and proposing solutions to a number of pressing, societal issues. Hence, it claims, we need “to look at new models for citizenship, to make it easier for citizens to assume roles of responsibility within society. Formal political systems can no longer claim to engage our citizens sufficiently – this democratic deficit needs to be addressed” (Aarhus 2017, 2012: 7). Through art under the banners of participatory culture, and through the establishment of so-called European laboratories of “unlimited creativity and originality,” the creatively active citizens of Aarhus are called upon to take part in the creation of “spaces for the untried, the unknown” (ibid.: 6), which will hopefully engage the general population as participants, and empower individuals, communities and stakeholders in the aforementioned issues.

On a more critical note, one could, of course, object to the overall agenda of citizen involvement and participation by pointing to the fact that this actually seems to de-politicize all these issues by annulling — or, at least, glossing over — all the political conflicts (e.g. Mouffe, 2005). We will return to this in our conclusion.

On another note, but equally critical, one could also object to the huge visions and great expectations, perhaps even label it alongside the other “bullshit” lingo, which so often seems to permeate the discourse of cultural field policies; that is, a discourse which is not aiming to lie *per se*, but rather just displays an “indifference to how things really are” (Belfiore, 2009: 343), or how they could feasibly be. The discourse of the application is, of course, clearly marked by the fact that the bid is trying to sell a project in competition with other applicants for European Capital of Culture, who are using an equally turgid prose (Connolly, 2013). But it is not just about cloaking vested interests (which was the crux of Belfiore’s critique), it also reflects how ‘participation’ and parallel notions like ‘user-involvement’ and ‘active citizenship’ have come into fashion once again. Everyone uses them, and therefore everyone has to use them as well. In this sense, on a more general level, it also reflects what is expected of cultural institutions or even singular art projects, if they are to gain funds and legitimacy — even if chances are that the results might end up falling short of those promises and expectations. Simultaneously, participation and involvement in decision-making — on one level or the other — is also something the public increasingly demands (e.g. as part of a more general set of norms concerning transparency, accountability, etc.).

This, in turn, means that when comparing the visions expressed in the application with concrete small-scale projects like we will do below, one has to proceed with caution. First of all — as Goux also puts it — all of these grand utopian aspirations do not hinge on the individual work of art (or participatory cultural process/project) anyway, but on art (or participation) in general. And secondly, it is not really clear if *all* the projects that already have and will be taking place under the *Rethink* umbrella are meant to have that kind of grandeur built into their practical realization. As we will argue below, the agenda of broad participation and societal transformation is, however, important in the specific projects analysed in this article — and, what is more, both from the perspective of Aarhus 2017 and from the young participants.

To be fair, Aarhus 2017 has recently revised its ambitions to a more modest and/or measurable scale. Still, on the level of *long-term impact* — besides highlighting collaboration, creativity, innovation, and knowledge as key ingredients to the creation of “a smart, inviting, vibrant and experimental” artistic programme — the programme is now more specifically focused on, for instance, “sustainability, democracy, diversity and change” as well as on “activate broad participation across the region” (Rasmussen, 2015: 16-17), which is meant to be measured in terms of a number of key performance indicators. Of particular interest to us when looking at the predicted long-term impact would be the stated social and political ambitions to turn inhabitants in the region into “more active citizens”, for instance by aiming for more participation in a number of specified areas: more volunteering, bigger audiences, and more young cultural entrepreneurs.¹ Furthermore, we will be interested in a set of so-called organisational and political aims: strengthened interdisciplinarity and cross-sectoral collaboration as well as the idea of an

increased significance of arts and culture in the region — all of which surmounts to participation as an interinstitutional, transdisciplinary activity. In the revised ambitions, it is remarkable how the expected long-term impact concerning the increased significance of arts and culture in the region is only fleshed out in the key performance indicators in strictly quantitative terms relating to cross-sectoral cooperation (number of partnerships, funding, etc.). Compared to the much grander ambitions of the application, these new aims and objectives of Aarhus 2017 are obviously more modest — not least on the rhetorical level — than the ones originally envisioned. And to the regret of some they are, of course, also much more ordinary or less ambitious.

In the following we will examine how the stated ambitions of Aarhus 2017 correlate with the expectations and ambitions of the young people who participated in our cases. In extension of this, we will discuss what notions of participation are at play here, and how these different conceptions might cause problems and challenges to the different stakeholders, in this case especially the young cultural entrepreneurs on the one hand, and on the other, the Secretariat of Aarhus 2017 as well as the municipalities of the involved cities.

GETTING YOUNG PEOPLE INVOLVED IN 'THE PLAYFUL SOCIETY'

Among the first initiatives of Aarhus 2017 was a series of micro grant-sponsored art/cultural projects. These projects, each funded with DKK 10.000 (approximately €1,350), are closely related to the ambition of broad participation in 2017. With a total of 100 micro projects it should be possible to secure engagement and co-ownership across a variety of stakeholders. According to Managing Director Rebecca Matthews, the micro projects emphasize the width and scope of the overall project: “Aarhus 2017 is a project and an opportunity for everyone – whether you are an individual or representing a larger organization” (Aarhus 2017, 2014).

In 2012 an open call attracted more than 120 proposals, of which 25 received funding. In January 2014, this was followed by a second call, this time with the specific theme of “The Playful Society”, and open only for applications from the region’s young people (aged 18–30). These micro-projects for young cultural entrepreneurs reveal some of the dilemmas and challenges of citizen involvement in Aarhus 2017, and will thus be our subjects of investigation. We will include a number of sources, among them the applications for the grants, written evaluations by the project-makers, a range of documents retrieved from the homepage of Aarhus 2017 and, in particular, the information we gathered at an evaluation workshop at Aarhus University in August 2014, organized and facilitated by the Secretariat of Aarhus 2017 and the research unit rethinkIMPACTS 2017, in concert with the consultant agency Urban Goods and ourselves.

Two projects out of the selected 24 micro-projects will be given special attention in this study, namely Urban Art Gallery and Rampen. Alongside each other the two very

different projects illustrate some of the potentials and problems that pop up in relation to the *Rethink* projects. The two projects were both developed and realized by highly engaged, dynamic and competent young citizens, but as we will argue below, the way they were framed and integrated by Aarhus 2017 and other established cultural and political actors meant that participation and ownership came to mean very different things in the two cases.

Urban Art Gallery was a public art gallery in which a number of artists were invited to do street art on Aarhus Harbour. It was initiated by Ciara and Emma Louise, two students from Aarhus University, and it ran from May 2014 until the end of the year. Rampen, which means “the ramp” in skater lingo, is an ongoing project centred around a rather new meeting place and cultural platform for young people in the small town of Ebeltøft, situated quite isolated at the southern tip of Djursland, about 50 kilometres outside Aarhus. Here the young people (at the workshop represented by Maja and Esther), all around the age of 18 and even less, used the grant for start-up meetings and other activities. This place, however, is part of a much larger project initiated by the town council in an old factory, which, as we will discuss in more detail below, has had a number of implications for both the project and the youngsters.

The stated ambition of the second call — to “bring life, joy, activity and play into society” (Aarhus 2017, 2014) — should most likely be seen in light of the overall philosophical starting point of Aarhus 2017; namely, that we live in “a world where rationality and logic dominate” (Aarhus 2017, 2012: 6). But it also had its own rationality: According to the then Programme Director Gitte Just, the call was motivated by a wish to give potential cultural entrepreneurs of the future “a possibility to play along” and thereby eventually make it possible for the projects to be developed further and perhaps eventually even be included in the 2017 programme (TV2 Østjylland, 2014). The small grants for young people thus had a dual function: They were a laboratory for project development, but also for the making of new cultural entrepreneurs, in relation to 2017 as well as to the following years.

In order to attract the young people targeted by the call, the application procedure was rather easy and ‘young’: They were mainly addressed via a Facebook event, asking “Are you between 18 and 30? Do you want to play with us?”, and promising that it “is all about having fun in and with public space” (“Rethink puljen 2014 — 25 x 10.000 kr.”, 2014). Instead of labour-intensive, written applications including elaborate budgets and so on, the young applicants were only required to hand in a two minute video presentation, which would be followed by an “audition”, if the project was considered potentially worthy of funds.

In spite of the low entry barrier and the seemingly ‘youthful appeal’ of the application process, the 2017 secretariat only received 32 proposals, out of which 24 were funded. The meagre interest in the call might have to do with failed communication — with not reaching the young people. It might also have to do with the loose framing of the project

or even, as we will elaborate in more detail later, with the theme of the ‘playful society’ altogether. Whatever the reason(s), the meagre result seems to confirm a widespread conception: that young people do not participate in culture and society — at least not the way they are expected to by older generations — and that this constitutes a serious societal problem. When it comes to civic participation in social organizations, in democratic duties or in cultural institutions — often referred to as proper “political participation” (Cohen & Uphoff, 1980: 215-6) — young people tend to be seen as a somewhat problematic segment of the population. They simply participate too little or, at least in a traditional perspective, not in the right ways.

The importance of involving the younger generations in culture and society is probably obvious. The future – not only of particular art institutions, political parties and social organizations, but also of society as such — depends on them. Furthermore, in a world and a society characterized by constant change, this importance is strengthened. No matter if the young generations are conceived as ‘seismonauts’ of emerging types of social communication, behaviour and engagement, or they are seen as actively “forming the core of our future society” and as “driver[s] of social change” (European Commission, 2013), they are crucial for any project dealing with the future.

As both representatives and citizens of the future, it is essential to engage young people, and Aarhus 2017 is just one among many cultural and political organizations looking for new ways to involve them. In Denmark, the Ministry of Culture has thus appointed 2015 “Youth Culture Year”, highlighting the importance of the youngsters, among other things stating that “Everything starts with children and young people”, and that “young people learn when they participate in social contexts, are included in joint activities, contribute to the community and achieve influence” (Kulturministeriet, 2014). The youth strategy chosen by The Ministry of Culture is very similar to that of Aarhus 2017. In the so-called Urkraft 2015 programme, an important part of Youth Culture Year, the focus is also on art and culture and on young people’s preference for flexible, self-organized activities. And as was the case with the Playful Society project, the Ministry funds a specific number of youth-initiated projects in art, culture and citizenship – in this case 100 projects – with the exact similar amount of money: DKK 10.000 (Kulturministeriet, 2015).

PARTICIPATION AND ITS DIFFERENT ROLES, INTERESTS, AND FUNCTIONS

The matrix we apply for discussing The Playful Society and its micro-projects is the one suggested by Sarah C. White in her “Depoliticising development: The uses and abuses of participation” (1996), where she edges out how different interests meet — and quite often collide — in various types of participatory processes. She distinguishes between four different types according to the form of participation, the interests in participation from the designers and organizers (the “top-down”), and from the participants themselves (the “bottom-up”), and finally the overall function of the specific type of participation:

FORM	TOP-DOWN INTEREST	BOTTOM-UP INTEREST	FUNCTION
Nominal	Legitimation	Inclusion	Display
Instrumental	Efficiency	Cost	Means
Representative	Sustainability	Leverage	Voice
Transformative	Empowerment	Empowerment	Means/End

These four types rarely appear in a pure form, and White emphasizes that participatory projects typically involve a mix of interests, a change over time, and quite diverse conceptions of which type of participation is in play (White, 1996: 8). But precisely because of her acknowledgement of these variations, the distinctions are a useful analytical device, especially when it comes to dynamic and conflictual participatory projects. In the micro-projects we thus find all four types of participation and also interactions between these types, which would remain hidden with other analytical devices.

If we were to consult most theory on participation, “representative” and “transformative” participation would certainly be the normative darlings, whereas the other types would risk falling under ‘false’ participation. To take two seminal theories: In Carole Pateman’s vocabulary “nominal” or “instrumental” participation would not equal “full”, but only “partial” participation (Pateman, 1970: 70-71). Likewise, on Sherry R. Arnstein’s (1969) so-called “ladder of participation” both of these types would be closer to “manipulation” at the (normative) bottom of the ladder, than to true “citizen control” at the top.

Whereas Pateman and Arnstein both focus quite one-dimensionally on power — “equal power to determine the outcome of decisions” in Pateman (1970: 71) and “citizen power” in Arnstein — and seem to equal good participation with autonomy, White’s distinction between different interests enables a more varied analysis. Using Pateman or Arnstein as a frame of reference one would assume that those processes we perceive as less instrumental, but also less top-down dominated, would be the most successful, and the ones that would have the most happy — or at least less disappointed or disillusioned — participants. But this was not really the case in the micro-projects we analyzed. We are, of course, well aware of recent theories (e.g. Carpentier, 2011 and 2015; Kelty et al., 2015) that integrate power with other dimensions of participation. Many of these do, however, focus on participation in media contexts, and while media projects were surprisingly absent in *The Playful Society* we have chosen to use White’s differentiations which — although they are generated in a context of development studies — seem well suited to meet the complexity of the field in which Aarhus 2017 operates. In addition, we will draw on other theoretical distinctions, when we consider it appropriate.

NOMINAL PARTICIPATION

The interest in *nominal participation* is, according to White, characterized by legitimation for the organizers and inclusion for the participants. This is highly important for Aarhus 2017 when aiming at being “a project and an opportunity for everyone” as stated by Matthews. Being — and appearing (cf. White’s definition of display as the function of nominal participation) — inclusive to ordinary citizens is vital to the overall success of Aarhus 2017, and the small, low-cost and easily accessible micro-projects are one way of displaying that a broad variety of people and ideas can be involved in the overall project.

Yet, nominal participation is also a central element from the bottom-up perspective of the participants. For the young project initiators the inclusion in and funding by Aarhus 2017 was perceived as an official recognition that could be added to their CVs and maybe facilitate their access to future projects. At the workshop, some of them therefore asked for a ‘diploma’ of some kind, and for a more visible display of their personal participation on the website.

INSTRUMENTAL PARTICIPATION

Instrumental participation is equally vital in the micro-projects, and again both from a top-down and a bottom-up perspective. From the perspective of Aarhus 2017 — a project whose ambitions clearly exceed the available funding (which is by no means a problem for Aarhus’ European Capital of Culture alone (cf. Palmer 2004) — the micro-projects enable the realization of many small initiatives for a very modest effort and amount of money. Compared to the potential outcome, the investment is minor. But this economic ‘efficiency’ is only possible because the young participants work (almost) without getting paid. For Aarhus 2017 the micro-projects are explicitly expected to create value and make a difference by activating social capital through voluntary work (Aarhus 2017, 2012: 77). But for the participants (cf. the wish for diplomas) this voluntary work is more likely to be a risky investment or “hopeful work”; that is, the kind of underpaid, or unpaid, work typically undertaken in the cultural/creative sector by mostly young people being motivated by hopes or expectations of more profitable employments in the future (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013).

Contrary to many other theories of participation, instrumental participation — using participation as a *means* — is in White’s typology not something that should be normatively criticised *a priori*. Instrumental participation is not only a means to cost-effectiveness, it is also necessary for the realization of a local project or facility when external funding is scarce. In our interviews, this realization was essential to the young project-makers: they did not seem to value participation in itself, but valued it as a means to change or create something new. At the workshop the young women from Rampen talked enthusiastically about changing the social and cultural life for young people in

Ebeltoft: “The things we saw in Berlin — that’s what we want to do in Ebeltoft!” In Rampen as well as in the other projects, instrumental participation was much more than an economic investment in career and efficiency — it was also about using your own resources as an instrument for something bigger.

REPRESENTATIVE PARTICIPATION

White’s third type, *representative participation*, is about hearing and being heard. For the ordinary participants, voice is requisite for expressing interests and ensuring leverage. For Aarhus 2017, allowing voice improves the chances of making the projects meaningful, durable and sustainable. From ‘above’, the representative aspect of the micro-projects is further related to the wish for broad inclusion and diversity. And The Playful Society is more specifically aimed at the inclusion of young people whose interests and ideas are essential for the long-lasting effects of the cultural capital — both on a general, but also on a very tangible level, by influencing and/or paving the way for other, more ambitious projects and thus making “micro projects for macro change” (Aarhus 2017, 2012: 77).

Contrary to the explicit intentions of Aarhus 2017 — and also to the expectations of the young project-makers — the representative participation was rather absent in the micro-projects. The two young women behind Urban Art Gallery expressed the feeling of not being heard and seen, when telling how their own happiness and pride of a successful opening was contrasted by the disappointment and surprise that no one from Aarhus 2017 came to see it — or more generally showed any interest in what they were doing. Others expressed similar disappointment, and our group interviews and discussions at the evaluation workshop were dominated by the somewhat unexpected feeling of having been abandoned — or at least neglected — by the 2017 secretariat as well as by city representatives. The general impression was that Aarhus 2017 did not make use of the micro-projects’ potentials by not taking them seriously enough. The participants got access to funding, but if they were to have *voice* as well, it would have been requisite to establish a much closer dialogue regarding their ideas, projects and wider potentials. As this did not happen, as they did not feel that they were being heard, the youngsters and their micro-projects had no leverage.

That representative participation can be used and experienced otherwise, was exemplified by the project Rampen. Contrary to the other temporary and/or event-based micro-projects, Rampen is a (more) permanent cultural platform and meeting place for young people. Also regarding political and organizational context, Rampen differs from the other projects by being part of Ny Malt, a large project initiated by Syddjurs municipality (located in Ebeltoft). The youngsters had worked closely together with representatives from the municipality and were actually really pleased with that, while the — at first sight — more ‘autonomous’ agents in the other projects were significantly more frustrated by getting bounced back and forth between different bureaucratic offices and restrictions.

Paradoxically, what many of the youngsters needed — and explicitly asked for — was representative participation from ‘above’. First, they needed someone at the Town Hall who could function as an entry point, a “go-to guy”. This is worth noting, not just if the idea is to get youngsters interested in a future career as cultural entrepreneurs, but also because current research (Hjortskov, Andersen & Jakobsen, 2015) seems to indicate that *personal* meetings with bureaucracy officials are also crucial to citizen participation in political processes in general, including both very tangible questions about where, how and with whom to use your voice and achieve influence, and the more abstract notion of what political participation is really all about. All questions that are highly relevant for Aarhus 2017 given the overall ambitions of the whole project.

Secondly, the youngsters needed an organized contact to the Aarhus 2017 secretariat, a person who could follow and supervise the projects, provide sparring, feedback, and so on. This was formulated early in the process in some of the written evaluations after the audition, and at the workshop it became clear that the need had only increased as the projects evolved. Many of the participants simply did not understand the lack of interest from those who had funded the projects.

TRANSFORMATIVE PARTICIPATION

This leads us to White’s fourth and final category, *transformative participation*. This is the only form of participation where means and ends merge, participation being both one and the other, and where ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ share the same interest: empowerment. The basic idea behind transformative participation is that the practical experience of participation (cooperating and discussing with others, developing ideas, considering options, making decisions, taking action) is transformative and empowering in itself (White, 1996: 8). Transformative participation has an ‘educative dividend’, which includes learning-by-doing on multiple levels: both regarding how to participate in participatory processes *per se*, but also how to take part in the various processes of society in more general terms (Kelty et al., 2015: 6-7). This interest in empowerment is explicitly shared by Aarhus 2017. In the original bid, securing “a more active citizenship through comprehensive and active participation” (Aarhus 2017, 2012: 8) is one of six strategic goals, and in the revised ambitions the one and only long-term social impact is that “inhabitants in the region are more active citizens”.

One of White’s arguments regarding transformative participation is that empowerment cannot be brought about from above. But it can be facilitated. Recommendations for how this can be done — and how to involve young people in cultural projects in general — are provided in the report *Ungekultur i nye rammer* (*Reframing Youth Culture*, Børnekulturens netværk, 2010). This report is based on recent research on youth culture (*Ungdomsforskning*, 2008; Illeris et al., 2009; Knudsen et al., 2004) as well as on dialogues with a number of municipalities, art institutions, various specific initiatives

involving young people, and the like. According to the theses presented in this report, young people prefer youth projects with the following qualities: interactivity, self-organized activities, influence and flat hierarchies, fast and flexible procedures, networks and social communities, physical facilities for youth culture, that they represent no one but themselves, so-called ‘young-to-young’ methods, art and culture rather than projects that work under the banner of integration, and finally, art and culture in every part of the country; that is, not just centralized.

The way the micro grants were structured is, in fact, in line with most of these recommendations: when they fund and enable self-organized projects by young people, when they focus on art and culture and on ‘young-to-young’ methods, and in relation to the application process as well. However, two of the report’s recommendations are *not* in line with the strategy of Aarhus 2017: Whereas the report argues that you — in order to facilitate influence and horizontal structures — need to develop new types of involvement and participation, to give the youngsters a voice and to *help and supervise them* in managing and developing their projects, Aarhus 2017 pursued another strategy by funding them and then practically leaving them alone.

The report also argues that in order to enhance networking and social communities, you need to think networking strategies into the project descriptions, to promote networking across diverse youth groups, and to anchor temporary initiatives in networking platforms: “Art and cultural projects for young people not only ought to provide opportunities for creative expression but also to create social communities and networks, between young people as well as between them and relevant social settings, initiatives and persons” (Børnekulturens netværk, 2010: 31). Again, this did not happen in the micro-projects. The participants did not know of the other projects except for a brief meeting at the audition, and during the period of the projects’ planning and realization they missed contact with each other and not least “an economy of sharing”. At the evaluation workshop this was critically addressed as a lack of communication platforms.

The fact that Aarhus 2017 did not follow all the recommendations in the report is interesting since the recommendations actually generalize what stood out as the main problems for the participants in the evaluation workshop: the lack of interaction between the young project owners themselves, *and* between them and Aarhus 2017. What was possibly intended by Aarhus 2017 as confidence in the ability and will to self-organized projects was, in fact, experienced by the young people primarily as a state of isolation both from the other projects and from Aarhus 2017. For the young participants, the lack of supervision and follow-up was primarily experienced not as a liberating lack of control, but as a confusing and somewhat demotivating lack of interest and interaction.

As pointed out by Palmer in his study of European Capitals of Culture 1995–2004 conducted for the European Commission (2004: 16), the process of establishing and maintaining networks has never been an easy task. Especially not when it has involved the balancing of already existing, established cultural institutions and agents on the one

hand, and on the other, new, alternative, independent, and typically young cultural participants on the cultural scene. Yet even if this problem might have some generic quality, it is still unfortunate, especially in a future perspective. Thus, in *The Playful Society*, the absence of communication and interaction most likely means that the opportunities for cooperative learning and networking among the youngsters, as well as for influencing Aarhus 2017, were pretty much wasted. In this way, empowerment was not facilitated, despite the explicit intentions of Aarhus 2017 to do exactly so.

MAKING ENDS AND INTERESTS MEET IN PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES

Applying White's distinctions, the lack of interest — and not least the disinterest in taking advantage of and learning from the micro-projects — risks placing *The Playful Society* one-sidedly in the category of nominal participation; that is, by enabling Aarhus 2017 to simply just check the box 'young, experimental, participatory art projects' and then be done with that. This way, there seems to be a somewhat unfortunate parallel between the theme of *The Playful Society* and the organizational framing of the projects: They were handled too much like children's games in the sense of 'it's just a game' — without any impact outside the game itself. And this certainly does not fit the youngsters' own ambitions, which were much larger than their own individual projects. They wanted to take social responsibility, to (aspire to) act sustainably, to create a Berlin-like youth culture in Ebeltøft, to make art accessible to all, and so on.

These goals — articulated at the workshop — are obviously not just a game. They are more ambitious than that, even if they are not as ambitious as the prose and the great expectations of the *Rethink* application discussed at the beginning of our article. Once again, measuring small-scale projects like these up against the grand visions expressed in the application and similar texts perhaps makes little sense, especially given the fact that the feasibility of these utopian aspirations often seems rather slim. Yet, the young people themselves actually *did*, in fact, voice expectations and ambitions that were much in line with those expressed in the application prose. They expressed desires that clearly transcended the limited scope of their own individual projects, and in particular the way these were handled by Aarhus 2017. The young cultural entrepreneurs wanted to influence the living conditions and social communities not only of themselves, but of the cities in which they live. In that respect they seem to support the grand visions of the *Rethink* application, even after these seemingly have been abandoned — or at least rhetorically downscaled — by Aarhus 2017 itself (and questioned by sceptical academics such as the authors of this article).²

Returning to the positive and negative assumptions mentioned earlier about the youngsters — that they are essential for our social life and common future, but hard to engage in it — the micro-projects also cast new light on the validity of these. While the basic data of the application round itself mostly seems to confirm the negative assump-

tions, the actual engagement of the project-makers does not. In fact, one could ask, if it would have been easier to attract young people if the call had not been announced under the headline “Do you want to play with us?”, but rather, “Do you want to make Aarhus/the region/the world a better place to live?”. When contrasting the projects, perhaps most notably Rampen, with the theme and its actual facilitation and lack of follow-up, it also seems relevant to ask whether the expectations that young people are only interested in short-term casual projects actually have had a negative effect on the whole project (and similar projects as well), since the kind of projects facilitated within this mindset are of a kind, which do not take the young people seriously and give them a genuine voice.

This brings us to the issue of power. When we interviewed the participants about the conditions and challenges of their projects, no one mentioned *empowerment* or even *power* as a concern, let alone a problem in the process. In fact, it was not mentioned at all, which is somewhat surprising, especially given the amount of attention paid to it in the theory on participatory projects and processes from Arnstein and Pateman to Nico Carpentier and Christopher Kelty. One reason for this may be that empowerment is rarely identified as a key issue by the ones in need of it. In general they have more immediate and tangible problems and interests (White, 1996: 9). In our case, of course, the young cultural entrepreneurs were not poor and disadvantaged in a way vaguely similar to the Bangladeshi or Zambian people in White’s study. But still, most of them were carrying out their projects without any other institutional, economic or political ballast than the one provided by Aarhus 2017. The exception is, of course, Rampen. They did, in fact, get a lot of support from their local municipality, but still they did not have ownership, possession, or full control over that external logistic resource (cf. Kelty et al., 2015: 8-9; della Porta and Mattoni, 2013: 177-178).

Another reason for not mentioning power as a problem may be that the participants never really expected nor wanted to realise their projects without any external interference, or, for that sake, thought of it as being about power at all. They were simply just more frustrated with the lack of contact, network and interaction, both with each other and with 2017, than with the lack of autonomy and power.

This can be interpreted in two opposing — or perhaps complementing — ways: One interpretation is that something really important may have happened since Arnstein, Pateman and White wrote their seminal texts on participation. Now, participation is everywhere — and is expected to be, not just by the citizens themselves, but by companies, authorities, and so on. This means that power is perhaps not the big issue it used to be; especially not power in the sense of the politico-symbolic act of attaining access to the participatory processes themselves. This is not a monopoly that is being fought over that much anymore — or at least not in the same ways. Because it is worth keeping in mind that whereas most of these theories were conceived in a highly political, anti-authority climate — or in White’s case, in the context of Third World development, where the stakes are also quite high — the practices we are studying and measuring up against these

theories are performed in a quite different societal setting – one that is marked by a much higher emphasis on functionality, efficiency and pragmatism, mixed with what sometimes appears to be almost compulsory participation. This may affect the way that the young people understand their own projects and contributions. It may mean that they worry less about autonomy, power and instrumentality — and more about networks, impact, and a psychosocial feeling of being part of something (by ‘chipping in’).

Another — more critical — interpretation is, that ignoring power makes it more problematic than maybe ever before. When one forgets the power dimension, one ignores “the main defining component of participation”, the one that separates it from *access* and *interaction*, which are “necessary but not sufficient conditions of possibility of participation”, as Carpentier argues elsewhere in this issue (Carpentier, 2015). When he emphasizes “the importance of equal power positions in decision-making processes for the definition of participation” (ibid.), he makes a claim not only for conceptual clarity but also for the close link between our understandings of participation and democracy. According to him, ignoring the power dimension puts us at risk of contributing to the hegemonization of a minimalist conception of participation — and ultimately also of democracy. In a comparable line of thought, one could also argue, that the contemporary discourses of participation, inclusion, user-involvement, and so on, do, in fact, obscure the hegemonic and antagonistic character of society and the political (cf. Mouffe, 2005).

Returning to Goux’ and Michaud’s waning utopia(s) of art, mentioned at the beginning of this article, turning a blind eye to this glossing over of the conflictual and antagonistic relations of power might be the price that needed to be paid, in order to re-install the modern utopias. But today, the societal potential of art can just as well be to illuminate, question or subvert the dominant hegemony (Mouffe, 2008); a notion, however, that Aarhus 2017 does not subscribe to — at least not explicitly — and also a notion that is absent in their conception and realization of participatory processes.

In our analysis, the micro-projects highlight some of the crucial, and therefore also constantly recurring, challenges within the fields and theories of participation. Questions that are concerned with participation in *what*, by *who*, *how* and in which *context* (e.g. Cohen & Uphoff, 1980). To these questions there might, in fact, be multiple answers, as in our cases. First of all, the challenges are not the same in the specific micro-projects and in the development of the overall *Rethink* project. In the former, autonomy and differences in power were lesser problems than the lack of connectivity and interaction. And in the latter, this had the consequence that the young project-makers did not participate. They participated in the micro-projects but missed interaction with The Playful Society and did not even have access to the overall *Rethink* project (cf. Carpentier, 2015).

Secondly, even within the singular participatory process itself, participants not only have different interests, but also think of the participatory activity of themselves and others in quite different ways. In fact, stakeholders that take part in the same project or process might actually on closer scrutiny turn out to be participating in quite different

things after all. In our case study the ambitions were obviously wide apart, and some of the problems of The Playful Society have to do with the overall project sitting awkwardly between something way too small (that we are just playing) and something much too grand (that we can change the world). These differences are in the ambitions and practices of Aarhus 2017, but also between the various stakeholders: the local youngsters, the 2017 administration, local/regional politicians, and the international organisations and offices involved with the European Capital of Culture programme. Obviously, these stakeholders have quite different agendas, even if they seemingly take part in the same (participatory) project; which they — as it might turn out, when looking at it this way — perhaps at the end of the day really *do not*. Any given participatory project, including the ones discussed here, could perhaps be said to exist in multiple, and in some ways merely theoretically overlapping, contexts at the same time. The problem, or perhaps simply the condition, is that the term ‘participation’ has become very broad and heterogeneous, even “vague” and “jumbled” (Kelty et al., 2014: 5) — paradoxically, as a partial effect of all the attempts in recent decades to define it more specifically. And to add to the complexity, this is not just a problem from a strictly theoretical perspective. Our expectations of what a particular participatory project is and ought to be all about are probably even more heterogeneous than the theoretical understandings. Just think of the contextual gap between the individual life project of a teenager in Ebeltoft and the socio-political and cultural agenda of a transnational project of the European Union. And then add to the complexity of this mix, that the teenager in Ebeltoft might actually emphasise transnational inspiration and networking more than those in charge of the cultural programme of Europe. Given this, it certainly is a challenging project to make such radically different ends and interests meet in participatory processes like these.

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NOTER

- 1 Interpreting the ambitions of getting more active citizens as well as more volunteering, bigger audiences, and more young cultural entrepreneurs as clear-cut examples of some socio-political agenda, does, of course, primarily make sense if these specific aims are tied to a larger, mostly neoliberal, conceptual framework of 'social entrepreneurship' (Leadbeater 1997). Otherwise, it would just as easily fit into the more mundane agenda of enlarging, renewing, and developing audiences, which all institutions in the cultural field address on a daily basis.
- 2 To establish whether this is a deliberate shift of paradigms in the way Aarhus 2017 (especially the administrative unit) thinks of itself and its role, or if it is merely a consequence of the meeting between genuinely great expectations on the one hand, and on the other, the harsh realities of European Capitals of Culture, in which mundane problems of occasional (or permanent) underfunding, understaffing, etc. seem almost generic (cf. Palmer, 2004), is, however, beyond the scope of this article.