

Introduction

By Camilla Jalving |

You have to go all the way down to the beach to see *Gazebo*, an artwork by the Danish artist group AVPD. But once there, you cannot avoid seeing it. Standing as it does like a foreign element of glass and concrete between the dunes and the sea. A stringent, formal, modernist structure built in 2015 on the man-made shore as part of the exhibition *Art in Sunshine* at ARKEN Museum of Modern Art. It has no apparent function. It is just there – like a shed, a place you can go into, sit inside, find shelter or shade, change your clothes, look out of and be looked at. There are mirrors on the walls of the pavilion that reflect the sky, the lyme grass, the sand, the sea and the other people on the beach. A glass section functions – depending on how the light falls and how close you are – as a mirror or window that either reflects the gaze or extends it.

In the two-way mirror you see yourself but also your surroundings – observe yourself *in* the world. A viewing machine and generator of gazes, views, reflections and motifs. You can also see it – especially with the art museum ARKEN on the other side of the dunes – as a model of a museum, posing in the midst of the busy summer beach as a meeting place between people, gazes and an inside and an outside. A place that can be used but that is completely different to other places. A place where you participate imperceptibly, becoming a co-producer as soon as you enter the stage it forms, as soon as you look out, are mirrored, sit down to tie your shoelace, or go into a corner to squeeze into your swimsuit.



AVPD, *Gazebo*, 2015

This could be one way to begin a publication on art and participation. With an artwork that, although speechless and silent, creates a situation for participation by presenting itself as an open invitation to activity, exploration and exchanges of gazes. And with an understanding of the museum as a site of meetings and participation: a place that can be used without defining a specific purpose. The artwork also comes under the broad concept of participation that forms the basis for this publication, an understanding of participation that ranges from concrete action to the situational exchange of gazes, from doing something to watching and imagining something.

This peer-reviewed publication is an extension of ARKEN's research project *Deltagerisme: Dogme og mulighedsfelt* ['Participationism: Dogma and Realm of Possibility'], which was funded by the Danish Ministry of Culture's Research Committee. Thanks to this support it has been possible to fund the time necessary for ARKEN's Chief Curator Stine Høholt, the curators Dorthe Juul Rugaard and myself, as well as head of ARKEN EDUCATION Lise Sattrup to research participation as a general cultural phenomenon as well as a strategic and methodological tool for art museums. As part of the research project, in 2015 ARKEN organised the seminar *Deltagerisme: Seminar om kunst, subjektivitet og viden i en deltagelseskultur* ['Participationism: Art, Subjectivity and Knowledge in a Participatory Culture'], which addressed the concept of participation from a range of cultural theoretical and museological perspectives. This is the concluding publication, exploring the concept of participation with a focus on art and the art museum. Through eight articles, the concept is analysed as a strategic tool for museums, as an art practice, as analytical alertness, as part of the exhibition situation and institution of the museum, and as an approach to learning. They take us through artworks by artists including Palle Nielsen, Karoline H Larsen and Jesper Just, as well as ideas about the engaged museum, participatory models, the commons, co-production, democracy, affect and performativity. Each article is introduced in more detail below, but first some more general observations on participation.

A New 'Ism'?

The word participation itself raises a number of questions. When do people participate? How do they participate? What do they participate in? And to what end? In the arts and humanities the concept of participation has been analysed and used extensively, not least during the past five-ten years. Not always with the same intention, let alone the same understanding of the concept, something that could be due to the extreme pervasiveness of the term. Participation as a strategy and practice has entered so many fields – from political theory to the arts all the way into our daily lives – that it apparently defies clear-cut definition. Its prevalence has inevitably generated criticism. The foreword to a special

edition of the Danish culture journal *Kultur&Klasse* describes participation as *sine qua non* for contemporary productions, interactions and experiences – a socio-cultural paradigm and norm – and in his book *Bad New Days*, the art historian Hal Foster writes:

“Activation of the viewer has become an end, not a means, and not enough attention is given to the quality of subjectivity and sociality thus affected. Today museums cannot seem to leave us alone; they prompt and program us as many of us do our children. As in the culture at large, communication and connectivity are promoted, almost enforced, for their own sake. This activation helps to validate the museum, to overseers and onlookers alike, as relevant, vital, or simply busy, yet, more than the viewer, it is the museum that the museum seeks to activate.”

And the normative nature of participation is certainly evident if we look at the culture currently on offer. Hal Foster mentions museums, where we are increasingly positioned as ‘users’ and ‘participants’ and co-creators of content, or are at least invited to express our opinion by ranking artworks, taking part in the dramatized museum experience, or simply by answering questions in exhibition materials deliberately aimed at audience involvement. Participation has become a key attraction in other aspects of our lives too. We participate in food festivals with communal dining and open-air philosophy festivals, the news is no longer something we consume but also content we shape and produce ourselves by sharing, liking, tweeting, instagramming and blogging, preferably as and when it happens since instant status updates are the ultimate proof of participation.

As a result, participation has become part of our daily lives as well as a structuring principle of cultural consumption and production. From the surprising and stimulating, to the predictable and prescriptive. The increasing role of participation is linked to new technology and new forms of art practice, but also to new cultural policies, the experience economy, and increasing demands on cultural institutions to justify their existence, as discussed in several of the articles in this edition of *ARKEN Bulletin*. Participation is therefore not as simple as ‘taking part’. On the

contrary. To participate is *also* to take part in new forms of consumption and behaviour that are firmly anchored in the politics and ideology that form us as subjects.

The Democracy Discourse

The ways in which participation is articulated in different fields varies. With the risk of oversimplifying, three dominant discourses within the field of art and museology can be outlined: a ‘democracy’ discourse, a ‘museum’ discourse, and an ‘art’ discourse. In the democracy discourse participation is seen as a key tool in developing democracy and the individual citizen. This occurs with terms like active citizenship and multivocality, where the level of power and decision-making are key parameters. The media researcher Nico Carpentier uses this as a basis for differentiating the concept of participation, distinguishing as he does between access, interaction and participation. In doing so, he articulates a radical concept of participation that not only requires access or interaction, but where users can also influence the kind of content that is produced, who produces it, what technology is used, and what the organisation behind the production should look like.

In many ways Carpentier’s criteria make him a hardliner compared to other discourses of participation. Indeed, his concept of participation is something of a rarity in art museums where – if we stick to Carpentier’s terminology – participation largely takes the form of ‘access’ and ‘interaction’, and where the power relations are rarely as egalitarian as required to meet his demands for participation.

The Museum Discourse

Compared to a hardliner like Carpentier, the museum researcher Nina Simon is a pragmatist, and her book *The Participatory Museum* from 2010 has become a virtual textbook on participatory forms at museums. Within the museum discourse, Nina Simon’s voice is far more hands-on than the political theories and ideas of democracy Nico Carpentier represents in this context. Nina Simon bases her work on the assumption that as a strategy and design technique, participation is crucial if museums are to demonstrate their relevance and value to a modern audience. Nina

Simon's call for participation represents an extension of the ideas of participation and relevance of museologists and learning researchers like Graham Black, George Hein, John Falk and Lynn Dierking, and is perhaps best summed up in Stephen E. Weil's famous 1999 dictum on the changed role of the museum: "From being about something to being for somebody." In practice this has been realized in audience development focusing on 'active' participation, as well as in educational and outreach strategies that emphasise user involvement, constructive pedagogy, and dialogical and situational learning. Here participation is seen as a tool that makes the museum relevant to new groups of users, and as a way for the museum to acknowledge its responsibility in terms of democratic development.

The Art Discourse

Also in art criticism, participation has become a theme in relationship to art and its manifestations, a perspective Michael Birchall develops in this publication. Here the discourse is rooted in the relational aesthetics and socially engaged art analysed by people like Nicolas Bourriaud and Grant Kester. With publications like *Participation* (2006) and the book *Artificial Hells* (2012), the art historian Claire Bishop has been at the forefront of shaping the way what she calls 'participatory art' is talked about in the art world. For Bishop, participatory art is where the artistic material and medium are 'people' – viewers, participants, co-agents – who use participation "as a politicised working process". Bishop sees this participatory art as part of 'the social turn' in art, which as well as being oriented towards social and political realities, also implies the desire to turn established categories like art/ artist/ audience upside down, or as Bishop writes:

"To put it simply: the artist is conceived less as an individual of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of situations; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term project with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a 'viewer' or 'beholder', is now repositioned as a co-producer or participant."

This art often takes the form of workshops or other forms of art practice that do not adhere to established concepts of art and may not even always be recognisable as art projects. Bishop is far from uncritical of this kind of art and the power attributed to it, just as she criticises the use of art as a socio-political tool, especially in a British context where during the 1990s art was claimed to be a means of generating social inclusion. As she writes: "Participation became an important buzzword in the social inclusion discourse (...) for New Labour it effectively referred to the elimination of disruptive individuals." This is a point worth considering given the current interest in participation in a Danish context, where as Maj Klindt's article reveals utility value has become an explicit element of the rhetoric of contemporary cultural politics.

An Art of Participation?

The list of dominant discourses relating to participation could doubtless go on, yet the contours of a democracy discourse, a museum discourse and an art discourse emerge clearly. Whilst they might use different concepts, these discourses apparently share the view that participation (what is considered 'real' or 'the right' participation depends on the individual theorist) strengthens democracy, makes things relevant, and generates the possibility of political change. In the democracy discourse, participation has been linked to the idea of actual decision-making. In the art discourse, it has been used about a specific kind of art where participation is manifested in a concrete, physical activity involving the audience. In the field of museology, on the other hand, it has been regarded as something that develops through specific communicative and curatorial methods, like co-creation and consultation groups, or less radically through different ways of involving visitors, such as letting them choose their favourite artwork, commenting via post-its, participating in debating events, or attending a concert or a poetry reading among the artworks. The list is long and apparently endless. Museum practice today is an activity. The goal is not only to 'show', but also to 'activate'.

But what if rather than thinking about participation as something linked to a specific art form or something achieved through specific strategies and methods, we see it as embodied in the art objects themselves and

the situation they create? Then maybe it is no longer participation – or at least not according to the terms of the existing discourses. It could, however, be a kind of participation rooted in another discourse. This discourse would focus less on tools and strategies, and more on the affective encounter and the presence of materiality. It would be a discourse where participating is what we do when we experience something, go to an exhibition, encounter art, reflect, evaluate, understand and misunderstand. Where it is the art itself that invites us to take part. Whereas the catalogue for the 2009 exhibition *The Art of Participation* raises the rhetorical question "Is there an art of participation?" we could polemically claim that there is, in fact, no other kind of art, since the exhibition situation and art encounter always have – to a greater or lesser degree – a participatory element. Art has an effect – on us – in different ways and in different situations, and we in turn have an effect on the situation it is shown in.

This issue of *ARKEN Bulletin* unpacks participation: both the direct participation of the three discourses above, *and* the less obvious participation that occurs through sensing and affect. In doing so, it examines the ways in which participation has been formulated, conceptualised and used by museums, and surveys the ways art itself can create spaces for different forms of participation. It analyses existing discourses in depth, but also invites us to explore new ways of thinking about participation. It does so on the basis that precisely because the concept of participation is so prevalent today – because it has, to some extent, become the norm – then we need to interrogate our knowledge of the concept so participation continues to be a productive field of possibility, instead of being reduced to a meaningless dogma. And most importantly of all, so that participation continues to be based on what this publication takes as the heart of the art museum: the artworks themselves and the materiality, presence and situations they offer.

The publication is divided into four sections: *Strategy*, *Co-Creation*, *Affect* and *Democracy*. The first section, *Strategy*, outlines the challenges posed by participation and the different ways in which the concept is verbalised and used in the fields of cultural politics and museology. This section begins with Stine Høholt's article 'The Art Museum Today: Participation

as a Strategic Tool' in which she provides an overview of the broad field of participation in acknowledgement of the fact that the key to the success of cultural institutions lies in increased visitor orientation. Whereas in the past the role of museums was to form and educate the nation, today the focus has shifted to the individual citizen. Drawing on the 2014 exhibition *The Model* at ARKEN, Høholt outlines the different ways participation and the participant are formed in relationship to the museum as a cultural institution, public institution and economic institution. One of Høholt's central points is that a balanced understanding of participation is a precondition for the success of the cultural institution today. In her article 'When and How Do We Participate?' Maj Klindt builds on Høholt's overview. Klindt identifies and discusses the contexts for a museological and cultural-political use of the concept of participation, and the extent to which these contexts overlap with a third context of market orientation. By introducing Nico Carpentier's concept of participation, Klindt argues that 'low-effort' forms of museum participation can still be meaningful for visitors, even though they do not enable decision-making in the way that Carpentier defines it.

The *Co-Creation* section focuses on socially engaged art practices and how these can invite different kinds of participation. In his article 'Situating Participatory Art Between Process and Practice', Michael Birchall outlines how the art museum as an institution has become a site for production and 'participatory models' where the exhibition visitor is co-producer. As Birchall writes, participant-observers emerge "as galleries seek to widen their participation in the gallery itself." It is no longer solely about "learning in the museum" but also about "learning through the audiences." Based on the project *Art Gym* at Tate Liverpool in 2016, Birchall exposes the artistic and political background for and development of socially engaged art and 'the educational turn', and the ways in which socially engaged and situated practices manifest themselves within and beyond the museum.

The focus on socially engaged art continues in the article 'Co-creation and Affect in Karoline H Larsen's *Collective Dreams*'. Here Dorthe Juul Rugaard analyses the two different kinds of participation that took place in Karoline H Larsen's art project *Collective Dreams* at ARKEN in 2015,

i.e. the co-creation that unfolded during the process of making the work, and the affective participation that emerged due to the work's performative, situational presence. The article builds on concepts like performativity and affectivity to identify an affective form of participation that offers a way out of the 'means-and-ends' thinking participation is often embedded in.

The *Affect* section addresses affective participation and the involvement that takes place in the actual art encounter and the viewer's performative exchange with the materiality of the artwork. In her article 'The Affects of the Artwork', Mette Thobo-Carlsen shifts the discourse of participation away from 'active participation', or what she calls 'well-intentioned' participatory projects where the rules are laid down in advance. Instead she focuses on the ability of art to create participatory objects that enable a social and material form of audience participation that is undirected. Taking the works of Yayoi Kusama as a case, and using affect as a theoretical lens, Thobo-Carlsen uncovers an affective and bodily form of participation that is based on a 'participatory gaze'.

In 'Affect and the Participatory Event', I extend this perspective on participation with an analysis drawing on theories of affect and performativity. Taking two total installations by the artists Jesper Just and Randi & Katrine as cases, the article delineates a concept of participation based on 'the participatory event' and the sensory and physical experience of the art work, thus challenging preconceptions of 'active participation'. As the article argues, this kind of understanding of participation is relevant partly because it can inform the exhibition practices of museums, and partly because it is based on the artwork and thus occupies a strategic position by representing a defence of participation on the terms of art itself. The fourth and final section *Democracy* deals with participation, democracy and the production of knowledge. Informed by Jacques Rancière's understanding of democracy, in her article 'Democratic Participation in the Art Encounter' Lise Sattrup analyses the democratic participation of children in educational activities at the art museum, as well as in general museum communication. On the basis of a series of cases and the role of 'stops', 'gaps' and 'cracks', she explores processes of participation and knowledge acquisition in the teaching situation, arguing for a shift from

the view that participation has to be learned to the assumption that everyone can participate.

In the concluding article, ‘Public and Commons: The Problem of Inclusion for Participation’, Helen Graham turns to the paradox of museums having to limit certain actions and uses to ensure that they continue to be available for the public good. Graham uses the concept of ‘commons’ to put forward a model for participation at the museum that rethinks ideas of access, use and participation. This is explored specifically in the context of cultural history museum conservation, an issue that is equally relevant for art museums. How can conservation be seen as a participatory practice that prevents the object from not only ‘running out’ materially, but also running out of people’s interest? How can the museum be understood as a new form of commons that has a material-social rather than physical form?

We hope that this publication can contribute new approaches and ideas to the wide and continually growing field charted by ‘the participatory turn’, approaches and ideas that we welcome you to explore, reject, criticise, pursue, add to, like or share either analogously, digitally, in your notebook, on your laptop, in the exhibition, at the museum, or on SoMe. The invitation is hereby issued. Please take part!

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NOTES

- 1 The seminar was held on June 19th, 2015 at ARKEN Museum of Modern Art. The speakers were Anne Scott Sørensen, Dan Zahavi, Niels Righolt, Camilla Mordhorst, Bjarki Valtýsson and Henrik Holm.
- 2 Mikkel Bolt et al., 'Foreword', *Kultur & Klasse: Deltagelsens æstetik*, year 42, no. 118, 2014: p. 5.
- 3 Hal Foster, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*, New York: Verso, pp. 134-135.
- 4 Nico Carpentier, 'The Concept of Participation: If they have access and interact, do they really participate?', *Communication Management Quarterly*, no. 21, Year VI, Winter 2011, pp. 28-30.
- 5 Carpentier, p. 31.
- 6 Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010, p. ii.
- 7 Graham Black, *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement* (2005) and *Transforming Museums in the Twenty-first Century* (2011); George Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (1998), John Falk and Lynn Dierking, *The Museum Experience Revisited* (2012).
- 8 Stephen E. Weil, 'From Being About Something to Being For Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum', *Daedalus. Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 128, 1999: pp. 229-258.
- 9 This thinking is evident in the Danish project 'Museums and Cultural Institutions as Spaces for Citizenship' (2009-2013) in which ten participating cultural institutions investigated how they could contribute to cultural citizenship through their exhibitions, performances, teaching and organisation on the basis of the concepts of 'multivocality', 'participation' and 'self-reflection'. The project was funded by the Danish Arts Foundation under the Danish Ministry of Culture, and as such reflects the prevailing orientation towards 'participation' and 'user involvement' – also by politicians.
- 10 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) and Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2013).
- 11 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, New York: Verso, 2012, p. 2
- 12 Bishop, p. 2.

13 Bishop, pp. 13-14.

14 Boris Groys et al., *The Art of Participation*, Thames & Hudson, 2008, p. 12. The exhibition *The Art of Participation* was held at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2009, and included works ranging from the historical avant-garde, Dada and Marcel Duchamp, to the concept art of the 1960s, the performance art of the 1970s and Fluxus, Joseph Beuys' social plastic, and the relational and media art of the 1990s. Or, as the curator Boris Groys put it in the catalogue: "What we are concerned with here are events, projects, political interventions, social analyses, or independent educational institutions that are initiated, in many cases, by individual artists, but that can ultimately be realised only by the *involvement of many*." P. 19 (my emphasis).

ARKEN Bulletin, vol. 7 (2017):

The Art of Taking Part: Participation at the Museum

ISSN 2446-4503

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ARKEN Bulletin is a peer-reviewed research journal
published by ARKEN Museum of Modern Art, Denmark