When and How Do We Participate?
On Participation from a Museological and Cultural-Political Perspective

By Maj Klindt

The article identifies and discusses the different contexts for a museological and cultural-political use of the concept of participation, and how these contexts overlap with the context of market orientation. By introducing Nico Carpentier’s concept of participation, it makes an argument for the meaningfulness of ’low-effort’ forms of museum participation.

According to the museologist Kenneth Hudson in his 1999 text ‘Attempts to Define ‘Museum’, ‘participation’ is just another fashionable museum term “used in the same loose and largely meaningless way” as other ‘jargon terms’, like ‘experience’ and ‘communication’ that have gained ground in the attempt to define the contemporary role of the museum. He refers to the communication theorist Marshall McLuhan, who at a 1967 seminar at the Museum of the City of New York outlined the contours of “the participating museum” that

“would ask visitors questions, rather than give him answers. It would encourage visitors to touch objects. It would give equal value to understanding through the ear and understanding though the eye. It
would assume that communication was both complex and untidy, that the person ‘who lives in an oral world, that is where the primary method of communication is by mouth to ear, lives at the centre of a sphere where communication comes into him simultaneously from all sides, banging at him.”

Hudson continues: ”Dr. McLuhan’s ideas of what a museum can and should do are clearly very different from those current in the museum world thirty or forty years ago. They are possible only as a result of new electronic tools and they illustrate how museums need to be continually re-defined, within the context of new technical and new social demands.”

This redefinition of the museum in relationship to technological and social change continues to provide a basis for museological reflection. According to a 2010 report on the art museum of the future by ARKEN Museum of Modern Art, museums today are in crisis because the tradi-

Dan Perjovschi, Old-new museum, 2015
Courtesy the artist and Galerija Gregor Podnar, Berlin. Radical Museology, 2013. Drawings for the publication Radical Museology by Claire Bishop, published in 2013. Set of 24 drawings on paper, 29,7 x 21 cm each and 10 drawings on paper, 30,5 x 22,8 cm.
tional model of the museum reflects a culture that no longer exists. As a result, one of the most urgent tasks facing museums today is to make their social value apparent, as well as their relevance and actual contribution to society. Catchphrases like ”[f]rom Being about Something to Being for Somebody” and the shift from “collection based institutions to visitor-centred museums” that ”instead of being ”about” something or for ”someone” […] are created and managed ”with” visitors” – to quote the popular and influential experience designer and director of Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, Nina Simon – reflect the fact that it is not the objects in the museum, but museum visitors and their relationship to the objects that have become central to how museums and museologists answer questions about the relevance of the museum. These museum visitors are increasingly referred to as participants, co-creators, co-owners and citizens, something reflected in book titles like *The Participatory Museum* (Nina Simon 2010), *The Engaging Museum* (Grahma Black, 2005) and *The Interactive Museum*, which show that the ‘participating museum’ of Marshall McLuhan is once again a popular and heavily debated concept.

In what follows, I analyse the use of the concept of participation and its relevance for museology and art museums today. Using the media researcher Nico Carpentier’s political and democratic view of participation, I identify two contexts for a museological and cultural political use of the concept: the first a cultural educational context, and the second a media-based context. In a media context, I address the expanded concept of participation used by theorists like Nina Simon. I then move on to a third, market-orientated, context for the concept of participation, using examples drawn from the museum world. Here I also touch on the difficulty of separating these different contexts in concrete museum projects. Finally, I discuss the meaning a narrower concept of democratic and political participation has had for the development and openness of museums, as opposed to working concretely with the potential of a broader concept of participation.

**An Expanded Political Perspective**

As Carpentier emphasises, the concept of participation is central to democratic theories, discourses and debates on the participation and inclusion
of citizens in decision-making processes. In this context, Carpentier distin-
tinguishes between a minimalist understanding of democracy, as exer-
cised during general elections when participation is limited to electing
political representatives to act on our behalf, and a maximalist under-
standing of democracy, associated with a broader concept of politics
and a broader political field. Here, participation, the distribution of
power, and the possibility of influence play a more central role – both
implicitly and explicitly – in a range of political practises and social
and cultural spheres that are often located beyond the boundaries of
institutionalised politics.

The democratic significance and political character of the concept of
participation is relevant for developments in both a broader cultural and
more specific museum context. The idea of the participating museum
proposed by McLuhan in 1967, came at a time when the concept of par-
ticipation was popular and widespread in a broad range of social fields.
By exposing them as political, democratic movements, activists strove to
create broad social change by challenging social structures and practises
that had previously been taken for granted. The realm of the political
expanded to include social and cultural arenas, which were subsequently
subject to demands for democratisation and increased participation.

The art museum became part of these developments. Influenced by fem-
inism and the civil rights movement, the anti-institutional art movements
of the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s problematized the self-perception and
self-representation of the museum, including the myth of the art muse-
num as an autonomous sovereign site for neutral aesthetic experiences.
The museum was exposed as being saturated by social, cultural, political
and economic relationships that shaped the art museum and its contents.
Declaring that ”all representation is political”, these artists challenged
the exclusivity of the museum through their art and practise.

**Democracy and Cultural Education**

As the cultural theorist Andreas Huyssen argues, this critique and the lo-
cation of the museum in a broader political and cultural context has not
been without effect in the art museum and the field of museology. On
the contrary, it has contributed to tearing down the walls of the museum
and to its democratisation. This was expressed in a change in the perception of museums, which went from being seen as shrines or temples, to becoming more open and democratic institutions where the borders between the formerly non-public spaces where knowledge was produced and the public spaces where visitors were granted a share in that knowledge were broken down. By allowing new voices to be heard and stories to be told from new perspectives, the former power relationship between the museum and its audience was open to debate. According to the museologist Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, writing in 2000:

”Museum professionals are not always conscious of the power that they wield, but this power is very real in constructing ‘reality’, in shaping consciousness. It is time for museum professionals to acknowledge and address the power of museums, to accept that museums are necessarily implicated in cultural politics, and that, therefore, professional practises and decisions have political dimensions.”

These ideas led to new models for museum communication. Hooper-Greenhill describes a shift from a model where the museum poured its knowledge into visitors, who were seen as ”empty vessels to be filled”, to a model where visitors play an active role in the construction of knowledge, bringing experiences and knowledge with them that they use to interpret the objects on display. This thinking is currently gaining ground at museums in the form of new communication strategies and concepts of cultural education, as well as in perceptions of outreach work and citizenship. In ARKEN Museum of Modern Art’s report on the museum of the future, visitors and non-visitors are described as co-owners of the museum offered as a platform for participation. Here, the museum is a place for debating issues that the public, society and citizens are interested in. This view is also reflected in cultural-political rhetoric, where the dominant perception of communication is based on a dialogue-based or interactive concept where it is no longer about delivering established truths from the institution of the museum to a marvelling, inquiring or unwilling general public, but more about looking for partners in processes of realisation that increase the understanding
of similarities and differences between people, generations and historical periods in the history of society. Or when the Danish Agency for Culture’s publication *Museums: Knowledge, Democracy and Transformation* states that: “Education is citizenship that presupposes participation and the individual citizens’ obligation to reflect critically. Education is the prerequisite for us to be able to handle the challenges we face as individuals and as a society.”

**Media Orientation**

The democratic and educational context for the use of participation in museums is also linked to a technological and media context. The idea of more open and democratic museums is often accompanied by high expectations of the potential of new media and digital technology as an open platform that can offer museums more democratic participation, involvement, multiple voices and transparency. Via new media, visitors can play a more active role as ‘citizen curators’ who can have a voice and contribute in ways that can challenge the authoritarian voice of the

![School children at ARKEN. Photo: Sofie Amalie Klougart](image-url)
museums of the past so the museum becomes “a marketplace of ideas offering space for conversation, a forum for civic engagement and debate, and opportunity for a variety of encounters among audiences and the museum.”

On her blog *Museum 2.0* and in the book *The Participatory Museum* (2010), Nina Simon emphasises how the role of new technology continues to be a driving force in relationship to contemporary perceptions of participation. One of the contributory factors to the idea of a participatory museum has been developments in web 2.0, which she argues has transformed participation from something for a small, select group of people, to something available to everyone, everywhere, at all times. The different forms of participation she analyses reveal an expanded field of participation that includes content production, sharing, tagging, rating, commenting, and collecting and organising content and is directly inspired by the possibilities offered by social technologies like YouTube.

In an interview, Simon describes how her own work is heavily inspired by the possibilities these media can offer the physical museum: ”

“Web 2.0” is a term that was coined in 2004 to describe all the tools online that allow people to create, share, and interact around content. In the mid-2000s, people in the museum field started asking, ‘What would it look like if a museum worked like a wiki?’ ‘How would things change if museums functioned like YouTube?’ I wasn’t that interested in how museums engage in the digital world, but I became obsessed with the question of how participatory culture online might influence how we design exhibits and programs in the real world. As a designer, I want to create museum experiences that invite visitors not just to consume content but to comment on it, argue with it, add to it, and discuss it … which is why it’s called Museum 2.0.”

**Access and Interaction**

Even though in her book Simon repeatedly identifies participation as providing an opportunity to produce and contribute to content, as well
as to comment on and debate political and cultural issues, on some fronts her expanded view of participation can be seen as symptomatic of what the media researcher Nico Carpentier calls ‘over-stretching’ the concept. More than any real opportunity to influence power relationships and decision-making processes, participation is an invitation to socialise and interact with others around the content and resources of the museum: an opportunity to be creatively expressive, learn something new, and relate to the contents of the museum. To emphasise these aspects of the concept of participation, Carpentier therefore distinguishes between participation and concepts like access and interaction. He does not consider access and interaction unimportant – they are, after all, preconditions for participation – but he sees them as being too frequently conflated with the concept of participation.

‘Access’ covers access to technology, content, people and organisations – to the museum, its collections, and its knowledge. Access was a key part of the 2006 Danish Museum Act, which included directives for museums to make their collections and documentation accessible and available to the public. Access was also seen as a key element of museum communication by early public museums, which were characterised by a transmission of knowledge and information from the museum to the public.

In the introduction to the Danish anthology *Det interaktive museum* (2011), which focuses on the potential of new media to change interaction with the museum audience, the editors write that it is difficult to imagine a museum that is not interactive, i.e. a museum that has no exchange with others than itself. But according to Hooper-Greenhill, even if visitors play an active role in interpreting the exhibits and the information the museum provides, the communication of many museums with their audience has primarily been one way. The audience has been seen as a generalised mass, the opportunities they have had for feedback have been limited, and their prior knowledge or experience has only rarely been taken into account.

In this context, new technologies, a changed cultural-political context, and a series of political initiatives have led to major changes in how museums communicate with their audience. As well as passing on information, there is now a major emphasis on (social) interaction with
other people, exhibits or with technology in the construction of meaning. The concept of the ‘object’ has taken a back seat to a focus on visitors, their experiences, and their knowledge processes. “The museum becomes a catalyst for users to engage, generate content, share it with others and comment on their contribution” just as “familiar forms of museum information have an added dialogic layer,” the editors of *Det interaktive museum* write. This development is also reflected in the most recent Danish Museum Act of 2012, which stipulates that museums, in addition to the interconnected tasks of collection, registration, preservation, research, exhibitions and communication, not only have to be accessible and make their material available, but also have to make their collections and resources relevant in a contemporary context, and develop the use of culture and natural heritage for use in the future.

**Market Orientation**

As Carpentier writes, interaction and participation often get conflated. In the context of actual museum programmes and initiatives, this might seem like a dispute about mere words, but the distinctions between access, interaction and participation and the democratic aspects of participation seem important to preserve if we look to a third context for the concept in today’s museum. The concept of participation is often used in the context of creating more open, democratic institutions, but it is also key to increasing commercialisation, market orientation and the focus of the 2000s on the experience and culture economy, something that often surfaces in discussions of the social value of museums. In a Danish context, the concept of the experience economy, which is based on the increasing demand for experiences by consumers, was granted a high degree of cultural-political power in the 2003 strategy paper *Danmark i kultur- og oplevelsesøkonomien* [‘Denmark in the Cultural and Experience Economy’], which argued for increased collaboration between cultural institutions and business. The Danish Ministry of Culture’s 2008 *Reach Out* catalogue also sees audience participation and inclusion in relationship to the experience economy’s appeal to the needs of “users – dare I say customers?” as then Minister of Culture Brian Mikkelsen rhetorically asked. An audience that is seen as willing to pay for the experiences institutions have to offer.
Participation is key to the experience economy. According to the founders of the concept B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, the experience economy is not only about adding entertainment to existing activities, but about engaging the audience through new kinds of experiences that are entertaining, as well as educational, aesthetic and escapist. This kind of experience engages visitors as either active or passive participants (a role determined by whether visitors have a direct influence on the activity), and describes the relationship of visitors to their surroundings in terms of ‘absorption’ and ‘immersion’. There are thus parallels between Pine and Gilmore’s proposals for creating good experiences and Nina Simon’s expanded concept of participation, which is perhaps not surprising given that Simon often draws on commercial examples in her writings.

**Participatory Intersections**

From a cultural perspective, it can therefore be difficult to identify the boundary between democratic and market-orientated contexts for participation, since the two often co-exist and intersect. In 2011, for example, MoMA initiated a project that was an instant hit. Visitors were given a
card with the words “I went to MoMA and…” where they could draw or write their own impressions, experiences and opinions. These could then be shared by being hung on the wall in the museum lobby. The project was later digitalised: the cards were scanned and projected onto the wall and via an URL code people could find their own words or drawing on a website, tag it, see the contributions of others, search using keywords, and share their contribution on Facebook and Twitter. The staff have since blogged about the contents on MoMA’s blog Inside/Out, under headlines like ”I went to MoMA and…: The Kids Are All Right”, ”I went to MoMA and…: Love is in the Air”, ”I went to MoMA and…: Deep Thoughts, Deep Talks”, ”I went to MoMA and…: It Looks Like This Mr Picasso!”

Another example is the National Gallery of Denmark, which in 2013 took out an ad in several newspapers where as part of the rebranding of the museum they asked people in Denmark to join a wordplay on the museum’s initials SMK (‘Statens Museum for Kunst’). “What’s SMK to you?” they asked, providing a number of self-ironic answers posing as questions and inviting people to come up with their own alternative answers as to what the museum was and stood for on Facebook.

Both of the examples above look like open, inclusive activities that allow public opinions about the two museums to be shared and seen by others, as well as for the individual visitor to have a say. But since the contributions of the public subsequently appeared as campaigns in magazines or on posters, banners and busses in the city, we need to ask whether the projects should not primarily be seen as creative marketing?

Here we can turn to the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe, who has criticised postmodern museums for abandoning their educational role to become sites of entertainment where participants and users are consumers, and where success is measured in visitor numbers. As she writes: ”The type of ‘participation’ they promote is based on consumerism, and they actively contribute to the commercialization and depolitization of the cultural field.” Precisely because museums occupy a strategic place at a time when the art world has been virtually colonised by the market, and when ‘the creative industries’ have reduced cultural institutions to ‘entertainment centres’, museums – according to Mouffe – are one of the few
places still open to ‘counterhegemonic politics’ and can therefore be used to reformulate the social. Mouffe argues that: ”By staging a confrontation between conflicting positions, museums and art institutions could make a decisive contribution to the proliferation of new public spaces open to antagonistic forms of participation where radical alternatives to neoliberalism could, once again, be imagined and cultivated.” 38

**Popularity and Problematisation**

In a theme issue entitled ‘The Museum Revisited’, *Art Forum* writes:

“Nearly from its beginnings, the public museum has been recognized as a reflection of the social order – with modes of display (and the objects housed therein) steeped in both the ethos and economy of the day. What, then, should we make of the museum now, when the audience for art is, inarguably, larger than ever, and the distinctions between art and other creative industries increasingly subtle?” 39

The museum has always mirrored technological, social, economic and cultural change, and therefore, as the media researcher Michelle Henning argues, has to be seen in the context of a much larger ‘exhibitionary complex’, i.e. other institutions whose techniques and technologies influence museum practises and also shape their audiences, their expectations and their modes of attention. 40 But the question of the quote also indicates the pressures museums are under today, pressures that come from ideas generated throughout history alongside expectations that museums justify their existence and demonstrate their contribution and value to society. Participation has become one of many tools to meet these demands and expectations. The use of the concept often has greater consequences when it appears as a demand or expectation from political or other supporting bodies that museums demonstrate their legitimacy through participation and the involvement of the public. The Danish foundation Nordea-fonden, for example, supports “activities that communicate and inspire public participation in the world of art and culture.” 41 Participation has, as the editors of the journal on cultural participation *Conjunctions* write, become ”a highly valued “currency”, something that
also impacts on the way the concept is used in practise. Participation has therefore also been criticised as justifying what can be seen as the economic and social instrumentalisation of art and the museum. Here participation is about providing solutions to economic or social issues, and is used by politicians as a form of financial or social policy to justify the use of public funds on art. In their report, ARKEN warns that “The role of the art museum cannot be to operate as an economic or social lever in society, since this would result in the long-term legitimacy of the museum being subsumed by short-term solutions.”

Which is precisely why it is important to investigate, probe, clarify and specify the concept of participation, as well as its possible meanings and its uses – also within the museum, where we have to be clear about why we should participate and what it is we are invited to participate in. Not to define the concept once and for all and thereby shut down the meaning it has or could have, but to continue to be aware of the contexts and frameworks we use the concept in. When is it about education? When is it about marketing? Not to find any unequivocal answer, but to be clear about the possibilities and potential, but also the more problematic aspects of the widespread use of the concept of participation in the broader field of culture, including the museum, art, and not least in relationship to museum visitors.

**Participation as an Option**

In this article I have identified the ways in which the concept of participation is expressed in the educational, media and market orientation of art museums today. As shown by the campaigns run by MoMA and the National Gallery of Denmark discussed above, these often overlap in concrete projects, revealing the complexity of participation in a museum context, where it can operate across numerous platforms, producing a plethora of meanings that are not always possible to distinguish from each other. Due to the diffuse boundaries of the concept, and to counterbalance the propensity for market orientation where participation serves other purposes, it remains important to acknowledge the historical and conceptual connections between democracy and participation. Not necessarily something that can be realised in a museum context. As Carpentier
points out, equal access to decision-making processes has proven difficult to put into practise. Plus, it is not necessarily desirable or compatible with the museum’s other duties and obligations to entirely demolish the distinctions between museum professionals and visitors. As Carpentier writes, the concept of participation should not necessarily be used to remove those distinctions, but rather to open up for more expansion in and variation of professional roles so a more diverse range of people have access to the production or interpretation of museum narratives, exhibitions and exhibits. In this sense, the democratic significance of the concept of participation has played and continues to play a key role in opening the museum to the public.

The question, however, is whether this narrow, democratic perception of participation is not of most relevance in the context of academic analysis? And whether, in actually working with a democratic and political concept of participation in the museum, it is more important to focus on the potential of expanding the concept to include ‘low-effort’ forms of participation that are easier to work with because they do not demand a restructuring of the entire institution, but only affect parts of the museum? These forms could co-exist with more traditional forms of museum communication, as ‘both and’ rather than ‘either or’, and therefore be more compatible with the needs of many visitors who express no desire to participate, seeing the museum as a respite from everyday life instead. 

‘Low-effort’ forms of participation can be more meaningful for visitors who are not necessarily looking for a chance to influence decision-making processes and power structures, but have more personal reasons for participating. These can include doing something meaningful with their friends and families, learning something new, having a good experience, or having the opportunity to express themselves creatively with inspiration from the museum’s exhibitions. These activities can provide an experience of being actively engaged with the museum and make it a more social and lively place, as well as having relevant long-term effects. From a museum perspective, small steps can be of great value, providing the institution with feedback and having an influence on more far-reaching decisions and considerations, which when taken as a whole can change museums and the way they operate.
Simon writes partly against the background of a disappointing American survey showing falling visitor numbers and homogenous audiences. In ARKEN’s report on the art museums of the future Phil Knowlen, director of the Getty Leadership Institute, writes that museums today are clearly in crisis, because they reflect a culture that no longer exists. Many museums, he claims, are starting to become “federations of self interest” that appeal to a narrow audience of peers and thereby risk becoming superfluous. Even though visitor numbers have risen in Denmark in recent years, Danish surveys show that art museums attract a narrow segment of visitors with an overrepresentation of women, senior citizens and people with higher education compared to the general population. In this context, the idea that different forms of participation can make museums more relevant, multivocal, dynamic and responsive community spaces that are not only ‘nice to have’ but ‘must-haves’ addresses more general issues about the social value, relevance and justification for the existence of museums. Here participation offers if not the only answer, then at least a realm of possibility we should continue to explore.

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NOTES


2 Hudson, p. 378.

3 Hudson, p. 378.


7 As Nina Simon writes, based on a popular citation from Stephen E. Weil “instead of being “about” something or for “someone”, participatory institutions are created and managed “with” visitors”. Nina Simon, The Participatory Museum, Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010, p. iii.


9 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. 13-36


See, for example, Duncan F. Cameron ‘The Museum, a Temple or a Forum’ (1971), in Re-inventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation of the Paradigm Shift, ed. Gail Anderson, pp. 48-60 and Marstine, pp. 9-11.


Hooper-Greenhill, p. 27.

Hooper-Greenhill, pp. 16-25.


ARKEN, Fremtidens kunstmuseum, p. 48

The Danish Ministry of Culture, Udredning om museernes formidling, København, 2006, pp. 9-12.


Simon, pp. 3-13.


Carpentier, pp. 24-30.

Hooper-Greenhill, pp. 15-18.


Hooper-Greenhill, pp. 15-18.
In Denmark these initiatives include the cultural-political strategies set out in state and ministerial publications like *Danmark i Kultur- og oplevelsesøkonomien – 5 nye skridt på vejen, Vækst med vilje* (2003), *Kultur for alle – Kultur i hele landet* (2009) and *Strategi for småbørns, skolebørns og unges møde med kultur* (2014).

30 Carpentier, pp. 27-29.


32 Marstine, p. 11. See also ARKEN *Fremtidens kunstmuseum*, pp. 5-35.


37 Chantal Mouffe, ‘The Museum Revisited’, *Art Forum*, summer 2010: p. 327. In relationship to the social, political and cultural changes of the 20th century Hooper-Greenhill sees changes in the museum as a shift from ‘the modernist museum’ to ‘the postmodern museum’. Hooper-Greenhill links the concept to democratic processes, whereas Mouffe sees the postmodern museum in the light of the increased market orientation and commercialisation of museums.

38 Mouffe, p. 384.


40 Michelle Henning, *Museums, Media and Cultural Theory*, Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006, p. 3. The term ‘the exhibitionary complex’ comes from Tony Bennett, for example in his book *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995. In the book, Bennett describes the relationship between and exchange between a range of institutions like museums, department stores, modern fairs, international exhibitions and amusement parks in the 1800s and 1900s. This kind of institution symbolised urbane modernity, and with their ostensible openness and public character were seen as places where behavioural norms could spread to the rest of society. Media plays no role in these early descriptions, but it makes sense to include it in the contemporary ‘exhibitionary complex’, because it is via mass media that the values and norms of today spread.


ARKEN, Fremtidens kunstmuseum, p. 16.

See the Danish Agency for Culture, Museums: Citizens and Sustainable Solutions, København: 2015, pp. 15-16. The publication presents the results of a national survey from 2014, where 23% of museum users say they use the museum to recharge their batteries and find the peace and time for contemplation.

ARKEN, Fremtidens kunstmuseum, p. 36.

See, for example the Association of Danish Museum’s newsletter ODM nyt, 20.04.2015.