

The Dangerous Museum

Participatory practices and controversy in museums today

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Abstract: *Whereas museums shunned controversy in the past, this article argues that as museums embrace the new trend of audience participation some have also opted to introduce “hot topics” into museum exhibitions. Museum professionals who have adopted this particular form of museum practice predict that it has the potential to reform museums as we know them, and to turn museums into active agents for democratic change in society. In a bid to understand and scrutinize the implications of this development in museums, the article consults critiques raised by art critics writing about a related development in contemporary art, i.e. relational and participatory art forms.*

Keywords: Museums, controversy, hot topics, participation, relational art.

It has been said that it is no coincidence that the Youth Rebellion has bypassed museums completely. They are not considered to be part of the Establishment, which is what the rebellion is against, but rather to be store rooms for the relics of past societies, and the feeling seems to be that museums are not really worth bothering about. Some years ago people talked about the radio as being dangerous; what if one day we could talk about dangerous museums? Precisely because museums deal with all other societies than the one we are living in right now, they could become arsenals that provide arguments to criticize the established order; they could generate a new philosophy of life.¹

A museum visitor, who believed that museums should stop being tame and timid when they had the potential to be much more than that,

formulated these harsh words in 1969. The visitor was none other than the Danish Minister of Culture, Kristen Helveg Petersen, who presented his views in a political review that dealt with the cultural sector in general and museums in particular. In clear terms the review criticises the dated displays of the museums at that time as well as the lack of attention paid to the needs of their visitors, and this review laid the grounds for reform.

This paper is concerned with the Minister of Culture's final proposal quoted above, in which he suggests a new progressive role for museums to play in the future as “dangerous” places that initiate change through questioning things as they are, and by presenting new perspectives on things. It seems the Minister advocated a

4 politicised museum that could participate in a changing society. That sort of museum would have been a novelty in his own lifetime, though perhaps not today.

The aim of this paper is to analyse certain aspects of contemporary museum culture where it appears that museums act “dangerously” by means of exhibitions that intentionally use controversial topics as a means to reach out and engage with their visitors.

Firstly, this paper looks at what controversy in cultural history museums means to the museum professionals that deploy it. Secondly, a series of exhibitions where museums use “hot topics” are analysed in order to understand the implications of this growing infatuation with controversial subject matters. Thirdly, the aim is to explore the relation this development has to another important trend in museums today, that of audience participation. Finally, an attempt is made to analyse the preoccupation with the controversial by using theoreticians and art critics that write about similar trends in contemporary art such as art forms that aim to be radical, effect change and also depend on a co-producing public to create process-oriented art works. It is argued, that museums that act dangerously in this way and radical relational art forms both take action in the hope of changing the world for the better, and therefore both could be subjected to the same type of analysis and critique.

EXHIBITIONS AS CONTESTED SITES

Three recent publications form a point of departure for this paper. In 2010 Fiona Cameron and Linda Kelly edited the anthology *Hot Topics, Public Culture, Museums*. The anthology was conceived out of a joint Australian Research Council and Canadian

Museums Association grant that was titled *Exhibitions as Contested Sites: The Roles of Museums in Contemporary Societies*. The anthology explores how museums primarily in Australia have dealt with hot topics in exhibitions. Also in 2010 an anthology was published in Sweden, based on papers from a conference held in Belgrade in 2009, *Why Museums and to Whom – Museum as Forum and Actor* (Svanberg 2010). It argues that museums should assume the role of forums in which issues relevant for society can be debated, and it contains presentations of two exhibition formats, *Hot Spot* exhibitions and *Difficult Matters*, that both use controversial topics as a means to achieve this goal. Similarly, a 2013 special issue of *Museum Management and Curatorship*, edited by Bernadette Lynch, is dedicated to sharing the outcomes and analyses of a series of museum exhibitions in the UK that focused on differences of opinion or conflicts within the institutions and between the museums and their visitors.

All three publications were initiated by museum professionals and theoreticians and were based on practical experience with setting up exhibitions that deal with controversial subject matters. Simultaneously, they also express the need for museums to change, and “become more self-conscious actors in society” (Svanberg 2010:9). What has to change, as it is stated in one of the publications, is culture production as

one-way communication where the one and only truth is presented; about us, the others, the past, our country and what kind of art is good and bad. [...] Museums may assume the role as forums in which issues relevant for society can be raised, addressed, debated and reflected upon in new and constructive ways (Svanberg 2010:9).

This includes dealing with difficult matters in society, “how can museums effectively engage contentious topics in new ways considering that in a contemporary complex society, pluralism and discursive conflict is an emergent contemporary condition?” (Cameron 2010:3) Bernadette Lynch also expresses the need for museums to rethink their approach in order to make a difference in society by referring to Chantal Mouffe’s *Politics and Passions: The Stakes of Democracy* (2002):

Thus, the prime task of democratic approach is neither to eliminate passion and partisanship nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to establish a rational consensus in the public sphere. Rather, it is to mobilise passion and partisanship for democratic ends, working together to create collective forms of identification around democratic objectives (Lynch 2013:3).

The quotes illustrate that these museum professionals feel that museums have the potential to play a new and more active role in a changing society, and that one of the vehicles in the museums’ new assumed role as such forums is to engage in hot topics and controversial subject matters. They also agree that this will constitute a departure from how museums have acted before, and predict that this new approach will be seen as

a challenge to the institutional foundations and the philosophical integrity of the museum. Museum metaphors as they currently stand are predominantly orientated towards the production of stable, certain meanings, ordered categories, unified heritage values and socially symbolic meanings such as local or national identity (Cameron 2010:2).

The authors relate this change of paradigm to

“new museology”, which first expressed the need for museums “to deal with complex political and social issues, arguing that museums must develop a function of critique and see them-selves as a forum for debate” (Svanberg 2010:16 ff., Cameron 2013:1). As Fredrik Svanberg explains, this new approach is a practical response to implementing what is essentially a theoretical approach and developing “new museology” into museum practice:

Firstly, the idea of the museum as a sort of inclusive social forum, letting people take part, influence and be seen, and creating a platform for democratic discussion, where many voices and perspectives are shared rather than as a place for authoritative indoctrination. Secondly, the idea that museums should not be passive in current important issues. These ideas may also be aligned with two principles common to current museums development: those of inreach and outreach (Svanberg 2010:20).

Fredrik Svanberg’s final remark expressed on behalf of the co-authors explains how the key to obtaining this change is linked to a new way of approaching museum visitors. He dubs this new approach *outreach* and *inreach* programs. The latter, in my view, resembles participatory practice. “Inreach is about letting audiences take part in museum practice, creating a setting for co-creation, inviting ‘community curators’ from stakeholder groups or source communities, opening up databases for interaction and user generated contents and so on” (Svanberg 2010:20).

WHY AND WHAT IS CONTROVERSY IN MUSEUMS?

The core theme repeated by the museum professionals involved in these processes is their

6 insistence that this is a relatively new and also radical departure from existing museum practice. As early as 1999, Steven C. Dubin explained that the role that museums were expected to play was about to change:

Museums are important venues in which society can define itself and present itself publicly. Museums *solidify* culture, endow it with tangibility in a way few other things do. Unflattering, embarrassing, or dissonant viewpoints are typically unwanted [...] If museums stray from *making nice*, they risk a confrontation with those who have a certain image to shield or an alternative image they would prefer to project (Dubin 1999:3).

What Dubin is saying is that in the 1990s, museums seldom set out to act politically or dangerously. Although publicity was always a good thing, museums rarely wished to draw negative attention in the form of bad press. Traditionally, museums were expected to emanate culture and learning, and present a rounded perspective on things. Museums resolved. Museums were not expected to stir things up and act dangerously.

Dubin predicted that this was about to change, and for the aforementioned museum professionals and theoreticians such as Fiona Cameron, this has indeed changed over the past twenty years: “hot topics such as homosexuality, sexual, racial and political violence, mental illness, massacres, lynching, drugs, terrorism and climate change are now all part of museological culture” (Cameron 2010:1). She sees this development as a necessary reaction to years of exhibiting rounded, non-confrontational or unproblematic conceptions of facts, truths, natural history, and *the Other* and claims that this approach “is no longer sustainable in an environment where the

self-evidence of all these things is under question” (Cameron 2010:1). The arms-length approach has given way to a more complex narrative based on the more unsavoury aspects of the same subject matter. But she also stresses that not all museums are prepared to go down that road for fear of political repercussions, or the alienation of visitors.

Eva Silvén expands on this and links the development to changing collecting practices in museums from the 1970s to present day:

Over the same time period, there has been a shift in the view of museum collections and collecting: from *artefacts*, objectively representing different physical settings, to *material culture*, with a growing emphasis on the social meaning of objects and their role in people’s construction of identity and memory, to today’s *materiality*. [...] This last concept attempts to blur the borders between the material and the immaterial, between people and their things, between artefacts and conceptions. It stands for a phenomenologically influenced interest in people’s simultaneous experience of an object’s physical, tangible, sensual, and emotional qualities. It opens up for a performative view of the material world, and allows for consideration of both humans and artefacts as actors in power relations and other forms of social life. In doing this, it makes new approaches to collections possible (Silvén 2010:141).

Silvén sees the preoccupation with controversial issues as being part and parcel of museums being interested in collecting and displaying objects that facilitate a dialogue with their visitors, a dialogue about identity-making, self-reflection, and cultural understanding. And she continues, “Not surprisingly, this dialogue will often include ‘difficult’ matters and ethically multi-dimensional issues” (Silvén 2010:142).

Based on the above statements, it seems that the introduction of controversial subject matter

in museums is linked to the idea of a change of mission for the museum as an institution, from being a solidifier of culture to an institution that mirrors and creates change in society. It is based on a new approach to collecting and to audience participation, where dialogue about identity and cultural understanding is key. Objects are curated and narrated in order to initiate and sustain such a dialogue, and one of the ways to achieve that is to pick a controversial topic.

HOT SPOTS

The pioneers of this exhibition format in Scandinavia are Malmö Museum and Skellefteå Museum. Since 2001 they have collaborated with Mutare Museum in Zimbabwe in developing an exhibition format called “Hot spot – awareness making on contemporary issues in museums”. For these museums, engaging in hot topics is not just about stirring up conversation, or resolving how to deal with difficult objects in the collection; for them, museums are not about the interpretation of objects but the means to create public awareness about bigger issues. The mission statement for Hot Spot exhibitions stipulates that

there are several topical issues that arise in contemporary society which need to be articulated in various public media. In general museums have lagged behind in making the public aware of many of these important issues. There are a number of causes to inaction and slow response, for instance there is a general lack of adequate public awareness making mechanisms to provide a quick response, contributions and information to the society on critical political, socio-cultural and economic issues. The museums may already know of the need for awareness making but are

lacking in the methods of doing so (Bergkvist 2004:10).

The publication with this mission statement targets museums’ boards and curators and offers advice on how to stage Hot Spot exhibitions.

The museums in both Sweden and Zimbabwe have staged Hot Spot exhibitions on a regular basis. The exhibitions are generally small in format but are designed to have a strong impact on visitors. The topics addressed in the exhibitions have been rape, obesity, aids, drug addition, use and abuse of animals in the clothing industry, freedom of speech – amongst others.

This exhibition format differs in a profound way from the traditional museum exhibition. It could be argued that rather than providing learning or information based on the museum’s collections, which is what museums traditionally do, this format turns the museum into a soapbox. Education and learning is replaced by awareness making. Subject matters that traditionally preoccupy academia and museums are replaced by topics that should concern political organizations and the news media.

DIFFICULT MATTERS

From December 1999 to September 2000 a mobile exhibition called *Difficult Matters* toured Sweden. The travelling exhibition was curated by Mats Brunander, Eva Silvén and Anders Björklund and it displayed objects (not themes) and narratives about these objects, which were disturbing or caused affect in one way or the other. The material on show originated both from the participating museums and the visitors. The stories told

8 represented fragments from shared history, and simultaneously individual tales of personal experiences: The jewellery box that used to be full of family heirlooms, but was emptied in connection with a break-in in a house in Odensala on September 3 2000; or a box of watercolours that caused the death of the one-year-old daughter of Wilhelmina von Hallwyl, in 1871. The ambition was to shed light on collecting practices and the reception of material culture in museums “which is a question of what is possible and legitimate to remember and tell of in different times and contexts” (Silvén & Björklund 2006:254). The curators conclude that the narratives attached to objects are crucial to establishing meaning, and that objects are meaningless without narration “they become neither easy nor difficult, neither harmless nor dangerous. Without knowledge of their meanings they become just dead numbers in the accession ledger” (Silvén & Björklund 2006:253).

In terms of assigning meaning, there are certain museum objects that were considered harmless when collected but are perceived as contentious by today's standards. Whether these objects are taboo or not is socially and culturally determined, and in addition this condition can change over time. These objects were collected in an era that was less sensitive to amassing and displaying religious, cultural or personal objects such as human remains from distant lands. As a more sensitive approach to collecting and displaying these objects has gained influence, not least due to the regulative on museum ethics instigated via ICOM (The International Committee of Museums), the display of some of these objects has been restricted, or they have been repatriated. The rest often remain in storage, out of sight, so they do not stir emotions.

However, there are museums that share the dilemma of being custodians of yesteryear's collecting practices with their visitors, and in doing so they risk stirring public emotion. The *Powwow* exhibition, held at Nationalmuseet in Copenhagen in 2012, presented the culture of Native Americans, past and present. The object that stirred a debate amongst Danish politicians about museums and self-censorship did so simply because it was not displayed. One exhibit was an empty display case with a drawing of a human scalp and a sign that asked, “Should ancestors be exhibited or reburied?” This approach left it up to the visitor to consider the cultural and historical background for scalp taking, and to ponder whether it was appropriate to display these types of objects or not. Instead of resolving the matter by not mentioning scalp taking or returning the scalp for burial, the museum took the opportunity to let the visitors participate in thinking about the fate of this potentially controversial museum object. In addition the museum's on-line visitors could vote on whether the museum should exhibit human remains (Gabriel & Petersen 2013). This example represents a new approach to interpreting a controversial museum object, where the museum shares its concerns on how to act with its visitors, through audience participation.

CHILD PORNOGRAPHY OR FINE ART?

Awareness making, uncovering, and investigating issues that matter to society in general as well as acting as a watch dog lies at the core of journalistic practice. So does the hunt for the next good story that can create headlines. In a bid to engage its visitors in how journalists work, the Mediamuseum in Odense, Denmark, also makes use of the aforementioned

Hot Spot exhibition format. It does this because the format resonates with the museum mission to stimulate debate and support freedom of speech by arranging exhibitions where visitors are prompted to emulate a journalistic approach to investigating news stories, posing critical questions, and considering different agendas. With the exhibition format *Mediemixeren. Speak your Mind*, the Mediamuseum presents a topic or dilemma with relevant arguments and provocative standpoints in order to prompt the visitors to discuss matters and form opinions of their own. Documentation is not the primary object in the display. The debate that arises becomes the exhibition. The utterances of the visitors in different media are the objects that go up on the wall and shape the exhibitions. This format could not work if it did not rely on controversial issues to spark conversation.

The first exhibition in this format was put up in 2010 and was about erotic Japanese Manga, or Hentai cartoons. It was an exhibition that prompted visitors to think about whether erotic Manga cartoons are child pornography or fine art by posing the question, "Should Manga be banned, and does this mean that all Japanese people are paedophiles?" This theme was also chosen because the topic preoccupied legislators and the media in both Denmark and Sweden at the time (Mortensen & Vestergaard 2011:47). The exhibition raised a media storm; it was described as scandalous, although no actual animated pornography was on display (only Manga magazine covers). The media storm slowly died down, but in the meantime the exhibition had fuelled an existing debate and reached beyond the museum walls to legislators and a wider public (Mortensen & Vestergaard 2011:48). Off to a

flying start, the *Speak your Mind* exhibition format serves its dual purpose in that it manifests the mission of the museum, and at the same time it engages the visitors in the journalistic practice that the museum represents. This format is quite radical in that it replaces the traditional display of historic objects and museum labels with a participatory audience based approach. Participation is widely used in museums today as a way to engage visitors but seldom exclusively, and rarely in this form where participatory practice is the sole purpose of the exhibition.

THE TROUBLES

For some museums controversial issues are not something they have to seek out; controversy is already a factor in the culture or history they represent. These museums have to think carefully about how to handle this prerequisite. In the case of Northern Ireland, the nation has a troubled past and as it turned its back on conflict and moved forward, museums had to think carefully about how to represent the past. Northern Ireland is now seen as a good practice model for resolving long-term conflict, but as William Blair, Head of Human History at National Museums of Northern Ireland (NMNI) pointed out at the 2011 INTERCOM conference in Copenhagen, "dealing with the legacy of the conflict remains a significant challenge. [...] In Northern Ireland the past is not a 'foreign country' – it continues to shape important aspects of contemporary cultural and political identity" (Blair 2011:1 f.) At the opening of The Ulster Museum in 2009, there was a prizewinning display covering the history of Ireland from early settlement to the present, with a gallery about *The Troubles* based on a narrative

10 dedicated to politics and conflict. In a recent addition dubbed “Facing the Past” the NMNI is encouraging people to tell their stories, through objects and by recording their memories. It is all part of coming to terms with a recent and troubled past by confronting it – not by avoiding it. In this case the museum is not trying to change matters but attempting to heal a troubled past.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION AND CONTROVERSY

These cases present museums that do not shy away from controversy but incorporate or embrace controversy and hot topics, as a means to engage with their visitors, and to amplify their mission statements. These museums also share another common denominator in that to some extent they all use a participatory approach as a means to communicate with their visitors. They have all parted with the traditional monologic approach and replaced it with dialogic interaction.

Audience participation is *de rigueur* in museums today and in society in general. The museum professional who deserves the accolade for promoting participatory practice in museums is Nina Simon. Simon’s widely read go-to-guide *The Participatory Museum* (2010) and complementary blog *Museum 2.0* have started a virtual participation movement. In participatory museum practice, visitors are encouraged to enter into a dialogue, and subsequently learn through that experience. Central to this paper is that Nina Simon sees the potential of controversy, or in this case *provocation*, to stir up a conversation. In her chapters on how to design exhibits for participation, Nina Simon stresses the powerfulness of social objects:

Imagine looking at an object not for its artistic or historical significance but for its ability to spark conversation. Every museum has artifacts that lend themselves naturally to social experiences [...] It could be an art piece with a subtle surprise that visitors point out to each other in delight, or an unsettling historical image people feel compelled to discuss [...] These artifacts and experiences are all social objects. Social objects are the engines of socially networked experiences, the content around which conversation happens (Simon 2010:127).

According to Nina Simon, social objects, whether real or virtual, have common qualities. They are or can be personal objects that have a personal story to tell – or active objects that pop into motion intermittently and cause strangers to converse. They are *provocative*, or they are relational objects that invite interpersonal use, such as a telephone.

The *provocative social object*, according to Simon, “need not physically insert itself into a social environment to become a topic of discussion if it is a spectacle in its own right”. Simon gives the example of spontaneous conversations that arose around a display case with piles of money stacked to demonstrate wealth disparities among different races in the US. This powerful physical metaphor was on display in the Science Museum of Minnesota in 2007, as part of the exhibition *Race: Are We So Different?* (Simon 2010:129 ff.). According to Nina Simon, provocative social objects only work as participatory exhibits if they manage to spark off a conversation. She warns:

provocation is tricky to predict. If visitors expect to be shocked or provoked by content on display – as in some contemporary art institutions – they may choose to internalize provocation instead of discussing it. To work well, a provocative object must be genuinely

surprising to visitors who encounter it (Simon 2010:132).

THE EMANCIPATED SPECTATOR

The preoccupation with participatory practices in museums does not stand alone. It is part of a wider trend in society, and in contemporary art and culture in particular. This development is framed amongst others by philosopher Jacques Rancière's notion of *the emancipated spectator*, "What is required is a theatre without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs" (Rancière 2009:4).

The emancipated spectator constitutes a new type of theatregoer, or in this case museum visitor, who no longer needs (art) historical knowledge to appreciate the displays; all that is required of the visitor, is to participate. This new inclusive trend seems to attract present-day visitors that have grown accustomed to taking part and sharing their thoughts through social media. The emancipated spectator relates to other terms and theories on what drives and describes social relations in society today, such as *the social turn*, and *networked society*.

Simultaneously, art forms based on dialogue, participation, and interactive practices have preoccupied artists, critics, and art historians since the mid-1990s. Participatory and collaborative art has brought the artist out of the studio, and often out of the museum, to produce situations where collaborations with a random audience can take place. It replaces the traditional art object with its finite quality based on a process-oriented approach. This involves activities to transform what was formerly perceived as a passive audience into an

active agent, and the spectacle they witness into a communal performance.

Nicolas Bourriaud, in his seminal book on *Relational Aesthetics* from 2002, defines these new art forms as art based on human interaction and a social context creating a collaborative meaning rather than the traditional assertion of a personal symbolic space. Social art or relational art is of a collaborative nature and it often has an explicit social or political content and agenda. It does not focus on the traditional display of art works for their visual or aesthetic content. As Claire Bishop and others who write extensively about relational art have pointed out, these art practices provide a challenge for the museum institution in that they rarely produce an object that can be collected and later re-exhibited.

This replaces the preoccupation with aesthetics and history of the past with a politicised urge to create a change in society. According to the museum professionals working with the Hot Spot exhibition format, "Museums should aim to create an environment or space for dialogue" and focus on "awareness activities" based on the following topics: socio-cultural issues, such as religion, health, migration, education, modernism; economic issues, such as poverty, unemployment, gender, discrimination, globalisation, child labour; political issues, such as human rights, conflicts, corruption, abuse of power, democracy, and good governance (Bergkvist *et al.* 2004:18). An example was the 7th Berlin Biennale (2012), where politicised curators rejected traditional art historical and aesthetic quality in favour of socially oriented and radical art or non-artist projects that aimed for direct political influence. According to curator Artur Zmijewski, "The concept of the 7th Berlin Biennale is quite straightforward and can be

- 12 condensed into a single sentence: we present art that actually works, makes its mark on reality, and opens a space where politics can be performed” (Lange 2012).

POINTS OF DEPARTURE FOR A CRITIQUE

Bourriaud’s theories on *relational aesthetics* and the observation that relational art often has a political agenda are quite similar to the contemporary museum practice that is the focal point of this article. In the view of some museum practitioners and theoreticians, this development has the potential to change the museum as we know it. For Fiona Cameron, it has the potential to renew the museums’ contract with society in a profound way, by making museums central to cultural and community life:

Engaging [...] controversial topics and controversy is now a fundamental role for many museums in an increasingly complex and globalizing world. Controversy is no longer something to be feared, but signals the contemporary relevance the museum form in public political culture [...] museums have a critical role in activating controversy as a productive means for engaging their audiences; in formulating new knowledge; in contributing meaningfully to current debates to more effectively operate within an increasingly pluralistic society and as spaces operating within new transitional risk management and decision-making flows on matters of societal concern (Cameron 2010:53).

Politically radical relational art projects also provide the museum or the biennale with an opportunity to renew their contract with society and make them central to community life. But whereas controversy as a curatorial strategy in museums has been subject to very

little scrutiny and critique so far, radical relational art forms have.

The remainder of this article attempts to visit the expansive and vibrant critiques put forward by writers such as Claire Bishop on relational art, and apply them to aspects of this particular curatorial practice that also relies on controversy, participation, and the hope to contribute to better society. The idea is that this attempt could point to some of the potentials and limitations related to this particular museum practice, and offer a critique that seems to be missing in museological research so far. Admittedly, it is a bold attempt that only works superficially because it does not properly address its own shortcomings and analytical blind spots. Firstly, it is based solely on the testimonies put forward by museum practitioners, and provides no empirical research that could determine whether and how curating controversy has an impact on visitors or stakeholders, or indeed on society at large. It does not explain in depth the differences between controversy incorporated in a finished artwork and appropriated by the art museum, and everyday objects harvested and narrated as controversial objects in exhibitions, in say, a cultural history museum. However, the shared agendas between this particular contemporary art form and its related museum practice are too obvious to be ignored, and so the arguments and critique put forward in the following should be read as polemical and as an attempt to launch a debate about the potentials and shortcomings of a new curatorial trend that has high hopes about its own potential to reform.

The most important example of a shared agenda is the hope of building a better society. Art critic Claire Bishop’s views on relational art forms and their potential to reform clearly

refute this, “These shifts are often more powerful as ideals than as actualised realities, but they all aim to place pressure on conventional modes of artistic production and consumption under capitalism” (Bishop 2012:2).

Concerning curators that use controversial subject matter and participatory strategies in exhibitions, the question remains whether these exhibitions have had an impact. At first glance it seems that the debate that arises from museums narrating controversy is only engendered among the visitors who attend the exhibitions. In other words, the exhibitions merely perform as mirrors or add-ons to an ongoing debate on the same topic in news media or elsewhere. Even though the subject matter of these exhibitions probably influenced a larger debate in society, such as the Manga exhibition, it is difficult to determine whether it had an impact on legislators that the exhibition was there because the media coverage was very intense.

In art museums, engendering controversy and heated debate obviously depends on the art works the institutions display, and at present the consensus seems to be that political statements in participatory art projects often do not give rise to the response they set out to create. The case is not so much that controversy and participatory dialogue are taking the place of aesthetic contemplation, and in so doing confusing an audience that is used to the former art practice. Rather the problem seems to be two-fold: one problem is that people today expect contemporary art to challenge boundaries, provoke and ask awkward questions. And as Nina Simon stressed in an earlier quote, if visitors expect to be provoked they may choose to internalise their reaction, and not discuss it. Art works often lose some of

their potency when they are institutionalised, and therefore they struggle to fulfil their radical potential. Through institutionalisation museums have a calming effect on even the most provocative of subject matters.

Another problem is that potentially engaging and controversial art, especially when exhibited outside the museum, struggles to be recognised as art. If the art work is a taxi service (Thomas Hirschhorn, *Bataille Monument*, 2002) or a library (*Martha Rosler Library*, NY, 2006) initiated or erected by artists as relational art works, a lot of museum visitors or passers-by will probably struggle to recognise them as art.

Problems with excluding participants were also recorded by the UCL Museums, which contributed to the special issue of *Museum Management and Curatorship*; they speak of introducing a Socratic method to exhibition making:

Aileen Strachan and Lyndsey Makay, the curators of Glasgow’s *Curious* project, note how expectations of debate discriminates against people who do not have that social, cultural or educational background and with it the confidence, vocabulary, knowledge base and desire to challenge the museum (Lynch 2013:4).

This observation points to the fact that museums do not appear more democratic and inclusive just by replacing knowledge, or aesthetic knowledge, with dialogue and debate.

Turning again to the question of whether museums that act dangerously can provoke change, Claire Bishop claims that this is not possible. At some point the artist, and in this case the museum, who sets out to make a difference has to pass the torch to other institutions if social change is to be achieved. For art and the museum, political conversion cannot be “the primary goal [...], this is why

14 art and museums continue to have a potency that can be harnessed to disruptive ends” (Bishop 2012:283). In other words, and this is an important point of departure for a critique, art works and museums cannot and should not aim at becoming agents of change. Because in doing so they would lose their potency as art, or as a museum, and risk transforming into something they are not: political organizations, politicians, or news media. The organisers of the Hot Spot exhibitions are aware of this, and warn their colleagues:

Though it must be remembered and emphasised as well that we are not encouraging museums to act as newspapers. Great care must be taken when tagging on to contemporary issues. Museums should aim to create an environment or space or dialogue. The primary agenda should be one of bearing testimony and making visible topical contemporary events (Bergkvist 2004:17 f.).

This approach leaves the curators, artists and museums open to the critique that they engage in hot topics to profit in terms of media attention because they merely sustain the debate, and do not act in order to better things or resolve matters. But as Bishop points out the tension between museums and/or art, and real life must be maintained in order for them not to lose their potency, again because art or museums would then merely occupy a place that is already occupied by other institutions.

Another important point of departure for a critique has to do with measuring quality. In this era of participatory practices, both in museums and art, how do we measure the quality of the museum visit? Information, education, and aesthetic experience are not the focal point of participatory practice. Conversation and collaboration are. How do

museums measure if visitors had a conversation or if some form of collaboration took place?

Turning to the relational art scene for answers, Claire Bishop points out that art critics reviewing collaborative art projects have been criticised for paying more attention to process than to product. Other than counting the number of collaborators as a measure for success, the evaluation of relational art projects asks only a limited set of questions: Is it a good or bad model for participation? Is it genuine participation? (Bishop 2006) This offers limited insights into what is going on when a critic only looks at how collaboration is undertaken, and whether it exploits or represents the co-producers. “Paradoxically, this leads to a situation in which not only collectives but also individual artists are praised for their authorial renunciation. [...] Emphasis is shifted away from the disruptive *specificity* of a given work and onto a *generalized* set of moral precepts” (Bishop 2006).

Another way of measuring success is to record the media response or attempt to establish whether the display made a difference and changed people’s minds, or altered the way of the world even. But as Claire Bishop has pointed out, this reduces the artwork, and in this case the exhibition, to mere propaganda. This limited scope is related to another critique, the argument that even though the topic is controversial and the approach is collaborative, it does not make up for the fact that the artist or the curator stages the work of art or exhibition. Bishop uses Rancière’s critique to express

that participation in what we normally refer to as democratic regimes are usually reduced to a question of filling up the spaces left empty by power. Genuine participation [...] is something different: the invention

of an 'unpredictable subject' who momentarily occupies the street, the factory, or the museum – rather than a fixed space of allocated participation whose counter-power is dependent on the dominant order (Bishop 2012:283).

It seems then, that museums cannot act dangerously without risking to lose their identity and status as museums. So when museums utilise controversy to converse visitors this trend is perhaps best understood, not as an attempt to reform the institution or better society, but rather as a timely new tool in the museum's box of tricks designed to attract contemporary visitors that are used to watching reality-TV programs and participating on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Linked-in.

NOTES

1. "Man har hørt, at det ikke er et tilfælde, at ungdomsoprøret hidtil er gået museerne totalt forbi. De opfattes ikke som udtryk for det etablerede samfund, mod hvilken oprøret retter sig, men som depoter for tidligere samfunds efterladenskaber, og fornemmelsen er vel, at de simpelthen ikke er krudtet værd. For nogle år siden talte man om den farlige radio; hvad om man engang også kunne tale om de farlige museer? [...] Netop fordi museerne beskæftiger sig med alle andre samfund end det, hvori vi netop lever, kunne de blive arsenaler, hvorfra argumenter kunne hentes til kritik af det bestående; vækstpunkter for en ny livsholdning." (*En Kulturpolitisk Redegørelse* Petersen 1969:154f., author's translation.)

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