4 Participation and dialogue

Curatorial reflexivity in participatory processes

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Introduction

Lately, several museum projects in the Nordic countries and around the world have explored the potential of extending museum participation into actively involving users in the process of museum exhibition design. This participatory museum paradigm shift (Holdgaard and Klastrup, 2014) defines visitors as collaborators, who bring into the museum design process diverse knowledge, expectations and experiences. The aims of this active visitor involvement are multiple and include the pragmatics of shaping relevant activities as a political endeavour of democratising cultural heritage institutions. This new situation raises key reflections for museums such as (a) how museum professionals co-produce knowledge in dialogue with museum users, (b) how museums may develop infrastructures that embrace participatory methods in ways that are meaningful to diverse visitor groups, and (c) how museums may fulfil the role of open cultural heritage institutions as places for social change, dialogue, democracy, human rights and activism (see e.g. Black, 2010; Marstine, 2011; Message, 2006; Sandell, 2016). This is a matter of how museums and museum professionals constitute their sites as organisations for public dialogue and participation, rather than as institutions that merely exhibit objects (Lynch, 2011; Parry, 2007; Phillips, 2003).

The participatory museum paradigm comes in parallel with the 'turn to openness' currently going on in cultural heritage institutions, which includes aspects of sociability and designability (Marttila and Botero, 2013). Openness requires dialogue and participation, and being attentive to what visitors know and how that knowledge may change the institution. Visitor involvement establishes connections with audience groups that go beyond the 'boundary encounter' practices (Meyer, 2010) employed when, for example, amateurs are mobilised in collecting cultural heritage objects (Star and Griesemer, 1989). Participatory processes create relations that help museum professionals to attune to their visitors' interests. Rather than

being understood as activities related to content, visitor participation has been framed as a knowledge process that connects museum staff with societal issues, and as a method to open up museum exhibition design to views and preferences of the audience (Stuedahl and Smørdal, 2015).

The encounter with visitor groups or stakeholders as participants in a collaborative process requires dialogue that goes beyond conversation by involving certain qualities in which 'participants display ability to listen, to be empathic and to open up to others' argument and show a willingness to change their standpoint' (Dysthe, Bernhardt and Esbjørn, 2013, p. 51; Linell, 2009). Our understanding of dialogue is, therefore, closely related to active participation and leans on how Norwegian professor in educational research Olga Dysthe links Bakhtin's theoretical tradition of dialogue, which emphasises the multivoicedness of dialogue (see e.g. Bakhtin, 1981) with existential philosophy. It is always 'We' and not 'I' who create meaning through dialogic interactions. The other inspiration for our concept of dialogue is the Brazilian educator Paolo Freire's political pedagogy. For him, dialogue was the starting point for consciousness-raising, which would lead to change (Dysthe, Bernhardt and Esbjørn, 2013; Freire, 1970). The third is John Dewey's pragmatic approach to knowledge, as constructed in practical activities in which groups cooperate within a cultural context (Dewey, 1934, 2007).

In this chapter, we discuss how museum professionals engage dialogue when integrating participatory approach, methods and tools into their participatory practice. We describe a participatory design (PD) process related to the exhibition *FOLK – from racial types to DNA sequences (FOLK)*, which opened at the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology (NTM) in March 2018. The participatory project involved a group of 11 young people 12 to 18 years old from a multi-ethnic suburban area of Oslo. The participatory project was centred on developing a digital activity connected to the exhibition. Before coming to the museum, the young people had already been members of Grorud Youth Council, a district advisory body which advises on community issues. The participatory process was managed by a participatory team within the museum, consisting of one curator, a museum pedagogue and one interaction designer from the exhibition team together with a researcher from a partner university. The participatory team planned the workshops and collectively facilitated them on the basis of their various competences. The participatory process lasted for a period of ten months and included eight workshops. The data collected in the PD process were recorded during the workshops by the authors and participatory team. The video and audio files, alongside reflection notes and written diaries, were shared within the team. Between the workshops, we communicated with the participants on Facebook (FB). We used a closed FB group to share not only plans for each workshop but also tips for sound-databases, editing

tools and so forth. This chapter is based on analysis of these recordings and notes and emphasises the development of purpose, the new judgements, understanding (dis)continuities of participatory practices and the adjustment of practice between each workshop.

The exhibition *FOLK* explores historical and contemporary research on human biological diversity through its interactions with society, culture and politics. The curatorial research interweaves understandings of individual and group identities with broader political and ethical issues, such as concerns on migration, the rise of racist and discriminatory attitudes or indigenous peoples' rights. Therefore, the topics of science, identity and belonging were the starting point for the participatory team, which focused on the making of a visitor activity. Parallel to this participatory process, the exhibition team organised multiple encounters with focus-group workshops, public lectures and roundtables. All these meetings aimed at fostering dialogue between museum professionals and individuals or social groups outside the museum, and at creating communal spaces on a topic with difficult history and high contemporary societal relevance to Norway and more broadly to Europe. Here, we focus on the process of the ten months collaboration and co-creation in the participatory project.

The outcome, a digital installation inviting museum visitors to mix, record and edit sounds that express the diversity of human emotions, was placed at the entrance of the *FOLK* exhibition (Figure 4.1). The installation was given the title *The Sound of FOLK*, which reflects the exhibition title, *FOLK – from racial types to DNA sequences*. Almost all museum visitors, alone or in groups, encounter the digital installation when entering the museum. It invites adults and children to listen and create soundscapes describing an emotion they choose out of eight categories. The soundscape they produce, for example, a soundmix of an ambulance siren, a baby crying and a sigh expressing the emotion fear, is uploaded to an archive, together with a written text and a picture or an avatar that describes the sound. The sound installation aims to strengthen the dialogue among visitors, by either creating soundscapes together or by listening to other people's contributions on the tablets or under the sound shower. During the formal learning activities, the installation is used to connect with the exhibition themes on human biological similarities and differences. The students are asked to explore the exhibition and make a soundscape that expresses an emotion connected to an object of their choice. The educator uses these stories of sound, for example, of how a poster from an human zoo in London in the 1830s elicits sadness or surprise, to facilitate dialogues around the exhibition topic.

The chapter addresses the relationship between co-production of the installation and dialogue with participants in the participatory process. We focus on three levels and three forms of dialogue that the participatory

Figure 4.1 The digital installation *The sound of FOLK*.

Note: *The Sound of FOLK* was developed during the participatory process. The museum staff collaborated with a group of 11 young participants over a period of ten months. The installation is placed close to the entrance of the exhibition *FOLK*.

Source: Photo: Håkon Bergseth.

team engaged in. These dialogic practices were necessary to retain the commitment and motivation of the young participants while ensuring that the design process developed according to the time frame of the exhibition process. The three levels of dialogue refer to the actors involved, who took part and from what positions. The participatory team managed dialogues with:

- The young participants during the workshops and in between the workshops.
- The participatory team summarising the workshops and planning the next steps of the process.
- The main exhibition team, reporting from the participatory process and adjusting decisions on content, form and levels of communication on the basis of the work with the young participants.

The dialogues were both discursive and practice based, as the encounters in the participatory process were based both on discussions of concepts and on experiences of diversity and identity, as well as on collaborative and creative activities. We have organised the forms of dialogue in three axes:

- Discursive; discussions, narratives, conceptual mapping and conceptual clarifications.
- Collaborative and creative activities, media production, model building and so forth.
- Voting, testing and evaluating on material outcomes.

Our analysis in the chapter focuses on how these levels and axes of dialogue were sources of the museum professionals' reflection and reflexivity that was crucial for grasping and supporting the participatory process. The research question we draw attention to is: what are the main challenges of making dialogues work, and what reflections are created during participatory and co-productive processes in museum exhibitions? The chapter focuses on the dialogic work and reflections of the museum staff involved in the participatory team.

Co-production, dialogue and reflection in the participatory museum paradigm

Audience participants' involvement in exhibition design requires creating a shared and neutral space for both museum staff and non-museum employees (Mygind, Hällman and Bentsen, 2015). Many participatory museum projects fail to overcome institutional power structures and relations and the result of the process is controlled by the museum (Lynch and Alberti, 2010). Participation and dialogue thus is a matter of museum professionals appropriating participatory methods adjusted to the situated context of the museum, the topic of the exhibition, the participants and the communities in question. This appropriation is a matter of translations – of re-ordering relations and 'drawing things together' (Björgvinsson, Ehn and Hillgren, 2012; Suchman, 2002). It necessitates temporal and transformative processes of finding new ways to make judgements, to understand (dis)continuities and to adjust practice. Participatory processes in museums, as in other organisations and institutions, include processes of staff becoming participatory designers through enactments, dialogues, collaborative learning and understanding. This is a process of becoming, where matters of concern relate to appropriation of participatory methods and its outcome (Stuedahl and Smørdal, 2015). These processes are strengthened if the organisational infrastructures support this becoming, which is not always the case (Dindler and Iversen, 2014; Pihkala, 2018; Saad-Sulonen *et al*., 2018).

Visitor participation in museum exhibition design is also a form of co-production. Helen Graham argues that this co-production tries to overcome the access barrier of the glass case of the exhibited museum object by expanding the variety of people and objects that are involved in museum practice (Graham, 2016). Graham illustrates how this expansion by co-production collides with the stabilisation processes needed for museums to legitimate their work. Co-production, participation and community involvement in museums in this way challenge the limits of the glass case exhibitionary complex (Bennett, 2006), and the museum performs simultaneously 'the desire to expand the number of people involved, while seeking to retain, and even stabilise, museums' political assumptions' (Graham, 2016, p. 4). This double move of pluralisation and stabilisation can become problematic. It questions the assumption that museums' legitimacy necessarily originates from making 'objects' publicly accessible through display rather than by cultivating responsive and reciprocal relationships with specific people and community groups (Graham, Mason and Nayling, 2013). Museums, Graham suggests, could benefit from adopting *relational ontologies* rather than particularity or abstraction. This includes viewing participation as a way to conceptualise the relational state of things, people and events in participatory processes. It also includes viewing *translations* as a concept that captures the dialogues and interpretation work involved in participation (Graham, 2016; Latour, 2005; Treimo, in press). Graham's insight into the double move between expansion of knowledge perspectives and stabilisation of museum legitimacy gives an indication of what goes on behind the scenes of museum participatory processes and dialogues with visitor groups.

Participatory practice, dialogue and co-production of exhibitions require embracing uncertainty, which is often experienced as in conflict with the needs for certainty built into the operating values of the museum (Morse, Macpherson and Robinson, 2013). The challenges are multiple; participatory practices go beyond the competencies of the museum professionals, where dialogues have traditionally been mediated by the exhibition or in guiding tours. Participatory practices require an often-missing shared organisational strategy and a proactive plan for managing cultural differences between staff, visitors and societal context. Further, participatory practices require acceptance to partial submission of authority by museum staff, as well as aligning personal agendas and emotions according to Mygind (Mygind, Hällman and Bentsen, 2015). Acceptance may bridge the gaps between intentions and realities of dialogues and co-production between museum professionals and participating visitors, but requires awareness of how one's own analytic framework influences interpretation and actions. This requires reflection and reflexivity.

Reflections during the design process has been the central topic of Donald Schön's (1987) argument for understanding design as a reflective

process. Schön has been studying professional designers in several domains to articulate common elements in their practices. He states that designers' knowledge differs from everyday actions because designers reflect in action; the designer may even respond by reflection in action; by thinking about what she is doing while she is doing it, in such a way as to influence further doing (Schön, 1987). This gives us an interesting departure point for discussions on participatory design in museums, as it turns the focus towards museum staffs' reflection on procedural activities in addition to objects and artefacts.

Sociological and anthropological literature abounds with defences of, and challenges to, reflexivity. It is impossible to do justice to such rich insights in this limited space, so here we will attempt only to sketch how central methodological concerns on reflexive interpretation in the social sciences resonate with the practice of understanding in participatory museum exhibition design, as well as in other participatory projects. Reflexivity has gained much currency through a renewed interest in the sociological work of Pierre Bourdieu and his focus on undermining dualisms such as objectivism/subjectivism and structure/agent (e.g. Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 2000). Weber differentiates between being reflective and reflexive in research as a matter of whether one focuses on scrutinising 'the assumptions, biases, and perspectives that underlie one specific component of our research' or 'all components of our research, and in particular the interrelationships among them', respectively (Weber, 2003, p. vi). While the part of being reflective resembles what Schön calls reflection-in-action, being reflexive relates not only to the researchers' own process but also on how they are situated in a context where both their research arena, institutional relations and disciplinary background play a role in their work. In this case, reflexivity allows the reflection-in-action to include analysis of how contextual relations influence the design work.

However, there is also a difference between reflexivity in research and reflexivity in design. Research has developed tools for studying and describing, whereas in design, these tools do not fully support the work of creating new design objects. 'Design is intentional; therefore, design interpretations are also intentional. It is intention that predisposes us towards certain data and values. This means that interpretation cannot be done without an understanding of a direction – without desiderata' (Nelson and Stolterman, 2003, p. 156). Nelson and Stolterman (2003) suggest that even in the most objective approaches in design, such as engineering design, there is still a need for interpretation:

> Interpretation, as a part of the design process, serves the same purpose as evidence and proof does in science. Interpretation is part of our

> attempt to grasp the conditions and context that exist and will set the stage for our ideas and new design.
>
> (p. 154)

The concept of interpretation with a direction gives a special character to the dialogue and reflexivity in a participatory design process (Stuedahl, 2004). Implementing a reflexive methodology in PD design means, therefore, to be aware of the intentionality behind interpretations and translations in dialogues. This reflexivity also includes the theoretical, disciplinary and institutional context of intentions and interpretations.

Participatory design competencies in museums as reflection-in-action

In participatory design (PD), facilitating participatory processes requires knowledge and structures that support the open-ended process of continuous dialogue and co-creation between designers and external participants (Björgvinsson, Ehn and Hillgren, 2012; Ehn, 2008; Dantec and DiSalvo, 2013; Hillgren, Seravalli and Emilson, 2011). It is important to focus on the designer using the method, and on that we cannot know participatory methods without the person or people enacting them (Light and Akama, 2012). This includes the practitioner's characteristics, the worldviews, purpose and decisions made on the way, as well as the moment-by-moment dialogues and shifts in position, focus and delivery that form the fundamental elements of PD facilitation.

Schön's reflective concept described the process of the designing as a conversation with situations: in a good process of design, the conversation with the situation is reflective. In response to the situation's back-talk, the designer reflects in two ways: reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. Reflection-on-action is a retrospective on the construction of the problem, the strategies of actions or on the model of the phenomena, and may have been implicit in the designer's moves (Schön, 1987). The designer's reflection-in-action is interpreted as reflection during the design process. The understanding involved in the reflection-in-action is defined by changing activities: 'the unique and uncertain situation comes to be understood through the attempt to change it, and changed through the attempt to understand it' (Schön, 1987, p. 132). For museum professionals working in PD processes, reflection-in-action may revolve around understanding how participants engage – or not – in a collaborative process, and changing activities according to the development process.

In the museum context, reflection-in-action is about trying to grasp the participants' understanding of the project. Users' or participants' interpretation

and understanding may differ from museum staff's. The museum staff should be able to take the users' understanding as their departure point: 'by taking the meaning of Others as a fundamental starting point for design, designers must proceed from their understanding of users' understanding, which is understanding of understanding, or second-order understanding' (Krippendorf, 1995, p. 149). In participatory museum exhibition design, this brings awareness to how curators develop the competencies needed for analysing plurality and complexities, reflecting on these and conveying these into strategies of exhibition design.

The shifting of perspectives is a characteristic of dialogic practices, as dialogue requires reflexivity and positionality in the 'We', which both assume that the participants in dialogue are aware of their position and are prepared for this to be negotiated. Facilitation of shifting perspectives in PD is a competency which can be achieved only in dialogic practice and is what we have earlier framed as 'matters of becoming' (Pihkala, 2018; Stuedahl and Smørdal, 2015). This dialogic practice includes front stage (e.g. workshops) and back stage relations; exploring, creating and consolidating working relationships; creating attention and support around an exhibition topic; and investing time in dialogue with participants in order to build common understanding (Dindler and Iversen, 2014). The dialogic perspective requires an emergent lens to the participatory processes as well as to the institutional patterns and practices in museums to be able to connect the diverging purposes and focus involved in participatory processes (Arnstein, 1969).

The challenge is to find the tools and techniques for dialogue and awareness, which enable the voices of the participants to be valued at a level equal to that of the museum professionals (Tzibazi, 2013; Stuedahl and Skåtun, 2018). Giving authority and legitimacy to young audience groups in the design process may challenge the professionalism of the museum professionals if they are not seeing the intentions of dialogue, negotiation and critique as a means of developing meaningful alternatives (Smith and Iversen, 2014). A participatory approach that includes audience in the curatorial process, such as in the conceptual, operational and evaluation phases of exhibition design, would also require a common agenda and integrated methods on all levels of the museum organisation (Taxén, 2004). However, a common agenda can have different meanings to the different participants involved.

Making PD at the museum dialogic

When the museum participatory team engaged in the co-production project, they kept dialogues cross-axes of departments and disciplines, responsibilities and interests. The participatory team reported to the exhibition group

consisting of 17 museum professionals and an external designer, while 30 experts and students joined in during the two-year exhibition development. To this aim, the participatory team was established consisting of curator, educator, interaction designer and researcher. The curator had to report and *legitimise the participatory process*, both towards the exhibition project group and to the museum management. While the exhibition group recognised the importance of long engagement to increase ownership of the participatory process and interweave different perspectives, the participatory process with the young people started at a point when curatorial themes were beginning to settle. Therefore, the participatory team experienced more pressure when arguing for the open-ended nature of the participatory process. As the curator recollects:

> We do not think that the management level really knew in detail what we were working on. They knew we had invited a group of young people from Grorud but not how it was organised and facilitated. The exhibition project group had good insight in the process, and gave their consent, but they still only had the knowledge we translated.
>
> (interview with curator Ageliki Lefkaditou)

The curator argued for the participatory process as a way to research peoples' opinions (and experiences) on the topic of human diversity and belonging, and to expand the scopes and perspectives on content, form and communication in the exhibition.

The aim of the participatory team was to work with a group of young people who had a special interest in the exhibition topic. At the same time, the team wished to avoid the common approach of representation as a starting point for participation in projects under the auspices of intercultural dialogue policies and initiatives, and thus single out the specific groups as multicultural youths. The participatory team made contact with Grorud Youth Council, a youth organisation in the Grorud suburb of Oslo, through a youth umbrella organisation. The organisation had a special attention towards active citizenship and youth participation on several levels in society. The Grorud district is a multicultural residential area with among 50% immigrant citizens, consisting of first-, second- and third-generation immigrants. The six boys and four girls, from 13 to 18 years, who came to the first museum workshop had various backgrounds, and a common engagement and consciousness of being a young person in a multicultural district.

The facilitation of roundtable dialogues was shared within the team, and facilitation of collaborative dialogues in workshop activities was distributed among team members throughout the eight workshops, which we present later on in this section (Figure 4.2). After each workshop, the participatory

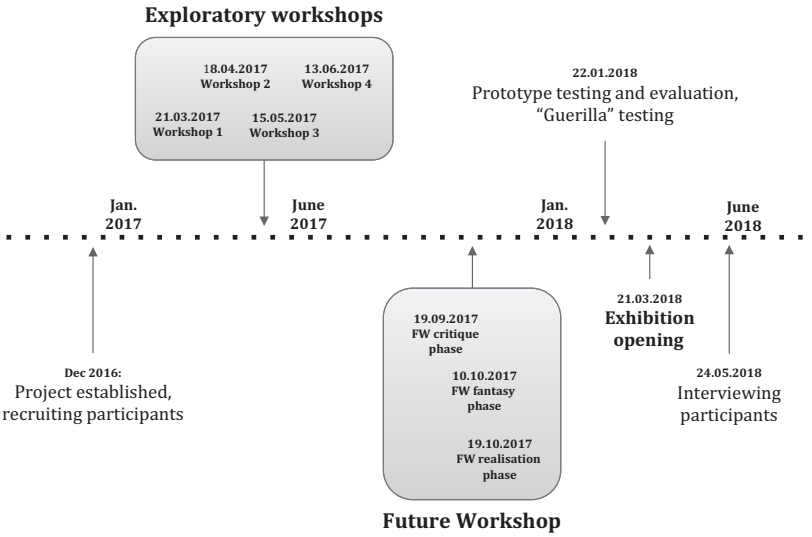

Figure 4.2 The participatory process of *The Sound of FOLK* lasted over eight workshops.

Source: Illustration: Tobias Messenbrink (2018).

team debriefed on the outcome of the workshop, and discussed next steps in the continuation of both the participatory process and the design.

In the PD meetings with the young people, the museum participatory team struggled to grasp the participatory practice and to redefine their roles related to the open-ended character of the process. They started with several potential design outcomes – an exhibition activity, an educational activity or an installation – and had to make sure that diverse professional agendas, responsibilities, demands for certainty concerning time, human resources and funding were aligned. While they had to be focused on the outcome of the PD process, they were also responsible for keeping the participatory process open, given the uncertainty of how the young participants would understand the complex topic and content of the exhibition.

The participatory team decided to focus on a sound activity that created the opportunity for audience creation and contribution to the exhibition, while avoiding privacy concerns. The team argued that sound would complement the predominantly visual communication of human biological diversity prioritised in the exhibition. We *see* difference, but what does *hearing* difference entail? This double focus on exploring a new medium – sound – and its potential for participatory activities, as well as on grasping young people's

understanding of science, identity and belonging, formed the basis for the eight workshops of the participatory process.

The first three workshops concentrated on the young people's literacy with sound and narratives of identity and belonging. The dialogues were facilitated through concept mapping, and the production of audio dramas showed the diversity of descriptions and the blending of cultural and biological markers of the young participants' identities. The group discussions focused predominantly on how cultural understandings of similarity and difference are embedded in everyday contexts. However, in the debriefing sessions, the challenges identified were multiple. The museum professionals reflected on the process being too open, and that the link to the exhibition theme became too vague. They worried that dialogues on such a complex topic without having the actual exhibit open may be too demanding for the participants. They also recognised that while most of the young people were well-versed in discussing issues related to racism, discrimination or belonging, they had problems relating such considerations to the *role of science*. Still, the team agreed that working in an open-ended manner also had a purpose of giving insights into how young people from a multicultural district reflected in words and actions about identity and belonging, as well as on how they would like to engage with these issues in a museum. This would have not been accessible in other ways.

The fourth workshop focused on presenting the exhibition work and the collaborative production of stories related to defined objects chosen for the exhibition. Nevertheless, after the fourth workshop, the participatory team still struggled with the open-ended process and became uncertain of the young people's engagement. One critical reflection was that the participants took a student role and delivered assignments and responded as if they were in school. They still had very little understanding of what a museum activity (or a museum practice!) is, and it was challenging for them to envisage how an unfamiliar topic could be communicated in an unfamiliar space. Faced with these challenges, the participatory team decided to change strategy. They put more emphasis on collaborative dialogues and activities related to developing a prototype focusing on identity and belonging.

The team decided to try the Future Workshop (FW) method in the fifth participatory workshop. This is a method developed in the 1970s by Robert Jungk, Ruediger Lutz and Norbert R. Muellert (Vidal, 2005) to facilitate group-dialogues and find solutions to social problems in urban planning projects. The method was developed especially for people without experience in creative processes and consists of five phases: *preparation phase*, *critique phase*, *phantasy phase*, *realisation phase* and *evaluation phase*. The FW was adjusted to the participatory process, and the team decided to focus on the critique phase, phantasy phase, realisation phase and evaluation

Figure 4.3 Future Workshop, the phantasy phase.
Source: Photo: Tobias Messenbrink.

phase. The participatory team redefined the previous four exploratory workshops as being the preparation phase. The facilitation of participatory workshops was also discussed, and it was decided to have one clear facilitator for each session. The educator would lead the fifth workshop. The design researcher would facilitate the phantasy phase, while the sound designer would be responsible for the realisation phase and prototype testing in workshop seven. This choice reflected a need for structuring the process, and start focusing on a final design outcome and a product that would be reliable.

For the critique phase in workshop five, the whole participatory project group visited the exhibition *Typical* at the Intercultural Museum in Oslo. The exhibition used a variety of interactive installations and textual statements to examine the concept of prejudice. This topic resonated with the themes the participatory team tried to raise in the previous discussions with the young people. During the visit, the young participants and museum professionals discussed experiences with different forms of exhibition engagement with the topic in this specific exhibition.

Workshop six, phantasy phase, focused on drawing a picture of future possibilities. It took place in the makerspace at the museum and the participants

worked in groups of three, involving museum staff and young participants. Each group developed a scenario for a potential museum visit that made use of sound and touched upon the themes of identity and belonging. A range of materials was available to enact their scenarios on a small wooden stage. The dialogic collaboration levelled the power relations between participants and museums professionals, as dialogue was easier while collaborating and looking down at a stage than by making eye-to-eye contact around a table. The group engaged in a long discussion on the kind of sounds used in the installation, and what they would express. They decided that the installation would invite people to reflect on the connections between sounds and emotions with individual and cultural identities and thus offer another view on human similarities and differences. An FB vote was arranged to decide which model would be developed further in workshop seven, the realisation phase. A prototype of the installation, based on the FB voting session, was discussed in workshop eight, the evaluation phase.

Dialogues and reflections during and after the participatory process

The dialogues and reflections that emerged during the participatory process can be explored on the basis of Graham's dilemma between pluralisation and stability. We suggest that this could be seen as a dialogic process of changing standpoints, listening and being emphatic and open to the multivoiced arguments of the participants. Our experience suggests that stabilisation comes through continual adjustment. The awareness of this complexity in roles and movement through dialogic reflection-in-action allowed the participatory process to move forward.

Keeping the process open was a strategic choice, despite the challenges it elicited for the participants and for the main exhibition group. This openness required that the participatory process was discussed and evaluated constantly in relation to the multivocality that the participants brought in, as well as the needs of the exhibition group. The reflection-in-action that the participatory team made during, and after, in de-briefing dialogues, was focused on how to organise the dialogue with the young participants as well as with the exhibition group and the topic of the exhibition.

Reflections on participatory dialogue, engagement and adjustment of method

Much of the reflection-in-action of the participatory team centred on the dialogue with the young participants and their engagement in the participatory process. The thematic refocusing of the process from an emphasis on

scientific perspectives to familiar, everyday situations and the structuring of the whole design process around the participants' interest in the medium of sound were the most important strategic changes to ensure the participants' continuous engagement.

The participatory team was also concerned with creating an environment that would empower the participants. This required being empathic to both the young participants' experiences of the museum space and the participatory process. All workshops took place in a room dedicated to experimental exhibition making outside of museum working hours, which meant that the young people did not get to experience the museum in full activity. However, the workshops started with joint dinner and conversation on more general topics to enhance the feeling of safety and common purpose. The participatory team noticed that the young people quickly became familiar with the space and seemed comfortable and safe.

The participatory team discussed whether an alignment of motivations was needed to maintain the participants' engagement. The museum professionals aligned around the common purpose of creating a participatory activity, but the participatory team wanted to address more emphatically what the benefit could be for the young people. Therefore, they prioritised presenting the museum exhibition process and revealing different aspects of working in a museum. Some of the young participants expressed that coming to the museum in the evening gave them a feeling of belonging to a valued group and that their views were important.

The introduction of the Future Workshop (FW) method gave all participants a common and structured understanding of the outcomes of each workshop and introduced a methodological framework that assigned equal roles to the participatory team and the participants. It also legitimated the continuation of the time-consuming participatory process towards the museum exhibition team, by adding a concrete, acknowledged scientific method to the process. The dialogues during the workshops became more structured and the participatory team could focus more on ensuring engagement than struggling with uncertainty on all levels. In this sense, the FW method became a stabilising factor that allowed pluralisation.

By the end of the process, the participants were pleased to see that their ideas materialised in the installation. They also expressed that the participatory process gave them insight into the workings of a museum and an understanding of the complex processes of exhibition making. The museum had no previous established strategy for community participation or dealing with cultural diversity. While not foregrounded during the process, the museum professionals worked on opening up a discussion about diversity at the museum and arranged to hire some of the young people as explainers

during the summer season. These outcomes point to how reflexivity on the whole participatory process may affect engagement during the process itself and beyond it.

Dialogue and reflections of the outcome of the participatory project

The slow shift in how the participatory project engaged with the exhibition's topic required reconfiguring the project's contribution to the exhibition. The activity with the sound installation focused on identity and belonging and was complementary to exhibition themes but did not reproduce them. The sound installation could encourage interaction and dialogue, allowing visitors to experience an easier and familiar entry to the exhibition that is more demanding and dense in content. As the time of the exhibition opening was approaching and the whole exhibition group was becoming anxious to see the outcomes of the participatory process, stabilising this aspect of alternative entry became important.

The participatory group realised, however, that while the theme of the exhibition was becoming easier to grasp in the sound installation, its connection and contribution to the exhibition's topic appeared weaker and more abstract. A reason for this may be that the user-generated soundscape was not integrated as part of the exhibition narrative (Galani and Moschovi, 2013). When the sound designer presented the prototype to the exhibition team, they suggested a number of adjustments to create visual coherence with the exhibition and to showcase the different ways humans express their emotions on human diversity.

The new relationship to the exhibition, however, led to another strategic translation regarding the spatial relations between the exhibition and the installation. During the Future Workshop (FW) process, the participatory team had to consider the best position for the installation to open reflections and dialogue on the exhibition topic, the limitations of space within the exhibition, and the request of the exhibition's designer to keep the room contemplative. An interactive activity based on sound did not align well with the overall atmosphere of the show.

The participatory team responded to these new challenges by experimentally placing the activity at the foyer space of the museum. For this decision, they relied on recent museum research, which points to the multiple transformative functions of the foyer space (Laursen, Kristiansen and Drotner, 2016). While this decision was motivated by the intention to prepare the visitors through a broader and more familiar topic, the response from the visitors was lower than expected. Therefore, the activity was finally moved right outside the exhibition entrance.

Dialogue and reflections on the exhibition topic in the participatory project

The participatory team tried several times during the four first workshops to open up an explicit dialogue about how science interacts with conceptions of identity and belonging through the concepts of race and ethnicity. This seemed to engage the young participants less than discussions on daily life and their own experiences with identity and belonging. The initial theme made more sense to the experts, and the participatory team reflected extensively on whether they should insist more on focusing on science.

For example, while the curator noticed that a commercial DNA testing kit attracted the participants' interest and could become a good entry point for discussing issues related to nature and nurture, she did not bring it back to the dialogue. This was a result of inexperience and fear of dominating the discussion, as well as a conscious choice to follow on what emerged as more relevant for the participants. The participatory team decided that they were not interested in replicating the voice of the exhibition, but in embracing other perspectives even if they appeared to be leading astray from the original themes.

The title of the participatory project, *Science, Identity, and Belonging*, did not change in any of the documents or in the group's social media account. Even if the focus on science became less obvious, this reflected the wish of the participatory team to hold on to it as a possibility. Meanwhile, for the curator, the introduction of the Future Workshop (FW) process gave the focus on scientific practices a return, but in another, more subtle, form. The FW introduced a scientific method of structured experimentation, and the focus on science was translated into a focus on scientific method:

> With the FW solution, that's where we left the original focus on science and moved to the idea towards emotions expressing the themes of diversity, identity and belonging. However, we engaged with conscious experimentation. Though we left science, our method became more scientific: By experimenting with FW as a method of inquiry, we established an experimental zone, we became co-researchers and even redefined our research questions.
>
> (interview with curator Ageliki Lefkaditou)

Finally, the participatory team redefined the focus on science, society and culture – after consultation with the whole exhibition group – without changing the design outcome. For example, they translated the number of categories of emotions available for the visitors to create soundscapes to be related to research in social psychology and anthropology of emotions

and a critical positioning (Messenbrink, 2018). The participatory team also discussed if the re-focus resonated with research on the role of emotions in constructing group identities, belonging and origins as well as in processes of racialisation, discrimination and exclusion, to be found in social scientific research.

Concluding thoughts

This chapter explores how reflection and dialogue during participatory processes enable museum professionals to sustain engagement and to make translations necessary for exhibition design on difficult topics such as belonging and identity for young individuals with diverse backgrounds in Norway/Europe. While an exhibition design process requires a final product within given institutional frames and deadlines, co-production and multiple voices flourish with openness and investment in long-term processes. Our research suggests that this tension between stabilisation and pluralisation is a creative one. Reflection-in-action over the whole participatory design (PD) process allowed the museum professionals to acknowledge that stabilisation is only momentary and in dialogue with continued movement. The explicit discussions of the challenges that the topic posed for the participants brought an awareness of the complexity of roles, motivations and agendas in the participatory process and made it possible for the museum professionals to reflect on reasons for what the participants could contribute and what they could not.

When the interdisciplinary participatory team embarked on this project, they were faced with an unfamiliar practice and the lack of supporting arguments for PD at the museum. They struggled with establishing shared understandings and language, with achieving participatory methods, situations and actions, as well as with being reflexive and ready to negotiate and change their perspectives. The PD process required adjustments in methods, in relation to the main exhibition, and ultimately in the prevalence of the specific exhibition topic in the outcome of the participatory project. It is through these translations and re-configurations that the museum professionals became participatory designers able to assemble, justify and defend the PD process.

Participation emerged through the appropriation of PD methods, tools and techniques, while the museum professionals benefited from the latter in terms of translating both purpose and supporting arguments for the participatory process. Within the PD process, different levels and forms of dialogue – among nested groups of actors and covering a range of discursive and creative activities – sharpened the interpretative skills of the museum professionals and structured the participatory process without

compromising its open character. The initial explorative workshops pushed them into being comfortable without having absolute control and clarity over the outcome of the project or the emerging discussions. At the same time, those workshops revealed the need for structuring elements such as the Future Workshop, which supported the project by providing a focus on a concrete outcome in the collaboration with the participants, as well as in the communication with the exhibition group.

We have shown how museum professionals implement participatory methods in their practice of audience collaboration and how they make dialogues work. We have illustrated how they reflect about the purpose of dialogues and how they co-produce knowledge with their participant groups, and how they adjust practices of designing visitor activities and exhibitions to hold the complexity of including other voices. The outcome of the PD process, the sound installation, was a more abstract invitation to visitor engagement with ethnicity, belonging and identity and was a result of museum professionals understanding how young people from multi-ethnic backgrounds think, engage and live with the topic. In this way, the PD process gave museum professionals insights that they would not have gained with more traditional audience involvement methods.

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Artefact vignette #2: *The New Europe* app

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The New Europe app was designed to be a metaphorical passport that would evolve throughout a visitor's path in a pop-up living lab in the multi-ethnic neighbourhood of Nørrebro in Copenhagen. The app's interactive journey follows a path through a custom pavilion, where participants collaborate to create an alternative, fluid and dynamic statement about their collective identity and perspective on European values for the future. *The New Europe* app explores the potential of interactive data visualisation to emphasise the ambiguous, layered and changeable nature of identity. Further, it generates opportunities for dialogic exchange using the visualisation itself as a prompt for comparing one's own perspectives with

a constellation of other ones. The first room of the pop-up living lab was conceived as an immersive threshold-space through distortions of lights and projections that suggest the reflexive nature of identity. The second room introduced third party voices into the process of identity 'rebuilding'. Here participants could listen to statements culled from current affairs or historical documentaries and related to the *Europe in 12 Lessons* pamphlet (European Commission 2011). The journey concludes with a sociable but also reflective space furnished with a group hammock where participants can look at the visualisation of their identity 'fingerprint', resulting from the interactions with all rooms in the living lab, alongside those of other living lab guests.

The progressive and relational articulation of the composite gradients visualising the participants' approach to European identity corresponds to the process of renewing or re-making cultural identity and one's own sense of belonging, calling into question fixed categories and embracing complexity and mobility. By doing so, *The New Europe* offers an immersive and data-driven take on topics frequently addressed in museums dealing with European history, such as migration, difficult coexistence and the significance of transnational or cosmopolitan cultural frameworks. Rather than following the predominant model of staging mediated encounters among visitors and members of different cultures, in *The New Europe*, people can also take a contemplative distance from their own usual self and come to see themselves as 'the other'.

The context of *The New Europe* app: www.cohere-4.com/living-lab/

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