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Taking part: performance, participation and national art museums

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On Saturday, 28 March 2009 hundreds of demonstrators gathered outside Nasjonalgalleriet, Norway's national museum of fine art. At 2 o'clock they joined hands to form a symbolic chain around the building. The reasons for this unusual action were explained in a website entitled *Bevar Nasjonalgalleriet* (Save the National Gallery). It called upon the Norwegian government to reverse its decision to close the museum and move it to a new building that it planned to erect in another part of Oslo (Collett n.d.).

A protest such as this refutes a still widespread suspicion that national museums are, at best, solid and unchanging and, at worst, dull and irrelevant. Recent events in Norway confirm that national museums are in fact contested places in a state of constant change. Often, these permutations take the form of scarcely perceptible refurbishments or seemingly unremarkable redisplay. Occasionally they undergo more radical transformations such as the provision of an additional wing or construction of a brand new building. This is well illustrated by Norway's Nasjonalgalleriet. Its present home gradually took shape in three distinct architectural phases from 1879 until 1924. And, despite the best efforts of *Bevar Nasjonalgalleriet*, it might well end up experiencing a complete metamorphosis in the near future.

The demonstration that took place in March 2009 served as a reminder that national museums are emphatically performative spaces. The exhibitions they mount are not

the only form of display. On show too is the public (cf. Solkin 2001: ix). Those people that chose to link arms outside the walls of Nasjonalgalleriet were placing themselves, as it were, in the frame. Their carefully choreographed actions formed the prelude to the theatrical submission of a petition signed by over 11,000 people opposed to the relocation of the museum. This was captured on camera at the moment it was placed into the hands of Norway's then minister of culture, Trond Giske. The resulting photograph appeared in the media, taking its place alongside other images of those street protestors who sought to (as they saw it) 'defend' the museum (Frivik 2009; Owe and Hverven 2009).

Such events represent pinnacles of high drama. On a more mundane, day-to-day level, however, museums seek to set all sorts of limits on the kinds of actions and conduct that are sanctioned in any gallery 'performance'. On arrival visitors are invariably confronted with lists of 'dos-and-don'ts of... comportment', as Carol Duncan points out at the start of *Civilizing Rituals* (1995: 10, fig. 1.3). The title of her book makes the familiar connection between museums and notions of improvement and refinement, at the level of both individuals and society. A similar relationship with education and democracy is equally well established (Carrier 2006: 11).

This chapter sits within this tradition. It seeks to marshal the linked issues of participation and democracy in order to explore the performative aspects of national museums. It focuses on examples drawn from three northern European countries: the aforementioned Nasjonalgalleriet in Oslo; Moderna Museet and Nationalmuseum in the Swedish capital, Stockholm; and London's Tate Modern and Tate Britain. They are critiqued through a narrow selection of exhibitions and events, all of which have

in some way sought to use a sense of participation in order to intellectually engage their audiences. In so doing the host institutions have endeavoured to promote themselves as active and vital – and thus far from the monolithic and staid, boring and extraneous stereotype of the national museum. In this they have almost certainly succeeded. Yet what this paper reveals are the limits to participation and the constraints that are seemingly endemic in today's national museums.

Models of participation

The loose concept of 'participation' underpins much of the literature on museums. It features in hands-on guides produced *for* practitioners (Black 2005); reports from the field written *by* practitioners (Russell-Ciardi 2008; Lagerkvist 2006); course-readers devised for students (Corsane 2005, §4); analyses of government policy (Message 2007); and accounts of developments in technology (Ciolfi et al 2008). Indeed, when it comes to the latter, a resource such as Web 2.0 is characterised as providing the very 'architecture of participation' (O'Reilly 2005).

This literature has two consequences. In the first instance it generates a sense of evolutionary improvement, the implicit message being that, as national museums are becoming progressively more participative, they are as a result growing increasingly democratic and their audiences ever more empowered. Yet this welter of material has an additional corollary: it obscures the evident limits to audience involvement and fails to really address what is meant by the very word 'participation'.

This is problematic because in any given situation participation is a matter of degree. Again, recent events in Norway illustrate this nicely. The protest of March 2009 traces its origins back to a controversial redisplay of Nasjonalgalleriet's permanent collection some four years earlier. This rehang reflected the fact that, in 2003, Nasjonalgalleriet had lost its autonomy by virtue of being incorporated into a new, composite institution known as the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design. In order to reflect this change it was decided to replace traditional conventions of display according to chronology with one based on theme. Older 'classics' were therefore interspersed among more recent pieces drawn from the National Museum of Contemporary Art (which, like Nasjonalgalleriet, was now part of the expanded National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design). This novel arrangement was further intended to portray Norwegian heritage 'in a wider perspective' by placing it 'in an international context' (Nordgren cited in Bringager 2005: 3). Familiar canvases by a Norwegian painter like Edvard Munch were now seen alongside 'foreign' works by van Gogh and Gauguin.

For some this 'postmodern tsunami' was all too much (Strömberg 2005). Knut Berg, director of Nasjonalgalleriet from 1973-95, intoned the 'death of the National Gallery' (Berg 2005). Secretive lobbying by his son, the businessman Mikkel A. Berg, pressurized the museum into reversing these changes and contributed to the premature resignation of its first director, Sune Nordgren (Söderling 2006). Nordgren left Norway and returned to his native Sweden, secure in the knowledge that the enormous amount of media attention generated by the short-lived changes he had implemented had at least fulfilled one of his objectives: 'Welcome to take part in our

conversation', Nordgren had declared in his foreword to Nasjonalgalleriet's new guidebook, 'everybody talks about the museum' (cited in Bringager 2005: 3).

Yet talk is but one form of participation – and a very prescribed form at that. Indeed, what seems to have characterised the heated rhetoric swirling around Nasjonalgalleriet was how little those on opposing sides really listened to each other's arguments or used them to initiate a thorough-going evaluation of the museum's decision-making mechanisms. Not everyone's voice in the 'conversation' carried as much weight as a Knut or a Mikkel. The capacity for the audience at large to instigate actual change was tightly curtailed, hence the protest that erupted outside the museum in March 2009 and the furtive petitioning behind the scenes by the businessman son of a former director.

All this would seem to confirm David Carrier's assertion that the public art museum 'is not yet a true public space, a place encouraging genuine debate' (Carrier 2006: 212). Yet instead of 'debate', Carrier ought really to have used the word 'participation'. For, whilst Nasjonalgalleriet had undoubtedly changed, it was no more participative than before. Nordgren's mantra was not: 'Welcome to take part in our *decisions*. Everybody *curates* the museum'. Whilst the public could talk about a predetermined hang, no proper discussion about how popular sentiment might feed back into the curatorial process was forthcoming. Any chance of this happening was dashed by the abrupt removal of the visitors' book when the turbulent response to the redisplay was at its height. More fundamentally, a report undertaken in mid-2008 into the internal workings of the museum painted a picture of an organisation

‘characterised by conflicts, mistrust and reduced motivation’ (Solomon et al 2008: 18).

A democratic deficit has been exposed by the Nasjonalgalleriet debacle. This situation is far from unique. A general awareness of the power-laden implications of the word ‘museum’ has given rise to a multitude of pacific modifiers – hence its prefixing with terms like ‘civic’, ‘neighbourhood’ and ‘community’ (Corsane 2005, §4), plus ‘engaging’ (Black 2005), ‘responsive’ (Lang et al 2006) and ‘inclusive’ (IMC 2009).

The only way to properly evaluate these modifications and statements of supposed egalitarian intent and determine where our national museums sit along the democratic spectrum is to initiate far more nuanced examinations of the nature and extent of participation within specific institutions and at particular moments. Probing questions need to be posed. Who is the audience and what exactly is it participating in? Is everything open to negotiation? Is participation, in other words, restricted to certain, limited domains or does it extend to the workings of the entire organisation, at all times and in all places? Where participation is encouraged or tolerated are the range of potential outcomes curtailed within predetermined parameters of acceptability? Or is it, in truth, a cosmetic exercise, one in which discussion is encouraged, but only one, already settled outcome possible?

Such scenarios – open-ended negotiation; circumscribed discussion; and mock ‘debate’ – can be marshalled into three categories: full, partial and pseudo-participation. These subsets were explored by Carole Pateman in her book *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970). It was published in the wake of 1968, a

year when the word participation ‘became part of the popular political vocabulary’ (Pateman 1970: 1). Pateman’s main area of interest concerned participation in the workplace. Yet echoes of her subdivision of participation can be found in Nina Simon’s recent work into Web 2.0 and the ‘hierarchy of social participation’ (Simon 2007).

Pateman realised early what subsequent research has confirmed, namely that ‘participation is neither a single practice entity nor derives from a singular ideology’ (Hyman et al 2005: 5). As such it is the *context* in which participation occurs that is all important. Thus ‘varieties of institutional approaches [to participation]... locate outcomes within... an interplay between actors in specific and contingent institutional contexts’ (Hyman et al 2005: 14). The ongoing saga of Norway’s Nasjonalgalleriet with its changing displays, curators and managers is part of a matrix within which participation is being constantly reformulated.

An exemplary model

[M]useum exhibitions transform how people look at their own immediate environs. The museum effect works both ways. Not only do ordinary things become special when placed in museum settings, but also the museum experience itself becomes a model for experiencing life outside its walls (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991: 410).

This quotation makes for an interesting link with recent events concerning Nasjonalgalleriet. In this instance, the ‘immediate environs’ of the museum referred

not just to the urban environment of Oslo – it referenced the Norwegian nation as a whole. At stake was a disagreement over how best to ‘experience’ the nation. The disputed outcome will shape how this culturally significant institution ‘frames’ Norway for both present and future audiences. The debate concerning Nasjonalgalleriet was so heated precisely because the museum is elevated as a ‘model’ determining how people can and should perceive the nation. The street demonstration of March 2009 was a literal manifestation of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s argument: as the protestors encircled Norway’s national museum they formed a chain ‘outside its walls’.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s quotation also provides the ideal introduction to what is perhaps the ultimate example of an exhibition serving as ‘a model for experiencing life outside its walls’. Arguably there can be no better instance of a national museum embracing participation and democracy. It took place at Moderna Museet in the Swedish capital, Stockholm from 30 September until 23 October 1968. The event was far from an anomaly in the history of the host institution. By the late 1960s the prevailing ethos of Moderna Museet – ‘to engage both children and adults in activities’ – had been pursued to such an extent that it ‘had become just as important as displaying the art itself’ (Tellgren 2008: 78). Nowhere was this more evident than during the autumn of 1968 and the exhibition ‘The model – a model for a qualitative society’ (*Modellen – En modell för ett kvalitativt samhälle*, hereafter ‘*Modellen*’).

Modellen was the brainchild of Palle Nielsen (born 1944), a young art school drop-out from Denmark. Nielsen had been involved in clandestinely building playgrounds for children who lived in the less privileged suburbs of Copenhagen (Bloom 2007: 132).

This was direct action: rather than struggling with bureaucracy and officialdom, Nielsen and his colleagues simply turned up, consulted with local residents and got to work.

Nielsen brought this logic to Sweden – only this time he also sought to realise his ideas in a national museum rather than on a housing estate. He secured both financial backing and the support of the leadership of Moderna Museet and, with the help of local anti-Vietnam war activists, began building what was in effect an enormous playground at the heart of the museum. A long, raised wooden platform was constructed over a Masonite floor covered in brightly coloured, irregularly-sized foam blocks. Ample quantities of paint and building materials were supplied together with theatre costumes, props, make-up, wigs and masks of the political figures of the day – de Gaulle, Mao and Lyndon B. Johnson. Loud music of every conceivable genre was played on record players placed into each corner of the gallery (Larsen 1999: 39).

The museum stressed that *Modellen* was not a ‘finished’ exhibition – it was the ongoing activities of the children that were important (Hultén 1983: 43-44). Indeed, the catalogue text of the event declared that there *was* no exhibition: the children’s play constituted the work, so it was only an exhibition for those who were not playing (Nielsen 1968: 2). This effectively meant that the adults were marginalised in favour of the children. The latter participated for free; only adults had to pay. So many wanted to attend *Modellen* that numbers had to be restricted and an additional play area built outside the museum. This meant that the museum had literally as well as metaphorically broken out of its architectural frame and become ‘a model for experiencing life outside its walls’ (to recall Kirshenblatt-Gimblett).

An important aim of *Modellen* was to assess how the children would react to this stimulating environment, one where ‘everything was, without reservation given over to the visitors – the children’ (Granath and Nieckels 1983: 190). This was participation of the most comprehensive kind; a variety that did not just modify the orthodox authority structure – it completely reworked it (cf. Pateman 1970: 106). It was motivated by dissatisfaction with the status of children in society and an education system that failed to value and nurture a child’s artistic and creative potential (Hultén in Nielsen 1968: 32). *Modellen* was also a ‘protest’ against a society that was seen as prioritising commercial interests over giving full rein to children’s fantasy. It was anticipated that *Modellen* would elicit ‘constructive’ play; constructive in the sense that the children would learn to communicate and collaborate with their peer groups and because these activities were to be filmed and studied by psychologists (Hultén 1983: 43-44).

Nielsen used *Modellen* to hit out at what he perceived to be a sense of anxiety and powerlessness felt by many adults. He did not want the latter to project their fear of society onto their children. He also hoped that *Modellen* would serve to release ‘the child in the adult’ (Tellgren 2008: 265). This was embodied in a series of oft-reproduced images of a man whose face is still widely recognised today, even though well over twenty years have passed since he was tragically gunned down in a Stockholm street. It is the Swedish politician and statesman, Olof Palme (1927-1986), who at the time was the Swedish Minister of Education.

Palme was an advocate of an active, participatory politics. Whilst Nielsen was doubtful about the benefits of street protests – preferring instead the ‘direct action’ of building playgrounds – Palme saw no such distinction. His photographed leap is a performative action that is on a par with his extremely controversial decision to participate in the anti-Vietnam war demonstration that took place in Stockholm on February 21, 1968. An image of him carrying a flaming torch appeared on the front page of *Dagens Nyheter*, eight months before the same national newspaper depicted him leaping into the air of Moderna Museet.

Palme’s performative actions on the streets and in the museum literally embody the notion of participation when it comes to democracy. Politics is everywhere and happens all the time. It is not restricted to political representatives and periodic elections. The museum as an essential ‘element of cultural politics’ played a key role in this (Palme 1971). Carole Pateman’s aforementioned book *Participation and Democratic Theory* came out a few years after *Modellen*, and her focus was elsewhere rather than museums. It nevertheless encapsulates the notion of establishing ‘local political institutions’ as ‘training grounds for democracy’ (John Stuart Mill cited in Pateman 1970: 47). By allowing Nielsen to construct *Modellen*, Sweden’s national museum of modern and contemporary art was aligning itself with a radical political project: an unambiguous attempt to establish a model not only for *experiencing* life but for *changing* it. That was the explicit objective of Pontus Hultén, the director of Moderna Museet from 1960 until 1973 and the man who had sanctioned Nielsen’s ‘experiment’. In the catalogue to *Modellen*, Hultén declared boldly that the exhibition provided nothing less than ‘a model of a new form of society.’ He used this to advocate a ‘new role for museums’, one whose most ‘pressing task’ was to provide

space for precisely these kinds of ‘experimental models’ (Hultén cited in Nielsen 1968: 32).

Modellen was the most uncompromising endeavour to date of an institution that was only a decade old. Since its founding in 1958, Moderna Museet had mounted a series of bold experiments in art: shows such as the exhibitions *Movement in Art* (1961) and *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* (1968); the 5 New York Evenings of ‘happenings’ of 1964 including Robert Rauschenberg’s legendary performance alongside a live cow in slippers; and ‘interactive’ works such as Nikki de Saint-Phalle’s *She – A Cathedral* (1966), an enormous female figure that contained the exhibition and which was accessible through her ‘vagina’. This programme established Pontus Hultén’s reputation and left an indelible impression on Moderna Museet. Hultén might have departed the museum to become the Pompidou Centre’s first director in 1973, but his presence at the museum remains there to this day – as we shall soon see.

One artist who featured at Moderna Museet during the Hultén era was Allan Kaprow (1927-2006), a pioneer of ‘happenings’. These were overtly participative artistic events that invited the audience to ‘come out and play’ in marked contrast to the more usual museal injunction: ‘do not touch’ (Harding 2005: 10). The Swedish artist Öyvind Fahlström (1983: 169) was therefore right to compare *Modellen* to a Kaprowian ‘happening’. Kaprow’s work was all about ‘the blurring of art and life’. This is the title given to a book of his collective writings. In the introduction its editor noted that ‘actual participation [or ‘full participation’] in a work of art courts anarchy’ (Kelley 2003: xviii). And it was anxieties over the anarchic nature of *Modellen* that

led to criticism in the media, not least when injuries resulted from youthful dives into the sea of foam. The exhibition was forced to close when the fire chief of Stockholm declared the exhibition to be a safety hazard. This necessitated the replacement of the foam blocks with slides before the show could reopen. Nielsen interpreted this decision as being politically motivated. Blurring art and life in the way he had was, for some at least, a participatory step too far.

Modellen is a landmark exhibition. It constitutes a vitally important rider to the evolutionary claims that museums are progressively becoming more engaging, inclusive and participatory. Take, for example, this statement in the opening chapter of *The Responsive Museum*:

Over the past 50 years there has been a major shift in the relationship between museums and their audiences. In the 1960s the relationship could have been considered simple and one-dimensional; the museum was all-powerful and the uncontested authority (Reeve and Woollard 2006: 5).

It must be stressed that the authors here were referring to the history of British museums, so they can be forgiven for not qualifying their line of reasoning by referring to *Modellen*. But their argument overlooks an analogous example that *did* take place in Britain, namely Robert Morris's infamous 1971 exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London. Motivated by a desire to establish 'a new role for the artist in relation to society', Morris oversaw the construction of a series of large-scale structures which 'invite[d] the physical participation of the public' (Compton and

Sylvester 1971, n.p.). Akin to an adult version of *Modellen* it closed after only four days due to the ‘wild’ behaviour of the participants (Kennedy 2009).

In 2005, the foremost writer on *Modellen*, Lars Bang Larsen pondered whether an exhibition such as that devised by Palle Nielsen would nowadays be possible. He quite reasonably concluded that ‘no public art gallery would today allow any activist to take it over for the purpose of uncontrolled social experiment’ (Larsen 2005: 217). This was affirmed indirectly in 2009 when Tate Modern decided to resurrect Robert Morris’s abortive exhibition of 1971. Entitled *Bodyspacemotionthings* it would be more accurate to describe it as a ‘tame’ reworking of the original (Rees Leahy 2009). Health and safety concerns led to a number of changes. The first thing that visitors encountered was a rope suspended over a huge ball (*see page 1 above*). In 1971, participants could hang from it and manipulate the sphere with their feet. The 2009 version retained this as a centrepiece for the display. But the rope was tied into a knot to keep it just out of reach. A poignant metaphor in other words for this decidedly *controlled* social experiment, one that was given over to the visitors *with* reservation.

An abortive model

The 1968 catalogue to Moderna Museet’s *Modellen* featured quotations from a diverse range of writers and thinkers including Søren Kierkegaard, Mao Tse-tung and a six-and-a-half year old boy called Mats. Characteristically it was the latter that was given the first word. His thoughts and sketches doubled as preparatory designs for what was actually built in the museum. Mats revealed that he, like other children, found it boring to be stuck on the ground. He dreamed of escape via an enormous

ladder reaching straight up in the sky – rather like (not) climbing that elusive rope in Tate Modern's *Bodyspacemotionthings*.

That it is not just children who find life on the ground mundane was confirmed by Yoko Ono. In 1968 she conceived a conceptual work entitled *Sky Event for John Lennon*. This consisted of asking as many participants as possible to get hold of a telescope or pair of binoculars, dress in their smartest clothes and gather together to 'check the sky'. In addition, 'ladders of great height should also be prepared for people who wish to climb up high to check' (Liverpool Biennial). It would take exactly forty years for this surreal event to be realised. Renamed *Liverpool Skyladders* it took place in the ruined church of St. Luke's as part of Liverpool's year as European City of Culture. When I visited the exhibition I was rather surprised to find that none of the ladders had any occupants. I soon realised why: health and safety concerns had again intruded. It was strictly forbidden to climb up high to check the sky.

I was reminded of this a few days later as I stood in the Duveen Gallery of Tate Britain in London and watched as every thirty seconds a lone runner sprinted down the empty hall. This was the artist Martin Creed's *Work No. 850* (The Duveen Galleries Commission 2008, July 1 – November 16, 2008). My hopes of joining in this dash through a national museum were thwarted by a sign warning that: 'For reasons of safety, we ask the public not to run or obstruct the runners'. This was ironic given that it was on the very site where Robert Morris's exhibition took place in 1971. Perhaps anxieties about physical involvement are part of the museum's institutional memory? If so, its sibling Tate Modern is slightly less encumbered: as demonstrated

by its ongoing 'Unilever Series' in the museum's Turbine Hall, which has included such participative works as Carsten Höller's *Test Site* (2006) and the (albeit less anarchic) reworking of Robert Morris's project.

Nevertheless, *Work No. 850* and *Liverpool Skyladders* marked a morose fortieth anniversary of Moderna Museet's *Modellen*. This despondency was compounded by another temporary exhibition that ran concurrently at Tate Britain. Forming part of the museum's 'Art Now' scheme it was entitled 'The way in which it landed' (August 2 – October 26, 2008). This was a group show curated by the British artist Ryan Gander (born 1976). For his own contribution, Gander opted to randomly select two metal racks from Tate's reserve store and, maintaining the same configuration, relocate the paintings to the 'white cube' of the gallery. This subverted normal curatorial conventions and had the potential to generate a plethora of questions concerning the museum's collecting practices and exhibition policy. Yet nothing of any consequence was forthcoming beyond the inane transcript of an interview conducted by Gander *with himself*. The audience had absolutely no influence in determining 'The way in which it landed' and were denied the opportunity to access the museum store.

Similarly, visitors could not take part in Martin Creed's *Work No. 850*, not unless they had made prior contact with the museum and been 'trained' how to comport themselves. This is all a very far cry from the liberating autonomy of *Modellen*.

This is not to deny that there was a participatory dimension, however limited, to the work of both Gander and Creed. That much is clear from the museum's decision to invite these artists into the institution and allow them to comment on its collections and enact a performance in its galleries. There is a very long line of such actions,

many of which come under the loose category of ‘institutional critique’ (Burch 2007: 50). At its best this phenomenon has the potential to activate the sort of insights identified in Pateman’s (1970: 103) study of democracy:

The major contribution to democratic theory... of... theorists of participatory democracy is to focus our attention on the interrelationship between individuals and the authority structure of institutions within which they interact.

Exploring the limits of what can be tolerated reveals a great deal about museum attitudes. That much became abundantly clear at another exhibition held in 2008, this time at Nationalmuseum in Stockholm (the institution from which Moderna Museet disaggregated in 1958). Entitled ‘Examining Form’ it consisted of a number of interventions in the museum by a series of artists, designers and a choreographer. An introductory panel related that they had been ‘invited to give their own personal interpretations of the museum and its collection of applied art and modern design.’ In so doing Nationalmuseum posed itself a question: ‘what happens if we change the rules and let others interpret the museum?’

The answer to this query by the designer and writer, Zandra Ahl (born 1975) did not make for comfortable viewing for the museum authorities. Ahl had produced a video entitled ‘Nationalmuseum and me’ (*Nationalmuseum och jag*). She had, as the title suggests, responded to the institution in a very personal, direct manner. She chose to address ‘the delicate situation that exists between practitioner and institution when it comes to taste, power, gender, influence and hierarchies of interpretation’ (Ahl cited

in Zetterlund and Plöjel 2008: 29). Ahl recorded interviews with members of staff and edited what they had to say to form the material for her video piece. Ahl was explicit about the fact that, for once, it was she who held the upper hand. The roles had shifted: from being the *object* of analysis by curators, Ahl was now the *subject* with the power of interpretation over the museum and its staff (Zetterlund and Plöjel 2008: 31). Her critique of the institution and its collecting practices proved too much for some of the museum's personnel. They objected to 'the malevolent tone' ('*den illvilliga tonen*') of the video and, because it was perceived to have a negative impact on the working environment, ordered its withdrawal from display (Josephi 2008).

When I visited the 'Examining Form' exhibition just as it was about to close in August 2008 I got the distinct impression that the museum could not wait for it to be over. The supply of leaflets guiding the visitor around the various works had run out. And no explanation was given in the gallery concerning the Ahl piece: the video was simply switched off and I was unable to view it. It was only by reading about what had transpired in the media and speaking subsequently to members of staff at an unconnected museum seminar that I learned what had happened.

In this example we can see the pernicious effect of the rhetoric of engagement. Nationalmuseum's act of self-censorship utterly contradicted the museum's own professed aims. In the pamphlet produced in connection with the exhibition the museum's director, Solfrid Söderlind had argued persuasively that because there is not one, authoritative interpretation of either the past or the present, it is 'important that we have a lively discussion about the museum, our collections and exhibitions' – and that this was all part of the museum's goal of initiating an 'active dialogue with

the contemporary art and design world' (Söderlind cited in Zetterlund and Plöjel 2008: 3). But – to recall the words of Carole Pateman – it would be a mistake to describe this 'friendly approach' as 'democratic', ignoring as it did 'the authority structure within which this approach occurs' (Pateman 1970: 106).

This affair reveals the abortive consequences of a museum buying the illusion that it can unconditionally 'change the rules and let others interpret the museum' (cf. Soren 2009: 235). Ahl's video was later purchased by the Röhsska Museum of Fashion, Design and Decorative Arts in Gothenburg (Öqvist 2008: 66). This means that Nationalmuseum is the real victim here. A victim of the omnipresent nature of the literature on engagement and a denial of any frank understanding or assessment of participation and the real implications it has for museums.

A promising model

A pre-eminent example of a national museum that still likes to promote itself as an open, participative institution is Moderna Museet. Lars Nittve, its director since 2001, repeats again and again that the institution over which he presides strives to remove physical and intellectual barriers: 'all unnecessary obstacles, anything that makes the visitor feel excluded' should be set aside in order to ensure 'a closer contact and more encounters between artists and the public' (Nittve cited in Burch 2007: 55). Such pronouncements from the leader of an organisation are important in establishing a participatory 'climate' (Pateman 1970: 71).

One current initiative that comes close to realising *Modellen*'s goal of empowering children and young adults is the 'art project', *Zon Moderna*. Positioned on one of the museum's lower floors it is described as a 'zone of freedom... where there is loads of material, loads of freedom and helpful adults' (Nittve cited in Malmquist 2006: 120-121). Participants work with leading artists, undertake guided tours of the gallery spaces and produce their own work. Its proponents claim that school children have 'made themselves at home [in the museum] and created fantastic things.' This has clearly made a lasting impression on some of those involved given that a number of former participants have 'come back... with their own suggestions and initiatives' (Malmquist 2006: 127).

Those behind *Zon Moderna* argue that it 'has affected the entire museum' (Malmquist 2006: 127). This is key if a participatory ethos is to become embedded in an organisation. Zones of participation need to go beyond 'outreach' projects, temporary initiatives and activity rooms if an organisation's commitment to it are to be credible, sustainable and pervasive.

A further avenue for novel participative ventures will present itself after December 2009, the month when Moderna Museet will inaugurate a new branch museum in the southern Swedish city of Malmö. This will draw attention to Moderna Museet's credentials as a *national* institution (or, at least, not simply a 'Stockholm institution'). Pateman, as we have seen, paid particular attention to the role of 'local political institutions' as 'training grounds for democracy'. Indeed, she noted that people are generally more interested in matters pertaining to their own region than they are with national concerns. This led Pateman (1970: 46) to argue that the building of political

confidence and competence were more pronounced at local level. This represents a critical challenge to all ‘national’ museums: how to bolster their relevance to the whole population, not just those that live in the capital city (Burch 2007: 54).

When ‘Moderna Museet Malmö’ comes into existence it will inevitably prompt comparisons with its dominant partner in the Swedish capital. How might the participatory ‘climates’ of the two differ? What ‘model’ might Malmö follow, assuming that an ‘uncontrolled social experiment’ such as *Modellen* will be unfeasible? Well, one exemplar that would certainly be worth considering when it comes to participation is the Pontus Hultén Study Gallery (Burch 2008). Designed by the Renzo Piano Building Workshop it opened in May 2008 in a former library space of the main Moderna Museet building. Its principal purpose is to house the 800 works from Hultén’s private collection, which were bequeathed to the museum shortly before his death in 2006. Hultén stipulated that these holdings were to be always accessible, even when not on display in the main galleries. This has been realised thanks in part to the support of ‘the Access project’, a state-funded initiative ‘to care for, preserve and make available collections, objects and documents’ (see Burch 2007: 55). Such undertakings form the bedrock of participation, as is shown by what they facilitate at the Pontus Hultén Study Gallery. Utilising the sort of machinery normally found on a factory production-line, visitors can, with the help of a gallery assistant, access works of their choice via a touchscreen computer and literally download one of thirty panels or screens that are stacked in the air above. The ways in which the paintings ‘land’ in the gallery are determined by *all* visitors – not just ‘special’ (sic) mediators like Ryan Gander, the self-indulgent artist responsible for ‘The way in which it landed’ at Tate Britain.

A visit to the Hultén gallery is a decidedly performative experience for all concerned. The public is as much on show as the art: both are equally visible through a glass wall and a series of windows that look down from the museum's entrance hall. The Pontus Hultén Study Gallery takes the idea of 'open storage' a stage further. Thus the Luce Foundation visible storage areas at Brooklyn Museum and the Smithsonian's American Art Museum in Washington might be far larger than the Hultén gallery, but the latter is superior in two important respects: the paintings are not trapped behind glass walls, and it is the visitor who actively decides what to look at from the available selection.

With this in mind it will be interesting to see how the Pontus Hultén Study Gallery is utilised. Should it be a 'curated' space? It has the potential to complicate traditional divisions between curator and visitor in much the same way as Web 2.0 blurs the status of reader and writer (O'Reilly 2005). The computer terminal used to access the holdings could be programmed to log the number of times individual works are selected and in so doing help the museum to identify its 'best sellers'. In a similar vein, profiles of the museum's 'customers' could be established and, by acting like an online retailer, the information gleaned would make it possible to flag up related works: 'other people who looked at this painting were also interested in ...' The Study Gallery might, by extension, be used to allow groups or individuals to curate 'their' screen on a topic of their choosing. It could moreover act as an adjunct to exhibitions in the main galleries. It has the potential to provide an opportunity for 'hot interpretation': rapid responses to current crises or topical news stories. This would

serve to embed the museum in the politics of the present – a vital objective if national museums really are to become ‘training grounds for democracy’.

Yet all this will only ever remain instances of ‘partial-participation’ so long as the public’s involvement is limited to responding to a predetermined collection. Full-participation will only come if they can actually shape it in the first place. Acquisition constitutes the acid test of a museum’s commitment to participation. The sorts of challenges it raises are conveyed vividly in Bruce Altshuler’s edited volume, *Collecting the New* (2005). In it, Howard N. Fox of Los Angeles County Museum of Art considers the widespread notion that museum curators are ‘astute experts’ whose ‘innate insightfulness, cultivated sensibilities, and special training... allows them to make... judgements on everyone’s behalf’ (Fox 2005: 15). Working on the hypothesis that the authority of museums is all too often left unquestioned by society at large, Fox wonders whether those employed in museums acknowledge properly the authoritarianism of their institutions and, by extension, their own powerful role. This is taken up by Robert Storr (2005: 40), who points out that museum collecting, despite appearances to the contrary, is very far from ‘being a matter of serenely disinterested scholarship or discernment’. This is particularly evident when it comes to ‘collecting the new’ given that, unlike older works of art, recently produced pieces have not been validated by time (Altshuler 2005: 1, 8). In a striking assertion, Altshuler (2005: 2) claims that the future value of art – be it financial or art historical – is ‘a matter of guesswork’.

This is absolutely *not* the impression conveyed by Moderna Museet when it exhibited some of its most recent acquisitions in late 2008. The works were simply presented

without comment, with no indication of their cost or the process by which they were acquired. The museum has been slightly more forthcoming when it came to its recent call for additional funds to address the gender imbalance of its collection. An interior wall in one of the service areas of the museum was devoted to a large text panel explaining the reasons for this initiative and a list of the names of those female artists that Moderna Museet wished to acquire. The same information was mirrored on the museum's website in a text signed by Nittve in which he set out why these female 'masterpieces' were necessary (Nittve 2006). Yet who is to say that the 'right' women (or works) are being sought? How was the list drawn up? Is there a hierarchy of importance? Which names have been left off? Has there been universal agreement either within the museum or outside?

None of this was addressed. The public were invited to accept a decision that had already been reached. Indeed, it was expressed in such a manner as to obscure the fact that there was anything to decide in the first place. The museum's practice was naturalised. Its cool, measured demeanour exuded authority: Nittve and the other (unnamed) connoisseurs have decided and we can relax, secure in the knowledge that the museum is safe in their hands. Yet how can the experts (sic) of yesteryear have presided over a collection with such glaring 'gaps'? Their oversight dictates the collecting practices of the museum. Lacunae in the collection as well as the areas of coverage provide the rationale for the acquisition policy of the present (Tellgren 2008: 20).

It was precisely this issue that Zandra Ahl raised when she participated in Nationalmuseum's 'Examining Form' exhibition (Zetterlund and Plöjel 2008: 31).

‘Museum collecting today is weighed down by tradition’, Ahl complained. This means that museums ‘continue to build on their history’, to the detriment of those whose value systems are based on an alternative frame of reference. Perhaps that’s the real reason why Ahl’s video sat so awkwardly in the hallowed halls of Nationalmuseum? But, of course, I don’t know the answer to that question given that the museum had switched off the monitor, thus denying me the opportunity to make up my own mind.

A mute model

Detecting signs of participation is relatively easy. The squeals of children in *Modellen*, the splattering of paint at Zon Moderna, the mechanical clicks and whirls as paintings descend in the Pontus Hultén Study Gallery. Seeing evidence of non-participation is significantly more challenging. Is that Zandra Ahl video broken, or has it been censored? These sorts of thoughts surfaced in my mind during my many research trips to Moderna Museet in 2008. I spent a considerable amount of time in one particular gallery and watched as people moved about the space reading the little labels and glancing momentarily at the accompanying paintings. What, I wondered, were they thinking when they read this:

An intensely red, orange and blue meadow of flowers appears from out of the thick layers of paint. Direct painting – no preliminary sketches were made. The lush garden, part of the artist’s farm in Utenwarf on the German west coast, was painted in the midst of the First World War, in a time of schism and violence. To Nolde flowers incarnated the eternal cycle of birth-life-death. He

continuously found new motifs in his garden. Flowers were also emblematic of art – Nolde saw both works of art and flowers to be the products of natural forces. For a short period he was a member of the expressionist artist group Die Brücke.

This classic piece of art-speak referred to *Garden (Utenwarf)* painted in 1917 by Emil Nolde (1867-1956). Similar material was repeated in the museum's online catalogue along with basic information about its provenance. This indicates that the work was in the possession of one Otto N. Deutsch of Frankfurt am Main prior to 1923. What happened to it between then and its sale at auction in the 1960s was not mentioned. Moderna Museet's catalogue of 2004 states that it was purchased by the museum in 1967. It uses much the same language as that seen on the text label but adds one additional piece of information: Nolde was viewed as a so-called 'degenerate' artist by the Nazi regime and over one thousand of his works were confiscated from museums. Twenty-nine of them appeared in the infamous Entartete Kunst exhibition held in Munich in 1937 (Müller-Westermann 2004, n.p.).

In 2002 the heirs of Otto Nathan Deutsch contacted the museum to notify them that their forebear had been forced to part with the painting during the Nazi period. It took a further seven years before a mutually acceptable decision was reached – one that will ultimately see Moderna Museet relinquish ownership of the painting (Eriksson 2008; Nittve and Rowland 2009). Yet when I conducted research for this paper in 2008, *Garden (Utenwarf)* looked just like any other artwork on the walls of the museum. Those visiting the museum at that time would have learnt nothing about this

affair, one that raised absolutely fundamental questions about what Moderna Museet is, how it is managed and what role it plays in society.

I felt this particularly acutely when I saw middle-aged Swedish men looking at Nolde's wonderful painting hanging mute on the wall. Was one of them called Mats and did he as a six-and-a-half year old visit *Modellen* to dive into its sea of foam just like Olof Palme? If so, did it prepare him for a life of participation? Would he have welcomed the chance to have a say in whether the painting he was looking at should stay in the national art collection of Sweden or be returned to the heirs of Otto Nathan Deutsch?

None of this mattered, however, because the museum opted to remain silent on the subject until a decision had been reached. This is reminiscent of the process by which the canon of female artists was drawn up and announced. Only once a judgment had been made on the part of the museum leadership were the public invited to enter into the process by attending an ongoing series of debates focusing on some of the artists that had been pre-selected.

The imminent deaccessioning of the Nolde painting and the choice or appropriateness of seeking to 'fill' gaps in the collection get to the heart of the form, function and financing of this national museum. Nevertheless, these two matters, like the Ahl incident at the nearby Nationalmuseum, reveal the limits of participation rather than the scope of critical enquiry. They can be seen as indicative of the constrained nature of today's national museums and affirmations that they fail when it comes to 'encouraging genuine participation' (to misquote David Carrier). Because simply

initiating a debate and celebrating the fact that ‘everybody talks about the museum’ does not equate to full or even partial participation. Yes, the pronouncements of museum directors like Sune Nordgren, Lars Nittve and Solfrid Söderlind are important in establishing a participatory climate – but the end results constitute instances of pseudo-participation at best. Only the case of the Pontus Hultén Study Gallery might be deemed an example of partial participation.

But perhaps this is the most that national museums can manage. At the outset of this chapter it was asserted that participation is always a matter of degree. This is easily missed when being seduced by the museological literature and soothed by reassurances that ‘all unnecessary obstacles’ have been removed from today’s museums. Yet that phrase – ‘all unnecessary obstacles’ – is more revealing than its author, Lars Nittve perhaps intended. Obstacles come in many guises. Yes, some can be abolished. But others are *necessary*. Necessary for reasons of health and safety. Necessary so that certain vested interests retain power. Necessary to ensure the practical functioning of the institution. Necessary to safeguard the collection. The injunction ‘do not touch’, for example, might well be a necessary obstacle. But what about a ban on taking photographs? The simple point that photography is forbidden in Sweden’s Moderna Museet but not down the road at Nationalmuseum reveals that determinations over whether an obstacle is necessary or not are far from fixed. A video by Zandra Ahl is not inherently controversial: its acceptability or otherwise is determined by those who wield the greatest power in the museum. It is they who adjudicate which obstacles are incontrovertible.

A clearer attention to the nature and extent of participation – both physical and intellectual – will help us identify, locate and define the framework of obstacles that of necessity constitute the parameters of any given museum. Who has determined which ‘obstacles’ are necessary or not? Do they apply to everyone, or are some ‘special’ groups or individuals exempt? In what ways have these strictures changed and how might the boundaries shift in the future? If opportunities for partial participation are accorded to visitors, then perhaps museums – those ‘training grounds for democracy’ – could scale back a previously necessary obstacle, opening up possibilities for greater participation?

That such modifications *do* occur confirm that museums are indeed contested places in a state of constant change and that participation, rather than being a fixed entity, is instead a dynamic, contingent phenomenon that merits interrogating in a far more nuanced, critically engaged manner. Yes, audiences participate in national museums. But we would do well to remember the rope that remained just out of reach at Tate Modern in 2009. For it is obstacles – whether necessary or not – that set limits on everything that happens in our national museums. It is up to us to decide if these impediments are justifiable and in the right places.

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