# Review

Pille Runnel/Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt (eds.), *Democratising the Museum: Reflections on Participatory Technologies*, Peter Lang, 2014. 240pp.  ISBN-10: 3631649169.

*Democratising the Museum*: *Reflections on Participatory Technologies* is a collection of studies looking at how the concept of participation and way technologies in a broader sense can support museums in the process of becoming more open and therefore more democratic. The book explores in thirteen chapters how technologies are used to facilitate audience participation in museums. At the same time, it pursues an interest in the relation of the museum entity and its participatory practices with the current political climate. Principally, based on a large scale research project 'Museum communication in the 21$^{st}$ century information environment' and centered on the Estonian National Museum that was planned to be built throughout the project period the chapters in the book discuss the challenges of the museum identity in a post-communist context and indicates the direct influence of government and state politics on the museum development per se.

The book is structured in four themes looking into theorisation and analysis of participation, audiences as participants, the struggles of the museum professionals and digital technologies for participation. The content derives largely from museum studies' perspective along with the museum practice angle as well as allowing the input of media and visitor research, communication and information studies.  Almost all the chapters in the book give great importance to the methodological approaches combining ethnographic research methods and multiple interventions on the site and online. The key research project at the Estonian National Museum brings museum practices and academic research together by having an insider researcher based in the museum environment that also works within academia. The assorted influence of both editors Pille Runnel and Pille Pruulman-Vengerfeldt can be grasped in the edited book. Runnel, the research director of the Estonian National Museum and a researcher at the Institute of Journalism and Commmunication at the University of Tartu brings in the combined practice and academic work on museum and ICT. Pruulman-Vengerfeldt, an associate professor of Media Studies at the same university clearly influenced the media studies' perspective and the work related to audience and visitors' research.

The first chapter by Runnel, Tatsi and Pruulman-Vengerfeldt, '*Who Authors the Nation? The Debate Surrounding the Building of the New Estonian National Museum*'

portrays the close relationship of the museum with local and global politics and the socioeconomic environment. The museum is seen by a nation in a transitory situation as an opportunity for a recovering stable national identity, reclaiming a shared sense of belonging. This view challenges the museum's new museological envisioning of becoming an architectural emblem of Estonia, allowing fluid and multiple histories to occur. It also touches upon how the nature of participation under a communist regime has altered the view and understanding of participation for the individual as well as of participation in institutional settings. The chapter *'When the Museum Becomes the Message for Participating Audiences'* by Pruulman-Vengerfeldt and Runnel takes the first chapter towards the importance of a museum that should embrace the uncertainties and ambiguities of the society. The discussion extends towards the notion of participation, counseled largely by Simon's (2010) work that approaches this concept as differing in the various context of the museum and seen as complimentary to the aims of the institution as well as influenced by Bourdieu's fields (cultural, economic, political) and their ever-changing role that affects participation (Bourdieu, 1998). The article uses the communication model of Who says What to Whom in the different operational fields of the museum to understand how audiences participate by also looking at the various types of audiences such as friends, visitors, clients, users, participants, prosumers (Toffler, 1980) and produsers (Burns, 2006). The last chapter of this section, '*A Multi-method and Multi-site Interventionist Approach to Studying Audience Participation in Museums'* by Pruulman-Vengerfeldt, Runnel and Aljas provides a detailed analysis on a multilayered research that brings together audience analysis from media studies perspective with visitors' research. The scope of the study gives a unique gaze as it places a researcher inside the museum providing useful insides and interventions for both museum theory and practice.

The first chapter of the second section *'Handicraft Hobbyist in an Ethnographic Museum – Negotiating Expertise and Participation*' by Lepik and Pruulman-Vengerfeldt is asking the museums' goers their opinion on what participation means for them and engaging them in reproducing cultural heritage. The museum is perceived as place that old times and cultural value are celebrated.  Expectably, the expertise and knowledge of the museum provides the established power relation between museum and public.  The chapter *'Analysis of Participatory Activities in the Museums in Latvia'* engages with aspects that relate to how audiences participate in museum in Latvia and how the mechanisms of participation in the soviet context has formed the existing practice and understanding of it. Lotina's research in Latvian museums also indicates that museum professionals are more comfortable with the notion of interactivity rather than participation (Lotina, 2014: 102).

An interesting chapter by Nico Carpentier *'Facing the Death of the Author. Cultural Professional's Identity Work and the Fantasies of Control'* opens the section on the struggles of the museum profession by discussing professional identities in relation to the audience identities and how they co-exist within the institutional structures and organisational cultures (Carpentier, 2014).  He deepens into Laclau's and Mouffe's concept of identity as a subject position looking into a number of characteristics that constitute the modernistic

cultural professional. The modernist articulation of the cultural professional still privileges an author-based model of society and he argues for a relationship that acknowledges differences across the two, that also share a common cultural space and accept each other's perspectives. The remaining two chapters by Tatsi, *'Identity Struggles of Museum Professionals: Autonomous Expertise and Audience Participation in Exhibition Production'* and '*Democratising Collections through Audience Participation: Opportunities and Obstacles'*, by Tatsi and Aljas use data from interventions that acknowledge facts we are already familiar with, such as the expected tension across different professions within a museum programme (Tatsi, 2014) as well as pinpointing the problematic of ephemerality when it comes to co-curationship and audience participatory projects (Tatsi & Aljas, 2014).

The last section on digital technologies and participation occurs to me as the weakest one and perhaps that reflection relates to the vast work that exists in that area. The focus lies on the use of databases on memory institutions, discussing the interrelationship of users and museum collections through a detailed breakdown of the online users. The chapter '*Digital Cultural Heritage-Challenging Museums, Archives and Users*' by Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Aljas focuses on the interrelationship between the users and the museum's collections and the issues of digitising heritage. The study investigates the participation of different types online users with young people as a key target group.   The chapter *'Happily Lost in Virtual Space'* by Carpentier includes an evaluation of a CD-Rom of a simulation of three-dimensional museum space. The last chapter by Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel *'Increasing the Usability of the Museum: Four Studies'* looks into opportunities for the public to engage in dialogue with heritage institutions bringing us close to ways of increasing user motivation for participation and also reminding us that there is still some hierarchical relationship with the museum and audience. The important points to take from that section include the validity to ask 'why' to participation and the problematic of perceiving online and virtual environments as complementary to the real that results in missing great opportunities (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt & Aljas, 2014: 180).

The conclusion seems to focus on an overall discussion across the difference between audiences, visitors, users, participants, their relationships and activeness when it comes to participation. It also considers capital and identity as conditions for cultural participation; however this point seems rather underdeveloped. The authors provide some distinction across the terms that allow an open understanding of participation, encapsulating the ideas that have followed through the overall book.

The originality of the material does not necessarily lie in the arguments and chapters, as the majority of the chapters are republished, but it is the context that makes it unique with the aim to bring together professional work and academic expertise. In regards to the latter, while this is achieved to some extent, the discussion on data with the more theoretical debates on participation seems rather scattered in some sections of the book. Also repetition can be tracked – with chapters supporting each others' arguments - rather than providing a plurality of opinions, as for example models of participation of Simon and

Carpentier as used throughout the overall book. The introduction also builds the expectation of more analysis to the various types of participants and audiences.

It seems that the existing debates of digital participation if extended in the given context can be very fruitful. How is the existing societal comprehension of participation both in an individual and institutional level challenged? What does that indicate for the overall theories of participation and the digital or online democracy? Also further analysis on the sociocultural landscape and its development can be enlightening taking into account how museums can be established while lying in this transitory moment. How can it function and does it suggest something about the existing global museum view? Nevertheless, I think the book encourages this type of questioning, allowing some level of criticality on the aspects of democracy in participation as well as broadening the notion of technologies beyond computers.

The book is certainly a useful collection for museum professionals and permits some grounded debates on museum studies but it is rather selective in terms of the use of media studies or ICT approaches.

Irida Ntalla,

City University, London, UK

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