

The Kaleidoscope of Culture: expanding the museum experience and the museum narrative by inviting visitors into the curatorial process

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Abstract

Traditional art museum exhibitions are planned according to art-historical elements. At Trapholt – a museum of modern Danish art, design and applied art in Denmark, we are interested in exploring what happens when ordinary visitors are invited to curate personal exhibitions in the museum space. This paper analyses the project *The Kaleidoscope of Culture*, where people with no art historical background were invited to curate exhibitions based on the Trapholt collection of art and their own cultural backgrounds and experiences. The main argument is that, by allowing these personal voices in the museum space, new museum narratives are established. But to make the museum a truly transformative space the art-historical knowledge and methods must also be activated.

Keywords: constructivist museum, art interpretation, curatorial practice, audience engagement, audience development, personal growth

Introduction

To what extent should art museums insist on disseminating specific knowledge about selected works of art? Could it also be the role of art museums to use art as an epistemological arena? Could both approaches be important? On the one hand, it is necessary to have on hand considerable, concrete knowledge about art in order to know what one is working with. On the other hand, the perceiver's personal construct will inevitably colour the experience of a work of art. To the art-historically orientated visitor, art history is an integrated part of the frame of reference in perceiving art. For other museum visitors, personal references are probably more important. An artwork must be experienced as significant and relevant for the visitors, if they are to spend time on it and if the museum institution is to be a potentially transformative space.

Those were some of the considerations that defined the point of departure for *The Kaleidoscope of Culture*, a project conducted in 2011-12 by Trapholt – a museum of modern Danish art, applied arts and design in Kolding, Denmark.

The project had several different focus points: 1) The participants in the project were all individuals of non-Danish ethnicity living in Denmark. How was their perception of the Trapholt collection of art different than that of an ethnic Dane? 2) The participants had no art historical background. How is art historical understanding to be introduced in the project? 3) In the project, curating was used as the cognitive framework for understanding art. What effects did this specific method have?

In this paper, we will explore the third focus point and analyse what happens when the art museum stops insisting solely on the art-historical knowledge as the point of departure of the museum experience, and invites visitors into the curatorial processes – in this case as a part of the project *The Kaleidoscope of Culture*. Which elements and dynamics are in play? Finally, we will analyse and discuss the impact of this project – on the participants and on the museum institution.

Creating a new museum experience

For several years, the work at Trapholt has been inspired by the research of people like George

Hein, John Falk and Lynn Dierking. Their research shows us that the museum experience is a personal and social one. No matter how well we plan our exhibitions, the visitors will inevitably create their own memories and their own understandings of the exhibition and of the visit.

Falk and Dierking (2000: 5) describe the museum visitor experience with the interactive experience model, which involves three different contexts: the personal context, the physical context and the social context. The personal context includes prior experiences and knowledge, interests and motivations, and forms the personal expectations of the museum visit. The physical context is the museum as a building, the objects and artefacts exhibited and the ambience. The social context includes all the other people in the museum space and the interactions the visitor has with them: the museum staff, the other visitors, the company the visitor arrives with etc. The interaction of these three contexts creates the museum experience – an experience that will always be unique to every visitor and every visit (Falk and Dierking 2000: 10–11).

George Hein (1998: 155–179) presents to us the idea of a constructivist museum, in which the fact that we all interpret society, art, the world and everything in it differently, depending on our own backgrounds and experiences, is acknowledged. The constructivist museum has no predetermined sequence and encourages comparisons between the familiar and the new through a range of activities that utilize the visitor's life experiences (Hein 1998: 34–5).

Seen through these theories, the museum visit is a unique personal experience, and we wanted to use this approach to see if it could help us understand how to create a more relevant experience for visitors with no art-historical background or knowledge. Inspired by the idea of offering different classification systems to the visitors (Bourdieu and Darbel 2006: 39–41), we were interested in finding out how the personal experience could be used as point of departure for a new code of classification. Bourdieu and Darbel (2006: 72) put it this way:

It must also be said that the same work can be deciphered according to several frameworks and that, just as a western can be the object of a naïve following or of a scholarly reading, the same pictorial work can be received differently by receivers of different levels and, for example, satisfy an interest in anecdote or hold attention through its formal properties alone.

The more codes of classification available to the individual, the more relevant and accessible the art will seem, and the more pleasant and fulfilling the museum experience will be. Maybe by insisting solely on the traditional art-historical classifications, the museum limits the potential experiences of certain visitors. By creating hierarchies between the different kinds of knowledge visitors bring with them, the museum supports the idea of the museum as a place only for the initiated. Would it be possible to create a museum experience where several different codes of classification were activated and thereby opening the museum to a broader audience?

Bourdieu and Barbel describe the hierarchical relationship between the different codes of classification ('different levels') concerning an art museum – and thus of different kinds of knowledge:

Those who did not receive the instruments which imply familiarity with art from their family or from their schooling are condemned to a perception of a work of art which takes its categories from the experience of everyday life and which results in the basic recognition of the object depicted. (Bourdieu and Darbel, 2006: 44).

During the museum visit the art-historical and aesthetic knowledge is seen as having higher status than the personal knowledge of the visitor. Traditional art museum exhibitions can be seen as a manifestation of the knowledge of the art-historical staff. The exhibitions are planned according to art-historical knowledge and elements (a certain style, a certain period or a specific artist) and have a certain story to tell and a certain experience to facilitate. But if every visitor forms a personal understanding of the exhibitions and the objects shown, why not use this fact actively in the exhibition making? What would happen if we invited visitors with no art-historical background into the backstage of the museum, making them curate exhibitions not based on art history, but on their very own prior experiences and understandings? Could we combine the three contexts defined by Falk and Dierking by letting the prior experiences and knowledge of the visitors be the point of departure for engaging with the physical context (the objects) by curating in a social context consisting of both museum staff and friends or colleagues?

Finding participants

Based on these considerations, Trapholt conducted *The Kaleidoscope of Culture* in 2011-12. From the beginning, we planned three exhibitions in the spring of 2012.

We wanted the participants to be resourceful, not ethnically Danish individuals living in Kolding. This choice was based on different perspectives: first of all, we wanted our participants to be resourceful and active members of the community because we did not want the project to be about social inclusion but about gaining new perspectives. In this case, resourceful is to be understood as the ability to reflect actively upon oneself and one's situation. Secondly, the choice of individuals not ethnically Danish (people living in Denmark but born in other countries) was taken to make sure that the personal experiences, knowledge and cultural background of the participants would be quite different from that of the typical Dane. In current discussions in Denmark, integration is often defined as being about making immigrants resemble the inhabitants of the new country. But could it be that immigrants have something interesting to tell or share with the inhabitants of their new country? Which stories are we missing out on by insisting on making immigrants look like us? Thirdly, as art historians, we were curious to know which stories other cultural backgrounds would make emerge in the experience of Danish art.

This last consideration was of great importance in the project. Most projects where museums with community-based heritage organizations focus on the specific cultural background of the community and on objects in the museum collection that relate to this culture (see for example Sandell and Nightingale 2012). The Trapholt collection consists primarily of Danish art and design, so our point of departure had to be Danish heritage. But we did not see this as an obstacle in working with ethnically non-Danish people. We were not interested in the participants telling us about objects or art from their home countries and cultures. On the contrary, we wanted them to engage with Danish heritage from their own point of view – hoping that in this way they could expand the museum's narrative on certain objects in the collection (Keith 2012: 45). We saw them as experts, not on a specific culture, but on understanding Danish heritage from a different cultural background. We were not interested in supporting or creating cultural stereotypes but in creating a 'third space' – a space between cultures where individuals are permitted to cross the boundaries of belonging and are offered opportunities for self-representation (Bodo 2012: 189).

The project was curiosity driven and conducted very intuitively without a specific thesis in mind. We were curious to see where the process would take us. All we knew was that there were going to be three exhibitions in the spring of 2012. What the exhibitions would be about, we had not planned, leaving this to be decided by the participants.

In the beginning, finding participants proved to be a challenge. For the team, it was interesting to learn that people's preconceptions of what an art museum should do, in themselves became a challenge to the project. It became apparent that most people had a reverent perception of how knowledgeable they ought to be about art history to be able to participate in a project at the museum. This deep, great respect for art history and the museum as an institution was in itself a thoughtprovoking lesson. It was a considerable challenge to convince participants that it was actually their personal and individual starting points in relation to art that were the essence and quality of the project. Maybe this phenomenon can be explained with the words of Bourdieu and Darbel. They state that the code of classification possessed by the museum institution and by art history is seen as more powerful than the extrinsic codes possessed by the visitors (Bourdieu and Darbel, 2006: 47). Even though the people asked to participate were all nice and well-educated people (like the majority of the visitors to Danish museums), many of them expressed this threshold fear. The term threshold fear is used to define the constraints people feel that prevent them from participating in activities meant for them (Gurian 2006: 115-126). Why were we so surprised? Research in the last 40 years, with the publication of writings like *The Love of Art* (Bourdieu and Darbel, first published in 1969) and *Inside the White Cube* (O'Doherty, first published in 1976), has shown us that cultural needs in the world of modernism do not evolve out of nowhere but need to be nursed and satisfied to exist. Cultural capital reproduces cultural capital (Bourdieu and Darbel, 2006:70). According to Tony Bennett, art galleries

(...) remain the least publicly accessible of all public collecting institutions. This is largely because of their continuing commitment to display principles which entail that the order subtending the art on display remains invisible and unintelligible to those not already equipped with the appropriate cultural skills. (Bennett 1995:10).

Reaching out to people with no art-historical background proved difficult, because they felt inferior to the institution and because they were afraid that they did not possess the right codes of classification to have valuable and important opinions about art.

Creating new exhibition concepts

Finally, the team succeeded in recruiting three different groups of very committed participants. One group of Afghan women, one group of European and American women married to Danish men, and a mixed group of friends from Greenland, the Lebanon and Bosnia. Through workshops, the participants were introduced to the museum, to the art collection and to the curatorial process with the purpose of articulating the possibilities of art as a catalyst for their individual stories. Subsequently, each group was asked to choose a theme, based on the elements which had emerged during the curatorial process, based on their cultural background and on their present life situation in Denmark. The themes would be visualized through the Trapholt collection of art and shown in the three exhibitions. This preliminary task led to many long talks on identity, of being a Dane and a non-ethnic Dane in the same person, of the importance of art in different cultures, of food, traditions, prejudices, war, suppression and joyous occasions. During these talks the participants would have copies of paintings from the Trapholt collection in front of them, the size of postcards. The selection of paintings and the curating of the exhibitions took place during these talks. Before making the final decisions on which paintings to include in the exhibitions, the participants would have a look at the real artwork.

From the perspective of an art historian, the process of selecting the works of art for the exhibitions was interesting to follow. The participants allowed themselves to be absorbed by the artworks, and with the personally defined theme of the exhibition in mind, they let their feelings play a crucial part in selecting the artworks. This meant that many of the participants chose those artworks that 'spoke' to them and with which they could identify. The art-historical and aesthetic perspective was not a part of the argument for their choices. Hence, the traditional curatorial process was turned upside down, thereby letting other possibilities emerge. Paintings that from an art-historical angle had nothing in common were now put together to represent a unique view of the world.

The participants came to feel a sense of ownership concerning certain works of art and they showed a great deal of enthusiasm and personal involvement during the process. This made it evident to us that looking at art in relation to your own experiences and background as the inevitable 'glasses' through which you understand and experience the art, and using this fact in an active process, can make people reach a state of flow in the museum. The experience of flow happens in a situation where the person is faced with challenges that match their capabilities (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 85). The cognitive framework of curating enabled the participants to reach this state of flow even though they had no prior knowledge of art. We found this to be a truly engaging experience for the participants, an experience that placed art as a relevant part of their everyday lives. But as we will see later on, the role art came to play was more like a confirmation of their existing perspectives and not as a way of growing or evolving as a person.

Three exhibitions

The curatorial process and exhibition planning took place during the course of 12 months, and it all culminated with three exhibitions and three big openings at the museum in the spring of 2012. As a result of this new curatorial praxis, the art-historical styles were mixed criss-cross in a not always aesthetic, but anarchistic way, making the participants' interpretations of the works become the leitmotif of the exhibitions. The themes of the exhibitions were: the experience of moving to Denmark for love of a Danish man; Afghan New Year; and the challenge of leaving your native country and creating a new identity between two cultures. The exhibitions were all given titles inspired by old Danish songs to illustrate the meeting of cultures.

The impact of the project

For the participants, the project changed their view on themselves and on art. Mona Mohamed Awad (originally from Beirut, the Lebanon, but living in Denmark since 1986) says,

All of a sudden, a voice was given to thoughts and feelings that for a long time had been on standby. All of a sudden, I was asked the questions: 'Who are you and where do you come from?' Questions that I have answered hundreds of times – though not with the same answer every time. I had actually accepted myself as a mixture during the last many years, and often I have answered: 'I am just me...' Because after all, I am just me. But in the course of the project, the confusion and the mess all of sudden reared their heads again – and that is expressed in some of the paintings I chose. Throughout the process, I felt that I had to answer questions of who I am, and tried to answer as well as I could – but it ended up with the answer being just as messy as my own identity actually is. Because of the fact that I grew up between two completely different cultures, I cannot avoid being divided, which I have accepted now.¹

For Mona M. Awad, the project was a journey helping her to accept herself and her mixed identity. It is a common feature for several of the participants that, through the project, they have had certain sides of themselves and their lives sorted out. The experience of looking at art and curating an exhibition based on one's own personal stories proved to be capable of making the museum a truly transformative space in relation to their personal stories (Duncan 1995: 13). But did the museum become a truly transformative place in relation to their understanding of art? Did the art-historical and aesthetic knowledge of the museum bring on this change? Or could it be that it was the conversations we had and the fact that the participants were given time to reflect actively upon themselves and on their own stories that had an impact and made this transformative space possible, more than the experience of the artworks?

Still, art was the starting point of the project, and when the participants had overcome their first reluctance, the stories began to flow unhindered. To Hilla Esmati (originally from Paghman, Afghanistan, but living in Denmark since 1997), the importance of the art was clear: 'When you use the paintings as your notepad, the stories will come automatically.'² The scenes gave the courage to tell the personal stories because they came to resemble the participants' own views on their lives. To Fabienne Bramsen (originally from Saint Omer, France, but living in Denmark since 1989), this effect was also evident and it made her feel, '...safe to know that there are others who have had the same thoughts and feelings as me and expressed them in a painting'³ Of course, from an art-historical point of view Fabienne Bramsen is wrong. In the painting, she may have found an expression covering her personal feelings. But it is very unlikely that the artist of a specific painting has felt the same feelings as a young woman moving from France to Denmark for the love of a Danish man. What is true, though, is that she felt a certain kind of safety in the painting. A safety based on her personal experiences. But the fact that she equates the artwork with her personal feelings is a challenge in the project which we will return to later on.

Even though in the first place the art had been almost terrifying, in the end it gave the participants confidence in their stories and choices. In their book *Art as Therapy* (2013), Alain de Botton and John Armstrong argue that art can be a tool capable of extending our capacities beyond those that nature has originally endowed us with – and thereby enabling us to become better versions of ourselves (de Botton and Armstrong 2013: 5). In the case of *The Kaleidoscope of Culture*, art was capable of putting into words or images the feelings of the participants and making art a tool for personal confidence. Furthermore, de Botton and Armstrong identify seven functions for art – or seven psychological frailties that art might help with. Two of them, *Self-understanding* and *Growth*, explain to us some of the effect that *The Kaleidoscope of Culture* may have had on the participants. By noticing which artworks that catch our eyes, we will come to know more about ourselves. And through our preferences and choice of art, we can also let others know more of what we are really about. When we find points of connection to what used to be foreign (in this case art), we are able to grow as

individuals (de Botton and Armstrong 2013: 44-58). The participants did indeed change in their perception of art, but they came to understand art as an illustration of their own stories. This very personal interpretation was not challenged during the project.

Many people other than the participants were happy about and interested in the exhibitions and the project. The museum had hoped that the participants and their personal circles would find the exhibitions interesting. But in addition, a great many of Trapholt's other visitors also felt inspired and expressed great enthusiasm for the project, both to frontofhouse staff and through letters addressed to the museum. Unfortunately, we did not do a systematic survey on or collection of this feedback. Nevertheless, we found two perspectives in the positive feedback. One was the visitors' enthusiasm for the surprising, thoughtprovoking and personal stories told in the exhibitions. The other was reflections on the creation of the project and its method – meta-reflections on the way a museum works. *The Kaleidoscope of Culture* not only changed the participants' perception of art – it also altered the perception of other visitors on how art can be perceived, and how it can – and does – impact upon the individual. By allowing different voices in the museum space, we created a space where visitors felt safe to express their own understandings of the artworks (Black 2010: 142). What the exhibitions, apparently, did not alter was the visitors' interest in and reflection upon the art-historical and aesthetic elements of the exhibitions and the artworks. This is another of the challenges in the project which we will return to later on.

For the team from Trapholt and for many of the visitors it was interesting to see how traditional Danish art could suddenly illustrate, for example, the traditions of Afghan New Year. These anarchistic sides of the project opened the collection for a whole new range of uses, interpretations and stories. It did expand the museum's narrative and our own understanding of the collection, as we had hoped. The personal knowledge of the visitor became superior to the knowledge of the museum – thus turning the hierarchy of knowledge found in Bourdieu and Darbel upside down (Bourdieu and Darbel 2006: 72).

Discussion: What happened during the curatorial process?

As the project was curiosity driven, we did not have a specific thesis as a starting point. But the popularity of the project made us curious to find out what actually happens during the curatorial processes. The participants were more than willing to share their stories, and they all became very attached to certain artworks, to the museum staff and to the museum as an institution.

Museum collections are composed of individual objects whose meaning is constructed, at least in part, because of their relationships with other collection items. The way these relationships are exhibited and described is critical to the way that meaning is constructed in the museum context (Cairns 2013: 107). In *The Kaleidoscope of Culture*, the participants themselves created the relationship between the collection items – and thus constructed a specific and personally relevant meaning. By letting these new stories that are relevant to the society of today be told inside the traditional art museum and using the art to express them, the museum comes to reflect the world of today – and the collection keeps being alive, dynamic and relevant (Black 2012: 9).

The good relationship between the participants and the museum staff was one of the main reasons why the project turned out as it did. Having no expectations, we let the participants tell their stories the way they wanted, and new meanings and connections in the art emerged by the interaction between different kinds of knowledge: the institutional knowledge of the museum and the personal knowledge of the participants. We later found that this method is more or less similar to the 'Innovation Diamond' – a concept developed by Lotte Darsø. The 'Innovation Diamond' is a model that symbolizes a dynamic field of process in four dimensions: knowledge, concepts, relations and non-knowledge. The four dimensions are not opposites – but present simultaneously, and are all essential for innovation to take place. The model is conceptual and is intended to illustrate dynamic interaction. The innovation process is constituted by two simultaneous and interconnected dynamics; a knowledge dynamic between knowledge and non-knowledge and a communication dynamic between relations and concepts (Darsø 2011: 68-72). Traditional art exhibitions do not necessarily contain all four dimensions. Usually, they are based on academic knowledge expressed through an exhibition concept. But in the

case of *The Kaleidoscope of Culture*, the participants' own personal knowledge was invited in as another guiding line in the curatorial process. *The Kaleidoscope of Culture* became an arena where the participants' personal knowledge and Trapholt's institutional knowledge could interact. Mutual non-knowledge about each other was acknowledged as an inevitable driver and energy in the project. The curatorial process was the new relation that challenged the traditional concepts of art-historical exhibition practice caused by the communication dynamics between participants and museum staff, whereby a new concept for exhibition practice could emerge.

The double experience

This exchange of knowledge and non-knowledge also had another effect. By welcoming the non-knowledge as energy in the project and by not insisting on the art-historical facts and data, we permitted the possibility of the existence of two very different experiences. We did not tell the participants anything about art history or the artworks before looking at the collection. We let the participants be guided solely by their own preferences and intuitive reactions. Then, after the participants had made their choices, we told them some of the historical facts of the artworks. We gave them the time to reflect upon their own personal experiences of the artwork before letting this experience be extended by art history and the institutional knowledge of the museum. Looking back on the process, the fact that we had not made it clear to ourselves what kind of knowledge we wanted to share with the participants becomes striking. Was it the art-historical and aesthetic knowledge and understanding, or was it the institutional knowledge of how a museum works? This uncertainty was probably one of the main reasons why the participants stayed in their personal reflections and did not reflect on the artistic or aesthetic elements in the artworks.

Nevertheless, this procedure or method has similarities with the writings of Sandra H. Dudley. She argues that if the information (the text panel or the label) is displayed right next to the object, this information will interfere with and maybe even prevent the personal experience. The visitors will feel drawn to read the information first, before having their own experience with the object. The physicality of the object will be missed and influenced by the cognitive understanding of the object. But by permitting the personal and sensorial experience, the visitor will be more emotionally receptive to the object and, therefore, have a greater interest in its history (Dudley 2012: 2). As mentioned earlier, we experienced that participants became attached to certain paintings. The artwork became a symbol of something quite unexpected, because we did not present the formal, passive meaning as a part of the first experience. Instead, the art-historical data became a supplement to the personal experience (Dudley 2012: 11). This double experience would not have been possible if we had insisted solely on the art-historical angle.

The double experience with the personal experience and the art-historical experience complementing each other can also be interpreted as a situation of liminality. The term liminality is used to describe a situation that opens a space in which the rules of normal social behaviour are suspended, and the individuals can take a step back from the concerns of everyday life to look at themselves and their world in a different way to obtain new and larger perspectives (Turner in Duncan 1995: 11). This is exactly what happened when we asked the participants to curate and express themselves through the Trapholt collection of art. The normal social behaviour at the art museum ('Do not touch the artworks', 'Be quiet') was suspended during the curatorial process, and the participants tried out the artworks in different constellations. They lost track of time and became absorbed in the activity, which eventually changed their perspective on both themselves and on art. They reached a state of flow, and the situation can be seen as an almost ritual setting that demands a certain kind of performance from the participants. This ritual performance is possible at the art museum, Carol Duncan argues, when the visitors are engaged in a structured experience that relates to the history or the meaning of the site (Duncan 1995: 12). The experience has to be relevant both to the museum institution and to the individual visitor. By creating the possibility for curating and thus for engaging with the artworks in a very personal manner, we offered a structured passage into the museum and the artworks for those not accustomed to looking at art and engaging with the museum.

The ritual experience is thought to have a purpose and an end (Duncan 1995: 13). In *The Kaleidoscope of Culture*, the purpose or the goal was seen, in the beginning, as the exhibitions and the opening night. But as the project developed, we saw that each time we looked at a painting, discussed it and analysed it through the perspective of the single participant, we gave a specific meaning to the painting and renamed it in some way. This process of renaming and committing to the meaning of an artwork by giving it a new title can also be seen as the end of the ritual experience. By putting the new meaning of the artwork into the new title, the performance and the liminal experience are closed.

By letting the participants make these very personal choices, we were in fact taking advantage of a tendency very common for people in the age of reproduction: many people, children and adults, have boards in their homes where they pin a selected collection of photos, reproductions of paintings, drawings, postcards etc. This entire collection speaks the same language because it has been chosen in a highly personal way (Berger 1972: 30). By letting the participants curate their own small exhibitions, we were, in fact, using the concept of the board pinned with personally selected images. Only, in our case, the images were actual artworks.

John Berger's theory of perception also helps us understand some of the other elements in play in *The Kaleidoscope of Culture*. Berger explains to us that our way of looking at art (or at each other, or at the world) is historically determined. He writes,

If the new language of images were used differently, it would, through its use, confer a new kind of power. Within it we could begin to define our experiences more precisely in areas where words are inadequate. (Seeing comes before words.) Not only personal experience, but also the essential historical experience of our relation to the past: that is to say the experience of seeking to give meaning to our lives, (...). (Berger 1972: 33)

Images are capable of expressing feelings and concepts that are difficult to put into words. So when Fabienne Bramsen tells us that she finds relief in seeing artists having expressed her present feelings in paintings, she is actually taking advantage of what Berger would call the full potential of the visual world. She finds peace with her feelings and former experiences by seeing them reflected in artworks.

During the project, we became aware of new potential in this way of using the collection. The participants often described the project as a kind of meditation where they had the time and the tranquillity to reflect upon themselves and the world. The stories they told were very personal, and they spoke honestly and courageously of their lives, experiences and journeys to Denmark. Telling these stories and mediating them through the Trapholt collection of art made the participants reflect upon themselves and their stories in new ways. The museum experience became a truly, personally transformative experience because it was a personally relevant experience (Duncan 1995: 13). The focus in the museum experience became the interaction between art and the perceiver. Possibly because personal questions led the way into the world of art, the impediment and motivator for looking at art became affect – instead of cognitive understanding. This evoking of emotion and personal stories has the potential to increase engagement and motivation, thereby opening up possibilities for learning – about oneself or about art (Pedretti 2007: 127-129).

The fact that the personal knowledge came to dominate the exhibitions was an unforeseen challenge for the mission of the art museum making one important question evolve: How do we make the personal knowledge not prior to but equal to the knowledge of the museum? How do we create equality between the two? This way, not only the museum collection would open up to new understandings and interpretations, but the participants would also open up for new understandings of and sensibilities towards art (Black 2010: 140). In *The Kaleidoscope of Culture* the participants stayed inside their personal interpretations without making relations to the historical and aesthetic knowledge of the museum.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored what happens when the art museum stops insisting solely on the art-historical knowledge as the point of departure of the museum experience and invites visitors into the curatorial process with their personal knowledge and experiences.

Different phenomena were at play during this process. The recruitment of participants proved to be a challenge. Mostly, this was because the people asked were afraid not to possess the right amount of cultural capital (Bourdieu and Darbel 2006: 41; Duncan 1995: 8-9). Having surmounted these first obstacles, the participants engaged with the artworks and reached a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 85). During the process their personal stories came to dominate the artworks, leaving only a little amount of space for the art-historical and aesthetic knowledge. Alain de Botton and John Armstrong argue that by noticing which artworks catch our eyes, we will come to know more about ourselves. When we find points of connection to what used to be foreign (in this case art), we are able to grow as individuals (de Botton and Armstrong 2013). The participants in *The Kaleidoscope of Culture* did not use their personal preferences as a tool of investigation of their inner selves. They used the artworks to express their own personal interpretation of themselves and their stories. They did not evolve or grow as individuals in relation to the artworks. In the 'Innovation Diamond' by Lotte Darsø (2011) we can find an explanation to this fact. In the 'Innovation Diamond' Darsø argues that knowledge and non-knowledge need to be present simultaneously for innovation to take place. We allowed the personal knowledge of the participants to take up too much space in the project, leaving only little space to their non-knowledge or to art-historical and aesthetic reflections. If we could somehow make these two different kinds of knowledge interact more actively and complement each other, maybe it would have the potential to make both the visitor and the museum institution grow. In *The Kaleidoscope of Culture* we placed art as a relevant element of the participants' lives, but it stayed an element that confirmed them in their understandings of themselves and not a factor in their personal growth and understanding of aesthetics.

Our opening question concerned to what extent art museums should insist on disseminating specific knowledge about selected works of art. One answer could be that the museum should insist on disseminating this specific knowledge, but at the same time remember the fact that visitors come to the museum with their own personal knowledge and background. Therefore, the project left us with some very interesting and new questions. Our point of departure was the writings of George Hein, John Falk and Lynn Dierking, their theories on the personal museum experience and the constructivist museum. Maybe these theories forget what the purpose of a museum actually is. The purpose of a museum is not to confirm the visitors in their prior conceptions of themselves but to give them new knowledge and insight into the world of art and aesthetics – thus making them more sensitive and more conscious of the visual world that surrounds them every day. If the art museum does not insist on passing on the art-historical and aesthetic knowledge, the museum has no role or relevance in the contemporary world.

But how do we make this happen? This will be the opening question for future research at Trapholt. The museum will continue to do research into the curating method used in *The Kaleidoscope of Culture*, since it has the potential to open the door to concrete dialogue and communication between the artwork and the perceiver in a way that extends the significance of the artwork as well as the perceiver's perception of himself and of art. But as long as this potential is used only in smaller projects with a limited group of participants, the museum will not be truly inclusive. On the back of *The Kaleidoscope of Culture* and similar projects, Trapholt has received funding to realize this potential in a permanent, physical installation in the museum space allowing ordinary guests to curate their own exhibitions. This exhibition opened in December 2014. Our research in addition to this exhibition will be focusing on how to make the personal knowledge of the visitor interact with the art-historical and aesthetic knowledge of the museum and thereby making both parties grow.

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Notes

- ¹ Mona MohamadAwad, personal communication with Kirsten Jensen, March 2012, Kolding.
- ² Hillal Esmati, interview by Kirsten Jensen, digital recording, 15 March 2012, Kolding.
- ³ Fabienne Bramsen, interview by Kirsten Jensen, digital recording, 15 March 2012, Kolding.

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