

WHEN AUDIENCES TEACH – OR THE REDEFINITION OF THE INSTITUTION

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Almost no matter who you ask in Danish cultural life these years, there seems to be a massive interest in the question of how to effectively address more citizens and reach the groups who do not use the institutions and other publicly funded cultural initiatives today, and at the same time increase the rate of return visits by the already established group of users.

Across the country, there have been a multitude of different audience initiatives under way in recent years and we are now reaching a level where the experience overall forms a sort of ‘backdrop’ for a more nuanced and immersed perspective on the relationships between the potential audience and the producing and controlling level in the cultural sector.

There is hardly any doubt that the institutional interest is sincere. The vast majority of decision makers in culture have long understood that an extension of the audience circuit also implies a possible expansion of revenue and, not least, a greater legitimacy for policy makers. This has led to a number of studies – conducted more or less professionally – and a subsequent steady stream of reports.

REFLECTING TRANSFORMATION

User and audience surveys are being conducted frequently in relation to individual institutions and cultural activities within municipalities and regions, and as a kind of general sector initiatives under the auspices of the funding agencies and official bodies. The large annual User Survey on Museums in Denmark from the Danish Agency for Culture is an example of the latter. The in many ways exemplary and comprehensive study and examination of the users of our museums reflects the need to take the process one step further in order to get an even more timely and qualified image of the institutional challenges that museums face in relation to developing a relationship with the surrounding society to ensure that they are perceived as relevant and important to the community at large.

The user survey’s realisation of the museum branch being in the middle of a transformation process in relation to its dissemination of knowledge, where the research-based knowledge and learning potentials have become more of a joint project between the institutions and the citizens in the surrounding society, reflects, in many ways, the societal changes and the increased democratic expectations that those who are paying for the ‘party’ also have the right to be invited to take part in it. The cultural institutions are under increasing pressure to turn to those parts of the population whom they have no real experience in reaching out to. The

traditional and often normative publicly funded cultural offers in Denmark, which have long been synonymous with the culture-bearing national identity, now suddenly have to act far more pluralistically and experimentally in a development of multi-voice reflection spaces where narratives as well as knowledge are up for negotiation. The vast majority of the institutions lack experience, tools, inspiration and partners that would enable them to meet these challenges.

CHALLENGE OF REPRESENTATION

From a political point of view, the demands for a democratisation of the cultural sector are increasing in terms of a more inclusive practice that may increase both audience volumes and the composition of the audience. If the political ambition is to create better conditions for all citizens’ opportunities to take part in cultural life, thus creating space for a meeting and an interaction between different cultural traditions and the citizens’ different experiences, knowledge and perspectives, then the institutional challenge is perhaps best described as a matter of artistic, performative and social representation in terms of repertoire, recruitment practice, audience and dissemination work, organisation etc. without lowering the requirements for quality and timeliness.

We are in a time of change, with all that this entails. Artists’ way of producing, the channels used, the media, new patterns in audience consumption, institutions’ and arts’ democratic role and opportunities and responsibilities are constantly changing. From live digital displays of operas at the local cinema, subtitled performances at theatres and three-dimensional museum displays to interactive and partially user-led cultural projects online and in public spaces. Some of the main changes in the way we organise ourselves are supported by the professional, semi-professional and entertainment-based global social media and networking sites such as LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, the long-term political and democratic implications of which we have only seen the beginning.

HANGING ON TO DEVELOPMENT

It is a great challenge for most cultural institutions simply to hang on to the development. The changes in society and participation are so extensive and rapid that dialogue with the new possibilities becomes a pure survival strategy for cultural institutions in the form we know them today. Especially for the small and medium-size institutions, finding a lasting way to deal with societal changes through a real transformation of their practice costs many resources, which they do not feel that they have. The ability to act interactively and openly in relation to the new reality is a prerequisite

for the development of both the institution and its employees, and it is worrying that a great number of institutions cannot see how they are supposed to be able to change their modus operandi.

According to the Danish Museum Act, the national and government-approved museums are under obligation to comply with five pillars: collection, registration, preservation, research and education. In many ways, these are logical areas, which naturally must be taken into account in any professional museum's operational practice. However, the very same pillars are perhaps a part of the problem in reaching out to a wider audience or to new audiences. The Museum Act does not clearly describe the importance of dissemination of the museums' knowledge to a non-professional group of receivers, whether these are citizens or other societal bodies. The museum as a communication platform – or if you like, as the scene of specific narratives or even storytelling for a potentially large public audience – is not sufficiently articulated, something which could be perceived as a reason for the somewhat outdated hierarchical structure in the relationship between the museum and the surrounding community. The lack of focus on dissemination issues also indicates why quite often there seems to be an absence of dialogue between the institution and the community it serves.

COMPLEX DEMANDS

Especially in the major cities, cultural institutions' ability to reflect and incorporate the demographic and social complexity plays a significant role in relation to how they are experienced by the surrounding community. Demographic composition – not least the presence of a rapidly growing critical and well-educated mass of citizens with different cultural references and the digitisation of society, infrastructural changes and new media opportunities – places new demands on the institutions. The museums in e.g. Copenhagen will have to be able to meet, reflect and interact with the ongoing changes and urban development in order to be able to set an institutional cultural agenda in the future. Institutions that are perceived as outdated and old-fashioned find it harder and harder to recruit new employees, find other financial sources, create new partnerships etc. The judgement from society is as it is with competition: it is hard.

Reports from Denmark as well as from abroad show that institutions that are not able to change their reproductive patterns – in terms of content, research and education and perhaps especially in relation to the composition of their workforce and their selection of external partners – are less motivated to seek the necessary changes in their mindset and attitude in relation to reaching out to a wider audience.

DEVELOPING INSTITUTIONS

In many of the case studies carried out by the Danish Centre for Arts & Interculture, we have seen a close correlation between how institutions perform and how they manage the transition between more traditional models of organisation skills, professional roles, attitudes, developmental perspectives and a new way of interacting with their surroundings, influencing all parts of the institution. Dialogue, renewal and openness are often highlighted as the key concepts for the development of institutions when adapting to the new reality. An increasing flow of knowledge and the development of skills among individuals and institutions and among employees with different perspectives and experiences seem to be necessary in order to exploit the new opportunities and at the same time provide the basis for new knowledge and stimulate further enhanced creativity within the institution itself.

When investigating some of the more progressive initiatives within the culture scene, we found indications that genuine and sincere audience engagement rather than a mere focus on the relationship between programme and repertoire, PR and audience, reaches far deeper into the organisation. It turns out that a promising audience engagement process is also about the recruitment of new employees and new skills, budgetary changes of priority, the establishment of new partnerships, new funding sources, new production methods, new communication strategies, new goals and perhaps even new assignments and new public agreements.

These indicators have already reached the political level leading to the formulation of new contracts and new demands on the institutions. The Royal Danish Theatre in Copenhagen – by far the largest cultural recipient of state funds in Denmark – has, as the Chairman of the Board phrased it, received an agreement with emphasis on audience, audience, audience and audience! In practice, this challenges all aspects of the theatre's way of working. The Royal Danish Theatre is now working on a strategy where the theatre's self-understanding and artistic responsibilities in a complex interaction and cooperation with its audiences, artists, and other institutions and organisations work together in shaping the institution's new identity.

SENSORY CONCEPT AS A FRAMEWORK OF UNDERSTANDING

It is on this background that initiatives such as the national user survey on museums should be seen. The survey for 2012 focused on how the physical environment affects people's well-being and behaviour at the museum based on the thesis that the *atmosphere* is essential to the learning and education process of which the visitors are a part. Referring to the French

phenomenologist Merleau Ponty, the study sympathetically introduces the soft sensory concept of the *atmosphere* as a parameter to get a better understanding of what is going on in the meeting between the users and the museum, where the senses are recognised as the starting point for any meeting with an exhibition. The aim of the study is to develop new methods and tools for experience, development and learning that take both individual and collective experiences and knowledge into account. The results document, in a way, the complex and ambiguous factors that reflect the individual's visit to the museum.

The introduction of soft parameters and a greater focus on the experience help focus on one element of the professional museum practice that does not quite have the same status as research: the show, the exhibition, as an advanced space for dissemination, a narrative structure, a stage for stories and interaction, where the audience shapes the experience to a greater extent than in many other contexts, tapping into one of the largest development potentials for the museums.

It is quite an obvious idea, in a way, to add another dimension to the interpretation of visitor behaviour by addressing a non-verbal and non-specific element, which so clearly is part of the museum experience. But by doing that, you also raise awareness about a certain tension that has not yet been properly addressed: What does it mean if *atmosphere* plays a major role for the visitors in terms of changing the position of the otherwise very exact and verbal research tradition within museums? Does it only change the forms of sharing knowledge or will it also influence what museums put on show and how they do it?

AUDIENCE DEFINES RELEVANCE

With the Chilean scientist Humberto Maturana's¹ words, "causality is in the minds of the observer" – or expressed less academically: The consistency (meaning) is in the minds of the audience. It is each single user of the institutions who defines the relevance of their visit. So the challenge is how to ensure that the museums of tomorrow will have a sufficient and fruitful dialogue with their users, ensuring that they are perceived as relevant and important? I agree that the new requirements and expectations of the museums indicate the need for a 'lovingly critical' look at the professional standards of research and training, developing museums' knowledge into an even more active social resource. The question is, though, from which position this happens and whether it is enough.

There is little doubt that the results from studies of this kind help to emphasise the importance of working with a deliberate educational design in the development of museums as a social learning space for knowledge-

producing processes and meetings. And it is encouraging that one of the objectives of the study is to create a tool that can help develop museums to become inclusive institutions that can support the development of cultural democracy. It is a strength in the design of the user survey that it is so clearly linked to the establishment of cross-sectoral learning partnerships between institutions and groups of citizens with different social and cultural backgrounds as a prerequisite for museums to live up to their democratic responsibilities as learning environments and knowledge institutions in society.

SEGMENTATION MODELS AS OPERATIONAL TOOLS

With the study in hand, you are provided with a very detailed picture of the users, and both the Gallup Kompas' nine segments that have been applied and John Falk's six-segment segmentation model make good sense in terms of getting an operational picture of the visitors and as a meaningful way to concentrate the collected data. Similarly, the Dutch Uitburo collected segment data in a number of cities for years using an eight-segment model, and the largest state-funded performing arts institutions in Oslo are currently working with another segmentation model in a performer project in collaboration with one of the UK's largest players in the field. Segmentation as a working model reflects an international movement towards getting a functional grasp of the challenge of how to understand the audience – or at least the audience that the institutions already have.

This brings us back to the question of what museums and cultural institutions put on show. It is fine, of course, that museums start reflecting on how they communicate and disseminate research-based knowledge in relation to a sensory framework and the audience's experience from visiting the museums. However, this is not necessarily enough in order to be perceived as relevant to the general public, at least not if you ask those who do not make use of the cultural offers.

A comprehensive report about Danish cultural habits and leisure activities,² which was published in the autumn of 2012, showed that although cultural participation is increasing (now 64% of the population), a good third of the population does still not make any use of publicly funded cultural activities. And although the report immediately got an enthusiastic reception by the then Minister for Culture and by the Danish public at large, a scrutiny of the figures showed that there is still a long way to go when one in every three Danes declines the invitation to participate in the publicly funded cultural offers with the argument that they do not experience the activities to be relevant to them.

IT IS NOT RELEVANT!

The report presents quite a lot of interesting new material, and the analyses of the survey got the Minister for Culture to highlight the Danish practice of performance contracts as a way to ensure that the institutions receiving public funds are constantly aware of the audience perspective and the need to work hard to make sure that as many people as possible will experience them as a genuine offer. For the first time ever, the report mapped new citizens' cultural habits. They are clearly left behind when it comes to use of traditionally 'highbrow' art and culture such as theatre, museums and concerts. Every one in three has never been to a museum, one in five has never been to a theatre and one in ten has never visited a concert hall. Several interviewees expressed that they do not feel invited to participate, they do not experience the cultural offers as relevant to them, and they expressed that a lack of time, a lack of interest and a fairly high price image also play a role in their rejection of the offers. But their main reason was aimed at content. The 'stories' told are not perceived as relevant, or the institutions simply fail to explain why their offers might be relevant to the groups often described as non-users.

The new Danes' 'lack of interest' emphasises that cultural institutions still have a long way to go in terms of establishing long-term and sustainable relations with the new Danes. There is a profound need for a nuanced picture of who the new Danes are, in the same way that one has to build up a picture of who the other segments of the population who reject the publicly funded cultural experiences are. It is not at all a homogeneous group, but rather a heterogeneous mass that reflects the diverse reality in which we all live. And new investigations of the cultural behaviour of citizens with non-western backgrounds in greater Copenhagen show that they definitely make use of cultural offers in a parallel structure outside the normative mainstream.

INVESTIGATING EXPERIENCES

A few years ago, the Danish Centre for Arts & Interculture performed a study, on behalf of the Danish Centre for Culture and Experience Economy, of the reflections made by 40 major Danish cultural institutions in relation to their audience.³ The institutions were asked to participate in a varied experience exchange about methods, perspectives and opportunities for audience development: What are the consequences and outcomes for the cultural institution when a deliberate strategy is implemented about the work of establishing new audience relationships and extended audiences? They were also asked to answer questions about rethinking the task, methods, the role of the institution and their possible partners. The idea was that the perspectives and issues that they would raise might be

relevant for all players on the Danish culture scene – regardless of size, governance and commissioning.

The study showed that most of the institutions appear to be searching for the same 'key' that would unlock the transformation from perceiving the audience as 'customers' to seeing them as 'co-perceivers' and perhaps even as 'co-creators'. There was broad agreement amongst the experienced institutions that audience development is not about developing audiences, but rather about the development of the organisation that seeks to renew its audience. That any outreach initiative requires an in-reach ditto – a critical look at the organisation itself.

Efforts to renew the audience are closely linked to all other parts of cultural institutions or cultural project conditions. Each cultural institution has its own special and very different policies and framework, and the work with audience engagement is basically something that must start from within the organisation.

COMING CLOSER TO WHAT IS NEEDED

The Danish Agency for Culture's national user survey, the large report about Danish cultural habits, and our own studies of the experience of varied audience work all suggest that we are continually getting closer to a clarification of what appears to be needed for cultural institutions and projects to come into contact with and attract a larger proportion of the population to a higher extent than is currently the case.

It is about thinking across existing boundaries and structural limitations and creating some incentives to develop and use modern communication methods, using innovation and inclusive methods that can contribute to increased diversity in the cultural offers, and thus create greater resonance with the potential audience and ultimately contribute to a better use of the growth potential in the cultural sector as such.

And it is about delegation of power, or rather delegation of influence on what is to be shown – in order to create space for new stories, new perspectives and new skills. It is about increasingly creating the framework for the stories told together with the users. It is about seeking renewal through new partnerships, new competencies, not least through the support of networks responsible for the exchange of knowledge and dissemination in the field.

Obviously, the institutions have a responsibility to boost development, but there is an even greater need for some overarching political incentives or requirements about greater diversification and broader goals in terms of users if the institutions are to be able to meet the demands. Cultural de-

mocracy is only possible if the institutions are part of a real dialogue with the users who do not see the institutions as relevant. That is maybe one of the important lessons about engaging with the audience. The audience will both be part of an educational and social practice and regarded as an equal part in the process.

A HETEROGENEOUS LANDSCAPE

At the same time, the surveys and studies provide us with a picture of a Danish cultural landscape in at least three stages. The cultural infrastructure in the country is simply very different on the eastern and western sides of the Great Belt, respectively. There are large regional differences in how people experience artistic events, cultural institutions and products, and their role and assumed responsibility in society. It is striking to see the extent to which local and regional cultural priorities – or the lack thereof – have led to a cultural landscape in Denmark with very different approaches to the role that arts and culture play in society as a whole and in the local community in particular.

Not least when it comes to initiatives or projects closely related to the audiences' perspectives, local expectations and the need to renew repertoires or programmes, is there a need for further development of overall nationwide action initiatives and incentives.

PARTICIPATION AS SOCIETAL DEVELOPMENT

The importance of being able to embrace and promote increased user participation and cultural diversity in modern society is multifaceted, especially when put into a global perspective. It affects not only the arts and culture sector locally, but also the concept of culture as such and the community at large. It is about identities, production environments, innovative growth layers, creative and highly skilled culture workers, business start-ups, investments, self-perception etc. In order to meet this challenge politically, audience engagement and cultural diversity should be thought of as a focal point for new approaches, new investments and new projects, free from the more traditional cultural distribution practice, which relates to the individual disciplines in a sector-divided competence and organisational structure.

However, it is crucial that quality, innovation and renewal underlie the priorities in the institutions, and that a reflective practice is established that can incorporate both the users' different perspectives and the institutional need for research and dialogue.

Endnotes

- 1 Humberto Maturana (born September 14, 1928, in Santiago, Chile) is a Chilean biologist and particularly known for creating the term autopoiesis about the nature of reflexive feedback mechanisms in living systems. His work has been influential in many fields mostly with the biology of cognition.
- 2 Bak, Lene (ed.) and Anne Sophie Madsen, Bettina Henrichsen and Søren Troldborg: "Danskernes Kulturvaner 2012", Kulturministeriet, Udarbejdet af: Epinion A/S og Pluss Leadership A/S, Copenhagen, November 2012 (ISBN 978-87-7960-140-6).
- 3 Aidt, Mik (Ed.) and Sofie Henningsen, Niels Righolt: "Fra Guder til Tjenere", Center for Kunst & Interkultur, Copenhagen, Februar 2012 (ISBN 978-87-993435-3-9).