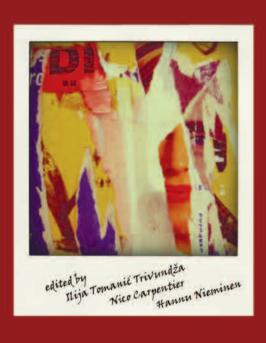
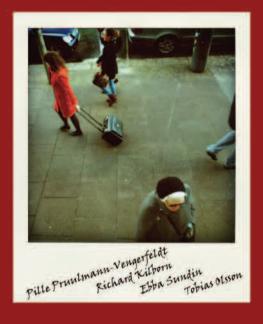
Past, future and change: Contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes





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PAST, FUTURE AND CHANGE:

CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS OF EVOLVING MEDIA SCAPES

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Handicraft Hobbyists in an Ethnographic Museum – Negotiating Expertise and Participation

Krista Lepik and Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt

1. Introduction

Relatively recently, Desvallées and Mairesse stated that "the chronic lack of interactivity in museum communication has led us to ask ourselves how we can make the visitor more active, while seeking his participation" (2010: 30). This article, which looks at visitor participation, focuses on a very specific group of visitors, handicraft hobbyists, and more specifically their relationship to an ethnographic museum, the Estonian National Museum, by asking members of this specific group what museums do and should be doing in order to make use of visitor input.

This chapter makes its contribution by focusing on museum-goers' perception of participatory practice. It departs from the constructivist, grounded theory developed by Charmaz (2006), and pays attention to concepts that are important to the visitors, and to their view of the role of the museum in their lives. Against the backdrop of earlier works (Simon, 2010, Goodnow 2010, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel 2011), this paper attempts to provide a direct answer to the question: What do the visitors themselves think about cultural participation in museums?

The works mentioned in the previous paragraph have contributed extensively to our understanding of various forms of participation in museums, and how these forms might be compared to one another. For example, Goodnow (2010) takes a somewhat hierarchical approach, relying on Carpentier (2007), and delineates participation at the levels of access, reflection, provision and structural involvement, on the basis of the extent of power handed over to participants in museums. Instead of treating various forms of participation "as progressive steps" (Simon, 2010: 188), Simon

(2010) suggests considering different variables that help to distinguish "contribution, collaboration, co-creation, hosted" (Simon, 2010: 188) models of the participatory museum. Different variables (e.g. power handed to potential participants, the institutional commitment, the motivation of participants, resources, skills and eventually the perception of non-participating visitors (Simon, 2010)) all come together to form a matrix that helps to explain the nature of participatory projects. It is, however, crucial to keep in mind that not all the characteristics of these variables match perfectly with any particular form of real participation. On closer analysis, it emerges that different projects borrow elements from various forms of participation. The third approach mentioned above (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel 2011) draws on various fields (economic, political, and cultural) in order to provide an analysis of the possibilities of participation frames within "the classical communication model of Who? Says What? To Whom?" (Lasswell, 1948; McQuail and Windahl, 1993 cited in Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel, 2011: 16). With a measure of caution, this latter work also introduces hierarchical models of participation assembled from different disciplines, but its main contribution is that Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel (2011) outline a great range of participatory practices in museums. These fields (economic, political, and cultural) are interwoven in practice, and therefore analysing participatory activities may in some cases be more understandable, to both practitioners and potential participants, in terms of categories that are more closely related to everyday practice. As this chapter focuses on the relationship between museums and potential participants, it is also important to theoretically outline the notion of expertise and its relationship with participation.

2. The role of experts in cultural participation

This section looks at expertise in general, then at the area of cultural participation, and finally considers the role of expertise in museums. On a very general level, we can draw on the work of Anthony Giddens (1991). Giddens has emphasised the role of expert systems in contemporary, reflexive society. According to him, "expert systems bracket time and space through deploying modes of technical knowledge which have validity independent of the practitioners and clients who make use of them" (Giddens, 1991: 18). Expert systems (and we see museums as expert systems, too) in this approach are not so much about the power they involve, but rather their scope and knowledge. Indeed, as Giddens himself mentioned earlier, the involvement of communication, power and sanctions is fundamental to all social practice (Giddens, 1979: 82). It allows us to treat the existence

of power as a default characteristic, and thus also to leave it in the background, so that we can instead pay attention to other immanent traits that define expertise. For the purposes of this work, it is important to mention that "even the most cherished beliefs underlining expert systems are open to revision" (Giddens, 1991: 141), thus even being "routinely available to laypeople as part of the reflexivity of modernity" (Giddens, 1991: 141). These democratising tendencies, after spreading from "the orthodox political arena" (Giddens, 1994: 192) to other domains, have to some extent also influenced the cultural sphere.

In some cases (such as when examining the phenomenon for statistical purposes (Morrone, 2006)), cultural participation is seen as cultural consumption, rather than as something that revises "beliefs underlining expert systems" (Giddens, 1991: 141), or refers to amateur production – "professional practices are excluded here" (Morrone, 2006: 7). In these cases, "cultural participants" are clearly distinguished from "experts", both semantically and practically. These denominations, while designed for statistics and mainly for closed circles of decision-makers, are also made public through the news media and various reports. Thus, they also carry the potential to shape public awareness about cultural participation and shape the opinions of potential participants.

In specific cultural institutions, including museums, a somewhat different picture develops, as the expertise is provided by these institutions but also opened up, to a certain extent, for revisions. Such cultural transformations, however, take time, as both museums and their visitors are deemed to be seeking forms of participation that satisfy mutual expectations (and those of spectators, as Simon (2010) has proposed). The identity struggles of museum professionals as experts were highlighted very recently (Tatsi, 2013) in the instance of an Open Curatorship project staged at the Estonian National Museum, which showed once again the importance of acknowledging participatory practice at both the rhetorical and the practical level. In this case, establishing a participatory intervention triggered debates among museum professionals, as it ran counter to their "traditional" understanding of curatorship (in which the expert alone decides upon the content of exhibitions), fuelled anxiety, resistance and othering, resulted in them focusing on how clearly the visitors' ",amateurishness' becomes evident through the exhibition" (Tatsi, 2013). The borderline between museum and visitors is thus clear and strong even in the case of a participatory project that supports the clearly distinguished identities of museum professionals and visitors. This has the potential to foster a "relatively isolated culture of hosted exhibitions" (Tatsi, 2013) in the future. Although it is for each museum to decide what participatory activities are appropriate for it, the question of striving for mutual exchange of expertise still remains.

3. Context and method

Although this study considers the Estonian context, the issue of lack of interactivity, and the recent signs of will to solve it through participatory initiatives, have been much debated in the European and North American museum communities. Thus, the purpose of this context section is to refer to common traits and issues that the Estonian National Museum (and also other Estonian museums) shares with its international counterparts.

The data for this study consist of interviews and analysis of online materials collected during an intervention study conducted in the winter of 2011. The aim of the study was to involve handicraft hobbyists in reproducing cultural heritage materials found at the museum, either as an authentic copy or as an inspired item. Altogether 47 people indicated their interest by registering, and 37 completed works were submitted for the competition. The entries were evaluated in two categories - copies of originals and inspired items. The evaluation was carried out by a jury, consisting of museum staff and experts invited from the local community. For the data collection, nine interviews were conducted during and after the event. The respective quotes are marked with a number (I 1-9) to indicate the interview. Additionally, as the hobbyists were invited through their online community forums, material from those forums (a total of 23 forum topics with 370 posts) and related blog posts (nine posts in total) were collected during and after the competition¹. Those posts were not used for detailed analysis, but as contextual information accessed through close reading.

¹ The authors are grateful to Master's student Marke Teppor, who was responsible for the running of the intervention, related data collection and initial analysis (Teppor, 2011) in the framework of her thesis project.

Interview Code	Gender	Age	Competition entry
I1	F	44	Karja quilt (Image 1)
I2	F	63	Gloves "Luigi"
I3	F	45	Mittens
I4	F	34	Ceramic dessert bowls
I5	F	38	Chamber of pins
I6	M	32	Hammer-wrought tools
I7	F	42	Ram skin pouches
I8	F	33	Bag in Tunis technique

Wrought rack for herring baking

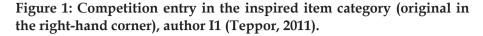
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Table 1: Interview participants and their related competition works

For the purposes of analysing the interview data, the constructivist grounded theory developed by Charmaz (2006) was applied. This implies that stress was placed on a "participant's definitions of terms, situations, and events" (Charmaz, 2006: 32), while focusing on "his or her assumptions, implicit meanings, and tacit rules" (Charmaz, 2006: 32). The handicraft hobbyists' understandings of relationships and collaboration with the ethnographic museum, in terms of trust, access, degree of control etc., are mostly embedded in these assumptions and meanings. In order to gain a better insight into the perceptions of the museum held by the handicraft hobbyists, line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2006) was applied - this made it easier to understand that the identity of handicraft hobbyists as museumgoers can very much be analysed through meanings they attribute to the museum itself. The ways in which the museum is identified in the interviews give "points of departure" (Charmaz, 2006: 17), and evoke certain differences and similarities that help to position the identity of hobbyist crafters as museum-goers. Various differences and similarities, then, are used in the process of axial coding as "conditions, the circumstances or situations that form the structure of the studied phenomena" (Charmaz, 2006: 61). These conditions influence potential ways of participation in the museum that, in terms of Charmaz, can be seen as the "actions/interactions, participants' routine or strategic responses to issues, events, or problems" (Charmaz, 2006: 61), and that eventually can lead to certain "consequences, outcomes of actions/interactions" (Charmaz, 2006: 61) - either material (such as the tangible results of some common project, for example) or mental (the experiences from the participatory process, "feeding" in new conditions supporting or hindering participatory processes in the future).





4. Estonian hobbyist crafters' perceptions of the Estonian National Museum's expertise

Various roles played by the Estonian National Museum, as perceived by participants of *My Favourite*, have been analysed. It appears that, besides the articulation of the traditional tasks of museums (namely acquiring, preserving, researching, communicating and exhibiting (ICOM, 2006)), a dimension reflecting the expertise of a museum is also present. The expertise seems to be grounded in four distinguishable characteristics displayed by the museum: its large scale, its possession of cultural treasures, its knowledge and its management of risks or conflicts.

Table 2: Characteristics of the Estonian National Museum according to handicraft hobbyists

	The large scale	Cultural treasures	Knowledge	Conflict or risk man-agement
Acquiring	Temporal dimension: reaches back to the past; spatial dimension: Estonian and Finno-Ugric culture	The ENM is best aware of what is to be collected, has the right set of values	Knowing what is the "proper" item to be collected	What is to be acquired today? What is authentic and what is fake?
Preserving	Temporal reach to the future, for generations to come	"Depositing" heritage	Knowing how to take good care of old, delicate objects	Conflict betwe- en preserving and exhibiting, finding solu- tions
Research	Large collections nourishing research	Research of treasures	Knowledge taken for granted: "museum knows best"	Are researchers the only people to be allowed to work with original arte- facts?
Commu- nication	Large collections provide plenty of information for exhibitions, educational events and for studying collections individually	Introducing delicate works, popularising old toys (to counter-balance the impact of mass production) and archaic craft techniques	Knowing how to organise an exhibition, distin- guishing "good" ideas (about what is to be exhibited) from less good ones	What arte- facts should be digitised first (in order to improve public access to informa- tion)? Quality vs quantity of digitising

It is, therefore, relatively easy to depict the Estonian National Museum's identity (as perceived by handicraft hobbyists) in a brief table. Since, in some cases, the boundary between communicating and exhibiting can be quite thin, and it is possible to view exhibiting as a part of communication (as in the "PRC model" (Reinwardt Academie cited in Desvallées and Mairesse, 2010: 68)), here exhibiting is also present in the category of communication.

The large scale of the museum is evident both in temporal and spatial dimensions. The temporal reach is considered important, as the ENM is related to objects from "old times", from the past, introducing them to current visitors and future generations. At the same time, the ENM also

displays large scale spatially, as handicraft hobbyists refer to the folk traditions inherent to the resources of an entire ethnos, and of all walks of life. The large scale of the museum is beyond the grasp of an individual. Therefore, handicraft hobbyists highly value the information that is made accessible to museum users who need to study the collections individually in the museum's study rooms: "It is very pleasant that these are on display for interested people and craftsmen. So that laypeople who do not conduct scientific research there are allowed to come up close and have a look. This is very, very positive" (I4).

The large scale also poses a problem for handicraft hobbyists, as the collections of the ENM are "immeasurable, but there's not much information about the contents of the collections, of what could be found there" (I5). This means that more communication about the scale and richness of the collections is expected, and, despite the scale, a degree of availability is also expected.

Possession of heritage as a cultural treasure is the second important aspect of the ENM as an expert. On the one hand, the value of this treasure is hidden in relative all-inclusiveness (as the ENM is interested in Estonian and Finno-Ugric culture), in the quantity of the museum. On the other hand, handicraft hobbyists also emphasise the quality and exquisite essence of cultural treasure. Here, the critique of contemporary mass production or crafts performed slovenly or in a hurry is notable, as is the wish to learn from high-quality items created by previous generations. So we meet the same centuries-old paradox that Gauntlett (2011: 48) has described: "the Arts and Crafts alternative led to beautiful handmade products that the typical worker could not afford", and that can only be eliminated by "doing it yourself". When talking about "cultural treasures", the interviewees usually remain quite generic about particular methods of communicating, yet they emphasise the purpose of introducing "cultural treasures": "popularising old toys for children, to counterbalance" the impact of mass-produced toys (I3), "introducing archaic techniques of work and maintaining a distance from 'plastic and chemistry'" (19), or "popularising more sophisticated handicraft techniques" (I3).

Besides valuing cultural heritage as a treasure, the museum is also considered *knowledgeable* (and that is not only because of the knowledge the museum preserves). The interviewees acknowledge the knowledge and skills of museum professionals, while quite often their understanding of the knowledge needed by museum professionals to perform remains blurry. This perception is, therefore, compensated for by the hobbyists

taking the expertise for granted, referring to museum work "as it usually is in museums" (I5). An honest "confession of a layman", talking about the roles of the museum, is also relevant:

[I]n the case of textiles preservation, there can be huge differences, since, when you touch a bowl made of clay, with white gloves, nothing happens. But for this fragile textile, this is so museum-specific, I don't know what conditions it requires for preservation (I4).

However, when considering an exhibition or some other communicative activity, knowledge is needed to distinguish good ideas from less good ones; as one of the interviewees states: "not all ideas are worthy of being developed" (I6).

The issue of evaluating, distinguishing or choosing may lead to conflicts that only the museum is capable of managing or resolving. In Table 1, several conflict situations are introduced, but probably the most topical issues for handicraft hobbyists are linked to access to collections. They are generally aware of the dilemma that exists between preserving and exhibiting fragile objects, and actively propose solutions to solve it, suggesting "making copies of objects, showing these and letting people touch them, but preserving authentic objects properly" (I8), or "digitising objects so that it wouldn't be necessary to bring things out from the repositories all the time" (I5). Yet digitising means more problems, as the lack of resources (required to deal with the vast collections) means it is necessary to prioritise, and choose between quantity (many objects digitised) and quality (lots of information attached to fewer digitised items). There is also an issue that is particularly topical for handicraft hobbyists: as they are interested in discovering new techniques, they also value information about reverse sides of pieces of furniture, garments, etc.:

[W]hat I am missing are the wrong sides. By default, the books or photos as presented in the information system do not display wrong sides in close view. But if you want to learn some kind of technique, then the wrong side is very informative... You may want to turn a chair upside down or open the doors of a closet and have a look at what is inside (R3).

5. Estonian hobbyist crafters in relation to the Estonian National Museum

These four characteristics (the large scale, cultural values, proper knowledge and managing conflicts) are forming the identity of the ENM as an

expert in the eyes of the handicraft hobbyists. In return, these traits also help to identify hobbyist crafters as museum-goers. Those traits can be first seen as in opposition to the perceived identity of the ENM.

First, compared to the vast national museum, and its collections and knowledge, hobbyist crafters perceive themselves as being rather small and temporary. This has an impact on their values, and, as a result, it is possible to see that handicraft hobbvists position themselves as help-seekers or users (in relation to the Estonian National Museum). Second, they express their concerns about the need to value and popularise cultural heritage even more, yet they feel that their own concern is not sufficient. "Proper" knowledge is the third aspect that distinguishes an individual hobbyist crafter from the museum: given their relative lack of this knowledge, they sometimes excuse themselves for not being au fait with matters of museology. The lack or absence of knowledge is probably one of these factors that relate the role of the ENM with the interest to actively participate in museum activities, as besides referring to little knowledge about museum work it also hints to the lack of perception of how a handicraft hobbyist could contribute to the museum. This is very vividly expressed by one of the interviewees: "I don't know how it works, therefore I cannot demand or want it... or I cannot see that it would be a problem" (I4). The end of this quote also shows that the ENM is trusted to notice and solve possible conflicts (in case there are any), since, because of their lack of knowledge, individual museum-goers (including handicraft hobbyists) tend to distance themselves from these conflicts.

However, there are also shared characteristics which help to contribute to commonalities and possible forms of collaboration. First, the vast collections of the museum are at least to some extent *accessed* by all participants of this intervention project (at least because the *My Favourite* contest required them to do so). In some cases they also mention visiting the collections either alone or with a group with whom they have shared interests (institutions where they work, NGOs where they are members). The interest in their native culture is shared with the ENM, as is their *interest in the wellbeing of objects* relating to their hobby or handicraft. So, despite the large scale of the museum, handicraft hobbyists also have their own "spot" related to at least a small part of collections. Being handicraft hobbyists, the interviewees *value Estonian handicraft*, and presumably their hobby is one of the main factors that helps them articulate cultural heritage as a cultural treasure. Even though their knowledge of museum work is limited, their dedication to their hobby has in some cases formed in childhood,

with the benefit of useful hints and tips from parents and grandparents. A handicraft hobbyist is, therefore, a *potentially knowledgeable person*, at least in her/his area of interest. This means that there is some acknowledgment and encouragement needed to support the specific group in their valuable interactions with the ENM. Eventually, although the general museological issues are supposed to be addressed by the museum, hobbyist crafters, as users of museum collections, publications, databases, exhibitions etc., have several ideas about how to resolve some conflicts (as was also introduced above) or about *finding new ways to collaborate*. The final part of this paper is dedicated to their suggestions about collaboration with the museum.

6. Hobbyist crafters as cultural participants in an ethnographic museum

Hobbyist crafters have proposed several ways to improve the collections, in some cases involving collaboration both on acquisition and preservation. As practical people, crafters have sometimes looked upon collections by considering both the tangible heritage preserved in repositories, and the electronic information about the collections preserved in databases, as an integral entity. Although they cherish the authenticity of objects, they also value the informative aspect of objects preserved in collections (a defect in a piece of furniture or a garment, for example, or its reverse side). Therefore, given the conflict between the need to preserve or exhibit and use fragile items, recommendations suggesting ways to add new and useful information are quite common.

They see an opportunity to contribute to the *information provision* together with the digital cataloguing of objects, "paying attention to defects, and adding instructions" (I5) on how to create a similar object. In this collaboration, handicraft hobbyists see potential for themselves in compiling the instructions (containing notes on "measurements, materials used, details and views" (I5)), with the museum professional reviewing and confirming, so that "the museum worker shouldn't have so much of a workload" (I5) (when helping crafters in research rooms).

Other ways to collaborate, through *working with the tangible heritage*, would include "restoring museum objects or crafting copies when something is very broken" (I9), or making copies to assist museum researchers (when they want to publish a textbook on some handicraft technique). "Selling handicraft to the museum" (I1) has also been considered.

A distinctive way to contribute to a museum is to send in one's *stories or interpretations*: like "the story of making my national costume" (I3), or by adding some thoughts or suggestions about collections when competing in another contest the museum might organise.

A rather specific way to collaborate, proposed by one of the interviewees, is to involve handicraft hobbyists with the required skills and knowledge in *conducting research* in fields that have been explored less thoroughly: "the work that I could definitely do would be studying items made of bones, bladders or horns. These seem to be rather unexplored" (I7).

Another area in museum work, triggering lots of ideas about collaboration between handicraft hobbyists and the museum, was related to *communication*. According to the interviewees, this area can be divided into four discrete domains: informing communities, organising exhibitions, providing courses and publishing.

7. Conclusions

While the museum, with its accumulated expertise, can be perceived as awe-inspiring and has a clear view of its relationship with the particular group of handicraft hobbyists, this scale, expertise and knowledge can in many cases also be seen as a self-construction tool. In addition to the identity-building that takes place through the relationship, these people see their role, through their self-acquired expertise as having the potential to support the museum in its endeavours.

As explored in this paper, handicraft hobbyists have proposed a rather diverse range of ways of collaborating with an ethnographic museum. Depending on the particular context, some of these suggestions may find a positive reception among museum professionals, yet some might need more time to be reconsidered or developed further. Still, it should be emphasised that the nature of these recommendations, linked to the current knowledge and museum-related identity of these handicraft hobbyists, is rather cautious, adhering very closely to previous experience. In this way, by confirming the ENM's expertise, they also re-affirm their own relationship and knowledge base through this expertise.

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