The Hospitable Museum

An analysis of a participatory exhibition project in a Norwegian museum of decorative arts and design

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Summary

Through a case study, this thesis explores how Nordenfjeldske Museum of Decorative Arts and Design (NKIM) use co-curating in the exhibition “125 objects, choices, stories” as a method for reaching out to its publics. Particularly it examines what museums are communicating by exhibitions that are co-curated with selected participants from their publics. An analysis of the co-curated exhibition was carried out by the use of interviews with two staff members from NKIM, along with a visual and textual analysis of the exhibition. I have examined how, and why, the museum staff decided to use the co-curating method; how they found their participants; and how the collaboration unfolded up until the exhibition was opened. The research is set in the context of the development of the curatorial role and the focus on social inclusion in museums over the last few decades. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu (1991) and Jacques Derrida’s (2000) theories that regard the willingness to open up our domain to strangers along with my collected data, I argue that there is a way of working on collaborative exhibition projects that does not adhere to the traditional art museum codes. At its core collaborative projects are not about teaching participants and audiences the best way of working within the conventions of the art museum, but to challenge the museum to change what the result could be all together.
Preface

First of all, I want to extend my deepest gratitude to the staff at Nordenfjeldske Museum of Decorative Arts and Design in Trondheim for their invaluable contributions to this thesis, and for their generosity to me during my visit. I also want to thank them for their willingness to open up their domain, not just for me as a researcher, but for their publics, to come in and share their wonderful stories for their anniversary exhibition.

A sincere thanks is in order, to my supervisor Christopher Whitehead, for sharing his knowledge and insightful advice with me in this process. My fellow students at the master programme for museology and cultural heritage studies also need to be thanked, for making these last two whirlwind years incredibly educational, rewarding and fun!

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1 Introduction

1.1 Hosting a participatory exhibition project

You have invited someone to your house for a dinner party, perhaps it is a birthday celebration. How free are your guests to move around? Can they walk through the front door without ringing the bell, or should they wait for you to welcome them in? Can they go straight to the dinner table to sit down or should they join the other guests in the living room to wait for you to say that dinner is served? Maybe the guests do not know you that well yet, they might be new friends, co-workers, or maybe you’re their boss. What kind of rules are the guests expected to follow? How are you, the host, treating them? The ideal is “make yourself at home”, or “my house is your house”! But is this really the case? Do we as hosts let guests behave in our home as they would in the their own?

It is one thing to navigate the role as host in the private sphere, but what about when it is a museum that is the host for new guests? How does the museum treat the guests that are invited to join in a participatory project to make an exhibition? How ready are museum professionals to let go of their power to define, give the voice to the publics, and to let their guests make themselves at home? In this thesis I will look at how Nordenfjeldske Museum of Decorative Arts and Design (NKIM) use co-curating in an exhibition for reaching out to their publics, and how the museum staff’s choices impact the result.

The role of the curator was professionalised in the interwar years in the 20th century, which also served to separate the curator from the communication with the public, turning the role inwards to the collection (McClellan 2008, 171). The curator’s responsibility has thus been to provide visitors with the interpretation of art exhibitions based on their expert knowledge of art through their written and formal arrangement, and organisation of the displays (Whitehead 2012, xii). However, a curatorial role is increasingly being given to members of the public in order to move away from the conventional ideal of the authoritative museum. The importance of hearing from diverse voices from a vast number of people from all over society is being acted upon. But in this new climate, are museum professionals keeping up with these changes, or are they stuck in their traditional way of working and thinking about exhibition work? As Bernadette T. Lynch points out, ‘Invited spaces’ in museums, as elsewhere, are ostensibly devices for dialogue, but remain forever permeated
with the power effects of difference” (2011, 147). Are museum professionals aware of their positions as hosts in an institution that long has held the authority of presenting “the truth”?

**Research questions**

There are many ways of researching the participatory aspects of museum work today, but in my thesis, my focus is on the museum’s side of producing a participative exhibition. I have looked at how the museum staff is dealing with the task of providing publics a place to be heard and seen and taking a step back in the process which has belonged to them for such a long time. Therefore, my research question is: “What are museums communicating by exhibitions that are co-curated with selected participants from their publics?” Specifically, I look into what is being communicated by NKIM about the audience, the objects, and the museum. What is being communicated specifically, as well as the subtext of the communication. I ask this question because I argue that all exhibition work is a form of communication, and an exhibition carried out in a museum will necessarily be affected by the institutional frame, regardless of the museum staff’s intentions or manner of involvement in the project.

**Case study, theory and methods**

The case study for my thesis is NKIM’s 125th anniversary exhibition where the museum invited 125 individuals to be their co-curators. The exhibition consisted of the co-curators’ choices of favourite objects from the museum’s collection. Each participant was to choose one object and write a text about it. In taking this approach, the museum wished to step away from the traditional way of making an anniversary exhibition and show the collection in a new light.

I have carried out an analysis to look at how the museum, the host, handled the task of having 125 guests co-curate their exhibition. Since this process stretches beyond the actual exhibition design period, my analysis regard the communication throughout the whole project, and I have looked into how and why the museum staff decided to use this method, how they found their participants, and how the collaboration unfolded up until the exhibition was opened. To analyse this in light of my research question, I have conducted interviews with two staff members from NKIM to get their perspectives, along with a visual analysis of the exhibition and an analysis of the texts belonging to it.

For my theoretical framework, I draw on two theories that explore our willingness to open our domain to others, to ‘strangers’, so to speak. To create a historical context for the
view of how museum professionals today deal with issues of inclusion and diversity in their work with the audiences, I use Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel’s *The Love of art. European Art Museums and their Public*. In the 1960s Bourdieu and Darbel investigated art museums and their visitors. They examined who the visitors were and how the museum treated them – in terms of enabling them to understand what they saw; how to move inside the galleries; and who was encouraged to visit. Their conclusion was harsh: art museums maintain class divisions in society by reproducing them in tending to “the cultivated classes” who already have the tools to understand the codes needed to use the museums. These codes are inherited from their social class, and people from lower classes do not have this advantage. Thus, they are excluded from the museums.

I have combined this theory with Jacques Derrida’s theory of hospitality to see how the museum deals with the co-curators. In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida talks about how the host treats the guests that are invited into his or her domain. ‘Unconditional hospitality’ is the ideal where the host gives full access and freedom. But does this really happen? And what happens when the guest comes too far into our domain? How does the host react to that?

How hospitable is the act of hospitality? How hospitable is the museum that invites the public to be co-curators for an exhibition? Are the co-curators free to make their mark on what the exhibition conveys or are they at the mercy of the established codes of practice – and interpretation – that the curators have used for years? How hospitable can the museum be when one considers the claims of Bourdieu and Darbel? Are these claims still relevant, or is this an overly pessimistic way of looking at the situation? Are the museum professionals not getting enough trust in what they are able to accomplish? These are questions I look into in my discussion, based on the findings from my analyses.

**Structure of the thesis**

The thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter one is the introduction, with a historical background and an account of the development up until today’s situation. Theory, Methods and Empirical Framework is the title of chapter two, wherein I explain in greater depth my choices of theories and methods and their relevance to this thesis, along with an introduction to the case study. I also discuss ethical considerations to my thesis in this chapter. Chapter three is my analysis, in which I use the data I collected during my field work to analyse the different elements of the project in light of my theoretical framework. Chapter four, Discussion, is where I look at what I have found in my analyses and discuss some main
aspects of this. The final chapter is my conclusion, where my answers to the research questions are summarised, and I make my final remarks.

1.2 Towards a diversity of voices

The public museum as a cultural form emerged fully in the 1800s. Both as a response to the Enlightenment era and the French Revolution at the end of the 1700s, and as result of the nation-state building in the new century. Before this, museums had largely been private collections, belonging mainly to rich European men of power who wished to display their wealth and status (Vergo 1989, 1-2). In the 19th century, it has been argued that museums were intended to show the strength and importance of the countries and nation-states, enhance rational, scientific and universally valid truths (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, 13), and educate and cultivate the public (Weil 2007, 33). The art museums in this period sought to improve and harmonise the society by exposing the public to the best objects and artworks that the nation could exhibit, which became increasingly important and as the 20th century approached and the pace of the modern life quickened (McClellan 2008, 21).

In art museums and museums of decorative arts and design – the latter was formed as a direct result of the industrial revolution and the new demands for products of craft and design after the world exhibition in London in 1851 – the focus was on conveying style studies. The museums collected and showed the best objects of study, for artists to get inspiration and people to have something upon which to model their taste (Glambek 2010, 96). In their early years of existence, their function differed from that of today, and the museum’s purpose has moved away from a canonising model of the traditional art historical adoration where “the museum positioned the art both on the side of the sacred, set apart from ordinary life, and as a source of moral authority” (Pollock 2007, 1-2). But the road has not been straightforward, and art museums have undergone periods of critique, change and backlashes from conservative professionals. This critique has dealt with both the ideals of the museums, the practices of display, of their communication with their audiences and the role of the museum professionals (McClellan 2008, 4)

For decades, the social roles and purposes of museums and galleries have been unquestioned. This has begun to change with the issue becoming more and more foregrounded and put on the agenda (Sandell 2007, 96). Particularly since the 1990s, the profile of issues of access and social inclusion in museums has increased highly (Kawashima 2006, 55), sparked by Peter Vergo’s New Museology in 1989. This book asked questions
about *why* museums do what they do, and for whom, instead of how (Vergo 1989, 2-3). Museums have since had to assume new roles and develop new ways of working to demonstrate their social purpose and become agents of social inclusion, in order to help avoid groups being marginalised and disenfranchised (Sandell 1998, 401). In this process, the focus on equal opportunity and equal access to public institutions such as museums were brought to the forefront by minority groups. Museums found that their potential for social inclusion lay in being places for learning for the widest audience possible (Sandell 1998, 403). This had the greatest possibility to be of help, rather than the traditional focus on preservation and conservation (Hooper-Greenhill 1997, 1, as cited in Sandell 1998, 403).

Visitor studies emerged as a research field in the 1920s but was not truly embraced until the 1970s. This field of study aims at examining visitor behaviour in exhibition venues, and deal among other things with areas such as audience research, and exhibit design and development (Bitgood and Shettel 1996, 6). Visitor studies play a central role in the ongoing dialogue regarding the museums’ responsibility for being accessible to a wide range of audiences. It has shown that variables in exhibition design such as label contents, and characteristics of the visitors, has a strong influence on what they take away from their visit, and that museum professionals should be concerned with achieving a greater experience for visitors through exhibitions (Bitgood and Shettel 1996, 9). Visitor studies have provided useful lessons on the issue, but these are still not always acted upon in the exhibition work (Hooper-Greenhill 2011, 773). The fact is that museums and especially art galleries have a long way to go because traditions of excluding social classes still persist within institutions (Sandell 1998, 409). In *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* Eileen Hooper-Greenhill wrote that museum professionals – e. g. curators – have the power to determine what the visitor is able to see, how, and when. The visitor on the other hand has restricted access to the objects, and thus, restricted access to what kind of knowledge is produced and conveyed (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 7).

The concept of the exhibition is still that of a selection of objects put on display for an audience, but it has changed somewhat over time along with the change in the concept of the museum’s responsibility and communicative power (Davies 2010, 307). Jane K. Nielsen defines communication within museums as the articulation of understandings. In that communication is transmission and exchange of information, but in museums this also deals with meaning-making, interpretation and education (Nielsen 2016, 443). With this new awareness of the museum’s and the curator’s role, curators’ undertakings are also being re-established and redeveloped. This has led to today’s approach of exhibition production mostly
always being carried out in a team consisting of people with varying job descriptions. But the task is still curating and when outsiders come in, they are guest-curators (Davies 2010, 308). The term ‘co-curation’ itself is subject to different interpretations, and Davies elaborates on this, saying that while the term can mean working together with other people to produce an exhibition, it does not necessarily involve the whole process that the curator and museum team works on. It could simply be smaller tasks that are isolated branches of the process of making the exhibition (Davies 2011, 59). Regardless, inviting community members in as co-curators for the stories that museums are telling, can help the museums to ask questions of why rather than just how. And also, those questions they need to ask themselves in regard to the future of collecting, interpreting and researching. Thus, it can be helpful both in the everyday tasks as well as with communication strategies (Nielsen 2016, 448).
2 Theory, methods and empirical framework

2.1 Theoretical framework

In order to examine what museums communicate in participatory exhibitions, I combine two theories that talks about our willingness to open up our domain to others; Pierre Bourdieu’s research on how inclusive European art museums are, and Jacques Derrida’s theory on the act of hospitality towards strangers.

Museums and their publics

Central to Pierre Bourdieu’s work as a sociologist and anthropologist was the study of how structures and power mechanisms in society impacts how the individual behaves and how freely she can move around. He was particularly focused on how the educational system created and recreated divisions in society and how these includes some individuals while excluding others. Bourdieu’s research into the museums and their behaviours have had a strong effect on the field of museum studies in the last thirty years and was central to the development of the study of museum visitors (Barrett 2011, 120).

Bourdieu and his associate, Alain Darbel, conducted an extensive investigation on over thirty art museums and their visitors in five European countries (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991, 6-8), resulting in the book The Love of art. European Art Museums and their Public in 1969. They examined who the museum visitors were and how the museums treated them, in terms of providing the necessary tools for the visitor to be able to understand the artworks, how to behave inside the galleries, and who were encouraged to come visit. They discovered that the most frequent museum visitors were of a higher social class than those who visited more rarely (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991, 14), and that the frequent visitors were more satisfied with their visits, feeling they got more out of it. People who did not know how to interpret what they were looking at consequently spent less time in museums than those who did know (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991, 37). They were left confused, often wanting more information and help in interpreting what they looked at. It was the visitors from what Bourdieu termed the ‘cultivated classes’ who had the means and the knowledge to enjoy the art museums.
If this is the function of culture, and if the love of art is the clear mark of the chosen, separating, by invisible and insuperable barrier, those who are touched by it from those who have not received this grace, it is understandable that in the tiniest details of their morphology and their organization, museums betray their true function, which is to reinforce for some the feeling of belonging and for others the feeling of exclusion (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991, 112).

Museums maintained divisions between different social classes because they reproduced them by tending only to the ‘cultivated classes’ who already knew the codes needed to be able to use the museum and appreciate the artworks (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991, 39). These codes were inherited from their social class via the cultural education people in this elite receives in their upbringing and the exposure to “cultivated” cultural activities, which are far more widespread amongst members of this part of society than in lower social classes. In this way, people from the lower classes were effectively excluded from the museums (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991, 37). Bourdieu contributed this division to the educational system and argued that education was the defining factor behind this diversion. Throughout the book, other factors were discussed as well, such as social and cultural background, but none of them were deemed as powerful as education in enabling them to use the museums. Or, oppositely, the lack of education excluded them from it.

What Bourdieu and Darbel says is that there is a need for a complete rethinking of how the museum should treat their visitors, and that the reason they are not capable of accommodating the lower classes, is among other things due to their own education for becoming curators (1991, 96). They are continuing the traditions and conventions taught to them, instead of looking at what is really being conveyed to the public. In effect, museums are “[…] consecrating established values […]” (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991, 98). Museums say they want new visitors but are unable to tend to them because of their conventional ways of working, from which they are unable and unwilling to move away from (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991, 92). Consequently, no matter what they do to attract new people, as soon as they enter the museum, visitors feel the same way as always, because everything is the same.

The Love of Art sparked a discussion about how adaptable and adjustable the art museums are due to their institutional frames of reference. Art museums still expects their audiences to know how to behave and how to decode the displayed objects, even though visitors request instructions (Gonzáles 1992, 103). Today, the picture is not as simple as Bourdieu argued in 1969, and he has been criticised for not including the whole picture when it comes to gender, race or ethnicity, which already in 1960s were important social factors (Gonzáles 1992, 106). Also – social exclusion is linked to the combination of problems such
as unemployment, low income, high crime environments and bad health, among others, and individuals in these life situations thus struggle with benefiting from educational and cultural opportunities (Watson 2007, 15). The large disparities in relative attendance between different social groups still exits, even though there has been a general rise in the use of art museums (Skot-Hansen 2010, 77). The attendance of people from ethnic minorities is markedly lower than the overall population, as has been seen in a study from London in the 1990s. The reasons for this have been attributed to the content mediated in museums being seen as irrelevant, the architecture to be intimidating, and staff perceived as unwelcoming (Merriman 2007, 336).

The museum might be seen as validating, endorsing and thereby encouraging exclusionary practices and processes within the political, social and economic dimensions. Hence the museum that fails to tell the stories of minority groups, not only denies access to its services for that group but also exacerbates their position of exclusion by broadcasting an exclusive image reinforcing the prejudices and discriminatory practices of museum users and the wider society (Sandell 1998, 408).

*The Love of Art* has become a seminal work in social and cultural theory but was not noticed much in museology until 1990s (Hooper-Greenhill 2011, 769). It is one of few studies that has addressed questions of social class and exhibition reception (MacDonald 2007, 151). But the focus on social issues in regard to museum use has increased since the 90s, enabling a wider research field into museology and the inclusion of sociologists and theorists like Bourdieu, that brings a more pragmatic focus (Hooper-Greenhill 2011, 765).

**Unconditional hospitality?**

Jacques Derrida was a French philosopher whose later works focused a great deal on the issue of ethics. This is also the case with his theory on hospitality. The book *Of Hospitality* (2000), consist of some lectures by Derrida on the issue where he discusses the contradictions of the idea of hospitality and how possible it is to be hospitable to a stranger. The term hospitality itself is defined by Oxford Dictionary as “the practice of making guests feel welcome and valued” (*Oxford reference, s.v. “hospitality”, read March 11, 2019*). The word also deals with the ethical aspects of caring for the just treatment of strangers or ‘others’, which is Derrida’s project. The term moreover encompasses our willingness to be receptive to new ideas (Barnett 2005, 237). In Derrida’s work, the stranger is not a complete stranger – an anonymous person who does not have social status or even a name – but someone who has the right to hospitality (Derrida 2000, 25). The one who is invited is according to Derrida a *desirable guest*, someone
the host knows of, who adheres to rules and is a citizen, and as such, some rules are immediately bestowed upon the situation. Because the host is selecting her guests, she is choosing the desirable ones, as opposed to those who does not follow the rules she has made and invades her privacy (Derrida 2000, 53,55).

When a host invites someone into her domain as a guest and gives them access, this is a hospitable act. The ideal is that of unconditional hospitality, a hospitality without rules or limitations. But Derrida argues that the host imparts rules as to how this stranger is supposed to act. He discusses these contradictions of hospitality. Because right at the outset when one invites a stranger into one’s home, the notion of unconditional hospitality is compromised due to the fact that a host will impose rules and restrictions upon the guest in order to be able to stay the host and the owner of that house (Derrida 2000, 73).

Derrida starts off by looking at a text from Plato’s *The Sophist*. In the text Socrates and another teacher is meeting a foreigner and listens to what he has to say, how he questions the laws in the society that is taken as natural and given (Derrida 2000, 5). By joining in a dialogue with a foreigner, the sophists get a new perspective on a subject. This happens by inviting the foreigner to question the established truths in society, trying to understand what the foreigner is saying, and then considering the criticisms that he makes with his viewpoint (Benson 2017). Thus, hospitality is a way to get new insights and perspectives on things that one is familiar with and has stayed the same for many years.

However, a contradiction to the act of hospitality is that it feels like a violation of the home when the guest invades it too far and threatens the traditional conditions of hospitality. It can lead to the host becoming more protective of her home, so as to not have it invaded by the foreigner. The host wants to receive whomever she chooses to retain the sovereignty as host, and to secure that her ipseity is not invaded. She does not want an undesirable guest, – the guest that does encroach the hosts sovereignty as host– which can be seen as an enemy if the xenophilia is too strong due to the feeling of invasion (Derrida 2000, 53,55). The host needs to select the right guest in order to be at ease with the situation, but this is act of violence, it excludes the one who is not seen as a desirable guest. Hospitality then – which is seen as a right – is a right only for some people in society.

Derrida’s theory concerns the home or the country and can relate to how a country welcomes new inhabitants. But this can also be transferable to museums that are reaching out to new citizens and multiple cultural aspects in society. I argue that it can also deal with how ready the museum professionals are in truly welcoming new ideas for how they are to mediate their exhibitions to the public.
Using the theoretical framework

The questions which guided me through the analysis and discussion, are those I posed at the very start of my introduction where I presented the idea of the museum as a host, and the co-curators as their guests. How hospitable can the museum staff be when one takes into account Bourdieu’s conclusions?

Both Bourdieu and Derrida’s theories were formulated before the situation of today’s focus on inclusion in museums were put on the agenda and are not directly appropriate the contemporary situation. However, I have used them in a pragmatic manner, extracting what is relevant, as their positions continue to be relevant in the museology field. The theories influence what I search for in my analysis, and they are used throughout the discussion to shed light on how NKIM’s choices are affecting what they communicate in their exhibition.

2.2 Methods

I have conducted a critical study of the exhibition process and the museum professionals’ choices and approaches for showing the co-curators’ choices. This approach includes, among other things, content analyses of galleries, exhibition catalogues, websites and interviews with museum professionals, and can answer questions about the museums’ role in society, how they create knowledge, and their relation to different constituencies (Tucker 2014, 342). To implement this approach, I have conducted an analysis of the process of making the exhibition “125 objects, choices, stories”, and interviews with museum staff. In the following, I will go deeper into my choice of methods and argue why these are suitable for my thesis.

Semi-structured interviews

Analysing the exhibition display and the associated texts gets me far in learning about the knowledge that museum professionals have created in this project, but not all the way. What this method does not account for is their choices and reasonings behind the final outcome. It neither says anything about the process of selecting participants. In order to examine this and to be able to say something about why the museum wanted to make this kind of exhibition in the first place, I chose semi-structured interviews as the most suitable approach. Information from this process is used throughout the analysis to enhance how the museum staff has thought about the choices that are visible in the final exhibition.

The semi-structured interview is characterised by some factors: the interviewees were asked the same open questions; I spent time developing the questions beforehand so that they
were focused on the research topic; I had supplementary questions at hand in the case that the subject did not spontaneously address some sub-areas of interest that I had formulated, or if the subject touched upon a theme I found it relevant to hear more about; and the same amount of time was given to the implementation of the interviews (Gillham 2005, 70). The questions were articulated into an interview guide, which functions as a script that structured the course of the interview (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 130). This guide helped me formulate the questions as explicit and clear as I could to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings. However, as the interviews were done orally, it was important to let the interviewees speak freely. As such, I changed the chronology of my guide where it was natural, to ensure that the conversation was a dynamic one that let the subjects think about some answers and come back to topics they forgot at first. In this regard, I took the approach of thinking about the interviews as “adjustable tools” (Sørensen 2009, 165).

The interviewees and the interview process
I initiated contact with my informants by sending an email to an employee at NKIM, introducing my project and asking if they wanted to be a part of it by letting two to three staff members be interviewed by me. I contacted the museum in late June 2018 but as it were in the middle of their summer holiday season, I did not hear back from them until late July, when they enthusiastically responded that I could interview two individuals who had been involved in the project. We arranged for us to meet in August. Before the meeting, I submitted my project to the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), and got it approved. When this was done, I sent the interviewees an information sheet for them to sign. This included a thorough introduction of my project that informed about the aim of my thesis; why they were invited to participate; the length of the interviews – approximately 45 minutes; their right to be anonymous; and their right to withdraw their consent at any time during the project. The participants agreed to be interviewed, and for information about them that could lead to their identification to be published. However, I have chosen to anonymise the informants because the first information sheet I sent needed to be reworked in a sentence dealing with the possibility to recognise the interviewees. I sent this new information to NKIM, and they still wanted to participate. Nevertheless, I want to honour my first outreach and keep them anonymous as best I can. There is no reason for them to be recognisable in my thesis, and since there are only two informants, it will not be confusing for the reader.

The interviewees were informed of their right to insight of their interviews throughout the process, as Gillham proposes is an act of courtesy (2005, 14). The interviews were
conducted in Norwegian, so all of their quotes have been translated into English by me. This might have the consequences that some aspects may have been said in a different manner than what I have translated them to be. However, all the quotes have been sent to the informants for them to approve what has been communicated from our interviews. I wish to be aware of the fact that qualitative interviews are about seeing the reality as the interviewee sees it, in order to interpret what this can mean based on my theoretical perspective and the specific situation (Trost 2005, 15).

Since NKIM is a quite small museum, I did not get to interview others than these two. However, as the informants had different responsibilities in the exhibition projects, they were able to give me insights to different aspects of it. The two that I interviewed are those who were suggested to me as the most relevant to talk to in terms of the project. Even though the number of interviewees is small, the answers and insights I got from them were formidable. The informants gave me open, candid and forthcoming information that has provided insights that are of great help for investigating how museum professionals thinks about exhibition work that deals with visitor participation. I also believe it is a testament to their personal motivations for doing this project in order to challenge themselves in their work and include a larger section of their publics in the museum’s domain.

The exhibition analysis
The analysis deals firstly with how the museum staff collaborated with the participants, and how this process unfolded. I have explored why the theme and method were chosen and how NKIM reached out to the public via internet and social media for communicating about the project and inviting participants, and how this played out in the process of selecting co-curators. Then, I analyse the list of the selected co-curators to see who made the cut and try to unearth how the museum staff’s approach played a part in the final result of the exhibition. In this section of my analysis, the interviews were my main source for data, as they were important in seeing how the staff’s thinking and reasoning lines up with what the result has become, and how these fit together. Even though my first physical experience with the project was the exhibition in my visit in June 2018, my initial encounter with it was with what the staff communicated about it on the internet and in articles in the local newspaper, Adresseavisen.

Lastly, I analyse the exhibition and its related texts, to see how these fit together with NKIM’s aims and perspectives. As NKIM has communicated in both Norwegian and English throughout the process, I used the English texts as much as possible to avoid unnecessary
interpretations and translations on my part. In the instances that I have translated a text into English, it has been because the museum only wrote this particular one in Norwegian.

My analysis is both an analysis of how the museum interacted with the public, the co-curators and their contributions in the exhibition process, and an analysis of the physical exhibition. I am using Stephanie Moser’s methodological framework, “The Devil is in the Detail”, which approaches display analysis by investigating how a mix of different aspects of the exhibition – layout, displays, light, colours etc. – work together to create knowledge (Moser 2010, 22). Keeping the perspectives from my theoretical framework in mind – who the guests are, and how the host is treating them – I have chosen some aspects for which I apply Moser’s framework: space and layout. When analysing space, I particularly look at formal elements of the gallery rooms. In regard to layout, I examine the displaying and arranging of the objects are considered. The reason I have decided to focus on these aspects are that they have been done by the museum professionals after the collaboration with the co-curators was finished and have been implemented to mediate the co-curators’ choices. I find this interesting as an insight into how the museum, the host, has shown the guests’ choices, and how the difference between institution and audiences has been torn down or sustained.

In addition to the visual displays, text is an important part of the communication in this exhibition, even though texts written by museum professionals have been deliberately held to a minimum. To analyse them, Louise J. Ravelli’s book Museum Texts. Communication Frameworks (2006) is used, which is an extensive methodological framework for analysing texts in the museum. It is a linguistic work, focused especially on the language in texts written or spoken by the institution, as these are powerful resources for communication (Ravelli 2006, 1). I have chosen some aspects of this framework to use in my analysis of the texts, as what I am analysing is how and what the museum professionals communicates about their work with participation. This proposes an examining of the introductory panel and the information labels, as well as the introductory texts written by museum professionals in the exhibition catalogue. In doing this, I look at what Ravelli defines as genres and themes, and the accessibility and interactive levels of the texts. I only use this framework on the texts written by the museum. In analysing the texts by the participants, I take another approach as these are not written by people who work with texts in museums on a daily basis. It is not fair to the diversity of the participants’ backgrounds, or helpful to my research, to go in-depth in analysing the language in these very varied texts. Instead I examine what criteria the participants convey as their reasons for choosing their objects, and how well these reasons have been accommodated by the museum, as I argue that this is an important
part of the exhibition concept. To this extent, I use a quantitative method and examine how often different reasons are repeated among the participants (Trost 2005, 14). An analysis of this is helpful in looking at the ability of the museum to be hospitable to the “stranger” and the variations in the new perspectives.

**Ethical considerations and self-reflexivity**

My fieldwork was conducted during the summer of 2018, as this was the period when the exhibition was open, and after I had got the approval for my project outline from the institute. I made two trips to Trondheim to visit the museum. The first trip was in the middle of June, as I wanted to see the exhibition before interviewing the staff and possibly be influenced by their knowledge and information about it. In late August, when I had done some reading and prepared my interview guide, I travelled again, right before the exhibition closed, to conduct my interviews and to see the exhibition one more time.

In doing fieldwork in a qualitative study, there is the aspect of the researcher's lens, which is the viewpoint that I as a researcher bring to the study, and my paradigm assumptions (Creswell and Miller 2000, 125). By taking a critical approach in using the theories of Bourdieu and Derrida, wherein I aim to “uncover the hidden assumptions about how narrative accounts are constructed, read, and interpreted”, I need to be reflexive of, and disclose what I bring to the narrative (Creswell and Miller 2000, 126). My academic background in art history with a specialisation in conservation positions me traditionally on the side of the objects of study. Thus, I have been trained to look at the quality and the formal aspects of the artworks and to assume an objective position when discussing and writing about art. Additionally, the conservation classes taught me how sensitive artworks and objects are, but that at the same time, our cultural heritage must be used by society in order for their preservation to be meaningful. This thesis is therefore as much a task for me coming from inside the art history field to open my eyes and challenge my thinking about museum work as it is to point my finger at an institution celebrating their 125th anniversary. The use of NKIM and “125” as a case study have thus helped me transition from general assumptions that I carry with me from my academic background, to a specific practice of a museum working with the community it is situated in (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 67).

Since my empirical framework consists of just one exhibition project, I have approached the analysis with “thick description”, as defined by Kvale and Brinkmann as “the ability to see and describe events in their value-laden contexts, and judge accordingly” (2009, 67). I have thus aimed to provide validity to my argumentations by situating the exhibition
project in its context and in a temporal and social narrative. This is done with the use of explicit examples both from my own observations and from information from my informants to get more perspectives on the case study, and by grounding my claims on earlier research on the topics (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 78-79).

2.3 Empirical framework

The case study

NKIM was founded in 1893 and their aim has since the beginning been to collect contemporary objects of decorative art and design (DigitaltMuseum, n.d). The museum has a large collection of historical objects, including Japanese and art nouveau objects, local traditional objects, textiles and craft works (NKIM, n.d. e). Furthermore, they are responsible for the purchase of contemporary Norwegian decorative art and design objects with economical support from The Norwegian Association for Arts and Crafts.¹ This task enables the museum to document the development in Norwegian decorative arts. In this way, NKIM says, “the museum is still oriented towards its own time and its various issues, which makes it a living and exploring contributor in contemporary debates in society” (NKIM, n.d. e).

NKIM is located in the city centre of Trondheim and contains the exhibition spaces, store rooms, offices, a research library and a museum shop. NKIM also has the museum management responsibility for Autstrått, a fortress from around year 1000, and The Hannah Ryggen Centre, which shows a large part of the museum’s collection of Ryggen’s tapestries, both located in the municipality of Ørland. In addition, NKIM has the mediation responsibility for Stiftsgården, the royal residence in Trondheim (DigitaltMuseum, n.d). The building which houses NKIM today was built in the 1960s. The exhibitions are divided on three floors. The permanent collection of design and furniture is found in the basement, in a chronological exhibition. The gallery for temporary exhibitions is on the ground floor, and on the first floor, the museum shows (at the time of my visits) an exhibition of Japanese artefacts, a large Hannah Ryggen-exhibition, silver products from the Trondheim-area, and contemporary art and design objects, divided over six different spaces.

In 2012, NKIM was consolidated into MiST (The museums in Sør-Trøndelag), in line with the Norwegian national museum reform which started in 2001 (NKIM, n.d. e). In total, MiST consists of 9 museums and 24 viewing locations. The museums are still independent

¹ This responsibility is shared with the museums of decorative arts and design in Bergen and Oslo.
museums in their daily life but are under the management of MiST in their strategy and vision platforms. MiST’s premise state that:

In MiST, we believe that the art and the cultural heritage are signposts towards an unknown future, and points of reference for the past. Our task is to create exciting meetings between past, present, and future. We are to preserve and convey both the cultural heritage and the contemporary art, and through this appear as an active actor in society. We are, through knowledge, inclusion and involvement, to be an active participant in the national culture policies (MiST, n.d., my translation).

NKIM’s statement on their website writes:

Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum is a national museum with a responsibility to collect, manage and mediate decorative art and design. Our responsibility is made visible in our encounter with the public, who we want to leave the museum a good experience and an interesting thought richer (NKIM, n.d. e, my translation).

The project I am analysing for my thesis, NKIM’s 125th anniversary exhibition, is quite an extensive collaboration project. The museum’s team selected 125 people from outside the institution to be a part of the exhibition by choosing one favourite object each from the museum’s collections and writing a text about it. These texts were published in the exhibition catalogue alongside a picture of each object. The catalogue was to accompany the exhibition and to serve as the museum’s anniversary issue. “125” was displayed from April 26th to August 28th, 2018 – for 125 days. On their website, the museum has an introduction to the project:

The exhibition shows the museum’s collection in a new and perhaps surprising manner, since the objects are not chosen by the museum staff, but by people outside the institution. We have invited physicians, immigrants, children, carpenters, students, musicians, politicians and artists to pick their personal favorite from the collection. These 125 choices not only represent the things in themselves, but 125 new pairs of eyes and 125 new stories about the collection’s place in society. Through these contributions, we gain an insight into what the objects do to people (NKIM, n.d. a).

The project has proven to be very successful, in many ways. From my interviews and in talking with other staff members during my visit, I learned that the exhibition had a very large number of visitors, and the feedback from the them have been incredibly positive. This is also visible in the many comments that the museum has got from the audience on their social media profiles. NKIM also sold a lot more of the exhibition catalogues than what is normal for their sales (information from interview 2), which says something about the visitors being
interested in the new perspectives that the project provided. In addition, the museum won first price for this project in the annual Norwegian museum conference, hosted by the Norwegian Museums Association, in April 2019, for “the most innovative, creative and exciting solution in mediation and/or collections management” (Sande 2019, my translation). This was decided with a combined voting from the participants and a jury, and NKIM was one of eight nominated museums from all over the country (Kirkholt 2019).

It is because of the project’s success that I want to analyse it in the way that I have sought out to. I believe it is in those projects that are successful, that one really is able to look at the “nuts and bolts”. It is also because the museums staff has been so welcoming and open about their project that I have had the opportunity to do this. This openness and transparency are key to moving forward and genuinely being able to examine what is hiding in the walls (and store rooms) of the museums and to move away from the blind spots.
3 Analysis

How is the host welcoming her guests? Who are invited and how are they being treated once they have entered the host's home? In this part of my thesis I analyse the exhibition project, to look into how the choices that the museum staff made, impacted what is communicated by the exhibition. Firstly, I look at the process that took place before the exhibition itself was made – how the idea took form, how they contacted and recruited the co-curators, and the co-curators’ level of participating. The second part is a visual analysis of the exhibition to look at what is being communicated in the displaying of the objects. Thirdly, I analyse the texts related to the exhibition, mainly the texts written by museum professionals. The interviews are included throughout the analysis to highlight how the museum staff’s choices and aims played a part in the process. In a participatory project like this, I argue that it is important to look at all of the processes that went into making the final result, since they all impact who has been included, what is on display, and what is conveyed to the visitors.

3.1 The collaborative phase

Idea, aim and reaching out

Stephanie Moser says that the act of displaying collections is itself an eminently interpretive process that constructs knowledge (2010, 23). To properly get an idea of how this is carried out, and what kind of knowledge the museum constructs, it is important to get a sense of who the professionals responsible for the exhibition are, the nature and history of the collection that is presented, and the motivation and aims for presenting the selecting topics (Moser 2010, 23-24). In this capacity, I asked the interviewees why they chose the participatory aspect for their anniversary exhibition:

The idea that the museum staff could choose and show their own favourite objects, has been brought up a couple of times. However, for this anniversary, it quickly turned into the more radical idea that it should be our audience’s favourites instead. Much more interesting. The result is the exhibition “125”. It was pretty natural when we talked about how we should commemorate the anniversary, how we can both show the history and also what the museum should be in the future (…) (Informant 2, pers.comm. 2018)²

² This quotation was changed at the request of the informant and differ from the original verbatim response.
Informant 1 answered that Nina Simon’s book *The Participatory Museum* was an important influence, and that NKIM wanted to use the opportunity to do something new instead of the more expected method of bringing out the ‘treasures’ or ‘masterpieces’ in an exhibition that relates to a canon:

It is what we notice when we work here, that we all have our, these blind spots, or that one pampers with a particular field one has written a lot about, and that one repeats those stories. This can make us lesser professionals, because it does not necessarily have to result in new research, we don’t get any new views, and we become less critical. Is my allegation. Of course, one should work in-depth, but specifically in an anniversary exhibition then, that was not to be based on research, but a way to show the city, or to remind the city about what we had in our storeroom, then this co-curating idea was discussed, and we discussed it for a long time (Informant 1, pers.comm. 2018).

The informants’ responses express a wish to show their importance for the community by displaying the collection in a new light and to use the anniversary as an opportunity to show that the collection is of relevance to the public. This is visible through their emphasis on the word “favourites”. By doing this through co-curation, NKIM was in line with what Nina Simon argues is why one should use participation in cultural institutions, namely to reconnect with the public and demonstrate their value and relevance in contemporary life by inviting people to actively engage as cultural participants, not passive consumers (Simon 2010, ii).

NKIM’s first step was reaching out to potential participants. Informant 1 answered that they started with an open-call event which they advertised on their website and on their Facebook page, where everyone could sign up, where there were no limitations (information from interview 1). This was formulated in a Facebook event arranged by the museum:

> In 2018, Nordenfjeldske Museum of Decorative Art and Design is 125 years! Our anniversary exhibition will contain as many works and objects from the museum’s collection – chosen by 125 different persons. One of them can be you! No prerequisites needed! Thursday October 12th at 18.00, we are having an initial presentation of the project, where the audience is given a look into the collections of over 30.000 things. This evening one can register one’s interest to be one of the 125 choosers. Free admission to the event! (NKIM 2017, my translation)

The post is an invitation to “our anniversary exhibition”, that 125 lucky people (“One of them can be you!”) gets to participate in. The tone of the message is at the outset direct and personal but ends with an impersonal communication about the process of signing up, when the museum addresses an anonymous audience. NKIM is positioning themselves as the host of an exhibition where people are invited in to look. The language adheres in this way to a
classic communication form, and the museum can be said to see the users as passive receivers (Hølgaard 2011, as cited in Gronemann 2014, 42). The event attracted several people. According to Informant 2, between 30 and 40 people signed up this evening. They also put up a link on the museum website and on Facebook, where people could sign up. It was a team effort from the staff to find participants that might be interested in joining the project:

Many of us who work here suggested people that could be a part [of the project]. Both people they were interested in: “What would this person have chosen?” but also from different sectors of society as we really wanted for the 125 curators to be a broad section of the population, both in age and in what one does. To fill the open spots, we tried to reach out broadly, to people who are not our core audience. (Informant 2 pers. comm. 2018).³

In order to fill the available spots, the staff took a more active approach and “of course thought strategically about how we could get the widest possible representation, so then we went to somebody that we thought could be interesting. Like some artists, or politicians, but also groups of immigrants. Within a group, we could get someone” (Informant 1 pers.comm. 2018). In the open-call phase, the museum’s communication reached those who already knew the museum, by posting on the museum’s Facebook page and website. In order to be notified about the event on Facebook, one had to follow NKIM’s page, so my argument is that the people they contacted via this channel were mostly people who already had an interest in the museum. The post on the website is more openly accessible, but one still has to actively seek out information about the museum by visiting the page. The informants reported that they tried to adjust this by actively inviting people from a variety of backgrounds. However, it seems that those that the staff were interested in hearing from based on personal interests, came before inviting those who were unacquainted with the museum, which were used to complete the list.

The exhibition can be characterised as aiming to show a representative selection of the museum’s collection by displaying a range of different objects not related by a specific theme or story (Moser 2010, 26). I make this claim on the grounds that NKIM emphasises the diversity of the large group of invited co-curators both in their initial communication about the project and in their interviews. It gives the impression that this will also affect the diversity of the objects and stories the audiences will get to see.

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³ This quotation was changed at the request of the informant and differ from the original verbatim response.
The selection

Because of the exhibition’s aim of displaying diversity, I asked some follow-up questions about how the staff invited participants that did not sign up themselves, and if they were concerned that the selection should be a representative one. Informant 1 responded that they were very concerned with this aspect and that they included “men and women of different ages, different occupations. Of course, we looked at gender, so then we went to the leader of FRI4 (…). So that we got that perspective in” (Informant 1 pers.comm., 2018). From their answers in the interviews, NKIM appears to have been concerned with getting a representative selection, and to have had a focus on this throughout the process.

The selection is published as a list with the heading “125 curators” on the museum’s website (NKIM, n.d. b) and is also to be found in paper form in the exhibition. It is an alphabetised list of the participant’s names with a title describing each one written behind them. I have analysed the list of participants by counting and grouping them to see if there are some resemblances or repeating factors. The list does not give any details beyond what the participants have disclosed about themselves, so my analysis is done purely based on this information. I have tried to steer away from categories that can give a misleading categorisation of the participants. This analysis is done to get an idea of what the reader of the catalogue or the visitor to the museum may perceive about the selection, and it is based on my understandings. Therefore, I do not lay claim an objective classification. The list is counted through for each category, and the participants have often fallen under more than one category, as there is no reason why people from the “cultivated classes” cannot have foreign names. Or, people from the “cultivated classes” are not necessarily interested in art.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People from the “cultivated classes”5</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People who reference an occupation or interest in art/culture, or ties to museums6</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People with foreign names/states they are immigrants</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People who claims no connection to the “cultivated classes”</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Categories of co-curators

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4 FRI is the Norwegian Association for Gender- and Sexuality Diversity (my translation).
5 In this category, I have included people with higher education/students/leaders, high-status professions, creative jobs, friends of the museum, or statements that the co-curators have special interests in art and culture
6 These are people who claim an interest in areas of art or culture but doesn’t necessarily describe a higher education or a high-status occupation in fields outside of the culture section.
What this count indicates, is among other things that the gender distribution is uneven, with a larger proportion of women, with 61.6 %, against men at 38.4 %. This unevenness is higher than of the typical museum guest in Norway. Statistics Norway states in their publication “The Norwegian Cultural Barometer 2016” (my translation) that the percentage of women who visits museums or art exhibitions are slightly higher than men. For museums in general, the percentage in 2016 was 43 for men and 45 for women (Vaage 2017, 50). The difference is larger when it comes to art exhibitions than museums in general. 31% of men and 40% of women visited an art exhibition during 2016 (Vaage 2017, 44). For exhibitions of decorative arts and design, the percentage is 10 for men and 13 for women (Vaage 2017, 48). This is rather low for both genders, but the difference among the genders is a lot lower than the difference in the selected participants. However, the staff reported that they were pleased with the distribution in their selection: “When counting the list afterwards, the gender distribution turned out pretty balanced” (Informant 2 pers.comm. 2018).

The list also shows a significantly larger proportion of people who claim a specific connection to – or interest in – areas of art or culture (60%), along with people from the general category “cultivated classes” (76%). Statistics Norway states in their publication “Cultural Habits 1991-2015” (my translation) that it is those with a large interest in the different culture activities who uses them the most (Vaage 2016, 23), and that education is – besides gender – the most indicative of the use of cultural activities. The higher the education, the more one uses activities like museums and art exhibitions (Vaage 2016, 31). In 2012, 31% of people with an education from secondary school visited a museum in the last year, and 24% visited an art exhibition. For people with a long education from university or college, the percentages were 58 and 60 (Vaage 2016, 31).

I followed up further on the issue of inviting people from the “cultivated classes” as I wanted the informants to elaborate on the aspect due to the relevance of the topic in light of Bourdieu’s arguments of museums tending to a knowledgeable audience, and Derrida’s claim of the host inviting her desired guests. To this end, I asked if these participants had signed up on their own: “No, they were brought in too. Because we, I think that it is interesting to get the view from the coming theatre director and some artists, but no, it was our regular audience, members of our Friends of the Museum that came first” (Informant 1 pers.comm. 2018). Informant 2 elaborated on this aspect: “We also invited some “cultural celebrities”, both because we were ourselves curious about their views on the collection, and since we know that a general audience is curious about this, too” (Informant 2 pers.comm. 2018). The
“cultural celebrities” seems to have been brought in to create an even more exciting exhibition in the eyes of the museum staff.

A participatory project like NKIM’s which advertises that the co-curators are people outside of the institution, invokes a perception that these are people who does not frequently visit the museum. It communicates an act of hospitality, of the museum wanting open up their domain and invite the “strangers”, and that there is something there that everyone can relate to. The selection of co-curators will have an impact on the exhibition because it is their choices and stories that are displayed. The selection process for the participants thus have a great opportunity for opening up the conventional narrative and reaching out to broader audiences by actively engaging members of the public that before has not had the chance to be included in the narrative that the museum conveys. This is also something NKIM is concerned with:

We are very aware of who we are reaching, and we try (...) to reach other audiences. For example, we are aware of that in the mediation work and through exhibitions or events (...). Because the regular visitors, with them, we score high when it comes to audience surveys, where they are pleased with what we deliver, find that the events are good enough and that a lot happens at the museum (Informant 1, pers.comm. 2018).

Hence, the invitation of people that already are known to the museum, who have been a part of the museum in the past, and who are “cultural celebrities” is problematic in that these came before those that the museum focused their communication around. The staff argued that it was due to it being interesting to the public to see what they would pick. My perception is rather that it was to help NKIM in the task of affirming their relevance and importance.

**The co-curators first visit**

Once the 125 co-curators had been selected, they were to come to the museum, and walk around with a staff member to find the object they wanted to include in the exhibition. NKIM stated in the message for their open-call event that the co-curators had over 30,000 objects to choose from, so my question about this aspect was how free the co-curators actually were in their choices. Informant 1 talked about the process and said that they indeed were very free and that NKIM started by finding out about the co-curators’ interests. Informant 2 explained how the museum approached those with specific knowledge about some areas:

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7 Some curators were not able to come Trondheim and were sent catalogues and other material to able to choose (information from interview 1).
We prepared a form that we filled in when they arrived at the museum, as a preparation for the walks in the storerooms. And we had a conversation first and filled in some keywords for where we should start looking. If one was very interested in whitework, then one knows a great deal about the museum from before, if one has that kind of starting point. (...) And, maybe someone was interested in fishing. Then we could look for objects, patterns or decor related to those specific interests. So, all of the choices are made on the basis of the selector, by the selector’s starting point (Informant 2, pers. comm., 2018).\textsuperscript{8}

This was elaborated on by Informant 1 as well: “Anne Lauvlan, a friend of the museum and a passionate jewellery collector, was asked to choose in the jewellery collection. But most were allowed to choose freely. It was just time that limited (...)” (Informant 1 pers. comm., 2018). The idea of talking to the co-curators is a good way to be able to guide them through an extremely large mass of objects. For the people who did not know the museum beforehand, this can work like a guided tour to be able to get more knowledge about what they find in the stores, and to treat them with respect for their own interests and preferences. The more well-known participants, and those who the museum knew from before, seem to have been steered more towards the areas that the staff wanted them to choose from, while the people that did not have a relationship to the museum, was freer to choose from their personal wishes.

\section*{3.2 The exhibition}

\textbf{Space}

“125 objects, choices, stories” is located in NKIM’s gallery for temporary exhibitions. Upon entering the exhibition, I was advised by a museum host to bring along the catalogue. Copies of it were to be found on a table that functions as an interactive station in the exhibition space, just to the right of the entrance. “125” consists of four rooms – the large main room, a smaller exhibition room that can be entered directly into from the main room by two large entrances without doors, and two small interior rooms, ‘Interior van de Velde’ (NKIM, n.d. d) and ‘Interior -52’ (NKIM, n.d. c). Interior -52 has two entrances – one from the main room and one from the smaller room – and Interior van de Velde can only be reached from inside the smaller exhibition room.

Once inside the main room, the visitor steps into a large, rectangular space with white painted walls and floor-length, white curtains that shuts out the natural light coming through the windows on the long exterior walls facing the street outside. The emergency exit in the back of the room is not covered and is the only source of natural light (figure 2). Throughout

\textsuperscript{8} This quotation was changed at the request of the informant and differ from the original verbatim response.
the main space are white weight-bearing pillars. The floor has a dark grey-brown linoleum flooring, the roof is covered in black tiles, and the lighting consists of spotlights on rails mounted in the ceiling that illuminates the objects by sharp spotlighting. This décor of the space resembles Brian O’Doherty’s notion of ‘The White Cube’, the concept of the seemingly neutral exhibition room for modern art which have come to be seen as a natural context for showing art works in the 20th century. However, O’Doherty argues that this is indeed far from neutral, but full of traditions and rules, and by being placed in this space, away from the outside world, objects turn into artworks. The white cube is a clean, white room, illuminated only from the ceiling, with covered windows so the world outside does not come inside, and the art is “free” to have its own life (O’Doherty 2002, 9). NKIM demonstrates a thinking that
is somewhat in line with this concept: “And you can see, it is packed, we cannot fit anything else. (…) and these are artworks that should be allowed to have some space and air around them (…))” (Informant 1, pers.comm. 2018). This framing of the exhibition rooms as an art gallery affects the space wherein the visitors enter. The museum is establishing itself as an authoritative host in possession of a space with rules for how the guest should behave.

The appearance of the white cube in “125” is however softened a bit by the use of some colours. Throughout the main room, there are seven asymmetrical partition wall constructions painted in two light green colours. The one closest to the entrance holds the introduction text, which is mounted on a large, bright yellow surface facing the entrance (figure 2). The project leader and the exhibition designer has designed and organised the walls (information from interview 2), which functions both as room-dividers, backwalls for display stands, and podiums for larger items. In addition, there are some free-standing podiums in the same design but without back walls. On the top of some of the partition walls, the museum’s logo is painted in the same green hue as the wall, but in a glossier paint, making the look discrete, but noticeable (figure 3). The outcome of this is a reminder of where the visitor is located – in the domain of an official institution with its own logo and authority. Even though the choices of objects are not the museum’s, the design, display, and environment are. The exhibition’s home is the museum. The logo gives the design an association to an almost royal look, as the logo is a monogram. The greens and the yellow colours stand out as key colours and ties the layout together, creating a calm expression. In addition, the yellow is repeated throughout the museum’s hallways and stair case rails etc. It is also the colour that the museum uses on their website. This aspect also fixes the exhibition in the museum’s domain. The museum as a host is very noticeable through the spatial aspects of the exhibition. The visitors have not entered the space of co-curators, but of the host.

**Layout**

A large number – and variety – of objects are placed throughout the rooms and appeases the appearance of the clinical modern white cube as the presence of colours have done. In addition to the designed podiums and partition walls, different kinds of glass display cases of various sizes, colours and materials, are used throughout the space, which offers a dynamic feel and helps avoiding it to be too clinical. In the smaller room, there is also built a big, diagonal wall for a tapestry and a large display case with a glass front, both painted dark brown (figure 4). The use of glass cases informs the visitor that the objects are fragile museum objects that are not to be touched, only looked at. They situate the exhibition once
again in the home of the museum. Colour is an important signifier in the layout as well as in the spatial elements, and the appearance is that this is done to calm down the exhibition – to make it tidier, and to make the display comfortable to look at.

According to Moser, the layout is a fundamental part of the perception of what kind of exhibition it is (2010, 24). The objects are placed together in groups due for instance to similar materials like pieces of garments, glass sculptures, or porcelain objects. Other groups are placed together because of colours or matching motifs. A group of furniture in similar style and warm wooden tones is placed beneath a painting of a woman in a chair. This group gives an impression of a 1950s living room (figure 5). Right across from this group, another grouping of objects stands out. Two pieces of haute couture from about the same time period as the previous group are placed together on a podium – a cocktail dress and a women’s knitted jumpsuit. Right next to them hangs two commercial posters, and in front of them, a ceramic vase from the same period is displayed in a glass case on a brown pedestal, a colour similar to one of the posters (figure 6). A light turquoise colour tone in all these objects ties them together as a group. The feel of the 1950-70s is enhanced by the entrance to the Interior-52 room to the right of the cocktail dress.

To the right of this entrance again, four porcelain objects are displayed in crisp white surroundings. Three of them are placed in one glass case each, on white pedestals. The last one hangs on the white wall. At first glance, these all have the same aesthetics of Chinese porcelain, with blue patterns on white porcelain surfaces. But at a closer look, the objects are very different. Some of them are objects from the late 19th century, while others are contemporary artworks. They are Norwegian, Japanese, English and Dutch, and their functions are very diverse. However, they are tied together in this setting by their aesthetic appearances. Repeated throughout the space, this organising gives the exhibition an appearance of order and harmony. The objects seem to fit naturally together and are placed together accordingly. There is not made an effort to question this placement of the objects, or to make the visitor wonder why they are put together, as there is no explanation for why certain objects are juxtaposed. It creates a sense of order in a multifaceted collection. The objects look nice next to their neighbour, even though there is a feeling of distance between the different groups, as they are not to come too close to each other to make the aesthetic messy. There is a lot of room between objects, so the exhibition feels tidy and spacious, in contrast to the museum staff’s concerns that the gallery is “packed”. This is markedly more carried out on the arrangement of art pieces than on “everyday objects” and utilities, although
it needs to be noticed that this might also have to do with the larger size of many of the artworks as opposed to the “everyday objects” and utilities.

In the smaller, room, the layout is the same as in the main space. However, the atmosphere here is more intimate, which is due to the dark brown colours that are found in both the display cases and in many of the objects in the room. In addition, the monumental size of several of the objects enhance this. The large objects are a doll house, a 18th century carriage that is placed inside a monumental glass display case and two tapestries by Hannah Ryggen. Next to the largest tapestry are wooden glass cases with different smaller items placed inside. The one to the left is furnished by two black iron objects – a bird from the museum’s Japanese collection, and a Tiffany lamp – and two white porcelain mugs, along with an Art Nouveau pattern plate. Next to this again is an old poster from a Munch-exhibition in Prague in 1905, before the visitor approaches the entrance to the Henry van de Velde-interior. Again, the grouping of an array of different objects closely together creates a calm entirety.

The absence of any “right” kind of path to move between displays, and the placing of objects regardless of time period or area of the world, frees the visitor from the typical way of ordering the world that many museums does, to present the history as a linear development (Whitehead 2016, 9). This gives the visitor a chance to make up her own mind about what she is looking at, and not see this display as a historical development of art and design articles. It
also reduces the hierarchy of what constitutes “masterworks”, and what are merely “everyday” objects. In this way, the exhibition is a democratic one. However, the grouping of the objects implies a kind of natural order to things: that the museum’s collection is harmonious and balanced, and that the selection is one large coherent arrangement instead of a fragmented and diverse selection. It emphasises in this way the imbalance in the list of participants favouring the overall similarity between most of the co-curators.

Together with the spatial features that gives the impression of a clean gallery room, and the absence of interpretive texts (which will be discussed in-depth in the next part of the analysis), this again draws the objects in and frames them all as art works. A lot of the objects are indeed art works or design objects, but many are also functional objects like appliances, jewellery, weapons or books. These are not necessarily made to be purely decorative or artistic objects, or to be displayed isolated from their function. The most important reason for why this framing is problematic in this project, however, is that the co-curators did not always choose the objects because of its artistic qualities. As one co-curator writes about her choice of a sculpture from 1979:

> Is it a hammer made from fruit juice? No, it’s an anvil in velour. And a chair. And a sculpture! And I want to sit on it straight away and take it for a spin across the floor among teddy bears and car racing tracks and LEGO ladies with chocolate hair and be five years old again (NKIM 2018, 132).

In this example, the museum has taken an object that was chosen by the co-curator because of her perception of its humour and for providing a nostalgic feeling of wanting to be a playful child again, and reinstated it as an art object carefully placed on a podium to be looked at based on how the museum categorises it. The overall look of the exhibition is that what is displayed are ‘art treasures’ that does not require any interpretation for the knowledgeable visitor – the visitors from the “cultivated classes” – to understand.

Informant 2 explained that the exhibition was a very late phase of a project that really concerned everything that came before it. The process of dealing with the co-curators and their work was the most important thing, and the exhibition “(…) was strictly a result of all of the choices being in place, all the people being in place and all the texts written (…)” (Informant 2, pers.comm. 2018). However, the claim that the exhibition itself is more or less arbitrary and secondary, is to see the process as too straight forward. The curating that regarded choosing objects were done by the co-curators, but the curation of the exhibition and subsequently the interpretation of it, was done by NKIM. As Moser says, the act of making an
exhibition is an act of interpretation, and the way the exhibition is designed, with the layout, colours, lighting and arrangement, all work together to establish a meaning, and constructs knowledge (2010, 23). Informant 1 pointed out that the most important part of this project was the participants “(...) so, it was the eyes of audience, and we were to be servants, facilitators for the audience’s interaction with the collection” (Informant 1 pers.comm. 2018). Even though the museum professionals facilitated for the co-curators to interact with and choose the objects based on personal interests, by their choices in the interpretation of them, they influenced how the visitor was to make sense of the exhibition. The hospitality moves away from the ideal of being unconditional as the host is reclaiming her domain.

3.3 The Texts

Interpretive texts
The first text that the visitor encounter is the introduction panel (figure 7): a text of 286 words over three paragraphs, (if the Norwegian version in the left column is disregarded) (figure 11). The genre in the first paragraph is what Ravelli calls a Report, a common, traditional genre in museums wherein the purpose is to describe how something is (2006, 20). This starts out with an initial classification of a phenomenon, before a description of the phenomenon follows. It is written in the present tense, and focusses on a general theme, rather than specific things (Ravelli 2006, 20): “To collect is to find, acquire, organize and care for. It is also a way of thinking about the world insofar as there are usually certain criteria about what one wants to find out or speak about with one’s fragment of the world”. The next paragraph is also written in the present tense, but this is an Explanation (Ravelli 2006, 21). It starts out with a statement: “The anniversary exhibition “125” is a sharing and collaborative project”, before it moves on to explain how this phenomenon is carried out. The last paragraph however, which discusses the limitations to the exhibition and invites visitors to participate by giving the museum
feedback on what their choices would be, takes the form Directive (Ravelli 2006, 22). Directive texts seek to influence the visitor’s behaviour and positions her to respond to a given command (Ravelli 2006, 79). The genres in the introductory panel moves from a traditional, authoritative voice, addressing an anonymous audience, to being increasingly more directed towards the reader. However, since the text is very long, there may be only a small amount of people who sticks around to read the whole text, leaving many visitors with the perception of reading a conventional text about museum work.

Theme is another part of Ravellis’ framework related to the organisation of texts and concerns the text’s point of departure: how the first part of a sentence (a clause) is formulated to make the theme of the text clear to the reader (2006, 37). In the introductory panel, the very first theme is thus the statement: “To collect is to find, acquire, organize and care for”. This is a well-known concept in the museum world and concerns museums’ task of collecting and preserving objects for the future, and the different meanings and values attributed to this activity (Belk 1994, Keene 2005, Pearce 1995). In using this as a starting point, the museum has positioned the project in a context of museum work, by posing a statement about what collecting is. Every statement is a selected perspective chosen from many other alternative perspectives. What is included is as interesting as what is not included (Ravelli 2006, 112). NKIM’s statement is confusing, as it is so specifically linked to traditional museum work, while the exhibition claims to be about people outside the institution and their perspectives.

In the second and explanatory paragraph, the visitor can learn about the inclusive and collaborative aspect of this exhibition. However, the theme changes with the introduction of new information:

The participants own short texts make up a collection of marvellous congratulation cards (some of them are included in the gallery; all of them can be read in the catalogue). The same 40,000 (!) things was available to the 125 individuals – but nobody took note of or felt pulled toward the same things. The result we present here must be the most varied exhibition the museum has ever put on (figure 11).

It informs the visitor that the exhibition is made up of 125 things and texts written by participants outside of the institution, but this project is actually done as a birthday gift to the museum. The last sentence in this paragraph confirms the museum's authority and presence in the exhibition by saying that “we” present this exhibition. In the last paragraph, the theme shifts again, to the representativeness of the selection process. The museum acknowledges the many more voices that exist out there, that are not included in the selection and invites visitors to join in by sharing with the museum what their favourites are.
Since the scope of “125” is a collaborative project, the *interactive aspect* of the texts produced by the museum needs to be analysed. In this regard, the choices that the museum professionals have made in the texts are interesting for seeing how they enable an extension of this interaction with the public, which is what the museum implies in the last paragraph. These choices and the meanings they create can be found by looking at who the visitor can be (who did the writer imagine as the reader) and how the text addresses this visitor (Ravelli 2006, 71). With the first sentence in the introduction, the museum takes up the role of the traditional, pedagogical institution that are educating the visitors in a chosen topic (Ravelli 2006, 71), but this role shifts throughout the text, and takes the more modern approach of establishing a responsive relationship with the visitors (Ravelli 2006, 71). By giving the visitor an offer to participate, the museum has made the text more accessible and interactive (Ravelli 2006, 75).

The third sentence in the second paragraph makes a point of the texts being in the gallery room, but this is confusing, as none of them were to be found there during my visit. I asked the museum staff about this:

Yes, I understand why you have that impression, because at the beginning, we had them, and it is written in the wall text. (…) But then we got quite a few complaints from the audience on the font size. It was too small, so then we had to reprint bigger labels. We also wanted to treat all the selectors the same, and not favour any of their texts; since the selection was commented on by some of the people involved. So, then we dropped including any texts physically in the room, and instead we got larger font size and no complaints afterwards. To make the total design so-called universal is always a challenge (Informant 2, pers.comm. 2018).  

The exclusion of any participant text into the exhibition was not a choice by the museum from the outset. In fact, it was their plan to incorporate a selection of them. This change in plans is not an uncommon situation, and it is understandable that things happen in projects like these. It is appropriate that the museum staff took action when they received complaints about the readability and the selection of some texts over others. However, the sentence does lead to some misunderstanding, and might leave the visitor looking for the texts as she moves around, and to be disappointed when something that is promised at the outset is not included.

The other interpretative text in the gallery room is a wall text on the side of the entrance which is a repetition of the offer for the visitors to participate in the selection of objects. The wall text is written in Norwegian and English, and starts with the heading “What

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9 This quotation was changed at the request of the informant and differ from the original verbatim response.
would you have picked out?”, before it continues “Find your favourite in the exhibition “125”, or in one of the museum’s permanent exhibitions, and write your arguments or story – either in this book, on our website www.nkim.no/en/125, or on social media marked #nkim125. Thank you for sharing!” This text reinforces that the museum really wants to hear from the visitors, that they are inviting them in as well to partake in the meaning making, and that the process of participation is not over even though the exhibition process is completed.

However, different aspects of the introductory text works to minimise this effect. By starting out with establishing the main theme as the caretaking of objects in the collection and that the collaborative project was done as a gift to the museum, the invitation to join in and share has been placed fairly low on the agenda. This is also reinforced by the length of the text preceding the wish to include different voices. The text appears as a long introduction, and what is perceived to be the most important part is that which has got the best placement – the start. Therefore, the outcome is that the inclusiveness and the new voices are not the most important features in this exhibition – rather it is the objects. The visitors are thus invited to take part in the creation of the knowledge that this exhibition produces but are not allowed to co-construct it in the same way that the museum does in their defining what counts as the most important knowledge in the first place (Ravelli 2006, 74). The museum’s hospitality has some boundaries.

The information labels

Throughout the exhibition there are white labels in the same layout and content:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selector/eng. translation</th>
<th>page number/eng. translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/eng. translation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist/eng. translation/ title of artwork</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of object/eng. translation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size/eng. translation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country of origin/eng. translation, year of production</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object number</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8: Content and layout on information labels in “125”.
Figure 9: One of the labels from the exhibition (photo by Stine Sølberg).

The labels are designed in white KAPA-sheets, with black writing. They are placed in close proximity to the associated object – on the walls, pedestals, or inside the glass display cases. Some are placed alone, others together in groups if the objects are also placed together. There
does not seem to be one single, preferred way to place them other than what is the tidiest method. Rather, it appears to be a pragmatic solution to the organising of the 125 labels.

These identification labels do not provide any interpretive texts (Serrell 1996, 28-29) but are nevertheless a marker of meaning in the exhibition. They resemble a conventional format for identification labels that are used in art museums and galleries (Serrell 1996, 29). However, NKIM has made some adjustments to them to fit the scope of the exhibition. Instead of the artist’s name being enlarged and highlighted, the name of the participant that selected the associated object has been given the main focus with a large and bold font size. The labels inform the visitors of certain selected aspects of the objects that the museum by inclusion has deemed important to know. Directly below the participant’s name is the descriptive title of the selector from the list, which by proximity also appears to be important. The eye moves directly to this title after having read the name. The rest of the space on the label is given to technical information about the object, and this part has got the most room: The artists name and the title of the object is included wherever the information was available to the museum staff. The size and the material of the object, as well as the country of origin and the number that the object holds in the museum’s collection is also included. All of the information on the label also has an English translation.

The labels represent choices made by the museum for how they provide information to the visitor about what they are looking at. NKIM initially turns the focus from the artist or designer towards the co-curator, and the appearance is instantly of a museum that dares to take a new path and place their publics in the spotlight. In one of the interviews, this became a topic in between some questions, as I pointed out how the participants’ names being highlighted in the labels made me walk around and look at them. The interviewee answered: “Yes, it is a bit radical actually that we don’t highlight the object particularly on the label. It is included, but here it is the selector’s name that is the headline” (Informant 2, pers.comm. 2018). The effect is there, but it is reduced due to the traditional listing of information on the rest of the label. The format of the text and the building up of a theme that switches from concerning the participant to concerning the technical information about the object, provides the same effect as the introductory panel. The object is actually in focus: the artist, title, type, materials, size, country of origin and its placement in the museum’s collection is given the main portion of the space. Like the introduction panel, this draws the framing back to the museum’s practices of collecting objects ‘to say something of the visually aesthetic human being’. What the labels also do is frame all of the objects as works of art. Since this is a museum of decorative arts and design, it is not surprising, but given the circumstances of this
exhibition, it is somewhat out of place, as the choices for selecting the works is not necessarily based on artistic criteria. This will be analysed further in the next section.

The use of the participants description of themselves in the labels is another thing that sticks out in this exhibition. It is a surprising and creative variation on the labels, and something that the museum has done to be more inclusive and bring the participants into the exhibition, but what is does is it situates their choices. It highlights the status of the co-curator and can make the visitor walk around and judge the choices based on the selector, before having read the texts which are inside the catalogue. In order to even locate the belonging text, one has to have read the label to see the page number. With so many co-curators being “cultural celebrities” or professionals within the field, it is easy to get a prejudice that they are the ones who knows what they are doing, and that the “ordinary individuals” has not based their choices on sufficient knowledge. This creates a split between the professionals and the laymen which I am sure the museum did not intend.

By using these information labels instead of the participants’ texts, the museum is not completing the hospitality to the participants’ contributions to the exhibition. The second part of their contribution is not included, even though the texts’ relevance and importance are highlighted on the museum’s information about the exhibition on their website:

These texts deal with art and the culture of objects, but just as much about people. The texts are generous and humorous, deep and sparkling. All the new stories meditate over the endless potentials of the collection. Thanks to the selected objects, we also get to see what the public is interested in, and the type of exhibitions we should be planning for the next 125 years (NKIM. n.d. a).

This communication conveys the idea of NKIM as a generous host that invites all of these people in to change how we look at the museum’s place in society, and that they are responsive to these changes. The text is in line with Ravelli’s argument that museums need to be more reflexive and diversified in order to accommodate the need and interests of the broad range in visitors. This change is a result of the transition from the earlier focus on curated exhibitions of the past towards the contemporary attention to thematically focussed projects that can problematise their knowledge production (Ravelli 2006, 3). In this capacity, the texts in an exhibition is an important contributor because they are a means of meaning making and communicating values and agendas from the museum’s perspective (Ravelli 2006, 3). NKIM’s aim is to open up and be more inclusive of the diverse voices of their publics, but what is included in the exhibition space is the museum’s narrative about the origin of the objects, and what the institution has designated as the important information. The repetition of
this 125 times, increases the effect of an authoritative institution. The participant is invited in, but only to a certain degree, and the host is once again claiming back their territory. The visitor is repeatedly shown that the museum’s information is more important than the co-curators’ texts, which are represented only by the page number in the catalogue that one can look up to find them.

The catalogue
The exhibition catalogue *125 objects, choices, stories* consist of 280 pages, and starts with two introductory texts from the museum – each with an English translation – in the first eleven pages (NKIM 2018). The remaining pages are dedicated to the participants’ texts and their chosen objects. Each participant has got one page for their text and the English translation of it, and a picture of each object is placed on the adjacent page to the right.\(^\text{10}\) Since the main texts are not written by museum professionals, and are therefore not essentially written to educate visitors on an exhibition topic or as a complimentary to a regular exhibition, the analysis of these will not be extensive. These are personal texts based on the participants’ feelings towards their favourite object and represents a diversity in voices and perspectives. Because this thesis is about what the museum is communicating by this exhibition, I do not analyse the texts by the participants in the same way. But there are some quantitative aspects I want to look into.

As pointed out in an earlier part of the analysis, the objects have not necessarily been chosen because of their artistic qualities. Many of the participants has given other reasons for their choices. By counting up the texts and dividing them into some categories that I found suitable based on my understanding of them and based on the aspect in the text that stood out as the main reason for choosing the object, a range of reasons for choosing the objects became apparent:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Artistic/craft/design qualities:</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical use/community related topic:</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story/personal reasons:</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic/Nostalgia:</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic qualities:</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor:</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10: The co-curators’ reasons for choosing their objects.

\(^{10}\) Six co-curators got two pages because of the length of the text, or the space needed to include a complete photo of the object.
The total number of co-curators that chose the objects mainly based on the artistic quality of the object, is 34 (27.2%). This may correlate with participants with ties to the art- or museum sector, who knows how to interpret and judge artistical qualities because of frequent museum visits or professional training. It may also indicate that those people chose items they are used to seeing in their visits, that they know to be typical objects for art exhibitions. However, even in most of these texts, the reasons were difficult to pin down to this category. The reasons the participants had for saying that the objects were of high artistic qualities was almost always joined with another perspective, either social, historical or personal, and always very varied. A large part of the texts included aspects of the aesthetic or artistic qualities in the objects, but these were rarely the ultimate reasons for choosing them.

The catalogue’s first introductory text is one page long and written by the museum’s director. This is called “On looking back and charting a new course at the same time” and consists of seven paragraphs. The text’s theme in the first two paragraphs is the history and development of the museum and turns to the collection for the next two. These deal with the museum’s possibilities and challenges going forward. The last three turns outward, discusses the future of the museum, the importance of new perspectives, and thanks the co-curators for their contributions. The word ‘co-curator’ is only mentioned one time in this text, in the very last sentence. The exhibition project is the theme in only the two last paragraphs, which consists of respectively two and one sentence, and even when the exhibition is the subject, the focus is on how the museum can benefit from this project:

At a time when the museum is moving towards major changes, it is important to invite everyone to enjoy our collections. Each of this exhibition’s 125 choices gives us an opportunity to beat new paths through the storerooms, ask new questions, generate new knowledge and provide more experiences related to this treasure trove of a collection located right in the centre of Trondheim.

The museum would like to thank all of our kind co-curators whom, with their stories, have admitted the collection into their lives and enlivened the public eye as an aspect of our memory (NKIM 2018:5).

The second text is written by the project leader for the exhibition, and this is the text that the introductory panel has been made from. The panel – and the text on the exhibition’s website – consists of excerpts from this text, which is about two pages long. In the catalogue, it has the title “125 encounters” (NKIM 2018, 9) The text discusses the history of collections, the Wunderkammer, Michel Foucault’s inclusion of a classification of animals in The Order of Things, and how the museum translates these categories to their own collection, based on
some of the participants’ texts. Only after this first page is the project introduced, with the process of taking the participants into the storerooms, a definition of the term ‘curating’, and the change in museum work towards being more inclusive:

“125” is also a project to access new ideas, stories and inspiration. By opening up the storerooms and inviting people to take part in the co-curating of the exhibition, our congratulation cards were written for us – in the form of 125 well thought through observations. And what marvellous texts we were given! They deal with art and the culture of objects, but just as much about people. The texts are generous and humorous, deep and sparkling. This book has become a real page turner! All the new stories meditate over the endless potentials of the collection. Thanks to the selected objects, we also get to see what the public is interested in, and the type of exhibitions we should be planning for the next 125 years (NKIM 2018, 10).

This text has a stronger emphasis on the exhibition project than the first introductory text and goes more in detail about how the project was done. It also discusses the possible shortcomings of the process. However, it is not an accessible text. It has a high lexical density in that it gives the reader a lot of information (Ravelli 2006, 55). This makes the text heavy to read, and the themes it discusses presupposes that the reader has prior knowledge to the history of collections and classification and understands why this is relevant to the exhibition’s theme, for example the referring to Foucault and a new organising of the collection. The text ends with a half page in italics, explaining the order of the contributions in the catalogue, how they are placed according to their inventory number, and an explanation of what this is and how the museum uses these numbers in their collections’ management (NKIM 2018, 11).

Both texts are largely carried out in a written mode (Ravelli 2006, 53). They have an impersonal, institutional voice, and discusses to a large degree general concepts over concrete ones, especially in the first paragraphs. They reinforce NKIM’s authority as a host for this exhibition throughout the whole process, in spite of the museum repeatedly conveying the importance for museums let go of the former authoritative place in society: “Today’s museums are interested in the visiting public as a rule and want to be less authoritarian than before. Institutions should be places where visitors can create, share and relate to each other in respect of a content that is often adapted to the individual, being in that way of relevance to society” (NKIM 2018, 10). The texts situate the exhibition project inside the institutional frames of the museum and draws the reader’s attention to the work that the museum does in their collections’ management. They do emphasise the importance of participatory work, and for the museum to continue to be relevant to the public in the years to come. However, the
setting is always inside the museum, and the texts enhances the feeling of this project being done to celebrate the museum – the contributions are gifts to the museum, and it is done on the premises that the museum offers. As Lynch points out, the language of a museum’s written communication is an important factor in participatory projects. It can continue an undervaluing of the potential breath of knowledge of the participants in favour of the museum’s, by placing the museum in the centre and the participants in the periphery, as passive subjects awaiting improvement, despite the museum’s genuine wish to be of service (Lynch 2011, 16).

NKIM does not address the potential new visitors, or the visitors that does not have a background that enables them to crack the codes inside the exhibition. The imagined visitor is the one that knows the museum from before, and in that way, knows the collection’s relevance. The museum then, does little to attract new visitors and to really open up the stories that are told. Throughout the exhibition, the objects have been given the most focus – they are included the exhibition and the catalogue. In contrast, the participants texts have only been exposed one time, in the catalogue. They have although been published on NKIM’s Facebook page with a picture of the object – one participant’s choice per day in the exhibition period – and some objects are shown on NKIM’s website along with an excerpt from the text. But in the physical exhibition space, the objects and the museum appear as more important than the participant.
4 Discussion

New eyes in
During the project, there were very few conflicts between the museum staff and the participants. The museum did not impart any rules for the texts, the co-curators could write what they wanted (information from interview 1). But the cooperation ended after the texts were proofread and translation was approved by the co-curators. However, it seems that the few incidents where conflict did happen, was what made the museum staff learn the most about their position and responsibility as a host. Embracing diverse opinions in collaborative projects can lead to the power that the museum possesses to take a more productive and positive form (Lynch and Alberti 2010, 30). An example of this was a situation with one co-curator who had chosen a piece of contemporary art in the form of a black wall cabinet with large red spikes at the top and the bottom. The co-curator had submitted his text – a poem with references to the #metoo-movement – which the museum perceived as somewhat problematic due to different factors: the co-curator submitted it as a copyright, gave the cabinet a new title, and wrote from a perspective that some of the museum staff did not feel was appropriate. It was a concern that visitors might find it to be mocking and upsetting. The staff decided after some rounds of discussion to include it in the way it was submitted by the co-curator:

As a museum, and if we are to open up for all the voices and choices and expressions, then we also have to let those that chose, be able to bring their explanation or text about it. And to edit or remove it would have been wrong, then we would not have been true to the project. And I think it was a nice exercise for us. At first, someone reacted to it, but by going a round or two, we landed on, yes, it was not a problem (…) (Informant 1 pers.comm. 2018).

And it shows that we cannot just invite 125 persons and expect them to be like minded, or people who look at the world exactly as us (…), our eyes. I understand that very well. But that process with text really stood out from the others. So actually, it was just educative (Informant 2 pers.comm. 2018).

“125” has contributed a lot of knowledge about the value of collecting diverse voices and stories that can change the mediation and interpretation of museum objects on display, and NKIM’s curiosity in what people outside of the museum feels about the museum and the objects has shone through in the project. Storytelling is an important part of a museum’s communication and can be considered a direct way of approaching visitor participation, for example by the use of a framework of storytelling in exhibitions (Nielsen 2016, 445). It can
motivate engagement and influence design levels, display approaches and communication (Nielsen 2016, 448). In my discussion, I explore further some aspects from the analysis to try to get an answer to my research question, about what NKIM’s communicates in the project.

Why are we having guests over?

In the introduction to The Participatory Museum, Simon makes a statement that using participatory techniques to develop valuable experiences is not a question of intention or desire, but a question of design (2010, 1). I argue that this claim is inadequate, as the question of intention or desire is an important one for any institution embarking on a participative project to ask themselves before planning out how to design the project in the best way. In her analysis of temporary exhibitions of co-production in museums and galleries in the UK, Sue M. Davis found that values are an important factor guiding the museum staff in a direction of choosing the kind of participation that they feel is right for them. “During the initial analysis, it appeared that underlying beliefs, attitudes and norms about a range of factors, including for example the correct function of museums, the best way of producing an exhibition and the most appropriate role for visitors, influenced the nature of co-production” (Davies 2011, 151). While implementing the right kinds of tools and design to carry out the participative project is important, this is never the starting point. The values both of the institution and of the staff guides their choice of participation.

Museums can reinforce certain social diversions or stratifications through their stories and how they treat their visitors, which can be done by their priorities or the narratives they choose to convey to the public, or through the typology they privilege over others (Coffee 2008, 266). This can affect who they are trying to reach in their communication, and who responds to this. In “125 objects, choices, stories, it affects how the museum frames the project, and thus what interests they are tending to. With the notion of an art exhibition being the underlying frame, it may impact what kind of person dares to enter the museum. This, I argue is important for any museum to take into account when formulating their information to the public, choosing the channels to convey it and the manner in which to design the project.

In their introduction panel, NKIM included a definition of the exhibition, in terms of what kind of participatory approach they used: “The anniversary exhibition “125” is a sharing and collaborative project” (figure 11). This definition is based on Nina Simon’s categories of participation. In the complete version in the exhibition catalogue, The Participatory Museum is referenced, which leads me to draw this conclusion. In it, Simon identifies four models for public participative projects: Contributory projects, Collaborative projects, Co-creative
projects and *Hosted* projects. Collaborative projects are defined as visitors being invited to serve as active partners in the creation of institutional projects that are originated and ultimately controlled by the institution (Simon 2010, 187). *Sharing* projects does not go in under these categories, but the activity is defined by Simon as museums or other cultural institutions sharing access with visitors to the objects in their care. This can be done “in two ways: by initiating projects to share objects with visitors, and by creating policies that encourage visitors to share object experiences with each other” (Simon 2010, 173). This, Simon claims, is important for cultural institutions to do for the way in which the public will see them – as a publicly owned utility or a private collection. Thus, NKIM’s project is in line with Simon’s definitions.

As seen in the analysis by the characteristics that NKIM communicated about the project through their written statements, talks with the press, and during the interviews, the museum has emphasised certain participatory aspects. The museum said they let go of their power to define (Sande 2018) and invited a broad range of participants from outside the museum, based on criteria of diversity. The participants got to choose from 40,000 objects in the museum’s collection (figure 11) and the museum staff did not lead the participants in any direction – they were free to choose as they wanted. And lastly, the exhibition was simply arranged by the museum’s curator and designer after the participants’ choices were made. However, what they are communicating in the exhibition is different.

The idea of ‘favourites’ seems to be a core aspect of the exhibition. The act of calling these chosen objects the participants’ ‘favourites’, looks back at the aim of celebrating themselves with 125 congratulation cards. According to Lynch, words matter, and can illustrate what the museum explains to themselves about the project, about the purpose of the work, and how central it is to the museum’s goals (Lynch 2011, 16). Davies argue that museums that are more object-centred are less likely to use significant co-production in their projects than museums that are more focused on people (Davies 2011, 152). My informants said in the interviews that the aim for “125”, was to open up their own way of thinking so as not to walk on already-trodden paths. They wanted to let those outside the museum be the ones to tell the stories and, in this way, remind the people of Trondheim what treasures are hidden in their store rooms. Inviting 125 people to participate thus seem like a means for NKIM to show new objects from their collection, rather than to use the opportunity to shift their own focus. What this indicates is that the project is about the artworks and objects rather than the participants, which is emphasised with the informants’ accentuation of the importance of the collection in relation to the art field.
For those who knows the museums of decorative arts and design, you could say we are a mini-V&A, Victoria & Albert Museum, which was founded after The Great Exhibition in 1851, and aimed to show the top pieces of industrial art, which is a term that is not used today, but, design, craft objects, mass-produced objects. (Informant 1, pers.comm. 2018)

And that international profile and the focus on the contemporary has been followed by later directors. Which has resulted in parts of the collection being quite unique and famous. And that isn’t something local people in Trondheim are especially aware of. It is about getting that out, then. We have to be proactive in informing about what the collection actually contains. But it does make people travel to Trondheim to see the small van de Velde interior, for example. And the last decade, especially Hannah Ryggen. (Informant 2, pers.comm. 2018)

The exhibition can be argued to be a way for the museum to show that they are a serious art museum with a world class collection. As a result, this is not an exhibition made for showing the relevance of the collection to a diverse audience. Rather, it is for those who knows art and design and are able to appreciate the famous pieces in their collection. Subsequently, NKIM is communicating to those members of the public who are already familiar with the museum and who knows how to use and appreciate it. Taking Bourdieu’s claims into consideration, these individuals know this because they have received the proper education and have learned the right codes through experience and habit by being exposed to them within their social conditions. This skill is thus not a natural, aesthetic pleasure that anyone regardless of their background can achieve (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991, 109), which thereby excludes those who are not already familiar with the museum. The familiar visitors have also been identified by visitor studies done in 80s and 90s: “In general, museum users were shown to be wealthier, better educated, of a higher social class than the population as a whole, with this being more marked in art galleries than in more general museums” (Hooper-Greenhill 2011, 770). As seen in the analysis, these numbers are still the same as per Statistics Norway’s analyses of Norwegian museum visitors. NKIM, by their emphasis on the importance of the collection in their formulation of the exhibition’s aim, is at the outset approaching the “cultivated classes” as their target audience.

In their highlighting of the participants’ contributions over their own minor tasks, what NKIM communicates about the project is that it leans towards a Hosted project. In projects such as these, the museum turns over a space as an open platform to members of the community in order to e.g. encourage the audiences to be more comfortable in using the museum, to give room for new perspectives, or to attract new audiences (Simon 2010, 281-
282). Lynch and Alberti defines this as “radical trust”, which means that the museum controls neither the product nor the process (2010, 15). In the catalogue, NKIM communicates that they are opening up their narratives in this capacity: “Since museums’ collections belong to us all, the least we can do is to give more people an opportunity to see them and to make their own selections. And since the objects tell stories about people, as many as possible should have a chance of take part in creating the stories told by the museums” (NKIM 2018, 10-11).

While this phrase is right in line with political and ideological guidelines, as well as writings throughout the museum landscape today (ICOM 2017, 24; NOU 2013:4,153; Hooper-Greenhill 2011, 363), NKIM is not successful in their attempt. I argue here that this has to do with how they have treated the contributions from the participants, starting with their selection of them, but the effect is clearest in the exhibition gallery, as I discuss further shortly. Although NKIM has claimed that they have given away their power to define, and that they are merely assuming the role of organiser for the needs and wants of the co-curators, this can be argued to be an overestimation of their ability to relinquish control of the creative process of the exhibition. The museum thus communicates two separate messages by what they are saying about the exhibition, and by what they are saying through the exhibition.

**Who’s invited to dinner?**

Research has shown that those who most often participate in co-production work tend to be wealthier people with a higher education (Davies 2011, 67). As seen in the analysis, those that most often visit cultural institutions are also highly educated individuals, and women are at the top of the list. Stated in a publication about participatory work in Norwegian museums for the Archive, Library and Museum-sector in 2010 (ABM-utvikling) is that because of this, it is even more important for the museums to reach out to other groups in society for these projects (Brekke 2010, 17). The aim of responding to the diversity of the public is also stated on a governmental level, as seen on the Arts Council Norway’s website (2018) on mediation in museums:

> In a contrasting and diverse community, it is (…) important to facilitate and promote a wide range of voices and offers. Cultural offers with public support thus have to be widely available, so that those who wishes, is given opportunity to participate in, and experience a diverse cultural life (From the Ministry of Culture’s 2014 grant letter to the museums, my translation).

But is this enough? By merely being widely accessible, are museums like NKIM truly actively including different groups in society? It is worth noting the argument from Amelia
Wong, that museums tend to view ‘community’ as a self-evident good because it has democratic connotations and thus might be understood as a strategy that museums use to legitimate their actions (2015, 297). This could be taken to mean that museums might not take the time to properly think about their aims for reaching out to the community. They might instead see it as a quick fix to correct the role they have played in imperialism, social oppression, irrelevancy or elitism (Wong 2015, 296). Addressing their publics is a positive change from earlier practices, but it needs to be done in a careful manner.

A common thought by museums interested in attracting new audiences is that this should be done from the perspective of the collection, rather than the people (Falk and Dierking 2013, 56). Participatory projects are designed to deal with this, but it presupposes that the museums are inviting those that are left outside. The likelihood that these will come on their own initiative is low. This was also stated in one of the interviews, when the informant talked about different events they have been participating in, which helped new people come into the museum.11 “And we get feedback about that, that the threshold into the Museum of Decorative Arts and Design, and the Trondheim Art Museum is (...) that the architecture feels a bit heavy, difficult. The threshold is, both physically, and (...) it is experienced as heavy to enter here, somewhat scary” (Informant 1, pers.comm. 2018).

In using Derrida’s arguments, NKIM’s “desired guest” was in fact the guests who already know the museum. NKIM is not new to changing their activities to give wider audiences new occasions to use the museum. However, they did not actively try to direct this in communicating specifically to those that might need help in entering. Instead, they reached out to another desired guest – the cultural celebrities – the ones that the museum staff argued the audience would be intrigued by. But there were no claims made in the interviews that this aspect was researched. It was decided in meetings, where staff members made suggestions as to who they felt were interesting to hear from. NKIM commented in an interview in Adresseavisen that the museum needs to be relevant in order to survive (Sande 2018), so my question is who were they trying to be relevant for? As people from the part of society who more seldom visits the museum was not invited until after the people from the “cultivated classes”, I argue that their voices were not the most important ones for NKIM in this project. Reaching out to those that might be perceived as less challenging and more in keeping with the institution’s priorities, for instance those who already knows the museum and its profile,

11 E.g. “Kulturnatt”, an annual event in Norwegian cities, where cultural institutions are open at night-time.
can provide a “false consensus” in that conflict and difference of opinion is avoided (Lynch 2011, 11).

The threshold for coming into the museum can be seen as both physical and mental, as Informant 1 stated. The architecture can make the building and the idea of the museum scary, but this is just one side of it. Another reason why museums can be scary places for those who are unfamiliar with them, are the many codes and rules one must know to be able to understand what is going on and to feel at ease in one’s visit (Simon 2010, 34). Falk and Dierking have argued that there are many reasons why people do or do not visit museums, and that these are based on a combination of social, cultural and individual factors. People who have been raised in a tradition to visit museums, often uses museums as adults. It is a complex situation, and not reducible to either education, income or race and ethnicity. These factors rather need to be seen together, and to account for the feeling of relevance the museum is perceived to have for the prospected visitor (Falk and Dierking 2013, 61). Inviting participants to be active co-curators of an exhibition can help with this problem, by making the museum staff communicate with the publics in a dialogue, instead of a monologue, and have the participant’s contributions be a part of the exhibition that other visitors get to see.

**When the guest has entered the host’s home**

The second threshold in the project appeared when the participants came into the museum to select their objects, and the museum reinstated their boundaries. The dinner guest probably isn’t allowed to go into every room in the hosts home when she’s visiting, at least if not guided by the host. Museum visitors are neither allowed to walk freely around the museum and open every door or drawer they wish without permission. But in “125”, this is what NKIM communicated that they wanted to change: “it was a point that we who always have the power, the power to define, was not going to join [in the choosing]” (Informant 1, pers.comm. 2018). As previously mentioned, their task was to be the facilitators. The co-curators started by looking at catalogue cards and pictures as not to touch too many of the objects in storage (information from interview 2). The restriction thus started with the staged look into the exclusive world of the back rooms of the museum, before they could go into the store rooms and touch their objects. In effect, the guest got a but a brief encounter behind the scenes. By displaying to the participants, the seriousness of what they were allowed into, a secret world that “ordinary individuals” are usually not able to see, the museum’s authority was established.
However, this is also the part of the project where the museum staff managed their role as host in the best way, by asking participants about their interests to get to know each individual and in that way to steer them into a section. It is an act of respect and interest in what the co-curators is interested in and honours the individual. The museum staff knows the museum best, and their help can aid the co-curators and make them feel more comfortable in the environment and to be able to handle the potential overwhelming task it might be to pick just one object out of very many. But NKIM’s deciding for those who were invited because of the staff members’ curiosity of what they would pick does not emit the same impression of honouring the individual. In these instances, the staff seems to have gone by another set of values and directed the participants into areas that the museum wanted them to choose from. Of course, this may not have been done to all of them, but it seems to be the case for quite a few. NKIM wanted them to choose based what the museum staff was interested in. Of course, the participants may well have wanted to do this themselves but deciding for them meant that one cannot know this for sure, and that all participants were not treated equally. This is another occurrence where the host tried to take back her domain by tending to the desired guest – to ensure that the exhibition turned out as they wanted, that their sovereignty as host was not diminished.

**The host is claiming her ground as the guest enters**

NKIM uses many different definitions on their project to explain what it is about: *Co-curation, sharing, collaborative, co-production and crowd-curation* (NKIM 2018, 10-11). These definitions have different meanings, and none of them are straight forward or easy to understand without further explanations. It indicates that their aim for the project was not clear, which can also hinder a constructive dialogue around the purpose and progression of such work (Bunning et.al. 2015). All five terms have to do with a participatory aspect of creating content, and the museum did get a lot of contributions from their 125 co-curators. However, once the short collaboration period ended, the museum took back the reins and formed the content into something of their decision. This is where Derrida’s host takes back her domain when the guest becomes too invading for her comfort.

Wherever the “home” is violated, wherever at any rate a violation is felt as such, you can foresee a privatizing and even familialist reaction. (…) The perversion and pervertibility of this law (which is also a law of hospitality) is that one can become virtually xenophobic in order to protect or claim to protect one’s own hospitality, the own home that makes possible one’s hospitality (Derrida 2000, 53).
NKIM’s curatorial choices for the exhibition resulted in a traditional and authoritative display. Isolating the objects in a space that resembles a white cube and providing for their perceived need to breathe – away from things that might disrupt a harmony – conforms to conventions for treating museum objects as aesthetic works that needs to be read in an orthodox way (Thiemeyer 2015, 400). It is the opposite of what NKIM aimed for, and what they had communicated to the public about the result. In framing the objects as art again, now physically in the exhibition room, the museum designed the exhibition for the envisaged art museum visitor which they had communicated to earlier in the process. NKIM used the typical colours and style associated with the modernist art gallery – the white cube. They grouped objects together based on achieving the look of a cohesive and calm aesthetic display which gives the visitor an idea of a harmonious collection that fits well together. This was done instead of focusing on the diversity and chaos such a project might make, as per the example of the Chinese porcelain objects. NKIM also placed the grouped artworks and objects on podiums and pedestals without any interpretation, only conventional technical information on discrete information labels. The introductory text, which is the first thing the visitor sees, frames the exhibition in the museum’s ownership. This, in addition to the use of the museum’s anagram and of colours present elsewhere in the museum, stands out as efforts to assure the audiences that it is in fact the museum who has control and the final say.

This aspect is cemented by the choices the museum made regarding the labels. Here, a battle of power is taking place. Although the names of the choosers are included in the labels next to their self-chosen title, this is another example of creating distance between the knowledgeable guest and the “strangers”. As mentioned in the analysis, it can cause the viewer to look at the title or profession and thereby to judge – unintentionally – the choices as being well thought through or arbitrary, depending on the imagined knowledge this type of person has about the chosen object, and why.

In interview 2, I was informed of one of the influences that played a part for the staff in creating this exhibition, *The Museum of Broken Relationships*, a travelling exhibition:

> It is a collection of objects given by people, that represents a break up of a relationship. (…) I spent such a long time there because, on the labels (…) one got to read a story about the relationship and what it [the object] represents in that break-up. It was just unique stories and personal angles (…) And I think this exhibition has a bit of the same (Informant 2, pers.comm. 2018).

The staff was genuinely interested in collecting the stories and choices from their co-curators, and I claim that the aim of reaching out to the “cultivated classes” was not a conscious move.
in addressing them at the expense of a representative selection of people. I believe the reason this initial aim got lost in the process of making the exhibition had to do with the large task of organising the project. Museums are understaffed and overworked and must make priorities in every decision in order to bring a project to the finish line. The reason then, that one can lose sight of one’s purpose, may have more to do with the institutional traditions they are working in rather than a rational consideration of the facts. The objective conditions characterising the traditional group that museum curators constitute, are ideologically linked to the social conditions of the profession, which favours the traditions laid out by earlier generations (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991, 96).

NKIM, with “125”, steps into the discussion of the changing role of the museum, and the choice of excluding the co-curator’s stories for the museum’s information about the objects is the ultimate, albeit unintended, control move. This shows that the museum has the power to include and exclude. Instead of focusing on the diversity of the participants and the collection, the museum made the exhibition a cohesive unit. This communicates the idea of the large collection not creating any conflicts or challenges to display, but instead, a balanced entirety that fits well together. The material that the museum received from in the collaborative part of the project was very diverse and provided interesting perspectives for looking at the objects, as the texts from the co-curators differ from the traditional way for art museums to communicate with their visitors. Art museums tend to control the labels and write didactic texts that project objectivity and final authority and the use of visitor interpretations inside their space is not commonly requested (Nashashibi 2003, 21). This is what I believe it was NKIM’s intentions to move away from. However, with the approach that the museum had for the collaboration, the museum took the next step in asserting their sovereignty of the domain by removing those examples of texts that originally were placed in the exhibition space. The case of the conflict around one co-curator’s textual contribution for his chosen cabinet is another example of this demonstration of power. The idea of including the text in the catalogue as it were, might have seemed educative and difficult for the museum, but in not displaying the text in the exhibition room, NKIM in fact made it invisible to the visitors that did not actively open up the catalogue to read it.

Even though NKIM wanted the co-curators to change their narratives about the objects – which were done by the co-curators’ texts about them – the museum oppressed these narratives in favour of their own, of a traditional art exhibition without interpretive texts. Davies found in her research that the narrative was the element that museums doing participatory exhibition work were most reluctant to give away to the external parties (Davies
2010, 314). This is again a threshold made by the museum staff and occurred when the museum collected the contributions and then curated the exhibition display on their own, without any input from participants. My argument is not that the museum should include all the co-curators in this process. This would not necessarily be efficient, just as this is neither an argument for applying complete unconditional hospitality. Rather, by taking Derrida’s example of Plato’s dialogue with the foreigner as mentioned in chapter 2 of this thesis, what a more unconditional hospitality can contribute with is that “[...] any viewpoint alien to our own can help us become aware of the perspectives we habitually and unthinkingly adopt” (Benson 2017). What I argue is that the choices the museum staff made for how to display the objects, show that they inserted a boundary. The informants communicated that this part of the process was more or less about organising the objects, indicating that this task was not an interpretative one.

Davies found participation in this kind of work to normally be reduced to only particular phases of the production and not carried out throughout the whole process. This is especially typical in the planning phase and in the actual curatorial stage (Davies 2010, 315), in line with NKIM’s project. But making an exhibition is a creative and messy process, and it isn’t linear or straightforward. By being open to conflicts and serendipities, the potential for new knowledge and insights, and thus outcomes, are higher than if one only sticks to the usual ways of working (Davies 2011, 50-51). I argue that it is in challenging oneself to move towards a more unconditional hospitality in participative exhibition work that the museum and its contributors have the opportunity to achieve new insights. Helen Graham argues that museums applying co-production should be more open minded about what result they aim to achieve:

Is community co-production a process about training young people or adult collaborators to be curators in producing exhibitions in the same way as ‘professionals’ and to the same notion of ‘quality’? Or is the purpose of their involvement to transform what ‘it’ is and, through this, transform also notions of quality? (Graham 2016)

It appears though, that NKIM implemented the use of co-production in their project as a means for creating an exhibition with the qualities of a traditional, object centred art exhibition, and as a better way of reaching the same goal they have been used to aim for. Not to challenge themselves in a profound way to move out of their own comfort zone in who they are addressing with their activities or to use the opportunity to learn something radically new about themselves and their publics. In a somewhat similar exhibition to “125” from 2001
which included visitors’ texts, visitor engagement with these were markedly higher than in art exhibitions with traditional labels, leading to a more relaxed atmosphere with increased conversations between visitors – aspects shown to foster learning among social groups in museums (Nashashibi 2003, 23). The large interest from NKIM’s visitors in purchasing the catalogue demonstrates the relevance and importance of the project to their publics, but also the limits imposed by the exclusion of the text from the exhibition.
5 Summary and concluding remarks

This thesis has attempted to examine the tensions and possibilities that occur when “strangers” are invited into the museum to participate in a collaborative exhibition. The focus has been on the actions of the museum staff at NKIM, and through analyses of the different stages of the process of making their 125th anniversary exhibition “125 objects, choices, stories”, I have illustrated how the museum has ended up communicating certain things through the exhibition that differs from what they have been communicating about it. By using a theoretical framework that concerns hospitality towards strangers, I have positioned the museum as a host, and shown that along the way, there have been instances which have shifted the hospitality forwards or backwards. The findings from the analyses have then been discussed to try to answer to my research question: What are museums communicating in exhibitions that are co-produced with selected participants of the public? This has regarded specifically what NKIM has communicated about the audience, the objects and the museum.

NKIM used a variety of definitions about the project, and I argue that this is an indication that staff were not clear about what their aim and motivation was for doing the project. In the communication to the public, to the press, and in the interviews with me, staff members repeatedly used the term “giving away their power to define”, highlighting that they merely displayed the co-curators’ choices in their spaces. In reality though, the museum controlled the project through the entire process. They mainly invited their “desired guests”, those who does not intrude on the host’s premises – in this case, those who did not challenge the scope of the exhibition – which impacted the reality of how socially inclusive they were, and how representative the selection of co-curators turned out. By actively inviting audiences already familiar with the museum and people from the “cultivated classes”, NKIM’s motivation for the exhibition was different from what they communicated – to be more relevant to the community. My argument is that the aim was really to show the relevance to the cultural field in Trondheim, to their desired guests. Combined with displaying the objects in a frame of a traditional art exhibition without the codes available for the unfamiliar visitor to instantly understand what the object is, other than something that is so valuable that it is put on a pedestal, under glass, with sparse information that indicates that this is something ‘one ought to already know’, the museum is actually carrying out “their true function” of museums, as Bourdieu claimed, “[...] which is to reinforce for some the feeling of belonging and for others the feeling of exclusion (Bourdieu & Darbel 1991, 112).
When the guests entered the museum, the host started taking back control of the project. This was not done in an explicit manner but lies in the choices that was made in how they treated the co-curators and their contributions. When the museum staff curated the exhibition, they shaped it into a traditional art exhibition with conventional labels, based on what the museum decided was important for visitors to learn. In this choice laid also the decision to exclude all of the participants’ text in favour of letting the artworks “breathe”. This shows that the hospitality had ended before the museum started their curating, and that the battle for the power to define manifested itself the information labels.

The example of the black wall cabinet and the associated text is an example of this power struggle. The co-curator was in effect an undesired guest, in that he challenged the museum’s way of working, and what should be communicated in their exhibition. What this incident shows is that the museum producers were challenged in their views of how they should deal with those perspectives that differs from their own. In this incident, NKIM pushed themselves further in the direction of Derrida’s idea of an unconditional hospitality, and in effect, the co-curator provided a possibility of learning for the museum staff. What it also shows then, is that this instance has proven that there is a way of working with collaborative exhibition projects that does not adhere to the traditional art museum codes. It was an undesired and unanticipated act for the museum, but the learning outcome was profound, and illustrates a way forward for what collaborative exhibition projects can be about. It is not about teaching participants and audiences the best way of working within the conventions of the art museum, but to challenge the museum to change what the result could be all together.

In this thesis, the participants’ and visitors’ experiences were not included, as it was beyond the scope. But these would be interesting aspects for further research. Examples could be examining what visitors interprets by the museum’s communication, or how the participants experienced the process of co-curating the exhibition. What could also be a topic for further research on this topic is the comparison of other participative exhibition projects. In my thesis, the aim was to analyse the process from idea to exhibition, but it would be interesting to see if this topic could relate to other Norwegian art museums as well. My hope is that this way of doing participatory work in art museums will be even more common in the future, and that many others will follow in NKIM’s footsteps to show museums how to go about taking on large projects that can alter the way museums and their publics tells stories about the objects in their collections.
Bibliography


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Appendix

125 objects, choices, stories
Nordenfjeldske kunstindustrimuseum 1893-2018

To collect is to find, acquire, organize and care for. It is also a way of thinking about the world insofar as there are usually certain criteria about what one wants to find out or speak about with one’s fragment of the world. For 125 years, this museum has collected selected works and things from our artistically formed and designed world, classified things by type of material used, by period or geographical location, so we can say something about the visually aesthetic human being.

The anniversary exhibition “125” is a sharing and collaborative project: 125 people from outside the museum have chosen one art work or object from the collection – something that moves or speaks to them. The 125 choices not only represent the things themselves, but 125 new pairs of eyes and 125 new stories about the collection’s place in society. The participants own short texts make up a collection of marvellous congratulation cards (some of them are included in the gallery; all of them can be read in the catalogue). The same 40,000 (!) things was available to the 125 individuals – but nobody took note of or felt pulled toward the same things. The result we present here must be the most varied exhibition the museum has ever put on.

One hundred and twenty-five is a big number, but not that big either – and we are painfully aware of the many observations and accounts we have not included. We hope you will share ideas for other possible selections and your opinions with us in the exhibition room, face to face, on social media (#nkim125) and on our dedicated website (www.nkim.no/125) – and in other ways in the future.

Figure 11: Text on the introduction panel (English version, NKIM’s own translation).