

ARTICLE

Participation and Receptivity in the Art Museum – A Phenomenological Exposition

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Abstract There is a powerful trend in museums today of asking visitors to participate in the exhibitions, co-create content, and to be active and engage with one another in the museum space. While welcoming the participatory agenda as an initiative of democratizing art museums, we argue in this paper that the rise of the participatory agenda also redefines the purpose of the art museum in a way that risks overlooking the kinds of experiences people undergo in art museums. Based on qualitative and phenomenologically inspired interviews with museum visitors, we present a sketch of a class of aesthetic experiences that ought to be taken into consideration in curatorial practices. Developing a picture of the phenomenology of aesthetic experience, we argue that such experiences should be taken into account when considering the question of the purpose of the art museum.

INTRODUCTION

There is a powerful trend in museums today asking visitors to participate in the exhibitions, co-create content, and to be active and engage with one another in the museum space (Black 2012; Eriksson et al. 2019; McSweeney and Kavanagh 2016; Simon 2010, 2016). This “participatory agenda” is a response and solution to challenges facing art museums, the most important one being that they still today are mostly visited by the well-educated public (Kulturstyrelsen 2017). As early as 1969 Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel demonstrated in their study *The Love of Art*, that visits to the art museum are closely connected to your educational and cultural background (Bourdieu and

Darbel 1990). This issue persists today across the Western world and art museums are still struggling: a large percentage of the population does not consider the art museum as a place where they belong or feel comfortable (DCMS 2018; Kulturstyrelsen 2017; Simon 2016) – not least due to its alienating rules and conventions (Duncan 1995; Samis and Michaelson 2016). Therefore, the critique of the art museum as elitist is still as relevant as ever. While welcoming the participatory agenda as an important initiative of democratizing art museums to make them more inclusive, we argue in this paper that the rise of the participatory agenda also redefines the purpose of the art museum in a way that risks overlooking the various kinds of experiences people undergo. While art has been

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known to challenge our perceptual capacities (see e.g. Arnheim 1954/1974; 1969/2004), provoke our moral sensibilities (Jørgensen 2003, 2006) and lead us to reflect upon societal and political matters (Adorno 1970/1997; Ranciere 2004/2013; Roald and Kjøppe 2015), it also has a power to evoke intense, existential, meaningful, and even life-changing experiences. The nature of these specific experiences can be studied phenomenologically and psychologically, which in turn reveals that their significance for human flourishing cannot be understated. The participatory agenda, however, does not seem to embrace this type of aesthetic experience. In fact, we will argue that the very nature of the participatory approach to museums is at odds with certain types of aesthetic and existentially laden experiences. Based on thorough qualitative and phenomenologically inspired interviews with museum visitors, we present a sketch of a class of aesthetic experiences that ought to be taken into consideration in curatorial practices. In other words, we develop a picture of the phenomenology of aesthetic experience and argue that the existence of such experiences should inform the question of the purpose of the art museum in the same way as the participatory agenda.

The paper is structured as follows: we begin with a presentation of Nina Simon's conception of the participatory cultural institution and show that considerations of what kinds of experiences that occur in the art museum art are largely absent. We in turn provide such considerations ourselves in three steps: firstly, by briefly accounting for the methodology of phenomenologically inspired interviews; secondly by presenting excerpts of some of the interviews we have conducted in art museums; thirdly and finally by identifying the central experiential structures within these interviews in exchange with an account of aesthetic

experience from the philosopher Mikel Dufrenne. This leads us to propose that the possibility of having aesthetic, life-changing experiences in the museum should play a greater role in informing curatorial practices in particular, and in questioning the purpose of the art museum in general.

THE PARTICIPATORY MUSEUM

As an authority in the participatory trend, Nina Simon argues that cultural institutions should become more participatory and involve their audiences in co-creation and encourage different forms of expression. In *The Participatory Museum* she defines a participatory cultural institution as:

a place where visitors can create, share, and connect with each other around content. *Create* means that visitors contribute their own ideas, objects, and creative expression to the institution and to each other. *Share* means that people discuss, take home, remix, and redistribute both what they see and what they make during their visit. *Connect* means that visitors socialize with other people—staff and visitors—who share their particular interests. *Around content* means that visitors' conversations and creations focus on the evidence, objects, and ideas most important to the institution in question. (Simon 2010, III)

Today the museum is reconceived as a social space in which our focus is not only on the objects on display, but also on personal expression, on sharing with others in the context of, or around, content. Overall you can say, with the words of the museologist Steven Weil, that the museum has gone from "being about something to be being about someone" (Weil 1999) and one could add, "to being *with* someone", as

participatory practices become ever more fundamental to museum work (Rung 2018). The art institution is not only a place where visitors can perceive art, but also a site where they discuss, contribute and create. For instance, exhibitions are often co-created with users and interpretative material is generated on the basis of a diverse range of dialogical and interactional practices such as user-feedback, games, discussion sessions and so on (Black 2012; Eriksson et al. 2019; McSweeney and Kavanagh 2016; Simon 2010).

There are many reasons why the participatory agenda has been developed to become one of the key strategies of the museum today. The educational role of the museum has, since the birth of museums in the 1800s, been part of the rationale on which the museum is built (Bennett 1995). Learning theory has therefore played an important role in museological theory. In particular, social constructivism and situated learning have, for the past decades, challenged the traditional transmission model of learning and have explained how social and active participation stimulates learning (Bakhtin 1981; Dewey 2007; Hein 1998; Wenger and Lave 2003). In this regard, John Dewey's (2007) concept of learning as socially situated, as well as his thoughts about inquiry-based education, remains central. Incorporating these thoughts into the interpretative and educational practices of the museum has been a way of professionalizing museum work and of developing more meaningful and educational experiences for the museum visitors. However, these perspectives are not the only motivation behind the participatory agenda: the Danish cultural theorist Anne Scott Sørensen explains how participation within the field of cultural politics has been described as an "obscure blend of an economic (liberal), a social-integrative (corporate) and a

political (democratic) rhetoric" (Sørensen 2015, 2). She argues that the participatory agenda is politically motivated because participation is thought to be what cultural institutions need in order to engage a larger proportion of the public and thereby generate income to become financially sustainable. At the same time, Sørensen maintains, it is also argued that participation enables a broader and more diverse user group, thus introducing new audiences to cultural life (Sørensen 2015, 2).

Nina Simon's participatory proposal echoes these issues as it is meant to respond to the two following problems: (1) There aren't enough visitors in the art institutions and (2) Art institutions are irrelevant to many social groups. Arguing for the first problem, she presents a 2009 report from the National Endowment for the Arts, showing that attendance at art institutions was declining (Simon 2010, I). In a more recent European context, however, the general trend is one of visitor increase. In Denmark, for instance, Louisiana, AROS, and The National Gallery of Art (SMK), have celebrated consecutive records in visitor numbers over the last decade (Danmarks Statistik 2015a). Visitor numbers, however, do play an increasingly important role as the continuous decrease of state funding demands that museums generate a higher percentage of their income through ticket sales. Simon is therefore right to argue that art museums need to attract more visitors. However, in the Danish case this not because visitor numbers are declining, but because attracting visitors is increasingly central to meeting budgets.

The second problem that art museums are irrelevant to many social groups also holds true in Europe. Evidence from both Denmark and the UK shows that museum visitors are mainly white and well-educated. In 2017, 47% of the

visitors to SMK belonged to the eight percent of Danes holding a lengthy college education (Danmarks Statistik 2015b; DCMS 2018; Kulturstyrelsen 2017). Simon addresses such issues in her recent book, *The Art of Relevance* (2016), which provides a detailed analysis of this problem and its possible solutions. One of these leads us back to the idea of participation. Remember Simon's premise that increased participation is a way to address the problem of the museum's narrow social appeal. She claims that:

Visitors expect access to a broad spectrum of information sources and cultural perspectives. They expect the ability to respond and be taken seriously. They expect the ability to discuss, share, and remix what they consume. When people can actively participate with cultural institutions, those places become central to cultural and community life. (2010, II)

It may be that this approach can make art museums more relevant for both new and old user groups and in turn "de-elitise" the art museum. However, Simon does not mention the perspective of the kinds of aesthetic experiences that can arise in art museums (or their relation to the participatory museum), perhaps because she refers mainly to libraries (Biblioteek Haarlem, Simon 2010, 7) history and science centers (Minnesota's Historical Society's History Center, *ibid.*; Ontario Science center *ibid.*, 86; Anne Frank Museum, *ibid.*, 92), nature centers or natural parks (The Wild Center, *ibid.*, 14; Yellowstone National Park, 2016, 61) as well as digital, social technologies ("social technographics", 2010, 8; YouTube, *ibid.*, 10). It is evident how and why participation in such places will be of mutual benefit, but while art museums share characteristics with these institutions, they also differ from them.

PARTICIPATION AND SUBJECTIVITY IN THE MUSEUM

Concepts such as experience, subjectivity and aesthetics traditionally belong to the domain of philosophy, phenomenology and psychology. Within psychology, different theories deal with aesthetic experience, relying on different, fundamental assumptions (see Allesch 2006; Funch 1997; Roald 2015; Roald and Køppe 2015 for overviews). However, only the phenomenological traditions examine how aesthetic experience appears to the subject herself and focuses on describing this appearance. Here, Mikel Dufrenne has provided the most detailed account from a theoretical point of view, while Clark (2006), Funch (1997; 2019), and Roald (2015) have begun the work of describing how experiences with visual art appear empirically. Still, as Cupchik 2016 argues, descriptions of lived experiences with art are missing to a great extent. Apart from "experience", Simon does not consider such terms in her presentation of the participatory museum. The kinds of art institutions that Simon refers to all display different kinds of objects, but from the perspective of aesthetic phenomenology (Bertram 2015; Dufrenne 1973; Roald 2015), encountering a piece of art is not first and foremost the mere seeing of an object, but rather an interaction with another expressive quasi-subject (Dufrenne 1973, 393) through which one can acquire a different relationship to oneself (e.g. Clark 2006; Funch 1997; Roald 2015). In other words, an aesthetic experience concerns a subjective, or intersubjective, process and not an objective property, or better yet, it is a relation of meaning encompassing both subject and object. Henceforth, we call this emotionally and existentially heightened experience, "aesthetic experience".¹ For Simon, however, museum

content is “consumed” (2010, 2), experience “designed” (*ibid.*, 25), museum visitors are “users” (*ibid.*, 2). This perspective does not consider the experience of museum visitors from their first person perspective and we present the following phenomenological analysis to counter-balance the participatory agenda.

PHENOMENOLOGICALLY ORIENTED QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS: METHODOLOGY

Before engaging the phenomenology of aesthetic experience, we here present the method used to generate the data analysed to ground this phenomenology. Since their inception, fields such as anthropology, ethnography and psychology have been engaged in the question of how to reliably interview others for the purposes of theory construction. Within the field of psychology, inspired by Edmund Husserl, Amedeo Giorgi (e.g. 1975; 2009; 2012) was the first to develop a methodology in which such interviews could target the structure of lived experience. Carl Rogers (e.g. 1945; 1961) and Steinar Kvale (1996) also put down foundational stones for phenomenologically oriented interviewing and since then, there has been a proliferation of phenomenologically inspired interview techniques, especially as applied in healthcare and therapy (Englander 2019; Van Manen 1990; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). The use of such methods has recently gained great traction in phenomenology and cognitive science with the invention of Neurophenomenology (Varela 1996) and Microphenomenology (Petitmengin et al. 2019). These various approaches discuss, also among themselves and against each other (Van manen 2017; Smith 2018; Zahavi 2018; Englander 2019), the kinds of questions science is generally concerned with: how exactly is the

method implemented? Are its results reliable? Are they reproducible? How does the inclusion of experience into our ontology and metaphysics affect our conceptualization of nature and science? To discuss such questions are far beyond the scope of the current paper and are only mentioned to illustrate that working with knowledge and data in the second person (Høffding and Martiny 2016) through interviews cannot be considered arbitrary or unscientific, contrary to the claims of more naturalistically inclined researchers (Schwitzgebel 2002). Instead of trying to avoid subjectivity in favour of objectivity, in phenomenologically informed research we foreground our subjectivity and use it together with logical reasoning in order to reach valid and general knowledge claims.

The interviews that inform this paper were conducted in keeping with best practices from phenomenological psychology (Kvale 1996) and ethnography (Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Ravn 2016). As a rule of thumb, these semi-structured interviews encourages the interviewees to describe a past experience in as great detail as possible, while being steered away from theories, explanations, and opinions. Once the interview is concluded, it is transcribed and subjected to several close readings to identify central structures and categories of the experiences presented. The interviews used for this paper are part of a research project in phenomenological psychology: For more than 15 years, this group has been investigating the relation between visual art and subjectivity based on people’s descriptions of their own experience as published in Funch (1997; Roald 2007; 2008; 2015). More recently, the group has focused on the role of pre-reflection in aesthetic experience. From March 2017 to March 2018, Høffding and Roald (2019) conducted 20 interviews at

Esbjerg Art Museum, the National Gallery of Denmark, and at the department of psychology, University of Copenhagen. In Esbjerg, the people recruited for these interviews were invited by the museum administration, whereas in Copenhagen they were invited through the newsletter of the National Gallery or simply approached directly by the researchers in the museum. Participants were of mixed backgrounds, but all belonged to the middle class: teachers, university students, unemployed and retired people. Those who accepted our invitation, as mediated by the museum outreach, could be considered typical, core customers (simply in virtue of being contactable by the museum) and those directly approached would match an idealized typical visitor, lingering for long time stretches at individual paintings. Given museum statistics for instance from the Danish National Gallery showing that 88% of visitors go to the museum with someone else (Kulturstyrelsen 2017), however, the selected interviewees to be presented are atypical as they came on their own and spent longer time at the museum than the average visitor.

A phenomenologically inspired qualitative interview works on validity criteria that are different from the statistical significance of for instance a questionnaire survey (See Flyvbjerg 2011 for a general discussion). A good interview that achieves sufficiently detailed descriptions easily lasts 45 to 90 minutes and among the 20 conducted interviews, five had the sufficient length to provide this degree of detail. Being willing to engage in such a long interview about one’s aesthetic experiences in itself demonstrates an unusual commitment to the perceived importance of such experiences. Hence, the interviews to be presented are not typical or representative of most museum visitors’ experience and we do not claim this. Our claim is rather that they can be used to present accounts of

intense aesthetic experience that are valuable to us as human beings and which art museums should consider protecting, even if only representing a minority of visitors. Our normative stance is that thinking curatorially of how to cater for such experiences could avail them to a greater quantity of visitors. Generally speaking, although our selected interviewees have different expectations of the museum, when they relate their most significant aesthetic experiences, most have some common characteristics such as being surprising, overwhelming, and as coming from “out of the blue.” They begin passively and affectively, become existentially dense, and usually take place while alone. In the following, we present three interview excerpts with Karin, Sabine, and Louise.² These were selected because of the density and nuance in their descriptions, in other words, because they most clearly illustrate the phenomenon in question.

EXPERIENCES OF AESTHETIC ABSORPTION

Karin, for instance, travelled across Denmark in order to describe her experiences with art to one of us. These experiences are intensely meaningful to her, she says, and occur almost every time she visits an art museum although the experience changes a little each time, depending on the work of art in question. She describes these experiences as immediate: “I know it as soon as I see it [the work of art], almost before I am aware that I have seen it. . . . It happens with the speed of light. I think the thoughts come afterwards.” She continues: “I think it is a mixture of shock and falling in love the very first time I see it.” This immediacy refers not only to instantaneity, but also to minimal mediation: “I try hard just to let my body and my senses experience it without

something”, and “without really thinking too much about it [I] just let myself experience the work of art, then it happens quietly by itself.”

Sabine says something similar. She talks about an intense encounter with Andre Derain’s painting *Woman in Chemise* at the National Gallery of Denmark:

You come in, and that Derain, which comes right out of the picture at you, I thought it was fabulous, I love that. . . I wasn’t really expecting it to be so powerful. . . [T]he life in the picture. . . I think that was what struck me. . . You just stand there and it sort of goes into you. The memory is very vivid later and you just take it in, in Norwegian you would say ‘man tar imot’ [you receive], you just sort of feel receptive to it, I guess.

So her experiences are surprising, intense and instantaneous. She is struck by the work of art, which works irrespective of her own volition. For Karin such immediate experiences are linked to bodily feelings of various kinds: “It can both be a feeling of being more grounded, but there can also be butterflies in the stomach, yes, almost the opposite of anxiety, you know, if one is scared, a pressure in the chest or having to breathe faster, but in this case, it just goes the opposite way. It is much more relaxing”. This kind of experience is not only important to Karin, it also changes her: for instance, at AROS, a modern art museum in Aarhus, Denmark, she describes her experience with a pink room installation to which she keeps returning: “Something happens to me when I am there and I feel calm.” Visiting art museums in general makes Karin calm also by clearing up her thinking: “I feel as if some bricks are physically moved around in my head or body. . . And it feels strange to say, but it is as if a cleaning takes place or that some issues are more solidly put in

place.” These are existential thoughts that are hidden in everyday life, but here they surface and stay with her for a long time. Karin also says that: “I know I am saying thoughts, but it is non-verbal.” These non-verbal thoughts are inner expressions of emotional states and changes. Something similar happens when she sees Edvard Munch’s *Måneskinn* (Moonlight) which she has “been in love with” since the very first time she saw it: “I guess I have created my own room with this picture and [I] block out all other disturbances, but yes, so I have just been standing and looking at this picture.” Both works not only elicit feelings, but also enable her able to cope with her own emotional life:

It belongs to that side of things that we cannot fully verbalize, but which comprises some kind of insight, a kind of knowledge or feelings. . . Both works [Munch and the pink room AROS installation] make a lot of feelings present at once and make me have them. . . make me able to deal with them. It [the work] can bring forth a lot of feelings, but just in a way that makes them okay. . . it is not because they [the feelings] disappear, but they are reduced in strength, perhaps, in comparison to how large a negative influence they could otherwise have.

In other words, she describes her experiences with works of art as immediate, with intense bodily and affective feelings, and with existential significance in the sense that her own emotional life becomes more tangible and manageable. Like Karin, Sabine reports that such experiences are deeply satisfactory and gives her a kind of existential feeling. It affects her in the diaphragm and satisfies a thirst for colour:

[I]t affects me here in the diaphragm, . . . no it is not, I don’t really get physical sensations, except, haha, you know, I did not grow up with

the Nordic winter, and as November goes into January, I feel actually thirsty for color, so then when I see color, the feeling of thirst is removed, you know I feel, I once bought a red painting in November, it's just red and then there is two red cherries on, and I felt warm.

In regards to a painting by Cezanne, she says that it alters her way(s) of being in the world where she finds or resonates with herself. Here is an excerpt from the dialogue:

1. It gives me a feeling of being myself, it gives me, it contributes to my sense of identity in fact, actually.
2. Oh, that's very interesting. What does that mean?
3. That's also very difficult to describe because a sense of identity is difficult to describe
4. Yeah, do you mean your sense of identity as a woman with a particular history you have, living in a particular place that you do, with a particular occupation that you have, or is it something more personal, existential?
5. It's more existential, this is me, this is who I am, and that might also related to the fact that because we lived removed, you change friends, you change cultures, and so your sense of identity can be a little fluid, so everything that gives me this feeling of, strengthens my sense of identity.

As we can see, Sabine has intense experiences with works of art that target her very subjectivity, including her sense of self or sense of identity. Louise describes a similar situation. She talks about how pictures provide her life

with an existential kind of content. They are a source of happiness and fulfilment, without which she can feel ill. She describes these effects, while talking about an experience at Esbjerg Art Museum:

[I]t is psychological. The only option is to become happy. . . The artists have dedicated their lives to create an expression which they have given to us. It is fantastic. . . They make one calm and content. And it is beautiful. When one sees something beautiful one becomes calm inside. . . [Asked what this calmness and happiness means for her] It means that I have the surplus it takes to take part in life and engage myself in others. It makes it possible to be joyful and thereby have a relation to other people. . . you are allowed to be yourself. You are allowed to enclose yourself in the picture and that creates a great happiness and calmness. . . [Without art] Then I think that I actually would disappear into the blue fog, I actually believe that. . . I don't think I could live with that. . . Then I think I would disappear. It means incredibly much to me, it does.

Considered all together, Sabine, Louise and, Karin's accounts represent a general class of aesthetic experiences. These are intensely and existentially meaningful, resonating deeply with them, moving them and their way of being in the world.³

MIKEL DUFRENNE AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Many features of our empirical material are generally mirrored in theories about aesthetic experience found in philosophical aesthetics. Moreover, they are particularly compatible

with the French phenomenologist, Mikel Dufrenne's systematic and rich account of the nature of aesthetic experience. Inspired by Immanuel Kant, yet addressed from a phenomenological point of view, he describes what he regards as necessary features of aesthetic experience. He argues that imagination (1973, 361) and reflection (ibid., 389, 393) are to be held at bay as aesthetic perception must concern perceiving the work of art as it is; it is about perceiving the art object as art, that is, as a grasped or felt meaning. Although imagination fulfils an important function, it needs to be restrained for aesthetic experience to develop. Imagination must adhere to the form and content of the art object, and not follow other associations that can lead the experience astray from the work. Rather than concerning imagination and reflection, aesthetic experience begins with a bodily resonance, an immanently meaningful presence experience. The meaning here is not "detached," but one that "concerns and determines me, resonating in me and moving me" (ibid., 336). It is an immense and powerful experience, yet it has a strong element of "passivity" characterized by feeling: it is passive in the Husserlian sense⁴ not only in so far as it depends on the efficacy of the work of art, but also in that it cannot be brought about by any act of volition: mental acts of analytic reflection or object detached imagination diminish or lead away from the aesthetic experience. In other words, passivity in this context does not mean "static" or "lifeless" as if the subject does not participate in or affect the experience. Rather, it means that the participation is not initiated by egoic act of "wanting to do", but by pre-reflective and receptive acts of "being willing to submit". As mirrored in the descriptions provided by Karin, Louise, and Sabina we can with Dufrenne say that the aesthetic object "imposes its presence on us" (ibid., 427) and

that it "causes us to yield to it, rather than accommodating itself to us" (ibid.). In other words, it is a particular kind of object, a "privileged" (ibid., 388) and unique object, or even "quasi subject" (ibid., 393) "overwhelming us with its imperious presence" (ibid., 388) that is causing what Dufrenne calls an aesthetic feeling.

Such aesthetic feeling consists in a certain receptivity to sensuousness which prominently marks it as a form of existential communication: "Aesthetic feeling is deep because the object reaches into everything that constitutes me" (ibid., 404). Feeling is about being receptive and open to the work of art, creating and sustaining intimacy, immediacy, and depth:

to understand a work is to be assured that it cannot be otherwise than it is. This is no tautology, since this assurance can come to us only when we are infused with the work to such an extent that we allow it to develop and to affirm itself within us, discovering in this intimacy with the work the will to seek out its meaning within it. For, to repeat, existential necessity cannot be recognized from the outside or be experienced except in myself, insofar as I am capable of opening myself up to this necessity. Such is the necessity of the aesthetic object, which I must at the same time recognize in myself (ibid., 396).

To perceive the work of art as aesthetic, an opening, a receptivity, an "aesthetic attitude," as Dufrenne calls it, is necessary. This receptivity is not an intellectual or critically reflective one,⁵ but enables one to be "struck," to come into contact with the aesthetic object. According to Dufrenne, one has to free oneself from a practical attitude and the humdrum of everyday life aside and become open to the feeling, and thereby the meaning, the art work elicits through its affective resonance.

**THE PURPOSE OF THE ART MUSEUM:
CONCLUSION**

The participatory agenda to some extent is at odds with the account of aesthetic experience presented here: if the art museum is primarily intended as a social platform in which we actively discuss ideas, express our creativity and share this with others – all expressive activities – then it will be difficult for us to be sufficiently open, receptive and passive for the emergence of these kinds of intense aesthetic experiences. From our interviews, we know how fragile these experiences can be. If you are overly concerned with talking to other people or with thinking about how you can express, create and share, it is not likely to afford the essential shift away from the everyday, practical toward the aesthetic. Simon’s suggested kind of participation is likely to overshadow the subtle changes in the passive and pre-reflective features of consciousness that Karin expresses as the “cleaning [that] takes place” or the “bricks [that] are physically moved around in my head or body”. However, it is also clear that in order to become sufficiently receptive to aesthetic experience you need to feel comfortable and relaxed when visiting an art museum. This brings us back to the outset of this article and the problem of the museum visitors’ narrow social background (Bourdieu and Darbel 1990). Aesthetic experiences might have universal structures according to Dufrenne and therefore in principle be accessible for everyone, but whether these are actualized in the individual entering the museum is entirely contingent: you might be alienated from the museum if you are uncertain of its rules and conventions (Duncan 1995; Samis and Michaelson 2016). As Samis and Michaelson state: “Museums are intimidating spaces with a language all their own” (Samis and Michaelson 2016). The question is therefore this: how can we curate for

these fragile aesthetic experiences in a manner where the visitors, who do not belong to the cultural elite of museum regulars, feel included, comfortable, and welcome? How do we square the immense value of aesthetic experiences, such as those of Karin, Sabine, and Louise with the societal challenges facing the museum as pointed to by people such as Simon? On the one hand, we need to open up the art museum such that it addresses more than a small privileged elite. On the other hand, we have to acknowledge that if the art museum only functions as a participatory and interactive space, we risk jettisoning its ability to facilitate the emergence of the intense kinds of aesthetic experience we have discussed.

Is it possible to structure the art museum such that different ways of engaging with artworks are taken into account? To work reflectively and carefully with zones or areas that prioritize either active engagement or the more ‘passive’ reception? And finally, can all of this be done without promoting elitist narratives or compromising current, successful use patterns? We do not possess the full answers to these kinds of questions, nor to the general challenge of how and whether to reconcile phenomenological ideas with participatory and political agendas. Rather, this paper has demonstrated the existence of a class of aesthetic experiences of great emotional and existential significance to the museum visitors who undergo them. Further, it has shown this perspective to be somewhat in contrast to the participatory agenda. This agenda has informed debates about the purpose of the art museum in today’s society. Likewise, the presentation of the phenomenology of aesthetic experience justifies our assertion that the potential of the art museum to evoke aesthetic experiences should be centrally considered when curating exhibitions and displays.⁶ **END**

NOTES

1. We do not in any way rule out that aesthetic experience can be a great many things, and that aesthetic experiences do not need to occur in the context of seeing art (natural scenarios can also be aesthetic), or that experiences in art museums that do not necessarily fit our definition of being intense, emotional and existential can yet be valuable and significant (see for instance Nanay 2015 for a clear discussion of such issues). Rather, our claim is that a rather unique and intense form of experience can occur in art museums and that it ought to be protected and regarded in curatorial practices. From this consideration, it should be evident that we do not subscribe to a romantic and naïve account of aesthetic experience, but describe what people in our interviews take meaningful and aesthetic experiences in art museums to be.
2. All interviewees are anonymized with fictitious names. All direct quotations are taken from the transcription of the recorded interview and translated from Danish into English.
3. See Roald (2015) for other descriptions of aesthetic experiences.
4. We refer to Husserl's work on "passive synthesis" (Husserl 2001. See also (Høffding 2019; Høffding & Roald 2019) for an account of passive synthesis and musical absorption).
5. Note that Dufrenne distinguishes between "critical" and "adherent" reflection, the latter yielding proper aesthetic experience. (ibid. 393).
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