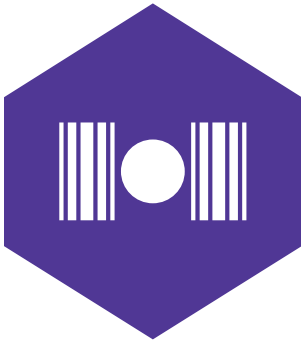




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Aliens and Auras

Towards a Critical Practice of Representing Difference

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Aliens and Auras: Towards a Critical Practice of Representing Difference

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Abstract: This article traces the historical development from modernism's critique of the traditional authoritarian museum to the inclusive museum practices of today, arguing that the development often has not led to freedom, democracy, equality, and inclusion in the museum but rather to a semblance of the aforementioned notions. From an examination of current inclusive practices and their failings, the article discusses the possibility of furthering the museum as a democratic institution.

Keywords: Adorno, Aura, Benjamin, Clifford, Dialectics, Inclusion, Participatory Museum, Representation, Simon

These days “inclusion” leaps from the pages of almost any academic paper or seems to be the justification behind almost any curatorial practice. It may be called outreach, participatory practices, or something entirely different. Behind the terminology that signifies diversity, however, lies the same idea: creating democratic institutions by making space for and embracing elements, people, and voices that did not traditionally inhabit the institutional space. However, in this article I will argue that something is lost in the transition from the theory of inclusion to the practice of inclusion. I will argue that what appear to be inclusive projects, in reality, often continue a repressive center-margin structure. The projects may have the semblance of inclusion, but in the way they construct meaning and represent meaning they are a continuation of the divide between the powerful and the powerless. I will begin by briefly presenting an outline of the historical background for the current discourse of inclusion. Following this, I will present and discuss various examples of different inclusive projects and examine how they highlight and exclude certain forms of meaning. Finally, my critical examination of both the historical background as well as today's practice of the inclusion-discourse will lead me to discuss navigable paths for furthering the museum as a democratic institution.

From Modernism's Critique of Representation to Postmodern Representation

With “New Museology,” and its so-called participatory or inclusive practices, comes a promise of a revitalization and democratization of the museum. In a historical perspective, the emergence of “New Museology” can be seen as a reaction to, and in many ways a continuation of, the critical onslaught on the museum as institution led by modernism and its theorists. One notable example and widely used reference of the critique is from German thinker Theodor W. Adorno. In his essay “Valéry Proust Museum in Memory of Hermann von Grab” he writes: “The German word museal (museumlike) has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association” (Adorno 1967, 175).

Adorno is not the first to point out that the museum is at least metaphorically connected to death. This link can be traced back to the French revolution when Catholic clerics protested the removal of religious art from the churches, thereby removing art from its religious social function and context (McBride 2006). However, what Adorno does so well here is display his eye for the

dialectics in this process of putting “the art of the past to death” (Adorno 1967, 177). When works of art are relieved of their religious context and hoarded into treasure holds called museums, they are at the same time inscribed into a discourse of market value and capitalism. Art of the past does not address the needs of the present but acts as citations of tradition—citations because they are in fact removed from their connectedness to that tradition by being taken from churches and put in museums. Two major problems arise from this: firstly, such citations of tradition come to form a kind of false history naturalizing the idea that these works of art are in fact autonomous and that their value is that of the market. Secondly, the works of art—in their newfound uniqueness—are infusing this false history with a cultish aspect because they are presented as auratic objects, to use the term made famous by Walter Benjamin. “Treasure hold” and “Temple” are intricately linked, and as Andrea Witcomb (2003, 102) points out: “It is also an image which points to the central importance of objects, to the material world, in constructing narratives of cultural authority. The materiality of objects seemed to provide an empirical basis for the nineteenth-century ideas of civilization as material progress at the same time as supporting ideas of authenticity and originality which were essential to the construction of a notion of tradition [...] a historical framework that used the exhibition space of the museum to popularize a narrative of Western society as the pinnacle of civilization.”

The almost religious focus on objects has made museums temples of enlightenment discourse. However, it has also laid them bare for criticism by those who have an eye for the ruins of history, which are left in the wake of such a discourse. The modernist and avant-garde critique of the museum has historically taken on two significant forms. Firstly, the institution was to be challenged from within. Works of art have continued to explore the boundaries of the institution in the hope of breaking down the barriers between institution and life. The hope was, as Peter Bürger (1984, 22) writes, to “reintegrate art into the praxis of life.” Nevertheless, while museums continue to thrive, modernism now finds itself relegated to the museum as a testament of the failings of both. Modernism too has been subsumed by the institution, or perhaps it even contributed to paradoxical success of the institution with its very onslaught, as McBride (2006) points out. Secondly, there has been a call for transparency. Notably this has been exemplified in the Neues Deutsche Nationalgalerie created by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1968. Rethinking the “temple” within the framework of modernist aesthetics, he reduced it to its very basics: pedestal, roof, and columns (McBride 2006). The innards of the clearly monumental temple were exposed with glass used as the main material. In McBride’s (2006, 224–25) brilliant analysis of the construction, he points out the internal antagonisms of the structure: “Mies’s glass museum gave material expression to the democratic ideal of social transparency, but it also preserved the gap between art and life by reverting to the semiotics of the museum as temple. [...] His glass walls signaled democratic accessibility, but they also negated the hall’s function as a space for exhibiting oil paintings, since they deteriorate when exposed to sunlight.”

The one great challenge for the museums, that the modernists did not have a solution to, is how to be inclusive and transparent, while at the same time retaining museums as meaning-making institutions exploring history in narrative space. This is because the very meaning-making process is about something solidifying into form, which means that transparency has to give way. Embedded in the creation of knowledge and meaning is the exclusion of aspects that do not fit into this generalized narrative of history. Especially, and perhaps not surprisingly, scholars from postcolonial studies have been a driving force in pointing out the many omissions in the western narrative most often presented at museums. Together with “new museologists” they have continued the modernist’s cry for a renewal of the museum institution, however, in a somewhat different way. Whereas modernists tried to break down the barriers between museum and life from within—perhaps even by dissolving the very idea of narrative altogether—new museology and postcolonial studies want to include many different and even conflicting narratives within the museum walls. One of the most influential thinkers in this regard is James Clifford, who, in 1997, reapplied Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of “contact zones” to the museum in

his book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. A contact zone is a space in which intermingling cultures and their different histories could be presented and represented in order to create dialogue and critical encounters. This not only challenges the western narrative's supposed universality and thus also the museum-temple as a repository for historical truth, it also in the process makes a distinct shift in the view of what history actually is and what museums are supposed to do. The museum as a contact zone is representative of an epistemology that ceases to understand knowledge as absolutely objective—unlike the positivist epistemology that had traditionally been the basis of museums from the late 18th century onwards (Duarte 2012). Instead, the contact zone focuses on how knowledge is produced, the power structures at play in such a process, and how these can be unveiled.

The rise of the acknowledgement of multiple sets of often conflicting narratives and the need for the museum to express such a multitude has two major impacts on exhibition design. First and foremost, national, homogenous narratives now have to compete on equal terms with the many different narratives that were previously disregarded because they did not fit into the generalized “objective” historical truth. The importance of this is tremendous. Secondly, the idea of the museum as a site for dialogue and democracy shifts the attention from museum-object to museum-visitor. Since the museum is no longer a repository of historical truth, its objects are no longer important in themselves but in the dialogue they invoke when placed in or juxtaposed to the different narratives. This also means that the visitors have something to contribute as well, leading to a host of practices focusing entirely on visitor experience and participation in order to make the museum a welcome open social space, engaging, democratic and community-based. I would argue that such practices shape the face of new museology today, since curators and perhaps especially educators have largely appropriated it. At least in Denmark, Nina Simon's (2010) book *The Participatory Museum* has been the overwhelming source and inspiration for inclusive practices in the museum world over the last few years. However inclusive and engaging the practices might seem, the depth of the theoretical implications of both the modernists and the postmodern critique of the museum (as seen for example in James Clifford's work) is often forgotten. It becomes the very act of engaging with different groups of visitors, which becomes the mark of “inclusiveness” —as if the content of the engagement or the result of the engagement was of no consequence. If we for a minute consider Clifford's idea of the contact zone again, it is not merely about bringing outside narratives into the realm of the museum. An important feature of the contact zone is the clash of multiple sets of conflicting narratives, which creates critical, reflective encounters in which the validity of narrative itself might be challenged. If the museum wants to be a true site for democracy and democratization, it has to do more than uncritically celebrate the process of engagement. It has to create spaces for critical thinking where the visitor is not only able to let his or her voice be heard, but where the visitor can also reflect upon and question that very voice.

Aliens in the Institution

In the preface to *The Participatory Museum*, Nina Simon (2010, ii–iii) writes: “I define 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.” Although Simon's definition clearly has a lot in common with Clifford's contact zone, her focus seems more centered on visitor engagement and experience than on creating contact zones for critical reflection. Giving up curatorial power and taking on a facilitating role becomes a way to empower communities and give them a chance to produce their own representation. One could argue that people produce their own representations all the time anyway: on Facebook, in their

work-life, and so forth. What makes the museum special is that it is seen as a place of authority, thus inscribing value to the representation produced. Paradoxically the sharing of power undermines this very authority and therefore the empowerment it can produce diminishes gradually as it shares its power more and more. In other words, the attractiveness of the museum as a site of representation stems from the fact that it is *not* an open social space—from the fact that it is exclusive and pretends to have a close relationship with truth. Still, from a curatorial point of view, the sharing of power can be interesting because it can be a form of critical encounter with the normal curatorial practice of the museum. Other voices, other viewpoints, might also open up new ideas about how to represent altogether.

On October 4, 2013, The Media Museum, Denmark, opened its doors to an exhibition about early digital culture called “Space Invaders over Brandts.” The exhibition was unusual not because of its topic, but because it was initiated and created by a small group of users coming from an underground digital music scene in Odense. In an email sent to the author on May 03, 2013, the aim of the exhibition was—according to Lise Kapper, curator at The Media Museum, who facilitated the exhibition development—not to display a subculture, but to present “early digital culture from the eighties focusing especially on computer games and hacking culture.” Being a colleague of Lise Kapper, I followed the process of creating the exhibition from the sideline. The analysis, however, is strictly based on the outcome of that process, not on the process itself. However interesting and inclusive the process may be, the interest of this article has been to examine whether the inclusive practices presented creates inclusive products. The exhibition is what Nina Simon (2010, 264) has coined a co-created exhibition, which means that the exhibition is very much a shared responsibility between the curator/facilitator and the user group involved in the exhibition’s development: “Co-creative projects progress very similarly to collaborative projects, but they confer more power to participants. Staff members and community partners work closely to achieve their shared goals. The project development process is often co-determined by the preferences and working styles of participants. The result is a project that is truly co-owned by institutional and community partners.”

However, the lofty ideals of institution and community partners co-owning projects together look better in writing than in reality. The inclusive gesture of opening up towards a community is at the same time a confirmation of the hierarchy of power. It is in the power of the museum to be inclusive or exclusive. For the previously excluded the inclusive gesture welcoming them into the arms of the institution is thus in a sense a continuation of their own powerlessness. They are momentarily given power to express themselves within the framework defined by the museum: the benevolent dictator, who in the end holds all the power if push comes to shove. The bottom line is that power cannot be shared—it can only be taken—since even the inclusive gesture of the museum is an expression of the inherent institutional power. In this context, it comes perhaps as no surprise that the general metaphor used in the poster for the inclusive exhibition “Space invaders over Brandts” was not one of co-creation or co-ownership, but one of war. Both title and visuals suggests that the museum institution is a battleground—a fight for power in which otherness threatens stability and order. They portray their exhibition as “the other,” who threatens to destroy the institution, while they at the same time elegantly tie the visuals to the computer and arcade gaming culture from which they and their exhibition stem. Simultaneously, the poster in both title and visuals inscribes a performative aspect of the battle. It is something about to happen, that they have set in motion. However the binary structure they establish is not new but merely a repetition of modernism’s view of museums: the institution as closed, static, and passive (as something which connotes “death”), while they themselves as the institution’s “other” are presented as lively, aggressive, and full of performative aspects. The point, however, is not that the “Space invaders” choose war and opposition instead of dialogue and cooperation as proposed by the museum. The point is that they probably had no other real option. If they have defined themselves as a subculture in opposition to the institution and the values they ascribe to the institution, then the benevolence of the institution, the outstretched open arms, may invite

them in, but only on humiliating terms: they have to accept the institution's power to do so, thus they have to confirm the hierarchy of power in which they are at the bottom and the institution is at the top. The workaround they chose was to use the open arms of the institution as a platform to work against the institution from within.



Figure 1: Poster for the Exhibition "Space Invaders over Brandts"

Source: Bolding and Esbech 2013

Institutionalizing Aliens

One of the ideas behind including other voices in the exhibitory practices of the museum is also to bring in new perspectives and new ways to define, see, and create exhibitions. However, locked in their modernistic oppositional rhetoric the user group behind the exhibition "Space Invaders over Brandts" does not bring anything new to the table. Interestingly they have taken the warlike rhetoric of modernism, while at the same time discarding the aim of modernism's onslaught: a radical democratization following the destruction of hierarchy of power and

knowledge. In fact, what they have created is in many ways very reminiscent of the museum Adorno and the modernists were opposing.

The exhibition presented a series of objects taken from early digital culture. However, the objects were presented as something in themselves, removed from the sociohistorical context in which they were found. Or even worse, by lifting them out of their original context, they were re-contextualized within the mental framework of the neo-Goth style of the user group: a space filled with dark walls, neon lights, and retro-futuristic elements, etc. In such a mental space, time, space, and the relative importance of each object seem to have dissolved: Retro-objects of today are presented next to objects from the eighties, and subcultural elements of eighties digital culture like cracker-parties are given equal weight as the elements central to the general use of computers at that time. Furthermore, the objects do not interact with each other. They are all put on display as individual, unique highlights. There seems to be no meaningful order or structure in the way they are arranged. This is also the case in the encyclopedic wall of the exhibition: A construction, which consists of a number of cabinets in which different elements of early digital culture, is presented. Each object is put on display disjointed from the context and social use of the object itself. The Commodore 64 is no longer a computer and the joystick not a game controller. They are presented almost as objects of art or as relics of culture—infused with a sense of aura.

If the objects are displayed in a manner that enhances their appearance of uniqueness to the level where they are almost presented as relics of an early digital culture cult, then the text accompanying the objects is in the same vein. Like any other religion, it must operate with a notion of outside and inside, of hidden knowledge only the privileged have access to. The text accompanying a Commodore 64 computer is an example of this: “How do I hack the system and become as cool as Triad [presumably one of the members of the user group]? [...] Find out for yourself, lamer.” The “funny” remark says a lot more than it means to. Others—outsiders—have to qualify themselves to the hidden knowledge that the curators have seemingly attained. Knowledge is certainly not something democratically shared. It is centralized, thereby creating barriers between visitor and curator. A new priesthood, with new hidden knowledge and new truths, is established to replace the priesthood of old. Inclusion has turned into the reproduction of the structures of power separating curator and visitor. The hostility towards the visitor combined with the almost religious light in which the exhibition artifacts are presented does not really point towards modernism’s loss of meaning and questioning of knowledge. It is much more closely linked to ideas formulated for example in early 19th century romanticism.



Figure 2: The Main Exhibition Space

Source: Lübker 2013

However lacking the exhibition is in terms of breaking new ground or being inclusive, one element of the exhibition promised to make up for some of its faults: the teenage room from the eighties. In a corner of the exhibition, a small “room” was created in order to let visitors experience a typical teenager’s room from the eighties. By recreating the setting that early digital culture was a part of, there is a promise of reconnecting the objects to the sociohistorical context in so far as that is possible. Unfortunately, the context created is not exactly representative of the eighties; the aesthetics of the room is a continuation of the aesthetics in the rest of the exhibition. For example, the Bang & Olufsen record player was very expensive at the time, and probably not found in many teenagers’ rooms back then. The posters on the wall highlight the same problem: Depeche Mode, Eurythmics, Jean Michel Jarre, Laurie Anderson, David Bowie, Rutger Hauer in his Blade Runner role and more of the same are hardly a fair representation of the general context in which the computer was at play in the rooms of teenagers in the eighties. Surely, there were far more posters of Samantha Fox or Madonna, than there were of Laurie Anderson at that time.

“Space Invaders over Brandts” is not an exhibition of early digital culture from the eighties. It is a mental snapshot of the user group’s subjective childhood rememberings of digital culture mixed with their retro-interest of today. Through the exhibition this is placed as *the* narrative of digital culture in the eighties, thereby giving the user group’s subjective memories credence because they are presented as historical fact. They invade the museum, not to dissolve its hierarchy but to place themselves as the priesthood telling the truth to the masses.

One could argue that “Space Invaders over Brandts” is just an example of another bad exhibition, and that may be true. As I have argued, however, the very nature of working with inclusion in exhibition design does not necessarily promote a more inclusive design because the inclusive process in fact highlights that there is a center and a margin rather than dissolving such notions.

Since I write from an outside position, I hesitate bringing forth solutions to how the exhibition could have reached a more inclusive result; after all, I do not know the subject matter at hand in detail. However, since nostalgia seems to be at the very heart of the exhibition, I turn to Svetlana Boym's (2001, 17) main work on nostalgia, in which she outlines two different types of nostalgias: "Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* [return home] and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically desperately. Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt." The exhibition described clearly falls into the category of restorative nostalgia stressing the curators' subjective memories as if they were absolute truth and highlighting artifacts of early computer culture as if they were relics and not material objects. Following Boym, I suggest the exhibition could disrupt the restorative nostalgia by juxtaposing it with elements of reflective nostalgia thus destabilizing the idea of one truth. For example, the aestheticization of the artifacts of early digital culture could be juxtaposed with a presentation of the artifacts as function. Likewise, the teenage room of the eighties should be put in contrast to a presentation that is closer to the typical teenage room of the time. Furthermore, the reflective nostalgia works in terms of irony and humor rather than seriousness, fragments of memory rather than totality, and details rather than symbols. Again, the juxtaposition of the sign-system of reflective nostalgia and restorative nostalgia opens up space and meaning through the destabilization of restorative nostalgias' focus on absolute truth, seriousness and totality.

It is doubtful if such an inclusive exhibition can be achieved within the framework of the co-created project description Nina Simon gives us. It calls for a strong institution that does not just lend out its authority to whatever voices want to be heard without making sure that the result is furthering the agenda of inclusion rather than reproducing structures of exclusion.

Another example of how the very process of inclusion works against its own agenda is the photo exhibition "A Mosaic—Photographs from the Collection Selected by People from Vollsmose." These were on display at the same time as the "Space Invaders over Brandts" in the Photo Museum, located just a floor below The Media Museum in the same complex. The exhibition was an attempt to bring the marginalized into the center of things by letting citizens from the local ghetto, Vollsmose, choose the photos put on display. According to the explanatory text accompanying the photos, the message of the exhibition was the simple: "We are all alike." "So does this exhibition show any signs that the pictures were chosen by people from Vollsmose? [...] The answer is no – a couple of pictures are even the same as the ones the Prince Consort chose in 2009, where His Royal Highness Prince Henrik was given the same challenge." In the well-meaning attempt to include socially and ethnically marginalized groups, the exhibition actually constitutes the very hierarchy in which these groups are marginalized. We learn that they are people just like you and I, as if it were a surprise, but, furthermore, they are *even* like the Prince Consort Henrik. The individuals asked to choose the pictures are anonymous in the exhibition. Their worth seems to be that they are representing the ghetto. They are thus reduced to the function of being at the bottom of the hierarchy, not even being allowed the privilege of being presented as individuals. It is against the backdrop of this dehumanization that the exhibition reveals its revelatory message: They seem to be surprisingly human, despite their place in the hierarchy. Such inclusive practice says more about society's prevailing racism or stereotypes than it does about inclusion.

In "Space Invaders over Brandts" one of the reasons for the failure of ending up with an inclusive result was in the very design: the co-created exhibition, where the museum willingly lends out its authority without providing adequate opposition or guidance to whatever truth the included party brings to the table. In "A Mosaic" the flaw is in the design as well: Using individuals to exemplify class or ethnic structures is reducing them and their identity to that very

class or race. Therefore, the whole premise of the exhibition is wrong. The only way you can dissolve prejudices of class or race is to let people's voices be heard—not as a symbol of the color of their skin or the thickness of their wallet. Simply let people emerge as themselves instead of reducing them to stereotypes in order to combat other stereotypes. This means let them have a name and a face. Perhaps let them present their stories alongside their picks of photos. Make them tangible as human beings.



Figure 3: The “White Cube” Exhibition Space of “A Mosaic”

Source: Lübker 2013

As a last example of how the inclusive practice often constitutes the opposite of the intent, I will leave the museum exhibition space for a brief moment and turn towards another form of exhibition, namely the recreational area called Superkilen in Copenhagen. This is very much an example of the postmodern practice of inclusion where different narratives are presented side by side. In order to create an open multiethnic place they have chosen to bring one element from a number of different cultures throughout the world. They have, for example, brought a red square from Russia, a Thai-boxing ring from Thailand, and a Manga-styled playground slide from Japan. The inclusion is thus reduced to an inclusion of stereotypes: condensed, symbolic objects designed to represent a whole nation or ethnicity. The individual is lost in the equation, marginalized by the stereotypes created by the practice of inclusion. Exactly the opposite of the aim of inclusion.



Figure 4: The Red Square in Copenhagen
Source: Wikimedia Commons 2016

Totalizing Difference: Towards Radical Democracy in the Museum

The examples above highlight different forms of what I call superficial inclusiveness: gestures and ways to represent difference that in reality reproduce and consolidate a hierarchy of power and a system of center and margin. As is the case in “Space Invaders over Brandts” such practices often end up privileging certain forms of knowledge and representations thereby infusing these forms with an almost auratic element. Such failed attempts at inclusion and their production of aura remind me of the discussion between Adorno and Benjamin about cinema (Adorno and Benjamin 1973). Benjamin saw certain democratic possibilities in cinema as a mass medium. Contrary to this, Adorno points out that democratization does not rely on the exclusivity or non-exclusiveness of art. Instead, he calls for “more dialectics” (Adorno and Benjamin 1973, 67). To understand this, we need to have a closer look at his definition of dialectics from the opening pages of *Negative Dialectics*: “The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of the adequacy. [...] Contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity; the dialectical primary of the principle of contradiction makes the thought of unity the measure of heterogeneity. As the heterogeneous collides with its limit, it exceeds itself” (Adorno 1973, 5). Adorno’s point is that thinking in itself is an activity that structures and defines center and margin. The very act of bringing something forth—of representing something through thought and language—is at the same time an excluding process, marginalizing that which does not fit into the conceptual schemata of the object. Dialectics, he says, is the awareness of that something left out of representation—an awareness of difference or of the dark side of what is highlighted, if you will. When he asks for “more dialectics,” what he is calling for is a representational practice that constantly attempts to keep itself open to those forms the very

representation itself excludes. While Benjamin looked at the democratic potential of works of art from their relation to their onlooker (cinema as mass medium as opposed to idealistic bourgeois art), Adorno sees the democratic potential as something embedded in the very representational practice. In this, the democratic potential is characterized by an opening towards difference—an opening to that which has been left out. If we apply this notion of the democratic potential to the examples of different inclusive practices I have given it is easy to see how they fall short. Surely, the inclusion of a user group does not have a democratic result in the case of *Space Invaders*, since the exhibition rejects difference in order to elevate the subjective memories of the user group to historical fact. Likewise, *Superkilen* on Nørrebro is not democratic in nature despite the fact that it invites people of different nations and ethnicities to use the space, because it does this on reductive terms forcing people to be subsumed under the stereotype of that nation or ethnicity. The same is true in the case of the exhibition “A Mosaic” in which the marginalized are only brought to the fore as exactly that: their function as marginal is more important than their identity as human beings.

Within his own field, professor of educational theory Gert J. J. Biesta highlights some of the same issues and raises some of the same questions as I attempt to here on inclusive practices in museums. Outlining the arguments of Jacques Rancière, he writes: “Democracy – or to be more precise, the appearance of democracy – is therefore not simply the situation in which a group who has previously been excluded for from the realm of politics steps forward to claim its place under the sun. [...] For Rancière, therefore, democratization is *not* a process that emanates from the center and extends to the margins. [...] This means that for Rancière democratization is no longer a process of inclusion of excluded parties into the existing order; it is rather a transformation of that order in the name of equality” (Biesta 2010, 122–23).

Following Rancière, Biesta argues that democratization is a form of two-way disruption: as quoted above it disrupts and transforms the existing societal order in the name of equality, but, at the same time, it is also an interruption of individual wants and a transformation of those into collective needs. If we combine Adorno’s cry for more dialectics—for a representational practice that constantly keeps itself open for interpretation and meaning—with Biesta’s emphasis on the transformative aspect inherent in democratization it is clear, that to be truly inclusive is not just about including other people’s perspectives (fulfilling their wants) in the exhibition space. It is about creating a space where their voice can critically and self critically interact with the voices of others—not to find a final discourse, not to provide a final answer—but to understand and acknowledge that their perspective is not the only one. Inclusive practice should not be about fulfilling individual needs for self-representation, but rather about engaging with what is missing from your own perspective. For museums, this also means challenging representation in itself. To represent multiple narratives is not enough; representation is in itself highlighting and hiding aspects of history all the time.

Therefore, if the museum wants to be truly inclusive it must walk the tightrope between the two extremes of museum practices: between the authoritarian “one representation, one truth” to the constant chaos and disruptions of the participatory museum, where fulfilling every individual want as a valid narrative threatens to do away with history and truth altogether. If we are to transcend the semblance of inclusion in many of today’s practices—if we truly want the museum to be a democratic institution—we have to combine the modernist approach of destroying power and hierarchy from within and the postmodern practice of bringing multiple narratives into the museum. We have to represent and challenge representation at the same time. This of course is an almost impossible task, but following the thinking of Adorno and Biesta the outline of a practice of critical thinking for exhibition design can perhaps start with the following few points:

- Design to create critical encounters and engagement between different discourses to create unstable spaces where new meaning can emerge.
- Challenge the “wants” of both the institution and the visitors—going from individual desire to what is collectively desirable.
- Brush history against the grain: destabilize stereotypes.
- Representation is always barbarism—while illuminating one perspective it hides and negates other perspectives. Explore what is missing.
- Provide questions instead of answers and make the visitors ask questions instead of providing answers. Create open narratives.
- Focus on doubleness and open unfinished forms.

In such a disruptive space representation and meaning is always vulnerable—on the verge of disappearing or appearing. It is, however, in precisely such a space that true diversity, which is diversity of thought, can emerge.

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The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum

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