

IDENTITY STRUGGLES OF MUSEUM PROFESSIONALS: AUTONOMOUS EXPERTISE AND AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION IN EXHIBITION PRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

The established identity of a museum professional is that of a traditional modernist cultural expert, deploying hegemonic power stemming from institutionalised legitimate knowledge. At the same time, its identity work bastions its components against diverse forms of structural audience participation. The museum professional's identity responds to the challenge of structural audience participation with resistance, anxiety and othering. The museum professional's identity work involves a considerable amount of bastioning in that regard, and after participatory intervention has taken place, it works towards marking clearer frontiers between the legitimate expert and idealised amateur. With the experience, a small amount of assimilation of participatory diversification also appears, while the possibilities remain of a 'third expertise' emerging through future collaborative processes.

KEYWORDS: identity • cultural expertise • museum professional • audience participation • exhibition production

INTRODUCTION

The following paper* is concerned with the formation of the museum professional's identity in two processes of exhibition production. One is a more traditional curatorial process and the other challenges such curatorship by opening up possibilities for structural audience participation in exhibition production. In order to analyse the 'traditional' formation of curatorial identity and what happens to it in processes where audiences are given more power, this article first looks at the identity processes in the ongoing production of the permanent exhibition on Estonian cultural history at the Estonian National Museum (ENM). Subsequently, this article juxtaposes this with an exhibition production process triggered by an audience empowerment project. The responses, such as resistance, anxiety and othering, make explicit both the consequences of the challenge to the established identity and also the limits to developing a more collabora-

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tive exhibition production model that are embedded in that identity. However, a more fluid/hybrid expert identity forms a perspective from which to theorise possibilities of overcoming some aspects in the dichotomy of experts and amateurs.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs an ethnographic methodological framework. This comes through the author having taken part in the identity processes within the museum itself, both the more traditional curatorial processes and the challenge, the latter also including a facilitatory role in the project. Moreover, I have participated in these processes in a double role: first as a museum professional managing exhibitions, but after two years moving to the research department and becoming an ethnographer conducting participatory observation 'at home'. As a researcher, I had the advantage of already being immersed in the culture of exhibition production. In the permanent exhibition process, collecting data largely entailed taking part in the permanent exhibition planning meetings as a member of the curatorial team working on the exhibition content. From the processes of the intervention, the data is pooled through participatory observation at the intervention design meetings and the meetings where the project was introduced and discussed within a broader group of ENM professionals (open board meeting, internal seminar of the research department). Apart from that, I held a roundtable debriefing among the involved and interested museum staff after the first intervention exhibition had finished. Last but not least, the draft of the research article was circulated among the museum professionals in the ENM and feedback was encouraged.

SITUATING THE THEORETICAL ISSUES AND RESEARCH OBJECT

Identities are here seen as social: possessing both individual and collective dimensions and working both towards establishing differences as well as similarities (Jenkins 2008: 17–21). At the same time this article identifies with the fundamental social ontology of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985; also Laclau 2007 [1996]) by believing that identities are contingent positions that identify with meanings. Meanings tend to be arranged according to some hegemonic discursive framework, but will also always preserve the possibility of being rearranged, identifying with other markers of meaning. The human knowledge of "who is who and what is what" is very much embedded in language and is a process (Jenkins 2008: 5), therefore it can never be entirely fixed. Such processes are sometimes also called 'identity work' to capture "the discursive efforts that people have undertaken in order to (re)construct and maintain their identities" (Carpentier 2011b: 189). The particular identity under study in this article is that of museum professional. It signifies those who are engaged in cultural production in museum institutions and employ curatorship over the museum collections and/or knowledge production, which involves constructing the frameworks of meaning enabled (or not) in museum exhibitions. There is one more important notion in the identity processes concerned by this research and that is participation. Without going into an extensive discussion of the term, 'participation' here is chosen to refer first and fore-

most to 'structural' participation which includes co-deciding exhibition content, policy and technology as well as evaluating the content (Carpentier 2011a: 130). Whether it structurally incorporates audiences or only 'traditional' cultural experts is also a crucial aspect for analysing a traditional/established/modernist museum professional's identity when encountering a 'new' identity component that involves a different attitude towards a more structural audience participation. The museum itself, then, is the particular setting where the identity processes at the focus of this analysis take place. While traditionally "measured by its internal possessions such as collections, endowments, staff and facilities" (Watson 2007: 1), it is becoming more and more influenced by "specific, demonstrable and measurable benefits to the public" (ibid.). In the discussions and debates over the social relevance of the museum (Fyfe 2006) and the new horizons (often opposed to outdated limitations) for museums, referred to as "new museology" (Vergo 1989) most emphasis is put on rethinking the museum's relationships with its audiences. While certainly not a completely new discourse (Dana 1917), it has intensively brought to the forefront keywords such as 'access', 'social responsibility' and 'community involvement', replacing the discourses that emphasise collecting, interpreting and exhibiting (Witcomb 2003: 59). The role of active audiences (Hein 2006; Runnel, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2010) and the techniques through which to facilitate audience engagement (Black 2005) and participation (Simon 2010) as well as debates over empowerment and its limits (Macdonald 2002; Golding 2009; Burch 2010) are increasingly at the heart of the museological texts, although they also in impact studies (RCMG 2002) and policy documents (DCMS 2005).

While Watson and Waterton (2010: 1) point out that community engagement/involvement as both concept and practice has been well integrated into the 'heritage sector', becoming part of the jurisdiction, legislation and management processes, sometimes even resulting in box-ticking and an ossification of the related assumptions and practices. However, the "abiding and inequitable imbalances between the professionals and communities" (ibid.: 2) might remain there, they argue. Relying on fieldwork in community-based archives, Stevens et al. (2010) show how archive professionals in the UK are not prone to valuing alternative forms of expertise, which clearly implies that the rigidity of the museum professional's identity is not only a matter for post-Communist societies. There is ample reason to invite museum (and heritage) professionals to reflect on the ways they construct and perpetuate certain components of professional identity and, through that, those of the community and audiences.

Informed by the issues raised in the overall intellectual climate of new museology, it is nevertheless important to take into account the Foucauldian genealogy of the museum and its agency in society theorised by Tony Bennett as a museum-specific "governmentality" the general regulatory aim of which is "to allow the people, addressed as subjects of knowledge rather than as objects of administration, to know; not to render the populace visible to power but to render power visible to the people and, at the same time, to represent to them that power as their own" (1995: 98). Another important perspective on the ways museums have functioned in cultural (often colonial) encounters is James Clifford's employment of Marie Louise Pratt's notion of "contact zone" by giving it a perspective for theorising encounters over social distances between the museum and communities "within the same state, region, or city – in the centers rather than the frontiers of nations and empires" (Clifford 1997: 204). Andrea Witcomb does that effec-

tively by analysing the pressures of popularisation on curatorial culture in a number of cases in the museum field of Australia. She looks at the seemingly imperative but also very complex change in the curatorial culture from being centred on the traditional practices towards popularisation in two directions. The first of them is the “smiling professionalism” that marketing discourse calls for in order to survive economically in the increasingly competitive leisure market. This led, in one of the cases Witcomb studied, to the development of two different museum spaces: one based on the ‘old’ curatorial culture of thorough research and preservation expertise, and another one a leisure-market-oriented new space with a centrepiece that emphasised popular sentiments of the day in order to be more attractive to the general public (Witcomb 2003: 51–78). Witcomb also discusses community access galleries as another way of popularising museums, which may empower communities with the skills of curatorship and facilitate the production of their own representation(s) (ibid.: 79–101). This is another way of popularisation: implementing facilitatory practices (giving up power) but when encountering the curatorial culture of the museum, it also functioned in Australia as a community instruction project on cultural diversity. Here Witcomb acknowledges Bennett’s arguments about the positive productive power of the museums’ continuing governmentality and along similar lines questions the opposition between communities and museum that has been constructed by the new museology. Trying to overcome that opposition, Witcomb draws implications for the museum’s changing role: by regulating communities, initiating civic reform and producing communities it is always possible to become more democratic and representative as new communities are continuously constructed and possible to reach. The curator and the museum cannot only play the role of facilitator but are destined to remain cultural producers as well (ibid.: 79–80). In other words, this can be viewed as an implication of a third way: museum professionals must become more reflexive and critical about their power(s), and become more open to diversified professional identities when it comes to traditional roles and functions of a museum. At the same time, they continue to work from the position claiming (productive) power and (positive) governmentality inherited from the modernist agenda of museum professionalism.

As Tali and Pierantoni point out, the construction of new museum institutions in Central and Eastern Europe tend to be driven much less by the local civic society than the interests of public authorities and neoliberal market actors. These new institutions all consequently tend to function as symbolic monuments for the new social order established since the beginning of the 1990s (Tali, Pierantoni 2008: 243, 259–260). After the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre and the Art Museum of Estonia (Kumu), the ENM has been third on the official construction waiting list of such symbolic monuments, being also an old debt to the national consciousness by not having had its own building, created for museum purposes, throughout the 103 years of its history.¹ At the time of writing, the general building process has passed through the phases of international architectural competition and preliminary design. The production of a permanent exhibition is in the middle of conceptualisation, design and object selection. The current permanent exhibition from 1994, on Estonian culture, is essentially a display of an ethnographic present of late 19th century peasant culture and is based on the collecting ideology that once sparked the establishment of the ENM. The prospective display, however, aims at broadening the scope both chronologically and paradigmatically by extending the beginning of the storyline from earliest history to the present day and dis-

cursively also looking for a more multicultural and diverse representation of everyday life (Rattus 2009).

IDENTITY FORMATION OF THE MUSEUM PROFESSIONAL IN 'TRADITIONAL' EXHIBITION PRODUCTION

Those involved in the permanent exhibition production are ENM professionals. They form the core curatorial team, although there are several external experts involved too, from the fields of archaeology, language studies, and folklore studies and religion sociology. The architects of the building and exhibition designers are also external experts, commissioned to the design task through a competition. The external experts assume the position of a museum professional, but there are also effective distinctions at work to differentiate between the museum's own expertise and other experts in the process.

Following the theoretical framework of social identity in Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, Nico Carpentier (2011b) formulates the "old"/modernist components of the cultural expert's identity. The first of them is knowledge and skill, expertise in context and objects, sometimes with a more contemporary marketing and managerial knowledge component (legitimate knowledge in Bourdieuan terminology). Closely linked to expertise is the second element – autonomy from a number of influences, such as the market and state but in some situations also audiences with their "unwarranted claims". The third element is public service provision, which tends to (but not necessarily) articulate audiences as more passive receivers. A certain professional ethic forms the fourth element, to which non-experts are not bound. The fifth element structuring the culture professional's identity is institutional embeddedness, which is often based on employment relationship, support systems and a network of peers. The formation of a professional community can lead to the positioning of audiences as 'ordinary' thus making it distinct from professional 'elites'. Stemming from the professional responsibilities, a cultural expert inevitably deploys management and power, and this sixth element leads to a sense of psychological property. (Carpentier 2011b: 191–193) Consequently, cultural production often entails the "management of audiences' bodies and the targeted exposure of audiences' minds to carefully selected meanings" (ibid.: 193).

In the ENM exhibition production, museum curator identity is embedded in the habitual practices and articulations. On closer examination, its formation resembles first and foremost an established/traditional/modernist identity of a culture professional, with some institutional diversity challenging this hegemonic discursive structure. At the time of writing, the identity work of museum professionals and the involved experts goes on between themselves, retaining autonomy from the public. These culture professionals thus 'govern' the visitor experiences and construct the museum exhibition space. While doing so they maintain and generate the power that enables them to construct 'appropriate' narratives and object displays with the 'appropriate' tone and design. Even though it is possible to conclude that the museum professional can rely on the bastions of its autonomy, it has not been an easy process to synchronise curatorial knowledge and the knowledge of professionals from the other fields of production – especially with those of the architects and the designers. Extensive struggles between curators and architects over where to position the internal walls are quite exemplary here. While the debates were hardly over the meanings that the architecture offers they reveal how the autonomy of the culture professional, even when well defended

from the influence of the audiences, can also be a source of antagonism when different types of legitimate knowledge claim authorship over the same area. Curators have been engaged in similar battles with the designers too as in the process of prototyping the curators have sometimes experienced that some design choices override their authorship over content. Such struggles are controversial and uncomfortable, but nevertheless appear at the same time to be legitimate compared to the hypothetical ones that structural audience participation would give rise to. There is a default agreement that those who are engaged are entitled to the position of cultural expert and thereby to deploy their legitimate power over structure and content, which overlap to some extent and (because knowledge and professional ethics might differ) create antagonisms/struggles.

The struggles with the external experts simultaneously appear to prevent the internal antagonisms within the core curatorial team from appearing, which could theoretically stem from different positions regarding the pressures of popularisation. In the case of the ENM, there has not been as much pressure to move towards marketing-oriented popularisation as in the Australian cases that Andrea Witcomb has analysed. The traditional functions of the museum are still dominated by the structure of its departments: collections, research, conservation, exhibitions and museum education. The relatively high autonomy of the curators from the influence of the market can to some extent be explained by the fact that there is no powerful marketing unit at the ENM as of today and that the managerial and marketing component of the museum professional is not widely incorporated within the curator identity. The leading role in permanent exhibition production is designated to the curators of the research department, many of whom have experience of producing exhibition content over the years in the temporary building. Their 'legitimate knowledge' largely stems from ethnography (historically centred on material culture) and cultural history. A small minority are also members of the intervention design team, embedded in (new) media and communication studies, also influenced by new museology. The head curator of the permanent exhibition is also clearly informed in contemporary anthropological theory and cultural studies, leading to the advocacy of multiculturalism and detachment from the ways of reconstructing an ethnographic present employed in the current permanent exhibition on Estonian cultural history. The common ground for curating content is currently broadly defined as 'everyday life' where the sources of data are 'informants'. The researcher-informant relationship could be theorised as a certain way of facilitating audience participation (what Nina Simon [2010] categorises as contributive participation) and through that giving legitimacy to exhibition producers to do their work. Although the representation of different cultural (mostly ethnic) minorities has been on the agenda of the permanent exhibition, the more structural participation of audiences has been incorporated in a very limited way in what seems by default be a full-scale professional game.

The museum professional here clearly has to work in partnership with the external parties, for whom the museum professionals represent the client and, paradoxically but unsurprisingly, sometimes even the public (Ghotmeh 2009). The implicit premise seems to be that the public will by default benefit most from the end product from the best "public serving" experts.² The identity components of autonomy and public service seem to hide an antagonism: while the experts work autonomously to the greatest public good, there is a tendency to underrepresent the public because the museum professionals themselves would be in the (power) position of a client in that process. Consequently, the audiences become slightly annihilated symbolically, resembling the visualisations of the designers where semi-transparent human figures stroll through the exhibitions sometimes engaging in pre-designed interactions.

CHALLENGES TO THE MUSEUM PROFESSIONAL'S IDENTITY IN THE OPEN CURATORSHIP PROJECT

In parallel to the permanent exhibition production process, an intellectual intervention was designed, stemming from a broader research project agenda influenced by new museology, cultural studies, and new media studies. The design came from a research group affiliated both with the museum research department and the university. The research project design is built on a number of interventions that follow an academic agenda, but are at a more practical level also aimed at introducing some new communicative approaches to the everyday work and practices of the ENM. The research group has, in two and a half years designed five different audience participation interventions at the museum and led internal seminars on museum communication (focusing on new media and audience participation). In the context of this article these are interpreted as diversification opportunities for rearticulating the established identity components of museum professionals. The intervention of particular interest here is the Open Curatorship model – publicly promoted as “Create Your Own Exhibition” – as the one aiming to develop structural audience participation in the field of exhibition production. What took place was, in short, the launch of an open public call inviting everyone except museum professionals to submit their ideas for an exhibition in the ENM temporary exhibition space, with a public online/onsite vote conducted to determine the winners.³ It has been possible to submit exhibition ideas to the ENM in the past, but it has not been strategically communicated to the general public before and a committee of ENM professionals has always been the sole gatekeeper making the decisions on who gets to make an exhibition at the museum.

In the framework of the intervention, the power relations between curators and audiences are played out differently, and this consequently presents an obvious challenge to the established identity of the museum professional by restructuring roles and redistributing power. On the one hand, the museum professional in the Open Curatorship production format can, instead of fully controlling exhibition content and design, set minimal terms and conditions to the process where publicly selected members of the audience make decisions over museum content. On the other hand, the museum professional's identity was provided with an opportunity to embrace new components. In order to analyse the diversity of the responses in the museum context, this paper brings in a theoretical framework of these possible components from a comprehensive analysis by Carpentier (2011b) in an analysis of a culture professional's identity in general. These are modelled after what he calls “an agonistic participatory fantasy” stemming from the socio-cultural actuality of a “more post/late/liquid-modernist logic” (ibid.: 2). According to that model (which is more or less echoed in the overall agenda of the intervention):

- 1) The knowledge and skills component established by legitimate knowledge could be ‘updated’ with recognition of the diversity of expertise during the employment of curatorial skills in the national museum exhibition space.
- 2) The autonomy component would have to avoid detachment and anxiety towards audience participation and employ well-communicated connectedness instead.
- 3) Public service provision could entail more facilitation of participation.

4) The fundamental professional ethics should accordingly encompass the principle of equalising power imbalances in the skills and resources needed for exhibition production and, while remaining embedded in institutions and peer networks, foster a respect towards amateurism by finding new ways to include amateurs in these networks and even institutions.

5) Last but not least, while continuing to deploy management and power over the museum collections, museum professional would have to explicitly communicate how such a symbolic power could be shared in an exhibition space. (Carpentier 2011b: 200–201)

When looking at the responses to the offered new components, it is apparent that these rely strongly on the established discursive structure of a museum professional's identity, and a hope to see a quick assimilation of a participatory identity work seems to be rather idealistic. The responses to the challenge were pooled at three instances during the different phases of the project. The first was before the project had actually been announced in public – an open board meeting of the ENM (a regular practice, discussing issues approximately once a month in the organisation with the wider forum of the museum staff) where the overall activity of the research group was introduced and the Create Your Own Exhibition project proposal was intensively debated as a fresh project idea. The second meeting providing responses was one of the internal museum communication seminar series where the soon to be launched project was thoroughly debated. At that time, the project had just begun and a few initial ideas had already been submitted. The third meeting took place as a debriefing session after the first winning exhibition had just been taken down from display. Not as large a number of museum professionals participated, but the discussion was more focused and responses more diverse (two of the post-production responses came by email). The first two debates involved more museum professionals and the challenge was much more 'imaginary' than at the debriefing session. In addition, the first two meetings evoked proportionately much more resistance, anxiety, othering and (with only a couple of exceptions) no supportive assimilation. The diversity of the responses was largely only in the different articulations of resistance/othering and also in the level of anxiety. It was only after the first production process had come to an end that the responses diversified.

Positioning from a potential selection committee member to becoming a voter equal in the selection process with 'ordinary' people does create a threat to the established hegemonic professional identity. Resistance was expressed against the way that the exhibition to be produced was chosen, i.e. to the new scheme of power relations, which created a feeling of museum professionals being left out of the decision-making process. The traditionally receptive/passive audiences were being 'upgraded' to a position of an active content-provider and decision-maker, which the established professional identity began to resist also by doubting whether the members of the general public could really refrain from exploiting the possibility of voting more than once and for oneself. The responses at the start of the project also revealed anxiety echoing through the resistance over whether the Create Your Own Exhibition project would create a conflict over museum resources by, for example, claiming the same exhibition space at the same time as when the museum would want to use it. Such attitudes show that the museum professional is perhaps too comfortable with the professional committee mak-

ing decisions on museum exhibition content and programming, and leaving that to the audience is difficult to integrate within the established elements of their identity. The potential amount of extra work it could cause created similar anxiety over the possibility of overexploiting museum resources (with a project that might not be the museum's top priority) and the key role of professional skills regarding the object management in exhibition production were highlighted.

One of the aims of instituting the category of engaging museum objects into the Create Your Own Exhibition format was to intervene in the established ways of contributory public-collections relationship. These are traditionally based on a correspondents' network established in 1931, gathering mainly textual answers to thorough questionnaires, but also photographs and objects. Access to the actual objects once they are in the collections is highly regulated and a member of the public accessing these objects is positioned with the signifier 'researcher', which seems to imply the privilege of 'serious' research interests towards the 'authentic' objects (such as a museum professional would have) over all other kinds of interest or participation. Museum collections are at present managed by different museum professionals and, for a number of infrastructural and historical reasons, are geographically rather dispersed into spaces not directly accessible to the public. This hasn't left much room for even considering someone other than a museum professional or acknowledged cultural expert participating in making an exhibition which engages museum objects. In order to overcome the rigid dichotomy of cultural expertise and amateurism, the intervention experimented with the possibilities of opening up forms of 'third expertise' to enhance access and participation related to museum collections. There was a clearly communicated opportunity to propose exhibition ideas with museum objects in the Open Curatorship intervention. The possession of legitimate knowledge provides the traditional museum professional's identity with the power position required to doubt whether giving audiences the power over which objects to show from the museum collections is the right thing to do: "people, even our younger [colleagues] do not know the collections" and whether "is it really possible to present an idea with a picture of something (s)he has not even seen?" (author's fieldwork notes). The established premise is to keep ignorance at bay and 'educate' the public through professionally curated exhibitions rather than seeking participatory opportunities to overcome that ignorance in alternative ways.

Another type of response was to other the participating audiences by articulating them as authentic when they were as autonomous from professional influences as possible. This can be characterised as a very professional-centred point of view because they appear to prefer to be autonomous from the influence of the amateur audiences. Ways of constructing the true amateur identity in the exhibition context were consequently opposed to culture professionals at general whose ideas might also not be suitable for such an exhibition format. Even though these other cultural experts are not museum professionals, their knowledge appears not to be 'legitimate' in this context. Potential participants were signified mainly with an idealised non-professionality, whose value to the museum depends on how well their 'amateurishness' becomes evident through the exhibition. This is again a museum-professional centred way of looking at the possible identities in the exhibition production process.

However, the possibility of the 'third expertise' is constantly undermined by these antagonistic significations in opposition to a 'real' museum professional. Both the inter-

vention designers and the other museum professionals shared the anxiety that exhibition proposals would be dominated by amateur collectors (e.g. matchboxes), hobbyists (e.g. painters) or performance artists. Such audiences were suspected of being incapable of sticking to the right topic (everyday life) because of too little reflection over how what they want to exhibit expresses the everyday. One of the proposals given as a negative example here was an idea to exhibit someone's nature photos, which raised the issue that it is not an expression of everyday life because an explicit human element was missing from the frame. In other words, there are some human expressions less desired by museum professionals to qualify as an exhibition displayed at the ENM: where the established professional identity prefers traditional curatorship over the possibility of participation-sensitive 'third expertise', there the interventionist seeks to connect audiences who have not yet discovered the legitimacy of their knowledge and experiences in the museum exhibition context. Both share the assumption that those who want to participate are more likely to have an almost abnormal drive to exhibit but are less likely to have the appropriate content for a national museum exhibition space. Here it is also important to note that the agenda of the intervention was also intended to reach out to audiences who would otherwise not imagine a (national) museum being relevant for their lives in any way; the agenda also influenced the ways the potential participants were imagined.

Regarding the museum collections and possible 'third expertise', the debate raised by those representing the established professional identity was not actually about how to raise and facilitate public interest in collections, but much more about finding arguments for how to defend against an imagined rush by the public into the collections in preparation for an exhibition idea. This is reflected in a statement by a museum professional that excursions to the collections are definitely out of the question, thus also discarded as a potential strategy to overcome the obstacle of lacking legitimate knowledge about the collections. There was a general feeling one could sense that the regular access hours and online directories for getting acquainted with collections were somehow not enough in the context of the Open Curatorship project, although in actuality it proved to be more than enough. All these can be interpreted as indications of building (traditional) identity bastions related to decision-making, legitimate knowledge and collections. The museum serves the public, but at the same time there seems to be a tendency towards a stiffening of identity regarding this service especially when attention is drawn to alternative access and participation approaches for the audiences consulting the collections. While collection managers are seen as a valuable resource, seeing 'third expertise' along similar lines is not yet a reality.

This introduces the argument surrounding another important established component of museum professional identity that is perhaps most difficult to attribute any kind of 'third expertise', namely professional ethics. The lack of it is echoed through an experienced danger that the audiences would act irresponsibly when producing the exhibitions: because the process is too complicated, the person(s) might not be ready to comply with all the proposals given and terms/conditions set by the museum. The most dubious expression of othering through the lack of professional ethics was a spreading rumour in the museum (when the first Create Your Own Exhibition was already on display) that a few old photographs put on display by the 'amateur curator' had been stolen from an old house in the countryside. This was never confirmed, but it left

an overall subconscious suspicion towards the diversification of expertise in exhibition content production.

After the first exhibition production the responses were more diverse and slightly more reflexive, although the traditional identity remained well established and the consequences for the professional identity become more evident. After having seen the first Create Your Own Exhibition,⁴ some of the museum professionals involved in the production struggled to articulate the possible benefits of the project for the museum, while doing so still largely giving their opinions based on the standards of (modernist) curatorship. Those more involved in the actual production experienced that the Create Your Own Exhibition curator was working very independently; the interventionist facilitator helped with the logistics so that workload was not particularly high and regarded positively as such. The opportunity to engage 'other kinds of audiences was also generally seen as positive, but when it became evident that they might not always synchronise with the museum professional's established view on what an exhibition should be like, some antagonisms become apparent, leading to defensive identity work. The first of such identity bastions is the value of objects from the perspective of what would contribute to the existing course of exhibitions at the museum as well as to the museum collections. The general conclusion was that the first own exhibition, apart from being emotionally difficult for some because of its topic, did not provide any new paradigm or approach. The bottom line for evaluating the success for the museum was not the participatory characteristics of the production process but whether objects on display were already featured in the collections and whether the exhibition (or a submitted idea) wasn't too focused on a myriad of objects, sometimes coupled with a similarly undesirable overly historical perspective. Here, again, an authentic amateur was constructed as ideally bringing "new quality in content and design", which once again evokes the antagonism of amateurs being authentic because they are not professional but simultaneously becoming othered as such.

What clearly emerged after the participatory intervention was the established museum professional identity working towards a clear distinction between the museum exhibitions and the public's own exhibitions, sometimes desiring this to be explicitly reflected in the design. A professional involved argued that probably no more than one out of five visitors was aware of the fact that this was a public and not an ENM exhibition. Another proposed trying to delegate even more power to the participating audiences and aim at a fully hosted⁵ exhibition format in the future. However, such a separation (even when it is articulated as a productive 'branding' project) in the museum between professional and amateur exhibitions, might well lead to the creation of a relatively isolated culture of hosted exhibitions that would not function as a contact zone between the museum, participants and audiences. Neither would it facilitate the productive governmentality of the museum very much, because such a model would not empower audiences with the curatorial knowledge and skills that they are constantly argued to be lacking. This is not to argue that hosted exhibitions do not have place in a national museum – on the contrary, they are already taking place regularly and the Open Curatorship format might want to aim at more collaborative exhibition production, which requires new participatory components to be integrated into the hegemonic museum professional's identity.

CONCLUSIONS

The Estonian National Museum has not yet had the chance to produce a truly contemporary display on Estonian culture in a true museum building. This is a debt to museum culture to be paid off. It coincides, however, with the sociocultural changes that put the museum's relationship with its audiences under review, meaning that there is a myriad of changes to be implemented at the same time.

The third way implied in Witcomb's analysis on the pressures and changes in curatorial culture and Carpentier's model of a more participatory identity for the culture professional does remain both a chance and a challenge in the Estonian case. The ENM professional has so far been able to enjoy relatively low pressure from marketing-oriented popularisation and has at the same time retained and defended the 'old' modernist identity of museum professional. From the perspective of that identity, the culture of producing the new permanent exhibition is centred on facilitating traditional/established professionalism of the expertise related to the field, engaging different professionals who participate by applying the best practices of their fields. At the time of exhibition production today, structural consultations take place between experts, (re) interpreting the existing collections and filling in the gaps according to the needs of the constructed abstract narratives while imagining a community of visitors. The potential in the developments of new media are high on the agenda of the designers and emphasise both access and interactivity. Communities of today are largely left with the opportunity to consult a readymade exhibition when it is opened. Structural participation is looking overall to be quite limited, but the open access gallery will probably be developed in the climate of participatory design. Runnel et al. (2010) have argued that there is, however hardly any consultation, not to speak of audience participation, regarding the permanent exhibition spaces. Although it is never clear whether and to what extent audiences are ready to take some of the responsibilities usually 'delegated' to the cultural expert, such a structure and the invitation to it has to come from within the museum both at the rhetorical (already appearing from time to time) and practical level, with different modes for participation gradually integrated to the permanent exhibition.

When it comes to the Open Curatorship intervention, the critical arguments of museum professionals construct their own identity by positioning themselves against alterity (i.e. the audiences) by signifying them with what a professional is not. What flashes in these discussions is the museum professional not (yet) willing to symbolically share the stage of museum exhibition production with amateurs by employing more diverse, hybrid and negotiated participatory identities and doing that on more equal and empowering terms. A significant obstacle is anxiety about the museum professionals' own acquired and established professional standards (and with that, their established identity) being damaged or watered down. Keeping in mind one of the important components of the modernist culture professional's identity – deployment of power –, then at the heart of the intervention is a relatively strong disempowerment of the museum professional and an empowerment of the audiences by asking them to provide content and participate in voting to determine the winners. Both components of the intervention were unprecedented as such at the ENM. The terms and

conditions were set so that the museum professionals were not allowed to participate in idea submission and the vote was also in stark contrast with the traditional process in the ENM where the exhibition programme is decided in a committee comprised of relevant museum professionals. What the intervention offered was a new facilitatory and participatory identity, reconfiguring the museum professionals' position to that of being a partner for the empowered audience, instead of an autonomous decision-making body of who gets to see what and which meanings are available at the museum to the general public. There was a significant amount of resistance, which implied a clear-cut distinction between museum professionalism and the professionalism of the Open Curatorship model, in which 'third expertise' is given more control. What the Open Curatorship format seems to be facing in the museum setting is a need to develop a way to very clearly communicate the fact that exhibitions can be produced in a climate of a 'third museum'. This communication would probably have to articulate possible rearrangements of the identities of researcher and informant in the way knowledge is produced. Apart from that, it is at the same time crucial to give participating audiences the opportunity to become signified as respected 'third experts': audience-as-curators of their own content. This calls for the integration of the autonomous curatorship skills and knowledge of museum professionals relating to exhibition production into a more collaborative (and inevitably agonistic) public agora for proposing and producing museum exhibition content. The museum professional needs therefore to be assured that audience participation does not make things too complicated for them. Those engaged in the relevant identity work need to co-produce and acknowledge the benefits for the museum that have so far been developed in the spirit of (high) modernism into a more democratised cultural sphere with a newly legitimate sense of a shared responsibility and symbolic space. Such a professional identity in a museum experiments with the construction of a participatory climate in order to be able to integrate the collaborative/participatory component as a valuable and necessary component of a museum professional's identity.

What takes place in a museum is a production of a particular culture of knowledge filtering, layering, design and display. When there is integration of the connectedness and sharing symbolic space in museum professionals' identity, a constant context-dependent negotiation over this contact zone of particular cultures on more equal terms could gradually come into being as an acknowledged exhibition format at the ENM. It would become a sort of 'third museum' where the museum professional doesn't only administer, but actively climbs on the ladder of participation together with the audience-as-curator to exhibit and contextualise content according to the particular negotiated agenda, relying on collaborative knowledge and skills. Through that, the ENM would increasingly act as an agent reforming the public (Bennett's governmentality in the positive sense) towards a civil society, provided that what are produced there are not only comfortable truisms but also diverse contact zones between the cultures of audiences and museum culture, thus also producing new cultures.

One obviously cannot expect a new national museum to be composed of halls full of participation and community access galleries. The (high) modernist museum agenda of established, but communicatively uni-directional displays of cultural content will always be there. Hopefully, the new permanent exhibition area of the ENM might ben-

efit from operating not only access or even interactional types of participation but also more structural ones. And the uses with which the visitors, users, and audiences will be engaging themselves might provide valuable input from which to set new landmarks of participation in civic society as a whole – definitely a desirable strategic goal for the ENM in the 21st century.

NOTES

1 Estonian National Museum was established in 1909 by leading intellectuals of the national awakening, nine years before an independent country of Estonia appeared on the political map.

2 See Runnel et al. 2010 for a more thorough discussion about the divide between professional expertise and the lack of dialogue with the public when attempting to ‘reinvent’ the Estonian National Museum through the design of a new building.

3 There were a total of 33 proposals for the Create Your Own Exhibition project (27 applicants with their own objects and 7 engaging museum objects) and 564 voters participated online and onsite to choose the two winners: one with the applicant’s own exhibits and the second that engaged museum collections as well. The two proposals that won the contest went into the exhibition production process and involved museum staff from exhibitions manager to public relations person, as well as collection managers and conservators.

4 The first Create Your Own Exhibition that also won the idea contest was on Estonian funeral traditions and customs, interpreted by a funeral director who collects related materials and objects, and has written a self-published book on the topic.

5 In her *The Participatory Museum*, Nina Simon (2010) distinguishes four main types of participatory projects: contributive, collaborative, co-development and hosted. Her terminology echoes in the discussions of this article.

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