Negotiating the Tensions of the Participatory Turn

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Photograph taken by author

Abstract

The present thesis contributes to the growing discourse of participatory practices within museum studies by providing the practical and experienced-based perspective of museum professionals. Through eight semi-structured interviews with staff from four different urban museums in the Netherlands, it offers a nuanced and context-specific understanding of these practices' implementation, ultimately seeking to shed light on their complex and often challenging navigation. Informed by a broad body of scholarship, ranging from studies that highlight the potential of participatory practices to democratise museums to critical perspectives that question the institution's ability to truly become inclusive, this research arrived at several key findings. Firstly, the thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that participatory practices are understood and enacted in diverse ways within museums, often shaped by individual ethics and professional roles, suggesting that participation is not a fixed concept, but a fluid and negotiated process. In addition, three institutional shifts were brought to light, each signaling a participatory turn: museums reaching out to communities rather than waiting to be reached; professionals adopting a more listening-oriented approach towards participants/partners; and the emergence of new roles and responsibilities specifically designed to support museum's evolving social function and engagement with local communities. At the same time, the study showed that the implementation of these practices is significantly hindered by institutional challenges, including internal struggles, difficulties building lasting community partnerships and the subtle persistence of museum-centric mindsets. Lastly, a key insight that emerged was the need for a peer network among practitioners engaged in this institutional transformation, which could function as a supportive space for fostering mutual learning and sharing experiences.

Keywords: participatory practices; social role; institutional challenges; museums; Netherlands

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Contents

1. Introduction

Participatory practices, broadly understood as audience-oriented initiatives that involve visitors in meaning-making, co-creation, or decision-making have become increasingly integrated into Dutch museums in recent years, following the example of the United Kingdom and the United States (Simon, 2010, p. 8, 183; Sitzia & Elffers, 2016, p. 39). This growing adoption reflects broader developments in museum studies, particularly the emergence of new museology in the late 20th century, which redefined museums as visitor-centred spaces engaged with contemporary societal issues, moving away from their perception as isolated institutions focused solely on collection and preservation (Vergo, 1989; McCall & Gray, 2014, p. 19).

As a result of this development, museums have come to be seen as among the most flexible organisational institutions within modern society, capable of serving a wide range of community roles, such as educational, spiritual and social depending on societal needs (Weil, 2000, p. 11). Seen as a key strategy for fulfilling these evolving roles, participatory approaches are adopted to actively engage audiences in various processes, strengthening museum's function as a space where diverse perspectives, including local voices are actively heard (Simon, 2010, p. 351; O'Neill, 2010, p. 24). This shift toward more inclusive and audience-oriented practices has recently been described as the participatory turn in museums (Arnaboldi& Lema, 2021, pp. 1-3; Huvila et al., 2022, p.158).

Particularly in urban contexts, these practices can take on an additional layer of significance, as museums function within diverse and dynamic, often contrasting communities (Vermeulen et al., 2019, p. 1). Participatory initiatives, in this setting, can serve as a means of fostering deeper connections between museums and local communities, as well as strengthening bonds among residents themselves, ultimately cultivating a sense of belonging that is often missing in urban locations (Sitzia, 2019, p. 194; O'Neill & Hooper, 2019, pp. 1-2). However, while these practices are increasingly implemented in museums, and scholarly interest in them has grown in recent years (Linn et al., 2024; Valic, 2023; Sitzia, 2019; Stuedahl, 2018), there remains less inquiry into how museums manage their implementation and the complexities that accompany this process (Lynch, 2011; Simon, 2010; Bienkowski, 2016).

More specifically, their incorporation requires a complicated process of adaptation as it introduces multiple institutional challenges and requires a shift in power, moving away from a top-down structure toward a model where authority is shared with the audience (Simon, 2010, p.

55; Sitzia & Elffers, 2016, p. 44). Because their meaningful implementation depends on numerous institutional shifts, these practices both operate within and provoke systemic change. Yet, this transformation is not instantaneous but rather a long-term commitment that includes extensive organisational and managerial adjustments, necessary to sustain, document and support participatory initiatives (Simon, 2010, p. 340; Fleming, 2012, p. 221).

This study addresses this gap by exploring how museum professionals working in Dutch museums in urban settings integrate participatory practices in order to engage with the local communities (residents of the city); such as inviting and encouraging community members to participate in discussions, decision-making, and co-creation. Specifically, it investigates the strategies, problem-solving processes, and organisational adaptations that shape the design and implementation of participatory initiatives. It focuses on museum professionals rather than the communities themselves, as their insights are key to understanding how museums as institutions evolve and transform their internal operations in this process of the participatory turn. Thus, the research question guiding this study is "How do museum professionals in Dutch museums negotiate the tensions of the participatory turn?".

To address this question, the study adopted a qualitative approach based on eight semi-structured expert interviews with museum professionals from four Dutch museums; Centraal Museum Utrecht, Dordrechts Museum, Zeeuws Museum and Stedelijk Museum Schiedam. By speaking with professionals involved in designing and implementing participatory practices aimed at engaging local communities, the interviews offered insights into how these initiatives are conceptualised and enacted in practice, the extent to which they are embedded in organisational structures, the challenges faced, and the strategies used to balance institutional goals with community needs. Ultimately, by addressing a key gap in literature about the navigation of those initiatives, the research contributes to the growing discourse on participatory practices within museum studies, as well as underscores the increasing importance of museums in facilitating social inclusion by amplifying the voices of local residents through participation (Silverman, 2010, p. 20; Fleming, 2012, p. 224).

The trajectory of the thesis is reflected in a five-chapter structure. The next chapter provides the theoretical foundation of this study by exploring the shift toward participatory practices in museums, critically examining both their potential and limitations in fostering social inclusion. It discusses how participation is variously defined and enacted across different

professional roles within museum institutions, drawing attention to the tensions between strategic, institutionalised uses of it and more political, agency-driven approaches. Finally, it engages with critical perspectives that highlight how institutional power dynamics, internal resistance, and structural challenges often complicate efforts to create meaningful and inclusive community engagement.

Chapter three outlines the methodological approach and details how semi-structured interviews were conducted and thematically analysed to explore the reflections of museum professionals. The subsequent chapter presents the findings and analysis of these interviews organised in four themes, revealing how participatory practices are practically conceptualised and navigated in relation to the theoretical framework. Specifically, the results show that participatory practices in Dutch urban museums are interpreted in diverse ways, require institutional changes such as proactive community outreach and the creation of new professional roles, which in turn give rise to several challenges. These obstacles, including internal resistance and a quiet continuation of museum-oriented thinking, prompted a call among professionals for peer support networks to sustain and strengthen this transformative work. Finally, chapter five reflects on the limitations of the research, presents the main insights, while considering their broader implications and proposing directions for future research and practice.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Museums as Socially Embedded Institutions and the Shift toward Participation

The transition from what Vergo (1989) termed the "old museology" to the "new museology" marked a shift from a technical focus on museum methods to a more theoretical and humanistic approach (Macdonald, 2006, p. 2). Rather than assigning a fixed interpretation to a museum's collection, new museology viewed meaning-making as contextual and contingent, while acknowledging museums' commercial and entertainment roles, rejecting the notion that they exist outside of such influences. Moving away from traditional museology's collections-based mindset -which primarily catered to the tastes of specific social groups- new museology drew attention to the role of visitor perceptions in shaping exhibitions, paving the way for a more inclusive and accessible museum (McCall & Gray, 2014, p. 20; Valic, 2023, p. 185). While a traditional art museum, for instance, might structure its exhibitions based on curatorial expertise, a museum embracing new museology might co-curate exhibits with the public in order to integrate diverse perspectives.

Collectively, these ideas redefined museums as dynamic and socially embedded institutions, challenging the notion of them as neutral and detached. Of course, this shift toward a more participatory and inclusive museum was not just a matter of institutional choices but also a demand for museums to broaden their audiences, reflect societal values of equity and justice, and ensure accessibility for marginalised groups, such as including people with disabilities and those with lower levels of education, while also addressing issues such as calls for decolonisation (Lonetree, 2012; Linn et al., 2024, p. 3). Historically, these external pressures have also pushed museums to become more democratic, ensuring they serve the diverse needs of the communities they claim to represent (Scott, 2012, p. 44; Fleming, 2012, pp. 217-220).

This reframing of museums as not neutral was, in fact, part of a broader intellectual movement in the 1980s that questioned the construction of meanings, underscoring their inherently political nature (Macdonald, 2006, p. 3). Influenced by theorists such as Derrida and Foucault, scholars challenged the assumption of museums as impartial transmitters of objective knowledge (Watson, 2007, p. 32), fueling a "representational critique" that challenged the idea of it as objective with scholars beginning to investigate the reinforcement of social inequalities (gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality). Similarly, in scientific discourse, growing skepticism toward scientific authority prompted a shift from one-way knowledge delivery, where scientists were

seen as the sole authorities and the public as passive recipients, to more inclusive, two-way communication (Schiele, 2020, pp. 46–55).

In response, calls for greater reflexivity emerged, leading to critical analyses that deconstructed cultural products such as texts and exhibitions, exposing their political underpinnings and the power structures they upheld. Under this context, participatory practices and especially ones including the co-development and co-creation of exhibitions or museum activities, have gained traction as an option that safeguards the representation of diverse groups, giving a voice to often underrepresented or "misunderstood" communities (Simon, 2010, p. 3). By including the public in interpretation, co-creation and decision-making processes, museums aim to enhance their democratisation, while proving their relevance in contemporary life (Simon, 2010, p. I; Runnel & Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2014, p. 35), signaling what has been described as the participatory turn; a transformation toward dialogic, and socially engaged museum models (Arnaboldi& Lema, 2021, pp. 1-3; Huvila et al., 2022, p.158).

Participatory initiatives have, also, been increasingly seen as an active contributor to the perception of museums as "contact zones", which no longer "speak for" cultures but evolve to spaces where dialogue and shared authority is embraced and encouraged (Clifford, 1999, pp. 187-199; Boast, 2011, p. 57). From this perspective, by implementing practices that position visitors as emancipated actors in constructing their own meaning, museums acknowledge their responsibility/role in combating social and cultural inequality (Sandell, 2012, p. xvii, 3), while answering to the call of current scholarly interest which is to not just analyse how museums construct and present history and culture but what their actual societal impact is in addressing social issues such as racism and discrimination (Sandell, 2012, p. 3; Linn et al., 2024, p. 2).

However, this optimistic view is complicated by critical museological scholarship that questions the depth and authenticity of such participatory efforts. For some researchers (Boast, 2011, p. 65; Hilden & Huhndorf, 1999, p. 178), these collaborations risk functioning as institutional subterfuge and mechanisms for appropriating external input without surrendering meaningful control. Harrison (2005, p. 196), in particular, argues that the colonial and exclusionary history of the museum does not cease to be reflected in these efforts, as the relationships between institutions and the communities with whom they now aim to collaborate are fundamentally imbalanced. In this view, even when participation is embedded into the institutional logic, museums often retain the power to define the terms of engagement, thereby

producing “contact zones” of unequal power rather than truly reciprocal spaces (Linn et al., 2024, p. 3; Boast, 2011, p. 65).

Ultimately, while participatory efforts are often regarded as progressive steps toward greater inclusivity, critical scholarship suggests that they can also function as institutional strategies that maintain control under the guise of collaboration (Hilden & Huhndorf, 1999, p. 178; Boast, 2011, p. 65; Harrison, 2005, p. 196). Building on these discussions, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship that not only questions the narratives museums construct, but also critically examines their institutional capacity to act as socially responsive spaces. Focused on the practical and institutional realities from the perspective of professionals themselves, it examines the conceptualisation and implementation of participatory practices, shedding light on the practical mechanisms through which museums attempt to foster social inclusion amid persistent imbalances.

2.2 Defining Participation: Diverging Understandings

While participatory practices have been highlighted as a tool for social inclusion and democratisation, or conversely a reinforcer of exclusion under the appearance of collaboration, as already discussed, scholarship reveals that the term “participation” itself carries multiple, often diverging meanings within museums. Notably, Sitzia and Elffers (2016, pp. 42-55) provide a valuable framework for understanding this internal complexity particularly in art museums, by identifying four co-existing distinct interpretations of participation, each aligned with the professional priorities of a specific group: artists, curators, educators and marketing staff. These perspectives reflect different goals, expectations, and methods to participatory work, illustrating both the richness and the tensions that arise from competing understandings of what participation entails within the museum context.

More specifically, for artists, participation centres on experimentation, process, and audience agency, aligning with Bishop’s (2012, p. 2) notion of co-authorship in participatory art, while curators tend to see participation as a method for broadening engagement and deepening interpretive experience. Educators, on the other hand, frame participation through a pedagogical lens, as a pathway to learning, empowerment, and inclusivity, whereas from a marketing standpoint, participation is often harnessed as a means to attract larger and more diverse audiences, reinforcing institutional visibility (Sitzia & Elffers, 2016, p. 46).

While this framework helps us see more clearly the diversity of intentions behind participatory practices as well as the variety of definitions held by different museum staff, it is important to also consider an additional perspective that views participation as embedded in power relations. Building on the work of Bourdieu and Duncan, O'Neill (2010, pp. 27-28) argues that even the act of visiting a museum is politically charged as it relies on individuals possessing the cultural capital necessary to navigate and engage with such institutions. Following the same logic, the definition of participatory practices can also be politically rooted, as their existence and meaningful implementation challenges institutional authority and has the potential to extend participation to privilege not only those already socially equipped to navigate these spaces.

In a similar vein -emphasising the shift in institutional power- Simon (2010, p. 2) conceptualises participation as a multi-directional flow of interaction, in which museums provide platforms for engagement rather than controlling the narrative. What runs through these varying interpretations of participation is, as Huvila et al. (2022, p. 158) note, the recurring challenge of how power is or is not shared between institutions and participants and it is precisely this ongoing negotiation of power, situated in the evolving and often contested landscape of participatory practice, that lies at the centre of this research. Instead of seeking to establish a fixed definition of participation, this study draws on the theoretical frameworks discussed to explore the varied and sometimes conflicting logics behind these practices. By examining how professionals interpret and enact participatory initiatives, it explores not only how staff members navigate the multiple meanings of participation in relation to their roles, but also how it is used to navigate, reinforce or potentially transform institutional power structures.

As a consequence of the various understandings of participation, scholars have attempted to "measure" participation in order to provide a more objective perspective on it. More specifically, inspired by Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, Sitzia (2019, pp. 190-191), developed a scale of participation tailored to art museums. At the bottom of this scale and on the "negative" side there was attendance, followed by contribution, collaboration and interpretation/co-creation of meaning, while at the top, there was co-creation of an artwork/event (Sitzia, 2019, pp. 191). Amid later criticism by researcher Vich for lacking clarity about what it was actually measuring (was it power, involvement, or something else?) this typology was revised (Sitzia, 2019, pp. 191).

Exposing ambiguities in this linear hierarchy, Vich's criticism prompted Sitzia to reframe her focus from power to agency, shifting the emphasis from institutional structures to participants' experience. Following this, the present study does not treat participatory practices as inherently better or more meaningful based on fixed models. Instead, their value is understood in the degree of agency they afford to participants within specific contexts. Approaching them as contextual and relational processes, shaped by professional values, institutional roles, and organisational environments, the study examines how museum professionals understand, negotiate and attempt to "measure" participation. In doing so, it investigates the criteria they use to distinguish between "good" and "less effective" practices and whether these criteria include considerations of the participants' level of agency.

2.3 Institutional Realities and the Complex Implementation of Participatory Practices

Rather than opposing participation itself, critical perspectives increasingly highlight that the success and transformative potential of participatory initiatives depends on a deeper transformation of institutional structures and power relations; without such change, participation risks becoming superficial or restrictive (Valic, 2023, p. 187; Bienkowski, 2016, pp. 42-43; Lynch, 2011, p. 11). On one hand, the emphasis on two-way communication and inclusivity gestures toward a vision of the museum as a socially engaged space, where people can "grow, build relationships, and heal", as Silverman envisions (2010, p. xi).

On the other hand, scholars such as Macdonald (2002, p. 219) caution against assuming that participation necessarily equates to democracy or empowerment, arguing that the way participation is framed fundamentally shapes its effects. Similarly, Watson (2007, p. 9) stresses the persistent power asymmetries between museums and their audiences, suggesting that participatory initiatives often remain confined within institutional boundaries that primarily serve the museum's own interests. This study situates itself within these critical conversations not to question participation as a concept, but to examine how it is operationalised; how institutional arrangements, framing practices, and internal priorities shape its implementation and impact. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the structural and strategic dynamics that define contemporary participatory museum practice.

These theoretical tensions become particularly relevant when examined in light of the day-to-day challenges museums face in operationalising this turn. Bringing participatory ideals

into practice requires significant organisational adaptation and introduces complex challenges, including a rethinking of values, control, interpretation, authority, and curatorial redistribution (McCall & Gray, 2014, pp. 26-27; Simon, 2010, p. 322). More specifically, as experts, curators and program makers shift from being the sole content creators to facilitators of visitor engagement, this decentralisation of authority can lead to power struggles (Simon, 2010; McCall & Gray, 2014). Even in "best practice" models such as co-creation, where the public is actively involved, institutions often retain significant control, limiting the extent of true shared authority (Sitzia, 2019, p. 194), while in several cases the social role of the museum is not widely shared among professionals who insist on its cultural role, perceiving its social agency as unnecessary (Sandell, 2012, p. 3).

These internal contradictions and/or tensions are often rooted in the historical legacy of museums as hierarchical institutions traditionally governed by an elitist minority and shaped by colonial histories (Jung, 2010, p. 275). Shifting toward more inclusive and participatory practices therefore requires more than surface-level change; it involves a fundamental reconfiguration of institutional culture and power dynamics, which is an inherently complex and gradual process. Especially professionals in higher-ranking positions, such as directors and curators, whose roles have traditionally been associated with prestige and authority, often continue to prioritise the museum's aesthetic and cultural functions (Jung, 2010; Bienkowski, 2016, p. 9). As a result, they may show less interest in or commitment to its social and educational potential, and demonstrate reluctance to relinquish control, hindering the integration of participatory and community-focused approaches and necessitating an advocation of the museum's social role. Through interviews with museum professionals, this study explores how power struggles and conflicting views on museum's social role influence or hinder the implementation of these practices.

At the same time, museums that aim to foster collaborations with community groups are faced with the challenge of attuning to the needs and interests of their participants (Boersma, 2023, p. 92; Sitzia, 2019, p. 197). Without deliberate efforts to involve marginalised or vulnerable groups, participatory processes can actually deepen their exclusion. As such, professionals are challenged to remain reflexive, continuously adapting their practices to ensure participation is meaningful, responsive to the communities' needs, and inclusive, while also critically reflecting on whether such projects genuinely resonate with participants and address

their interests, or whether they are primarily shaped by institutional priorities (Bienkowski, 2016, p. 43; Lynch, 2011, p. 11).

As observed in evaluation reports on participatory museum practice in twelve British museums and in the "Our Museum" programme in the United Kingdom (Lynch, 2011, p. 12; Bienkowski, 2016, p. 9), institutions often maintain control by subtly reinforcing their own values as "common sense", rewarding participants who conform while sidelining dissenting voices. The result is what Gaventa terms a "false consensus", in which participants appear to agree with institutional goals but may in fact feel disempowered or marginalised. In such cases, the process of participation becomes performative, a consultation that is more cosmetic than collaborative, leading museums to engage with familiar and non-confrontational community partners (Bienkowski, 2016, pp. 11-15). This is further complicated by the way museums may conceptualise and approach the idea of "community". Boersma (2023, p. 87) argues that the invitation to participate is often extended to imagined communities/groups defined through institutional assumptions rather than direct dialogue. As a result, the goals of the project may be predetermined by staff, as discussed previously, reinforcing existing power dynamics and undermining the potential for meaningful collaboration. It is precisely this institutional perspective -the internal framing of participation and community- that this research examines by focusing on museum professionals, in order to shed light on the negotiation of such challenges within the Dutch museum context.

Additionally, as pointed out by Taylor (2017, pp. 155, 160), institutions that make a shift toward more participatory approaches may focus primarily on external inclusion, such as expanding their audiences or increasing accessibility, while neglecting to critically examine their internal culture (deeply held beliefs and biases that shape institutional behavior). This oversight can be linked to previously discussed challenges, including the uneven acceptance of the museum's social role and the reluctance of some professionals to relinquish institutional power, underscoring that participatory change requires not just tokenistic initiatives, but a deeper transformation of internal values. After all, inclusion is not only about who enters the museum, but also about creating internal environments where all staff can feel valued and equal opportunities are developed. Therefore, change requires, as many studies state, a sustained, organisation-wide transformation of institutional values, supported by inclusive leadership and

reflective practices (Bienkowski, 2016, p. 7; Taylor, 2017, p. 160; Boersma, 2023; Simon, 2010, p. 322).

Another challenge arising from the implementation of participatory practices is that of engaging with new audiences in the long term and, consequently, establishing sustained relationships with communities that are new or traditionally underrepresented in museums (Boersma, 2023, p. 85). While participatory methods are often used to reach out to individuals or groups who do not yet visit the museum, these initiatives do not always translate into lasting relationships. Despite initial engagement, participation does not necessarily translate into durable ties between the institution and the participants, and this challenge becomes even more complex when considering that museums also maintain and nurture existing relationships alongside developing new ones. Thus, the sustainability of participatory practices depends not only on their capacity to initiate engagement, but also on their ability to foster long-term bonds (Bienkowski, 2016, p. 6).

These complexities are particularly relevant in the context of Dutch museums in urban settings, where diverse communities with varied social, cultural, and economic backgrounds interact (Vermeulen et al., 2019, p. 1). While participatory practices have been increasingly discussed in international museum literature (Linn et al., 2024; Valic, 2023; Stuedahl, 2018; Boersma, 2023), the institutional and professional dynamics shaping the negotiation of such practices remain underexplored both internationally and particularly within Dutch urban museums (Sitzia & Elffers, 2016; Sitzia, 2019). This study contributes to that discourse by examining the practical realities of participatory museum practices from the perspective of museum professionals, shedding light on both their transformative potential and the barriers that hinder their effectiveness in fostering meaningful community engagement.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design & Sample

To answer the research question: “How do museum professionals in Dutch museums negotiate the tensions of the participatory turn?”, this study employed a qualitative research method. This approach was suitable given the aim of the study to understand the nuanced experiences, perceptions and decision-making processes of museum professionals. Rather than seeking to generalise, the study focused on gaining in-depth insights into complex institutional practices and interpersonal dynamics that are not easily captured through quantitative measures (Mason, 2002, pp. 1-5; Bryman, 2012, p. 160). More specifically, eight semi-structured expert interviews were held to examine the implementation of participatory practices in four museums located in different cities within the Netherlands.

Semi-structured interviews provided a balance between structured inquiry and open-ended exploration, enabling participants to elaborate on their experiences, while ensuring that key themes related to participatory engagement, institutional adaptation, and community involvement were thoroughly examined, with space for new insights to emerge from the data (Bryman, 2012, p. 12; Kvale, 2009). This approach made it possible to capture subjective experiences and cultural perceptions, providing nuanced insights into how museum professionals perceive and navigate the participatory turn. Based on the participants’ responses, follow-up questions were adjusted in order to deepen the discussion and encourage further exploration of their views. Additionally, the choice of semi-structured expert interviews ensured that the findings were both contextually grounded and analytically comparable, ultimately allowing for a richer understanding of the implementation of these practices. This method also builds on existing empirical studies in the field, where researchers such as Boersma (2023), Lynch (2011) and Bienkowski (2016) employed similar interview-based approaches to investigate the implementation process of these practices.

The interview participants were chosen based on a combination of purposive and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002, p. 273; Bryman, 2012, pp. 418- 424). To ensure the relevance of the sample to the research question, the primary selection criterion was that participants were museum professionals working in urban settings who had direct involvement in the design, implementation, or management of participatory practices (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). As such, professionals holding roles related to curation, education, social programming, or community

engagement were prioritised, as their expertise was expected to provide valuable insights into how participatory initiatives are conceptualised and executed, constituting "information-rich cases" (Patton, 2002, p. 273).

More specifically, the sample consisted of one city programmer, one project curator, one curator, two social programmers, one educator and one art handler. Although the art handler's role is typically associated with collection care, their inclusion offered a complementary perspective on how participatory practices may influence or intersect with exhibition development, enriching the understanding of institutional adaptations beyond educational or curatorial viewpoints. Snowball sampling was used to expand the sample by allowing initial interviewees to recommend colleagues who could offer additional perspectives or had been involved in specific participatory projects. This approach ensured a diverse yet relevant selection of interviewees, capturing a range of institutional viewpoints while remaining focused on the study's research.

The participants worked in museums located in urban settings involved in participatory initiatives designed to build and sustain meaningful connections with diverse local communities. These are: Centraal Museum Utrecht, Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, Dordrechts Museum and Zeeuws Museum. The urban context was especially relevant to the study, as one of its key aims was to explore how museum professionals navigate the complexities of engaging multiple, sometimes divergent, local communities through participatory initiatives. Lastly, the semi-structured interviews were conducted either on-site at the respective institutions, or online, depending on the availability and preferences of the participants. Table 1 summarises key details of the sample, including the interviewees' pseudonyms (used to protect interviewees' identities in line with ethical guidelines), roles, interview dates and durations.

Table 1. Overview of interview participants, roles, interview date and interview duration.

Pseudonym	**Role**	**Interview Date**	**Duration**
Mary	City programmer	1 April	40'
Pieter	Project curator	19 March	90'
Anna	Educator	4 April	75'
Lisa	Social programmer	20 March	75'

Emma	Head of exhibitions	1 April	40’
Helen	Curator	3 March	60’
Lotte	Social Programmer	17 April	75’
Ben	Art handler	3 April	60’

3.2 Operationalisation

To translate the theoretical concepts outlined in the framework into researchable components, the interview guide was designed to reflect key perspectives on participatory practices, community engagement, and institutional adaptation (Appendix A). To be more specific, the study and therefore the questions were constructed to examine i) how museums define and implement participatory initiatives within their institutional structures, ii) the ways in which these initiatives are aimed to foster engagement with local residents, iii) and the challenges professionals face during their implementation. In line with Kvale’s (2009) emphasis on understanding both the “what” and the “why”, these focal points were systematically integrated into the interview guide.

As already outlined, the new museology framework, which moved away from traditional museology’s collections-based mindset and drew attention to the role of visitor perceptions in shaping exhibitions, informs the study's focus on how participatory practices are embedded within institutional structures (Vergo, 1989; McCall & Gray, 2014, p. 20). This, along with discussions about the societal role of museums and the use of participatory practices as a tool for social inclusion (Sandell, 2012, p. xvii, 3; Sitzia, 2019), were examined in the first set of questions (‘Defining & Implementing Participatory Practices’, Appendix A), by exploring how museum professionals define and implement participatory strategies, the extent to which these practices align with institutional missions, as well as how they ensure diverse representation. To assess this, the research explored institutional values, shifts in audience engagement and the professionals’ interpretation of participatory initiatives.

Another concept that was operationalised is that of museums as contact zones (Clifford, 1999), where participatory initiatives create spaces for dialogue between museums and local communities. In line with this, the second thematic structure of the interview questions (‘Operationalising Participation& Community Engagement’) explored how institutions involve

local residents in exhibition design, programming, and decision-making processes, assessing whether participatory efforts genuinely facilitate shared authority or whether museums retain significant control over narratives and representation (a risk discussed by Boast, 2011, p. 65; Hilden& Huhndorf, 1999, p. 178; Lynch, 2011, p. 11; Bienkowski, 2016, p. 42). Moreover, while participatory practices are often framed as tools for social inclusion, not all museum professionals embrace this perspective (Sandell, 2012, p. 3). In some cases, the social role of museums is not widely shared among professionals who emphasise their cultural function, perceiving social agency as unnecessary. By investigating how different professionals explain the factors influencing project design, the challenges encountered and potential conflicts in the third set of questions ('Challenges & Institutional Adaptation'), the study captured tensions between curatorial authority and community involvement as well as among professionals. Lastly, the open-ended nature of the interview guide, following Kvale's (2009) approach, ensured that while the questions remained focused on the study's research objectives, participants had the flexibility to elaborate on unexpected insights and nuances, enriching the depth of the data collected.

3.3 Analysis

The interview data was analysed using thematic analysis in order to identify key patterns across the cases, following the steps of coding and analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 202-204). This method was chosen for its flexibility and ability to capture both predefined theoretical themes and emerging insights (Flick, 2014, p. 27, 147). The analysis was primarily inductive, meaning that codes and themes were derived from the data itself rather than imposed a priori. However, existing literature on participatory practices served to sensitise my interpretation during the coding phase and to deepen the analysis once the themes began to take shape. At the same time, I remained open to novel interpretations that extended beyond existing literature. For example, the fourth theme 'Networks of Support' was not drawn from prior research but emerged solely from repeated observations in participants' accounts. This allowed for a dialogue between the empirical findings and previous theoretical discussions, strengthening the analysis and situating it within broader academic debates on participatory practices. In addition, to maintain reflexivity throughout the process, I remained aware of how my thoughts and assumptions could influence the interpretation of data (Mason, 2002, p. 5). Therefore, I regularly returned to the

transcripts and notes in order to question my actions and ensure that codes and themes were grounded in the participants' actual expressions rather than filtered through a predefined lens.

The analysis followed a structured thematic approach, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 202-207) methodology, supported by Excel software to organise and manage the data (Appendix B). First, interview transcripts were carefully studied to ensure familiarity with the content, with initial notes taken to allow for highlighting items of potential interest. After multiple readings, complete coding was conducted across the entire dataset, capturing both theoretical points of interest (researcher-derived codes) and emergent patterns (data-derived codes). Once initial coding was complete, the coding system was refined to ensure clarity and consistency, eliminating redundancies and merging overlapping codes where appropriate. Relationships between codes were then examined, allowing for the identification of broader observations and the linking of related codes. These connections were grouped into preliminary categories that captured features of the data relevant to the research question.

Next, broader themes were identified and refined to provide a coherent interpretation of the interview data, and as they began to take shape, they were considered in light of existing academic debates. These themes were then further developed through an iterative process of returning to the data, ensuring that they accurately captured the participants' perspectives and were solidly grounded in the data. This structured and adaptable approach ensured that the study remained aligned with the empirical data, while being informed by relevant academic debates (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 202-208; Flick, 2014, p. 147). By iteratively refining the four themes that emerged in dialogue with both the dataset and the literature, the study aimed to produce interpretations that were grounded in participants' experiences yet analytically robust.

3.4 Ethics

Regarding ethics, firstly, all interviewees were informed about the purpose of the research, their role in it, and how their responses would be used (Mason, 2002, pp. 79- 83). Before each interview, participants were provided with an informed consent form, outlining their right to confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the option to withdraw at any stage without consequence (Mason, 2002, pp. 79- 83). Additionally, upon discussion with interviewees and given the small size of the organisations involved, special care was taken to ensure confidentiality and avoid any form of coercion or misrepresentation. To this end, all participants

were pseudonymised, as listed in Table 1 in section 3.1, and any descriptive information that could lead to their identification was deliberately kept vague. In the results chapter, only their professional roles are mentioned, without reference to specific institutions or locations. This decision was made to prevent any unintended traceability and to foster a safe environment for open and honest dialogue. Throughout the interviews, the process remained respectful by remaining attentive to the participants' personal/emotional state and encouraging a conversation that fostered openness and honesty (Weiss, 1994, p. 65; Mason, 2002, p. 80; Bryman, 2012, p. 479)

4. Results

The thematic analysis of the eight interviews with museum professionals was conducted through several processes of coding, which allowed for the identification of broader observations across participants' experiences. This led to the development of four overarching themes, each shedding light on a different facet of how participatory practices are understood, implemented, and envisioned within contemporary Dutch museum contexts: 1.Negotiating the meaning and ethics of participation, 2. Institutional changes during the shift to participation, 3. Navigating the challenges of the participatory turn and 4. Networks of support: enabling participation through professional solidarity. The first three themes are further elaborated through distinct dimensions to not only reflect the complexity of professional practice but also allow for a more nuanced interpretation of the data in light of existing academic discourse on participation.

The first theme explores the various conceptualisations of participation, revealing a wide spectrum of meanings attributed to participatory practices across different professional roles, ethical considerations and a need to differentiate them from other engagement practices. The second theme examines the institutional changes that museums have undertaken, or are in the process of undertaking, in order to meaningfully navigate the participatory turn. These include museums' initiative to reach out instead of waiting to be reached, a listening-oriented approach towards participants/partners and the emergence of new roles and responsibilities specifically designed to support museum's evolving social function and engagement with local communities

The third theme addresses the two most discussed challenges that arise in the pursuit of this participatory transformation; sustaining long-term relationships with communities and managing inherent power imbalances. Lastly, the fourth theme turns to the future, encompassing participants' strong desire to create a peer network which could function as a supportive space for fostering mutual learning and sharing experiences.

4.1 Negotiating the Meaning and Ethics of Participation

A recurring argument across interviews revealed that participation was not viewed as a static or uniform concept but rather as a nuanced and often personal process shaped by values, context, and intent. For Lotte, a social programmer, for example, participation resonated with ideas of identity-building, meaning that people "through that work, would feel like they could

have a conversation about the past, learn something, and exchange views and feelings. That is what participation meant to me".

Participants frequently described how it differs from other forms of public engagement, what ethical or institutional values underpin it, and how it should ideally be practiced. Through close engagement with the data, three interrelated dimensions of this theme became apparent; first, participants pointed to concrete examples that, for them, embodied successful participation, highlighting the elements they considered most essential to its effectiveness. Second, they articulated ethical concerns surrounding participation, particularly around inclusivity and representation, and third, they often drew distinctions between participation and collaboration, emphasising important differences in the level of agency given to community members. The following sections discuss each of these dimensions, illustrating the multiple ways in which professionals understand and negotiate the meaning and ethics of participation.

4.1.1 What Makes Participation "Good"? Competing Visions in Museum Work

A recurring topic in the interviews was how practitioners define and experience what they consider "successful" participation. Many stressed engagement, shared decision-making, and relationship-building as central indicators of what they perceived as effective participatory practices, though the emphasis placed on each element varied among individuals. This diversity resonates with theoretical perspectives that define participation not merely as audience inclusion, but as a relational and contextual practice (O'Neill, 2010; Sitzia, 2019, pp. 190-191; Sitzia & Elffers, 2016).

For instance, Ben, an art handler, offered the example of an exhibition where the audience actively selected artworks for display by voting, pointing out the importance of inviting and responding to the public's voice. This process he described as "the best example of a more modern way to ask the public to participate", calling it "a playground for adults". In contrast, Helen, a curator, placed greater emphasis on the immersive aspect of participatory exhibition: "What we really liked about it was the active engagement of all the visitors, the participants in the exhibition", while Emma, a head of exhibitions, stressed the importance of value-driven team effort. Reflecting on a project that stood out to her, she noted:

> Everybody who was involved in the exhibition-making, including the designer, they were so, from their core values, believing in the importance of telling this story and making this exhibition. That is also what you felt inside the exhibition hall; that everything was so considerate, with so much attention, with so much care, including the people who constructed the exhibition.

This deep sense of collective intention and care reflects her view of participation as a mission-oriented and emotionally resonant process but also echoes what Bienkowski (2016, p.21, 27) and Lynch (2011, p. 17) have already highlighted as key to participatory practice; the significance of everyone in the museum being "active champions for change". After all, as several participants indicated, gaining full support from within the institution is rarely simple and should not be taken for granted. It is, therefore, understandable given the challenges several participants described in securing support from their institution that Emma, working in a leadership role that involves overseeing the curatorial and design processes, places particular value on strong internal collaboration. Her leadership role likely makes her especially aware of how essential team alignment is to realising participatory goals, as she is responsible for ensuring that different team members are unified in their commitment to the project's values.

While Ben draws attention to playful and engaging ways to involve the public more directly in institutional practices (selecting artworks), Helen to the audience's active engagement and Emma to team commitment, Lotte, a social programmer, views as a success the cultivation of trust and long-lasting, transparent relationships:

> A participatory practice that I am proud of is … because I feel like I was able to build relationships that last… There was initial doubt, or maybe even fear, but because we were able to have these conversations and be so transparent, it worked. We both felt satisfied with the way we were working, and we were able to build trust.

This diversity in how museum staff define "good" participatory practices reflects what Sitzia and Elffers (2016, p. 41) identify as the fragmented nature of participatory discourse across different domains within museums; curatorship, marketing, artistic practice, and education. The present analysis underscores and adds to this by demonstrating how professionals from various departments -and even from programming and technical departments- prioritise distinct aspects of participation, ultimately shaping their objectives and expectations in divergent ways.

This plurality of viewpoints, while reflective of the complex and multi-faceted nature of participatory work, may consequently present challenges for developing cohesive institutional strategies. Lotte, a social programmer, illustrates this when she says:

> That became a real discussion; our definitions of participation did not match at all. For me, participation meant people working on the ..., and through that work, feeling like they could have a conversation about the past, learn something, and exchange views and feelings...We also really value building long-lasting connections. I noticed that a group of volunteers came back every week. Some of them had never been to our museum before, it was their first time. For me, that was great. They had their first museum experience and felt welcome enough to keep coming back. But for other people in the project, that was seen as a negative: 'We cannot have the same people come back every week. We need more people, more reach.' So, we had to put more effort into finding new people, which became a point of friction between institutional partners. That friction took a lot of time and energy away from what actually mattered in the project.

While Lotte reflects on disagreements with external institutional partners, the tension she describes highlights a broader issue faced by museums, the fact that differing conceptualisations of participation can create tension, whether within internal teams or with external collaborators. Such conflicts, as in Lotte's case, for example, the prioritsation of building long-lasting relationships versus reaching new audiences, can undermine cohesion and hinder the development of a unified strategy. Therefore, recognising and navigating these differences is essential for establishing a cohesive and harmonious modus operandi within institutions.

Taken together, these findings suggest that participation is not a fixed concept but one that is shaped by individual roles, institutional expectations, and personal values. The examples shared by participants suggest that participation often becomes a site of negotiation shaped by ethical tensions and differing visions of public engagement. Instead of aiming for a single, unified definition of "good" participation, it may be more useful to see participatory work as an ongoing, situated process, one that involves navigating competing ideas and priorities, and that requires openness to disagreement and adaptation. In addition, as the following section will explore, for many professionals these practices are not merely new additions to the museum's agenda, but initiatives that carry a certain sense of responsibility. In this sense, understanding

what constitutes “good” participation cannot be separated from negotiating the responsibility that comes with it.

4.1.2 Navigating Responsibility

Many interviewees placed great significance on the ethical ramifications and personal responsibility they feel when executing participatory practices. Particularly, several expressed a deep concern about the risk of excluding individuals, especially marginalised communities. Lotte, a social programmer, articulates this fear:

> I think that is part of working with communities; you carry a big responsibility. You want people to feel seen, heard, and safe. And you can do a lot of good, but you can also do harm. If a project hurts someone or makes them feel excluded, that is serious. I do not know yet if this project harmed anyone, but I feel like it could contribute to a sense of disappointment, particularly for descendants of enslaved people or communities affected by racism, who might see this as just another white-led project where they were not really invited in.

Lotte’s reflection suggests that participatory practices are not simply methodological choices but emotionally and ethically charged processes. Her concern echoes wider debates about tokenistic practices, where institutions invite participation without truly relinquishing control or ensuring meaningful inclusion (Young, 2002, p. 210; Lynch, 2011, p. 12; Bienkowski, 2016, p. 9; Linn et al., 2024, p. 2). This was also voiced by another social programmer, Lisa, who expressed strong opposition to the superficial involvement of communities for the sake of institutional gain:

> ‘I want to do something with the local community just for receiving funds. And so I can write it down and just send a green... check’. I am allergic to that thinking. I think it is not ethical. So that is what I mean, like with advocating or educating; you really have to develop those projects with an honest heart, and not because you want to check boxes.

Both Lotte’s and Lisa’s sense of personal accountability indicate that for them participation is not a neutral activity, but one loaded with emotional labor and moral stakes. In their roles as social programmers, they feel compelled to address existing social inequalities, prioritising museum’s social agency by striving for meaningful and sustainable relationships.

Their thoughts reflect an awareness of the real-life consequences of cultural work, encapsulating, Sandell's (2012, pp. 3-9) argument that museums are not only symbolic spaces that construct identities through representation, but also institutions capable of materially improving people's lives. As these concerns highlight, meaningful participation is something that institutions cannot achieve by simply inviting people in. It requires sustained and thoughtful approaches in order to avoid being tokenistic or even harmful, thus underscoring the need for institutional mechanisms that support staff in managing the ethical and emotional dimensions of participatory work.

This sense of responsibility is not only about avoiding tokenism and addressing museum's social role but also about recognising the practical and relational complexities of co-creating with communities. Pieter, a project curator, acknowledges the ideal of shared decision-making, but also the reality of asymmetrical power relations that shape the process:

> So, I think what I am also trying to say is that based on their level of organisation, professionalism or experience with professional work but also the challenges within the type of group that it is, I also choose how much power I have in the collaboration and how much I direct the group. Because I think we dream of a collaboration where it is a total democracy, where every step of the way we have decided together but in practice it does not work because we were not on equal footing.

Here, Pieter approaches responsibility in a reflexive way, treating ethics as situational. He realises that while full democratic collaboration is an admirable goal, it often clashes with the practical realities of unequal power and experience between institutions and community groups. As he later puts it, "success definitely depends on what we have agreed on", pointing to the importance of transparency and negotiated expectations. Although all three interviewees attribute great importance to the relationships formed with participants, Pieter addresses responsibility in terms of what is possible in practice (acknowledging structural limitations). Rather than striving for what he perceives as an unattainable "total democracy", he highlights the need to continually navigate and recalibrate the power dynamics within participatory work, while forming transparent agreements and relationships, a point highlighted in literature (Bienkowski, 2016, p. 31; Boersma, 2023, p. 133). True collaboration, as Pieter suggests, is not about equal power in the abstract, but about institutions recognising their authority and making space for shared ownership through ongoing negotiation, thus, aligning with Simon's (2010, p. 121) statement

that true expertise lies not in monopolising the visitor's experience but in learning how to manage platforms and facilitate spaces where multiple voices can be heard.

This tension between aspiration and reality sits at the heart of participatory museum discourse, echoing ongoing scholarly debates about whether institutions can truly share authority in a meaningful way (Watson, 2007, p. 9-11; Lynch, 2011, p. 12; Bienkowski, 2016, p. 9; Linn et al., 2024, p. 3; Boast, 2011, p. 65). Both Pieter and Lotte seem aware of the fact that they work within institutions historically structured to reinforce social inequalities, not to dismantle them (O'Neill, 2010, pp. 28-29) and therefore, participatory practices occur in a context that has long served to validate dominant identities. Their thoughts show that participation is not simply a matter of technique or project design, but a fundamentally political act (O'Neill, 2010); one that involves navigating institutional legacies, managing power asymmetries, and negotiating the limits of what museums are currently willing or able to relinquish.

The fact that these practices provoke systemic change when implemented in a meaningful way -one that is not intended to merely cater to institutional needs- means they have the potential to drive fundamental reform. This transformation, which directly confronts questions about the inherent exclusive nature of museums (O'Neill, 2010, p. 25; Boast, 2011, p. 65), is deeply political, as it repositions museums as social institutions required to shift the power structures they have historically upheld by empowering communities to define and represent themselves, rather than having their stories told on their behalf. In fact, this negotiation of the agency afforded to participants prompted interviewees to draw distinctions between forms of participatory practices, highlighting the nuances of their implementation.

4.1.3 Collaboration versus Participation

A recurrent distinction made by participants between collaboration and participation, suggests that these terms, while often used interchangeably in museum discourse, carry different implications in practice. Pieter, a project curator felt the need to express that differentiation saying, "Because a lot of times we work with communities and we tend to say it is collaborative, but sometimes it is participatory". In all cases the difference expressed was the level of agency offered to the participants, echoing discussions about power and agency as tools of measurement in efforts to develop a scale of participation (Sitzia, 2019, pp. 190-191). Mary, a city programmer, pointed out that projects developed with the public from the outset tend to foster a

more equal relationship, compared to initiatives where the museum defines the concept and invites people to contribute at a later stage.

> You have different kinds of collaboration. In participation you really decide for the whole concept yourself and you ask people to participate in a certain way, so there is not much freedom, not much agency for the people. But still, it can be the best form for the goal that you are trying to achieve or the number of people that you are trying to involve. But in co-creation, for instance, you are almost equal to each other in terms of how much agency you have, how much you have to say about something.

Pieter agrees with this differentiation stating that:

> Because it is a concept that has been created a lot of times by a museum, by an organisation and you approach with that concept a community, an organisation and you say, 'Hey, we have this idea and we think it would help, it would create awareness or it would create opportunities. We are offering a platform. Are you interested, would you like to participate?' So it has collaborative aspects to it, but it is participatory.

Pieter's phrasing "we are offering a platform" suggests a top-down invitation rather than a jointly developed initiative and this is exactly what also Mary stresses. They both highlight that for practitioners, the terms "participation" and "collaboration" are not semantic since they signal different power structures. However, this distinction should not imply that participatory formats are inherently disempowering or tokenistic. As Mary herself highlights, participation can still be the most suitable approach depending on the project's goals or scale, especially when it is pursued with care and openness. The key lies not only in *when* people are brought into the process but *how* they are engaged. Even with pre-defined frameworks, participation can still offer space for individuals to voice their perspectives to shape the project, as long as those concepts are not imposed though a "false consensus" (Bienkowski, 2016, pp. 11-15; Simon, 2010, p. 121).

Whether participants who join at a later stage are granted meaningful agency ultimately depends on the institution's willingness to remain flexible and to allow them to actively shape the trajectory of the project. Lotte, a social programmer, for instance, illustrates this variability when she explains:

> The fact that we had a concept but that we were looking for people to engage with that concept and to change it to fit their needs that made it participatory for me but I also see like it is not every participatory project is the same of course because another project I am doing now it is more participatory in the fundamentals, meaning that we set out to connect with someone but we do not have a concept of the project, so we do not have a workshop or an exhibition.

In all cases, this emphasis on the extent of power retained by museums and their readiness to redistribute decision-making authority to participants signals a broader shift in contemporary museological practice, marking a key feature of the participatory turn. As the next theme will explore, moving toward more equitable forms of engagement requires not only structural adjustments but also a deeper institutional openness to negotiation and co-ownership.

4.2 Institutional Changes During the Shift to Participation

While the first theme explored how professionals understand and negotiate the meaning and ethics of participatory practices, the second theme concerns how the interviewees drive and respond to institutional changes as they work to expand the potential of their institutions and put these practices into action. Participants often mentioned the profound transformation they and their colleagues have experienced in this process, explaining that these changes are not merely operational, as they signal deeper cultural shifts within museums which strive to become more inclusive, responsive, and dialogical.

Based on their descriptions, the theme is divided into three subthemes, each capturing distinct aspects of this ongoing transformation. The first reveals a shift in outreach dynamics, with museums now taking the initiative to approach communities, rather than waiting to be approached. The second addresses how museums are learning to listen, remain open and adopt a reflexive attitude towards their collaborators, and the third focuses on the emergence of new roles and occupations designed to support participatory work.

4.2.1 Reversing the gaze

"We come from a culture of being approached or not necessarily going out...We are in an experimental phase for sure" Pieter, a project curator says, encapsulating a core institutional shift expressed across several conversations. His words point to a broader transformation in the posture of museums, which have traditionally been positioned as authoritative spaces to be visited (Jung, 2010, p. 275). However, now, as they move toward more participatory models, they are beginning to actively initiate contact with communities. Emma, head of exhibitions illustrated this shift when she described the museum's early outreach efforts: "in that first beginning, she [a colleague of hers] really went out in the city and said, 'if you want to collaborate, if you come to our museum, we make up a project'.

This reorientation in mindset and practice reflects a growing awareness of the need to align participatory practices with the interests and realities of the communities they aim to engage, as without sustained efforts to understand and center the voices of marginalised groups, museums risk reproducing the very exclusions participatory practices are meant to challenge. (Sitzia, 2019, p.197; Linn et al., 2024, p. 3; Lynch, 2011; Bienkowski, 2016). In fact, several interviewees acknowledged this focus on outreach and inclusion as central to their agendas, describing concrete efforts to counteract patterns of exclusion by specifically targeting under-represented communities that cultural institutions have historically failed to engage (Bienkowski & McGowan, 2021, p. 127). This is precisely the kind of work Mary, a city programmer, described:

> So, at the start we make a plan, and we look at the city. We look at which groups are big in the city, which communities, and also which communities deal with social issues that we want to be of significance to, of relevance… In those six years, we have decided for some focus communities, and we have, I think, six of them now. But next to that, we also collaborate with all the other residents.

Mary's reflection sheds light on how she and her colleagues are developing strategies grounded in local social realities in order to diversify their audience/partners, aligning with recommendations that institutions explicitly map their communities than defaulting to easy-to-reach audiences (Bienkowski & McGowan, 2021, p. 128). Similarly, Anna, an educator, describes their intentional approach to ensuring diversity in collaborative projects: "we decided

that we wanted to have a very diverse group of people, so we reached out to certain people specifically which we really wanted to include in the panel".

While Mary and Anna highlighted more strategic and targeted approaches to inclusion, Helen, a curator, shifted the focus toward cultivating inclusive relationships through ongoing engagement and mutual understanding. Rather than assuming what the gap between museum and community entails, she described a more exploratory and dialogic approach:

> So, we have been building different types of programs to see what lives among the residents of these areas, what keeps them busy, and also to see what is this gap made of? Is it really a gap? Can we find each other somewhere? So, we ask them actively to come to the museum.

Helen admits that understanding the lived realities of residents is essential to building a truly inclusive museum, framing inclusion as an institutional desire to bridge divides through shared meaning. This recognition echoes Vacca's observation in her discussion of participatory museum work with forced migrants, where she argues that meaningful participation requires museums to be deeply embedded in the lives of the communities they engage with. As she puts it: "museums cannot expect to work with forced migrants without being enmeshed in their lives" (Boersma, 2023, p. 92).

In addition, following Fleming's (2012, p. 224) reasoning, such engagement with the public actively resists the idea that mass appeal requires oversimplification -what he refers to as "dumbing down", as it is rooted in trusting that people are capable of engaging with complex, relevant and meaningful material when it is shaped by their own concerns. Seen in this light, the commitment to staying relevant and responsive takes on a broader social significance. When guided by the purpose of contributing to social change and regeneration, such efforts can enable museums to make a lasting and meaningful impact on people's lives (Fleming, 2012, p. 224).

Lotte, a social programmer, reflects a sentiment similar to the previous quote, explaining how she engages in dialogue and reciprocity through an everyday, grounded approach:

> But we also are, I guess, struggling or researching how we can do more programming that is not necessarily connected to an exhibition, that is a process that we are in now, and my role in this is sometimes really simple; it is going outside and getting a coffee and see

> how other people are engaging with the theme that we are curious in, or the other way around.

Together these examples suggest that the shift towards participatory practices puts museums through a profound transformation in how they understand their role within society, moving away from the traditional, authoritative model to one that is actively engaged with the communities it serves. The efforts discussed here, from outreach initiatives to tailored programming, underscore a growing recognition that museums must go beyond merely attracting visitors; they must become spaces of mutual exchange and social relevance. Yet, this shift would be futile if museums fail to genuinely listen to the voices they seek to engage, as it is only by truly learning to listen that they can ensure their outreach is meaningful. As Pieter, a project curator says, “people will not come to you if they feel like whatever you do and present has nothing to do with them”.

4.2.2 From Speaking to Listening

To amplify the voices of as many residents as possible and especially those who have felt overlooked in the past by institutions like museums, interviewees underlined two key aspects: first, the importance of taking the initiative to reach out to communities (as discussed in the previous section), and second, the equally crucial need to truly listen and respond to them. However, listening requires more than just hearing. It also demands a shift in how communication itself is approached. Social programmer, Lisa, drew attention to this specific challenge, describing how she had to rethink her own methods of engaging with new audiences:

> So, for example, in the museum we communicate a lot with email or phone calls, but a lot with email, just way too many emails. But I think that if you work with the local communities or local partners, it is way more with WhatsApp or just calling or just show your face and ask what you want.

This openness not only to adjusting communication methods, as described by Lisa, but in general in collaborations emerged across many conversations as a fundamental quality necessary for successful participatory initiatives. By listening to the public and staying open to their suggestions and viewpoints, museum professionals are challenged to be adaptable and to

embrace unexpected scenarios in collaborations. As Emma, head of exhibitions, describes this, "you really have to stay open and be aware that you cannot plan the complete trajectory", suggesting a need to accept unpredictability. This kind of flexibility is exactly what museum discourse identifies as one of the most important prerequisites for meaningful participatory practices, since the only way to cater to the needs of people is by actively listening to what they have to say (Fleming, 2012, p. 26-27; Boersma, 2023, p. 92, 133). Mary, a city programmer underscores this point clearly when she explains, "that is the whole concept of this program line; that we can be flexible, and we can respond to the city. Otherwise, there is no point in this kind of programming", affirming that without such responsiveness, participation loses its purpose.

However, this crucial shift that professionals are striving to make in their way of working to build partnerships grounded in dialogue where they are able to welcome uncertainty, does not come very naturally in environments that have long operated according to predetermined structures and carefully planned outcomes. Social programmer, Lotte, captures this dynamic in the following excerpt of our conversation:

> Working with community means adjusting the way you work to something that works for them also. You cannot just say 'okay we have the planning, and we need this by this day'. You give away a lot of control on the process, but also on the outcome, and that is something that not everyone finds comfortable. Some people find it really hard, and they get really frustrated because they are like 'I want to know where this is going', and the answer 'we do not know' is not always fun.

Lotte, here, in addition to highlighting the importance of listening to the participants in collaborative projects, points to a fundamental change that many staff, as she mentioned, find difficult to navigate; the fact that, in order to embrace uncertainty in these relationships, one must be prepared to relinquish control. On a similar note, Anna, an educator, adds:

> There are, I will not call them old-fashioned, but people who have worked for longer in the museum, for example, and who are perhaps more traditional in that sense, they really believe in their own experience, and in their own expertise, which is also very important, and they do not really need, or they think they do not need the input of the audience, or as much, for example. So, no, I do think we still have to win a battle there.

Since collaborative projects belong to both staff and public, and therefore no longer rely solely on the expertise and planning of professionals, museum professionals are required to step back and give the stage to others (Young, 2002, p. 210; Lynch, 2011, p. 12; Bienkowski, 2016, p. 9; Linn et al., 2024, p. 2). Yet, this act of opening space for others entails a departure from established working methods and as Lotte remarks later in our discussion "change is not fun, it is difficult, it is uncomfortable".

It is already difficult to embrace uncertainty and relinquish control in collaborative processes, but it is even more challenging to truly understand the public's perspectives and needs, especially when those question the legitimacy and purpose of the museum itself. While interviewees expressed a willingness to engage with diverse perspectives and pave the way to a museum that listens to the public, there were moments this openness appears to falter, suggesting that this commitment to listening is not without its limits or contradictions. Specifically, Anna, an educator, reflected:

> When someone says to me, 'I think museums are useless, we should all shut them down, or we should shut the … museum down', then I do have some principles. So, I am not completely convinced that we should always go all the way with the audience input.

Although the comment may stem from a desire to preserve museums' valuable work and contribution, and therefore the work of museum professionals, it risks dismissing the deeper reasons behind such critical statements, such as feelings of alienation, exclusion or fundamental misalignment between people's needs and what the institution offers. Therefore, that fragility of the museum's openness -the fact that it is willing to listen but only up to a point- as reflected by this text, could suggest that institutional authority and participatory rhetoric may coexist, echoing scholarly critiques which state that even though museums may "speak the language" of participation, they may still retain traditional forms of authority; deciding when and how to listen, and when to stop (Linn et al., 2024, p. 3; Valic, 2023, p. 187; Lynch, 2011, p. 18).

This contradiction between professed openness to public input and retention of control over the listening process also speaks to a broader issue; the ongoing struggle to recognise and embrace museum's social role. The shift towards attuning to the perspectives of diverse publics represents more than a methodological change, it signals a deeper transformation in how museums see themselves -not just as spaces for preserving and displaying heritage, but as active

participants in social dialogue. However, since the idea of the museum as an agent of social change continues to be met with resistance, it leads to hesitation or partial implementation of participatory ideals (Sandell, 2012, p. xvii; Boersma, 2023, p. 46). As such, this move toward less predictable, more dialogic forms of engagement calls for new competencies and professional roles -changes that, as the next session will show, are already underway.

4.2.3 Emerging Occupations and Reeducation

During the interviews, it became evident that the shift toward participatory practices entails a deeper commitment to the museum's social relevance, prompting the emergence of new roles within museums. In fact, several participants noted that their positions were recently created, with some being the first in their institutions to hold such roles. Lotte, a social programmer, exemplified this development when she described how her position was established following the reception of funding aimed at galvanising museums to address pressing social questions and contemporary issues:

> My role is a social programmer, which was a function in the museum that did not exist yet, so there was nothing to build on basically and I think it is useful for you to know why the museum basically made this function. It is because we had started a program in …, so a subsidy basically specifically for museums to make programs that focus I guess on the museum's social role in society.

On a similar note, Lisa, another social programmer, reflected on the conditions under which she was hired, explaining how the museum recognised the need to foster stronger connections with local residents and sought someone to take on this crucial community-focused responsibility.

> They wanted to include more people from [the city], but they did not know how. So, they asked me to investigate the city, to look for people or organisations who work with people who are not too normal to visit the museum.

Helen, a curator, also commented on this institutional shift toward new roles focused on community connection, highlighting the creation of a colleague's position as a significant investment to establish and sustain meaningful relationships with local communities through programming:

> And in the case of the position that [one colleague] has, yes, this was quite a big investment to really set up a different function. And also thinking about how we can make this sustainable and connected to all the other outreach programs that we have.

These accounts collectively reveal that the emergence of such roles represents a fundamental shift in museum practice and philosophy, signaling a move toward institutions that not only acknowledge but actively embrace their evolving role in addressing sociopolitical issues and becoming more responsive to their social contexts. (Boersma, 2023, p. 46; Valic, 2023, p. 199). Such actions and particularly the recruitment of professionals from within local communities are an effective way to better understand "where people are coming from" (Lynch, 2011, p. 13), while also holding the potential to move inclusion and diversity beyond theoretical commitments to practical, day-to-day work (Bienkowski & McGowan, 2021, p. 122-124).

However, this change does not unfold unhindered, as both interviewees who hold the role of social programmer underlined the need to consciously advocate for their positions within their institutions. They described how several colleagues initially, and to a lesser extent over time, failed to understand the relevance of hiring someone whose work is not directly involved in artistic processes. This tension is clearly reflected in their accounts:

> What I struggled with is that my colleagues had no idea what I was doing. My function does not fit into one of the understandable boxes of what kind of expertise is needed in the museum. So, they were like, 'What are you doing here exactly?'. And it is getting better, because the work is becoming more visible, but sometimes it is still a struggle.

> Yes, well, maybe shout is not the right word, but I have to advocate for myself and advocate why it is so important, because, you know, people who work in a museum for many years, 10-20 years, the main or the core business is to make exhibitions or to show their collections and show people how great it is and how pretty and how much you can learn.

Given that museums have historically operated with a collections-based, art-oriented mindset, and that the acceptance of their social agency remains uneven, this challenge is unsurprising (Sandell, 2012, p. xvii, Boersma, 2023, p. 46). However, it brings to the forefront the importance of securing institution-wide commitment when evolving toward a more participatory structure,

emphasising the necessity of embedding community engagement into the job descriptions of all staff (Bienkowski, 2016, p. 27; Stuedahl, 2018, p. 228). Even though the creation of such new positions is a critical and emerging necessity in the participatory transformation, their efficacy can be hindered if the underlying goals are not embraced as a shared mission, and particularly by the leadership team (Bienkowski & McGowan, 2021, p. 123-126). Differences in how museum staff perceive the institution's mission, as Lynch (2011, p.17-18) argues, necessitate a leadership that consistently places public engagement at the heart of the museum's values. Emma, head of exhibitions, provided an example of how such alignment can take root when supported from the top down:

> I have been here since our previous director, who changed the mission of the museum to be more focused on the city and also started the participatory trajectories. And I have witnessed the whole change, what that means for the exhibition team and for the museum team, and how it has entered into the DNA of the whole museum.

Yet, this is no easy task, as museum professionals are often pressured by the fast pace of keeping up with new programs for funding, diverting attention from staff capacity-building and responding to local needs (Boersma, 2023, p. 49; Lynch, 2011, p. 18). Additionally, as several interviewees noted, internal lack of understanding reflects a broader institutional need which is that all staff require frequent training and reeducation in order to keep up and align with the museum's shifting priorities and develop competencies necessary for participatory work (Linn et al., 2024, p. 3). Pieter, a project curator, accurately captures this need when he says, "but when you actually start working…you come across a series of challenges that you do not anticipate, and you are actually not prepared for". Similarly, Lotte, a social programmer who was the first one to have this role in her museum expressed: "my hope is getting more skilled in participatory practices in museums".

Beyond the lack of preparedness and practical skills regarding participation highlighted by the aforementioned participants, which is undoubtedly crucial and can be addressed through training, another important dimension of reeducation lies in learning how to become a different kind of host. As Helen, a curator, explains:

> What I feel is very important is that you learn to become a different type of host as a museum, so that you move from the institute of authority and that type of object to, okay,

> we know a fraction of what the meaning of this object is. Learning to listen and to host. But we need to find better ways to communicate this as well with our participants, with the co-curators or co-creators that we work with. So, I think it is a challenge indeed in terms of reeducating ourselves. So that needs some time.

Ultimately, the shift toward participatory practices in museums requires a multilateral, collective effort by all staff to ensure shared understanding and alignment, including not only training in practical skills but also reeducation that challenges and reshapes traditional ways of working. As Helen notes, that means also learning how to become a host who listens, collaborates, and relinquishes sole authority over knowledge- a key dimension emphasised also in the first theme, which revealed the ethical weight of recalibrating power dynamics in these practices. This process is most effective when it moves beyond isolated individual efforts and is reinforced through institutional commitments to capacity-building, reflective practice, and inclusive training (Bienkowski & McGowan, 2021, p. 110-111; Simon, 2010, p. 346).

4.3 Navigating the Challenges of the Participatory Turn

While the first theme focused on how professionals understand participation within their workplaces and the second explored their descriptions of what it takes to practically enact participatory practices, the third was shaped by the recurring emphasis interviewees placed on the obstacles encountered in participatory museum work. Given the frequency and the depth with which participants discussed specific limitations, the theme was divided into two subthemes, each addressing a key challenge consistently described across interviews: the difficulty of building and sustaining relationships with communities and the subtle persistence of museum-centric mindset. These subthemes capture the ideological and operational frictions that surface in participatory projects, while reflecting broader debates within critical museum studies concerning power, and the limits of institutional reform.

4.3.1 Building and Sustaining Relationships

The second theme revealed that one of the most catalytic institutional shifts in the participatory turn is museums learning to no longer only attract but also reach-out to the

communities they strive to be of relevance for. However, this institutional change is accompanied by one of the most discussed challenges among participants -that of building and sustaining relationships with groups and communities of the city. These may include organised collectives, neighborhoods, informal groups of people or individuals who collaborated on specific projects. Museum professionals often expressed concerns about how to extend a relationship beyond a one-time collaboration with many highlighting the significance of establishing long-lasting relationships, which, however, demand time, effort and institutional commitment in order to be secured. Helen, a curator, explains:

> Because it is just a lot of work to keep in touch with everyone and make sure that you have these conversations that you are not just spending moments of time together and then losing each other again and have to start all over.

Helen here underscores an underlying concern that without consistent follow-up and presence, these relationships risk becoming transactional, limited to the duration of a project, while stressing the labor-intensive nature of maintaining meaningful ties with people.

However, beyond the time-intensive nature of building relationships, this challenge is further heightened by the structural limitations professionals face in their roles. Lisa, a social programmer, draws attention to this when she notes:

> I think one of the main struggles is how to maintain those relationships, because of course you have a very close bond with partners or with their people. I mean, [the city] is quite big and I am just on my own.

As shown in this example, the investment that professionals put into these connections can sometimes clash with the practical demands of their roles, since they demand more time and effort than the available staff can handle, revealing the strain placed on individuals operating within under-resourced institutional frameworks. Lisa's comment reflects a broader tension between the ambition to work in deeply participatory and community-rooted ways and the limited capacity in terms of staff, time and resources available to do so. In extreme cases, this can lead to communities feeling exploited, valued primarily as a means to secure funding rather than as genuine partners in the process (Lynch, 2011, p. 6; Linn et al., 2024, p. 3).

Boersma (2023, p. 85) further complicates the picture by highlighting that another difficulty lies in the institutional capacity and resources required to make museums feel genuinely safe and welcoming for those who may not typically see themselves reflected in these spaces. Lisa powerfully articulates how perceptions of cultural and social distance can discourage people from visiting museums, stressing the deeper emotional and symbolic barriers institutions must address to cultivate that feeling of safety and welcomeness:

> If you look around and you do not see people who look like you, you do not feel safe. If you do not feel like you are wearing the right clothing or the right shoes, or you know, the good haircut, you do not feel like you belong there. So, I think this is one of the things I really have to keep repeating. Like, if you do not feel safe in an environment, you are not going to visit a museum. Of course you are not, because you feel like everybody is watching you. Or if you feel like you are too dumb to understand the exhibition text, for example because everything is written in a university language.

Similarly, Lotte, a social programmer, emphasises the importance of taking the time to build trustful relationships with partners in order to secure a welcoming environment for them:

> We were able to build trust and show them we had good intentions. That we were there to build a long-lasting relationship, and that we were willing to adapt the program if it was not working for them. Because of that, we were able to do more workshops and eventually reached a place where it felt safer to talk about more difficult or sensitive topics, like political unrest or social injustice. But that takes time, and that takes conversation; to build trust with the organizations you work with. I am really proud we were able to do that. I am proud we were able to build that kind of trust. And I am still working with them today.

Her example shows that this type of relationships rely on a gradual process during which trust is not given but earned. At the same time, such relationships can be highly dependent on individual professionals, as in many cases, “those individuals do not establish partnerships with the museum but with individuals within that institution” (Watson, 2007, p. 18), making them particularly vulnerable to staff turnover. Lisa, a social programmer, points out, “So if I leave this job and do something else, or switch jobs, the next person has to make those connections again”,

highlighting the precariousness of relationships that rely on personal networks rather than institutional continuity. Similarly, Anna, an educator, echoes this concern, noting that she has to actively work to ensure the connections she builds are not lost when staff roles change:

> Yes, I do think we count a lot on already existing collaborations, and we try to make them, so it is not only dependent on the people I know, and when I leave that no one else knows these people. For example, we do try to embed them more in the organisation.

Seen in this light, while the personal nature of these relationships helps foster trust and familiarity (Linn et al., 2024, p. 3), it also makes them vulnerable, and adds too much pressure on specific individual professionals, highlighting a need for better institutional management, which is capable of not only creating personal connections but also doing so in a way that is sustainable. Without mechanisms for continuity, hard-earned trust can quickly be lost, and museum professionals bear the responsibility for too many roles at once, balancing relationship-building with project management, outreach and administrative tasks. Although existing literature acknowledges the value of personal relationships in establishing long-term, trusted partnerships, the professional strain and structural limitations placed on staff in maintaining these ties remain insufficiently explored (Watson, 2007, p. 18; Linn et al., 2024, p. 3; Lynch, 2011, p. 6).

In addition to these structural limitations, maintaining long-term relationships can also be complicated by conflicting expectations. Helen, a curator, recalled a situation in which an exhibition that engaged a religiously affiliated group made them feel welcome in the museum for the first time. However, their continued visits coincided with a subsequent exhibition featuring nudity, which deeply conflicted with their values. “The people who for the first time felt welcome in the museum continued to visit us and then were appalled by the nudity in the Surrealist exhibition”, she explained, depicting how external expectations can clash with institutional programming.

Museums are asked to navigate not only the diverse and sometimes conflicting needs that exist between communities but also within them. Groups that are often treated as homogeneous may in fact hold differing, even opposing views on how histories should be represented and engaged with. Pieter, a project curator, reflected:

> For example, slavery is always a very contested subject because there are parts of the community that would very much like to put this past them and are sometimes even offended when associated with the subject because for a lot of communities that have been associated with the history of slavery is not only painful but historically a source of shame. They would very much like not to talk about this, but it also means that they would very much not like to attend the next exhibition that talks about their connection to slavery. But there is also another part of the community who say 'I think it is very important because it puts our life in context and our history in context and speaks about how that specific occurrence in history has worked, has its influences on today and how our lives are today'.

What often happens in practices centred on communities, and was highlighted in this instance shared by Pieter, is what Lotte phrased clearly in our conversation: "not everyone that you feel as being one community is actually one community". In cases where, as Boersma (2023, p. 87) stresses, projects give limited agency to the people involved, museum staff may end up inviting "imagined" communities based on assumed shared traits, thereby flattening complex identities and perspectives. This institutional tendency to approach communities as fixed or homogeneous entities is only one of the reasons why building and sustaining relationships with participants was phrased as a significant challenge. Alongside the other obstacles discussed, ranging from lack of institutional commitment, limited staff, conflicting external expectations and perceived exclusion, these factors intertwine in ways that make the work of relationship-building particularly demanding. Taken together, such tensions reveal a disconnection between the aspirational rhetoric of inclusivity and the practical realities of its realisation, calling for a reframing of participation not as a series of isolated initiatives, but as an embedded institutional ethos.

4.3.2 The Subtle Persistence of Museum-centric Thinking

The difficulty of forming sustainable relationships was not the only challenge that surfaced as a central concern in the interview data. Underneath efforts to foster collaborative projects, interviewees frequently observed that museums often retain a dominant role in shaping narratives, themes and processes, sometimes without fully recognising the extent of their

influence. However, this main challenge reflects a deeper tension that has surfaced throughout the analysis; the difficulty of letting go of traditional institutional authority. From the ethical weight of recalibrating power in the first theme to the need for staff to learn how to be a different kind of host in the second, the persistence of museum-centric thinking is a foundational tension that underlies the whole process of the participatory turn. A social programmer, Lotte, points this out when she says:

> With a participatory project where you already have a concept, I think the challenge is for the museum to be aware of the power that you have and of the narrative that you bring, and how you may steer the way that the project goes. Either because you as an individual bring a certain view on how something should be, or because you pressure the project, because you are working with a certain time limit, or a planning, or a space. I am not necessarily saying that is bad, but you need to be aware of it. And I think the tricky part is: how are you aware of it, and how do you create a social space with your partner where they feel powerful enough to call you out on your shit.

Without framing this power as inherently negative, Lotte underscores the need for awareness and reflexivity over how control, even if not intentional, can still be generated through time constraints, spatial limitations and even personal bias. An example that gives concrete shape to this concern was clearly described by Ben, an art handler:

> And I get a lot of feeling that in various museums they are putting an exhibition together because the conservator specifically is interested in that part. And I can get it because they are working on one exhibition for three or four years but sometimes, I miss the point. We put up a great design, spent a lot of time in it, also building it, and I had a great time, but nobody comes to see it because it does not interest them.

As shown in the examples, internal motivations can quietly drive the development of projects, in a way that fits the museum's broader agenda, perpetuating a culture of inward-facing logic that the new museology and participatory practices specifically are meant to counteract (McCall & Gray, 2014, p. 20-24). This recurring difficulty in recognising and navigating the extent of control exercised raises one of the most pressing questions: is it possible for a structurally colonial and neocolonial institution to achieve meaningful and inclusive

collaborations? For some scholars (Boast, 2011, p. 65; Hilden& Huhndorf, 1999, p. 178), regardless of the professionals' sincere intentions, such an endeavor amounts to little more than subterfuge since the history of the institution is "symbolised by the imbalanced relationship between museums and those with whom they now seek to collaborate" (Harrison, 2005, p. 196). Institutions that continue to define the rules, still hold real control, creating "contact zones" of unequal power (Linn et al., 2024, p. 3) rather than of "cross cultural dialogues" (Clifford, 1999; Boast, 2011, p. 65).

Although several interviewees recognise the institution's past and ongoing legacy of control, the question is: to what extent is this acknowledgement sufficient to enact genuine structural change? Can heightened awareness meaningfully challenge Boast's critique of museums' contact zone practices as "clinical collaborations"; that is, as interactions designed to appropriate what is useful to the institution while ignoring or silencing what is not? Emma, head of exhibitions, reflects on this awareness:

> I think if you go back in the day, museums or specialists can have a tendency to think they know, have the truth, or they know the standards. We also control the standards. You need to be aware of that when you work in a museum.

However, she also adds, "You should really be aware that the pre-knowledge is different from yours. So you cannot make the assumption that if you request something like okay, you deliver content. You will not always get your content". These two quotes appear somewhat contradictory. On one hand, there is clear recognition of who is "controlling the standards". On the other hand, the assumption that content can simply be "requested" and then "delivered" reflects a transactional, institutional-drivel model where the museum sets the task and expects others to respond accordingly. Therefore, while the interviewee cautions against making that assumption, the underlying structure of the interaction implies a power imbalance. These accounts point to a fundamental tension at the heart of participatory practice; a friction between the desire to collaborate meaningfully and the deeply embedded structures and logics of the museum.

While some scholars argue that these initiatives amount to "clinical collaborations" that result in "empowerment-lite" (Lynch, 2011, p. 11) experiences, others see potential in these initiatives, but only if museums confront their own authority. From this perspective,

acknowledging the unequal relationship between institutions and communities is a necessary starting point for cultivating more equitable and meaningful participation (Watson, 2007, p. 9, 17; Macdonald, 2002, p. 219; Lynch, 2011, p. 11, 16). Yet, part of this acknowledgment must go beyond awareness to include trust. This was underlined in different ways by two interviewees. Ben, an art handler, reflected on how museums sometimes attempt to appear more welcoming, yet still subtly convey mistrust toward visitors:

> Yes, it is more to keep people away without forcing them again. Like, you cannot come here because we do not trust you. We want the visitors to feel trusted. But sometimes you have to be prepared for the worst. Okay. And in my honest opinion, I do see a bit more cocky behavior...So you want to prevent people from coming too close, obviously, but you do not want to let them feel mistrusted.

Even though Ben is specifically referring to exhibition settings, his observation points to a broader institutional hesitancy to relinquish control and fully trust the public. This tension was echoed by Pieter, a project curator, who emphasised that museums committed to the participatory turn must take a leap of faith, not just in their participants, as Simon (2010, p. 38) suggests, but also in the idea that interest itself can be cultivated:

> Because I believe the genuine reason that a lot of times museums do not offer a lot of freedom in choosing subjects and allowing non-traditional participants or participants is that they are not accustomed to create, is that they believe that whatever is going to be presented will not be appealing to their audience and the audience of museums are very important to them because it is a lot of time that keeps them driving, keeps them going. Interest has to be created, and you have to seek them out. People will not come to you if they feel like whatever you do, and present has nothing to do with them so it is up to the museum to trust that if they reach out and if they create interest that this will also bring them a new audience. I believe that is what is necessary; a trust that interest does not exist, but it has to be created.

In this sense, trust is not just about believing in participants' capabilities, but also about trusting in the possibility of change: that new subjects, new publics, and new forms of engagement can emerge if museums are willing to open themselves up, take risks, and let go of full control.

Together, these reflections suggest that meaningful participation cannot be achieved through frameworks that seek to manage or contain community input. Instead, it demands a more radical openness, one that begins with institutional humility and a willingness to trust in both the process and the people it seeks to engage.

4.4 Networks of Support: Enabling Participation through Professional Solidarity

Amid the institutional challenges described so far, interviewees pointed to the importance of collegial support and the value of connecting with peers who are navigating similar issues. Many participants emphasised the potential of shared learning, emotional solidarity, and informal exchanges as ways to sustain and strengthen their efforts. At the same time, some accounts revealed a more complex picture, where relationships between institutions were marked by competition and a reluctance to share resources or ideas. These contrasting perspectives shaped the fourth and final theme, highlighting how professional networks have the potential to foster mutual growth but often reinforce institutional silos.

Lisa, a social programmer, expressed her desire for a more collegial interaction across museums but reflected on its feasibility:

> But yeah, I think everyone is more on their own. I would love to have this group of people who are coming together like once every four months, whatever. But for some reason, I do not think it is going to be a thing. And I mean, museums are quite competitive... So yes, sometimes I feel like some people are not that open to sharing information. And I get it.

While Lisa recognised that regular meetings with peers holding similar roles would be beneficial, competitive dynamics between institutions make this collaboration seem unlikely. Additionally, later in the conversation, she also shared that it is common in the museum sector for colleagues to reach out with the intention of "stealing" promising project ideas. As highlighted in literature (Boersma, 2023, p. 48-49; Lynch, 2011, p. 9, 18; Watson, 2007, p. 1), this type of tensions, are rooted in the structural reality of museums' reliance on fundings, which fosters competition and limits open exchange and mutual support. More specifically, the growing number of museums alongside decreasing public subsidies for heritage projects has intensified competition for

funding, which in turn fosters uncollegial attitudes among professionals and hinders collaborative opportunities.

Lotte, another social programmer, provided an example which illustrated how valuable good project ideas are within this competitive landscape. When her team wanted to incorporate a concept previously implemented by another institution, they felt the need to ask for permission: "But in searching for projects that we could do, we also found this idea. And we talked to [name of museum] and they were okay with us doing it". In a similar vein, but from the opposite perspective, Ben, an art handler, emphasised the professional pride and institutional value placed on originality:

> Because you do not want to copy something you have seen in Amsterdam or in Den Haag. You want to find your own way ... [name of museum] did it with ... and then more started doing it ... We were still the first.

Both aforementioned examples reveal an implicit etiquette around intellectual ownership in the sector where ideas are treated as assets that require permission to be reused. This reliance on funding, which is often allocated based on audience numbers, fuels a competitive drive to develop original projects, ultimately hindering museums in their efforts to overcome boundaries and meaningfully adopt participatory practices. As Lynch (2011, p. 9) argues, the creation of genuinely open and collaborative spaces requires a "significant level of trust and confidentiality" which apparently is not supported by the prevailing institutional culture.

This concern was echoed by Anna, an educator, who highlighted the importance of sharing institutional vulnerabilities rather than only success stories:

> It is easy to tell 'oh my god, [name of a project] has been here for 10 years, and we are doing so great'. I think we can learn more from each other when I say 'oh, we are struggling financially at the moment, how did you do it? Because we are thinking about option one, two, three, and four, for example'.

On a similar note, Lotte, a social programmer, emphasised how valuable it was for her to participate in group meetings with peers from other museums who shared similar challenges and roles:

> But the feeling that, you are facing similar challenges is motivating… So then it is really nice to have connections with other people who are trying to do the same. And something else that we just started doing at our museum; we organised meetups and those were like two days of workshops of conversations, where we invited everyone who is engaging with these topics. And that was really fun, also to meet other people who have the same function as me inside a museum, or people who work at the museum and want to have more of those professional positions but do not know where to start or do not know what to do… And the result of that is not necessarily a formal network, but more of a 'Hey, I would like to talk to you, do you want to get a coffee?'. And then you speak to one another. But I really do feel that it is something that I need as an individual, and that maybe other people also need.

While existing literature acknowledges the competitive nature of the museum sector (Boersma, 2023, p. 48-49; Lynch, 2011, p. 9, 18; Watson, 2007, p. 1), there is limited theoretical engagement with the nuanced tensions between professionals and the potential of professional solidarity. Yet, the accounts of these professionals bring this important issue to the forefront, highlighting collegial support and networks as crucial and underutilised mechanisms for enabling participatory practices. These grassroots forms of support may not always crystallise into formal networks, but their emotional and practical significance should not be underestimated. In fact, such instances may represent a critical, under-theorised, dimension of the participatory turn.

5. Conclusions

This study aimed to answer the research question: “How do museum professionals in Dutch museums negotiate the tensions of the participatory turn?”. Placed among growing academic and institutional interest in participation as a means of enhancing inclusion, democratisation and museum’s social agency, this thesis explored the objectives, methods and challenges faced by museum staff involved in participatory work aimed at engaging with local communities. Through eight semi-structured interviews with professionals across four urban Dutch museums, the research revealed that the increasing implementation of participatory practices is not accompanied by a smooth institutional transformation. On the contrary, the findings show that it is a complex and negotiated process, resonating with existing scholarly critiques (Linn et al., 2024; Sitzia, 2019; Bienkowski, 2016), while offering a more nuanced, context-specific understanding of how this unfolds within the Dutch museum landscape.

The study’s thematic analysis yielded four central themes that illuminate how participation is conceptualised and operationalised by museum professionals. First of all, it revealed that the term participation is divergent within museums and dependent on the roles of professionals. Contributing to existing literature (Sitzia, 2019; Sitzia & Elffers, 2016), the research showed that the variety of meanings attributed to this term extends to several professional domains, such as conservation or social programming, and are shaped by factors such as institutional seniority. Additionally, the findings identified three main institutional shifts that signal a participatory turn: museums taking initiative to reach out to communities, professionals embracing a more listening-oriented approach and the creation of new roles designed to support participatory work.

In line with critical scholarly perspectives (Linn et al., 2024, p. 3; Lynch, 2011, p. 6; Bienkowski, 2016), despite the positive connotations of participation, the study highlighted significant challenges and institutional barriers that hinder its meaningful implementation. Such limitations include internal resistance, lack of professional preparedness and especially persistence of traditional hierarchies, and difficulties in maintaining long-term partnerships with communities. Professionals often found themselves advocating for participatory work within institutions that remained ambivalent or underprepared for this transition. Yet, one key insight that emerged as essential for improving this transformative process was the need for ongoing

reeducation and professional development, alongside the establishment of peer networks, which would create a supportive and reflexive space for institutional growth.

While the study offers rich insights into the tensions of the participatory turn from the perspective of museum staff, it does so within a specific scope that entails some limitations. An important consideration is that the thesis draws exclusively on the perspectives of mid-level staff, leaving out the perspectives of senior leadership such as directors and decision-makers responsible for the overarching institutional strategy. Including these voices in future research could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how participatory agendas are shaped, supported or challenged at the managerial level, ultimately contributing to a fuller picture of this institutional transformation.

At the same time, although the focus was intentionally placed on the perspectives of professionals working in urban Dutch museums, future research could build on this by including the voices of community members themselves who have participated in such practices. This multi-perspective approach would not only offer a more balanced account of how participatory practices are experienced from both sides but also shed light on the dynamics of power redistribution within these collaborations. That way it would provide a better understanding of whether and how institutional authority is shared, offering richer insights into the challenges and potential of the participatory turn within the Dutch museum context. Lastly, although my own background and values influenced the way material was interpreted and analysed, conscious efforts were made to remain self-aware throughout the research process, engaging with the data in a reflexive way.

5.1 Discussion

This research builds on the theoretical premise that participation is not inherently emancipatory, but rather contingent upon how it is framed and implemented (Macdonald, 2002, p. 219; Watson, 2007; p. 9; Sitzia, 2019). While participatory practices have the potential to facilitate greater inclusion and social engagement, they can also, as the findings suggest, reproduce institutional hierarchies if not critically examined. In line with this, the analysis demonstrates that the participatory turn in Dutch urban museums is accompanied by many of the same tensions identified in broader literature (Bienkowski, 2016; Lynch, 2011; Valic, 2023; McCall & Gray, 2014). These include institutional resistance, ambiguity around professional

roles and a difficulty of genuinely decentralising power. That these dynamics persist in museums actively pursuing participatory agendas highlights the systemic nature of such challenges and underscores the importance of addressing them not only at the level of individual projects, but also through sustained institutional transformation.

Although awareness of these risks can help mitigate them, their subtle persistence is likely to continue unless accompanied by deliberate efforts to enact fundamental institutional change. This widely acknowledged call for deeper transformation (Bienkowski, 2016; Taylor, 2017; Boersma, 2023; Simon, 2010, p. 322), was reflected in the analysis as a pressing need for comprehensive training and reeducation -an aspect that, despite its significance, remains underexplored in literature (Bienkowski & McGowan, 2021). Such initiatives were seen as essential not only to reform the kind of institutional hosts museums aspire to be, but also to adequately equip practitioners with the skills and reflexive capacity required to manage participatory work effectively.

Additionally, for museums to effectively navigate this new endeavor -learning how to relinquish control and share authority with audiences who were previously positioned primarily as passive recipients- this institution-wide transformation, as expressed by staff members and literature (Bienkowski & McGowan, 2021), is accompanied by a shift in leadership. This translates into a leadership team that places participation at the heart of the museum's mission in order to steadily negotiate key features of the participatory turn highlighted in the themes, such as learning how to approach rather than solely attract, actively listening to the public, and cultivating a sense of trust toward new publics.

While much of the existing literature focuses on institutional frameworks or community dynamics (Boersma, 2023; Linn et al., 2024; Arnaboldi & Lema, 2021), the role of interpersonal support among professionals remains under-explored. Yet, as revealed in the analysis, such solidarity could not only help professionals navigate the emotional and structural complexities of the participation turn but also foster a sense of collective resilience that is crucial for maintaining long-term commitment to participatory values. This under-theorised dimension can play a significant role in sustaining participation, signaling deep institutional reform with the potential for lasting impact. To address this aspect, this thesis proposes the concept of participatory resilience to describe the collective capacity of museum professionals to sustain participatory practices through interpersonal trust, shared learning and support systems. This concept adds to

the field by drawing attention to the often-overlooked relational dynamics within museum teams, complementing the need for institutional change by acknowledging its dependence on a more holistic understanding of what enables participation to take root and endure. This way, participatory resilience offers a new lens for both academic enquiry and institutional strategy.

Building on this, the practical implications of this study directly inform museum professionals and policymakers by providing insights into how museums can navigate the complex process of implementing participatory practices. By drawing from the experiences and reflections of museum professionals, the findings highlight key challenges frequently encountered in this transition, serving as important considerations for institutions currently undertaking or planning a participatory turn. They underscore the need to move beyond viewing participation as a project-based activity limited to a few individuals, but as an institutional commitment that flourishes with long-term, sustainable partnerships. More importantly, this study goes beyond identifying challenges by offering practical suggestions to better navigate this shift. These include the need for comprehensive professional training, institution-wide commitment to participation as an embedded ethos, and the establishment of peer support networks to foster ongoing learning and resilience among practitioners. Together, these insights offer a roadmap for museums seeking to move from isolated projects towards sustained, meaningful collaboration with their communities.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Background & Role:

- Could you briefly introduce yourself and your role at …?
- How long have you been working here, and what are your main responsibilities?

Main Discussion

Defining & Implementing Participatory Practices

- What are the museum's values?
- Do they extend beyond cultural?
- Have you noticed a change in perspective towards engagement with audiences? If so, how?
- Could you tell me something about your institution's thoughts on participatory practices?
- What, according to you, is a good example of a participatory initiative?
- Why this particular example?

Operationalising Participation and Community Engagement

- How does the museum approach its role in the city?
- Is it important for the museum to include local residents and communities (in shaping museum content or programming)?
- Why?
- What strategies does the museum use to accomplish this?
- What factors influence the design of these projects?
- How do you ensure these initiatives are inclusive and representative of diverse voices in (e.g. Utrecht)?
- Have there been any collaborations with specific community groups or institutions?
- If so, what were their goals and why is it relevant to the museum to do this?
- How do participatory practices, in your opinion, contribute to fostering a sense of belonging among local residents?
- How does the museum evaluate the impact of its community-focused participatory initiatives?

Challenges & Institutional Adaptation

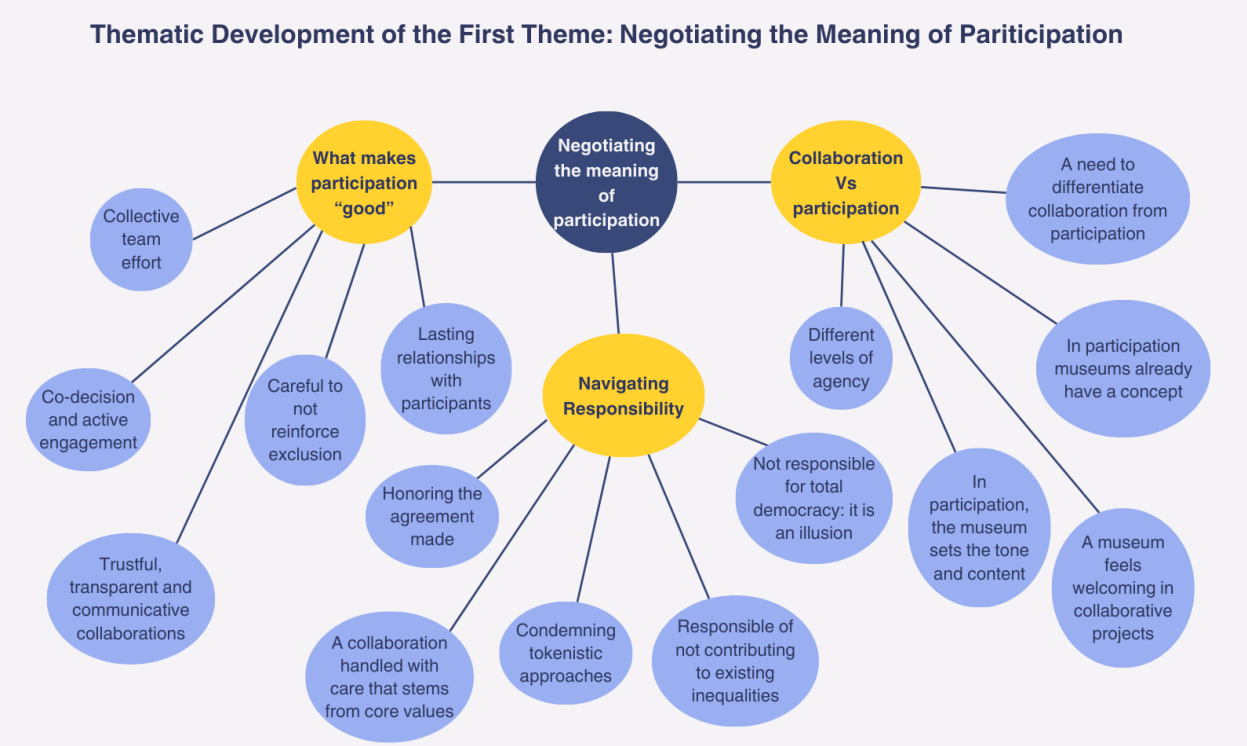
- What are the main challenges you have faced when implementing participatory projects focused on engaging the local community?
- Do you have any examples of when this did not work out the way you planned?
- Have you encountered resistance -internally or externally- to participatory practices?
- How did you navigate this conflict?
- How does the museum balance curatorial expertise with shared decision-making in co-creation projects?
- What resources (financial, personnel, structural) are needed to sustain these projects?

Conclusion

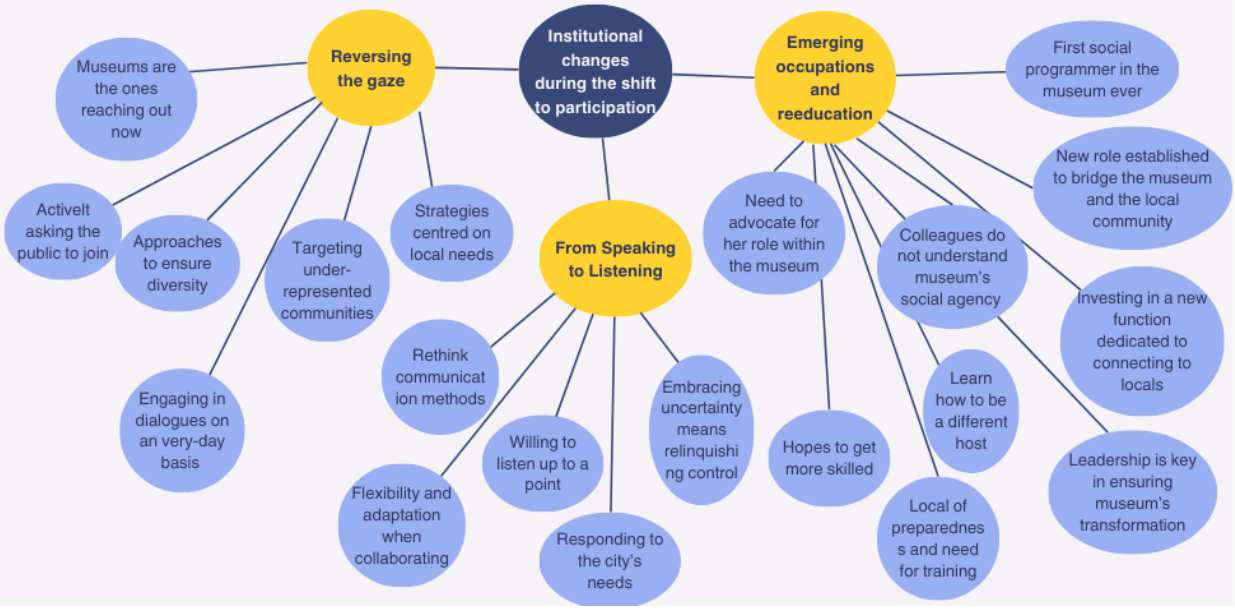
- What advice would you give to museums looking to strengthen their participatory engagement?
- How do you see participatory practices evolving in Dutch museums over the next decade?

Appendix B: Thematic Maps

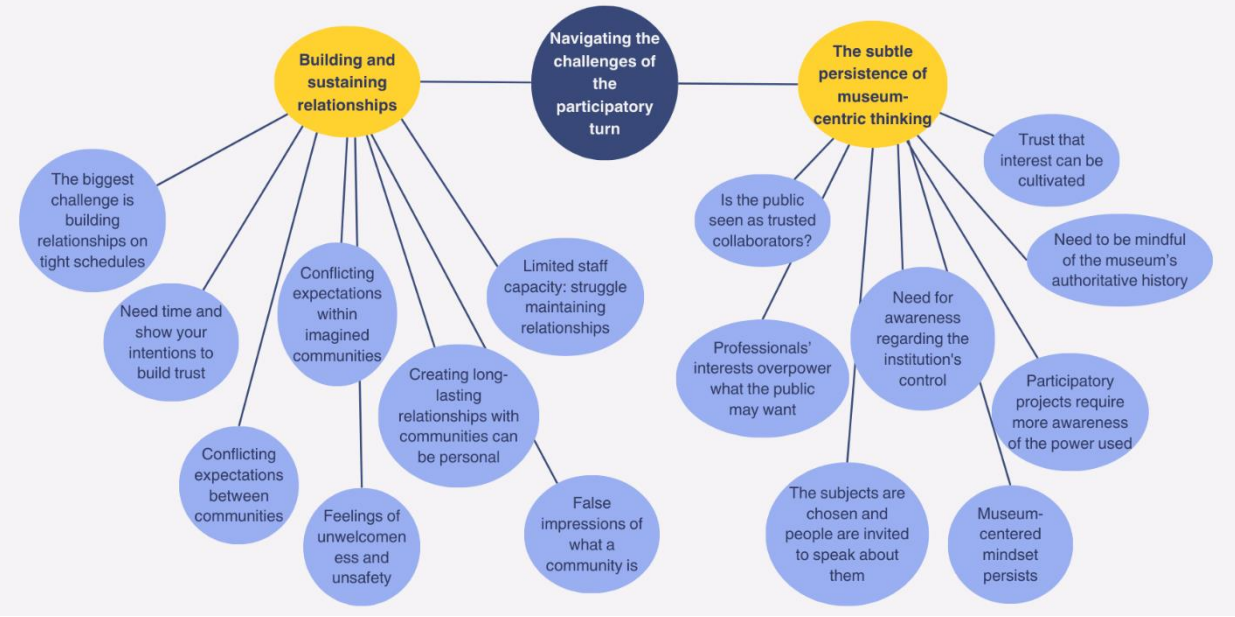
The diagrams illustrate the thematic maps that trace the development of the themes. They visually represent how initial inductive codes (blue nodes) were grouped into subthemes (yellow nodes), which collectively informed each overarching theme (central node).



Thematic Development of the Second Theme: Institutional Changes During the Shift to Participation



Thematic Development of the Third Theme: Navigating the Challenges of the Participatory Turn



Thematic Development of the Fourth Theme: Networks of Support: Enabling Participation through Professional Solidarity