
Lorenzo Morganti

Experience and Interaction in Exhibition Displays and Their Contexts



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ONCURATING.org

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1. Introduction

1.1 History and Significance

At the turn of the 20th century, Mary Anne Staniszewski decided to depict a peculiar history of New York's Museum of Modern Art through the lens of its exhibition installations. In her portrait, besides indirectly investigating how the influential American art institution emerged and rose to prominence, she thoroughly described the *power of display*, finally clarifying the role of the *apparatus* as a crucial element not only to curatorial practice but to our very understanding of art and culture¹.

'A work of art, when publicly displayed, almost never stands alone: it is always an element within a permanent or temporary exhibition' and 'seeing the importance of exhibition design provides an approach to art history that acknowledges the vitality, historicity, and the time-and-site-bound character of all aspects of culture'². The significance and the implications of exhibition design, in fact, go far beyond the surface of the single elements it contains, revealing, like Staniszewski proposes, the social conventions and all the 'collective rituals that enhance particular notions of subjecthood'³. Moreover, exhibitions 'like the artworks themselves, represent what can be described as conscious and unconscious subjects, issues, and ideological agendas'⁴. Thus, she not only reads 'installation design as an aesthetic medium' but as a complex, multifaceted and multilayered *representation*, where less visible aspects are equally central as a 'component of the contem-

- 1 ——— Staniszewski briefly defines her overall work and research as follows: 'I investigate the way we 'invent' things in our cultures, how concepts and institutions emerge, such as art, exhibitions, and race. Framing such entities historically can reveal how we create not only our cultures, but also our sense of ourselves. This perspective has political implications. By making visible the historical limitations of social conventions and disciplinary discourses, my intention is to demonstrate how cultures can be changed and transformed.' [Staniszewski, Mary Anne, in <http://www.arts.rpi.edu/pl/faculty-staff/mary-anne-staniszewski>, accessed 02.01.2020]
- 2 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge (Mass.): Mit Press, 1998, page xxi
- 3 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, in <http://www.arts.rpi.edu/pl/faculty-staff/mary-anne-staniszewski>, accessed 02.01.2020
- 4 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Mit Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1998, page xxii

porary art system in order to understand its historical and ideological limits⁵. Staniszewski substantiates her interpretation in many ways, highlighting the belief of the director René d'Harnoncourt's, that there is no such thing as a 'neutral installation'⁶ or recollecting the international avant-garde installation methods 'to treat an exhibition as a historically bound experience whose meaning is shaped by its reception'⁷. Accordingly, she compares viewers in exhibitions to readers in relation to texts, explicitly quoting the critical theory of 'the reader in the text'⁸, therefore focusing on the relationship between the audience and the exhibition as it occurs when analysing literary or *artistic texts*. The idea that an exhibition might be *read* as a *text* is consistent not only with the aforementioned theory but with a multitude of studies, even though, as Mieke Bal warned, 'it is important that we precisely define the concepts which we use', since 'a more restricted interpretation of what constitutes a text' is also coherent within many fields of application that 'reserve this term for *language texts* only'⁹. To this extent, Staniszewski's interpretation is of course a wider one that broadly interprets the concept of the *text* and where 'another, non-linguistic, sign system is employed'¹⁰. In fact, as Barthes put it, these texts are systems of communication that he defined as *myths*, and can therefore consist of modes of writing as well as other possible kinds of representations, exhibitions included. Furthermore, and in accordance by way of example, the exhibition he included in his *Mythologies*, was MoMA's *Family of Man*¹¹. Moreover, according to Mieke Bal's definition, an exhibition can not only be defined as a *text* in that it is a *finished, structured whole composed of language signs*¹² but would also be a text of a peculiar kind, corresponding to her definition of a *narrative text*:

5 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *Ibid.*, page xxii

6 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *Ibid.*, page 94

7 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *Ibid.*, page 27

8 ——— The comparisons exhibition/text and viewer/reader are implicitly present throughout *The Power of Display*, but also explicitly when the author criticises the 'modernist' conventions for taking installation photographs without any 'subjects in the texts' (viewers), and finally, when Bayer's *field-of-vision* exhibition technique is referred to as 'the reader in the text'. [Suleiman, R., Susan, Crosman, Inge, eds., *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1980]

9 ——— Bal, Mieke, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985 page 4

10 ——— Bal, Mieke, *Ibid.*, page 4

11 ——— Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, New York: The Noonday Press, 1991. See pages 100-102, 109

12 ——— Bal, Mieke, *Ibid.*, page 5

'in which an agent relates a narrative'¹³. Albeit focusing mainly on *written* sign systems, she explicitly underlines that 'in another sign system — in a film for example — the same reactions are evoked' to a reader/viewer. As Bal clarifies, this definition of narrative texts suggests a 'three-layer distinction' where, under the actual textual layer, lie the *story* ('the way in which events are presented') and the *fabula* (the 'series of logically and chronologically related events'). This separation is a 'theoretical supposition based upon a process of reasoning'¹⁴ and is 'only temporarily meaningful, and has as its purpose a better insight into the functioning of the extremely complex meaning production of narrative texts'¹⁵. The theory of narrative therefore aims at providing analytical tools to allow this insight, since 'only the text layer, embodied in the sign system [...], is directly accessible'. Exhibitions can thus be analysed as narratives, and the display is the first directly accessible text layer — the place (whether it be physical or not) where the text/reader interaction (i.e. exhibition/viewer) takes place, hence its *power*. If the researcher 'distinguishes different layers of a text', the 'average reader', like the average viewer, 'does not make such a distinction', so that part of the narrative is perceived *unconsciously*, as Staniszewski would put it, under a fictitious 'neutral installation'. Beneath this first layer there lies the *story*, the way in which linguistic and non-linguistic signs are presented by a *narrator*. Similar to the curator in exhibitions, 'the narrator is the most central concept in the analysis of narrative texts. The identity of the narrator, the degree to which and the manner in which that identity is indicated in the text, and the choices that are implied lend the text its specific character'¹⁶. The narrator/curator determines the focalization, the 'colouring', hence the *narrative situation*. Bal warns not to 'see focalization as part of the narration, as is usually done' to avoid failing 'to make a distinction between linguistic, visual, or auditive — hence, textual — agents and the purpose, the "colouring"'¹⁷. Here again we find a strict coincidence with Stanisze-

13 ——— Bal, Mieke, *Ibid.*, page 5

14 ——— Bal, Mieke, *Ibid.*, page 6

15 ——— Bal, Mieke, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 3rd ed., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009, page 18

16 ——— Bal, Mieke, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985, page 120

17 ——— Bal, Mieke, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 3rd ed., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009, page 18. This sentence has been modified several times by Bal in her four editions, but only in the third one, the colouring, indistinguishable from the different elements of a text (also the very physical ones) has been clearly associated to 'the purpose' (Ed.1 and 2 refer to the purpose alone, while Ed. 4 only refers to the colouring).

wski's efforts to distinguish and highlight the 'unconscious' layers of exhibitions that suggests 'that which is present — and powerful — but often unseen, overlooked, and unacknowledged'¹⁸. Finally, the logically and/or chronologically related exhibits are the main elements of the *fabula* — the characters of the play — that an average viewer will focus on, usually unaware of the relevance of the stage they were provided.

Ultimately, an exhibition, like a narrative text, can in fact be read through all its indivisible *layers* that start with its installation design, leading up to its exhibits. To this extent, the level of complexity in the meaning production of an average exhibition might be significantly high, considering the wide number of people involved in the definition of a single layer, that belongs to a whole, but is often created separately, by different people easily passing from one level to another. Reportedly, Alfred H. Barr, MoMA's founding director, did not choose the paintings of his first exhibition, but installed them instead, while Charles and Ray Eames created the installation for the *Good Design* exhibition and at the same time provided some of the exhibits, therefore further substantiating the relevance of the exhibition design in the overall narrative text and the frequent overlapping and role playing of the main agents¹⁹ within an exhibition's narrative text. From this point of view, one of the pioneers in playing and overlapping different roles (artist, curator, exhibition designer, critic etc.), was undoubtedly Marcel Duchamp, whose actions still puts to test art museums' standard ways of *labelling* works of art.

18 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne. *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*. Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1998, page xxviii

19 ——— The main roles of *narrator*, *focaliser* and *actor* of a narrative text as described by Mieke Bal often overlap in exhibitions.

1.2 Theoretical perspectives

1.2.1 The 'power of display': how exhibitions address a visitor

In her chronological journey into MoMA's exhibitions through more than seven decades, Mary Anne Staniszewski's focus since the very beginning has been on how to *frame* exhibition design. To this extent, she found a first conscious understanding of the relevance of the subject and its influence on the visitors in the fundamental work of the international *Avant-Gardes* and within their disruptive displays, now becoming the true 'new language' through which the modernist 'ideological scaffolding' is unveiled²⁰.

1.2.1.1 From the avant-gardes to the 'Art of Propaganda'

In fact, Staniszewski does not fail to underline the relevance of the countless avant-garde innovations: from Frederick Kiesler's *interactive* and *kinetic* displays as examples of *universal* design *ante litteram*, to El Lissitzky's *abstract cabinet* or Herbert Bayer's *field of vision* and the first Dada experiments. But on the other hand, she also acknowledges that all these revolutionary modernist experiments, from the second decade of the 20th century until the end of the flourishing 1920s, gradually shifted from the display of 'projects and ideas [...] too radical' and utopian²¹ to an alleged 'denial of the Political'²². This shift paradoxically happened within a few years and became particularly evident in the restricted milieu of the Bauhaus movement, where exhibition design was first nurtured and developed into one of its main departments ('Exhibition Technique'). Here it passed from Moholy-Nagy's vision, rejecting 'idealist aesthetics' and fostering the concept of 'an exhibition as a historically bound experience whose meaning is shaped by its reception'²³ to Mies's and Lilly Reich's aestheticised, 'self-referential' and supposedly 'apolitical approach'²⁴. In fact, Staniszewski follows

20 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne. *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*. Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1998, chapter 1, page 3

21 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *Ibid.*, page 14

22 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *Ibid.*, page 35

23 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *Ibid.*, page 27

24 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *Ibid.*, page 39

the in-depth analyses of Elaine Hochman's²⁵ and Richard Pommer's²⁶, where the backstage of the selection process for the 1934 propagandistic exhibition *Deutsches Volk / Deutsche Arbeit* is unveiled. Much has been written on the subject of Mies and political ideology from multiple points of view, but Elaine Hochman could undoubtedly clarify that Mies' 'apolitical stance' had a rather different meaning at that time from what we might infer today, since 'the government claimed that "he who is not for us is against us"' and the 'apoliticism that had earlier been so admired was now reviled, and — especially for an architect seeking government commissions — downright dangerous'. According to Franz Schulze's biography, a few years before he thought that the incoming 'new era' was 'neither better, nor worse than any other'²⁷ and for this reason he didn't fear dismantling the swastika erected in front of the Bauhaus in 1933²⁸, or, a few months later, to meet the minister of culture in order to proudly defend and promote the Bauhaus without standing in on those ceremonies to which the Nazi minister was probably accustomed. In August 1934, this strenuous pursuit of that 'ambiguous concept' of 'apoliticism' eventually came to an end when, however 'reluctantly', he acquiesced to the demand from the

Reichsminister for Propaganda and the National Chambers of Music and Creative Arts to sign a proclamation of 'prominent cultural leaders supporting Hitler'²⁹. Elaine Hochman thus states that 'the 'pure' artist, unconcerned with all but aesthetic issues, is not always distinguishable from the opportunist'³⁰, and while 'the sincerity of Mies's' aesthetic convictions is beyond doubt, so is his universal availability'. Yet, at the same time Hochman also acknowledges that 'Mies was under Nazi surveillance', because, as early as January 1934, he was under criminal investigation 'for politicising the Bauhaus' and embezzlement of the school's licence fees, while the school itself had already been closed in July 1933. The minister Rosenberg still resentfully referred to him as 'the creator of a memorial for Liebknecht and Rosa

25 ——— Hochman, Elaine S., *Architects of Fortune: Mies van der Rohe and the Third Reich*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, New York, 1989

26 ——— Pommer, Richard, *Mies van der Rohe and the political ideology of the Modern Movement in Architecture*, in: Schulze, Franz, *Mies van der Rohe: critical essays*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1989

27 ——— Schulze, Franz, *Mies van der Rohe: una biografia*, 1989 Jaca Book, Milano, page 188

28 ——— Schulze, Franz, *Ibid.*, page 187-188.

29 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne. *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*. Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1998, page 39

30 ——— Hochman, Elaine S., *Architects of Fortune: Mies van der Rohe and the Third Reich*, New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989, page 218

Luxemburg', charges that were all dropped only in 1935, after his signature of the proclamation, and after his financial situation had seriously deteriorated³¹. However much *apolitical* his stance could be, reportedly, Hitler had already decided that Mies was 'dead as an architect in Germany'³². If the modernist section at the 1934 propagandistic exhibition *Deutsches Volk / Deutsche Arbeit* had 'considerably enhanced the Nazi regime's claim to artistic liberality', thanks to the uncredited work of Walter Gropius, Herbert Bayer, Lily Reich and Mies, which remained 'vivid in Speer's and other's recollections forty years later', the exhibition had literally 'angered' Hitler. In fact, according to Speer, Mies's 'design expressed his view — unlike that of many of his fellow modernists, who denigrated tradition, or that of the Nazis, who extolled it — of architecture as a unity of past and present, indebted equally to technology and the principles of industrialisation and to the teachings of antiquity'. These concepts were expressed with such clarity, 'poetry and force, [that] presented both challenge and rebuke'³³ to the forthcoming 'new era'. From Gropius's *Nonferrous metal exhibit*, to Mies' composition of pure and massive walls another constitutive principle surfaced within the exhibition, apparently less evident but constantly perceivable: the exhibits displayed *equalled* the exhibition. This principle had already been anticipated, with much less monumental emphasis and a far more modern attitude, by Lily Reich's and Mies' *Velvet and Silk Café* exhibition held in Berlin in 1927, where 'the installation was constructed of and shaped by what was exhibited'³⁴. This device was meant to foster in the public's mind the Bauhaus interpretation of a *neue sachlichkeit*, like the mesmerising dynamism of the revolving spiral of different metals conceived by Gropius. It was but one of the many new devices that the members of the school had been discovering and effectively practising in commercial installations in order to address and involve the visitors in their exhibitions since the times of Hans Meyer's directorship during the Weimar Republic. Hans Meyer had in fact created the 'commercial-art' department, which,

31 ——— Considering Mies's earlier involvement with Eduard Fuchs and his official affiliation with the *Society of German Friends of the New Russia* in 1926 (see Hochman, Elaine S., *Ibid.*, page 54), and considering the ruthless efficiency of the regime in finding and punishing much smaller forms of non-compliance with its ideological agenda, his absolution actually seems more the result of his *reluctant* compliance, than a reconsideration of the Nazi judicial system.

32 ——— Hochman, Elaine S., *Ibid.*, page 203

33 ——— Hochman, Elaine S., *Ibid.*, page 213

34 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne. *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*. Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1998, page 38

comprising exhibition design and shifting emphasis toward its *techniques*³⁵, had linked the legacy of the avant-gardes to the Bauhaus' practical and industry-led approach born to develop 'a new guild of craftsmen, free of the divisive class pretensions that endeavoured to raise a prideful barrier between craftsmen and artists'³⁶.

1.2.1.2 From propaganda to post-war aestheticised models

Photography and film (as well as graphics and advertising) had also become a fundamental part of this new technical approach, which explored these media 'revolutionising modern perception and culture' and integrated them within exhibition design following the successful example of the 1928 Soviet Pavilion at the *Pressa Exhibition* by El Lissitzky³⁷. As Staniszeswki remarked, this exhibition was 'paradigmatic on a number of levels, the most important being that the installation design itself was a realisation of its subject: the power of the new mass media, the new materials, and the new technologies'³⁸. Moreover, the dynamic installation of the exhibition could 'implicitly acknowledge the role of the viewer in the creation of meaning by providing a stage-like experience for the spectator'³⁹, which 'by far attracted the largest number of visitors, and had at times to be closed owing to over-crowding'⁴⁰. Given the explicit claim that 'The Task of the Press is the Education of the Masses', this exhibition, apparently dealing with mass media, technology and commerce was 'constructed mainly as political propaganda'⁴¹. These innovative and successful techniques that could increase the participation and, arguably, the actual involvement of the visitors, often conceived as radical experiments for the renewal of the arts, soon caught the attentions of subjects previously uninterested.

In 1932, Fascist Italy decided to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the march on Rome with a large exhibition at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome: by that year the regime didn't need any pretext to set

35 ——— Staniszewski, *Ibid.*, page 27

36 ——— Gropius, Walter, *Programm des Staatlichen Bauhauses in Weimar*, Weimar, 1919. For an English translation of the manifesto see: Gropius, Walter, *Programme of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar*, trans. Design Museum of Chicago, 2025, online, available at: <https://bauhausmanifesto.com> [accessed 8.1.2025]

37 ——— Staniszewski, *Ibid.* page 45

38 ——— Staniszewski, *Ibid.* page 46

39 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne. *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*. Cambridge (Mass.): Mit Press, 1998, page 48

40 ——— Tschichold, Jan, *Display That Has DYNAMIC FORCE: Exhibition Rooms Designed by El Lissitzky*, in: *Commercial Art* (London) 10, no. 55 January 1931, page 22, in Staniszewski, *Ibid.*

41 ——— Staniszewski, *Ibid.* page 50

up an exhibition of pure political propaganda. As the *Power of Display* highlights, the *Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution* involved fairly different approaches to art and display design under the same ideology: the political involvement of many of the futurist artists, as well as of a rationalist architect like Giuseppe Terragni, had allowed the regime's propaganda to extend its reach to include (and exploit) a significant part of what Germany might have been dismissed as 'entartete' art ('degenerate art'). In Rome, one of the preeminent rooms of the exhibition was the *Sala O* by Terragni: based on asymmetrical, sloped walls featuring three-dimensional hands of different sizes, hailing a hand-written text by Mussolini, the room, 'created an explosive looking visual spectacle' with giant photo-murals much alike El Lissitzky's and strikingly different from the adjacent *Sacrario* ('shrine'), a symmetrical, 'timeless' and almost neoclassical hall.

Yet, in parallel to Mies in Germany, the Italian regime carefully watched and hindered all those artists and architects involved in any sort of non-complying political activity, and who dared raise any criticism, as it happened to Edoardo Persico. He had a worse fate than Mies', being jailed twice and dying prematurely in 1936⁴². In spite of his misfortune, and the few exhibitions he was allowed to design, his *Gold Medals Room* at the Italian Aeronautics Exhibition, conceived together with Marcello Nizzoli, was undoubtedly one of the most significant exhibitions held in Italy in those years (Milan, 1934): 'the installation's armature was a gridlike scaffolding [...] extending from floor to ceiling [...] and text panels [...] seemed to float in space, an appropriate formulation for an exhibit celebrating [...] the Italian air force'⁴³. This concept was not only meaningful in itself, for it symbolically represented the air force, but also 'achieved the elegance and the sense of dematerialised support structure that was inchoate in Kiesler's L and T system and explored in Lissitzky's *Film und Foto* installation' to such an extent that Gropius was reportedly 'spellbound' when he visited⁴⁴. Its concept of lightness also influenced the subsequent work of Franco Albini. From his *Exhibition of the Antique Italian Jewellery* held at the 1936 Triennale in Milan onwards, Albini mastered more than any other the use of extremely light floor-to-ceiling structures for displays and

42 ——— Although no document certifying his two imprisonments was found, several sources report the fact and the Italian writer Andrea Camilleri, famous for his crime fiction novels, wrote a plausible novel raising doubts about the unexpected death of Persico and speculating about a possible political murder. See paragraph 3.3 for a short biography.

43 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne. *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*. Cambridge (Mass.): Mit Press, 1998, page 57

44 ——— Staniszewski, *Ibid.* page 57

installations, designing some of the most interesting exhibitions and museums of post-war Italy. Albin became the Italian representative of that ‘*purely aesthetic*’⁴⁵ movement that stemmed from the improvement, the systemisation and codification of the early innovations of the *avant-gardes* that had been widely experimented on for propagandist purposes. When Moholy-Nagy’s *new vision*, Bayer’s advanced exhibition techniques and Mies’ monumental simplicity reached America, all of these devices and experimentations could continue and grow outside Europe, eventually becoming a new international standard⁴⁶.

1.2.2 Exhibitions as *other places* within their context

If utopias are ‘countries without place and stories without a chronology’ that ‘do not belong to any place’ and do not exist outside ideal constructs, there can on the contrary be, according to Michel Foucault, *localised utopias* that do ‘have a precise and real place’, and can thus be considered as ‘counter-spaces’, since they are *absolutely* different from all the others and since ‘they oppose all the others and are destined to cancel them, to compensate them, to neutralise them or to purify them’⁴⁷. These ‘other spaces’ are what Foucault, as both analogous and in contrast with utopias, defined as *heterotopias*; a concept deeply intertwined with his thought and his interpretation of history that he analysed in a series of conferences between 1966 and 1967⁴⁸.

⁴⁵ ——— Staniszewski, *Ibid.* page 57

⁴⁶ ——— ‘Like the experimentation of the international avant-gardes, exhibition designs for purely aesthetic installations, for the display of modern design and architectural prototypes, and for political propaganda were an integral part of the reception and promotion of modern art and culture at the Museum of Modern Art until 1970’. Staniszewski, *Ibid.* page 57

⁴⁷ ——— Foucault, Michel, *Le eterotopie*, in Foucault, Michel, *Utopie Eterotopie*, edited by Moscati, Antonella, Edizioni Cronopio, Napoli, 2014, pages 11–12

⁴⁸ ——— According to Antonella Moscati the theme was first introduced by Foucault during a radio conference entitled *Les hétérotopies* that he held for *France Culture* on the 7th of December 1966, a conference later transcribed by François Rey and available in: Foucault, Michel, *Die Heterotopien/ Der Utopische Körper*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 2005. A second conference, held a few months later, on the 14th March 1967, further analysed heterotopias to be edited and published only in 1984:

Before sketching out the first basic principles of the new possible science of ‘hetero-topology’⁴⁹, he clarified the relationship between utopias, heterotopias, and ourselves, with the example of the *mirror*. Any mirror can in fact be seen as a ‘placeless place’, ‘an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface’ but it is ‘also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality’⁵⁰. A heterotopia is a place showing *other* things instead of itself, a place opposing utopias and ‘teaching us’ that ‘we have a body, that this body has a shape’⁵¹ occupying a place and that it ‘is not pure and simple utopia’. Similarly, he also defined the museum as a heterotopia, one of a specific kind ‘open onto [...] heterochronies’ and ‘indefinitely accumulating time’. He thought of an institution ‘accumulating everything’ and ‘constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages’⁵², thus apparently not linked to time ‘in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect’ as, for instance, ‘the fairgrounds’ or commercial exhibitions are. Yet, according to Tony Bennett’s ‘*birth of the museum*’ (based on Foucault’s very same historical vision), there is ‘a tension’ within the museum itself between the ‘apparent universality of the subject and object of knowledge (man) which it constructs, and the always socially partial and particular ways in which this universality is realised and embodied in museum displays’⁵³. Like Foucault’s first example of heterotopia, the mirror, the museum often fails to represent itself and the image that it reproduces cannot coincide with what it aims at representing, and should thus provide a visible *frame*.

This ‘tension’, as Bennet defined it, is traced in Foucault’s definition of the museum, if we consider that his *heterotopia* (‘other place’) is actually conceived in contrast to all *utopias*, to all ideal and ‘fundamentally unreal spaces’ that presented society either ‘in a perfected form’ or ‘turned upside down’⁵⁴. All *Heterotopias* are on the contrary

Foucault, Michel, *Des espaces autres*, in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, no.5, October 1984, Groupe Moniteur, Paris, 1984

⁴⁹ ——— Foucault, Michel, *Le eterotopie*, in Foucault, Michel, *Utopie Eterotopie*, edited by Moscati, Antonella, Edizioni Cronopio, Napoli, 2014, page 14

⁵⁰ ——— Foucault, Michel, *Of Other Spaces*, trans. Miskowiec, Jay, in *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986), Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, pages 22–27

⁵¹ ——— Foucault, Michel, *Il corpo utopico*, in Foucault, Michel, *Utopie Eterotopie*, edited by Moscati, Antonella, Edizioni Cronopio, Napoli, 2014, pages 11–12

⁵² ——— Foucault, Michel, *Of Other Spaces*, trans. Miskowiec, Jay, in *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986), Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, pages 22–27

⁵³ ——— Bennett, Tony, *The birth of the museum*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995

⁵⁴ ——— Foucault, Michel, *Ibid.*

defined as ‘real places’, like the museum and its exhibitions, which are therefore supposed to ‘simultaneously’ include ‘represented, contested and inverted’ sites, rather than some unattainable timeless ‘universality’. The very same idea of Foucault’s accumulation of ‘everything’ can in fact be read as an opposition to that simplified ‘universal human nature’ that Roland Barthes defined as a ‘very old mystification’ while criticising MoMA’s *Family of Man* exhibition held in Paris⁵⁵. These remarks are in fact particularly important to help us highlight how both the principles and the limitations described by Foucault and Bennet are not only applicable to the museum as an institution, but are indeed operating in exhibitions as well.

As Bennet underlined, the museum defined by Foucault is necessarily connected to man ‘in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows; enslaved sovereign, observed spectator’⁵⁶. This also explains Bennett’s broader interest for department stores, fairs, and commercial exhibitions, also defined as *heterotopias* belonging to the category of the ‘fairgrounds’ and ‘festivals’ that, though based on a different concept of time, Foucault himself defined as ‘relatives of libraries and museums’⁵⁷. Over the last decades this relationship has become increasingly important and as Bennett had already suggested ‘the focus on the relations between museums, fairs and exhibitions is meant to serve as a device for a broader historical argument’. Each of these institutions, in fact, is ‘involved in the practice of “showing and telling”: that is, of exhibiting artefacts and/or persons in a manner calculated to embody and communicate specific cultural meanings and values’. Storytelling has in fact always played a key role in curating⁵⁸ and is today becoming crucial to more and more sectors of our society, pervading many disciplines. At the same time sensorial *experience* and *interaction* (not only and not mainly digital) also seem to have been rediscovered and are positioned to be the most common ways through which these new stories are told⁵⁹. In fact,

55 ——— Barthes, Roland, *The Great Family of Man* in: Staniszewski, M. A., *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge (Mass.): Mit Press, 1998

56 ——— Bennett, Tony, *Ibid.*

57 ——— Foucault, Michel, *Of Other Spaces*, trans. Miskowiec, Jay, in *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986), Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, pages 22–27

58 ——— ‘Everything tells a tale’: according to Andrea Quartarone storytelling seems to be an essential part of our lives themselves (Quartarone, A. *Tutto racconta* in Romano, G. *Become a Curator*, Milano: Postmedia books, 2019)

59 ——— Pine, Joseph B., Gilmore, James H., *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre & Every Business a Stage*, Boston: Harvard Business Press, 1999

interaction is repositioned in its privileged role in curating, as in the early experiences of the International Avant-Gardes⁶⁰ at the very birth of modern exhibition design, and *experience* is intended also as ‘the rediscovery of time’⁶¹, at the basis of that temporal heterotopia ‘relative of museums’ as Foucault puts it.

To this extent, we might infer that, in-between heterochronic heterotopias, museums and exhibitions have shifted today toward that ‘mode’ that he linked ‘to time in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect’ and are no longer focusing on an ‘eternal’ perspective that was indeed connected to ‘history’ as ‘the great obsession of the 19th century’.

1.2.3 Experience and Interaction: foreground, middle-ground, and background as a possible framework

If, according to Staniszewski and Bal, the visitor of an exhibition is like a *reader in the text* and to Bennett an *observed spectator* whose experience and interaction are thus *bijective* and participate in the creation of the meanings of art, it might indeed be useful to outline a possible general framework defining these experiences and interactions, which Paul O’Neill has tried to do, both theoretically and in his own curatorial practice, over the last fifteen years.

In his analyses he acknowledges the relevance of Mary Anne Staniszewski’s work and he underlines how, due to the ephemerality of temporary art exhibitions, ‘the ways in which artworks are displayed and experienced are overlooked or remain undocumented and under-represented’⁶². To this extent any broader study of the vast work and of the ‘influential role played by visionary artists, designers, and curators’⁶³ collectively providing complex displays, can’t simply foster

60 ——— The first projects of a ‘self-conscious’ exhibition design by Kiesler, Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy in the 20s and Bayer’s, Reich’s, Nizzoli and Persico’s in the 30s as described by Mary Anne Staniszewski (*Ibid.*)

61 ——— Foucault, Michel, *Ibid.*

62 ——— O’Neill, Paul, *The culture of curating and the curating of culture(s): the development of contemporary curatorial discourse in Europe and North America since 1987*, PhD Thesis, London: Middlesex University, 2007, page 52

63 ——— O’Neill, Paul, *Ibid.* page 53

our understanding of exhibitions from a merely historical point of view, but, according to Hans Ulrich Obrist, it also 'affects innovative curatorial practice'⁶⁴. While quoting Obrist, O'Neill is referring to experimental art exhibitions (to start with the *avant-gardes*) and the role they played in developing new forms of visitor-exhibit interaction. He acknowledges the role of stage-like experiences for the spectator within the surrounding environment of the exhibition which he equates to a *landscape* as defined by Susan Stewart. Centred on metaphors arising from the relation of language to experience⁶⁵, her complex essay 'On Longing' crosses several topics including art, art collecting and a critique of the museum as the 'central metaphor of the collection', striving for 'authenticity and for closure of all space and temporality within the context at hand' (thus resonating with Foucault's definition)⁶⁶. The main metaphors around which the text is built being those of the *miniature*, 'for the interior space and time of the bourgeois subject' and the *gigantic*, 'for the abstract authority of the state and the collective, public life'⁶⁷, O'Neill mainly focuses on the second one and, more specifically, on landscape as an articulation of 'our most fundamental relation to the gigantic', providing 'our immediate and lived relation to nature as it 'surrounds' us'⁶⁸. According to Stewart, while the miniature is known as a 'spatial whole, [...] we know the gigantic only partially', like that part of the landscape we can move through, a 'metaphor of containment'⁶⁹. With this in mind, the meta-

64 ——— Obrist, Hans Ulrich, *Conversation*, in: Tawadros, Gilane, Obrist, Hans Ulrich, *The Producers: Contemporary Curators in Conversation* (2), Gateshead and Newcastle: Baltic and University of Newcastle, 2000

65 ——— 'This essay centres on certain metaphors that arise whenever we talk about the relation of language to experience or, more specifically, whenever we talk about the relation of narrative to its objects.' Stewart, Susan, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993, p ix

66 ——— Susan Stewart then further clarifies the issue of sought-after, yet unreachable 'authenticity' quoting a criticism on the Museum by Eugenio Donato: 'The set of objects the Museum displays is sustained only by the fiction that they somehow constitute a coherent representational universe. The fiction is that a repeated metonymic displacement of fragment for totality, object to label, series of objects to series of labels, can still produce a representation which is somehow adequate to a non-linguistic universe. Such a fiction is the result of an uncritical belief in the notion that ordering and classifying, that is to say, the spatial juxtaposition of fragments, can produce a representational understanding of the world.'

67 ——— Stewart, Susan, *Ibid.* page xii

68 ——— Stewart, Susan, *Ibid.* page 71

69 ——— Stewart, Susan, *Ibid.*

phor of a collective, public space, surrounding and containing us, a space of knowledge and *longing*⁷⁰, O'Neill suggests the metaphor of the exhibition-as-landscape, 'an organised built environment' sharing the aforementioned metaphors on the gigantic. It can be argued that, although Susan Stewart did not explicitly refer to the exhibition in these terms, O'Neill's comparison is not only consistent with the collective and public nature of the landscape, but it also resonates with Stewart's own acknowledgement of 'the display mode of the gigantic'⁷¹. Consequently, O'Neill defines the exhibition by means of the following categories:

- 1 – It 'surrounds the viewer who moves through it'⁷²
- 2 – It allows the viewer only partial interactions
- 3 – It 'contains the viewer in its space of display'

It is worth noting here how these definitions, just as their subsequent spatial and experiential interpretations introduced by O'Neill, don't appear to have an exclusive value, but are rather intertwined and partly overlapping. By way of example we might in fact notice the very close similarity between the act of 'surrounding' and that of 'containing', albeit the former being more dynamic, allowing movement *through* the exhibition, and the latter, more static, apparently limiting the viewer *in* the space of display. Needless to say, this succession of movements and stops, limits, and permits, is already a first crucial form of that 'partial interaction' he refers to in his second definition, thus further blurring the boundaries between the three of them. In fact, when describing his curatorial practice and an exhibition like *Coalesce: Mingled-Mangled*⁷³, he clearly refers to the 'created environment of the exhibition as a whole'. The matter of this 'whole' is not an 'overarching subject', nor that the works 'are arranged so as to demon-

70 ——— In the *Preface | Hyperbole*, Susan Stewart has clarified the three main meanings to be taken together to encompass her 'study of narrative, exaggeration, scale, and significance: yearning [*lacanian*] desire, the fanciful cravings incident to women during pregnancy, belongings or appurtenances', *Ibid.* page ix

71 ——— 'Although the body serves as a "still centre", or constant measure, of our articulation of the miniature and the gigantic, we must also remember the ways in which the body is interiorised by the miniature and exteriorized, made public, by the display mode of the gigantic.' Stewart, Susan, *Ibid.* page 102

72 ——— O'Neill, Paul, *Co-productive Exhibition-Making and Three Principal Categories of Organisation: the Background, the Middleground and the Foreground*, in *Oncurating*, Issue 22, April 2014, Zurich, 2014

73 ——— O'Neill, Paul, *Coalesce: Mingled-Mangled*, exhibition, London Print Studio Gallery, London, 14 April – 24 May 2004

strate a coherent inter-textual relationship', but it is rather 'a setting for the staging of spatial relations between works, and between viewers, with curating put forward as the activity that structures such experiences for the viewer and for the work'⁷⁴. Ultimately, he argues that curating equates to structuring interactive experience, and, more specifically, to structuring *ritual* experiences.

1.2.3.1 Ritual, Experience, and Interaction

After observing that 'since the 90's curatorial discourses have primarily focused on the ritual experiential space of the exhibition as an *event* rather than on the objects comprising them and as a means of configuring a relationship to the exhibition as a whole'⁷⁵, O'Neill further clarifies his critique to these curatorial practices remarking that he thinks of the exhibition 'as an entire entity [...] rather than something which is made of different components'⁷⁶. What he is inviting us to reject is not the 'ritualised and the ritualising experience of art', but the idea of autonomy of the work of art 'as the primary medium through which' this experience takes place. In other words, some forms of secular ritualising experience of art do not simply seem plausible but are *inherent* to contemporary exhibitions, whether sought for by 'politically organised and socially institutionalised power [...] to realise its desire to appear as beautiful, natural, and legitimate'⁷⁷, or made visible to reveal to the viewer social conventions and 'particular notions of subjecthood'⁷⁸ as highlighted by Staniszewski.

According to Carol Duncan, and following her studies on art museums' rituals, 'the very architecture of museums suggests their character as secular rituals'⁷⁹, also considering 'that the temple façade was for two hundred years the most popular signifier for the public art

⁷⁴ ——— O'Neill, Paul, *The Exhibition-as-Medium, the Exhibition-as-Form*, Art Space, Sydney, 25.11.2011 available at: <https://www.artspace.org.au/program/public-programs/2011/the-exhibition-as-medium-the-exhibition-as-form-three-principal-categories-of-organisation-the-background-the-middle-ground-and-the-foreground-paul-o-neill/> [accessed 03.02.2021]

⁷⁵ ——— O'Neill, Paul, *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ ——— O'Neill, Paul, *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ ——— Duncan, Carol, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995

⁷⁸ ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, in <http://www.arts.rpi.edu/pl/faculty-staff/mary-anne-staniszewski>, accessed 02.01.2020

⁷⁹ ——— Duncan, Carol, *Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship* in Karp, I., Lavine, S. D., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, page 91



Fig. 1: A visual mashup of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and of the Greek temple of the Parthenon

museum'⁸⁰. If it is undeniable that temple-like façades entail and clarify that kind of 'secular' ritualisation 'rooted in the Enlightenment'⁸¹ that Duncan is analysing and that was established when the very foundations of the Modern Museum were laid, it must also be acknowledged that the long history and the wide use of this architectural trope had already made possible multiple *significations* (as Barthes would say) and many other practical applications (i.e. not only the Smithsonian American Art Museum, but also the White House or, later on, the U.S. Supreme Court, the 11 Wall Street building, and even the Sing Sing first prison for women, to remain in the US). In fact, behind those façades Duncan underlines how a much wider series of 'monumental classical forms also brought with them the space of rituals — corridors scaled for processions and interior sanctuaries designed for awesome and potent effigies'. As a consequence, she can argue that modern 'museums do not simply resemble temples architecturally; they *work* like temples, shrines, and other such monuments'⁸².

In fact, as Tony Bennett also argued, since the birth of the modern western museum, the very act of visiting these cultural institutions was promoted as capable of transforming 'the inner lives' of a population, improving their 'morals and manners'⁸³. Moreover, he described

⁸⁰ ——— Pevsner, Nicolaus *History of the Building Types*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979

⁸¹ ——— Duncan, Carol, *Ibid.* page 90

⁸² ——— Duncan, Carol, *Ibid.* page 91

⁸³ ——— Bennett, Tony, *The birth of the museum*, London and New York:

the space of the museum as an ‘emulative one’ to teach ‘civilized habits’⁸⁴. The repeated visits, the organized routes and the specific actions that were encouraged while touring, from wearing formal dress to keeping silent, for instance, were all beneficial habits from a social and institutional point of view⁸⁵. In brief, these habits defined a structured ‘way of doing something in which the same actions are done in the same way every time’: the very definition of a *ritual*⁸⁶.

We have thus entered the field of experience, where *interaction* and *ritual* come into play and where the architectural features are intertwined with the perceptions, flows, actions, and reactions of the audience. In fact, ‘Museumgoers today [...] bring with them the willingness and ability to shift to a certain state of receptivity. And like traditional ritual sites, museum space is carefully marked off and culturally designated as special, reserved for a particular kind of contemplation and learning experience and demanding a special quality of attention — what Victor Turner called ‘liminality’⁸⁷. It can in fact be argued that if many of the new rituals defined by the birth of the modern museum were explicitly intended to improve ‘civilized habits’, these institutions and their displays were consequently designed as *liminal* places ‘between [...] two different [...] states’ of civilization, ‘morals and manners’⁸⁸.

The term *liminality*, first used by the folklorist van Gennep to denominate the intermediate stage of a ‘rite of passage’⁸⁹, is derived from the Latin *limen* (threshold), and is defined by Turner as literally

Routledge, 1995, page 20

84 ——— Bennett, Tony, *Ibid.*, page 47.

85 ——— Bennett also mentioned an 1841’s *Report* from a ‘House of Commons Select Committee on National Monuments and Works of Art’, in which explicit comparisons were already ‘drawn between the new public exhibitionary institutions of the time and cathedrals’. According to this Report, several forms of visiting experiences were already being investigated and fostered with preference to ‘streamlined ways of managing the visitor via organized routes’ and ‘one-way systems which do not allow visitors to retrace their steps’ (Bennet, Tony, *Ibid.*, page 55)

86 ——— Cambridge Dictionary, *Ritual*, Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2025, online, available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ritual>, [accessed 22.06.2025]

87 ——— Duncan, Carol, *Ibid.* page 91

88 ——— Such, according to Cambridge Dictionary, is the current definition of the term ‘liminal’. See: Cambridge Dictionary, *Liminal*, Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2025, online, available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/liminal>, [accessed 28.06.2025]

89 ——— The first phase coinciding with the separation from ordinary life and the last leading to re-aggregation

‘being-on-the-threshold’, thus meaning ‘a state or process which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day, cultural, and social states and processes’⁹⁰. Entailing public actions (*liminal rites*) to *perform*, often within a specific location, liminality is ‘full of potency and potentiality [...] not confined in its expression to ritual and the performative arts’⁹¹. In fact, when referring to ‘art exhibitions, sculpture, architecture, and [...] written plays’, he rather uses the adjective ‘liminoid’ (or ‘liminal-like’) in order to describe those genres and phenomena that he sees as ‘prominent mainly in Western Europe in nascent, capitalistic societies’ and that, unlike the liminal, ‘are not cyclical, but intermittent, generated often in times and places assigned to the leisure sphere’⁹². Moreover, the latter are ‘plural, fragmentary [...] and often experimental in character’: ‘liminoid phenomena, unlike liminal, do not so much *invert* as *subvert* [...] structures and symbols’, a kind of subversion that ‘takes the form of rational critique’. We might in brief argue that if the museum, according to Foucault is a *place* indefinitely accumulating in itself *other* places, including the ‘contested and inverted’ sites, Turner is formulating a similar concept regarding the *performances* and phenomena, that happen within museums and exhibitions⁹³. The necessary separation from ordinary life prior to liminality coincides with that ‘system of opening and closing that both isolates [heterotopias] and makes them penetrable’⁹⁴, since ‘either the entry is compulsory [...] or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications’⁹⁵, which he meaningfully exemplifies as having ‘a certain permission and make certain gestures’.

To better clarify which ritual gestures belong to the liminoid category, Carol Duncan provides us with a series of examples. As she underlines, both contemplation and learning already require an active role, a ‘shift’ in the behaviour of the visitor, which is triggered by those spaces she again defines as *ritual sites*: ‘a ritual site of any kind is a place

90 ——— Turner, Victor, *Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality* in: *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, December, 1979, Vol. 6, No. 4, Nagoya: Nanzan University, 1979, page 465

91 ——— Turner, Victor, *Ibid.*, page 466

92 ——— Turner, Victor, *Ibid.*, page 492

93 ——— A similar remark, applied to an interpretation of the city of Venice as a *heterotopia*, has been argued in: Tufi, Stefania, *Liminality, heterotopic sites, and the linguistic landscape. The case of Venice*, in: *Linguistic Landscape*, 29 June 2017, Vol. 3, No. 1, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017, pages 78-99

94 ——— Foucault, Michel, *Of Other Spaces*, trans. Miskowiec, Jay, in *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986), Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, page 26

95 ——— Another concept overlapping with Turner’s: ‘in the liminal case, persons *have* to undergo ritual’, *Ibid.*, page 493

programmed for the enactment of something [...] a place designed for some kind of performance⁹⁶. The kinds of performances to which she is referring do not necessarily require spectacles or complex artistic practices (which according to her would belong to the category of the ‘structured experiences’) but include all the *rituals* that, besides contemplation, are enacted by the visitors, like ‘following a prescribed route’⁹⁷, ‘recalling a narrative’, witnessing a drama, hearing ‘a recital of texts or special music’⁹⁸ and so on. Although with different effectiveness, the ‘museum’s sequenced spaces and arrangements of objects, its lighting and architectural details provide both the stage and the script’⁹⁹ for the performance. According to this interpretation all displays thus involve certain forms of *rituals*, which can be defined as *liminal-liminoid* whenever they are able to promote a permanent behavioural ‘shift’, in Duncan’s words, or some new ‘civilized habits’ in Bennett’s definition. This latter definition and its underlying theory, besides clarifying the spatial nature of experience within museum and exhibition spaces, is also referenced by Paul O’Neill and, together with Stewart’s metaphors, constitutes the theoretical background of the final definition of his proposed ‘form-structuring device’¹⁰⁰.

1.2.3.1 Background, middle-ground, foreground

Once defined, the exhibition as a space of experiences and relations is structured in three metaphorical and functional layers (to *surround*, to *interact* and to *contain*), and O’Neill further develops them into a spatial, organisational, and ordering method. This provides him with ‘three planes of interaction available to the viewer’¹⁰¹: the *background*,

96 ——— Duncan, Carol, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, page 12

97 ——— Duncan, Carol, *Ibid.*, page 12

98 ——— Duncan, Carol, *Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship* in Karp, I., Lavine, S. D., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, page 91

99 ——— Duncan, Carol, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, page 12

100 ——— O’Neill, Paul, *The Exhibition-as-Medium, the Exhibition-as-Form*, Art Space, Sydney, 25.11.2011 available at: <https://www.artspace.org.au/program/public-programs/2011/the-exhibition-as-medium-the-exhibition-as-form-three-principal-categories-of-organisation-the-background-the-middle-ground-and-the-foreground-paul-o-neill/> [accessed 03.02.2021]

101 ——— O’Neill, Paul, *Co-productive Exhibition-Making and Three Principal Categories of Organisation: The Background, the Middleground and the Foreground*, in Zurich: Oncurating, Issue 22, April 2014, page 36

the *middle-ground*, and the *foreground*. These three definitions, according to the speech he held in Sydney in 2011, strictly coincide with the previous three metaphorical layers defining an exhibition, but are more clearly determined within the physical space of the exhibition, since:

– 1 The *background* is constituted by the architecture, ‘the primary layer of the exhibition’ that in his practice become a white page to convert ‘into a dominant aesthetic experience’;

– 2 The *middle-ground* essentially coincides with the ‘overall exhibition design [...] prior to the exhibition installation’ including ‘display structures, gallery furniture, seating’ and intended as ‘an area with which audiences are intended to interact’;

– 3 The *foreground* is ‘a space of containment’ for a ‘subject-to-object relationship’, dedicated to non-site-specific works (that cannot be changed or ‘adapted’) and requiring specific ‘conditions of display’¹⁰².

Although these ‘spatial coordinates’ mainly served as an organisational method helping the curator to deal with complexity by bringing ‘about a certain order to the exhibition material’, they are also possible general categories for curatorial practice insofar as they remain *spatial* and pertain to the ‘configuration of the architectural setting [*background*], the exhibition design, form, style [*middle-ground*], and artistic content [*foreground*’¹⁰³. According to this latter interpretation of his own (which is slightly different from the previous ones) we might redefine the three terms as follows:

– 1 the background project would entail an analysis of the location (whether it be architectural or not) and its actual *signification*, reshaping the *form* according to the exhibition’s new signification (primarily by means of interventions on the *ritual* ‘prescribed routes’, the stops and the goes: *subverting* the architecture, if necessary, without changing it);

– 2 the middle-ground project would become the overall exhibition design, including lighting, specific plants, displays, captions: the actual *stage* ready for interaction as described by Duncan;

102 ——— O’Neill, Paul, *Ibid.*

103 ——— O’Neill, Paul, *Ibid.*

– 3 the foreground project being the artistic content, it would not necessarily have a strict spatial definition and would coincide with the curatorial mediation. Ordering categories would thus be just a possible filing strategy, thus avoiding conceptual hierarchical categories within the artists' group (such as 'foreground artists', 'middle-ground artists', 'background artists').

The main changes proposed hereinabove, besides erasing subliminal hierarchies, mainly aim at distinguishing between the actual artistic interventions, the display (the overall exhibition design) and their 'container'. The updated definitions preserve the curators' role and now frame O'Neill's spatial categories as a useful ordering device for group exhibition curated collectively (like *Coalesce*) as for any other form of exhibition, where, for instance, artistic intervention on the background might be the only one (like in anamorphic installations) or might be not desirable at all.

2. Cultural Analyses (from narrative theories to exhibition design)

As already clarified in the introduction, exhibitions may be defined as a peculiar kind of sign system that can be ‘read’ (and ‘written’) like narrative texts and whose meanings are shaped by their reception. From a methodological point of view, this approach does not seem to simplify or shorten the analysis work on exhibition making, but it might offer manifold advantages. In fact, narrative theories and, more specifically, the peculiar and ‘systematic, hence limited, approach’ defined by Mieke Bal can be applied as a useful ‘set of tools’ not just for decrypting and understanding complex displays but also for a conscious, transparent practice in exhibition making, allowing ‘the possibility of exchange of opinions, and of emancipation from intimidation’¹⁰⁴ she wished to foster. Not explicitly mentioned as a design toolkit, Bal codified it as a flexible instrument for *varied uses*, since it was not merely conceived from a ‘desire for absolute, empirical knowledge’. Consequently, she used this method for aesthetic and ideological criticism and, more in general, to help ‘unlimited and free’ interpretations ‘although not absolutely arbitrary’¹⁰⁵. Her main concern was in fact that of making ‘each interpretation expressible’ and equally ‘accessible’ without abdicating the verifiability of the process. Moreover, in the following years and up to the second edition of her text, Bal had been ‘less oriented towards literary narrative than to narrative in [...] diverse domains’¹⁰⁶ such as anthropology and visual art and she had also decided to further emphasise her method as a ‘heuristic tool’ rather than ‘an objective grid’. By the third edition, with her direct engagement in visual practice (namely in film-making), this *heuristic* methodology had consequently and overtly become a flexible toolkit available ‘for the construction — as much as for viewing — of visual narratives’¹⁰⁷. Yet, despite her worries about ‘the tone’ of the previous edition or about possible reductionist approaches to narrative theory, both the flexibility of application to different sign systems other than literature, as well as the possible bijective use of her methods (to analyse and design) was already inherent in the first release of her studies in 1985, although explicitly stated only in 2009. In fact, narrative theory methods as shaped by Bal aim at ‘theoretical consistency’ that strives not to become ‘dogmatic’¹⁰⁸. She has also applied these methods quite loosely throughout her wider research work and not only to literary

¹⁰⁴ ——— Bal, Mieke, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 1st edition, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985, page ix

¹⁰⁵ ——— Bal, Mieke, *Ibid.*, page x

¹⁰⁶ ——— Bal, Mieke, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 4th edition, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017, page xi

¹⁰⁷ ——— Bal, Mieke, *Ibid.*, page xv

¹⁰⁸ ——— Bal, Mieke, *Ibid.*, page xvi

texts but also to *artefacts*¹⁰⁹, and in her own practice as a video artist. Moreover, albeit with a non-all-encompassing narrative analysis, Mieke Bal, like Donna Haraway¹¹⁰, criticised the ‘rhetoric’ address of the American Museum of Natural History and of its permanent exhibition, firstly for the way in which its collection was compiled and then, explicitly, for its *narrative*. In fact, ‘the space of a museum presupposes a walking tour, an order in which the exhibits and panels are to be viewed and read’ addressing ‘an implied ‘focaliser’ whose tour is the story’¹¹¹ conveyed to the public. In regards to the ‘indispensability’ of a non-dogmatic and accountable consistency, it seems reasonable also for practice in exhibition making to assume a similar approach, where, in brief, ‘the primary goal of [...] presenting, remains clarity’ which Bal further defines ‘as *intersubjectivity*: to give access and thus empower people, whether or not they are specialists’¹¹². This specific view of narratology, in fact, cannot and does not aim at providing a ‘method of analysis’ for classifying texts, since ‘there is no direct logical connection between classifying and understanding texts’ or artefacts, while ‘understanding [...] is the point’¹¹³. Here, Bal’s method seems to depart from Genette’s ‘classical theory’, which she partly integrated in her text and partly criticised due to what appeared to her as actual limitations¹¹⁴. For instance, she departs from the classic theory’s strict ‘taxonomy’ or its specific jargon, and, most importantly, its restricted field of application, like in Genette’s ‘*Narrative Discourse*’¹¹⁵, where Proust’s ‘*A la recherche du temps perdu*’ is the specific subject treated (actually a quite *irreducible* text to prove the logic of narrative representation). It must indeed be acknowledged though that Genette, by starting from Proust’s *anomaly*¹¹⁶, was already intending his methodology as a way

109 ——— As she recently clarified: ‘I present conceptual tools, together forming a coherent theory of narrative, for the analysis of the narrative texts and artifacts, or to put it differently: the analysis of the narrativity in a variety of texts and artifacts.’ In: Bal, Mieke, *Narratology in practice*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021, page ix

110 ——— Haraway, Donna, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, New York: Routledge, 1989

111 ——— Bal, Mieke, *Telling, Showing, Showing off*, in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Spring, 1992), page 561

112 ——— Bal, Mieke, *Narratology in practice*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021, page xi

113 ——— Bal, Mieke, *Ibid.*, page xx

114 ——— ‘As I have argued at length in my reply to Genette, the pervasive taxonomical bend of narratology is epistemologically flawed’ Bal, Mieke, *Ibid.*, page xx

115 ——— Genette, Gérard, *Narrative Discourse: an essay in method*, Ithaca – New York: Cornell University Press, 1980

116 ——— See: Johnathan Culler in the Preface to: Genette, Gérard, *Narrative*

to prove that ‘the knowable is at the heart of the mysterious’¹¹⁷ and had for instance derived the specific use of one of his key terms, ‘*diegesis*’ (which Bal would also use in her first texts), from cinematographic narrative theories¹¹⁸, thus already alluding to a wider possible application of the method.¹¹⁹

Discourse: an essay in method, Ithaca – New York, Cornell University Press, 1980, page 12

117 ——— Genette, Gérard, *Narrative Discourse: an essay in method*, Ithaca – New York: Cornell University Press, 1980, page 23

118 ——— The term *diegesis*, introduced by Plato as the opposite of *mimesis*, is also referred to by Genette as *histoire* (the French translation of the Greek term, *story* in English). In spite of the similarities of use, Genette’s term does not actually originate from Plato, for whom *mimesis* is a ‘perfect imitation’ (or reproduction) of a real discourse (*lexis*), like in a direct speech act, while *diegesis* is a mediated utterance of a discourse, like an indirect speech and stories. In fact, as the English translator could clarify thanks to a note by Genette himself: ‘the term *diegesis*, [...] comes [...] from the theoreticians of cinematographic narrative’ and, similarly, is used as *histoire*, ‘story’. See: Genette, Gérard, *Narrative Discourse: an essay in method*, Ithaca – New York: Cornell University Press, 1980, pages 27, 30

119 ——— An even more explicit *reverse* use of narrative theories to *design* artworks and exhibitions was for instance visible in: Bal, Mieke, Williams Gamaker, Michelle, *Madame B. Explorations in Emotional Capitalism*, 6th December, 2013 - 9th February 2014, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź. See: Museum Sztuki, *Mieke Bal & Michelle Williams Gamaker. Madame B. Explorations in Emotional Capitalism*, available at: <https://https://msl.org.pl/en/mieke-bal-michelle-williams-gamaker-madame-b-explorations-emotional-capitalism> [accessed 18.01.2024]

2.1 From the commodified author to intersubjectivity

Another crucial issue suggesting the possible use of a narrative toolkit to handle the exhibition sign system is also its peculiar attitude to the figure of the author. In close connection to Roland Barthes' studies and, to some extent, almost prosecuting his research, narrative theory indeed confirmed, if not 'the death of the author'¹²⁰, a much weaker position of the latter. The author is thus briefly acknowledged as no more than the subject 'entrusting' the *narrator* with the narrative function¹²¹. After years spent criticizing the very same 'concept and authority of the author'¹²² and after the example of surrealist automatic and collective writing, first Barthes then Foucault had in fact deemed to be necessary (and inevitable) the destruction of the author. From that moment on, they assumed it would thus be useless to 'decipher' a text, mainly because there would be no need to 'impose a limit' on the text itself, a fixed, 'final signification'¹²³, thus maintaining that 'a text is made of multiple writings', and is *per se* a 'multiplicity' that can be focused in one place 'and that place is the reader, not [...] the author'¹²⁴. It was probably also due to the narrative method that the author was not 'murdered' as Foucault suggested, but rather allowed to vanish¹²⁵ in the background without condemning textual analysis and still allowing that *multiplicity* that Barthes thought necessary for 'the birth of the reader'. To this extent, the aforementioned *intersubjectivity* offered by the narrative toolkit, can be seen as a form of mediation between the text and the reader: multiple descriptions are possible, but not *any* description, only consistent and verifiable ones. Furthermore, Bal

¹²⁰ ——— Barthes, Roland, *The death of the author*, 1967, in Aspen, no. 5-6, New York: Roaring Fork Press, 1967. See paragraph 4.1.1

¹²¹ ——— Bal, Mieke, Lewin, Jane E., *The Narrating and the Focalizing: A Theory of the Agents in Narrative*, in: *Style*, Spring 1983, Vol. 17, No. 2, Narratology (Spring 1983), Penn State University Press, 1983, page 244

¹²² ——— Bal, Mieke, *Narratology in practice*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2021, page 60

¹²³ ——— Barthes, Roland, *The death of the author*, 1967, in Aspen, no. 5-6, Roaring Fork Press, New York, 1967, also available in: Barthes, Roland, *Image - Music -Text*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1978, page 147

¹²⁴ ——— Barthes, Roland, *Ibid.*, page 148

¹²⁵ ——— As Bal clarified: 'It is both impossible and useless to generalize about [the author's activity]': Bal, Mieke, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 4th edition, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017, page 7

described these moments as crucial¹²⁶: when the autonomy of the *narrator* from the author was first discovered and then, when the *focaliser* appeared, bearing a function previously attributed to the narrator, thus further focusing on the text (thanks to Genette), rather than on its 'outside', like the biography of its 'commodified author [...] as fictitious as any character'¹²⁷. To describe this paradigm-shift, as Genette would suggest, the life of the author of the *Recherche* could 'be used for a rigorous analysis' of the text not 'any more than the reverse'¹²⁸. Moreover, as Bal argues, if the author as unique centre of meaning, a 'marketable commodity', only leads to disempowerment as a result¹²⁹, the opposite move to a framework enabling readers to express and structure what they understand (facilitating discussion), is the basis of a 'democratic joint activity of analysis, description, and interpretation'¹³⁰. Similarly, the application of this methodology within the field of exhibition making, would foster an equal shift from the design of commodified 'authorial' concepts to *intersubjectivity*, as intended by Bal. Nevertheless, neither this specific concept fully coincides with classic narrative theories, nor the proposed methodology for exhibition making aimed at reproducing them, especially considering that, as they tend to minimise the relevance of the 'author', a subjacent risk might be an equivalent 'disappearing' of the reader/visitor due to the focus shift on agents inherent *in* the narrative texts. Firstly, unlike readers and authors in literary narrative texts, viewers and curators are already embedded in the exhibition sign system, whose specificity is to frequently and literally rely on 'multiple writings' and multiple subjects, that, in order to foster intersubjectivity, might at times just need to be *made visible*. Secondly, a flexible use of the narrative toolkit implying its bijectivity, inevitably leads to a non-all-encompassing,

¹²⁶ ——— 'At a crucial moment in the history of the theory of narrative, the vital importance of that representative was discovered, the autonomy of him whom the author deliberately entrusted with the narrative function within the narrative: the narrator.

At another moment, just as crucial although more recent, another discovery was made – that of the presence of the one to whom this narrator in turn delegates a function midway between himself and the character: the focaliser. The significance of this discovery cannot be overestimated; credit for it belongs entirely to Genette'. In: Bal, Mieke, Lewin, Jane E., *The Narrating and the Focalizing: a Theory of the Agents in Narrative*, in: *Style*, Spring 1983, Vol. 17, No. 2, Narratology (Spring 1983), Penn State University Press, 1983, page 244

¹²⁷ ——— Bal, Mieke, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 4th edition, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017, page 61

¹²⁸ ——— Genette, Gérard, *Ibid.*, page 28

¹²⁹ ——— Bal, Mieke, *Ibid.*, page 61

¹³⁰ ——— Bal, Mieke, *Ibid.*, page 4

‘spurious’ and much less structured methodology, which will be briefly described in the next paragraphs. Thirdly, maintaining, like Stanisze-wski does, that the *meaning* of an exhibition is ‘shaped by its recep-tion’¹³¹, it entails a level of interaction between the text/exhibition and the reader/viewer that narratology doesn’t seem to fully acknowledge, since ‘reception is not an issue of narratology per se’¹³², albeit it striving for an ‘open’ reading of the texts as opposed to all final and ‘closed’ interpretations.

2.2 The narrative toolkit: a three-layered method

The starting point of the narrative *toolkit*, whether according to Genette’s ‘classic’ theory or to Bal’s non-dogmatic one, is a ‘three-layer distinction’¹³³ of the narrative text. This distinction was established only to allow our insight into the main elements of a complex narrative system by approaching it gradually. As Bal argues, it is in fact ‘possible to analyse the three layers separately’ although they don’t exist ‘independently’¹³⁴ and although a text (or an exhibition) in its actual form always appears as an indivisible whole. This purely theoretical partition — text, story, fabula — is a reasonable basis’ meant to describe (and possibly organise) a narrative system. The *text* can thus be defined as ‘a finite, structured whole composed of language signs’ which becomes a narrative text insofar as it contains a *story* relating a *fabula*, i.e. an intertwined series of events ‘caused or experienced by actors’. So, when Jane Lewin and Mieke Bal first introduced these terms¹³⁵,

¹³¹ ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *Ibid.*, page 27

¹³² ——— Bal, Mieke, *Ibid.*, page 17

¹³³ ——— Bal, Mieke, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 1st edition, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1985, page 6

¹³⁴ ——— Bal, Mieke, *Ibid.*, page 6

¹³⁵ ——— Bal, Mieke, Lewin, Jane E., *The Narrating and the Focalizing: A Theory of the Agents in Narrative*, in: *Style*, Spring 1983, Vol. 17, No. 2, Narratology (Spring 1983), Penn State University Press, 1983.
The English ‘text-story-fabula’ was loosely translated from the French *texte-récit-histoire*, which in some way seemed to acknowledge Genette’s first introduction of three different ‘meaning’ layers: *récit-histoire-narration* (Genette, Gérard, *Ibid.*, page 27). In fact, Bal’s definitions appear to be fairly consistent with Genette’s: ‘*histoire*

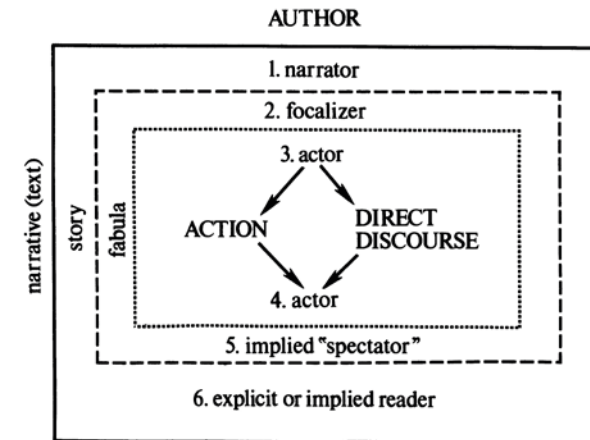


Fig. 2: Excerpt from: *The Narrating and the Focalizing: A Theory of the Agents in Narrative*, (Bal, Lewin 1983)

they also drew a graphic representation of this concept to highlight how the written narrative text, more than being ‘layered’, literally *contained* two inner elements (‘planes’), apparently *hidden* within the text. Thus, in the first edition of *Narratology*, Bal consequently decided to organise the structure of the index by starting from the hidden ‘core’ of the theory, i.e. the *fabula*, an order which in the second edition she decided to reverse, favouring the *text*, a way of presenting that was more consistent with a series of *layers*, one overlapping the other. This early visualisation introduced the different partitions together with their main agents and was particularly clarifying in presenting the actual author as external to the narrative. Unlike the *narrator*, ostensibly embedded in the narrative text, but outside the story, the author was in fact not included in the narrative set. Finally, the *focaliser*, or the ‘holder of the point of view’¹³⁶, was in turn embedded in the story and distanced from the actors in the fabula. Considering the frequency with which a focaliser might coincide with one or more actors, this distance is also theoretical and conceived to highlight the crucial function of this agent, necessary to define the ‘colouring’ of the fabula, hence the story derives meaning. Finally, at the heart of this figure lies

(l’ensemble des événements racontés), *récit* (le discours, oral ou écrit, qui les raconte) et *narration* (l’acte réel ou fictif qui produit ce discours, c’est-à-dire, le fait même de raconter)’. What differs, are the keywords used, both in French and in the English translation, thus stating a different focus and, in brief, a different interpretation of narratology. See: Genette, Gérard, *Discours du récit*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972, page 15

¹³⁶ ——— Bal, Mieke, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 4th edition, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017, page 12

the fabula, where the actors cause or experience some events. Yet, in this early text, Bal imagined a reverse movement from the core to the surface where ‘each agent affects the transition from one plane to another: the actor [...] creates the story; the focaliser [...] selects the actions [...]; while the narrator puts the narrative into words’¹³⁷, the very movement she decided to reverse later. Another crucial movement, which she does not wish to highlight, but rather leaves in the background, is the overall implicit communication process from author-narrator-focaliser-actor to the reader’s categories (here represented as a top-down movement, evidently beyond her actual intentions). Indeed, as any visualisation, this figure implied a necessary level of simplification, like the single agents instead of the more common plural ones, and carefully avoided any overlapping of functions (not uncommon, in real life, like the narrator-actor) and did not of course include elements that were theorised later, but could still serve as a useful working model offering a snapshot of the methodology.

2.3 Exhibitions as texts

Before any further consideration on this working model, it is necessary to clarify the similarities (and the differences) between the previously mentioned definitions and a possible application to exhibition making. In fact, the terminology used by the theory of narrative is not inconsistent with a possible application to the display sign system. This is not only because exhibitions always entail a large number of written texts (frequently of narrative nature) — or because other studies have effectively compared exhibitions to texts¹³⁸ — but also because many narrative texts are ordinarily transferred to different sign systems like visual images, films or any other, a ‘phenomenon [that] demonstrates that something happens with the fabula that is not only exclusively language-based’¹³⁹. In other words, the events generated by the actors in the fabula can be organised and narrated by means of

¹³⁷ — Bal, Mieke, Lewin, Jane E., *The Narrating and the Focalizing: A Theory of the Agents in Narrative*, in: *Style*, Spring 1983, Vol. 17, No. 2, Narratology (Spring 1983), Penn State University Press, 1983, page 244

¹³⁸ — Above all and as already mentioned, ‘The Power of Display’ by Mary Anne Staniszewski and Bal’s ‘Telling, Showing, Showing off’.

¹³⁹ — Bal, Mieke, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 4th edition, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2017, page 6

very different media. For this reason, Bal herself at times includes literary texts in the more general category of the ‘sign systems’¹⁴⁰ to which exhibitions belong. Just as we can define literary texts based on their different natures (such as the *argumentative*, or the *descriptive*), a certain amount of non-narrative elements must be considered in exhibitions; therefore, we might wonder whether a discontinuity in the narrative nature of a display, due to some parts, might affect the whole. Yet, a novel, even when it is not miscellaneous or discontinuous, can also include different typologies of texts, especially the descriptive ones, and, according to Jonathan Culler, Genette based his classic theory in its entirety on the interpretation of Proust’s novel to prove that it did not suit only ‘the simplest narratives’¹⁴¹, but also the most complex ones. Moreover, Mieke Bal warns us against the illusion that argumentative or descriptive comments¹⁴² might be ‘innocent’ of ideology¹⁴³, thus eradicating the idea that these elements per se might be irrelevant or *neutral* to the narrative as a whole, which also resonates with one of René d’Harnoncourt’s strongholds in exhibition design: no installation is ever ‘neutral’¹⁴⁴. As a general principle, in fact, she maintains that ideology is equally communicated ‘in descriptive and narrative parts’ in different ways and that the descriptive elements are functional to a narrative, like a threshold¹⁴⁵ or a corridor that is functional

¹⁴⁰ — ‘In whatever way one regards literature, whether one values books as autonomous works of art, as products of an individual or group, as objects of communication, or as a specific form of a sign system, one can never escape the obvious fact that works of art and literature are made by, for, and (usually) about people’. Bal, Mieke, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 4th edition, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 201, page 6

¹⁴¹ — Genette, Gérard, *Narrative Discourse: an essay in method*, Ithaca – New York: Cornell University Press, 1980, page 9

¹⁴² — To this extent, she considers both opinions and ‘factual’ declarations alike, ‘because the division between opinions and facts is difficult to draw’: Bal, Mieke, *Ibid.*, page 25

¹⁴³ — Bal, Mieke, *Ibid.*, page 23

¹⁴⁴ — ‘There is no such thing as a neutral installation. A work of art is so much like a person - the same work of art reacts differently at different phases of history. Installation is a very complicated exciting subject.’ Helmann, Geoffrey, T, *Profiles: Imperturbably Noble*, 29 April 1960, The New Yorker, 7 May 1960, online, available at: <https://archives.newyorker.com/newyorker/1960-05-07/flipbook/048> [accessed 18.01.2024]. Also quoted in: Staniszewski, Mary Anne. *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*. Cambridge (Mass.): Mit Press, 1998, page 61

¹⁴⁵ — For the relevance of a threshold in terms of narrative see: Bal, Mieke, *Telling, Showing, Showing off*, in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Spring, 1992), page 586

American Museum of Natural History in New York. As already highlighted, this approach is necessarily much less structured than the ones applied in literature. On one hand, this might probably be because the material and visual sign systems can only be partly assimilated in the very same 'logical and conventional restrictions' inherent in literature's 'narrated universals'¹⁴⁸ unveiled by narratology. On the other hand, literature studies can rely on an incredibly wide history and research if we consider its structural and rhetoric devices. The figures of speech for instance, were studied and applied over centuries, while it is not so for exhibition design, inevitably at the crossroad of different disciplines, but considered in its own specificities only quite recently¹⁴⁹ and indeed after the birth of the museum¹⁵⁰ in modern times.

Bal herself tends to apply slightly different categories when discussing the design elements at play in the American Museum, so that a strict use of her own theory to describe exhibitions as *texts* might be limiting. There are indeed elements that are directly connected to her analyses of a narrative text, for instance when she highlights *visual synecdoches*, or when she thoroughly describes the museum's 'mixed discourse'¹⁵¹ of images and words. But, as far as the overall visual-textual narrative is regarded, she introduces new categories that are just as relevant and which have never been fully part of any 'orthodox' narrative study.

Yet, a large majority of these elements do resonate with the contemporary exhibition design practice, albeit never previously considered for their narrative implications. In fact, the urban location of an exhibition, or the halls' layouts and its overall spatial distribution and route, introduce narrative sequences and thresholds, connecting or dividing different logic segments that, together with many other practical design solutions, are loaded with theoretical and ideological implications, even more relevant than those inherent in the textual apparatus alone. The comprehension of the narrated structure and the underlying *fabula*, therefore, cannot simply be 'read' through labels and panels in their textual rhetoric figures and structure, but require a comparative visual and textual analysis as with the American Museum case study.

¹⁴⁸ ——— Bal, Mieke, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1985, page 19

¹⁴⁹ ——— Before Herbert Bayer's courses of exhibition design, the discipline was previously considered (and still is, at times) as a set of practical activities subsidiary and collateral to museology and/or museography and curatorial studies.

¹⁵⁰ ——— Bennett, Tony, *The birth of the Museum*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995.

¹⁵¹ ——— Emphasis added, see: Bal, Mieke, *Telling, Showing, Showing off*, in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Spring, 1992), page 594

2.5 Design elements: urban location

The very first design element of an exhibition that could be defined as 'semiotically charged', is not inherent in it, but literally outside of it, given its actual location within a specific urban context (i.e. a material, social and cultural context overall). The relevance of the location will be more extensively discussed in the following chapters, but its deep narrative connection with the display sign system is at play here. Considering the context of New York as a planned city¹⁵², which was built in a relatively short amount of time compared to other urban contexts, Mieke Bal was in fact able to describe the hidden semiotic structure connecting the American Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art as larger, political and ideological narratives well represented by James Clifford's 'art-culture system' (which, in turn, was rooted in Greimas semiotic square). Based on the common perception of the 'elegant' East Side of New York in comparison to the 'less classy' West Side, she unveiled the 'rhetorical nature of the experience of the cityscape'¹⁵³, whose planning subtlety placed the 'Art' institution in the East side (the Met) while relegating its 'other', the 'cultural' institution, to the West Side (the American Museum of Natural History). Clifford's symmetrical opposition between Art (as unique, as singular) and culture (as repetitive, as plural) was thus made visible by reading the symmetrical urban design that suggested an intangible association between the two museums, one made 'specular' to the other. In fact, the Met materialised the very concept of 'art for art's sake' in its 'universal value', thus fostering a somewhat de-contextualised abstraction in its representation and display strategies as a device to 'obscure' the 'political itinerary coming from Europe'¹⁵⁴, while the American Museum, on the contrary, staged 'nature' highlighted in its

¹⁵² ——— Although all cities are almost always subject to planning, urban studies generally acknowledge as '*planned cities*' only those urban settlements in which an all-encompassing, homogeneous, long-term plan is defined before they are built. These plans generally tend to be 'ideal' (if not utopistic at all) in comparison to 'unplanned' cities, where different plans (even contrasting ones) and 'spontaneous' collective constructions played a preeminent role in their evolutions. This also accounts for the reliability of a possible narrative interpretation of New York city.

¹⁵³ ——— Bal, Mieke, *Telling, Showing, Showing off*, in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Spring, 1992), pages 556-557

¹⁵⁴ ——— Bal, Mieke, *Telling, Showing, Showing off*, in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Spring, 1992), page 599

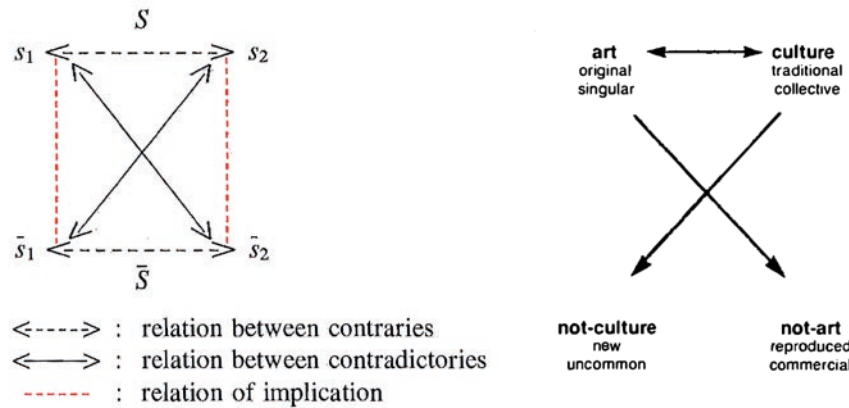


Fig. 4: Greimas semiotic square (edited) and James Clifford's art-culture system

context, by 'naturalising' even artworks and entire foreign populations. The 'division of the city map' therefore coincided with this partition opposing 'art', hierarchically focused on western artefacts, to 'nature', juxtaposing 'animals and foreign peoples as the two others of dominant culture'¹⁵⁵. Considering that, already in the 90's, the American Museum had tried to deal (not very successfully, according to Bal) with these foundation biases and with a legacy in many ways problematic, a lot of changes were made afterwards, especially dealing with the lexicon used¹⁵⁶, but also dealing with new digital technologies and even with a brand-new access facility. This latter was emphatically defined as 'an antidote to misinformation and science denial', made 'urgent by the pandemic and the emergence of a post-truth world,' by the former president Ellen Futter¹⁵⁷. The American press didn't fully support this enthusiastic description of the new curatorial pro-

¹⁵⁵ — Bal, Mieke, *Ibid.*, page 562

¹⁵⁶ — Terms such as 'Indians of North America and the Eskimo' highlighted by Mieke Bal aren't in use any longer and the website of the museum today uses a different terminology, although the columnist Carolina M. Miranda highlighted the 'a top-to-bottom' nature of 2022's entire redo of the hall devoted to the Indigenous cultures of the Pacific Northwest. See: Miranda, Carolina M., *Can the new wing of New York's Natural History Museum help reframe outdated ideas?* 29th August 2023, Los Angeles Times online, available at: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2023-08-29/american-natural-history-museum-has-a-new-cave-like-wing-by-jeanne-gang> [accessed 18.01.2024]

¹⁵⁷ — Sutton, Benjamin, *American Museum of Natural History's soaring, \$465M new science center opens*, 31st May 2023, CNN online, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/style/amnh-gilder-center-tan/index.html> [accessed 18.01.2024]

gramme¹⁵⁸ and, according to both negative and positive reviews, it seems that the real and main innovation was unanimously perceived as a more aesthetically appealing architectural fantasia, rather than an actual curatorial and scientific reframing. Of course, in time some of the dioramas had also been removed¹⁵⁹, together with Theodore Roosevelt's statue standing outside, but the *metamuseum* suggested in Bal's text, never really appeared, thus preferring to select and remove, rather than soliciting 'reflections on and of [the museum's] own ideological position and history'. A history that now endures, for instance, in its location, although probably 'classier' than it used to be when funded. In fact, the urban structure of cities, however subject to continuous interventions and redefinitions, tend to be more persistent than the society that created it with its architecture. To this extent, Bal's considerations on the possible implicit intertwining between a

¹⁵⁸ — Benjamin Sutton for the CNN, although praising the renovation project, thought necessary to highlight in the title its 465 million dollars, while Philip Kennicott for the Washington Post also defined it as 'splashy' while criticizing the very same concept underlying the extension, mainly as unnecessary and un-sustainable. Furthermore, Carolina Miranda (Los Angeles Times) clearly highlighted the permanence of many of the issues brought to the front by Mieke Bal already in the 90's. Another 'positive' review by Micheal Kimmelman (New York Times) focusing, like the CNN, mainly on the aesthetic features of the new architecture, reluctantly confirmed the opinion of the sceptics who 'asked whether the whole thing wasn't really just an elaborate excuse to construct a big new party space for museum fundraisers' by admitting that 'the atrium will inevitably function as that also revealed that.' See:

Miranda, Carolina M., *Can the new wing of New York's Natural History Museum help reframe outdated ideas?* 29th August 2023, Los Angeles Times, available at: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2023-08-29/american-natural-history-museum-has-a-new-cave-like-wing-by-jeanne-gang> [accessed 18.01.2024]

Kimmelman, Michael, *Wonder and Awe In Natural History's Stunning New Wing*, 25th April 2023, The New York Times (nytimes.com), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/25/arts/design/gilder-center-natural-history-museum.html> [accessed 18.01.2024]

Kennicott, Philip, *New York's splashy new Gilder Center is all seduction*, 4th May 2023, The Washington Post (washingtonpost.com), available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2023/05/04/natural-history-museum-gilder-center-new-york/> [accessed 18.01.2024]

¹⁵⁹ — Carolina Miranda alone mentioned a recent 'correction' of a diorama for 'errors of fact', the removal of the Theodore Roosevelt monument and the 'top-to-bottom redo' of an entire hall in her article, but the AMNH has actually undergone several over the last decades and since Mieke Bal wrote her text.
Miranda, Carolina M., *Ibid.*



Fig. 5: The art-culture system applied to New York city map according to Mieke Bal

display and the subjacent rhetoric of its urban stage, are indeed applicable to other contexts as well, although they might be less evident. In older cities, in fact, different urban plans (together with different interpretations of their societies, culture and tangible heritage) tend to overlap, merge and, at times, clash, so that a unique or unambiguous 'reading' might be misleading, if not impossible. Yet, even in these cities, the phenomenon described here is not absent, and a less geographically charged 'chiaroscuro' is very frequently present and acknowledged by their citizens.

Lastly, and together with its location, part of the problematic legacy of the American Museum of Natural History persists, invisibly to most, in its very spatial distribution as in many halls' layout, that are also a crucial design element suitable to determine the narrative embedded in an exhibition.

2.6 Spatial distribution: diagram and layouts

As briefly mentioned hereinabove, the idea that the physical staging of an exhibition is a 'complex means for communication' in which the exhibits (with their textual panels) would 'fill only part of the field'¹⁶⁰, is at the very basis of Bayer's 'fundamentals of exhibition design', where, as for Mieke Bal, different elements are all at play contributing to the narrative text as a whole.

Unsurprisingly, if we exclude the location, the first 'known means of design' analysed both by Bal and Bayer is the spatial distribution or, in Bayer's terms, the 'diagram'¹⁶¹. Narrative analysis and design practice meet here and help us understand why, for instance, 'the messiness'¹⁶² of the American Museum of Natural History refrains from making clear its 'double status' as a contemporary institution and as a 'museum of the museum', and tangible 'product of colonialism in a *postcolonial* era'. While visiting the new venue and following the new directions defined by its renovated plan, the journalist Carolina Miranda noted how it essentially provides new 'points of access to the rest of the AMNH, a byzantine four-block compound that has been added to piecemeal over a century and a half', but still results 'in awkward circulation patterns and many dead ends'¹⁶³, in spite of the new plans. It might seem that this new plan as a whole, as the architectural critic Michael Nicholas put it, was perhaps intended as 'the most accurate symbol of our constantly evolving ideas about the world, more contentious and rife with conflict than any individual moment could suggest'¹⁶⁴, but Bal would probably maintain that this bewildering plan still struggles 'to demonstrate an awareness of the burning issues of today's society', if it still does not at all lack 'the absorption of a more acute and explicit self-criticism'¹⁶⁵ as in the 90s. Indeed, the plan sequence provided by

¹⁶⁰ ——— Bayer, Herbert, *fundamentals of exhibition design*, PM (Production Manager) 6, no.2, December 1939 – January 1940, pages 17-25

¹⁶¹ ——— Bayer, *Ibid.*, 17

¹⁶² ——— Miranda, Carolina M., *Can the new wing of New York's Natural History Museum help reframe outdated ideas?* 29th August 2023, Los Angeles Times, available at: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2023-08-29/american-natural-history-museum-has-a-new-cave-like-wing-by-jeanne-gang> [accessed 18.01.2024]

¹⁶³ ——— Miranda, Carolina M., *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ ——— Miranda, Carolina M., *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ ——— Bal *Ibid.*, page 561

the museum was already identified as crucial at that time, and the renovated layout now offers an increased ‘freedom of choice’ in the visitor’s journey whose previous limitation was criticised by Bal. Yet, this new flexibility still does not solve the crucial issue of the ‘constant shifting from time to space’¹⁶⁶ inherent in the original layout of the museum, which inadvertently persists, and still supports the former narrative where ‘*Time* is the crucial factor, the ground whose absence (in the American Museum) or presence (in the Met) produces the meaning of the representative object’¹⁶⁷.

2.7 Entrances and their use

As clarified, the order of the walking tour is not only part of the exhibition’s visible textual layer, but acts as one of the most relevant *focalisers* (at a story level), significantly contributing to the stream of *events* in the exhibition too (at a fabula level). To this extent, its starting point, i.e. the main entrance to the display, together with secondary ones and inner doorways, can indeed help decrypt the underlying narratives. As a consequence, and in regards to AMNH’s new Gilder centre, one of the main reasons why part of the specialised press, like the Italian *Domus*, praised Jeanne Gang’s design, was for the very new entrance it now provides: an entrance inverting the previous inner flow, thus questioning ‘the very founding concepts’¹⁶⁸ of the Museum.

Not explicitly quoting Mieke Bal’s or Donna Haraway’s critiques of the Museum, Beatrice Grenier, current Curator and Director of Curatorial Affairs at *Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain*, also criticises the American institution for several aspects in her article for *Domus*. The very heart of her critique appears to be our broken relationship with nature that the Museum would somehow foster and that Gang’s building ‘seeks to repair’ today on many levels.

In first place, in fact, she associates the overall aesthetics of this new organic cave-like architecture with Central Park’s rock formations, enabling ‘our eyes to see nature’.

¹⁶⁶ ——— Bal, *Ibid.*, page 582

¹⁶⁷ ——— Bal, *Ibid.*, page 566

¹⁶⁸ ——— Grenier, Beatrice, *New natural histories: Jeanne Gang’s Gilder Center is a radical manifesto*, 3rd May 2023, *Domusweb.it*, available at: <https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/gallery/2023/05/03/jeanne-gangs-new-gilder-center-is-a-radical-manifesto.html> [accessed 18.06.2024]



Fig. 6: The new entrance provided by the Gilder Centre (red arrow) and inverting the previous inner flow (white arrow). (Edited image, original by: Milstein, Jeffrey, 2023, 5526-gp-amnh-campusaerial-labeled-c-jeffreymilstein-scaled2, photomontage, 2023, Studiogang.com, available at: <https://studiogang.com/projects/gilder-center/> [accessed 18.06.2024])

Then, quite similarly to Bal’s remarks, she highlights how ‘the two entrances are diametrically opposed in tone and symbolism’, therefore interpreting the new one as an explicit criticism and a refusal of the institution’s previous ‘posture’. The symbolism of the old entrance, was made of steps to ritually ascend to the exhibition and monumental columns to watch in awe while entering a consistent vestibule surrounded by an emphatic sculptural apparatus, like ‘entering the Roman Pantheon’. Moreover, all these elements, according to Grenier, were designed and positioned to underline ‘Man’s domination over different non-Euro-American peoples and over nature’. The newly designed entrance, on the contrary, ‘is stripped of any representation of man’, ‘curvilinear, asymmetrical’: an ‘anti-façade’ in representational terms¹⁶⁹.

Lastly, Grenier also focuses on the new relationship that is now established between the museum and the city by moving the entrance westward, a relocation that symbolically and visually embeds nature

¹⁶⁹ ——— Grenier, Beatrice, *New natural histories: Jeanne Gang’s Gilder Center is a radical manifesto*, 3rd May 2023, *Domusweb.it*, available at: <https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/gallery/2023/05/03/jeanne-gangs-new-gilder-center-is-a-radical-manifesto.html> [accessed 18.06.2024]

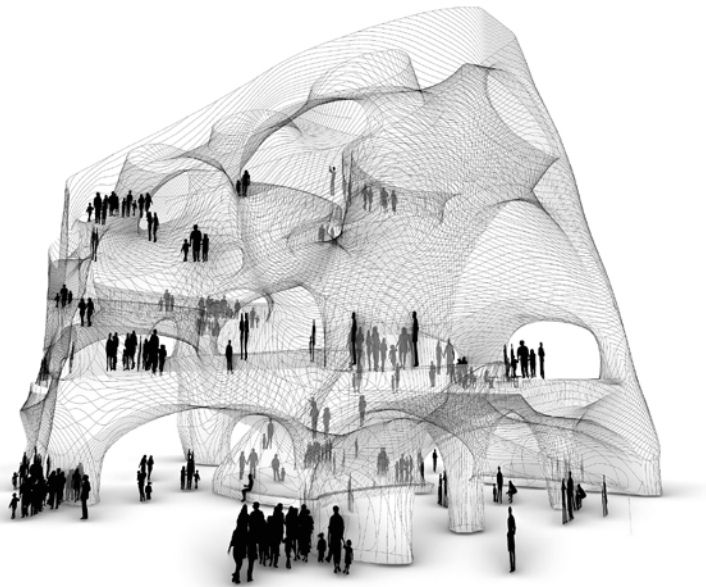


Fig. 7: The central atrium 'shotcrete' structure. (Studio Gang, 2023, 5527-gp-gilder-center-axonometric-perspective-c-studio-gang, axonometric perspective, 2023, Studiogang.com, available at: <https://studiogang.com/projects/gilder-center/> [accessed 18.06.2024])

in architecture' as opposed to the previous one, with classical architecture to 'dominate' the nature of Central Park. This shift, she finally argues, is meant to signal to visitors 'that one does not enter the building to understand man's rationalisation of nature but rather one that questions this precise history of domination'.

However relevant and 'semiotically charged' an entrance could be and however convincing Grenier's analysis might be, her final assumption does not seem to fully coincide with the actual intentions of the institution and probably, not even with Jeanne Gang's. In fact, neither the architect, nor the institution, acknowledge the paradigm shift of the new entrance, 'whose form extends outward to greet the park and neighbourhood beyond'¹⁷⁰. Gang rather describes her intervention as a vast improvement of functionality and of the visitor's experience, that establishes a new 'accessible entrance' creating 'more than thirty connections among ten different buildings, replacing former dead ends with continuous loops' to tap 'into the desire for exploration and discovery that is so emblematic of science and also such a

¹⁷⁰ — Studio Gang, *Richard Gilder Center for Science, Education, and Innovation at the American Museum of Natural History*, available at: <https://studiogang.com/projects/gilder-center/> [accessed 18.06.2024].

big part of being human'¹⁷¹. Gang also clarifies that the new addition 'is clad in Milford Pink Granite, the same stone used for the Museum's entrance on Central Park West', apparently more willing to establish a connection with the Museum's other entrance, rather than fostering a 'powerful counter argument and subversive stance'¹⁷². In fact, as the Museum's official website confirms, 'visitors can enter and exit through Central Park West (upstairs) at 79th Street or at the accessible entrances on 81st Street/Rose Centre for Earth and Space or Columbus Avenue at 79th Street/Gilder Centre'¹⁷³. Therefore, the actual reach of the renovation project and, more specifically of the new entrance, is much reduced in its scope and outcome by the continuity of the three other pre-existing entrances, and even ticket desks are still available in Theodore Roosevelt Rotunda as before, although today 'all tickets [...] must be reserved online in advance'¹⁷⁴, apparently reducing hierarchies between entrances. Furthermore, and as far as the aesthetic features are concerned, today's standards of the monumentalism that Grenier intends to criticise, seem to be more aligned with highly technological building and construction methods, just like the 'shotcrete' used to spray 'structural concrete directly onto rebar cages that were digitally modelled and custom-bent'. In fact, the American press, has not failed to acknowledge the 'grandiose' (CNN), 'splashy' (Washington Post) and 'stunning' (NYT) features of the new entrance, which Domus alone sees as 'advocating for a new posture of humility towards nature'. Organic architecture in America, after all, from Wright's utopian cities to Arcosanti's giant structures, up to Saarinen's Twa Terminal in New York (the direct reference to Gang's intervention) has always aimed at a certain level of grandiosity and large-scale interventions, rather than at humility. Similarly, the 'natural' presence of Central Park can be read, in Bal's own words, as a 'domesticated preserve of nature-within-culture'¹⁷⁵. This definition is consistent with this American 'National Historic Landmark': a large intervention of landscape architecture designed and constructed by removing more than a hundred thousand cube meters of soil and rocks. Almost as much topsoil was then

¹⁷¹ — Studio Gang, Ibid.

¹⁷² — Grenier, Beatrice, *New natural histories: Jeanne Gang's Gilder Center is a radical manifesto*, 3rd May 2023, Domusweb.it, available at: <https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/gallery/2023/05/03/jeanne-gangs-new-gilder-center-is-a-radical-manifesto.html> [accessed 18.06.2024]

¹⁷³ — AMNH, *What You Need to Know*, available at: <https://www.amnh.org/plan-your-visit> [accessed 15.07.2024]

¹⁷⁴ — AMNH, *Ticketing*, available at: <https://www.amnh.org/plan-your-visit> [accessed 15.07.2024]

¹⁷⁵ — Bal, Mieke, *Telling, Showing, Showing off*, in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Spring, 1992), page 556

brought in from New Jersey and Long Island to allow for a plantation of allochthonous and 'picturesque woodlands'¹⁷⁶ that required a huge labour force of arguably underpaid immigrant workers¹⁷⁷ to demolish and 'naturalise' the previous areas of settlement of a displaced African-American community. To this extent, the old entrance cannot be read as symbol of man 'dominating' nature any more than the Park itself is. Again, while entrances can significantly determine the visitors pathway and the focalisation, it seems quite unlikely that they might alone alter the context's inherent narrative or determine a paradigm shift within an institution as Grenier appeared to infer. Yet, paraphrasing Bal, AMNH's more accessible and less problematic entrance has now become the most used one¹⁷⁸.

2.8 Doorways | thresholds

Analysing the interior doorways of the museum, they appear to be another relevant element in the narrative of the contemporary intervention, thus deserving a further assessment in the light of Bal's methodology and critique. In the early 90s, when Bal analysed the AMNH, the spatial route and the general distribution were much less flexible and 'freedom of choice at the entrance' of several halls 'was strongly limited 'both by the layout [...] and by the constant shifting from time to space'¹⁷⁹. It was in fact possible to access the hall of the African Peoples 'either by way of the Birds of the World (the south entrance) or from the Akeley Hall of African Mammals'. Over the last years, structural changes have increased both flexibility and freedom of choice:

¹⁷⁶ — Central Park Conservancy, *Park History*, available at: <https://centralparknyc.org/park-history> [accessed 15.07.2024]. The website also acknowledges that the site was previously inhabited and that 'the most densely populated section of the site was a settlement known as Seneca Village: a predominantly African-American community, many of whom were property owners. Seneca Village accounted for approximately 225 of the 1,600 total residents living on the land who were displaced through the process of eminent domain.'

¹⁷⁷ — See: Rosenzweig, Roy, Blackmar, Elizabeth, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park*, Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press, 1992

¹⁷⁸ — Bal, *Ibid.*, page 591: 'the most successfully critical entrance is also the least used one, while the most problematic entrance is the most obvious one to use.'

¹⁷⁹ — Bal, *Ibid.*, 583

the Gilder Centre alone is accountable for thirty new inner 'connections', and a new 'functionality' that 'improves visitor flow'¹⁸⁰ by means of new bridges, passages and doorways. As a result, the hall of African Peoples is now directly accessible also by the areas of the new venue, devoted to 'Science Education and Innovation' and by a short corridor and a new elevator, linked to 'Programme Theatres' and to the hall of the 'Northwest Coast'. This hall had been one of the most criticised by Bal: originally called the hall of the 'Indians of North America and the Eskimo' it was partially renamed already in 1993's edition of the 'Official Guide' as 'Northwest Coast Indians'¹⁸¹ and had already undergone several changes, to then close and reopen in 2022 after a five-year renovation project¹⁸². Therefore, it must be acknowledged that many of Bal's remarks have led to several changes in the Museum: not only in the lexicon used, but in the actual layout and spatial distribution too. Yet, if from a methodological standpoint 'clarity' remains 'the primary goal of presenting', the aforementioned criticism to the 'constant shifting from time to space', alternating 'climax of time'¹⁸³ zones to geographically determined areas, is on the contrary even more frequent today than before. This increase might further boost the shifts from a 'personal language situation' (I-you) to an 'impersonal representation of 'him', 'her', or 'them'¹⁸⁴, i.e. that very posture that the renovation

¹⁸⁰ — Studio Gang, *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ — AMNH archives are today digitised and offer a meaningful insight into the changes introduced over the last decades in their permanent exhibitions. All 'Official Guides' are in fact available and, as a general remark, they prove a continuous work of synthesis and reduction of texts, thus apparently trying to skip all potentially problematic issues, like the ones highlighted by Bal. If 1993's guide still signals the presence of an 'Eskimo Hall' 'beyond the Hall of Northwest Coast Indians', this area vanishes in the title of the paragraph, and is no longer mentioned in the 2001 edition. See: Zappler, Georg, *Official Guide to the American Museum of Natural History*, New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1984; AMNH, *Official Guide: Images from around the American Museum of Natural History*, New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1993; AMNH, *American Museum of Natural History: the official guide*, New York: American Museum of Natural History, 2001; AMNH, *American Museum of Natural History: the official guide*, New York: American Museum of Natural History, 2001, (2004 reprint)

¹⁸² — Lubow, Arthur, *Museum of Natural History's Renewed Hall Holds Treasures and Pain*, 5th May 2022, The New York Times (Nytimes.com), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/05/arts/design/museum-natural-history-indigenous-art.html> [accessed 15.07.2024]

¹⁸³ — Bal, Mieke, *Telling. Showing. Showing off*, in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Spring, 1992), page 571

¹⁸⁴ — Bal, *Ibid.*, page 571

project was supposed to reduce and refuse. Moreover, albeit via the many renovations, no actual solution seems to have been found to ‘the transition from this cultured ‘nature’ to culture *as* nature — from mammals to peoples —’, which, as Bal clarified, remains ‘highly problematic’. Any doorway between two halls, new or pre-existing, should therefore be considered ‘semiotically charged as a threshold’ and not only as a ‘functional connection’ to speed up inner flows. In other words, and to avoid the perpetuation of a juxtaposition that could implicitly equate animals to non-western peoples, Bal had in fact suggested to mark and ‘thematise’ doorways by transforming them into *thresholds*, ‘so as to increase an awareness of the museum’s contemporary educational endeavour’ without any ‘cover up’ of its colonial past¹⁸⁵. To this extent, the recent addition of doorways and passages, has indeed increased ‘freedom of choice’, while at the same time diminishing *clarity* indeed, if not even shying away from the educational endeavour. Thus, the opportunity of founding the ‘meta-museum’ advocated by Bal, is today probably lost in the multiple layers of additions and renovations, at times integral, at times partial, and at the expense of a more fruitful balance between freedom and clarity¹⁸⁶.

2.9 Inner spatial route and sequence

While the main entrances (or the most used ones) are crucial to determine the very beginning of an exhibition’s narrative, and inner doorways can be seen as semiotic thresholds, the overall distribution guiding the spatial route of the visitor is made of a much wider variety of elements, at times overlooked, like temporary or permanent partitions and walls, displays, pedestals, ‘security’ barriers, panels and structures which, together with the exhibits, will define the actual curatorial plans and shape the visitors’ possible interactions and expe-

¹⁸⁵ ——— Bal, *Ibid.*, page 564

¹⁸⁶ ——— Penelope Heilbrun Duus had already noticed in 2017 that the Hall of the Northwest Coast Indians had ‘undergone many [...] renovations, complicating its analysis and interpretation’. If analysis and interpretation were complex, we can assume that the overall ‘clarity’ in presenting the museum, was probably lacking in many respects. See: Heilbrun Duus, Penelope, *From archetypes to actors: the impact of the repatriation movement on museum displays of Native America*, Senior Capstone Projects 645, Anthropology Department, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie (NY), 2017

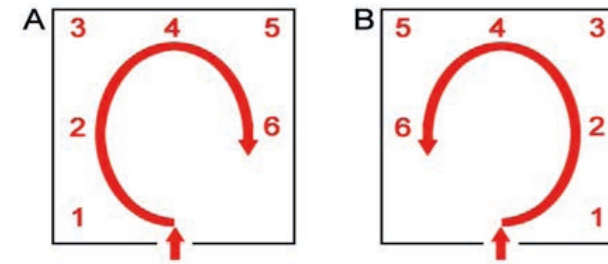


Fig. 8: The subconscious direction of visitors according to Herbert Bayer in: A) a dexiographic (left-to-right) script context and B) in a right-to-left script context

riences. It should therefore not pass unnoticed how, for instance, in the original guidebooks to the AMNH, the curatorial ‘sequence’ never explicitly acknowledged the continuous shift from mammals to peoples¹⁸⁷. The actual text sequence originally analysed by Bal at the beginning of the 90s, explicitly divided the realm of ‘nature’ from that of ‘culture’ to a point in which the main criticism of the text might have probably highlighted the problematic absence of western cultures rather than the actual juxtaposition between animals and non-westerners experienced by Bal in her visit. In brief, the inner spatial route relevantly altered the chapters’ sequence available in the guide, thus making visible and explicit what remained unsurfaced (or less evident) in the guidebook. Although the spatial route was defined in accordance with the curatorial plans, its inherent sequence therefore determined a different story, hence a different colouring, from the guidebook. The fabula, intended as the actual series of events narrated, was indeed the same, but the resulting story, however consistent in this specific example, was not. Similarly, Herbert Bayer, both in his foundational text, as in his design practice, carefully avoided a very relevant level of freedom in his spatial routes. After a very poor public reception of his first American exhibition, which was dedicated to the Bauhaus¹⁸⁸ and which he designed and co-curated with Ise and Walter

¹⁸⁷ ——— The content list of the 1984 guidebook started with two introductory chapters dedicated to the Museum and to ‘How Exhibits Are Made’, then analysed Earth History as well as extinct and living animals, following an ideal evolutionary trajectory that finally led to ‘Human Evolution’ with an apparently random geographical order (in which Europe was missing), to finally conclude with Meteorites and the Hayden Planetarium, almost hinting at the space race of the 80’s as the last chapter of this world ‘evolution’. See: Zappler, Georg, *Official Guide to the American Museum of Natural History*, New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1984, page 2

¹⁸⁸ ——— Bayer, Herbert, Gropius, Ise, Gropius, Walter, *The Bauhaus 1919-1928*, 7th December 1938 – 30th January 1939, Museum of Modern Art, New York

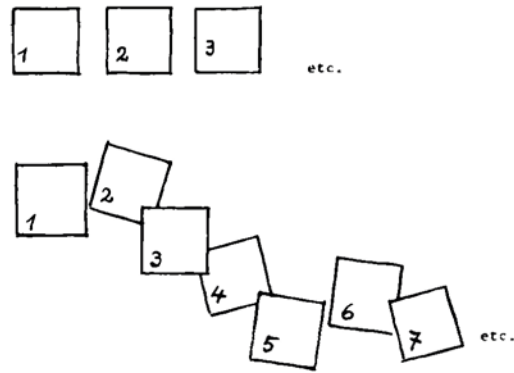


Fig. 9: Reading direction: excerpt from: Bayer, Herbert, *fundamentals of exhibition design*, page 2

Gropius, he made sure in his following projects that clarity was never shaded throughout the visit. In order to do so, he almost obsessively researched all available methods for an 'organised direction' that could avoid any possible 'disorder' in the exhibition's flows¹⁸⁹. This is what he primarily referred to, for instance, when using the term 'diagram': an unambiguous spatial route to help 'read' an exhibition. And while associating exhibitions to written texts, he could already highlight as the 'reading direction of our printing' would 'subconsciously' influence 'the direction of visitors', thus inviting not to underestimate the habit of 'walking to the left or to the right'¹⁹⁰ according to the different cultural contexts (like in areas using the Latin or Devanagari alphabets in comparison to contexts relying on the Hebraic or Arabic ones, for instance). This is a principle that proved true in his 'installation design' for the 'Road to Victory', a photographic exhibition 'directed by Lieutenant Commander Edward Steichen' of the US Navy Reserve with texts by 'his illustrious brother-in-law, Carl Sandburg'¹⁹¹. Differently from his previous experience at the MoMA, Bayer could now fully concentrate just on the physical staging of the exhibition while Steichen and Sandburg would provide images and texts. The first crucial decision he took, was unsurprisingly, to define an inner route structured so as to guide the public during the visit according to the aforementioned

¹⁸⁹ ——— Bayer, Herbert, *fundamentals of exhibition design*, PM (Production Manager) 6, no.2, December 1939 – January 1940, page 18

¹⁹⁰ ——— Bayer, Herbert, *Ibid.*, page 19

¹⁹¹ ——— Museum of Modern Art, *Road to victory, a procession of photographs of the nation at war directed by Lt. Comdr. Edward Steichen, U.S.N.R.*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1942 [exhibition catalogue, page 2 and 19]

principle of the 'organised direction'. The road 'to victory' was in fact literal, very visible and present in the museum by means of its protective barriers, ramps, and U-turns. Moreover, an excessively orderly structure was apparently applied by Bayer here, finally resulting in diminishing the visitors' actual freedom of choice in terms of movement, interaction, and experience. Exhibition design was in fact used 'to indicate exactly¹⁹² where each photograph [...] was to be placed', seen, and therefore read¹⁹³. As the catalogue clarified, 'although Road to Victory was planned in October 1941¹⁹⁴, America's entrance into war immediately charged it with new significance'¹⁹⁵ and with a 'clearly propagan-

¹⁹² ——— emphasis added

¹⁹³ ——— Museum of Modern Art, *Road to victory, a procession of photographs of the nation at war directed by Lt. Comdr. Edward Steichen, U.S.N.R.*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1942 [exhibition catalogue]

¹⁹⁴ ——— If, according to the catalogue, the exhibition had already been planned two months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and although a representation of the attack eventually became a crucial part of the exhibition, MoMA's 'Road to Victory', was probably meant to motivate Americans to a war that a large majority of them arguably did not want. While many historians acknowledged President Roosevelt's 1937 Chicago 'Quarantine speech' as a first clear stance against the Nazi and Fascist governments, he had also made clear, in that very same speech, his 'determination to pursue a policy of peace' and 'to adopt every practicable measure to avoid involvement in war'. Again, at the outbreak of WWII, in September 1939, Roosevelt confirmed that 'a proclamation of American neutrality' was being prepared: a non-interventionist conviction he officially maintained until 1940's presidential campaign, albeit some scholars argue that the situation in Europe (May-June 1940) and South East Asia (September 1940) had changed significantly the off-the-records policy. It was only in December 1940 that Roosevelt explicitly rejected 'negotiated peace' with the 'gang of outlaws' of the Axis, but still limiting America's role to supporting 'the nations defending themselves against attack'. It should not sound paradoxical then, if some influential American Institutions, like the MoMA, had already been co-opted to 'prepare' Americans for a new war even before that war was officially declared. See: Roosevelt, Franklin, D., *October 5, 1937: Quarantine Speech*, Chicago, online, full transcript available at: <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/october-5-1937-quarantine-speech>; Roosevelt, Franklin, D., *September 3, 1939: Fireside Chat 14: On the European War*, Washington DC, online, full transcript available at: <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/september-3-1939-fireside-chat-14-european-war>; and: Roosevelt, Franklin, D., *December 29, 1940: Fireside Chat 16: On the 'Arsenal of Democracy'*, online, full transcript available at: <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/december-29-1940-fireside-chat-16-arsenal-democracy> [accessed 05.08.2024]

¹⁹⁵ ——— Museum of Modern Art, *Ibid.*, page 18

distic aim' that was 'intended, according to the press release, to 'enable every American to see himself as a vital and indispensable element of victory'¹⁹⁶, as the Museum acknowledges today. While the Director of the Museum, Alfred Barr had been criticised just a few years before by art historian Schapiro for his 'unhistorical' approach, almost disavowing the social and political implications of the abstract artworks he exhibited at the MoMA¹⁹⁷, something was changing in the policy of the Museum. In January 1941, John Hay Whitney had been elected as President due to the resignation of Nelson Rockefeller, who, although remaining an influential board member, was now leaving presidency because of his new political appointment by President Roosevelt as 'Coordinator of Commercial and Cultural Relations between the American Republics'¹⁹⁸. From this very moment, according to Eva Cockcroft, the MoMA started a long path to become a 'minor war contractor, fulfilling thirty-eight contracts for cultural materials [...], and especially [for] Nelson Rockefeller's Office'. While under the new director from the Motion Picture Division who would spend his wartime in the 'OSS, predecessor of CIA'¹⁹⁹, the MoMA should, in his very words, 'educate, inspire, and strengthen the hearts and wills of free men in defence of their own freedom'²⁰⁰, and, even more overtly, 'act as a weapon in national defence'²⁰¹. Such was the background of what Staniszewski defined as the first exhibition 'in the series of famous wartime shows' of the Museum that 'would put their exhibition design in the service of explicit political propaganda'²⁰². If the photographs selected by Edward Steichen, and the texts written by the poet Carl

¹⁹⁶ — Museum of Modern Art, *Road to Victory*, Moma.org, available at: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3038?> [accessed 06.08.2024]

¹⁹⁷ — Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1998, page 81

¹⁹⁸ — Museum of Modern Art, *John Hay Whitney Succeeds Nelson A. Rockefeller as President of Museum of Modern Art*, 08 January, 1941, online archive, available at: https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/663/releases/MOMA_1941_0002_1941-01-08_41108-2.pdf?2010 [accessed 06.08.2024]

¹⁹⁹ — Cockcroft, Eva, *Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War*, in: *Artforum*, vol. 12, no. 10, June 1974, page 39-41; [available in: Francina, Francis, *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge, 2000, pages 147-155]

²⁰⁰ — Cockcroft, Eva, *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ — Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1998, page 210

²⁰² — Staniszewski, *Ibid.*, page 81

Sandburg were already very evocative and emotionally charged to move the public, everything in those exhibitions was 'intended to persuade'²⁰³. To this extent, Bayer's contribution was so crucial that, according to Christopher Phillips, the actual 'impact of 'Road to Victory' depended largely on the ingenious installation [he] devised for Steichen'²⁰⁴. The latter, apart from the many technical devices he resorted too, relied completely, in Bayer's own definition, on 'the directional flow of the visitor, so that he could pass through the exhibition and look upon the displays in the desired sequence'²⁰⁵. As the images of the original maquette from MoMA's archive still show, all of the photographs were carefully numbered and positioned in order to build what Phillips acknowledged as the desired, linear 'visual narrative that combined the most dramatic devices of film and Life-style photojournalism'. As Staniszewski noted, although the museum's framework was no stranger to the 'ideological dimensions' in Barr's earlier exhibitions, these were originally 'more subtly articulated' if not even subconscious, while 'highly visible' and explicit in Bayer and Steichen's work. Oddly enough, both the extreme simplicity and linearity in the overall visible narrative, depended on a thorough, relevant work of measuring and visual balancing by Bayer, a work that had started more than ten years before. In narrative terms, the fabula's sequence built in the exhibition was simple, similarly to what Mieke Bal identified as Bremond's 'narrated universal', mainly based on largely undisputed 'logical and conventional restrictions'²⁰⁶, which, consciously or not, were frequently

²⁰³ — Staniszewski, *Ibid.*, page 209

²⁰⁴ — Phillips, Christopher, *The Judgment Seat of Photography*, October, Autumn, 1982, Vol. 22 (Autumn, 1982), The MIT Press, page 43

²⁰⁵ — Emphasis added. See: Bayer, Herbert, *Aspects of Design of Exhibitions and Museums*, in: *Curator: The Museum Journal* (4), July 1961, No. 3, page 264

²⁰⁶ — Bal, Mieke, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 4th edition, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017. See page 159: 'Starting from Barthes' assumption that all fabulas are based on one model, we can begin to search for a model that is so abstract that it may be considered universal [...]. One model that makes ample provision for this possibility is the one suggested by Bremond. According to him, the narrated universal is regulated by the same rules as those which control human thought and action. These rules are determined by logical and conventional restrictions. A logical rule is, for example, that effect succeeds cause; thus, the hero dies after the bullet strikes him. A conventional restriction is, for example, that a worker is not rich'. Although Bal does not finally acknowledge the existence of any such 'universal' and unique kind of fabula (or 'narrated universal') it is relevant to notice how, according to her, Barthes did, especially knowing that Steichen's 'Family of Man' exhibition was one of the 'myths' he read and criticised. In other words, Barthes' and Bremond's models might be applied, if not to all narratives, to linear exhibitions as the ones designed by Bayer and Steichen.

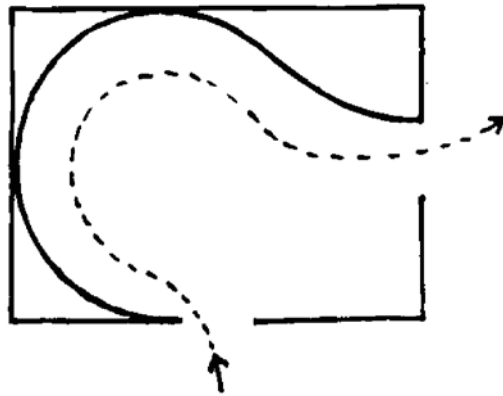


Fig. 10: Curved wall to guide the route: excerpt from: Bayer, Herbert, *fundamentals of exhibition design*, page 19

used in ordering the photographs (even when Sandburg's text was not necessarily implying them). Similar to the 'evolutionary' sequence highlighted by Bal in the AMNH (but with a single entrance that also served as exit), the 'Road to Victory' was designed to highlight the USA's 'manifest destiny': starting from a big scale representation of the 'virgin land' found by the first settlers 'in the beginning'²⁰⁷, like the 'opening panels [that] welcomed the viewer and urged him to follow the curve into the exhibition'²⁰⁸. A curve just like the one sketched by Bayer in his 'fundamentals' of exhibition design, which would lead the viewer to observe and turn westward (both ritually and symbolically), thus trespassing on the 'virgin land' of the buffalos and of the three welcoming Native Americans portrayed in the entrance, to pass on to the room dedicated to the new inhabitants: the 'white tide' of joyful, hardworking 'pioneers and home-seekers'²⁰⁹. Moreover, this movement to the left started a (mainly) clockwise circulation path, consist-

²⁰⁷ — Museum of Modern Art, *Road to victory, a procession of photographs of the nation at war directed by Lt. Comdr. Edward Steichen, U.S.N.R.*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1942, page 2

²⁰⁸ — La, Kristie, 'Enlightenment, Advertising, Education, Etc.: Herbert Bayer the Museum of Modern Art's Road to Victory. In: Art[Theory|Criticism|Politics, *Artists Design Exhibitions: A Special Issue*, October 2014, No.150, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 2014, pages 63–86

²⁰⁹ — Museum of Modern Art, *Ibid.*, page 2. The text read as follows: 'In the beginning was virgin land and America was promises [...] and the Red Man gave over to an endless tide of white men in endless number'. Similarly to the AMNH, the pictures of the Native Americans, almost smiling as if to welcome both this 'white tide' and the exhibition's visitors, were here juxtaposed to the images of the land and of the buffalos.

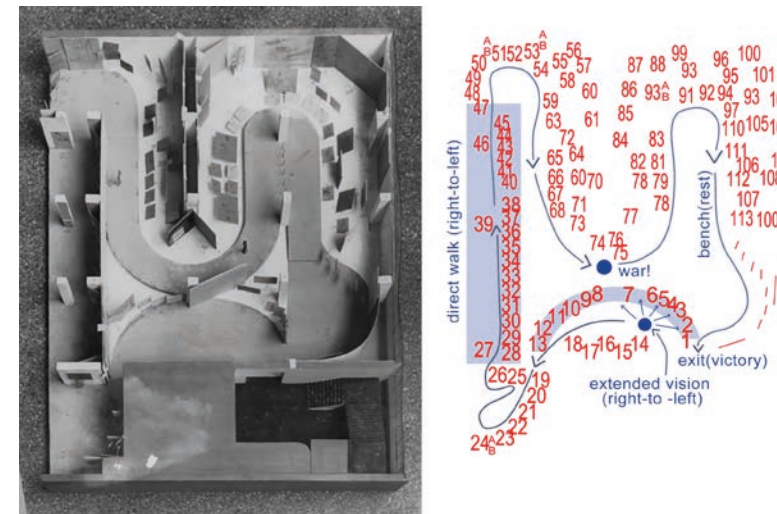


Fig. 11: Bayer's original model and the exhibition's sequence (numbers sketched by Bayer. See: Museum of Modern Art, *Model of installation for the exhibition, 'Road to Victory'*, online screenshot, available at: https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3038?installation_image_index=12, [accessed 06.08.2024])

ent with the American reading verse, as advised by Bayer for a 'spontaneous' direction of circulation. It is worth noticing here that, given the plan with its pillars and surface limits, this general principle (the reading from left to right) could not be kept consistent throughout all the sections. Yet, anytime Bayer had to abandon it, some 'singularity' was designed for more seamless passages. Such was the case of the panels at the very entrance, arranged according to principles of the 'field of vision',²¹⁰ and creating a sort of a circular screen-barrier. This screen made it possible for the viewer to have a quick overview of all the pictures installed almost without moving and at same time favouring a rotational movement of the eyes that would trigger a similar movement of the body to start the first left-to right sequence for the photographs simply hanging on the wall behind. This would last till the subsequent section (the second and last exception), where by necessity, most of the images had to be installed from right to left, which Bayer made less evident by rotating a large majority of the panels (from 27 to 46), helping the viewer to move straight forward. The path remained linear while viewers simply had to turn their head slightly to the right, to finally approach the first U-turn, a second singularity preparing for an artificial slope. And while the path was clearly made visible throughout the entire exhibition's flow by means of white paint on the flooring,

²¹⁰ — Which he also defined, more clearly, as 'Extended vision' in: Bayer, Herbert, *Ibid.*, page 277

the ramp would last only 'more than half of the linear length of the visitor's walk'²¹¹. Unlike a similar device he had used in the Bauhaus exhibition (with a mainly aesthetic significance), both the white paint and the ramp here intended not only to underline the direction but, more importantly, to distance the visitors from what they were observing. Not coincidentally, the first linear section presented a simple, almost pastoral rejoicing American society, through its work, leisure, and family scenes, marking no difference between the subjects who would see the images and the photographs installed, signalling a visual *capatio benevolentiae* and a physical mechanism for identification. Native Americans, buffalos and corn fields in the introduction were conversely installed on a white traffic island that appeared again when the everyday life scenes transferred to representations of dams and factories: the advanced industrial power of a hard-working country, where a first U-turn appeared. Then, almost immediately, the ramp started at the appearance of the first images from American military industries ('the men behind the man behind the gun') to further protect the visitor, allowing long views as well as close views of small and giant photographs²¹², from a safe and pre-determined standpoint. Here, when the apex of the US industrial and military achievements seemed to be reached, just after a happy crowd, the ramp reached its highest standpoint and a second, dramatic, U-turn. A real interruption in the flow happened: a large representation of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Again, the events in this visual fabula were arranged according to the simple conventions and dichotomies of the 'narrated universal' via cause and effect as Sandburg's commentary here read 'War - they asked for it - now, by the living God, they'll get it'. This dramatic text was superimposed on a very concerned American farmer standing against a bright sky backdrop, simply dressed, with an inexpensive, lightly coloured shirt. On the opposite side, below a very dark representation of an explosion in Pearl Harbor, two sitting Japanese diplomats, visually confronted the farmer, in their rich black suits, laughing. Apart from the very linear timeframe of the fabula, the colouring of the story was also physically evident here: black and white, sorrow and joy, labour and leisure. Still, the exhibition's catalogue, commenting on this sequence, maintained that the evoked emotion was 'not so much hate as a sense of terrible necessity and noble strength'²¹³, even though the photographs of the exhibition reportedly didn't 'sit quietly on the wall' but impacted the viewer and would rather 'jut out from the walls and

²¹¹ ——— Bayer, Herbert, *Ibid.*, page 264

²¹² ——— Bayer, Herbert, *Ibid.*, page 264

²¹³ ——— Museum of Modern Art, *Ibid.*, page 20



Fig. 12: Museum of Modern Art, *Installation view of the exhibition 'Road to Victory'*, online screenshot, available at: https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3038?installation_image_index=12, [accessed 06.08.2024]

up from the floors to assault your vision...'²¹⁴ as the photographer Ralph Steichen remarked. Steichen himself understood that the photographs were not 'placed there for their aesthetic values' but rather that they were 'used as a force and people flocked to see' them, even 'people who ordinarily never visited the museum'²¹⁵. To *Newsweek* he clarified that the exhibition intended to show 'the good common horse sense of the common people' and to 'give them something to base their faith upon.'²¹⁶ This, apparently justified Beaumont Newhall's posthumous criticism of Steichen's real interest 'in the illustrative use of photography, particularly in the swaying of great masses'²¹⁷. And Bayer, after personally experiencing the example of another propagandistic milestone exhibi-

²¹⁴ ——— Phillips, Cristopher, *Ibid.*, page 4

²¹⁵ ——— Edward Steichen in: Phillips, Cristopher, *Ibid.*, page 43

²¹⁶ ——— *Newsweek*, *Road to Victory*, 1st June 1942, New York: *Newsweek*, 1942, page 64, online archive available at: https://dn720002.ca.archive.org/0/items/sim_newsweek-us_1942-06-01_19_22/sim_newsweek-us_1942-06-01_19_22.pdf [accessed: 07.09.2024]

²¹⁷ ——— Beaumont Newhall in: Phillips, Cristopher, *Ibid.*, page 40. Phillips clarifies in his research the distance between Newhall and Steichen, both at a professional level (Newhall simply 'could not work with Steichen') and, more importantly, in their different interpretation of photography. Reportedly, when he started his collaboration with MoMA, Steichen didn't propose photography as 'art' anymore, while Newhall's belief in 'the art of photography' was so strong to be considered 'snobbish' and 'pontifical' by the photographic press.

tion like El Lissitzky's 'Pressa'²¹⁸ in Cologne (1928), then studied and perfected the physical principles to 'persuade' visitors, first at the Bauhaus, then as a professional in the US (and in his texts), as he knew space design well, and how to build an effective narrative with it. Through such an orderly and very precise positioning of each photo, visitors were emotionally led to assumptions not necessarily inherent in Steichen's selection. This was in fact the case of the picture of Ambassador Nomura laughing, placed under the first act of war and immediately under the date of the 7th of December 1941, even though that picture was probably shot in a different moment and arguably in a very different context, as some American historians today acknowledge the sincere commitment of Nomura to peace and to prevent war, and even the likeliness of him being kept in the dark about the impending Japanese attack. The installation, on the contrary, seemed designed to reinforce the speculations on his personal responsibility of an attack without a prior declaration of war as expected. Steichen chose the synecdoche²¹⁹ (the Ambassador to represent all the Japanese), which Bayer's design charged with a specific time sequence stating responsibility and reinforcing the negative colouring of the story. The rest of the ramp showed, always behind a protecting barrier, other images of explosions and soldiers at war, now displaying the use of the weaponry introduced at the beginning and with curtains appearing in some points: almost as if to pretend to cover up part of the most disturbing images of the 'loads of deaths' and 'tons of annihilation' that were to be dropped 'down on the enemy' while the visitors, lifted from the floor could better identify with the US Airforce. Then the platform finally descended to lead the viewer to a bench to rest on, to watch a giant poster of American soldiers marching. A new and younger generation in arms was now heading slightly south-eastward, toward the exhibition's exit, with some old couples' pictures (the 'fathers and mothers of soldiers'²²⁰) superimposed on the poster, and apparently approving with their smiles, finally, the road to war, while the 'protective' traffic island on the floor slowly faded away. It is not irrelevant to notice how the curator decided to emend the final image for the archive of this long

²¹⁸ ——— Bayer, Herbert, *Ibid.*, page 267: 'The innovation is in the use of a dynamic space design [...], in the unconventional use of various materials [...] and in the application of a new scale as in the use of giant photographs. At the 'Pressa' [...] El Lissitzky first used montage techniques with photo-enlargements', the same that Bayer would use at the MoMA.

²¹⁹ ——— As Mary Anne Staniszewski noted, Steichen went even further by 'appropriating and resituating' the photographs, not any different to Bayer's cropping and enlarging work. See: Staniszewski, *Ibid.*, page 215

²²⁰ ——— Museum of Modern Art, *Ibid.*

exhibition path. The picture of the exit was in fact mirrored to make again visible the title of the exhibition, which originally appeared in reverse to visitors exiting, since it was a cut-out text correctly readable only from the entrance. This very linear and impactful narrative sequence and the simple installation methods used, immediately became an example, originating with Steichen himself, who widely relied on them in all his subsequent exhibitions (included 'The Family of Man' analysed by Barthes). Bayer also transformed his method (the 'planned circulation') in a recurrent standard in his following exhibitions (like MoMA's 'Airways to Peace') and in his museum's projects (e.g. the United States Air Force Museum), which, according to him, was 'carried so far' to become 'the central motif' visible also in the sketches of Le Corbusier for a 'Musée d'Art Moderne' and, similarly, even in Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum. A clearer view of the impact of a similar all-encompassing installation methodology is visible in the photographs of the same exhibition when it was staged some months later in Chicago²²¹ (April 1943), this time apparently with a minor involvement of Bayer and reproducing an 'overview'²²² of his original installation design²²³. In fact, this new interpretation resulted in an apparently

²²¹ ——— Art Institute of Chicago, *Road to Victory: A Procession of Photographs of the Nation at War*, Apr 1–May 2, 1943

²²² ——— Art Institute of Chicago, *Press Releases from 1943*, online, available at: <https://www.artic.edu/press/press-releases/5/press-releases-from-1943> [accessed 10.08.2024]. March 22, 1943. Road to Victory: A Procession of Photographs of the Nation at War, exhibition, lent by The Museum of Modern Art in New York and directed by photographer assigned by US Navy, Lt. Comdr. Edward Steichen; caption by Carl Sandburg; *overview* [emphasis added] of installation designed by Herbert Bayer; special opening reception, honouring representatives of patriotic and military organizations 19-20'

²²³ ——— The full text of the news release of the Museum acknowledged that 'the technical installation, interesting for its originality and flexibility, was specially designed by Herbert Bayer, famous European designer and artist'. Yet, this clarification does not account for the actual work that Bayer did or did not do in Chicago and whether he re-designed the display according to the new location. Moreover, archival photos show this new installation as quite inaccurate: some posters partially overlapped and the original sequence was altered on several occasions (relevant changes at the story level here dismissed as 'flexibility'). It seems likely that, considering the promoters and the objectives of the exhibition, Bayer's supervision was not deemed necessary in 1943, and, maybe, not even Steichen's, if the press release announced that only Carl Sandburg was 'planning to attend the opening' in Chicago. See: The Art Institute of Chicago, *Road to Victory opens at the Art Institute of Chicago, April 1 - May 2 in Galleries 51, 52, 53 and 25, 22* March 1943, courtesy of: the Archives of the Art Institute of Chicago

poorly planned circulation, where, unlike the first one in New York, archival photographs fail to reproduce the ordering principle inherent in his exhibition design clearly. Moreover, some specific details were designed very differently, like Nomura's photo, here physically detached from Pearl Harbor's attack, or like the portraits of the three Native Americans, not immediately visible from the doorway, but rather 'hidden' in the left corner past the entrance, the image of the landscape now prevailing. Even curtains had a much less measured application as a mere backdrop, no ramps or platforms around the pictures, no protective barriers, and no white traffic islands on the floor. The reception of this restaging seemed not particularly warm, when considering an apparent lack of feedback in comparison to the 'ecstatic' press reviews²²⁴ of its first edition. Although temporary partitions dictated the flow, space treatment in Chicago appeared much less unambiguous, apparently offering more freedom of movement and rest (like a pre-existing wood bench, probably left in its original but narratively inconsistent location), almost as if there was more than one 'road to victory'. It is no wonder that when, in 1990, always at MoMA, Dennis Adams decided to criticise the US intervention in Iraq and the 'Desert Storm' campaign with an installation, he consciously reverted Bayer's basic principles used in the 'Road to Victory'. The circulation between the dark glass vitrines he placed at the entrance of the gallery was in fact difficult, resulting in 'a kind of a blockade'²²⁵ with many narrow passages, rather than a single, comfortable one. The original 1942's photos of the airplanes bombing were also mirrored on the floor, thus using the same methodology, while reversing the narrative, as well as the position of the visitors, symbolically put in danger by this unexpected bombing from the ground.

²²⁴ ——— Staniszewski, *Ibid.*, page 210

²²⁵ ——— Staniszewski, *Ibid.*, page 296

3. State of Research

3.1 Exhibition design's dangerous crossings... (the impossibility of a comprehensive literature review)

In regards to the present research on experience and interactions in exhibition displays, the selection of texts and references analysed could not but be partial and limited: not only because of the extensive body of texts available today, but especially because of the hybrid and multifaceted nature of the subject requiring a multidisciplinary approach. In particular, the experience deriving from the relationship between the public and a display is acknowledged as the very generative principle of its content, inasmuch as exhibitions are complex acts of communication generated by different strands. The design of an exhibition is therefore situated at the intersection of a rich corpus of knowledge deriving from different fields: here curatorial studies meet with cross-disciplinary analyses of various kinds that span from design fundamentals and technical studies, to philosophical and sociological research on museums and galleries' 'civilising rituals'²²⁶, to communication studies and narrative theories. These different crossings might at times be dangerous, especially when considering very different specialist research or theories: how to relate, for instance, the colour and the size of a caption's font with a heavy load of philosophical and sociological assumptions? However risky, the texts highlighted here, literally belong to different realms that casually meet (or collide) on the exhibition ground and, despite all declarations of intent, each of them is jealously safeguarded against unauthorised intruders. Therefore, the few texts analysed here, alongside the ones already introduced in the first two chapters that supported the definition of a possible methodology are not necessarily the latest nor the most complete, but appeared as 'portals' or, more correctly, as multilevel bridges: the elements of a route and of a specific stream of knowledge, multidirectional by nature and endowed with an uncommon capacity to connect different skyways at many levels.

²²⁶ — Duncan, Carol, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995. See paragraph 1.2.3.1. Forms of rituality were also inherent to the 'white cube' as defined by Brian O'Doherty, even though explicitly declared by McEvilley in the 1986 edition's preface and not by O'Doherty himself (who only hinted at the 'ritual hostility' of the modernist artists against what he defined as the 'wrong audience'). Carol Duncan's analysis also resonates with Tony Bennet's research on 'The birth of the Museum'.

3.2 Exhibition design fundamentals

Since the modern foundation of the discipline of exhibition technique at the Bauhaus, a series of strategies and practical tools were experienced which Herbert Bayer also had the possibility of investigating for the first time and systematise in his 'fundamentals of exhibition design'²²⁷. In his text, whose conclusions are far from being technically surpassed in the current practice of exhibition designers, a wider analysis on the actual significance of a display is already present, highlighting the exhibition as '*the apex of all collective effects, of all powers of design*'²²⁸.

Bayer, already in the 1930s, had thus clarified how exhibitions consisted of a conglomerate of different media, or, in his own words, 'of all known means of design: diagram²²⁹, lettering, the word, photography, architecture, painting, sculpture, tone, light, film', each one of which produces meaning. Twenty years later, when further systematising his findings and adding more photos of his own practice to his original sketches, he elaborated on this concept confirming that the designer's aim was 'to improve and to intensify communication' by the 'total application of plastic and psychological means' defining exhibition design as 'an intensified and new language'²³⁰.

However consciously aware he was of what was beyond the technical nature of an exhibition, Bayer still explicitly aimed at defining a method that, like the old 'formalistic' solutions he was critiquing, still rested 'on the *universal* application of all the known means of design', in an apparent search for some sort of definitive, all-encompassing strategy. This particular concept, more than other elements structuring his thought and his practice, more than his insistence for each exhibition's 'specific solution'²³¹, lasted longer, until, from his flexible and hybrid approach, the elements of a style first, and finally a standard, were extracted. Unlike other famous avant-garde designers (like Kiesler²³², for instance), Bayer did not only smoothly pass from his parabolic Bau-

²²⁷ ——— Bayer, Herbert, *fundamentals of exhibition design*, PM (Production Manager) 6, no.2, December 1939 – January 1940, pages 17-25

²²⁸ ——— Bayer, Herbert, *Ibid.*, page 17

²²⁹ ——— Intended as *spatial distribution* | layout as clarified in Paragraph 2.6

²³⁰ ——— Bayer, Herbert, *Aspects of Design of Exhibitions and Museums*, in: Curator: The Museum Journal (4), July 1961, No. 3, page 257

²³¹ ——— Bayer, Herbert, *Ibid.*, page 264

²³² ——— As Brian O'Doherty noted: 'European utopians - who can forget Kiesler moving like a Brownian particle through the New York milieu? - don't do well here'. O'Doherty, Brian *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, The Lapis Press, Santa Monica - San Francisco, 1986

haus experience (a student-turned-professor, then marked as a 'degenerate' artist²³³) to a new life in the USA, but also left a long-lasting legacy through his writings and even more through his exhibition design practice for the Museum of Modern Art and other museums and institutions.

His texts can still prove useful for insight and action in design, provided that two main risks are acknowledged and circumscribed. The first lies in the idea of a misunderstood 'neutrality' (of colours, of backdrop, of light, ...): modernism in exhibitions was not and did not intend to be neutral and was, in fact, much more colourful and non-uniform than we can admit. The second lies in the possible misunderstanding of that 'universal'²³⁴ character frequently pursued in the study of exhibition design, to start from Bayer's essays, up to contemporary compendia on exhibition design (like, for instance, Pam Locker's published in 2011²³⁵). As clarified by Mary Anne Staniszewski, Bayer did not aim at any easy simplification or standard homogeneous solution, but was aware of both the 'complex means of communication of the idea' and of his position being just a 'point of view' that he had conceived to oppose 'stylisation' and, as Staniszewski put it, to develop a 'viewer-sensitive exhibition technique [...] that promoted interaction between the objects and the viewers'²³⁶.

3.3 Critical studies and exhibition design

It is mainly thanks to Mary Anne Staniszewski's comprehensive study²³⁷ on seven decades of exhibitions held at the MoMA, if not simply to understand 'the importance of exhibition design' but also its ideological and 'time-and-site-bound character' that was finally fully taken

²³³ ——— Herbert Bayer's work was in fact exhibited in the 'Degenerate Art' exhibition held in Munich in 1937

²³⁴ ——— 'Exhibition design rests on the *universal* application of all known means of design'

²³⁵ ——— Locker, Pam, *Basics Interior Design 02: Exhibition Design*, Lausanne: AVA Publishing, 2011

²³⁶ ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1998, page 176

²³⁷ ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *Ibid.*

into account. Staniszewski not only analysed exhibition design in order to acknowledge the relevance of a few 'innovators' such as Frederick Kiesler, El Lissitzky, Lily Reich, Edoardo Persico²³⁸ and Philip Johnson or of the 'new' techniques such as Bayer's *field-of-vision*, but she also unveiled the analogies of these latter examples with 'the reader in the text' narrative theories in order to highlight the conscious and unconscious 'ideological scaffolding' inherent to a display's language and its power.

Even if her analysis was limited to the context of the MoMA up to the end of the nineties, the insight it offered went far beyond its actual limits of time and space, and also its strict disciplinary limits. As a curator, art historian and professor, her work still tells much of New York's main art and design institution as it indirectly speaks of many institutions alike in the western world (Milan included), and by following an intuitive timeline her story uncovers various subtexts, from (unresolved) social issues and changes, to the manifold nature of the staging of exhibitions. The physical tropes, gestures, technical and conceptual innovations in the staging of MoMA's exhibitions could form a text of exhibition design *per se*, not very different from what Bayer did, even though this was not Staniszewski's main focus. As she investigated the hidden agendas behind exhibitions, she could show the increasingly blurred lines between practice and theory, between the scientific and theoretical work of a curator and the practical activities of an exhibition designer, thus unravelling the apparent unacknowledged overlapping of the two areas and the intrinsically collec-

238 ——— Edoardo Persico, born in Naples in 1900, left his law studies to start writing philosophic tales, novels and travelling around Europe (Paris, Moscow, Yugoslavia, ...). Close to the antifascist politician Piero Gobetti and himself arrested by the regime more than once, he moved to Turin in 1926 where, after a short period as a Fiat labourer, he started a career as graphic designer for the magazine *Motor Italia* and co-editor for Fratelli Ribet to then establish his own publishing house. In Turin he met the writer-painter Carlo Levi and 'The Group of Six', which he promoted and supported. As he became more and more interested in art and architecture, with Giuseppe Pagano Pogatschnig (who died in Mauthausen in 1945) he became co-director of the most influential Italian architectural magazine, *Casabella*, promoting the international rationalist movement in Italy. He curated the Italian exhibitions of artists like Paul Klee, Vasilij Kandinskij, Juan Gris and Jean Arp and he also designed with Marcello Nizzoli the 'Gold Medal Room' exhibition (see paragraph 1.2.1.2) and the main hall of Milan's Triennale (involving the still young artists Lucio Fontana and Mario Sironi). His mysterious death at the age of 36 from 'undetermined causes' is at the basis of Rino Camilleri's semi-fictional investigation book *'Dentro il Labirinto'*, published in 2012.

tive and cross disciplinary nature of exhibitions. In fact, while reporting on Philip Johnson's recollections of Alfred Barr's crucial role in the inauguration of the 'neutral, non-skied installation' method that would become MoMA's signature, Staniszewski also quoted the modernist architect clarifying that Barr and himself 'didn't do anything separate', thus implicitly showing the unitary nature of the curatorial project with its design, especially in the period of the 'aestheticised installations for modernism' that the two represented. Singularities and contradictions would only surface much later, mainly after the age of the 'installations for political persuasion'²³⁹ and especially in the seventies, to start with Takis Vassilakis early dislocation of his own *Tele-sculpture* in the garden of the museum and contrary to its planned position within the exhibition 'The Machine at the End of the Mechanical Age' (1969). As Staszewski recalled: 'Takis had requested that guest curator Pontus Hulten omit his work from the show. Failure to heed the request led to the art-jacking'²⁴⁰. Symptomatically, the artist decided to hijack the original curatorial plans and to make his protest visible by changing the position and indirectly altering the route originally designed for the show, thus succeeding in altering the meaning of the entire exhibition. These mechanisms, unveiled in the text, were intuitively experienced by avant-garde artists even before Bayer systematised his findings, and were then rediscovered by artists after a long period in which avant-garde and modernism had become something else. A period in which the indivisibility of the staging as perceived and experienced from the exhibition's meaning was more and more frequently interpreted as Barr and Johnson's unitary principle: a perfect consonance between curator and exhibition designer, which would favour the designer-curator (like in Charles and Ray Eames's 'Good Design' exhibition) or, the curator-designer. This unitary principle in fact appeared also in Michelle Elligott's portrait of René d'Harnoncourt, another influential curator and director of the MoMA for almost two decades, amongst whose talents she underlined 'one particular activity in which he truly delighted: the design and installation of museum exhibitions'²⁴¹. Remembered by Geoffrey Hellman in the *New Yorker* as a 'champion installateur', he was praised by Barr for developing 'the art of installation to a point that [wasn't] equalled anywhere in the

239 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1998. Such is the title of the fourth chapter, following the ones already mentioned and dedicated to the Avant-Gardes, to the 'Aestheticized Modernism' and to 'Good Design'

240 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *Ibid.*, page 263

241 ——— Elligott, Michelle *René d'Harnoncourt and the Art of Installation*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2018

world'. d'Harnoncourt not only 'devoted attention to exhibition design as a creative practice'²⁴², but, as Staniszewski reported, and very differently from Philip Johnson, he also 'foregrounded the representational implications of an exhibition design by employing diverse installation methods' since he 'believed that there was no such a thing as a 'neutral installation''²⁴³. According to Elligott's research, and confirming Staniszewski's broader analyses, these practical methods emerge as inseparable from the ultimate goals and their subtext, or story represented within a display, which they in effect shape, no matter whether staged by a designer, like in the example of Johnson, Bayer and Eames or by a curator, like Barr or d'Harnoncourt.

This is also why, as Elligott reported, d'Harnoncourt himself had defined installation as 'terribly dangerous' and 'full of terribly seductive temptations' which Elligott directly associated to 'the ecstasy of the eye' that Robert Motherwell thought was his 'ultimate concern' in exhibitions²⁴⁴. In fact, d'Harnoncourt introduced to the museum new kinds of emotional, extremely dark exhibitions with dramatic spotlights on the artworks ('*The Timeless Aspects of Modern Art*' 1948), appearing probably for the first time. Then, he invited Navajo sand painters to perform live within the MoMA ('*Indian Art of the United States*', 1941) and codified the method of the 'vistas': inner windows connecting both visually and conceptually different areas of an exhibition (*Art of the South Seas*, 1946)²⁴⁵. As it appears from Elligott's and Staniszewski's analyses, the set of big and small innovations that d'Harnoncourt introduced in the MoMA could indeed be defined as anything but 'neutral', although it also contributed to the definition of the new museum's standards.

Besides, their texts ultimately argue not only for the impossible neutrality of a staging but also for the impossibility of the exhibition narrative to remain unchanged if its physical staging or part of it (like in Takis's art-jacking) is altered, even unintentionally. This second possibility became clearer in the age of the 'installations for political persuasion', that started at the MoMA with *The Road to Victory* (1940) by Steichen, Sandburg and Bayer, and that peaked with *The Family of Man* (again by Steichen and Sandburg, this time supported by Paul Rudolph, first showed²⁴⁶ in 1955). This exhibition, in fact, introduced three main

²⁴² ——— Elligott, Michelle, Ibid.

²⁴³ ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1998, page 94

²⁴⁴ ——— Elligott, Michelle, Ibid.

²⁴⁵ ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, Ibid., pages 84-98

²⁴⁶ ——— Originally showed at the MoMA in 1955 the exhibition had an incredibly long-lasting life: like its predecessor *The Road to Victory*, it travelled around the world for several years becoming the very

singularities in its physical staging that went beyond the original curatorial plans and almost hijacked the actual intended political narrative, that was intuitively conveyed in its title, and that represented, according to Roland Barthes, an 'ambiguous myth of the human 'community'' serving 'as an alibi to a large part of our humanism'²⁴⁷. Two main 'accidents' in the 'myth' happened already during its first staging in New York, when Steichen and Rudolph realized that something was not going on as planned in their panoramic photo installation. It seems possible that Steichen underestimated the peer-to-peer work led in his previous exhibitions with Bayer, and, once become Director of Photography (since 1947), had 'real battles' with a 'relatively young architect'²⁴⁸, like Staniszewski remarked. Reportedly, one of these battles concerned the number of photographs, which, in 1940, Bayer had squeezed and meticulously positioned in less than 120 groups (most of which made by no more than one or two photos: 150 photographs in total). Rudolph was also not willing to increase the number of photos beyond three hundred and fifty or four hundred. Ultimately, Steichen prevailed and 503 photos were selected. Bayer's numbered sequence model thus gave way to multiple photo groupings that composed thirty-seven 'thematic sections' aimed at privileging the 'narrative flow connecting these diverse themes' rather than the single shots (which, on the contrary, were still very visible in *The Road to Victory*). One of these images, printed in small size (probably to feed 'the mood' of a dramatic section) unexpectedly created the main accident: 'a photograph of a lynched African American [...] that spectators were hesitating in front of'²⁴⁹, 'a disruption' according to Wayne Miller, who had assisted Steichen in the selection of images. That image, unlike the dreadful bombings of *The Road to Victory*, had no possible justification,

stereotype of the international travelling exhibition (in Italy alone it was exhibited in Rome, Venice, Turin and Milan as well in the new Pavillion of Contemporary Art in 1959). It was then given new life in 1994 becoming a permanent exhibition in Luxembourg, after a second 'posthumous' world tour from 1992 to 1994 (when the restored collection was seen in Toulouse, Tokyo and Hiroshima). It was declared a 'Memory of the World' by UNESCO in 2003 and again restored (in 2010 and 2013) and re-staged in its permanent venue at Clervaux Castle in Luxembourg. Analysed in depth by the 'Power of Display', Staniszewski's findings offer an example of the present liveliness of her research, at different levels and in different contexts.

²⁴⁷ ——— Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, New York: The Noonday Press, 1991, page 100

²⁴⁸ ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1998, page 240

²⁴⁹ ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, Ibid., page 251

no barriers, no distancing, no privileged standpoint offered or sympathetic curtains to diminish its effect, and, more importantly, within the context of MoMA, directly interpellated the American audience. In fact, when Steichen and Miller observed the traffic flow, they saw that 'the photograph... was a stumbling block' and even though they considered it 'a fantastic picture' they agreed that it 'didn't work there' and removed it after two weeks, reportedly because they 'wanted this exhibition to flow'. In that period, a second removal also happened to a mirror exhibited in the same narrow corridor where the first change was brought to the 'inhumanities' section. Here, amidst the 'faces' section, a mirror at eye level appeared to include the face of the visitors in the show, which Miller described as 'unnecessary', 'corny and wrong', explaining that they thought it useless to state so literally 'that "The Family of Man" was you'²⁵⁰. Once again, another singularity was removed: in an exhibition where some elements were explicitly 'compared' to 'the cinema'²⁵¹ by its designer, what was removed was precisely the only scenic device that would break the fourth wall, again interpellating the audience directly and requiring a second stop in the flow. Also, when the catalogues were printed, these singularities were removed along with the only colour photograph: an H-bomb exploding. The latter thus remained the only critical element of the staging (conveniently omitted in the show in Tokyo) and, as such, it was carefully positioned in a specific darkened gallery for a safe pause in the flow, then further anaesthetised by the happy ending where a large photo of the assembly of the United Nations appeared, to conclude the section of "the magic of childhood" where the walls were in hues of pink: the final 'theatrical sleight of hand'²⁵² of the show, according to Stanisze-wski. It is also worth noticing that the first staging of the exhibition without removals, would have probably reduced in scope and strength some of the criticisms advanced by Roland Barthes, like the allegation 'to suppress the 'determining weight of History'²⁵³ in favour of a simplistic 'classic humanism' that did not acknowledge the actual and historical differences linked to the different colour of the skin. The lynching of Emmett Till was in fact mentioned by Barthes as a blatant example of the 'magically' produced 'old imposture' conveyed by the exhibition which he saw as a sentimental and false idea of 'unity from pluralism',

250 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge (Mass.): Mit Press, 1998, page 244

251 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *Ibid.*, page 238

252 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *Ibid.*, page 249

253 ——— Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, trans. Lavers, Annette, New York: Noonday Press, 1972

of a universal human nature denied by 'History'. Both the mirror, that literally connected the audience (real people) to the images, and the shocking photo '*Death Slump at Mississippi*' would have made a possible argument against Barthes' criticisms, but they were removed long before the exhibition travelled to Paris. Interviewed by Staniszewski, Miller attributed the decision to remove the most critical image to Steichen, although he also admitted that he had no idea whether he had 'had other pressures on him'. As the *Power of Display* clarified, many subjects probably interfered in the exhibition, even though, maybe, not always as evidently as in the case of a sponsor in South Africa, where the show had added a world globe 'encircled by bottles of Coca-Cola': Steichen's dream of a universal human nature thus 'transmogrified into the universal markets of Coke'²⁵⁴, as Staniszewski remarked. Needless to say, this single addition of an element apparently not included in the exhibition, but within it, further reinforces the argument for the impossibility of a narrative other than what arose from the whole of the different elements staged (sponsors included)²⁵⁵. In the age of the exhibitions 'for political persuasion' (as Staniszewski defined the period in the history of MoMA which goes from the 1950s up to the 60s), a period of interferences and 'pressures', a long process had thus started: notwithstanding Bayer's original intentions and efforts (e.g. for specific solutions or for collective effects) modernism was losing many of its original characteristics and ideals to progressively become a universal style. His methods of exhibition design started being investigated mainly as part of a specialist's discipline made of pure technical knowledge, frequently neglecting 'the historical limitations of social conventions and disciplinary discourses'²⁵⁶ bound to it. To this extent, systematic research like Staniszewski's maintain an unaltered bridging capacity between the practice of exhibition design and critical studies today by acknowledging the relevance of displays and their actual staging, without lacking the necessary specificity in the analysis of the actual site-bound morphology.

254 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *Ibid.*, page 257

255 ——— To further clarify, not only the works exhibited but all intentional and unintentional elements will shape the reception, and therefore the meaning of an exhibition. A concept thoroughly studied by Staniszewski: 'The interactive elements set up a framework for viewing art that acknowledged its reception by a viewer as necessary for the creation of meaning' and 'the Pressa installation implicitly acknowledged the role of the viewer in the creation of meaning by providing a stage-like experience for the spectator' and, more importantly: 'different displays create different meaning' (Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *Ibid.*, pages 8, 48, 116)

256 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, in <http://www.arts.rpi.edu/pl/faculty-staff/mary-anne-staniszewski>, [accessed 02.01.2020]

3.4 The White Cube and commodification (intuitive crossings of non-systematic research)

Besides systematic studies open to new multiple readings and investigations pertinent to different fields of application, an even wider repertoire of non-systematic research is available for further consideration, offering new relevant insight on the interplay between the works exhibited, the display and its audience and context. As anticipated, the prior 'aestheticized installations for Modernism'²⁵⁷ in time gained the modernist 'point of view', an increasingly growing influence in exhibition making as in the very definition of the new contemporary museums.

This influence eventually crystallised, by the 1970s, in the 'White Cube': a 'fragile evolutionary product of a highly specialised nature' that 'subsumes commerce and aesthetics, artist and audience, ethics and expediency'²⁵⁸. This concept, probably one of the main legacies of his text, appeared in O'Doherty's 'notes'²⁵⁹ together with other ideas, hints, explicit and elliptic formulations, in three²⁶⁰ very readable but, indeed, non-systematic articles and an afterword. In this definition, he condensed a large part of his findings that would resonate, for instance,

²⁵⁷ — Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1998 [Chapter 2: 'Aestheticized Installations for Modernism, Ethnographic Art, and Objects of Everyday Life']

²⁵⁸ — O'Doherty, Brian, *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Santa Monica - San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986, page 80. Apart from McEvelley's preface and O'Doherty's own afterword, both written in 1986, the main three articles in the book were originally published in *Artforum* in 1976 and partly presented at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in January 1975, when the lecture 'Inside the White Cube, 1855-1974' was first delivered.

²⁵⁹ — Although only the first chapter has been identified as 'Notes on the gallery space', the colloquial style and loose structure of the text remain constant in the following chapters ('The eye and the spectator' and 'Context as content'). Within the book, built as a collection of articles, the same concepts are at times repeated, while in some cases they are investigated in a different way.

²⁶⁰ — A fourth one was added to the expanded edition: O'Doherty, Brian, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space, Expanded Edition*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010

with the thorough insights from the MoMA unveiled by Staniszewski. Oddly enough, O'Doherty's main assumptions started from a short and fragmentary history of frames and hanging²⁶¹ techniques that apparently helped him cross several busy and dangerous crossroads in the history of art safely, like Impressionism, Pointillism, Fauvism, Analytic and Synthetic Cubism, Dadaism or Conceptual Art, up until the Colour Field and Spatialism, just to mention a few. The implicit question of his quick incursion into art history might have been why, as the new century was approaching, easel painting was still with us. And again, with the same confident step, and by targeting many of the analysed artworks for 'looking like the ultimate in capitalist art'²⁶² (here he referred to the Colour Field), he implied that the survival of easel painting mainly depended on its easy commodifiable nature. The art process at play that he highlighted, the increasingly 'shallow'²⁶³ picture plan, the consequent surface tension²⁶⁴ and a redefined relationship between the edges²⁶⁵ of the paintings and their supporting walls, was a process that gradually led to the rise and prevalence of a new subject, the 'modernist white wall' that could artificially reconcile easel paintings with the gallery space, thus developing a commodified process of art. More precisely, the main target of his critique was not the art world *per se*, but rather western art museums, since he believed that 'the gallery space is exclusive' and that 'what is on display looks a bit like valuable scarce goods, jewellery, or silver: aesthetics [...] turned into commerce'²⁶⁶, because 'a gallery is, in the end, a place to sell things'²⁶⁷.

Consequently, the 'evolution' (involution, some might argue) to which he refers and whose final 'product' is the white cube, corresponded both to the changes underway in Western society and its art, and to the definition of precise material 'canons'. These latter exam-

²⁶¹ — 'Hanging, indeed, is what we need to know more about. [...] The way pictures are hung makes assumptions about what is offered' O'Doherty, Brian, *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Santa Monica - San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986, page 24

²⁶² — O'Doherty, Brian Ibid., page 26

²⁶³ — 'As the vessel of content becomes shallower and shallower, composition and subject matter and metaphysics all overflow across the edge until, as Gertrude Stein said about Picasso, the emptying out is complete' O'Doherty, Brian, Ibid., page 22

²⁶⁴ — 'The forces that crushed four hundred years of illusionism and idealism together and evicted them from the picture translated deep space into surface tension': O'Doherty, Brian, Ibid., page 35

²⁶⁵ — 'The easel painting is not transferable to the wall [...] What is lost in the transfer? Edges, surface, the grain and bite of the canvas, the separation from the wall' O'Doherty, Brian, Ibid., page 25

²⁶⁶ — O'Doherty, Brian, Ibid., page 35

²⁶⁷ — O'Doherty, Brian, Ibid., page 76

ples, were made explicit firstly by the 'spotless' white walls 'as the frame dropped off' and 'the pedestal melted'²⁶⁸, then 'Modern architecture [...] ran the blank wall into the blank ceiling'²⁶⁹, and 'technology bestowed on the ceiling [...] indirect lighting'²⁷⁰ thus eliminating windows and all viewpoints on the context, to reinforce the 'isolation' and 'estrangement' of art (and of the artist) in an 'extensive, homogeneous space'²⁷¹. And if this description may still sound familiar today, it is because, over time, these characteristics have become an authority-infusing standard (thus a canon), almost fitting to grant recognition *per se* to the institution adopting them and, as a consequence, to the works exhibited. According to Thomas McEvilley's interpretation in his preface to the book, 'the purpose of such a setting is not unlike the purpose of religious buildings'²⁷², i.e., to appear 'untouched by time' and thus to represent art, supposedly 'free' from context and society²⁷³ and 'in a kind of eternity of display'²⁷⁴, but in the end fully corresponding to 'the image of the society', since 'the white wall's apparent neutrality is an illusion' because it actually 'stands for a community with common ideas and assumptions'²⁷⁵. Whether consciously or unconsciously (as Staniszewski would put it), the form he described, neither simply follows function any longer (as Bayer probably believed), nor can it offer any 'neutral installation' (if there ever was, considering d'Harnoncourt's earlier opinion). The white cube, to use O'Doherty's definition, thus coincides with a symbolic *emblem*, a spatial *ghetto*, and a social *attitude*²⁷⁶ and does not only aim at 'estranging' the artist but also at marking a difference between self-proclaimed high art and the vernacular. Considering that O'Doherty was mainly referring to the

268 ——— O'Doherty, Brian, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space, Expanded Edition*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010, page 87

269 ——— O'Doherty, Brian *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Santa Monica - San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986, page 66

270 ——— O'Doherty, Brian, *Ibid.*, page 67

271 ——— O'Doherty, Brian, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space, Expanded Edition*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010, page 87

272 ——— McEvilley, Thomas, *Introduction*, in: O'Doherty, Brian *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Santa Monica - San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986, page 7

273 ——— 'The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself', O'Doherty, Brian *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Santa Monica - San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986, page 14

274 ——— O'Doherty, Brian, *Ibid.*, page 15

275 ——— O'Doherty, Brian, *Ibid.*, pages 79-80

276 ——— O'Doherty, Brian, *Ibid.*, page 80

New York art scene, it is no wonder that a large part of this non-systematic overview on art and art galleries, resonates with Staniszewski's meticulous and substantial reconstruction of the history of MoMA. But O'Doherty was not interested in bridging different disciplines or in investigating in depth institutional power structures (interferences, pressures, role overlaps etc.) and, when focusing on the physical elements, he overlooked many of the white cube's specificities. Yet, his notes could intuitively subsume many of the elements and findings of different and subsequent analyses. For instance, his description of the transformation of the visitors into the single isolated 'Spectator' first and then into the 'Eye', sounds like an implicit criticism to Bayer's 'Field of Vision' (in which Bayer literally sketched a big biped eye). As already clarified, Bayer's thought was more complex and the modern movement was never so monolithic as it is sometimes described. Yet, in the course of the successive stratifications, some characteristics of the modern movement sedimented and, in 1976, (when the articles were first published) 'Modernism', especially in museum architecture and exhibition design, had apparently assumed the aspect of a 'tradition'²⁷⁷. Similarly, what O'Doherty defined as unrepeatable 'gestures', e.g. like Duchamp's 1938 Dada exhibition, or Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* (1923-1943), or Yves Klein's *Le Vide* (1958), were remarkable examples of 'overlaps', where art took the stage²⁷⁸, refusing to 'sit quietly' on the white wall, even at risk of interfering with other artworks (which Duchamp actually did, with nonchalance, while Schwitters literally enclosed artworks, reproductions or common use objects). O'Doherty concluded that Duchamp had 'invented the ceiling' adding that this 'gesture' as any other, was a 'form of invention' that could only 'be done once'²⁷⁹. While expressing admiration for this kind of intervention, he also admitted that Duchamp's 'ceiling/floor transplant gesture', might have been 'repeatable as a "project"', for the first time fully acknowledging exhibition design. In reality, Yves Klein had mainly worked on a 'project' by leaving Irit's gallery completely

277 ——— In reaction to this transformation, a few years later, in 1980, the Venice Architecture Biennale gave birth to the 'Strada Novissima' installation. Following the example of postmodern philosophy and thought, architecture also abandoned modernism to become 'post-modern' thanks to the participation of designers such as Robert Venturi, Frank Gehry or Hans Hollein (who also participated in Documenta 8) or Rem Koolhaas (whose studio co-curated Manifesta Palermo)

278 ——— In the seventies at MoMA, this became quite common practice for artists (not only in terms of performance), which Staniszewski in fact titled as: *Installation Design and Installation Art*. Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *Ibid.* [Chapter 4]

279 ——— O'Doherty, Brian, *Ibid.*, pages 66-69

empty and just emphasising the entrance with blue draping, blue paint and flowers and offering blue drinks. Finally, Schwitters probably offered him the most interesting example, since his *Merzbau* was, quite literally, 'a project': growing 'like a big city', with a real 'structure' constituting a 'space extended', an environment open for occasional visitors to enter and with actual displays for his artworks/relics: a continuously growing exhibition, itself turned into art and even more than the works exhibited. Quite meaningfully, the *Merzbau*, was repeated (or 'continued'?) when Schwitters moved to the United Kingdom, not to mention subsequent reconstructions (re-stagings) as it also happened to Duchamp's *1.200 Coal Bags*, proving the inherent repeatability of a 'gesture/project'.

3.5 Plans, display, experience, and unanswered questions

O'Doherty's definition of the white wall, providing a solemn, disembodied backdrop, where the visitor's experience becomes ritual, together with his frequent use of religious metaphors, anticipated, though just partly, several studies, included Carol Duncan's arguments of the 'civilising rituals'. Much less interested in ritual aspects, Tony Bennett also seemed to share a similar point of view while quoting Michel Foucault's *heterotopias* and criticising any pursuit of an unattainable timeless 'universality' that, always recollecting Foucault's thought, would disregard our inevitable, ambiguous position as 'observed spectators'²⁸⁰. Bennett's thorough research, while focusing mainly on the birth and the evolution of the western museum seen from the standpoint of a sociologist, could in fact offer a further and more in-depth theoretical basis for a critique of the contemporary museums' formats and of the current practice in exhibition-making, thus advocating for new forms of displays²⁸¹. In fact, following a broader historical argument,

²⁸⁰ ——— Bennett, Tony, *The birth of the Museum*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995

²⁸¹ ——— To this extent, the Diffused Museum of Bicocca (MuDiB), acknowledged this intention in its first exhibition with a section dedicated to 'The Birth of the Museum' already intending the diffused/distributed model as an alternative methodology neglecting the estrangement, the exclusivity and the commodification of culture generated by the white cube (see Chapter 7).

he underlined how the modern 'exhibitionary complex' embodies and communicates 'specific cultural meanings and values'. To this extent, and from a very different perspective than O'Doherty's, Bennett was also concerned with the experiential side of exhibitions. In fact, in his view, experience could be framed as a Marxian dialectical²⁸² process between the exhibited artworks and the spectators, and, more specifically, as an interactive process, where 'the work of art exists as such, (namely as a symbolic object endowed with meaning and value) only if it is apprehended by spectators possessing the disposition and the aesthetic competence which are tacitly required'²⁸³ (quoting Bourdieu). In the western context 'one could then say that it is the aesthete's eye which constitutes the work of art as a work of art [and] this is possible only to the extent that the aesthete himself is the product of a long exposure to artworks'²⁸⁴. In this apparently tautological system²⁸⁵ Bennett saw the theory as that which 'mediates the relations between the aesthete and the work of art offering', a theory composed of 'principles governing the display of art [that] works as in the aesthete's head'²⁸⁶, bridging the visible (the artworks as displayed) and invisible (the concept of art). According to this interpretation it is not only the artwork, but art itself that could exist only insofar as 'envisaged in the plans and projections of their advocates, designers, directors and managers'²⁸⁷, then displayed *and* experienced. Here, the collective nature of these

²⁸² ——— 'These are two sides of the same coin, the production of *'art'* and the production of aesthetes forming two aspects of the dialectic through which, as Marx argued in the *Grundrisse*, the processes of producing an object for consumption and a consuming subject always organise and beget one another in the forms required for the circuit'. Bennett, Tony, *Ibid.*, page 164

²⁸³ ——— Bennett, Tony, *Ibid.*, page 163

²⁸⁴ ——— Bennett, Tony, *Ibid.*, page 164

²⁸⁵ ——— I owe this definition to Okwui Enwezor, who also clearly saw and denounced this paradox in art as a 'tautological system'. See: Enwezor, Okwui, *The Black Box*, in *OnCurating*, Issue 46, June 2020, Zurich, 2020, page 428

²⁸⁶ ——— Bennett, Tony, *Ibid.*, page 164

²⁸⁷ ——— Bennett, Tony, *Ibid.*, page 11. In this regard, Bennett considered the subjects involved in museums and exhibitions as broadly as possible, also including for instance, the workers present within the staging, and considering their possible (un)intentional interferences. While commenting on the Open-Air Museum at Beamish, England, where costumed interpreters act, he remarked that '*the text of the museum [is not] entirely without contradictions of its own. It has its cracks, some of them occurring at the level of those practices which are least susceptible to planned control: the conduct of museum workers*'. Bennett, Tony, *Ibid.*, page 118. A remark that might apply to almost all forms of exhibitions, also outside museums.

plans and projections emerges once again, as does the relevance of exhibition design as a crucial element of theory that shapes art through experience. It could be inferred that experience prevails over theory and over the original plans, if Bennett himself explicitly acknowledged not having addressed the different important questions raised by 'the degree to which such plans and projections were and are successful in organising and framing the experience of the visitor or, to the contrary, the degree to which such planned effects are evaded, side-stepped or simply not noticed'²⁸⁸.

To consider the categories, the tools, and the findings of installation design (as in the wide range of case studies offered by Stanisze-wski) and to investigate a possible methodology to connect an intended narrative to its final staging as experienced by the audience, is, ultimately, to investigate a possible response to Bennett's unanswered questions. Furthermore, a toolkit of this kind, by advocating for new possible forms of practice, would favour a paradigm shift disrupting the autoreferentiality of the bi-dimensional 'circuit of exchange' that Bennett criticised in his text. In time a new form of 'exhibitionary complex' would then arise, firstly as a three-dimensional process (a spiral-like model, evolving in time), and eventually as a multi-dimensional one (involving other axes of meaning). New forms of 'mutant' institutions where variable formats of displays would prevent the prior formal and ideological stereotypes like the white cube in its most crystallised form. If a possible, although not comprehensive, 'multidimensional' kind of exhibition design, fully capable of overcoming the 'flat', self-replicating experience of the white cube has yet to be investigated, several studies and practical applications have already been experimented with, to begin with Okwui Enwezor's 'Black Box' concept.

²⁸⁸ ——— Bennett, Tony, *Ibid.*, page 11

3.6 The Black Box and its new lexicon

The Black Box was conceived for Documenta 11 in 2002 both as a transparent curatorial device to read the goals and the objectives of the exhibition and as an explicit opposition to the white cube model. Considering the complexity of a similar event, Enwezor introduced in his text a fully multi-dimensional and multi-purpose exhibition format 'firstly, by displacing its historical context in Kassel; secondly, by moving outside the domain of the gallery space to that of the discursive; and thirdly, by expanding the locus of the disciplinary models that constitute and define the project's intellectual and cultural interest'²⁸⁹. The output of this model was a series of five platforms organised into five different moments in time, six different locations across four continents and manifesting in different forms of a 'range of social, political, and cultural networks'. The platforms could in fact be read as one, albeit multifaceted, exhibition. If this latter term had been reserved by Enwezor to the fifth platform alone, instead of considering the five of them as a whole, it would seem to be due to his will to promote a paradigm shift. Consequently, he also redefined the very lexicon of his exhibition to foster change and in order to dismiss a *tautological system*²⁹⁰ of artworks corseted in a space 'that does not refer to an external world'²⁹¹. The space he was criticising, unsurprisingly, resonated with O'Doherty's definition of the White Cube (where '*the outside world must not come in*'²⁹²). Therefore, the Black Box had, on the contrary, 'no overarching conclusions to be reached, no forms of closure'²⁹³ and,

²⁸⁹ ——— Enwezor, Okwui, *The Black Box*, in *OnCurating*, Issue 46, June 2020, Zurich, 2020, page 428, originally published in: Enwezor, Okwui, *Documenta 11_Platform 5: Exhibition Catalogue* Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern, 2002

²⁹⁰ ——— 'An exhibition as a kind of meta-language of mediation that constructs a tautological system in which the artwork is bound up in its own self-referentiality through the relationships established between mediums, objects, and systems': Enwezor, Okwui, *Documenta 11_Platform 5: Exhibition Catalogue* Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2002, page 42

²⁹¹ ——— Enwezor, Okwui, *Ibid.*, page 42

²⁹² ——— O'Doherty, Brian *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Santa Monica - San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986, page 7. The association in this case, as in many others, seems obvious, albeit neither O'Doherty, nor the term White Cube were explicitly mentioned in this text of Enwezor's.

²⁹³ ——— Enwezor, Okwui, *Ibid.*, page 42



Fig. 13: Documenta 11, the pavilion designed by Kuehn Malvezzi (Schwarz, Ulrich, 2002, Kuehn-Malvezzi-Documenta-Kassel-Ulrich-Schwarz-2, photograph, kuehnmalvezzi.com, available at: <https://www.kuehnmalvezzi.com/?context=project&oid=Project:1173>, [accessed 06.01.2025])

ultimately, it implicitly aimed at fostering ‘temporal pluralities’. And, in quoting Mbembe and Roitman on decolonisation, he hailed a new ‘regime of subjectivity [as] an ensemble of ways of living, representing, and experiencing contemporaneousness, while at the same time inscribing this experience’²⁹⁴ in history. This, implied a curatorial approach that would question contemporary ‘aterritoriality’²⁹⁵ and make visible and present at all times the ‘other’ in a ‘demand for full inclusion’²⁹⁶. These main elements of his theoretical framework (also part of a wider vision of the ‘postcolonial order’) were thus intended as the basis for his plan for Documenta 11’s five platforms, the basis of the ‘Black Box’. Apart from some very incisive definitions and beyond a clear definition of intent, his text did not offer full insight to decrypt the elements and structures that guided the exhibition. Enwezor was in fact not aiming at a staging format to oppose the White Cube, but rather

²⁹⁴ ——— Enwezor, Okwui, Ibid., page 44. Here quoting: Mbembe, Achille, Roitman, Janet, *Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis*, Public Culture, no. 16 (winter 1995), page 324

²⁹⁵ ——— Enwezor, Okwui, Ibid., page 45. This interpretation of our age’s ‘principal order’ he borrowed, together with some other, from Giorgio Agamben, to then develop, as a reaction, his own plan for Documenta 11’s ‘extraterritoriality’, which was intended as the activation of the different locations in various countries far from Germany, to involve them in a network, rather than decontextualising artworks (and practices) by shipping them to Europe.

²⁹⁶ ——— Enwezor, Okwui, Ibid., page 44

at a non-format that would materialise precisely within the exhibition’s experience. However, and as any curatorial plan, Enwezor’s Black Box also had a strategic scaffolding that seemed to rely mainly on the different platforms also intended and physically staged as a real network of other places. In fact, the very choice of the exhibition’s multiple locations alone provided ground for the intended ‘critical enunciation and radicalisation of spatiality and temporality’. In other words, it was the specific contextualisation of the conferences, debates and workshops linking to the heart of Europe such distant places and their communities, that was meant to disrupt the universal, decontextualised, ‘ghetto’ space of the White Cube. Moreover, Enwezor’s analysis, while claiming a new visibility for the ‘displaced’, apparently limited in scope the crucial role of the physical displacement of the platforms’ locations, by restricting in time the first four²⁹⁷, which essentially anticipated the main exhibition. Paradoxically, if Bayer’s innovative research on exhibition techniques seemed to lack full awareness of the many theoretical implications of exhibition design, Enwezor’s complex and thorough analysis seemed to become more elusive in regards to his practice and the possible methods to develop his concepts and goals. Even without neglecting Enwezor’s major findings and acknowledging the complexity and reach of an event like Documenta 11, the possibilities of the new lexicon offered by the Black Box did not seem to be fully expressed. There was, in fact a visible hiatus between the proposed paradigm-shift and some expressions of its ultimate embodiment, for instance, in the pavilion designed by Kuehn Malvezzi²⁹⁸. This, although presenting a non-simplistic layout in the form of a maze and having disrupted the eye-level artwork hanging standard, still did not seem to mark the expected distance between Enwezor’s plans and an evolved form of ‘white cube’. This might indeed be due to the institutional ‘cracks and contradictions’ remarked by Bennett and present in any such big event but it seems also partly connected to Enwezor’s non-binding approach. His objection to possible ‘forms of closure’, might have in fact led to a ‘blurred’, or to some extent not fully defined²⁹⁹, exhibition content. More generally however, allowing inter-

²⁹⁷ ——— Platform 1, 2, 3 and 4 were spread over 37 days in all from the 15th of March 2001 to the 21st of March 2002. The international conferences, symposia, and workshops anticipating the main exhibition in Kassel (from the 8th of June to the 15th September 2002) happened in: Vienna (1 day); Berlin (23); New Delhi (5); St. Lucia (3); Lagos (6)

²⁹⁸ ——— See: Malvezzi, Kuehn, *Documenta 11. Warehouse conversion and exhibition venues*, online, images available at: <https://www.kuehnmalvezzi.com/?context=project&oid=Project:1173> [accessed 06.01.2025]

²⁹⁹ ——— ‘In fact, if the larger intellectual and curatorial scope of Documenta 11

nal contradictions to be made visible might offer a strategy to foster further developments, similar to the Black Box concept and its vocabulary, apparently not yet fully expressed, especially in terms of the installation design (apart from the structured network of multiple locations and content platforms).

3.7 Practice-based theories and the Italian context

Ultimately, what possible methods and tools do we have today to design an inclusive and cross-disciplinary form of exhibition, composed of a complex conglomerate of media, is a question that requires an equally complex answer, which not many have attempted. If narrative theories applied to installation design can offer a general and quite flexible methodology³⁰⁰, the texts analysed so far can provide many possible examples of useful tools for practice. Learning from the white cube entails not only the understanding of its commodifying trope, but also the full recognition of those relevant examples of partial (or substantial) 'resistance' to it (i.e. O'Doherty's 'gestures'). In this regard a better understanding of the modernist exhibitory forms is needed, for what they were historically, i.e. far less universal, monolithic (and commodifying) than its much-criticised trope. The literal definition of the white cube, albeit useful to frame a phenomenon, could in fact neither match the colourful sketches and displays nor the complex morphologies and vistas designed by René d'Harnoncourt (as shown and investigated by Elligott). From this point of view, the Italian context of exhibition design also offered a peculiar environment in which modernism could develop and grow alternative solutions to the modernist stereotypes criticised by O'Doherty. These emerged mainly from the work of many professionals whose work was

is to be placed in proper perspective it is in the idea that there are no overarching conclusions to be reached, no forms of closure, and that no prognosis can be derived from the critical task it set out to examine and question, namely the idea that the means and approach taken by an exhibition is necessarily fully encrypted into the result of what it displays and the forms it recuperates for artistic posterity. Enwezor, Okwui, Ibid., page 43

300 — See Chapter 2

well represented by the precious accounts of Franca Helg, who analysed the practices of exhibition design of the first and second generation (which she belonged to) of modernist designers in Italy³⁰¹. In her texts, mainly a collection of essays and transcripts from her lectures and conferences between 1976 and 1989, and particularly in *the issue of exhibition design*³⁰², she could in fact clarify the manifold and non-simplistic nature of modernist exhibition design in Italy from its early avant-garde stage to post-war research, thus sharing her views on her own activity and on her work with BBPR³⁰³ and Franco Albini, who had represented Italy at the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (International Congresses of Modern Architecture) where the international modern movement was born³⁰⁴. At the very beginning of his career as an exhibition designer, Albini reportedly 'doesn't know how to and doesn't wish to get out of black and white' like many other modernist designers, yet in the white and extremely light struts of his concepts the 'wall envelope disappears'³⁰⁵, unboxing the exhibition. At the

301 — Helg, Franca, *Il problema degli allestimenti*, in: Pastor, B., Polci, S., *Parliamo un po' di esposizioni. Le esperienze di Franco Albini, del gruppo BBPR e di Carlo Scarpa*, Venezia: Università internazionale dell'arte, 1982

302 — Helg, Franca, Ibid.

303 — Gian Luigi Banfi, Lodovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso, Enrico Peressutti and Ernesto Nathan Rogers (BBPR) founded their architectural studio in Milan in 1932. They joined the architectural modern movement and represented Italy at the C.I.A.M. since 1935. In 1938, after the promulgation of the racial laws in Italy, they became active members of the Italian resistance movement, founding the group 'Justice and Freedom'. Rogers, from a Jewish family, fled to Switzerland in 1943, while Banfi and Belgiojoso were jailed and sent to Gusen camp in Mauthausen in 1944, where Banfi died in 1945. Peressutti, a fascist in his early years, left the party to join 'Justice and Freedom' with his colleagues and then the National Liberation Committee to fight the Italian Social Republic. When they rejoined at the end of the war, they maintained their full name (BBPR) to pay homage to Banfi. They gained a preeminent role in the reconstruction of post-war Italy and delivered several projects including the project for the restoration of the Sforza Castle and its permanent displays in Milano (where they installed Michelangelo's *Rondanini Pietà*). One of their last works was, in 1980, the display for the Italian Memorial in Auschwitz (dismantled in 2014).

304 — Started in 1928 the congresses lasted until 1959 and were held in different countries around Europe (Italy included, in 1949). It's highly likely that they could also meet and exchange ideas with Herbert Bayer who also took part in the C.I.A.M., together with Le Corbusier, Charlotte Perriand, Gropius, Mart Stam, Alvar Aalto, ...

305 — Helg, Franca, Ibid. Original text in Italian: 'non sa e non vuole uscire dal bianco e nero' and 'l'involucro murario scompare'

same time these new forms of displays, according to Helg, implicitly expressed one of the first form of critical design. In fact, she noted that ‘The Palazzo dell’Arte, built by Muzio [in 1933] with monumental criteria, was not loved by Albini and by Romano who, intervening with threadlike and repeated elements, tried to contrast, cancelling it, this solemn space, creating a different one, more suited to their way to conceive the exhibition’³⁰⁶, the values of which contrasted its context. This was furthermore evident as she explained why many designers in Italy turned to exhibition making in those very years. In fact, ‘when Albini or the BBPR began to work, the activity of architect [...] was practically reserved for those who adhered to the fascist ideology’ and exhibition making, especially in its most temporary forms, still allowed (for some time) a space for modernist designers. These were hard times, especially for all those like Franca Helg, who probably were under the surveillance of the regime’s secret police (the OVRA). Edoardo Persico³⁰⁷, writer, curator and exhibition designer, certainly was and, quite likely, the BBPR group was also. Here, in their studio, a very young Franca Helg, who was then completing her studies in architecture, started practicing before joining Franco Albini a few years later, whom she associated with in 1952³⁰⁸. One of the only four women in a batch of 154 to graduate in 1945³⁰⁹ at Milan’s Politecnico, from that period she recounted, a ‘large group of young Milanese architects [...] linked to the modern movement and to a sober and essential language [who] found an important outlet in exhibition making [as] an opportunity for work, for research, for the affirmation of their principles. Young people in their thirties threw themselves into these works with enthusiasm and commitment, wishing to produce and experience a new

306 ——— Helg, Franca, Ibid. Original text in Italian: ‘Il Palazzo dell’Arte, fatto da Muzio con criteri monumentali, non era amato da Albini e da Romano che, intervenendo con elementi filiformi e reiterati, hanno cercato di contrastare, annullandolo, questo spazio solenne, creandone uno diverso più adatto al lor modo di concepire l’esposizione.’

307 ——— See paragraph 3.2

308 ——— In 2020 a cycle of digital conferences was held on the occasion of the 100th anniversary from her birth. Several first-hand testimonies were recounted, like Marco Piva’s (son of Franco Piva). In 2017 a theatrical performance (written by Paola Piva) was also showed in several locations in Milan. See: Albini Marco, Bazzi Agata, Collina Luisa, Albini Paola, Mariconti Daniele, *Raccontare Franca Helg – 4th June 2020*, Ordine Architetti Milano e Fondazione OAMI, online, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PG_Wg2to-yQ [accessed: 07.01.2025]

309 ——— Colombo, Federico, Zreick, Irene, *Alumnae. Ingegnere e tecnologie*, Milano: Alumnipolimi Association, 2020 [page 24]

expressive language’³¹⁰. This language, consistent with the language of avant-garde modernism in central Europe, was the same language that, according to Staniszewski³¹¹, impressed Gropius so much on his visit to Milan’s Triennale in 1934, that some of those features were visible in some of his subsequent exhibitions. Persico and Nizzoli with their exhibitions also influenced the work of Albini (at that time in his twenties), who, together with Franca Helg, would research further on light, flexible, structural systems for exhibitions in the following years. And considering that, according to contemporary scholars³¹², since she started working with Franco Albini (in 1950), Franca Helg was in charge of exhibition design and of many permanent installations inside museums, it seems reasonable that, when in her transcripts on this matter she referred to Albini’s work (who had already passed away), she intended their shared philosophy. In fact, she quickly became an associate in 1952, and, since then, all projects were signed by both Albini and Helg. Moreover, it is also highly likely that she referred to a collective vision when she hinted at the first influential examples of a ‘school’ (the ‘school of Milan’ as it was later defined³¹³). A ‘school’ that was directly linked to the international movement and

310 ——— Helg, Franca, Ibid. Original text in Italian: ‘quando Albini o i Bbpr incominciarono a lavorare, l’attività d’architetto nel senso tradizionale del costruire era pressoché riservata a coloro che aderivano alla ideologia fascista e la interpretavano con linguaggio trionfalistico. La folta schiera di giovani architetti milanesi che gravitavano attorno a ‘Quadrante’ e a Bardi e attorno a ‘Casabella’ e a Pagano, era legata al movimento moderno e ad un linguaggio sobrio ed essenziale. Per questi giovani l’attività professionale trovava un importante sbocco nella attività espositiva. Ciò ha contribuito alla caratterizzazione di questa scuola. Le esposizioni erano un’occasione di lavoro, di ricerca, di affermazione dei propri principi. I giovani trentenni si gettavano in questi lavori con foga ed impegno, desiderando di produrre e sperimentare un linguaggio espressivo nuovo’

311 ——— Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1998, Page 57

312 ——— Mariconti, Daniele, *La Lezione di Franca Helg*, in: Albini Marco, Bazzi Agata, Collina Luisa, Albini Paola, Mariconti Daniele, *Raccontare Franca Helg – 4th June 2020*, Ordine Architetti Milano e Fondazione OAMI, online, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PG_Wg2to-yQ [accessed: 07.01.2025]

313 ——— To start with 2009, the publishing house Electa, edited a series of books on the modernist movement in Milan, defined as ‘the School of Milan’. The series analysed the work of: Ignazio Gardella, Franco Albini and Franca Helg, BBPR, Piero Bottoni, Figini and Pollini. These were probably some of the professionals that Franca Helg had in mind in her recollections.

which re-established their contacts after the ‘blackout’ caused by the regime and the war. In Helg’s words this movement was not at all responding to universal ‘monumental criteria’, but rather focusing on structural lightness obtained through ‘ephemeral material for ephemeral display’ and thus generating a sense ‘of ephemerality, fragility and temporariness [that] does not generate a negative sensation, but [...] connotes the exhibition as a ‘newspaper’ and not as a ‘book’’. Not considering the fact that Franca Helg’s installations, but also Albini’s or BBPR’s could hardly be represented literally as white cubes, her text resonates with Staniszewski’s (and her metaphor of the reader in the text), and even Enwezor’s (her design has ‘no overarching conclusions to be reached’). The school of Milan could in fact maintain the avant-garde vision of the modern movement, even in post-war years, delaying crystallisation and offering possible alternative strategies to the white cube, mainly due to a diffused anti-dogmatic habit that had made modernism in Italy more flexible, and, in the context’s constraints, far less ‘universal’. Still, this text by Franca Helg is one of the few first-hand testimonies on this approach, considering that not only Franca Helg, but also other representatives of this school in exhibition design, left few theoretical insights on their work, preferring to focus on practice. Such is for instance the case of an architect like Gae Aulenti³¹⁴ (graduated in Milan eight years after Helg) who, despite the large number of texts and publications on her works, limited herself to a few interviews and short texts usually of a more technical nature³¹⁵. Her work, especially within the domain of exhibition design, can still offer further examples of the aforementioned non-dogmatic approach mainly by means of her actual practice of realised but also unrealised projects. These were tied to long international research, well represented by Bayer and studied by Staniszewski, which also offered several interesting examples of resistance to the commodified white cube.

314 — Gae (Gaetana) Aulenti was born in 1927 and graduated in 1953 in architecture. In her long career she worked at very different scales: from furniture and lighting devices to large buildings. She designed the *Musée d’Orsay* in Paris (1980-86), and, also in Paris, the new exhibition design of the *Musée National d’Art Moderne* at the *Centre Pompidou* (1982-85), then the display of Palazzo Grassi in Venice (1985-86) and ‘Galleria dell’architettura’ of the Triennale in Milan. She worked on many temporary art exhibitions and theatrical stagings in Italy and abroad. For more information see: Archivio Gae Aulenti, *Dott. Arch. Gae Aulenti*, 2021, online, available at: <https://www.archiviogaeaulenti.info/biografia/> [accessed: 07.01.2025]

315 — For instance: *Aulenti, Gae, L’architettura del Museo*, 1980-1986, in: Zardini, Mirko, *Gae Aulenti e il Musée d’Orsay*, Milano: Electa, 1987, pages 22-23

Similarly, the legacy of one of these different forms of exhibitory models, the diffused museum, will be analysed from the practice point of view in chapter 7.

4. Artists and Exhibitions: an exhibition in its context

4.1 ‘The Richard Mutt Case’ (1917, The Blind Man) — a virtual exhibition

In 2017 the BBC honoured the 100th anniversary of ‘Marcel Duchamp’s controversial Fountain’ as the work that ‘would alter forever the way the game of art is played’³¹⁶; a work that a survey of 500 artists, curators, critics, and dealers commissioned via the sponsor of the 2004 Turner Prize (Gordon’s) and that had already been crowned as the ‘world’s most influential piece of modern art’³¹⁷. Over the last century, Fountain has been widely investigated and analysed from multiple points of view, and the lively debates that are still going on concerning not only the interpretation of this artwork, but also its very same authorship, its actual consistence, its creative process, and its implications in defining art itself, are indeed further certifying its significance in the world of art and of art exhibitions of this modern art junction. As the story goes, in a few days Duchamp chose and signed a urinal under the pseudonym Richard Mutt which he sent for the exhibition of The Society of Independent Artists (whose board of directors he was a member of). After its refusal and Duchamp’s resignation from the board, the artwork was exhibited on a magazine under the title Fountain, and an endless case was born. In 2002, several years before the celebration for Fountain’s centenary began, Irene Gammel revived the debates shedding new light on it thanks to her in-depth biography dedicated to the ‘Baroness Elsa’³¹⁸ (Elsa Plötz, married von Freytag-Loringhoven), where, as a first clue, she highlighted how Elsa’s sculpture God, one of her most significant works, could be defined as ‘a sister piece to Duchamp’s sensually gleaming urinal’. Meaningfully, her rather phallic³¹⁹ plumbing trap, had previously been attributed to Mor-

³¹⁶ ——— Grovier, Kelly, *One hundred years ago this month, Marcel Duchamp’s controversial Fountain made its debut. It would change art forever* 11.04.2017, online, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20170410-the-urinal-that-changed-how-we-think> [accessed: 20/02/2020]

³¹⁷ ——— Higgins, Charlotte *Work of art that inspired a movement ... a urinal*, The Guardian, 2 December 2004, online, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/dec/02/arts.artsnews1> [accessed: 20/02/2020]

³¹⁸ ——— Gammel, Irene, *Baroness Elsa: gender, dada and everyday modernity: a cultural biography*, Cambridge (Mass.): Mit Press, 2002

³¹⁹ ——— Amelia Jones described the sculpture as ‘the penis/phallus ultimate

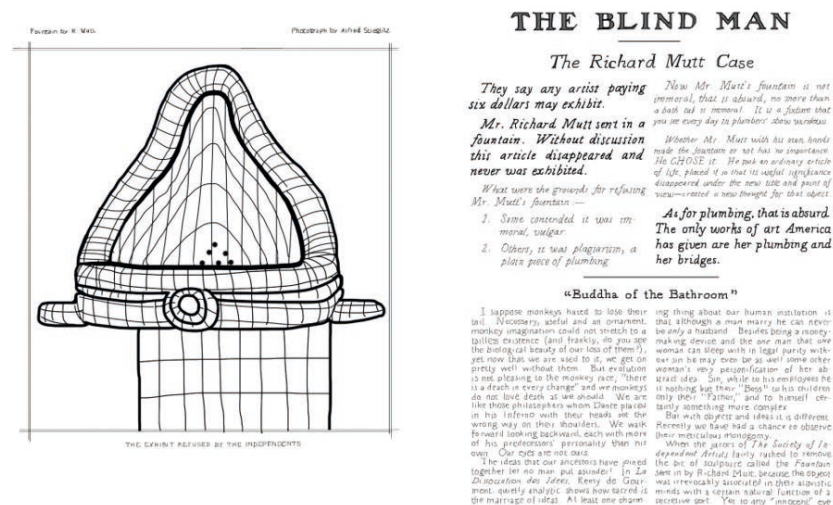


Fig. 14: 'The Richard Mutt Case' as a virtual exhibition

ton Schamberg until, only in 1994, Francis Nauman noted that 'the Baroness [...] probably came up with the idea of combining the extraneous elements in this sculpture, as well as of assigning the unusual title, while Schamberg was probably responsible only for mounting the assembly and for recording the work'³²⁰. Here, in the title of the artwork, where Nauman only saw something unusual, Gammel on the contrary found further evidence for the attribution to Elsa, recalling 'the religious conflicts between her mother and father, with her antireligious father taking the wind out of Ida's [her mother] sails by equating the ritual of the nightly prayer with the constitutional visit to the toilet for urination'³²¹. This detail was not only fully consistent with the sculpture God, but could provide a possible biographical background in the case of a different attribution of *Fountain* too. According to Irene Gammel in fact, 'the provenance of this artwork remains shrouded in intriguing mystery' and 'the authorship becomes even more complex in light of Duchamp's 11 April 1917 letter to his sister Suzanne informing that *Fountain* was conceived by a friend'³²². This letter, originally written in French, had already been published and translated into English in 1982 by Francis Naumann as follows:

signifier for the transcendent ruler of all': Jones, Amelia, 'Women' in *Dada: Elsa, Rrose and Charlie*, in Sawelson-Gorse, Naomi (ed.), *Women in Dada: Essays on sex, gender and identity*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1998

³²⁰ — Naumann, F., M., *New York Dada, 1915-23*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994

³²¹ — Gammel, Ibid., page 219

³²² — Gammel, Ibid., page 223

April 11 [1917]

My dear Suzanne –

[...] One of my female friends under a pseudonym, Richard Mutt, sent in a porcelain urinal as a sculpture; it was not at all indecent

– No reason for refusing it. The committee has decided to refuse to show this thing. I have handed in my resignation and it will be a bit of gossip of some value in New York –

I would like to have a special exhibition of the people who were refused at the Independents – but that would be a redundancy!

And the urinal would have been lonely –

See you soon,

Affect.

Marcel³²³

11 avril [1917]

Ma chère Suzanne –

[...] Une de mes amies sous un pseudonyme masculine, Richard Mutt, avait envoyé une pissotière en porcelaine comme sculpture; ce n'était pas du tout indecent –

aucune raison pour la refuser. Le comité a décidé de refuser d'exposer cette chose. J'ai donné ma démission et c'est un potin qui aura sa valeur dans New York –³²⁴

[...]

Although Naumann's translation was not literal, it was indeed reliable (more so than Gammel's³²⁵), but on the contrary his interpretation of the letter has been widely discussed and recently criticised. In his essay

³²³ — Naumann, F., M., *Affectueusement Marcel*. Ten letters from Marcel Duchamp to Suzanne Duchamp and Jean Crotti, in *Archives of American Art Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 4, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982, page 8

³²⁴ — Duchamp, Marcel, Letter from Marcel Duchamp to Suzanne Duchamp. 11th April 1917 (Jean Crotti papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC), in: Bailey, Bradley, Duchamp's 'Fountain': the Baroness Theory Debunked, *The Burlington Magazine*, 2019

³²⁵ — 'Gammel's mistranslation of Duchamp's statement in the letter to his sister, 'One of my female friends who had adopted the pseudonym Richard Mutt sent me a porcelain urinal as a sculpture', dramatically changes the sequence of events' [Bailey, Bradley, *Duchamp's 'Fountain': the Baroness Theory Debunked*, *The Burlington Magazine*, 2019] Also, the novelist Siri Hustvedt, after quoting Gammel's translation in her novel *Memories of the future*, had to admit that she 'got it wrong', since, as Glynn Thompson pointed out to her, the English translation didn't exactly coincide with the French text written by Duchamp (which Gammel had provided). [Hustvedt, Siri, *Woman in the men's room: when will the art world recognise the real artist behind Duchamp's Fountain?* *The Guardian*, 29.03.2019]

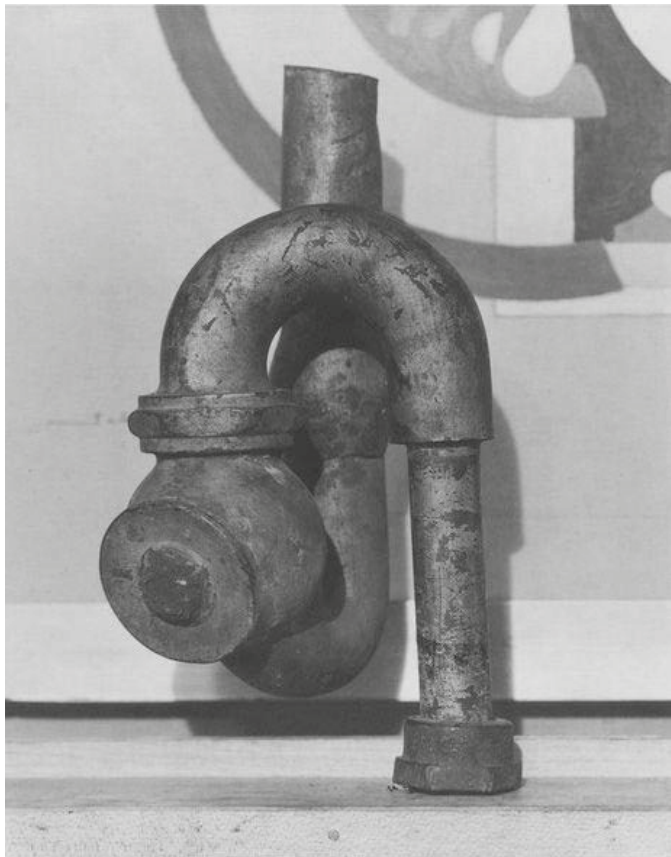


Fig. 15: "God" by Baroness Elsa Plötz von Freytag-Loringhoven and Morton Schamberg c. 1917, gelatine silver print, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, online screenshot (edited), available at: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/261000?who=Freytag-Loringhoven%2c+Elsa+von%24Elsa+von+Freytag-Loringhoven&ao=on&ft=*%26offset=0&rpp=20&pos=1 [accessed: 20/02/2020]

he defined the artwork as 'the object that Duchamp submitted'³²⁶, apparently contradicting Duchamp's own statement (One of my female friends under a pseudonym, Richard Mutt, sent in a porcelain urinal as a sculpture). Yet to his understanding there was not any contradiction since, as he explained in a footnote, 'Duchamp originally intended this work to have been submitted by a woman', and although Naumann found 'curious' that Duchamp did not 'even acknowledge to his sister that the entry was actually his own' still he believed that 'apparently, Duchamp kept his identity a closely guarded secret until [...], after the appearance of *The Blind Man* magazine, [...] the item [...]

³²⁶ — Naumann, F. M., *Ibid.*, page 8

was first provided an adequate public defence'³²⁷. This interpretation remained substantially undisputed until Irene Gammel argued that it seemed 'more plausible' that Duchamp's words were 'truthful', rather than 'a bashful Duchamp was telling a white lie to her sister'. Considering Duchamp's fame, and the importance of the artwork, this statement drew the attention of a wide public, thus sparking another incredibly vibrant, albeit posthumous, debate about the French artist and his work. This controversy about the authorship of *Fountain* went much beyond Gammel's original intentions, if, as she stated, 'final evidence of the Baroness's involvement may be missing' and her research essentially highlighted 'a great deal of circumstantial evidence that points to her fingerprint'³²⁸. It was in order to find forensic evidence in fact, that Glynn Thompson committed to further research, finally finding a urinal from the beginning of the XIX century almost coinciding with the original vitreous china model used for *Fountain*. Unlike Gammel's academic theory, mainly aimed at fostering further research and raising questions about the authorship's paradigm, and the gender roles (which she succeeded in), Thompson's research seems on the contrary to be targeting a simplification of an extremely complex case, apparently substituting an old 'fiction reiterated into dogma'³²⁹ with a new one. In fact, according to his findings, 'Duchamp's 1960s claim, that he had bought the urinal from the J. L. Mott Iron Works, at Fifth Avenue and Seventeenth in New York City' was simply 'impossible, for this was set of showrooms, dedicated, as every native-born American knows, to display, not retail sales, and everything that Mott's sold they manufactured themselves'³³⁰. So, if J.L. Mott Iron Works never even incidentally showed and sold under any circumstance items manufactured by other companies (which we could not really be certain of), then the discovery that *Fountain* was manufactured elsewhere could actually be crucial to the Richard Mutt Case. Therefore, Thompson emphasised that 'meticulous forensic research' established that 'a vitreous earthenware flat back Bedfordshire lipped urinal, manufactured by the Trenton Potteries Co.' corresponded 'in every detail to the urinal that was submitted to the Independents and photographed by Alfred Stieglitz, on April 13'. The photos and the drawings to which Thompson referred in his analysis did show an industrial earthenware

³²⁷ — Naumann, F. M., *Ibid.*, page 18

³²⁸ — Gammel, *Ibid.*, page 224

³²⁹ — Thompson, Glynn, *The Richard Mutt Affair Meets the Louisiana Purchase Exposition*, in *Saint Louis Magazine* 01.02.2016, available at <https://www.stlmag.com/culture/visual-arts/the-richard-mutt-affair-meets-the-louisiana-purchase-exposition/> [accessed 20.02.2020]

³³⁰ — Thompson, Glynn, *Ibid.*



Fig. 16: Comparison between the model represented by Stieglitz and the photo reported in Thompson's analysis (by Adam Aymor). The photos have been scaled and outlined to highlight the differences (the most important in red), not only in terms of shape and proportions, but also in terms of different morphology.

more similar to the original one photographed by Stieglitz than any of the replicas currently exhibited in museums around the world, but, when analysing its details, few significant differences appeared. Thompson himself later admitted that there were 'apparent discrepancies in size and proportion between the "Stieglitz"' and the model he had described as identical, discrepancies that he believed were 'due almost entirely to the difference in the properties of the lenses used in two photographs taken almost 100 years apart, and the focal length and aperture of that used by Stieglitz compressing the foreground and background'³³¹. This explanation, though plausible, was not sufficiently substantiated, either with some digital forensic analysis or demonstrating similar differences between Stieglitz's photos of the same age and the contemporary photos of some existing artwork. Furthermore, another relevant difference is clearly visible between the photos of the Trenton Potteries Co. model and Fountain as highlighted here (see Figure 16) and, however similar, the latter does not correspond in 'every detail' to the first one. Finally, the fact that J. L. Mott Iron Works was a showroom where common customers could not usually purchase anything, it does not entail that Duchamp was a common customer or that it was absolutely impossible for him to have a urinal for free. More likely, and considering that showrooms (in the USA as elsewhere) commonly submit samples for evaluation, Fountain might also have been a sample temporarily lent for a possible public exhibition, a photo shoot, and an advertisement on a newspaper

³³¹ ——— Thompson, Glyn, *The Magic Chef Mansion Urinal and Marcel Duchamp, Part Two*, in Saint Louis Magazine 29.09.2016, online, available at <https://www.stlmag.com/culture/visual-arts/the-magic-chef-mansion-and-marcel-duchamp-part-two/> [accessed 20.02.2020]

before getting it back after the signature was cleared. Even if this hypothesis, to put it alongside Thompson words, might lack 'forensic evidence admissible to the tribune of art history'³³², it is useful to underline how any hypothesis based on the likeliness of an event will necessarily need more than circumstantial or partial evidence to provide a thorough understanding of a complex case. From this point of view, Thompson's research adds further consistent elements to Gammel's theory but fails to provide final evidence and hence we end up once again within the complexity of Duchamp's testimony³³³. A complex letter to read in between the lines, also because different interpretations had been expressed about Duchamp's 'female friend' even before the biography *Baroness Elsa* was written, the main one of which seemed to be dismissed by Gammel without particular consideration in a footnote. In fact, after reporting Camfield's opinion that this female friend was just a 'shipping agent', she briefly quoted, as a very secondary element, the fact that Naumann thought this friend could be Louise Norton Varèse, since her address was visible on the artwork's tag in the photo by Stieglitz, seemingly forgetting that Louise Norton had an important role in the Richard Mutt case since she had signed the article on *The Blind Man*.

Louise Norton instead was not only considered to be the *amie sous un pseudonyme* by Naumann, but also by André Gervais³³⁴, and more recently, by Stefan Banz³³⁵ and Bradley Bailey³³⁶. Both Banz and Bailey provided thorough analyses and firmly confuted Thompson's and Spalding's³³⁷ controversial hypotheses. On one hand Banz dis-

³³² ——— Thompson, Glyn, *Ibid*.

³³³ ——— This is a re-contextualised quotation from the work of Avi Feldman, who, while trying to unravel the legal frameworks in art, analysed the issue of testimonies and forensic evidence, explaining the passage from the old 'Era of the Witness' to the present 'Era of the Forensic' which, according to this very quotation, seem to fail in providing simple interpretations as one could expect. Feldman, Avi, *After the Law: Towards Judicial-Visual Activism*, Zürich: Oncurating.org, 2019

³³⁴ ——— He thought that the trio Duchamp-Norton-Mutt, was a stratagem similar to what the French novelist Romain Gary did when, desiring to keep secret his authorship of a novel, he wrote under a pseudonym and then had his cousin's son receive the Goncourt prize revealing the fact only posthumously.

³³⁵ ——— Banz, Stefan, *Marcel Duchamp: Richard Mutt's Fountain*, Les Éditions KMD; Vienna: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2019

³³⁶ ——— Bailey, Bradley, *Duchamp's 'Fountain': the Baroness Theory Debunked*, in: *The Burlington Magazine*, October 2019, no. 1399, London: The Burlington Magazine Publications, 2019

³³⁷ ——— In his provocative book *Con Art*, Spalding affirmed that it was 'proved beyond any shadow of reasonable doubt that this 'female friend' was none other than the redoubtable Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loring-

missed the idea that the German Dadaist was the artist behind Richard Mutt, providing solid background and historical evidence connecting once again Duchamp to the artwork, while on the other hand Bailey mainly highlighted the role of Louise Norton 'whose direct and documented involvement was essential to the successful execution of the *Fountain* submission'³³⁸. Banz seemed to aim mainly at reaffirming the traditional (and apparently absolute) role/paradigm of Duchamp as a 'great artist personality' putting him back on 'his pedestal'³³⁹. Therefore, he patiently retraced an almost linear creative process, providing forensic evidence and its chronological milestones, like the early note from 'La boîte de 1914': 'On n'a que: pour femelle la pissotière et on en vit. –' (One only has: for female the urinal, and one lives of it), a text that might be the underlayer and inspiration for his first and only single piece ready-made. He also underlined the presence of a hanging urinal visible in the 1918 photo of his studio at 33 West 67th Street exhibited in a very different way, but clearly re-contextualized as an artwork, maybe the very same used for *Fountain* at that time exhibited together with other Duchampian ready-mades. Bailey's objectives on the contrary appear quite different: rather than reaffirming the status of a master, he takes the chance provided by Gammel to shed new light on Duchamp's productive process. Focusing on the figure of Louise Norton Varèse McCutcheon, an American author and translator, much less eye-catching than the performer and Dadaist artist, the Baroness, Bailey did not simply stop at the tag on the urinal bearing Norton's address under the name Richard Mutt, but provided a clarifying background and collected substantial historical testimonies, such as her own and such as Stieglitz remembering that a 'young woman' who could hardly be the Baroness (at that time twelve years older than Duchamp, while Louise Norton was younger) and who '(probably at Duchamp's instigation) sent a large porcelain urinal on a pedestal to the *Independents*'³⁴⁰. At 'Duchamp's instigation' or not,

hoven'. Yet his statements were based on Gammel's and Thompson's research, so it's unclear how, 'a great deal of circumstantial evidence' was transformed by Spalding into an incontrovertible judgement. Spalding, Julian, *Con Art. While You Ought to Sell Your Damien Hirsts While You Can*, Julian Spalding, 2012

338 ——— Bailey, Bradley, Ibid.

339 ——— 'I was shocked when I read all these articles with always the same content that, on the basis of incomplete knowledge and obviously motivated by a delight in scandal, seek to denigrate one of the great artist personalities of the 20th century or to knock him off his pedestal', Banz, Stefan, Ibid., page 7 [emphasis mine]

340 ——— Letter from Alfred Stieglitz to Georgia O'Keeffe, 19th April 1917, in: Greenough, Sarah (ed.), *My Faraway One: Selected Letters of Georgia*

'shipping agent' or real participant, she undoubtedly played a key role writing the main article for *The Blind Man* and possibly facilitating the temporary exhibition in Stieglitz's studio for the photos she needed for the article. As Bailey underlined, the artistry in *Fountain* 'was not found in the object itself, but in Duchamp's gesture' and in a new art form that was 'articulated so successfully in "The Richard Mutt Case" and Norton's Buddha of the Bathroom'³⁴¹. This 'gesture' was the key point, that somebody analysed and described as a well-organised and pre-ordinated production method 'intrinsically linked with the very concept of the readymade'³⁴². According to Jan Bäcklund, 'ready-made objects are never 'autographic' works, but mere *props*', or, more precisely, 'essentially allographic'³⁴³ practice (performance). Even if not all Duchamp's ready-mades may fully fit this definition, the hypothesis that Duchamp (and his companions) conceived and organised The Richard Mutt Case as a *performance* (or *gesture*, as Bailey affirmed) since the beginning, seems to find some validation. Timing, in this case, seems crucial, since everything happened within very few days (the submittal, the rejection, Duchamp's resignation, the shooting of the photos and the publication in *The Blind Man*), and Duchamp's own satisfied statement after the refusal of the *Fountain* ('it will be a bit of gossip of some value in New York'), all seem to point to a premeditated plan to create a 'case' and to have an artwork refused by the *Independents*, by the exhibition with no juror or curator. An exhibition was also already in his mind and part of the plan ('I would like to have a special exhibition of the people who were refused at the Independents') and 'since the urinal would have been lonely', *The Blind Man* provided a wider (and long lasting) public. One of the members of the committee who voted 'no', Katherine Dreier, wrote immediately to Duchamp, declaratively ready to refuse his resignation if he reconsidered it and almost apologising for her vote. Her 'no' to the 'question of whether a person has a right to buy a readymade object and show it with their name' was due to lack of knowledge, since she did not know that he

O'Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz, Volume I, 1915–1933, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011, page 135. Also in: Bailey, Bradley, Ibid.

341 ——— Bailey, Bradley, Ibid.

342 ——— Bäcklund, Jan, *Readymade and Fake. The Richard Mutt Case Reiterated*, Visuel Arkivering, No. 13 (2018), pages 24–45, 2018.

343 ——— 'Term introduced by Goodman to describe works of art [...] where there can be multiple copies, each of which is equally an instance of the work. The contrast is with those such as paintings where only one instance is the work, and copies would be either reproductions or forgeries. These are called autographic. See also type-token ambiguity' Blackburn, Simon, *Oxford Philosophy Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008 [emphasis mine]

'had conceived of single objects' and she 'felt unfortunate that a meeting was not called and the matter discussed'³⁴⁴. Moreover, she could not even see the artwork 'surreptitiously stolen' and she was just reported of a 'plumbing' with no 'handling' of any sort, which, without any meeting or further explanation provided, she obviously rejected, maybe fearing some legal action: Duchamp's performance had succeeded. Finally, *Fountain* had to be exhibited and *The Blind Man* provided one of the first *virtual*³⁴⁵ exhibition ante-litteram, ultimately with a wider reach and a larger audience than the Independents' exhibition itself.

4.1.1 Authorship and labelling

Although Michel Foucault in 1969 had already warned against the attitude of regarding authors and authorship as the establishment of 'a genealogical table of exceptional individuals', this trend still seems to be visible underneath the contemporary controversies about Marcel Duchamp. Foucault himself had to reject the criticism of having put anybody on a pedestal, explaining that he 'wanted to determine — a much more modest task — the functional conditions of specific discursive practices.'³⁴⁶ He went as far as to ask himself why he had used the names of authors instead of just avoiding their use altogether, but he still found it necessary because 'when we study the history of a concept, a literary genre, or a branch of philosophy, these concerns assume a relatively weak and secondary position in relation to the solid and fundamental role of an author and his works'³⁴⁷. As Foucault further clarified it is not a matter of status, when dealing with authorship, but rather a matter of restricting oneself 'to the singular relationship that holds between an author and a text, the manner in which a text apparently points to this figure who is outside and precedes it'. The author is outside because today his work 'has freed itself from the necessity of

³⁴⁴ — Letter from Katherine S. Dreier to Marcel Duchamp, Archives of the Société Anonyme, April 13, 1917, quoted in: Bäcklund, Jan, *Ibid.*, page 37

³⁴⁵ — 'adj [attrib] almost or nearly the thing described, so that any slight difference is not important but not completely' Hornby, A., S., *Oxford Advanced Learners*, 5th ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995

³⁴⁶ — Foucault, Michel, *What is an Author*, 1969, in Foucault, Michel, *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, vol. II, New York: The New Press, 1998 [first presented as a lecture to the Societe Francaise de philosophie on 22 February 1969]

³⁴⁷ — Foucault, Michel, *Ibid.*

'expression'; it only refers to itself, yet it is not restricted to the confines of interiority' and also, because 'where a work had the duty of creating immortality, it now attains the right to kill, to become the murderer of its author'. Roland Barthes, in his essay on 'the death of the author', published two years earlier than Foucault's, had already criticised the still powerful 'Author's empire'³⁴⁸, fostering both alternative creative processes, such as the automatic and collective writing developed by the Surrealists, and linguistics, the precious analytic instrument that 'furnished the destruction of the Author'. Barthes in fact stated that 'once the Author is gone, the claim to 'decipher' a text becomes quite useless', since 'to give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing' while he refused to assign the text an 'ultimate meaning'.

From this point of view, the *Fountain* anticipated in art what Foucault and Barthes would later affirm: not only because of its multiple possible meanings and interpretations (which have not actually come to an end), but also because of the choice of its pseudonym, that had succeeded in 'killing' the author. Moreover, this 'murder', as highlighted hereinabove, needed a premeditated plan and a motivated 'gang' since it was also targeting the independence of the 'Independents', and, probably, art itself, as it used to be conceived. Besides, as Breton reported, the very same 'practice of drawing and painting appeared to [Duchamp] as a kind of trickery that tended towards the senseless glorification of the hand and of nothing else'³⁴⁹. In fact, Duchamp in these years is indeed immersed in New York's artistic milieu, where, already in 1912, Marius De Zaya attacks modern art from a Dadaist point of view, stating that 'the modern artist is the prototype of the sense of consciousness. He works with premeditation, deforms, de-harmonises, overstates with premeditation. He is eclectic in the spirit and iconoclast in the acts'. Thus, De Zaya finally declares, anticipating the Dadaist movement, that 'art is dead'³⁵⁰. These were the ideas around which a 'gang of art murderers' could join, maybe in Stieglitz's own studio (De Zaya was in close relationship with Stieglitz, in fact).

Yet, at some point, when in the 1950s art dealers started asking for signed replicas of the *Fountain*, Duchamp conveniently decided to 'resurrect' the author and take its place, thus erasing a multi-layered, decade-old creative process and the team that had led to it. For this

³⁴⁸ — Barthes, Roland, *The death of the author*, 1967, in Aspen, no. 5-6, Roaring Fork Press, New York, 1967

³⁴⁹ — Breton, Andre, 1959, quoted in: Lebel, Robert, *Marcel Duchamp*, Paragraphic Books, New York, 1959

³⁵⁰ — Baur, John Ireland Howe, *Le arti figurative in America 1910-1950* Edizioni di storia e letteratura, Rome 1954 page 45

reason, the latest criticisms advanced to current labels visible in museums underneath Duchamp's signed replicas should be scaled down. The old and common practice of labelling works of art is still in fact a useful (though not necessary) means in exhibitions and, akin to Foucault, 'it is obviously insufficient to repeat empty slogans: the author has disappeared. Rather, [...] we should await the fluid functions released by this disappearance.' Similarly, captions could also foster this fluidity when needed, especially considering the wider diffusion of digital displays in museums. Yet, about the possible utility of an author or a collective and multi-layered series of authors, as Foucault argues, 'an author's name is not simply an element of speech [...]. Its presence is functional in that it serves as a means of classification'. This is also what, specifically referring to painting, music and technical fields he refers to as 'author-function', which is 'undoubtedly only one of the possible specifications of the subject and, considering past historical transformations, it appears that the form, the complexity, and even the existence of this function are far from immutable.' Moreover, according to Mieke Bal, our main concern should not be 'to deny the importance of the author or artist as the historical subject who made the [work] but to emancipate both author and reader from the [...] hold of a misconceived interpretative authority'³⁵¹. In this, both Foucault's and Bal's interpretations slightly differ from Barthes', and seem to mainly focus on the possibility of multiple interpretations, and on the exclusion of predetermined ones (which, for Bal, coincide with censorship) without necessarily abandoning the functional presence of an author.

Its presence does not in fact prevent us from imagining 'a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author', and thus in some cases without any need for an author in captions.

³⁵¹ ——— Bal, Mieke, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985

4.2 The exhibition's context: Manifesta 12 Palermo

4.2.1 The choice of a location

In defining the staging of an exhibition, the first communicative element underlying its narrative is inherent in the choice of its location. The multiplication of forms, structures and spaces available (conventional and non-conventional) have contributed over the years to making this choice less and less obvious, changing the relationship between art institutions, cultural events, and their social and material context.

An interesting example is the biennial Manifesta, founded in 1994 and briefly defined as 'the European nomadic biennial': a 'traveling platform' without a predefined location and with the aim of investigating 'the dialogue between art and society in Europe'³⁵². Relying on young artists, opposing national exhibitions and 'involving extensive research rather than national representatives'³⁵³, the biennial implicitly aimed at offering an alternative to the format of the Venice Biennale, but also to the 'the relatively more recent and 'political' Documenta'³⁵⁴. The programme, as it was further defined in 1998, was indeed 'challenging'³⁵⁵ on the one hand because of the complex structure of a travelling biennial and on the other hand because of the actual difficulty to answer the crucial question that the curators asked themselves: 'What is Europe?'³⁵⁶. Brainchild of the cultural department of the Foreign Ministry of the Netherlands³⁵⁷, its first edition took place in Rotterdam,

³⁵² ——— Manifesta, *About the biennial*, online, available at: <https://manifesta.org/biennials/about-the-biennial/> [accessed 22.08.2020]

³⁵³ ——— Fleck, Robert, Lind, Maria, Vanderlinden, Barbara, *Manifesta 2: European Biennial for contemporary art*, Luxembourg: Agence luxembourgeoise d'action culturelle and Casino Luxembourg, 1998, page 6

³⁵⁴ ——— Zuliani, Stefania, *Manifesta - The European Biennial of Contemporary Art*, in Ricerche di S/Confine, vol. VI, n.1 (2015), *Le mostre, storie e significati delle pratiche espositive*, Parma: Dipartimento di Lettere, Arti, Storia e Società, Università di Parma, 2015

³⁵⁵ ——— Fleck, Lind, Vanderlinden, Ibid.

³⁵⁶ ——— Fleck, Lind, Vanderlinden, Ibid.

³⁵⁷ ——— 'The germ of Manifesta can be found in the cultural department of the Foreign Ministry of the Netherlands', Block, René, Fijen, Hedwig, Hughes, Henry Meyric, Néray, Katalin, *How a European biennial of contemporary art began*, in Filipovic, Elena, Vanderlinden, Barbara, *Mani-*

two years after the Treaty on the European Union was signed in Maastricht (one of the three cities that were considered as the first possible location). Manifesta duly investigated the main issues arising from the new Europe under construction 'with the ambition of building bridges throughout European cities of the East and the West', tackling 'the gap between centre and peripheries and [...] the North-South divide'³⁵⁸. Since the beginning in fact there was 'consensus to create a new type of biennial that would respond to this new European situation and reflect it in terms of cultural policy'³⁵⁹. This inherent desire to 'explore the psychological and geographical territory of Europe' establishing dialogue between 'art theory and politics in a changing society'³⁶⁰ was indeed a very difficult task: no wonder it sparked debates and criticisms.

Recently, addressing the Palermo edition, Miriam La Rosa questioned the biennial's imagined 'values of unity and solidarity in the European context', wondering if, on the contrary, it presented 'in the contemporary art field an idea of Europe as a fragmented hegemony'. In 2013, Vesna Madžoski lamented an alleged lack of transparency in the institution, due to its unavailability to provide her with full access to the 'documents about the selection procedures of curators and host cities'³⁶¹. She criticised Manifesta from many points of view, also stating that it 'was soon turned into an economic enterprise' differing from 'old colonial attitude'³⁶² only in the voluntary participation of the host cities ('complicity', according to her definition). To further support her theses, she also quoted Okwui Enwezor's definition of the biennial as 'an extension of Brussel's cultural policy' and being 'complicit in the current official disappearance of immigrants in Europe from its cultural institutions'³⁶³. It's not unlikely that the choice of Palermo as host city in 2018 and the idea of the Planetary Garden as a

Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibition and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe, Cambridge (Mass): MIT Press, 2005, page 189

358 — La Rosa, Miriam, *A Guest on the Edge: Manifesta and the Quest for European Unity and Solidarity*, in *Oncurating*, Issue 46, June 2020, Zurich, 2020

359 — Block, *Ibid.*

360 — Manifesta, *About the biennial*, online, available at: <https://manifesta.org/biennials/about-the-biennial/> [accessed 22.08.2020]

361 — Madžoski, Vesna, *De Curatoribus. The Dialectics of Care and Confinement*, New York – Dresden: Atropos Press, 2013, page 86

362 — Madžoski, *Ibid.*, page 100

363 — '[Manifesta] entrenches itself as an extension of Brussel's cultural policy: Enwezor, Okwui, *Tebbitt's ghost*, in Filipovic, Elena, Vanderlinden, Barbara, *Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibition and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, Cambridge (Mass): MIT Press, 2005, page 184

'metaphorical approach to migration'³⁶⁴, the actual theme of the 12th edition, was partly due to the intention to respond to Enwezor's second criticism. Ippolito Pestellini Laparelli and Mirjam Varadinis (two of the curators of Manifesta Palermo), when interviewed on this criticism, partly acknowledged that it was well-founded, even though Varadinis maintained that their investigations on migration in Palermo were motivated by the situation at that time and the specific urgent issues in the location, albeit this was chosen by Manifesta and not by themselves³⁶⁵. As for the first criticism (being an emanation of 'Brussel's cultural policy'), recent analyses underlined how the ambition to 'maintain the maximum independence from political, commercial and sectarian influences' was 'not always attainable'³⁶⁶. On the occasion of the Palermo edition, a few Italian online art magazines, in their analyses, went as far as to describe the biennial as a neoliberal 'brand' that 'belongs to post-Fordist Europe'³⁶⁷, in some way spreading 'globalised culture' and 'colonialist aesthetics'³⁶⁸. On this matter, the curators Varadinis and Laparelli, while proving a real commitment to inclusive curatorial plans, as opposed to the alleged 'colonialist aesthetics', acknowledged that Manifesta in time 'became a brand', 'a huge economic machinery', 'with all that implies'³⁶⁹. Manifesta would therefore be 'a by-product of the neoliberal art system [...] that needs to have a brand coming with it'³⁷⁰. If there is something that both the hardest criticisms and the praises that Manifesta collected throughout the years have in common, it is that they value the mutability of the location as the very crucial factor of the biennial. According to

364 — Zonnenberg, Nathalie, *A planetary Garden in Palermo: Manifesta 12 as Ambassador for the New Politics of Aesthetics* in *Oncurating*, Issue 46, June 2020, Zurich, 2020

365 — See the interviews in the appendices: Chapter 8, paragraphs 8.1.1 (Pestellini Laparelli): '[Okwui Enwezor] might be right [...] and the only person who could answer this it'd be Hedwig Fijen'. And 8.1.3 (Varadinis): 'Choosing Palermo was not my decision, although I felt it was a really good decision. Because I feel that, specifically at the time, it was such an important kind of point where so many super important themes of the time would be present.'

366 — La Rosa, Miriam, *Ibid.*, page 359

367 — Scottini, Marco, *Il brand Manifesta: la versione cinica dell'exhibition making*, 14.08.2017 *Operavivamagazine*, online, available at: <https://operavivamagazine.org/il-brand-manifesta/>, [accessed 30.08.2020]

368 — Faletra, Marcello, *Neocolonialismo estetico. Manifesta secondo Marcello Faletra*, 19.10.2018 *Artribune*, online, available at: <https://www.artribune.com/arti-visive/2018/10/manifesta-palermo-editoriale-marcello-faletra/> [accessed 30.08.2020]

369 — Mirjam Varadinis: see paragraph 8.1.3

370 — Ippolito Pestellini Laparelli: see paragraph 8.1.1



Fig. 17: Info Day: Manifesta 12 Collateral Events + 5x5x5 (Excerpt from: Manifesta, Info Day: Manifesta 12 Collateral Events + 5x5x5online, available at: <https://m12.manifesta.org/poker-oriental-website-poker-yg-mampu-bikin-tajir-mendadak/index.html>)

Zuliani in fact, Manifesta's 'singularity is essentially recognised in the unprecedented itinerant character', which she defines as a 'bold choice', a political stance 'privileging uncertainty' and 'the gamble of careful navigation [...] to create the possibility of a different European network for art, focusing mainly on cities and decentralised territories'³⁷¹. Detractors on the contrary see this 'uncertainty' and the opportunities it offers as a problematic element further fostering that 'art of living with chronic instability, with unexpected turns and permanent innovation', that coincides with an 'opportunistic tonality' that the sociologist Pascal Gielen believes inherent to Manifesta³⁷². According to this interpretation the location might become more relevant than the actual work of the curators (always changing and redefined as artistic mediators) since both 'the curatorial team and the artists are called upon to stage new ideas of culture and sociality in a space of freedom tolerated and contained by the economic and administrative framework of the event' the main guidelines of which 'have already been stipulated by an agreement, iterated from the previous edition, with a different partner [the host city]'³⁷³. To these, and other similar allegations, of a disconnect between the curatorial project and the

³⁷¹ — La Rosa, Ibid.

³⁷² — Gielen, Pascal, *The Biennial. A Post-Institution for Immaterial Labour*, in Hlavajova, Maria, de Duve, Thierry, Mouffe, Chantal, Nesbit, Molly, Groys, Boris, Hardt, Michael, Rogoff, Irit, *The Art Biennial As a Global Phenomenon: Strategies in Neo-Political Times*, Nai Uitgevers Pub, Rotterdam, 2008

³⁷³ — Scottini, Ibid.

local context, expressed before Manifesta 12, the institution implicitly replied in the early stage of the process with a participatory program based on three levels that was publicly displayed to the citizens during an open info-day.

In fact, 'two models of participation alongside the biennial'³⁷⁴ were planned to 'foster exchange between local professionals and Manifesta's' network (the '5x5x5'), to promote local side projects to take place simultaneously (the 'collateral events'). Yet the very same visual representation of the participatory project seems, in some way, to distinguish the very heart of the biennial from these programmes, in part confirming the impression that 'local artistic communities have not been given appropriate importance and space'³⁷⁵.

4.2.2 The choice of a location: Manifesta's selection process

Manifesta's selection process for its locations today seems to be fairly different from its origins. As reported above, and according to René Block and Henry Hughes, the first edition of the *Nomadic European Biennial* did not seem to differ significantly from Venice's format. Reportedly, the first preparatory discussions happened in Venice between national commissioners (mainly the Dutch) and one of their main reference formats was Venice's 'Aperto'³⁷⁶, with the desire to 'build a structure that would be more like Documenta [...] where every country would be actively involved'³⁷⁷. Focus would thus be given to younger artists, the location to be chosen amongst Amsterdam, Maastricht and Rotterdam, viability to be equally granted by both a Dutch

³⁷⁴ — Manifesta, *Info Day: Manifesta 12 Collateral Events + 5x5x5*, online, available at: <http://m12.manifesta.org/poker-oriental-website-poker-yg-mampu-bikin-tajir-mendadak/index.html> [accessed 22.08.2020]

³⁷⁵ — La Rosa, Ibid.

³⁷⁶ — Block, René, Fijen, Hedwig, Hughes, Henry Meyric, Néray, Katalin, *How a European Biennial of Contemporary Art Began*, in Filipovic, Elena, Vanderlinden, Barbara, *Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibition and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, Cambridge (Mass): MIT Press, 2005, page 191

³⁷⁷ — Block, Fijen, Hughes, Néray, Ibid., page 192

foundation (EAM) and foreign partner organisations, thanks to 'mutual cooperation and financing'³⁷⁸ fostered by an international advisory board.

What pushed the foundation to a change were several factors: the unavailability of some partners to pay their fee 'to allow others to select an artist' from their country, the fact that 'the majority of the finances were organized through the Dutch foundation', and the European Union funding seen as a source of 'possible conflict' with arising potential allegations of 'inconsistency' in representing Europe³⁷⁹. All these factors combined, eventually led to the current structure, where 'funding' is supported by a wide range of international funds and foundations' and with 'substantial financial support by corporate sponsors'³⁸⁰. The main difference with the funding structure of the first Dutch biennial is that the most significant part of these foundations and sponsors, as in the case of Palermo, has now become an emanation of the host city. This, in order 'to enter the official selection procedure [...] formulates a so-called 'Bid''³⁸¹.

This selection process differs from a pure commercial bid in that the board of the Foundation and its Director, select 'the successful candidate [...] based on an evaluation of social, political and geographical aspects, financial considerations, infrastructure, institutional stability, local expertise and, of course, the general artistic and intellectual context'³⁸¹.

Paradoxically, Manifesta — albeit born as a renovation of Venice's (and partly Kassel's) 'outdated' form of national representation — could create its new form, only resorting to an even older and more criticised type of selection process, apparently derived from World expos. For this reason, many of the criticisms addressed to the European nomadic biennial directly depend on the choice of the location, which, taking the form of a private agreement between public and private entities, actually exposes itself to several allegations and can impact the curatorial project before its start.

If we cannot easily dismiss Scottini's speculations depicting the selection of host cities as a mainly economically-driven process (unless Manifesta settled for public sessions when choosing), he seems to overestimate the financial aspects in the process of selection, while the example of Nicosia (Manifesta 6) clarifies that the choice of a loca-

³⁷⁸ — Block, Fijen, Hughes, Néray, Ibid., page 191

³⁷⁹ — Block, Fijen, Hughes, Néray, Ibid., pages 193-199

³⁸⁰ — Manifesta, *Funders & Sponsors*, 2020, online, available at: <https://manifesta.org/support-us-2/funders-sponsors/> [accessed 31.08.2020]

³⁸¹ — Manifesta, *Hosting Manifesta*, 2020, online, available at: <https://manifesta.org/biennials/hosting-manifesta/> [accessed 31.08.2020]

tion could get an entire curatorial project cancelled regardless of financial issues.

According to Vesna Madžoski, the choice of Nicosia and the subsequent cancellation of the biennial was, in fact, a geo-political issue. In May 2004, there had been one of the most significant enlargements of the European Union with several countries joining in, amongst them Cyprus and Estonia. So, their respective capitals, Nicosia and Tallinn were now competing as possible locations for Manifesta. An email quoted by Madžoski from the Manifesta Archive, and sent by Jara Boubnova in the same month, gives us a partial and collateral but meaningful insight into the 2004 discussions for the selection process: 'And of course it's about the location that is between real West and real East. Not to mention beautiful southern climate and historical sites. [...] The choice is very difficult having in mind that Manifesta 6 in both Tallinn and Nicosia will be a metaphorical confirmation of European expansion of EU of culture.'³⁸²

Only two years later, after Nicosia had been chosen and before the biennial could start, after a series of conflicts and mutual allegations mentioned in the official press release, the host-guest mutual exchange form turned from hospitality into *hostipitality*,³⁸³ and the Municipality of Nicosia eventually cancelled the project. The two parties seemed to agree upon the fact that the main reason could be found in the plans of the curatorial team to establish and operate 'an essential part of the Manifesta 6 School in the occupied part of Nicosia'³⁸⁴. The curators in fact strongly reaffirmed their compliance with the 'contract agreement' and the value of their project, confirming the foundational goal to build bridges. Apparently, a deeper geo-political reflection from the Board's or the Director's side, could have foreseen these issues before the location was chosen. According to Madžoski, the conflict between the Greek and the Turkish sides was 'constantly in focus', but what 'remained hidden' was that Cyprus is divided in three parts (the Greek, the Turkish and the British) and that, since 1960, it never really gained full independence, hence the wall built in 1974 was no *local* matter that could be solved by a team of curators discussing with a municipality. Manifesta 6, in brief, failed where the

³⁸² — Mad Madžoski, Vesna, *De Curatoribus. The Dialectics of Care and Confinement*, New York – Dresden: Atropos Press, 2013

³⁸³ — See: Marina La Rosa (Ibid.) and her interpretation of Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, Cultural Memory in the Present, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2000

³⁸⁴ — Manifesta, *6 June 2006 A letter from Mai Abu ElDahab, Anton Vidokle and Florian Waldvogel, former curators of Manifesta 6*, available at: <http://manifesta.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/June-6-2006-IFM-press-release-.pdf>

United Nations and the European Union also failed twice³⁸⁵ (in 2004 and 2018), probably underestimating the geopolitical situation and the actual geographical reach of their planned intervention.

4.2.3 A theoretical-practical tool to handle the location's issues and define the venues: the *Atlas*

'Atlas, a collection of maps or charts, usually bound together. The name derives from a custom — initiated by Gerardus Mercator in the 16th century — of using the figure of the Titan Atlas, holding the globe on his shoulders, as a frontispiece for books of maps. In addition to maps and charts, atlases often contain pictures, tabular data, facts about areas, and indexes of place-names keyed to coordinates of latitude and longitude or to a locational grid with numbers and letters along the sides of maps.

General-reference atlases emphasize place locations, the connections between them, and the relative size or significance of the places designated. Thematic, or special-subject, atlases deal primarily with a single subject, such as the agriculture, geology, climate, history, industry, languages, population, religions, resources, or other characteristics of a geographic area. National atlases are usually produced by government agencies to cartographically present the whole range of a particular nation's salient features: physical, historical, economic, social, cultural, and administrative.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁵ ——— For a short synthesis of this complex situation as well as of the origins and the current problems related to the division of Cyprus see: Lemmi, Davide Nicosia, *Nicosia, Cyprus. The last wall dividing Europe*, 07.08.2018, Lifegate, <https://www.lifegate.com/nicosia-cyprus-wall-europe> [accessed 01.09.2020]

³⁸⁶ ——— Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Atlas*, online, available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/atlas-maps> [accessed 04.08.2020]

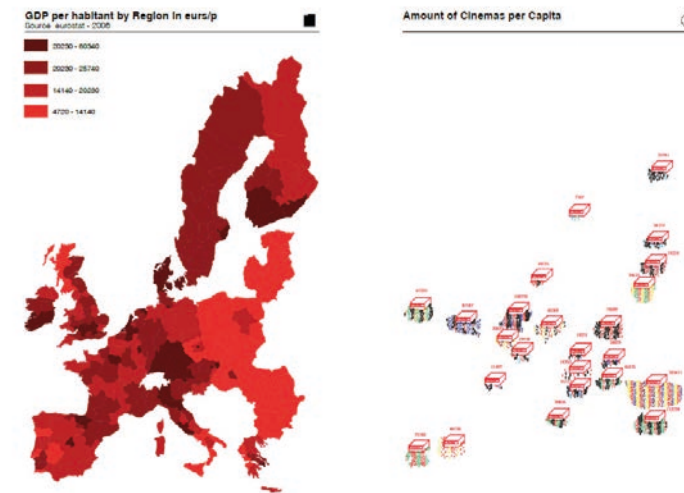


Fig. 18: OMA, *Atlas of Europe*, 2009 (GDP per habitant and Cinemas per capita in the EU)

Though widely used in many different sectors of humanities and geo-political studies, the potentiality of the use of an atlas as a framework for the research and planning of an art biennial, was probably one of the main findings of Manifesta's 12th edition held in Palermo in 2018. If on the one hand the biennial sparked (as usual) many lively debates, the introduction of this new tool was considered as a useful preliminary investigation, which, far from being merely an analytical instrument, implicitly provided a first sketch of the biennial's concept. As La Rosa underlined, the actual planning of the curators was in fact 'the consequence' of this six-month research conducted by OMA \ AMO, the 'Office for Metropolitan Architecture' founded and directed by Rem Koolhaas, who played a role since the first edition of the biennial, when 'Wim van Krimpen lobbied to have the first edition of Manifesta [...] at the new Kunsthal Rotterdam'³⁸⁷ that he had designed. Then, on the occasion of the publication for Manifesta's first decade, Koolhaas had been interviewed by Hans Ulrich Obrist to describe his interpretation and vision of Europe which were in some ways inherent to the biennial's project and which derived from his first participation in a EU think tank that led his office 'to begin a study of the iconography of Europe'³⁸⁸ a twenty year-long research (ongoing) the output of which were several publications, public exhibitions and, in 2009, the

³⁸⁷ ——— Fijen, Hedwig, *Ibid.*, page 191

³⁸⁸ ——— Koolhaas, Rem, Obrist, Hans Ulrich, *Europe calling*, in: Filipovic, Elena, Vanderlinden, Barbara, *Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibition and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, Cambridge (Mass): MIT Press, 2005, page 123

point of view of the new communities and their inherent consistency with the historical multiculturalism of the city, which, by direct analogy, Giuseppe Barbera (professor at the University of Palermo) analyses through the painting *View of Palermo* by Francesco Lojacono. The painting offers a positive metaphor of the history of a long process of natural flows in Palermo: ‘with nineteenth-century realism, Lojacono reaffirms the great biological richness of the Mediterranean landscape, the exemplary coexistence between indigenous and exotic spe-

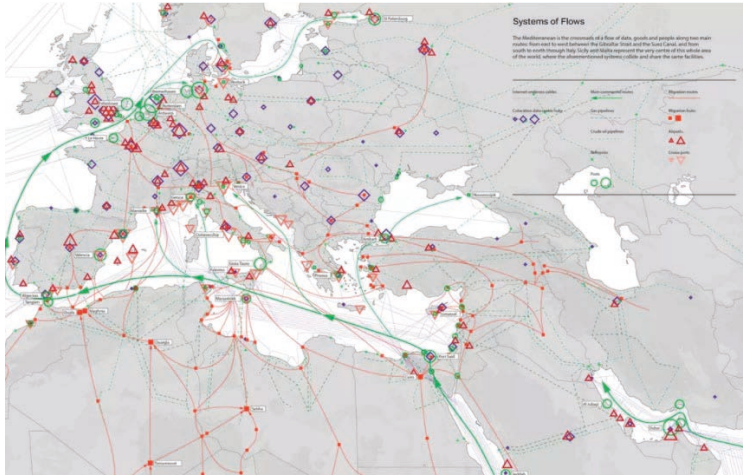


Fig. 20: System of flows, from *Palermo Atlas* (edited)

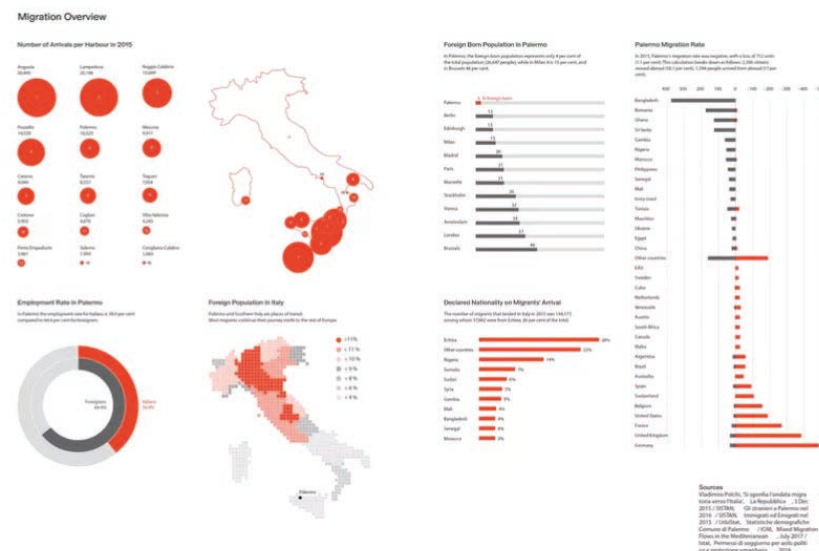


Fig. 21: Migration overview, from *Palermo Atlas*



Fig. 22: View of Palermo, from *Palermo Atlas*

cies, the ability to adapt to the characteristics of the environment which, as in the long summer aridity, can be extreme or they can turn into a heavenly sweetness³⁹⁷ (Fig. 22).

The fifth chapter is dedicated to the *mutation of the city* and reports the damage caused by private interests prevailing over public good: this situation is lyrically synthesised by the writer Giorgio Vasta reflecting on the city's own name: ‘when I say Palermo — if I really pay attention — I feel the physical space of the city rapidly contracting and crumbling, like a sheet of paper that burns from the edges towards the centre³⁹⁸. A city map therefore shows UNESCO's world heritage sites highlighting the unforeseen gentrification effect that they are causing in their immediate surroundings (Fig. 23).

With a similar critical approach, Palermo's architecture, its physical voids and gardens of the city are also analysed, paying particular attention to the area of the Kalsa, that eventually hosted the main sites and venues for the exhibition. The last chapter, *Journey* is in fact a report on the ‘field explorations’ identifying ‘those sites and stories that are representative of the physical archaeology of the city and its current conditions’ and illustrating ‘a potential selection of places, projects,

³⁹⁷ ——— OMA, *Palermo Atlas*, Manifesta 12, Humboldt Books, 2018

³⁹⁸ ——— OMA, *Palermo Atlas*, Manifesta 12, Milano: Humboldt Books, 2018



and routes'³⁹⁹. Given the very specificity of the Atlas and according to Pestellini Laparelli, only some parts of this research are actually replicable in other exhibitions, yet we might outline the following main features of this tool:

1 – Participation: it is participatory and it does not rely on some idealised alien projection on the context, thus it does not offer easily pre-defined outputs. This implies that the actual structure might vary not only according to the main objectives of the exhibition but also in order to acknowledge the requests and issues of the social and cultural context.

2 – Territory: participation and mediation cannot be detached from the referenced territory and the actual conditions of its areas, venues, and material culture. Ground exploration in the case of Palermo was not only an 'urban affair' since the whole curatorial team was involved in it and it directly and indirectly helped all subsequent curatorial activities before the publication. To this extent, a new approach to urban studies will therefore provide an actual connection between the plans and the projections of the curators, the social fabric of the area and its physical sites.

3 – Cross-disciplinarity: as underlined it would be misleading to merely define the *atlas* as an urban study, since it rather involves

³⁹⁹ ——— OMA, *Palermo Atlas*, 2002 online, available at: <https://oma.eu/projects/palermo-atlas> [accessed 04.08.2020]

different kinds of studies and approaches relevant to the context and the exhibition.

4 – Analysis: the consequence of the cross-disciplinary approach is that, in the *atlas*, video research was also included, together with excerpts from collective memories, essays, texts and other forms of media. In brief, albeit parametric analyses are needed, not all the findings shall be necessarily reduced to figures or maps which, at the same time, might themselves provide a more conceptual representation. It is undeniable how this feature, especially where the conceptual side prevails, is highly likely to anticipate or prepare the actual curatorial work.

5 – Different scales: the contemporary dynamic of migration flows, being a global issue, could not be effectively analysed from a strictly local perspective and without considering an area with a larger scale (in this case at least European and Mediterranean). At the same time the architectural studies of the city might highlight both regional and urban specificities, like the Kalsa.

Along with the aforementioned features, and according to some criticisms that a biennial like Manifesta had to face, a sixth feature could be added:

6 – Proposition & forecast: if the analysis can already be viewed as a crucial anticipation of the curatorial work, an explicit proposition is expected from an *atlas* of this peculiar kind, at least in terms of possible venues. From this point of view, even if Palermo Atlas had 'no focus' and didn't include a very specific proposition, the final staging of the exhibition in fact coincided with the main findings of the research (the venues selected amongst the most relevant case studies, the themes fully coinciding with its general vision). An explicit proposition will also include the expected outputs, if not a real forecast considering short to long-term effects of the actions proposed.

If an operational tool cannot per se guarantee the positive lasting effect of an art manifestation at the local level, it could indeed foster transparency and allow subsequent assessment by the local partners. To this extent, the relevance of a similar proposition can be argued by some interventions in Palermo that were specifically designed to last, like 'Becoming Garden', but were allegedly lacking 'an artistic stance and commenced from a particular societal assignment'⁴⁰⁰. This project

⁴⁰⁰ ——— Zonnenberg, Ibid.

of a community garden planted with the participation of the inhabitants on a former dumping ground but excluded⁴⁰¹ from the main sites of the biennial was probably responding to the allegations of lack of a 'fruitful relationship with the territory and its inhabitants'⁴⁰² rather than actively participating in the biennial. On one hand Ippolito Pestellini thought it better for this new garden in the ZEN neighbourhood to be 'off the spotlight' because they 'didn't want to turn the ZEN into a zoo [...] where people coming from Art Basel, in nice suits would go to the controverted areas and take pictures'. On the other hand, Mirjam Varadinis refused the allegation of lack of artistic stance, maintaining that this was on the contrary one of their main outcomes and confirming her interest as curator in a kind of 'art that has also an impact on society'. The necessity to create 'fruitful relationship' was confirmed by the 13th edition of Manifesta in Marseille, that 'following the successful introduction of this model'⁴⁰³ relied once more on a similar study (now under the title of 'Le Grand Puzzle') edited by Winy Maas of MVRDV and The Why Factory. Their research also included 'a number of spatial interventions [...] illustrating a path for potential solutions and directions'⁴⁰⁴. According to Winy Maas and Hedwig Fijen, the research showed 'the incredible urban possibilities and impossibilities of Marseille, through conversations, analyses, maps

⁴⁰¹ ——— Such was the term used by Mirjam Vardinis in a recent talk at the conference: "Contemporary Art Biennials – Our Hegemonic Machines in Times of Emergency" (conference for the presentation of Issue 46 of *Oncurating*:

Kolb, Ronald, Patel, Shwetal A., Richter, Dorothee (eds), *Contemporary Art Biennials—Our Hegemonic Machines in Times of Emergency*, *Oncurating*, Issue 46, June 2020, Zurich, 2020).

Rather than a complete 'exclusion', Pestellini Laparelli clarified that a place like the ZEN, where the DIY garden was staged, was simply not easy to be reached: 'everything was on a map, everything was told very openly, but it required an effort to go to the Zen or to go to Pizzosella: it required time, so we tried to treat it as any other project, and of course the flow was mostly in the centre, and some people were brought to the Zen, but there was definitely a different intent of intensity off the spotlight' (see paragraph 8.1.1)

⁴⁰² ——— 'Has there ever been any institution, educational space or local collaborative platform that survived the 100 days of the event and preserved a fruitful relationship with the territory and its inhabitants?' Scottini, Ibid.

⁴⁰³ ——— Manifesta, *Le Grand Puzzle Winy Maas urban study of Marseille for Manifesta 13*, 2020, online, available at: <https://manifesta13.org/2019/06/27/le-grand-puzzle-winy-maas-urban-study-of-marseille-for-manifesta-13/> [accessed 31.08.2020]

⁴⁰⁴ ——— Manifesta, *Le Grand Puzzle Winy Maas urban study of Marseille for Manifesta 13*, 2020, online, available at: <https://manifesta13.org/2019/06/27/le-grand-puzzle-winy-maas-urban-study-of-marseille-for-manifesta-13/> [accessed 31.08.2020]

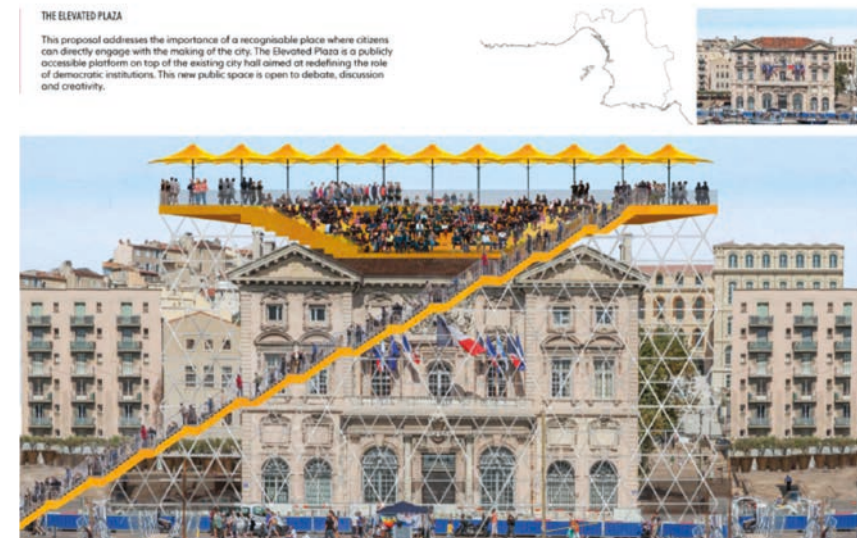


Fig. 24: The Elevated Plaza, *Le Grand Puzzle* [The Why Factory, Ibid.]

and ideas'⁴⁰⁵ which 'had been discussed with citizens since its development' in order 'to forge strong links with many often-invisible communities, to mediate between their local and global narratives — too often ignored — and to interact with a variety of audiences through the perspective of Marseille's complex and multiple histories'⁴⁰⁶. The biennial was therefore repeating and possibly trying to further improve Palermo's organisational model. Yet there were few significant differences, the main of which was that, unlike Ippolito Pestellini, Winy Maas was not appointed as a member of the Manifesta's artistic team and he did not therefore actively take part in the curatorial project. Consequently, MVRDV worked as an external design agency thus providing several interesting architectural proposals consistent with Manifesta's philosophy and arguably with the requirements of the board, but apparently disconnected from the curatorial project (Fig. 24). In fact, 'the research study [contained] interviews with myriad stakeholders, extensive cartography of the city based on comparisons with other European (port) cities, and a deluge of urban interventions and

⁴⁰⁵ ——— Quotation extracted from: Harrouk, Christele, *MVRDV and Delft University of Technology Release 'Le Grand Puzzle', an Urban Study of Marseille in the South of France*, 31.08.2020 available at: <https://www.archdaily.com/946733/mvrdv-and-delft-university-of-technology-release-le-grand-puzzle-an-urban-study-of-marseille-in-the-south-of-france> [01.09.2020]

⁴⁰⁶ ——— Bria, Ginevra, *Marseille is Manifesta. The 13th edition is getting ready*, 06.07.2020, Domus, online, available at: <https://www.domusweb.it/en/art/2020/06/28/marseille-is-manifesta-the-13th-edition-is-getting-ready.html> [accessed 31.08.2020]

fantasies imagined by students of art, architecture, and urbanism – the next generation who will run the cities’⁴⁰⁷. Along with these ‘fantasies’ that represent a list of ‘wishes’ for the ‘future city’, the research study also gave way to a preliminary programme. This included the projects ‘The Invisible Archives as part of Le Tiers Programme that [aimed] to recognise and re-activate some extraordinary examples of community synergies [...] as well as the citizens’ assemblies called “Le Tour de Tous les Possibles” by Tarek Ghezalli and Joke Quintens where they brought together citizens from various backgrounds to [...] build their life together in the city’⁴⁰⁸. The research could thus consider both extremely long term, utopian, propositions (the ‘fantasies’) and short-term participative programmes, but still failed (like the previous editions) to introduce middle term concepts and a review phase, with former host-cities. This latter in particular might be a useful last feature for an appendix of an exhibition *atlas*.

4.2.4 The choice of the location in permanent institutions

Recently, in his analyses on the financial and political issues underlying the incredibly complex machine of the Venice Biennale, Marco Baravalle, while suggesting radical changes in the institution (and in the world of art in general), had few words of praise for the Presidency of Paolo Baratta and his team who ‘were able to lift La Biennale out of both a financial and positioning crisis’ without ‘following blindly the classical neoliberal recipes’, since ‘a good market performance immediately translates into intellectual autonomy’⁴⁰⁹. To briefly synthesise this ‘dramatical improvement’ of the Foundation’s financial performance, Baravalle highlighted the ‘renewed formula of the International Art and Architecture Exhibitions’ as essentially based on an increased use of the Arsenale space, the imposed annual alternation

⁴⁰⁷ — The Why Factory, *Le Grand Puzzle: MVRDV and The Why Factory present an urban study of Marseille as part of Manifesta 13*, 03.09.2020, online, available at:

<https://thewhyfactory.com/news/le-grand-puzzle-mvrdv-and-the-why-factory-present-an-urban-study-of-marseille-as-part-of-manifesta-13/> [accessed 04.09.2020]

⁴⁰⁸ — Bria, Ginevra, Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ — Baravalle, Marco, *On the Biennale’s Ruins? Inhabiting the void, covering the distance*, in *Oncuring*, Issue 46, June 2020, Zurich, 2020

between Art and Architecture Exhibitions and the reduction of all the activities ‘to a single curator’s exhibition’⁴¹⁰ except for national participations or collateral events.

According to his interpretation, these achievements were partly due to a more effective use of the Biennale’s venues, thus he similarly proposed a complex system of radical renovations that mainly deal with a different use and distribution of the exhibition’s spaces (together with stricter rent policies) to revive the city. Venice is in fact becoming more and more ‘a unique marvellous city with a lot of art and a very little life: the perfect context where to base private art foundations linked to global capitals’⁴¹¹.

If the idea that the Biennale alone might easily invert a trend in the depopulation of Venice’s city centre that started as early as 1952⁴¹², it has no actual possibility of success, yet it is undeniable that the Biennale could have a much greater and positive effect on the life of the city, to start with its mainland. The visitors of the Biennale in 2019 (593.616⁴¹³) were in fact a relatively small number when compared to the overall amount of 37⁴¹⁴ million people that visited the city throughout the same year. Yet the potential could indeed help foster in the long run a gradual urban renovation no longer relying on growing rents and depopulation, and paradoxically the redefinition of the already effective location strategies might actually become the first step for a series of actions renovating not only the Biennale, but the city itself and, to this extent, a tool like the *atlas* might offer useful indications.

⁴¹⁰ — Baravalle, Ibid.

⁴¹¹ — Baravalle, Ibid.

⁴¹² — De Rossi, Roberta, *Da 175.000 a 56.000 abitanti: così si svuota Venezia*, 23.02.2015, online, available at: https://nuovavenezia.gelocal.it/venezia/cronaca/2015/02/23/news/da-175-000-a-56-000-abitanti-cosi-si-svuota-venezia-1.10921951?refresh_ce [accessed 27.08.2020]

⁴¹³ — La Biennale di Venezia, *Chiusa la Biennale Arte 2019 che conferma i 600.000 visitatori*, 24.11.2019, online, available at: <https://www.labiennale.org/it/news/chiusa-la-biennale-arte-2019-che-conferma-i-600mila-visitatori#:~:text=Durata%20poco%20pi%C3%B9%20di%206,il%2031%25%20dei%20visitatori%20totali.> [accessed 27.08.2020]

⁴¹⁴ — Pagliuca, Gino, *Turismo, l’effetto Covid è devastante per quattro città italiane (c’è anche Milano)*, 27.08.2020, *Corriere della Sera*, online, available at: https://www.corriere.it/economia/consumi/20_agosto_27/turismo-l-effetto-covid-devastante-quattro-citta-italiane-c-anche-milano-c53ba942-e825-11ea-b091-8b361f593974.shtml [accessed 27.08.2020]

5. Relevant experiments with exhibition signs in contemporary practice

5.1 The ‘*Atlante di Corsico*’ (*Corsico Atlas*): tools of local engagement in a possible global network between physical and digital interaction.

If, according to the curators, the long-term impact of Manifesta Palermo and its legacy at a local level had not fulfilled their initial expectations, the artist collective *Comteatro*⁴¹⁵, based in the outskirts of Milano, has recently created an *Atlas* of the town of Corsico as one of a series of local actions for a long-term engagement of the local community. While the two interventions in Palermo and Corsico share many similarities, though at a significantly different scale, the latter was planned since the beginning as part of a wider strategy that was intended to be locally based. On the contrary, the ‘*European nomadic biennial*’ of Palermo, with its multiple artistic actions, explicitly referred to a European (and possibly intercontinental) framework where all local actions were mainly planned depending on an international *milieu*. In brief, on one side there is an international network of institutions and curators trying to trigger local actions (*top-down*), while on the other, there is an artist collective already engaged within its territory finding connections and new possible strategies on the international scene (*horizontal*), the latter having a longer-lasting impact in the engagement of territorial communities. To this extent we might in fact argue that, in spite of the many similarities and in spite of the objectives of Manifesta, the biennial is part of those ‘Global Systems’ trying to foster some ‘world theory’ as criticised by Donna Haraway, while the latter is actively promoting ‘situated knowledge’ for a horizontal, light form of a ‘network of connections including the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different — and power-differentiated — communities’⁴¹⁶.

415 ——— ‘Comteatro is a group of artists who for over thirty years have believed in theatre as a tool for improving the human being, as a vehicle for self-knowledge and one’s relationship with the world.’ *Comteatro, Cos’è Comteatro?* Online, available at: <https://comteatro.it/associazione/storia-di-comteatro/> [accessed 28.05.2021]

416 ——— Haraway, Donna, *Situated knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, in *Feminist studies*, Vol.14, No. 3 (Autumn 1988) pages 579-580

5.1.1 The example of Rimini Protokoll: horizontal forms of international networking

*'In everyday life there are already many forms of theatre, so if Shakespeare says "all the world's a stage" maybe we have to study where exactly this scene takes place and who are the protagonists, what are the roles, in the sense of social roles, rather than the theatrical roles that someone is playing. Life is staging and everyone can talk about their own staging that results from their own biography.'*⁴¹⁷

(Stefan Kaegi, 2009)

According to their experience in the *Mnemopark* project, the contribution of the Swiss German collective *Rimini Protokoll* in shaping territorial identities 'is to explore the way in which the interaction between painting, video art and theatre introduces a hybrid theatricality while calling into question the very place of the spectator, thereby questioning the very notion of perception from an intermedial perspective'⁴¹⁸. Their experiences have in fact continuously confirmed the relevance of the *physical* dimension, despite their wide use of digital technologies, or perhaps because of them, to prove digital devices as media to develop new forms of audience interactions and of 'being' in a place. The project *Remote X*, for instance, relies on and at the same time deeply questions our very use of digital technologies and artificial intelligence⁴¹⁹:

⁴¹⁷ ——— 'Dans la vie quotidienne il y a déjà beaucoup de formes de théâtre, alors si Shakespeare dit 'tout le monde est une scène' il faut peut-être étudier où exactement se passe cette scène et qui sont les protagonistes, quels sont les rôles, dans le sens des rôles sociaux, plutôt que des rôles de théâtre qui joue quelqu'un. La vie c'est une mise en scène et tout le monde peut parler de sa propre mise en scène qui résulte de sa propre biographie'. Kaegi, Stefan, *Mnemopark. A Mini Train World - Rimini Protokoll*, 17.03.2009 available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivZoFCbEnVU> [accessed 28.05.2021]

⁴¹⁸ ——— Arfara, Katia, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Intermedial Reproduction Rimini Protokoll's Mnemopark*, in: Vanderbeeken Robrecht, Stalpaert Christel, Depestel David, Debackere Boris, *Bastard or Playmate? Adapting Theatre, Mutating Media and Contemporary Performing Arts*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011

⁴¹⁹ ——— 'Who do we follow when we are guided by algorithms? [...] Remote X questions artificial intelligence, big data and our predictability.' Rimini Protokoll, *Remote X*, available at: <https://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/project/remote-x> [accessed 28.05.2021]

a group of fifty people, after wearing headphones, is guided in a physical journey through their city by a 'synthetic voice' that also asks them to perform specific actions. According to Stefan Kaegi⁴²⁰ the public space in *Remote X* is read as a performative space that can foster the interaction of the audience. The participants are the only active performers ('subject and object of knowledge', as Bennett would say) and this relationship between them and the performative space is one of the most relevant topics researched by Rimini Protokoll. Even when the space is reproduced as a mock-up (as in *Mnemopark*) or as a virtual model, their aim is bringing people together, rather than having them watch a screen that 'keeps people away from you'. The virtual models are then used only to provide that the kind of interaction they want to trigger could not happen otherwise.



Fig. 25: Rimini Protokoll *Remote Milano 2015*⁴²¹

Far from being a luddite collective, Rimini Protokoll is used to continuously question technology and digital media as an objective, thus promoting performances in which the main focus is rather on the audience itself, its perception in 'an intermedial perspective' and its 'very place', as Katia Arfara argues while commenting their *Mnemopark*⁴²².

⁴²⁰ ——— Krapp's last post, *Remote Milano. Intervista a Stefan Kaegi*, 26 January 2017, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6x90TuFeX0w> [accessed 28.05.2021]

⁴²¹ ——— Edited screenshot from: Stratagemmi, *Rimini Protokoll - Remote Milano*, online, available at: <https://youtu.be/MRBBdRX4Fwo> [accessed 28.05.2021]

⁴²² ——— Arfara, Katia, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Intermedial Reproduction Rimini Protokoll's Mnemopark*, in: Vanderbeeken Robrecht, Stalpaert Christel, Depestel David, Debackere Boris, *Bastard or Playmate?*

Similarly, from June 2021, they have started staging 'The Conference of the Absent', where, instead of relying 'on bad Skype or Zoom connections' like anybody else in times of pandemic crisis, they unexpectedly decided to get back to 'all the performative means of the theatre' thus making people from the same city of the audience take on the identities of the absent expert invited in the conference. In this 'game' of real bodies becoming avatars, questioning what is fake and what real, the people (both the audience and the fake specialists) are at the very centre, staging locally the 'contradicting theses on the consequences of globalisation'⁴²³. It is, therefore, not surprising that Rimini Protokoll, in this case, decided for the least possible digital form of representation, albeit they have been working with international conference calls for quite a long period (in fact their projects dealing with international calls and distance meetings started as early as 2005 under the name 'Call Cutta'). As Kara McKachnie had already underlined, Rimini Protokoll have actually fostered a use of digital media and technologies on stage that is never pursuing an 'illusionistic approach'⁴²⁴ for its own sake, but rather resonates with Brecht's idea of a performance 'with complex contents and far-reaching social objectives'⁴²⁵ today, entailing multiple levels of interaction to the point of destabilising the very distinction between audience, performers and directors, thus continuously reshaping the boundaries of their performances. They can therefore work on many different levels and within many different institutions and physical venues: 'it might be a museum, it might be a theatre, it might be a city' provided that there is always a relevant relationship with time since it can bind together a group of people (often with the help of technological means) that is never an anonymous audience and that participates actively in the creation of meaning to the point that 'there is not such a big difference' between the audience and the authors⁴²⁶.

Adapting Theatre, Mutating Media and Contemporary Performing Arts, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011

⁴²³ ——— Rimini Protokoll, *Conference of the Absent*, available at: <https://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/project/konferenz-der-abwesenden> [accessed 01.06.2021]

⁴²⁴ ——— McKachnie, Kara, *instance: Rimini Protokoll, Mnemopark*, in: Bay-Cheng, Sarah, Kattenbelt, Chiel, Lavende, Andy, Nelson, Robin, *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005

⁴²⁵ ——— Brecht, Bertolt, *The Street Scene a Basic Model for an Epic Theatre*, in Willet, John, *Brecht on Theatre. The Development of an Aesthetic*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1964

⁴²⁶ ——— Rimini Protokoll, *There's not such a big difference between us and the audience*, 29 September 2020, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-WwiOf3l-0> [accessed 28.05.2021]

5.1.2 Innovations in the *Corsico Atlas*

If one of the recurrent topics in the work of Rimini Protokoll according to Stefan Kaegi is the 'international input'⁴²⁷ of their projects, linking German cities to Milano, spanning Nigeria and India, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and again Germany; the model of performance pursued by Comteatro throughout their work is overtly linked to the local context of Corsico, in the outskirts of Milano. This, as Carola Boschetti clarified, did not impede Comteatro from structuring a project like the *Corsico Atlas*, which was largely influenced by the international experience of Rimini Protokoll, but at the same time helped them in defining an in-depth project, that does not simply refer to and interact with a physical space, but which refers to specific spaces and interacts with their communities. Unlike *Remote X*, which stages a series of experiences that might happen (and do actually happen) in many different cities around the world exporting the same artistic format with few changes, the *Atlas* is not simply based on a specific place but, more importantly, is actually born from its local communities. In spite of these differences Carola Boschetti does not criticise Rimini Protokoll's work, but acknowledges its relevance, which we might ascribe to a thin globalism according to O'Neill's interpretation; *i.e.* to that trend pushing 'for a greater degree of diversity in social and cultural networks of interconnectivity involving the movement of ideas, information, images, practices and people who also carry ideas and information with them across the globe', whereas globalisation is commonly understood 'as pervasive neo-liberal force which transcends national boundaries in the name of economic free trade'⁴²⁸. To this extent *Comteatro* forms the necessary situated intersection of this cultural network, an open hub acting locally. Like Kaegi, Boschetti (who curated the *Corsico Atlas*) decided to focus on the people and, pursuing a wider involvement of the different communities residing in the town of Corsico, personally interviewed many of its inhabitants (from the young to the elderly, from the natives to new inhabitants...). These interviews, like in the case of Palermo, could define a cultural Atlas connected to real locations in the town that were then 'thematically' linked in order to form two different walks that the audience could follow while listening to their headphones

⁴²⁷ ——— Krapp's last post, *Ibid.*

⁴²⁸ ——— O'Neill, Paul, *The culture of curating and the curating of culture(s): the development of contemporary curatorial discourse in Europe and North America since 1987*, PhD Thesis, London: Middlesex University, 2007, page 68



Fig. 26: *Corsico Atlas 2020*, screenshot from video, courtesy of Comteatro



Fig. 27: *Corsico Atlas*: one of the open-air performances, screenshot from video courtesy of Comteatro

playing a dramaturgy written accordingly. Like the Palermo Atlas, the Corsico one shared the same methodology and, specifically, it was participatory, territorial, intercultural, analytical, and based on different scales of interventions. Moreover, throughout the walks, alongside dramaturgy, open-air performances took place in some of the locations found suitable, further increasing the level of complexity and interaction. Although conceived as part of a wider programme which was supposed to include one main stage performance (to be delivered by *Comteatro* together with a group of citizens), the general lockdowns decided by the Italian institutions in 2020 and 2021 stopped the project, which had to be reduced and redefined in accordance with the requests of the sponsoring institution. Yet, the lockdowns unexpectedly proved the validity of the project, since after all theatres, museums and public buildings were closed, these theatrical walks, origi-

nally planned and staged in 2019, could be re-staged in the open in the month of September 2020 as the only performative art activity held in Corsico in 2020 and one of the very few in the whole region. This is not only due to the choice of open-air locations, but also to the hybrid format that *Comteatro* defined, and thanks to which the walks failed to fall within any of the specific categories of cultural activities that were deemed as 'unnecessary' and thus strictly forbidden throughout the lockdowns in Italy.

6. Shaping the curatorial project and visitor's experience

6.1 Tools for exhibition design

6.1.1 On labels: *nomen est omen*?

The intrinsic limits and the risks of labelling appear quite clearly from the Oxford Learners' Dictionary if we consider the various meanings to which the word 'label' refers. Commonly understood in the English language as 'a piece of paper [...] that is attached to something and that gives information about it', the term also refers to pricing and trademarks and is a key marketing element while, at the same time, bears the stigma of being a 'word or phrase that is used to describe somebody/something in a way that seems too general, unfair or not correct'⁴²⁹. Its synonym, 'caption' ('as some prefer to call it' according to Maurice Davies⁴³⁰) shares an equally problematic root, if we consider its 'early senses "arrest" and "warrant for arrest"'⁴³¹, directly connected to the Latin *capere* (to seize, to capture), as if a caption could to some extent arrest or freeze our understanding of an artefact. Already aware of the relevance of the subject, in 1999 the British Museum Association published a short handbook of 'guidelines on labelling for museums'⁴³² collecting several articles on the topic in which its former Deputy Director clearly acknowledged that labels or captions could literally help 'deconstruct the dogma'⁴³³ of an institution. This text, not unlike the more extended one by Beverly Serrell published three years before⁴³⁴, apparently had a 'corporate' approach to the matter, for instance when highlighting the need to determine the text of a caption according to the 'target' audience, thus supposedly supporting a commercial strategy by letting the audience/market set the label/price⁴³⁵.

⁴²⁹ — Oxford Learner's Dictionary, *Label*, Oxford University Press, 2022, online, available at: https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/label_1?q=label, [accessed 03.10.2022]

⁴³⁰ — Campaign for Museums, *Design a label: guidelines on labelling for museums*, London: Museum Association, 1999, page 1

⁴³¹ — Oxford Learner's Dictionary, *Ibid.*

⁴³² — Campaign for Museums, *Ibid.*

⁴³³ — Campaign for Museums, *Ibid.*

⁴³⁴ — Serrell, Beverly, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, 2nd Edition, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015

⁴³⁵ — The habit of merging marketing's jargon and strategies with museum management appeared quite common in the '90s if we also consider the book 'Museum exhibition' published, with a specific paragraph

Yet, apart from this possible ambiguity, it must be acknowledged that these publications from the late nineties were already focusing on several issues that remain crucial today, like accessibility as 'a far greater problem' than 'providing ramps for wheelchairs' or the complexity of language mediation. Moreover, many of their practical suggestions are still relevant in contemporary practice, also considering that Serrell's text was fully re-edited in 2015 and that other institutions like the Museums and Galleries of New South Wales recently edited a similar 'Exhibition Labelling' handbook (2021) sharing the same synthetic structure and part of their objectives⁴³⁶ with the British Museum Association's 'guidelines'. The audience issue is indeed still relevant, but rather than focusing on a specific 'target', the Australian institution now seems more concerned about which audience their labels '*may not communicate effectively with*'⁴³⁷, in a clear attempt to be as inclusive as possible. Furthermore, this text also confirms a substantial difference between exhibitions' labels and 'Object IDs', at least as internationally defined and although five of their descriptive categories coincide⁴³⁸. Considering that IDs were intended mainly for catalogues, archives and in order to help 'law enforcement agencies [...] in the fight against art thieves'⁴³⁹, their objective is literally that of helping identify and record a cultural artefact, thus requiring more standardization and less curatorial interpretation. Yet, just like the aforementioned comprehensive studies on labels, the international codification process for object IDs started in the '90s (with the Getty Information Institute), to find its standard acknowledged form in 2005 within the International Council of Museums. Unsurprisingly, this international association provides thorough information and background knowledge on Object IDs, as an important part of its structural research and activities, while only one study on labels appears on their website as

dedicated to 'targeting audiences' (page 20), largely relying on figures and graphs like the psychologist Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Human needs' to explain museums' strategies. See: Dean, David, *Museum Exhibition. Theory and Practice*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994

⁴³⁶ — A similar attention is dedicated to label types and background colours, but also, and more relevantly, on texts' extension as a crucial means to improve communication and clarity. See: Museums and Galleries of New South Wales, *Exhibition Labelling*, mgnsw.org.au, 2021, available at: <https://mgnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Exhibition-Labelling-2021.pdf> [accessed 18.10.2022]

⁴³⁷ — Museums and Galleries of New South Wales, *Ibid.*, page 1

⁴³⁸ — Artist/maker, Title, Date, Medium/materials, Dimensions

⁴³⁹ — International Council of Museums, *Object ID*, available at: <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/objectID/> [accessed 18.10.2022]

an incidental resource,⁴⁴⁰ and in the form of a reference to the book published by the Indian National Council of Science Museums (again another text published in the late '90s), thus further fostering specific solutions for labelling as a non-standard and non-objective activity. This implicit view is also transferred to many countries, like Italy, where one of the most comprehensive, if not the most relevant Museum Association, appears to be the Italian branch of the International Council of Museums and where other voluntary institutions, like AMACI⁴⁴¹ (Contemporary Art Museum Association), appear to have limited outreach. Also apparently limited, at least in the field of contemporary art, is the outreach of the work by the 'Direzione Generale dei Musei' (the Italian '(State) Museums' General Directorate'), that recently published a specific and comprehensive leaflet on labels ('*Improving the museum narrative. Detailed studies for the drafting of captions and panels*'⁴⁴²) after the more general 'Communication guidelines'⁴⁴³ for Museums. Of course, the different etymology of the word 'didascalia'⁴⁴⁴ in Italian does not make labelling any simpler or less underrated in the Italian context. In fact, the matter was not under the spotlight, at least until contemporary studies and research, like the

⁴⁴⁰ — The reference is available at: ICOM, *Resource*, available at: <https://icom.museum/en/ressource/museum-display-labels-the-philosophy-and-practice-of-preparing-written-labels-and-illustrations-for-use-in-museum-displays/> [accessed 18.10.2022]

⁴⁴¹ — Amaci, *Amaci*, online, available at: <https://www.amaci.org/> [accessed 18.10.2022]

⁴⁴² — Calandra, Gianfranco, Condò, Francesca, Morana, Tiziana, Serangel, Roberto. *Migliorare il racconto museale. Approfondimenti per la redazione di didascalie e pannelli*, Direzione generale Musei Servizio II - Valorizzazione Sviluppo della fruizione e mediazione dei musei - allestimenti museali, Rome, (2019) available at: <http://musei.beniculturali.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Approfondimenti-per-la-redazione-di-didascalie-e-pannelli.pdf> [accessed 03.11.2022]

⁴⁴³ — Da Milano, Cristina, Sciacchitano, Erminia, *Linee guida per la comunicazione nei musei: segnaletica interna, didascalie e pannelli*, Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo Direzione generale Musei, Rome, 2015, available at: <http://musei.beniculturali.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Linee-guida-per-la-comunicazione-nei-musei-segnaletica-interna-didascalie-e-pannelli.-Quaderni-della-valorizzazione-NSI.pdf>, [accessed 03.11.2022]

⁴⁴⁴ — The Italian 'didascalia', derived from the greek Διδασκαλία, is apparently less problematic, since directly linked to some 'teaching', originally intended as a call to performative and ritual action, an 'instruction' provided to the choir in Greek tragedies, and to religious rites attendees, today simply understood as an 'explanatory text usually below the picture' scritta esplicativa di un'illustrazione, situata di solito al disotto della figura ('instruction, tuition, teaching' according to Wordreference).

ones led by Maria Chiara Ciaccheri, Anna Chiara Cimoli and Nicole Moolhuijsen, who synthesised several studies in a few cycles of lectures⁴⁴⁵ and, consequently, in a book⁴⁴⁶. Following a more narrative and much less standardising approach to captions, other than that of Serrell (whose strategies, we must remember, could be practiced mainly for science museums), Cimoli highlights the flexibility and the adaptability of several labelling methods, suggesting the use of questions and avoiding any pretended objectivity. She in fact suggests new possible solutions for labels, either by using dubitative, 'temporary' texts or, as a possible alternative, using 'multivocal' ones (i.e. synthesizing the different voices of a cultural or socio-political ongoing debate)⁴⁴⁷. Either one is equally aimed at fostering the transparency of the institution and of the curatorial project, rather than perpetuating the myth of objective captions. It might not be irrelevant to notice that if 'a work of art almost never stands alone', even the most essential kind of displays generally require the presence of a label, probably the first element that might represent that implicit system of social structures to which Mary Anne Staniszewski refers.

6.1.1.1 Additions or removals?

Given the substantially non-objective nature of labels, and once acknowledged that they don't form an irrelevant part of the overall curatorial strategy, transparency should probably be one of the first concerns while handling them. To this extent, the latest transformation that the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford has undertaken, with a specific focus on labelling, offers an example of a more conscious way of handling this important tool. Since Laura Van Broekhoven took over as new director of the museum in 2017, she overtly decided not to 'shy away from difficult conversation' over the 'Museum's complicated colonial history'⁴⁴⁸ and engaged in a 'long-term programme of curato-

⁴⁴⁵ ——— *Le metafore della didascalia* conferences held at Fondazione Querini Stampalia, 24-25 March and 7-8 April 2017, Venice,

⁴⁴⁶ ——— Ciaccheri, Maria Chiara, Cimoli, Anna Chiara, Moolhuijsen, Nicole. *Senza titolo. Le metafore della didascalia*, Busto Arsizio: Nomos Edizioni, 2020

⁴⁴⁷ ——— Cimoli, Anna Chiara. *Didascalie museali. Domande, non risposte*, 24.04.2016, Atribune, online, available at: <https://www.tribune.com/attualita/2016/04/didascalie-musei-pubblico/> [accessed 19.10.2022]

⁴⁴⁸ ——— Returning Heritage, *Pitt Rivers makes real progress towards decolonisation*, 17.09.2020, online, available at: <https://www.returningheritage.com/pitt-rivers-makes-real-progress-towards-decolonisation>, [accessed 19.10.2022]

rial work'⁴⁴⁹. This entailed a series of actions to start with the 'Labelling matters' project, that reconsidered all existing labels in order to foster cross-cultural understanding. The new objective was not to destroy the museum's 'unfortunate archives, but to in fact activate and mobilise them to address some of the problems that lie at the root of racialised stereotypes and other problematic systemic colonial legacies that linger in the present'⁴⁵⁰. In brief, both the collection and the historic captions were thoroughly scrutinised, shedding new light on the archive and on the museum itself, which new large introductory labels now define 'as a footprint of colonialism'. Panels highlight that the museum is 'not a neutral space', especially if we consider that even the overall archive organisation per type of artefacts, mixing different geographical areas, is largely due to its Victorian planning. The new labelling strategy thus entailed few specific interventions, for instance covering racist language on historic captions and removing them, when necessary, together with a large number of additions to help visitors experience a space that would otherwise be problematic in itself. This new transparent approach to labels and the choice to add rather than to remove and to remove only when necessary, taken by the Pitt Rivers Museum, is intended to facilitate the task to 'dissect and dismantle some [...] complex contested words, stereotypes and concepts'⁴⁵¹. This transparency, that has partly been praised also by the newspapers of a former colony like India, cannot solve all the issues connected to those objects that 'came to the museum as the result of plunder and looting'⁴⁵². Van Broekhoven's new course thus includes 'restitution' as 'an important issue for our sorts of museums', although she admitted that the museum was just in the process 'of drafting a policy on the return of objects'⁴⁵², while other institutions, like the V&A Museum, according to the Director, Tristram Hunt, 'are very clear

⁴⁴⁹ ——— Returning Heritage, Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ ——— Odum-Thompson, Marenka, Van Broekhoven, Laura, *Labelling Matters*, Pitt Rivers Museum Oxford, online, available at: <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/labelling-matters> [accessed 19.10.2022]

⁴⁵¹ ——— Thompson-Odlum, Marenka, quoted in: Dunk, George, 'Labelling Matters: Decolonising Historical Approaches by Marenka Thompson-Odlum (Pitt Rivers Museum)', 29.5.2019, University of Lincoln, available at: <https://pearl.lincoln.ac.uk/2019/05/29/labelling-matters-decolonising-historical-approaches-by-marenka-thompson-odlum-pitt-rivers-museum/> [19.10.2022]

⁴⁵² ——— Laura Van Broekhoven quoted in: Naomi Canton, *British museums to be transparent about colonial artefacts*, The Times of India 28.01.2019, available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/uk/british-museums-to-be-transparent-about-colonial-artefacts/articleshow/67714722.cms> [19.10.2022]

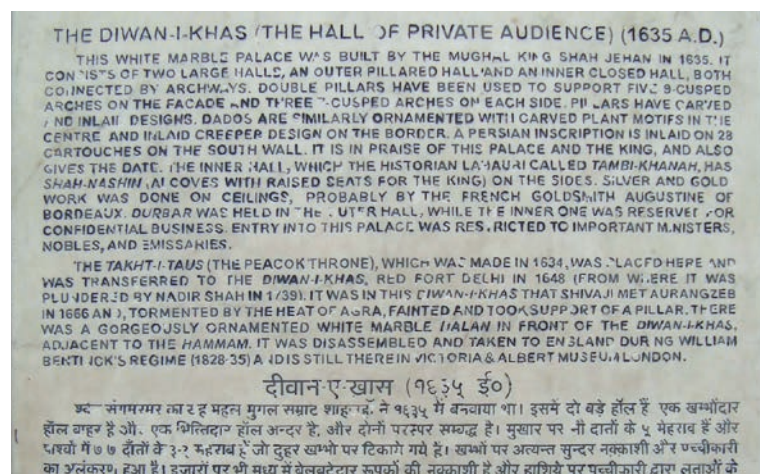


Fig. 28: The caption carved in marble visible in the Red Fort of Agra (edited image, see footnote 453)

and open about [...] colonial past, but [...] are not going to remove things'. It is therefore interesting to notice how captions can clearly highlight these frictions, not only in England, where a specific text of the Pitt Rivers thoroughly informed visitors about an artefact that should not be there and about the ongoing process of restitution of two wooden ceremonial paddles from Nigeria, but also in some of those historical sites where these artefacts should be. In the Red Fort of Agra, in fact, the Indian curators decided to use captions (solemnly carved in marble) not only to describe what is in the location, but also to describe what is not in the location, like the 'gorgeously ornamented white marble *dalan* [portico]' that was 'disassembled and taken to England during William Bentinck's regime (1828-35) and is still there in Victoria & Albert Museum London'⁴⁵³. In this specific case it remains unclear why the policy of not removing was not applied, since the V&A's online archive informs viewers that 'the colonnade fronting the bathhouse in the fort at Agra'⁴⁵⁴ (supposedly the very *dalan* described in Agra) is not currently on display (as of October 2022⁴⁵⁵). Since some

⁴⁵³ ——— Archaeological Survey of India, *Inscription plate (Information) of Diwan-e Khas, Agra Fort, Agra, UP, India*, text from the photo, available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Agra_Fort_-_Diwan-e_Khas_Inscription.JPG - Wikimedia Commons [15.10.2022]

⁴⁵⁴ ——— Victoria and Albert Museum, *Colonnade*, available at: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O116828/colonnade/> [accessed 15.10.2022]

⁴⁵⁵ ——— Since the 31st of May 2025, the *Colonnade* was moved to the V&A East Storehouse. It is now again 'on display', finally visible to a wider public and explicitly captioned as 'Agra Colonnade' in the online archive. See:

art historians in India have speculated⁴⁵⁶ that this removal was William Bentinck's first attempt to check the technical and economic feasibility of removing and selling artefacts from Agra, and since, they argue, he was planning to target the entire Taj Mahal, the investigations and the different opinions on this subject should eventually be made available to a wider public through specific captions, especially considering the V&A's commitment to 'addressing these issues, and to review and update [...] records accordingly' as one of the digital captions illustrating these un-displayed artefacts from Agra clarifies⁴⁵⁷. Since the late 1960s, artists like Hans Haacke had already staged a series of artworks and installations that underlined the invisible contradictions of art and culture institutions thus inaugurating the institutional critique movement. But the case of the Red Fort's Museum implicitly blaming the V&A in its captions, seems one of the few visible and conscious inter-institutional critiques, overtly involving two public institutions on a post-colonial controversy which appears far from being solved. It is worth noticing here how Haacke himself, with his *Manet-Projekt 74*, mainly worked on 'labels', since his installation was literally meant as a coordinated series of framed labels offering an alternative commentary on Manet's *Bunch of Asparagus*. Although Haacke's work and his 'labels' simply represented the provenance of the painting through the short biographies of its previous owners, he could thus

Victoria and Albert Museum, *Agra Colonnade*, available at: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O116828/colonnade/agra-colonnade-colonnade/> [accessed 23.06.2025]

⁴⁵⁶ ——— While the matter is still highly debated, both in India and in the UK, the Ministry of External Affairs in India officially supports this speculation on their website, stating that 'The British, along with the Jats, a caste of northern India, looted the Taj of the lavish carpets, jewels, silver doors and tapestries that once bedecked it. Lord William Bentinck, the first governor-general of India, even planned to dismantle the Taj and sell off the marble', quotation from: Anthony, P.J., *The Taj Mahal is a Glorious Survivor*, 16.5.2004, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, available at: <https://www.mea.gov.in/articles-in-foreign-media.htm?dtl/14706/The+Taj+Mahal+Is+a+Glorious+Survivor#:~:text=The%20British%2C%20along%20with%20the,and%20sell%20off%20the%20marble.> [accessed 15.10.2022]. As of June 2025, this link 'doesn't exist anymore' and it's unclear whether the new visibility gained by the colonnade in its now preeminent position at the V&A East Storehouse has anything to do with this *digital* removal (as some older articles are still available). For the Colonnade see: Koch, Ebba, *The lost colonnade of Shah Jahan's Bath in the Red Fort of Agra*, in: *The Burlington Magazine*, 124, no. 951 (1982): 331–39.

⁴⁵⁷ ——— Victoria and Albert Museum, *Colonnade*, available at: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O116828/colonnade/> [accessed 15.10.2022]

highlight the unknown Nazi background of the donor and patron of the museum, the banker Herman Abs. The Museum's rejection of the artwork that, according to Haacke happened after consulting Herman Abs as well, thus coincided with a decision not to show an alternative piece of information and allowed Haacke to prove 'the collusion of the Museum's interests [...] with the suspected or actual interests of its donors'⁴⁵⁸. Part of the legacy of these early institutional critiques, seems today to have been introjected by the institutions themselves, if we consider the Pitt Rivers Museum's critique to its very same foundations and Anna Cimoli's own invitation to design labels that interpellate the audience and pose questions rather than offering reassuring answers. Moreover, remembering Mieke Bal's semiotic analysis of the Museum of Natural History in New York, there is even more possible physical and tangible bias, other than their labels, that institutions should today make clear and redefine⁴⁵⁹. Once again, panels, labels and captions might transparently offer some alternative institutional piece of information to add. A new level of information that could pose questions to the audience and clarify problematic issues, possibly engaging with some uncomfortable memories from the past, rather than ignore or erase them. Using Bal's words, there would finally be space for a 'museum of the museum', or a 'meta-museum', to explain exhibition models 'ruthlessly dated' and 'based on comprehensive collecting as a form of domination'⁴⁵⁹.

6.1.1.2 Relabelling

Although sharing the same objectives with the Pitt Rivers Museum, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam opted for a different strategy to tackle the problem of pre-existent colonial terminology in its labels by launching a vast project of 'Adjustment' in 2015. The museum, in fact, decided to begin a long process by creating a special group 'whose members include representatives from various departments in the Rijksmuseum', that 'regularly consults curators and information specialists' (included 'other museums' and specific 'interest groups')⁴⁶⁰.

⁴⁵⁸ ——— Haacke, Hans, *Hans Haacke sulla censura del Wallraf-Richartz Museum al suo lavoro per Projekt '74* (Hans Haacke on Wallraf-Richartz Museum censorship at his work for Projekt '74), leaflet released in Köln, 24.06.1974, in: Hans Haacke, *Projekt '74 (Kunst Bleibt Kunst) L'arte resta arte?* in *Data, practice and theory of art*, Summer 1974, Volume IV, No.12, Data Arte s.a.s., Milano, 1974, 34-37

⁴⁵⁹ ——— Bal, Mieke, *Telling, Showing, Showing Off*, in: *Critical Inquiry*, Spring, 1992, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Spring, 1992), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992, pages 558, 560

⁴⁶⁰ ——— Rijksmuseum, *Terminology*, available at: <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/>

Then the group was 'tasked with critically assessing previously used terminology', initially focusing 'on terms referring to skin colour and on some forms of ethnographic nomenclature' to finally remove 'outdated' terms from titles and captions of artworks from their extensive collection. Of course, the practice of 'relabelling' is to some extent a common if not a routine practice for any museum, but the criticisms that the Rijksmuseum received after launching this programme were mainly due to the changes that they introduced to the actual titles of the artworks, probably considered as an 'untouchable' category of the object ID that is usually thought as part of the artwork itself. The museum could easily rebut this critique by proving that 'throughout the years some objects in the collection of the Rijksmuseum [...] had different titles' and that the 'original' might not even be the one conceived by the artist, but rather an attribution due to former curators or owners, like in the case of the painting *Isabella* that, according to the Rijksmuseum, finally found the real title originally conceived by its author, but only in 2020, and was thanks to this relabelling process, as well as to new archival research⁴⁶¹. A more substantial objection to this method could instead be that while an additional label strategy can clarify the 'footprint' of colonialism, an excess in relabelling might result in shying 'away from difficult conversation' as Van Broekhoven would put it, and finally not addressing the issue. Moreover, as in the case of Mieke Bal's analysis of the Museum of Natural History, a critical assessment should possibly find a balance between necessary updates and the equally necessary preservation of the 'museum's status as meta-museum [...] for the sake of historical awareness'⁴⁶². To this

en/research/our-research/overarching/terminology, [accessed 19.10.2022]

⁴⁶¹ ——— Rijksmuseum, Ibid.: 'When a painting made by Simon Maris in circa 1906 became part of the museum's collection in 1922, it was not known that the artist himself had given this work a title. It carried the description 'East Indian type; Oriental girl sitting in an armchair'. In the 1970's one of the museum's curators gave the painting the new title 'Little Negress'. In 2015 this title gave rise to a public debate on terminology used by museums. In the Rijksmuseum this led to the formation of a team to look into our use of terminology. This team proposed to change the title of the painting to 'Young Woman with a Fan'. At the same time research was started to uncover the identity of the portrayed girl. Documents and photos in the Maris family archives revealed her name as 'Isabella'. So, in 2020 the painting could be reconnected with the title the artist originally had given it. Since February 2020 Isabella is on view with her 'new' title as part of the permanent exhibition in the Rijksmuseum (gallery 1.18). Every period has its own language, terms and titles.'

⁴⁶² ——— Bal, Mieke, *Telling, Showing, Showing Off*, in: *Critical Inquiry*, Spring,

extent, the praxis of relabelling, although more reassuring and apparently more adherent to the needs of a more inclusive and multicultural institution, could probably be considered on a case-by-case basis, rather than become an overarching strategy, as it would seem in the case of the Rijksmuseum. In fact, if on the one hand the solution suggested by Mieke Bal was to preserve the historicised exhibits of the American museum while adjusting verbal panels, on the other hand she also criticised precisely the lack of 'self-criticism' and the 'presence of an apologetic discourse' in the renovated texts.

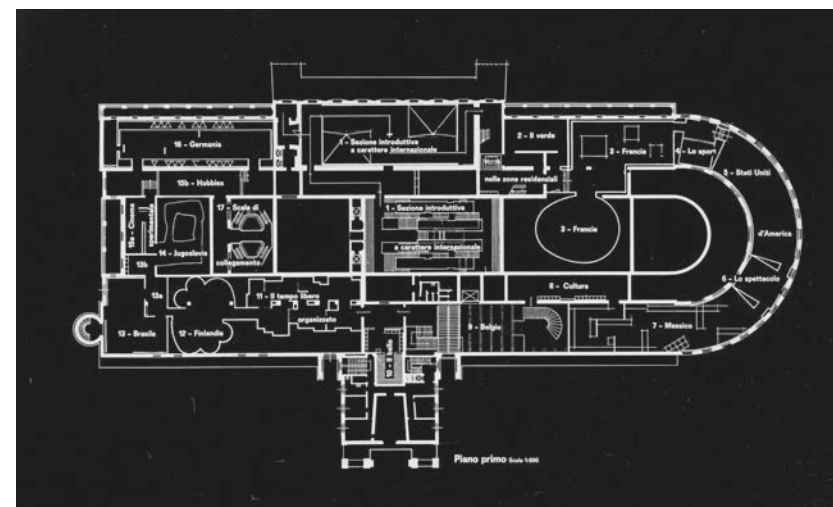
6.1.1.3 Delabelling

When Umberto Eco and Vittorio Gregotti curated the introductory section of the XIII Triennale in 1964, the habit of not telling much of what they were going to see to an audience, was much less usual as it might be today, and seemed, for many a reason, highly criticisable (as, in fact, it fiercely was). Considering the expectations of the audience of an old format exhibition dedicated to modern decorative, industrial arts and architecture and that the institution's board had requested 'four introductory rooms of historical and explanatory character', Eco was aware of the requirements and that the Triennale 'by nature should propose solutions of a technical, architectural or commodity-related kind'⁴⁶³ but simply decided not to comply with any of them⁴⁶⁴. If the section should serve as an introduction, i.e. meant to guide the visitor and to introduce the main theme of the 'tempo libero'

1992, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Spring, 1992), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992, page 562

⁴⁶³ — Eco, Umberto, *La Triennale di Milano. Intervista a Umberto Eco*, in: Marcatré, No. 8/9/10, July-August-September 1964, page 134.

⁴⁶⁴ — This form of substantial 'non-compliance' was not rejected by the board for many a reason, but it is indeed worth noticing how Bruno Zevi, a relevant member of the Triennale's Research Centre's Committee, had also fiercely criticised the subject selected and the absence of a real *urban and architectural* focus for the newly planned exhibition. Zevi even proposed an alternative theme and informed the Secretary of the Committee that he thought that choosing 'Free time' as a theme would be 'offensive' and would mean 'escaping' the Italian context and acting against 'engaged culture', thus announcing his resignation in case a new subject was not chosen. We can therefore assume that the curators were provided with the widest possible margin of discretion and that a critical approach was probably expected, if not demanded. [cf.: Letter from Bruno Zevi to Tommaso Ferraris, s.l. [ma Roma] 3th December 1961, in: Bosco, Alessandro, *Uno spazio immersivo: La XIII Triennale di Milano 1964*, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022



explain 'what free time 'is not', so that 'the visitor, presumed to be an adult citizen of a democratic country, once leaving the introductory rooms' could visit 'then the various pavilions, deciding with their own heads whether the proposals [...] still fell within that sphere criticised [...], or replaced those deceptive images of free time [...] with a decisive alternative'⁴⁶⁹. As expected, given his studies on the 'opera aperta' ('open work'), published two years earlier, where he had already made clear that this would entail the participation of the audience in the creative act as 'a tool of revolutionary pedagogy'⁴⁷⁰, the exhibition's concept required some form of indeterminacy like the absence of clarifying panels or labels explaining the concept or providing possible guidance to the audience. Yet, and even before the concept was staged, the very same idea to represent precisely what they thought free time 'was not' without being explicit about it, was immediately and publicly criticised by some members of the curatorial team, who feared that this could sound like actual praise of what they wanted to deconstruct. What Canella, Mantero and Semerani rejected was in fact 'the substance of Umberto Eco's draft [...], opposing the technique of mali-

1964, Peter Lang, Oxford, 2022, page 71. Bosco here quotes a meaningful sentence from the magazine *Edilizia moderna* about 'the decadence of the great exhibition [...] as a means of mass communication' (*la decadenza della grande esposizione [...] in quanto mezzo di comunicazione di massa*). As inferred by Bosco, it is highly likely that this opinion was Gregotti's own opinion, as editor-in-chief of the magazine and although the article was 'not signed'. And while the Triennale informed the public that the exhibition was acknowledged and 'registered in permanent form by the 'Bureau International des Expositions' since 1932, it was probably a common opinion within the curators and the members of the 'Centro Studi' (*Research Centre*), that the very same idea and format of an international exhibition based on a show of commodities from different nations had to be reformed, if not abandoned, because of its *decadence* (as Gillo Dorfles also believed: Dorfles, Gillo, *La XIII Triennale*, in: *Casabella*, no. 290, august 1964, Milano: Editoriale Domus, pages 2–17)

469 ——— Eco, Umberto, quoted in Bosco, Alessandro, *Ibid.*, page 68: 'Ci siamo limitati a raccontare in queste sale cosa il tempo libero 'non è', in modo che il visitatore, presunto come cittadino maggiorenne di un Paese democratico, una volta uscito dalle sale introduttive dove appunto gli si chiariva cosa tempo libero non fosse, visitasse allora i vari padiglioni, decidendo con la testa propria se le proposte che gli facevano gli inglesi, o gli jugoslavi o i belgi o i tedeschi e così via, rientrassero ancora in quell'ambito da noi criticato, o sostituissero a quelle immagini ingannevoli del tempo libero, da noi proposte, una alternativa risolutiva'

470 ——— Eco, Umberto, *Opera aperta. Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee*, Milano: Bompiani, 1962, page 37, quoted in Bosco, Alessandro, *Ibid.*

ciously making oneself a prisoner of the system in order to criticise it from its own dissemination structures', thus stating the "ideological" principle of not giving up a basic criticism'. Although the opposers did not submit a detailed concept, it is likely that they were planning to make this ideological principle visible also by means of some panels or labels. In fact, their position resonated with Gillo Dorfles's, whose review for the magazine *Casabella* also included few concepts of what he would and would not do if he 'had been in charge'. Dorfles, clarifying *Casabella's* view⁴⁷¹, rejected both 'the highly learned (and cryptic, and hermetic) texts' seen in the previous editions, as well as the new 'show of imagination, playfulness, 'popartism' [...] lavished on this Triennale'. If he didn't consider the new approach 'an effective tool of education and renewal', it was because he believed that the visitors would 'understand very little' and, unlike Blake, he thought that even having the 'unlikely' opportunity 'to read the explanations in the guide' it would still be possible to grasp few elements of the curatorial project, namely some of the works exhibited (and he mentioned the ones by Fontana, del Pezzo, Baj, Crippa, but also by Munari, Castiglioni and Zanuso). Yet, although Gregotti confirmed that they wanted to 'minimise the expository means, the labels explanation, the instruction with a pretence of rationality'⁴⁷², few 'labels' were actually installed, although mainly in a bewildering and, at times, misleading way. Here, Eco and Gregotti did not simply part from the board's requirements (and in particular from any possible expectation of a glamorous exhibition of leisure commodities⁴⁷³), but also from the friends of Casa-

471 ——— Dorfles's review was indeed a relevant point of view within the influential magazine since he was a member of the Research Centre Committee. Furthermore, *Casabella* also relied for several years on the collaboration of Guido Canella and was directed in 1964 by Ernesto Nathan Rogers, who was also a member of the Executive Council of the XIII Triennale almost until its opening, before which he had to resign for health reasons (cf. Bosco, *Ibid.*, page 157). To this extent, we could probably consider the alternative concept proposed by Canella and Mantero as more respondent to *Casabella's* vision, hence the likeliness of a similar stance on the exhibition's 'de-labelling'.

472 ——— Gregotti, Vittorio, *Ibid.*

473 ——— As the Minister for Scientific Research, Senator Arnaudi, declared during the exhibition's opening: 'if one could only draw the attention of the Italians to the problems of green areas in cities, of circulation, of the need to ensure that free time is not wasted in overcrowded buses or trains, that there are simple opportunities for play, sport and relaxation made available to young and old, already with this the Triennale would have deserved all the support that the Government has shown it in the past' ('se anche solo si riuscisse a richiamare l'attenzione degli italiani sui problemi del verde nelle città, della circolazione, della necessità di far sì che il tempo libero non venga



Fig. 30: 'Caption corridor' [Sezione introduttiva a carattere internazionale - Corridoio delle didascalie, Publifoto, bromide gelatine photo (edited), 18x24, 1964, TRN_13_01_0022, courtesy of: Triennale Milano ©, available at: <https://archivi.triennale.org/archive/archivi-triennale/13>]

bella and from their former team members, who, besides sharing the idea that free time was 'idealised and mystified'⁴⁷⁴, mainly wanted to exhibit some positive 'principle' to 'educate' the audience, thus excluding the very principles of the 'opera aperta': the visitors' interaction, their own choices and participation in meaning making within a 'work on the move'⁴⁷⁵. Only one direct message from the curators was sent to the audience, a sort of caption unconventionally projected in an environment dark enough to make visible the glowing fonts with different styles that were projected on the wall and reporting that 'one of the dangers of industrial civilisation is that leisure time is organised by the same centres of power that control working time. In this case, free time is consumed according to the same rhythm as working time. Having fun means being integrated' (Figure 30).

sprecato in autobus o treni sovraffollati, che vi siano facili possibilità di giuochi, di sports e di distensione offerte a giovani ed anziani, già con questo la Triennale avrebbe meritato tutto quell'appoggio che il Governo le ha dimostrato in passato). in: Triennale di Milano, *Tredicesima Triennale di Milano: tempo libero: esposizione internazionale delle arti decorative e industriali moderne e dell'architettura moderna: Palazzo dell'Arte al Parco, Milano, 12 giugno-27 settembre 1964*, Milano: Arti Grafiche Crespi, 1964, page 9

⁴⁷⁴ ——— Eco, Umberto, in: Triennale di Milano, *Tempo libero tempo di vita. Note, studi e disegni sulla preparazione della 13 Triennale*, Giordano Editore, Milano 1964.

⁴⁷⁵ ——— 'Opera in movimento' ('work on the move') was a peculiar kind of 'opera aperta' which coincides specifically with the 'kaleidoscope' section of the Triennale, and, more generally, with all the introductory section. (cf. Bosco, *Ibid.*, pages 75-76)

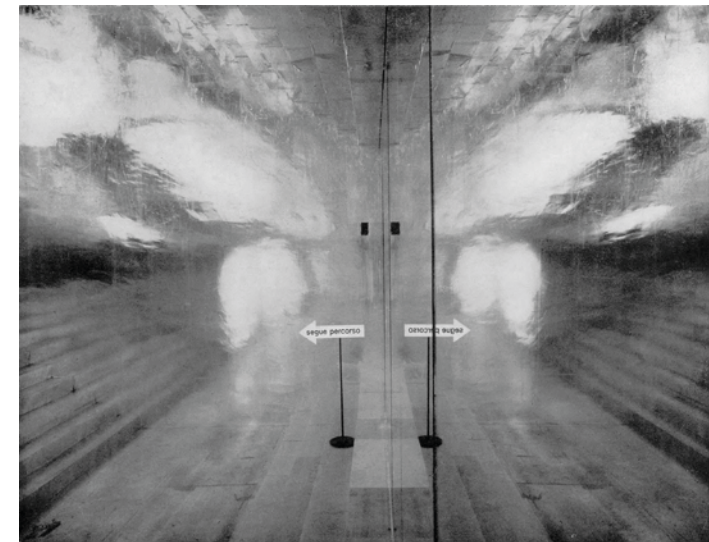


Fig. 31: Sardonic signage 'this way' ('segue percorso') [Mulas, Ugo, *Particolare delle scale di raccordo dei condotti nella Sezione introduttiva a carattere internazionale*, silver bromide gelatine photo (edited), 30x40, 1964, TRN_XIII_FF_0013, courtesy of: Triennale Milano ©, available at: <https://archivi.triennale.org/archive/archivi-triennale/13>]

The graphic design of this caption 'representing the central thesis'⁴⁷⁶ of all the introductory section, was surprisingly based on different kinds of fonts, both with or without serifs, with seemingly random upper and lower cases, sometimes italic, sometimes bold, or even extra light, projected in different sizes, with no alignment and no punctuation. The graphic designer, Massimo Vignali, a design enthusiast who had participated in one of the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* when he was a teenager, had worked as a professional designer both in Italy and in the US, where he had also taught at the IIT Institute of Design in Chicago, getting to know the famous Bauhaus expat, Mies van der Rohe and, arguably, the work of Herbert Bayer too. Knowing that Vignali, consciously or not, applied throughout his career many of the principles that Bayer had taught at the Bauhaus and partly written in the first exhibition design's 'manual', like avoiding the alternation of upper and lower cases, or preferring sans serifs to serifs and black fonts on white background to increase the readability of the text, it becomes evident how the projection of the main thematic caption was deliberately meant not to be easily and quickly read, and possibly not to offer a solution, but rather to puzzle and to pose a question. Moreover, this apparent randomness of the typography could probably seem

⁴⁷⁶ ——— Gregotti, Vittorio, *Ibid.*

to pair with the electric signs on the other side of the room, meaningfully defined as 'the captions corridor'⁴⁷⁷. The signs, lighting up alternatively and apparently reproducing 'certain well-known advertising fonts', defined 'a composition of trivial sayings and commonplace about free time'⁴⁷⁸, but, once again, no other clue but the light's persistency was offered on whether the central thesis was represented by the first text or by this latter intermittent composition. Then, when all the signs were unlit, some spotlights revealed mannequins sitting upside down on a sofa hanging from the ceiling, mirroring the spectators with a similar 'condition of impotence'. Both the texts and the geometry of the exhibition produced a false impression of symmetry which was not literal and which opposed a true negative interpretation of our spare time as an entrapment, to a 'positive' false commonplace on leisure as freedom: the recreation of a mirror effect which would be the main narrative thread of the exhibition. Confused by the reflections, the visitor was supposed to rely on signage, that at times could sardonically appear in front of another mirror, not really appropriate to help the people in a maze of reflecting installations. Neon signs were used in the exhibition design just to identify the titles of the four themes in the 'tubes room', thus making it difficult for any viewer to distinguish exhibits from 'captions', unless they read the guide before.

Another quite unconventional text instruction, to take-away, was handed over to the visitors by five machines in the 'decompression room', a rather empty space where there were these 'aluminium cubes 90 by 90 by 90, [...] between the juke-box and the washing machine' bearing 'Lichtenstein's large pointing hand reproduced on their foreheads'. These machines were provided with 'a series of buttons corresponding to a series of definitions of the viewer himself (age, profession, gender, favourite entertainment)' and could be operated by the visitors who, after entering their data, would be returned 'a note containing explanatory captions for the first two rooms and an invitation to choose one of the four routes to the next room'.

⁴⁷⁷ — The English text of the 1964 catalogue used the term '*indicative corridor*' which is not used here, considering that the overall translation of this specific part of the catalogue, with missing sentences, was probably intended as a short text (Cf.: Triennale di Milano, *Tredicesima Triennale di Milano: tempo libero: esposizione internazionale delle arti decorative e industriali moderne e dell'architettura moderna: Palazzo dell'Arte al Parco, Milano, 12 giugno-27 settembre 1964*, Milano: Arti Grafiche Crespi, 1964, page 16)

⁴⁷⁸ — Gregotti, Vittorio, Ibid.

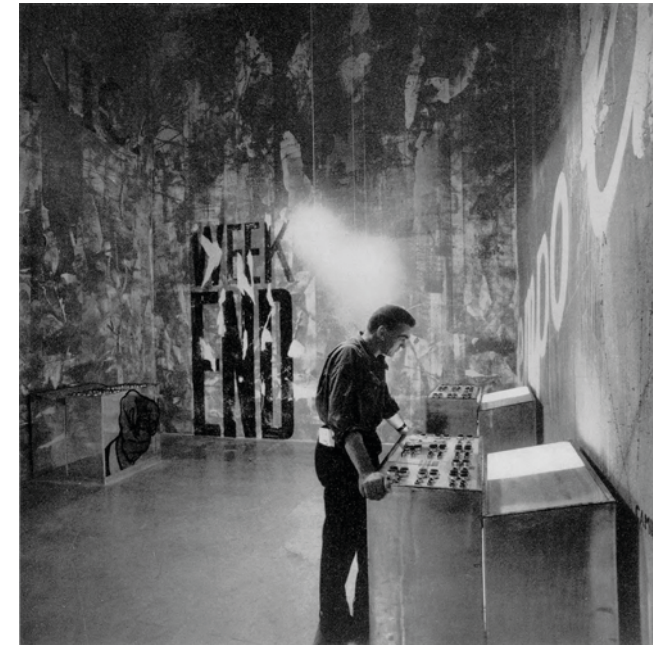


Fig. 32: The machines in the 'decompression room'. The wall paintings by Aurelio Carminati, are in the catalogue downgraded as 'decoration'. Excerpt from: *Triennale di Milano, Triennale di Milano: tempo libero: esposizione internazionale delle arti decorative e industriali moderne e dell'architettura moderna: Palazzo dell'Arte al Parco, Milano, 12 giugno-27 settembre 1964*, 12 giugno-27 settembre 1964, Arti Grafiche Crespi, Milano, 1964, page 20. [Mulas, Ugo, *Camera di decompressione: il tempo vuoto nella Sezione introduttiva a carattere internazionale*. silver bromide gelatine photo, 30x40, 1964, TRN_XIII_FF_0001, courtesy of: Triennale Milano ©, available at: <https://archivi.triennale.org/archive/archivi-triennale/13>]

Yet, as Gregotti clarified, 'the relationship between the data introduced and the indication obtained' was 'of course false, just as false is the belief, in our conditions, that we have made a real choice regarding the use of free time'⁴⁷⁹. Apart from ambiguous projections, sardonic signage, and deceitful 'notes', sound design was also meant to bewilder the audience, to start with Berio's 'tribute to Joyce'. This, was an electronic sound collage of an already fragmentary reading that, according to Gregotti, was chosen to 'emphasise the sense of unification of the metallic material' used to clad the tubes and the main staircase leading to the first floor. The sound installation further reinforced the designed perception that offered no specific insight on the subject of leisure, but rather contributed to a growing sense of alienation which culminated in the 'kaleidoscope'. Here, in what Blake defined as 'the

⁴⁷⁹ — Gregotti, Vittorio, Ibid.

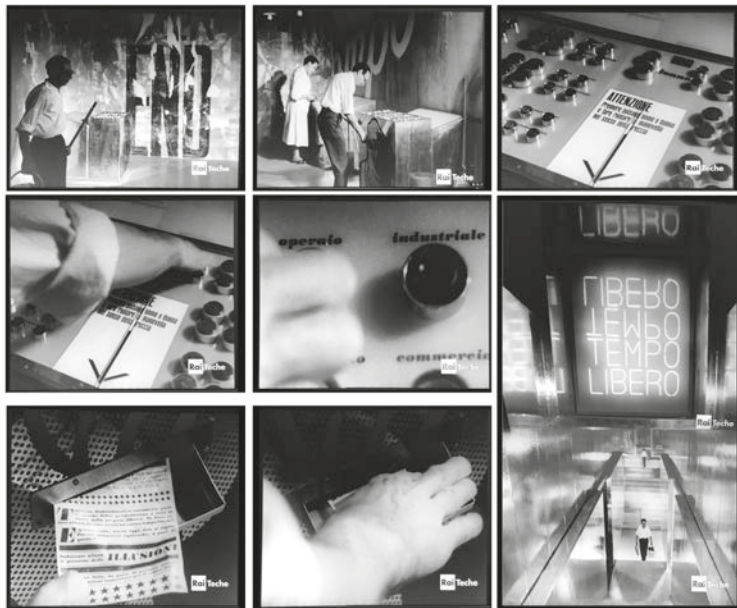


Fig. 33: 'Storyboard' of the decompression room created from the screenshots of 'Rai Teche' (edited), video accessed at: Triennale Milano – Archives

nearest thing to hell that one might ever expect to see in an exhibition'⁴⁸⁰, the visitor entered a triangular prism, an out-of-scale kaleidoscope, where two short films were projected at the same time on the floor while the inclined mirror walls reflected them multiple times, the people walking visually becoming a part of them. These films had been created by a young Tinto Brass, newly arrived from Paris, where he had worked at the archives of the Cinémathèque Française and where he had encountered the latest developments of the Nouvelle Vague and of directors like Jean-Luc Godard. The press defined them as a 'hammering sequence of frames'⁴⁸¹ with an electronic soundtrack somewhat obsessive that, combined with the multiple reflections probably created a destabilising impression, a kind of interaction the viewers were subjected to rather than engaged by, in order to make them feel that, both in our working time, and in our free time, 'we are never free'⁴⁸². Gregotti's contribution to the curatorial concept had probably steered

⁴⁸⁰ ——— Blake, John E., Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ ——— Moro, Cristina, *Quando Eco commissionò a Tinto Brass i corti per la Triennale*, 6th March 2021, domusweb, Editoriale Domus, online, available at: <https://www.domusweb.it/it/dall-archivio/2021/03/05/come-impieghiamo-il-tempo-libero-la-riflessione-di-tinto-brass-alla-triennale-del-1964.html> [accessed 04.01.2023]

⁴⁸² ——— Moro, Cristina, Ibid.



Fig. 34: 'Veline', the 4 possible notes provided by the machines of the decompression room. [13 Triennale, *Volantini con testi introduttivi per i percorsi utopie, integrazione, illusioni, tecnica* (Raccolta Grafica TRN_13_RG_004_007, courtesy of: Triennale Milano ©)]

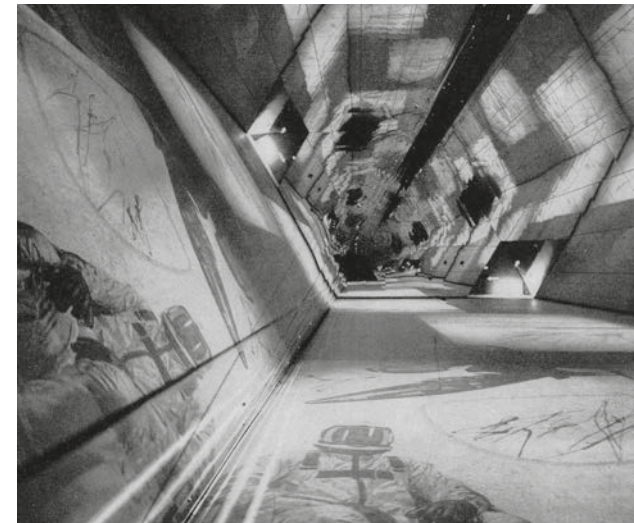


Fig. 35: The kaleidoscope, excerpt from: Triennale di Milano, *Triennale di Milano: tempo libero: esposizione internazionale delle arti decorative e industriali moderne e dell'architettura moderna: Palazzo dell'Arte al Parco, Milano, 12 giugno-27 settembre 1964*, 12 giugno-27 settembre 1964, Arti Grafiche Crespi, Milano, 1964, page 20

part of the original openness meant by the 'opera aperta' concept, slightly reducing the actual performative choices of the visitor, toward a 'scenic tempo of the route'⁴⁸³. Gregotti's concept was an 'opera aperta' apparently more based on the stage, rather than on the actors, whose choices were in reality dictated by machines providing 'false' instructions (or 'veline', the Italian term for propaganda news, which is the

⁴⁸³ ——— Gregotti, Vittorio, Ibid.

word currently used by the archives of the Triennale to define them). According to the texts collected within the publication *Tempo libero tempo di vita*, reproducing many of the original sketches, drafts and notes proposed by committee members, curators, exhibition designers and artists during the preparation of the exhibition, Eco's early proposal is meaningfully introduced as a series of 'indications for the script of an exhibition'⁴⁸⁴. A script that Canella, Damiani, Gregotti and Semerani only considered for 'possible use'⁴⁸⁵, highlighting how the stage would prevail over the script itself and not only over the visitor/actor. The latter, although 'at the centre of the action' was in fact meant to lose 'the distinction of self from the object, by being offered continuous alternative choices, i.e. forcing him to act'⁴⁸⁶. Apparently, very little was changed of this display concept even after the group split: an advanced sketch of the 'tubes room' is in fact acknowledged in this publication as the whole group's work and even the idea to 'force' the visitor by means of an apparent choice proves that the machines giving false instructions were consistent with the preliminary draft. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume that, to make visible Canella and Mantero's alternative 'ideological principle' and considering that a good part of the physical staging was already decided, an alternative labelling apparatus might have been the main difference. On the contrary, the final staging of the exhibition remained, just as desired, open to different possible interpretations in its bewildering form, not even preventing possible misunderstandings of the curatorial representation of leisure driven by 'the edibility and the selected marketability of the expression as pure information'⁴⁸⁷ that Canella and Mantero denounced. This risk materialised when, as early as the 2nd of July 1964, just three weeks after the opening of an exhibition that would last until the end of September, the Italian magazine 'Vie nuove'⁴⁸⁸, reviewed the exhibition and dedicated its front cover to its

⁴⁸⁴ ——— Triennale di Milano, *Tempo libero, tempo di vita, Note, studi e disegni sulla preparazione della 13 Triennale*, Giordano Editore, Milano 1964, page 36

⁴⁸⁵ ——— Triennale di Milano, *Ibid.*, page 43

⁴⁸⁶ ——— Gregotti, Vittorio, *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁷ ——— See: Bosco, Alessandro, *Ibid.*, page 66

⁴⁸⁸ ——— Founded by Luigi Longo (the Secretary of the Italian Communist Party from 1964 to 1972), the magazine was then directed by Paolo Bracaglia Morante and, unlike the Italian *Casabella* or *Domus* or the British *Design*, that also reviewed the exhibition, it was not a specialised magazine, although Virgilio Vercelloni, the author, was himself an architect and architecture historian who read and quoted the exhibition guide. The issue No.27 offers a wide variety of other subjects, from popular culture to sociological and political themes.

'novelties and abstruseries', briefly described as a 'gigantic amusement park'⁴⁸⁹. In fact, Vercelloni believed that the visitor could not but be 'amazed and disoriented' at the end of a journey mainly intended 'for specialists and initiates'⁴⁹⁰ and that a 'Kafkian myth' of leisure was presented here as the unquestionable model of a 'an advanced consumer society (such as the American one)' that would be 'repeated in our country as well'⁴⁹¹. What free time 'was not' had thus visually become an unquestionable Kafkian 'model'.

6.1.1.4 Length and readability

A relevant issue directly connected to misunderstandings and elitism in exhibitions is indeed that of the length and readability of the textual apparatuses. According to David Martin's 'guidelines'⁴⁹² (first published in 1997 by the Museum Association), two specific tests were suggested to check the actual readability of a label's text and its possible outreach: the Fry test and the Fog Index. The first one, originally developed by Edward Fry to help teach English as a second language, considers several parameters, like the average syllable number used for words and the number of sentences for every 100 words, to score the complexity and the readability of a text from 1 to 15. The simpler Fog Index, provides a readability rating according to the average words per sentence, considering 'very easy' and accessible to the 90% of the readers 8-word sentences (or shorter ones), while 26-word sentences (and longer ones) would just reach 5% of the readers. Similar guidelines were also provided by the Italian Museums' General Directorate in 2015, although the Italian institution limits the interpretation of 'legibility' to the actual possibility for the public to see and read the text, while the intelligibility of its content is analysed in a subsequent paragraph as 'accessibility'⁴⁹³. This paragraph, acknowledging the

⁴⁸⁹ ——— Vercelloni, Virgilio, *Tempo libero al luna park*, in: 'Vie Nuove', No. 27, 2nd July 1964, Villa franca Lunigiana (MS): Giuseppe Chiappini Editore, 1964, pages 48-51

⁴⁹⁰ ——— Vercelloni, Virgilio, *Ibid.*, page 49

⁴⁹¹ ——— 'Il mito cioè del tempo libero di una civiltà dei consumi in avanzato stato di sviluppo (quale quella americana) presentato come modello che dovrà indiscutibilmente ripetersi anche nel nostro paese.' Vercelloni, Virgilio, *Ibid.*, page 50

⁴⁹² ——— Campaign for Museums, *Design a label: guidelines on labelling for museums*, London: Museum Association, 1999, page 2

⁴⁹³ ——— Da Milano, Cristina, Sciacchitano, Erminia, *Linee guida per la comunicazione nei musei: segnaletica interna, didascalie e pannelli*, Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo Direzione generale Musei, Rome, 2015, available at: <http://musei.beniculturali.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Linee-guida-per-la-comunicazione-nei-musei.pdf>



Fig. 36: The audience of the XIII Triennale, excerpt from: Vercelloni, Virgilio, *Tempo libero al luna park*, in: 'Vie Nuove', no. 27, 2nd July 1964, Villa franca Lunigiana (MS): Giuseppe Chiappini Editore, 1964, pages 48-51

work by Louise Ravelli on 'Museum Texts' (published in 2006⁴⁹⁴), not only introduces the distinction between readability and accessibility, but also transfers the interpretation of a series of relevant language parameters to the Italian language in order to determine the overall complexity such as the 'lexical density'⁴⁹⁵. According to her studies, written texts tend to have higher density, although she does not strictly relate density to accessibility, but rather introduces this specific parameter 'to illustrate [...] how the perception of (some aspects of) complexity is constructed in language'⁴⁹⁶. Lexical density, thus becomes

musei-segnaletica-interna-didascalie-e-pannelli.-Quaderni-della-valorizzazione-NS1.pdf, [accessed 03.11.2022] page 55

⁴⁹⁴ ——— Ravelli, Louise, *Museum Texts. Communication Frameworks*, London: Routledge, 2006

⁴⁹⁵ ——— 'Lexical density is a measure of the proportion of lexical items in a clause. Note that this is not a measure of the number of words in a clause or a text; rather, it is a measure of those words which carry lexical content (as opposed to grammatical content [...]), and their proportion relative to one clause'. Lexical items which 'carry contents' (such as nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) and grammatical items that 'tend to be the 'glue' of the language' (conjunctions, prepositions, determiners/articles, and pronouns) are in fact generally used in very different ways in spoken and written texts (see: Ravelli, Louise, *Ibid.*, pages 55-56). Given the similarities between the English and the Italian grammar, the Museums General Directorate could easily translate this very same concept into Italian with no apparent changes.

⁴⁹⁶ ——— Ravelli, *Ibid.*, page 57

one of the multiple factors to handle. Another critical factor is in fact 'nominalisation' that Ravelli describes as a process of abstraction through which the actions or events that in spoken language frequently require a single clause, are condensed into one shorter element, like a noun (or another *lexical element*). This factor, since producing more synthetic and 'efficient' language, can enable 'a technical view on a subject area', but can in turn lead to jargon as well, when this synthesis happens 'unmediated'⁴⁹⁷. Therefore, Ravelli does not criticise nominalisation in itself, but rather the possible lack of mediation. This concept is also crucial to understand how some measurable parameters, such as the number of words and/or clauses per sentence, do not raise or diminish the accessibility of a text per se, but should be considered as elements of a whole, where lexical density and nominalisation also play a relevant role. To this extent the focus should thus be on balance, for 'short sentences can be as impenetrable as long ones, and conversely, a long sentence might be perfectly accessible'⁴⁹⁸. And as the text's accessibility depends on the balance between complex factors, regardless of the language⁴⁹⁹, Ravelli also criticises those 'simple rules' and 'magic answers' provided by a simplistic interpretation of 'Plain English' as 'the opposite of gobbledygook and of confusing and incomprehensible language'⁵⁰⁰. Not shying away from complexity, Ravelli states that although 'most people feel that they recognise 'gobbledygook' when they see it' and nobody 'would dispute the aim to make a text "easy to read"', still very 'little is actually defined' in these shortcuts to 'Plain English', seen as singular and 'monolithic'. Quoting Solomon and Brown, she opposes to monolithic interpretations the variable of 'the purpose, the subject matter, the relationship between reader and writer', as the key elements shaping different possible kinds of 'Plain English'. The outcomes of this interpretation highlight consistency over variety and allow different writing styles into play, alongside few mediated and explained technicalities. As a result, she criticises language tests, including the already mentioned Fry test, mainly because 'a simple count of length will always be problematic in language' and the Fog Index, because of its failure to take account of issues of meaning and comprehension. In spite of these limitations, as Da Milano and Sciacchitelli underline, many of these tests (including the 'Gulpease Index' for the Italian language) have recently 'made a

⁴⁹⁷ ——— Ravelli, *Ibid.*, page 61

⁴⁹⁸ ——— Ravelli, *Ibid.*, page 61

⁴⁹⁹ ——— For instance, in the Italian language, according to Da Milano and Sciacchitano, it would also require this difficult balance (see: Da Milano, Sciacchitano, *Ibid.*, page 56)

⁵⁰⁰ ——— Eagleson, 1990, cited in: Ravelli, *Ibid.*, page 64

comeback thanks to the development of information technology which has made their application easier⁵⁰¹ and thanks to several readability analysers available online for free use. Still, as Ravelli highlighted, and although several institutions around the world are still relying on these methods, given the partiality of the evaluation they can provide, they 'should be viewed, at best, with caution'. Even considering the future possible evolution of these digital tools into complete AI assessment (and even composition) methods, what Ravelli seems to be criticising is their very principle, i.e. a parametrisation of mediation. She does not exclude measurable parameters (e.g. lexical density), including the ones taken into account in tests and indexes, but she rather excludes simplistic solutions or automatisms in defining accessibility, because 'meaning is complex and multifunctional, and cannot be limited to a transparent notion of 'content''⁵⁰². Therefore, as Da Milano and Sciacchitano clarify, 'the only way to tell if a document is truly understandable is to test it on readers'⁵⁰³, and for this reason they suggest a three-fold evaluation process to start with an *ex-ante* analysis based on the exhibition's public, then an intermediate review of the work in progress with a small sample of visitors and finally the *ex-post* assessment. Yet, this method might seem of difficult application within the Italian institutions they are addressing, considering the seeming gaps of the assessment methods used in recent years. As they report, a 2008 survey on Italian State Museums showed how the 96% of the institutions had self-assessed their texts accessible also to a non-specialist public, while just one year later, when more than 4,500 questionnaires were administered by the MiBACt Research Office, only the 75% of the consulted visitors found the panels and labels 'readable', thus highlighting a possible '21% bias' in the institutions' self-assessment methods⁵⁰⁴. So, even if the three-fold test on a public seems to rely on a robust scientific framework, current practice might still require some simpler working tool (also including partial parametrisation) not to delegate mediation, but rather to gradually reduce the gap between institutional assessment and that of the public. Today, even commonly used software, like Microsoft Word, can count the number of words per sentence, the percentage of passive sentences, and calculate the Flesch-Kincaid level of a text. Serrell's

501 — Da Milano, Sciacchitano, *Ibid.*, page 83

502 — Ravelli, *Ibid.*, page 155

503 — Da Milano, Sciacchitano, *Ibid.*, page 84. This also resonates with Ravelli's approach: 'Rather than "measuring" issues such as complexity, it is better to "evaluate" the overall effectiveness of a text, by testing visitor comprehension.' (see: Ravelli, *Ibid.*, page 67)

504 — Da Milano, Sciacchitano, *Ibid.*, see page 35 and 37

suggestion to 'stay on track' and 'check the reading level occasionally'⁵⁰⁵ is neither an invitation to delegate mediation to AI, nor to rely on questionable tests, but rather a reminder of the relevance of a continuous self-assessment based on 'external' tools. Moreover, it is worthwhile considering that Ravelli's thorough analysis is focusing primarily on the accessibility, aside from the fact that a fully accessible panel text might still be too long to be read. Time is in fact a very relevant factor affecting any experience and interaction within an exhibition and, as Beverly Serrell clarified, the possible time spent in reading labels should indeed be considered. If, as she reports, the average reading time for a native speaker is 250 words per minute, labels and panels should be designed accordingly and so to allow the public enough time to look at the works the captions comment on and possibly to do different things⁵⁰⁶, e.g. to activate discussions amongst themselves, or join in planned performances or interact with installations. If we consider that the 59th Biennale in Venice in 2022 exhibited 1433 works and that the ones exhibited in the introductory section were frequently captioned with texts of about 230 words (title included), the expected visit time, according to opening hours, would have been three days just to read captions and with no time dedicated to the works, the introductory panels or any other activity (not even a quick lunch break). It is therefore likely that the curatorial team did not expect the public to read the labels (if not just a small percentage of them, or maybe partially), but even these very rough kinds of calculations, already highlight the necessity to consider that, altogether with text accessibility, the length of labels and panels will also shape the experience of the public. As far as the Biennale is concerned, it must be considered that the texts used for the labels were the same texts used for the short guide, thus allowing the institution to keep its final price lower than similar publications (in comparison with documenta 15, for instance, it costed about 30% less⁵⁰⁷). Yet, the increased economic accessibility of the catalogue probably reduced the panels and labels' general accessibility and the visitor's experience. As Beverly Serrell

505 — Serrell, Beverly, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, 2nd Edition, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, page 92

506 — 'There is a tendency for longer-time visitors to spend their time doing more things, not doing a few things in greater depth': Serrell, Beverly, *Ibid.*, page 98

507 — As of March 2023, the 59th Biennale's *short guide* (384 pages, 15 x 20 cm, English and Italian) is still available and sold at 18,00 € as well as documenta 15's *handbuch* (320 pages, 15 x 20,5 cm, English) at 25,00 € (as seen at: <https://store.labiennale.org/en/prodotto/biennale-arte-2022-short-guide/?v=cd32106bcb6d>; and: <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/handbook/> [accessed 01/03/2023])

warned, 'More text might please directors, donors, funders, founders, or curators who think that more is better' but the focus should be on the public and if 'research has shown repeatedly that visitors often, and in particular, skip the introductory label', supposedly the most important, this is not because the type is too small or the text speaks to experts, but 'because at three hundred or more words, they look too



Fig. 37: Anna Farley, *Britto Arts Trust*, visual panel, documenta 15, 2022, courtesy of documenta 15 and Anna Farley [Available at: <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/rethinking-labels-in-art-institutions/>]

long'⁵⁰⁸. To this extent, an increase in the use of visual tools (e.g., pictograms, diagrams⁵⁰⁹, mind maps...), integrated with non-exceedingly lengthy labels and panels, could indeed be a useful practice, not only to increase the overall accessibility of the texts, but also to improve the public's experience and the possibilities of further interactions and exchanges during their visit.

6.1.1.5 Labels as art mediation: Anna Farley's case study

Based in Hastings (UK), the art collective *Project Art Works* 'collaborates with people with complex support needs' and provides 'the conditions for a broad range of autonomous and collaborative practices with neurodivergent artists, who take part on their own terms'⁵¹⁰. One of their board members and associate artists, Anna Farley, is 'an autistic artist based in London' who recently experimented with new interesting visual approaches to design the text apparatuses of some relevant international exhibitions. The official page of the collective describes how she balances 'concept and craft' in her practice and 'makes process-based art using methods of sculpture, photography, sound, drawing, text, and participation'⁵¹¹. Award winner of the Autism Leaders List 2018, she recently created Sensory Backpacks and guides for the 2021 Turner Prize, the visual guide for the performance 'Set and Reset by Trisha Brown' held at the Tate Modern in 2022⁵¹², and some visual panels dedicated to several artists on the occasion of documenta 15: the outcome of a long work on 'how to communicate via labels in the exhibition'⁵¹³. Interviewed⁵¹⁴ on these recent works of her

⁵⁰⁸ — Serrell, Beverly, *Ibid.*, page 103

⁵⁰⁹ — Remembering Alfred Barr's diagram on Cubism and abstract art, albeit much criticised, visualisation has always proved a very useful tool in the arts curatorial practice, apparently underused, probably because of the different skills required (conceptual and technical altogether) and since it is time-consuming.

⁵¹⁰ — Project Art Works, *About Us*, 2022, available at: <https://projectartworks.org/the-organisation/> [accessed 01/11/2022]

⁵¹¹ — Project Art Works, *Anna Farley*, 2022, available at: <https://projectartworks.org/makers/anna-farley/> [accessed 01.11.2022]

⁵¹² — Farley, Anna, *Set and Reset by Trisha Brown*, March-August 2022, Tate Modern, London, visual guide. As of March 2023, the visual guide is still available at: https://www.tate.org.uk/documents/1738/SetandReset_VisualGuide.pdf [accessed 01.11.2022]

⁵¹³ — documenta, *Rethinking Labels in Art Institutions*, 1.9.2022, accessible at: <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/rethinking-labels-in-art-institutions/> [accessed 31.10.2022]

⁵¹⁴ — Farley, Anna, *Interview with Anna Farley: Captions and inclusivity*, 2022, see Annexes. According to her requests the semi-structured interview

own, she describes this experience as a *hybrid curatorial approach*, a 'practical tool' she also uses for herself 'to be able to understand a work'⁵¹⁵ and thus make it visible, 'distil it in a snapshot'. She is therefore an artist applying the methods and the very tools of an artist, while acting like a curator, at times within the same curatorial team. A practice which appears clearer when acknowledging that "artists" and "curators" are no longer functions that can be distinguished in each and every case', since 'both are involved as cultural producers in signifying processes'⁵¹⁶. In the case of Tate Modern, she had in fact 'full access to the curatorial team' (Fiontán Moran, Catherine Wood and Tamsin Hong), sharing the same limitations the whole team was subjected to, due 'to the [fleeting] nature' of performative art, but with the same possibility of open access to the archives (like the Trisha Brown Dance Company Archives in New York) and to meet the performers (Candoco Dance Company). Her texts and visuals thus represent the result of a process to 'best pack knowledge for people to get the most out of it, for [her] to get the most out of it, and then using that as a starting point for a wider audience engagement'⁵¹⁷. This process, that is built from the beginning to increase the accessibility of captions and labels, is therefore more related to a knowledge process (her work as curator) and to the specific skills and visual synthesis to distil it (as an artist and exhibition designer), rather than to Anna Farley's autism. The outcome has an expanded reach which is probably wider than expected by the institutions that commissioned Anna within their accessibility framework (the visual guide to 'Set and Reset' is in fact available online in the Tate's website, by opening the 'accessibility' contents). As Anna clarifies in fact, in her practice she is 'striving for inclusion, which is not centred on a specific minority': she comes at it from her 'perspective as a neurodivergent artist... or neuro-minority artist [...] because technically neurodiversity means everybody', but the goal is 'that as many people as possible can find a new window into the work [...] and it's not about necessarily creating something that's so [much] for one community that somehow it becomes less practical for others'. A concept which she further synthesises as follows:

with Anna Farley has been divided into three parts on the 21.10.2022, then on the 31.10.2022 and on the 08.11.2022

515 ——— Farley, Anna, Ibid.

516 ——— Richter, Dorothee, *Artists and Curators as Authors – Competitors, Collaborators, or Team-workers?* in: *Oncurating*, Issue 19, June 2013, Zurich, 2014

517 ——— Farley, Anna, Ibid.

'What we're trying to get towards is that there are just more options. And that they don't follow one mode of doing that. And as I always say when I'm doing training: what tends to work for an ASC community, which is autism spectrum condition, what tends to work for an autistic community tends to benefit everyone. Because a lot of it is fostered in very clear and succinct communication.'

According to her interpretation, there are elements of this methodology that necessarily belong to art practice, 'but it's also got elements of curatorial practice and access as curatorial practice [...], elements of invigilation, [...] elements of educational programming...[and] mediation'. And this is why she suggests that in the future the methodology might potentially be embedded in curatorial practice, because the visualising tools that it can produce are in fact not limited to a specific, restricted public and can on the contrary offer flexible solutions also to the time issues analysed in the previous paragraphs, allowing a more direct communication without requiring any loss of complexity.

7. Practice-based research (around the staging of exhibitions)

At the time in which this research started, 2019, this world seemed much different to me... and probably not only to me... Besides my collaboration with several public and private institutions in Italy, that were fostering research and dissemination in the field of art and design, an entire new universe of possibilities seemed to be unravelling. New museums and partner institutions were opening inside and outside my home-country Italy, and more and more exhibitions were being planned and staged. My city, Milano, was becoming a lively hub for fruitful international exchanges in a world that seemed smaller and in which, in spite of many relevant challenges, peaceful cohabitation, inclusion, fair, mutual relationships and sustainable development seemed to be achievable, if not at hand. More than six years have passed now since the outbreak of the pandemic crisis, a worldwide grief the eulogy of which still has to be written, and the many changes my research underwent in this period seem nothing in comparison to the likes of which the world has. The first 'victims' of the pandemic crisis were probably freedom of movement and her twin sister social exchange: since the first lock-downs, not only some cities and towns were subjected to restrictions, but entire networks of relationships and exchanges started inadvertently collapsing. In a few months, the long-lasting public debates on open borders were very easily swept away as in many countries even the walls of our houses were becoming impassable borders, thus leading to a substantial interruption of both short and long-distance travels and, along with it, the de facto suspension of all international (and national) dialogues based on free movement⁵¹⁸. Unfortunately, the new world that arose

⁵¹⁸ — Without considering the Chinese lockdowns, in the European context, for instance, the Schengen Agreement was de facto suspended in the blink of an eye. The so-called Schengen Area, comprising more than 29 countries with more than 450 million people, was sacrificed without any prior discussion or public debate, although even its establishing institutions, while withdrawing, still considered it 'pivotal in turning border regions into places of economic and social exchange as well as model regions for territorial cooperation and institutional innovation'. Thus, the European Parliament, officially lamented that not only social exchange was at risk, but that even freedom of movement had been 'severely affected by the full or partial closure of borders by Member States'. Whereas it will take time to fully understand all the consequences and repercussions of the 'the rushed and uncoordinated sudden closure of borders', the E.P. had already explicitly made clear that these measures had left 'people in transit stranded' and had 'severely' affected our very 'ability to cross a border for work, to provide and receive services or to visit friends or family members'. As a consequence, the Parliament ultimately stressed 'the detrimental effect that the closing of internal and external borders [...] had on the

from the so-called post-pandemic ‘rebound’ does not seem to have been ‘built back better’, at least not peace-wise. Uncertainty has today become the travel companion of almost any cross-boundary project and activity, but even the smallest local actions seem subject to a greater volatility than before, at least here in Europe, due to the current geopolitical situation that is directly impacting our everyday life as never before⁵¹⁹. Although it is not possible to demonstrate that the prolonged stopping of international exchanges to the detriment of mutual understanding increased confrontations eventually facilitating the outburst of new wars (or reviving old ones), it seems equally impossible to maintain that these crises presented any kind of a ‘chance’⁵²⁰ to improve our world. Similarly, I would not describe the

international business, scientific and tourism sectors’ advocating, ‘instead of [...] border controls’, for ‘measures to enable people to cross borders while ensuring maximum safety’. See; European Parliament, *European Parliament resolution of 24 November 2020 on the Schengen system and measures taken during the COVID-19 crisis (2020/2801(RSP))*, in: Official Journal of the European Union, C 425, 20 October 2021, Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union, 2021

519 — As the UN Secretary-General António Guterres repeatedly warned that ‘the risk of nuclear catastrophe is now at its highest level since the Cold War’, the world we live in, far from being greener or healthier, is today not only a more dangerous place than before the pandemic, but it is also becoming more and more unequal, according to Oxfam report on inequalities. The NGO, in fact, holds that equitable international cooperation and democracy itself are undermined by what it ‘describes [as] a ‘movement toward a global oligarchy,’ where the ultra-rich, often through their increasingly monopolistic corporations, shape global political decision-making and rules to enrich themselves while thwarting vital global progress.’ See: United Nations, *Warning ‘Risk of Nuclear Weapon Being Used Has Reached Heights Not Seen since Cold War, Secretary-General Urges Moving Back from Brink*, 7 June 2024, online, available at: <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sgsm22261.doc.htm>, [accessed 25.09.2024]; United Nations, *Guterres warns against nuclear catastrophe risk in message to Nagasaki memorial*, 9 August 2023, online, available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/08/1139557>, [accessed 25.09.2024]; Gandour, Jackson, Riddell, Rebecca, Ahmed, Nabil, *Multilateralism in an Era of Global Oligarchy: How Extreme Inequality Undermines International Cooperation*, 23 September 2024, Oxford: Oxfam.org, 2024 Oxfam, *World’s top 1% own more wealth than 95% of humanity, as ‘the shadow of global oligarchy hangs over UN General Assembly,’ says Oxfam*, 23 September 2024, online, available at: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/worlds-top-1-own-more-wealth-95-humanity-shadow-global-oligarchy-hangs-over-un> [accessed 25.09.2024]

520 — In Italy, for instance, former Prime Minister Mario Draghi promised a ‘greener’ and ‘more equal society’ to come...

pandemic and the subsequent crises as anything other than an unexpected and very unwelcome series of events that stimulated resilience and creativity just by accident, or, to be more precise, that forced the majority of us to be more resilient and creative. In a relatively quick span of time, in fact, the lockdowns led to a general stop within all Museums, public and private institutions for a long period, in my home country in particular, but also in the UK and throughout the world in general. Consequently, my original plans and my curatorial projects were redefined several times, until I defined the resilient format of the ‘Footnotes’ workshop. This was in fact conceived as a flexible tool allowing ‘instant exhibitions’ even in a time of freedom limitations to possibly allow for exhibition making in the case of strict lockdowns and it proved feasible during the second and third ‘wave’ of the pandemic even in countries under strict lockdowns such as Italy and China. Thus, in a period in which digitalisation was being promoted as a panacea and seemed the only possible solution for exhibition-making under the lockdowns, paradoxically, the relevance of the physical staging of an exhibition was confirmed thanks to a single basic tool like installing a caption. The resulting open air ‘footnotes’ to the reality around us in fact provided a level of flexibility and resilience that was compatible even with some of the most severe restrictions and offered a useful tool available in different contexts and situations around the world, regardless of the different sanitary limitations. At the same time (and as restrictions were being lifted), also middle-term and long-term actions could share the same methodology, a methodology based on the comprehension of the physical display as a bijective narrative sign system the meaning of which is co-created by the interaction with its viewers.

Roberts, Hannah, *Italy promises greener, fairer society in Europe’s biggest coronavirus recovery plan*, 25 April 2021, Politico, online, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-italian-prime-minister-mario-draghi-recovery-plan/> [accessed 25.09.2024]

7.1 Foreground, Middle-ground and Background practicen

Similar to the new understanding of the background, middle-ground and foreground of an exhibition derived from O'Neill's interpretation and re-defined in the first chapter, the practice articulated in this research is aimed at providing a possible example of three different levels of curatorial actions:

1 – the curatorial mediation based on the *footnotes* workshop format: a short term repeatable curatorial project relying on the work of young artists and designers around the world and not linked to a strict spatial definition, but always situated in a specific physical and social context (the 'foreground').

2 – the stage for visitors and community interaction of the *Atlas of Reception* exhibition; a middle-term tool for creative actions, knowledge, dissemination, and improvement of the main activities for hospitality and reception of the people in need residing in the city of Milano (the 'middle-ground')

3 – the long-term plan for the creation of the venues supporting the *Diffused Museum* of Bicocca (the North-Eastern suburban area of Milano) connecting the Bicocca University and its departments, with the territorial private and public institutions (like the Pirelli Foundation and the Municipality) and with local communities and associations (the 'background')

In fact, as highlighted above, the core of these actions mainly lie in one of the three levels, although, strictly speaking, each one of them inevitably included a foreground, a middle-ground, and a background of their own (both literally and conceptually). The foreground arguably offered more flexibility and therefore short-term available outcomes in comparison to the middle-term staging of a series of exhibitions (the *Atlas*) connecting artists, charities and municipality or the long-term foundation of a new museum (however light its 'structure' could be), inevitably linked to a wider social, urban, and architectural background, with its inherent rituality and liminal spaces⁵²¹.

⁵²¹ — As defined in paragraph 1.1.2.1.

And although the ideological forms of museum 'rituals' and habits have been criticised here, one of their elements, namely the visibility and recognizability of a main route as an organizing principle, is proposed as one of the prerequisites for further acknowledgement of the new institution. This research therefore advocates not only for a specific methodology and specific tools rooted in the materiality of exhibition narratives, but also for a possible and necessary graduality of intervention. It acknowledges that an essential element for the accountability of a curatorial plan (and of social action at large) lies not only in it being 'situated and embodied'⁵²² within a specific community and social context but also within a given timeframe.

7.1.1 Research procedure and Institutional Cooperations?

Different institutions, designers, and artists were involved (initially virtually and remotely, and later via physical presence) and participated in the following projects (always in presence). Although a focus was placed mainly on my city, Milano, the works presented included also several international locations, especially in the different editions of the *Footnotes* project, thus allowing for the establishing of a wider network and 'a larger vision': the joining of partial, located views, as a 'collective subject'⁵²³. This was possible mainly because of the availability of many young talents who were invited in the non-compulsory *Footnotes* workshop activities and who were based in different countries. The participants were enrolled in the courses of the School of Design of Politecnico in Milano (Italy) and of the China Academy of Arts in Hangzhou (China) and some of them therefore attended these elective workshops online from their hometowns, especially during the years 2021 and 2022, with in-presence activities to be fully restored since 2022 (in Italy) and 2023 (in China).

⁵²² — See: Haraway, Donna, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, in: *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988), Washington DC: Feminist Studies, Inc., 1988

⁵²³ — Haraway, Donna, *Ibid.*, page 590

As clarified, the definition of a network of instant exhibitions was not meant for the creation of any form of fixed or 'universal' meaning, but was rather rooted in the local communities as a useful test for the methods (and the specific tools) used in very different contexts and under different circumstances (with specific reference to pandemic restrictions). Besides, the common sharing moments started a network of local knowledges while highlighting the possible contrasts, contradictions and diverse understanding of an unprecedented situation that shared many similarities around the world. For the same reason the middle-term/middle-ground actions and the long-term/background ones were based locally with a potentially wider network and larger reach. The *Atlas of Reception* was in fact defined as a further flexible format, focusing on the possible actions to monitor and counter-balance inequalities and growing poverty within the city of Milan, shedding light on the local manifestation of a global issue. Therefore, a local stance required a wider net of conversation on the matter, which was offered by framing the exhibition as one of the 'official' events of the 'Design Week' in Milano. This, paradoxically, helped the local NGO (promoting the exhibition) to engage with its municipality: 'internationalisation' as a means to trigger institutional response locally. As for the long-term foundation project of the first diffused museum in Milano, similar dynamics and procedures are at play, where public funding is absent and unavailable to start (and grow) a new public cultural institution, recognition becomes one of its main objectives. Sadly enough, recognition and funding go hand in hand in the Italian context (as in many others), so scarcity and inequalities appear to grow in the cultural institutions as in societies, another issue potentially wider than its local appearance. In this case two public institutions were already directly involved: a public university (the first main sponsor of the Bicocca diffused museum) and the municipality (the actual 'owner' of all the main indoor and outdoor venues), thus making any possible action longer, more intricate and difficult. The possible access to private funding for instance, is particularly challenging for a public institution (especially at decision-making level), although in the context of Milano, private funding is offered as the main possibilities for cultural actions. For these reasons, the three levels of intervention presented different challenges and offered interesting knowledge on the local cultural field with a worldwide opening as a series of finished and progressively improving actions.

7.2 Footnotes (in the margins)



Fig. 38: *Footnotes editions* 2021-24: locations of the works (mainly in the cities of Milano, Italy, and Hangzhou, China)

The significance and value of the physical dimension of the exhibitions and, more generally, of the multifaceted programme of conferences, seminars and festivals, which have always been the basis of the most interesting opportunities for meeting and confrontation in the world of arts and creativity, has hardly ever been so underestimated, legally limited and hindered as in the years of the global pandemic. The worldwide phenomenon of lockdowns that saw many states decide to close and restrict almost any activity that was not defined as 'necessary' resulted in the immediate closure of museums, galleries, libraries, archives, foundations and almost any kind of cultural institution, private or public, in many countries around the world. The observation that such a large number of world governments, regardless of context and political colour, viewed arts (and culture in general) as 'unnecessary' elements of our lives and that digitalisation was more or less explicitly promoted as the only possible solution for the continuation of the cultural programmes, offered the starting point of the 'Footnotes' project, originally defined as *Footnotes (in the margins of the pandemic)*.

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, the word footnote does not only indicate 'an extra piece of information that is given at the bottom of a page, below the main text' but can also refer to 'an event or person that may be remembered but only as something/somebody that is *not important*'⁵²⁴. This second definition thus pro-

524 ——— Bradbery, Jennifer, Deuter, Margaret *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, available at <https://>

vided the ground for the title and helped shape the format of an elective short workshop open to an international group of students of two schools of art and design who were asked to design and 'install' a very basic 15-minutes outdoor conceptual exhibition made of just one caption (the *footnote*). At the end of the pandemic, considering that not all the countries lifted all their 'pandemic' restrictions⁵²⁵, and considering the possibility of investigating the concept of marginality that the format offered, the project went on as an interesting tool for short-term and loosely structured instant exhibitions not lacking a wider socio-political meaning.

7.2.1 The format

The first workshop took place in the month of April 2021 with a group of Italian and international students⁵²⁶ attending to the School of Design of Politecnico di Milano (mostly physically present) and in the subsequent month of June with a second group of young artists enrolled in the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou (by distance). Both groups

www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/footnote?q=footnote [accessed 08.04.2021]

525 — Although the World Health Organization had declared the pandemics officially ended by 5th of May 2023, as of June 2023, freedom of movement was not fully restored internationally. For instance, China required travellers a Covid-19 negative test within 48 hours before their flight (up to September 2023). In Italy also, several places, like hospitals, were still de facto unavailable to friends and relatives for visits or any kind of possible support to patients, regardless of their ward and their actual health conditions and several minor restrictions like face masks remained mandatory up to July 2024.

See: World Health Organization, *Statement on the fifteenth meeting of the IHR (2005) Emergency Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic*, 5 May 2023, online, available at: [https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-\(2005\)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-19\)-pandemic](https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-(2005)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-19)-pandemic), [accessed 30.09.2024]

Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, *Repubblica Popolare Cinese*, 29.8.2024, online, available at: https://www.viaggiare Sicuri.it/schede_paese/pdf/CHN.pdf [accessed 30.09.2024]

526 — The students, from different design majors, were mainly attending their third year of the Bachelor's degree, with a few students from the Master's degree courses who had also joined in.

were provided with the same basic information to define and install their captions and both groups were eventually shown the works of their peers.

Considering that throughout the period of the workshops the students were residing in different places, although mainly in the cities of Milano and Hangzhou, they were subject to different kinds of possible restrictions (from mask mandates and social distancing to curfews, closures and stay-at-home orders) and such variable regulations that it seemed impossible to define a common framework of limitations and therefore design a general strategy to help the students stage their basic real-life exhibition. Nonetheless, since several forms of outdoor activities were possible in 2021, even in those contexts still undergoing the strictest restrictions, open air locations appeared to be the last remaining possibility to plan and organise minimal live cultural interventions without infringing on any law. Moreover, and apart from the actual programme of these 15-minutes exhibitions, the very same idea of a public offline exhibition was meant to reaffirm the relevance of live cultural activities, raising them at least to the same level as going to supermarkets, neighbourhood jogging or taking dogs out⁵²⁷. The installation of these minimal hybrid exhibitions based on a physical environment even in times of pandemic restrictions, explicitly required a sustainable and almost costless creative strategy based on two of the most basic elements in exhibition design: location *and* captions.

The participants were in fact asked to simply print their 'footnotes' and to take a picture of these texts lying on the ground (or on some other existing support), as standard captions of different open-air places, describing partial, meaningful, situated knowledges at the margins of the pandemic.

The requirements provided to allow the definition of a common framework for the exhibitions, were the following:

1. To choose an outdoor *location and/or object* in their city
2. To choose a relevant short *quotation* for the *footnote*
3. To *print* the quotation in A3 format (a sample was also provided)
4. To *'install'* the quotation either on the ground or on some pre-existing support (with no permanent alteration of the context)
5. To leave it there for *about 15 minutes*
6. To take *high resolution pictures* of the *single-caption-exhibition* (a sample was provided)

527 — Such were the only activities allowed in Italy during the strictest lockdowns, which, as it seems, were also allowed during lockdowns in many other countries.

7. To take a picture of *possible accidental visitors*
8. To *remove* the text
9. To write an *abstract* explaining the exhibition

Finally, the pictures of both groups of young creative talents were collected to compose an overall digital exhibition in the form of a short video that was shown online and made available to all the participants, thus using the IT tools to facilitate sharing and connections otherwise impossible, rather than to substitute real life activities with

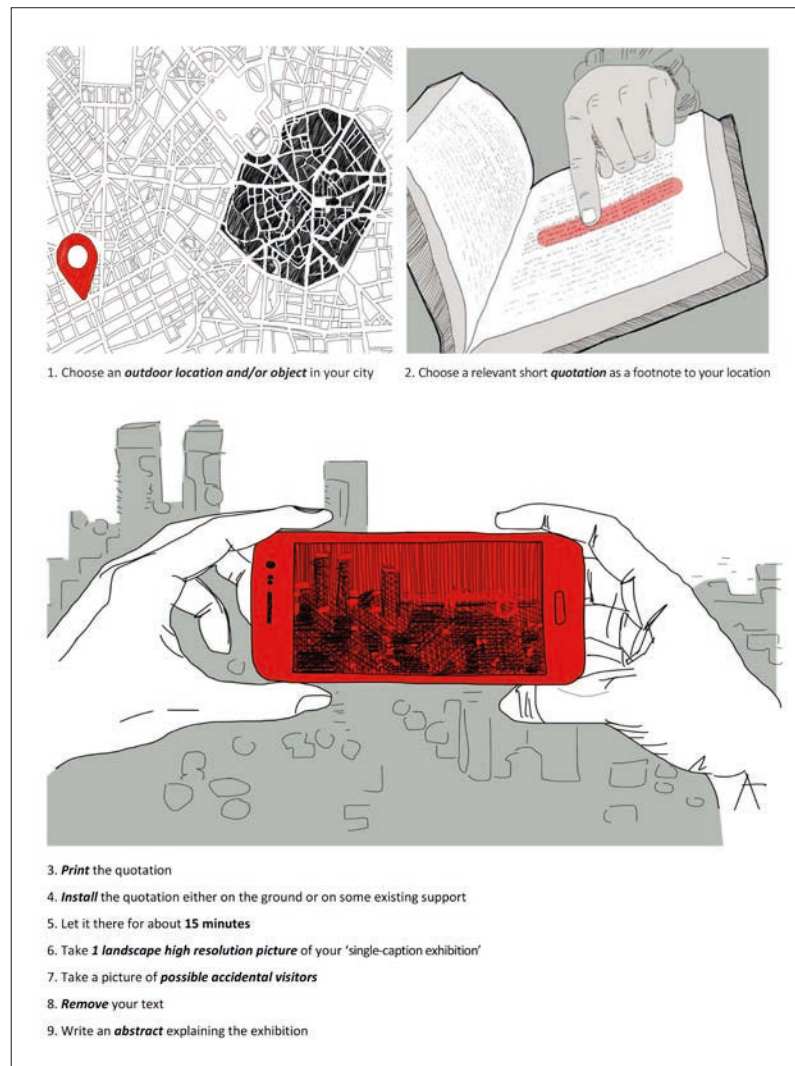


Fig. 39: The visual guidelines shared with the participants and prepared to describe the activity framework for the 'Footnotes'

digital ones. The proposed project was never intended as an argument against digitalisation (or de-materialisation), but it strongly reaffirmed the relevance and necessity of some form of bodily experience in exhibition-making. The slightly wider participation during the pandemic years (2021-2022) apparently confirmed this need. In fact, one of the first motivations of the participants largely remained that of reclaiming more space for 'possibility': possibility to move and wander, possibility for encounter and meeting, possibility to perform creative and social actions within a real context, and possibility to exchange concepts with other people outside the commodification of the digital platforms⁵²⁸. At the same time, given the elective nature of the workshops, the slight reduction of participants in the post-pandemic formats would justify an equal reduction of interest in a more socio-political interpretation of marginality outside of a period in which a much larger number of people probably felt marginalised by the sanitary restrictions (as it seems according to the abstracts attached to the 'Footnotes').

7.2.2 Flexibility and limitations within the format

The de- and re-contextualisation of the quotes in different visual perspectives contributed to widen the possible fields of application and the expected reach of the original texts, and although the participants essentially adhered to the spirit of the texts they had selected, the defined format also allowed possible misinterpretations of the quotes, whether voluntary or not, thus further expanding the conceptual flexibility as much as possible. The actual limitations were mainly in the few technical requirements for the final visual outputs that were originally intended to be more homogeneous, to simplify collection, filing and the subsequent steps of assembly, sharing and dissemination. In order to delineate these limitations, a live presentation was provided with extensive Q&A sessions to all the groups involved where specific

⁵²⁸ — Currently there seem to be a growing scholarly consensus on the nature of social media platforms not only as a crucial pillar of the 'surveillance capitalism', but also as a tool for the commodification of their audiences, as useful sources of free labour and providers of personal information. See for instance: Crain, Matthew, Cohen, Nicole, *Social Media and Audience Commodification*, in: West, Emily, McAllister, Matthew, (Edited By), *The Routledge Companion to Advertising and Promotional Culture*, London: Routledge, 2023

samples were also provided, further clarifying all the details (like the layout for the caption, the font, its size, the file extension, and the features of the pictures). Yet, several outputs did not meet all the requirements, because of the use of a different file extension (which prevented the quick assembly of the abstracts to share), or because of a different picture format and other possible changes that, in general, always required a longer processing time for the final video. In fact, given the collective nature of the project, some participants introduced one or more spontaneous changes in the format, at times resulting in even more complex exhibitions including more structured installations and even sculptures or short performances, thus shedding new light on the project. Nonetheless, even when not fully complying with the requirements, the 'footnotes' maintained their nature of alternative or extra meanings attached to the surrounding reality, as new visual narratives offering some subjective (re)-interpretation of a place, made visible and public in as many exhibitions as the authors involved.

7.2.3 Cultural background

If the word *Footnote* was an understatement reaffirming the relevance of a physical stage for culture and implicitly highlighting the relevance of small coordinated actions as 'extra pieces of information' at the margins of the (pandemic) world, the participants were also offered a possible theoretical guidance through a short quotation from Deborah Poole. According to the American anthropologist, 'the term 'margin' describes areas far from the centres of state sovereignty, in which states are unable to ensure implementation of their programmes and policies'. Apparently, this incapability that many contemporary states share to implement their programmes, appeared to be worsened by the pandemic, thus increasing inequalities and enlarging the 'margins'. At the same time, 'understanding how people perceive and experience the agency of the state; who is of, and not of, the state; and how practices at the margins shape the state itself are central themes'⁵²⁹.

Therefore, considering the wide territories (not only material) left at the margins by the pandemic, the participants were invited to focus on any of these, exiting the loop of a forced digitalisation pushed by

⁵²⁹ — Poole, Deborah, *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, School of Advanced Research Press, 2004

the restrictions, and by taking advantage of the few limitations imposed to outdoor activities. Besides quickly referencing the work and the research in the field of cultural anthropology, included Anna Tsing's⁵³⁰, the possible creative use of the 'margins' for both curatorial and artistic practice as in the case of Shubigi Rao⁵³¹ was hinted at, although no conceptual restraints were set, and any possible interpretation of the main title was allowed. Since these foundational references as core themes of 'marginality' intrinsic to the 'Footnotes' were not bound to the pandemic emergency, they offered an equally valid theoretical background even after the pandemic, fostering the new editions which now ideally required a more conscious understanding of the social nature of exhibition making and art at large.

7.2.4 Highlights from the participants

7.2.4.1 Footnotes (in the margins of the pandemic) - 2021

As expected, the final outputs were not homogeneous and presented many different themes and features, spanning both aestheticised interpretations and more critical ones. The theoretical and geographical perspectives were also very different, allowing partial insights on several communities during the pandemic: 63 *footnotes* were presented in total, majority of which highlighted the contexts of Milano and of Hangzhou, as the main seats of the young creative talents involved, but other partial views were also offered on Helsinki, Lisbon, Tabriz (Iran), Beijing, Lianyungang and Shanghai.

Some of the footnotes adhered to the theme of the margin from a social point of view compared to others, like the work of Linghui Li, who focused on a peripheral area destined for a construction site at that time surrounded by brick walls. She highlighted the sharp contrast between the 'expectations for the efficiency and goals of modern society' represented by the progressing construction hidden by the walls and the visible corn outgrowing them, ostensibly representing the invisible migrant workers living and planting different crops within the secluded

⁵³⁰ — Lowenhaupt Tsing, Anna, *From the Margins*, in: Cultural Anthropology, Aug., 1994, Vol. 9, No. 3, *Further Inflections: Toward Ethnographies of the Future*, Wiley, Hoboken, 1994, pages 279-297

⁵³¹ — The text and exhibition '*Written in the margins*' was mentioned.

area. She decided to pick up a quotation defining this divide as the separation of ‘the hasty modern [urban] society’ from the countryside — of ‘science and technology’ from ‘nature’: a literal wall between the ‘pedestrian in a hurry’ as she defined them, and the workers.



Fig. 40: *Footnotes (in the margins of the pandemic)*: locations of the footnotes in Milano, 2021

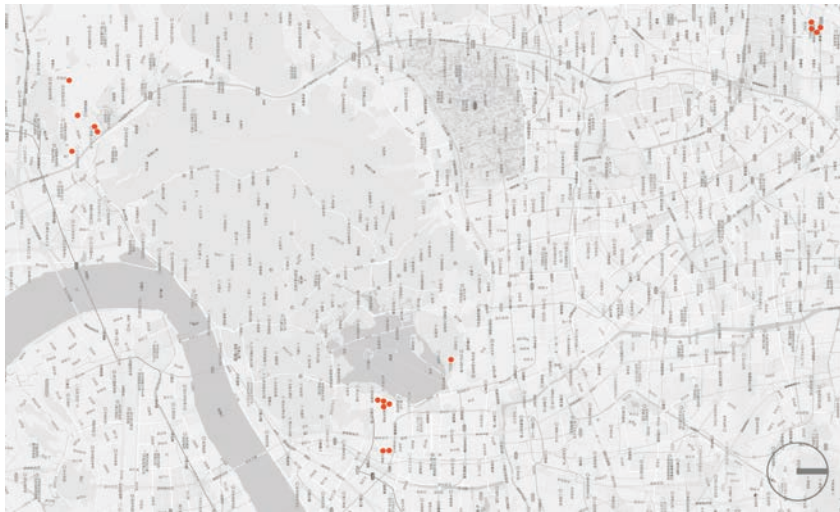


Fig. 41: *Footnotes (in the margins of the pandemic)*: locations of the footnotes in Hangzhou 2021



Fig. 42: Linghui Li, *Footnote*, Hangzhou, 2021

Several other Chinese footnotes instead, like Sun Ying's from Shanghai or Yudi Yan's from Lianyungang, and Kexin Shen from Beijing, recorded a marginalisation of human contact due to the sudden increase of internet driven home deliveries. The same phenomenon, albeit with slight differences due to the contexts, was depicted poetically (as Shen did) or with light irony, as in the picture by Yudi Yan. Yan chose the American writer Shannon Thompson to let us know that ‘we were together even when we were apart’, installing this caption in front of an express delivery cabinet which was ‘updated and rapidly developed under the epidemic in China’ to become ‘a social corner’, which, in her view, actually connects people narrowing distances, while at the same time pushing them far away from each other.

A less ironic view was Sun Ying's, who quoted Pingyao Jia, lamenting that ‘spring is always followed by winter’, with social distancing and takeaway services remaining even after the end of the restrictions. Kexin Shen shared a more poetic concept with her description of the new ‘secret codes’ used by the students in Beijing, who now resorted to fallen leaves to substitute the slips of paper where they wrote their individual codes to hand over for courier pick up. She meaningfully compared these secret codes to the conversational etiquette of the upper-class youngsters in London at the beginning of the 20th century,



Fig. 43: Yan Yudi, *Footnote*, Lianyungang, 2021



Fig. 44: Sun Ying, *Footnote*, Shanghai, 2021

a code that an outcast girl who had escaped from an influenza epidemic in Kenya could not decipher.

Deciphering the invisible was the key concept for Stefano Garagiola as well, who — with a more aestheticised and metaphorical photograph — decided to stage a quotation from the German painter Max Beckmann, bridging ‘the visible to the invisible’ due to the reflection of a puddle requiring an interaction from the viewer, in order to materialise. Less focused on the context used as an appealing industrial backdrop for the staging of the photograph, the concept was indeed



Fig. 45: Kexin Shen, *Footnote*, Beijing, 2021



Fig. 46: Stefano Garagiola, *Footnote* (detail), Milano, 2021

mainly focused on the final visual output. Similarly, Maria Castro from Lisbon worked on balancing black and white, light and shadow to emphasise Irene Yu's home commendation.

The audience of these instant exhibitions was mainly composed of friends who probably helped the authors in the staging as well. Yet, in some cases, unexpected interactions were triggered despite it being such a short period of time. In particular, the *footnote* by Laure Bourgain, that arose from a quote extracted from the song ‘We All Try’ by the musician Frank Ocean, which she installed in front of the artwork



Fig. 47: Laure Bourgain, *Footnote*, Milano, 2021

Coloris by Pascale Marthine Tayou, ‘caught the attention of plainclothes policemen who took [her] for questioning, since they saw [her] between the poles with [her] placard and thought it was a form of political protest’. Nonetheless they could neither understand nor forbid, and therefore they let her place her paper caption and take pictures, without ‘approving nor comprehending [her] actions’. Unsurprisingly, this was the only chosen location within a financially relevant district, right in front of Zaha Hadid’s newly built shopping mall, and the skyscrapers of the second and third largest European insurance companies (Allianz and Generali). No other questioning or issues were reported from any of the other locations, either in Milano (city centre included), or in the other European, Iranian, Indian, and Chinese cities.

Connected online, since travelling to and from China was essentially impossible, the Chinese students reported a situation similar to the European, with the strictest restrictions already lifted, but with some limitations remaining, which evoked a very similar sense of unease and general discomfort. The relevant increase of food delivery was for instance frequently associated to ‘imprisonment’ images: Yizuo Wang explicitly used this term while portraying the iron bars of a gate in Hangzhou, just as Sun Ying did in Shanghai, but underlining a sense of permanent loss rather than melancholically referring to the cyclic nature of the seasons and particularly, winter as an inevitable part of our lives that will not last forever. A similar sense of loss was signalled also by Xu Ke, reclaiming beauty to be given ‘back to us ordi-

nary people’ (a quotation from the writer Murong Xi) while Chen Ge held that ‘beauty is purposeless happiness’. Not only in China, but in Italy as in the other locations where the photographs were shot, these instant exhibitions were mainly meant by their authors as a small yet liberatory act to make visible a common but latent pain/loss and to possibly distance themselves from it.

7.2.4.2 Footnotes (in the margins of the pandemic) – 2022

The 2022 edition of the Footnotes project saw a slight decrease in terms of number of participants and, apparently — since many of the participants were exiting from the restrictions of the pandemic — the ‘therapeutic’ need to publicly express their discomfort, was diminishing too. In some cases, though, the pandemic shadow was still very present. Xuerong Cai, at that time residing in Italy, was still concerned about ‘his friends and all the citizens in Shanghai’ who had been ‘suffering from a lockdown since the end of March’, a lockdown that was also partly affecting Hanlu Ma’s city, Qingdao. Ma judged this as ‘highly controversial’, so much so as to now lead to ‘rethinking’ the ‘Chinese strict zero-Covid policies’. In fact, if the containment strategies adopted during the first pandemic waves were still assessed as a ‘remarkable success’, in 2022, instead, a ‘struggle’ was clearly emerging in order to find ‘a balance between disease control and enabling people to live normal lives’. Their footnotes were thus comparing the remaining restrictions either to a Kafkian novel⁵³² or to a ‘political poem’ against a ‘feudal’⁵³³ rule. Nonetheless, and apart from these crit-

532 — Ma, Hanlu, ‘*It is possible, said the doorkeeper, but not at the moment.*’ (Footnote, Qingdao, 2022). In her abstract she clarified that, ‘In previous waves, Chinese strict zero-Covid policies (the strategy of mass testing and quarantining, along with partial lockdowns), had remarkable success containing the pandemic. As Covid evolves and more transmissible variants emerge, however, the policies are being rethought. People now are struggling to strike a balance between disease control and enabling people to live normal lives. At the moment, everything is still under the shadow of lockdown. We are still waiting for the door which nobody knows whether and when it will open.’ Another participant, Moyao Sheng, also reported in her abstract a meaningful excerpt from Huifang Liu clarifying how the long-lasting discomfort could probably trigger unrest even more than the sudden ‘panic’ caused by the epidemic itself: ‘At the beginning of the epidemic, although we panicked, *we did not expect it to linger*’ (emphasis added).

533 — Cai, Xuerong, ‘*The awakening of spring cannot be imprisoned by a mere wall.*’ (Footnote, Milano, 2022). The attached abstract reads as follows: ‘Cai empathetically compared this image to a verse of an ancient



Fig. 48: *Footnotes (in the margins of the pandemic)*: locations of the footnotes in Milano, 2022

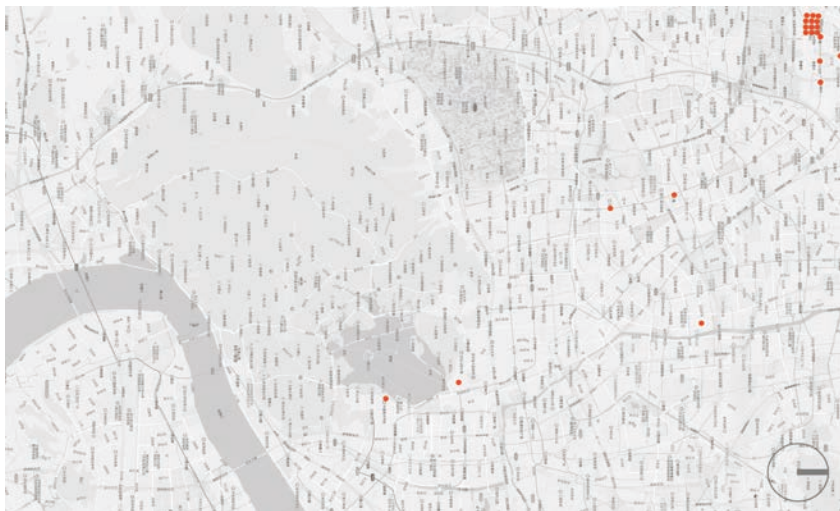


Fig. 49: *Footnotes (in the margins of the pandemic)*: locations of the footnotes in Hangzhou, 2022

Chinese poem, in which the poet wrote his experience of visiting a locked garden in spring with luck to spot a flower cross over the hedge. Some believes the poem was intended as a political poem against feudal dictatorship and government oppression. Even though locked, oppressed, imprisoned, the hope and ardour symbolised by spring never vanished.

ical remarks, the general tone and the subjects of the footnotes were slightly less melancholy, even though several works maintained a high level of gravity, like that of a contrasted, yet possible, 'spring regeneration' (not only Xuerong Cai, but also Marie Maruyama), or like the sorrowful representations of our 'third death' and 'light passage' on Earth⁵³⁴. At the same time, some hesitant metaphors of a possible 'rebound' or 're-start' appeared, with Julia Lancucka, symptomatically reflecting on the strenuous post-war reconstruction in Warsaw, and Giulia Macchini quoting Gramsci on the difficult transition between the 'old world' dying and the new one struggling to come to life (a dangerous 'time for monsters'). Despite these worries, under a bright blue sky with incoming clouds of war (Giulia Mondatore), the general situation in Milano started appearing less tense, also considering that nobody felt the need to question Elisa Bonopera. She installed her footnote on Wilfredo Prieto's rock sculpture 'Beso' within CityLife park, nearby Generali's and Allianz's skyscrapers that only one year earlier was controlled by the plain-clothed officers who questioned Laure Bourgain. Elsewhere, positive images represented the margins between shadow and light (the latter prevailing, according to Wenshu Hong quoting Charles Dickens in Hangzhou). A new perception of the surface surrounding us was also presented. Anna Albanese in fact reminded us, in Italo Calvino's words, that 'the surface of things is inexhaustible', thus preferring to linger on a sunny day's reflections of the Lake of Como on Daniel Libeskind's mirror-like sculpture, rather than venturing 'to seek what's underneath'. This appears as a 'carpe diem' philosophy (not necessarily consistent with Italo Calvino) very much rooted in the post-pandemic mood, as she clarified that 'there are situations in which to approach things with a bit of superficiality, not in a negative sense, but to dwell on the surface, understand it and appreciate it'. Similarly, Carlotta Salvatori investigated the 'surface' by quoting Kundera in her footnote on the entrance door of Piranesi's Villa Magistrale in Rome (with a logically reverse location to her quote⁵³⁵), an aesthetic choice that granted her exhibition a wide audi-

His friends and all the citizens in Shanghai, China have been suffering from a lockdown since the end of March, with little chance to enjoy the spring of the year, nor freedom of actions. However, Cai hoped their spirits of spring will not be imprisoned, yet grow and bloom.'

534 ——— Chen Ye quoting David Eagleman on a semi-abandoned tomb and Carlo Schoeneberger quoting Sergio Atzeni in an ancient Sardinian necropolis

535 ——— The footnote reads: 'On the surface there was always an impeccably realistic world, but underneath, behind the backdrop's cracked canvas, there lurked something different, something mysterious or abstract.' Reversing Kundera's text, Piranesi's doorway in Rome, chosen for this



Fig. 50: Hanlu Ma, *Footnote*, Qingdao, 2022. The Chinese text on the board reads 'Bingo Amusement Arcade. Welcome!'

ence even in fifteen minutes that was meant to promote a 'new perspective', or a next future to come and to overcome 'the obstacle and see something unexpectedly beautiful'. More existentialist in tone and quoting Albert Camus⁵³⁶, with a similar future-oriented attitude, the footnote by Lei Ming was moved by an explicit (and fatalist) desire to get rid of the pandemic situation, thus portraying a now deserted temporary structure installed in a residential neighbourhood in Hangzhou soon after the Chinese New Year (February 2022) for instant Covid testing. Finally, several participants approached their instant exhibitions staging installations and ready-made sculptures (like Lorenzo Valentini, Ding Shiming or Moyao Sheng) in order to possibly trigger interactions with the viewers. For instance, they took inspiration from Marina Abramovic's *Imponderabilia* (Filippo Valenti) or poetically offered candies, since a 'candy doesn't have to have a point' (Wei Lin quoting Roald Dahl). The most positive of these installations was Moyao Sheng's, who went as far as envisioning 'the existence of a 'health virus': neither a medicine, nor a vaccine, but an ideal infective cure made of blue and green balloons that could heal 'and spread health to others through [...] contact' so that social distancing would now be banned in favour of social proximity.

instant exhibition, shows an impeccable and realistic view of Saint Peter's dome behind a more mysterious (and abstract) keyhole.

536 ——— 'But what does it mean, the plague? It's life, that's all', from: Camus, Albert, *The Plague*, London: Penguin, 2016



Fig. 51: Lei Ming, *Footnote*, Hangzhou, 2022 ('But what does it mean the plague? It's life, that's all')

7.2.4.2 Footnotes (in the margins of the pandemic) – 2022

In the years 2023 and 2024 four groups of participants - two in Milan and two in Hangzhou - were involved in the non-pandemic editions of the project: *Footnotes... (in the margins)*. The cohorts in Milan were, as in the previous editions, more international in their composition than the groups in Hangzhou, where only Chinese citizens participated and where the workshops happened for the first time with physical presence. The outcomes were shared live during the final general exhibitions collecting all the works and projects created within the larger framework of the China Academy of Art's summer school's collaborative international workshops. It was therefore possible to display the Footnotes (an 'exhibition of exhibitions') to a wider group of scholars, students, and professionals at the end of the summer school and within CAA's Liangzhu Campus exhibition area and main conference hall. Facing a totally different situation, all restrictions now lifted (apart from minor ones), the footnotes became more general, at times optimistic, but at the same time much less personal and specific, both in their tone as in the topics presented. Giulia Colli for instance, elaborated on a kind of visual pun with a footnote lying on the ground while inviting the viewer, in Stephen Hawkins's words, to look up at the stars (and 'our dreams'). Martina Accetta worked on a visual oxymoron by relating one of Gesualdo Bufalino's 'words/bluffs' to a telescopic lens for tourists in Bergamo, here contrasting mass tourism and one of its most fetishistic devices by comparing it to 'the lenses, indicators of an intelligent myopia' (quite unexpected for an Italian audience was the

association of the Sicilian poet and writer with a heritage site in Bergamo, Northern Italy). One of the most personal works installed in Milan, was Turkish student Ezgi Deniz Ergin's, who took as pretext a view of the MiCo Congress Hall in Milan to investigate the topic of the emergency procedures and consequences of the earthquake that hap-



Fig. 52: *Footnotes... (in the margins)*: locations of the footnotes in Milano, 2023-24

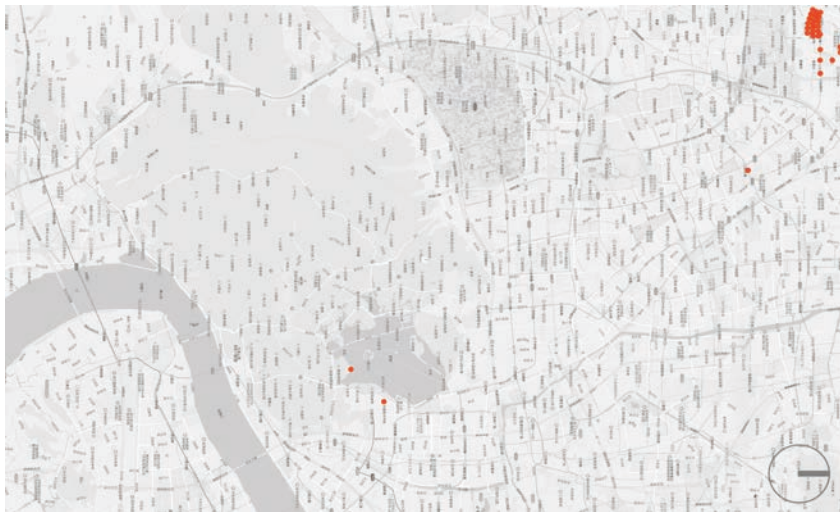


Fig. 53: *Footnotes... (in the margins)*: locations of the footnotes in Hangzhou 2023-24

pened in South-Eastern Turkey on the 6th of February 2023. The building portrayed in the photo, with its seemingly twisted exterior canopy designed by Mario Bellini which looked as if it had been struck by a harmless earthquake (an architecturally deconstructivist building) had been selected as the main venue for the 18th World Conference on Earthquake Engineering to come. So, her photo related it to an opposition MP's tweet criticising the official Turkish State narrative of the earthquake, described by news outlets in the country as a disaster that caused a much smaller number of victims (50.783) in comparison to the '183.000 credit cards' that resulted in them not being used as mentioned in the footnote⁵³⁷. Safety, politics, and state narrative here overlapped at an international and national level, with a footnote evidently written in the margins of the presidential campaign in Turkey (this instant exhibition happened about three weeks before the 2023 Turkish general elections).

In 2023, another politically relevant *footnote* was Alice Castelli's quotation from the American abolitionist poet James Russell Lowell ('compromise makes a good umbrella, but a poor roof') which she ironically attached to the temporary rooftop of a student's tent installed in the public park in front of Politecnico's Rectorate in the midst of a student protest against expensive rent and a general lack of public housing policies, especially for non-residing students. Sadly enough, but quite unsurprisingly, the public institutions that were all asked to take action and find possible solutions to this issue have

537 ——— 'On February 6th 2023, Northern Turkey and Syria were hit by two major earthquakes: 7.8 and 7.7 that resulted in thousands of deaths and a lot of people having to relocate. It showed how unprepared these cities were for an earthquake, despite being in a dangerous fault line. The official numbers of Turkey state that 50.783 people lost their lives. This number, however, contradicts some other statistics, shared by politician Turhan Çömez: the number of people who did not use their phones after the earthquake, and the number of credit cards that were never used after. Comparing it with the number of houses that were damaged, the official numbers do not seem realistic. The cities that were affected got very little help in the first 48 hours, causing many people to die under the wreckage in the cold. There were almost no assembly parks, forcing people to be trapped in destroyed illegally built buildings. The 18th World Conference on Earthquake Engineering 2024 will be held in Allianz MiCo, the building we see behind the park. No doubt, these earthquakes will be a main discussion point, emphasising the importance of well-regulated constructions and assembly parks. 'After the earthquake, 300 thousand GSM subscribers have not used their mobile phones, it was also reported that 183.000 credit cards were never used. Approximately 700.000 houses became unusable. When we take these into account, don't you have more questions?'.

failed to take responsibility. The collective protest is still ongoing and tents appear every now and then in Milano, where the activists formed a wider network connected to international groups whilst still committed to finding permanent solutions, rather than ‘compromising’ temporary, individual solutions.

Less political in intent and more intimate and psychological, Yasmina Ghandour’s footnote made visible Sylvia Plath’s struggle with mental health and those ‘small thoughts buried and torturing us



Fig. 54: Deniz Ergin, *Footnote*, Milano, 2023 ('But what does it mean the plague? It's life, that's all')



Fig. 55: Alice Castelli, *Footnote*, Milano, 2023



Fig. 56: *Footnotes... (in the margins)*, 7th July 2023, China Academy of Arts, Liangzhu Campus, Hangzhou

within' so that the medieval 'Palazzo della Ragione' in Milan's city centre, with its echoing arches, would transform into a form of public, still unheard, whispers. In Hangzhou the non-pandemic footnotes were less political and more intimate: the format, on the contrary, was public, thanks to the final show, where every student could exhibit their work. Within the context of the summer school's final show, some negotiation with the organisers was needed in order to find a suitable way to show all the works instead of a selection. Following the principle declared at the beginning of the workshop that, apart from the required 'footnote' structure, no restriction would be imposed on the contents and quotations, no selection was thus made for the final exhibition. This choice resulted in limited visibility of the footnotes, due to the limited space available for the display in the context of a big participatory event. In 2024, CAA's final exhibition took place in the form of a live video projection presented in the University's auditorium (and made available on their platform). Due to the time constraints of this format, the visibility of the footnotes was reduced to a short projection of a few seconds amidst all the projects and activities delivered by all the cohorts during the summer school (about 525 participants in total). As in 2023, the chosen quotations and their staging mainly dealt with general topics, frequently positive in their tone (like Hangyu Wu's) but with a transversal prevalence of works based on the transience of existence itself (like, in Milan, Yuan Li and Antonia Goycoolea, but also Paula Garzon on 'movement' and Zile Wang in Hangzhou). It is not unlikely that this common topic was also to some extent con-



Fig. 57: Giada Insinna, *Footnote*, Milano, 2024

nected to a post-pandemic search for motivation, with some participants opting for more existentialist takes in Europe and more fatalist and reassuring ones, in China (not only Hangyu Wu's, but Yibo Yang's, Li Sijia's, Xinrui Lu's and Zile Wang's too). Although the two positions probably expressed a very similar point of view and a similar implicit memory of a distressing period, a relevant difference in tone was maybe due to both the actual material and cultural context. Artists in China were in fact frequently quoting the ongoing summer showers in Hangzhou as something unwanted, to be faced 'just like [with] fate'⁵³⁸: a very different interpretation of the very same natural cycles, experienced in Europe. Antonia Goycoolea, for instance, preferred to strike the accent on the continuous death⁵³⁹ of the trees (in Ursula Kroeber Le Guin's words) while the heavy rain was mainly presented highlight-

⁵³⁸ ——— Yang Yibo, *Footnote*, Hangzhou, 2024: "The future is like the heavy rain in midsummer, it hits us with umbrellas before we even have time to hold them." – Cixin Liu. "The heavy rain in summer seems to never make any forecasts, just like fate, it can be unexpected and inevitably cause injury and frustration. If we don't have time to hold an umbrella, we strive to become our own umbrellas, just like the pale-yellow mushrooms on a damp grassland, small but dense. The future is imminent, and everyone needs to bravely open their arms to face challenges. Fate whispers to the warrior, 'You cannot resist the storm.' The warrior responds in a low voice, 'I am the storm.'"

⁵³⁹ ——— Goycoolea Antonia, *Footnote*, Milan, 2024: 'What goes too long unchanged destroys itself. The forest is forever because it dies and dies and so lives.' (quotation from Ursula Kroeber Le Guin's *Tales from Earthsea*)

ing the regenerative phase of the life cycle in the footnotes in Hangzhou⁵⁴⁰. In both cases, and despite a common invitation to investigate 'the margins', most of the works tried to investigate general topics. Even Giada Insinna's quotation from Renzo Piano, written in Italian and apparently expressing a specific political stance on suburban areas in Milan, was staged in an aestheticised manner, with a technically appealing black and white shot, that resulted in diminishing the impact of her criticism and transforming an abandoned park area in Milan into a romantic site.

7.2.5 Main findings

As already mentioned, the *Footnotes* (not only the ones that could be included in this text, but all of them) were an 'extra piece of information' relevant to their contexts and authors *per se*, since they could share as many subjective interpretations to annotate marginal situations with varying standpoints, but always from within and co-existing with those communities. Moreover, for many participants, the project offered the opportunity to stage their first exhibition and share the outcomes both with a local and an international audience, thus possibly triggering further interpretations and actions (at a network level). As already highlighted, the project was meant to operate at different levels: within local communities, the main objective (if not a proper 'teaching' objective) was to show and experience, especially during the pandemic, simple practices to restore some of the most basic rights embedded in curating and exhibition making such as the freedom of movement, the freedom of expression, the freedom of assembly, and the freedom to participate in the cultural life of the community sharing one's creativity. Needless to say that the latter, acknowledged in the

⁵⁴⁰ ——— Li Sijia, *Footnote*, Hangzhou, 2024: "The best thing one can do when it's raining is to let it rain." - Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. "The main point of this saying is that in the face of the inevitable situation, even if we can't change the weather, we can still choose an optimistic and positive attitude to face it. It encourages people to find joy and positivity in adversity, transforming their perception of the environment by simply enjoying the rain. Convey this optimism and positive attitude, there by lifting the mood of the people and the spirit state of the community. My aim is to inspire and inspire visitors in the park through this project, so that they can learn to positively face difficulties and challenges in their daily lives"

universal declaration of human rights of the United Nations, could not simply be 'digitalised', being rights of a mainly social nature, thus requiring a community and in-person relationship for their actual fulfilment (freedom of movement included). Community-wise, the footnotes also triggered specific (re)actions that sometimes went beyond the expected reach of the single exhibitions. It is not possible to determine their effects in full on plain-clothed policemen or on the many visitors that stopped to read the footnotes and at times to take selfies, or maybe to interact with the installations as it was implicitly intended. All the direct interactions that were recorded further proved that this tool could cross different levels of meaning and reach different audiences, like more structured forms of exhibitions. And what is more relevant is that these interactions and forms of active participation in the meaning-making process of the exhibitions was allowed even by very basic tools. Lastly, this was probably one of the main findings/teachings as highlighted by several participants, like Marie Maruyama⁵⁴¹, who realised the 'possibilities' of meaning-making by means of an original choice through costless strategies. Similarly, Kivisik Kertu admitted that 'the project pushed [her] out of [her] comfort zone, as [she] chose a public place with rapid traffic. The most important outcome was the act itself. It was a great reminder of how we, creators and designers, can create space disruptions and acts of surprises with simple tools'. Space disruption and the possibility to 'alter' our routine context was also investigated by Shivani Sankar who conceived her footnote as a transitional object that could partially 'shift the sense of reality' of the viewers simply by installing her piece of paper on a metro turnstile. Its very presence caused some form of reaction even from the commuters who did not read it and simply avoided that turnstile⁵⁴². Giulia Macchini, while focusing on the 'people reacting' to her

541 ——— 'Through this project, I realized that the interesting point is that it has many kinds of possibility to make a message even without much cost, just to add an original interpretation.'

542 ——— The footnote was placed right below the ticket feeder of the validation machine at a metro station. The intention was to create a moment of tension between people and the space, one that could potentially break or question their monotony. [...] for someone whose daily commute is the metro, the validation machine acts merely as a momentary interaction, a second in a rigorously instinctual system. Even the brief satisfaction of entering the station is quickly surpassed by the need to catch the train. So, when I placed this footnote on this object of passage, I noticed how different people interacted with its 'altered context'. Some seemed unbothered, in a hurry, with purpose or distracted by their phones or accomplices. Others, took a moment to read the note, develop a brief understanding of whether it was a priority (or maybe a moment of self-reflection) and proceeded. A

installation, positively commented on the possibility to 'shape the world of tomorrow'⁵⁴³ also by means of small actions at the margins of the main narrative and by relating 'the exhibits to the space and environment'⁵⁴⁴. In brief, the participants experienced creative installations of their own reflecting on the relevance of the location, of the specific position of an exhibit and, finally, of the multi-layered possibilities⁵⁴⁵ offered by a short text to convey their concept: a basic form of exhibition-making almost always available and complex enough (in narrative terms) to foster the interaction of the possible visitors (both locally and at a wider network level).

7.3 Middle term actions: The Atlas of Reception

As previously clarified, one of the main findings of Manifesta Palermo in 2018 was probably the *Atlas* as a bijective tool for a deeper knowledge of a location to trace a preliminary action plan. To this extent, when a charitable institution based in Milano decided to stage their first exhibition in order to widen their reach in the city, the curatorial plan proposed and agreed upon with the support of its board of members was the 'Atlas of Reception'⁵⁴⁶. More than a title, the exhibition

significant number of people seemed to recognise just a piece of paper, took a mental note to avoid it and moved to the next machine to not obstruct their drill. Maybe this 'installation' [...] shifted their sense of reality.

543 ——— 'Working at this installation and seeing people reacting to it, made me reflect even more on how with our actions we are shaping the world of tomorrow.'

544 ——— Shiming Ding: 'I learnt how to quickly relate the exhibits to the space and environment according to what I wanted to say in the introduction.'

545 ——— Giulia Mondatore: 'The same expression associated with different contexts can assume different meanings, or be adapted to describe various situations, evoke memories or feelings, or stimulate reflection.'

546 ——— The exhibition, held in Milan, was named in Italian '*Atlante dell'Accoglienza*' and was loosely translated into English, for the international visitors, as 'The Atlas of Hospitality'. It is here renamed as 'The Atlas of Reception', although the former translation was probably more consistent with the actual actions of the promoting organisation and the objectives of the display. In fact, the organization

was not in fact planned for mapping a static situation, but rather as a replicable exhibition — a progressive format meant for continuous updating. This would be in order to know the various activities already delivered by public and non-profit institutions within the city, for the support and protection of people in need, to foster better coordination between them and ensure more integrated and comprehensive actions. According to the main features highlighted in the analysis of Manifesta 2018, the Atlas of Reception, was thus planned to be:

1 – *Participatory*: helping the promoting institution to activate both its volunteers, public partners, and private organisations to participate in the project for its development, dissemination, and future evolution.

2 – *Territory-focused*: refusing general statements and all-encompassing declarations of intents on issues of migration and rising poverty, and rather focusing on the specific situation in the city of Milano to assess the solutions at hand and foster possible improvement.

3 – *Cross-disciplinary*: involving different kinds of studies and approaches relevant to the context and taking advantage of the international public of Milan's 'Design Week'.

4 – *Analytical*: including different sets of data on reception, including the City's quantitative research together with qualitative surveys and data from direct observation.

5 – *Different scales*: presenting the research to a wider audience not only residing in Milan in order to trigger possible fruitful exchanges and for a possible wider network of reception.

6 – *Propositional*: introducing new knowledge to include neglected areas and start a dialogue within the city involving institutions and activating new resources.

is not involved in the first reception of migrants, but rather they intervene in second and third level reception and *hospitality* at large, for instance by providing weekly food and apparel, short-term temporary lodgings, education, retraining and placement support.

7.3.1 The promoting institution and the main objectives of the exhibition

The promoting institution, 'La Cena dell'Amicizia' ('*The Friendship Dinner*', or simply 'the *Dinner*'), is a non-profit voluntary organisation that was founded in Milano in 1968. Originally helping the homeless by organising a weekly dinner and food distribution, in time it became a more structured organisation, increasing its actions as, unfortunately, the number of people in need in the city was also growing. Today the '*Dinner*' can rely on the support of six full-time qualified social workers and a variable number of volunteers (of about a hundred) actively committed to tackle different forms of marginalisation and supporting different categories of people. Apart from the weekly 'Friendship Dinners', the volunteers also organise food distribution and a weekly wardrobe service besides managing several small-sized day and night shelters, mainly focusing on second and third level reception for the support and re-integration of marginalised people. Moreover, while supporting the education and training of its volunteers, the organisation fosters 'awareness-raising activities aimed at citizens of Milan and beyond' and 'actively participates in the cultural debate on the topic of serious marginalisation'⁵⁴⁷. Therefore, the possibility to stage an exhibition on the occasion of the Design Week to be held in Milano from 16th to the 21st of April 2024, appeared to be the perfect setting for a cultural debate on marginalisation that could cut across city limits while remaining anchored in contextualised and long-term actions. The Atlas of Reception was thus the very first concept to be discussed with the co-curator Barbara Pietrasanta: the example of Palermo had shown that an atlas could be a flexible tool not necessarily limited to mapping activities but also open to possible creative actions and cultural exchange. The Atlas of Reception would then form a framework open for future development, and intended, even in its first edition, as a bidirectional form of communication; on the one hand showing to a wider public the places and the actions already organised on the ground to tackle marginalisation within the city, and on the other hand offering a public 'blackboard' for collective demands and for a wider, shared knowledge. Opposed to a static concept of mapping, this Atlas would thus be a collection and collector of information, based on a finished set of data (provided by the municipality and the association) but essentially unfinished and open for continuous updating.

547 — See: Cena dell'Amicizia, *Che cosa facciamo*, online, available at: <https://www.cenadellamicizia.it/che-cosa-facciamo/>, [accessed 30.09.2024]

Unlike the Palermo Atlas, which still served as a useful reference, and despite the striking difference in terms of available budget, the objectives of the Atlas of Reception included:

1 – Bottom-top planning

As already highlighted, the main limits in Manifesta appear to lie in its structure and in a kind of planning that, regardless of the curatorial plans, striving for a wider and deeper involvement of the residing communities, is inherently top-down and in some way detached from its temporary contexts. Being a European travelling biennial, Manifesta is always inevitably planned from outside of the hosting communities, the main decisions being taken in the Dutch headquarters and in closed-session meetings with mayors and/or ministers, this at times causing a possible failure to trigger more permanent actions/improvements at local level as curators generally intend (at least in the case of Palermo). The collective nature of the promoting organisation, on the contrary, helped in this case to promote an inverse planning structure: from the city context and the volunteers to the organisation's board and the curators, to finally call to action the local government (and possibly the regional and national government).

2 – A small-to-large scale strategy

If Manifesta projected the international public debate about migration in the city of Palermo, a 'universal' vision only partially considering the local situation, where migrant communities, actually marginalised, were aesthetically idealised in appealing photo reportages, the Atlas of Reception was more simply based only on the actions and events organised on the ground. In narrative terms, the Palermo Atlas remained at text (wonderfully written, with a relevant budget) and story level, especially aiming at a positive 'colouring' of the latter, but without any actual possible intervention at fabula level (real events), thus resulting, as the curators acknowledged in a vanishing legacy: the aforementioned idealisation of marginalised communities. On the contrary, a small-to-large scale strategy was mainly intended — also considering the low budget — to present the events and the actions (fabula) without excessive emphasis on the proposed story and on glitzy displays (text). Thus, the exhibition would offer an opportunity for a more factual debate, based on the concrete actions already available in the city, presented to the international community of the *Design Week*, discussing possibilities and avoiding idealised visions.

3 – Visual and creative tools to offer a further support element

Creativity, rather than as an objective per se, was meant as a tool to gain a different view and explore new concepts and possibilities to confront inequalities. To this extent in fact, it was important to clarify that a more factual and less idealised strategy does not necessarily have to neglect the positive impact of an ideal and more comprehensive vision, but could on the contrary weave ideal proposals on a more factual web of actions. In the case of Corsico, for instance, site-specific performances were organised based on a real urban web, to form an atlas of recollections and at the same time shape a new perception of those places.

7.3.2 Context and location

Although it might not be immediately evident in the case of Milano, as for other cities around the world, very different contexts are at play, generally with few chances of mingling one with the other. Differing from the example of New York as analysed by Mieke Bal, Milano is no 'foundation city'⁵⁴⁸ and a similar urban narrative interpretation could be misleading, and would inevitably be fragmentary. In the frequent overlapping of different ages, each fostered different ideas of the city (and of its society), that met, clashed, and eventually reconciled with one another, many times in seemingly odd ways. To start from an apparently Celtic circular layout, no real trace of its Celtic origins can plausibly be acknowledged, except, quite likely, the name 'Milan'⁵⁴⁹ itself.

⁵⁴⁸ — The Italian term, 'città di fondazione' (*foundation city*) is used here instead of the more common 'planned city', used in the English language, in order to remain consistent with the Italian context. In Italy, the concept of a 'foundation city' as an ideal, at times utopian, and very specific kind of planning based on an all-encompassing design, has generally little to no connection with the common contemporary practice in urban studies.

⁵⁴⁹ — The origins of the city have in fact been attributed, since Livy, to the Celts, although the etymology of the city, that Cesare Cantù also acknowledged as Celtic in his 'History of Milan', is still debated. Undoubtedly derived from the Latin 'Mediolanum', the meaning of the name was frequently compared to those of other Gallic settlements. Names associated to the political and religious centres generally built in the 'middle of the land' where a group of Gauls would reside (like, in France, Melain, Malain, Medillan, Medi, Madion, and many more, according to Cantù). Conversely, a famous medieval bas relief, the representation of a boar visible in the city centre's medieval town hall,

Even its status as the first capital of the western empire since Diocletian, as remembered in history books, left no more than a few remains, like its imperial paving and Roman axes, the *cardo* and *decumanus*, just faintly visible in the urban layout, or the ancient circus, echoing in a street's name; not to mention Saint Lawrence's colonnade: displaced, dismantled and reassembled, today still standing with a new heart of concrete and steel and a 'plastic' make up⁵⁵⁰. Similarly, the long rule of the Germanic populations, one of which the entire region is named after (the Longobards), left almost no more than ghosts and dark tales together with a real treasure of gold, gemstones and, paradoxically, a more precious Iron Crown (supposedly used by Charlemagne), today semi-forgotten in the nearby town of Monza. The Middle Ages also left less traces than acknowledged, with an abundant prevalence of neomedieval houses and churches (built in the Nineteenth Century) over the counterfeited-real-medieval ones, that were frequently rebuilt in the same years, when every little asymmetry had to be amended and long-gone façades had to be rebuilt anew according to supposed medieval standards. In brief, very few visitors are aware, when they take pictures in front of the cathedral, that its façade has little to do with gothic churches, or that Filarete's tower is actually Beltrami's and that the 'Arch of Peace' was originally erected to celebrate Napoleon's

convinced many about a possible connection between the name of the city and the foundational myth of the 'scrofa semilanuta' (*half-woolly sow*). The sow/boar's dominant feature (being 'half-woolly') was thus transferred to the city in a very uncertain Latin etymology (Cantù's '*in medio lanæ*') although this interpretation found many supporters. The myth of a city built in a clearing where a half-woolly sow would be found is no more reliable than the 'initial furrow' of Romulus, still it seems reasonably connected to the round planning of the Celts' average settlements. See: Cantù, Cesare, *Milano, storia del popolo e del popolo*, Milano: Tipografia e libreria ditta G. Agnelli, 1871

550 — The colonnade, made of marble Corinthian columns, was not originally in its current location where it was moved at the beginning of the 5th Century CE; restored several times in the following centuries, between 1952 and 1955 it was completely dismantled and then reassembled for a controversial intervention that filled the columns with concrete and steel to grant them structural stability. In the '80s when plastic-based paints became popular, the columns where then covered to be protected from smog, another controversial and supposedly invisible intervention that proved ineffective in time. See: Carbonara, Giovanni, Fiorani, Donatella, *Il Restauro dei Monumenti*, in: Carbonara, Giovanni, Fiorani, Donatella, Stanley-Price, Nicholas, Tomasello, Francesco, *Restauro e conservazione. Il sito archeologico*, 2002, online, available at [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/restauro-e-conservazione-il-sito-archeologico_\(Il-Mondo-dell'Archeologia\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/restauro-e-conservazione-il-sito-archeologico_(Il-Mondo-dell'Archeologia)/) [accessed 25.10.2024]

imperial wars to then be renamed on its inauguration by the Austrian emperor, to celebrate Napoleon's defeat. No wonder then, in a small city so full of oxymorons and hidden contradictions, that many different social contexts are also present at the same time. While to most people Milan is today the global stereotypical city 'of design and fashion'⁵⁵¹, connected to a second, national, equally stereotypical milieu of workaholics always on the move including company owners and rentiers, Milan is also home to a seemingly shrinking, more down-to-earth, local, national, and international middle and working class. Finally, Milan is more than ever a place of inequalities⁵⁵², for the homeless, poor and working poor: home to different categories of marginalised people and one of the main final destinations in Italy for migrants and asylum seekers, a city that, according to Ferruccio De Bortoli 'tends to expel not only the poorest but also the middle classes'⁵⁵³.

A possible interpretation could attribute a different urban 'ring' to each one of these different social contexts, and, to some extent, the city centre does hold a preeminent place in the urban social structure. However, its international rise over the last decades has also led to a more literal rise of new buildings in places (or non-places⁵⁵⁴) outside the

551 — Ianfry, Charles, *Say Milano to Yourself and What Comes to Your Mind*, in: Salone del Mobile.Milano, *Milan Design (Eco) System*, Milano: Salone del Mobile.Milano, 2024

552 — Several reports described the phenomenon of growing inequalities in Italy (and in Milan) over the last years, with a wide echo on news outlets, so much so that, as of 2010, Istat (the Italian National Institute of Statistics) had already started a specific project, called 'Bes', to monitor 'Fair and Sustainable Wealth and Wellbeing'. We might wonder whether Istat's findings were seriously taken into account, since absolute poverty almost doubled in the period 2010-2023 (from 5,2% to 9,7% of the population) and relative poverty, generally considered as an indicator for inequalities passed from 13,8% to 14,5% of the resident population (while primary or absolute poverty is defined as the impossibility for an individual to meet the basic needs of life, relative poverty accounts for an income level below the 50% of the average income within the group considered). See: ISTAT, *Anno 2010. La povertà in Italia*, Rome: ISTAT, 2011 and: ISTAT, *Le Statistiche dell'Istat sulla Povertà | Anno 2023*, Rome: ISTAT, 2024. For Lombardy and Milan, see: Accolla, Gisella, Rovati, Giancarlo, *La povertà in Lombardia*, Milano: PoliS-Lombardia, 2023

553 — In: Vazzana, Marianna, *Milano a due facce, l'abisso del reddito: cinque volte più alto nel centro città*, 24.11.2024, Il Giorno, online, available at: <https://www.ilgiorno.it/milano/cronaca/reddito-den6ucee?live>, [accessed 25.11.2024]

554 — Augé, Marc, *Non-Places. An Introduction to Supermodernity*, 4th edition, London: Verso, (1995), 2023. Urban studies, especially within the

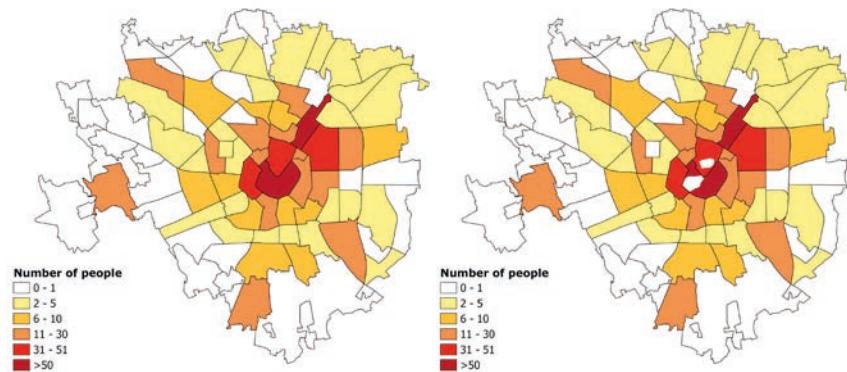


Fig. 58: 2024 – Homeless people in Milan by area (excerpt from ‘racCONTAMI’). On the right a revised map highlighting the actual findings of the survey in the smaller areas of Citylife, Sant’Ambrogio and Brera.

actual city centre: the new skyscrapers of the global elites⁵⁵⁵ and the new residential compounds for a new class of influencers, urban nomads, and socialites⁵⁵⁶. In fact, over the last decade a new ‘layer’ has been superimposed on a small city like Milan that struggled to become a big city, and big cities, as Marc Augé puts it, ‘are defined firstly by their capacity to import and export people, products, images and messages’, while, paradoxically, ‘the city as such is disappearing’. Consequently, the contrasts between centre and peripheries are apparently becoming

Italian context, have extensively used the concept of non-places. According to Marc Augé’s definition, non-places define a ‘contractual relation’ fostering a transformation of the citizens into city-users and eventually into *customers* (like supermarkets and airports). The concept has then been widened by others to include new urban categories, like large scale high-rise business centres which have generally been alien to the Italian urban context.

⁵⁵⁵ — The tallest buildings in Milano are currently named as follows: *Unicredit tower*: the sixth European bank by capitalisation, its shareholders mainly from the USA (42%) and the UK (25%), the main one being Blackrock (7%); *Generali tower*: one of the main European insurance companies with a majority of Italian shareholders (66%) to start from the investment bank Mediobanca; *Allianz tower*: the largest European insurance company with 39% of its shareholders from Germany (mainly small investors), 38% from the rest of Europe and 17% from the USA; *Pwc tower*: the multinational professional services company based in the UK, currently the second largest global accounting network by revenue with firms in 149 countries.

⁵⁵⁶ — The new compound called ‘City-life’, designed by the famous British-Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid, is probably one of the most relevant examples of this trend: it is today inhabited by fashion influencers, music performers, football players and general managers temporarily residing in the city, new and old socialites.

less visible, if maybe not ‘increasingly meaningless’⁵⁵⁷ as Augé noted. As a matter of fact, marginalised people, like the homeless, are currently more likely to be found in the very city centre⁵⁵⁸, rather than in the brand new⁵⁵⁹ contemporary compounds, which, to a certain extent, seem designed to prevent the reception of marginalised people⁵⁶⁰.

Moreover, in 2024, the Italian National Institute of Statistics officially recorded an increase of absolute poverty in Northern Italy, with the main urban centres leading this increase, whereas in suburban areas

⁵⁵⁷ — Augé, Marc, *Introduction to the Second Edition of Non-Places*, 24 November 2023, online, available at: https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/introduction-to-the-second-edition-of-non-places?srltid=AfmBOor3axecKDjJpVuVQhitUdT2V6NOujYhR7a7yhKY_IjSloGYDK55, [accessed 25.10.2024]

⁵⁵⁸ — Verona, Federica, *La povertà che Milano non vuole vedere: i senzatanetto fanno paura, ma il disagio non si combatte sui social*, 10.12.2023, La Repubblica, online, available at: https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2023/12/10/news/poverta_milano_senzatanetto_politiche-421615535/, [accessed 25.10.2024]

⁵⁵⁹ — New decontextualised, ‘signature’ compounds popping up around the world as urban merchandise were also mentioned by Augé as part an urban global transformation phenomenon: ‘The pre-eminence of system over history and of the global over the local has consequences in the domain of aesthetics, art and architecture. Leading architects have become international stars, and when a town aspires to feature in the world network it commissions one of them to produce an edifice that will stand as a monument, a testimony proving its presence in the world, in the sense of being wired into the system. Even if these architectural projects refer, in principle, to the historical or geographical context, they are quickly captured by worldwide consumption: the influx of tourists who come from all over the world to sanction their success.’ See: Augé, Marc, *Introduction to the Second Edition of Non-Places*, 24 November 2023, online, available at: https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/introduction-to-the-second-edition-of-non-places?srltid=AfmBOor3axecKDjJpVuVQhitUdT2V6NOujYhR7a7yhKY_IjSloGYDK55, [accessed 25.10.2024]

⁵⁶⁰ — Especially within the American context, urban planners and designers have long developed what is generally defined as ‘hostile’ or ‘exclusionary’ architecture. Specifically designed to prevent people from sleeping or camping in public areas, this new kind of public area thus removes, for instance, public benches or turns them into single seat elements, avoids canopies and porches, but also low-rise buildings with ‘generous’ protruding eaves (all particularly present, on the contrary, in the Italian historic centres). For instance, see: Hu, Winnie, *‘Hostile Architecture’: How Public Spaces Keep the Public Out*, New York Times, online, 14.11.2019, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/08/nyregion/hostile-architecture-nyc.html>; [accessed 25.10.2024]

and small towns the situation remained stable⁵⁶¹. In the specific context of Milan, a worsening situation was recorded also by non-governmental organisations like Emergency⁵⁶² or Caritas⁵⁶³ and Cena, that all saw an increase in the number of people helped. And although measuring inequalities and poverty might be 'a complex issue'⁵⁶⁴, as the main financial Italian newspaper based in Milano wrote in December 2024, things appear to be much clearer in light of the analyses and surveys led by the volunteers and organisations actively involved in tackling the problem. The municipality also delved into this 'complex issue' and, in February 2024, launched a new census of the homeless residing in the city, which, despite a limited reliability in terms of absolute numbers⁵⁶⁵, still recorded a serious situation, worse, in percentage,

561 — See: ISTAT, *Le Statistiche dell'Istat sulla Povertà | Anno 2023*, Rome: ISTAT, 17.10.2024. See also: ISTAT, *Famiglie povere - tipo comune di residenza*, online, available at: https://esploradati.istat.it/databrowser/#/it/dw/categories/IT1,HOU,1.0/HOU_POVER/DCCV_POVERTA/IT1,34_727_DF_DCCV_POVERTA_7,1.0, [accessed 25.11.2024] and: Istat, *Individui poveri - regione di residenza*, online, available at: https://esploradati.istat.it/databrowser/#/it/dw/categories/IT1,HOU,1.0/HOU_POVER/DCCV_POVERTA/IT1,34_727_DF_DCCV_POVERTA_10,1.0, [accessed 25.11.2024]

562 — Bauducco, Simone, *Milano, la povertà non arretra. Il report di Emergency: 'Tra caro affitti e inflazione, famiglie sempre più povere anche se lavorano'*, 17.04.2024, Il Fatto Quotidiano, online, available at: <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2024/04/17/a-milano-la-poverta-non-arretra-il-report-di-emergency-tra-caro-affitti-e-inflazione-famiglie-sempre-piu-povere-anche-se-hanno-un-lavoro/7516365/>, [accessed 25.11.2024]

it/2024/04/17/a-milano-la-poverta-non-arretra-il-report-di-emergency-tra-caro-affitti-e-inflazione-famiglie-sempre-piu-povere-anche-se-hanno-un-lavoro/7516365/, [accessed 25.11.2024]

563 — Respinti, Matteo, «Cresce la povertà a Milano»: per uscirne ci vuole più assistenzialismo o più intraprendenza?, 17.10.2024, available at: https://www.milanocittastato.it/milano/lacittadeisogni/cresce-la-poverta-a-milano-per-uscirne-ci-vuole-piu-assistenzialismo-o-piu-intraprendenza/#google_vignette, [accessed 25.11.2024]

564 — Tremolada, Luca, *Misurare la disuguaglianza e la povertà è un tema complesso*, 01.12.2024, Il Sole 24 Ore, online, available at: https://www.infodata.ilssole24ore.com/2024/12/01/misurare-le-disuguaglianza-e-la-poverta-e-un-tema-complesso/?refresh_ce=1 [accessed 01.12.2024]

565 — The survey was led by volunteers (about 1.500) that were assigned different areas of the city and it is likely that some areas could not be fully investigated and that the final figures could thus be bigger than observed. Also, the number of homeless temporarily accommodated in smaller private structures, could be over or underestimated. Therefore, the slight decrease seen since 2019 (-0,02%) does not seem a fully reliable figure and, more importantly, neither public, nor private structures can currently provide even a temporary lodging for more than one third of all the homeless. See: Braga, Michela, Monti, Paola, Serra, Chiara, *Esplorare l'assenza di dimora a Milano: racCONTAMI 2023 e 2024*, 25.06.2024 - Sala Alessi, Palazzo Marino, Milano: Comune di Milano, 2024

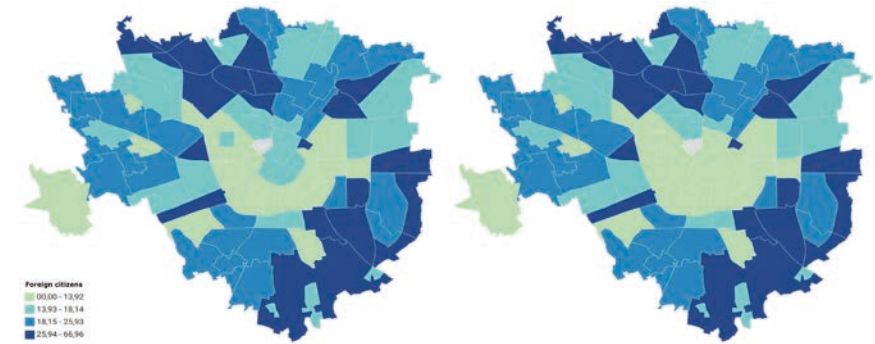


Fig. 59: 2022 – Foreign people in Milan by area (excerpt from 'Focus Stranieri'). On the right a revised map highlighting the presence of non-EU citizens (namely without Romanians and French)

than in larger cities like Rome, Berlin, or London⁵⁶⁶, with its relevant 0.17% of homelessness over the residing population. Counterintuitively, and as the survey showed, most of them mainly reside in the historic centre (thus further complicating the reading of a possible 'urban narrative' by rings) and mainly consist of foreigners (more than 70%), half of which with no residency permit and generally much younger than the Italian homeless (mainly over 55).

According to the latest report published by the city of Milan in 2022, resident foreigners account for the 20,6% of the entire city population and live in almost all districts except for a semi-central half-ring and for the western suburban area of Baggio⁵⁶⁷. Not considering a 0.3% of French citizens (living in the central and semi-central areas) and a 1.1% of Romanians (mainly in suburbia), all foreigners residing in Milan come from outside of the European Union, the three main largest communities being the Egyptian, Filipino and Chinese. By comparison, in the 2022 national survey on the entire metropolitan area including the outlying towns, non-EU citizens account for the 12.2%, whereas the national average is 6.2%⁵⁶⁸. These figures, just like the pre-

566 — The survey commissioned by the municipality reported lower values for Rome (2014), Berlin (2020) and London (2022). This rate of homelessness is comparable to the USA's average of 2 per 1.000, with the exception of New York. In 2019, 79.000 homeless were reported in New York by the New York Times (See: Hu, Winnie, Ibidem).

567 — Comune di Milano, *Focus Stranieri 2022*, Milano: Comune di Milano, 2022

568 — MLPS-Direzione Generale dell'Immigrazione e delle politiche di integrazione con Anpal servizi S.p.A., *La presenza dei migranti nella Città metropolitana di Milano. RAM Milano 2022*, Rome: Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2023. The report and its figures include

vious ones, appear to be slightly underestimated, since they do not include people staying in the city without a regular residency permit, which only non-governmental organisations have attempted to estimate. In fact, according to Foundation ISMU⁵⁶⁹, the number of people staying in Italy without a permit, constantly diminished between 2019 and 2023 and accounts for about 8% of the entire foreign population. These data points are relevant inasmuch as they hint, in many ways, to a non-stereotypical interpretation of the contemporary phenomenon of migration in Italy and, more specifically in Milan's urban context. In brief, it would be misleading to portray a huge irregular foreign population occupying the outskirts: firstly, because all foreign people in Milan, except a small percentage, are legally entitled to stay, and secondly, because they reside in almost all areas, city centre included. The occupational rate of non-EU citizens in 2022 was slightly lower than the average in the city (69.4% vs 70.1%), which, combined with a smaller percentage of inactive foreign people, implies a more relevant rate of unemployment (7.8% vs 5.4%)⁵⁷⁰. Furthermore, also due to the high percentage of lower wage manual labour (71.2%) reported for non-EU workers in comparison with Italian and EU workers (19.2%), the foreign population in Milan appears to be more exposed to the risk of poverty, consistently with ISTAT's latest surveys, highlighting for foreigners the highest recorded poverty rates since 2014, with a 'more marked criticality' in the central municipalities of metropolitan areas like in Milan's⁵⁷¹. In fact, different NGOs report very similar findings⁵⁷²,

all non-Eu citizens regularly staying in Milano, while the 'Focus' published by the municipality only considers *residents* in the City Registry and does not account for all those who, although regularly staying in Milano, are not registered (for instance because they might be officially registered in other Italian or EU cities).

⁵⁶⁹ ————— Fondazione ISMU ETS, *Ventinovesimo Rapporto sulle migrazioni 2023*, Milano: Franco Angeli, 2024. The Foundation, hereinabove defined as 'non-governmental' is partially participated also by public subjects (the Region and the Chamber of Commerce).

⁵⁷⁰ ————— MLPS-Direzione Generale dell'Immigrazione e delle politiche di integrazione con Anpal servizi S.p.A., *La presenza dei migranti nella Città metropolitana di Milano. RAM Milano 2022*, Rome: Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2023, pages 15-17

⁵⁷¹ ————— ISTAT, *Le Statistiche dell'Istat sulla Povertà | Anno 2023*, Rome: ISTAT, 2024 [page 5]

⁵⁷² ————— About 58% of the requests for medical and pharmaceutical support in North-West Italy came from foreigners in 2022 according to Rete Banco Farmaceutico (see: Banco Farmaceutico, Osservatorio Povertà Sanitaria, *10° Rapporto Donare per Curare - Povertà Sanitaria e Donazione Farmaci*, Milano: Osservatorio Povertà Sanitaria, 2023); about the 64% of all help requests in Milan during the year 2023 came from foreigners, according to Caritas (see: Caritas Ambrosiana, *La*

recording a majority of foreigners in need during their daily work and efforts to tackle poverty. But this data, as far as the urban context of Milan is regarded, also exposes a situation which contradicts the expected stereotypical contrast between centre and periphery as recorded in the area of Milan by urban studies from the post-war period up to the nineties⁵⁷³. Many similarities unfortunately remain, like the underprivileged situation of migrants, once coming from Southern Italy and today from abroad, but still mainly involved in low salary occupations (specialised and unspecialised manual labour) and still risking poverty. What is changing more than ever is the socio-urban structure, thus making focused interventions more difficult and apparently demanding a wider network of second and third level reception. The global phenomenon highlighted by Marc Augé's remark also resonated in Gianni Biondillo's warning against simplistic news on the reportedly 'suburban disorders' of November 2024 and against the definition of Corvetto's neighbourhood 'as periphery or as banlieue'⁵⁷⁴. The Milanese writer, in fact, clarified the different scales of the Milanese urban context, putting the spotlight on the 'permanence of classes', inequalities, and on the difficult situation of the younger underprivileged generations, regardless of the origin of their families and of the place where they live. Neighbourhoods like Corvetto, with their 'neglected social housing' and low-income inhabitants are in fact very well-functioning infrastructures connected to the city-centre and therefore, according to Biondillo, very '*desirable*' for possible future gentrification. While the example of Manifesta Palermo shed light on

povertà nella Diocesi Ambrosiana, Dati 2023 - Infografiche, Milano: Caritas Ambrosiana, 2024)

⁵⁷³ ————— In the Milanese context, the direct connection between the conditions of migrants, manual labour and the risk of poverty was in fact already analysed by Piero Bottoni in his comprehensive urban research on the suburban area of Sesto San Giovanni since the early 60s. See: Tonon, Graziella, *Sesto San Giovanni e Piero Bottoni*, Milano: Ordine e Fondazione dell'Ordine degli Architetti, Pianificatori, Paesaggisti e Conservatori della Provincia di Milano, 2015. Today migrants in Milano don't come from Southern Italy, and the big suburban factories are closed, but the situation still seems similar.

⁵⁷⁴ ————— See: Biondillo, Gianni, *Non chiamatela banlieue: al Corvetto è la rabbia di una generazione che abbiamo abbandonato*, 27.11.2024, La Repubblica, online, available at: https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2024/11/27/news/corvetto_milano_scontri_cosa_e_successo-423740329/ [accessed 28.11.2024] and also: Biondillo, Gianni, Simoneschi, Lina, *Non chiamatela banlieue. Realtà e rivendicazioni delle periferie urbane*, 28.11.2024, RSI Audio e Podcast, online, available at: <https://www.rsi.ch/rete-due/programmi/cultura/alphaville/Non-chiamatela-banlieue--2397320.html> [accessed 28.11.2024]

migrations and first level reception (though it was not a first destinations like Lampedusa or Augusta) it would seem appropriate for a city like Milan, wealthy, but with major inequalities⁵⁷⁵, to focus on second and third level reception.

We could synthetically define this as social inclusion, a need for both EU and non-EU citizens, whether they be entitled to stay (the largest majority) or without official permits (apparently accounting for about the 8.4% of all non-EU people⁵⁷⁶). If larger cities in Europe, with very different socio-urban structures and economies, seem to share very similar problems, social inclusion could probably be seen as one of the main issues for western contemporary cities. Therefore, the work of organisations like Cena seems today even more urgent than officially acknowledged and the creation of a possible international network of subjects committed to second and third level reception, could probably help to share best practices and possible solutions, besides helping a better and more comprehensive understanding of a common problem. Accordingly, the location for Cena's first exhibition had to be within the city and within the international network of its 'Design Week'. More specifically the chosen location needed to raise awareness in a part of the city not directly involved in the reception of underprivileged people in order to shed light on matters involving the entire city

⁵⁷⁵ — According to the main indicators therefore, the area of Milan would seem to be a privileged one in comparison, for instance, with Southern Italy. Still, a specific focus on the city would show that, in spite of many positive factors, like the highest average income in Italy (39.039 € in 2022), Milan also has the highest economic inequalities indicator (the Gini Index after taxes, equal to 0,54, much higher than the national average of 0.35, or the British 0.32, and the American 0.41, while more similar to the Colombian 0,55). Moreover, according to the data provided by the MEF (Ministry of Economy and Finance) people living in the area of Brera (where the mayor lives) or Citylife, have an average yearly income of 108.000 € or 94.285 € versus an average of 19.614 € in the area of Quarto Oggiaro/ Roserio. See: ISTAT, *La redistribuzione del reddito in Italia*, Rome: ISTAT, 2022, page 2; Gay, Guido, *Vecchie e nuove povertà: un welfare che cambia*, Milano: Polis Lombardia, 2020: 'despite a higher average income, the city of Milan confirms itself as a particularly unequal territorial reality and characterised by a greater risk of poverty compared to the other Lombard municipalities'. See also: Accolla, Gisella, Rovati, Giancarlo, *La povertà in Lombardia*, Milano: PoliS-Lombardia, 2023, and: Vazzana, Marianna, *Milano a due facce, l'abisso del reddito: cinque volte più alto nel centro città*, 24.11.2024, Il Giorno, online, available at: <https://www.ilgiorno.it/milano/cronaca/reddito-den6ucee?live>, [accessed 25.11.2024]

⁵⁷⁶ — ISMU, *XXVIII Rapporto ISMU sulle migrazioni 2022*, 01.03.2023, Milano: Fondazione ISMU, 2023

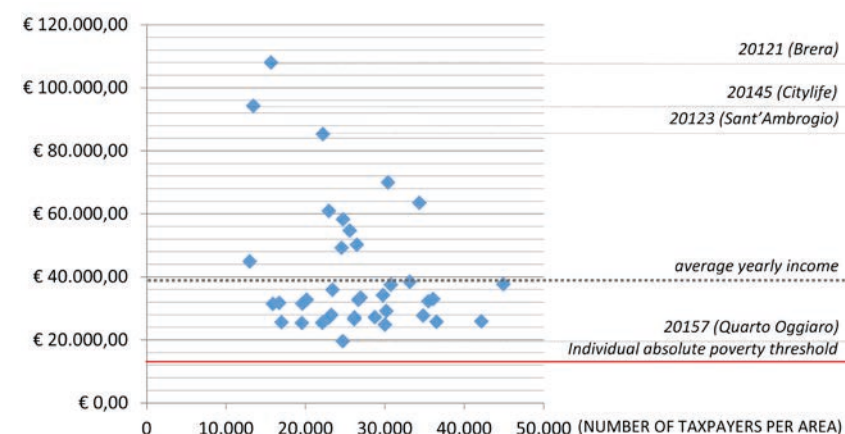


Fig. 60: 2022 - Average Income in Milan by Area (data from: Ministero dell'Economia e Finanze): the areas of Brera, Citylife and Sant'Ambrogio are the top three, the last being the northern area of Quarto Oggiaro. The average yearly income is not representative of most of the citizens (and areas), mainly living below that threshold, and, in the case of Quarto Oggiaro, even not very far away from the limit of individual relative poverty.

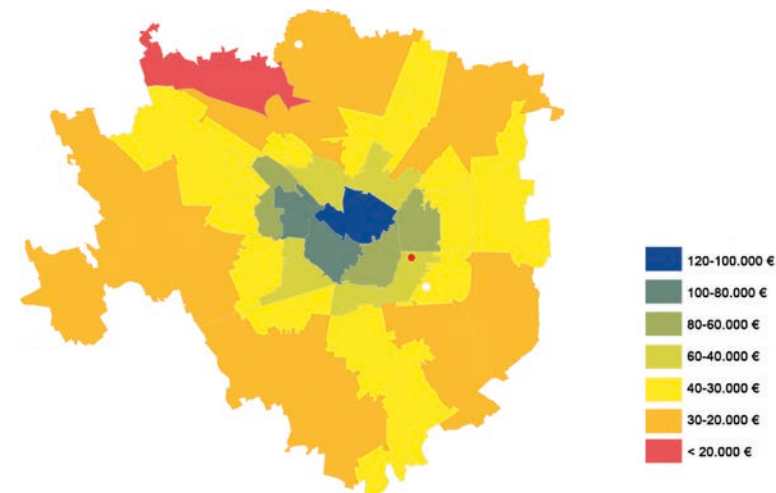


Fig. 61: 2022 - Average Income in Milan by Area (data from: Ministero dell'Economia e Finanze): today the distribution of wealth is becoming less and less affected by the traditional dichotomy between centre and periphery. Census areas also seem wider than the small zones where wealth is probably concentrating

and more visible than those of a far-away port or island in Southern Sicily. For this reason, a small commercial venue available in the more central via Bezzacca (highlighted with a red dot in the image) was chosen since the beginning in between the facilities available to the organisation (the white dots).

7.3.3 Timing

The choice of the location was closely connected to the timing, since its central position within the city not only made the exhibition available to a neighbourhood probably less aware of the city's available offer and need for reception, but could also possibly involve the international visitors, thus triggering new exchanges and connections, also putting a spotlight (at city-level) on the initiatives represented in the exhibition. As already mentioned hereinabove, the timeframe had in fact been defined as the main necessary element to start the first exhibition of a possible yearly series that could foster the development of the cultural debate on the theme of marginalisation and raise the citizens' awareness in Milan and beyond, according to the objectives of the organisation. Moreover, in the context of the 2024 'Fuorisalone', the proposed exhibition introduced a 'third sector' organisation for the first time as the main promoter of an exhibition showing the work of designers and entirely dedicated to reception and social inclusion, topics generally ignored or only partially considered even by the public institutions involved in the International Design Week. The 'Fuorisalone', literally 'Off-Fair' initiatives programme, was originally intended as a more vibrant and unconventional programme including non-structured displays, installations or performances happening outside the Fair, to be much less business-oriented. However, over the last decades, it became more and more structured and business-focused to a point that it is today much less distinguishable in its spirit from the trade fair. The assumption that an exhibition like the 'Atlas of Reception' would be unprecedented within the 'Off-Fair' programme was proven correct judging by the availability of the main promoters of the programme: the online platform 'Fuorisalone' and the magazine 'Interni' that decided to sponsor the exhibition by providing their banners and full support through their communication channels (websites, guides, maps and social media). The latter, literally 'doubled' the exhibition as foreseen, expanding its reach, although in a few basic pieces of information, to

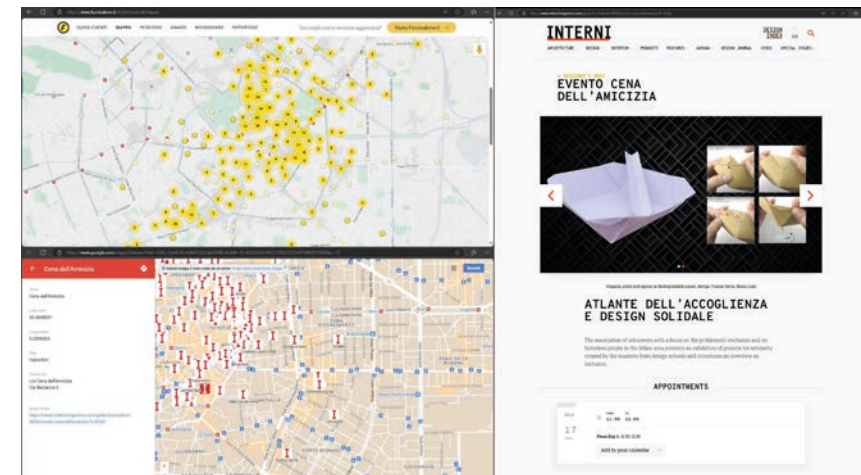


Fig. 62: Screenshots from Interni's and Fuorisalone's websites. [online, available at: <https://www.fuorisalone.it/it/2024/ eventi/mappa> and at: <https://www.internimagazine.com/guida-fuorisalone-2024/evento-cena-dellamicizia-fs-2024/>, accessed 01.01.2025]

an international online audience and increasing its timeframe, by making it available for one year (and more, if considering the digital archives of the two platforms and associated websites).

7.3.4 Plans and interactions

Once the main objectives, the timeframe and the location were clarified, the 'Atlas' was conceived as a real platform mainly made of:

- *visuals* to account for the different reception levels in the city: a graphic level of communication that had to make visible and reproduce a new form of *atlas*;
- *real objects* to represent and support the association: 3D haptic elements for the visitors to touch and to relate with the community of the Fuorisalone introducing the topic of solidarity in the form of a table (the 'table of solidarity');
- *real stories* to recount marginalization in the city: a non-physical yet very tangible event that took the form of a book presentation ('If my feet could talk. The real story of a homeless man' by Cornelia Pelletta).

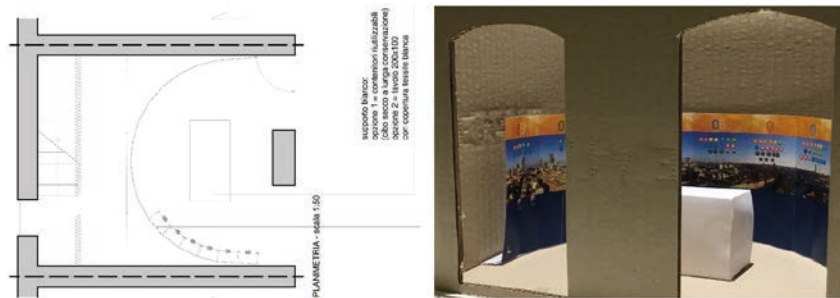


Fig. 63: Early sketch and model of the planned exhibition

The *atlas* therefore offered both the framework and a part of the content itself, by means of a representation of the city reporting the necessary information about the basic services available to people in need (counselling and support, sleeping facilities, restrooms and areas for personal hygiene, canteens and food, dressing venues, health care, legal assistance and immigration centres). All these were represented through simple graphic pictograms highlighted on a 360° city landscape representation by the co-curator Barbara Pietrasanta. The photo was thus organised in the form of a panel sequence surrounding the visitor and allowing a quick comprehensive overview according to Bayer's 'field of vision'. The few texts, in Italian and English, for international visitors, reported all service centres, including municipal ones and those managed by other associations, acknowledging reception as a non-exclusive and necessarily collective act. Below the surrounding landscape, as agreed with the co-curator, labels were printed on a 'blue-board' on which it was also possible for visitors to stick post-it notes. The blue backdrop was chosen as the primary colour opposite to the Cena's signal orange hue on the 'colour wheel'⁵⁷⁷. Consequently, the 'table of solidarity' displaying real objects and prototypes was covered in a blue tablecloth, and placed at the centre of the city 'landscape'. The round, free-standing panels were printed on recycled honeycomb cardboard, to reduce the impact of a visual installation that was originally not supposed to have a second life. The designers invited to participate in the exhibition created their concepts under the simple and open-ended brief of creating objects that appeared as an invitation to share and create solidarities. Five objects plus one were then delivered and set at a height suitable for good visibility at the table, almost equal to that of a real dining table to welcome guests. They were the following:

⁵⁷⁷ — The 'colour wheel' was introduced as a design tool by Johannes Itten at the Bauhaus and is still widely used in common practice as one of the main possible colour associations codes (today also influenced by colour management in physics and software)



Fig. 64: the 'Solidarity table' of the Atlas of Reception

- *La + I*: A modular tablecloth with hooks that expanded into a large-format tablecloth, a runner or even a placemat, to 'Add a place at the table for an extra friend...' (designed by Arianna Padula)
- *ORIGAMi*: an easy to assemble bowl and spoon for a quick snack or meal, printed on recycled cardboard with PLA coating in order for it to be eco-sustainable and biodegradable (designed by Jhoan Luis Yantas Soria)
- *Mestolo*: a traditional wooden ladle that could be modified for different uses thanks to a set of interchangeable, magnetic tools (designed by Lorenzo Mingione)
- *CiPu*: a ladle rest and a 'bread warmer' made of soapstone pots' scrap (Designed by Federico Giovanettoni)
- *Share*: both a soup bowl and a dinner plate, one object designed to share two different functions and courses or two different food traditions (designed by Lorenzo Morganti)
- *Atlas of Reception* (soundtrack): an invitation on how to understand the needs and requests of a city through music, with its nuances and contradictions by practising listening as a first step for reception (music by Antonio Orio)

The labels, like the main visual landscape, were printed in white on a deep blue backdrop over recycled cardboard and simply placed beside each object that visitors could touch, except one: a QR code allowing visitors to download and listen to the street music created by Antonio Orio specifically for this exhibition and reproducing the different sounds in the streets of Milan. On the opening day of the exhibition Antonio Orio performed live an extended version of his composition.

7.3.5 Further developments

As of September 2024, the second edition of the 'Atlas of Reception' was unanimously approved by the Association's board, to be staged in April 2025. The main issue now is the selection of one of the many ideas that have already surfaced during the first edition to foster the creation of different consistent chapters, with a greater involvement of artists and designers and without neglecting the interactions of the citizens for a more participative form of display. At the same time the main visuals of the 2024 Atlas representing the city and its several reception centres was moved to the main reception hub, the 'Milano Welcome Centre' opened at the end of November 2024. Here, in the new setting, the panels lost their possibility to activate requests or pose questions while gaining a more 'institutional' (and fixed) character to officially inform everybody entering the 'Welcome Centre' about the second and third level reception centres active in the city. What partially lacked, or did not happen as expected, contrary to the original plans, was the active participation of the visitors: the visual panels had in fact a 'blueboard' initially designed to collect post-it notes for possible comments, requests or supplementary information, but the synthetic introductive texts could not clarify this extra-feature, which, consequently, was not activated. Further stagings could for instance consider and organise specific sessions with mediators helping visitors using markers and post-it notes to create a participatory and updated version of the panels.

7.3.6 Main findings

The different kinds of audiences that visited the exhibition — from the many volunteers involved in the sponsoring organisation, to the citizens living in the neighbourhood and outside, from the journalists invited, to some of the municipality's representatives, included the Deputy Mayor for Welfare and Health — allowed for an increased awareness to start a debate on marginalisation and on the actions organised by *Cena* and other entities alike to tackle it. Unexpectedly and without any prior planning, the exhibition helped *Cena* raise funds for its institutional activities, besides growing its visibility to increase the number of possible future volunteers and generating awareness of the issues represented amongst citizens. Moreover, the digital permanence of the exhibition further proved that, whereas a digital exhibition can hardly be 'mirrored' in the physical domain, it is on the contrary quite simple to create either reduced or extended digital forms of a physical one, expanding its original reach and availability, and at the same time providing it with the 'solid' reliability of a material event. This research does not intend to advocate for a general criticism of the digital realm and to the many possible forms of virtual exhibitions, and acknowledges the intangibility (if not the virtual nature) of communication at large. At the same time, the basic starting point for the creation and co-creation of meaning is considered to be here and now, in the physical realm, like in the case of the first '*virtual*' exhibition staged by Marcel Duchamp and Louise Norton Varèse by means of a magazine more than one hundred years ago. Again, as in the case of Manifesta Palermo, the effectiveness of an exhibition's narrative does not only rely on the appropriateness and accuracy of its physical text-staging, and not only on its 'colouring' (the story), but also needs a structured series of events (fabula). To this extent it was easier to organise the exhibition's narrative from reality, like the manifold set of actions led by associations like *Cena*, rather than the opposite, hoping that the outcome might have a positive and durable grip on reality. Given the mainly social nature of the exhibition, its narrative therefore had to start from real social issues and existing actions to widen and increase their outcomes.

7.4 MuDiB – Bicocca's Diffused Museum, a perspective

The concept of the 'diffused museum' is not unusual in the Italian context, where several examples can be found, like in the case of Maria Lai's diffused museum in Ulassai. Fredi Drugman⁵⁷⁸ was one of its major advocates and early theoreticians, whose work Franca Zuccoli and Rita Capurro (respectively the Rector's delegate for the Museum and her scientific consultant and assistant), acknowledged as foundational while establishing the MuDiB or Diffused Museum of Bicocca University. It is therefore relevant to highlight differences and similarities, both in terms of practice and format, between the 'diffused' museum as it was originally defined (and as it is still intended) in Italy, and the more common 'distributed' museum within English-speaking countries. The latter was, in fact, the term used by Franca Zuccoli when describing the MuDiB project in English⁵⁷⁹, although with a dif-

⁵⁷⁸ — Alfredo (Fred) Drugman (Feurs 1927, Milano 2000), while still a student was one of the founding members of the Architecture Collective in Milan in 1945. He graduated from the Polytechnic in 1951 and was assistant to Franco Albini in 1963 at the University Institute of Architecture in Venice. He was appointed associate professor of Architectural Composition in 1977 and full professor of Museography in 1981 at the Faculty of Architecture in Milan. For more than twenty years he combined his teaching and research dedicated to the museums with his professional activity oriented towards the social and political role of architecture in the city planning. He worked in the suburban area of Milan, on the first constructions of cooperative houses in the 1950s and 1960s (in Muggiò, Monza and Sesto San Giovanni). Since the 1970s, his research activity focused on the study of the museum institution seen as a cultural asset, social service, and urban resource to be made available to the neighbourhood becoming an active part of the social life of the city. Particularly relevant is his work on scientific museums and his proposal for a Museum/Archive of the Polytechnic of Milan. Excerpts translated from: Doneda, Cristina, *Fredi Drugman*, 01.03.2005, SIUSA online, available at: <https://siusa-archivi.cultura.gov.it/cgi-bin/pagina.pl?TipoPag=prodpersona&Chiave=21180&RicProgetto=architetti>, [accessed 02.01.2025] As one of his students of Museography (it was the end of the 90s) I remember his dedication to teaching and his real commitment to innovate and improve museum standards in Italy.

⁵⁷⁹ — Zuccoli, Franca, *MuDiB: il Museo diffuso Bicocca. Un museo in divenire che valorizza le interconnessioni* | *MuDiB: Bicocca's distributed museum*.

ferent interpretation from the prevailing one. According to Ed Rodley's thorough review⁵⁸⁰, the 'distributed museum (network)' is in fact mainly intended as a digital entity 'decoupled from the edifice of the museum building' (here quoting Balsamo and Bautista) to such an extent that it 'may be found in a tablet, in a mobile application or a social network' (referencing Saldaña and Celaya). Rodley's contribution to 'New Digital Practices' in cultural institutions, also acknowledged as foundational, amongst others, a 2010 text, written by Nancy Proctor⁵⁸¹, that highlighted the advantages of the 'Distributed Network Model' for museums in comparison to the 'Multiplatform Model', and criticised the latter for its aim 'to create a direct copy — as perfect a replica as possible — of the same original (content, message) on each platform'. But, as Proctor noted, 'brochures don't make good websites' and 'as physical artefacts have to be photographed or scanned to create a digital representation for online use, at a minimum videos and photographs are frequently recoded and reformatted to meet the size requirements of the different social media platforms'⁵⁸². This, she argued, would mean we'd 'speak less of the "original" and more of the "simulacrum" — the copy without an original': a digital network with a life of its own⁵⁸³. It appears clear why Ed Rodley wondered what

A museum in the making that reinforces interconnections, in: *Educazione Aperta, I musei come spazi del sapere sensibile ed ecologico*, No.15, 7.2.2024, Bari: Fasi di Luna, 2024

⁵⁸⁰ — Rodley, Ed, *The distributed museum is already here. It's just not very evenly distributed*, in: Lewi, Hannah, Smith, Wally, vom Lehn, Dirk, Cooke, Steven, *The 'Routledge International Handbook of New Digital Practices in Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums and Heritage Sites*, London: Routledge, 2019

⁵⁸¹ — Chair of MuseWeb, the annual international conference on 'Museums and the Web', Chief Strategy Officer of the Peale Centre, Baltimore's Community Museum, Nancy Proctor was also Head of Mobile Strategy and Initiatives of the Smithsonian Institution.

⁵⁸² — Proctor, Nancy, *The museum as distributed network*, 2010, online, available at: <http://museum-id.com/museum-distributed-network-21st-century-model-nancy-proctor/> [accessed 07.01.2025]

⁵⁸³ — Proctor, Nancy, *Ibid.* Here, she explicitly refers to Baudrillard's theory of the *simulacrum*, namely to the 'third order' *simulacra*. As fascinating as the research hypothesis is, and although Proctor's main findings proved quite effective over the years, it seems problematic to associate the digital network of a museum (and even its digital archives) to Baudrillard's third order simulacra or, in Proctor's words, to 'copies without an original'. In fact, Baudrillard saw, already in the early 80s, 'an implosion of meaning in the media' which he considered directly linked to a radical loss of communication. Moreover, he had explicitly criticised museums and especially the 'museification' process for misrepresenting and at times even damaging some 'original'

'exactly is being distributed in a 'distributed' museum' of this kind, and noted that, in reality, 'though all Proctor's examples are internet-based, none of the qualities of her imagined distributed network are possible only via the internet' (i.e.: being conversational, engaging, generative and open-ended, sustainable and 'smarter', intended as 'more effective'). Although Nancy Proctor aimed at distributing content, or, more specifically, a 'tailored' and 'user-authored content'⁵⁸⁴, she mainly focused on 'the actors and their relationships', as Rodley remarked while introducing a slightly different model based on 'content or experience' by Susan Bautista and Anne Balsamo. Their interpretation is particularly interesting in the light of the MuDiB, since they 'begun moving beyond the typical 'physical v. digital' dialectic to situate their exploration [...] within the larger context of the transformation of the museum from a place to a space'⁵⁸⁵. Based on de Certau, Bautista and Balsamo defined space as something different from place, as a space would be 'constructed by people through the practice of living and walking'⁵⁸⁶, a concept very consistent with the earlier definition and model of the 'diffused' museum by Drugman and, again, not necessarily entailing a digital platform. On closer inspection, the new digital media were seen as an opportunity to innovate the contemporary

archaeological finds (like in the case of Ramses' mummy: a real mummy transformed into a simulacrum and deprived of its context and meaning). In Baudrillard's perspective it seems therefore unlikely that by simply adding a further (digital) layer of information, the simulacrum of simulacrum, this could reverse, rather than escalate, a consolidated process of loss of signification to finally help producing better communication and new meaning.

584 — While Ed Rodley states that her model is meant to distribute 'both content and authority', Nancy Proctor explicitly defined the notions of 'authority and hierarchy' as 'not very helpful in describing relationships and processes that work together more like mash-ups than pronouncements', ultimately advocating a 'user-authored content' network and an anti-panopticon and totally free environment. This was an integral part of a more comprehensive view in which the internet would be a non-hierarchical, collaborative, self-regulating web, free of the 'master-slave model' ruling computers. See: Proctor, Nancy, *Ibid.*

585 — Rodley, Ed, *The distributed museum is already here. It's just not very evenly distributed*, in: Lewi, Hannah, Smith, Wally, vom Lehn, Dirk, Cooke, Steven, *The 'Routledge International Handbook of New Digital Practices in Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums and Heritage Sites*, London: Routledge, 2019, page 83

586 — Balsamo, Anne, Bautista, Susan, *Understanding the distributed museum: Mapping the spaces of museology in contemporary culture*, in: Trant, Jennifer, Bearman, David, *Museums and the Web 2011: Proceedings*, Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics, 2011, page 58

museum, to design new experiences, interactions and relevant meaning-making processes while getting rid of 'the burden of tradition: the unquestioned processes, mindsets and workflows that [had] possibly outlived the circumstances for which they were designed'⁵⁸⁷. But a very similar objective was declared by Fredi Drugman in 1982, when he criticised the isolation (both architectural and substantial) of the museums from the living social realm, institutions which he saw as nineteenth-century museums, isolated and fixed in their repetitive exhibition diagrams or in the 'grandeur' of their architectural layouts⁵⁸⁸. He thus thought it necessary to challenge the paradigm according to which museums were seen 'always and in any case [as] something different from life, by definition crystallising what is mobile' (here quoting the Italian anthropologist Alberto Maria Cirese). This, he made possible only by committing to a 'truly laboratory experiment' and 'taking fully into account what the museum was, the institution we lived with for years and the inconveniences that this coexistence accumulated'⁵⁸⁹. The outcome of this process, that was then taking shape, was finally 'a diffused organisation, a network, a museum in form of a complex system of services primarily aimed at conservation, but rooted in the original context [...] and allowing participation in a collective creation, [...] a museum that no longer would exhaust the preservation-information cycle within the old walls of few standardised buildings, but established in various cornerstones of the territory'⁵⁹⁰.

587 — Rodley, Ed, *The distributed museum is already here. It's just not very evenly distributed*, in: Lewi, Hannah, Smith, Wally, vom Lehn, Dirk, Cooke, Steven, *The 'Routledge International Handbook of New Digital Practices in Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums and Heritage Sites*, London: Routledge, 2019 [page 86]

588 — Drugman, Fredi, *Il Museo Diffuso*, in: *Hinterland*, No. 21/22, March-June 1982

589 — Loosely translated from: 'Occorre allora applicarsi a condurre qualcosa che davvero sia come una sperimentazione da laboratorio [...] fare i conti fino in fondo con quello che il museo è stato, con il quale si è convissuto per anni, con i fastidi che questa convivenza ha accumulato.' In: Drugman, Fredi, *Ibid.*

590 — Loosely translated from: 'una organizzazione diffusa, a rete, ramificata del museo come sistema complesso di servizi preposti prioritariamente alla conservazione, ma radicato alle origini, alle fonti dei beni culturali (istituti di ricerca, gallerie e accademie, collezioni, luoghi produttivi agricoli, artigianali, industriali, comunità locali ecc.) e al sistema dell'istruzione (scuole dei vari ordini, strutture per l'istruzione permanente, associazioni culturali, ecc.) che consenta di partecipare a una creazione collettiva, come qualche cosa cominciata prima e che presumibilmente continuerà dopo, dando così la consapevolezza di una forza che passa attraverso. Un museo che non può più esaurire il ciclo di conservazione-informazione entro le vecchie mura di pochi tipi edilizi ripetuti, ma si attesta in capisaldi del

Altogether, considering his very early criticism of the ‘abuses’⁵⁹¹ of the (western) institution of the museum, the idea of a diffused museum network, in its planned mutability, open to change but situated in a real social context and participatory in its methods, Drugman’s proposal was far more radical than it actually appeared at the time. The concept was in general well-received and raised no actual controversy, mainly because of the accent he stressed upon conservation⁵⁹² and because of the commitment of many local communities that subsequently saw this model as an opportunity and enthusiastically started some of these first networks. In fact, according to Silvia Dell’Orso, ‘while American museums, [...] are strongly tied to the market’, there is almost no ‘Italian museum that has no relation to its territory’, intended as the lively and animated place ‘from which they have drawn their main reason for being’⁵⁹³. Silvia Dell’Orso, writer, art journalist and active museum promoter who worked for the FAI (the National Trust for Italy), was also an early supporter of the diffused museum,

territorio’ In: Drugman, Fredi, *Ibid.*

591 ——— A few months later, in October 1982, while associating museums and cities, he further remarked on his view on ‘the museum as the city, a more or less strong instrument of accumulation, of power, or better said of the powers that direct them. A history of symbols and abuses, as much for the museum as for the city.’ (‘Il museo come la città, strumento più o meno forte dell’accumulazione, del potere, meglio dire dei poteri, che li dirigono. Storia di simboli e prevaricazioni, così per il museo come per la città.’) See: Drugman, Fredi, *Musei scientifici, territorio, architettura*, Rome, 1-2 October 1982, in: Basso Peressut, Luca, Ricci, Marcella, *Fredi Drugman. Idee per un Progetto di museo lungo il Trebbia*, Firenze: Edifir, 2016, page 145

592 ——— He advocated ‘recovery, conservation, protection, [of a kind] connected no longer only to sources, research institutes, galleries, academies, but above all to *artisanal and industrial production sites, local communities, educational structures, including lifelong learning*’ (the emphasis is mine). At the same time, he thought that the diffused museum should ‘avoid melancholic historicist archaeo/geo/paleonto/anthropo-scientist prefigurations with a moralistic background’. In fact, his proposal for a diffused museum along the Trebbia River, included many non-conventional ideas, such as preserving an abandoned steel bridge by transforming its lower structure into a new venue for public gathering and community associations or including new productive areas, concrete and steel scaffoldings for fishing and even a new kennel in the museum network. See: Basso Peressut, Luca, Ricci, Marcella, *Fredi Drugman. Idee per un Progetto di museo lungo il Trebbia*, Firenze: Edifir, 2016 [pages: 41, 55, 83, 89, 154]

593 ——— Dell’Orso, Silvia, *Musei e territorio. Una scommessa italiana*, in: Gennaro, Eloisa, *Musei e paesaggio. Da tema di ricerca a prospettiva d’impegno*, Ravenna: Provincia di Ravenna - Settore Cultura Sistema Museale Provinciale, 2011, page 51

which, in her 2009 text she acknowledged as rooted in Andrea Emiliani’s thought, the art historian who thoroughly analysed the subject, starting in the same years as Drugman, and initially focusing mainly on *diffused cultural heritage*⁵⁹⁴ as a driver for new social policies. As Cristina Fiordimela noted⁵⁹⁵, Emiliani’s thought was ‘synergetic’ with Drugman’s museographic research and, as clarified, both implied ‘experimentation on *commons*’ and an active involvement of the communities, rather than simple preservation. According to both, the heritage that a diffused museum would promote, would not be, so to speak, crystallised, since this model was meant to activate, respectively, ‘social construction’ and ‘collective creation’. Ultimately, their definition of this new model appears today to be very close to the contemporary distributed model, which, although mainly intended as digital, is not only and not necessarily bound to create a virtual network of connections. At the dawn of what Drugman saw as the incoming ‘electronic revolution’ age, his concept was already open to the ‘most advanced technologies’ and later on, in 1997, while maintaining that the network would be diffused over the territory, he admitted that the primary hub providing main information could be a ‘virtual place’⁵⁹⁶, and not necessarily a physical one. Drugman’s approval of any ‘gimmicks, witchcraft and sorceries of the techniques of reproduction’ expressed a priori in 1982 was however contrary to the scepticism of Emiliani who, in 2016, lamented the negative impact of the internet on field-based research, which he considered as one of the most crucial pre-requisites of the diffused museum⁵⁹⁷. What Emiliani criticised

594 ——— In one of his foundational texts, written in 1974, he defined a ‘new concept of cultural heritage that, [...] revealed to be so extensive and *diffused* as to penetrate every moment of our life’ and to demand ‘to enter [...] the decisive acts that society requires for its own construction.’ (‘è proprio il nuovo concetto di bene culturale che, reso dinamico da un’interpretazione finalmente sociale, accertato sotto ogni illuminazione dalla verifica scientifica e storica nonché dalla sua stessa utilità informativa, rivelatosi così esteso e diffuso da penetrare ogni momento della nostra vita, può esigere di entrare di forza, spezzando le ovvie resistenze all’interno degli atti decisivi che la società esige a propria costruzione.’) See: Emiliani, Andrea, *Una politica dei beni culturali*, Torino: Einaudi, 1974, page 12

595 ——— Fiordimela, Cristina, *Da bene culturale a museo diffuso. Intervista a Andrea Emiliani*, in: Basso Peressut, Luca, Ricci, Marcella, *Fredi Drugman. Idee per un Progetto di museo lungo il Trebbia*, Firenze: Edifir, 2016, page 189

596 ——— Drugman, Fredi, *Museo diffuso: una rete ben tesa*, in: Basso Peressut, Luca, Ricci, Marcella, *Fredi Drugman. Idee per un Progetto di museo lungo il Trebbia*, Firenze: Edifir, 2016, page 163

597 ——— Drugman, Fredi, *Il Museo Diffuso*, in: *Hinterland*, No. 21/22, March-June 1982, page 69, and Andrea Emiliani Fiordimela’s interview: Fiordimela,

was indeed not the possible use of a digital network in general, but rather the risk of relying exclusively on it, relinquishing the study of cultural heritage and, more importantly, the policies of participation⁵⁹⁸. Yet, the apparently irreducible difference from the distributed museum as intended by Proctor and the diffused museum as intended by Emiliani, tends to shrink when we consider their objectives, the wider theoretical background and the latest developments of the two models. Drugman's view in fact prevailed and it would currently seem unthinkable for any institution today not to plan a consistent presence online, while at the same time Emiliani's caveat is not to be dismissed at all. To this extent, Zuccoli and Capurro thus reasonably decided to use both terms in English (diffused and distributed), while keeping only 'diffuso' for their Italian texts. Furthermore, they made clear that the new Museum would not just be an online simulacrum and would not renounce its local community's involvement ('as a museum that [was] intended to be participatory and inclusive') and at the same time would 'incorporate both remote and in person dimensions'⁵⁹⁹ (digital technology thus playing a crucial role 'in developing and implementing the museum's communications program').

Cristina, *Da bene culturale a museo diffuso. Intervista a Andrea Emiliani*, in: Basso Peressut, Luca, Ricci, Marcella, *Fredi Drugman. Idee per un Progetto di museo lungo il Trebbia*, Firenze: Edifir, 2016, page 192

598 ——— Emiliani, Andrea, *Ibid.*: 'it is not just a matter of connecting institutions, but, even before, it's a matter of studying the territory, the cultures, the images of labour and interweaving knowledge, as well as activating, through this ramified vision of the museum, policies of participation and protection of architectural sites, of historical and social value' ('non si tratta solo di connettere delle istituzioni, ma ancor prima di studiare il territorio, le culture, le immagini del lavoro e intrecciare conoscenze, nonché attivare attraverso questa visione ramificata del museo politiche di partecipazione e di tutela dei siti architettonici, di valore storico e sociale')

599 ——— Zuccoli, Franca, Nuvolati, Giampaolo, Capurro, Rita, *A Proposed New Distributed Museum at The University of Milano-Bicocca. Leveraging Digital Content*, in: Gómez Chova, Luis, López Martínez, Augustin, Candel Torres, Ignacio, *EDULEARN21 Proceedings 13th International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies July 5th-6th, 2021*, Valencia: IATED, 2021

7.4.1 A difficult contribution: a diffused network of public spaces, cultural repositories and archives without a space, repository, or archive...

When I was asked to support the founders of the MuDiB by joining some of their in-person and online meetings between 2023 and 2024 for possible operational guidance while they were defining their middle and long-term intervention plans, I was already aware of the basic theory underlying the concept of the diffused museum for having personally met and studied with Drugman in the 90s. Nevertheless, despite my background and my external standpoint as a production and installation support coordinator, I initially found it quite difficult to grasp both the regulatory and operational framework of the new rising institution. Additionally, MuDiB was aiming at the creation of a diffused network of public and private spaces, cultural repositories, and archives without having any space, repository, or archive 'of its own'. In simple terms, while a diffused museum advocates for inclusion and for the wider possible participation of all the subjects involved in the subjacent context, its operational framework should allow for a certain level of flexibility and independence as a peer to the institutions involved. This alone proved particularly difficult in the case of the MuDiB, especially when considering that its founding institution, the University of Milano-Bicocca, also does not have full independence in regards to the use of their spaces, for instance due to the joint participation of the city of Milan, the actual landlord in charge (at different levels) of the maintenance and upkeep of all the venues included in its administrative territory. Designed by Vittorio Gregotti, the main buildings that host the university since 1998 as well as the latest ones and the entire university campus, were in fact conceived as an open institution, with no fence or gate: an entire mixed-use neighbourhood of teaching and research centres, residences, offices, theatres, commercial activities, gardens and squares. To this extent, and as an example, the museum should apparently find a specific agreement with the municipality in case a new permanent panel or caption had to be installed next to an outdoor artwork of the collection that the University granted it with, like 'the Pietrarubbia Group' by Arnaldo Pomodoro⁶⁰⁰. Moreover, the largest part of this collection, as I discovered

600 ——— More specifically, the artwork was installed on the university's main



Fig. 65: Of all the venues and locations of the MuDiB some are highlighted here as main hubs also including the network of relevant partners of the museum (here the Pirelli Foundation and the Hangar Bicocca), and some new prospective institutional and public hubs

during my first survey on site, was also exhibited in venues which the new museum would not have actual control of, such as corridors or public hallways of which the university itself had made limited use, thus making the work of the Rector's delegate and of her assistant and chief curator very challenging, and significantly reducing (but not cancelling) the possibilities of the museum in terms of display enhancement and increased availability of its cultural repository. Lastly, a further level of complexity was structurally inherent to the founding institution with its fourteen departments, its different locations spread over more than nine municipalities and about twenty venues just in Bicocca's main campus. Considering that the museum also intended to preserve and make visible the archives and the collections of these departments, each one with a different level of accessibility and each

building's raised square, Piazza dell'Ateneo Nuovo (strictly speaking a public rooftop). The artwork itself was first granted to the University in 2017 by the Arnaldo Pomodoro Foundation in the form of a (renewable) five-year loan for use. In turn, the University granted its artwork collection (permanent and temporary) to the Museum. Due to the location, a possible redefinition of the outdoor panel to caption the artwork whereas acknowledging the presence of the museum, appears today a real bureaucratic puzzle, both in terms of budget and in terms of authorisations.

with a different focus (from sociology's collection of photographs of women workers, to psychology's visual panels based on gestaltism) this wide constellation immediately appeared to me both as very interesting in its variety and very complex to be exhibited adequately (different media, different materials, different sizes, different required levels of security,...). These difficulties, inevitably surfaced during the organisation of the Museum's first exhibition, '*Birth*' from the 28th of September 2023 to the 14th of January 2024. In 2023, the university was in fact celebrating its 25th anniversary and the foundation of the new diffused Museum, together with its first exhibition, was a unique opportunity to further promote the relationship with the territory and the participation of the local community at different levels. According to this objective, Franca Zuccoli and Rita Capurro had opened the doors of the new institution not only to the university's departments and archives, but also to the other universities within the city and to the main public and private institutions of the neighbourhood. Thus, a small part of the unique material stored by the departments in archives with limited visibility, would finally be exhibited publicly and the other city universities and the Bicocca's partner institutions would be symbolically represented in the exhibition by a physical object, each representing their connection with the network (e.g. the Pirelli Foundation with one of the few remaining original Munari's first pedagogic toys). Given the expected size of this first exhibition, the first possible location proposed to the Chief Curator was an open hall in the ground floor of the main building, big enough to offer the requested flexibility of display (in terms of route and for a possible opening conference). This space was also already equipped with built in displays, and highly accessible, but due to the university's celebration programme it was unavailable during the scheduled period. Therefore, a smaller but suitable alternative was found, thanks to the availability of a place in the library: a hallway in the first floor in front of the main entrance to the reading rooms. This had displays and panels previously used for the library's own exhibition which could eventually form the first permanent hub of the diffused museum. Although, probably, the first-floor location would partly limit in the long term the participation of the neighbourhood's wider public, nonetheless, as a first exhibition, it favoured the expected students' main audience, according to one of the museum's declared objectives, and as a first relevant step to create an active community around the museum. Besides, when the exhibition's first plans were being defined, it seemed possible to stage

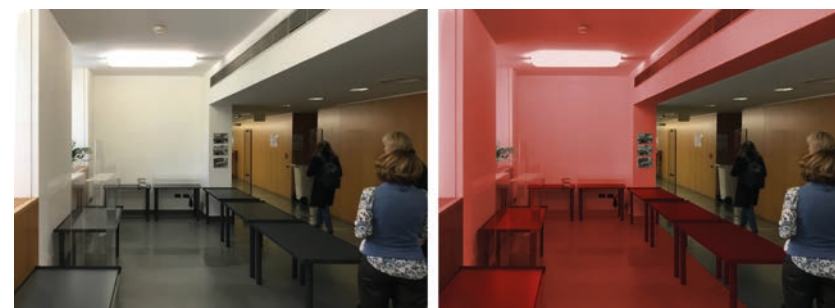


Fig. 66: 'Birth' final proposed layout

a first example of a diffused exhibition relying also on a second outdoor location: Bicocca's plant nursery, which would have helped reaching out to different kinds of audiences and increasing the possible interactions with the surrounding territory. This possibility vanished quite soon, given the absence of suitable outdoor equipment and lacking a substantial budget for a new setting that could protect the works and objects, but an early concept model for the plant nursery's exhibition was displayed in the remaining location, accounting for the future plans and possibilities of the museum and making transparent the long process at stake.

7.4.2 From a diffused museum to a *pervasive* museum?

As Franca Zuccoli noted, making the new institution 'known and recognised within the academic community' first and then in the entire community, was the main reason at the basis of the temporary exhibition programme that MuDiB started in 2023. The Museum's board was in fact aware that both the ambitious plans for the involvement of an entire part of the city and the actual complexity of the proposed diffused model (not to mention the Italian regulatory framework) would require a long-term commitment and huge work. Therefore, considering the final outcome of the first staged exhibition as a mediation between the proposals and the needs of the different departments, of

Fig. 67: 'Birth' and some of the proposed indoor *reversible* interventions (2024)

the library, of the Atheneum, and the actual budget constraints (mainly depending on poor public funding for culture and research in Italy) and considering the inherent collective nature of any such exhibition, the future plans should possibly consider small pilot projects based on simpler forms of installation to create a flexible repository of tools and equipment. In fact, while some of the different available locations of the museum will undergo renovation, the museum could in the first instance create specific equipment of its own in order to not underuse any of its possibilities like the availability of many outdoor locations to follow from the plant nursery. According to Francesca Fabbri⁶⁰¹, the diffused museum would in fact be historically connected to the eco-museums and urban open-air museums as per ICOM's definitions. And if the definitions provided by ICOM should be considered with a certain level of flexibility⁶⁰² (ICOM itself recently updated the main definition of a museum to adapt it to the rapidly changing context), it

⁶⁰¹ — Fabbri, Francesca, *Digital storytelling e open air museum in un progetto di rigenerazione urbana (UIA04-137 DARE): la memoria e il patrimonio culturale della Darsena di Ravenna*, [PhD Dissertation Thesis], Bologna: Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, 2024

⁶⁰² — ICOM's definitions are usually renewed and updated not only to serve as a possible tool for research and museum practice, but also to acknowledge the continuous changes happening in museum institutions, that might be faster, at times, than definitions. For instance, while Fabbri clarified the differences between archaeological parks and archaeological open-air museums (AOAM) in ICOM's definitions it mainly depended on these latter missing archaeological excavations and relying on real scale reconstruction, while in the meantime hybrid formats of the two already appeared. This is the case of the Archaeological Ruins of Liangzhu City Park in Hangzhou, China, which mainly presents a series of large-scale reconstructions to visitors (like an AOAM) in the context of real archaeological excavations. Besides, the original site is also connected to an entire network including a new museum facility (the 'Liangzhu Museum' designed by David Chipperfield) and open-air laboratories (with access generally restricted to researchers).

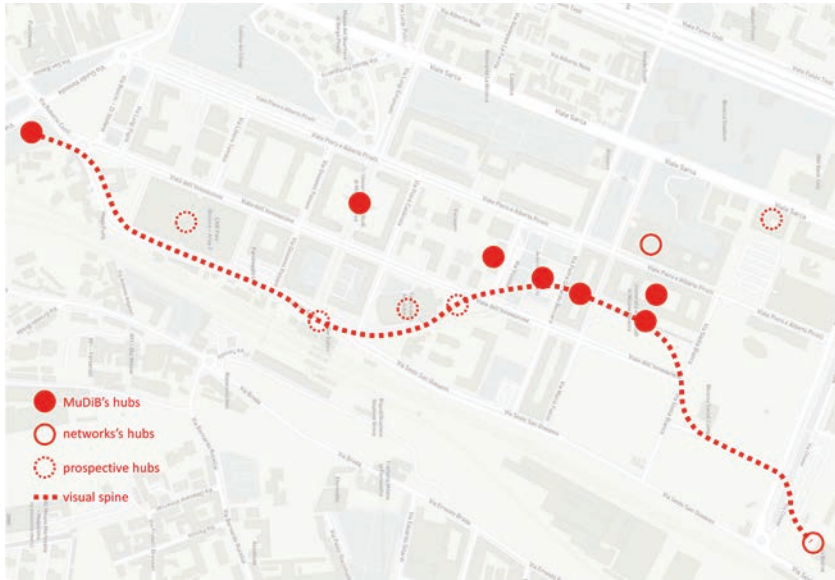


Fig. 68: The physical dissemination of outdoor displays infiltrating the public areas and visually connecting the different temporary locations: a *visual spine*.

is undeniable that many diffused and distributed museums are indeed consistent with the model of the open-air museums as defined by ICOM. Again, considering Drugman posthumous publication on Trebbia's diffused museum, the MuDiB would also need a visual spine, which in Drugman's case was the river itself, visually and physically connecting the main cornerstones, hubs, and laboratory centres of the proposed diffused museum, while in the case of MuDiB, could take the shape of a physical dissemination of outdoor displays infiltrating the public areas and visually connecting the different temporary locations. The diffused museum would thus be a pervasive museum, connecting and enhancing several destinations and repositories of public interest, fostering mediation, but not depending on it in its operations, and provided with a real-world presence mirroring and supporting its programmes (visits, conferences, exhibitions, and laboratories) and the activation of Bicocca's community.

8. Interviews and appendices

8.1 Semi-structured Interviews

I would like to thank Ippolito Pestellini Laparelli, Carola Boschetti, Mirjam Varadinis, Anna Farley and Chiara Ianeselli for their availability and for allowing very useful insights into the topics of this research. In order to maintain the tone and spirit of the discussion, the texts have been edited as little as possible to facilitate reading. These interviews were defined according to specific themes (as indicated in the titles), but also to further investigate the increasingly indistinguishable boundaries between the different functions involved in the cultural production of an exhibition: artist, performer, exhibition designer, curator, director etc.

8.1.1 Interview with Ippolito Pestellini Laparelli: Manifesta Palermo, the Atlas, the Location and the Local Communities (20.11.2020 – Zoom)

Lorenzo Morganti (LM): *Thank you very much for being available and being here today, I would start from the genesis of your curatorial project, the project you took part in for Manifesta Palermo, so please tell me something about it...*

Ippolito Pestellini Laparelli (IPL): For the edition of 2018, Manifesta - Manifesta is an institution - wanted to experiment with a different kind of model addressing the issue that many biennials have (or nomadic biennials, such as Manifesta itself) to have a limited and shorter impact in the city. So, the problem, somehow, that they face is that they didn't want to be recognised as a byproduct of the global art system coming to a city and extracting basically value from a city without leaving anything behind. And, in a way, this also happens in light of the reactions that were happening in Athens during the special edition of Documenta that took place both in Kassel and Athens. I think that the output of Documenta in Athens was actually positive, but there was a lot of resistance from the local population, from the local community of artists and so on, [stating] that this was an operation of cultural and capital colonialism. So, with that in mind, Manifesta asked

us to... asked me first to get involved and to get involved basically as a non-art curator - because I come from a background of architecture - to launch a sort of a pre-investigation on the city, that then came to be called *Palermo Atlas*, which is deliberately non-academic research, but rather an exploration on the ground supported by data, that acted as a sort of three-dimensional scan of the *status quo* of Palermo today starting from one point of view. And the point of view was to basically look at Palermo not any longer as a city but rather as a geography of flows, flows of many different types: of people, obviously, but also of goods, of data, of seeds, of ecosystems and so forth. So, in a way, going back to the roots, to the historical roots of the city which was always a conundrum of flows of different kinds, so also a conundrum of possibilities of coexistence, and the Atlas served to establish a first approach to Palermo: it worked as a mediation between the city and an international organization such as Manifesta, it set the blueprint of the biennial, but also, potentially, for a possible development of the city and then it had to create a network of... a sort of a local community, or a network of local collaborators that then were incorporated in the project *per se*. So, in a way, it really acted as a bridge to actually help Manifesta get rooted in Palermo. So, normally, you would say that... you know, normally you write a curatorial concept and you bring it to a place, in this case basically the city provided the curatorial concept, and the city became the set of information and interviews and testimonies and historical overviews and contemporary observations and so on... became basically the humus upon which we have built our project, but also not just in terms of topics, but also in terms of spatial organization, because many of the places that were topics in the Atlas exploration became locations of Manifesta and the idea to look at Palermo as a geography of flows, somehow, so a 'post-city' in a way, also helped us to find a dimension that would be able to reconcile very local observation with a very global dimension. So, we took Palermo as a way to land... as a sort of land to discuss contemporary challenges...

LM: *And to this extent: you have also said a 'bridge' and a 'blueprint', would you define it more as a tool or... because it actually looks like a first step, a first level of the curatorial project...*

IPL: ...no, it is.

It is basically a sort of foundation of the curatorial project. And, in a way, once we finished the Atlas, not in its published form, but in a sort of report, which was more extensive and full of information and so on, the report was given to the group of curators of which I was part of, together with Andrés Jacques, Bregtje and Mirjam, but also to every

single international contributor that we had invited. So, the Atlas acted as a sort of tool, and in some cases, it was also taken as form of... as basic knowledge on the city, but also... it unlocks a certain mechanism, so that every new art intervention that we initiated was done in collaboration with a - let's say - selection of local contributors which was very transversal. So, from groups of refugees, to academics in the universities, so in a way we also wanted to question the model of artistic intervention by questioning its authorship. Every project that we brought there was the output of a conversation with local people. So, that's why it was a tool: the Atlas created this set of connections.

LM: *And how did you create this network? I mean, you said that you were together to do the Atlas, the final editor of which is you, your collaborators, OMA, but how did you actually pick up this... the subjects for the interviews?*

IPL: I mean, partially, you know, this was almost like a digging process, so, once we set the kind of observation that we wanted to take, or to make, we identified a number of parties which seemed to be interesting for us to talk to, and we simply reached out to them. Also, Manifesta made an important effort to bring a team in Palermo very early this time, so quite in advance [in comparison] with the other biennials, and the team itself worked with us to establish this network, so it was a really collaborative effort, that once we set the number of topics we have decided to basically reach out to a number of people. So, for example, on everything that had to do with - let's say - landscape, the agricultural history of Palermo, or the natural history of Palermo, the movements of seeds across the Mediterranean, we worked with a Professor from the University of Agronomic Studies called Giuseppe Barbera and a number of botanists that actually are active workers and agents in the *Orto Botanico*, in the Botanical Garden. So, that was quite an easy connection, but for other projects, instead, we had to reach out for example to cooperatives of refugees in the middle of *Ballarò*, such as the one around *Moltivolti* that helped shape other kind of projects, the ones dealing mostly with human displacement and migration. For the project that we did with Gilles Clément at the *Zen*, this was a very long process, really difficult, and it was only possible because we liaised with an activist group, located at the *Zen*, working in the *Zen* since a long, long time. So, Manifesta was also highly criticised by the system of gallerists, so [by] the 'art market system' in a way, but our intention was never to appeal to that system, our intention was really the opposite. To position an event as a tool of urban and cultural regeneration and not really as an instrument of the globalised art system.

LM: *You've just mentioned Gilles Clément: who came up with the idea of 'The Planetary Garden'? How did you actually get to that as a possible connection between the themes of the migrations and so on?*

IPL: Within this idea of looking at Palermo as a geography of flows, where multiple forms of coexistence are taking place, so its coexistence between people of different ethnicities but also its coexistence with technology in the form of flow of data and digital infrastructures, its coexistence between plants or seeds coming from different parts of the world and generating a completely different landscape, its coexistence with toxicity, so in a way its coexistence with other forms of otherness... and as a student I was a big fan of Gilles Clément's text and I've read most of his books, included obviously 'The Planetary Garden', which models this metaphor in an extremely effective way by talking about the idea of an unknown pure ecosystem, an ecosystem that is basically growing upon the enrichment of multiple flows and so on, and during a discussion with the other curators I brought this book, which as you know is a very small book (*The Planetary Garden*), and we all liked it, and that became the title, we just wanted to add something, so: 'Cultivating Coexistence' as... as a form of care... which is obviously the intention, I think, at the foundation of the book of Gilles Clément. So, our project was a project of care towards the city, at least it was in the intentions. And it seems to be the ideal title, but of course we didn't limit the idea of coexistence to just plants and gardens, it became a model to investigate all these other forms of coexistences.

LM: *You've also mentioned the involvement of the local communities which is of course quite interesting and I've also seen that Manifesta was working on this three-different-level programme: so, there was one main system, one main series of events and then the 5x5x5...*

IPL: Those were the parallel events.

LM: *I've seen that there have been complaints from local communities, I don't remember whether from galleries as you said or from artists, but I've picked up a quote by Miriam La Rosa and she said that not all local communities were given importance... Do you think that maybe is just a matter of different connection between this three-layered system or do you think on the contrary that this is an unfair...*

IPL: No, I think...

LM: *...I mean an unfair remark?*

IPL: No, I mean, of course we face criticism and to a certain extent I believe it's inevitable... And as much as you try to be as inclusive as you can, you cannot be inclusive 100%. So, it's also difficult to liaise with every single artist group. I think what maybe set people off, is that because the composition of the curatorial team was a non-traditional one — because among the four of us there was only one art curator, Mirjam Varadinis, the rest was coming from different fields and disciplines — so we were interested to work with not necessarily just the artist community or artist collectives. And so, we had to make choices: in some cases, we thought that artists would be... or practitioners, because we invited also many non-artists, you know, architects, botanists, activists, journalists, video makers and so on... we thought that it was better to set them off with other cultural producers, other cultural agents. For example, Laura Poitras, who's an Oscar winning journalist and film maker, she did this amazing work on the MUOS, on the parabolic antennas in Niscemi, Sicily and she did it with the experimental school of cinema from Palermo. So, she worked actively with twelve students. She didn't work with local artist groups, but I think in the general perception, Manifesta was supposed to be an 'art biennale', so with installations, with sculptures, and objects, and so forth and it became something very different, because of course the curatorial intentions were different, and therefore, different kinds of groups were involved, also people that are not close to cultural events, normally. I mean, I don't think that no-one from the work done at the *Zen* ever visited a biennial, but that was exactly the point. It was the point to shift the attention away from the typical art community. So, I'm aware and I know that many art collectives and so on felt not to be represented in a way.

LM: *But, is it true... because if I remember well, it was Mirjam Varadinis who said that there was not – I don't know if I express myself correctly – the same level of publicity to these three different levels of events, so that, for instance, the international audience was not actually brought to the Zen... I don't know if I actually understood this...*

IPL: Hmm... there were other concerns... we didn't want to turn the *Zen* into a zoo. You know, where people coming from Art Basel, in nice suits would actually go to the controverted areas and take pictures, and see how cool it was, and so on... It seemed to be just wrong. I mean we did the project because we wanted to do the project there, because we set something in motion, because we did it for a community there, we did it also with the help of impressive persons, because Gilles Clément came, he gave guidelines, he gave talks, he met the mayor and so

on. But we didn't want to put, let's say, the 'spot' in areas which otherwise would have become just a show-off, you know. And it would have worked exactly against the original intention, I think.

LM: *So, this is why there was actually...*

IPL: Yes, there were basically... there was a main tour which was basically taking place mostly in the several locations of the main centre, the historical centre, as you know mostly in 'found bases' or non-museums, abandoned buildings and so on... there was also the intention of Manifesta to work not within the existing cultural infrastructure of the city, but rather within 'found spaces', also to re-inject some form of life into these places. But I mean... obviously everything was on a map, everything was told very openly, but it required an effort to go to the *Zen* or to go to Pizzosella: it required time, so we tried to treat it as any other project, and of course the flow was mostly in the centre, and some people were brought to the *Zen*, but there was definitely a different intent of intensity off the spotlight.

LM: *So, it was mainly a project for the community...*

IPL: Yes, yes.

LM: *And about the choice of the location and actually about Palermo itself, because, if there is one thing that the Atlas highlights perfectly is of course the historical tradition of Palermo in these series of migrations of different people, different cultures coming to Palermo, so that there's really a lot of layers on it, but the question is: this actually seems, according to the Atlas, more historical, because, for instance I have seen that migrants today seem to not even come to Palermo, so it's probably rather Southern Sicily, which is actually mainly interested by the phenomenon of the migrations and then also the numbers and figures that you used in the Atlas say that they seem to go north, so it seems strange that overall Sicily, just Palermo, which actually seems to be less involved in this...*

IPL: I mean, Palermo is not at the forefront, because it's a harbour that is facing north, obviously, but Palermo is crucial because of its historical meaning in relation to migrations across the Mediterranean and it was crucial at the time also because Manifesta happened within a very specific political vision, which was the one of, let's say the city government led by Leoluca Orlando, who, just a couple of years before, released the Palermo Chart, where he claimed human mobility as a fundamental human right so he made an appeal to an International

United Nation Organization. We only can understand Manifesta within... as an entangled piece of this political vision. Manifesta became a way to discuss very political issues, but in different forms and outside of the traditional places of politics. Having said that, I think it important to recognize that there is a very diverse community living in Palermo. It's just that many of the numbers are not represented because there are people who are not registered. So obviously the date that we have it's referring to official numbers, but it's true what you say: people tend not to stay in Sicily, because it's a poor land, so they tend to migrate north, to reach either the north of Italy or Germany, or France, or the UK. It's an edge, it's a threshold, but it's the place where everybody passes through, so that's still really important, but I think more importantly it's to look at the qualities of those numbers, so it's not irrelevant that the most present foreign community in Palermo is from Sri Lanka so from South East Asia, and those are the people who are actually settling in and that's a migration that started already thirty years ago and really contributed actively to the relaunch of the historical centre in a phase when the historical centre was completely derelict and almost entirely abandoned. So part of the Atlas was trying to investigate also what are the new cultural and spatial dynamics that are emerging from these new flows, which are reaching far beyond the Mediterranean, so, Palermo you know is Arab-Norman, as much as it is today Ghanaian and Tamil you would say and it's important to recognize that because that also has an impact on the way certain areas of the city are developing, certain spaces are being used and colonised and so forth.

LM: *And regarding this theme of the migration in particular, Okwi Enwezor had criticised Manifesta already in 2005, wasn't in this case the choice of Palermo probably a sort of an indirect answer to the criticism: he said that 'Manifesta is an extension of Brussel's cultural policy', 'complicit in the disappearance of [immigrants]...*

IPL: Who said that?

LM: *Okwui Enwezor*

IPL: Yes... Well, I mean, he might be right...

LM: *But do you think that Manifesta thought that this could be an...*

IPL: I don't know, I don't know because I was part of the curatorial team for one edition and I think the only person who could answer

this would be Hedwig Fijen who is the founder and director currently still of Manifesta for 25 years. I think she did an impressive job in positioning Manifesta always as something that was trying to experiment on a different model from the typical biennial. We discussed also that maybe it was not even right to call it a biennial or a biennial of visual arts, maybe it was something else, maybe it becomes a sort of a governmental agency or it will become a sort of a governmental agency able to steer certain thinking about certain problems in certain places. But I think the connection to Palermo was basically its part of the rotation in the axis of interest of Manifesta. Manifesta was born to bridge the east and the west after the fall of the Berlin wall, through cultural production, through artistic practices and then, gradually - because of course now there's a south to north dynamic: incredibly interesting and also incredibly contested because of the migrations, because of climate change and so on- ...the axis basically shifted north to south, and that's why I think Palermo came into the picture, then we had Marseille, then also the next edition which will be, if I'm not wrong, in Prishtina... so we are looking at a different kind of Europe here.

LM: *Sure. But since these decisions were taken actually before, you and...*

IPL: Yes, yes...

LM: *Did you actually feel that... I've seen that somebody said that – this was Pascal Gielen, the sociologist – said that 'the curators were contained' and 'tolerated'... Did you actually feel this way, or...? Because it doesn't look like, from what you're telling me now, so I just wondered...*

IPL: No, no, really not. I had enormous freedom.

LM: *Because from his point of view 'the economic and administrative framework' it is actually the one that is shaping the event, so...*

IPL: No, that's true. I mean, there is a city that wins the bid and then curators are appointed in response to the specificity of the bid and the specificity of the institutional architecture, so to say, but I never felt that I was not... I never felt contained to be honest, I was completely free to develop the Atlas the way I wanted to, to basically talk to the people I wanted to, I mean obviously there were economic constraints but that's in any kind of project, you know, it's not something that you can avoid, and in this case they were quite severe, because there was not so much money, but I don't think it really had an impact on the final output. I mean, there are things which I might have done differ-

ently, but those are details: it's about communication, it's about visual identity, it's about... but the core topics, the way we assembled...

LM: *Due to the bid?*

IPL: Hmm?

LM: *I mean that you did differently due to the bid?*

IPL: No, no, no, no: during the process of making the biennial. The bid only declares the winning city and after the bid basically a local Manifesta foundation is established, with local stakeholders. But again... it's not stakeholders that never really had a major interference in our process... I mean: we had to obviously take certain instances into consideration, but it's also difficult, unimaginable, to do a project without any kind of friction. You somehow work within a structure that is existing, but, really, I think we were able to do, to move quite freely and never really felt any kind of containment, to be honest, really.

LM: *So, now, two years after, what do you think is the legacy of Manifesta to Palermo?*

IPL: Well, I mean... definitely very different from what I have imagined: we had higher expectations, and we also had higher expectations in terms of political support of that legacy, because obviously the political framework is essential to keep alive certain projects. And I'm afraid that after Manifesta, in a way, the interest of the city itself moved, shifted somewhere else. Obviously, we went through a very difficult tier, because of Covid, that had an impact everywhere and, for any kind of project that doesn't have an immediate economic result, that also has an impact. I think the most important legacy of Manifesta is that we established a network which is still existing, and there are people who are still collaborating, from Palermo toward other parts of the World, and that I believe is the output of, maybe, this mechanism that we set into place. The other thing is that Palermo for two years was really in the spotlight, in terms of the media's attention which obviously generated a form of attraction of potential interest, looking really at the pragmatic aspect of it. But certain projects which were meant to resist the timeframe of Manifesta, to really project themselves into a much longer temporal horizon, did not necessarily succeed: for example, the project at the Zen. It was designed as a completely resilient low maintenance garden, the garden is there, but I know that the local activists are struggling to keep it alive and to keep it working, so I don't

know how much that will resist. And I do feel that with the surrendering a way of politics people who were involved in the project felt somehow abandoned and that's something that of course it's beyond us and it's I think part also of the naïve attitude of people like me working in cultural practices and, you know, you cannot work in the absence of political support, or at least you cannot work without building that political support very seriously for a very long time. So, let's say... it's not black and white, but I would say that the legacy lies in a sort of grey area. I would not say that it's successful, but I would not say that it's not existing.

LM: *Maybe, when you are referring to the political framework you probably refer to the gentrification highlighted in the Atlas, because there were a lot of interesting hints and analyses at a larger scale... were you also referring to this?*

IPL: Well, I think some gentrification is fine. Although... in a city like Palermo some gentrification means some form of investments and money flowing and generating economy: it needs to be regulated and it needs to be curated in a way. And I do think that certain mechanisms were set in place and that's totally ok. I'm referring more to the fact that part of the collaborators... some collaborations did not continue, some projects were left a little bit abandoned, like the garden at the *Zen*. For example, the main headquarter of the whole project, the Teatro Garibaldi, which took an enormous effort, both in terms of design, but also legal, in order to reactivate it, simply did not have an afterlife, although we've even come up with a programme for its afterlife. So those are the operations that maybe left a bitter taste as an output. But, again, I think it was overall a very positive operation and maybe it's naïve to think that the whole project has the strength to continue as such for hundreds of years, I don't know, or decades. Certain things moved on, certain things didn't, and it's a pity that certain things didn't. But, again, I think it's because of a picture that was larger than us in a way and maybe it's also naïve to think that these events can fix everything, because they can't, obviously. They can only, I think, set potential directions, they can give initial tools to set something in motion, but then it needs to be maintained.

LM: *But there is one legacy which is actually quite visible which is the, let's say the tool of the Atlas, because now in Marseille they've also picked up something similar, with a very different approach, so... I don't know if you feel comfortable about telling me something about the work by Winy Mas... What do you think about that, the 'Grand Puzzle'?*

IPL: No, I didn't see it properly, to be honest... the only thing that I contested to the organization is that...

I mean, I was involved at the time with the Atlas as a partner of OMA, so they also wanted to play the card of the 'high calibre' office looking in the city. I think that's exactly where things get really fragile and very uncertain, because of course it's not a guarantee for a very in-depth study. The way I decided to set the work up was actually to build the team that was partially local and partially non-local, so in order to really have a grip of the situation. We also had many contributors, as you know, who wrote on the Atlas, who were from Palermo and I think, as far as I've seen, the operation made by MVRDV and Winy was very different, in a way, at a level of this kind of helicopter view of the city, and I think that's exactly where the things don't necessarily work, but that's my personal opinion. When, again, Manifesta, they asked me whether I could suggest offices that would look into Marseille, or researchers, I gave a very vast list of names, but I gave myself as a rule to only pick from the Mediterranean region... French, North African... wonderful research entities in North Africa... Because I think you needed to have that sensibility to understand certain mechanisms. And Manifesta decided to go with the big name again and to me that was a sign of the fragility also of Manifesta in a way and also of the fact that it's anyway a by-product of the neoliberal art system, you know, that needs to have a brand coming with it.

LM: *To this extent I also think that there's a very different approach, because the tool is probably the same but... I don't know if you've seen it: there are sort of, I would call them utopian projects that they asked groups of students to sketch and to design...*

IPL: Yes.

LM: *...so it's quite strange, because, I don't know if this is actually true because I never found the exact quotation, but you know that Rem Koolhaas is supposed to have said the famous 'fuck the context'...*

IPL: ...No, but I mean Rem is much more sophisticated than that and that was something extracted from a much larger interview...

LM: *This actually looks like the poetics of the Grand Puzzle, which is more straightforward, while I think that probably, correct me if I'm wrong, you were pretty much looking into the context...*

IPL: Yes, yes, yes. I think the way they wanted to expand the Atlas at the beginning was actually as a series of projects for the city, to sell to the city and I said: forget it! I mean, you are a Dutch organization, but you don't know how many failed attempts South of Italy had of major projects, so that's really not the way to go: we need to start from the ground, we need to start from a local scale and maybe try to really bridge conceptually the local with this major planetary dimension, so, I mean we looked at the scale of seeds coming through the black market from South East Asia into Sicily through the Sri Lankan community, seeds which are not allowed into European soil by the United Nations, but they do have an impact, of course. And to me to deliver a project was completely stupid, you know, Manifesta would have been the project and Manifesta was actually the project, but I also never understood this work as a way to get commissioned in Palermo. And I think that, knowing Winy, he saw the opportunity to actually get commissioned in Marseille. But I think that was not the way to go, I had strong, strong fights, both within my office and both with Manifesta about this.

LM: *Thank you for the really very frank...*

IPL: No, it's the reality, so...

LM: *I hope of course that I will be able to ask questions to Hedwig Fijen also, I don't know if you think that she might be available.*

IPL: Yes, yes, I'm sure she is, because she likes to discuss these things, also as a sort of criticism to the process and so on, so.

LM: *Because this double nature that you have highlighted, the brand-non-brand, it's a series of different things together so it's also quite interesting: you know that this thing the 'branding' Manifesta is probably the main or the fiercest criticism that Manifesta is going through...*

IPL: Absolutely, absolutely, I completely agree. I completely agree...

LM: *But you're actually sharing a part of this criticism, albeit you were...*

IPL: No, I share it, but the only thing... I can only talk from the specific point of view of the work done in Palermo. And the work done in Palermo was trying to position the biennial outside the typical format of the typical biennial, but also through the Atlas it was trying to look at a place, to get to know again a place, before deciding to project any

idea on that place, and that was our methodology, to basically unveil certain potentials, unlock certain qualities, unlock certain places, but it was really scratching from the ground in a way. At least that was our attitude, I'm not saying that's an attitude that's universal: we felt it was specific to that moment in that place at that time.

LM: *So, thank you really very much for this interview. Grazie mille.*

8.1.2 Interview with Carola Boschetti (Comteatro): Atlante (the Corsico Atlas), Performance, Territory and Local Communities (Interview held in Italian, translated into English with the support of digital tools, 26.05.2021 – Zoom)

Lorenzo Morganti (LM): *Thank you very much for your availability today. First of all, I would like to ask you to tell me about the 'Corsico Atlas' project in your artistic practice ...*

Carola Boschetti (CB): The 'Atlante di Corsico' [*Corsico Atlas*] is a project that started in January 2019, it was written by us and is part of a larger project called 'Fermata Corsico' [*Corsico stop*] that we sent to the Cariplo Foundation (which is a body that finances cultural activities in Lombardy) and that was funded. It kept us busy from January until September, when the theatrical walks took place and it was an action that was designed to further bring the citizens of Corsico closer to the theatrical activities of Comteatro [*the artist collective Carola Boschetti is part of*], because we have been working in that territory for more than thirty years, but we have always realised that our audience obviously also came from Lombardy, from Milan... the approach was thought of in the construction of these theatrical walks.

It is not something that we invented, the theatrical walks were first made by this company from Berlin called 'Rimini Protokoll', which also came to Italy and who did this show called 'Remote Milano', 'Remote Berlin'... There was therefore a precedent that had intrigued us, namely the intimate conduction that takes place through headphones, so the viewer takes an intimate journey with this voice that guides you, a journey into the city, which was what we were interested in: so to work on Corsico and its territory and at the same time, however, a journey that is made together with other people, even with actors and then we did it in our own way. Our way was to involve the citizens of Corsico, so I personally did more than fifty interviews with citizens between January and May that we had divided into senior citizens, foreign citizens and residents, young people and citizens, let's say, who did not fall into these categories. Obviously Comteatro has several links with the territory, with associations, so it was not difficult to contact these people. Surely foreign citizens were the most difficult ones, also because they do not speak Italian well and therefore in the interviews it was a bit complicated, but through the Italian courses for foreigners that are held in Corsico, we were able to enter the communities. We were interested in getting to the whole Corsico community. Corsico is a town on the outskirts of Milan, which has a very strong industrial past: the first industries were born because there was water, because there was the Naviglio [*Canal*]. And therefore, it has a very strong and very present industrial past that has gradually disappeared and therefore it has changed its face, several times. So, it has a particular territory and a particular population: we tried to involve it in the construction of the promenade. How? Doing the interviews. The questions perhaps weren't the best questions, but they are the ones that came to our mind: that is, if you had a place in your heart in Corsico... how you would have imagined Corsico if you had had to redesign one of its places, ... Once collected these interviews we worked with a playwright and a musician. The playwright wrote the dramaturgy with us. What did she do? She listened to all the interviews, she made a script: that is, we take a story in minute 2, where [*the person interviewed*] talks about his parents who met in the factory and then we combine it with an excerpt by Italo Calvino that talks about the invisible cities or other dramaturgical inventions that she always invented collaborating with me and with Claudio [*Orlandini*] who is the director. What did the musician do? He created the audio, that is, he created the audio file, then he put the music together, he cut the interviews and of course he made the listening enjoyable - and all this... since we are actors and we also like to keep the live theatre, during the walk there were three moments where the audience took off their headphones and the theatre hap-

pened in front of them, it was born from history: for example in the second walk we talked about the 'wolves of the paper mill' who were the people who unloaded the paper mill and then, in the 'Bar Stella', which we found as the final location, [the 'wolves'] told their story. So in my opinion there were two exciting things: on the one hand having a story in the headphones that had a poetic side, dictated by the actors, dictated by the dramaturgy, but which also had a very personal relationship with the places, on the other hand the story of those who inhabit them, on different levels: from a boy who is fifteen, to a foreign citizen who arrives and tells you: 'Corsico is very beautiful to me', because obviously for him it is his new city, to the one who has been living there for sixty years, who tells you the whole story. So, it was a personal accompaniment, I would like to say, and in fact the thing that excited people a lot is just that, even for the people who knew Corsico very well: they found something new, but because that 'new' was precisely the story that was born from the citizens, helped by theatre, i.e. [*the story*] transported in a poem, transported in a vision. So, it was certainly a very positive experience for us, because it was a theatrical action that we had never done before and it was certainly a beautiful thought for Corsico. Corsico, as I said, is a very peculiar territory and there is a whole part of abandoned areas, there is the Naviglio, there is the railway: the playwright, when she was writing the audio, needed to know where we would pass on foot, because obviously the passage in the city had to be told by the audio, so there was also a thought on where to pass and we created two different stories because we could not take a single walk, because there were still many things to see ...

LM: *So in addition to the actual theatrical planning, you also curated the paths ...*

CB: Yes, we have curated the routes because the routes could not be separated from the audio, they could not be separated from the story, because obviously, I don't know, ... the Naviglio Grande Hotel, which is now closed and is on the Naviglio, had been a house where prisoners were tortured during the war, so we wanted to tell this kind of story, so we had to go through that point of the Naviglio, and then from there we went to the new area where they demolished all the old paper mills and built the new residential buildings. So, we defined two walks, in fact one was called the 'water walk' and another the 'dream walk', because the territory was very vast and there were many stories to tell and therefore, we wanted to try to pass through as many parts as possible that interested us.

LM: *Two different walks so ...*

CB: Yes, they told different stories, just as if they were two separate projects and therefore people saw one and saw the other because the experience was completely different. The walks lasted more than two hours, so a lot of walking and they were quite long. There were also children (aged 8-10 and up, because otherwise it becomes tiring), but everyone took part.

The other thing, in regards to the city, that was important to us was the space for performances, because we needed places that could be suitable for spectators who would sit down for a moment and also to welcome the actors. So, for example, we found a beautiful amphitheatre, a beautiful location for theatre there: we should do a show there, and it is an absolutely abandoned place. So, we also really found places to stop and make the theatre happen. The fact that we were shooting with headphones even at night, that is, in the evening, with these illuminated headphones was certainly something choreographic. We also went inside the main church, because they opened it to us, because in the evening it could be opened: they were all moments where the theatre (which is an act that strongly needs a physical place, which is the stage) could find in the 'places for staying' [*the squares*], in addition to the 'places for going' [*the streets*], as many stages as our dear Consonni used to say [*Giancarlo Consonni, poet, urban planner and scholar*]. Because [the theatre] takes place in the squares and the square is a stage, so, seeing all this, seeing it happen, is always very exciting for me. And when the theatre comes out of its spaces, it seduces all that audience that might not have entered the theatre anyway and instead in this way becomes curious and stops and they ask you: what are you doing? ...

LM: *Also, because with the pandemic, correct me if I'm wrong, this was also one more action that allowed you to continue...*

CB: The first took place in September 2019, last year with the pandemic a part of the action of the Cariplo project was skipped, so we had to re-invent ourselves, let's say reposition those resources in another action and we decided to redo the walks in September 2020 and we managed to do them. In this sense, certainly this type of outdoor action where the public participates, but participates in a safe way, are certainly feasible [also] at this time.

LM: *So, a project born before that, thanks to the format, you were able to bring on stage also with...*

CB: We were able to bring it back to the stage also in 2020. For us it was certainly a unique project: it cannot be replicated, let's say outside of Corsico. Others maybe do it on parks, on trees, on nature, and therefore this thing is a little more replicable, our [project] was born in Corsico and therefore we would only do it again there, when we will still have the resources to do it: because obviously part of the project has been financed, but the actors who intervene must be paid every time.

LM: *At the level of artistic practice, I find a lot of consonance with what has been done by OMA for Manifesta Palermo. In Palermo, for the Biennale, they designed an Atlas: in that case it was a starting tool for the artistic and curatorial proposal, while in your case it became the artistic proposal itself. Tell me if you find contact with your project in some of the main elements of the Palermo Atlas that I would summarize as: participation, territory, interculturalism, analysis, variability of scale and, the only point that perhaps was missing from the Palermo Atlas was a proposition and forecast part ... and in the latter case I would like to ask you, assuming that all the previous elements, as it seems to me, were also present in your project ...*

CB: Yes.

LM: *...the Palermo Atlas as an object of study, which had also been carried out starting from a series of interviews, was perhaps missing the part of the legacy: when the curators were interviewed about the legacy left to Palermo, they complained a little about the fact that the outcome of these actions ...*

CB: Didn't last...

LM: *...they say it went differently from what they had planned. They thought of planting a seed, but little of what they planted is left. So, I also ask you the same difficult question: what is the legacy, given the territorial action, of your project on Corsico ...*

CB: Surely there is a legacy in having an experience together and in getting to know the city with new eyes... Those who participated, also at the stage of the interviews, participated actively, and this thing that later they could find themselves in the audio (even if we have cut some things)... anyway they participated in a path and this is something that surely remains; those who took part in the walk experienced the city, discovered places they did not know, discovered stories and had a theatrical experience, which obviously is an experience that is linked

to the imagination, which is linked to emotion: this is a legacy. Furthermore, the work done can ensure that this walk can continue or can even be structured in another way, creating another path. The 'Corsico stop' project had this among the objectives: in addition to enhancing the theatre in Milan, creating a sort of theatre criticism workshops, the citizens would then be brought on stage to participate in a show together with the *Comteatro*, where they should have this choir of the *Persians*, by Aeschylus. So, the idea was that, in any case, these series of active participation in theatrical events would then build a broader project, including training. Clearly this path of going on stage last year was interrupted by the pandemic and we were unable to do it again, because Cariplo asked us 'you must stop first', etc., etc., and because currently doing theatre training has become very difficult because we've done everything online. So, working for the first time with citizens who do not want to be actors, who are the ones who come to us, but who would have simply wanted to be part of a path, and, again, talking about the city, because then we would have indeed brought to the stage *The Persians*, but that is a play which tells of the war, which tells of a burning city, so it was again a way to try to use a theatrical medium to talk about today. Therefore, the legacy should have continued with other actions, which it was not possible to carry out. The current legacy is a sound document, if you like, a document that does exist and that we could still hear and tell again, in other theatrical performances.

LM: *It is a live archive, let's say, of the city, of the territory ...*

CB: Yes.

Italian original text

Lorenzo Morganti (LM): *Grazie mille per la tua disponibilità odierna. Anzitutto vorrei chiederti di raccontarmi del progetto Atlante Corsico nella tua pratica artistica...*

Carola Boschetti (CB): L'Atlante di Corsico è un progetto che è partito nel gennaio 2019, è stato scritto da noi e fa parte di un progetto più grande che si chiama 'Fermata Corsico' che abbiamo mandato a Fondazione Cariplo (che è un ente che finanzia le attività culturali in Lombardia) ed è stato finanziato. Ci ha impegnato da gennaio fino a settembre, quando sono andate in scena le passeggiate teatrali ed è stata un'azione che è stata pensata per avvicinare ulteriormente i cittadini di Corsico alle attività teatrali di Comteatro, perché noi lavoriamo in quel territorio da più di trent'anni, ma ci siamo sempre resi conto che il nostro pubblico arrivava ovviamente anche dalla Lombardia, da Milano... l'avvicinamento è stato pensato nella costruzione di queste passeggiate teatrali.

Non è una cosa che abbiamo inventato noi, le passeggiate teatrali sono state fatte per primi da questa compagnia di Berlino che si chiama Rimini Protokoll, che è venuta anche in Italia e che faceva questo spettacolo che si chiama 'Remote Milano', 'Remote Berlin'. C'era quindi un precedente che ci aveva incuriosito, cioè la conduzione intima che avviene attraverso le cuffie, quindi lo spettatore fa un viaggio intimo con questa voce che ti guida, un viaggio nella città, che era quello che a noi interessava: quindi lavorare su Corsico e sul suo territorio e nello stesso tempo però un viaggio che si fa assieme ad altre persone, anche con attori e teatranti e quindi poi noi l'abbiamo fatta a nostro modo. Il nostro modo era coinvolgere i cittadini di Corsico, quindi io personalmente ho fatto tra Gennaio e Maggio più di cinquanta interviste ai cittadini che avevamo suddiviso in cittadini anziani, cittadini stranieri e residenti, giovani e cittadini, diciamo, che non rientravano in queste categorie. Ovviamente Comteatro ha diversi legami con il territorio, con l'associazionismo, quindi non è stato difficile contattare queste persone. Sicuramente i cittadini stranieri sono stati quelli più difficili anche perché non parlano bene italiano e quindi nelle interviste era un po' complicato, però attraverso i corsi di italiano per stranieri che vengono fatti a Corsico, siamo riusciti a entrare nelle comunità. Ci interessava appunto arrivare a *tutta* la comunità di Corsico, Corsico è una cittadina alle porte di Milano, che ha un passato industriale molto forte: le prime industrie nascevano perché c'era l'acqua, perché c'era il Naviglio. E quindi ha un passato industriale molto forte e molto presente

che è andato via via a dismettersi e quindi ha cambiato faccia, più volte. Quindi ha un territorio particolare ed una popolazione particolare: noi abbiamo cercato di coinvolgerla nella costruzione della passeggiata. In che modo? Facendo le interviste. Le domande forse non erano le domande migliori, ma sono quelle che ci sono venute in mente: cioè se avevi un luogo del cuore a Corsico, come ti immaginavi Corsico se avessi dovuto ridisegnarne un luogo,... Raccolte queste interviste abbiamo lavorato con una drammaturga e con un musicista. La drammaturga insieme a noi ha scritto la drammaturgia. Cosa ha fatto? ha ascoltato tutte le interviste, ha fatto un copione: cioè prendiamo di un racconto il minuto 2, dove parla dei suoi genitori che si sono conosciuti in fabbrica e poi lo uniamo con un pezzo di Italo Calvino che racconta le città invisibili o altre invenzioni drammaturgiche che lei ha inventato sempre collaborando con me e con Claudio [Orlandini] che è il regista. Il musicista cosa ha fatto? Ha creato l'audio, cioè ha creato il file audio, quindi ha messo insieme le musiche, ha tagliato le interviste e ha fatto sì che ovviamente l'ascolto fosse piacevole. E tutto questo... visto che noi siamo attori e ci piace anche mantenere il teatro dal vivo, durante la passeggiata c'erano tre momenti dove il pubblico si toglieva le cuffie e succedeva il teatro davanti a loro, nasceva dalla storia: ad esempio nella seconda passeggiata si parlava dei 'lupi della cartiera' che erano le persone che scaricavano la cartiera e quindi in questo 'Bar Stella', che abbiamo trovato come location finale, [i 'lupi'] raccontavano la loro storia. Quindi le cose secondo me emozionanti erano due: da un lato avere un racconto in cuffia che aveva un lato poetico, dettato dagli attori, dettato dalla drammaturgia, ma che aveva anche un rapporto molto personale con i luoghi, dall'altro il racconto di chi li vive, a diversi livelli: da un ragazzo che ha quindici anni, a un cittadino straniero che arriva e ti dice: 'Corsico per me è bellissima', perché ovviamente per lui è la sua nuova città, a quello che invece vive lì da sessant'anni, ti racconta tutta la storia. Quindi è stato un accompagnamento personale, mi viene da dire, e di fatti la cosa che ha emozionato molto le persone è proprio questo, anche per le persone che conoscevano Corsico molto bene: ne hanno trovato qualcosa di nuovo, ma perché quel 'nuovo' era proprio il racconto che nasceva dai cittadini, aiutato da quello che è il teatro, cioè trasportato in una poesia, trasportato in una visione. Quindi è stata sicuramente un'esperienza molto positiva per noi, perché è stata un'azione teatrale che non avevamo mai fatto e sicuramente è stato un bellissimo pensiero per Corsico. Corsico come dicevo è un territorio molto particolare e c'è tutta una parte di aree dismesse, c'è il Naviglio, c'è la ferrovia: la drammaturga, quando scriveva l'audio, aveva bisogno di sapere dove saremmo passati a piedi, perché ovviamente il passaggio nella città doveva essere

raccontato dall'audio, quindi c'è stato proprio anche un pensiero su dove passare e abbiamo creato due storie differenti perché non riuscivamo a fare una sola passeggiata, perché le cose da vedere erano comunque tante...

LM: *Quindi oltre alla progettazione teatrale vera e propria hai curato anche i percorsi...*

CB: Sì, abbiamo curato i percorsi perché i percorsi non potevano scindersi dall'audio, non potevano scindersi dal racconto, perché ovviamente, non so,... l'Hotel Naviglio Grande, che adesso è chiuso ed è sul Naviglio, era stata una casa dove durante la guerra venivano torturati i prigionieri, quindi questo tipo di storia volevamo raccontarla, quindi bisognava passare da quel punto del Naviglio, e poi da lì siamo andati nella nuova zona dove hanno abbattuto tutte le vecchie cartiere e hanno costruito i nuovi palazzi residenziali. Così abbiamo definito due passeggiate, infatti una si chiamava 'passeggiata dell'acqua' e una 'passeggiata del sogno', perché il territorio era molto vasto e le storie da raccontare erano tante e quindi volevamo cercare di passare in più parti possibili che ci interessavano.

LM: *Due passeggiate diverse quindi...*

CB: Sì, raccontavano storie diverse, proprio come se fossero due progetti a sé stanti e quindi le persone vedevano una e vedevano l'altra perché l'esperienza era completamente diversa. Le passeggiate duravano due ore e passa, quindi c'era camminare ed erano abbastanza lunghe. C'erano anche bambini (dagli 8-10 anni in su, perché altrimenti diventa faticoso) però hanno partecipato tutti.

L'altra cosa rispetto alla città che era importante per noi era lo spazio per le rappresentazioni, perché ci servivano dei posti che potessero essere adatti agli spettatori che si sedessero un attimo e anche ad accogliere, gli attori. Quindi ad esempio abbiamo trovato un bellissimo anfiteatro, una location bellissima per fare teatro lì: bisognerebbe farci uno spettacolo, ed è un posto assolutamente abbandonato. Quindi abbiamo veramente anche trovato dei posti dove fermarci e far accadere il teatro. Il fatto che giravamo con le cuffie anche di notte, cioè alla sera con queste cuffie illuminate era sicuramente qualcosa di coreografico. Siamo passati anche dentro la chiesa principale, perché ce l'hanno aperta, perché alla sera si poteva aprire: sono stati tutti momenti dove il teatro, che è un atto che ha fortemente bisogno di un luogo fisico, che è il palcoscenico, trovava nei 'luoghi dello stare', oltre ai 'luoghi

dell'andare' altrettanti palcoscenici come diceva il nostro caro Consonni [...]. Perché [il teatro] avviene nelle piazze e la piazza è un palcoscenico, quindi vedere tutto questo, vederlo succedere, per me è sempre molto emozionante. E quando il teatro esce dai suoi spazi conquista tutto quel pubblico che comunque non sarebbe magari entrato in teatro e invece in questo modo si incuriosisce e si ferma e ti chiedono: cosa state facendo?...

LM: *Anche perché con la pandemia, correggimi se sbaglio, questa è stata anche un'azione in più che vi ha consentito di continuare...*

CB: La prima è avvenuta nel settembre del 2019, l'anno scorso con la pandemia è saltata una parte dell'azione del progetto Cariplo, quindi abbiamo dovuto re-inventarci, diciamo riposizionare quelle risorse in un'altra azione e abbiamo deciso di rifare le passeggiate a settembre 2020 e siamo riusciti a farle. In questo senso sicuramente questo tipo di azioni all'aperto dove il pubblico partecipa, ma partecipa in maniera sicura, sono sicuramente fattibili [anche] in questo momento.

LM: *Quindi un progetto nato prima che però grazie al format voi avete potuto portare in scena anche con..*

CB: Abbiamo potuto riportarlo in scena anche nel 2020. Per noi è stato sicuramente un progetto unico: non è replicabile diciamo al di fuori di Corsico. Altri lo fanno magari sui parchi, sugli alberi, sulla natura, e quindi questa cosa è un po' più replicabile, il nostro [progetto] è nato a Corsico e quindi lo rifaremmo soltanto lì, quando riavremo ancora le risorse per poterlo fare: perché una parte ovviamente del progetto è stata finanziata, ma gli attori che intervengono devono ogni volta essere pagati.

LM: *A livello di pratica artistica trovo molta consonanza con quanto è stato fatto dallo studio OMA per Manifesta Palermo. A Palermo per la Biennale hanno progettato un Atlante, in quel caso era uno strumento di partenza per la proposta artistica e curatoriale, mentre nel vostro caso è diventato la proposta artistica stessa. Dimmi se trovi contatto con il vostro progetto in alcuni elementi principali del Palermo Atlas che sintetizzerei come: partecipazione, territorio, interculturalismo, analisi, variabilità di scala e, l'unico punto che forse mancava all'Atlante di Palermo era una parte propositiva di proiezione... e in quest'ultimo caso vorrei chiederti, posto che tutti i precedenti elementi mi sembra ci fossero anche nel Vs progetto...*

CB: Sì.

LM: *all'Atlante di Palermo come oggetto di studio, che pure era stato svolto a partire da una serie di interviste, mancava forse la parte di lascito: una volta intervistati i curatori sul lascito rimasto a Palermo si sono un po' lamentati del fatto che l'esito di queste azioni...*

CB: Non è rimasto...

LM: *loro dicono che è andato diversamente da come lo avevano pianificato. Pensavano di piantare un seme, ma poco di quanto hanno piantato è rimasto. Quindi pongo anche a te la stessa ardua domanda: qual è il lascito, vista l'azione territoriale, del vostro progetto su Corsico...*

CB: Sicuramente c'è un lascito nel fare un'esperienza insieme e nel conoscere la città con occhi nuovi... Chi ha partecipato anche a livello di intervista ha partecipato in maniera attiva, e questa cosa poi che si è ritrovato nell'audio (anche se alcune cose le abbiamo tagliate)... comunque ha partecipato a un percorso e questa è una cosa che sicuramente resta; chi ha partecipato alla passeggiata ha vissuto la città, ha scoperto dei luoghi che non conosceva, ha scoperto dei racconti e ha fatto un'esperienza teatrale, che ovviamente è un'esperienza che è legata all'immaginazione, che è legata all'emozione: questo è un lascito. Inoltre il lavoro svolto può far sì che questa passeggiata possa continuare o anche possa essere magari strutturata in un altro modo, creando un altro percorso. Il progetto 'fermata Corsico' aveva questo tra gli obiettivi, oltre a valorizzare il teatro a Milano, fare una sorta di laboratori di critica teatrale, si sarebbero poi portati i cittadini in scena a partecipare a uno spettacolo insieme al Comteatro, dove avrebbero dovuto fare questo coro dei Persiani, di Eschilo. Quindi l'idea era che comunque queste serie di partecipazioni attive agli eventi teatrali avrebbero poi costruito un progetto più ampio anche di formazione. Chiaramente questo percorso di andare in scena l'anno scorso è stato interrotto per la pandemia e non siamo riusciti a rifarlo, perché Cariplo ci ha chiesto 'dovete fermarvi prima', ecc., ecc., e perché in questo momento fare formazione teatrale è stato molto difficile perché abbiamo fatto tutto online. Quindi lavorare per la prima volta con dei cittadini che non vogliono fare gli attori, che sono quelli che vengono da noi, ma che avrebbero voluto semplicemente far parte di un percorso, provare a parlare sempre della città, perché poi in scena avremmo portato sì i persiani, ma che raccontano la guerra, che raccontano una città che brucia, quindi era di nuovo cercare di usare un mezzo teatrale per parlare dell'oggi. Quindi il lascito avrebbe dovuto portarsi avanti anche

con altre azioni, che non è stato possibile svolgere. Il lascito attuale è un documento sonoro, se vuoi, un documento che c'è e che potremmo ancora sentire e raccontare altre volte, in altre repliche teatrali.

LM: *È un archivio vivo, diciamo, della città, del territorio...*

CB: Sì.

8.1.3. Interview with Mirjam Varadinis: Manifesta Palermo (10.12.2021 – Zoom)

Lorenzo Morganti (LM): *Thank you for being here today. I would start from the genesis of your curatorial project for Manifesta Palermo, like... how the team was formed... your first brainstormings... and so on. So, the very genesis of it.*

Mirjam Varadinis (MV): Well... the team was formed by Manifesta itself. So, it was an invitation from Manifesta and basically, they chose the four of us. The idea was to have people coming from different backgrounds and different expertise and knowledge bringing together. And it was also the idea of not having, let's say, only like classical curators, but to have also a filmmaker or an architect or two architects, both not really working as classic architects, of course, but still there was this idea of having a different approach to the city, a kind of a more in-depth analysis of the city as a starting point. So, there was this idea of doing this research, urban study research. There... we basically decided... this was then our decision as a curatorial team, that it would not be, let's say, an urbanistic study without us being involved, but it was from the beginning an exchange amongst us. So, in a sense that if... because the urban study was led by Ippolito Pestellini and his team at the time, but it was a kind of exchange of ideas. So, for example, we had some specific areas, ideas that we were interested to be covered within the urban study and then he just reported on things that he would discover or that could be interesting, so it was an exchange from the beginning. And also the approach to how this urban study was being taken or done it was also a common decision, in a sense that for us we

felt it would be important to unlock hidden histories of the city and not fall into the trap of stereotypes that are very, yeah, clearly defined when it comes to Sicily and Palermo, be it the Mafia, be it other things... so we didn't want to fall into that trap. And so, we wanted to have different voices, different backgrounds also there, that could do a tour for us through the city with their eyes and their knowledge and their focus, their attention, their specific attention. So, there was, again, a whole range of people: one was an aristocratic... I mean, a person of aristocratic background, because there's still quite plenty of those in Palermo, as you probably know, and then there was a... there was also an architect, there was a writer, an artist, visual artist, someone that came as a refugee to Palermo and was part of this kind of hidden parliament or second parliament they have, and others. So, let's say it was kind of linking... this methodology was linking to a tradition of these oral histories or *cantastorie* ['storytellers', Ed.], like what they have basically in Sicily, what we felt would be an interesting methodology also to apply as a kind of research form for our curatorial practice. So, we met regularly, be it on site really in Palermo or also in Rotterdam or in other places and via Skype, of course, because we were all based in different countries. And so that's how we met and how we exchanged, and of course the urban study was very important in like pointing out abandoned houses and venues that could possibly be used. So, this was part of the research, to make a list of all these houses. And this would be the basis for us to choose then also the venues for our itineraries and to show.

LM: *To this extent, you referred to Ippolito Pestellini and his team: he said that you were the only 'art curator'. So, what were the specificities of the curatorial group if there were, of course, and what was in general your experience within the group?*

MV: Well, I felt it was, um, it was an interesting group in the sense that we had a lot of interests in common, but also still quite a lot of differences, which made it interesting: so, we had differences also in approach because of course, I was very much used to do exhibitions, also working within an exhibition space and what it means to do that. But it was super inspiring for me to open up more... let's say to open up the field of experience. And also, the decision was then that we would not only invite classic visual artists, but also, as we did, writers or architects, so that, let's say, the selection of people participating would be reflected, and would reflect also the different backgrounds that we four would bring in. But it was, I mean, it was good to share these experiences. I think the whole urbanistic approach was very important and

I was very happy to have both Ippolito but also Andrés, Andrés Jaque who's also a very interesting thinker. So, that was really giving us much more as a basis than just plans of the city and, of course, historical information: that just opened really completely different approaches, and I think that was very important.

LM: *And would you agree with the idea that the Atlas was not only just a tool, because at some point in the interview [with Ippolito Pestellini] it comes out that this actually was a sort of a first step, if I can define it this way, of the Curatorial project. So, would you also agree with this? Because you've just said that it was also useful, of course, to define the venues, but was that the only thing or would you actually consider it as a first step of the curatorial project?*

MV: Yes, definitely. It would define, let's say, our curatorial project: the main theme of the garden as a metaphor, the garden as a model also... that was formed through this research that was done for the *Atlas*, because by then, through this research, we found out about this whole dramatic shift of landscape also, that happened in Palermo throughout the time... from, let's say, this beautiful green area and garden area that was built under Arab sovereignty and then this kind of... the changes of this landscape and the destruction of the landscape also. And also, it was interesting how people would perceive Palermo, if you look at these postcards, for example, that they gathered for the *Atlas*, you see how much the landscape somehow was replaced through buildings. And then, of course, the whole history of the botanical garden that also came up through this research, where we felt this is kind of the ground to experiment our ideas and where all the ideas that we are interested in somehow come together. Also, the notion of migration, of course, which was super important at the time and still is, but there also it would be easy to fall into a trap where you repeat patterns of how this topic is being represented. So, this whole idea of opening up the garden and plants as a metaphor and as a model opened up all the different possibilities to represent this theme of migration and to link it also to the specific history of that place, because that was very important for us. We didn't want... we didn't have a pre-defined concept: that was one of the big differences with other *Manifestas* before, because normally the pitch for a Manifesta curator would be to bring in the concept for a specific city and then the committee would choose based on this concept proposals who would be the curator. Here it was different, they chose people with specific kinds of thinking, knowledge, experience and perspective and then they came together and we formed the concept only then. We started to think about what would

be the curatorial concept and we wanted to build it out of the context, out of the city itself, and not having the concept pre-defined to be applied to the city but to have the city and then organically have the concept growing out of the city which again refers of course to plants and gardens and... growing organically... that's how we worked and in that sense the *Atlas* was really a very important first step to define also areas of interest and to have it at the same time as a research tool.

LM: *And what about the network... since you collected these experiences, you already mentioned some the people that you involved, but how did you actually build the network? So, what part of that was already existing, maybe within the contacts with the city, with the municipality and what was your research on the ground, so how did you actually create these interviews, these...*

MV: Well, as you probably know Manifesta doesn't have a fixed team to work with, not as other big biennials, but it builds up the team always on site in the city where it's being presented, so we also had local curators helping in the team, assistant curators that would help to do this research. Of course we were also in exchange, in very close exchange with the city, with the municipality, because both the Mayor and the *Assessore alla Cultura*, they were very close, right from the beginning, and this was also very impressive because we felt that we were very much supported and they completely got the ideas very early on, very precisely and they of course also gave us some contacts, so some people that they felt might be interesting to meet and also, of course, once you start to meet one person, this person again tells us 'oh you should meet that or that person' and so a kind of local network started, so that's how we proceeded basically. So, we had information from local people that would know the city very well, because we were all coming from outside, so that helped a lot to build up the network.

LM: *Let's come to the criticisms...*

MV: Yes, ok. [13.56]

LM: *So, in 2005, you probably already knew that Okwi Enwezor had defined Manifesta as 'an extension of Brussels' cultural policy, complicit in the current official disappearance of immigrants in Europe from its cultural institutions.' Do you think that the topic itself or the migration and maybe the very same choice of the whole city Palermo was actually influenced or maybe intended as a sort of an indirect answer to this criticism? So, was there any connection according to your opinion?*

MV: Can you repeat it again just that I understand?

LM: *Yes, he said that the Manifesta is an extension of Brussels' cultural policy and that he considered it a complicit in the current official disappearance of immigrants in Europe from its cultural institutions. So, my question is: was the choice of Palermo and the choice of the migration theme, a sort of a late response to this criticism?*

MV: Well, I can only answer in parts, I would say, because the decision of choosing Palermo was not my decision, although I felt it was a really good decision. Because I feel that, specifically at the time, it was such an important kind of point where so many super important themes of the time would be present. And sometimes it's like... I curated a show now in the museum where I work, in Zurich at Kunsthaus with Kader Attia and Kader Attia has been working on this post-colonial history for 20 years. But suddenly, now I do this show. I mean, I invited him four years ago. But the show happens now this year, when all this Black Lives Matter movement is going on. So, of course, it's an important issue that is there, somewhere. But sometimes it just pops up in the moment when an exhibition is happening. So, I know that for Manifesta was important, after having St. Petersburg, after having Zurich in the heart of Europe, to reflect more on the relation of North-South. And that's why they start, that's why they chose Palermo. And now they're in Marseille: the reflection is ongoing in that sense. So, I don't know, I don't think that this is a direct answer to Okwui's criticism. But this I cannot answer fully, because that's a decision by Manifesta, the board of Manifesta and the director of Manifesta, Hedwig. I think that's what the reason was, because first they started with more an East-West relation... after the fall of the Berlin Wall and what that means. And now I think it's more about the global South, its relation to the North and so on.

When it comes to migration, this was not something that was imposed by Manifesta on us, but this was a subject that we felt we had to address in this context. Because, of course, you have in Sicily, all these boats arriving with refugees crossing the Mediterranean. You're surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea. So, you cannot exclude that. And also, for the four of us, it was one of the crucial themes at the time and still is. But for us it was really important to ask, opposite to what Okwui said... for us... Palermo and also its mayor, the municipality's official representatives... The mayor of Palermo, for him, let's say, this idea of making refugees disappear, it was totally the contrary. He was fighting against the whole national politics at the time and regional politics,

which was more right-wing. And so, for him, everybody was basically welcome. He was the one to say: 'we keep the harbours open for all the boats that arrive', even though Salvini, I know, already wanted to close the harbour. And for us, it was important to give migrants also a voice. In the preparations, as I said, we had one of the tours through the city done by one of the refugees, but also with projects that would approach this very crucial theme of migration in a different way, not only in this emergency representation that you see in the media, but in a different way as well. And of course, you cannot deny once you're part of such a big event... I mean, you have to reflect on this whole city marketing, politics, European marketing... you are part of it. But - what we tried to do - you can be critical about it. Because we were pushed by Manifesta itself. We were pushed to have more iconic works, that's what they wanted, like big sculptures somewhere or something like that. But this was for us very dangerous in that relation, that we didn't want to fall in this trap of just having big sculptures in the city and that's it. So, we were trying to have a very critical approach to that, to have also more subtle approaches to involve the city itself much more. But of course, you still are a part of this machinery. I mean, that's how it is. It's like you cannot escape it fully, but you can be conscious of it: you can be critical of it. Yes, that's what you can do.

LM: *Yes, Let's go deeper with this machinery: according to Pascal Gielen, the Dutch sociologist who criticised the very same model of Manifesta, 'both curators and artists are provided a space of freedom tolerated and contained by the economic and administrative framework of the event'. But did you ever feel contained or tolerated? And to which extent was the pre-existing framework (choice of the location, some, let's say, structural choices and the preliminary choices) either an inspiration or a limitation to your curatorial work?*

MV: Well, I didn't feel kind of...

LM: *Tolerated?*

MV: No. I don't really... I felt very... But I think I was very happy to be part of this Palermo edition somehow. I feel that Palermo represented a lot of what I felt were the strengths of Manifesta, and linked Manifesta to its beginning, where I felt it was the strongest moment, basically. It's kind of giving a voice, on the one hand, giving a voice to an area that people would not know so much about, to give it a presence, in a wider context of the discourse, art discourse. And also, it was a very good selection at the time, I felt, because of the political situation

and of the potential that was within the city of Palermo. And so, I mean, I live in Zurich, but I felt the Zurich edition was much more problematic, somehow. Because I feel, in Palermo, we really had a necessity to do it there and also for the people in Palermo that would themselves not be able to be exposed or to see so much of contemporary art, if Manifesta had not been there. And you saw it: the visitors were really coming from Italy, from a local background also, from Palermo, from Sicily. Of course, you had internationals, but if you looked at who was there... That was very important for us. For us, it was important to do this exhibition not only for the international art crowd, so that you're not only part of this big machinery, but you do something meaningful for the specific context you're in and for the population that lives there. And for them, we wanted to create something that opens up also for themselves a new perspective on their own city, on their own kind of relevance, in that specific moment in a geopolitical context. And with all this, we were very much, as I said, we were very much supported by the mayor. And the mayor had a very similar agenda, but on a political level. So, it was a great combination, that you would not have so often. I feel now in Marseille, for example, it's much more difficult again, because, politically, it's a Le Pen's area. So, you're entering into a clash with the political elite there, with specific ideas. But we didn't have that, really. We didn't have it at all. On the contrary, we were very much supported. So, I don't think that this can be... And as I said also, we fought against some expectations from the institution, from Manifesta, as I said, with these iconic pieces, for example... some icons or some artists that would be the big names and so on. We just felt: 'no, this is not what we want to do'. And this was also good, because the four of us, we were all on the same page. That was clear, and this created some conflicts with the institution and their expectations. That might be, let's say, the only restraint. But it was not to an extent that this would really have an effect on the selection and the process.

LM: *About the local community, because actually, reporting a quotation from Miriam La Rosa, she considered that 'the local artistic communities have not been given appropriate importance and space in the biennial.' How would you reply to this criticism? Because instead you're telling me that you tried to involve them as well...*

MV: This answer you will get in every city. Because there's always local artists that are being excluded and they will react. That's how it is. And a curatorial selection is always a selection. So, you don't show all of them. So, you do, you select those that you feel are important for your

concept and for this context as well. You will get the same criticism for every Manifesta and every biennial that has a local implication. I mean, I can tell you. Maybe this has to do also with our specific team: let's say we included probably more writers and theatre directors, more in that area than classic visual artists from Palermo. So that might be let's say the reason for that criticism, but, as I said, you will get it even if you invite classic visual artists: you would get the same critique everywhere.

LM: *Don't you think that it might also be for the format? The format of Manifesta... I mean the division in the 5x5x5 program, the fact that they actually had different levels of attention, of public attention, different levels of publicity also, I might say. Do you think that this might be, let's say, a sort of reason or a possible reason why the criticism arose from local artists?*

MV: Yes, well... we had over, I think, over 30% of Italian artists in our program, because that was also a very conscious decision of giving Italian artists a platform, because I know subsidies in Switzerland are very good, but in Italy it's much more difficult. So, for us, it was important for this kind of international event, to also have a national... although I hate to talk about this kind of national-international-what-ever... but still it was a conscious decision. And of course, there is a kind of a hierarchy between the main event and the 5x5x5 and, all the other kind of parallel events. But this exhibition also intends to bring perspectives from the outside to your own context. So, I think the combination of the two is important. And it's not a local biennial, where only the local scene would be shown, because this you could do all the time. But this is to combine outside views and inside views. This was also done with the curatorial team a bit. Of course, we are not - I'm not - Sicilian, but, family-wise, we have a house since many years in Sicily, and I speak Italian. And Ippolito [Pestellini Laparelli] is originally from Sicily. And so, we had a kind of inside and outside view already, a little bit mixed. And then Andrés [Jacques], and Bregtje [van der Haak], they were having the complete outside view. So that was important: to bring this together. And so also for the artists' selection or the participants': it was the same.

LM: *So now, two years after the biennial, what do you think is Manifesta 12's legacy to Palermo and to Manifesta itself, to the institution? Because you said that there were differences between Zurich and Palermo. There are still differences now in Marseille. So, the legacy first to the city of Palermo and to Manifesta itself, if there is any...*

MV: Well, the long-term legacy is always a difficult issue. I mean, the hopes are that you do something that is sustainable and that leaves some traces. And I have to admit that I haven't been to Palermo, I mean, now also with COVID and also like for a year. So, I don't know exactly how the situation is. I get here and there some information. But what I know, for example, what we used as our headquarter is Teatro Garibaldi. That was kept as a place for cultural initiatives, although, lately, I saw what you define by culture can be difficult sometimes. But, at least, it was close. It was abandoned. It was squatted for a long time. It was not open to the public, let's say. But it had a very interesting history with very important theatre directors doing things there in the 70s, 80s, and so on. So, this was one of the tangible traces that you would see. Also, this project that we did a little bit outside of the city, in that Zona Espansione Nord, where you have this social housing, very difficult district. I know that they kept on doing workshops, for example, with the kids there for a while, for a few months at least, and also that the two people that worked with them, they came back and did some workshops. We started there before the opening, it was ongoing during the Manifesta, and it kept on going after the opening, after the end of Manifesta. So... but I don't know what the situation is right now, it is a super difficult context, but I'm already very proud, I have to say, and very happy that this would continue after the end of Manifesta. I mean: if you can create something meaningful for the local community, if it's not just this UFO that lands from the outside and leaves again and then 'basta!' [*enough!*] it's done, that's already really a lot. And I think that when I saw that also after I was there, after a few months, I saw it was still there... People would still take care of it. They would still do workshops. Just if you imagine to be in this social housing: first you had between the two blocks the dumping yard, really full of garbage, literally, then this is cleared and then you have suddenly people taking care of something and having people and kids... having plants grown and so on... that's very touching, and for me as a curator I'm always very interested in this, in art that has also an impact on society and a relation... I think that was really great. But I don't know what the situation is right now. Maybe it's destroyed, which is probably the case. I don't know. I would need to go and see once this whole COVID allows to go back.

And for Manifesta itself, I know that they tried to repeat the pattern of a curatorial team with an architectural study, urban study beforehand, but it was much more divided this time. It was a step of... you had the urban study done and then the curators took over, so it was not... and also the curators this time were all curators, I mean you had architec-

tural curators, you had art, visual art curators, but all curators, so it's different, like trying to repeat the model but it was not.

I haven't seen, it's really a shame, but I couldn't go, it's just because of Marseille that was on the red list, and so I cannot really say anything more. I was really so much looking forward to seeing it in Marseille, but I haven't seen it. So, I don't know how I could see, let's say, continuation or an impact from what we've done in Palermo.

LM: *Well, Ippolito Pestellini had also, let's say, some words of criticism for that work: the urban study in particular, as you defined it, because it's actually an urban study. And Ippolito also complained a bit about the support of the political institutions, in Palermo, because he actually expected that there would be, let's say, more support, especially afterwards. So, he said that what you did was the starting point for something, the renovation, the ZEN, the Theatre Garibaldi. He complained about the cultural program also...*

MV: Exactly, me too, because I saw like really, really terrible... like parties that would take place, I mean, it has nothing to do with....

LM: *He just defined the theatre as 'dead' or something like this. And so, it's quite curious because you were very satisfied about the cooperation, the positive cooperation that you had with the city. So, it's sad that after you finished your work, I mean, the cooperation...*

MV: Yes, but the cultural attaché left. I mean, he's not there any longer. And he was very important. And I think for the mayor the situation has become much more difficult as well politically. But nevertheless, it is a pity. It's not only in relation to arts, because I have this relation to Sicily and I feel there's in other fields as well. You have so much potential being there and then it's just - boom! - and it disappears and it's such a pity. But there's always these kind of fights between different kinds of clans, political parties, whatever, and that's very sad. But just if I think back, I hope at least that this experience, also if it's a year for a kid, for example, a year is a very long time. And, hopefully, this will be really important in the thinking and in the emotional feelings and in the idea of how you estimate yourself. For example, in Zen, it was a problem that there was nothing positive about this neighbourhood. And during this project we did there, there were blogs that would write 'finally' or 'we have something positive to be connected with and to take care of' and so on. So, I think if that can leave not just a physical impact but more on your thinking and on your perspective on how to look at the

world and yourself, that would be great. But I wish it could be more sustainable, I agree with Ippolito.

LM: *And one last, very last thing about Manifesta. You said that you were not contained, that your experience was good, but that you were pushed in some way. So, I think that this is again a sort of a double nature that comes out in the world of the curators, the fact that this branding of Manifesta is on the one hand very positive, because it makes things possible as, more or less, Ippolito said, but on the other hand it's pushing the curators. So, since this is actually the fiercest criticism, the 'branding' idea that Manifesta is going through, what do you think about this? Do you agree with this definition of Manifesta as a brand?*

MV: Yes, definitely. I mean, it became a brand and with all that implies. It's a huge economic machinery and it's a lot of money that cities have to invest also in such an endeavour, in such a biennial, and I mean this was different in the beginning and this is of course then you have certain expectations.

LM: *...are you referring to the very first maybe even the first Manifesta?*

MV: Yes, I think it was much smaller. Ljubljana, for example, or also other more peripheral places where things were also lighter somehow. You had not this big branding machine on your shoulders. And what was also difficult I felt was this idea of having all the time a new team being established. It is difficult because you lose a lot of knowledge over time. And there were luckily some crucial functions like production manager with someone who was there for several editions and in other areas as well. But for example, for communication, it was a disaster. There was no plan of communicating. And of course, this is a very important issue if you do such a large-scale project, because you want people to know about it and you want to spread the information and there you also need a certain expertise and knowledge and also a network of people that you could activate in such a case. And this was very difficult. Actually, we as curators had to deal a lot with all this stuff which made it difficult because also, we had tiny-mini-contracts, we were paid for - I don't know - two months of work and we worked two years for it, more or less... I exaggerate a bit, but more or less... and so... yes, these are the difficulties, but you also still wanted to be part of it because I felt I can do something really meaningful in this specific context, especially, where I relate very closely to it. And I think that's a big chance still of Manifesta. And I think after Zurich, St. Petersburg and Zurich, which became very, very, very traditional, very classical also

in St. Petersburg, it was in this huge museum, wasn't it?... So, why would you need Manifesta to do that?... also in Zurich, you would not need Manifesta. But I think in Palermo, you need Manifesta also as a kind of catalyst. That's what we worked for. Unfortunately, the motor sometimes dies afterwards, but we gave an injection. And a place like Palermo needs that. It needs an injection from the outside because inside it's so mingled and it's impossible to move something. There were initiatives that were there for years that would never lead to anything because they were killed by this internal... I think that's a good thing, it can be a push and it can really create something meaningful, as I said, and it has an urgency at this specific moment in a specific context. And the long-term impact: we cannot do miracles. That's how it is.

LM: *So, shadows and lights, you would say...*

MV: Yes.

LM: *So, thank you very much for your availability. Thank you for your time. It has been a pleasure having you here today.*

8.1.4. Interview with Anna Farley: Captions, readability and inclusivity

8.1.4.1 Interview with Anna Farley Part one (21.10.2022 – Zoom)

The first part of this interview happened unexpectedly during a short online call planned in order to meet me in advance and before the actual interview could happen. This occasional, non-structured talk, that could be recorded only partially, anticipated some of the subjects discussed later in the two following semi-structured interviews in a more spontaneous way, without prior submission of the questions.

Lorenzo Morganti LM: [this question is connected to the previous part of the discussion, not recorded, dealing with Anna Farley's practice] *Thanks a lot... Less text and a little bit more visuals: because you're actually visualising your interpretation or your 'explanation'... So, it's a sort of a second curatorial work the one that you do to some extent, isn't it?*

Anna Farley (AF): Yes, it's a hybrid approach because it's curatorial. I'm also using it quite honestly as a very practical tool for myself to be able to understand a work. That's where it starts. Is me trying to get the most out of all the available information and to distil it into a snapshot, without being reductive of artwork and the complexities of a practice and this is real challenge. But really it's a challenge I enjoy and I've been reflecting a lot about it because really I do see... and this is also why it's problematic: when you think about its role in an exhibition space, I do see the work, as all works, because it's a political questioning and challenging, you know, the responsibility of publicly funded exhibition spaces about whether priority lies in terms of who gains experience or information from these opportunities. Like, for example, with documenta the primary audience - which is why the posters were in German - is the local Kassel communities and this was... whether it's very clear from the outside, from the organisation's perspective, from documenta the Institute's perspective... this is the primary focus. Just coming back to the reason why I think it will be really interesting to see what the potential is for a practical element of re-staging visual interpretation in the best way that fits an exhibition and the artists and their work and the visitors' primary audience. It just would be really exciting to go through a process of what that would be like as a total research project from start to finish.

So, where would that exhibition be? Who's the artist? Whose artwork is placed within a curatorial team or with the curators? ...

LM: *So, you work with the curators, do you?*

AF: Not in this case. I wanted to... I think there's a lot of misconception around the simplicity of the process of doing this distilling... a kind of interpretation into visual content. I think that a lot of people may perceive that is quite easy, works quite simply.

LM: *So, they just asked you to come afterwards, after everything was, let's say, decided to re-... [AF nods] ...*

AF: Yes, so this comes into access as curatorial practice. It's this element that wasn't able to be embedded as part of the process of development of how an audience can understand and get the most out of art. The reason I do what I do, and I love doing it, is because all the things that I think have made me a more ethical human being I've learned from arts. It's from artists and specific artworks that taught me a lesson or made me think about something I've never thought

about before. I can give you list as well of what those specific artworks are, but I don't have it with me: it's a long list. But there are some specific ones that come to mind first.

LM: *When you worked with the Tate, was it different? Were you allowed to work within the curatorial team or did they approach you in a similar way, just asking you for a second step?*

AF: Yes, with Tate it was a very different process, so I had full access to the curatorial team: Fiontán Moran, Catherine [Wood] and Tamsin Hong as well... I had full access to the curatorial team. However, the curators themselves are limited in their access to visual material around performance and dance art specifically, because of the nature of what it is. And then we come into these tensions around documentation as artwork or artwork and separately documentation, and the role of archive, especially with live art, which was something that only through doing this process that I really began to understand the complexities around that entire critical area. Which is something I was aware of, but I had never really understood how it functions as a set of problems for curators and for institutions... but exhibitions for spaces, for artists, for archivists... and I ended up... because as well the curators only had gained access to the things that they felt were important. I then found myself liaising directly with some really cool archives. Like Trisha Brown Dance Company Archives in New York, and also the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. And beginning to... [...] create requests from my perspective, from everything I was beginning to understand and read and learn... And that idea of how can we best pack knowledge for people to get the most out of it, for me to get the most out of it, and then using that as a starting point for a wider audience engagement.

LM: *Well, thanks a lot because you already told me lot of things. [...] So, if you are available, we can meet again for a semi structured interview. I can send you the basic questions in advance and we can talk like today. [...] Thank you very much for your availability. It was a pleasure meeting you. See you on the 31st.*

AF: Alright, see you. Bye, bye.

8.1.4.2 Interview with Anna Farley

Part two

(31.10.2022 – Zoom)

The second and the third part of this interview were mainly based on a set of questions that were sent in advance to Anna Farley. Chiara Ianeselli, Curatorial Coordinator of the curatorial team of documenta XV also joined this interview on request of Anna and due to their collaboration during the project.

Lorenzo Morganti (LM): *So, this will be of course a semi structured interview: we're starting from this question, but if you have any need to detour or add something which is not really connected to the question feel free to do so... So [...] what was your personal experience with Tate Modern?*

Anna Farley (AF): So... I think what I'm going to do is I'm going to put the two questions about my experience with Tate as an institution and my experience to Documenta as an institution into one succinct answer. So, my answer is this that I feel that my journey within can't, you know, being in contact with those institutions was incredibly different, maybe, to how other people have experienced that as I always had this solid person, this kind of *mentor* within that organisation, really getting the best for me, in all situations. So, for example with the Tate, that's Julia Lepla, who's an incredible person, who really mentors me, but also fosters opportunities and advocates on behalf of my training and my art practice. That's what led to the Trisha Brown's *Set and Reset* visual guide, which is online. And with Documenta, that began with Frederikke Hansen as my kind of mentor and advocate for the work and concept. And that then transpired into a working group which is with Chiara [Ianeselli] and Sophia and Michael and Lisa and my support as well - my caring support as well. So, the biggest statement I think is clear to make, is that this work is so alternative, so progressive, and so... you know... it's a massive wild card for anyone to take a chance on, and the fact that I have so far managed to gather the belief and the passion of these two big organisations, art institutions, to take a chance on this concept, creating proof of concept and then being able to continue the journey forward is in itself a massive step forward. So, I can feel nothing but grateful – really - about that. Because this is definitely... and I think this works... this comes to how I position myself as a practitioner as well. It comes to that as well in terms of the role of an artist or a curator or a graphic designer, etc., and what kind of options are available or from what those roles give a practitioner in terms of how change can be enacted is quite interesting. So that's a

kind of an overarching statement I want to make about all of that work so far: is that basically it's incredible that the work exists at all, because it is such a huge step for those institutions to take and it's a massive risk... And luckily, it's paid off. So that was a relief. So now it's just about continuing that momentum of a belief that there are unexplored territories for interpreting and widening the doorway for more people to be able to enjoy what we enjoy about specific artworks. Was that a good answer?

LM: *Yes, absolutely. So, you consider yourself as part of this group, if I understood well, because you said that you worked together, to some extent, with the curators both at Tate and...*

AF: Yes, I mean, this is where it gets really exciting because as an individual, I've become fostered with all this knowledge and this very personal, this very intimate perspective on the work... very intimate details and research and familiarity with the work, that many people simply don't have that privilege and that luxury to become so personable with the work. So, this is amazing on that note too. And yes, the dream is within this process to be embedded. Because I do still think as much as we try, there is segregation between all these different elements that make up the institution of art: the director, the educational programmer, the curator, the artist, the audience, you know, all these elements... what I'm trying to do is try to understand everyone's role and then find a ribbon and weave everyone into one wholistic chunk the people can take a bite from. But it's hard because these changes depending on the work, depending on the artist, depending on the institution and the exhibition, the context and the concept that comes with all those things. It's like all those factors create a new recipe and a new recipe every time, so...

LM: *And could you meet the artists also? ...*

AF: Well, of course with the Trisha Brown with the visual guide for Trisha Brown which is really sad because I could not meet Trisha Brown...

LM: *Yes, of course...*

AF: ...But it was also interesting to work within the limitations and critical boundaries of dance and performance, as art and how that is archived, how that is collected and then how we refer to it.

LM: *I've read that there was also a performance, her works were still being performed, so, did you speak to the dancers and to the performers?*

...

[In 2022 the British dance companies Candoco and Rambert 'reconceived' and performed at Tate the dance 'Set and Reset', originally staged by Trisha Brown Dance Company in 1983]

AF: Of course, I got the chance to have a brief interview with Candoco, not with Rambert. And this is about, again, the very start... this is so the beginning, the tiny little seed that we're at this point... and it's got a long way to go before it becomes this giant tree of established practice. But I think this is something... The formula and the goal is to be as embedded in the development of that exhibition, that kind of plenary moment when the doors open and the visitors are let in, but also, it's past that beginning point, because there are almost multiple check-points along the process that, if you're able to be part of, you're able to advocate for element of access, but you're also able to probe and ask questions. And sometimes, being the non-defined fluid access person that I'm usually in the role of, I get content that potentially people in other roles are not privy to, because their role is very defined. Whereas, and I know that one of your questions is to talk about what is my role, like where do I sit in this kind of very binary sort of translation of what this institution is, and have all these roles built in this kind of 'tradition'. And the answer is: I don't really know. And that's not a haphazard answer. It's not. I'm not being purposely ambiguous about it. It's very much a decision to say 'I don't know'. I think there are elements of doing this practice that are definitely art because it's a problem and it's a problem that needs the freedom of being the artist to do and to bring forward. But it's also got elements of curatorial practice and access as curatorial practice. So, it has also got elements of invigilation and visitor experience... It's got elements of educational programming...

LM: *...mediation also?*

AF: ...mediation, exactly, but more importantly, what I do - I think - or what I've done so far, is I attempt to put myself in various different positions to learn as much as I can about what it is I'm trying to bring forward, and what I think are the most exciting or valuable things about the work. That's what I'm trying to learn. And sometimes, to do that, I think you have to morph and come at something from multiple different angles, which is exactly what all those 'traditional roles' are built around... is creating this kind of multi-dimensional approach, putting that forward to be represented.

LM: *Thank you: you have already answered one of the last questions... The next question is in regards to neurodivergent people: what tools - or not necessarily tools, because you already insisted a lot on 'being embedded', so maybe that's also part of your answer - what tools do you think could improve the design of an exhibition to foster their experience and also interaction? Because there is always also an interaction with the audience...*

AF: So, this is interesting, because I don't pretend to assume that I can bridge the gap for all people. If you even see it as a gap, because I see the other thing that is also in itself contentious to assume is that people have gaps. But I think... What's interesting is we're talking very much about what is a neurodivergent approach or toolkit. But really, what I'm striving for is inclusion, which is not centred on a specific minority. I come at it from my perspective as a neurodivergent artist... or neuro-minority artist, I should say, because technically neurodiversity means everybody. So, I think what I'm striving for is that as many people as possible can find a new window into the work. So, I don't want to be exclusionary, and it's not about necessarily creating something that's so much for one community that somehow it becomes less practical for others. And I think really what it's about is, which is what I say when... - this is my training because I do a lot of autism awareness training - really the root of what we're talking about here is good communication, and having options within how we communicate. And really what we're trying to get towards is that there are just more options. And that they don't follow one mode of doing that. And as I always say when I'm doing training: what tends to work for an ASC community (which is autism spectrum condition) what tends to work for an autistic community tends to benefit everyone. Because a lot of it's fostered in very clear and succinct communication.

LM: *Thank you. You have already answered four questions so if you want, we can stop... as you wish...*

AF: Yes, why don't we stop and then... because as well, I'm aware Chiara has got to go... and that I think...

[Chiara Ianeselli briefly intervenes on the last subject]

AF: It's like it always swings like a pendulum from one side to the other like these extremes. And the problem being that, you know, the reality is we all need to find some sort of middle ground ... I think that's what made Documenta give me this platform to do the posters, was that I made it pretty clear that whilst I am neurodivergent and the primary

audience is probably going to be someone who's neurodivergent - because I influence that, I can't help that - that it's a much wider... it's open for much wider opening. So, like people who have been excluded from education, people who English is not their first language, people who are scared of arts, whether they belong in an art gallery and whether they know enough of the right terminology and academia, critical thinking, able to participate in that experience of being in an art gallery, whether you've had... all kinds of... the age, as well: ageism... elderly... and you struggle with your attention span, wanting to stand there or sit there, or not pay attention to that kind of information so long... whether you're young and you have a very short attention span because you really just want to go and eat your brownie... you don't know why you're in this white cube... Like I said, the main thing for me is always just... I need to send you as well the artwork I keep talking about...

LM: *I'd be glad...*

AF: But I just think some of the best things I've ever learnt about the world and about having a wider perspective and becoming more sensitive and appropriate as a human being, is through art. It's not been through any other medium.

LM: *I liked in particular the first part of your answer: 'If there is a gap', that is already a very good, very short, clear and absolutely effective answer to the question. Being an architect, I generally tend to focus on how to do these things. So, to some to some extent I would say that visualising, more than writing, is in general something very positive, as far as the understanding of the exhibition is regarded. And this is also why I was interested in what you were doing, because I see that in good part what you do is not about writing. And I do think that even though, for instance, the Biennale in Venice had wonderful captions, they had an average of, if I remember well, 300 words per caption with long sentences, more than 30 words each, so I don't think that it was really for anybody...*

AF: I really, really, really... If I could have a dream for the next five years, I mean, that's a short timeframe, so I'm very ambitious. But I've got where I've got in two years, so who knows... but in five years' time, I'd like to see myself at the Venice Biennale with an access pavilion. So, the pavilion is just all about access. And it's not a country, because that's the other thing I think is really interesting, not a country, but actually about how do we bring access to everyone. So that's my goal. I want an access pavilion.

[Chiara Ianeselli and I briefly comment on the captions at the Venice Biennale and their readability]

AF: Exactly. It's not about either/or and being extremist about this kind of offer. It's very much about we just need more on that buffet table. It would be a really, really boring restaurant, wouldn't it? If you had done a restaurant that just served one thing - if it was a very good thing - but you get the idea: it's very restrictive.

The information that I'm working with is first and foremost the curatorial viewpoint, and the text, and the kind of written interpretation of the work as a really great starting point, you know, so it's not necessarily about that role becoming dated or unnecessary in fact it becomes more essential.

[Greetings and agreements for the following part of the interview]

8.1.4.3 Interview with Anna Farley and Chiara Ianeselli Part three (8.11.2022 - Zoom)

AF: So, since the last meeting, I thought it best to just go with the flow. So, you tell me... because I don't really know...

LM: *You already told me a lot of very interesting things. So, I would just pass on to the next question, which is: what are the drivers for your practice?*

[Anna Kay is present and Chiara Ianeselli is also joining]

LM: *Okay, so I was just asking you what are the drivers for your practice and what do you think is still lacking today in the average labels of an exhibition? Of course, now we're focusing a little bit more on the curatorial rather than on the artistic side...*

AF: Yes. So, I think the most important thing - and I'm going to rely a little bit on this formula that I applied to the Documenta labels - I think what is lacking is simply a pure realisation on behalf of anyone involved in how that becomes forward facing to the visitor; is thinking about what the visitor really needs, and trying to get away from the kind of this 'barcode label' that we like to put with work.

LM: Which is what you're trying to do, do you mean?

AF: Yes... trying to inject more of the process: this kind of element, in a sense, even within the fantasy of work, this element of the reality of how that thing is materialised or realised, if not in a conventional sense of material. So, I think we rarely think it's appropriate to ask the simplest questions, because for some reason we think it's not relevant to everyone. But of course, by asking the most immediate or simplified questions...

LM: To stay simple, do you mean?

AF: Exactly. And we're very afraid. Especially in the arts, where I think there's a lot of constant legitimization and justification of this high intelligence and this high academic competency. And, you know, it doesn't hurt to call a spade a spade. And there's nothing wrong with that. And I think sometimes we overcomplicate storytelling within the arts. And it's great, if your main audience is researchers, critics, collectors, curators, and the industry, the arts industry, that's perfect, that's really wonderful. But it doesn't encourage new viewers, new people trying to familiarise themselves with the power of art that we apparently all are highly convinced by. And we're already in that 'club', because we love it. So, it's about how do you share what you love about a work.

LM: To avoid it, it remains a closed club, you mean...

AF: Exactly. And then we're talking about elitism again, which comes back to this idea of this 'hyper academic', hyper justified proof of intelligence, and it's just... we just don't need it.

LM: I totally get the point, which leads me to the next question. Even though this was also criticised, more than 20 years ago, the British Museum Association had already suggested that a strong focus would be set on the readability of captions, so staying very simple, as you said. Today, a large majority of the exhibitions in the UK actually use short, plain English captions and labels of no more than 75 words. Do you think this is a positive approach? I mean, what is your take on this? Because this is also being criticised.

AF: I think the problem is that it assumes an infantilisation of the visitor. Okay, and I don't mean that...

LM: It does: they say that the visitor should be planned - if I remember well - between 8 and 12 years old.

AF: Yes, plain English is great. But I think we still have a lot of issues in terms of how experts feel safe in categorising communication and what is acceptable communication, what is this high kind of speech, what is this mid-range speech and what is this kind of I guess low-end speech about anything, and I personally I'm not trained in using plain English, but I would like...

LM: You remember that I sent you an email with three examples. You have probably noticed that I picked up three main institutions: the two ones you already worked with, Tate Modern and Documenta, and I added the one you said you would love to work with, which is the Biennale here in Venice. And you have probably already seen that the one that sticks the most to the British standard, is, of course, the Tate Modern. I don't know how you read it, but, for instance, as a non-native English speaker, I myself find the one written at the Tate much more readable. Of course, the one at the Biennale was also written in Italian, so I have to confess that I read it in Italian. But I can tell you that the English is exactly the same. What's your take and what do you think about those three examples?

AF: OK, let's pull them up, I think, so we can talk.

LM: Just as a first impact, I don't want you, of course, to analyse in full...

AF: Yes, so the first one is an image from Kassel, which I'm guessing is Documenta? Yes. What else? The network of the water system projects.

[Anna reads the caption of 'THE NETWORK OF THE WATER SYSTEM PROJECT', by Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun exhibited in 2022 at Documenta 15 in Kassel, attached to the caption there is a photo of the artwork]

AF: ...I love it. My favourite is when, so abruptly in an art's text, it goes from referring to a concept or theory, and then to the thing, and then back to the fantasy, and then to the reality, and then to the... [Finishes reading]

AF: Yes. A lot of the words are quite complex and relate to practices and vocations beyond my knowledge. So, it's really hard to...

LM: *And how do you find the Tate Modern's and the Biennale's?*

AF: So, if I go to the next one. So, this is the Venice Biennale. Cool. So, we have a nice neon light.

[Now reading the caption of LANDSCAPE IV, by Sable Elyse Smith, exhibited in 2022 at the Venice Biennale. An image of the artwork is also attached]

AF: Oh, dear!

LM: *I'm sorry for this...*

AF: No, I love it. It's great. It's great. Yeah. So, it's a shame that I'm not sharing it on the screen for the recording, but already I'm intimidated to read this. Because it's a book.

LM: *Is it because of the screen or would it have been the same if you were there?*

AF: Yes 100%. If I was there, I wouldn't read this because it's too much information for me to experience the work and process written information. I take it very seriously when I look at art. I get really invested and I want to understand things. So, it tends to be that I will have to research this later, or revisit the exhibition multiple times. When I do training with the Tate, I joke about making them go through an exhibition with me to understand how non-traditionalist I am as an exhibition audience member. And I completely... I go through an exhibition, maybe I'll go 10 times and I won't do it necessarily in the order laid out by a curator.

LM: *This is interesting...*

AF: And I will have to do research before I go in to find out if I've got any triggers, if anything inside that is the content is going to cause me any kind of distress or harm. So, I can manage that and manage my expectations and remain healthy whilst enjoying culture.

We really don't talk about that enough. Which is another reason why I do what I do.

Okay, so for example, with this label for the Venice Biennale, it's just such a solid block of text. It's really crazy.

LM: *It is.*

AF: It's like looking at, I mean, just a block, it's a block. And I just think to myself, 'oh my goodness, I don't know when I'll get a break'.

LM: *And what about the Tate's?*

AF: And then, so, and then if we move on to the Tate.

AF: So, with the Tate's labels, there's a little bit more space. The font, obviously they've designed that themselves. It's a specific design, but I do like it. And I got so excited when I did the Tate, the Visual Guide, I got to use the font. And I was... - I don't know why - but it's just so exciting, because I find it very readable. There's still a lot of mistakes in terms of how... the description is always a block, always.

LM: *But you find it a little bit more readable as far as you're telling me...*

AF: It's more readable. It still needs breaking down.

LM: *I wanted to show you this after the question about the British Museum Association, because out of these three examples, the one that sticks more to the requirements of the British Museum Association is the Tate's. The one most far away from the requirements of the BMA is of course the Biennale's, which is like the catalogue's: the text that they used for the captions was exactly the same they used for the catalogue. Probably less work for them, but a little extra work for the visitors, as you were pointing out...*

AF: Yes, and there is an assumption of course in terms of the main audience intended for the Venice Biennale, right? It's art for the arts.

LM: *They say that something like the 5% of the viewers will actually read the Biennale's captions...*

AF: Lorenzo, we should go to Venice Biennale together.

LM: *Yes, absolutely.*

AF: And make a note of... so choose a few pieces of work and literally stand there and make a note of who spends longer than one minute in front of a label.

LM: *Yes, exactly. They are much more than one minute. If you just make a rough calculation of the artworks shown at the Biennale and you just consider one minute each...*

AF: What would be really interesting as well is to think about comparing the differences or the nuances between something that I would say is fast paced exhibition. And in a sense, that is like the festivals, so like Documenta...

For example, the label system that you observed at Documenta, which was the magnetic strips with multiple bits of paper on. I had big hopes for that. And the hope was that as the work happened... because there was so much flux, so this again is the difference between a permanent collection and something like Documenta which is totally focusing on socially engaged practice, which has so many variables that are constantly happening and changing: the context of the work, the meaning of the work, the presentation of the work... Everything is completely up to discretion from opening to close, depending on what happens in that space, depending who's engaging, depending whether the artist wants to do something completely different. And this obviously is a massive challenge for an institution that wants to work in this way and share this practice, but also has these really simple responsibilities in terms of how that is communicated and how people are able to understand and learn about that and why it's important. So those metallic strips were a good solution that didn't necessarily come to fruition. They were put there in place with an idea that, like a fridge...

LM: *You can change them?*

AF: Yes, as things come and they're added. Because the thing is, about Documenta, that we should have called the opening the install and we should have called the closing the opening. It was like the work hadn't really been realised until day 100, because a lot of it was being built throughout the festival of 100 days. So how do you capture that and how do you share that and reference it for a wider audience? So, I really like the idea of this, almost like this fridge magnets, like putting up life as it happens. That makes sense.

LM: *Which has probably been underused, I think...*

AF: A hundred percent. Yes, it was really sad, but then this comes back again to the issue around economy and finance and wellbeing within the industry as well. So, for the amount of artists to be able to have that kind of ongoing reflection and feedback within the work that they're doing, they need to be able to have resources to be there and do that. And not everyone had that because the budget isn't endless. And well, I'm sure you probably know, probably more than me from things that you may have read or things online, about all of these issues.

LM: *...with this last answer, you almost answered the next question as well... it seems to me that you prefer adding a new voice, a new visual layer rather than opting for relabelling or delabelling, is that so and do you see any risk over-labeling?*

AF: Is there a danger of over-labeling? Yes, of course. But really, people will over-label whether it's all in a concise place. So, for example, when I was doing the posters, and it was really impossible because of the controversy that was happening within Documenta. This was all-consuming to the artists, of course, because it was so important and taking part in that debate was really important. Of course, I'm talking about the antisemitism issues. So, I don't want to get into that because that is a whole other set of questions and discussions, but that really affected their availability in terms of working with me, to the point where they were not able to collaborate with me on how their work became forward-facing. So, I ended up becoming an art investigator. I ended up looking to every single crumb of information that I could find on this trail: this existential trail of the internet or social media and books and doing everything I could to become as knowledgeable as I could on the subjectivity and the practice and the individuals that are involved in building that and the historical context, the current cultural context.

LM: *Your poster was mainly for the Britto Arts Trust, right? The collective from Bangladesh, if I remember well...*

AF: Yes, I actually had five posters that were installed during the exhibition. So, that was Britto, Project Art Works, Wajukuu Art Project, Trampoline House, Fondation Festival sur le Niger as well, of which me and Chiara worked very closely on, in fact, in the office with a big pen, which is really great, with a draw.

LM: *And really a lot of information, I guess...*

AF: Yes. So, I became so intimately familiar or attempted to be as intimately familiar as I could be. Which is, in a way, what the curator has to do. But incredibly intensive.

So, the fact is, and this is what's interesting, the information is out there. And there's lots of it. And there are lots of opinions and there are lots of interpretations. And a lot of that comes from the artists. And when it isn't coming from the artists, it comes from people who are interested by their work. And then it comes down to critics and people

who are potentially analysing it for its effectiveness, I guess. I think, what's interesting is that in the end, my poster is purely an amalgamation of all of the available information, but in one place. So, the question is, can you over label? I don't know. Because I feel like there's a risk, because you want people to gain their own understanding and knowledge. But then you have to say to yourself, what really are you labelling? Is it a critical academic comparison of abstract painting in the 1950s? Or is it that you're quite literally just making sure that when you use the word abstract, that people understand what the word abstract means? So, I think it's so complicated. And I think we've to decide what that would look like, what would over-labelling really look like.

LM: *You know that there is also a trend of different paths, so that the people can actually choose. And this is particularly possible with digital tools: I just pick up what I'm interested in. Only, I fear that it would be difficult to navigate through if there were too many layers. Anyway, I would ask you if there is any available version of your posters visible on the internet, because I just saw a small image...*

AF: There might be, I think there might be on the Documenta website. There should be the Britto Arts Trust.

LM: *Yes, I found that, but it was this big, not very readable...*

AF: Yes, so I think Chiara will be able to help me better answer it, probably just from logistics. Because Chiara is also helping me with getting into the archive, the document archive.

[Chiara Ianeselli speaks briefly about Documenta's archiving process and then about captioning at Documenta]

CI: I really enjoyed the conversation you had. And I really think that Anna was able to centre the discussion also: what kind of labels?... I'm familiar with the kind of research that you're mentioning, Lorenzo, but also with the statistics regarding the impact of labels on people. And it's funny because we can come up with all the standards, but at the end, it's highly individual, I think, what people look for in the labels. And it's very difficult. They made a lot of experiments, but they always write this help the understanding of a work of art. But I think it's impossible to understand the work of art. So, it's something to contextualize the work of art but to understand art, thank God, I don't think we will ever succeed. I think Anna was really giving good points about

what kind of language is used and what kind of labels we are making. Maybe I can expand, if you think it's useful, a little bit on what Anna said regarding Documenta.

Anna has been crucial, not only in the design of the posters, so these big labels, the ones she did design at the end. But she was crucial in the entire process of labelling. So, for example, she gave us indication and we really gave trust, because there are a lot of studies, but this Documenta was kind of learned in the field. So, for example, we decided to use different papers and different colours for the two different languages. German was considered the first, because it's a German-funded exhibition, it happens in Germany and the majority of the public is German. So, the German language was close, somehow, to the artwork, next of course to the English. And another input was not only about the materiality of it, but also about the content. For example, we used this which is described as 'easy language', as English is something that is still kind of being investigated. And we worked with a company from Berlin. So, we got the titles from the artists. Then we did a translation. And then, for example, for the medium, there was the idea to choose something that people could understand, as much as possible. And what is important to say is that, Anna will laugh as well, a lot of artists of Documenta were not familiar with the labels and with the process of labelling. So that was for me quite shocking, because, for example, when I asked: 'what's the title', they said: 'what's that?' And I: 'the title, you know, the title of the artwork'. And they were like: 'Chiara, you just choose', and I was like: 'no... choose the title!'

LM: *A lot of untitled...*

CI: That's exactly why, you know, because I love the untitled [*laughs*]... But, no, that was not possible. But this was very interesting research. So, to recap, Anna helped in the physical design as well as in the content design. And we tried to keep... that was an indication from the artistic team, from Ruangrupa plus the artistic team at large, they didn't want, for example, to include measurements in the labels. And this was considered somehow a challenge to the art market, because mostly the measurements help to establish a price, especially paintings, or so on.

LM: *The shipping, the people not present there...*

CI: Yes, with this idea I disagreed, because I don't think it's only against market, but I think it helps, if you take a picture, then you don't remem-

ber how big it was. So, you need the measurements. But the artistic team said that the measurements could help frame the items, the artworks within a market. And so, there was this decision not to show the measurements for example, which was quite curious: I've not seen it much or at least not paid attention a lot. And there were a lot of hanging artworks as well. So, I thought that the measurements could have helped. For example, this was a decision and then the artistic team wanted to give as much voice as possible to the artist. That's why all the labels that you found at Documenta were not written by the curatorial team or the artistic team. So, if there were texts and for example, this is the case of Sada, in Fridericianum, they were written directly by the artist. We gave them the possibility. I was the one conducting all the thousand artists and we gave them the possibility to add a note on their work. And it was clear: 'please write something here if you want this to be visible in the label'. But most of them did not. And then there's an entire other discourse for what concerns the wall text. This was something else. So, there were labels and wall text. These were the main two devices to provide visitors with information. It was quite liberal, and there was a lot of freedom granted to the artist. And then, as Anna mentioned, these metal bars were installed, but somehow the artist... although we communicated that there were a lot of issues in the artists being here all over the summer. So, some of them came, and this is the case, for example, Vicky Babi Kururu, which is a collective from Korea, they just came for the opening and then they left. Some others came at the very end, some of them stayed on site, and they really wanted to engage with the public in a more direct way, so to speak, having events. There were, I don't know, more than a thousand events over the entire Documenta. So, I think that's why they preferred a more direct, with feedback, kind of communication. But I think that the attempt and the idea of the flexible device, that can be continuously updated, was a great input from Anna and I'm sure it could continue and be used in other exhibitions of any kind. But in Documenta, maybe, there were too many things happening, and the scale of it was really...

AF: Yes, it was a trial by fire, definitely. I felt like I was being initiated onto this amazing... it was like going from being a massive fish in a tiny pond to being an amoeba, a little speck of algae. It was amazing... What an experience. And I mean that in a positive way, because that's how you know that you're progressing your practice and you're achieving things is being put into these complex...

LM: *Ocean...*

AF: Yes, the art ocean. But I just wanted to add as well. When doing my visual interpretation of the labels, there were some ethical concerns that I came across as an individual, especially given the stress that a lot of the artists were under by this consuming debate around the anti-Semitic content. It was, I'm painfully aware, my position as a British, white woman, and the privilege that that affords me, but also the history of colonialism, especially when dealing with a global art show... it was making sure that I wasn't at any point speaking for the artists, because I know Chiara, you were speaking a lot about giving them the ownership and the authorship over these titles and the way in which we refer or identify the works, right? And this was something I was very aware of. I was aware of my position doing that, and wanted with all the best ethical intention to make sure that this was not highly problematic. Because I think that was always very important to me. And I do think that something that we also don't talk about much in the arts is about who is that person who's helping that narrative or steering that narrative... And, how do you navigate that and what's your responsibility within that... And I think having contact or as much contact as you can, ideally 100% sign off and discussion around how that work is being perceived, because my gaze is a white gaze.

LM: *But you also write your name so the people know that it's you, right?*

AF: Because if I was doing it from a different position, you know, that changes the attention, which is really interesting too, I think.

LM: *You know, also the Tate and the Biennale have those little initials that actually refer to the author, the curator of the captions. And if you wish to investigate that, you can. It's just probably about being, I guess, transparent about that. And this is the last question.*

AF: Sorry Chiara, do you want me to carry on? Because I know Chiara was in the middle of talking...

CI: No, no, no. And regarding the files, I think, of course, you should see them, Lorenzo, to understand a little bit more regarding the use.

LM: *Yes, this would actually help me a lot.
[here brief exchange about files]*

LM: *Anyway, this is about the point of view and the artist, but what about the audience? So, what is your expected audience?*

AF: Well, although the work comes from a neurodiverse brain, and that's great, obviously I hope it's of help to people who have alternative ways of thinking and different life experiences with disability, as well as I think my hope is that by working in a more visual way, you are potentially becoming slightly more open to multiple audiences. And I think the problem is that with a lot of institutions they have normally a budget for youth engagement, a budget for development and people within the industry to come and 'schmooze'. So, there's all these kinds of groups and they all have multiple budgets, and they all become quite segregated. And a lot of the information gets regurgitated and I think the thing is that, by working in this format for the posters, my goal was to be helpful to many people. People who potentially are non-verbal or don't use language in a conventional sense, but also people who maybe English or German is not their first language. And there's a lot that can be done. A term that I love to think of is a picture can say a thousand words. So, scarily, those posters are dissertations. They are books. They are attempting to offer as much scope for a viewer to take with curiosity to learn more.

LM: *So, your next step, you mean, is to reduce the words to make them even more visual...*

AF: Oh, yes, yes, 100%. I create symbols. So, I have a library of symbols that I'm working on. My next goal actually is... I was talking a lot about triggers within exhibitions and the lack of pre-warning that's made for any visitor at the mouth of a show.

LM: *Like what you did for the Tate...*

AF: Yes, for the Tate. But this is an issue in all cultural venue spaces. This is not even just the arts. I have been developing a symbol that I'm in discussion with the Epilepsy Society in the UK about. And I'm interested to see how I can make this a global initiative. But this work is so ambitious. It's totally relevant and it's what we need. But it's very ambitious and I am but one person who does not understand the kind of complexities of globalizing a symbol to do this. But that's my next goal. It's to continue working with my symbol development and research and trying to find pictorial association for experience and impact. Whoa, that sounded really good! [*laughing*]

LM: *That would be really, really interesting also because the topic that you are touching is absolutely very wide. So, pictograms and pictorial information could definitely 'warn', as you said, the visitor of what is going to happen...*

AF: I actually have one last really good thing that I want to say. My biggest annoyance and biggest hope at the same time is that at some point the arts and the places where we put art will begin to trust the power of that place and that kind of presentation of the work. What I'm talking about here is a specific project when I was doing the Yayoi Kusama Infinity Rooms with Tate, and I was trying to encourage them to do video of the exhibition to help neurodiverse individuals feel confident to be independent within the space and rely less on support, so that they were able to engage with the work and really enjoy it in the way that it's meant to be enjoyed. Now, this was not acceptable, because obviously, especially with Yayoi Kusama's work, because of the history of authorship and ownership and the idea of the work becoming stolen, basically, and repurposed, or somehow that the magic is lost by creating an inferior kind of experience... So, for all those reasons, it didn't happen, the video didn't happen, but it still would have been one of the best ways to directly communicate to people how to prepare themselves, if they need to, for what the reality of being in that space would mean. And, as one of my friends who has autism said, it's not about ruining what to expect from the art, it's about knowing what you should do, so that you get it right, you behave in the way intended. And I just wish that the arts would have a little bit more confidence in the authenticity of an installation, solid installation, or a great show, and it's almost like there's this fear that if you do a video, and you show everyone what that exhibition looks like, no one's going to come. You can't, I'm sorry, but a video of a Yayoi Kusama Infinity Room is nothing compared to that moment when you stand in it and you experience the real. And so that's something as well that I think is going to be the hardest battle with something like the poster work, which is about using this visual communication.

LM: *I feel that this goes also into the managerial side, because that exhibition has free allowance for the members. I am a 'non-member', so I have to pay for a ticket, and it becomes a little bit tricky, probably, the issue that you're suggesting...*

AF: Of course, it becomes a minefield and a kind of economic minefield. But then we come back to also the veracity of what we're achieving.

LM: *I think if you propose a video for the permanent collection, probably there will be no problem, I guess...*

AF: *[laughs]* They don't want to do it; they don't want to do it at all. But this is an ongoing issue, I think, in that, I think there is a fear, right, that, you know, if there's a DVD or there's a book, the catalogue, that everyone will just buy the catalogue, no one goes. But this is not realistic, because I think arts institutions need to have just more confidence in the power of what they do, and how good it is.

LM: *Anyway, thank you for this extra time. You've been very kind to me by allowing me this long interview. So, thanks a lot.*
[Final greetings]

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