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Around the Lighthouse: A Co-Creative Performance Fostering Innovation Within the Cultural Heritage Itself

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About Article

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ABSTRACT

The experimentation with innovative ways to enhance the accessibility, resonance, and meaningfulness of our cultural heritage is a cornerstone to contemporary museums' development. The article explores this topic through an insight into the first experience carried out within the Open Atelier project, designed to test cutting-edge formats promoting new interactions among the audience, the museum, and its professionals. This experiment was realized through the cooperation among Art Museums of Skagen and Associazione Marchigiana Attività Teatrali. It engaged a group of Italian artists in the development of a cross-disciplinary and co-creative process intended to turn a collection of historical photos into a new experiential heritage, capable of fostering innovative interplays among different places, people, and cultures. The paper offers a thorough illustration of this case-based experience, by systematically describing its objectives and operational framework, the processes that enabled it, and the results that were achieved, and by providing contextual insights aligned with current debates in the field. This initiative has the potential to become a lens through which to explore broader implications for innovative interpretations and uses of heritage, enhancing its accessibility and resonance for contemporary societies. Its critical observation aims to foster the debate, and thus to inform and stimulate broader practice and policy around the topic.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Although museums have frequently been described as one of the most important communication systems of our time (Cameron, 1968), through which the notion and uses of heritage are processed and disseminated (Smith, 2006), the way they convey their collection is not always sufficiently resonant with contemporary audiences, especially to younger generations.

In the last years, many museums around the world have started to address these issues by experimenting with creative strategies intended to test innovative interpretation and communication modalities and to broaden public interaction and engagement with cultural values. Although the process addressing these objectives is underway and has already generated certain results, significant challenges remain open, requiring continued work and experimentation.

To what extent can contemporary museums adopt novel strategies and practices to enhance public engagement with cultural heritage, enrich its affective significance, and enhance its interpretative relevance, and how do such efforts influence museums' institutional evolution and their role within society? This article aims at contributing to the exploration of this topic by reflecting on an experimentation carried out within a Creative Europe project, Open Atelier: Building New Innovative Formats for Active Audience Participation and Interaction with Cultural Heritage within European House Museums, intended to design and test new cross-sectoral strategies to enhance visitors' engagement in the dissemination of cultural heritage.

Andrea: "This day – my first on the light-house – I make this entry in my Diary. As regularly as I can keep the journal, I will – but there is no telling what may happen to a man all alone as I am – I may get sick, or worse?... So far well!" (Poe, 1849).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The possibility to make objects, assets, stories and knowledge belonging to past cultural systems vividly eloquent and relevant to contemporary audiences represents a crucial challenge for museums. It can enable them to serve as spaces of meaning-making and forces for social progress, intellectual advancement, and personal transformation. However, it may also undermine the institution and its mandates, by making its collections "mute", or repleting it with boredom, disappointment, or even social injustice.

This notion assumes even more cogent implications in present-day socio-cultural scenarios. Major changes in demographic and migration flows, identities, lifestyles, and communication modalities are challenging the effectiveness of the traditional principles, practices, and tools that enable museums' presentations. These changes solicitate experimentation with innovative instruments and programs capable to address the ongoing evolution of heritage formation, interpretation, and dissemination processes (Knell *et al.*, 2007; Falk, 2009; Parry *et al.*, 2018; Cameron, 2024).

This search for innovative solutions pairs the ongoing renovation path that contemporary museums are undergoing to answer new questions about their role. As highlighted by the latest update of ICOM's definition, this process is being developed through the enhancement of some of their functions, to make these institutions more inclusive and capable to offer varied

experiences for enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge sharing. Specifically, these goals draw on the possibility to improve the cultural, linguistic, and cognitive access to collections, and foster their activation as a driver for education, mutual understanding, and social cohesion. This scenario thus places the effectiveness of audience engagement and the conveyance of heritage assets and values at the core of the mission of museums as equitable, relevant, and impactful institutions.

As emphasized by several authoritative voices emerging from Museum Studies, to effectively address these challenges it is necessary to adopt a ground-breaking approach, one that doesn't shy away from exploring revolutionary options and unhinging museums' principles, programs, and tools from their consolidated ganglions.

The focus on radical experimentation is a recurrent component of many of the visions that have been recently shared about the future of the institution. According to Jasmin Pfefferkorn, the "emergent museum" is experimental and disruptive, in that it shifts at a more rapid rate and remains in a state of flux, reacting to cultural prompts as they raise, and presenting itself as both porous and dynamic (Pfefferkorn, 2023). This notion draws on Beat Hächler's call to stop referring to the museum space as a container and rather to acknowledge its role as an active laboratory, an arrangement of relationships and a means of engineering certain performative possibilities (2015). The key role of an experimental and dynamic approach, based on openness and knowledge exchange, is also highlighted in Duncan Grewcock's idea of a "relational museum" (2014), that is an active-dynamic body, rather than a reactive-fixed one, and echoed in the "interrogative museum" envisioned by Ivan Karp and Corinne Kratz (2015), which offers museumgoers a space for dialogue, by addressing problems rather than solutions, and showcasing the multivalent nature of knowledge.

The growing body of theories promoting experimentation, dynamism, and openness to innovative knowledge exchanges as cornerstones to contemporary museums' development is reflected in an increasing quantity of cutting-edge practices engaging audiences in special experiences intended to make heritage more accessible, resonant, and meaningful. This field work is showing how traditional frameworks can be challenged by joining cross-sectoral forces, envisioning innovative interplays among disciplines, languages, and contexts, and especially by harnessing the power of a holistic and audience-centered approach – one that draws on the design of multi-layered and engaging experiences to reshape the ties between people, cultures, and museums' collections.

Andrea: "The cutter had a narrow escape – but why dwell on that, since I am here, all safe?" (Poe, 1849).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research framework: The Open Atelier Project

Open Atelier is a cross-sectoral network of four European House Museums – Art Museums of Skagen (Denmark), Millesgården (Sweden), Einar Jónsson Museum (Iceland) and Plečnik House at Museum and Galleries of Ljubljana (Slovenia). These institutions are partnering with one creative performance organization – AMAT, Associazione Marchigiana Attività Teatrali (Italy) – and two universities – Politecnico di



Milano (Italy) and Aalborg University (Denmark) – to develop innovative modalities enhancing audience engagement in the way cultural heritage is explored, interpreted, mediated, and used.

Drawing on the concept of the atelier, the artist's private workroom, the place from which all the involved museums stemmed, Open Atelier aims to innovate the understanding and engagement with this context by opening up its doors to the public and transforming it into a modern "experience lab". This is intended as an interactive, co-creative, dynamic, and participatory space, where collections become the point of departure for new interactions among the audience, the museum, and its professionals.

This process is being promoted in the framework of the European Commission's Creative Europe Programme (from October 2022 to September 2025), within which the four museums involved in the project are designing and implementing a set of experimental practices and formats – the Open Atelier Experiences – through interdisciplinary collaborations with the knowledge partners and a problem-based approach.

3.2. Research focus: historical photos from Art Museums of Skagen

The first experiment was carried out by the Art Museums of Skagen in Denmark, in cooperation with AMAT, the performance organization based in Italy. This partner engaged a group of artists in the development of a cross-disciplinary and co-creative process, aimed at testing a new approach to the interpretation and presentation of a selection of historical photos from the Danish institution's collection.

These images represent a relatively "new" heritage, as most of them have been recently found in one of the artists' homes belonging to the Art Museums of Skagen. The photos offer an unprecedented glimpse of the life of the group of Scandinavian artists that settled in Skagen in the late 1870s, attracted to the place by the unique and rugged nature, the light and the landscape, and the picturesque life of the fishing population. This context gave birth to the colony that was officially founded in 1908 by painters P. S. Krøyer and Michael Ancher, alongside hotelier Degn Brøndum and the local businessman Victor Christian Klæbel. The work of this group of artists was inspired by French Realism but resulted in distinctive traits and motifs (e.g. beaches, moors and cabins, as well as their own familiar environment), and it led to the establishment of the Art Museums of Skagen. This institution is currently composed of two artists' homes – Anna and Michael Ancher's House and Holger Drachmann's House – and a main venue conserving, researching, and displaying the world's largest collection of works by the Skagen painters.

The museum's collection of photographs from the artist colony period includes a large quantity of images, more than 5,000, the majority of which was kept in a storage for a long time, with only few people having access to them. Between 2022 and 2023, most of the pictures were digitized; their registration is still ongoing, so is the thorough process to identify the depicted people, places, and events. In the next years, the digital version will become available to a larger audience online.

A major part of the photos come from Anna and Michael

Ancher's collection. These pictures were taken by artists, their friends, or by professional photographers. The trove includes single shots but also series and albums, documenting different photographic techniques and covering a wide time span: the earliest can be dated to the middle of the nineteenth century, and the most recent are from the 1940s.

The collection illustrates Skagen and various moments of the artists' life, their work in their studio or at the beach, as well as their gatherings, feasts, homes, friends, and family, but also fishermen working or participating in rescue drills. Some images relate to motifs from paintings and were possibly used as preparatory studies.

The value of these historic photos does not only refer to their function as documentary and empirical statements, showing an unvarnished and authentic side of life among the artists in the Skagen colony. They can also be interpreted as performative acts that supported the development of this unique place, the group identity, and community formation processes, containing both a high degree of staging and a certain amount of authenticity. Most importantly, the potential of this additional heritage refers to the possibility to experiment with a range of new practices – one of which is carried out in the framework of the Open Atelier project.

3.3. Research process: a co-creative performance

A group of historical photos from Art Museums of Skagen has been the object of the first Open Atelier Experience, developed by the museum institution and AMAT. This collaboration enabled an innovative use of this heritage, profoundly rooted in the Scandinavian landscape, history, and culture, through its reinterpretation from a group of contemporary Italian artists. The experiment resulted in a public event, which was based on the presentation of the performance "Around the Lighthouse". The outcomes of this experience represent a valuable lens through which further investigations can be developed around the potential of co-creative processes in unfolding innovation within the cultural heritage sector. The following chapter will illustrate the experimented process, to critically evaluate the achievement of the expected objectives, to highlight the elements that enabled it, and to disseminate its results.

Andrea: "My spirits are beginning to revive already, at the mere thought of being – for once in my life at least – thoroughly alone; for, of course, Neptune, large as he is, is not to be taken into consideration as "society". Would to Heaven I had ever found in "society" one half as much faith as in this poor dog: in such case I and "society" might never have parted – even for a moment..." (Poe, 1849).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Around the lighthouse

A group of historical photos from Art Museums of Skagen has been the object of the first Open Atelier Experience, developed by the museum institution and AMAT. This collaboration enabled an innovative use of this heritage, profoundly rooted in the Scandinavian landscape, history, and culture, through its reinterpretation from a group of contemporary Italian artists. The experiment resulted in a public event, which was based on the presentation of the performance "Around the Lighthouse".



The first step of this process was the selection of a set of photos, carried out by one of the museum's curators, Mette B. Jensen. The selection included images depicting the artists working, hunting, and celebrating, but most importantly showing them together, and focusing on the colony as a community. Photos of the fishermen and their work were also chosen, as this was a significant and important part of life in Skagen and a subject that fascinated and inspired the artists. So were images of tourists enjoying life at the beach and sunbathing.

The photos were first shared with illustrator Mara Cerri and with Chiara Lagani, a playwright-actress who, together with Luigi De Angelis, founded Fanny & Alexander, a Ravenna-based performance company known for its vocation for experimentation and innovation. Through a multidisciplinary approach involving collaboration among artists from various disciplines, this group often engages with unconventional narrative forms, undertaking a creative activity characterized by intermedial openness. They have an interest in overflowing the confines of traditional formats, and they stage original shows integrating elements of theatre, music, dance, visual art, and other media.

The work with the collection shared by Art Museums of Skagen started from an elaboration of the historical photos, activated by a new insight, that of Mara Cerri. Her approach can be described as "external", as it belongs to a completely different context from the one from which the photos originated, and "free", as is that of an artist, who is capable to process creative re-semanticization acts. In the words of Chiara Lagani, her work is like "an endlessly moving game, in which forms arise from the most unpredictable intuitions and remain in a mobile and impermanent condition" (Lagani, 2020).

Mara Cerri's instinctive and personal intervention added new layers to the historic photos, made of brushstrokes, abrasions, and other signs. These were not simply over-imposed, but rather they operate as active elements developing an interplay with the figures and contexts depicted in the photos, altering contents and atmospheres, highlighting or uncovering details, or modifying the overall framework, and thus unravelling the "deepest image". This term was used by philosopher James Hillman (Montanari, 2022), in reference to an artwork that stimulates or provokes our imagination, and is concealed and invisible, hence it must be imagined and unveiled. Within the Open Atelier Experience, this creative process started from the manipulation of old photos, which resulted in the generation of new multi-layered images, allowing for hidden stories to unfold.

Andrea: "The hoary, grey Lighthouse, distant, austere, in the midst; and on the right, as far as the eye could see, fading and falling, in soft low pleats, the green sand dunes with the wild flowing grasses on them, which always seem to be running away into some moon country, uninhabited of men". (Woolf, 2008).

Another theorist of the image, James Berger (Belpoliti, 2014), states that a photo is a trace – as it takes a trace from reality, it fixes an instant, and it brings it under our eyes. A drawing instead is a translation, as every mark made on paper is related to the real or imaginary model we have in mind or before our eyes, but also to every mark already traced previously, by us or by others. Through Mara Cerri's work, the historic photos

from Skagen are turned into translations by her. As there is no translation that is not also an interpretation, these images become an interpretation of reality, fostering the reconnection of our gaze to the mystery behind it, and eventually probing and educating our sight.

The new layers created by illustrator Mara Cerri by graphically elaborating the photos were only the first element contributing to reinterpret the artists' colony heritage. When acting in the eyes of playwright Chiara Lagani, these new images served as a trigger for generating new stories. As she said, "it is as if the figures throw hooks at me to which the spoken and unspoken words cling". By calling for words, the graphically elaborated photos have enabled a process that she calls "exorcism – attracting the spirit through figures: this is what myths do" (Lagani, 2020).

Andrea: "They are morbidly attracted to the most pristine and deserted places, which then immediately stop being deserted as soon as they arrive. Even now, a few steps away from me, I see one... two... three of them! In Panama hats and yellow boots, seriously, softly, absorbedly, with an air of profound contentment on their round red face gazing, and then, when they have gazed, dipping; imbuing the tip of their brush in some soft mound of green or pink". (Woolf, 2008)

The new layers added by Chiara Lagani revolved around the creation of a character – Andrea, later performed by Luigi De Angelis on the scene – and on the design of an event of "performance poetry". This term, elaborated by Hedwig Gorski and Laurie Anderson (Gorski, 2006), refers to those works that use poetry composed for a performance with blended forms.

Poetry and photography are very distinct art forms. One communicates with words, the other with light. Poems and photographs are both a representation of something; they are both types of signs, and one can be used as a metaphor for the other. The performance created by the company Fanny & Alexander stemmed from the combination of the old photographic images with new narrative layers. In particular, these verbal images – inspired by the main motifs characterizing the images, e.g. the beach and the lighthouse – emerged from the reference to the poems of internationally known authors such as Edgar Allan Poe and Virginia Woolf. Thereby the photographs became the representation of the visual language, as the written word in the quoted poems are the images of the spoken language. However, both are an abstraction of reality, sending an experience of heightened perception, an intensity of looking and feeling, brought about by the union of visual and verbal images that merge, clash, contradict, emphasize, and evoke each other.

In the experiment promoted by Open Atelier, photos and poems share a common interest – to transform a lived experience into a new work of art. Both are attentive to aspects such as light, rhythm, narrative, and emotion. Both love the idea of collecting, narrating, sequencing, publishing, communicating.

Poets construct images through words. On the other hand, a photographer works in verse, weaving impressions and notions that awaken in front of the viewer's eyes. As forms of artistic expression, both poetry and photography can convey a narrative, a story, and they can be merely descriptive. However, both the photograph and the poetic act as perceiving solitary pursuits.



Notions of composition, languages, light, sound, space, printing, narrative, and writing reveal themselves as fundamental to both arts, from collaborations between the media.

This is also what poetry should do (Campo, 1998). The dramaturgy of “Around the Lighthouse” stitches together the words of Virginia Woolf and Edgar Allan Poe to give life to a mystery that filters from the historical photos into a new “story”. The protagonist, Andrea, enters the scene with a suitcase of memories that he gives to the audience in fragments

of images, quotes from poetry, and descriptions in a long stream of consciousness, supported by the rhythmic variation of sounds and the pulsation of lights. Through poetry, images, sounds, and lights, we become part of a plan, which project us – the spectators – into a universe whipped by the wind of Skagen.

The performance was presented during the evening of 8 February 2023, at Chiesa dell’Annunziata in Pesaro, a former church transformed into a venue for theatre works.



Figure 1. “Around the Lighthouse”, the co-creative performance presented on 8 February 2023 at Chiesa dell’Annunziata in Pesaro (Ph. Anna Fiorani)

Andrea: “I have passed this day in a species of ecstasy that I find impossible to describe. My passion for solitude could scarcely have been more thoroughly gratified. I do not say satisfied; for I believe I should never be satiated with such delight as I have experienced to-day... The wind lulled about daybreak, and by the afternoon the sea had gone down materially... Nothing to be seen, with the telescope even, but ocean and sky, with an occasional gull. I saw her today too. Lily.” (Poe, 1849).

4.2. A cross-sectoral and co-creative process

The resignification of the historic photos from Art Museums of Skagen, through an original, collaborative, and transdisciplinary act of creativity, turned them into a new work of art. The public in Chiesa dell’Annunziata in Pesaro gave several rounds of applause, and an extra performance had to be arranged since all tickets were sold out.

The performance was capable to ignite unprecedented

intellectual and emotional experiences for the audience, and to modify their perception of the world around them.

According to Peter Brook, one of the purposes of theatre is to make humans expand their vision and gain deep insights into themselves (Brook, 1968). This idea unveils the essence and power of this medium, which is capable to foster a greater understanding of our inner self. By enabling a special connection between the spectators and the characters and contents on stage, theatre operates as a vehicle for profound self-reflection and self-discovery, inviting us to explore our own strengths, weaknesses, desires, and fears. On the other hand, the transformative nature of theatre makes it an invaluable lens through which we view and understand the world, enabling us to see and analyze various aspects of human existence. This condition arises especially in what Brook refers to as “holy theatre”: this is “the theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible” (Brook, 1968), the one that makes visible on stage what escapes



our senses or has not been revealed yet, and thus supports the public in the genuine understanding of abstract topics or in browsing through the deeper meaning of things.

These potentialities of performing art were explored within the Open Atelier Experience to test an innovative way to activate the historic photos from Skagen, and to turn them into an eloquent and impactful resource for a contemporary public.

The co-creative work started from the images, that are deeply rooted in the distinctive scape of the small Danish town and its artists' colony at the beginning of the twentieth century: through the grafting of multiple layers of meaning, that were unfolded through lights, sounds, colours, graphic, poems, and literary figures, this process generated new storylines. These were designed to accompany the audience in an exploratory journey, allowing them to travel through space and time, and stimulating people to question themselves about reality. The multiplicity, density, and heterogeneity of the layers embedded in the performance made the experience capable to resound in the viewers' eyes and enabled a dimension similar to that of the "holy theatre".

The process that allowed to "activate" the pictures included two fundamental features, that defined its development and had a crucial part in the achievement of its outcomes.

First, it was based on a creative elaboration, that was meant to use the collaborative intervention of an inter-disciplinary group of artists to develop ground-breaking interpretations and expressions of a very specific heritage, pertaining to a distant time, space, and cultural framework. This process was intended as an original act of creativity, and thus it was operated within a field that was free from the pressure or limitations imposed by logic, authenticity, cultural implications, time or space orders. While these are pivotal parameters in the scientific methods through which cultural heritage is traditionally interpreted and presented (Runco, 2020), this experimental practice aimed at exploring a different approach.

As part of Art Museums of Skagen's collection, historic photos can be researched, displayed, and used in different ways, each of which can play an important and specific contribution to their dissemination among different audiences. The "Around the Lighthouse" project proposed an experimental use of this heritage; this process turned the pictures from "trace" to "translation" to "artwork", hence generating and releasing a new communicative power and allowing them to ignite different types of reactions in the viewers' eyes. In this way, the documentary nature of the photos and their interplay with the

museum's contents did not disappear, but rather became one of the many layers conveyed to the audience.

Another feature of this experience was the co-creative nature of the process. Co-creation is a pillar of the "innovation challenge" that characterizes the present moment (Rill & Hämäläinen, 2018), and is being further developed through the experimentation with new opportunities and tools (Bacharach *et al.*, 2016). In this context, the co-creative approach allowed not only for the multiplication of the ideas grafted on the historic photos, but also the intertwining of various means and languages.

A peculiar aspect pertaining to this experience curated by AMAT resulted from the international and cross-cultural dimension of the exchanges that led to the performance. The process that "transformed" the investigated heritage was based on its transfer throughout a range of contexts, which included the different cultural backgrounds of the Italian artists involved, but also the other geographies carried by literary figures and references.

The cross-cultural, collaborative, and trans-disciplinary approach was the condition for turning the photos into a performance, but also for generating a new, multi-layered mediation of this heritage, and thus enabling it to produce a transformative impact on the public.

The journey on which the audience embarked while enjoying the performance was only started by the work presented on stage: the show triggered it, but it did not completely defined it, as it then became a personal experience of each member of the audience. This is not only ensuing from the general impact of an artwork – as, in the words of Marcel Duchamp, "The artist performs only one part of the creative process. The onlooker completes it, and it is the onlooker who has the last word" (Tomkins, 1996). Within this experience, this aspect was even enhanced by the potential of performative arts: in theatre works, the construction of the plot and the establishment of communication with the audience draws on a multi-dimensional play with memory, that facilitates the start of rational or emotional journeys in people's mind.

Through the work of the Italian artists' group, the historic photos were transformed, as they activated a journey capable to bridge the particular place and time referred to the depicted scenes with the place and time of the performance. Through the eyes of the public, this was further connected to a wide constellation of other places and times, linked through a wish, or a memory triggered by an image, a word, a figure, or a sound.





Figure 2. “Around the Lighthouse”, the co-creative performance presented on 8 February 2023 at Chiesa dell’ Annunziata in Pesaro (Ph. Luigi Angelucci)

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. Unfolding the strategic role of co-creation to promote dynamic interpretation and dissemination modalities

The experience carried out within the Open Atelier project tested a new co-creative process for cultural heritage, stemming from within the art world itself, aimed to test innovative ways to convey cultural heritage and enhance its resonance for contemporary audiences. While the innovations that most cultural heritage institutions have promoted in the last years mostly focus on new technology or product development (Vicente *et al.*, 2012), ensuing from the accelerating pace of technology-driven changes in society, this project draws on unconventional dynamic interpretation patterns and dissemination modalities.

The experiment stemmed from the idea of the journey of a cultural heritage object situated in a specific time and place throughout a range of different temporal, spatial, cultural, and disciplinary innovative dimensions. The mobilization of the historical photos through this trans-disciplinary and cross-cultural process enabled new interplays among different characters, stories, and contexts, and changed the way they were received by the public.

This outcome ensued from a process based on the breaking of some of the layers usually applied to the interpretation and presentation of photographic heritage. Since its invention, photography has been observed as a primary tool of evidence (Sontag, 1973), firmly grounded in a documentary tradition because of its claims of truth and mechanical objectivity (Daston & Galison, 1992).

The Open Atelier Experience approached the old images from Art Museums of Skagen in an original way, that was not meant to annul the evidential language embedded in the medium but rather to unfold its creative potential, by turning the storage of stories housed in the photos into a resource fostering further creative expressions.

This potential was activated through the grafting of new layers performed by the multi-disciplinary group of Italian artists. The process started from the historical images, that were the point of departure of a journey across which graphic interventions, literary references from major works, new storylines, lights, and sounds were developed and then weaved together through theatre work.

This task was not carried out in the same way a curator or an art historian would do, but rather it grew as an original act of creativity, that unlocked the special heuristic potential of the condensed evidence of these images and turned them into a work of art. Being developed within the art world itself, this process was developed as the intersection of numerous contexts and actions, “leading to unexpected linkages between chains of morphological resemblance” (Egmond & Mason, 1999).

The exploration of multiple contexts and actions, and the various conceptual and material layers they produced, were coalesced and presented in the form of a “performance poetry”. This process broke new ground by testing an experimental interplay between a museum’s collection and tasks and the theatre realm – one that is completely different from the “museum theatre” format, and rather expands the notion of narrative exhibition by performing it in a new environment (i.e. the theatre).



This interplay was applied, on the one hand, in the construction of the performance, based on the capability of theatre to cohere different media and messages, and to bring together past and present. The work of museums usually draws on the notion of cultural memory as realized institutionally, a construct concerning a specific connection between time, identity, and memory, institutionalized in contents as part of culture (Assman, 2005). On the contrary, theatre mostly draws on the dialogue between the “small” and the “great” time, to use Bakhtin’s terminology, or between the human and the historical time, hence allowing the experience of the performance to co-exist in two worlds at once – the everyday world, and the world of memory. In this sense, the reinterpretation of a heritage piece within the context of theatre, which is a trans-historical marker of the unity between individual and collective memory (Kapushevska-Drakulevska, 2013), enabled the activation of the micro-histories embedded in the historical photos and their intertwining with a variety of other times and spaces.

Resorting to theater, on the other hand, was meant to enable the experimentation with a new type of interplay among the audience and the Art Museums of Skagen’s history. The grafting of new layers of meaning turned the photos documenting the life of the artists’ colony into an experiential heritage, capable to immerse visitors in a narrative event, activating a special connection between spectators and the characters on stage, and soliciting a high cognitive, affective, and reflective involvement. While the key experiential dimensions contributing to museum experiences are more of personal attributes, relating to excitement, learning, and contemplation, the presentation of this heritage as performed in a theatre enabled an experience that was both introspective and social. Hence, by harnessing the power of theatre as a medium, this cultural heritage was activated as a vehicle for self-discovery, allowing the public to gain a greater understanding of their inner self, but also as a lens through which to observe the world and various aspects of human existence.

5.2. Promoting the experimentation with art-led, creative practices to foster innovation within and from cultural heritage

By making new interplays among subjects, stories, and contexts visible, the Open Atelier Experience tested an innovative way to release the often-dormant potential of cultural heritage in revealing, promoting, or building various types of connections between different people and cultures.

We think this is one of the most powerful types of evidence of the strategic role of cultural heritage for contemporary societies. While globalization has turned the modern world into a village, where people can easily move from one place to another, cultural heritage has the potential to operate as a catalyst for the construction of shared values and experiences, the acknowledgment of analogies and recurrences, and the understanding of the fruitful contribution of past and present exchanges among different contexts.

The dissemination of these concepts can play a pivotal role in removing barriers, fostering solid bonds between groups despite their differences, and enhancing social cohesion, hence allowing multi-cultural communities to build a peaceful and

prosperous future.

Although it is being addressed by a growing body of theoretical work, this potential has not yet been fully exploited, and the exploration of untraditional museum practices is being solicited by the emergence of new challenges. This is one of the cornerstones in which we assess the value of the public Open Atelier Experiences.

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