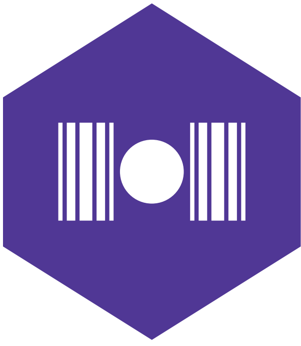

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Critical Theatricality in the Museum Space

JACEK LUDWIG SCARSO

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Critical Theatricality in the Museum Space

Jacek Ludwig Scarso,[1] London Metropolitan University, United Kingdom

Abstract: This contribution, developed from a presentation for the 2020 Conference on the Inclusive Museum, focuses on two participatory works created at Tate Modern in association with Tate Exchange, London Metropolitan University, AVR London and Anise Gallery. These projects, respectively entitled "In Limbo" and "The Pecking Order," consisted in large-scale live performance and VR installations, reimagining the Tate Exchange floor as a theatrical scenario. Reflecting Tate Exchange's ethos, the pieces champion the idea of demystifying the museum space through playful and theatrical encounters while at the same time ensuring multiple levels of engagement, tailored both to the broader public and to academic and sector-specific audiences with the additional curated talks and activities. If the terms theatricality and spectacle have been seen as potentially negative by some, symptomatic of an experience economy that risks dumbing down the complexity of culture by appealing to our ever-decreasing attention spans, I refer to these case studies as evidence for a new way in which the theatrical can be used as a powerful, critical tool in the museum experience. The article proposes the phrase "critical theatricality" to frame the projects in question, whereby the theatrical strategies and aesthetics employed highlight the context of the museum, as opposed to distracting from this. Here, the participant is both sensorially stimulated by the live experience while retaining critical distance in the deliberately partial immersion into the fictional narrative of each work, where the museum context is visible yet fictionally reimagined. Crucially, the works are only complete with the participants' involvement, challenging the objectification of performance in the contemporary gallery setting and promoting a playful and deep engagement with the museum audience.

Keywords: Theatricality, Performance, Public Art, Relational Aesthetics, Participation, Interactive Art, Public Engagement, Experience Economy, Contemporary Art, Spectacle

Introduction

There has never been a timelier moment to consider the role of the museum space than one in which the museum doors have been forcedly shut. No reminder of the museum as an enabler of experiences is more potent than attempting to simulate a museum visit through online tours due to the COVID-19 pandemic and realizing yet again that while digital media allow us close and comfortable access to the museum exhibit, the very thing that we end up missing is the context that hosts the live(d) experience of it.

This article reflects on two projects that I presented at Tate Modern via Tate Exchange in collaboration with the School of Art Architecture and Design at London Met, Anise Gallery and AVR London: respectively, *In Limbo* (Dec 2018) and *The Pecking Order* (Dec 2019). These projects, both live participatory installations with virtual reality components, were created before the term Coronavirus became a household name; yet, my aim to frame these as examples of what I will term here as "critical theatricality in the museum space" has incidentally developed in conjunction with the lockdown period, directly or indirectly bearing the signs of this unprecedented situation.

Theatricality and Its Problems

My work centers on an effort to extend the experience of theatricality beyond the theatre space and increasingly in the form of multidisciplinary works created for exhibition spaces, spanning performance, installation, video, and VR, often in collaboration, as is the case here, with partnering artists and organizations. Tate Exchange has been an important vehicle to test this approach, providing both a physical and conceptual platform to initiate experiments of a participatory nature, reimagining the floor designated to its program in the Blavatnik building at Tate Modern, as well as intervening in other Tate Modern spaces, such as the Turbine Hall and the Blavatnik staircase.

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My drive toward theatricality, stemming from my background as a theatre maker before moving increasingly into visual and multimedia arts, is motivated by the desire to redefine the theatrical in the context of art exhibitions. When it comes to art, the word theatricality has an ambiguous legacy. The term itself is somewhat scarred by a culture that defined it dismissively: while such cultural standpoint is traceable back to Plato (Quick and Rushton 2019, 3), more recent history saw a pejorative use of the term theatricality permeating art criticism, exemplified in Fried's writing (1980 and 1998). Fried suggests that the work of artists, such as Donald Judd or Robert Morris, and by extension, as Elwes observes, the very foundation of contemporary installation art, owes its impact merely to the spectacle created in relation to the public, seeing "this undesirable theatricality in the inscription of the putative viewer as the final term coalescing the drama and logic of the piece" (Elwes 2015, 54). In essence, according to Fried, within such practices, the "work" itself is not enough; it needs theatre to make an impact, an implication that is intended to suggest the artificiality of its premise, according to which theatricality impedes the true absorption into the work, thus camouflaging a lack of substance.

Of course, Fried's ideas date back more than fifty years ago and, understandably, his views have been regularly contested in art criticism since. Nonetheless, while increasingly embraced in some art circles, theatricality continues to raise suspicion in others. Casey (2005, 80) identifies a perception of this word connected with the contemporary museum's progressive focus on "edutainment" and immersive experiences for the public, whereby "the spectacle that satiates the contemporary experience-oriented audience privileges a structured and narrativized object, preferably with the theatricality of a theme park or Hollywood film." This, she claims, is often read as a trend that debilitates the capacity for intellectual and aesthetic engagement that is traditionally promoted in the museum context. I will return to Casey's observations, as these have been key in reframing this issue and problematizing it further.

It certainly does not help that the term theatricality as a conceptual reference point is one that originates largely outside of the theatre itself, and as such, it inherits an understanding of theatre that is at best partial and at worst distorted. Used as a comparison term identifying in something that is not intended as the property of resembling theatre, the concept is somewhat compromised from the start; it is based on the assumption that the idea of theatre, as a reference point, is a fixed one, perhaps one that is still framed by a proscenium arch and that is inherently reliant on the notion of drama. Where does theatricality then sit as a concept when the very idea of theatre has been, from within the field, revaluated in post-dramatic terms and its practice has been increasingly diversified?

To many, the word theatricality is inextricably associated with spectacle. This would not constitute a problem if it were not the case that spectacle is also a word whose lineage has been affected by pejorative connotations in art history—most famously, Debord's (1987) reading of spectacle as a capitalist strategy—"In the spectacle, which is the image of the ruling economy, the goal is nothing, development is everything. The spectacle aims at nothing other than itself." Spectacle is, according to this perspective, an ideological tool aimed at amusing people into passivity through its deliberately artificial construction, at once "pacifying and divisive, uniting us only through our separation from one another" (Bishop 2006, 12).

There is no doubt that museum programs, especially when it comes to large blockbuster shows, have been increasingly designed and presented to the public in spectacular terms. The progressive "eventisation of the museum," to use Wood's (2014, 129) borrowing of the phrase from Dorothea Von Hantellmann, is consistent with an economic model based on the packaging of experiences by cultural institutions, itself reminiscent of Pine and Gilmore's vision of an Experience Economy (2019). As Casey (2005, 79–90) points out, "prophesied by market researchers Pine and Gilmore, the 'orchestrated esthetic experience' has not only entered the museum but provides the very core around which contemporary museum interaction occurs." The question is how to separate the consumer-driven ideas of experience and spectacle from a notion of the museum space as theatrically engaging, where such a phrase is intended to denote a deeper, innovative understanding of what a museum can do.

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Tate Exchange—Beyond the ‘Society of Extras’

In reframing Debord’s (1987) idea of the *Society of the Spectacle* in the context of an increasingly mediatic contemporary world, Bourriaud (2002) suggested that, while the public’s role is no longer one of mere passivity as a receptor of spectacles, its inclusion in cultural exchanges may still denote a potential danger. His coinage of the phrase “Society of Extras” (Bourriaud 2002) updated Debord’s (1987) concept by contextualizing this in a dominant late Capitalist ideology that overtly promotes active dialogue but only in as much as its interlocutors are firmly placed in the position of consumers. Bourriaud’s (2002) influential concept of *Relational Aesthetics* has represented, accordingly, an antidote to this tendency. Here, he identified an unprecedented drive in some art practices toward an actual dialogical relationship with the public, whereby “the sphere of human relations” can be seen “as artwork venue” (Bourriaud 2002, 44), promoting an empowering understanding of the viewer as a creative contributor to the work.

Directly or indirectly, the sensitivity of *Relational Aesthetics* (Bourriaud 2002) has certainly been visible in art museum practices over the last two decades. Bishop (2006) identifies a related cultural pattern in recent artistic movements that have adopted activist strategies but, unlike previous forms of art activism, have developed within the institutional framework and curatorial programs of museums, as opposed to functioning as external responses to the establishment. Here, “social and aesthetic understanding are integrated into each other” (Bishop 2006, 172).

The creation of museum strands such as Tate Exchange could be seen as consistent with this ethos and as an endeavor to make this integral not only to curatorial choices but also to the explicit structural organization of the institution. Founded in 2016, Tate Exchange defines itself as “the first of its kind in an art museum anywhere in the world,” in the form of:

> A space and a programme at Tate Modern and Tate Liverpool for everyone to debate and reflect upon contemporary topics and ideas, get actively involved, think through doing, and make a difference. We work in response to an annual theme, and to the question, ‘what happens when art and society meet?’ We do this through collaboration with colleagues from across Tate, a community of Associate organizations, artists and our visitors. (Tate Exchange, n.d.)

One of the most apparent characteristics of Tate Exchange is the inherent difficulty of defining exactly what it is. The elusiveness of its categorization is significant in that it does not simply sit within the more expectable strands of community outreach or education widely existent across cultural institutions. The positioning of Tate Exchange could be said to destabilize the implicit hierarchy of values traditionally perceived in museum spaces: a hierarchy that sees the highest value (both culturally and economically) in the collection that the museum hosts and an added, thus secondary, value in the activities (educational and outreach) that widen the public who may engage with such collection.

Such positioning also mirrors an expanded idea of how pedagogical approaches may be integrated within the art practice, without these being branded as conventional educational activities, supporting the core program. Bishop identifies this trend, stating:

> Artists and curators have become increasingly engaged in projects that appropriate the tropes of education as both a method and a form: lectures, seminars, libraries, reading-rooms, publications, workshops and even fullblown schools. This has paralleled the growth of museum education departments, whose activities are no longer restricted to classes and workshops to enhance the viewer’s understanding of a particular exhibition or collection, but can now include research networks with universities, symposia reflecting upon their practice, and interdisciplinary conferences. (Bishop 2012, 4740)

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Through its network of associates, including both large institutions like universities as well as smaller art and community enterprises, Tate Exchange creates a circular process of engagement; rather than focusing solely on the outward reach of Tate's public engagement, it invites associates to propose and realize programs within the physical spaces of Tate Modern and Tate Liverpool. Thus, the conceptual stimulus for such programs stems from Tate (often in conjunction with existent curatorial themes) and is interpreted by the associates in their proposed projects, which in turn are realized and supported within Tate.

There is an important implication in the circularity of this exchange; the associates are seen not only as beneficiaries but as cultural and artistic producers in their own right, actively contributing to Tate's programming. Crucially, the work promoted at Tate Exchange is participatory in nature. The meeting between art and society mentioned in their mission statement is both symbolic and literal. Associates are explicitly asked to consider practical ways to make their programs interactive and accessible, actively challenging the cultural perception of the museum as a potentially exclusive and elitist environment.

In *Artificial Hells* (2012), Bishop argues for the need to question the implicit bias in relation to socially engaged practices for demonstrable impact, whereby the position of aesthetic value is inherently dismissed by what, in her words, has increasingly become a form of "critical orthodoxy." According to Bishop (2012, 382), this cultural perception "has tended to promote an equation between aesthetics and the triple enemy of formalism, decontextualization and depoliticization; the result is that aesthetics became synonymous with the market and conservative cultural hierarchy." In Bishop's (2012) view, while this has been an understandable outcome of an effort to question existent power structures in culture, it has led to a perception of artistic practice that does not do justice to its complexity of meaning and creative processes. Within my own creative work, I wholeheartedly share this belief. In the following paragraphs, I aim to discuss two projects that I developed within the context of Tate Exchange, leading me to propose the concept of critical theatricality as their shared principle. Both projects intentionally take on the guise of social experiments, yet the participant soon realizes that the topic of each piece functions essentially as a pretext or indeed a provocation. References to objective, quantitative approaches to data are intentionally playful. The role of the "observer," in both cases performed through fictional characters, is not only visible but theatrically heightened. Hence, the aesthetic choices made in these works are not simply oriented toward enhancing the impact of research underpinning them; they are the very research methods through which this process may pursue new ways of framing the relationship between participant, art experience, and museum context.

In Limbo

The public enters the Tate Exchange floor, here staged as the *In Limbo* Waiting Room: a space filled with stage smoke and guarded by "bureaucrat angels," who hand them a form to fill in and direct them to a long row of chairs. The form includes a range of trigger questions on their experience of waiting, ranging from trivial to deeper topics (e.g., "What are the last three things you have been waiting for," "how long have you been waiting for these?," "how much of your life is taken by waiting?," "is what you are waiting for worth the wait?). There is a doodling section in the form to fill in while waiting. As they complete the questionnaire, they hand it over to the angels, who hang them on a wall, creating an increasingly large collective artwork. The artwork itself becomes part of the experience for the viewers, perusing what participants before them have commented upon but only once their own form is complete. Throughout the event, an immersive surround soundtrack, produced by Jelmer Tuinstra, layers the sound of a ticking clock in reverse with a nostalgic waltz, which contributes to the playful tone of the experience and its symbolic reference to time. In the meantime, other angels are visible across the museum spaces. They are not allowed to talk to the public; they walk in slow motion, knowingly smiling, and pass on "secret messages" directing them to the Waiting Room. In a special collaboration with Felix Dodd

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and A-VR, *In Limbo* features a commissioned VR journey, immersing the public in a virtual waiting room. As they navigate this, they are confronted by further questions, once again through the presence of the bureaucrat angels. The VR complements the live experience by promoting a further level of playful engagement in the intimate nature of this medium. Across the physical space of the installation, TV screens play excerpts of the VR animation in 2D.

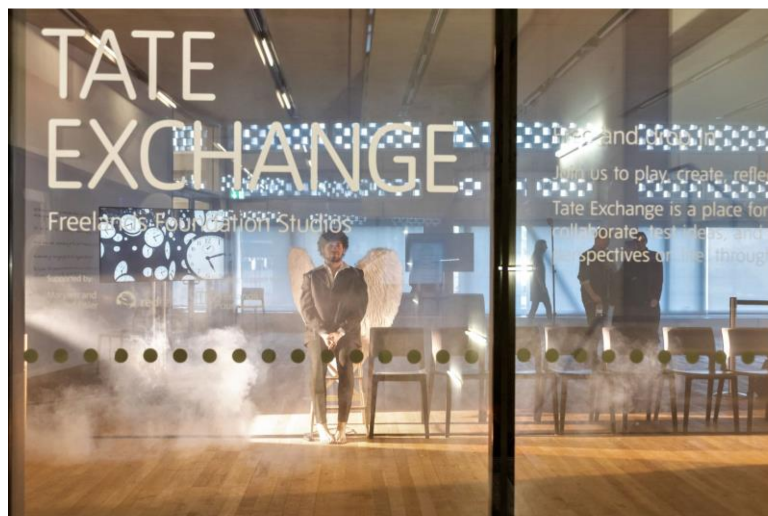

Figure 1: *In Limbo*; Installation View at Tate Exchange, Tate Modern:
View from the Entrance of the Tate Exchange Floor
Source: Scarso 2018

Figure 2: *In Limbo*; Installation View at Tate Exchange, Tate Modern:
Public Fills in the Project's Forms in Response to the Idea of Waiting
Source: Scarso 2018

As a participatory installation, *In Limbo* invited the public to ponder on the idea of waiting, which, in this context, was presented both as an action and, in many ways, as a condition of our lived experience. The premise of the piece is that as the speed of the world at large increases, it is not so much that we spend more time waiting but that we are increasingly, perhaps obsessively, conscious of it.

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In Limbo was created for Tate Exchange in December 2018 in collaboration with the School of Art, Architecture, and Design at London Metropolitan University, where I have coordinated our institutional associateship and the projects created thus far as part of this. The piece was realized in response to the theme of "movement." Themes at Tate Exchange are announced yearly and proposed by an invited lead artist: in this case, Cuban performance artist and activist Tania Bruguera. The idea of waiting is, of course, antonymic to the one of movement, but both share the potential for a metaphorical interpretation of stasis and action, explored in their ideological connotations. Waiting is movement that is yet to be realized, that is neither here nor there: "in limbo," indeed. This notion lends itself to countless framing possibilities; for instance, presenting the piece in the context of the ongoing Brexit negotiations imbued this theme with additional meaning in relation to an unpredictable political future.

It is arguable that the presentation of the *In Limbo* concept could have been technically possible even without the presence of live performers. Simple instructions could have been given by ushering staff or presented on signposts around the space. Visitors could have completed their forms and hung them up on the wall directly without the interaction involving the bureaucrat angels; yet, as apparent in the public's feedback, it was that very interaction that made the piece compelling. Live presence is, in fact, essential to the work, I would propose, as it contributes to the engagement of the public's imagination, allowing the public to feel immersed in the staging of the project. Reading more than a thousand forms that made up the collective mural resulting from the piece, I was pleasantly surprised by the personal experiences shared, the complexity and poignancy of the doodle drawings included, and, generally, by the time taken in committing to the task, with each visitor spending an average of twenty minutes responding to this. It was apparent to me, as a performance maker, that the same level of engagement would have been unlikely without the live characterization that informed this piece. As the performers wearing suits and large feather wings walked up and down the space, their stylized slow-motion manner seemed to encourage a commitment from the participants to engage with their sustained presence. Their time as viewers was needed to make the experience meaningful. The liveness of the encounter contributed to highlighting a human dimension in the piece, a safe space for sharing private experiences, and a level of empathy, both in the performer-participant relation and amongst the participants themselves, respectfully taking time to engage with each other's contribution.

Figure 3: *In Limbo*; Installation View at Tate Exchange, Tate Modern:
VR Journey, Accompanying the Live Installation
Source: Scarso 2018

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This empathy was not just visible in the main installation. One of my personal highlights of the project was an Instagram post by a visitor who encountered the performers in the Turbine Hall and was somehow comforted by their angelic presence, linking the experience with a significant turning point in her life. This was humbling to read; one could argue that the performance's premise might have been misunderstood here, but the project's ambiguity and fluidity were deliberate, and it was a pleasure to realize that these could be read in such a way. Similarly, seeing parents encouraging their children to interact with the performers, enthusiastically looking for the angels around Tate Modern (no doubt the scheduling of the piece in December contributed to an incidental Christmas framing, especially amongst family audiences) was ultimately an added bonus to the piece, making apparent the multiple levels of entry that the work was capable of achieving.

There is something in live performance that actively demystifies the museum space. As Wood (2014, 126) points out, "live art effects a shift in focus that unmasks the museum's human infrastructure, as well as the networks of human relations that underwrite and are affected by the objects on display." As performance is a growing presence in museums' programming, two tendencies seem to arise. On the one hand, performance is framed as a museum exhibit, rendered as an object, albeit ephemeral, that can be displayed and collected, just like a sculpture or a painting. Guy (2016, 2092) observes that "what is perhaps troubling here is an implicit suggestion that live work ought to aspire to, be structured so as to promote, museological accommodation and inclusion." Citing Wood (2014, 126) in her reading of Tino Sehgal's live installations, a form of drag is implicit to this cultural understanding, whereby performance ends up "impersonating the object-centric formulations of traditional museology" to earn the authority and perceived value associated with a museum-worthy artifact.

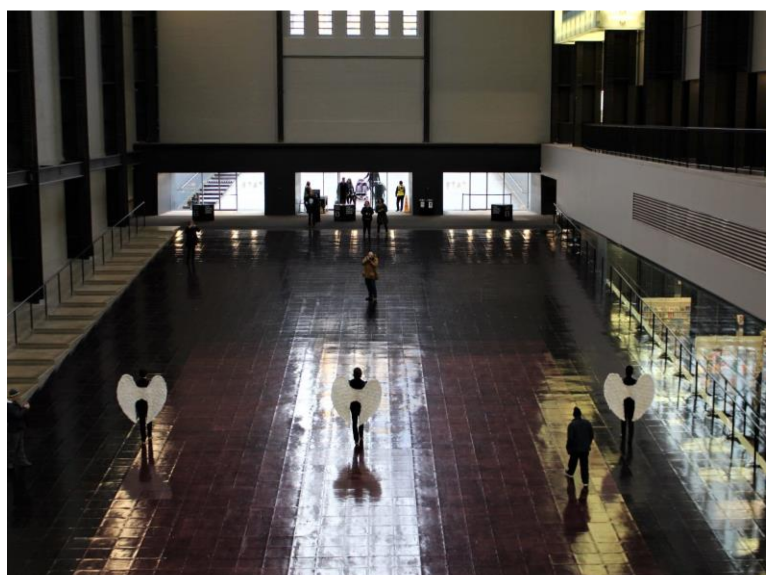

Figure 4: *In Limbo*; Installation View at Tate Exchange, Tate Modern:
Performed Action in the Turbine Hall
Source: Scarso 2018

On the other hand, performance helps us to experience the museum as a living, dynamic environment. It reminds us of the human capital on which the museum depends, of the fact that a museum is a human product, thus limited, relative, and changeable. In this light, the presence of performance allows us "to understand any artwork not just as the result of performed action, but as a potential pivot, an eddy in a stream of social relations and inter-subjectivities. The museum becomes a live field that can be intervened in, choreographed, dramatized, and leads us to read objects in new ways" (Wood 2014, 144).

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In this sense, the programming of projects like *In Limbo* reflects the shift identified by Guy (2016, 531) from an "informing museology" to a "performing" one, where the experience for the visitor is less akin to the observation of a display as a vehicle for the reception of knowledge and more to a participatory exchange, in which knowledge is the result of a live dialogue.

Figure 5: *In Limbo*; Installation View at Tate Exchange, Tate Modern:
Collective Mural Created as a Result of the Public's Responses
Source: Scarso 2018

If liveness is therefore central to a piece like *In Limbo*, it is not simply a case of real-time ephemeral presence that characterizes the work. The piece is quite clearly staged with aesthetic devices that deliberately fight against the neutral, open plan, day-lit look of the Tate Exchange floor. Stage smoke, theatre lights, and surround sound define the setting as a mise en scène, while intentionally embodying a post-dramatic configuration (Lehmann 2006) in the multifaceted and non-linear narrative being created through its participation devices, as well as in the still visible juxtaposition with the museum context (hence, the dramatic immersion of the visitor is only ever partial—a concept that will be explained in the following pages). My following project for Tate Exchange employed these devices even further, increasingly embracing theatricality as a key feature in this approach.

The Pecking Order

> A cordial message from the Birds: welcome to our Observation Nest. Please take part in some harmless exercises, as we examine the choices you make when you move in a space. We birds are baffled by you, but please pretend we're not there. We're just researching how your flocks move: don't be smug, you haven't quite figured out how are flocks move either… (Scarso 2019)

The above greeting welcomes the public to *The Pecking Order*, for which the whole of the Tate Exchange floor is this time used to create a structure of dustsheets, presented as the "Observation Nest." In a stage set realized by Jelmer Tuinstra, three discrete and simply furnished spaces invite visitors, prompted by video messages, to consider where they would place themselves in a given location: on a train, around a conference table, on an open floor space structured as a grid. They mark their placing with leaves, which were handed to them at the entrance of the floor, so that the spaces look progressively littered with these. As visitors

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make their way through the installation, they meet ominous characters in large bird-masks, quietly observing them and, in the grid space, measuring their proxemic distance from one another. Participants eventually realize, via a birds-eye view camera, that they are video-projected live onto a large screen. They conclude the journey with a VR experience, realized in collaboration with AVR London and Sylvia Koloszewska, in which they embody the point of view of a bird, spying on humans inside an imaginary virtual birdcage. An actor's voiceover accompanies the VR, relating the bird's thoughts in first person.

Figure 6: *The Pecking Order*; Installation View at Tate Exchange, Tate Modern: Performers on the Set of the Installation
Source: Scarso 2019

Figure 7: *The Pecking Order*; Installation View at Tate Exchange, Tate Modern: Performance Interaction with Visitors
Source: Scarso 2019

The Pecking Order was about surveillance and power dynamics in proxemic relations. In its playful and absurdist tasks, visitors were invited to reflect on the act of observing and being observed. The piece was conceived in response to Tate Exchange's curatorial theme of power, in

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this case, initiated by lead artist collective Hyphen-Labs. Such a theme was interpreted by looking at how power can be understood as a spatially informing concept, both physically and technologically. Foregrounding the idea of spatial relationships as power relationships, whether consciously or not, the piece encouraged visitors' responses on how everyday situations may be seen as unconscious negotiations of power in space with the additional implication of surveillance (e.g., CCTV cameras, data monitoring, etc.) symbolized by the presence of the birds. Triggered by the question "who's at the top of the Pecking Order?," the public's responses were conveyed both in their physical engagement with the installation, including the positioning of the leaves, and in the written comments prompted by a large mind-map concluding the journey.

Figure 8: *The Pecking Order*; Installation View at Tate Exchange, Tate Modern:
VR Journey Concluding the Live Installation on the Tate Exchange Floor
Source: Scarso 2019

In many ways, *The Pecking Order* and *In Limbo* shared a similar configuration. Both involved the main participatory action on the Tate Exchange floor, integrated with a VR interpretation of this. Both made use of a surround soundtrack to facilitate the immersion of the public in the narrative setting of the piece (for *The Pecking Order*, this featured the layering of film noir-inspired music with the sound of crows). Both projects included daily roundtable events (in this case titled the "Observation Nest Talks") with guests from different disciplines (art, performance, architecture, design, cultural studies) to discuss the issues explored by the respective piece from their specialist angle, emphasizing the aim for the aforementioned multiple levels of engagement with the pieces. Both projects "spilled" into other spaces at Tate Modern, such as the Turbine Hall, the Blavatnik staircase, and the Tanks. In a sense, *The Pecking Order* takes this format further in terms of the ambition of its scale and the theatricalization of its staging. Here, in comparison with the former project, the fictional setting was further defined, visually enhanced by the discrete set of the Observation Nest on the Tate Exchange floor.

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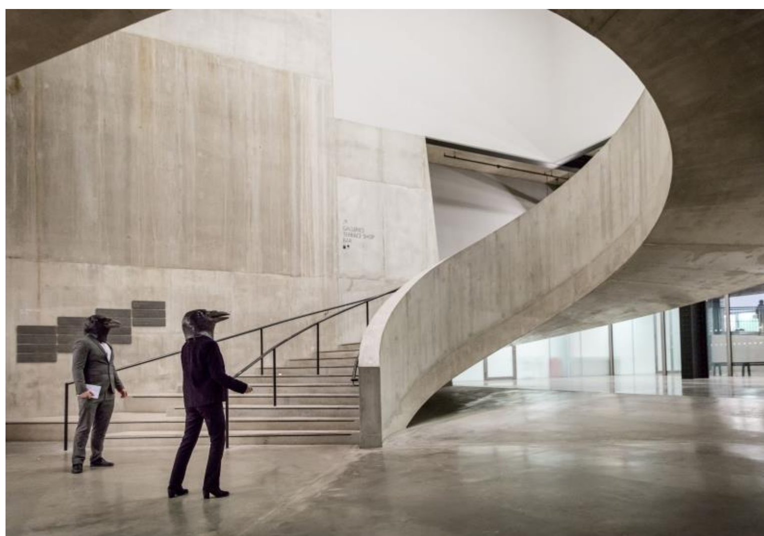

Figure 9: *The Pecking Order*; Installation View at Tate Exchange, Tate Modern: Performance Action in the Tate Modern Tanks.
Source: Scarso 2019

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Further defined was also the processional logic that characterized its staging. The set was deliberately conceived as a fictional journey, directly making use of the Tate Exchange floor's horse-shoe configuration to enable visitors to enter the space from one end and complete the journey, including its VR experience, from the other. In doing so, processional features intentionally punctuated the space. There was a sense of rituality in the prescribed path, whereby the visitors would encounter the humanoid birds in the different chambers, slowly advancing in an increasing visual manifestation of the metaphoric premise of the piece. As observed by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and McNamara (1985), key elements in processional performance may work in such a way that a complex aesthetic configuration (in terms of scenography, costume, music, movement patterns) is traceable back to simple and easily visible symbols unifying the procession's meaning. The presence of the birds, the key symbol in the piece, and their ominous and crucially similar appearance, certainly contributed to this connotation. Armed with portable sound-speakers concealed in their costume, the birds effectively initiated the processional journey from key locations within the museum; their accompanying soundtrack and their visual presence invited the museum visitors, the majority of them unaware of the piece taking place upstairs, to follow them to the Tate Exchange floor. This "Pied Piper" effect, as director of Tate Exchange Cara Courage defined it, further emphasized this processional aesthetic so that this could be read as a liminal intervention in the "public" spaces of the museum, "designed to compete with the existing environment around it, becoming for a time the dominant element," culminating in the more intimate space of the installation set.

Through this process, an important characteristic of this approach is that it does not want the public to forget the museum context of their experience. Indeed, the resulting theatrical journey highlights the already existent processional logic of the venue itself. As Casey (2005) points out, the modern museum, just like its *wunderkammer* ancestor, is intrinsically structured as a processional space. As Casey observes:

> This work in an almost dialectic reversal—the processional space suggests the freedom of the individual while actually delimiting the visual through architectural direction and object display. The dramatic procession through the museum is a performance by the individual, not only because the architectural conditions shape that social behavior, but also because those conditions construct the way object collections are seen. (Casey 2005, 82–83)

Accordingly, it is possible to consider *The Pecking Order* as "meta-processional," in that the inherent theatricality derives from highlighting the above characteristics rather than attempting to disguise these so that the participant is both immersed in the fictional procession staged in the piece and reminded of the processional logic of the museum as a whole. It is this deliberate tension between the staging of the piece and the awareness of the museum context as not only a backdrop but an essential semiotic frame for the experience—the key to an understanding of theatricality that I consider to be "critical" as opposed to merely spectacular.

Figure 10: *The Pecking Order*; Installation View at Tate Exchange, Tate Modern: The Observation Nest Talks
Source: Scarso 2019

Critical Theatricality

Diversifying our understanding of theatricality in the museum space is vital in order not to fall into reductive considerations of this term, as articulated earlier. The sheer numbers, humbling enthusiasm, and engagement shared by visitors at both *In Limbo* and *The Pecking Order*, along with how such responses consistently pointed at the theatrical realization of these pieces as a way to encourage an imaginative, dynamic, and vivid participation, suggest to me that theatricality can be a viable tool to make the museum a more inclusive environment.

However, its problematic definition continues to hinder this potential. "The general impression created by recent studies on theatricality," write Van Eck and Bussels (2010, 213), "is that of a dead end. Either the term has become so wide and all-embracing that it has become meaningless, or it is too narrowly based on a critique of the literally spectacular character of art works conceived in theatrical terms." Furthermore, the authors indicate a "conceptual slippage" in the implication of the phrase between what pertains to the technique of theatre and to the social connotations of it.

Perhaps, rather than dwelling on what exactly we mean by theatricality (is it a medium? an aesthetic? a style? a genre?), we should focus on what such theatricality is used for. In the same way that theatre may be created with various possible purposes, its countless forms reflect such a diversity of aims, so theatricality must be understood as an equally dynamic and multifaceted idea. Within a museum context, we should ask the question of whether theatricality is used to distract us from the "seriousness" of the surrounding environment, perhaps to make such surrounding more palatable on a commercial level, or whether it is employed as a vehicle to engage not only with the piece under consideration but also with the museum as a whole. Understanding the latter aim, which I would associate with the concept of critical theatricality, would help us distinguish this process from a more generalized notion of theatricality as spectacle.

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I choose the term "critical" here because this process combines the playfulness of the artistic choices proposed with a degree of intellectual distancing and self-reflexivity. Crucially, it is based on a dialogical dimension with the viewers, who contribute their responses as part of the work. As a participant, I am both transported into the imaginary world of the action and reminded of the real-world framing this. Even inside the sets of *In Limbo* and *The Pecking Order*, the museum is still visible; whether I am contemplating the idea of waiting in the former or of surveillance and spatial relationships in the latter, the real world is both apparent and somewhat changed. Its cultural construction is exposed in light of the concepts raised by the piece. To use Casey's (2005, 89) words linking this to Baudrillard's reality principle, "the performance conceals the fact that the museum proper is the unreal, the staged, while quietly exposing the reality that the museum's sacred aesthetic mission is a social construction." The difference here is that while Casey focuses primarily on performance, this understanding may be extended to all media employed in creating a critical-theatrical experience, whether live or not. This is ultimately not a question of whether an experience is live (indeed, many live art practices categorically refuse the framing of theatricality) but whether the playful artificiality that is inherent to it, that which reminds us of theatre, contributes to our understanding of what surrounds it or simply provides a distraction from it. Indeed, if the context of the museum is redundant in relation to the experience, perhaps we should ask whether that experience may be better located somewhere else.

Conclusion

Understanding different levels of theatricality at play not only validates work that aims to be theatrical but not merely spectacular; more importantly, it recognizes the participant as a reflexive contributor rather than a passive receptor or a mere "extra," to use Bourriaud's (2002) wording. If the traditional museum presented itself as a shrine to cultural power, granting visitors temporary access to its capital and invariably excluding others by the perceived elitism of its premise, an inclusive museum practice faces another risk. Here, we may fall into the trap of confusing engagement with experience consumption (Elwes 2015). An ethos of "edutainment" may simply end up replicating a consumer exercise, whereby the visitor is tantalized by many experiences but does not engage meaningfully with any of them. Both tendencies share a potential passivity of the viewer: in the former, by imposing culture unilaterally; in the latter, by focusing on experiences as commodities to window-shop, consume, and ultimately discard.

What I have treasured from my work with Tate Exchange so far, through projects like *In Limbo* and *The Pecking Order*, is an ethos for which the visitor is an active contributor to the work and not simply on the basis of being involved in practical activities. While COVID-19 is necessarily forcing us to implement digital tools in envisioning new museum strategies, it is also reminding us of what we are missing out on and just how important that is: the live(d) performative experience of the museum context. On a positive note, these unprecedented circumstances are also encouraging us to think outside of set parameters, blending the digital into our gradual reclaiming of the physical space, with these two dimensions becoming progressively blurred. Here, we may explore new opportunities, expanding both the idea of liveness beyond actual physical presence and our understanding of the relationship between artwork, participant, and venue. Undoubtedly, restaging *In Limbo* or *The Pecking Order* in the aftermath of COVID-19 would denote a new and potentially dominant layer of meaning; the themes of waiting in the former and of spatial proxemics in the latter would inevitably also evoke our recent experience of lockdown and social distancing. In a sense, this is part of these projects' inherent design. They are meant to evolve with new participants and new contexts of participation. Like theatre, they refuse to be static works.

While we envision new ways of working in museum practices post-pandemic, I propose that the key principles of the projects articulated here will still apply. Whether physically or virtually, demystifying the museum space is achieved not by distracting the viewer from it but by

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acknowledging a different form of participation, one that can be both playful and critical. There is no one correct formula to achieve this, and the debate should understandably be kept open as to the efficacy of the methods explored here. However, I do believe that theatricality may well be a useful vehicle to this end: an idea of theatricality that, drawing on Tate Exchange's ethos, is aimed at innovating and redefining our understanding of participation within the museum context. As the paradigms of theatricality will continue to be explored and questioned in the theatre itself, and who knows to what extent in response to the current pandemic, perhaps its renewed understanding will become progressively apparent in the context of an inclusive museum.

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