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Performing museography: A practice-led research for art museums, conducted at MUVE, Fondazione dei Musei Civici di Venezia

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Abstract
This contribution explores the relationship between performance and art museum practice, through a creative practice-led approach, as part of a collaboration with MUVE, Fondazione dei Musei Civici in Venice. The focus here is on the exploration of performance opportunities embedded in the museography of the case study institutions, encompassing both artistic and curatorial considerations. Through a reflection on current challenges faced by such institutions and through speculative implementation of creative practice ideas, the argument here is that, as museums have re-opened their doors to the public in the aftermath of COVID-19, their performance activation may be crucial in reclaiming their role as physical contexts for cultural dialogue. Performance provides a useful lens to explore and re-imagine the experience of visitors, emphasizing their subjective positionality and their inter-relational connections with each other, with the collection and with the museographic configuration of the space.

KEYWORDS
art-research, curation, museography, museum-practice, performance, performativity, practice-led

INTRODUCTION

How do we champion the importance of visiting a museum, particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19 lockdowns? If traditionally, the cultural value of a museum was identified chiefly

in what it contains, as a capital, both cultural and financial, to preserve for posterity, a general shift in recent years appears to have informed a renewed understanding that highlights the dialogical relationship with the public as not only the beneficiary of a collection's display and dissemination, but, crucially, as the key element that gives the museum its *raison d'être*. Accordingly, a museum may be reframed in its performing role, whereby we mean in the live, intersubjective and communal relations that it fosters: not in what the museum *owns*, but in what the museum *does*.

This understanding, which aligns with ideas such as the "postmuseum" proposed by Hooper-Greenhill, a museum with an emphasis on process and experience (cited in Mandelli, 2022), has provided me with a fundamental premise for a practice-led exploration of performance potentials, embedded in the very architecture of museum spaces and their museographic configurations. I began this exploration at Tate Modern in collaboration with its former strand Tate Exchange, where I created two large-scale live participatory installations, *In Limbo* (2018) and *The Pecking Order* (2019), framed by the concept of *critical theatricality* (Scarso, 2021). A key focus in my practice, the idea of critical theatricality may be summarized as the conceptual and artistic use of performance and theater conventions and creative strategies that, while often embodying spectacular aesthetics, nonetheless challenge the idea of spectacle as a commodification tool, in Debord's understanding of this term (Debord, 1987).

Rather than merely heightening the consumer appeal of the museum space in its progressive trend towards "edutainment" (Casey, 2005) and "culturtainment" (Smith & Fowle, 2012), these strategies are employed as reflexive tools, to invite the public to playfully rethink their relationship with the museum that surrounds them. The museum, through critical theatricality, is not disguised with the aim of making it less "intimidating"; instead, it is consistently highlighted in its cultural and ideological construction, in an open-ended dialogue, through which it can be re-imagined and, indeed, subverted.

These principles then led me to the creation of further artistic projects in art galleries (*Shrine of the Goat* at Anise Gallery, London, 2022) and public institutions (*Baroque Intrusions* at Museo del Barocco al Palazzo Chigi di Ariccia, Rome, 2018), as well as educational workshops devised with the MA Public Art and Performance at London Metropolitan University, in collaboration with institutions like The Monument to the Great Fire of London (2020-ongoing) and, more recently ACCA (Australian Centre for Contemporary Art), as part of my research fellowship at RMIT University in Melbourne (2023).

With the plan of extending this type of research to institutional examples from across the globe, for this discussion, my case study is the result of a collaboration with MUVE, the Foundation of Venice's Civic Museums. MUVE comprises 11 museums within the City of Venice (Palazzo Ducale, Museo Correr, Torre dell'Orologio, Ca' Rezzonico, Palazzo Mocenigo, Casa di Carlo Goldoni, Ca' Pesaro – Galleria Internazionale di Arte Moderna, Palazzo Fortuny, Museo del Vetro in Murano, Museo del Merletto in Burano and Museo della Storia Naturale), plus additional partnerships that include Forte Marghera in mainland Venice. In its mission statement, MUVE is identified as

> a network of autonomous museums with a central direction. In addition to traditional museum activities (recovery, conservation, study, promotion), it includes a wide range of cultural activities and services: research, training, dissemination, teaching, production of temporary events, in a ceaseless dialogue with the territory and its visitors.
>
> (MUVE website)

My research developed as a formal collaboration with MUVE in connection with CREATURE, Research Centre for Creative Arts, Cultures and Engagement at London Metropolitan University. As part of this collaboration, I had the opportunity of a research trip focusing on a selection of

institutions within the Foundation: namely, Ca' Pesaro, Palazzo Ducale, Palazzo Fortuny, Ca' Rezzonico and Forte Marghera. Alongside visiting these institutions and studying their collections, this activity enabled me to interview key people across the different strands of the organization. These interviews provided me with an insight into the organization's modes of delivery and dissemination, as well as into the challenges currently experienced: these pertain not only to the aftermath of COVID-19's impact on museum visitors, but also to the specific factors that determine the unique context of cultural institutions operating in a city like no other, Venice.

METHODS

It must be emphasized that this research is not about institutional policies: it delves instead into creative ideas that are employed as a means for an artistic critical reflection on the curatorial possibilities embedded in the selected case institutions. Nonetheless, such possibilities cannot be seen in isolation from the broader contextual factors that determine their feasibility and, crucially, their cultural relevance in the particular setting explored. This is specifically the case in the museums featured here, which, unlike institutions elsewhere that may have already explored radical rethinking and experimental strategies in museum practice, sit in a context that is invariably informed, and in many ways restricted, by the unique heritage of Venice and the countless logistical constraints that such heritage entails.

Furthermore, the positionality of the author must be acknowledged: as an artist and performance practitioner, my approach stems from outside of a museological context and, while aiming to provide ideas that may be relevant to this, it does not claim to directly advance its extensive theoretical discourse; rather, it aims to offer an outsider perspective that may in turn contribute creative stimuli for consideration in this field. Subjectivity is an important factor here: artistic practice denotes personal interpretation, shaped by the artist's own background and creative interests: importantly, this is not intended as a substitute for a scientific inquiry in the subject, but as a perspective that may complement this with further nuance.

In this sense, the methodology employed in my research denotes a combination of strategies. On the one hand, it involves the study of the selected sites from within MUVE, with a specific focus on museographic configurations, further informed by the aforementioned interviews and by ideas in contemporary museum, performance and participation practices. Such ideas derive from existent literature in museum and curatorial studies: this includes research in the use of multimodal communication strategies (Diamantopoulou & Christidou, 2016, 2017; Dicks, 2014; Eardley et al., 2016; Kress, 2010), in the museum as performative context (Bagnall, 2015; Casey, 2005; Diamantopoulou & Christidou, 2017; Eardley et al., 2016; Illeris, 2015; Malzacher, 2019; Mehzoud, 2019), and in participatory and inclusive strategies (Bishop, 2012; French, 2020; Høffding et al., 2020).

On the other hand, my research employs arts-based methods, in which, as observed by Knowles and Cole (2008), artistic creation can be seen in itself as a process of inquiry, but one where a final outcome is difficult to predict and where the distinction between method and finding can often be blurred; citing Borgdorff, artistic practice in this context is "not only the result of research, but also its methodological vehicle, when the research unfolds in and through the acts of creating and performing" (Borgdorff, 2010; p. 46). While arts-based research methods foreground, as previously mentioned, the subjectivity of the researcher, their application, as is the aim in this publication, adopts reflexivity as a means to interrogate the process of research, while consciously "locating knowledge claims within the subjective language of the first person, and situating researchers in their frame of research" (de Freitas, 2008; p. 470).

I refer to the creative aspects of my methodology within the context of a 'conceptual residency': like an artist residency, I benefit from a period of being surrounded by a different environment, enabling me to envision new ideas of creative practice. What makes this type of residency "conceptual" is the speculative nature of the artistic process used and the notion, drawn from conceptual art, that the idea itself, whether or not it is physically materialized in the space, is an artistic outcome in its own right. Perhaps, it is telling that this mode of work has developed in my practice particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, as a result of the necessity to create in the hypothetical and virtual domain, particularly in a context such as performance. It has now, though, become a key aspect of my approach, notwithstanding the possibility that the ideas that I explore may also evolve into physical presentations, such as the previously mentioned projects.

The creative exploration ideas mentioned here stem from the aforementioned principle of critical theatricality: in line with this, theatrical conventions (for instance ideas of *mise en scène*, dramaturgy, choreography and scenography) are often referenced as a way to frame the speculative artistic tasks envisioned, so that these may provide a different perspective on the existent performative relations within a museum and activate these through creative practice. Additionally, such creative exploration may also fluidly shift from artistic to curatorial concerns, reprising an evolution of the understanding of curating that is parallel with the shift in thinking about the museum's purpose toward a more experiential and participatory emphasis (French, 2020) and that has led to a progressive reframing of the act of curating in relation to that of creating (O'Neill, 2007).

My research explores the following questions:

- How may we creatively explore the museum's performativity, in conjunction with its museographic configuration?
- In the specific context of MUVE institutions, in what ways may circumstantial factors be considered in this process of exploration?
- What creative practice ideas may be generated as a result of a conceptual residency exploring the above?

A key idea in this discussion is the one of creatively exploring the performative characteristics already embedded in a museum. Acknowledging the complexity of perspectives that have referred to performativity across linguistics, social sciences and art practices, for the purpose of this discussion, performativity is understood here as the implicitly scripted codes of both verbal and non-verbal communication that inform the interdependent relations between users, exhibits, the museum environment and its institutional organization: these, for instance, may be understood as "restored behavior" (Schechner & Brady, 2013), informed by the "behavioral setting" related to the museum context (Falk & Dierking, 2010). Linking this with ideas of the "performative museum" (Casey, 2005; Griffiths, 2008; Michielon, 2013), this notion is here extended to emphasize the experiential and interactive ways in which a museum communicates (Cortez, 2019) and the multimodal agency of the user, as opposed to a passive spectatorial perception of the latter (Diamantopoulou & Christidou, 2017). In this perspective, notions of performance and performativity may at times blur, as museum visitors may themselves be understood as performers in their own agency within the museum context (Cortez, 2019). For clarity's sake, within this discussion, the term performance will be used to indicate the conscious, creative exploration and interpretation of performative relations, whether this may be achieved through live artistic media or not. Hence, in this context, the term performance is used to signify not only the inclusion of live public events in curatorial programming, but also the artistic exploration of the existent performative relations within a given museography: now more than ever, as we have reopened the museum doors in the aftermath of COVID-19, such exploration may be useful in order to reclaim the importance of the visitor's physical presence in the museum space.

VENICE, MUSEOGRAPHY AND THE PUBLIC

A term that is perhaps used more frequently in languages other than English, museography (*muséographie* in French; *museografia* in Italian) denotes an interesting resonance with performance composition. Its etymology links it with the idea of inscribing a museum space: orchestrating the choreography of the museum experience (Diamantopoulou & Christidou, 2016), whereby it is not simply the display of exhibits that is being composed, but, crucially, the movement of people across these and the performative relation between the two.

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has had an important impact on museographic strategies, whether directly embedded in these or indirectly noticeable. In my interviews with two members of staff at MUVE, both reported the visible effects of COVID-19 lockdowns on the way in which people are gradually rediscovering MUVE's museums. It should be said that such lockdowns followed further closures of MUVE institutions since the flood of Venice in November 2019, representing more than 2 years of almost no access to these. The inauguration of the Venice Biennale dell'Arte in April 2022 brought back an international audience to Venetian cultural institutions, with a return to pre-flood and pre-pandemic numbers of visitors only since May 2022. An interviewee, discussing the example of Palazzo Ducale, points at a change of behavior, with personal distances being more noticeable and groups more overtly spread out. They add, though, that this may present a positive effect, whereby a notoriously crowded museum such as Palazzo Ducale, an almost obligatory destination in tourist books of Venice, may now be more enjoyable in its use of space and in a slower pace of the public, suggesting a different and more thoughtful engagement with this.

What further complexifies the situation faced by Venice institutions is also linked to the current governance of the city, negotiating the need for limiting the overwhelming numbers of tourists in an increasingly fragile ecosystem, with the one for ensuring that Venice's cultural institutions may continue to be income-generating. These priorities have led to much debated policies including the proposal of daytrip fees, which some argue would contribute to a process of "Disneyfication" of Venice (Hanley, 2022), causing the city to progressively lose its identity as a "real" place to live, reducing its perception to a mere tourist destination. Additionally, the policy of closing Venice museums for such a long time has been contested as a way to deny residents the right to access these, in favor of seeing such institutions as only viable when the revenue-making international tourism is back.

The above factors contribute to an understanding of the public as a complex set of needs that is unique to Venice. One of my interviewees identifies this as threefold. Firstly, there are the local residents, those for whom organizations such as MUVE represent important access points for cultural development and community identity: residents typically benefit from either free or highly discounted entry to local museums. Secondly, there are the cultural visitors, both national and international, for instance those traveling to Venice to attend specific cultural events, such as the Venice Biennale: for those, Venice's cultural scene is perceived as dynamic, often radical and indeed internationally leading. Thirdly, there is the public generated by mass tourism, typically perceiving Venice in its romantic, timeless image, one made of *gondole* and selfies: a place of beauty, for sure, but ultimately seen as culturally static and somewhat conservative. The challenge for organizations like MUVE is that they need to speak to all these facets of the public at the same time, continually asserting their relevance and cultural importance, while careful of not alienating their multi-layered publics in the process.

In this sense, MUVE's wide array of museums is undoubtedly an asset, each developing a distinctive museal vision and related programmes. At one end of the spectrum is Palazzo Ducale as its most explicitly musealised institution, where its museography is carefully planned to manage the preservation of its historical building and collection, with large numbers of daily visits: as the most visited of Venice museums, its pre-pandemic numbers reached over 1.4 m yearly (Statista website). At the other end, venues like Forte Marghera

are used as temporary project spaces with a specific focus on contemporary art: at the time of visiting, I was able to attend there the launch of MUVE's exhibition *Artefici del Nostro Tempo*, dedicated to young artists in the fields of Video, Street Art, Glass Design, Glass Artworks, Photography, Comics and Illustration, Painting, Visual Poetry (MUVE Mestre website). Each time reimagining the fort spaces of this location as a new venue for innovative artistic practice, crucial in this activity is also the aim of putting mainland Venice, the district of Mestre, in the cultural map.

Between these two extremes, an equally wide range of approaches can be seen. In particular, historic residences turned museums ("*case-museo*"), such as Palazzo Fortuny or Ca' Rezzonico, show an attempt, according to an interviewee, to create a *continuum* between visitor and exhibit, where possible by eliminating the division between the two, in order for the public to experience the once lived-in dimension of these venues. This cannot always be the case, the same interviewee specifies, due to logistical necessities. Indeed, within Palazzo Fortuny, as a result of further measures taken in the Palazzo since COVID-19, there appears to have been a re-emergence of separations between visitors and exhibits, including more distancing tools, the current absence of performance in its programming, once a strong feature with dedicated seasons, including live interventions by the likes of Marina Abramovic and Ulay, and the separation of contemporary art interventions, now chiefly restricted to its basement floor.

On the other hand, in one of my interviews it was reported that Ca' Pesaro, particularly since its refurbishment in 2013, has seen a marked and deliberate effort toward removing barriers of access for its visitors: exhibitions involve little to no protective devices for the artworks and the large ground floor that greets the public with its colossal proportions is also used as an inclusive free co-working space. There have additionally been different examples of performance interventions at Ca' Pesaro, including live pieces in its outdoor courtyard by performance artists such as Romina de Novellis and Victoria Sin, in conjunction with MUVE Contemporaneo. According to my interviewee, these initiatives have been fundamental in both challenging public expectations about the gallery and encouraging a collective sense of ownership in its use.

Further interviews looked at the participatory activities of MUVE Education. Beyond entailing workshops with schools, its remit is described as a transversal operation, across MUVE institutions and across different publics: both national and international, with most activities being available in both Italian and English. A fundamental aspect in this strand is also represented by employing strategies to make exhibitions more accessible. As an example, tactile workshops are conducted at different MUVE sites, where visitors are encouraged to touch selected sculptures (where sculptural materials, such as bronze, make this possible), and to do so on the actual originals, rather than replicas. These workshops, initially conceived for the benefit of visitors with visual impairments, are also open to the broader public, as a way to encourage a more direct engagement with artworks and a sensorially diverse experience of the museums in question.

One interviewee argues that these initiatives are essential to reclaim the important relation between objects, stories and people. If one takes people out of the equation, in the sense of not actively engaging with them, we not only miss out on their participation, but also lose the stories that are created in their encounters with the exhibits. Another interviewee adds that this is to prevent museums from simply being "containers" that do not communicate with the rest of the city and its residents. The challenge, both agree, is in ensuring that this important mission, spanning education, participation and community outreach, is not simply seen as a separate add-on to the curatorial programming of MUVE museums, but that as fully integral to the latter: a challenge that both see as work-in-progress in the present situation at MUVE.

PERFORMING STRATEGIES

In the complexity of the factors illustrated above, a common feature across my interviews with MUVE staff was the highlighting of the importance of the museum as live experience, which simply cannot be replicated by digital formats, albeit augmented by these as evidenced particularly during the lockdown periods. The reopening of MUVE museums' doors in the aftermath of COVID-19 restrictions, while symbolically powerful as a gesture to re-affirm their relevance, may not be sufficient to reclaim the fundamental role of its museums as sites for social and cultural exchange. In this sense, creative and performing strategies that consciously explore and reflect upon the performativity of this context may be central in the re-activating of the museums in dialogical relation with the public. Accordingly, such exploration may be seen in line with a rethinking of the act of curating as performative. Drawing on Malzacher's observations:

> "performative curating" should not only acknowledge the social and other relational aspects of art, but that we should put these aspects at the center of our curatorial strategy. If we understand performativity not only as something that is intrinsic to the live arts, but also as a strategy to actively emphasize the very construction of its own reality, to show the process and not merely the product, to playfully acknowledge the artistic as well as the social, political, theoretical context, it becomes clear how this could become a powerful means for curating.
>
> (Malzacher, 2019; p. 223)

I concur with my interviewees that, according to this perspective, there needs to be a holistic approach to programming that sees collections, outreach activities and education as integral to one another and as concomitant. Indeed, in my previous writing (Scarso, 2021), I refer to this ethos in my work with Tate Exchange, where I saw in the nature of this strand of work exactly that potential of subverting the traditional hierarchies that see these as separate. It is unfortunate, and somewhat significant, that Tate Exchange has since been terminated in the aftermath of COVID-19, reverting to a default structure that is perceived as more "viable" – a step that has been criticized by many (Toonen, 2022).

The obvious place to start when thinking of performing opportunities in a museum is in the spaces that more fittingly allow for audiences to gather, sit and experience a performance face-on. Indeed, it was confirmed to me that the ground floor lobby of Ca' Pesaro, in its very large dimensions and open layout, is regularly used for performance events, such as theatrical readings, concerts, as well as symposia. During my stay, for instance, the lobby was used for the award ceremony of *Artefici del Nostro Tempo*, where a temporary auditorium was created, facing the main panel of MUVE representatives as well as invited special guests. While this use of space is logistically the most efficient and certainly the most conducive for events like award ceremonies, its default application for live events as part of a museum's programming also presents some limitations. The positioning of live events in spaces that are discrete from existent displays, while understandable, actively demarcates such events as an "add-on." Moreover, the typical configuration of these tends to create a hierarchy between the stage area and the audience. Such configuration, while sensible in terms of optimizing visibility, also invariably renders spectators' presence as passive, akin to the critique made historically to the proscenium stage concept, literally framing the performance, while positioning its viewers as implicit "fourth wall."

The attempt to confine performance to dedicated spaces in a museum was recently explored by Chamberlain (2019), looking at the case of the "Gray Box" planned (and eventually scrapped) at the Museum of Modern Art in NYC. The Gray Box was intended to provide a solution that would sit between the white cube configuration conventionally associated with

modern art exhibitions and the black box space typically associated with theatrical events. While presenting an interesting objective of validating art performance with its own purposely built environment, Chamberlain notes that this "compromise" would, inadvertently, relegate live interventions to settings in which they are no longer integrated in the museum's chief operations, responding to and, in many cases, rebelling against their constraints. "The ultimate risk of spaces like MoMA's Gray Box, of course, lies within the potential for performance to become sequestered and made to conform to rules of architectural intention (i.e., performance will no longer be interestingly out of place; it will be put in its place)" (Chamberlain, 2019; p. 226).

Of course, there is a key difference between performance art interventions, intended as artworks in their own right, and the presentation of live content within museum programming, especially when this is related to formal talks or indeed award ceremonies. However, I would still argue that, where possible, there is a case for disrupting such boundaries regardless, in order to promote a more inter-relational use of the museum space. Indeed, I noticed at Palazzo Fortuny that the current policy of confining temporary exhibitions and events to a dedicated floor invariably presents a limitation for the curatorial possibilities explored and crucially, for the integration of permanent collections and temporary activities. Perhaps the notion of a continuum previously mentioned a *casa-museo* (paradoxically, Palazzo Fortuny being a *casa-museo* in its own right) should be a principle to be applied and treasured as much as possible, irrespective of the museum's architectural origins.

Accordingly, I am particularly interested in spaces within a museum that could be described as transitional: locations that are used by the public to move from one area to another, that "spill" across different areas, providing an experience of liminality in their traversing and trespassing. It is these locations, while overtly functional in enabling and containing movement from A to B, that I see as opportunities to understand the "processional" dynamics of a museum (Casey, 2005), to reimagine such dynamics beyond logistical necessities, as a performance reframing of the visitor's dialogue with the space.

THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF MUSEOGRAPHY

Building on the study developed by Diamantopoulou and Christidou (2016), it is interesting to view the movement of museum users in choreographic terms. While their particular research investigates this process as a means to understand the museum experience in its multimodal dimensions, I applied this idea in the form of a creative interpretation of this, through which the proxemic and kinetic configurations of visitors are highlighted as artistic material, understood as choreographic gestures that are at once spontaneous, yet clearly informed by the architectural and cultural conventions of the museum building. Accordingly, I created a series of short video animations shot at Palazzo Ducale, the choice of venue motivated by the high numbers of visitors, in which the public was depicted in its use of transitional spaces. Here, people are seen walking, gathering, communicating with one another, observing and familiarizing themselves with the space around them. In post-production, they are further stylised and made unrecognizable through digital animation software: a process that was based on both an artistic choice, in the aesthetic re-imagining of the subject, as well as an ethical necessity, in preserving the individuals' anonymity and privacy.

These videos, entitled *Museographic Animations* (Figure 1), were some of my creative explorations as part of this conceptual residency, intended as artistic responses that can be experienced by the public, to be displayed at the same locations where the static camera was placed when filming; as such, offering museum users an artistic interpretation of their collective presence in the spaces depicted. What these videos capture, here presented as video stills,
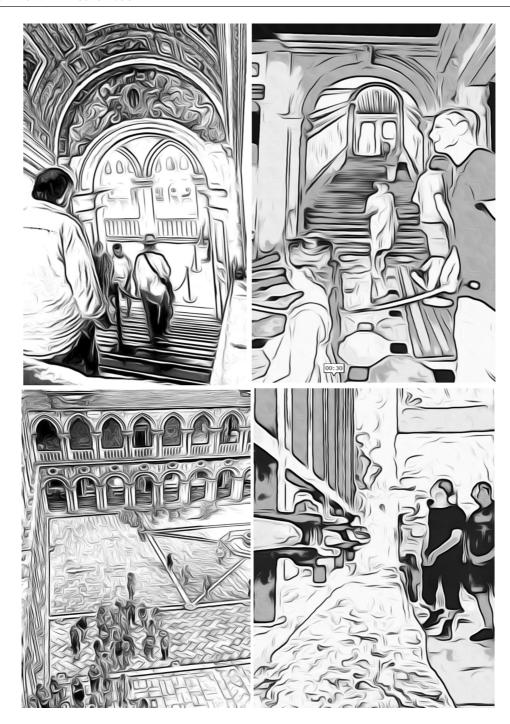
FIGURE 1 Stills from *Museographic Animations* at Palazzo Ducale. Copyright, Jacek Ludwig Scarso.

is a two-fold dynamic in the choreography of the public by the museographic configuration of the space. On the one hand, the public is "herded" across the venue by the constraints of architectural structures and additional signposting. This reprises Casey's observations on the processional nature of the modern museum:

> Like the displays of the early Wunderkammer, the modern museum's design structures a particular way of seeing and experiencing. The technical condition of the display is manifested through architectural procession – the museum space invites personal reflection as it propels the visitor through a tectonically defined path. This works 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; pp. 82–83)

On the other hand, though, the videos testify the marked character of each visitor: each one engaging in their individual "choreography of agency" (Diamantopoulou & Christidou, 2016), through which idiosyncratic actions reflect unique ways of moving in the space, in terms of pace, dynamics and movement intention, relating differently to the venue and to its exhibits. Choreographically, this results in a layered composition, that is at once predictable in relation to external constraints and playfully irregular, in the individual's improvisational response. An additional layer is given by my choice of music, further theatricalizing the resulting depiction. While this inevitably prescribes a mood to each depiction, hence a further semiotic frame in which to read the subject, it is also an effective tool to focus our attention onto the individuals' micro-narratives, as we speculate on the visitor's own story, leading them to this space and informing their journey within it.

As creative experiments, these videos are a stimulus for reflexive practice, enabling considerations on the context of the museum users as performers, while also acknowledging the positionality of the artist as performer and interpreter in their own right. In reprising the mechanics of existent observations of the behavioral choreography of museum audiences, such as the aforementioned study by Diamantopoulou and Christidou (2016, 2017), there is an important difference here: there is no attempt to disguise the presence of the observer here, but this is highlighted in the esthetic re-interpretation of the subject explored, achieved through production and post-production. In doing so, these works function as a response to and creative reflection on performative relations through playful reframing. The potential for these videos to perform as artworks in their own right contributes to highlighting the fact that the public, as much as the artworks on display, may provide a source for artistic inspiration, challenging the idea that the artistic stimuli afforded by the art museum lie solely in the objects that are explicitly displayed in this; rather, such stimuli are understood as expanding to include the dialogical relation between user and site.

SENSORIAL ACTIVATION IN THE MUSEUM

If museography can take place in multiple forms, its modes of communication, in the museums explored within this case study, have typically concentrated on the visual. Yet, MUVE institutions are not an exception in this regard. One only needs to think of standard signage around a museum building: instructions are given typically in written form and this to some extent contributes to a framing of the museum as an optical site first and foremost – a place in which to *see* and to *read*. Certainly, strategies of immersive and interactive engagement have challenged this tendency, particularly in recent years (Michielon, 2013). From the creation of immersive environments to the use of VR technology, many museums have seen a rapid shift in register and this to some extent has contributed to a pattern of division amongst institutions,

particularly in contexts such as Venice: ones that maintain a more traditional approach in relation to the idea of the museum as display and ones that instead have progressively concentrated on an experiential dimension, often via digital technology (ibid.).

As my focus in this article is on performance activation, my perspective here finds me in an ambivalent position: on the one hand, I champion an experiential dimension as conducive to a multimodal understanding of art and of the museum space; on the other, I am also mindful of the fact that many experiential strategies, particularly those integrating immersive formats, may inadvertently isolate the visitor, who, rather than being present in the social dimension of a museum, is instead transported into a separate world, one in which the presence in the museum is temporarily forgotten. Hence, an interesting question to ask might be: what are we trying to immerse the public into? That is, are we aiming to immerse the public into a deeper sensorial experience of the museum itself or into a different setting, in which the museum is ultimately redundant?

Considering this, I am interested in ways in which it is possible to emphasize kinaesthetic and sensorial diversity not only to activate a museum, but also to enable a multimodal appreciation (Diamantopoulou & Christidou, 2016, 2017; Dicks, 2014; Eardley et al., 2016) of how the museum operates, so that our focus is not distracted from this, but even more attuned to its processes of meaning making. In my conversation with one of my interviewees at Ca' Pesaro, we talked about the sensorial experiences that they associate with this venue: the bright and energized sound of visitors and staff moving and conversing in its spaces, the tactile experience of the materials of which the building is made, such as its decorative use of marble, and of course, the unmistakable scent of the Venetian lagoon. These factors, which inevitably differ from person to person, highlight the subjective point of view that a physical presence in a space may promote and that virtual tours of museums typically end up flattening. In this sense, we may draw important insight from educational and outreach programming, such as the aforementioned tactile workshops conducted by MUVE Education: originally developed to adapt museum visits to different experiential needs, such strategies may be used creatively, in an integrated curatorial effort, as advocated by my interviewees when discussing MUVE Education.

During my stay at MUVE's institutions, I explored how the architecture of staircases, such as those at Ca' Rezzonico and Ca' Pesaro, traditionally used to highlight the perception of importance of Venetian buildings upon entering these, may present opportunities for theatrical reimagining: in particular, developing a way to engage the visitor with a multimodal introduction to the venue not only in terms of its content, but also, and crucially, in relation to its functioning as museum. In a speculative design that I entitled *Prelude to the Backstage of the Museum* (Figure 2), I explored the large staircase that welcomes the public into Ca' Pesaro. Here, a scenographic structure made of disused construction materials from previous exhibitions at the venue would occupy the edges of the staircase. Such structure would integrate remnants from plans, archived materials and objects, as well as concealed sources of recorded sound, through which the voices from across the museum workforce, from curators to conservation and maintenance professionals, would be heard, sharing insights into the day-to-day workings of the museum building. Fragrance diffusers would accompany the visitor along the whole length of the staircase, highlighting key scents in the space: from the lagoon itself to the materials used for conservation of artifacts. The possibility to peruse this structure and engage in a tactile browsing of its elements is essential here, in order to foster, upon entering the venue, a dialogical relation with the user that challenges an optical-only display.

Reflecting on this idea in the process of drafting its design concept focused my attention on the importance to avoid a univocal introduction to the space, but rather to adopt a 'postdramatic' (Lehmann, 2006) tone of presentation. Lehmann's concept of postdramatic theater entails a tendency in contemporary live performance to question traditional principles

FIGURE 2 *Prelude to the Backstage of a Museum* at Ca' Pesaro. Copyright, Jacek Ludwig Scarso.

of dramatic development, by highlighting an aesthetic that is based on simultaneity, rather than logical progression, and on multi-perspectival delivery. Rather than attempting to stage a "true" representation of a dramatic text, postdramatic theater concerns itself with engaging the spectator in the construction of the performance, foregrounding its theatricality. Accordingly, the plurivocality of perspectives entailed by the recorded voices in my design, combined with the juxtaposition, multimodality and non-linearity in the aesthetic of the overall structure is intentional in disrupting the perception of the museum as definitive and self-evident communicator of cultural authenticity. In heightening the performance agency of the user right upon entering the space, reprising Casey's (2005) and Wood's (2014) studies, this integration of such performance devices highlights, in this way, the fact that the museum is not an ideologically neutral context: its meaning constantly evolves in relation to social factors at play and to its performative relation with its visitors.

REIMAGINING THE MUSEUM THROUGH PERFORMANCE SCORES

We can expand our exploration of museography by referencing the idea of performance scores. A performance score, within this context, may be defined as a "conceptual scaffolding" (In Terms of Performance website) to a performance intervention, instructing its content and composition, loosely or in a structured way as the case may be. The idea of performance score implies spectatorship and, if we refer back to my interviewee's observation that a museum consists of objects, stories and people, all equally important, then we can argue that the spectatorship *of* the public *by* the public is in itself something that we can actively extrapolate, rather than seeing as incidental: a factor that virtual tours during COVID-19 lockdowns have largely ignored. Of course, this can also be a contentious point: from a visitor's point of view, we may see the presence of the public as somewhat an obstacle to our experience, particularly in crowded spaces, and may indeed wish to experience a museum as if on our own. Yet, according to the premise that the physical and social dimensions of the museum are essential to its importance and continuing relevance, this process of 'exposing the public' (Bal, 2006) to the public itself may produce a creative stimulus to appreciate such dimensions even further.

Museums such as those visited at MUVE share a wealth of vantage points, from which the visitor may observe the public. These are intrinsic to the architecture of the buildings and in many cases were specifically designed to encourage an esthetic appreciation of the site: windows and balconies facing an internal courtyard, such as at Palazzo Ducale and Ca' Pesaro, are a perfect example of this. During my visit, I was particularly intrigued by the *enfilades* that can be found across the historic palazzos of the museums: formally aligned doors across a suite of rooms along a singular axis. *Enfilades* provide a perspectival experience that, owing to my theater background, I see as akin to the tradition in classical theater design (from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries in particular) of heightening stage depth and using wings to disguise performers off-stage. In my speculative concept entitled *Performance Score for Enfilade* (Figure 3), I draw on this idea. In a chosen location, depicted below at Ca' Rezzonico, I would invite the public to sit at the end of an *enfilade*, taking time observing such features, with visitors moving across doors in different directions, along depth and width. A set of simple instructions would define this score:

- Position yourself at one end of an *enfilade* in a museum.
- Consider the aligned doors as part of a theatrical scene: the spaces visible as the performance area and the ones to the sides as the stage wings.
- Observe the public crossing the space as if characters of the scene.
- Focus on the ways in which people respond to the space and the objects therein.
- Imagine the stories that each character brings to the venue and how they may relate to one another, considering what may have just happened, or what may be about to happen, behind the "wings."
- With headphones, listen to a piece of music of your choice, as soundtrack to the performance.
- Using that same piece of music as your personal soundtrack, now spend the duration of this, taking on aspects of the performance you have seen, re-enacting these through your own body language. Take time to notice how this may affect your experience, in relation to the space and to others.

The notion of performance score is here intentionally ambiguous: the concept deliberately blurs the positionality of the users as both performers and spectators – reading the observed public's actions across an *enfilade*, as well as their own, "as performance" (Schechner & Brady, 2013). While in previous performance scores of mine (*In Limbo*, 2018; *The Pecking Order*, 2019; *Shrine of the Goat*, 2022), the scoring directly defines and demarcates the professional performers from the existent audience within a museum or gallery, here I developed the idea in a participatory form.
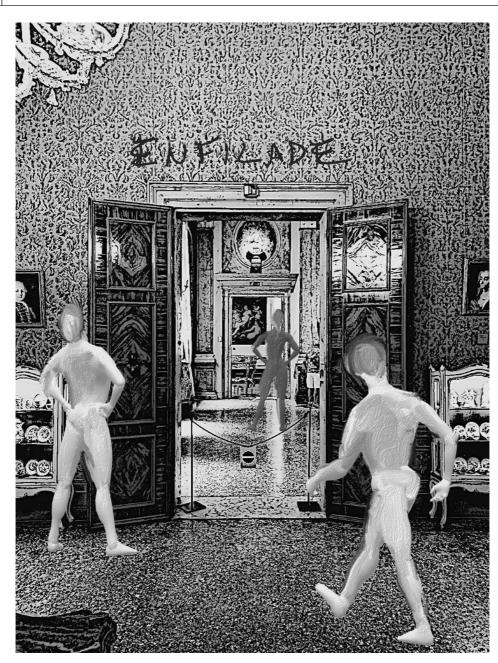
FIGURE 3 *Performance Score for Enfilade* at Ca' Rezzonico. Copyright Jacek Ludwig Scarso 2022. Copyright, Jacek Ludwig Scarso.

The instructions, open as they are, draw the participant's focus on the fact that there are multiple instances of performance scoring, implicit or explicit, taking place simultaneously. While they may not be able to predict the observed public's actions, such actions are inherently scored in the existent performative codes given by the behavioral setting (Falk & Dierking, 2010). In turn, the theatrical reading of the *enfilade* as *mise en scène* frames the perception of the action happening as a score with its own evolving composition. Lastly, the instructions themselves enable the user to become enactor of the performance, directly scoring this.

Such simultaneity, reprising once more that of postdramatic theater, thus informs a creative reflection on the performing nature of the museum experience, enabling the appreciation of the micronarratives taking place at any one time, as opposed to a single narrative development, deriving from continually evolving relationships between people, objects and space.

CONCLUSIONS

Much has been said about the contradictory implications of thinking of a museum as an experiential context: that the museum may be increasingly reduced to a cultural manifestation of the *experience economy*, trivializing and commodifying its programming in an effort to "culturtain" or "edutain" the public (Casey, 2005; Mandelli, 2022; Smith & Fowle, 2012). In this discussion, I have aimed to explore the experiential activation of the museums featured, while mindful of this potential risk; thus, looking at how such activation may be promoted through creative performance concepts from within, rather than merely as a spectacular add-on to, an existent museography. Building on the notion of critical theatricality, I have employed theater and art performance conventions to interrogate and reflect upon the existent performative relations of the museum venues referred to. As a result, each artistic response included here draws on such conventions to playfully yet critically explore the relationship between visitors, and between visitors and space.

The creative concepts proposed, in their imagined and speculative nature, are not so much intended to function as innovations in their own right, referencing, as they do, existent ideas of museum practice. Rather, they should be seen as artistic considerations and critical reflections brought together by an interest in the physical experience of the museum and the performance affordances that this entails. In doing so, these creative speculations, while functioning as conceptual artworks in themselves, are proposed also as thought experiments to develop possible crossovers between artistic, curatorial and participatory strategies. Such crossovers may in turn promote further multimodal opportunities for the public and interdisciplinary dialogues across departments in the institutions observed.

Venice has been a very significant context here: in MUVE, I found a unique set of challenges and potentials in observing the role of the public as a complex entity, returning to museums that were closed for longer than in most cities, in a unique environment that just cannot be replicated elsewhere. Like Venice itself, its museums are far more than tourist destinations and it is vital that they continue to be understood as dynamic venues, rather than magnificent, but static containers. The idea of "living museums" (Casey, 2005) is, in the tentative aftermath of COVID-19, more relevant than ever. I would like to suggest that the interventions and conceptual reframings proposed here can reprise such concept, highlighting two connotations within the phrase: the *live* and the *lived* – the *live*, in the physical presence of the visitor in the museum space, which is central to reclaiming the museum's vital role following years of lockdown; the *lived*, in the subjective, sensorial experience of the museum, which, while augmented by online technology and virtual tours, simply cannot be replaced by these. Activating the museum in performing terms is to be consciously aware of and creatively playful with these two connotations simultaneously.

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