

# Participatory museum experiences and performative practices in museum education

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Through the stage to the museum  
Performing arts in museums : practices, audiences, "cultural mediation"  
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## ABSTRACT

Is it possible to challenge the hegemony of 'vision' while experiencing art in a museum, thus pursuing a more dynamic sensorial experience?

What does it mean to widen one's perception to ensure a richer, more rounded experience?

How can we ensure the visitor transforms into an active protagonist of the experience?

Within this context, an approach that puts the body firmly at the centre is key to recovering 'feeling' in addition to 'thinking': perception in addition to rationalisation.

This form of 'embodiment' is the premise of my educational projects.

I research and design participatory museum experiences: starting with the body and integrating movement into the experience, I construct 'spaces' of knowledge.

### **corps à corps**

The first world war, whose centenary was commemorated in 2014, is also remembered by MART (Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Trento and Rovereto, Italy) with the exhibition "The war which is coming is not the first one – Great war 1914-2014" (04 Oct. 2014 / 20 Sep. 2015).

Curated by experts in contemporary Art and history, the exhibition aims to be more than simply a restaging and retelling of the actual historical event, and places itself as a more thorough investigation which passes through the XX century and arrives to today's confrontations.

How can a participative and collective experience answer the general questions raised by experiencing this exhibition?

The "corps à corps" project is a performative guided tour that intends to scale back conflict to an inter-individual dimension, since conflict and therefore clash between two

human beings is already the archetype of war.

The body itself – with its own tensions and physical limitations – becomes a space, a screen where contradictions, conflict, needs and themes of our times are projected.

The first world war (the Great war) is the starting point to reflect on the actuality of the conflict – still actual and at the centre of today's debate – but it is also and foremost an opportunity to build a space for 'dialogue' against any conflict or war.

Participants, with the aid of a facilitator-guide, go through the various rooms of the exhibition and engage in a variety of actions derived from techniques and games belonging to Augusto Boal's Image Theatre (Theatre of the Oppressed).

Image Theatre consists in the physical representation of thoughts and ideas which occurs through corporeal representations, a tableau of frozen poses made with the participants's bodies.

Starting as a viewer and ending as a protagonist, the participants have the opportunity to both act and observe, and engage in self-empowering processes of dialogue that help foster critical thinking.

The experience impacts upon the body, the mind, and also the emotions'. Participants engage in a collective performance that ends in a general reflection on the conflict and puts forward the common need to find new ways to express.

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Presidency : Anne Krebs, Service des Publics, musée du Louvre<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Information about the Conference : <http://www.univ-paris3.fr/le-musee-par-la-scene-le-spectacle-vivant-au-musee-pratiques-publics-mediations--357285.kjsp>

I'm Marco Peri, art historian, researcher, museum educator. I work in mediation with the public and for the public in the museum to bring people closer to the languages of contemporary art.

My aim is to create 'spaces' of knowledge of art, starting from the body and the movement. (movement of the mind, movement of the body, movement of the emotions).

The focus of my research is to explore the history of education in art museums, through creating connections between contemporary artistic practices, art history and museum education.

The Contemporary Museum is the privileged area of my activities. It is a border area between art and education, although for me the two things are not entirely distinct from one another, in fact my motto is "education through art", using art as an educational tool.

I am going to tell about some mediation projects realised in the contemporary art museum, "experiences of participation to test new ways of living the museum". 'Participation' means above all to move the focus from the objects to the subjects, from the simple vision of art to the experience of art.

'Participatory experience in the museum' to me it means offering the public an active and effective role in the construction of meanings as opposed to the traditional 'guided tour' in which adopt the role of passive spectator. The contemplative dimension is exceeded in favour of a deeper knowledge (embodied), participation allows the awareness to emerge. The experience of art becomes a space for individual and social transformation, and not just mere transmission of knowledge.

I want to offer the public a positive museum experience overall. I consider the

contemporary museum a relational space so the visit should be an experience of joy and beauty, of wonder and knowledge, of discovery and revelation. Let me quote the artist Alberto Giacometti: *"I love art but life interests me most"*.

In my proposals of mediation I constantly try to encourage public participation, blurring the boundaries between passive and active spectators. Generally the performative aspect has a specific importance in the activities that I propose to the public, precisely because I work with the participants' entire body, trying to stimulate a sensorial involvement bringing in more senses: vision, touch, hearing, smell and especially 'Kinaesthetic sense' and spatial sensitivity<sup>2</sup>.

The movement of the body is explored in every detail of its language, it is the tool that in the group work approaches to the knowledge of new communication options, through contact with the other which becomes essential in the act of communication. Art as "relational experience". Fostering the relation in all the directions.

The group dimension is the one I prefer, therefore my proposal of mediation encourages participation as a collective experience, almost 'ritual', with the intention of clearing social, generational, cultural boundaries.

I'm interested in renewing in the participants the ability to imagine different ways of living the museum:

- to overcome the contemplative dimension that usually prevails in the experience of the museum.
- to break the "code of behavior" in the museum (changing of pace, changing of perspective, continuous reversals and escapes from the exhibitiv preordained path, searching for hypertext and nonlinear pathways where one can move freely between

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<sup>2</sup> The proprioceptive ability is a particular sensitivity, thanks to which the organism has the perception of self in relation to the outside world.

different centers of interest) .

"**Art + Education**" is the name of my research for new educational practices for museum education. As examples of this approach I developed paths of Parkour \* (*Art du déplacement*) inside the museum<sup>3</sup>. With the guidance of a professional performer, the audience experienced the '*Art du déplacement*' as a way to visit the exhibition halls.

Frequent changes of pace and a continuous search for other points of view offer new ways of perceiving oneself and the exhibition space and allow visitors to look with new eyes at all that the contemporary museum contains: architecture, design, art, relationships.

I prepared and conducted '**aesthetic gymnastics**' workshops in which I experienced performative actions and forms of corporeal relationship between the artworks and the public. The result of these actions led to the creation of unique, unaware and unrepeatable performances.

On the same subject the '**chamber of wonders**' (**Wunderkammer**) is a workshop in which I involve children from the age of 5 years old with their parents in the history of art. I let them discover, play, dance, mime, impersonate and act the characters and the scenes of ancient and modern paintings and sculptures. The realisation of *Tableaux vivants*, shaping body sculptures, sensory explorations are some of the elements of this project. The young participants perform an interactive experience of testing the narrative and emotional potential of the works of art. While parents discover a space of freedom where they learn and find their physicality stimulating a new awareness of their own creative potential.

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<sup>3</sup> Parkour is a performative discipline to move into the urban space.

I designed experiences inspired by the concept of "*Situationist Dérive*" or "*Détournement*" where I invited the public to choose how to live the experience in the museum: "getting lost", "wandering", "diving" into a *debordian* exploration of voluntary loss of orientation, a playful, aimless wandering without purpose. The aim of this loss of orientation, is to accustom the public to an openness towards new, unexpected and perhaps alienating aspects of reality in the museum, to bring back later the experience in everyday life.

In the project "**Mapping: reinventing museum tour**", I invited students from 14 to 17 years old, to redesign the itinerary of the exhibition, creating an imaginary map of the halls of the museum to find out according to their sensitivity and their interest, the displayed artworks using their own point of view. An attempt which constitutes an act of liberation from the devices of museums perceived as rigid and authoritarian. Experimenting with new maps and new pathways became the occasion for a transformation, a new awareness of the functions of art.

## **CORPS À CORPS**

Now I am going to recount a recent experience (October 2014) developed for MART Museum.

The project "**corps à corps**" is part of a bigger project that I called "*I understand with the body*" a participatory experience to connect ideals and action, the rational dimension with the emotional one.

**Context:** The Museum is measured against the most difficult, tormented and thorny of the topics.

The exhibition 'Great War' is a complex project, on the one hand the historic celebration of the centenary of the First World War with documents and historical relics, on the other art with an evocation of the conflict in all its most pressing and actual implications.

At the centre there are many themes such as confrontation, conflict, destruction, death. The challenge is how to engage visitors to respond in a participatory and collective way to the questions generated by the visit to this exhibition?

The answer is not to be content with reflecting on the past, but to search, create, invent models of action and solutions to prepare the future.

Reassess the centrality of the conflict since it is omnipresent and it must be addressed positively.

“Corps à corps” is a museum experience of participation, a workshop where the body is a protagonist, a relationship between people, objects and thoughts.

The result is a performance that does not seek spectators but only active participants.

I have developed and promoted a series of performative actions for visitors, both adults and children, to experience the dynamics of confrontation and non-verbal dialogue, physical tensions, balance and instability in the relationship with oneself and with others. The awareness that comes through the experience of the body, *“embodied cognition”* is capable of going deep into the consciousness, and of speaking to a condition in the individual which goes beyond rationality.

The principle of this project is that "the whole body thinks". There is no separation between the body and the mind. Each one of us is a whole made by body, mind, emotions.

To remember that "a movement of a body is a thought" means recognising the polysemous aspect of language, taking care of the subject as a whole and open endless creative possibilities of communication..

Every moment of this process is an integral part of a whole; it is not just about simple preparatory exercises for something that will come later, but the beginning of a process developed in progressive and continuous steps.

My role was to stimulate relationships, encouraging participation, adapting the contents to the degree of interest and participation.

Visitors come to the museum with very different attitudes, emotions, motivations, personal experiences expectations and knowledge.

Therefore it is necessary to carefully prepare the start of the path by inviting participants to get fully involved listening to themselves and to the environment, to live the group experience in the museum in a whole new dimension.

A sort of confidence pact in which you choose to be led not only in the path of a guided tour, but above all in an exploration of self and of relationships with the other.

[**Theatre of the Oppressed:** The method and the actions that I have proposed to the public are inspired by the Theatre of the Oppressed (a form of unconventional theater, with a strong political and educational value experienced by Augusto Boal since the 60s). It 's a theater that keeps the audience active, to explore, to stage, to analyse and transform reality.' A form of participatory theatre to address the real problems with the collective intelligence.]

The process of physical involvement of the participants in the "corps à corps" performance takes place very gradually.

Through a "*games* and exercises" training, inspired by the techniques of awareness and physical mechanisation developed by Augusto Boal, I bring into play the dynamics of relationship with your body to dissolve the bodily and perceptive rigidity.

In this path all attention is given to the people and the artworks while the suggestions of the objects exposed in the museum lie in the background.

However the halls of museum are never neutral, participants are at the centre of attention but every action of the path is constantly seeking a connection with the subjects recalled by the exhibition.

Gradually, the involvement of the protagonists' bodies increases and I can open wider

spaces of relationships until reaching physical contact between them, the encounter or confrontation between them, intended as physical tension between the two.

The body becomes an instrument of connection and communication in the group work, an intense confrontation through the body.

**The performance:** the path ends with a collective action, a unique and unrepeatable performance that participants think about the drama of the conflict, researching and developing collectively critical solutions to overcome it positively.

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Art Historian, with over 10 years' experience as an independent Museum and Art Education consultant. The focus of my research is to explore the history of education in art museums and examine the relationships between art-making practices, art history, and museum pedagogy. I have a Master in art education focusing my research on the relationship between art, education and audience engagement.

I research and design participatory museum experiences: starting with the body and integrating movement into the experience, I construct 'spaces' of knowledge. I also design and develop interdisciplinary courses to link 'art' with other forms of knowledge. In this context, I am responsible for the development of educational programs, cultural projects and the creation of educational materials for museums, teachers, schools and other educational institutions.

I have worked for the Venice Biennale educational programs and for the MAN Museum of Art Nuoro. Currently I work for Tuttestorie Festival of Children's Books (Cagliari), and I collaborate with the education department of MART, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Trento and Rovereto.

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