

A participatory approach to the conservation of performance-based art

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Introduction

In recent years museums are increasingly exhibiting and acquiring performance-based art. These works tend to be difficult to collect and preserve due to their intangible and transitory nature. Many performance-based works also require degrees of interaction or participation. These attributes challenge museums as they attempt to find ways to display and preserve the works in their collection. Typically the conservation of performance-based art revolves around the collection and display of material remains from a past performance. These can include props or artefacts used during the performance or else visual documentation in the form of a video or photograph of the live event.



Interactive



Ephemeral



Interdisciplinary



Intangible

Public engagement re-evaluated

Throughout the 21st century museums have been seen to shift towards an emphasis on visitor engagement and participation.² Interactive experiences in particular are becoming ever more commonplace. However, this is not a reaction to the recognised need to incorporate audience experiences but rather the focus is on institutions fulfilling their social responsibility.³

Fig. 1 demonstrates a characteristic model depicting the benefits of public engagement in the form of participatory projects for museums.⁴ As is clear from the depiction, the trend amongst museums is to align themselves with ideals associated with the social value of public engagement, such as transparency, communication and accessibility.

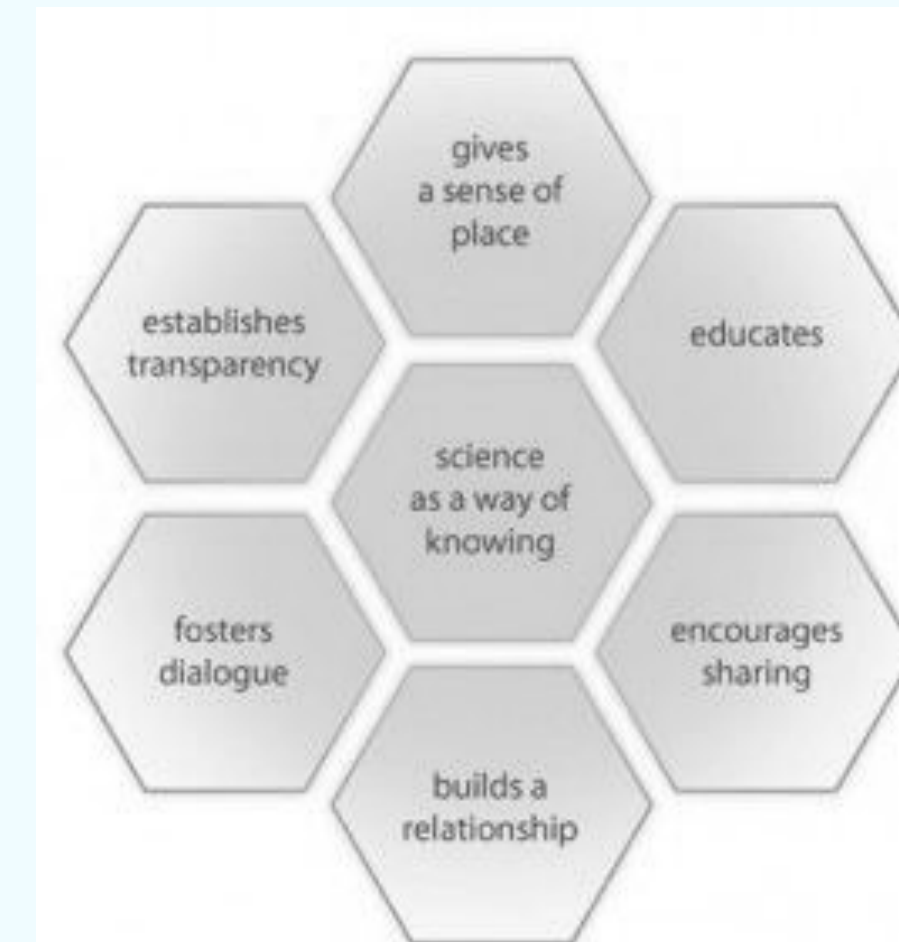


Fig. 1 Courtesy of Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum*

As it stands the relationship between visitor and museum seems to be distinctly one-sided. This study aims to reframe the process of public participation by promoting a mutually beneficial relationship in which the conservation potential of those outside the established profession is acknowledged.

Towards a more reciprocal relationship

In order to explore the potential of a conservation approach that acknowledges the substantial role of the audience in production and preservation, the research draws on precedents from a variety of fields, as the adjacent figure shows:

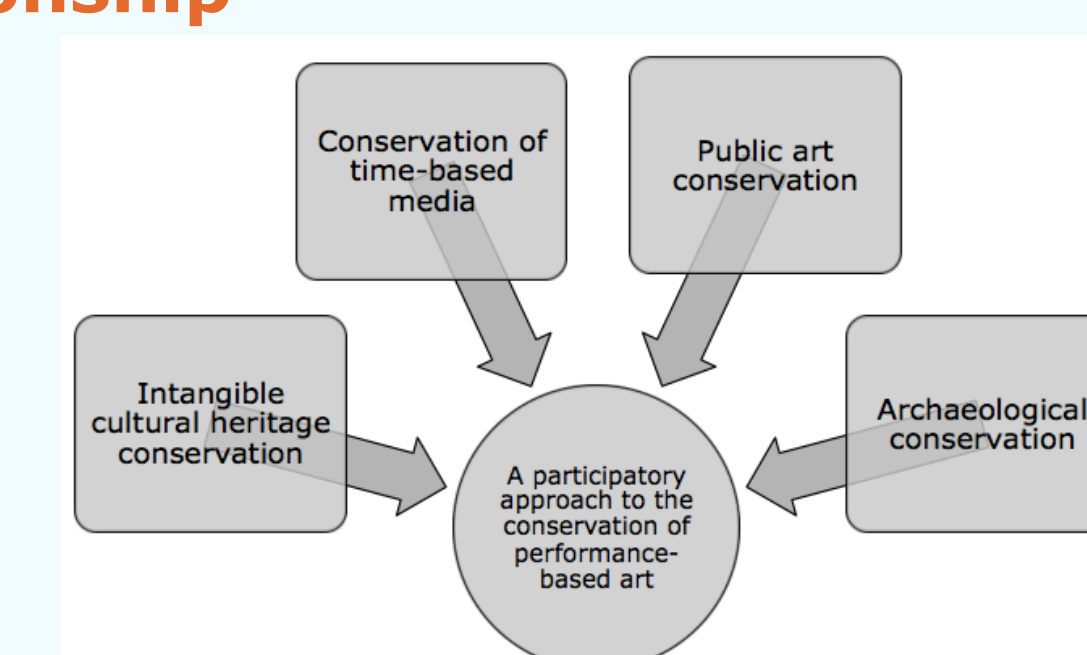


Fig. 2: Influential models of collaborative conservation

Conclusion

The role of audiences, a vital component of performance-based art, has been largely overlooked with regard to the re-execution and preservation of such works. Nevertheless, the concept of public engagement and participation looms large in museum rhetoric. This poster has tried to communicate the necessity of exploring the potential for audience engagement in documentation and conservation activities and creating a more balanced form of engagement in the museum.

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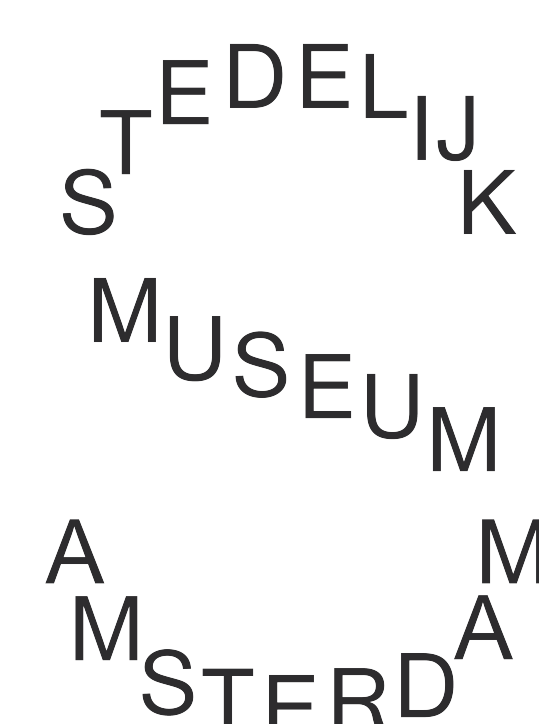
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” But what about the experience?

The above method of conservation has received criticism for the emphasis it places upon the material as opposed to the experiential. Such criticism focuses on:

- The exclusion of the audience from the tradition of performance art documentation and;¹
- The intention of documentation: often the purpose of recording a work by film or camera is to make the work accessible to a wider audience, rather than as an act of preservation



References

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- ² Anderson, G. (2004). *Reinventing the Museum. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*. Oxford: AltaMira Press.
- ³ Dodd, J. and Sandell, R. (Eds.). (2001). *Including Museums. Perspectives on museums, galleries and social inclusion*. Leicester: Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, University of Leicester.
- ⁴ Simon, N. (2010). *The Participatory Museum*. Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0.

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