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# Exhibition curation as practice-as-research performance historiography: an incomplete story of audience experience

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## ABSTRACT

Taking an interdisciplinary approach to information-led exhibitions focused on performance can be considered practice-as-research historiography if curation is engaged with as praxis. Approaching exhibition curation as research praxis is a knowledge-making process, reconfiguring exhibitions as far more than a 'pathway to impact' designed at securing a grant. In the curation of two linked exhibitions on nineteenth-century popular entertainments at the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum and University of Bristol Theatre Collection, which were stunted due to COVID-19, I developed an argument for the shared ground of exhibitions and performance. If archival objects can perform, the exhibition space itself is a stage through which they communicate embodied meanings to audiences. I explore how exhibition curation generates different epistemologies to written research by putting museum studies, performance history, audience studies and performance practice-as-research in conversation. I demonstrate how museum studies could benefit from performance in developing epistemological arguments, and how performance studies can more significantly privilege the audience in the knowledge production process. I conclude my findings by discussing how planned activities and lessons learnt from these exhibitions could provide a blueprint for practitioners interested in using the exhibition form and format to conduct historically relational practice-research inquiries in conversation with audiences.

## KEYWORDS

Historiography; exhibitions; audience research; practice-as-research; nineteenth-century performance

This article is the story of a halted and stuttered process. It is a means of exploring what did and what could/should/would have been before the exhibitions on nineteenth-century entertainments that I curated were impacted by the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic. It is the story of practice-knowledge, but also of possibility and potential frozen in mid-flow. It is about what happens when you put the fields of performance, museum and audience studies in conversation via a particular type of exhibition curation: creative information-led historiographic curation. The purpose of this type of exhibition is to educate audiences about an historic event or topic. Rather than being an add-on to a research project aimed at ticking a funder requirement, my analytical account of curating two exhibitions on nineteenth-century entertainments demonstrates how the public engagement activity of exhibition curation can generate new knowledge if designed and engaged with as practice-as-research.

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There are strong similarities between exhibitions as they are characterised in museum studies as research ‘knowledge-in-the-making’ (Bjerregaard 2020b, 4; original emphasis) and practice-as-research in performance studies as ‘doing-thinking’ (Nelson 2013), because both physically communicate with audiences by relationally reconfiguring space. Despite Robin Nelson listing exhibition curation as a type of practice-as-research in his influential book, little has been written on historiographic exhibition curation within performance studies<sup>1</sup> – the implication in his reference is to visual arts exhibitions, rather than those that are information led (Nelson 2013, 9). In museum studies, the concept of exhibitions as research is grounded in practice and has recently been given explicit articulation through Peter Bjerregaard's edited collection: *Exhibitions as Research: Experimental Methods in Museums*. Working in this space between performance studies and museum studies using historiography reveals how using material exhibition praxis can provide ways of knowing history that are different to archival practices aimed at a textual publication. Discounting exhibition curation as no more than public engagement risks ignoring the different potential insights that curatorial practice exposes. I start this article by setting the scene for my curatorial inquiry through four self-reflexive accounts of archival practice, demonstrating how responding to objects prompted a curatorial approach that incorporated digital experiences in order to connect visitors to nineteenth-century entertainments. Considering these moments as part of a wider curatorial process, I establish the ways of knowing that exhibitions as performance practice-as-research provides, particularly in reference to museum, performance and audience studies. In the final section, I focus back more closely on my own process and the digital and analogue means by which audiences could be more valued as thinkers if audience studies methodologies are fully embraced by curators and scholars. Exhibition curation offers an ideal historiographic methodology for those interested in audiences; it can be used to focus curatorial attention on historic audience experience by inviting today's audiences to historically reimagine the past by connecting it to their own lived experiences. If scholars and curators embrace audience research methodologies, exhibition curation has the potential to be a tool for thinking in conversation with audiences, providing researchers investigating the multiplicity of audience responses methods to look beyond their singular position. I am arguing that approaching exhibitions as interdisciplinary performance practice-as-research inquiries can be a form of crowd-sourced relational historiography that uses conversations with contemporary audiences to explore what their encounters might reveal about historic audience experience.

### **Moments of scene setting praxis**

In April 2020, I was due to curate the first of two linked exhibitions using the rich archival sources on nineteenth-century entertainments at the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum (Bill Douglas) and University of Bristol Theatre Collection (Theatre Collection). These two exhibitions were a key component of my work on the AHRC Theatre and Visual Culture in the Long Nineteenth Century project, which brought together researchers at the University of Warwick (Jim Davis and Patricia Smyth) and University of Exeter (Kate Newey and myself) to consider theatre as an integrated part of visual culture. Although, ostensibly, a ‘pathway to impact’ outlined in our original AHRC proposal, for me the

exhibitions were always much more than this, due to my prior experience and academic identity. In 2011, during my MA in Performance Research, I undertook a placement with the Theatre Collection, assisting artist Clare Thornton in curating a linked exhibition and performance.<sup>2</sup> In taking on the role of exhibition co-curator, I approached it as a means to explore creative practice generally and deepen my understanding of archival theory. Thornton's practice in *Unfurl* focused on examining, responding to, and displaying the visual and tactile potential of Deleuze's (2006). In particular, she investigated The Fold at a physical and metaphysical level through relationships of tension and release as well as its ability to obscure and reveal. The exhibition provided Thornton and I with a rare opportunity to explore and display items from the recently acquired Mander & Mitchenson Collection, prior to archivists cataloguing this internationally significant resource.

The combination of this creative visual focus and my background in circus, site-specific and street performance continues to inform my approach to exhibition curation. I arrange compositions according to the layered ways I perceive audiences as interacting with exhibitions. Displays should, I believe, work at both the sweepingly visual and the more detail-driven level, where people choose to engage with individual objects placed within the unifying concept.<sup>3</sup> My research is driven by the desire to explore embodied audience responses – to consider what it means to perceive an experience through your body as well as your mind. For this reason, these two linked nineteenth-century exhibitions offered another layer because digital encounters afforded our visitors the opportunity to explore nineteenth-century visuality through analogous experiences. However, the information-led nature of our exhibitions enforced a different visual focus than my work with Thornton. *Unfurl's* exploration of a concept allowed us to juxtapose eclectic items in surprising compositions, such as a colour transparency of Loïe Fuller displayed so that it obscured and revealed the raised black and white text of an 1882 pamphlet. *Unfurl's* visual rationale freed Thornton and I from the need to tell a conventionally coherent narrative, and it informed my layered approach to future exhibitions.

By the time the UK's first COVID-19 lockdown hit in March 2020, I had undertaken the bulk of practical preparatory work and we started a process of repeatedly rearranging dates based on when we hoped people could safely occupy space together. In Spring 2021, we concluded that the exhibitions needed to be scaled back because changing safety restrictions made access to archives difficult and uncertain for us, and a barrier to audiences congregating in exhibition spaces. Instead, larger audiences could be more reliably reached using digital methods that included blog posts, videos and podcasts.<sup>4</sup> What the planning stage and smaller installed displays reveal is a blueprint for considering how exhibition curation practice-as-research can generate new knowledge for researchers in conversation with exhibition audiences.

*Moment 1: August 2018. It is two months before the project officially starts. Our project team are presenting at the British Association of Victorian Studies Conference in Exeter. Jim, Pat and I take a break from panels to consult materials at the Bill Douglas. Pat has requested an Illustrated London News printed panorama of London (Figure 1/'London in 1842' Printed Panorama, Bill Douglas Cinema Museum EXBD 70576, nd.). What arrives is a depiction of London from the Duke of York's column on the Mall. Mounted on two separate pieces of card, it slots together to create an image that is roughly A0 in size and takes up most of two of the desks in the reading room. As Pat and Jim look over it, I find*

*myself observing them: watching as they map journeys, asking each other how to get between different London sites/sights. This experience resonates and I remember similarly mediated journeys using Google StreetView. I find myself comparing current and past experiences relationally, considering what endures and what is historically different. The panorama looks down from the fixed point of the Duke of York's column, whilst StreetView allows you to explore from the ground, but both ask you to look again at your world with and through new technologies.*



**Figure 1.** 'London in 1842' printed panorama, *Illustrated London News*, Bill Douglas Cinema Museum EXBD 70576. Start your own Google StreetView journey from the same location: [https://www.google.com/maps/@51.5063857,-0.1316681,3a,75y,139.05h,90t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1s2c14EkeQblvmObmgxmnoGA!2e0!6shttps:%2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3D2c14EkeQblvmObmgxmnoGA%26cb\\_client%3Dmaps\\_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D151.6289%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i13312!8i6656](https://www.google.com/maps/@51.5063857,-0.1316681,3a,75y,139.05h,90t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1s2c14EkeQblvmObmgxmnoGA!2e0!6shttps:%2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3D2c14EkeQblvmObmgxmnoGA%26cb_client%3Dmaps_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D151.6289%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i13312!8i6656) [Accessed 18 October 2021].

In this moment, a series of our project inquiries came sharply into focus through the practice of interacting with archives. It offered me a starting point to navigate the vast collections whose holdings I was tasked with unifying through curatorial display. This was kinetic spectatorship that suggested a shift in ways of seeing the world that were offered through an innovation in print technology and the cheaper availability of paper.<sup>5</sup> Not only that, but this 'panorama' image was a remediated visual trope of precisely the kind we sought to investigate. Panoramas crossed mode and media from hand panorama

to the large circular rotunda panorama that were housed in large buildings and enveloped audiences in 360 degrees of life-size immersive paintings of familiar and far-off places, whilst this spatial ‘panoramic’ trope repeats frequently in other media such as magic lantern slides. This emphasis on exploring active spectatorship immediately offered possibilities to play with twenty-first-century technologies to explore the implications of nineteenth-century innovation. If we were to communicate something meaningful to our exhibition audiences, then the opportunity to invite them to rethink and relook through their own experiences offered a tantalising possibility. Our own twenty-first-century innovation that recently incorporated QR code readers into smartphone camera apps provided the means by which digital content could be accessed quickly from cards within display cases. Here was an opportunity to explore ideas through the space, form and varied media afforded by an exhibition. This, and three further moments, detailed below, led my approach to curating the Theatre Collection exhibition, which informed how I interacted with the Collection over the next 18 months.

*Moment 2: We’re having a team study day in Spring 2019 at the Theatre Collection. I’ve called up the Wilhelm costume designs (Wilhelm, circa late 1800s a. eg Figure 2). Kate remarks on the artistry in these popular images and we begin to discuss how the art and craftsmanship in popular theatre is often forgotten in favour of respected nineteenth century artists such as Alma-Tadema, some of whose archaeologically detailed designs we looked at on a previous visit (Alma-Tadema 1893) . . .*



**Figure 2.** Heather Bell (BTC40/4/4) & Poppy (BTC40/4/2) Wilhelm Costume Designs in *The Art of Innovation* University of Bristol Theatre Collection exhibition.

*Moment 3: It's towards the end of a day in early 2020 and I'm about to pack up. Just as I go to leave, Jo Elsworth (the Theatre Collection's Director) leads me into the stacks and we open up the black rectangular box containing the silver Wilhelm set box (Wilhelm, 1800s b.). That day I've been examining again the beautiful Wilhelm costume sketches filled with colour and detail. Knowing our interest in artistry and craftsmanship, Jo mentions the Wilhelm paint box, which I remember appearing in another exhibition (Figure 3/ 'Wilhelm's paint box', nd). I find myself imagining a display involving the paint box, the beautifully painted set box and costume designs (Wilhelm 1800s a.) that might fit with the set box's themes. This might begin to build a sense of what a performance looked like. I want to invite our visitors to historically reimagine what it might have felt like to be in a past audience, because that feels like the best way of helping them to connect with nineteenth century theatre. I notice the audience are included as cut out figures and painted into the walls and doors of the box. Perhaps I can photograph the interior of the set box as a 360 image and invite audiences to use Google Cardboard located in the exhibition space . . .*

*Moment 4: I'm looking at resources on the Royal Polytechnic Institute ('Mander &*



**Figure 3.** Wilhelm paint box, University of Bristol Theatre Collection, HN/0/1.

*Mitchenson Polytechnic Theatre,' nd), prompted by my wider interest in remediations of the aerialist Jules Léotard. I start looking at material on Pepper's Ghost from the same venue, thinking about how combining the increased intensity of gaslight and reflective properties of industrial plate glass enabled this stage illusion to materialise*

and dematerialise spectral images of moving actors. Technology leads me to request material on stage traps (e.g. Wooden star trap model, Southern, nd and Figure 4), initiated by Kate's interest in the Corsican Brothers and the innovation it gave its name to – the Corsican trap – that saw actors glide upwards across the stage. As I look, I reflect more on technological innovation, and another linkage between technology and nineteenth century entertainments slots firmly into place. I can see the two archives in conversation ...

What emerged from these interactions – these moments of archival practice – was the



**Figure 4.** Wooden star trap door, Richard Southern Collection, University of Bristol Theatre Collection, TC/M/306.

concept for two linked exhibitions entitled: *Transporting and Evolving Views: Nineteenth Century Ways of Seeing*, focusing on the imaginative power of panorama at the Bill Douglas; and *The Art of Innovation: Experiencing Nineteenth Century Theatre and Performance* at the Theatre Collection. Running through both was the potential for nineteenth-century innovation to create novelty in any kind of visual entertainment and for the digital to convey nuances and shifts in visual perception – whether this was the digital embodying how shifts in visual experience encountered in the nineteenth century parallel our own digital revolution through analogous experiences, or the digital providing a means of historically reimagining experiences. Use of digital technologies provided today's audiences with new and different interactions with objects that permitted kinetic agency over their own embodied experiences: they could choose to experience a hand panorama in motion or zoom in on the star trap photograph from



the exhibition space (Figure 4), the latter of which was too large to be displayed in the exhibition space. I planned to mobilise relationships between the physical exhibition space and the digital realm to provide deeper insights and haptic interactions that mirrored nineteenth-century experiences.

### **Archival praxis and its ways of knowing**

What these series of moments reveal is praxis in action and how exhibition curation led my research process and acquisition of knowledge. In what follows, I outline the types of knowledge that exhibition practice-as-research activates by placing performance and museum scholarship in conversation, at the same time demonstrating how exhibitions are performances or shows. All archival research is embodied as soon as you access resources by physically entering an archive rather than conducting digital searches. However, the praxis of putting on exhibitions as educative entertainment activates different ways of knowing because it focuses primarily on visual presentation, rather than writing as the primary mode of communication. This interdisciplinary conversation reveals how scholarship on performance practice-as-research can support museological explorations of the ways of knowing that exhibition practice activates. At the same time, museum studies offers performance practice-as-research a valuable reminder that embodied knowledge is the preserve of more than just the researcher-practitioner.

Prior to my involvement in this project, my scholarship focused on early-twentieth-century popular performance. Engaging with both the Bill Douglas and Theatre Collection archives and interrogating their holdings alongside secondary contextual scholarship provided a fruitful method for me to learn more about nineteenth-century entertainments. As a process, it involves the same sort of investigation that all archival work engages with, where one has to ‘understand [an archive’s] complexities . . . strategise modes of operation while considering how best to make use of its contents and filter the archive materials through research frameworks and questions’ (Gale and Featherstone 2011, 23). The four moments I described above demonstrate this process in action. They provoked what I, and practice-as-research scholars, would think of as ‘hunches’ of informed speculation (Kershaw in Kershaw et al. 2011, 65). The archival evidence suggested avenues to follow through secondary scholarship, which included exploring panoramas as ways of relooking at the world, and how new technologies including gas lighting drove stagecraft, such as that of the Pepper’s Ghost’s spectral illusion, described above. Using Robin Nelson’s conception of praxis as it is involved in performance practice-as-research, I propose that archival research involves the first four components of his five-fold repeated process of ‘doing-reflecting-reading-articulating-doing’ (Nelson 2013, 32). This is particularly the case in historiographic archival practice, where the emphasis is placed on creative-yet-rigorous acts of evidenced interpretation.

In writing about the archival research process, Maggie Gale and Ann Featherstone stress the embodied experience of archival research. Drawing on Helen Freshwater’s argument that archives hold an allure that ‘charms’, Gale and Featherstone further highlight how physically interacting with archival sources influences researchers’ experiences. Comparing digital resources to material interaction, Gale and Featherstone argue that the sensations of touch and smell have the power to ‘create recall and memory’ (Gale and Featherstone 2011, 20, 32). This difference is one that my students articulated when

I took them to the Bill Douglas, reflecting that physical contact helped them to feel more engaged with the past and more able to historically reimagine it. As a researcher, I feel the act of accepting resources in an archives' reading room is often akin to receiving an anticipated but unknown gift. As I unravel the cotton thread binding on a file or receive a single image gently placed before me, I feel excitement about the yet-to-be-discovered possibilities to engage with the past that can also include discovering irrelevancy. In presenting me with an item, I feel the archivist transferring the responsibility of care, which increases my focus, concentration and anticipation. Art pedagogue Charles R. Garoian notes within the wider museum space that preservation conventions of low lighting, temperature and humidity controls exert a physical influence on audiences' bodies and that often generates a meditative and sublime atmosphere (Garoian 2001, 247). The prohibition on eating and drinking in reading rooms exerts another control on researchers' bodies that encourages focus. Carolyn Steedman has summarised this experience as far from physically neutral, but instead as constraining movement whilst provoking a strange combination of excitement and a desire to leave (Steedman 2001, 29). Consulting archival resources is a rarefied somatic experience that invites imaginative engagement through bodily contact with resources, procedural and atmospheric conventions.

When interacting with archival objects, the reason people tend to feel more connected and likely to historically reimagine the past, is precisely because the item materially existed at the time period being examined. The items in our exhibitions ranged between the entertainment itself, such as the stereoscope, to the representational remains of disappeared events from the past, as in the case of the Wilhelm pantomime costume designs. It is possible to experience how two separate images transform into one as a researcher holding the stereoscopic viewer, but not as an exhibition visitor separated from the object by glass. In discussing documents of performances and artworks that represented fabricated performances, Philip Auslander influentially argued that

our sense of the presence, power, and authenticity . . . derives not from treating the document as an indexical point to a past event but from perceiving the document itself *as a performance* that directly reflects an artist's aesthetic project or sensibility and for which we are the present audience. (Auslander 2006, 9; original emphasis)

I consider the multiplicity of audience response as more important than artistic intent. This means that I view any archival interaction as having the potential to perform the past within people's imaginations. Viewing a stereoscope, I am entertained by the same nineteenth-century amusement from a different historical moment, whilst the Wilhelm costume design provokes me to imagine the colour and spectacle of a past pantomime.

At this point, it is also worth evoking the nineteenth-century concept of an 'exhibition' to consider the shared ground of exhibitions and performance to educate and entertain. The Great Exhibition of 1851 exhibited art and new technologies under national banners. As Richard Altick has noted, 'It was the event toward which one main stream of London exhibitions proved, in retrospect, to have been leading; it was the exhibition of exhibitions, the most lavish of shows, the apotheosis of the lofty ideal of "rational entertainment"' (Altick 1978, 456). It was this exhibition in Hyde Park that funded the purchase of the land the iconic Victorian London museums now occupy in Kensington, close to the original Crystal Palace site. The word 'museum' also had a meaning often forgotten

today, and connects it to the ‘shows’ of the nineteenth century’s most infamous showman, Phineas T. Barnum, that included fictional exhibits such as the Fiji Mermaid (Goodall 2002, 21–25). Alison Griffiths has demonstrated how the tension in nineteenth-century exhibitions between putting on a ‘show’ that entertains and education bears out its legacy today, particularly in scientific museums that utilise new technologies as a means of offering ‘hands-on’ knowledge (Griffiths 2013, 159–94).

This legacy of exhibition showmanship is most striking in the Victoria & Albert Museum’s ‘blockbuster’ exhibitions such as *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* (2015) and *David Bowie is* (2013). Both these exhibitions communicated through extravagant sets, lighting changes, projection and screens playing competing action. Borrowing from performance scenography provided the means for each exhibition to embodying each artist’s identity, work and legacy whilst creating sensational audience experiences. Framing objects through compositions, captioning and catalogue texts, affect how they perform and influence the experience of viewing, which suggests that exhibitions are a form of object performances that offer opportunities for embodied knowledge. What this discussion of exhibitions as entertainment and education reveals is the varied modes of spectatorship audiences have always used and that work along a continuum between wanting to enjoy the show and learning something new. This confirms what I instinctively learnt from exhibition practice: audiences engage at the level of surface enjoyment of visual composition; or more deeply at object level, which at its most explicit involves visitors activating embodied interactive experiences from within the exhibition space. Visitors experiencing information-led exhibitions make choices about how deeply they wish to engage with the educative framing of each object within space.

I argue that any archival research is a practice of research, or practice-research, to use the more inclusive term recently adopted by many performance scholars as a means of uniting the varied ways in which practice is integral to research. However, staging an exhibition more explicitly adds to the final performative ‘doing’ phase outlined in Nelson’s praxis of ‘doing-reflecting-reading-articulating-doing’. In museum studies, Nicholas Thomas identifies three elements of exhibition curation that employ ‘museum as method’ as a means of knowing through museum ‘activity’ (Thomas 2016, 100–113): firstly, the ‘happening upon’ of responsive discovery; secondly, the framing of descriptive captioning; and finally, object juxtaposition, which Thomas, tellingly, refers to as ‘museum scenography’ (Thomas 2016, 106). In my exhibition curation process, Thomas’ methods iteratively slip and fold into each other throughout my doing-thinking. However, during this particular experience of mounting exhibitions at the Bill Douglas and Theatre Collection, elements were stunted by the halted nature of this project, leaving captioning and juxtaposition only partially realised rather than fully materialised due to the reduced scale of the displays. Captioning was evident throughout in the documents that acted as working abstracts for the exhibitions and later formed the basis for introductions to the online exhibition catalogues; they also guided me in my assessment of each object’s potential. Each object was assessed for the educative histories it embodied, its visual compositional possibilities, the potential to trigger similar digital experiences through QR codes, and ability to guide my secondary reading. For me, ‘juxtaposition’ was imbricated throughout the object selection process in the spirit of Nelson’s iterative practice-as-research praxis. From the start, I creatively visualised

compositions within cases, such as the Wilhelm set box alongside his costume designs and paint box, with the aim of inspiring audiences to imagine how vibrant, colourful and intricate popular performances such as pantomime were.

However, for theatre and performance historians, the mode of interaction with archives offered by exhibition curation provides possibilities for different connections. As a researcher focused on uncovering the details of a performer or performance, archival objects are usually called down at item level. Exhibition curation demands a wider consideration of objects because it is not just content in play, but also their visual appeal. When writing an article, a textual source may summarise ideas and arguments perfectly for an academic audience. However, that two-dimensional item of tightly packed text is unlikely to visually connote the same material at a glance to the general public, or in a way that invites curiosity; the very experience Thomas argues is so productive and should unite all types of exhibition (Thomas 2016). Visual tactics such as placing a frame around relevant text, or printing the vital material on foam boards may help give two dimensional materials more visual impact and guide interpretation. However, frequently it is best to find a visually arresting object, or series of objects, that does some of the work with a little less precision. Take for instance, the invitation to relook at the world given at the Bill Douglas: here a magic lantern slide of the exterior and a stereo card of the interior of Exeter Cathedral (the latter whose 3D effect was approximated online via a gif created from left and right eye images) visually performed the concept ('Stereo Card of the Interior of Exeter Cathedral', [nd.](#); 'Magic Lantern Slide of the Exterior of Exeter Cathedral', [nd.](#)). For that reason, it often involves casting the net wider and taking the time to revel in an archive or collection by exploring at box – rather than item – level, and by looking for a *different* set of visual connections than archival work solely focused on making a textual argument invites. As a process, it implies openness to new possibilities and connections, and 'inserts a layer of playful imagination to the research process that has the potential to guide research in new directions' (Bjerregaard 2020b, 11) and is driven by thinking through 'research questions with a spatial dimension' (Treimo 2020, 30). In Bjerregaard's words,

Working intensely with collections, testing ideas out in a physical environment, and relating more or less directly to a lay audience does not only tell us something new about how to make exhibitions, but may also provide us with more insight into the subject matter of the exhibition. That is, the exhibition has the potential to create a *research surplus*; through the making of exhibitions we are liable to *learn more* about the topic of the exhibition. . . . this research surplus does not only concern *how much* we know, but also involves *different ways* of knowing. (2020b, 1–2; original emphasis)

This mode of practice-research invites new connections through the task of visual communication that requires playing with framing and composition. The new ways of knowing that this produces are so varied that they create a surplus of knowing not contained within the exhibition space; after all, exhibition curation always involves juxtaposition and selection.

However, for Bjerregaard, the materiality of exhibitions has raised questions about the nature of this non-linguistic knowledge within museum studies (Bjerregaard 2020b, 9), and a number of chapters in his edited collection take this as their central concern (Treimo 2020; Bjerregaard 2020a; Bencard 2020). These chapters explore issues of

embodied knowledge, space relations and how juxtaposition, assemblage or randomness generate, or collapse, connections to create new knowledge. Tellingly, Henrik Treimo describes the materiality and space relations of exhibition epistemology in the language of performance by describing it as ‘scenographic thinking’. He goes on to consider ‘[e]xhibition scenography as [an] artistic practice [that] can be defined as architecture and theatre in a balance, created so as to elicit a dialogue between the audiences and space’ (Treimo 2020, 27). Yet, reading these essays as a performance studies scholar, I find myself considering whether the link identified between exhibition curation and theatre could add weight to explorations within museum studies of the ways of knowing that exhibition practice-research activates.

Performance studies has long recognised practice as having the power to trouble epistemological and ontological boundaries productively. The ‘centrality of *creativity*’ in practice-as-research methodologies enables ‘flights of imaginative fantasy [to be used] as a method that *logically* stretches the bounds of established sense’ (Kershaw in Kershaw et al. 2011, 65; original emphasis). Arguably, harnessing creativity helps all researchers to make new connections through thinking more imaginatively. Placing creativity at the centre of methodologies, as is done in practice as research, still means that you need to use logic and established sense to evidence claims. By carefully and reflexively using creativity in the material world for exhibition audiences, new avenues of investigation can be followed and new insights gained that blur the (false) boundaries of thinking and being. In recent years, Robin Nelson’s work has become the cornerstone of performance practice-as-research because he offers a model for this thinking/being knowledge. Nelson draws on information on perception to argue that practice-as-research gives access to a different kind of knowledge than theoretically driven written work; a ‘liquid knowing’ related to experience and embodiment (Nelson 2013, 52). His multi-mode epistemological model uses arts praxis as ‘theory imbricated within practice’ to activate ‘know how’, ‘know that’ and ‘know what’; three modes of knowledge that interact iteratively to generate new knowledge (Nelson 2013, 23–47). ‘Know how’ is skill-based experiential knowledge a practitioner draws on to make work. In my case, it is the procedural knowledge I have acquired about archives, exhibition curation and aesthetic compositional judgements learnt from my practical involvement in performance and curation. ‘Know that’ is more traditionally academic theoretical ‘outsider’ knowledge that implies critical distance, which in this case might relate to the concept of archives performing and knowledge on nineteenth-century entertainments derived from my reading and conference attendance. ‘Know what’ is the tacit knowledge of ‘know how’ made explicit through the repeated distance of critical self-reflection and constant engagement with ‘know that’. It is ‘knowing what “works”, in teasing out the methods by which “what works” is achieved and the compositional principles involved’ (Nelson 2013, 44). In praxis, cycles of ‘doing-reflecting-reading-articulating-doing’ are what activate and make tangible this new mode of experiential knowledge.

However, placing performance and museum studies in conversation reveals a blind spot in performance practice-research epistemology that misses the focus in museum studies on the role of the general public in knowledge production (Bjerregaard 2020b, 1–2 quoted above). Despite a performance often relying on the presence of an audience, that audience is strikingly removed from knowledge ownership in practice-as-research. Sally Mackey notes the tendency in practice-research scholarship to situate knowledge solely

with the researcher, and considers applied theatre practice-research as challenging this tendency particularly significantly (Mackey 2016, 481). Nelson's work is a case in point. Although he highlights that claims about impact need to be evidenced through post-show responses or questionnaires (Nelson 2013, 88–89), he states 'it is not possible in this context to undertake a full audience study in accordance with established social-science methodology' (Nelson 2013, 88). If we take Bjerregaard's edited collection *Exhibitions as Research* as indicating the current state of the museum studies field, then the audience is central to knowledge production, as explicitly described in the quotation above and used as an organising principle for the 'Collaborating with audiences'<sup>6</sup> book section. As a scholar of arts audiences, Ben Walmsley follows Lynne Conner in noting that "museums have led the field in acknowledging and facilitating audiences" cultural right to interpret art and how the performing arts have much to learn from them' (Walmsley 2019, 18–19). Perhaps it is time that performance practice-research learnt from a discipline also concerned with putting on a show from material display.

Like Mackey's work, many of the case studies explored in Bjerregaard's edited collection engaged audiences in the exhibition curation process in a manner that bears comparison to applied or participatory performance. If, as I do, you believe audiences co-produce meaning by bringing their own experiences and subject positions to any type of performance, then assuming knowledge can only be produced by a subjective researcher is problematic. Participatory museum and applied performance case studies may exemplify a certain type of cooperative approach, but they speak more widely to the fact that practice-as-research *could* mobilise the *audience knowledge* generated via performance, using interdisciplinary methods developed within the fields of cultural, media and communication studies *and* performance audience studies.<sup>7</sup> In writing about rigour in audience research at a time where there is an increasing interest in empirical studies into today's audience experiences,<sup>8</sup> Kirsty Sedgman raises a very similar point about performance practice-research. Although she considers it heartening that an increasing number of practitioners are turning to questionnaires to gain insights into audience reception, they seldom constitute more than 'lists of difference,' 'without fully teasing out what [interpretative/meaning-making strategies] might be behind such variations' (Sedgman 2019, 475). All practice-research could benefit from drawing on a wider range of audience research methodologies sympathetic to the artistic work. A questionnaire might be suitable, but other creative or participatory approaches such as responsive drawing or guided visualisation might be more sensitive to the work and more productive.<sup>9</sup> These tools could be designed to go beyond understanding whether the effect/affect desired is achieved in a one-way method of communication. Instead they can be used to discursively analyse audience responses as a *conversation* capable of providing wider ranging, deeper-level or alternative knowledge insights on the particular research inquiry.

### **In conversation with audiences**

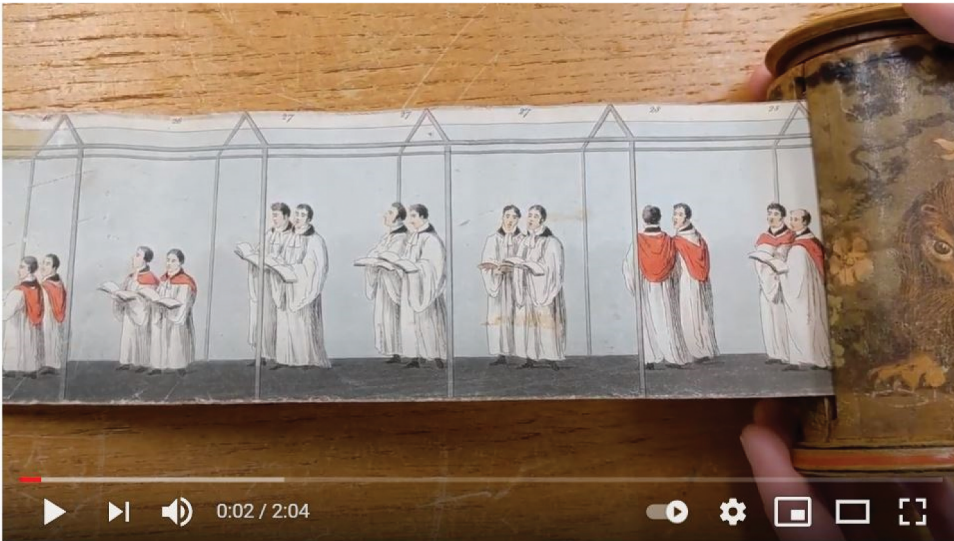
It is precisely this focus on audiences that returns me to the partly materialised exhibitions and the conversations I wished to instigate with our exhibition audiences. Although the Bill Douglas and Theatre Collection exhibitions were smaller and the audience numbers fewer than originally planned, I learnt valuable lessons from this

partially realised exhibition curatorial praxis. Through it, I formulated ideas of how the larger scale exhibitions would have sought to discover and utilise contemporary audience insights to think about the past. In proposing my approach, I drew on participatory practices in both museums and performance audience research to build a framework for gathering data in the digital and physical realms. At the centre of my approach was an interest in placing the physical exhibition space in dialogue with digital analogues to explore nineteenth-century audience experience with twenty-first-century exhibition audiences, whose responses I wished to gather. The exhibition aimed to build their tacit and embodied knowledge through descriptive catalogue text, exhibition scenography and digital analogues of nineteenth-century experiences. In the reduced exhibitions that were installed, these analogues included gifs created from stereoscopic images, a video of an unfurling hand panorama (Figure 5), the star trap photograph (Figure 4), and a wide-angle GoPro photograph of the inside of the Wilhelm set box, which aimed at providing an audience perspective of a yet-to-be-realised Wilhelm production. Through navigating the digital, physical and visual, I considered our audiences as having the potential to help us explore some of the fundamental questions at the heart of the Theatre and Visual Culture in the Long Nineteenth Century project. Might our exhibition audiences ask unexpected questions about the materials we presented or make unanticipated connections between the various analogue and digital experiences presented in the exhibition space? Could their interactions allow us to draw more expansive conclusions through participating with them?

As I described at the start of this article, my initial inspiration for using digital analogues sprang from watching Jim and Patricia interact with *the Illustrated London News*' printed panorama (Figure 1). Considering audiences as offering the possibility of conversation after having engaged with museum studies accounts of community-engaged curatorial practices, prompts me to consider whether participant observation at workshops could have further guided curation if I had organised them early in the process. In particular, the Bill Douglas has handling versions of interactive items such as zoetrope, hand panorama and flipbooks. Workshops during the exhibition development stage would have provided opportunities for today's audiences to play with technologies and for us to use their differing interactions as a means of considering variations in audience response.<sup>10</sup>

My desire to understand audience experience as varied is precisely what led me to activate twenty-first-century smart-device-based technologies within the exhibitions to engage our visitors' historical imaginations with past innovations. Informal responses gathered by Theatre Collection staff suggest this was successful. This included visitors expressing surprise and pleasure at the innovative theatre practices represented and appreciation that gifs helped them experience stereo cards as 3D (Bain 2022).<sup>11</sup> In incorporating digital elements, I was inviting visitors to participate in our project's knowledge creation via their physical navigation of the exhibition space and digital offshoots viewable on their own smart-devices. My body of research is preoccupied with uncovering embodied experiences that result from a body or bodies occupying space together (most frequently looking at aerial performance). In investigating the Bill Douglas resources, I became particularly interested in what haptic experiences its holdings offered. Within the frame of our Bill Douglas exhibition, how could digital

tactics mimic the tactile experience of being able to roll and unroll a hand panorama in the nineteenth century? How could we mimic actively controlling your interaction? In the installed Bill Douglas exhibition, a QR code provided the opportunity to play a video of the panorama unfurling. (Had the display been larger, this would have been accompanied by signage inviting audiences to play with the video by pausing, fast forwarding or rewinding.) In choosing whether or not they viewed the moving image contained within the static object on display, they made active choices about how to generate their own experiences, activating their historical imaginations through an embodied act of viewing.



**Figure 5.** Screenshot from the video of the Souvenir Hand Panorama of Coronation of George IV (EXEBD 69264), Bill Douglas Cinema Museum. Watch the film here: [https://youtu.be/w7DzZ96\\_jKE](https://youtu.be/w7DzZ96_jKE) [Accessed 18 October 2021].

Even though a shiny glass digital screen does not carry the same weight and feel as paper touching skin there is a similarity in opening up an analogous digital experience, such as viewing a video of a hand panorama unfurling, because it holds potential via active spectatorship and imaginative touching. In museology, Elizabeth Wood and Kersten F. Latham describe how the experience of ‘*imagined touching* . . . [can be] so specific and rich that one might even believe that they had indeed touched the piece’ (Wood and Latham 2011, 61; original emphasis). As such, these digital tools represent

moments where the museum visitor can imagine and transact with objects . . . transactions that create deeper investigations of the material interplay. . . . Touching, both physically and imaginatively, creates deep levels of reflective meaning; it brings the experience of time, place, and its relationship into the foreground. In a museum, this contributes to greater



consciousness and intentionality of the visitor around meaning and interpretation of objects, as well as contribution to the greater purpose and value of human experience. (Wood and Latham 2011, 61–62)

In offering digital jumping off points within the physical exhibition space, I invited deeper engagement with the exhibitions' content through digital touching. Walmsley has demonstrated that, like Wood and Latham's verbal descriptive act, digital participation outside the performance space has the capacity to elongate and deepen reflective engagement by providing a similar framework for the interpretative process (Walmsley 2019, 199–224). Digital touching is an embodied experience: curiosity prompts someone to physically activate the QR code, which results in the viewing of digital content that may result in surprise or, recognising the full range of experience, disappointment. Furthermore, for those who do not own a smart-device, seeing a QR code might provoke annoyance and feelings of exclusion, whilst those who are bored might simply ignore it. However, one participant informally asked about their experience noted that there was a magic in activating the code and technology responding with the hand panorama video displaying unrolling action. Standing in the physical exhibition space, separated by the glass case, the video showed what could be done with an object but the participant felt would seldom be done due to the rareness of the item. (It is certainly true we unrolled the hand panorama further than would usually be afforded by the size of the Bill Douglas reading room!) Although, admittedly only one response, this recounted experience demonstrates that analogous digital imaginative encounters can create deeply engaged embodied knowledge-generating experiences for audiences.

However, in the unrealised and more ambitious format, the aim of this particular piece of practice-research included gathering varied contemporary audience insights. Digital and physical feedback methods would have been more fully integrated into the exhibition format. However, it should be noted that active participants only account for a small proportion of audiences (Simon 2010, 4). Under normal circumstances, feedback would have been gathered via the Theatre Collection's comments book, but this was deemed unsafe during the pandemic. Those who might have chosen to leave a written comment would be those who felt sufficiently at home with the comments book convention and museum space. They also tend to be those prompted by enthusiasm or disappointment to leave their mark in ink in short sentences on the page. This self-selective process is predicated on the predisposition of each individual but may also be influenced by factors such as the busyness of the exhibition space and whether people attend an exhibition alone or with friends. Digital comments were solicited via an invitation to @mention the project Twitter handle of @theatviscult, but responses related to our tweeting the exhibition catalogue rather than the exhibition itself, probably as a result of low physical audience numbers. However, had larger displays been installed, I would have used selfie-frames featuring exhibition hashtags as physical prompts to guide and scaffold responses. These would have invited participants to upload photographic or digital video responses to Twitter and/or Instagram. As similar issues of participatory self-selection<sup>12</sup> would apply, I planned to increase the likelihood of engagement by using commonly used digital platforms.

Taking Twitter, for example, signage in the space would have invited audiences to Tweet the item that summed up the exhibition for them, or would have asked them to let us know how the exhibition changed their preconceptions about the nineteenth century. For those less keen on acting as creators, there would have been an invitation to share the digital content created specifically for the exhibition, e.g. the filmed hand panorama or 360 image of the Wilhelm set box, providing individuals with the opportunity to contribute at whatever level they felt comfortable. Clear signage within the space would have emphasised that these contributions were being gathered with the purpose of contributing and guiding our research. Project accounts would have thanked each respondent and retweeted content, connecting any similar responses to encourage further social interaction. These digital responses and shares would have been cast on screens within the space, hopefully reducing barriers to participation by demonstrating today's audience experiences were an integral part of the exhibition itself<sup>13</sup>; their digital presence in the physical space indicating the value we ascribed to individuals' online participation.

Returning again to the physical space, moments of group congregation such as exhibition launches and guided tours would have provided an opportunity for more in-depth conversation and verbal valuation of audience members' contributions. Participants would have explored the particular exhibition they were attending, before we requested their responses via a facilitated discussion, which would have been concluded by a question and answer session where the audience could find out more about the nineteenth-century historical context. This structure of exploration and conversation followed by academic context is aimed at combatting the 'expert-driven model' that risks devaluing audience contributions (Heim in Walmsley 2019, 189).

Both exhibitions, in their larger conceptualised and smaller realised format, sought to exploit the tension between digital offshoots and the physical exhibition space to inspire our audiences' historical imaginings. The physical-digital approach of the exhibitions was one I planned to extend when gathering qualitative audience response data by combining traditional museum practices with digital social media communications. Inviting audiences into an exhibition space offers the opportunity to start a conversation which I aimed to use to identify reoccurring themes across physical and digital interactions. Although responses were likely to be limited by self-selection, I hoped that by valuing audience insights we might explore, through current exhibition audience practices, more about historical experiences of nineteenth-century entertainments.

### **Where audiences, exhibitions and performance meet**

When submitting funding grants, exhibitions have often been included as planned pathways to impact – but they can offer much more. The praxis of curating an exhibition can be considered practice-as-research that iteratively engages tacit and embodied knowledge, activating similar knowledges in audiences. Exhibitions are shows that engage their audiences because they use material object relations as scenography and activate meaning through performative framing. Curating an exhibition always generates new knowledge because it is a communicative act that forces a researcher to consider the

media as a means of effectively transmitting ideas, arguments and propositions. As such, information-led exhibitions are shows in the tradition of nineteenth-century exhibitions, that sit at the interdisciplinary border of museums and performance to entertain and educate. Looking across disciplinary divides therefore illuminates the ontologies and epistemologies opened up for researchers *and* audiences. Using exhibition curation as historiographical praxis requires taking a *different* stance to source materials than traditional archival evidence suggests because the media of communication is visual and material rather than primarily written. If you embrace objects' potential to perform, then your exhibition will provide practice-research insights for you as a researcher because it invites different inquiries to be instigated and archival material to be approached differently; with openness, creativity, visuality and an eye on the clarity required in communicating materially with the general public.

In my case, treating information-led exhibition curation as relational performance historiography opened up opportunities to play with format and engage our audiences' historical imaginations by designing digital analogous experiences into curatorial display. Providing audience members the opportunity to digitally touch objects such as the hand panorama or to imagine themselves in nineteenth-century audience seats at a Wilhelm production, afforded opportunities for our exhibition audience to engage more deeply in their learning about the past. Just as there are many ways to engage and interact with performance audiences that range from sitting in a traditional theatre seat to immersive walking experiences, there are many ways to facilitate exhibition audience experiences that range from the embodied experience of viewing objects in space to high-level engagement. If you choose to, you can open up a conversation with today's exhibition audiences through exhibition space-based museum methods and digital social media means. If your interest is audience experience, then exhibitions offer a particularly fruitful opportunity to explore historical audience responses as varied. Working with audiences can move you beyond a one-way communicative model towards the type of 'impactful' dialogue with audiences that generates new hunches for interrogation and more varied models of audience interaction.

## Notes

1. Margaret Werry's book chapter is an exception that argues museum studies provides valuable lessons about decolonising theatre history without considering curatorial process (Werry 2020). In *Theatre, Exhibition and Curation*, Georgina Guy explores a variety of visual artworks that blur the boundaries between exhibition and performance as a curator-scholar. Her second chapter most closely aligns to this article and is devoted to art exhibitions that represent theatre history as a medium rather than curating the remains of past events (Guy 2016, 69–99).
2. The *Unfurl* performance took place at the Red Lodge Museum, Bristol on 3 September 2011 and was followed, from 26 September to 11 November 2011, by the exhibition at the Theatre Collection.
3. My method has been to curate exhibitions as shows whose purpose is to educate and entertain, akin to nineteenth century exhibitions (see later discussion). Bitgood's attention-value model of capture, focus, engage continuum provides a thorough analysis of how audiences interact with exhibitions (Bitgood 2010).

4. Online catalogues give a sense of installed displays: <https://theatreandvisualculture19.wordpress.com/bill-douglas-cinema-museum-display/> & <https://theatreandvisualculture19.wordpress.com/university-of-bristol-theatre-collection-display/> [Accessed 18 October 2021].
5. Jonathan Crary influentially argued that popular entertainments, such as the stereoscope (a device that created the impression of a single three-dimensional image using different left- and right eye- images of the same scene using a magnified viewer) indicate shifts in nineteenth century ways of seeing (Crary 1992).
6. 'Exhibition' is used loosely in the chapter to include outreach activities that do not always involve the presentation of objects, but create a museum 'thirdspace' outside the museum building (Bøe et al. 2020). This audience-centred approach in museum studies results from Nina Simon's influential *The Participatory Museum* (Simon 2010), which was developed via a participatory process.
7. For overviews of performance audience research see Walmsley (2019, 25–62) and Sedgman (2018). The latter explores the resistance within performance studies to the methodologies in cross-disciplinary audience studies that are grounded in asking audiences about their experiences and discursively interpreting responses.
8. This increased interest in audiences also comes from some performance documentation scholars, e.g. Giannachi (2017). Like this article, this field works conceptually between performance and archives but is less interested in the full range of established audience studies methodologies.
9. See Walmsley (2019, 111–139) for an overview and evaluation of audience research methodologies.
10. All observation would have been recorded with participant consent and ethics approval.
11. Other informal responses included considering tinsel prints a favourite item because the participant related them to today's celebrity colouring books and confirmation that most people successfully used QR codes.
12. Nina Simon uses data from *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies* to demonstrate that digital creators comprise a small proportion of audiences (Simon 2010, 8). Her point holds despite engagement with digital technologies increasing since 2010. Simon's principles of participation, such as scaffolding and offering individuals opportunities to share rather than create, guide my approach (Simon 2010, 1–32).
13. Digital methods result in unavoidable digital exclusion for non-smartphone users or those without digital confidence. However, it was hoped more digitally savvy friends would assist some individuals to enjoy, if not contribute to, digital aspects of the exhibition.

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## Notes on contributor

*Kate Holmes* wrote this article whilst a Postdoctoral Research at the University of Exeter working on the AHRC funded Theatre and Visual Culture in the Long Nineteenth Century project. Using approaches that range from examining spatial practice to theories of how bodies process movement, her research focuses on the history of aerial practice and its audience reception. Her monograph, *Female Aerialists in the 1920s and early 1930s: Femininity, Celebrity and Glamour* was published by Routledge in 2021. Her work has also been published in *Early Popular Visual Culture*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, *Performance Research* and edited collections.

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