

Theatricalization in the Cultural History Museum

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ABSTRACT

The article examines theatricalization and visitor participation as curatorial strategies in new museological practices. It asks: How are theatrical and participatory elements put into use and what is their effect on the visitor experience in terms of meaning-making. Based on a first-person phenomenological description, the analysis centres on the exhibition *An Army of Concrete* in The Tirpitz Museum on the west coast of Denmark. Looking at the processes of theatricality in the exhibition, it is argued that meaning-making ultimately relies on visitor participation and is produced self-reflexively in the engagement with the immersive environments, the audio-narratives and the displayed objects.

KEYWORDS

The performing museum, the Tirpitz Museum, *An Army of Concrete*, theatricality and participation in the museum, immersive environments, hermeneutical phenomenology, situated knowledge.

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INTRODUCTION

The past twenty years have seen an increasing overlap between practices of theatre and cultural history museums: New participatory and immersive forms of theatre encourage the spectator to move more or less freely in the performance space rather than remain sedentary during the performance, while the curatorial strategies of museums increasingly focus on storytelling and theatricalization in immersive environments as devices that structure the visitor experience. A recent example of the latter is the introduction of ‘boredom buttons’ in the collections of the Danish National Museum in 2018, the pushing of which elicits live performance and storytelling by professional actors. In an interview, the director of the museum motivates the costly installation with a reference to the: “... new Danish museums that successfully combine story telling with a more interactive and sensory approach in their curatorial strategy”.¹ The underlying argument is that participation and multisensorial experience are important parts of learning and that entertainment is a relevant tool in the museum’s communication of cultural history. Another example is the internationally acclaimed M/S Maritime Museum, which opened in 2013 in the dry docks of the former shipyard in front of Kronborg Castle in Helsingør. In this instance the participatory formats include an invitation to the visitors to play the role of sailing merchants in a competition to establish who makes the most profit trading goods from the colonies, as is the case in the exhibition entitled *Tea Time – the First Globalization*.²

The case to which I turn for my analysis is *An Army of Concrete*, one of four permanent exhibitions in the Tirpitz Museum in Blåvand on the west coast of Denmark. Responsible for the architecture of the museum, which opened in 2017, is the renowned BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group), who was also behind the M/S Maritime Museum. While the exhibition for the most part relies on the collections of Blåvand’s local history archive, its actual layout was commissioned from Tinker Imagineers, a so-called ‘experience design company’ from Holland.³

1 <https://www.dr.dk/radio/p1/p1-debat/p1-debat-2018-03-29> (28.02.2019) (author’s translation).

2 For a critique of the exhibition *Tea Time – the First Colonisation* see Matthias Danbolt 2018.

3 <https://www.tinker.nl/en/work/tirpitz-museum-denmark> (28.02.2019).

Content-wise *An Army of Concrete* provides glimpses into life in and around Blåvand in the years 1944 and 1945, when approximately 800 bunkers were built in the area by Danish workers and Russian prisoners of war overseen by German soldiers and officers.⁴ The form, in which the exhibition presents itself, relies largely on theatricalized elements activated through visitor participation. My analysis examines the underlying curatorial strategies with a view to their interplay with, and effect on, the visitor experience.

The article is divided into three parts: The first provides a review of the overlapping discourses between performance studies and museology with special attention paid to the notion of theatricality and the historically changing role of the subject-object relationship in the museum. Moving ahead to the analysis, I examine the role of theatricality in the curatorial strategies in *An Army of Concrete*. In situating my own position as a visitor *vis a vis* The Tirpitz Museum and the topic at hand, I reference Donna Haraway's notion of 'situated knowledge'.⁵ Emanating from a standpoint in feminist thinking and new materialism, the concept draws attention to the impossibility of an impartial perspective, as neutrality is inevitably overburdened by power relations. Arguing that "(v)ision is *always* a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted?" Haraway calls attention to the fact that any idea of the immaterial gaze as a metaphor for scientific objectivity has long since been compromised.⁶

Using first-person phenomenological description as grounds for the descriptive analysis, my approach is, moreover, inspired by Max van Manen's hermeneutical phenomenology, which relies on the merging of cognitive and non-cognitive ways of knowing to suggest that we: "know things through our bodies, through our relations with others and through interaction with things of our world."⁷ This stance, which implies that the researcher-visitor acknowledges her own role in the production and reproduction of knowledge, facilitates an understanding of the theatricalization in *An Army of Concrete* based on her interaction with the narrativized lives of the portrayed individuals, the objects and the spaces of the exhibition. This understanding is built analytically in an oscillation between the virtual and the real, between immersion and reflexivity.

The third part summarizes the results of the analysis and discusses the effects of the interplay between the curatorial strategies and the visitor participation on the production of meaning. In the postscript, I return to the impact of the treatment of the theme and the context as they come together in *my* visitor experience.

THEATRICALITY AND THE SUBJECT: OBJECT RELATIONSHIP IN THE MUSEUM

In her introduction to the book *New Museum Theory* (2006), Janet Marstine points to the call in new museology for a transformation of the museum "from a site of

4 A total of 8000 bunkers were built on the west coast of Denmark between 1943 and 1945 (Vemmelund Christensen 2013, 34).

5 Haraway 1988, 576.

6 Haraway 1988, 585. Italics in original.

7 van Manen 2016, xiv.

worship and awe to one of discourse and critical reflection that is committed to examining unsettling histories with sensitivities to all parties; ... a museum that is transparent in its decision making and willing to share power.”⁸ The perceived change is actualized not least in a changed relationship between subject and object so that the museum visit has “become a spectacle that engages all the senses, whether staged to evoke an aesthetic experience, a historical context, or an interactive learning environment.”⁹ Indicating the effects of spectacularization on notions of authenticity traditionally linked to the display of objects in the museum, the transformation discussed by Marstine plays out at the interface between new curatorial strategies and the museum visitors. Other scholars, to whom I will turn shortly, establish longer trajectories between the modes of perception in the museum and the theatre.

Notions of theatricality, whether grounded in Erika Fischer-Lichte’s semiotically informed and historic avant-garde inspired understanding of the term, or in Josette Féral’s definition of the term as a ‘dynamic of perception’, agree on its reliance on an interplay between perception and intention, between someone perceiving and something perceived.¹⁰ Thus, in the words of Féral, theatricality is not an empirical given, but rather “a *process* that has to do with a ‘gaze’ that postulates and creates a distinct virtual space belonging to the other from which fiction can emerge”.¹¹ Finding the privilege this definition grants to the spectatorial gaze somewhat reductive, my understanding of the term is more aligned with Marstine’s, in that it takes into account a comprehensive view of the senses involved in negotiating the shifts between what is perceived as real and what is perceived as fictional in the new museum.

In contrast to performing arts, often discussed as the ultimate art of the ephemeral now, classical museum exhibitions, in dealing with permanent artefacts, have tended to be perceived as conservative and enduring.¹² In addition to museum scholars such as Marstine, this distinction and its implications on the opening up of curatorial practices in the direction of theatricalization, has been discussed by critical theorist Valerie Casey.¹³ A converse opening towards museology has been made from the side of theatre and performance studies, not least by Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett¹⁴ and Susan Bennett.¹⁵ Based on their writings, I will briefly outline a scaffold of genealogies and analytical categories of relevance to the study at hand.

According to Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, the *mise en scène* is nothing new to the cultural history museum, the curatorial selection of which not only provides a context for the artefacts that assign them validity but also frames and controls the visitor’s gaze. In her words: “exhibitions are fundamentally theatrical, for they

8 Marstine 2006, 2.

9 Op cit., 25.

10 Reinelt 2002, 206-209.

11 Féral and Bermingham 2002, 97. Italics in original.

12 Phelan 1993.

13 Casey 2003, 2005.

14 Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 2002.

15 Bennett 2013.

are how museums perform the knowledge they create.”¹⁶ Kirschenblatt-Gimblett coins the useful distinction between ‘in-context displays’, where objects perform as they are typically arranged according to formal interrelationships, evolutionary lines etc. And ‘*in-situ* displays’, for example period rooms and other re-creations of settings and environments, whereby a virtual world is established into which the visitor enters. In overwriting the performance of the objects with the visitor’s own performance in the space, the notion of in-situ displays places draws attention to the spatial dimension of the visitor’s embodied experience.¹⁷

Valerie Casey, who acknowledges her debt to Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, identifies three historically overlapping categories of museum practices that distinguish the articulation of the subject-object relationship.¹⁸ The *legislating* museum provides a sacred venue for the display of objects.¹⁹ At the same time and in the (reversible) act of looking, not only do the objects on display but also the spectator-subjects become the spectacle.²⁰ In the *interpreting* museum, meaning is facilitated by categories, chronologies and themes.²¹ Here, Casey argues, the subject’s gaze is split between the objects and their interpretation in a manner that ultimately privileges the latter. Characterizing a strong tendency in what Marstine termed ‘the new museum’, the third category of practice, namely the *performing museum*, has proceeded from using interactive and multimedia means of communication to orchestrating the visitor experience through storytelling and re-enactments.²² As the case study will demonstrate, the focus in this category has been shifted from an authoritative interpretation of the material object to its integration into narrativized performance, the meaning-making of which relies on visitor participation.

In her discussion of the overlaps between current practices in theatres and museums, Susan Bennett notes a *theatrical turn* in new museology, a characteristic of which, in her terms, is to think of exhibition “as process rather than product.”²³ Drawing a comparison between contemporary theatre’s interest in developing forms of audience participation and the increasing emphasis on visitor engagement in the museum, she points to the use of role playing, as seen in the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, where the visitor is invited to take on the identity profile of either victim or perpetrator as well as the previously mentioned exhibition in the MS Maritime Museum. Other forms include visitors lending voice to the lines of scripted narratives and interactively engaging with media that elicits enactments or narratives performed by actors as is the case in the Danish National Museum and the Tirpitz Museum.

16 Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 3.

17 Op cit., 195.

18 Casey’s genealogy is informed by Foucault’s critique of power structures in *Panopticon* (1979) and Lacan’s notion of *the reversibility of the gaze*, which she uses as her analytical framework (2003, 4). In a later article the same trajectory is developed using Adorno’s concept of *critical self-reflection* rather than Lacan (2006, 83).

19 Recognized as one of the longest standing and most traditional ways to envision the museum, the notion of the museum as a sacred space is sometimes discussed as the paradigm of the shrine (Marstine 2006, 9; Bennett 2013, 16).

20 Casey 2003, 4.

21 Casey 2006, 83.

22 Ibid.

23 Bennett 2013, 9. Inserted quote from Halpin 2007, 5.

The above brief review of overlaps between new museology and theatre and performance studies provides a theoretical frame for my analysis.

THE TIRPITZ MUSEUM

Planning my first visit to the Tirpitz Museum, I hoped to gain a micro-historical and localised perspective on the German occupation of Denmark, which lasted for most of World War II.²⁴ Recently opened and highly acclaimed for its architecture, my curiosity was enhanced by the fact that the museum is situated in a region with which I am familiar, having spent the better part of my childhood summers only a few kilometres away.²⁵ It is moreover one, the subsistence of which today relies on mainly German tourists.²⁶ Last but not least, I found the references to the innovative exhibitions of the museum as ‘good entertainment’ for grownups and children alike rather puzzling. How could a museum, placed within a bunker largely built by Danish workers, German war captives and overseen by military personnel serving the occupying National Socialist state, be presented and perceived as providing a ‘fun’ experience? In this last respect, my understanding was pre-conditioned by the fact that my father’s experiences as a young man in the Danish resistance marked him for the rest of his life and also impacted on his family. Moreover, on this, the first of three visits, I was accompanied by a friend, members of whose family had lost their lives in the concentration camps.

Placed in the coastal landscape of sand dunes, the architecture of the Tirpitz Museum replicates that of the many bunkers in the area, each of which played a small but important part in the vision of an Atlantic Wall. The museum’s exterior reveals an imposing block of grey concrete, the original Tirpitz bunker, next to an artificial sand dune incised with four passage ways lined with oxidized metal plates. Additional rusty artefacts such as hedgehogs made from 5 ft steel beams are scattered along the path that leads from the car park to the museum entrance. Already at this point, the physical characteristics of the museum site and the encountered objects convey the legacy of World War II.

As noted by Casey, the spatial interrelationship of museum architecture, the design of its inside spaces and the exhibited objects has an impact on the visitor’s experience.²⁷ In the Tirpitz Museum, the interior layout mirrors the aesthetic and material qualities introduced in the short walk to the entrance. At the ticket sales, the visitor is provided with a hand-held device that combines a remote control and a small speaker. Where other audio devices used by museums, such as audio guides, typically steer the visitor through the highlights, the audio technology in the Tirpitz Museum provides no indication as to the order of the listening stations. As the visitor decides on her own path, the audio information links her to the objects, the stories and the spaces of the exhibitions in a personalized sequence.

24 The German occupation of Denmark lasted from 09 April 1940 to 05 May 1945.

25 A list of the prizes awarded to the Tirpitz Museum is provided here: <https://www.theplan.it/eng/webzine/international-architecture/tirpitz-museum> (28.02.2019).

26 Blåvand has around 500 permanent inhabitants, but about 50.000 in the high summer. The town has witnessed a sharp increase in the number of tourists after the opening of the Tirpitz Museum.

27 According to Casey, “The dynamism of the museum is in its separation and relationship of spaces, which are layered with the cultural and social effect of object encounter.” (2006, 2).

It is particularly this aspect of the museum experience which the overwhelmingly positive reviews have found to be innovative and refreshing.²⁸

Each of the museum's four permanent exhibitions has a different theme: *The Tirpitz Bunker* focuses on the gun bunker designed to hold one of the biggest canons of the Atlantic Wall, paying special attention to the engineering involved in the construction.²⁹ The exhibition entitled *The Hidden West Coast*, centres on some of dramas familiar on the Danish coast facing the North Sea such as storms and shipwrecks, while the third, *A Sea of Gold*, has a more generic focus on amber. My case study is the fourth exhibition, *An Army of Concrete*, which provides a cultural history perspective into lives lived in and around Blåvand in the years 1944 and 1945, when approximately 800 bunkers were being built in the area.³⁰

What follows is an analytical description of the exhibition in which I examine the interplay between curatorial decisions, my visitor experience and the processes of theatricalization.

AN ARMY OF CONCRETE

Upon entering the exhibition, I find myself in a large enclosed space casually strewn about with six life-size scale bunkers. Creating an *in situ* environment, the exhibition space holds only a few additional objects: an old canon, a wheelbarrow, and a poster. The latter illustrates the formal structure of Organization Todt, the organization in charge of the military engineering of the Atlantic Wall in addition to other fortification projects in Nazi Germany and the occupied territories. Listed at the entrance to each of the bunkers is a year and the name of a person. On one of the walls near the entrance are six plaques with portrait photos of the persons whose names appear on the bunkers and a short text that accounts for their whereabouts in 1945. Seen through a theatrical lens, the names may be seen to refer to the main characters the visitor is about to meet, or - depending on the path taken - has already met. Aside from these plaques, there are no explanatory texts to be read in the exhibition, nor is there any indication as to how to proceed.

My immediate response is both visceral and affective. Not only am I spatially disoriented, I am almost physically taken (a)back. Functioning as a site of memory (*a lieu de mémoire* ref. Pierre Nora,³¹) the *in situ*, or immersive, environment into which I have entered elicits an embodied memory of the ominous presence of the heavy concrete bunkers, a thorn in the flesh of my childhood's summers, where they loomed on the beach as a testimony to the years which had marked my father for life. While remembering how, as a child, I was simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by their enigma, I also recognize, how I had chosen to see their slow disappearance into the sand as a metaphor for the slowly receding grip of the trauma of the war.

28 See for instance <https://www.frameawards.com/winners/105818-tirpitz-hidden-museum-on-danish-west-coast> (28. 02. 2019)

29 The war ended before the gun bunker was completed.

30 A total of 8000 bunkers were built on the west coast of Denmark between 1943 and 1945 (Vemmelund Christensen 2013, 34).

31 Nora 1989, 7.

The exhibition space is lit by a combination of spotlights and daylight coming from the café at ground level. Hesitating in the in-between space of the bunkers, I identify almost imperceptible etchings in the grey concrete walls as well as audio buttons, some of which are so discretely placed, that I only notice them on my subsequent visits. In line with observations by several of the scholars mentioned earlier, it soon becomes clear that the experiential design relies less on the objects themselves than on the immersive environment and what is elicited through the audio media. Relating to specific artefacts (e.g. the brief history of the canon from World War One) and to topics of a more general relevance to the exhibition (e.g. an explanation of the Regelbau system according to which the bunkers were built), the information afforded is predominantly factual. Other buttons provide statistical details of the Danish workforce on the construction of the national socialist project of the Atlantic Wall (around 70.000) and the substantial costs involved for the Danish state.³² These bits of information are relayed by actors in a formal Danish similar to the language of newsreaders on the national broadcasting station.

There is a sharp contrast between the calm tone of voice used for the more factual information and the vocal delivery and form of address that introduce the Danish engineer Nielsen, who oversaw the construction work on the site. With this, the first named person I encounter, the mere rendering of facts is replaced with direct address: First, a mature, authoritative, male voice calls out: "Watch out, you are entering a construction site!" Having rhetorically established the visitor as a co-actor on the construction site, the voice continues in professional terms relating technical details about the larger project, which: "[...] relies on German brains and Danish hands" and ends with yet another line that addresses and implicates the visitor using the second-person pronoun: "Interesting, don't you think?"

Taken as a whole, the fragments of information offered in the in-between spaces of the bunkers, strike me as randomly stitched together in a manner not unlike the placement of the bunkers themselves. While I am unsettled by the loosely structured space, the emergence of my own embodied memories and the assumptions about what I find interesting, I also appreciate the freedom to move about in an intuitive manner. The non-linear and discontinuous experience calls to mind Casey's notion of the museum *flâneur* who, as a postmodern viewer, is fluent with mass mediation and comfortable with moving in and out of an active space, simultaneously engaging in and reflecting on the museum experience.³³ However, as much as I appreciate the lack of an authoritative spatial structure, the curiosity-driven path and the freedom to engage with different modes of participation and critique, I cannot help wondering if I have missed something important.

ENACTED NARRATIVES

The openings in the walls of the cement blocks reveal smaller enclosures with pieces of furniture and/or a few objects interspersed with animated material, such as films of a couple of minutes' lengths. Stepping into the first bunker, the entrance to which is marked by the year 1944 and the name of Pleines, I find myself standing

32 Appr. 70.000 Danish workers were active by March 1944 (Vemmelund Christensen 2013, 17).

33 Casey 2005, 87.

close to other visitors in a two-partitioned space dedicated to a young German officer. One part of the room has photos on the wall, a writing desk with playing cards and personal clothes as well as hand weapons in a glass montre and a uniform on a hanger. In my audio device, a male voice reads a letter to his mother whom he reassures in a comforting voice that the front in Blåvand, known as the Whipped Cream Front is a paradise compared to the eastern front. He also tells her that he has created a special bond with Anna, a local kitchen maid. As I listen to the letter, two short films are projected on the walls of Pleines' private quarters. One shows a young man in a tank top writing a letter at the desk. In the other, he is in bathing trunks, roaming with peers in the sand dunes on a sunny afternoon. Thus, in the intimacy of Pleines' private quarters, enacted scenes of his off-duty life are made present to the visitor through audio and visuals.

In the mirroring part of Pleines' room, both the artefacts on display and the filmed animation relate to his military duties as an officer at the radar station monitoring the airspace and calculating the trajectory of planes from the allied forces. The accompanying audio track relays the sound of firing guns as the male voice proudly notes that he has already shot down twelve enemy aircrafts and is still counting. The two-part division of his bunker points to the fact that the German officers serving war duty in Blåvand were young men far away from home. The contrasting tones of voice used in the private and the military parts remind the visitor that while Pleines took pride in carrying out orders on behalf of the Third Reich, he also had care for his mother, just as he nurtured a young man's interests and attractions. In this sense there is hinted at a schism between his sense of duty as a soldier and his private aspirations.

Anna also has a bunker dedicated to her. Amidst the personal items in her living quarters only two objects signal that she is in the midst of a war; namely ration cards and a so-called illegal paper published by the resistance movement with a list of names of women who were known (or thought) to have been in relationships with members of the occupying forces. The young woman evoked in the audio material speaks of reciprocated feelings for Pleines. As if confessing to her diary, she notes with relief that the resistance is not very active in Blåvand. Asking how love can be perceived as wrong, the visitor-me is invited to ponder the question with her. The audio track ends with 'Anna' speculating what will happen after the war.

In the remaining bunkers, the visitor is presented with the physical and narrated fragments of a German soldier, who had joined the Hitlerjugend at the age of 17 and who returns to Blåvand in an old age to reflect on the time he was stationed there. Another bunker portrays a deserter, a German soldier with a Danish alias, who is in hiding from his compatriots.

The last bunker is dedicated to the young Danish girl Astri. With its inside walls decorated with children's drawings, this is a considerably brighter space than the other bunkers in terms of both colours and light. In the audio files, a girl's voice tells about the chocolate bars she was given by German soldiers but also about the expropriation of her family home and her runaway-cat. Upon finding another button, especially inconveniently placed at the height of my knee, I hear the somewhat darker account of how she would bring food to the Russians, who

lived behind the barracks and were both hungry and sad. This particular snippet of information points to the historic fact that groups of Russian prisoners of war were stationed in camps along the West Coast, where they worked as forced labour on the construction project. Why this information was placed in the part of the exhibition that most clearly addressed children, is one of several curatorial decisions that left me puzzled - especially since the bunker dedicated to the deserter, a conscientious objector, was flagged for its 'disturbing contents' and recommended for children of more than 12 years only.

CURATORIAL INTENTION AND VISITOR PARTICIPATION

My descriptive analysis of the case study outlines a curatorial strategy that merges participatory formats designed to activate the visitor with the enacted narratives of civilians and military personnel in immersive environments brought to life through the voices of actors and sometimes animated images. With the handheld audio device as her companion, the visitor negotiates her own path through the exhibition in search of audio buttons that elicit fragments of stories of the portrayed characters. Dramatic conflict is implied in the personalised narratives, which hint at different moral qualms or ambivalences as well as politically driven conflicts concerning questions of loyalty and/or resistance to the national socialist project. Given the fact that the love story between Pleines and Anna is the only instance in which a direct link is established between individuals portrayed in the exhibition, they may be seen as protagonists - and their affair, with its perceived obstacles, as a key dramatic driver, the resolution of which is offered in the plaques at the entrance telling of their reunion and marriage after the war.³⁴

Based on the case study, my discussion of theatricalization as a curatorial strategy and its effects on the visitor's experience centres on three interrelated points: The interplay of fact and fiction, the embodied shifts between distance and proximity in the exhibition space, and the more or less subtly alluded conflicts provided in the personalized narratives.

When it comes to the explicitly theatrical elements of the exhibition, such as the enacted narratives, they seem to underscore ambiguity rather than clarity in terms of determining what is fact and what is fiction. Relayed in the story-telling voices of actors and without easy access to information about the source material and the curatorial decisions with regard to those sources, there is some ambiguity at this level of the exhibition. Upon asking a member of the museum staff, I learnt that the narratives largely relied on materials in Blåvand's local history archive, but also that the inevitable 'blanks' had been filled in from a composite of related data. An example of this is the partly fictive audio track relating to Nielsen, which is based on facts and figures relating to the engineering work on the construction.³⁵ The lack of information about the provenance of the material on which the narratives rely left me with the impression that the curators perceive it to be of

34 Paul Pleines fathered a child by Anna, they married after the war and lived in Germany but remained in touch with her home town. Both Anna and Pleines are buried in Blåvand's cemetery.

35 According to Anne Vemmelund Christensen, knowledge of Ejnar Nielsen's activities in Blåvand is mainly based on negatives and photos of the constructions taken by him and discovered after the end of the war (2013, 9).

less importance, which is fact and which is fiction. Thus, while it is made clear that there are multiple positions *vis a vis* the occupation of Denmark and the national socialist project, the transparency in terms of the curatorial decisions is found to be less convincing.

The oscillation between distance and proximity is a further curatorial strategy which impacts on the visitor experience. On the exterior of the bunkers, one is free to move about and let one's gaze wander to look at the seemingly randomly placed objects and the other visitors while reflexively engaging with the combined visual and auditive impressions. In the constricted interior spaces, however, where the experience is one of close proximity to fellow visitors, there also appears be less 'space' for critical reflection. Moreover, the crowding near the audio buttons often impedes the view of the *in-situ* display of objects. As a result, not only does the balance shift from the exhibition's visual properties in favour of the auditive, the importance of the material remains also recedes in favour of the narrated glimpses of the lives of the main characters. With the form of address in the audio files being characterized by a first-person perspective and lines spoken in present tense, it becomes difficult for the visitor to escape the snug connection established between the listener and the person portrayed. In this sense, it does not fully comply with the characteristics of the new museum outlined by Marstine as a site of discourse and critical reflection.

Rather than critical reflexivity, the combination of personalised narratives and visitor participation in *An Army of Concrete* suggests a curatorial strategy that aims for familiarity and identification with the actions as well as the moral dilemmas of the portrayed characters, whether German or Danish. In the use of the voices of actors speaking as if confiding in a diary or to close friend, the dominating listening experience inside the bunkers was one of intimacy. Positioned as a confidante without the possibility of asking questions or speaking back, the listener comes to corroborate the narrative and be implicated in the ethics and politics involved. Seen as a 'themed space of local heritage',³⁶ the larger message of the exhibition is one of non-conflictual co-existence between German military personnel, Danish contractors, builders and local service providers during the construction of the Atlantic Wall. Thus, the museum re-creates an image of the Whipped Cream Front, which adds to the branding of Blåvand as a tourist destination and supports the marketing strategy of the larger municipality to attract especially German tourists.³⁷

Looking to the processes of theatricality in *An Army of Concrete*, I argue that their impact on meaning-making ultimately relies on visitor participation and is produced self-reflexively in the engagement with the immersive environments, the audio-narratives and the displayed objects. The effects of the participatory involvement are enhanced by the requirements on the visitor to move in and out of

36 The notion of 'themed spaces of local heritage' is introduced by sociologists John Urry and Jonas Larsen in their Goffman-informed discussion on the performativity of the tourist gaze (2011, 154 and 191).

37 To illustrate the success of the museum, 70% of all tourists to the municipality were from Germany in April 2017. By July 2018, this figure had risen to 83%. See: <http://www.vardekommune.dk/content/danmarks-naeststorste-turismekommune-saetter-ny-rekord>.

doorways and navigate around fellow visitors through narrow passages. Among the effects of the immersive environment and its spatial design is the ability to call into play visceral sensations and multisensorial involvement. In my instance, the exhibition actualized the memories of war passed down through my family history, which - on several accounts – collided with those presented in the bunkers of *An Army of Concrete*. While it would seem reasonable to assume that the family histories of other visitors *vis a vis* the time of the war, and perhaps the building of the Atlantic Wall, are similarly actualized, such a study would require observations and interviews of a scope that exceeds the scope of this article.

POSTSCRIPT: WHAT HAPPENED TO WAR?

On the first of my three visits to Tirpitz and *An Army of Concrete* I was struck by the absence of almost any hints of the scale of suffering endured on account of the atrocities of the national socialist project. Presenting the director of Tirpitz museum with this in writing, the answer was: “Tirpitz is not a World War II museum.”³⁸ While I acknowledge and appreciate the local and micro-perspectival history perspective, the answer still surprised me given that the museum is named after the projected Tirpitz canon bunker and two of the four exhibitions are themed on the German occupation of Denmark and the building of the Atlantic Wall, which to my mind constitute acts of war. This is, however, not to suggest that an authoritative representation of ‘the war’ is possible or even desirable, as there is no consensus as to what constitutes ‘the war’, *wie es eigentlich gewesen war...*³⁹

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38 Mail correspondence 16 November 2017.

39 The argument has been forwarded by among others war historian Jay Winter, writing on the representations of war in museums (2013, 23).

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