

Participation beyond expectation: Contemporary art installation provokes unexpected responses in an English country house

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Abstract In 2019 artist Layla Khoo created and installed a participatory artwork at Nunnington Hall, a property owned by the National Trust, UK. The artwork, named *Change in Attitudes*, was a response to the taxidermy collection of hunting trophies displayed on site, all shot and collected by the last owner of the house, Colonel Ronald Fife. The work sought to encourage visitors to consider their thoughts on this difficult part of the collection, both in its historical context and in light of current societal norms, by inviting them to participate with the artwork through choice-making. This case study first analyzes the impact of this work on visitor engagement at the site, both in the participation methods intended by the artist and in the unexpected participation methods employed by the visitors as the installation evolved. The questions raised by this case study are then considered, as well as the research currently under way which seeks to answer them.

Keywords Country house, engagement, participatory art, installation art, heritage

INTRODUCTION TO THE ARTIST

Heritage sites looking for alternative ways to engage and attract new audiences have turned to contemporary art in the hope of achieving this (Cass, 2020). Existing research has attempted to understand and quantify the effects of these interventions (Tolia-Kelly et al., 2017). The impact of emotional engagement within museums has been explored (Smith, 2014), but the enabling role of participatory art in these settings has not (Witcomb, 2013). My work seeks to remedy the gap identified by Sheila Watson in the research (Watson, 2018) both on the emotional reactions of visitors and on their impact. The National Trust has an established history of utilizing contemporary art as an additional method to interpret their heritage narratives to their visitors, but there is no research into whether participatory contemporary art impacts on visitor engagement with heritage narratives (Farley & Pollock, 2022).

As an artist, I position my practice in the liminal space between art for practice and art for purpose. My brief is to respond to a site or collection with an artistic intervention that provides an interpretation of the historical narrative, with a directive to “engage” visitors. In this respect I become an engagement intermediary: as an artist I engage with the narrative or site or collection in order to create an artwork, and I then invite visitors to engage with my artwork by participating in some way. In recent years, I have become increasingly interested in the impact and effect of using visitor participation as a key element for engagement within my artworks and installations. To avoid the ambiguity that Leila Jancovich sees as embedded in the increasing use of the term ‘participation in art,’ I will clarify my meaning within my own practice (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2022). Within my own work and within this article, I define participation as a direct interaction between a visitor and the artwork, whereby the opportunity is given to the visitor to take an action of some kind to establish

direct engagement, rather than the witnessing of a spectacle (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2022). I am positioning visitors' participation with my interpretative artworks by positioning the audience as the "researchers" as identified by Heron and Reason in their values of participatory research. With this theory in mind, I consider whether the visitors (researchers) will achieve experimental knowing through transactional experience, by adding a physical transactional experience in the participation with the artwork (Heron & Reason, 1997). This builds on John Dewey's theories of combining physical interaction with learning within the museum environment to increase the intensity of the visitor experience, both at the time and in how it is recalled by the visitor after the visit (Hein, 1998). As both an artist and a researcher, it has become imperative for me to better understand whether participatory contemporary art interventions evoke emotional responses in viewers that enable deeper engagement with heritage sites/collections and their narratives, and develop more meaningful ways of evaluating these interactions.

EVALUATING PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

In the past, I have relied on the teams within heritage sites to collect and measure visitor responses to my artwork, following their established evaluation processes. To date, therefore, the evaluations of my own artworks have been limited to comments written in visitors' books (which are often not easily found or inviting to use) and statistical data drawn from brief questionnaires using closed questions and Likert scales. This information has been useful in providing quantitative data when the closed questions are clear, but I have often sensed that the simple questions asked may direct visitor responses.

Eric Jensen (Jensen, 2013) highlighted the shortcomings of closed-question, quantitative data collection in his revisiting, forty years later, of Bourdieu's themes of social exclusion in art museums. He instead combined ethnographic data collection – in the form of observations, photography, field notes, and qualitative interviews that were subsequently coded. This deeper research was made possible by working with a group of visitors over a period of time, rather than based on a single-visit questionnaire. While significantly more labor-intensive, this approach gives the researcher time to understand both the setting and the visitors more deeply, while building a rapport with the subjects of the research. This in-depth and more ongoing research is further recommended by Claire Bishop, specifically in the context of participatory art, where multiple visits are necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the work (Bishop, 2012). Unfortunately, neither participant observation nor open-ended interviews were conducted by the host site during the exhibition of *Change in Attitudes*. This lost opportunity to evaluate visitor participation more closely has highlighted the requirement within my participatory practice to work more collaboratively with host sites on embedding evaluation within and throughout participation with the artwork. Current evaluation tools seem to place the onus solely on the hosting/commissioning organization and so rely on organizations sharing this information with the artist. Even the 'Impact and Insight Toolkit,' produced by Arts Council England, says, "It's free to use for ACE-funded organizations, such as: National Portfolio Organizations, Investment Principles Support Organizations, Creative People and Places and some museums within the Museum Development Network" (Arts Council England). In the interests of progressing my own practice and understanding the audiences I work with, and taking into account in addition McNiff's (McNiff, 2013) provocation that the art itself can be the research method, this case study has led me to believe that there may be better ways to embed evaluation more collaboratively. In his foreword, Ross W. Prior outlines the advantage to utilizing the connection between art and artist in art-based research (ABR) to deepen understanding:

ABR explores the artistic process and brings forth new differentiations on the levels of intuition, perception, emotion, embodied and craft-based knowledge and intellect. ABR highlights sensory

and emotional elements that are crucial to aesthetic working, understanding and being. ABR addresses two key dimensions: the demand for clarity, form and method; and the importance of the source of the creative process that can and should lead to unexpected results in one's own research (McNiff, 2013)

Stephen K. Levine further confirms the benefit of undertaking iterative research in this way: that having no predetermined research path to go down can lead artist-researchers to places we had not expected (McNiff, 2013), further affirming what I was to experience with the unexpected outcomes of *Change in Attitudes*. This embedded evaluation in participation had previously been shown in the use of "Artcasting," a research project asking how galleries can inventively evaluate visitor interaction with art, held in the Bowes Museum, Durham, and then in the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, in 2015–16 (Ross et al., 2019). The participatory actions were taken by visitors, who were encouraged to digitally "cast" artworks to any place or time in an online map of the world. Where, when, and why they chose to digitally "cast" their art became the evaluation tool in itself, in terms of how people chose to participate with the program.

Embedding opportunities for visitor feedback into the museum or heritage experience may be more appealing to some visitors than being asked to answer questions afterwards. This approach was explored in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, in the autumn of 2015 (Blokland, 2019). When asked to reflect on how the emotional themes that Van Gogh and Edvard Munch represented in their works echoed the visitors' own lives and experiences, more than 30,000 visitors participated in writing their thoughts on this, which were to be shown as an evolving part of the exhibition (Blokland, 2019). Visitors were then observed to be equally engaged with reading other visitor comments, in some cases entering a dialogue. A similar phenomenon had occurred at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in 1998, where a selection of visitors' books were incorporated into the interpretation of an exhibition and visitors were asked to add their thoughts to those of public figures that were already included (Alexander, 2000). The feedback often became a written dialogue with other visitors, which, in turn, became an exhibit in itself. Finding ways to incorporate this kind of embedded feedback and response will be a key area to consider in my future artworks. Performative aspects of public writing in visitors' books, along with collaborative writing, have also been observed using an ethnographic approach at the National Museum of American Jewish History and at the Florida Holocaust Museum (Noy, 2015). While this represents a labor-intensive approach, the insights gained from observing visitors as they wrote would have been a useful insight into the visitor participation with my work at Nunnington Hall.

CASE STUDY: CHANGE IN ATTITUDES

In 2019, I developed the participatory artwork *Change in Attitudes* for the National Trust property, Nunnington Hall. Nunnington Hall is a Tudor Hall in the small village of Nunnington in North Yorkshire, England, bequeathed to the National Trust in 1952 by owner Margaret Fife. She had inherited the Hall in 1920 and subsequently renovated and resided there with her husband Colonel Ronald Fife and their two adopted daughters, Susan and Rosalind. The Hall averages 72,000 visitors per year, 81 percent of whom are National Trust members. Nunnington Hall has an active program of arts events, but this was the first artwork to have been commissioned as a creative response to the house and collection in approximately eight years.

The Stone Hall is the main entrance to the house. It is decorated primarily with the taxidermy "trophies" of animals hunted by Colonel Fife, including leopard and tiger skins, elephant tusks, and heads of a variety of smaller animals such as antelope, deer, boar, goat, impala, and antelope.

My brief was to create a piece of work which not only responded to the collection, but also opened a dialogue with visitors. The Stone Hall and the taxidermy collection had proved unpopular



Fig. 1. Nunnington Hall, copyright National Trust Images / Tom Carr



Fig. 2. Mounted taxidermy heads in the Stone Hall, photo by Khoo



Fig. 3. Mounted skull and weapons in the Stone Hall, photo by Khoo



Fig. 4. Mounted tiger, lion, and leopard skins in Stone Hall with interpretation panels, photo by Khoo



Fig. 5 Mounted elephant tusks in Stone Hall, photo by Khoo

with visitors (anecdotally, it was referred to in conversations with staff as “the room of death”), who either did not want to look at it at all or objected to the remains being displayed by the National Trust. The team at Nunnington Hall were about to send the big cat skins away for conservation work, and wanted to take the opportunity to engage visitors in a conversation about these unpopular objects in the collection. They wished to create a safe space for this to take place and for visitors to make up their own minds as to how they felt about these objects both in a historical and contemporary context. The installation of the artwork could take any form I chose, as long as it could not be perceived as imposing either my view or what could be interpreted as the National Trust’s perspective on the topic of hunting. After a period of research into both the collection and the memoirs of Colonel Fife (the individual responsible for hunting all of the displayed taxidermy), the final installation was inspired by the black rhino horn in the collection. This is the only piece in the taxidermy collection which is no longer on public display – not because the object is contentious, but rather due to the substantial risk of theft owing to its high value on the black market. We had initially intended to show the horn as part of the installation, but ongoing security concerns around potential theft would not allow this.



Fig. 6 Black Rhino Horn, Nunnington Hall Collection, photo by Khoo

A central element in this artwork was to encourage visitors to consider and discuss the collection and to enable them to express their opinions on the hunting trophies, both in a historical context and in light of current societal issues and norms. With this in mind, I felt that an artwork which would allow participation through choice-making would facilitate contemplation and discussion, rather than imposing a singular point of view.

I created an installation of 5,000 black porcelain models of rhino horns to represent the 5,000 black rhinos estimated to be left in the world. The horns were displayed on the walls of a purpose-built “room” structure to sit within the Stone Hall among the taxidermy collection. The circular structure measured two meters in height and 2.5 meters in diameter. Five hundred of the model horns were mounted on the outside of the structure; the remaining 4,500 could only be seen by entering the “room” via a small doorway.

Visitors were invited to make a choice: they could take a horn and keep it as a token of their visit, but in so doing they were told that it would not be replaced and this would leave less for others to see. If they made this choice, visitors were instructed to write their name and the date in place of the horn, to take ownership of this choice. Permanent marker pens were available for visitors to help themselves to, and there was no requirement for visitors to interact with staff to take a horn or record their choice: instructions and/or an invitation on how to participate were clearly displayed on the walls of the structure. Alternatively, visitors could leave the installation intact for others to



Fig. 7 Change in Attitudes installation, copyright National Trust credit Anthony Chappel Ross

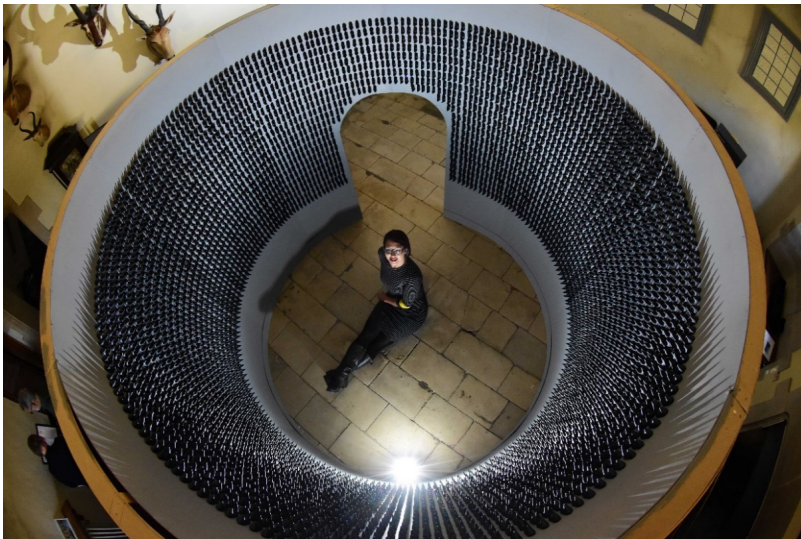


Fig. 8 Change in Attitudes installation, copyright National Trust credit Anthony Chappel Ross



Fig. 9 Change in Attitudes installation, close up of mounted porcelain rhino horns, photo by Khoo

see. The horns were mounted on the structure using Velcro, so that visitors were encouraged to touch the pieces and could remove a piece and return it without causing any damage. I hoped that the invitation to visitors to consider collecting, scarcity, and historical social norms in light of current views by making a participatory choice would enable them to engage more actively with the taxidermy and to consider whether attitudes to these issues had truly significantly changed.

Further context to the historical narratives and the contemporary issues around endangered species was provided by further exhibits. A trio of mirrors were etched with quotes relating to Colonel Fife, addressing his military, hunting, and family life and asking which version of himself he would see looking back at him. A trio of wall panels mounted with tiles impressed with the footprints of black rhinos, tigers, and lions were also displayed. The prints were taken from the enclosures of all three animals at Flamingo Land, a nearby zoo which had recently successfully bred a black rhino calf which was destined to be returned to a reserve in Tanzania. Finally, a “behind the scenes” room was created, showing the tools and molds used, the plaster imprints of the footprints, and a short video with interviews of myself talking about the artwork and the zoo manager Ross Snipp discussing current conservation issues and efforts with endangered species in captivity.

VISITOR INTERACTION

The first unexpected outcome of the installation came before the official opening, on the first day that members of the public entered the Stone Hall. The fixing mechanism (Velcro dots) had proved sufficiently strong in testing to hold the weight of the porcelain models, and a walkway of two meters had been left between the edge of the installation and the wall of the room to allow sufficient space for people to pass. However, we had not considered how visitors would move in the space now that there was a reason for them to look at the taxidermy. Prior to the installation, dwell time was very short in the hall, and most visitors would pass straight through to the next room. We observed that visitors now looked up at the walls to see the taxidermy and tended to walk backward while

doing so, often brushing their coats and backpacks against the structure of the installation and the model rhino horns. The Velcro dots were not robust enough to withstand this kind of contact, and the horns would fall to the floor. In the following 48 hours prior to the official opening event, all 5,000 horns had to be removed from the structure, a new fixing mechanism introduced, tested, and used as a replacement (industrial strength Velcro), and all horns reattached to the structure. It was important that the fixing mechanism could be reused: I wanted visitors to have the choice to put the horns back if they changed their minds, which many visitors did. This would also be encouraging to visitors to physically interact with the artwork without committing to a choice and without fear of getting it “wrong.”

I had hoped that the concept would encourage visitors to have conversations and discuss the issues raised by the work and the collection, but I had not expected the strong emotional responses expressed by visitors – not just about the artwork and the taxidermy collection, but about how other visitors were responding to it and the choices they were making. Visitors were increasingly expressing frustration that other visitors were making a different choice than their own. Volunteer room guides underwent additional training with the visitor experience team to prepare them for how to answer questions from visitors and how to avoid being drawn into emotive debates. Visitors contacted me via email and social media to ask whether I was upset that people had begun to take the horns. The following comment in the visitors’ book reflected the anecdotal information the room guides were giving:

Thought provoking installation and response to the collection. SHAME ON THOSE WHO REMOVED A TROPHY.

I visited the site once a month to count how many horns had been taken, so that a running total could be provided on social media.

The interaction with the installation was paused when Nunnington Hall and the rest of the country closed for the first Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020. When the Hall reopened, the visitor experience team worked hard to ensure that visitors would be allowed to physically interact with and touch the installation again.

In February 2021 I was contacted by the team at Nunnington Hall and asked to visit the site to advise on what actions should be taken now that visitors had begun interacting with the installation in a new way. Over the previous week, visitors had begun using the permanent markers (provided for names and dates to be noted upon removing a horn) to write their own comments on the structure of the installation. These first comments were written on the side of the installation hidden from the view of the room guide, suggesting that visitors knew that what they were doing was not “allowed” and that they did not wish to be observed doing so. Upon seeing one comment written on the structure in this way, others presumably felt emboldened to do the same – but again, out of sight of the room guide.

My first reaction to seeing these comments was a mixture of excitement and curiosity. This participation had not been expected or designed into the project, but I interpreted it as an enhanced level of visitor engagement. Visitors were so emotionally invested in both the artwork and the narrative that they were now breaking from expected behavior in a museum environment to effectively vandalize a piece of art with their own graffiti. Visitors already had the “right to reply” by means of a visitors’ book, as well as feedback questionnaires – so why did they then wish to comment in such a public and unauthorized way? I agreed with the Nunnington team that we would leave the first few comments to see what happened next. At no point would visitors be encouraged or given permission to write on the structure in this way, but they would not be prevented from doing so either. The Nunnington team supported this plan of action on the understanding that it would be

kept under review; if visitors used the pens on anything else in the house, then access would need to be restricted, and if any comments written on the walls of the structure were perceived by the National Trust as inappropriate, these comments would need to be censored in some way. Within two weeks, the comments written on the walls had multiplied. They were now being written in full view of the room guide.

Volunteers at the house had mixed responses to this new and unexpected development. Some were fascinated by what people had written, some were frustrated by the inconvenience of having to check the comments each day for those which had to be painted over, others were appalled by the behavior of visitors who were in essence scrawling graffiti on a work of art in a stately home. The comments fell under the following themes:

Direct feedback (transcribed)

Excellent way to communicate an important message
I love the concept – “chapeau” to the artist for this work
Excellent! Very Thought Provoking!

I did not have a definitive answer to why people felt compelled to leave feedback in this way. A visitors' book and visitor feedback questionnaires were both available, so visitors already had avenues to communicate their feelings. It is possible that visitors felt that their feedback was more direct when communicating directly with the artwork, or that they did not feel a visitors' book was relevant to them or this kind of artwork. It is also possible some visitors were not aware of the other feedback options available if they were not in the immediate vicinity of the artwork.

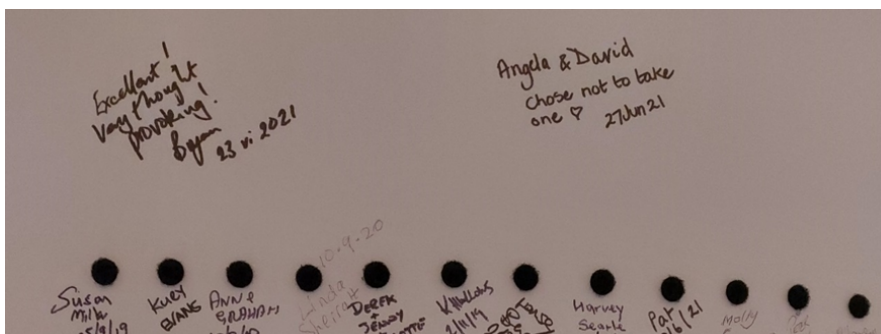


Fig. 10 Writing on display, photo by Khoo¹

Moral Dilemma (Fig. 11 and transcriptions)

To kill or not to kill, that is the question
Although a free rhino horn would be really Dope, I chose not too [sic], There [sic] like cool unicorns! I might need one when I rule the world
I love rhinos but want a souvenir

These types of comments seem to want to acknowledge that this was not an easy choice to make – either that they were tempted but resisted the temptation, or that they understood they had made what they perceived to be the “wrong” choice and wanted to explain. These reactions were regularly reported anecdotally by the room guides in the space: that in fact many visitors changed their mind

1 Fig. 10 text reads “Excellent! Very thought provoking. Bryan 23 vi 2021” and “Angela and David chose not to take one (heart) 27 June 21.”

during the course of the visit, either returning the horn they had taken before they left, or coming back to take one after all.

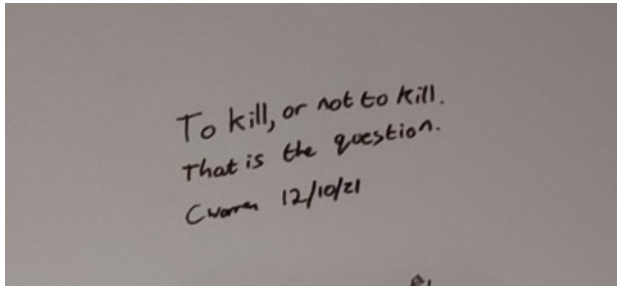


Fig. 11 Writing on display, photo by Khoo²

Justification (of the choice to take a horn) (Fig. 12 and transcriptions)

I took one it's a bit of clay not on animal life

[answered by]

True

It's just a piece of plastic

Great coat hook

I hate rhino they should die

Most of the visitor comments written on the artwork itself explaining why a horn had been taken were flippant in nature. Other visitors felt the need to justify their choice more seriously – by speaking to the house staff team or contacting me directly via email or social media. These justifications were completely unnecessary to me, the site, or the artwork – and yet visitors felt the need to let somebody know that they hadn't taken something for themselves, that it was to spread awareness, such as talking to schools about the project.

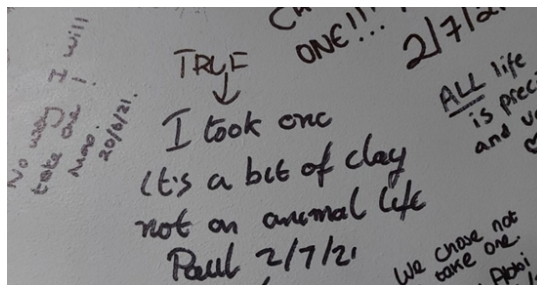


Fig. 12 Writing on display, photo by Khoo³

Dialogue (Fig. 13 and transcriptions)

Why leave less for others to enjoy

[answered by]

This should not be about human enjoyment!

2 Fig. 11 text reads "To kill, or not to kill. That is the question. Signature, 12/10/21."

3 Fig. 12 text reads 2 "True à I took one it's a bit of clay not an animal life, Paul 2/7/21" and "No way I will take one, Mao 20/6/21."

I took one it's a bit of clay not an animal life

[answered both by]

TRUE

[and] But the principle is the same

I'm 19... I want to see rhino's [sic] when I'm 90

[answered by]

Good bloody point!

Very thought provoking rich people always took what they wanted / exploited. Ordinary people take what they need and replenish and nurture

[answered by]

So not true, we're all the same I'm sorry to say

I found the dialogue between visitors fascinating. The original author would not be returning to see the answer, so whether agreeing or disagreeing, why write in this way? It may be that visitors are used to being able to reply to strangers' comments on social media sites and so applied this thinking to their written comments here.

The final image in this section appeared to show a visitor in dialogue with themselves – a commentator who appeared to return to add further remarks to their initial thoughts. This seemed to imply that the visitor wanted to ensure that anybody reading this was fully informed as to who they were, what they meant, and what their choice was.

The idea that this exhibit is presented to us shows it is not about individual choice but commercialism and the transnational corporations that trust the human race and each individual to save our planet > From a 15 year old worried about the future of our planet > I haven't decided if I'm going to take one yet > kind of mean about all resources in general.

Again, this confirmed what the room guides were telling us about visitor interactions. In some cases visitors would speak to one another about the decisions each had made, but more often they would express their irritation/bewilderment with the staff, who were seen as independent observers. It seems that by commenting on each other's comments, visitors were able to debate without direct confrontation.

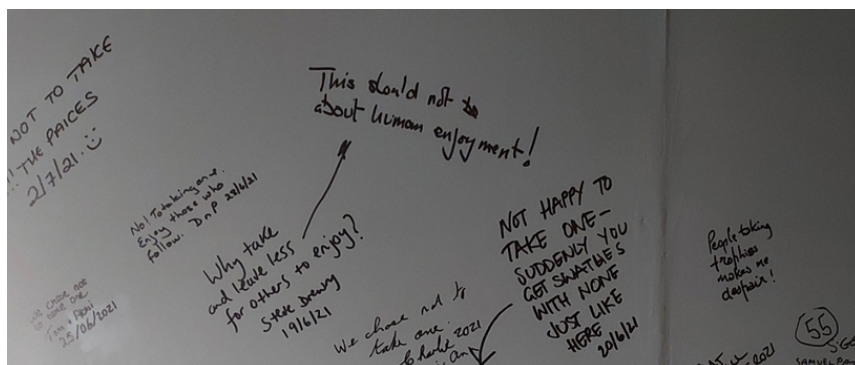


Fig. 13 Writing on display, photo by Khoo⁴

- 4 Fig. 13 text reads: "Why take and leave less for others to enjoy? Steve D 19/6/21" à "This should not be about human enjoyment!" "We chose not to take one. Charlie 2021" à "Not happy to take one – Suddenly you get swathes with none just like here. 20/6/21" and "people taking trophies makes me despair!"

Sayings / Slogans (transcriptions)

Horns should be worn on, The ones they were born on
leave no trace [while ironically, leaving a trace]
All Animals Matter! Save the Rhinos
One Planet, One Chance

These comments seemed to be “adding” to the artwork, their contribution being something that furthered the message they believed the piece should be sending. During the period of this installation, the Black Lives Matter protests were taking place, along with the rebuttal, All Lives Matter. I mention this to give possible context to the comment “All Animals Matter” cited above.

Outrage/Judgment (of choices made by others)

Horrified by the number taken! We are running out of time to save, not just rhinos, but many, many species
IT'S EXACTLY BECAUSE FAR TOO MANY PEOPLE CHOOSE TO “TAKE” THAT THE PLANET FACES SO MANY CHALLENGES TODAY. I WON'T BE TAKING ONE
What if it was your child or parent? Please let live
There's a lot of uncaring, greedy people who have visited this exhibition. No wonder the world is dying. Own it!
Leave them here don't take one! If you do not only are you thick you are on oxygen thief
You're not meant to take one! (You numpty!) The more we take away... the less beauty there is for others to see

Second only to visitors simply signing and dating and stating that they had not taken a horn (in total opposition to the instruction to sign and date if they did take one), these “moral outrage” comments were the most common type of comments left. Visitors commented assuming they knew (and could tell others) what they were “meant” to do: they wished to condemn the behaviors of others, while making clear that they themselves had made the morally superior choice. This has raised a particular interest for me in seeing if an audience monitoring, policing, and judging itself is a theme which will be repeated in future participatory artworks.

Drawings (Fig. 14)

Drawings were mostly of rhinos, and these often appeared to have been drawn by children. There were also drawings of people. Some faces appeared to express emotions, some were stick people, some appeared to be an avatar of sorts.

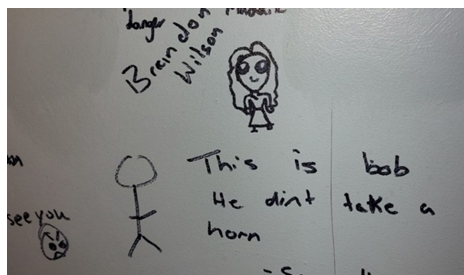


Fig. 14 Drawing on display, photo by Khoo⁵

5 Fig. 14 indicates a stick figure and text reads “This is bob [sic]. He didn’t take a horn.”

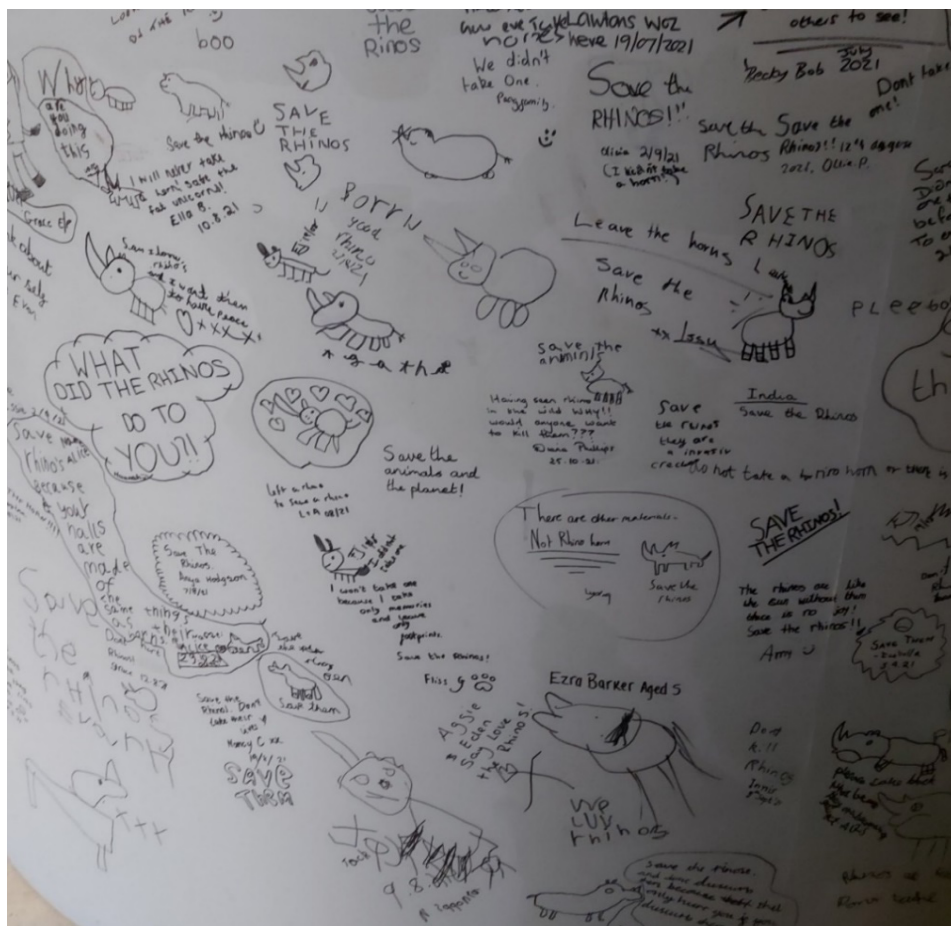


Fig. 15 Drawings on display, photo by Khoo⁶

Inappropriate (as designated by Nunnington Hall)

SS [heart] DD

Who took the horns how would you like me to take your ears

Shoot the hunters not the rhinos

I supplied the hall staff with paint to allow them to cover over any comments they deemed inappropriate. The censored comments fell into three categories: swearing (the property is a family site, and so any language unsuitable for children had to be removed); aggressive (the aim was to create a “safe space” for open discussion on what we knew to be a contentious subject, and the team felt that people wouldn’t make a free choice when faced with aggressive comments about the choices others had made); and irrelevant (social media handles, political slogans irrelevant to the issues of the artwork and the house, declarations of love between initials “BB 4 DP 4EVA” – toilet door graffiti). The censorship job became more difficult as the installation became more heavily interacted with, requiring staff members to inspect the entire installation every few days to identify any comments which they wanted to erase. This raises difficult questions about how we

⁶ Fig. 15 There are several doodles and drawings left in response.

wish visitors to participate, and who holds the final authority in deciding what type of participation is unacceptable.

EMBEDDING EVALUATION

The interim report from Nunnington Hall stated that visitors agreed that the installation gave them better insight into the life of Colonel Fife (87 percent), that the installation made them think about the historical taxidermy in terms of present-day hunting (86 percent), that the installation gave them a better understanding of why the National Trust conserves and displays the skins (88 percent), and that they had found the installation “engaging” (89 percent). This and the positive comments in the visitors’ book were encouraging, but the nature of the short surveys and the limited closed questions highlighted the need for a more meaningful way of understanding visitor responses.

Additionally, these statistics were taken from only 142 respondents. By the end of the installation period, 2,012 porcelain horns had been taken by visitors and more than a thousand comments had been written on the installation, highlighting the need to consider integrating the evaluation of engagement in terms of the ways in which visitors participate with ways of knowing which are not available to standard evaluation methods. Furthermore, we need to consider how we evidence and/or witness affect: although Knell and Whitaker’s Participatory Metrics Report highlights that “Some of the organisations commented that integrating the metrics into the participatory experience ... enables a better experience for participants (Arnolfini) and a better quality of response (Coney)” (Knell & Whitaker, 2016), there is still work to be done.

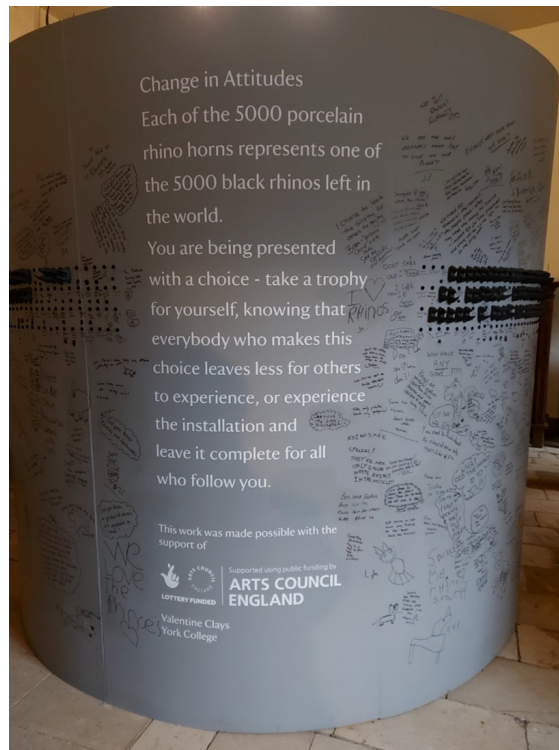


Fig 16. *Change in Attitudes*, Nunnington Hall, North Yorkshire, photo by Khoo

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

A change in perspective that does make a difference is one that focuses on all the rules of the game and not simply on the possibility of joining in the game: it focuses on the power to define what is visible. It is about entering into the contentious territory of what can be seen or said. (Sternfeld, 2013, p.4)

With the entirely unexpected outcome of visitors choosing for themselves how they participated in *Change in Attitudes*, visitor participation went one step further than the ubiquitous “Post-it” wall of feedback in museum spaces. This participation was not what visitors had been invited to do; this was a decision taken by a few, and then followed by many. In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and the difficulties experienced by heritage sites during this time (questions of restricting visitor numbers, managing routes through houses, and staffing issues), responding to this change in participation with enhanced observations and evaluation was not at the forefront of our minds. Instead, the questions raised by these unexpected outcomes have prompted me to pursue new practice-led research with the University of Leeds in a research project entitled “Deeper engagements? The role of public participatory contemporary art installations within heritage sites and collections.” Building on lessons learned and questions raised by the visitor interaction with *Change in Attitudes*, the new participatory artwork *A Virtuous Woman* invites staff and visitors to consider, interpret, respond, and engage with the Noblewomen Embroideries and to reflect on the question of female virtue.

Following Schrag’s approaches to participatory art (Cartiere & Schrag, 2023), I would position my practice in both these participatory artworks most closely with ‘dialogic art,’ though also with elements of ‘sited public art’ and ‘critical approaches.’ The authorship of the *Change in Attitudes* artwork is mostly my own: heritage visitor participants were making a choice and/or a physical interaction with a completed artwork. However, as the authorship was governed by a permitting body (in this instance the National Trust) and a funding body (Arts Council England in the case of *Change in Attitudes*, the Frank Parkinson Scholarship in the case of *A Virtuous Woman*)⁷, these two artworks could not be said to be entirely my own free artistic expression. Furthermore, while visitors to the site were instructed as to how they should participate with the artwork *Change in Attitudes*, that interaction was not closely staffed/ facilitated. The consequent freedom for visitors to make their own decisions as to how to express their response to the work resulted in the most interesting engagements, and developed into visitors taking authorship themselves of this final iteration of the artwork. This could well be in part attributed to the creation of an agonistic approach (Mouffe et al., 2013) and the promotion of a “pro-social conflict” (Cartiere & Schrag, 2023) in what many visitors perceived to be a moral dilemma.

As an artist researcher, I acknowledge that I can never be truly objective in my evaluation of visitor engagement with my own work. However, as the artist, I am able to respond iteratively to participation with my artworks and thus to gain a different way of knowing engagement and experience beyond what is possible through statistical data analysis of visitor feedback. Mindful of the potentially “intrusive presence” both of myself as researcher and of significant others such as staff and other visitors (Mannay, 2016), in the case of *A Virtuous Woman* at National Trust Hardwick Hall I will be evaluating the role of staff and volunteers as participants throughout (Cass, 2015). However, as the artist, I can know what is happening *while* it is happening rather than just *after* it has happened, including by investigating how the artworks themselves can be analyzed during the moment of visitors’ interaction.

⁷ Participation with *A Virtuous Woman* takes place between March and November 2024.

Recognizing my own and the visitors' subjectivity – inevitable in this process of being both artist and evaluator – will still allow for more creative methods of knowing the visitor experience with participation. In the new artwork *A Virtuous Woman* I will consider the questions raised by Joanne Williams' research on the challenges of the term "engagement" and on the issues around evaluating this as an end-destination to be arrived at, and measured against, by assigning value to demonstrable evidence (Williams, 2017). In their case study of the Barbican participation work *Unleashed* (2019), Maia Mackney and Toby Young argue that while traditional methods of evaluation can provide a rigorous starting point, especially in the context of the "evidence agendas" required to satisfy funding bodies, creative methodologies are not only more appropriate, but also provide a deeper level of knowing in participatory work than can be achieved by any other means (Mackney & Young, 2022).

In creating this new participatory art installation, which in providing interpretative responses to Hardwick Hall and its collections through the lens of contemporary societal issues seeks to go beyond traditional heritage interpretation methods in both engagement and evaluation while promoting dialogue and agonism, I hope to find answers to some of the questions raised through participation with *Change in Attitudes*. In so doing, I hope to gain deeper insight into knowing the relationship and the intersections between visitor experience, participatory practice, contemporary art, and heritage narratives.

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