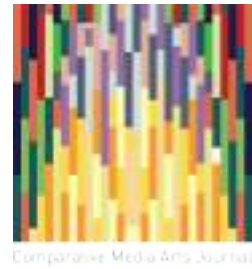


Shadow of the Wall: Immersive Media, ‘Non-Traditional’ Heritage, and Representation Strategies in Historic Cairo

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Abstract

This essay critically analyzes the ways in which immersive media can be used in urban heritage and upgrading projects to enable the artistic representation of heritage through participatory approaches that involve local communities as active participants and serve their needs while also engaging tourists and visitors from the outside. The focus on immersive media, and the participatory approaches they enable, can be understood as a response to the problematic use of street art. Street art such as graffiti and murals has increasingly become associated with urban heritage and upgrading projects that claim to support marginalized communities and help attract tourists to their neighborhoods. The use of street art, however, has been shown to further marginalize and exclude local communities. Through the lens of critical urban theory, this essay problematizes the use of street art in urban heritage sites, then critically explores the alternative use of performance as an immersive medium for the artistic representation of heritage through a close examination of a specific art project, “Shadow of the Wall.” The *Shadow of the Wall* is a performance-based project that took place in the heritage-rich area of al-Khalifa in Historic Cairo and involved the artistic representation of intimate forms of heritage —such as local accounts, urban myths and legends— through immersive storytelling performances. In comparison to street art such as graffiti and murals, this essay argues that



Fig.1

immaterial, ephemeral art forms such as performances provide the possibility for participatory and community-driven approaches to the artistic representation of urban heritage.

Keywords: heritage, immersive media, performance, urban art, production of space

Problematizing Street Art in Urban Spaces and Heritage Sites

Using different artistic strategies to create public art for social causes is not new (Kwon, 2004), neither is the use of heritage for branding cities and countries to visitors from the outside. The use of street art for creative dialogue in heritage sites is a trend that has been developing over the past years as a way of creating more engaging touristic experiences¹. These attempts at using art to attract tourism to heritage sites often tend to hide the complex issues and identities of the people living in these historic areas. This complex interplay between street art, heritage, international tourism, and capital can also lead to the commodification of heritage sites². This is especially troubling in developing countries where, in Egypt for example, some heritage sites are physically fenced off to restrict their access to locals (ElSheshtawy, 2006). To understand how a seemingly subversive form of art such as street art can potentially exoticize local communities and commodify their historic areas, we will first turn to Henri Lefebvre's theory of space.

According to Henri Lefebvre, one of the leading thinkers behind the multi-disciplinary spatial turn in the social sciences, space itself is not a void but a social product of the network of human relations. Every society produces a social space that reflects its values and is designed to maintain existing power dynamics. Space, according to Lefebvre, is produced by three elements: "conceived space," "perceived space," and "lived space." Conceived space refers to how the city is physically constructed and structured, mainly by the governmental, developmental, and technical entities in a society and in ways that consolidate the existing power structures. Perceived space refers to the ways in which individuals and groups of people make sense of, and attribute meaning to the physical space around them. Lived space is the space that people experience, use and appropriate. To Lefebvre, every citizen has "the right to the city" or

¹ See Ogarnia Street in Gdansk for a relevant example of such approach.

² See Eramo, M., (2021) *Wold in a Selfie*, Verso

the right to appropriate public space, but this right is threatened and restricted by the neoliberal, profit-driven system that dominates the modern urban space.

Street art has been seen as a form of spatial resistance through which people attempt to reclaim the city. In this way, street art is considered as an art that contests the existing “conceived space” by tangibly altering urban spaces in ways that defy the governing system that has produced them (Chabbert, 2015). In Egypt, street art such as graffiti and murals gained popularity in the wake of the 2011 revolution (Hamdy, Karl, 2014). In the years that followed, however, the art form has been co-opted and used in several urban art projects claiming to benefit marginalized communities³ and specifically increase women’s participation in the public space. The use of murals and calligraffiti in the upgrading of urban areas through cultural events and festivals is a global phenomenon that has been growing in the last ten years. This phenomenon was first met with enthusiasm and perceived as an artistically subversive way of upgrading the public space due to the popular association of graffiti with the culture of protest. Soon enough, problematic connections were made between the capitalist co-optation of street art culture for the purpose of branding and selling the urban bohemian dream to the rich⁴, contributing to social exclusion rather than inclusion. This paradigm has long been criticized (Merrill, 2021)⁵. Even projects done with the best intentions of serving communities easily succumb to the entanglement of the art market and real estate (Pritchard, 2019).

Due to its extremely politicized character and the strong association with anti-regime protests, there have been relatively few initiatives in Cairo attempting to co-opt murals for the purpose of gentrification. Murals are, however, more commonly used in food joints and TV commercials, and even in those cases they tend to display an astonishingly international style, washed out of any local character. While the links between street art and gentrification in Cairo are few and indirect (Abaza,2015), the links between visual art and gentrification are much more

³ Such as El Seed Mural in El Zabbaleen, Urban Garden Mural by Hitan for the GIZ or The Mozza Mural on the Ringroad.

⁴ “Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district, it goes on until all or most of the original working-class occupiers are displaced, and the whole social character of the district is changed.” is how Ruth Glass who first coined the term defines gentrification.

⁵ The famous street artist Blue repainting his mural in Berlin in protest as it has been used by a real estate agency as a selling point (apartments with a view) is an example how graffiti or street artist see the practice of using their work as unethical and neutralizing the subversive nature of the medium (Merrill, 2021).

pronounced⁶. One of the biggest “independent” art festivals in Egypt is, in fact, sponsored by a prominent real estate company that owns several buildings in Cairo’s downtown and uses them as a strategy to raise the value of the rundown neighborhood. This strategy has led to the eviction of rooftop squatters⁷, after which the company turns their apartments into trendy co-working spaces for upper class Egyptians and airbnbs. In addition to some of its interesting performance projects, it also often sponsors blatantly unreflective works. In 2022, one of its projects featured an installation of photos in an empty rooftop dwelling that had children’s stickers and scraps of torn off posters of football stars on the walls — traces left by the evicted low-income families. Turning these traces into a form of nostalgia is an obscene fetishization of the urban memory of the victims of the neoliberal economy and serves as a testimony to the problematic relationship between site-specific installations and capital.

Furthermore, in 2021 and 2022, two prominent exhibitions took place at the Giza Pyramids —a spectacular heritage site— where sculptural installations of international artists (including world-renowned street artists) were put on display, reflecting a form of implicit appropriation of heritage for the rich upper-class public. The events were marketed using art jargon in foreign languages and offers of exclusive VIP tours, clearly unwelcoming to the average or low-income viewer. This feeling of being disinvited is all too often projected by museums in ways that discourage the general public, and specifically marginalized communities, from accessing cultural events (Raicovic, 2021). Given the complicity of mainstream art in consolidating existing modes of power through the production of neoliberal “conceived space” in central urban areas, the production of “counter-spaces” —spaces most likely to contain a potential for radical change— is unsurprisingly linked by Lefebvre to the peripheries of the city, marginalized groups, and working-class activism.

Given that the urban space is perceived as male-dominated, when it comes to street art and gender dynamics, women and girls are less inclined to engage in art in public and less likely to feel safe enough to express themselves through street art such as graffiti. Looking at the numbers worldwide, more men and boys use graffiti and street art as their medium (Parisi, 2015). Painting women on walls and engaging girls in one-time workshops is unlikely to provide them

⁶ Following perfectly the observation that “(...) art and gentrification go hand-in-glove because gentrification merges the economic value of space with the cultural value of heritage and the arts, mediating these values through the lens of aesthetics and the histories of art and architecture (Zukin, 1991).

⁷ being mostly Cairo’s poorest residents

with a sustainable outlet for their creativity. In light of the widespread culture of urban street harassment, this form of artmaking makes it more difficult for women to participate.

Despite neo-liberalism’s increasingly rapid absorption of difference —described by Lefebvre as “forces of homogenization”— and dilution of the subversive potential in street art, it can still be used to effectively change our “lived space” through participatory involvement of the public (Chabbert, 2015). If the object-related nature of murals makes them marketable and entangled in the production of the commercial promise of the bohemian urban chic, perhaps the artistic media and strategies that defy the rules of the art market through their intrinsic unsellability can offer solutions. Having argued thus far that it is increasingly difficult to enact spatial resistance through object-based street art given its complicity in the reproduction of capitalist spaces, I now propose the use of immaterial, time-based art forms that are inherently unsellable and participatory. This paper is concerned with performance as an art form that defies capitalistic cooptation.

In the next section, I aim to show how immaterial, time-based art forms provide more community-driven approaches to artistic practice, and the means for people to reconfigure the “perceived space” and reshape the urban space for their collective benefit rather than for profit. Even if performance as an event is ephemeral, it is argued that such an immersive experience has a greater lasting potential than street art such as murals and graffiti as it has the possibility of involving the public in the actual production and performance of the work. This possibility, if pursued, changes people from passive consumers of “conceived space” to active producers. This collective action of producing the urban space and understanding the city as a “collective” oeuvre in Lefebvre’s sense,



Fig.2

furtherly supports looking towards performance as a collective experience in comparison to the solitary act of creating graffiti and murals. Lefebvre himself articulates, “Is it really possible to use mural surfaces ... while producing something more than graffiti?” (Lefebvre).

Performance as an Alternative Art Form

Traded in the form of written instructions and documentation, performance as an immaterial time-based work has been notoriously hard to sell, making it loosely bound to the commercial art market (Kino, 2010). The increasingly sophisticated ways to document events through photos and videos failed to solve the problem. Digital media, with ever more perfect ways of creating endless copies, contributed to issues around originality and authorship. The most recent promise of monetizing digital artwork using NFTs has yet to prove itself a viable option (Murray, 2022). The inherent “unsellability” of performance may be one of the reasons why it is an appropriate art form for empowering disadvantaged communities, opposed to appropriating their identity and urban folklore for gentrification or "mummification" of the city spaces⁸. It is often through the narrative of paying homage to the unique identity of local communities and fighting for residents that “early gentrifiers”⁹ justify their artistic projects in marginalized areas. These efforts rarely produce promised results, most often leaving a great entry in the artist's portfolio and the residents alone. In some cases, the projects are hardly even meant for the residents¹⁰ or fail to account for their perspective¹¹. Even approaches consciously aiming at escaping the clutches of the market often repeat the cycle and fail to benefit the communities they claim to represent¹². These are prime examples of the phenomena described by Lefebvre as the neoliberal potential to absorb all other modes of production of space. In

⁸ Term used by Marco d'Eramo very fitting to the Egyptian context.

⁹ “For sociologist Richard E. Ocejo, early gentrifiers tended to 'weave their commitment to the slum into their narrative and [...] new local identity', believing their subsequent involvement in 'community activism' helped 'prevent the neighborhood's total decline'. However, unlike Ocejo's analysis that 'the Lower East Side's early gentrifiers do not mention the unintended consequences of their efforts' (2011:292-3), PAD/D members made their role in the gentrification process explicitly clear, even if they were uncomfortable with it.” (Pritchard, 2019)

¹⁰ The best vantage point to see the whole of the famous mural the French-Tunisian muralist El Seed created in the Zabbaleen area in Cairo is from the middle-class neighborhood of El Moqattam or in the spectacular drone videos online, in the area one can see just the fragments on the houses

¹¹ As brilliantly discussed on the example of South Bronx Sculpture park, a project realized by John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres in Bronx in 1991, a project presenting sculptures of people from the neighborhood, created by the artists working in the area and violently rejected by the residents as misrepresentation (Kwon, 2014)

¹² this process being well exemplified by the efforts of PAD/D collective in NY in the 80's (Pritchard, 2019)
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contrast, since its emergence in the sixties, performance and time-based artworks have been problematic for the art market - being non-object based they prove very hard to collect and sell. Issues related to immateriality plague the digital media, adding the questions around originality and uniqueness ¹³. The question is, can this problem not be a blessing in disguise for projects concerned with heritage and aiming for a community centered approach? Exactly because of their “unsellability,” these approaches might just prove impossible to co-opt by the capital-oriented gentrification processes. They may genuinely support the aim of alternative urban development, in the sense of the citizens rather than capital, through preservation of mixed and low income and local communities.

To explore the role of performance as an art form that potentially empowers marginalized communities, I will begin to discuss a live performance project. “Shadow of the Wall,” that took place in February 2022 in the al-Khalifa area (a dilapidated, heritage-rich neighborhood) of Historic Cairo. The project involved live storytelling performances for the artistic representation of al-Khalifa’s urban heritage. The performances were performed by the storyteller Chrine ElAnsary and the author (Fig. 2, 3, 6 and 7). In discussing the project, I aim to address the question of *how* performance as an immersive, time-based art form facilitates

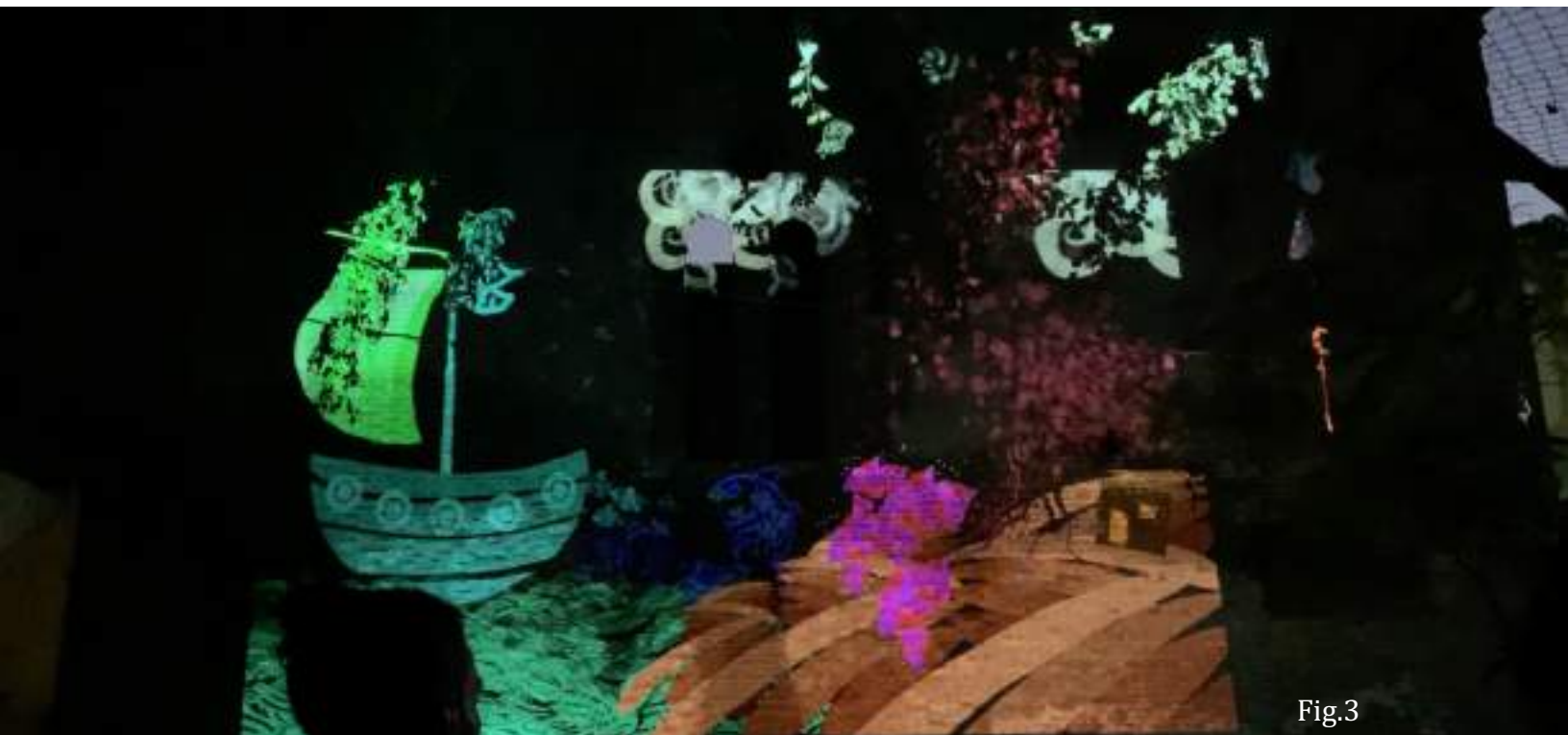


Fig.3

¹³ recently promised a solution in form of the NFTs

community-driven, participatory approaches to heritage representation in comparison to other forms of street art such as murals and graffiti. How can performance — both the production process and the performance itself— involve local communities without fetishizing or further marginalizing them while also meaningfully engaging visitors? How can performance as an immaterial medium avoid falling into the trap of selling out and instead contribute to the production of “counter-spaces” (in the sense of Henri Lefebvre’s framework of production of space)? Do immersive media really have the potential to empower local communities, specifically women? And, if so, then how?

To start with, the *Shadow of the Wall* project was concerned with two challenges in relation to art and urban heritage in marginalized areas such as al-Khalifa: 1) the common tendency for artistic projects to fetishize the lived experiences and aesthetics of people living in the historic areas of Cairo while also bringing them little to no value and sometimes even implicitly excluding them as audience¹⁴; and 2) reduced participation of women in urban space. Despite how traditional areas, through their tight alleys, semi-public spaces and close-knit communities, often offer more space for girls to move freely, this often changes with age. Women’s use of public space or engagement in artistic activities outdoors is rare, and already teenage girls tend to spend much less time outdoors than boys (Stiewe, 2007). Keeping these concerns in mind, I will begin to discuss the details of the project in the following sub-sections.

Shadow of the Wall: Setting the Scene

In February 2022, two visual performances took place in the historical backdrop of Fatma Khatun Mausoleum’s courtyard in the al-Khalifa area¹⁵. The courtyard was relatively small and secluded, with only a curved, narrow alleyway connecting it to the main street of the area, al Ashraf Street. The buildings around it were in ruins. Fenced off, protected heritage sites are commonly located next to old and dilapidated buildings inhabited by the area’s local residents. Many of these buildings are supported by makeshift measures that the locals take since

¹⁴ “Nostalgia narratives (...) weave new-found “personal experiences” into an area’s supposedly gritty past, ethnic and cultural diversity, and creativity and creative production” using these to “museumify” the lives of those who have already been and continue to be dispossessed” (Pritchard, 2017)

¹⁵ The area is privileged by its religious significance, its funerary function, and the historic imperial mausoleums. Considering its dense population and the dilapidated status from which the two Mamluk complexes have suffered, prompt action should be taken for a twofold purpose: to restore the missing parts of the cultural heritage as well as to encourage the residents to maintain it and raise their living standard at the same time. (Hassan, N, 2019)

they are often unable to obtain permits to renovate their houses (Wahdan, 2019). The co-existence of historical sites that bear witness to Cairo's greatest glory with some of its poorest dwellings showcases the paradox of Cairo's complex history and modern urban crisis and pays homage to the resilience of its people and culture. The performance celebrated both the historical and lived heritage of the area. The stories performed by Chirine ElAnsary included three different stories that weaved together historical legends with contemporary accounts such as personal stories, anecdotes and life events seen through the prism of local legends and anchored in the monuments and shrines of the area. They were performed in the total darkness of the courtyard, with the projection being the only source of light, creating a moment of magic suspended in time. The courtyard, situated between the historic building and the locals' small houses, reflects an ongoing negotiation between history and the present, the public and the private. The words were accompanied by live animations and drawings that took the viewers on a journey characterized by the blend between forms of old storytelling and digital technology.

The project's inception was influenced by traditional storytelling, the Egyptian Shadow Theater (discussed later on), and the Legends of the Cretan Woman's House¹⁶ — all providing visual language inspiration for the performances. Previously, these visual sources had inspired several murals in the area, ranging from the Noah's Ark mural which included Abdelrahman Abdou's copper plate design (Fig. 4) to murals on the walls of a cafe (a traditionally male-dominated setting) depicting contemporary local scenes featuring women drawn by the author, to augmented reality murals inspired by a variety of visual sources, all becoming a point of interest for tourists (Michalczyk, 2022). However, given that traditional street art like murals has come under a lot of scrutiny due to its complicated relationship with capital and complicity in gentrification, together with the close-by Al Moaz Street serving as a warning in the form of a sanitized open-air museum with local residents pushed out, doubts appeared as to the real usefulness of such projects.

¹⁶ a book with stories from the area collected by John Gayer Anderson, a British officer living in the historic house that later became the Gayer Anderson Museum and illustrated on a series of copper plates by a local artist Abdelrahman Abdu in 1896

Oral History and Collective Storytelling

In developing the storytelling experiences, several aspects needed to be addressed: the complexity of the site, the stories developed in the workshop based on real life events of the participating local women (discussed below), and the social relations and power dynamics involved in performing in someone's courtyard and attracting public from outside the area and of different social classes. Addressing these aspects in a way that reconciles the artistic vision and the usefulness for the people was not an easy feat. This dilemma is something that many socially conscious projects face, as navigating artistic aspirations and community needs is a difficult undertaking as discussed by Claire Bishop (2012) and Miwon Kwon (2004). In attempt to reconcile these issues, the architectural, narrative and visual heritage of the place were considered in designing the experience. These kinds of heritage were drawn from the visual sources previously mentioned, and more importantly, the stories told by the women from the area and developed during a storytelling workshop with Chirine ElAnsary — these stories created the storyline of the performance.

The stories were not only collected but also developed in a participatory process with the local women. This ensures that they are told in a way that gives the women the control over what and how is told. This is vital given that the audience members might know the authors and



Fig.4

events told, so the privacy and respect are crucial and the storyteller becomes a symbolic proxy of the actual storyteller. The topics and reasons for telling the stories and touching on the themes deemed important by the tellers are granted with issues such as access of girls to the public space, education and work as means to achieving independence in life featured prominently. The process of developing the stories in an intimate group setting over several sessions made it easy to open up and work in a safe and encouraging way. This created an environment of trust but also a genuinely empowering and sustainable method for creative expression in the future that has actually been used by the participants after the workshop ended.

The emphasis on the oral history and stories told and retold at times over several generations celebrates the transformational power of oral heritage and memory and reconstruction of the places as remembered. Given the performative character of the event, that was not only extracting the stories from the local women but engaging them throughout the process and performance itself, I argue a powerful instance of co-production of counter-space was created and clearly perceived by the local women as such, the taking ownership of the public space that in general is dominated by the men altered the “perceived space”.

Bringing Traditional and New Media Art Forms

The link between public performance and popular classes in Egypt and the region is certainly not a new phenomenon and Shadow of the Wall, in the conception of the event, heavily relied on restaging in new media forms a very old tradition, such as Shadow Theater, as several others projects did (Ugur, Fatih, Nezih, 2000). Shadow Theater (Khayal al Zill) is a performance form with a long tradition in Egypt. German orientalist Paul Kahle cited sources about Salah al Din himself enjoying a performance with a guest¹⁷. As an art form, it creates a bridge between high culture and popular culture. Khayal al Zill performances were held at court as a way of entertainment. Relying on stories being passed on orally, it left performers ample freedom to alternate the texts (Sai, 2012). Starting out as a form of high-class entertainment, it went on to be performed in the streets and cafes, using colloquial language to address the broader public. It also involved the participation of women as shadow players, as Baker Al-Sheddi writes. Through its narrative freedom, the Shadow Theatre continued to appeal to the common viewer and gave

¹⁷ their subsequent conversation being a proof of the high stage of the development of the art at the time and the fact that the topics presented did not only focus on light and satirical content but also more serious, historical and religious (Al-Sheddi,1998).

space for the expression of pressing social and political concerns. The loss of popularity of the Shadow Theater in the 17th century and onwards contributed to the rise in popularity of the Turkish puppet and glove theater, being easier to mount and perform as well as the disregard of indigenous folk traditions by the upper classes of society motivated by the desire to emulate the European art in the middle of 19th century¹⁸.

The use of this traditional art form, which is familiar in the al-Khalifa area, enabled the local residents to be engaged without feeling estranged. Keeping alive the local narratives inspired by urban legends and local personalities rather than high history through oral accounts, storytelling and using visuals people are familiar with was an approach inspired by the success of the project *Sundug al A'agab*¹⁹. It saw a group of artists recreate a traditional Wonderbox - where viewers could flip through images accompanied by the telling of a story. This show has toured popular areas of Cairo and brought together performing and visual artists.



Fig.5

¹⁸ Shadow theater - social tensions in the arts. High (imported) culture vs local.

Further on in his text Wannus can only report how the official. Arab culture that has dealt with shadow theatre, has declared its disgust with such a brazen, foul-mouthed and obscene form of art, and have purged, in all ways, even the little it has attempted to preserve and transmit of the texts from all their deviant elements. Distorting, mutilating, relegating them to a dusty shrine of the academy (Sai, F.,2012).

¹⁹ A reportage about the project can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUyEpluI-WM>
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Performance and the “Experience Economy”

Time-based media such as performance use historical sites and public spaces, but they do not imply lasting changes that could potentially change these places’ value or encourage their gentrification. Performances create moments of connection and exchange between and among the participants and visitors. In that sense, performances create an ‘experience’. Of course, the discourse surrounding the creation of heritage shows solely for the benefit of tourists and the commercialization of experiences — referred to as the “experience economy”— cannot be ignored in a discussion about the role of performance in community empowerment.

Jenny Kidd and Alke Gröppel-Wegener brilliantly discuss the dangers of immersive experiences in flattening complex social realities and packaging them in banal, easily digestible form for the benefit of the viewers. To understand the difference between this and *Shadow of the Wall*, I believe it is helpful to look at the example of Davydd Greenwood’s research on *alarde* in the Basque town of Fuenterrabia²⁰. He differentiates between performance as a practice that is socially meaningful for the performing community, and performance as a show put on for the benefit of the external visitors. In the case of *Shadow of the Wall*, given the involvement of the local women in developing the stories (during the workshop) as well as their repeated attendance of the show with their families, I argue that the performances bear inherent meaning to the local participants and involves them as their primary recipients despite the outside public being present.

Moving Beyond *Shadow of the Wall*

There are several suggestions for how an experience such as the *Shadow of the Wall* experience can be further improved upon. One of the first suggestions relates to the creation of



²⁰ cited in Sharon Macdonald’s *Memorylands*

possibilities for the public to interact with the architecture around them. Relational architecture projects such as the ones by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer²¹ or projection mapping and movement responsive software such as Touch Designer offer another direction through more specific relation to the architecture and provide examples for ways to involve the public as co-creators and active participants of the artistic experience through motion responsive graphics or sound installations that cause real-time change in the setup of the artwork through viewer interaction, potentially opening up new opportunities for creative expression and collaborative creation²².

Another suggestion being proposed is to combine the use of immersive digital media with public performance. In historic settings, the use of digital media could potentially facilitate clearer, more engaging connections between the past and the present by providing various strategies for the reframing, retelling and reenactment of historical narratives and stories. A great example of this is the Kaya Behkalam's AR experience, *Seeing History - the Augmented Archive*²³. It is a digitally mediated Cairo tour that allows participants to discover hidden contents. It demonstrates the unprecedented potential for mixed reality projects to create immersive environments and offer direct participation in history. Mixed reality projects could also provide the ability to defy censorship and memorialize and showcase alternative historical narratives as opposed to the official 'authorized heritage discourse' (Smith, 2006).

Conclusion

The questions of whose heritage is protected, and for whom, are largely reflected in art projects as they represent the power dynamics of negotiating who decides what is valuable²⁴, whose historical objects are valued and how, and to whom these objects are made accessible. Bigger funds are being spent on exclusive art projects that target rich tourists and end up art washing urban injustice, with relatively few projects concerned with closing the gap. Real

²¹ 'Displaced Emperors' by Lozano-Hemmer was set up at the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz Austria in 1997 and is part of his Relational Architecture series. "The visitor entering and actualizing the art project with his or her bodily act of widescreen-like projection via the sensors marks the scale between individual and history, the body and the urban, a living now and an ephemeral eternity." (Björgvinsson, E. and Hansen, A. H., 2011)

²² "The visitor entering and actualizing the art project with his or her bodily act of widescreen-like projection via the sensors marks the scale between individual and history, the body and the urban, a living now and an ephemeral eternity." (Björgvinsson, E. and Hansen, A. H., 2011)

²³ <http://augmented-archive.net>

²⁴ The idea of the heritage, identity and ownership discussed in (Ashworth and Turnbridge, 2000).

representation starts with projects that genuinely aim to listen to and involve local residents and improve their access to heritage without erasing their history.

Shadow of the Wall created an artistic experience deeply grounded in the history and urban heritage of the al-Khalifa area as understood primarily by its local communities, as well as through historical texts and visual sources. Instead of capitalizing on the locals' stories and lived experiences in an extractive manner, the project's immersive storytelling performances were developed using participatory and community-driven approaches that involved local women as active participants and enabled them to learn new artistic skills that they continued to use beyond the project. At the same time, *Shadow of the Wall* was engaging to visitors and tourists who were unfamiliar with the area and its heritage, helping attract more people to the neighborhood without excluding or fetishizing local residents. Furthermore, the use of new media arts to reinvent traditional art forms, the weaving together of stories from various sources, and the co-production of alternative spaces through immersive media such as performance, all received a positive response from both locals and visitors. However, the impact of such projects in terms of whether they enhance women's participation in public art and increase public access to heritage in a sustainable manner is yet to be seen.



Fig.8

In the age of the metaverse, through immersive and digital media, this access could be offered virtually without endangering fragile sites through touristic traffic or physical intervention in urban structures. Meaningful alterations, however, can still benefit the local residents by creating spaces for social use that encourage connection with the past and between and among people. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic forced the worldwide shutdown of tourism, we are forced to radically reconsider alternatives to the mainstream mass consumption of heritage, ones that are slower, more mindful, and minimalistic. The use of performance and time-based installations seem to offer the radical potential of bringing people together to negotiate and represent their urban heritage through participatory, community-driven artistic approaches, enabling them to reconfigure their “perceived space” and together co-produce “lived spaces.”

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Figure 1.

A drawing by the author exploring the forms of the puppets from Paul Kahle’s collection.

Figure 2., 3., 6., 7.

Documentation photos from the Shadow of the Wall performance taken by the author.

Figure 4.

Before and after photos of the mural Noah’s Ark implemented in al Khalifa.

Figure 5.

Image from the video published by Medrar TV's feature about the Wonder Box Project (reproduced with permission).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUyEpluI-WM>

About the Author

Agnes Michalczyk is as a visual artist and educator living and working between Cairo and Europe. Graduated from Academy of Visual Arts in Leipzig she currently teaches at the Faculty of Applied Sciences and Arts at the German University in Cairo.

Her work is exploring the urban space of Cairo through female perspective focusing on the city and its narratives, real or imagined. She works in variety of media, painting, drawing and collage, between 2012-2016 mainly focusing on Street Art and since 2014 working in digital media, contributing to different art projects in Cairo and abroad. Agnes is currently pursuing her doctoral research: on immersive media and heritage in historic at Freie Universität Berlin and The University of Edinburgh.