

Institution: Royal Holloway, University of London		
Unit of Assessment: 33. Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies		
Title of case study: Innovating the staging and curation of difficult pasts in museums		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013-2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Bryce Lease	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Reader in Theatre & Performance Studies	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2013-2020
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2018-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Dr Lease's research has developed new approaches to curating and staging historical narratives and objects in major, publicly funded museums in Poland and Argentina. Many museums have turned to theatre to engage visitors and enhance exhibitions, but sensitivities associated with representing difficult pasts and anti-theatrical prejudices have been a major obstacle for Polish and Argentinean museums adopting new approaches to their collections. By advising curators and theatre-makers, Lease's research has inspired new collaborations between theatre-makers and museums, generating innovations in museum curation; enhanced and diversified the visitor experience, enabling different publics to encounter difficult pasts in museums; and led to lasting changes in the curation of objects and exhibitions.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Museums are exploring how to transform their traditional roles as keepers of historical objects and cultural narratives, in order to attract new generations of visitors and to remain relevant in a globalised world. To become more immersive places, museums are engaging visitors at an affective level by employing theatre and performance. Yet collaborations between theatre makers and history museums are limited in many countries, and curators often remain apprehensive about employing theatrical strategies. This is particularly heightened in museums that address the Holocaust in Eastern Europe or Argentina's 'Dirty War'. Lease's research evaluated anti-theatrical prejudices in museum practices and explored theatre and theatricality as key modes of innovating the contemporary museum curation of difficult pasts (R1).</p> <p>Lease's research in Poland analysed how theatre and performance can extend memory into the public sphere beyond traditional approaches to museum display. In museums, he investigated the ethical concerns of curators about theatrical representations, and evaluated which theatrical and performative strategies 'extend' public memory of shared history and which 'collapse' it through exclusive or racist narratives and embodied experiences (R1). In theatre, his research analysed staging techniques used to represent Polish/Jewish relations across the twentieth century, specifically in relation to the Holocaust. This expertise led director Yana Ross to invite Lease to Vilnius to collaborate in a dramaturgical capacity for her production of <i>Nasza klasa</i> (Our Class) at the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre in 2013. This collaboration resulted in R2, where his discussion of Polish/Jewish and Holocaust histories extended to Lithuanian contexts and deepened his argument that theatre could produce narratives of <i>shared</i> rather than nationalistic history. Lease brought these two strands of his research together in his monograph, <i>After '89</i>, where he proposed modes of rethinking commemorative practices in Poland that move away from hierarchies of suffering or identifications with victimhood (R3). He argued that historical and memorial museums can use theatricality in an ethical way to engage visitors as active and critical interpreters of difficult pasts. Lease developed the term 'commemorative extension' to conceptualise this way of bringing together memory and history, site and memorial, and theatricality and visitor agency in an effort to extend memory across multiple ethnic groups (R1, R3).</p>		

Lease's research on inclusive, pluralistic and democratic approaches to commemoration informed his AHRC-funded project, 'Staging Difficult Pasts: Of Narratives, Objects and Public Memory'. The project included the first research collaboration between the Cricoteka and the Kraków Ethnographic Museum, and the transnational Polish-Argentinian collaboration at ESMA Memory Museum in Buenos Aires and Parque de la Memoria. The research led to co-production and co-curation with museums in Poland and Argentina, finding new ways to use theatre and theatrical strategies to frame the histories and memories of authoritarianism, fascism, and communism (R4 & R5). Insights from the project have been presented in workshops including in collaboration with the Imperial War Museum.

3. References to the research

R1: Lease, B. 'Shared Histories and Commemorative Extension: Warsaw's POLIN Museum', *Theatre Journal*, 69.3 (2017), pp. 383-401. DOI: [10.1353/tj.2017.0047](https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2017.0047). Double peer-reviewed article in leading journal.

R2: Lease, B. 'Theatre as Action, Dramaturgy as *Streben*: Cultural Confrontations at Lithuania's National Drama Theatre,' *The Drama Review*, 59.1 (2015), pp. 119-135. DOI: [10.1162/DRAM_a_00432](https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00432). This research was funded by the SCUDD David Bradby Award for Research in European Theatre. Double peer-reviewed article in leading journal.

R3: Lease, B. *After '89: Polish Theatre and the Political*, Theatre: Theory – Practice – Performance Series, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2016. Double peer-reviewed monograph. Available from HEI on Request.

External Funding Supporting the Research & Impact Activity

R4: Lease, B. (Principal Investigator). AHRC Standard Grant, 'Staging Difficult Pasts: Of Narratives, Objects and Public Memory', 2018-2021. Total budget: GBP495,735. Grant reference: AH/R006849/1. Project team includes Co-Is Maria Delgado (RCSSD) and Michal Kobińska (Minnesota), PDRA Cecilia Sosa (RHUL).

R5: Lease, B. Global Challenges Research Fund – Follow-On Impact Funding. ESMA Memory Museum, Buenos Aires, Argentina. 2019. GBP4985.

4. Details of the impact

Museums in contexts where the recent past has been particularly difficult have often struggled to find inclusive ways to represent their collections and animate their histories. Although theatre is widely used to represent the past in the heritage sector, it is rarely used in museums dealing with difficult pasts. This is due to the perceived risk of perpetuating nationalistic and exclusionary narratives. Lease's research in Poland and Argentina addressed this problem head-on, finding new ways for people with different affiliations, ethnicities, and cultural memories to engage with and commemorate difficult pasts, and introducing new theatrical strategies into museum curation in sensitive contexts. The primary beneficiaries of the research are museum curators and theatre-makers with whom Lease co-created workshops, exhibitions and performances. It also benefits cultural institutions, their visitors and the wider public.

Lease's research has (i) inspired new collaborations between theatre-makers and museum curators, generating innovations in museum curation and cultural production; (ii) enhanced and diversified the visitor experience at museums of difficult pasts by prompting deeper levels of empathy with historical narratives, objects and sites; (iii) gave new insights into museum collections, leading to lasting changes in the curation of objects and exhibitions; and (iv) informed new approaches to curation in cultural organisations more widely, changing mindsets on how museums can stage difficult pasts.

(i) Inspired new collaborations between theatre-makers and museum curators, generating innovations in museum curation and cultural production

Museum curators face particularly complex challenges in curating collections related to difficult pasts. In Poland, Holocaust memory is often fraught, confrontational and competitive, involving the attribution of blame; museums are typically dominated by nationalistic and/or ethnographic narratives. Working with curators at the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków, Lease initiated collaborations with performance artists as a way of moving their curated objects out of problematic framings. This was evident in the exhibition 'Widok z za bliska. Inne obrazy Zagłady' (Terribly close: Polish Vernacular Artists Face the Holocaust), which opened at the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków in December 2018, showcasing how local artists in Poland attempted to

represent the events they witnessed during World War II. Lease proposed a collaboration with the Cricoteka (a museum dedicated to the work of Tadeusz Kantor) that would offer a new mode of exhibiting the objects by placing them in a theatrical frame in order to work with the concept of 'commemorative extension'. The curators selected an object from the exhibition, a wooden toy in the form of a truck, described as 'truposznica', representing the corpse carrier used to transport the dead Jewish bodies that had been gassed to be cremated. Lease commissioned workshops with a member of the Cricot 2 theatre company (Ludmiła Ryba) and collaborated with Polish artist Wojtek Ziemilski to create a commemorative performance action, which consisted of a public procession transporting the 'truposznica' from the Ethnographic Museum to the Cricoteka.

Collaborating on this project with museum curators, [text removed for publication] found that '[text removed for publication]' (E1). [text removed for publication], who had been highly sceptical of participatory theatre in museums, noted the profound impact this work had on her curation practices at the Ethnographic Museum. [text removed for publication]' (E2).

Lease's advocacy of performance in museum curation has had a similar impact in Argentina. In Buenos Aires, curators at the ESMA Site of Memory Museum (a museum dedicated to victims of the 'Dirty War') have struggled to find appropriate ways to curate a room connected to the memory of perpetrators. The museum is on a site that was used as an illegal, secret detention and torture centre during Argentina's 1976-83 military dictatorship, and is considered one of the most significant museums in the world to 'stage' difficult pasts and engage with fundamental questions regarding human rights. Given the challenge of curating the perpetrator's gaze, Lease proposed theatrical and performative means to curate the space and introduced Wojtek Ziemilski to an artistic residency at ESMA Museum, which culminated in a public performance on 30 November 2019. This was the first time theatrical performance has taken place on this site, and required the approval of twenty-one members of the board, which includes human rights groups and NGOs directly connected to those detained, tortured and murdered in ESMA. In an interview with one of Argentina's leading newspapers *Página 12*, the museum's Director Alejandra Naftal said: *'In this space where five thousand men and women disappeared, we are facing a challenge. This performance is a risk that also enables us to rethink and be better.'* On the Museum's Facebook page she further wrote, *'We took the challenge of making this performance intervention which created a completely new way of thinking about what happened in this building and what happens in our environment'* (E3).

(ii) Enhanced and diversified the visitor experience at museums of difficult pasts by prompting deeper levels of empathy with historical narratives, objects and sites

Lease's research has changed the nature of the visitor experience in relation to museums of difficult pasts, moving away from the contemplation of objects to a relationship involving performative engagement and historical implication. This has enabled artefacts to be presented to more diverse audiences, allowing people with different affiliations, ethnicities and cultural memories to engage with and commemorate difficult pasts. In Kraków, the public performance moving the 'truposznica' from the Ethnographic Museum to the Cricoteka involved over 120 participants outside the museum walls. Many more members of the public (estimated 350) saw the performance, and over 50 participants attended a public forum in the Cricoteka following the performance to learn more about the object. [text removed for publication] at the Ethnographic Museum, [text removed for publication], noted that the performance was the first time she felt she '[text removed for publication]' of Holocaust memory in the city with non-Jewish local residents [text removed for publication], (E2). Lease's work thus enabled diverse audiences (Polish and non-Polish, Jewish and non-Jewish) to come together in a performance of commemoration that worked beyond hierarchies of suffering engrained in public memory of the Holocaust in Kraków.

In Buenos Aires, the innovations in theatrical and performative modes of curation at the ESMA Museum have enabled its collections to reach new audiences. The performance on 30 November 2019 was attended by over 200 audience members, more than half of whom had never visited the site before. It was reviewed in the newspaper *Página 12* (E4). Audience member and renowned theatre director Rubén Szuchmacher told *Página 12*: *'Until this*

experience, because I had a family that was a victim of the work of the perpetrators, I could never enter the former ESMA. This experience was very mobilizing' (E4). Adriana Suzaly Néstor Fuentes, a survivor of ESMA, commented: 'This presents a before-and-after of what is now possible to do in this space' (E5).

(iii) Given new insights into museum collections, leading to lasting changes in the curation of objects and exhibitions

Lease's research into theatrical strategies in museums of difficult pasts has led curators to gain new insights into their collections and museum spaces, leading to lasting changes in the curation of objects and exhibitions. In Kraków, following the public performance moving the 'truposznica' from the Ethnographic Museum to the Cricoteka, [text removed for publication], [text removed for publication] Cricoteka, added this object to the museum's permanent exhibition. This was the first time a non-Kantor object was displayed in the gallery, and thus changed the way the institution curates and understands its museum space (E6). [text removed for publication]' (E6).

The Cricoteka then used the documentation of this performance action and the changed permanent exhibition to represent themselves at Kraków Art Week KRAKERS (12 April – 6 May 2019) in a new exhibition 'Skok Pamięciowy' (Memory Leap). The curators who had attended the workshops with theatre-maker Ludmiła Ryba (organised by Lease) displayed the copies of the 'truposznica' that Ziemilski created for the performance beside Kantor's 'Kołyska mechaniczna' (The Mechanical Cradle). This has changed the institution's curation of Kantor's Bio-Objects and more explicitly linked his work to Holocaust memory (E7). [text removed for publication] named the collaboration with 'Staging Difficult Pasts' as one of their significant public initiatives in their successful application for annual public funding from the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage in 2020 (E6).

In Buenos Aires, the November 2019 performance at the ESMA Site of Memory Museum changed the curatorial script of the museum, leading to permanent documentary material of the performance in the exhibition. Curator Alejandra Naftal commissioned two films of Ziemilski's performance that are shown once a month in the museum as part of the permanent exhibition, and the concept was then applied to digital space when members of the 'Staging Difficult Pasts' team (Delgado and Sosa) curated a further performance online for the museum during Argentina's Covid-19 lockdown in July 2020.

(i) Enhanced approaches to curation in cultural organisations more widely, changing mindsets on how museums can stage difficult pasts

The approaches pioneered in Lease's 'Staging Difficult Pasts' project have influenced wider practices of curation in cultural organisations. Beneficiaries have included Parque de la Memoria Buenos Aires, a memorial to the victims of the 1976–83 military regime during the Dirty War, a period of unprecedented state-sponsored violence in Argentina. Lease and PDRA Cecilia Sosa worked with Joanne Rosenthal, Chief Curator and Head of Exhibitions at the Jewish Museum London until 2018, to develop a workshop with curators, artists, and human-rights organisations that explored the performative and theatrical curation of absence, trauma, and loss in public museums through spectatorial positioning to and encounters with objects, visual narratives on controversial themes. Florencia Battiti, Chief Curator at Parque, wrote that participants commented on *'its originality and the way in which it triggered new ways of thinking about traumatic past exhibitions'*. She further commented: *'From a curatorial perspective, the workshop led me to think that it is very important to expose oneself in the public sphere, to try to put the focus on themes that are out of common knowledge and to take risks by addressing difficult problems which might be even "taboo" for the society in which one is inserted'* (E8). Marcelo Brodsky, a member of Parque's board, commented that as a result of the workshop he would be *'more risky'* in his programming of public art works dealing with memory of difficult pasts in their exhibition space (E8). This change of attitude led to Holocaust survivor [text removed for publication], who attended the workshop at Parque, to share two pots that her mother had kept from Auschwitz-Birkenau and Mauthausen concentration camps with the new Holocaust Museum in Buenos Aires (opened one week after the workshop in December 2019) (E9).

The research developed in 'Staging Difficult Pasts' led to a commission to curate an online workshop on 5-6 October 2020 for the Second World War and Holocaust Partnership Programme (SWWHP), led by Imperial War Museums (IWM) and funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). [text removed for publication] asked Lease to share with their eight museum and university Partners insights into artistic approaches developed in Kraków (moving an object from a museal to a theatrical frame) and Buenos Aires (performative forms of curating difficult spaces) that would help them to engage diverse audiences across the UK with local, often hidden stories related to significant and difficult histories. 27 museum curators and education officers participated from the following organisations: Imperial War Museum, Manchester Jewish Museum, the National Holocaust Centre and Museum, Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums, the Museum of Cornish Life at Helston and Bodmin Keep Army Museum, The Highlanders' Museum, Holocaust Survivors' Friendship Association, and National Museums Northern Ireland. [text removed for publication] wrote '[text removed for publication]' (E10).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

E1: Interview with Polish artist [text removed for publication], attesting to the impact of his collaboration with Bryce Lease, Royal Holloway University of London, in the research project 'Staging Difficult Pasts', 23 February 2019. Available from HEI on Request.

E2: Interview with [text removed for publication] exhibition 'Terribly Close' at the Ethnographic Museum, Poland, attesting to the impact of her collaboration with Bryce Lease, Royal Holloway, University of London, in the research project 'Staging Difficult Pasts', 2 March 2019.

E3: Alejandra Naftal, 'Se realizó la última Visita de las Cinco del año - Pasados conflictivos en escena', report from the ESMA Museum published regarding the research project 'Staging Difficult Pasts', led by Bryce Lease, Royal Holloway, University of London, shared on the official Facebook page and sent as an email on their mailing list, 2 December 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/SitiodeMemoriaESMA/posts/1961387614007904>

E4: Article about Polish artist Wojtek Ziemilski's public performance at the ESMA Museum in collaboration with 'Staging Difficult Pasts', by Diego Fernández Romeral, 'Las formas de mirar el terror', *Página 12*, 2 December 2019, <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/234152-las-formas-de-mirar-el-terror>

E5: Feedback from Adriana Suzaly Néstor Fuentes, a survivor of ESMA, filmed in Ziemilski's post-performance discussion, ESMA Museum, 30 November 2019. <http://stagingdifficultpasts.org/esma.html>

E6: Letter of Support from [text removed for publication] Cricoteka, attesting to the institutional impact of their collaboration with Bryce Lease, in 'Staging Difficult Pasts', 01 June 2020.

E7: Cricoteka's curatorial script for the exhibition 'Skok Pamięciowy/Memory Leap', 12 April 2019. <http://stagingdifficultpasts.org/leap-of-memory.html>

E8: Feedback on the workshop, 'Exhibiting absence and loss: objects, narratives and trauma' led by Joanne Rosenthal, curated by Bryce Lease, 23 November 2019, from Florencia Battiti, Chief Curator of Parque de la Memoria, and Marcelo Brodsky, Board Member Parque de la Memoria. <https://stagingdifficultpasts.org/joanne-rosenthal.html>

E9: Feedback from [text removed for publication], Auschwitz survivor who attended the workshop 'Exhibiting absence and loss: objects, narratives and trauma' led by Joanne Rosenthal, curated by Bryce Lease, 23 November 2019. Available from HEI on Request.

E10: Letter of Support from [text removed for publication] of 'The Second World War and Holocaust Partnership Programme' (SWWHP), led by Imperial War Museums (IWM) and funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), attesting to the impact of Lease's workshop for 8 museum partners attended by 27 museum curators and education officers, 6 November 2020.