



The synesthetic power of sound in exhibition design: From sound as trigger to sound as interpreter

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Keywords:

Exhibition Design, Museum Studies, Narration, Soundscapes, Multisensory Spaces.

ABSTRACT:

Museums and exhibitions are increasingly becoming places of narration. The design of their exhibition systems implies not only “displaying” but rather developing a “participatory planning that generates shared and sharable culture”. This proposal starts from the central premise that exhibition design must intercept and activate the *perceptual capacities of our senses*. Our contemporary world is increasingly inclined to an obsessive spectacularization of images; storytelling, however, is based on listening by its very nature. It is inherently auditory, even before being visual. In the sphere of exhibition design, combining sound and sight means enhancing the capacity of environments and artefacts to enter into *sympiotic resonance* with visitors, triggering a *synaesthetic condition* in which a new sense, unconsciously called into play, activates different experiential levels, involves the other senses, and generates *perceptual concatenations*. Specifically, through the analysis of some paradigmatic case studies, this article aims to explore what happens when sound interacts with exhibition content, bringing it to life, and to examine the curatorial approaches and the methodological and operational choices that underpin them. Here, sound acts as a catalyst or accompaniment, ultimately becoming the interpreter of the narrative, thus fulfilling the dual role of both content and narrative and participatory tool.

Musei e mostre sono sempre più luoghi di narrazione. La risoluzione dei loro sistemi allestitivi non si attua soltanto nel “mettere in mostra”, quanto nello svilupparsi come “progettualità partecipata che genera cultura condivisa e condivisibile”. Questo contributo muove dall’assunto principale che l’allestimento deve saper intercettare, attivandole, le *capacità percettive dei nostri sensi*. Il nostro mondo contemporaneo è sempre più incline a una spettacolarizzazione ossessiva delle immagini; la narrazione, invece, si basa per sua stessa natura sull’ascolto. È intrinsecamente uditiva, prima ancora che visiva. Nell’ambito dell’allestimento espositivo, affiancare il suono alla vista significa, dunque, potenziare straordinariamente la capacità degli ambienti e degli oggetti di entrare in *risonanza simbiotica* con i visitatori, innescando una *condizione sinestetica*, dove un nuovo senso, inconsciamente chiamato in gioco, attiva livelli esperienziali diversi e coinvolge gli altri quattro, generando *concatenamenti percettivi*. In particolare, questo contributo intende esplorare, attraverso l’analisi di alcuni casi studio paradigmatici, cosa accade quando il suono intercetta i contenuti allestitivi e li anima, per verificarne gli approcci curatoriali e le scelte metodologiche e operative. Ecco, allora, che il suono agisce come innesco o accompagnamento, fino a diventare l’interprete stesso della narrazione, generando il duplice ruolo di contenuto e di strumento narrativo e partecipativo.

Opening Picture:

Migliore+Servetto Architects, Milan, Chopin Museum. Photo by Marcin Czechowicz. Courtesy Migliore+Servetto Architects.

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Sound as a *Communicative Synthesizer*

Museums and cultural exhibitions are increasingly becoming places of storytelling. The design of their exhibition systems is not simply a matter of “displaying,” but rather of developing them as a “participatory project that generates shared and sharable culture.”¹ It can be said, therefore, that exhibition design has become a complex ecosystem, where design strategies are developed that define the encounters not only between the collections on display and their visitors, but also between the multiple levels of narrative that can be revealed and activated by and for both, thus creating places filled with evocative presences. Both collections and visitors are, in fact, “carriers of stories”² and museums and exhibitions must make these stories “inhabitable”, not only in the interaction between space and objects, but also between these and the memories, sensations, and suggestions that accompany them and make them more deeply comprehensible. “The impact of the storytelling approach can be (...) radical. It can open up new topics, new ideas, and convey stories from every angle. Not just top-down histories, but bottom-up stories which invert, question, and interrogate.”³ The senses constantly accompany us in the stories that define our individuality and our belonging to a community, and help in establishing our choices and actions, shaping our personal inclinations with an intensity that the rational part of our behavior often ignores. Yet, we all have conscious experience of how a scent, a taste, or a sound can trigger within us sudden chains of relationships that project us into scenarios

of our own experience or give rise to new ones, allowing us to summarize the accumulation of knowledge with specific sensorial relationships that transcend the mere “calculable” boundaries of space and time, generating *a memory of things*. Yet, most of our modes of communication – and exhibitions, which are essentially a three-dimensional communication apparatus, are no exception – are based on the preponderant, unavoidable, and almost invasive use of images, almost as if sight were the only sense capable of guiding us through everyday life.⁴

Indeed, we live in a contemporary world that tends to privilege sight as the dominant sense, in an obsessive spectacularization of images⁵ that, however, in their unconditional proliferation, become increasingly less significant, within a process that pursues *simulacra*,⁶ rather than models that look to reality, originality, and concreteness. Pervasive and omnipresent images – initially advertising and television, today our mobile devices, merciless multipliers of images to be consumed in a few seconds –⁷ have lost the “corporeal dimension of photography to become a numerical sequence.”⁸ This decline is part of a general crisis in communication, also spread thanks to a culpable unawareness of the other human senses. A crisis that feeds on the proliferation of *storytelling*, emptied of its capacity to generate meaning.

Everyone's talking about narratives these days. Yet, paradoxically, the very fact that narratives are used in every context signals

*a crisis in the narrative experience. At the heart of this noisy storytelling lies a narrative void that manifests itself as a lack of meaning and a loss of direction. Neither storytelling nor even the narrative turn is capable of sparking a return to narrative.*⁹

Thus begins Byung-Chul Han's essay *The Crisis of Narration*. Later, the renowned philosopher clarifies:

*Today, storytelling is booming. So much so that it has created an atmosphere in which it seems possible to tell each other stories again. In reality, the spread of storytelling has a completely different meaning from narrative practice. It serves, above all, to make stories instrumental and marketable.*¹⁰

Yet, museums and exhibitions, if they consistently pursue their cultural and social mandate – thus excluding their “mainstream”¹¹ deviations – are repositories of non-commercial narratives. “Museums are places of community and sharing. Propagators of identity and historical awareness, they are promoters of critical thought.”¹² Places where we encounter the past, present, and future, to discover, learn, and participate, orienting ourselves in the meaning of things, traversing stories large and small, the ambition of eternity, and the wisdom of everyday life. “What moves every person who looks back is – and

should be – the desire to move forward: through history, we proclaim who we are and what we want to become”.¹³

Museums and cultural exhibitions, therefore, are *places of narration*. Contemporary storytellers welcome the memory of what has been and project it into the “memory of what will be”. By creating conditions for remembrance, they activate “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage”.¹⁴

Narrative, moreover, is, by its very nature, a two-way relationship based on listening. Narration, therefore, is aural, even before it is visual (or tactile, olfactory, or gustatory). In the context of exhibition design, combining sound with sight means, therefore, exceptionally enhancing the ability of environments and objects to enter into *sympathetic resonance* with visitors, triggering a *synesthetic condition*, where a new (but ancient) human sense, unconsciously called into play, activates other levels of experience and awakens the other four, generating perceptual chains.

Sound can also represent change in the sensory environment, drawing visitor attention by raising intrigue. (...) Neurocognitive studies have shown that capturing attention reflexively by presenting an auditory cue assists percep-

*tion of visual stimuli at the same location.*¹⁵

fact, a powerful design tool for triggering and developing *critical narratives*.

Furthermore, sound is itself narrative: it evokes, conveys, and makes recognizable circumstances, objects, and people, associating itself with places, times, and experiences – be they social, collective, or individual – just like the main categories of human memory.¹⁶ In doing so, sound makes a vast amount of “decryptable” information, very quickly and intuitively: sound is therefore a *communicative synthesizer*. It can be said that sound encourages us to “look”, as it generates different levels of interaction, depending on its multiple characteristics and the resulting sensorial outcomes.¹⁷ After all, as Ellen Lupton writes, sound is “personal,” “haptic,” “spatial,” and “synesthetic.”¹⁸

*Sound design, in an expanded sense, can open up the roles that sound has to play within design practices as a critical tool – particularly in experience and communication design. As something that is fleeting but that also is physical and spatial, felt in the body, and connected to concepts and politics of the voice, vocality, and memory, sound is suited for prompting questions, for destabilizing that which is thought to be stable, and for re-examining what we think we know.*¹⁹

From sound as trigger to sound as interpreter.

What role can sound play within an exhibition design system? And what happens when sound, in its various meanings, becomes the subject of the exhibition itself, the motif and fulcrum of the curatorial and exhibition narrative, generating the dual role of both exhibit content and narrative and participatory tool?

The fundamental assumption is that the use of audio should not simply be a complementary solution, brought into the exhibition design to enhance visitors’ emotional engagement episodically; rather, it should represent an opportunity to offer a different perspective on the content, constituting an integral part of it, made available to the public itself. The presence of audio is, in

Incorporating audio into the exhibition system means *activating listening practices* among visitors, whose senses will be stimulated more deeply and comprehensively, generating differentiated levels of awareness of the contents and contexts presented. How these practices can be operationalized and incorporated into the exhibition ecosystem is, of course, intrinsically linked to multiple parameters, from curatorial choices to the configuration of the exhibition space, from the narrative structure to the impact of sound on the overall staging system.

A few case studies, freely selected from recent projects, can provide methodological insights that, while not exhaustive, identify recognizable and distinctive attitudes toward the use of sound in exhibition de-

sign. Through them, a wide range of different ways of configuring a soundscape in relation to the multiple sources activated, the relationships they establish with the narrative structure of the environmental setup, and their mutual interaction are explored. Particular attention will be paid to the resulting perceptual outcomes and their role in the broader understanding of the exhibition and its ability to generate interactions with the individuals who attend.

Sound as *Environmental Redundancy*

To provide a powerfully evocative synthesis of the theme of unity in different human cultures, Ralph Appelbaum Associates and Mona Kim Projects presented *Voices*, an exhibition centered on an intensely immersive hemicyclical environment, at the first Universal Forum of World Cultures, held in Barcelona in 2004. The title is a declaration: to speak about languages and communication in the world, placing voices, oral expression, and the sound of speaking at the center.

The challenge: we live in a world with 191 countries, 5,000 languages, and +6 billion inhabitants. Yet 95% of all languages may disappear in this century. How do we create a powerful message and experience to reach the public's heart, and lend a sense of urgency to this stark reality? (...) The resulting set of spaces combined 500 min-

*utes of footage, +300 images, words, light, and sound to create a never-been-done-before exhibition format which was completely media and image-driven.*²⁰

A large hemisphere, constructed from a 12-meter-high open-mesh metal structure, surrounds visitors with a kaleidoscope of emotionally impactful images, focused on the faces of ordinary people, interspersed with zooms detailing their features, gestures, and expressions. These images are displayed by 46 digital projectors with 114 localized speakers. Along the outer perimeter, 42 multimedia stations provide statistical information on languages spoken around the world, translations, learning, and more. The power of the visual impact is evident, but it is equally clear that sounds, in this case human voices, play a fundamental role in triggering the narrative.²¹ Visitors are surrounded by a choral, polyphonic outcry that, despite the objective impossibility of deciphering all the words spoken – who knows all the languages on the planet? – generates an immediate awareness of the wide variety of cultural values that the human race embodies. After all, just imagine what would happen if the video sequences were missing their soundtrack: a visual “bombardment” without a recognizable soul.

Sound as the *Intimacy of Dialogue*

In *Sensitive City*, conceived and designed by Studio Azzurro for the Italian Pavilion at the 2010 Shanghai Expo, six cities (Siracusa, Matera, Spoleto, Lucca, Chioggia, and

Trieste) and their still-human-scale lifestyles are portrayed and revealed, guiding visitors through a highly empathetic and highly natural communication experience, despite the extensive use of digital solutions (11 video programs, 11 video projectors, 9 computers, 1 IR system for sensitive surfaces, 4 holographic screens). Indeed, “the places are described through the testimonies of those who inhabit them, eight hundred people who can be addressed by the public with a simple wave of the hand. A gesture that becomes interaction, a sensitive insight into lived stories, into personal perspectives on the city.”²² Here, the aesthetic experience of exploration is triggered by the sequential action of touching and listening. Extending your hand to stop and activate the digital testimonial delicately brings us back to the mutual attention of physical contact, while willing ourselves to pay attention to the words of the unknown interlocutor who appears before us implies a poetics of listening that is an invitation to mutual understanding, to exchange, to the making available of one’s time, granted in the mutual pleasure of the intimacy of a direct dialogue, despite its digital dislocation. One could almost say that the images, which also surround the visitor, recede and return to being the visual complement of the spoken words. Sound and time, in their synchronized editing, accompany each other and expand the perception of the moment of a chance but precious encounter, in the experiential infinity that will return to memory for times to come.

Sound as a “held note”²³

In 2015, Rome, his beloved hometown, hosted *Renato Zero. The exhibition*. It is dedicated to one of the most popular Italian singers of all time. The installation by NEO Narrative Environments Operas encourages visitors to engage with a multifaceted artist who, from his earliest days, combined his vocal talents with a powerful stage presence – initially rebellious and transgressive, then, by the late 1990s, more intimate and minimalist. The exhibition looks at the artist, the character, and also the man, and in doing so, casts a profound gaze on Italian society, its contradictions, ambiguities, and weaknesses. Hence, the choice of the DNA metaphor, as an element common to all human beings, yet unique to each of us, becomes the common thread that leads the visitor to discover the artist’s most human nature and his evolution.

*(...) the inspiring idea that characterizes the journey (...) is linked to the concept of DNA, that is, the set of information that constitutes the genetic heritage of a living being and, speaking of the human race, that which makes us simultaneously similar and different from one another. The narrative path represents an ideal transcription of Renato Zero’s genetic code, of that DNA that made him, through his courage, his heart, and his intelligence, a stubbornly different man and, at the same time, our brother.*²⁴

Two long, opposing walls welcome the visitors as they proceed through dense sequences of images, documents, and photographs by the artist, juxtaposed with references to Italian history over the past sixty years and interspersed with red and white light bars – evoking DNA strands – that intertwine different narrative layers, conceptually uniting them into a single life experience. Numerous video inserts give voice not only to Zero's songs, but above all to his words, through excerpts from interviews and conversations he held with his audiences during concerts.

*Renato Zero's film and photographic documents, but above all his words and music, accompany the audience through the Italian history of the last fifty years, arranged as individual constituent parts of a single sequence. (...) Renato Zero's music and words alternate with the sounds of life flowing in a continuous interweaving, underscoring the substance of things.*²⁵

The flow of sounds is continuous and shifts seamlessly from music to speech, from ambient sound to punctual sound, in an almost natural flow that finds its privileged moments in the encounter with the singing and, above all, the words of Renato Zero, who becomes the narrative voice of the exhibition. This occurs, with particular intensity, in the long sound corridor located halfway through the exhibition, where

excerpts from interviews introduce the metaphor of the years of Zero's artistic "fall" whose "rebirth" materializes in the audience's ovation after his famous performance at the Sanremo Italian Song Festival. *Zero* is a multisensory installation where sound takes visible form in the digital luminescence of numerous video contributions, and words intertwine with music, like a single narrative text spanning an entire lifetime.

Sound as a Narrative Counterpoint

When one of the world's most important historical music publishing companies decides to celebrate its 200th anniversary with an exhibition, it's clear that music becomes the conceptual and narrative heart of the event. In 2008, Atelier Brückner was invited by Bertelsmann AG and Ricordi & C. to exhibit in Brussels some of the treasures of the Ricordi Archive, an extraordinary guardian of the history of the Italian opera tradition – arguably the most renowned in the world of opera, not least because of the recognition it received from UNESCO, which included it in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2023.²⁶

The narrative structure of *That's Opera* allows visitors to fully participate in the entire process of creating an opera: "The exhibition guides the visitor into the 'backstage' area of the world of opera. Here, five theme-based areas illustrate the genesis, namely the 'making of' an opera – from the 'Libretto', the 'Score', 'Scenography', 'Voices and Costumes', and on to the final performance, the 'Rappresentazione'".²⁷



1

Each space pursues a strong emotional gradient, achieved through an intensely dramatic staging, accompanied by music whose presence or absence emphasizes the relationship between the exhibited objects and the logical sequence of the *making of*. Thus, the exhibition's *Prologue* invites the visitor to pass through several red curtains to encounter a screening of a performance of *Aida*, while in the *Libretto* room, the presence of the original scores is emphasised by the absence of sound: writing as an internalization of the creative process of music. In a strong perceptual contrast, in the "Score" room, the space is filled with sound, metaphorically transposing the experience of the so-called "mystic gulf" or orchestra pit. This careful sequence of sound presences, strongly contextualized to the main narrative system – the discovery of the "behind the scenes" – and to the collection on display, generates a sort of auditory counterpoint that avoids the risk of transforming the visiting experience into

a mere audition of selected famous pieces: a design choice that fully responds to the concept of *museum synaesthesia* theorized by Uwe R. Brückner, co-founder of the Atelier.

*Scenography has a long-term effect on visitor reception. In a good exhibition, understanding through observation and thus visual perception is not at the centre, but rather it offers an experience which addresses several senses at the same time. The term used for this is "museum synaesthesia" and means that the exhibition is perceived at the same time by seeing, moving, hearing, and sometimes even by touching and smelling.*²⁸

Fig. 1:
Studio Azzurro,
Milan
Fabrizio De Andr . La mostra.
Photo by
Fabio Cirifino
Courtesy
Studio Azzurro.

Marco Borsotti

The synesthetic power of sound in exhibition design: From sound as trigger to sound as interpreter



Sound as a *Game of Complicity*

A major traveling event, created by Studio Azzurro, toured Italy between 2009 and 2011 as a tribute to one of its most beloved singer-songwriters, *Fabrizio De André*. *The exhibition* traces not only his creative journey but above all the complexity of his imagination, his poetry, and his social and political sensibilities. The result is five sections populated with images and objects, among which visitors are invited to observe, but first and foremost to listen, often taking direct action to access the Genoese musician's sonic world. In the *Poetics* room (fig. 1), some of his songs, representative of the main themes of his work – Genoa, women, anarchy, the underdog, war, and death – combine audio and video in a vision that superimposes the singing onto the lyrics and the evocative images they portray. In the *Music* room, instead, by choosing a De André album cover and placing it on a *sensitive table*, information about the history of that recording and its contents is displayed, and

clips from interviews that refer to the historical and social context that inspired the individual songs are activated. An intriguing logical inversion, where the vinyl does not generate the sound, but rather explains it, revealing its creative background, and making it a narrative of itself (fig. 2). Finally, large video installations bring to life De André's most beloved characters, "revisited as figures from the universe of tarot cards, a world the singer-songwriter had chosen as the backdrop for his latest tour".²⁹ The installations imagined by Studio Azzurro transform the visit into a subtle game of complicity, where the content is offered to an audience that must take action firsthand and encounters the sound, not only as a musical track, but above all as oral testimony, in a logic where both provide access to an understanding of the layered complexity of human and artistic factors that lie "behind" a piece of music and that, first and foremost, qualify the depth of a unique artist's vision.

Fig. 2:
Studio Azzurro,
Milan
Fabrizio De André. La mostra.
Photo by
Fabio Cirifino
Courtesy
Studio Azzurro.

Sound as a *Listening Practice*/1

The key tenet of the exhibition design project for the *Chopin Museum* in Warsaw, created in 2010 by Migliore+Servetto Architects, is the development of “emotional landscapes and soundscapes.”³⁰ These “landscapes” allow visitors to access the world of the Polish composer and pianist through multiple thematic tracks, developed with multiple multimedia systems that involve public interaction as an open system of exploration and deepening. “The special atmosphere of the exhibition, stimulating both the imagination as well as the senses, is due to the careful combination of historical exhibits, music, scents, interactive elements and design.”³¹

The narrative structure becomes multidimensional, and sound acts as a supporting experiential layer. “The project clearly operates with a sound layer as an essential part of the exhibition, and not only as its background.”³² Thanks to the use of *Radio Frequency Identification* (RFID) technology that enables automatic data identification and storage, the numerous digital tools present throughout the exhibition allow visitors to access additional content and audio contributions, thanks to exhibition elements that trigger different musical listening practices. Thus, in the room dedicated to the musician’s hometown, “Warsaw”, three individual stations allow visitors to listen to Chopin’s youthful compositions in a personal and “intimate” way, while in the *Micolaj Chopin room*, immersed in a white space, the back wall becomes transparent and reveals a view of the living room of Chopin’s paternal home, which comes alive with its in-

habitants and, above all, the sounds of everyday life (fig. 3). Again, in the room dedicated to the “French period”, the ambient background music of the garden of George Sand’s house, the artist’s beloved summer retreat, contrasts with Chopin’s contemporary work, which is diffused throughout the room when drawers containing musical scores are opened. The most lyrical moments in the use of sound as a generative system of emotional engagement are achieved in two places with profoundly different narratives: the *Composer’s room* and the *Death room*. While in the first room (fig. 4), in fact, a true musical visualization is realized:

*We then design a large, bright installation cascading on the 14 different stations for study and investigation. The electroluminescent light, moving along the long vertical plates containing musical notation from Chopin, visually translates the rhythm of the musical piece, diffuses in the background,*³³

in the second one, it is the total absence of sound – an inescapable silence, achieved thanks to an anechoic environment, where the end of Chopin’s life and thus of his musical creation is dramatically crystallized – that suggests how this end is nothing other than the beginning of access to the eternity of his artistic legacy. In the *Chopin Museum*, the audio component is intrinsically linked to the visitor experience and the unfolding of a narrative in



3

which the objects in the collection transcend the static nature of their physical condition, becoming dynamic interpreters of a pervasive soundscape.

Sound as a *Listening Practice*/2

The *Caruso Museum*, dedicated to one of the greatest opera performers of all time, tenor Enrico Caruso, created in 2023 at the Royal Palace of Naples by NEO Narrative Environments Operas, is an intensely sonic place, paying homage not only to the unique voice of its protagonist³⁴ but also to the pervasive musicality that permeates the streets of his hometown. In the monumental Sala Dorica, visitors encounter multiple audio contributions integrated into the exhibition system by iconic elements revisited for exhibition purposes – from gramophones to

vinyl records – through multiple modes of experience, such as multimedia tables, 3D animations, film installations, and as many as 43 audio stations.³⁵ The museum adopts a *Beacon* system (small transmitters based on *Bluetooth Low Energy* (BLE) technology, capable of sending short-range radio signals to smartphones, tablets, and other mobile devices equipped with decoding apps), which allows visitors to listen to music and podcasts, as well as use audio guides, in close visual connection with the objects and iconography arranged along the route, thus offering a customizable, multi-layered exploration. The exhibition narrative unfolds along the parallel thread of the artist's private and public persona and makes extensive use of digital technology to enable multiple moments of interaction, where audio plays a

Fig. 3:

Migliore+Servetto
Architects, Milan
Chopin Muzeum
Photo by
Marcin Czechowicz
Courtesy
Migliore+Servetto
Architects.

prominent and scenographic role. A striking feature is the presence of five large video-projected discs (fig. 5), each dedicated to a musical piece that marked a milestone in the rise of the “Caruso legend”. These discs display looped images triggered by the visitor’s passage and synchronized with the audio content. A little further on, the records are displayed in their original form: eight 33-rpm vinyl records recorded by the tenor, which visitors can ideally “play” by selecting tracks from their mobile phone (fig. 6), thanks to *Near Field Communication* (NFC) technology, which allows for the automatic identification and pairing of two devices, initiating a two-way data exchange, without the use of cables or login credentials. Finally, numerous display and multimedia tables feature tags that allow access to dedicated podcast content. The entire highly immersive exhibition system is shaped in its aesthetic and formal aspects by the multifunctional ac-

cessibility of audio content, which structures the timing and modalities of the relationship between space, collection, and visitor.

Conclusions

The selected case studies span the last twenty years, presenting experiences developed by leading international studios, each characterized by diverse vocations and approaches: from the rigorous and holistic methodological approach of Atelier Brückner³⁶ to the aesthetic-technological-narrative evolution of Studio Azzurro, which consolidates the principle of “narrative” museums,³⁷ to the ongoing integrated and innovative research that distinguishes NEO Narrative Environments Operas and the active and disruptive cultural principle of the contemporary museum embraced by Migliore+Servetto Architects.³⁸



Fig. 5:
NEO Narrative
Environments
Operas, Milan
Museo Caruso
Photo by
Carlo Oriente
Courtesy
NEO Narrative
Environments
Operas.

Everyone is fully aware of the synesthetic power of sound in exhibition design. Therefore, the presence of sound is never a simple matter of sensorial complementarity but rather of integrated action, first of all within the curatorial narrative program, and then within the entire environmental ecosystem. To borrow Stefania Zuliani's words³⁹ it is aimed at "destabilising the exhibition canon", understood as a merely visual and monosensorial layout.

Exhibiting sound thus becomes a matter of coordinated, modulated, rhythmic, alternating, and blended intersections between noise-and-voice-and-sound-and-music, in a scenario that stimulates the visitor, often an active participant in initiating the synesthetic process itself.

*Sight isolates, whereas sound incorporates; vision is directional, whereas sound is omnidirectional. The sense of sight implies exteriority, but sound creates an experience of interiority. (...) Hearing structures and articulates the experience and understanding of space. We are not normally aware of the significance of hearing in spatial experience, although sound often provides the temporal continuum in which visual impressions are embedded.*⁴⁰

Almost fifty years have passed since the premiere of one of the most brilliant interpretations of the synesthetic power of sound, conceived by director Steven Spielberg for

the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, which he wrote and directed.⁴¹ In the iconic final scene, in fact, with extraordinary and visionary visual intensity, Spielberg represents the realization of the first encounter between humans and alien entities, through a dialogue based on a simple musical sequence of five notes, which a pianist – who, in the crescendo of the frenzy of performance, will alternate with a computer – and a colossal extraterrestrial spaceship – which will act as a kaleidoscopic cosmic linguistic instrument – perform in an increasingly whirling and powerful manner. Behind the pianist, an immense luminous screen represents the succession of notes through the lighting and extinguishing of sequences of colored horizontal bars: a sort of super-pixel LED wall *ante litteram*. By overcoming the specialized cryptic nature of the graphemes of a score and transforming music into an event readable and comprehensible to all, the artifice defines a coordinated system that involves sight and hearing, as well as the physicality itself determined by the powerful sound vibrations performed.

In an unstoppable crescendo, the film's key sequence thus unfolds a multisensory communication based on the repeated set of five sounds – four notes, two of which are separated by an octave, written by John Williams, at Spielberg's direct direction, who wanted them to be understood as the musical transposition of the word "hello" – and their instantaneous chromatic visualization. Spielberg thus transforms the most imaginative of "extraterrestrial" dialogues into an unexpected collective sensorial experience, crowned by the final transposition

of the notes into gestures – inspired by the Kodaly method for teaching music to children – as, finally, the first form of universal greeting. Spectators witness sound becoming music becoming language. Music is transposed into light and gestural sequences. Multiple sensorial engagements that introduce physical contact and the culture of encounter, here benevolent, friendly, and welcoming.

In many ways, this cinematic sequence is a sort of involuntary premonition of a manifesto for contemporary exhibition design – not coincidentally, a design discipline with many kinships with the seventh art – that aspires to the “staging” of a multisensory experience, where content reveals its narrative and therefore cultural, social, artistic, and historical significance, also thanks to digital tools that find in sound an extremely effective signifier, capable of reaching the invisible, that which encompasses and transcends sight.

A signifier that acts as a performative element to generate surplus information or as an interpreter to define and structure new levels of understanding and access to knowledge, in a system that pursues the habitability of places dense with meaning, yet capable of making this “meaning” welcoming and engaging.

The focus shifts from the object to the narrative surrounding it, reconstructing a life that contextualizes the artifact, bringing it out of its immobile sacredness. Thus, by juxtaposing the physicality of the material objects, spaces, and bodies with the immaterial dimension of the multimedia narrative, one can suggest the invisible, or rather, give space to the interpretation of that lost vital and ritual component that completes the meaning of its presence.⁴²

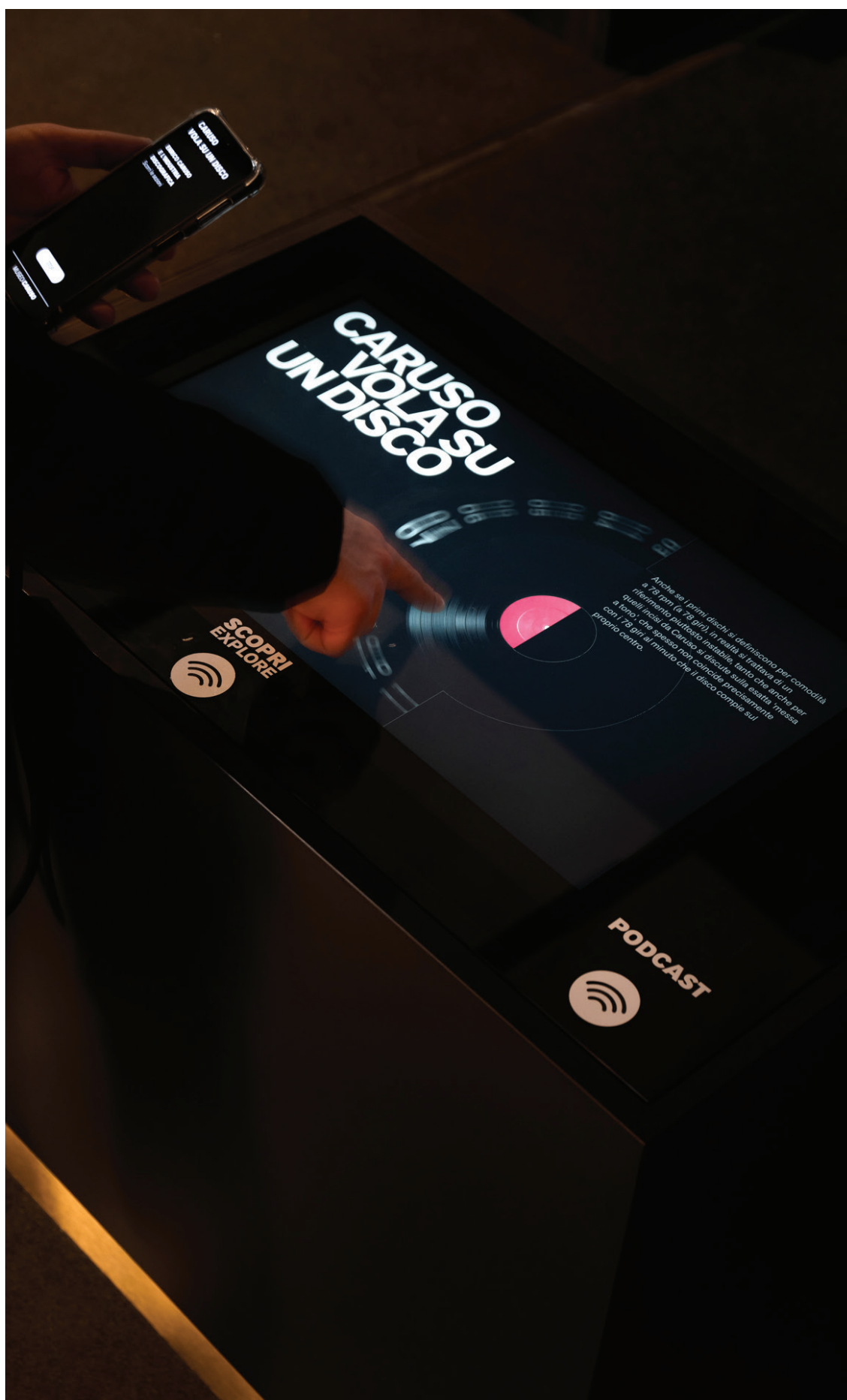


Fig. 6:
 NEO Narrative
 Environments
 Operas, Milan
Museo Caruso
 Photo by
 Carlo Oriente
 Courtesy
 NEO Narrative
 Environments
 Operas.

Endnotes:

- 1 Borsotti 2017. [Author's trans.]
- 2 Studio Azzurro 2011.
- 3 Hughes 2021, p. 3.
- 4 See also the first part of Zuliani 2024.
- 5 Debord 1968; Codeluppi 2007.
- 6 Baudrillard 2025.
- 7 “It was essentially only by chance that I noticed an article in front of me reporting on research by the Tate Gallery in London on how and to what extent, in the new era of hyperconnectivity, we pause before works of art in museums. The dwell time is impressive: 8 seconds.” Iotti 2020, p. 61. [Author's trans.]
- 8 “(...) photography, as we have known it for over a century, implied a real referent, a direct relationship with the event being photographed. But today, in the digital age, these coordinates are often only approximate, uncertain: images can be generated, modified, reused without any link to a recognizable origin. (...) ‘Image’ thus becomes a more elastic term, suitable for designating both a photo taken with a smartphone and an image generated by an algorithm, a 3D rendering, or any other visual form that the future will be able to invent.” Camporesi 2025, pp. 6-7 [Author's trans.]
- 9 Han 2024, p. 5. [Author's trans.]
- 10 Han 2024, p. 5. [Author's trans.]
- 11 Montanari, Trione 2017.
- 12 Migliore, Servetto 2025, p. 14.
- 13 Greppi 2024, pp. 11-12. [Author's trans.]
- 14 UNESCO 2003, *Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. (Paris, 17 October 2003). Article 2 – Definitions <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention> (accessed on 29/01/2026).
- 15 Roppola 2012, p. 130. In the Article, the author also refers to Hopfinger J.B., Luck S.J., Hillyard S.A., *Selective Attention: Electrophysiological and Neuromagnetic Studies*, in Gazzaniga 2004, pp. 561-574.
- 16 Ricoeur 2012; Halbwachs 1987; Assmann 2002.
- 17 Lupton, Jasper, Wagner 2018, pp 68-128.
- 18 Lupton, Jasper, Wagner 2018, pp. 84-89.
- 19 Candela, de Visscher 2023, p. 57.
- 20 <https://www.monakimprojects.com/projects/voices#slide-21> (accessed on 29/01/2026).
- 21 It's useful to recall here, for conceptual assonance, what Stefania Zuliani writes about the traveling performance, staged in Kassel for *Documenta 13* by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller: “The place is created, revealed each time through the sound of the voice, which embodies the word and transcends it. Because the voice is not a servant of language, but a force that contradicts the transparency of sight, which overturns the privilege of the eye on which Western thought has been based at least since Plato, the ‘philosophy that closes the ears’ of which the museum is both the result and the instrument”. Zuliani 2024, p. 55. [Author's trans.]
- 22 <https://www.studioazzurro.com/opere/sensitive-city/> (accessed on 29/01/2026). [Author's trans.]
- 23 “The precise meaning of tenuto is contextual: it can mean either holding the note in question for its entire duration (or longer, with a slight rubato) or playing the note

slightly louder. In other words, the tenuto symbol can alter both the dynamics and the duration of a note. In either case, the notation indicates that a note should be emphasized.” [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Articolazione_\(musica\)](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Articolazione_(musica)) (accessed on 29/01/2026). [Author's trans.]

24 NEO Narrative Environments Operas, n.d., Works, *Zero*. <https://www.neo.mi.it/works/zero-la-mostra/> (accessed on 29/01/2026). [Author's trans.]

25 NEO Narrative Environments Operas, n.d., Works, *Zero*. <https://www.neo.mi.it/works/zero-la-mostra/> (accessed on 29/01/2026). [Author's trans.]

26 The Archive, founded in 1808, is the historical memory of the music publisher Ricordi, acquired in 1994 by the German multinational Bertelsmann, which has since ensured its preservation and cultural development. Its prestige lies in the variety of documents it preserves, which offer a comprehensive view of Italian culture, industry, and society. Housed in the Palazzo di Brera in Milan, the Archive collects scores, letters from composers, librettists, and singers, sketches and costume designs, librettos, period photographs, and Art Nouveau posters. (Ricordi Historical Archive) <https://www.archivioricordi.com/chi-siamo/l-archivio/> (accessed on 29/01/2026). [Author's trans.]

27 Atelier Brückner 2011, p. 258.

28 Atelier Brückner 2019, p. 154.

29 Studio Azzurro 2009, from the project report.

30 “The soundscape is defined by the constituent sounds of an auditorily perceived environment, whether they are “natural” or the result of human activity. The study of soundscapes is the primary object of acoustic ecology (or ecoacoustics). The term soundscape, and the studies that refer to it, owe their success above all to the work *The Soundscape* (1985) by the Canadian Raymond Murray Schafer, to the World Soundscape Project he founded in the second half of the 1960s (with the collaboration of, among others, Bruce Davis, Barry Truax, Hildegard Westerkamp), and more recently to the activities of the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology (WFAE). [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/il-paesaggio-sonoro_\(Storia-della-civilt%C3%A0-europea-a-cura-di-Umberto-Eco\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/il-paesaggio-sonoro_(Storia-della-civilt%C3%A0-europea-a-cura-di-Umberto-Eco)/) (accessed on 29/01/2026). [Author's trans.]

31 https://muzeum.nifc.pl/en/muzeum/kolekcja-artykul/1026_fryderyk-chopin-museum/ (accessed on 29/01/2026).

32 Knast 2011, p. 75.

33 Knast 2011, p. 181.

34 “Caruso is a boy from the womb of Naples. He earns his living as an apprentice in a foundry, and in the evenings, he sings serenades among the tables of the restaurants on the seafront. Little Enrico doesn't yet know that one day he will become “the one, the only, the great Caruso” (Rosa Ponselle, *The New York Times Archives*, 25 febbraio 1973, p. 105). (Rosa Ponselle, *The New York Times Archives*, 25 febbraio 1973, p. 105). He doesn't even imagine that in his rich, fleshy timbre, capable of the colors of a baritone, in the cello-like sweetness of his legato, his contemporaries would recognize the most perfect incarnation of the “tenor of the new century.” Valente 2003. [Author's trans.] <https://www.marsilioarte.it/magazine/enrico-caruso-il-tenore-che-e-diventato-un-mito/> (accessed on 29/01/2026).

35 <https://ettsolutions.com/progetti/museo-caruso/> (accessed on 29/01/2026).

36 Atelier Brückner has consolidated a methodological practice called Creativ(e) Structur(e), which inserts each phase of the design approach into a multidisciplinary, integrated, and holistic system: “The Creativ(e) Structur(e) is the fundament of our design philosophy ‘form follow content’, it is method, navigation system, and curriculum at the same time. It helps to orchestrate all creative instruments in order to achieve a ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’, a holistic piece of art”. Atelier Brückner 2019, p. 172.

37 “The museum is increasingly becoming a place in which to live, to participate in a story through multiple stimuli (...) A dynamic, organic place, not only intended for

collection and exhibition, which marks the transition from the idea of a 'collection museum' to that of a 'narrative museum'. Studio Azzurro 2011, p. 13. [Author's trans.]

38 “(...) to shape a new concept of places of culture and encounter revolving around the idea we like to describe as “Museum Seeds”. (...) like a seed, a place of culture, must be capable of taking root in the surrounding urban and social fabric in order to activate new forms of behavior”. Migliore, Servetto 2025, p. 20.

39 Zuliani 2024, p. 62.

40 Pallasmaa 2012, p. 53.

41 *Close Encounters of the Third Kind (Incontri ravvicinati del terzo tipo)*, 1977, U.S.A., directed by Steven Spielberg, Columbia Pictures, EMI Films.

42 Studio Azzurro 2011, p. 13. [Author's trans.]

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