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An Archipelago of Floating Islands Memory, Transmission, Transformation

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35

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Abstract

In October 2023, Eugenio Barba donated his personal library to the Bibliographic and Museum Hub of the Puglia Region, along with his memorabilia, books and the Odin Teatret archive.

This paper presents the LAFLIS: Living Archive Floating Islands project, conceived by Barba and realised at the Bernardini Library in Lecce.

This ambitious initiative, the first phase of which was inaugurated on 4 October, 2023, aims to create a living archive based on Barba's poetics, the Odin Teatret and the Third Theatre movement. As Barba (2023) states:

How can we bring the knowledge, emotions, and experiences in these documents into the present, translating them into forms that resonate with today's concerns? How can documents build a bridge to cross over? Building this bridge is what makes an archive come alive. In essence, we are speaking of transmission in other forms, expressions, methods, and techniques. A different way of thinking and acting. An active process of intensification and metamorphosis, not merely preservation. (pp. 158-159)

LAFLIS goes beyond the traditional functions of an archive (memory) and transmission, embracing a third crucial role: transformation.

The challenge is to restore a sense of wonder and imagination to historical materials through a *mise-en-scène* bridging the gap between the past and the present and translating the archive into an artistic, sensory and kinaesthetic language.

This transformative experience was co-designed by Eugenio Barba and a team of "fellow travellers," turning the archive into a sensory and visual journey for visitors. The library's rooms, where the narrative unfolds, become themselves a performative space, animated by installations and immersive environments. At the heart of the project lies an exploration of memory — not merely as the preservation of archival materials, but as the very life of memory and theatre itself.

Keywords: living archive / Odin Teatret / third theatre / memory / performing space

Living Archive Floating Islands

“I am fascinated by the problem of memory, though not merely in terms of preserving archival materials” (Barba, 2023, p. 155).

This contribution presents LAFLIS — Living Archive Floating Islands, a living museum-archive conceived by Eugenio Barba and hosted at the Bernardini Library-Museum Hub in Lecce, Salento, the director’s homeland. Inaugurated on 4 October 2023, the project creates a living archive narrating Odin Teatret’s history, its founder, and the Third Theatre.

LAFLIS weaves multiple stories: a collective adventure of diverse voices; a repository of objects and traces evoking past journeys and performances; and a challenge to preserve, transmit, and transform memory. The archive bridges past and future, turning documents into active processes of preservation and metamorphosis — “a passage or a sowing toward the future” (Barba, 2023, p. 159).

The Place

Since 2016, Apulia’s Poli biblio-museali integrate libraries, museums, and galleries for cultural heritage management. The Bernardini Library, home to Carmelo Bene’s archives, expanded in 2022 via a partnership with Fondazione Barba Varley ETS to support Odin Teatret research.

Barba himself recounts how he proposed to the Regional Councillor for Culture the donation of part of his library and materials related to his artistic activity — but under one specific condition: not a mere archive, but a living place, one capable of transmitting and transforming memory.

The Archive as a Bridge

It is necessary to find a way to transport into the present the cognitive, emotional and technical wealth contained in documents, so that they may continue to speak and resonate today. As Barba (2023) observes, the moment a performance ends, it already seems to belong to the past. The challenge is not to let what has been accomplished slip away and become nothing more than history. Thus arises the question: “How can documents construct a bridge on which to pass?” (p. 158). The living archive is precisely such a bridge: between memory and the future, between testimony and transformation. It offers a new way of transmitting expressions, processes and techniques in alternative forms. It is an active process, composed of both preservation and metamorphosis, “a passage or a sowing toward the future” (p. 159). The LAFLIS project was conceived to move beyond the concept

of the traditional archive and beyond the simple transmission of knowledge, by adding a third essential task: transformation. At its foundation, three interwoven dimensions emerge: Memory, understood as the traditional archive that collects, catalogues and preserves historical materials, making them available for consultation.

Transmission, which transforms the archive into an active space for training, re-elaboration and sharing, through publications, meetings and courses.

Transformation, which breathes new life into documents by translating them into artistic, sensory and kinaesthetic languages.

Figure 1

October 4–6, 2023. Inauguration of LAFLIS, performance in the square in front of the Bernardini Library (photo by the author).



In this context, “transformation” means abandoning traditional exhibition hierarchies in order to create an immersive and disorientating experience, allowing the visitor to enter another world. Documents are no longer simply to be viewed or consulted, but traversed; they become living matter, capable of generating new perceptions. Bringing documents of the past into the present means integrating them into practice, making them converse with distant experiences and identifying connections and new uses. Barba (2023) further explains that to realise this vision, a team was required — one resembling a theatre ensemble — composed of individuals capable of working with different logics and attuned to the unexpected. The team needed to share affinities with the spirit of Odin Teatret: discipline and improvisation, the capacity to face the unforeseen, even hostility. What was required was a form of “unprogrammed interdisciplinarity” — not a method, but an affinity of vision —

through which a collective effort could generate new levels of organisation, capable of transferring the past into the present, making it accessible, engaging and able to speak to, intrigue and captivate even those unfamiliar with the world of archives (p. 159).

The mise en scène of Memory

The archive was inaugurated at the end of 2023 and constitutes the backbone of this ever-evolving organism, one that breathes and continuously changes form. It is a project in progress: while the cataloguing of books and materials is underway, the rooms are not definitively arranged; they shift, something is always being rethought, added, or moved. Contrary to what might be expected of an institutional archive, here everything continues to live. The alliance — as Barba defines it — with architect and set designer Luca Ruzza (a longtime friend and Odin's scenographer) has led to the *mise en scène* or, more aptly, the *mise en espace* of memory. Thus, the dimension of transformation was among the first steps: at its core, the desire to present materials, data and documents through a dramaturgy of space capable of evoking “the same sense of disorientation and displacement experienced by spectators in Odin's performances: an experience shaped by discontinuous, rhythmic, associative, and emotional logics” (Barba, p. 160). Within the Bernardini Library, a space has been created akin to a journey into the mind — a mind dense with memories, yet also with associations, images and sounds. It is a collective mind, where Barba's is not the only voice, but joined by those of his actors, collaborators and the groups of the Third Theatre.

The installation does not follow a linear or hierarchical order. Objects emerge from a design that is at once casual and intentional, allowing the visitor to trace their own path. As Ruzza (2024) emphasises, conserving and presenting theatrical memory through an archival installation offers a unique opportunity to render concrete and perceptible what might otherwise remain invisible. The space unfolds across three rooms — the Black Room, the White Room and the Red Room — echoing the colors of Odin Teatret's working spaces in Holstebro. These rooms are connected by an atrium corridor, yet visitors are encouraged to explore freely and construct their own narrative path. At the end of the corridor lies a floating glass floor, beneath which bones, shells, small objects and books personally chosen by Barba are displayed: his mental roots, his hidden foundations. Visitors may observe them as if walking — or flying — over an underground carpet. From a small staircase, one ascends to a raised platform where the dressing rooms of Eugenio Barba and Julia Varley in Holstebro have been reconstructed at full scale, with the objects faithfully repositioned by the artists themselves. The Black Room serves as an archive of scenographies, an incoherent mosaic of fragments, costumes and scenic objects that function as symbols and metaphors. From the carved wooden hands of *Mythos* (1998),

crafted by Balinese artisans, to the bench rectangle of from Min Fars Hus (1973), to the white egg from Ferai (1981), visitors are immersed in Odin's universe through relics of both past and recent performances; fragments that "seem to be in disarray, yet still evoke memories" (Perrelli, 2024, p. 51).

Figure 2

Eugenio Barba during the setup of the Black Room (photo Luca Ruzza, courtesy of the author).



Figure 3-4

Details of the Black Room (photo Luca Ruzza, courtesy of the author).





Figure 5

Barong at the entrance of the White Room (photo Luca Ruzza, courtesy of the author).



The White Room, dedicated to Barba's biography, constantly evolves with additions. At the entrance, a Balinese Barong,¹ mask guards the threshold, symbolizing culture's fight against oblivion, flanked by ISTA² masks and posters. Shelves display books mingled

¹ In Odin's performances, the Barong — a Balinese entity of health and auspiciousness — is a costume that gains vitality only when animated by two performers acting in unison inside it.

² The ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology) is an international, itinerant laboratory for theatrical research and theatre anthropology, fostering long-term dialogue between Western and Eastern traditions.

with photos, souvenirs, posters, and objects — arranged for fractured, unpredictable views that compel detours and estrangement. This sensory habitat, disorienting yet integrative, mirrors reading books blindly through their twists (Barba, 2023). A central chest-table invites visitors to unearth personal fragments: childhood at Nunziatella military school, sailor life on the Talabot, migrations to Poland, Norway, and Denmark — where Odin Teatret was born amid family roots.

Figure 6-7

Details of the White Room (photo Luca Ruzza, courtesy of the author).



The Red Room will serve as the memorial of the Third Theatre, a transcultural “archipelago of floating islands,” as Barba describes it: autonomous, creative and interconnected groups, each with their own identity yet bound together through exchange and relationships.

I did not want an archive solely about myself or Odin. The LAFLIS in Lecce is an opportunity to create something that also embraces the multifaceted constellation of theatre groups — the composite tradition of the Third Theatre that is so dear to me, scattered and dispersed, not always visible, yet fundamental for regenerating the meaning theatre held in the twentieth century and can still hold for future generations (...) It is time that this new and autonomous tradition be recognized: the specificity and originality of how actors conceive and realize their relationship with the city, with different social, cultural and human contexts (Barba, 2023, p. 162).

Figure 8

The Red Room (photo Luca Ruzza, courtesy of the author).

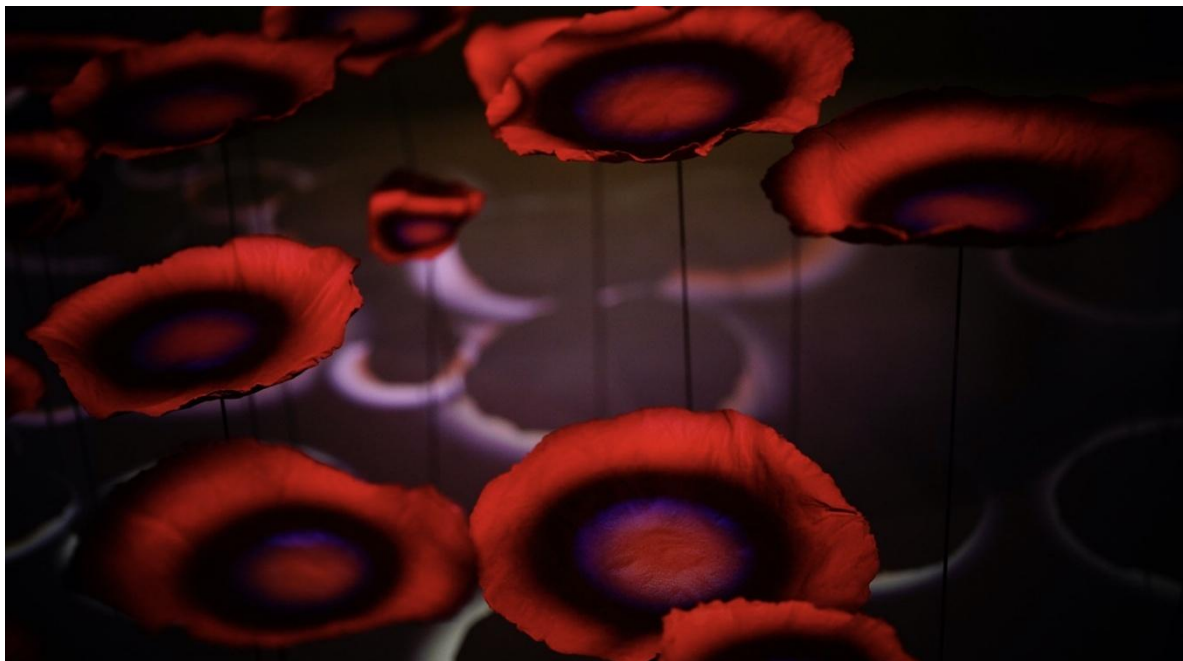


This metaphor inspired the image of a field of poppies — some large, others smaller — that now partially occupies the room and will continue to grow over time, constructing an immersive and multimedia narrative path to guide visitors through the history of the Third Theatre. Each poppy represents a theatre group. By selecting a group’s name, visitors can activate images, stories, sounds and even contact details for those who wish to learn about or collaborate with the groups. Interactive connections among the poppy islands, together with sound and lighting dedicated to each element, help to weave a visible network of relations, revealing the living, synaptic interconnections of group theatre on both local and

global scales. Entirely handmade by Francesca Carallo, a Salentine artist specialised in papier-mâché, the poppies lend a poetic yet profoundly material quality to this immersive and interactive environment.

Figure 9-10

Details of the handcrafted poppies in the Red Room (photo Luca Ruzza, courtesy of the author).



Conclusion

The creation of this living archive coincided with the year Barba stepped down as director of the Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium, severing Odin Teatret from its historic Holstebro headquarters and relocating it to Salento after a long journey. The goal was not to establish a new theater or preserve past memories in formaldehyde, but to forge bridges through a dialectical engagement with the present. Theater practitioners find little fascination in the past; they channel their thoughts and efforts into the now. Bringing past documents into today involves embedding them in practice, confronting them with remote experiences, uncovering connections, and revealing potential uses and contacts (Barba, 2023, p. 160).

Nora (1989) sharply distinguishes memory from history, which stand in radical opposition rather than synonymy. Memory pulses with life as a ceaselessly evolving, ever-present force binding us to an eternal now, while history reconstructs the absent past in flawed, partial terms (p. 8). Memory anchors in the tangible — traces, spaces, gestures, images, objects — whereas history clings to temporal sequences, progressions, and causal links (Giannachi, 2021, p. 125).

The project aligns with this through "seeing, acting, and interacting" (Amoruso, 2024, p. 61), transcending mere recollection via narrative transmission to safeguard cultural heritage. This reproduces it in varied expressive modes, sustains its vitality for future generations, and fosters inclusivity by honoring diverse voices and communal experiences. The archive incarnates collective memory — choral in voice and creative process alike. Translating memory into sensory, dynamic forms amplified by imagination converts knowledge into lived experience: a cascade of perceptual cues engaging visitors multisensorially to spark participatory comprehension (Amoruso, 2024).

Over the last fifty years, archiving has gained prominence. Echoing Agamben (2006), Giannachi (2021) portrays the archive as a transformative device that disseminates by nature (p. 136), hybridizing with collections, exhibitions, displays, and transmissions to encompass installations, Wunderkammern, databases, interfaces, and immersive environments (p. 14).

This initiative rejects historical linearity for a web of correspondences. In the Black Room, performance reconstructions from scene fragments and symbolic objects channel tensions and emotional charge from clashing assemblages, eschewing replication: these "transformations thus become equivalent to the performances themselves: new works of art born from their remnants" (Barba, 2023, p. 165). The White Room evokes a mental voyage, mirroring the Wunderkammer through juxtapositions of naturalia and artificialia in osmotic interplay, grouping objects by shared resonance; Barba prioritized energy-laden items to

evoke empathy and emotional stirrings (p. 166). The Red Room's interactivity and scenography render it performative, with narrative emerging from bodily motion.

Its core innovation transforms documents via narrative access, granting them independent artistic life through a process mirroring Odin Teatret's ethos from inception — far beyond static display. Barba (2023) fittingly closes: "The threads with which I begin to weave a new performance are always many, parallel, seemingly divergent, without points of contact. Then, slowly, they intersect, uncovering hidden logics, associative affinities, and rhythmic echoes. The same is happening with the living archive project: for now, the threads and desires multiply, and a moment for synthesis will come" (p. 167).

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