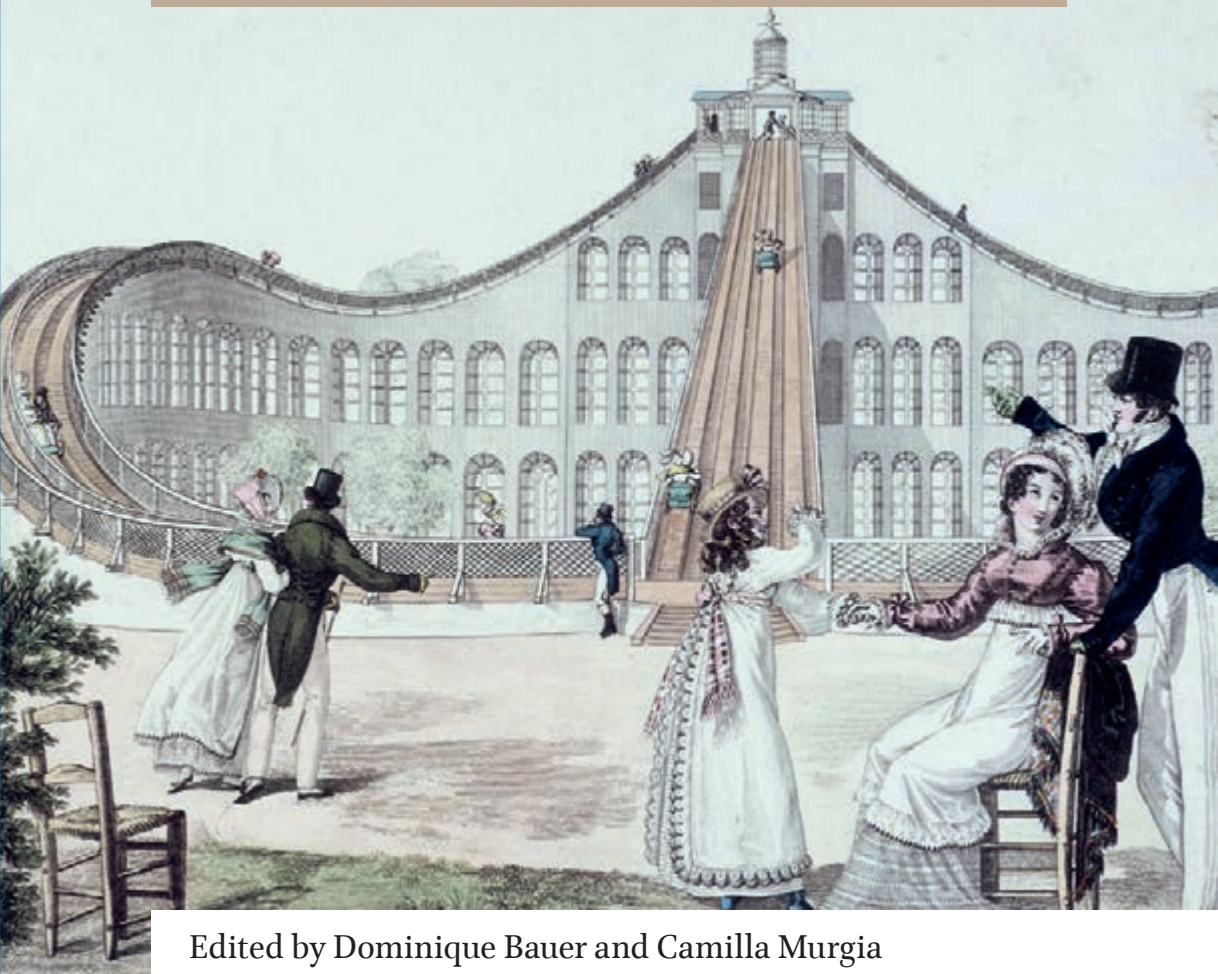


SPATIAL IMAGERIES IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE



Edited by Dominique Bauer and Camilla Murgia

# Ephemeral Spectacles, Exhibition Spaces and Museums

1750-1918

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Ephemeral Spectacles, Exhibition Spaces and Museums  
1750–1918



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# Spatial Imageries in Historical Perspective

This series is looking for interdisciplinary contributions that focus on the historical study of the imagined space, or of spaces and places as sensorial, experiential or intellectual images, from the interior to the landscape, in written, visual or material sources. From (closed) gardens and parks to cabinets, from the odd room to the train compartment, from the façade to the prison cell, from the reliquary to the desk, a variety of spaces in the shape of imageries and images unveils historical attitudes to history, to the object, to the other and the self and presents a subject that experiences, acts, imagines and knows. Spatial imageries and images in this sense constitute a prominent theme in various fields within the Humanities, from museum studies, intellectual history and literature to material culture studies, to name but a few.

*Spatial Imageries in Historical Perspective* therefore addresses a broad audience of scholars that engage in the historical study of space in this sense, from the Early Middle Ages to the Recent Past in literature, art, in material culture, in scholarly and other discourses, from either cultural and contextual or more theoretical angles.

*Series editor*

Dominique Bauer, University of Leuven, Belgium



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*1750–1918*

*Edited by  
Dominique Bauer and  
Camilla Murgia*

Amsterdam University Press



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Press

Cover illustration: Unknown, *Le Bon Genre, N°102. Promenades Aériennes*. Etching, hand-colored, 1817, 259 × 348 mm. Paris: Musée Carnavalet

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6372 090 8

e-ISBN 978 90 4854 293 2

DOI 10.5117/9789463720908

NUR 657

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# Introduction: Staging the Temporary: The Fragile Character of Space

*Camilla Murgia*

## Abstract

This volume examines a varied number of exhibition devices that are ephemeral in terms of the precariousness of their structure, but also in terms of their capacity to adapt to the space in which they develop. Special attention will be paid to spaces such as curiosity cabinets, portable museums, show gardens, and a number of unconventional exhibition devices. These spaces often function as microcosms, small autonomous universes that operate individually, but also in relation to their environment. The aim of this volume is to examine their development and relationship to context.

**Keywords:** spectacles, microcosms, museums, cabinets of curiosity, human zoos

This is the second of two volumes devoted to ephemeral exhibition spaces between 1750 and 1918. It deals with a wide range of exhibition spaces that were ephemeral owing to the precariousness of their structure and their ability to adapt to the changing environment in which they developed. Cabinets of curiosities, portable museums, spectacle gardens, cosmoramas, department stores, human zoos, *dépôt* museums and a number of alternative, unconventional exhibition spaces are discussed here in detail. Particular attention is paid to the fragility and versatility of the spaces that these entities have at their disposal. Indeed, in most cases, the space itself works as a microcosm, a small universe that evolves both independently and in relation to the environment in which it develops. This characteristic represents a common value for all these systems and makes it possible to understand, in each case, how the space is defined and how it oscillates between one reality and another, between a literary context for instance, and a fictional

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Bauer, D. and C. Murgia (eds.), *Ephemeral Spectacles, Exhibition Spaces and Museums: 1750–1918*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021

DOI 10.5117/9789463720908\_INTRO



Amsterdam  
University  
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dimension. Although these spaces are diverse, they nevertheless provide a coherent scope because they all are intended places of display. The variety of forms is revealing as regards their flexibility, their capacity to respond to a wide range of cultural contexts.

The chronological frame of this volume goes from the early nineteenth century up to World War I, and shows to what extent the concepts of ephemerality, elusiveness, and temporality evolved through this period. This is the second of two volumes that, taken together, are set between 1750 and 1918. Particular attention is paid here to the versatile and changing character of ephemerality, both with regard to time and spatiality: indeed, these displays constantly adjusted according to the political, cultural, and social environment that they were confronted with.

This volume studies the impact and structure of these manifestations within a dual perspective. On the one hand, particular attention is paid to the individual experience and the role that the different supports, such as locations, organization, and infrastructures of the exhibition spaces, generated. On the other, the ephemeral character of these shows allows a deep insight into the needs that are related to exhibitions. Indeed, the range of spaces bears witness to the dramatic necessity of spanning different registers of knowledge, visual references, and models. In doing so, these spaces define a series of microcosms that are evidently interrelated with the cultural contexts in which they developed. They work both independently, within an isolated environment, and as a catalyst for interaction, since they initiated an individual experience. The essays of this volume notably attempt to investigate the mechanisms through which these spaces functioned, their results as well as the patterns and the criteria that allowed their development.

If we think that the main purpose of these ephemeral spaces is the exhibition and the display, intended as a practical and intellectual experience, it is evident that these manifestations importantly host a number of interactions, ranging from a simple visit to a show, to the appropriation of the space to which it corresponds. Considered from an exhibition point of view, the act of displaying is crucial to this development. In recent years, museologists have dealt with the issues related to these interactions, by attempting to trace, reconstruct, and contextualize the scale of the practices referring to the display. In particular, Dorothee Richter studied the impact of contemporary art on society and claimed that exhibitions place objects in a context, create a set of relations, and, in doing so, they are part of “communicative processes.”<sup>1</sup>

1 Dorothee Richter, “Exhibitions as Cultural Practices of Showing: Pedagogics,” *Curating Critique* 9 (2011): 47–52.



Defined as cultural practices of showing, exhibitions attempt to fulfill an educational role, not only because of the ideas and contents they convey, but also because they propose a particular vision of a certain subject or issue. Within this context, the mechanism of viewing plays a pivotal role and is responsible for the valorization of the individual experience above all.<sup>2</sup> These mechanisms also interact with the space by creating a multitude of responses, practices, and encounters that define the complex reality of these “microcosms.” These small universes are – and this is possibly their most fascinating characteristic – fluctuating, somehow unsettled, in the sense that their functions and functioning vary and span different roles and practices. Their fragility is, within this context, similar to the one that Dominique Bauer recently identified and studied with regard to the borders between interior and exterior space.<sup>3</sup>

We will see through this volume that studying the ephemerality of these small universes goes far beyond their primary role of a location for display, and casts light on a number of cultural mechanisms and experiences that constantly vary, adapt, and react to the context in which they are set.

Historical research has focused on a number of these small systems, on their characteristics and on their functioning. For instance, Richard Taws has investigated the production of printed images and their use in a multitude of contexts, insisting on their transferability and their impact on revolutionary visual culture.<sup>4</sup> Through his numerous studies, Dominique Poulot has dealt with these small universes, focusing in particular on the revolutionary period and on the French situation.<sup>5</sup> Works such as those by Taws and Poulot have extensively discussed the objects involved in this relation between space, temporality, viewers, and users. However, little has been done to date on the materiality of these interactions, on the impact they had on the space they relied on, and the processes of visual and cultural appropriation they generated. This volume intends to study precisely these aspects. Within these microcosms, reality was shown, simulated, staged,

2 Richter refers here to the work of Eva Sturm, who analyzed the behaviors and practices that exhibitions generated in *Konservierte Welt. Museum und Musealisierung* (Berlin: Reimer, 1991), quoted in Richter, note 9.

3 Dominique Bauer, “The Imagery of Interior Spaces and the Hazard of Subjectivity,” in *The Imagery of Interior Spaces*, ed. Dominique Bauer and Michael J. Kelly (New York: Punctum Books, 2019), 21–34.

4 Richard Taws, *The Politics of the Provisional: Art and Ephemera in Revolutionary France* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013).

5 See above all Dominique Poulot, *‘Surveiller et s’instruire’: la Révolution française et l’intelligence de l’héritage historique* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1996).

imagined, and experienced. It therefore also embedded a recreational dimension. Against this background, the contributions to this volume will address a varied plethora of spaces and spatial installations: the *Wunderkammer*; the spectacle garden; the cosmoramas and the panoramas; the *dépôt*/temporary museum; and the alternative exhibition space.

Although there is much attention in the Humanities for spatial studies in historical context, and for particular spaces such as museums, portable cabinets, and installations such as panoramic theaters or dioramas, especially in the framework of today's developments of the museum and virtual reality, there has not yet been a study that addresses their dimension of ephemerality, which nonetheless constitutes one of their fundamental characteristics. Ephemerality in this volume is closely connected with a historical context of change (on the socio-political level, on the economic level of consumerism and the object as a commodity, on the level of aesthetic awareness and experience, on the level of imagination, identification, and the organization of knowledge) and with the cultural significance of the various characteristics of ephemerality, such as temporality, elusiveness, or liminality. From this dual background, the contributions to this volume show overall that these small universes, although different from each other, all rely on ephemerality, which works as the main component of these spaces. Furthermore, despite its diversity, ephemerality pursues a common goal, which is to question the relationship between the use of the space and its perception as a catalyst for ideas and for "communicative processes," to refer to Richter's terminology. Within this context, the diversity of the spaces becomes a link, a connection between the practices of displaying and the structures, spanning physical entities such as the Musée des Monuments Français and literary configurations such as Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*. Furthermore, the contributions to this volume provide a detailed analysis of the functions of ephemerality and bring to the fore the skills of the exhibition practices.

We will see that the investigation of the cultural context of the change determines the understanding of the display and the understanding of the cultural phenomena that these spaces initiated and supported. Nirmali Mulloli's discussion of the practices of display in the early years of the twentieth century demonstrates that the cultural context is crucial to the process of perception and the ephemerality of the representation. Her chapter, entitled "The Impact of Alternative Exhibition Spaces on European Modern Art before World War I," is based on the research project that the scholar managed at the University of Vienna and which established a database of the exhibition catalogs dealing with the notion of modern art



in the period 1905 to 1915. The inclusion of around a thousand exhibitions allowed Mulloli to investigate the social dimension of the space and present its role as a generator of individual experience. To illustrate her purpose, Mulloli opposed two exhibitions, quite different from each other. The first one is the Internationale Jubiläums-Kunst-Ausstellung, which took place in 1888 at the Künstlerhaus in Vienna. This exhibition, with its large space and decorations, directly referred to those of a conventional Salon. Such an approach appeared to be questioned by other displays, which Mulloli defines as “spatial constellations,” such as the Exposition d’Art Frieda Liermann & Cuno Amiet, which took place in 1902 in Geneva. The Geneva exhibition presented an innovative approach and questioned the space by introducing elaborate decorative wooden elements. Furthermore, this show also raised the question of the venue – Geneva’s Palais Electoral – which was not, at least initially, conceived as an exhibition space.

The appropriation of the physical space is at the core of Emanuele Pellegrini’s essay on New Yorker collections staging cultural appropriation and mirabilia: “The Last *Wunderkammer*: Curiosities in Private Collections between the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.” Pellegrini focused on one ensemble in particular, the collection of American entrepreneur William H. Vanderbilt, to which art critic Earl Shinn (1838–1886) – who often published under the pseudonym of Edward Strahan – devoted a one-volume study. Pellegrini focused on one object in particular, an ivory casket, which Shinn simply described as an artifact of the “Italian taste of the Giotto period,” and which was located in Vanderbilt’s New Yorker residence and, more precisely, in what was called the “Japanese parlor,” a sort of private cabinet featuring a number of objects from multiple backgrounds and serving several functions. Through his text, Shinn shows his interest in this reference and in the arrangement of the object in a space which was often described as a chamber of curiosities, of wonders – hence the reference to the *Wunderkammer*. Pellegrini insists on the process of cultural appropriation initiated by Shinn and essentially visible through the fact that the “Japanese parlor” had to be considered in itself a chamber of wonders, and that this perception provided both a line of argument and feeling of homogeneity, of coherence of the act of staging collected items.

The issue of homogeneity is further explored in the case of spaces that are broadly defined and extensive, such as cities, but also voyages and tours of a given natural path or site. Juliet Simpson is concerned with this ephemerality and elusiveness in her chapter “Portable Museums: Imaging and Staging the ‘Northern Gothic Art Tour’: Ephemera and Alterity.” Simpson investigates both the impact of the vision of the space and its meaning,

especially with regard to one coherent ensemble, the Northern European Gothic art. She pays particular attention to the impact of literature on the construction of the visual but also on the relationship to the past as staged by texts. Simpson further explores the role of these “portable museums” considering both the individual experience and discourse on art heritage.

This question of the coherence of an ensemble stands as a constant concern of the ephemerality of these spaces. In their chapter, “‘One Need Be Neither a Shopper Nor a Purchaser to Enjoy’: Ephemeral Exhibitions at Tiffany & Co., 1870–1905,” Amy McHugh and Cristina Vignone deal precisely with the notion of unity in the context of a commercial enterprise such as the jewelry shop of Tiffany & Co, founded in New York in 1837. McHugh and Vignone’s contribution analyzes different groups of objects that were displayed in the flagship American store between 1870 and 1905. The exhibited items are divided into three categories: artifacts that did not belong to Tiffany, military memorabilia, and objects, such as silverware works, which were generated by a Tiffany commission. Although all three categories are tremendously representative of the company’s strategies and bear witness to its development within a socio-economic context, the ensemble of “non-Tiffany objects” possibly epitomizes the most the impact of ephemerality on the relation between viewers and objects “on view” that these spaces generated. Clearly, the presentation of each group responded to both an economic and an educational purpose, also raising the issue of the consumption of these objects. The long nineteenth century came across different stages of mass-production, from a limited development often relying on technicity, to the development of a series of industrial approaches aimed at increasing productivity.

This attention to consumerism and the impact that its development had on society are well documented in a number of literary sources, which the present volume addresses. Kathryn Haklin contributed to this discussion through her study of Emile Zola’s perception of the rise of the department store in Paris, entitled “Enclosed Exhibitions: Claustrophobia, Balloons, and the Department Store in Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames*.” Haklin departs from the sale strategies of the department store, which Zola described, to analyze the ephemeral character of their structure and their capacity to fit in a socio-economic context. For instance, the author discusses the sale of summer novelties which is portrayed in Chapter IX of Zola’s text and links it to the number of sale strategies, such as the distribution of advertising balloons, which was organized on those occasions. Here, the process of appropriation of the space is critical because it makes it possible to consider different levels of interaction, such as the phenomenon of exposure/enclosure

characterizing the department store, or the interior/exterior relationship that the balloons initiated and the subsequent “manipulation” of the space, which occurred through commercial strategies.

Literary texts provide a further understanding of ephemerality because they offer multiple points of view and enable a punctual questioning of the cultural appropriation. The contribution of Li-hsin Hsu is representative of such an approach. Her chapter, “The ‘Phantasmatic’ Chinatown in Helen Hunt Jackson’s ‘The Chinese Empire’ and Mark Twain’s *Roughing It*,” investigates the ephemeral character of a series of locations related to Chinatown in literary sources. The study essentially focuses on two texts: “The Chinese Empire,” written in 1878 by Helen Hunt Jackson, and *Roughing it* by Mark Twain, published in 1872. Hsu carefully discusses the perception of the condition of Asian immigrants in the United States, referring to the work of scholar Lisa Lowe and to her book *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Culture Politics* (1996). Hsu is interested in the spatiality of the Asian community, which is understood, to borrow Lowe’s terms, as “a screen,” “a phantasmatic site” that allows the projection of a series of perceptions, linked, indeed, to the relation between Asian immigrants and the United States. This community of immigrants represents in itself a microcosm, and functions according to its own conventions and within a given space, which must be versatile because of its urban setting. The fact that ephemerality materializes a mechanism of projection helps us understand the scale of the individual experience that these spaces provided, but also their role of intermediary, between a real, material structure, and the comprehension of its role, functioning, and scopes.

These aspects of projection, intermediacy, and communication between different cultural contexts are at the core of the chapters by Camilla Murgia and Susan Taylor-Leduc on the spatiality of entertainment. In her essay, Murgia attempts to discuss the nature of various spaces devoted to recreational activities that increasingly developed in early nineteenth-century Paris. The chapter, “Parading the Temporary: Cosmoramas, Panoramas, and Spectacles in Early Nineteenth-Century Paris,” highlights the versatility of the number of amusements, shows, and displays of these years, but also their capacity to quickly adapt to the context of the change they are confronted with. Their ability to span different visual levels and categories further helps in understanding the impact of ephemerality on the socio-economic structure and the patterns of culture consumption.

These patterns are strongly related to the temporality, the elusiveness of the number of performances and shows that increasingly developed in Paris from the first decades of the nineteenth century. Taylor-Leduc’s



chapter, “*Jardins-Spectacles: Spaces and Traces of Embodiment*,” discusses the cultural significance of ephemerality with regard to the fugacious, temporary character of the entertainment. Taylor-Leduc focuses on the *jardins-spectacles* of early nineteenth-century Paris, on their adjustable structure and on the kind of visual experience that they offered. As an open-air space, the *jardins-spectacles* took particular care to propose an individual experience that was diverse and unique, allowing space for projection and imagination. The recreational sphere that these locations represented is further linked to the consumerism and their cultural context. Indeed, these structures mainly developed in the post-revolutionary years and therefore catered to the need for entertainment and social activities that characterized the socio-cultural context of this period.

The notion of vision and the role played by viewers is a critical element of ephemerality, especially when the displays consist of human beings, as discussed by Stefanie Jovanovic-Kruspel in her chapter, “‘Show Meets Science.’ How Hagenbeck’s ‘Human Zoos’ Inspired Ethnographic Science and Its Museum Presentation.” The author considers a group of photographs, which entered the collection of the Natural History Museum of Vienna in 2015, representing the *Völkerschauen* (“Peoples’ Exhibition”), organized by merchant Carl Hagenbeck in the late nineteenth century. The contribution investigates the question of the cultural appropriation and, more generally, the representation of the foreigner in a context of ephemerality that is brought to an extreme degree due to the staging of human beings. Some of the pictures stage the Inuit community from Greenland and appeared to serve as a visual model for at least two decorative sculpted elements of Vienna’s Natural History Museum. The transfer of references operates thanks to a mechanism of comparison, which largely applied to the process of observation and for which the experience of viewing represents a drastic hint.

The elusiveness of displays, as well as their cultural context, are discussed in the essay by Dominique Bauer, “The Elusiveness of History and the Ephemerality of Display in Nineteenth-Century France and Belgium. At the Intersection of the Built Environment and the Spatial Image in Literature.” Bauer studies how museums, exhibits, and collections respond to ephemerality in a society that was profoundly museal. From the interstices and overlaps between the built environment, the experience of spaces and their representation in literature – Balzac and Rodenbach – emerges a paradoxical ambition to vivify absent, past, or “other” worlds. Central to this “presentification” is the spectator, who is caught up in a dynamic of constant displacement and deferral and whose coherent perception is both determined and challenged by mechanism of fragmentation, composition, and temporal access.

Finally, this volume attempts to show that the ephemerality, the elusiveness of exhibition spaces and spatial representations significantly refers to their hybrid character and to their ability to respond to a given cultural asset. These “constellations” evolved further in a context of changes that determined their development and their significance. The essays of this volume deal with these processes of change, visual transfer, and cultural appropriation. They cast light on the impact of these forms on society, on the modalities of consumption, and on the experiences they engendered.

#### *Note on the use of translations*

All translations of sources in other languages into English are by the chapter authors, unless indicated otherwise.

We wish to thank Paula Freestone Mellor for her invaluable help.

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**Camilla Murgia** is Junior Lecturer in history of art at the University of Lausanne. She studied history of art at Neuchâtel (MA) and Oxford (PhD) universities. Her doctoral dissertation focused on the works on the French painter, art critic and collector Pierre-Marie Gault de Saint-Germain (*Pierre-Marie Gault de Saint-Germain (c.1752–1842). Artistic Models and Criticism in Early Nineteenth-Century France*, Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009). She works particularly on 18th and 19th centuries French and British visual cultures, with a particular focus on artistic reception, display, art criticism, printmaking, and caricature. Camilla has been Junior Research Fellow at St John's College (University of Oxford) and has subsequently taught at Neuchâtel and Geneva universities. As Junior Lecturer at the University of Lausanne, she is currently working on a research project on the relation between arts and theatre in the long nineteenth-century in France, paying particular attention to the transmediality of theatrical performances and arts.

