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ARTICLE

Public History and Participation

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Abstract

In this article, we present the field of public history, which we define as a process of making history more accessible, participatory, and connected to present-day public engagement with the past. In particular, we discuss how public history invites and develops interdisciplinary collaboration, such as between history and art. We also present the reasons, the practices, and the challenges of co-producing historical projects with non-professional members of the public. As a new paradigm, public history questions and reinvents the role of professional historians who share authority with other actors of the history-making process. We flesh out our arguments with examples from recent public history projects we developed in Luxembourg in 2024.

Keywords: artistic research; Luxembourg; migration; participation; public history

As its name suggests, the field of public history is all about making the production of history more public. This includes making historical content more accessible, representative, participatory, and resonant in the public space.[1] Although the term "public history" gained popularity in academia in the United States in the 1970s, many of its practices have long existed outside academia, for instance, in museums and archives.[2] Despite an increasing number of resources on what public history is and can do, its participatory dimension remains subject to debate. Participation is sometimes under-theorised and loosely defined as a single, fit-for-all, general approach. Shared authority, collaboration, participation, coproduction, and co-creation are not interchangeable terms; they embed different approaches and understandings of the role of experts, institutions, groups, and other actors. In this article, we reflect upon our recent project to discuss the benefits, challenges, gains, and losses of developing participatory practices for public history.

In 2023, we (Myriam Dalal and Thomas Cauvin) co-developed "Are We Home Yet?"—a project that looks at the quest for home and its historical interpretations by migrant/exile communities living in the town of Esch-sur-Alzette in Luxembourg. Initiated at the Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C^2DH), the project aimed to promote alternative participatory approaches and reveal unexplored histories of the town.

[1] Cauvin 2022.
[2] Karamanski 2025.

Figure 1. Poster illustration for the project *Lovó*, by Myriam Dalal, created using MidJourney AI.

Luxembourg is often described as a country of immigration for over a century. Furthermore, migrants are individuals who, by definition, have "lost" their "home" and are therefore in search of a new one. The idea and meaning of home can change in space and time, and in the case of migrants, it can also help shed light on the broader history of a place. This is why we created *Lovó* (which combines the words "love" in English and "avó"—grandmother—in Portuguese), a participatory public history project that highlights the memories of grandmothers of Portuguese and Cabo Verdean origin to understand the quest for home and the broader history of Esch-sur-Alzette (Figure 1).[3] Through *Lovó*, we discuss two types of participation: between historians and artists, and between academic scholars and Portuguese-speaking grandmothers.

1. Public history: an attempt to break down academic and disciplinary walls

Robert Kelley initially defined public history as "the employment of historians and historical methods outside of academia."[4] While public history can indeed take many different forms, including exhibitions, guided tours, and documentary films, it is not completely disconnected from academia. What the founding members of the movement argued was that public history challenged the walls of academia. Wesley Johnson saw public history as a response to the isolation of academic historians in their ivory towers.[5] Although Johnson was purposefully exaggerating the notion of the ivory tower to justify the need for more public history programmes, he was not completely wrong.

[3] C^{2}DH 2025.
[4] Kelley 1978, 16.
[5] Johnson 1978, 6.

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There are two main types of walls in academia: the walls between academic and non-academic actors, and the walls between disciplines. While certain disciplines such as anthropology openly address and engage with participation, academic historians have been much more reluctant. Many historians research periods whose witnesses are long dead, ruling out any participation of direct actors. The lack of participatory practices also comes from a general mistrust. Too often, academic history remains an individual quest to find, analyse, and interpret archives. Academia encourages and even reinforces individual research through the system of peer-reviewed publications, most of which—at least in the humanities—are single-authored. This reluctance extends further and can also be linked to the principle of separating past and present as a way of ensuring that research is immune to present-day subjectivity, what Peter Novick calls the "noble dream."[6] By working for, with, and among the public, public history challenges these practices and makes academic walls more porous.

The rise of participatory practices in public history has supported interdisciplinary initiatives. Making history (more) public involves preservation, dissemination, and inclusion.[7] However, because academic historians have traditionally written for their peers, they sometimes find it challenging to reach and engage a broader audience. We only need to think of how difficult it is for academic historians to write without footnotes or to communicate historical research through non-written formats. Although things are slowly beginning to change, very few academic historians disseminate their research through podcasts, comics, documentary films, or tours. Making history (more) public is also an act of translation, mediation, facilitation, and communication that requires interdisciplinary practices—thereby making disciplinary walls more porous too. In our project, we have developed participation between historians, artists, and members of the public.

2. When historians and artists work together

People sometimes (rightfully so) see history—and art—as elitist and remote. In order to make knowledge more accessible, public history projects have often combined history with other fields and disciplines, such as communication, museology, media production, computer science, and cultural heritage. For our project, we have explored, developed, and reflected upon opportunities to develop participation for artists in public history.[8] Art can be a useful tool when seeking to democratise access to knowledge, though it must be acknowledged that contemporary art practices have themselves sometimes become more elitist and exclusionary than academic research, especially when confined to museums and/or the market-driven sphere of galleries and auction houses. However, when used as a medium to communicate and make information accessible, art can bring historical interpretation a lot closer to certain publics and can undoubtedly have a wider reach. This is certainly what we were aiming for in developing art and history participation in the *Lovó* project.

We conceived the *Lovó* project as an ode to hidden Portuguese voices in Esch-sur-Alzette. It tells the story of appropriating the town and finding (or not) a home there, as told by Portuguese-speaking grandmothers through oral history. And because grandmothers are

[6] Novick 1988.
[7] Cauvin 2021.
[8] Bush and Paul 2017; Hayden 1997.

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Figure 2. Children interacting with the *Lovó* art installation created by Marieke Leene in Esch-sur-Alzette.

often natural-born night-time storytellers, their testimonies were highlighted in *Lovó* through nocturnal audiovisual tours, comprising light installations created by visual artists Duarte Perry, Marieke Leene, and Myriam Dalal (Figure 2). We designed these installations as visual elements that could accompany the audio excerpts. The latter were collected from six interviews that Dalal and Cauvin conducted with four Portuguese and two Cabo Verdean grandmothers.

Art can help visualise ideas and materialise otherwise abstract historical concepts. For example, in one of the *Lovó* installations (Figure 2), grandmother Elizabeth speaks about when she arrived in Esch-sur-Alzette after a long journey from Cabo Verde to Portugal to Luxembourg in the 1970s. For her, as a ten-year-old at the time, what was most striking was how much light the town had by night, in contrast to where she came from. By using motion sensor interactive light in the art installation, artist Marieke Leene materialised that historical emotion of change (Figure 2).

Art can also add an extra layer to historical testimonies by bringing emotions and facts together. This facilitates the connection between the spectator and the subject and enables individuals to project themselves into the presented narrative. It can make the information more memorable, relevant, and impactful because it can cultivate the spectator's empathy and has the potential to affect their judgement and behaviours in relation to the presented topics.

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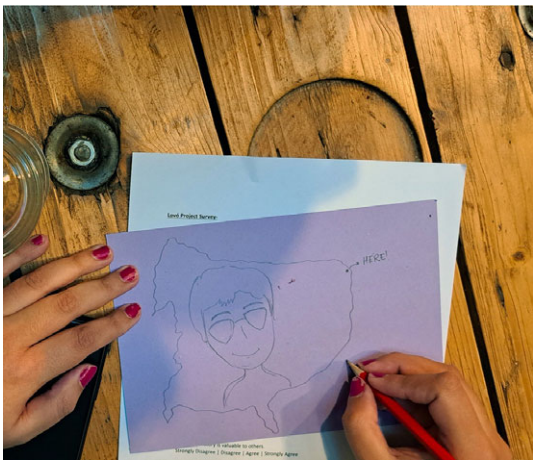

Figure 3. Students representing their grandmother's journey through drawing and collage during the *Lovó* workshop in Belval.

With that said, public history projects sometimes limit art to its communicative dimension. However, artistic methodologies have proven to be effective throughout every stage of research projects, from identifying the subject and conducting literature reviews to generating research questions and collecting and analysing data. Juha Suoranta, Mika Hannula, and Tere Vadén thus describe artistic research as a context-aware and historical process that involves developing and refining artistic skills, contributing to academic discourse, and engaging with the public to foster a deeper understanding of artistic and historical narratives.[9] And this perfectly matched our public history approach in the project.

For example, we used artistic research in the preliminary stage of the project, when we invited students at the University of Luxembourg to come and speak about their own grandmothers (Figure 3). By using collage to create visuals that represent stories about home, students' contributions helped to frame and communicate public interest in family stories. It also helped students think of what questions they would have wanted to ask their own grandmothers. As a result, the students ended up co-drafting the project's oral history interview questions with us.

Interdisciplinary projects are not all roses and rainbows, though. Partnering with the first cultural Biennale of Esch, the Lovó tours had to be scheduled according to their agenda and placed in relation to their activities. Additionally, the participation of artists in public history projects comes with its own set of issues. Dealing with artists' egos and their unwillingness to allow any interference or participation in their creative process can be very challenging. In such projects, artists—like historians—have to be willing to embrace participation and compromises and be flexible in their practice. It is equally challenging to create an output, product, or artwork that balances information and illustration, as well as facts and feelings. This is because the artistic output needs to convey the message without being too abstract. It cannot be too illustrative either, because it risks losing all its artistic/creative value. And in the art world, creativity and originality remain crucial and defining criteria for artists. As Robin George Collingwood argues in his essay on the principles of art,

[9] Hannula and Vadén 2014.

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art is not merely about representation or illustration but conveys deeper meanings and emotions through creative expression.[10]

Another challenge is historical accuracy, as artists sometimes have a different understanding of what the aim of an art piece is. In public history projects, remaining true to the narrative and accurate in terms of historical context is essential, while for artists, the line between fiction and reality can be blurred. For example, when working on the installation piece related to grandmother Adriana, one of the artists wanted to interpret her 50-minute-long oral history interview with a single rope that would connect one of the trees to the pavement. For us, this was way too abstract and minimalist to represent and express what this woman experienced when she moved to Luxembourg as a teenager. Additionally, the rope itself constituted a major hazard in a public space, especially as it was supposed to be installed next to a school where kids would have access to it.

Perhaps the wave of artists–archivists that contemporary art practices have embraced since the 1990s is the best testimony to that ambivalence, with artists like the internationally renowned Walid Raad creating a completely fictional archive, the Atlas Group, to present works addressing the history of the Lebanese Civil War. Hal Foster's essay "An Archival Impulse" identifies this artist–archivist trend in post-1960s (with conceptual art) and especially post-1990s art, where artists decided to use archival material in their work to challenge dominant historical narratives.[11] For Foster, these obscure, forgotten, or marginalised archives were the primary motive for artists to expose and make physically present historical information.[12] All of this sounds like music to the ears of public historians, as the similarities between both practices make it the perfect match for artists and historians to work together. Problems arise when these constructed narratives shift from reality and move into complete fiction. For artists, this is the epitome of creativity and imagination; for public historians, this is a falsification of history and a dangerous route. Therefore, the work of Raad and other artists/archivists, while of high value in the art world, can be seen as problematic if considered in the context of public history practices. In the absence of publicly available and accessible records of the history of the Lebanese civil war, and an educational history book that teaches it, Raad's Atlas Group is basically telling a story that never existed about something we do not know much about. And this "archival turn" in contemporary art—which Callahan describes as a shift in focus from the archive as a repository of truth to a dynamic space for artistic exploration and commentary—can significantly jeopardise the collective/societal understanding of a historical context, especially in cases where there is no agreed shared historical narrative.[13]

3. Who runs the world? Grandmothers!

3.1. Why public participation?

In addition to interdisciplinary participation, public history can call on groups, associations, or individual members of the public to create and develop projects. This can be part of a structural shift. Reflecting on the dialogical process in oral history during the 1980s, Michael Frisch developed the concept of a "shared authority" in which both narrators and historians

[10] Collingwood 1994.
[11] Foster 2004.
[12] Foster 2004.
[13] Callahan 2022; Dalal 2022.

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co-produce content.[14] Frisch believes that there is a shared authority that is not decided or agreed upon but exists by definition. The concept has influenced many participatory public history projects, especially with the rise of user-generated online content.

As well as reflecting technological and structural changes in the production of historical content, public participation can also derive from specific motivations and objectives. The involvement of members of the public can help unearth new types of sources that are not found in institutional and official archives, such as family letters, photographs, objects, or oral history. One role for historians is to identify absence, silence, and under-represented narratives in existing corpora of sources, as well as in historiography.[15]

For instance, in Luxembourg, over 20% of the population speaks Portuguese. This makes the Portuguese-speaking community one of the largest and most established communities in the country.[16] Yet while some research exists, the inclusion of Portuguese migrants in the recent history of Luxembourg is proportionally under-represented, partly because it does not fit the focus on industrial heritage that Luxembourg has been associated with in the twentieth century. Moreover, in existing research on Portuguese populations, the focus has mostly been on men moving and settling down in Luxembourg, much less on women.

To fill this historical gap, *Lovó* chose to speak to the moving grandmothers. Leaving home gives another dimension to family ties, and within the family nucleus, grandmothers are known to play an essential role as bearers of intangible cultural heritage, transmitting their knowledge and expertise in traditional practices, folklore, and culinary arts across generations. *Lovó* participants were therefore Portuguese-speaking grandmothers who had a rapport with the town of Esch.[17]

Playing an active part in the process of writing "their" history can help members of the public to engage, contribute, and benefit from it. This is why it was extremely important that grandmothers involved in the *Lovó* project be acknowledged and rewarded through the various events and award applications that we participated in. Grandmother Augusta, for instance, a singing exiled diva in her early years, recently performed at a conference event in Luxembourg where the project *Lovó* was presented.[18]

3.2. *From participation to participatory tasks*

Like citizen science, public history can be contributory, collaborative, or co-created, depending on participants' level of involvement. However, most public history projects limit participation to contribution, for instance, with participants' living memories. Understanding and developing participation as a multiplicity of tasks, as citizen science argues, creates new opportunities. We divided *Lovó* into several stages, giving different types of participants the opportunity to contribute at different times according to their availability.

[14] Frisch 1990.

[15] Trouillot 1995.

[16] A bilateral agreement on the employment of Portuguese workers in Luxembourg, which was signed in 1970 and ratified in 1972, provided a framework for the arrival of future Portuguese people and rectified the situation of illegal immigrants who had arrived in the 1960s.

[17] The inclusion of Cabo Verdean grandmothers in the project reflects the colonial legacy of Portugal, as people of Cabo Verde held Portuguese citizenship until 1975.

[18] Event held in March 2025 at the Documentation Center for Human Migration in Luxembourg, in celebration of International Women's Day: https://www.cdmh.lu/db/4/1412377504675/0.

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The role of historians here can be to guarantee consistent research frameworks, rather than necessarily being in charge or producing all the stages.

The multiplicity of tasks also helps identify different levels of expertise required for participation. It is erroneous to consider "the" public as a whole. Not everybody has the same skills, knowledge, or time and energy to devote to a project. Public history projects should allow different participants to engage in different tasks according to their interests, knowledge, skills, and expertise. Some tasks merely require general knowledge and can be performed by most participants. Specialised knowledge is held by a smaller number of participants, whereas domain-specific expert knowledge is gained through specific training or long-term practice. Not all stages of all projects can or have to be participatory. Instead of defining projects by whether or not they are participatory, it is more beneficial to reason in terms of levels of participation. It might sound irrational, but having more people involved in a project often necessitates more time than leading the project alone. This is because building participation requires framing the methodology, identifying participants' profiles, building trust, and monitoring the progress of each task.

As active participants, grandmothers were the project's narrators. Their answers to the set of semi-structured interview questions were central to the final audio piece. The questions enabled the grandmothers to decide which memories they wanted to mention. For example, some decided to focus on their journey, what they brought, and the people they travelled with, whereas others spoke more about the initial contrast between Esch and their former home. The role of historians was also to ask follow-up questions to contribute to the general themes and understanding of the past.

Additionally, not all stages were equally participatory. We chose artists who had previous experience with "sharing authority" in their work and were willing to do so again. We kept some form of control over what the artists produced and whether or not the created pieces would fit the project's general objectives. We acknowledged these choices and made sure that they were transparent throughout the process. We also chose the audio extracts that were included in the final audio pieces. We had initially thought of including other grandmothers living in the town in the process of selecting the audio extracts that spoke to them the most, and also asking them to review the artists' installations and discuss/suggest changes prior to their installation in the public space. That would have supported more collective decision-making, but as mentioned above, these stages, although ideally very useful for the project, would have taken considerable time and required extensive administrative planning and coordination, and we were unable to move forward with them given our limited manpower and the strict deadline set by the cultural association that was sponsoring the project.

We also developed other forms of participation that did not require lived experience. For example, we worked with Portuguese, Cabo Verdean, and senior citizens' associations to find and recruit narrators for the project. Building a network of participants is a very important step that affects the whole project. It is a complex task as it involves building a pool of active participants representative of different historical profiles.

Public participation in the interpretation of the collected data or even in the production of the final pieces is definitely more challenging, as those stages require more specific skills. This relates to the highly debated notion of quality control, or "quality insurance," as we prefer to say. Research projects need a solid methodology for knowledge production. Knowledge is not mere opinion and relies on evidence, contextualisation—in which

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individual stories are situated within broader narratives—and interpretation.[19] The active involvement of several groups and community members can also result in the multiplication of sometimes conflicting voices and historical interpretations. While this may lead to disagreements and impasses, polyvocal projects also allow us to practice, display, and communicate about the complexity of history. *Lovó* offered conflicting narratives of the arrival of Portuguese migrants, with some highlighting racist behaviours they were confronted with in the 1980s and others focusing on the new opportunities they obtained when they moved to Esch. Taking part in public history projects can help participants to understand the relationship between archives, specific stories, narratives, and sources with a broader historical context—a critical role for history producers. As the grandmothers who participated in the project listened to each other's narratives, they engaged with how historians connect singular narratives and sources with a broader understanding of the past.

To conclude, developing public participation in history production can be challenging, as it is a long(er) process often stemmed from differing approaches, disagreements, or even tensions. Overcoming these challenges is still critical, as it allows us to go beyond the academic disciplinary walls. Thinking strictly in terms of disciplines—is it history, is it arts?—runs the risk of reproducing and imposing academic systems on community partners. We demonstrate in this article that public history and artistic research have a lot in common and can both work towards making history more participatory, inclusive, representative, and people-centred. Successful participatory projects allow a plurality of voices and conceptions of the past, as well as multiple possible formats (not all written) of communication. As such, this is about how the partners enrich historians' work much more than how historians bring historical truth to partners. This does not yet mean that all steps of the projects were or have to be participatory, nor that all participants have similar skills and expertise. Successful participatory projects rely upon inclusive processes in which historical witnesses, historians, artists, city officials, and facilitators (like community homes and associations) can play a role in collectively interpreting the past. What historians brought to the project is twofold: first, they helped connect individual narratives to a broader collective understanding of the past. And in this, the collage activity was critical as it allowed participants to relate the individual to their surrounding contexts and communities. In a current context of exacerbated individualism and aggressive social behaviours, connecting individuals and communities is becoming a necessity. The second role of the historians in the project was to use their cultural and institutional power to support under-represented historical narratives in the public and official space. Doing public history is very much about knowing who is and who is not part of the public representations of the past.

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