

The Exhibition as Voice Dialogue

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To be means to communicate dialogically. When dialogue ends, everything ends. Thus dialogue, by its very essence, cannot and must not come to an end. [...] All else is the means; dialogue is the end. A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence. (Bakhtin 1984: 252)

This essay explores the exhibition format as a form of dialogue between voices, cultures, institutions, and media. To this end, I draw on materials from *Arif at MUNCH* (2024), an experimental and immersive exhibition that narrates the story of Arif, one of Norway's most accomplished rap artists. *Arif at MUNCH* was presented at the Oslo-based art museum MUNCH from 31 August to 1 December 2024. I served as curator as part of a broad, interdisciplinary team. The project's ambition was to engage youths and young adults from Oslo and bring them into the museum.

I view the exhibition through the lens of *dialogism*, a theoretical framework developed by the Russian philosopher and literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) in response to the works of the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881). According to Bakhtin, individual consciousness is formed not through abstract thought in isolation but only through dialogic relations with others. The concept of dialogism was not explicitly and consciously applied for the development of *Arif at MUNCH*; instead, it is used here in retrospect as an analytical tool for considering the general ability of exhibitions to function as voice dialogues.

Dialogism further prompts critical reflections regarding collective curatorial authorship and the individual-based writing of this essay within a dialogic framework. As for the latter, the writing process itself may be understood as a conducting and arranging of voices. It is my hope that you, the reader, will experience the text as a form of dialogic engagement with a multitude of voices, rather than as the monologic perspective of an individual consciousness.

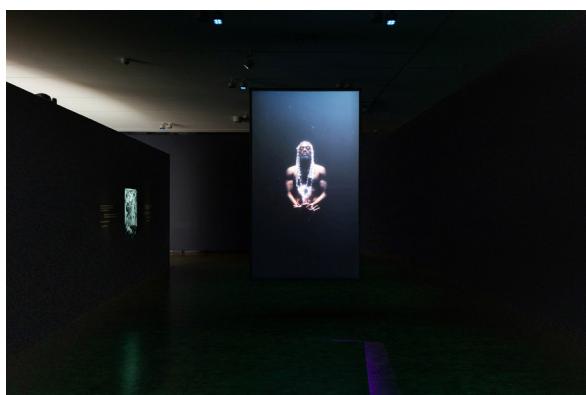
Among the multiple voices arranged in the text, the ones of the visitors are essential. They were recorded as part of the exhibition's encompassing processes evaluation and visitor research, spearheaded by the museum's innovation team in dialogue with a broad range of contributors. The conducted visitor research included digital surveys, focus group interviews, visitor observations, user testing, a population survey, mobile ethnography, and a multitude of quantitative indicators.

It's time to meet Arif. This is Arif at MUNCH

The exhibition looked as follows:



1) Introduction Space:



This space featured a tableau vivant depicting Arif floating in water while holding a beating shell.

2) Edvard Munch Reproductions and Quotations:



Three reproductions of graphic works by the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch (1863-1944) were displayed in the exhibition. These works were animated by morphing water projections and accompanied by Munch quotations.

3) Immersive Film Space:



Projected onto an eighteen-metre-wide and three-metre-high screen, a short film (approx. 13 minutes) narrated Arif's journey. Arif created approximately eight new songs for the film.

4) Transition Space:



A transitional corridor featuring an immersive light installation (using real water).

5) Community space:



A space for weekly live events and interactive components – including screens that allowed interaction with Arif's lyrics and message cards that visitors could send to Arif.

6) Music studio:



In the recording studio, Arif was present to work on a new album. While Arif could not see the visitors, they could observe him and his guests. They could also listen in via headphones or a web app.

Museological Response to the Dialogic Exhibition Format:

The dialogic dimension of museum exhibitions and institutions has been addressed repeatedly, and is therefore not particularly novel. Generally, the modern museum's gradual shift from a monologic organisation towards dialogic structures has been a recurring concern within museum studies (e.g. Hooper-Greenhill 1994: 1-34; McClellan 2008; Henning 2006: chs. 3-4). This paradigmatic transformation is generally situated in the second half of the twentieth century, with the 1970s often identified as a key starting point – perhaps in response to the mid-1960s critique of the art museum by Bourdieu, Darbel, and Schnapper (1991), alongside other critical voices and debates emerging in the early 1970s (e.g. Wittlin 2004; Cameron 2004). This trend was later synthesised more systematically under the term *New Museology* (Vergo 1989).

In contemporary museum practice, and as a continuation of this historical trajectory, there is widespread consensus that the museum no longer functions primarily as a monologic mediator and exhibitor of objects and their associated epistemic and narrative contents. Instead, it has become a dialogic interlocutor for its visitors, communities, and society at large. This shift is evident not least in the mission statements of museum institutions worldwide (Anderson 2019), as well as in the substantial body of literature promoting and providing frameworks for such approaches (e.g. Lang and Reeve 2007; Simon, 2010; Murawski 2021; Addis et al. 2023).

On a more detailed level, numerous research contributions have explored the dialogic dimensions of museums. Venieri (2022) provides a thorough overview of this extensive field.

Narrative

Eneste vi ville var å passe inn / Eneste jeg spurte om var muligheten /
Prøver å finne plassen min i jungelen //

Only thing we wanted was to fit in / Only thing I asked about was an opportunity / Trying to find my place in the jungle¹

(Arif, lyrics from song 'Syndebukk', produced for the short film shown in *Arif at MUNCH*)

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As long as a person is alive he lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word. (Bakhtin 1984: 59).

The story told in *Arif at MUNCH* follows Arif's quest to find his own voice. The resolution of this quest lies in community: the Bakhtinian notion that a voice finds its true self only through and among the voices of others. Importantly, the concept of a 'true self' does not denote a finalised state of being, but an open-ended process of becoming, as emphasised by Bakhtin in the quotation above. Did Arif's true self become tangible in the exhibition?

[The exhibition] got me thinking about life. Loved it.

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I'm still don't know who he is but it was fun.

(feedback from two visitors conducted in a digital survey with 362 exhibition visitors)

In the short film shown in the exhibition, Arif embarks on a journey through a magical seashell, which carries him from Oslo to Zanzibar – the East African island from which his parents migrated – from the present to the past (fig. 1) and into possible futures. The film functioned as the exhibition's narrative centrepiece.



Figure 1: *Arif at MUNCH*, childhood Arif, 2024. Film. © Munchmuseet.

The film [...] moved me because I felt it explored his side of living between two cultures. Being multicultural, I can relate to that, that maybe there are different expectations on each side, so I thought that was cool.

(visitor feedback from mobile ethnography, conducted in November and December 2024 with six participants aged 16-22)

The exhibition's critical reception draws a more mixed picture of the film: while the critic of the Norwegian newspaper *Dagsavisen* thinks the 'film does its job' (Elton 2024), the article published in the Nordic art magazine *Kunstkritikk* finds 'Arif's own story to be treated in a sketch-like manner, like a narrative about individualistic self-realisation'. At the same time, the magazine's critic states that it is 'not unthinkable that many with a multicultural background will see themselves' in it (Norton 2024).



Figure 2: Arif at MUNCH, beach funeral, 2024. Film. © Munchmuseet.

The dialogic and polyphonic dimension that Bakhtin detects in Dostoevsky's novels is not limited to interactions between multiple characters. He also sees dialogism at work *within* individual characters, where voices intersect and collide across an embodied, individualised mishmash terrain of personality (discourse about the self) and ideology (discourse about the world) (Bakhtin 1984: 78f.).



Figure 3: Arif at MUNCH, dance with death, 2024. Film. © Munchmuseet



Figure 4: *Arif at MUNCH*, ancestral celebration, 2024. Film. © Munchmuseet



Figure 5: *Arif at MUNCH*, grandmother, 2024. Film. © Munchmuseet.

Corresponding to this aspect of intra-character dialogism, the film narrates Arif's inner journey through a splitting of the self into a multiplicity of interacting voices, times, and spaces (figs. 3-5). A negotiation occurs between Arif's vulnerable self, universal existential experience, his Zanzibari roots and East African spirituality and tradition, and his present status as an Oslo-based Norwegian rap artist.

The fact that the film primarily facilitates dialogic interaction through visual and multi-sensory means represents an interesting deviation from Bakhtin's scholarship, which focuses on language and discourse as embodied dialogue. At the same time, Bakhtin himself notes 'that dialogic relationships in the broad sense are also possible among different intelligent phenomena [...], for example, among images belonging to different art forms' (Bakhtin 1984: 184f.). This media flexibility is grounded in the notion of '*polyphonic artistic thinking* beyond the bounds of the novel as a genre' (Bakhtin 1984: 270). Accordingly, the exhibition's various content-bearing components can be understood as dialogically interconnected across space (see interactive map above). Labelled an 'immersive experience', the exhibition's multimedia interplay became the source of both critical scrutiny and enthusiasm.

The winner is the entertainment industry and the immersive experiences. Here, all means – from the simple and self-explanatory symbolism to the video's projection on an ultrawide screen, as well as the

interactive screens with extracts of Arif's lyrics – are arranged in a way that you don't have to think. (Norton 2024)

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Incredibly good way to showcase a wider spectrum of Norwegian culture. Very varied forms of expression, interesting. Emotional.

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Liked that you used sound and light and that you could interact with elements. For example, the screens with lyrics.

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Would have liked to have more senses stimulated, like taste and smell.

(feedback from three visitors in the digital survey)

The exhibition's reception reveals a tension between visitors and critics, between, on the one hand, accessibility and democratisation of art and culture, and a critique of the commercialisation of art as a banal spectacle for easy consumption. This tension was also felt internally at the museum both during the exhibition's development and after its launch – reflecting the different professional perspectives and positions present in the organisation.

Visitors and critics were slightly more aligned on the use of Edvard Munch reproductions and quotations in three locations throughout the exhibition (see interactive map above). From a curatorial perspective, these elements were intended to open an intermedial artistic dialogue that echoed and amplified key themes of Arif's story – such as the expression of personal feelings and memories and the intertwined nature of spirit and matter, life and death, past, present, and future. Furthermore, pairing Munch's artistry with Arif's was an attempt to revitalise Munch's canonical imagery. Dennis Cutchins, reflecting on Bakhtinian thought in adaptation studies, discusses the notion of the canonical as a 'dead' category, closed to meaning-making and dialogic 'interpenetration and interpretation' (Cutchins 2017: 12). By entering a dialogic encounter with Arif's story, Munch's images and writings may become alive and meaningful again to the visitor. However, the reception of the exhibition draws a different picture.

I wouldn't say that the connection between Munch and Arif was very clear. When I first walked in and saw the image of Arif, I didn't understand that it had a connection with the Munch painting in the same section. I interpret the connection between Arif and Munch such that they are two artists who both experienced being in the limelight. [...] It can also be seen like Arif can recognise himself in Munch, in the hard work he did, and to leave a part of himself in every single work that is seen by thousands of eyes.

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The connection between Arif and Munch is that they used a number of quotes from Munch in the exhibition, and that Arif had been inspired by some of the quotes from Munch, but I didn't see any super big connection other than that.

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I don't quite see the connection between Arif and Munch.

(feedback from three visitors in the digital survey)

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The connection to Edvard Munch's art is so tenuous that it feels like a joke: they display three light boxes with large reproductions of Edvard Munch's graphics. (Elton 2024)

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Some short and more or less arbitrary Munch quotes about death and the role of art in life are plastered on the walls, in an attempt to create a connection to the video's rebirth narrative. Unfortunately, this attempt to justify the project's place in the museum does not achieve much, beyond making Munch look like a banal existentialist. (Norton 2024)

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Even though Munch's artwork is placed quite anonymously in the space, the connection between the two artists works surprisingly well. Both wear their hearts on their sleeves, and this togetherness gives the space a deeper resonance. [...] Despite the strong visual and narrative elements, the connection to Munch's art remains weak. (Fongen Langslet 2024)

Younger voices – collected through the project team’s visitor research – expressed that they felt inspired to view Munch’s original works after engaging with Arif at MUNCH. Many changed their view of what Edvard Munch and the museum stand for. The same goes for Arif, who often talked about his childhood relationship with the museum:

My relationship with Munch has over time, and especially after I’ve been here for a year now, become very good. I can relate a lot to his life, his ups and especially downs. I think back to myself. We didn’t dare go in because we didn’t think that art was for us, and that Munch wasn’t for us. Tons of kids like us think and feel the same way, so I hope and believe we can help make the museum a little less toxic.
(Køhncke Urholt & Edh Hasselgård 2024)

Development

It is quite possible to imagine and postulate a unified truth that requires a plurality of consciousnesses, one that [...] is born at a point of contact among various consciousnesses. (Bakhtin 1984: 81)

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I’ve spent much time working with musicians from all over the world to help craft their personal narratives into visuals, and it parallels my own experience creating filmic stories based on my heritage and personal history. I approached breaking down Arif’s narrative the same way, and also used MUNCH Museum’s method of organizing Edvard Munch’s biography as a template to bring Arif’s story to a mythic scale for audiences. (Andrew Thomas Huang interviewed in Mathias 2025: 153)

Bringing out Arif’s voice required a ‘plurality of consciousnesses’. These consciousnesses were dispersed across continents, languages, and cultures. As a result, the development model of the exhibition moved away from monologic authorship positions – typically personified by the curator or the single artist – and embraced a dialogic, dispersed model of curatorial authorship. This approach can be understood as a continuation of the ‘new authorial position’ Bakhtin (1984: 18) identifies in Dostoevsky’s novels, characterised by a loosening and democratisation of authorial authority.

Concretely, the central curatorial positions in the project were held by Chinese-American filmmaker and visual artist Andrew Thomas Huang, Arif himself, British filmmaker Wukda, me as the museum-side curator, as well as MUNCH's head of innovation, Birgitte Aga, and the head of the MUNCH Young programme, Awo Mahamoud Abdulqadir. In addition, the project commissioned contributions from Torsteinsen (exhibition architecture), Yoke (interaction design), Parabol (graphic design), and Also Known As (product design).

The conception and realisation of the central motif – the seashell – illustrates the exhibition's dialogic development process. When Andrew Thomas Huang joined the project team to develop the overarching concept and narrative for both the film and the exhibition, he developed the seashell motif based on a personal memory of Arif.

The reason for using seashells as symbols for the exhibition is as simple as this: every time my mom went to Zanzibar, she came home with seashells for me. Big seashells. 'Here, a piece of your roots. From me to you.' (Arif på #MUNCH: *Kunstnerportrett*)

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The seashell is a portal that bridges time and space. Like Munch's 'Tree of Life' [fig. 6], the shell is a timekeeper that connects the past, present and future through spiraled layers of growth over a lifetime like the rings of a tree. As a vessel connected to the sea that washes ashore, the seashell connects continents, linking the journey from Zanzibar to Norway. The shell also connects the biological with the mineral: the soft ephemeral living body with the hard crystallization of its aftermath. As a divine artifact that symbolizes cosmic eternity, the seashell is the perfect symbol to encapsulate Arif's journey into the infinite. (Andrew Thomas Huang, concept sketch for *Arif at MUNCH*)

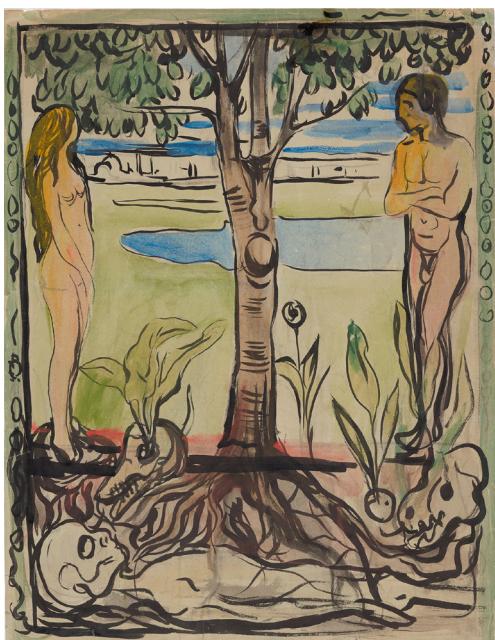


Figure 6: Edvard Munch, *Metabolism*, 1898. Watercolour and ink on paper. 64.7 x 49.7 cm. MUNCH. © Munchmuseet.

The dialogic exchanges between Huang, Arif, and MUNCH resulted in new imagery, conceived by Huang through dialogic engagement with generative AI tools. These images merged Arif's story, Munch's metabolic cosmology (Cordulack 2002: 97-106; Berman 2023), and existing conceptual threads, forming a visual foundation for further development (figs. 8, 9).



Figure 7: Slide 'Act 1 – Joy' from Concept Document for *Arif at MUNCH* © Andrew Thomas Huang.

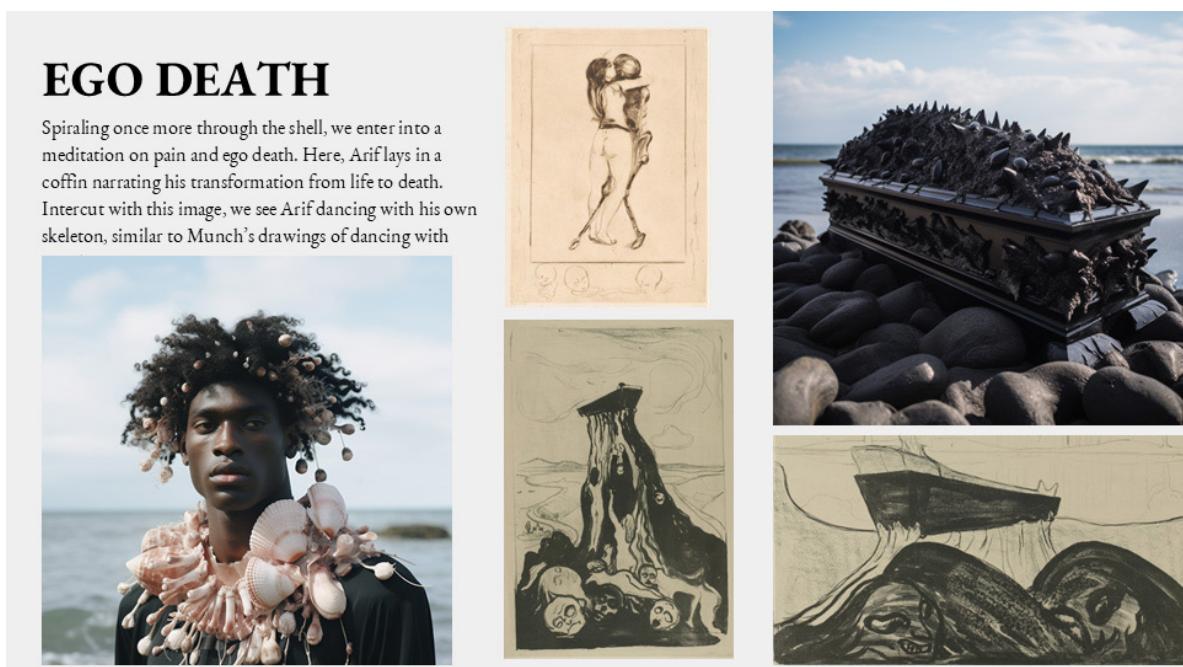


Figure 8: Slide 'Ego Death' from Concept Document for *Arif at MUNCH* © Andrew Thomas Huang.

When British filmmaker Wukda joined the project, he wove the motif into his film script and realised it cinematically.

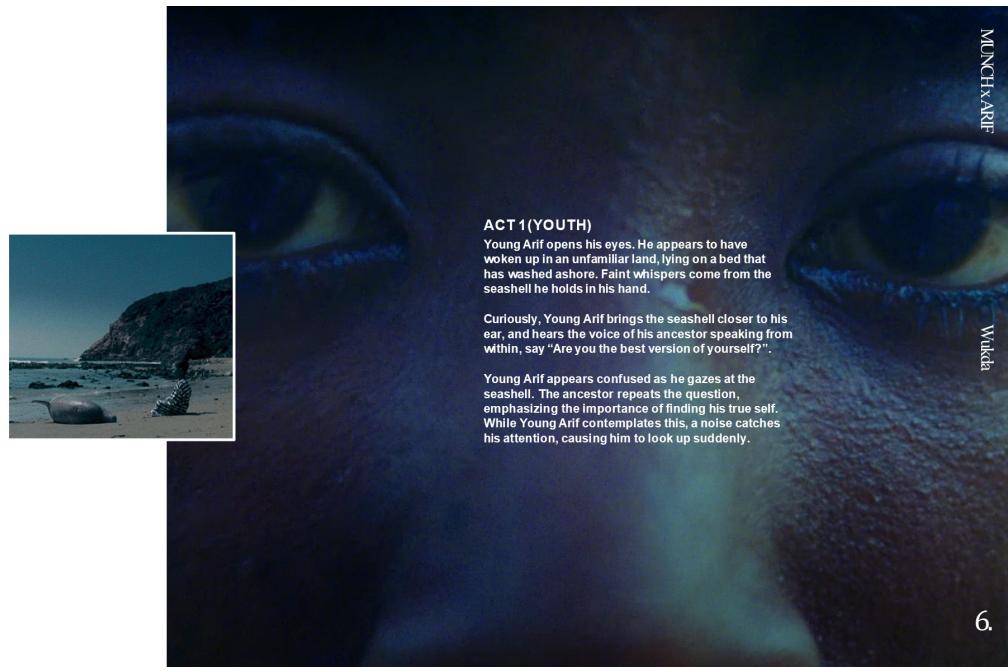


Figure 9: Treatment for the short film *Arif at MUNCH* © Wukda.

In parallel, my colleagues and I at the museum, together with the architecture and design partners, worked on embedding the shell's symbolism into the exhibition's texts, architecture, and graphic and interaction design.

Stories are like seashells. Some wash up on distant shores, others sink to the bottom of the ocean and disappear forever. On these screens, you can dive underwater and discover Arif's stories of joy, pain and hope.

(wall text accompanying the interactive screens in *Arif at MUNCH*)

The exhibition architects drew inspiration from the seashell theme for the furniture, seating, and other interior design elements (fig. 10). The museum's innovation catalyst, Julie Parisi, mapped out the exhibition's user journey and gathered feedback on the effectiveness of the seashell as a conceptual and narrative driver through user testing with target groups (fig. 11).



Figure 10: *Arif at MUNCH*, mood board for exhibition furniture. © Torsteinsen Design AS.

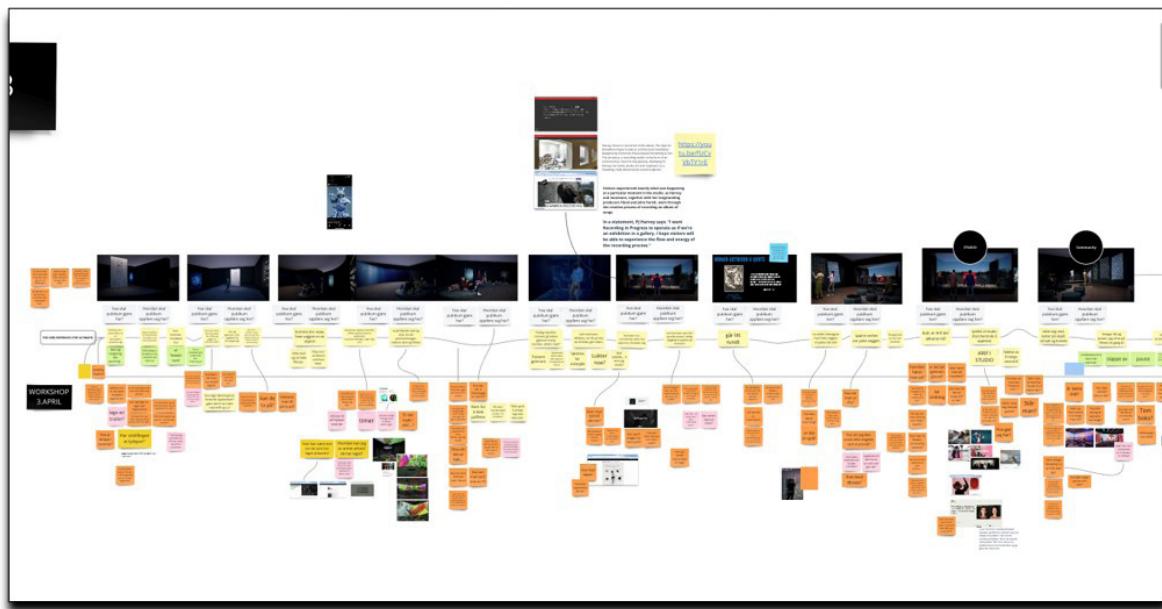


Figure 11: *Arif at MUNCH*, mood board mapping out the exhibition's user journey. © Munchmuseet.

Crucially, the dialogic development process laid out here should not be mistaken for a smooth and harmonious undertaking, as though the utopian promise of a dialogic community transcended all differences of culture, language, profession, and personality. How does Bakhtin conceive dialogism in Dostoevsky's novels? As a struggle between oppositional voices, culminating in the birth of authentic speech – 'a word truly adequate to [the protagonist]' (Bakhtin 1984: 56). More broadly, Holquist grounds Bakhtin's notion of dialogic authoring in the idea that 'we must appropriate the vision of others' to 'see our selves' (Holquist 2002: 27). In Bakhtin's worldview, consciousness is inseparable from the experience of otherness, which can never be fully overcome or synthesised. According to Holquist, 'Bakhtin's metaphor for the unity of the two elements constituting the relation of self and other is dialogue, the simultaneous unity of differences in the event of utterance' (Holquist 2002: 34).

The development of *Arif at MUNCH* was marked both by the joys of community and by the inherent struggles of dialogic collaboration (Holquist 2002: 36). Working across fields and continents – Huang in Los Angeles, Wukda in London, and Arif and MUNCH in Oslo – required constant negotiation and the cultivation of a dialogic culture. Cultural misunderstandings, competing interests, professional frictions, repeated work, and occasional side dialogues leaving others out were all part of the process. Yet, following Bakhtin, one may describe these complications as natural symptoms of dialogic practice.

Experience

Thus, in reading or hearing a work of poetry, I do not leave it outside myself, as someone else's utterance which must be simply understood. Rather, I make it to a certain extent my own utterances about the other, I make my own the rhythm, the articulatory tension, the internal gesticulation (the creating movements) of the story [...]. I am actively directed with the words, the phonemes, and the rhythm toward content – I encompass it, give it a form, and consummate it. (Bakhtin 1990: 305f.)

The dream is for people to interact, talk, and exchange ideas. Like 'Come into the Community Space'. Recreate the warmth you get from a grandma, an aunt, mom. That good, warm hug. (*Arif på #MUNCH: Kunstnerportrett*)

Bakhtin's narratology renders dialogism inherently incomplete without the *consummating* act of readership. The same can be said for the *Arif at MUNCH* project and its ambition to engage youths and young adults from Oslo. Only if these young locals came to the museum and felt seen and included could the exhibition be considered complete, and the project deemed successful.

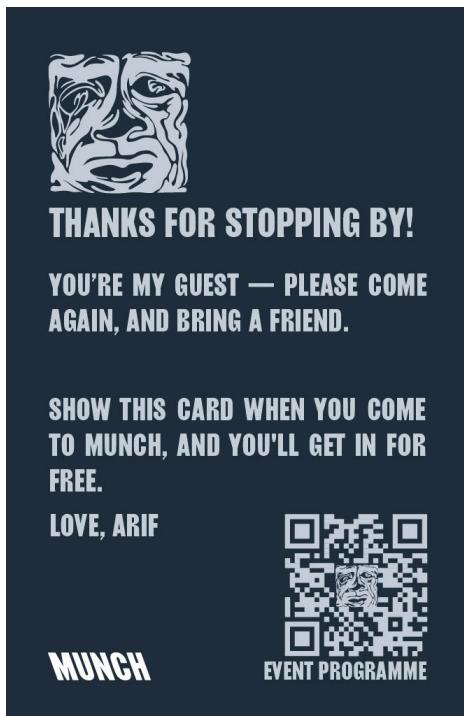


Figure 12: *Arif at MUNCH*, postcard invitation handed out to young visitors to encourage revisits.

How did the exhibition perform in terms of its dialogic outreach with young adults? In terms of raw numbers, the exhibition drove a 25% increase in visitors under 25, including many first-timers, many of whom planned to return. Targeted social media marketing – especially on Tik Tok – was effective, and partnerships with local youth clubs and organisations strengthened outreach. The free-entry cards (fig. 12) handed out to young visitors in the exhibition were redeemed 777 times at the ticket counter.

The exhibition attracted more women than men, in line with general cultural trends in Norway. Fewer men had heard about the exhibition, and they responded more negatively to its promotional material. Survey results also show men were more likely to dislike the exhibition, and older visitors tended to be more sceptical as well. Overall, the exhibition was well-received: 40% of participants rated it 9 or 10 on a 1–10 scale, with an average score of 7.7.

The recording studio is particularly noteworthy as it illustrates the complexities of dialogism.

[Arif:] So what we're going to do is build a studio. Where we'll create, or the goal is to create, an album.

[Andrew Thomas Huang:] A very cool part of this exhibition is to have the very artist himself here in the museum, making the work.

[Arif:] All the exhibition guests can see into our studio, but we, who are inside the studio, can't see out. (*Arif på #MUNCH: Kunstnerportrett*)



Fig. 13: Arif in the recording studio. Film still from *Arif på #MUNCH: Kunstnerportrett*.

In addition to observing Arif through one-way glass and listening via headphones or a web app, visitors could write messages to Arif on postcards (fig. 13), and Arif used his social media presence to communicate from the studio with the outside world. Over 12,000 postcards were sent to Arif.

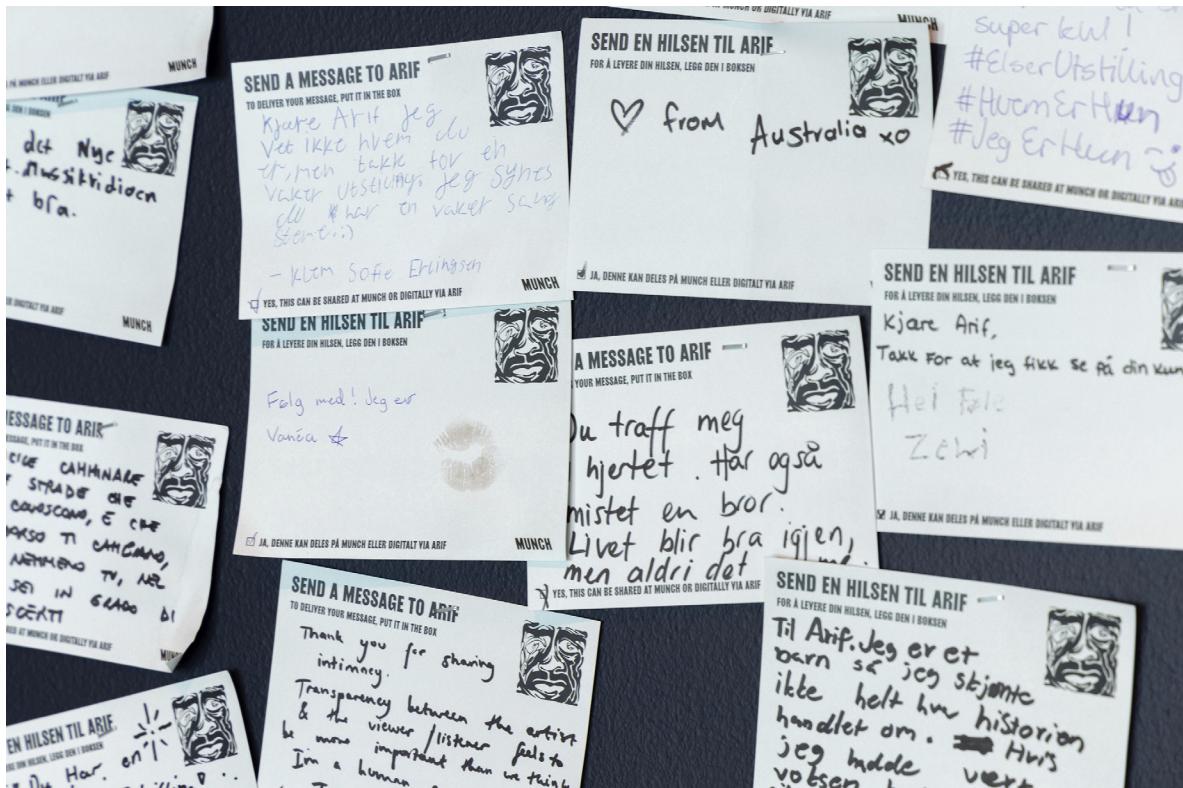


Figure 14: Arif at MUNCH exhibition, messages to Arif, 2024. MUNCH. © Munchmuseet.

I really like this part where visitors could write letters to Arif as well as drop them off in his 'mailbox'. I find it both heartwarming and visually interesting.

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When I saw that Arif was there, I think my jaw dropped, because I was so surprised. I read on the wall that he couldn't see us, but we could see him. It made me think about how he feels as an artist, that he must feel very scrutinised, almost like a zoo animal. Especially when there was a moment where many people moved around the window and looked in, it gave me the feeling of being in a zoo, it evoked some emotions that I didn't expect to get.

(feedback from two visitors, aged 16-22, conducted via mobile ethnography)

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I think it will be, or I know it will surely be, very strange the first few weeks. (Arif quoted in Køhncke Urholt & Edh Hasselgård 2024)

While being widely received as highly engaging by visitors, the recording studio also became a source of frustration and disappointment.

You hear the same recording on the headphones – in other words, little variety.

(visitor feedback from the digital survey)

When Arif was not present, the headphones and app played an earlier recording session from the archive. Visitors were often confused about what they were hearing, as the provided signage and text did not clarify this adequately. Arif could also press a mute button from inside the studio, which he did more frequently than anticipated. When the mute button was activated, the same archive recording played, creating even greater confusion and frustration for visitors, who could see Arif but heard something that did not correspond to what they were seeing. This situation exemplifies the crucial premises of situatedness and embodiment in Bakhtin's dialogism. The mute button presents a scenario in which these premises are absent: a rupture between time and space, speech and body.

Generally, there was no immediate face-to-face dialogue between Arif and the visitors. Every utterance was mediated through different technologies, and a temporal delay occurred between dialogic exchanges, for instance between

experiencing Arif in the studio and him reading a message written in direct response to that experience. In a dialogic setup as convoluted and complex as this, the risks of misunderstanding, miscommunication, and disrupted dialogue were not insignificant.

We repeat, this struggle takes place in everything a person uses to express (reveal) himself on the outside (for others) – from the body to the word, including the ultimate confessional word. [...] [W]here a full and dead balance is achieved, [...] there is no struggle, [...] there is no living *I* and *other*, no living and lasting interaction between them. (Bakhtin 1984: 295)

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Every experience, every thought of a character is internally dialogic, adorned with polemic, filled with struggle, or is on the contrary open to inspiration from outside itself – but it is not in any case concentrated simply on its own object; it is accompanied by a continual sideways glance at another person. (Bakhtin 1984: 32)

The Exhibition as Voice Dialogue?

Of course, writing in retrospect about the dialogic processes of collaboration – with their elements of (mis)understanding, struggle, and creative joy – is very different from participating in and experiencing them when they unfold. From an embodied, individual viewpoint, dialogic interaction within a specific social context is as much emotional, somatic, and sensory as it is intellectual. This certainly describes my personal experience as a curator in the *Arif at MUNCH* project.

I experienced infectious comradery in the team, shared intimate moments with others, built professional relationships and friendships, misjudged and misunderstood my collaborators, had moments of frustration and tension, and sometimes struggled for my voice to be heard; I felt the intense collective suspense when we released the exhibition to the public as a dialogic gesture, an experience to be had, and a story to be shared with all kinds of voices (including, sometimes, art critics) – these are experiences of dialogism that have had a lasting impact on me as a person and museum professional.

Are all exhibitions essentially dialogic? The answer is both yes and no. Bakhtin defines dialogism as fundamental to the human condition: to be and to know

oneself, we must engage with otherness. Yet, as Bakhtin notes, not every novel is equally dialogic, and similarly, not every exhibition realises this potential in the same way. Dostoevsky's great achievement was to represent and perform 'the thinking human consciousness and the dialogic sphere in which this consciousness exists' (Bakhtin 1984: 271).

In the same way, exhibitions such as *Arif at MUNCH* – and many others – can be understood as voice dialogues: sites of both community and tension, of listening and speaking, of empathy, struggle, and misunderstanding.

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Endnotes

- 1 If not stated otherwise, all translations from Norwegian into English are done by the author.

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