Renegotiating Materiality in Contemporary Italian Literature

CHIARA ZAMPIERI

Chiara Zampieri is postdoctoral researcher and lecturer in Comparative Literature at KU Leuven. After obtaining a PhD in Comparative Literatures at KU Leuven, she undertook a postdoctoral project entitled *Muséo-littérature: les musées et la commande aux écrivain.e.s contemporain.e.s (1998-2024)*. Chiara Zampieri is an active member of various international research groups aimed at studying the relationships between heritage, museums, and literature and she is responsible for the scientific coordination and communication for RIMELL (*Recherches Interdisciplinaires sur la Muséographie et l'Exposition de la Littérature et du Livre*).

Abstract

This article explores how contemporary Italian literary practices at the intersection of literature and the museum field challenge and reconfigure the materiality of literature. Focusing on a selection of literary exhibitions and contextual literary projects, it examines two complementary tendencies. On the one hand, how literary exhibitions seek to make literature tangible through books, manuscripts, artworks and other vicarious objects that evoke literary works without fully coinciding with them. On the other hand, how site-specific practices move beyond the traditional identification between literature and the book, experimenting with performative, visual and spatial modes of creation, circulation and reception. Together, these examples reveal how contemporary literary culture is not simply expanding beyond traditional forms, but also questioning the very conditions through which literature is produced, mediated and experienced.

Keywords: contemporary literary culture, literature and materiality, literary exhibitions, museums and literature

DOI XXX – URL: https://platform.openjournals.nl/CLWap (openjournals.nl)
Uitgever/Publisher: Vlaamse Vereniging voor Algemene en Vergelijkende Literatuurwetenschap (VAL)
Copyright: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (CC BY 4.0).

Renegotiating Materiality in Contemporary Italian Literature

CHIARA ZAMPIERI

Museums Challenging the Materiality of Literature

With the advent of globalization and the rise of the internet, literature – like many other cultural practices – has undergone profound transformations. As Giuliana Benvenuti and Remo Ceserani, among others, have observed, over the first two decades of the new millennium literature appears to be increasingly shaped by processes of standardization, by the diffusion of consumer-oriented models and by mainstream genres that are easily adaptable across a wide range of geographical and cultural contexts (Benvenuti and Ceserani 2012, 8). At the same time, literary production, circulation, promotion and consumption have become increasingly influenced by shared global patterns. These patterns are driven, on the one hand, by a paradigm of overproduction (which, as Giulio Ferroni notes, does not necessarily correspond to an increase in actual literary consumption (Ferroni 2010, 8)), and, on the other hand, by an ever-growing imperative for media visibility (Marras, Pias and Quaquarelli 2014). This imperative is further reinforced by the development of digital technologies, which not only allow contemporary authors and publishers to reach unprecedented levels of visibility but also enable more immediate and direct forms of interaction with readers and broader audiences (Van den Bossche 2024).

These transformations do not only affect the circulation and consumption of literature; they also contribute to a broader reconfiguration of the literary field itself. New literary practices have emerged that increasingly operate across domains, media, institutional contexts and public spaces, challenging traditional assumptions about the forms, material supports and cultural fields through which literature comes into being and reaches its audiences. As Elisa Bricco has argued, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have witnessed an increasing porosity between artistic disciplines and a growing number of artistic projects aimed at blurring, or even questioning, their traditional boundaries (Bricco 2015). Within this broader cultural reconfiguration, literature has increasingly engaged with discourses, practices and media beyond those traditionally associated

with the literary field, contributing to the emergence of what Olivia Rosenthal and Lionel Ruffel have defined as "literature outside-the-book" (Rosenthal and Ruffel 2010).

Literature outside-the-book refers to a form of literary production that emerges, circulates and manifests through channels and media beyond those traditionally associated with the book or publishing industries. It is, in David Ruffel's words, a "contextual literature" (Ruffel 2010), often realized *in situ* and tightly entangled with public spaces such as museums, galleries, theatre stages, public streets, parks and other non-literary venues. Rather than simply indicating the transfer of literary content into another medium, literature outside-the-book involves a redefinition of the very conditions through which literature is created, encountered and perceived. It encompasses a wide array of heterogeneous practices, frequently multimodal and intermedial, including, but not limited to, performances, live readings, real-time writing, literary exhibitions, digital storytelling, creative writing workshops, podcasts, video or audio recordings, street art and visual or concrete poetry. It also frequently involves forms of remediation and adaptation that are genuine acts of re-creation. Moreover, these practices frequently question traditional notions of authorship by introducing more collaborative forms of literary production.

Even though the book object remains the predominant medium for the circulation and reception of literature, literature outside-the-book is far from being a marginal phenomenon. On the contrary, it is steadily developing alongside more traditional forms of literature, suggesting that a reconfiguration of the literary field is currently unfolding, and that literature is progressively acquiring a new role within the contemporary cultural economy – one that is at once conditioned by market and media logics, yet also capable of generating innovative aesthetic forms. One aspect of literature particularly affected by these developments is its materiality. By moving beyond the limits of the page, outside-the-book literary practices reveal the extent to which literature has historically been connected to the physical form of the book, while at the same time exploring new supports, spaces and modes of existence. As numerous recent studies have shown (see, among others, Demanze 2025; Nachtergael 2023; Pontillo, 2022 and Régnier 2015), one of the most productive spaces for the development of such practices lies at the intersection between the literary and the museum fields.

As Marie-Clémence Régnier points out, literature and museums have been interacting in many ways for a very long time (Régnier 2015). Since the early 2000s, however, these interactions have significantly strengthened and developed toward unexpected directions. This is due not only to the aforementioned reconfiguration of the literary field but also to new orientations adopted by museum institutions and heritage sites. Beginning in the late 1980s, and in conjunction with the development of the New Museology movement (Brulon Soares 2015; Vergo 1989), storytelling has

gradually but steadily gained prominence within the art world – particularly within museums (Nachtergael 2023). Since the early 2000s, museum institutions have begun to use storytelling and other literary devices with increasing regularity to reshape their public image and distance themselves from the nineteenth-century image of the museum as an authoritative and monolithic monument to human knowledge where thousands of objects are collected, catalogued and exhibited to foster a specific version of history (Ravelli 2006, 2). Among the key strategies implemented by contemporary museums to align with a renewed understanding of their social and cultural function, the adoption of new museum strategies openly inspired by literature is worth mentioning (Bond 2025), alongside the inclusion of literature-related events, activities and publications into their cultural programming. Since the early 2000s, museums have hosted initiatives such as author residences (Bisenius-Penin 2023), collaborations with writer-curator figures (Martens 2022, 2021) or even the commissioning of literary works inspired by their collections (Zampieri 2023) with increasing frequency. For the institutions involved, these literary initiatives serve a dual purpose: on the one hand, they help redefine the museum's public image as a space of contemporary cultural and artistic production; on the other hand, they generate creative, artistic and sometimes unexpected forms of cultural mediation. Interestingly, the majority of these initiatives are expressed through outside-the-book literary devices that interrogate the materiality of literature in ever-new ways.

While the interaction between literature and museums, the emergence of literary practices beyond the book, and their implications for literary materiality have increasingly attracted scholarly attention, their development within the Italian context remains comparatively underexplored. Against this background, this article examines how contemporary Italian literature outside-the-book engages with its own materiality through a series of exemplary case studies. Rather than aiming to provide a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon, this article investigates the changing role of the book object in the contemporary Italian literary field through the analysis of two key trends: on the one hand, outside-the-book literary practices that strive to materialize, through museum tools, something as abstract as literature itself, making it tangible and concrete; on the other hand, site-specific – or contextual – literary performances implemented by museums in which the idea of the book object as a privileged and enduring site of literature is systematically undermined.

Materializing the Immateriality of Literature

In recent years, more and more Italian literary institutions like libraries or archives have begun to organize literary exhibitions. As Wolfgang Barthel has pointed out, literary exhibitions involve the representation – through the specific tools and languages of the museum – of the works, lives and activities of literary figures from the past. Depending on the curatorial approach, such representations may emphasize biographical, historical, literary or reception-related aspects. In some cases, special attention is also paid to the influence an author has exerted on their contemporaries or on later generations (Barthel 2009, 160). Despite their growing popularity, critics and scholars tend nevertheless to agree that exhibiting literature is never a straightforward task: Wolfgang Barthel, with a very nuanced approach, acknowledges that "[p]resentare la letteratura al museo pone numerosi problemi" ("showcasing literature in the museum presents numerous problems", my translation, Barthel 2009, 160). Oliver Heilwagen, adopting a sharper and more categorical stance, goes as far as to claim that "[è] infatti del tutto evidente che esporre la letteratura in senso proprio è impossibile e non lo si dovrebbe fare" ("it is self-evident that exhibiting literature in the proper sense is impossible and should not be attempted", my translation, Heilwagen 2009, 81). More recently, the collective volume *Expositions de la littérature. Enjeux, pratiques et Histoire* (Martens and Roussel-Gillet 2026) and the seminar *Expositions littéraires – scénographies d'objets* organized in 2023 by Anne-Christine Royère and Camille Van Vyve highlighted with renewed interest the many challenges and difficulties associated with this practice focusing, however, on the potential rather than on the limits of such an endeavor.

As noted by many scholars working on the topic, one of the main challenges involved in exhibiting literature lies in the tension between literature's material manifestations and its intangible dimension. The deeper meanings, emotional resonances and literary values associated with works such as Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* or Leopardi's *L'infinito* cannot be reduced to their physical form alone. The Hamilton 90 manuscript of Boccaccio's *Decameron* is not the '*Decameron*' itself, but rather one of the many material forms through which the text has circulated and been transmitted over time. Literature, in this sense, cannot be understood simply as a concrete object that can be directly displayed; rather, it emerges from a complex interplay between material supports, textual forms, and processes of interpretation. Faced with this challenge, museum professionals and curators undertaking the difficult task of exhibiting literature are therefore often forced to turn toward what are known as "vicarious objects": substitute artefacts that evoke rather than represent what is absent: the literary text (Barthel 2009, 165). The most obvious examples of such vicarious objects are, of course, books and manuscripts, but they may also include quills, pens,

desks, notebooks, typewriters and, more generally, all the contextual items associated with the production or reception of a specific literary work. Generally speaking, we can say that the closer an object is to the genesis of the text (for example, a quill or a typewriter used to compose the very first draft of a text), the greater its aura and perceived value. Such value is primarily referential: these objects matter precisely because they were present when the magic happened, and the creative act occurred (Korteweg 2009, 31). Because of this, they are considered as privileged witnesses and therefore invested with the power to refer more straightforwardly than anything else to the essence of the literary work and to thus convey a greater sense of proximity.

Over the past two decades, numerous strategies for exhibiting literature have emerged (Van Vyve 2026, 2024, 2023). The most immediate – and certainly the most traditional – form of literary exhibition is the display of the book object itself, typically presented in a glass case. This practice, which dates back to the Renaissance and Baroque *Wunderkammer*, emphasizes the material dimension of the book as a cultural artifact, highlighting its aesthetic, editorial or historical value. In such cases, what is exhibited is the physical book in all its tangible components: bindings, covers, marginalia, autographs and, more generally, all its iconographic and paratextual elements. These types of literary exhibitions are most often organized by libraries and archives, i.e. institutions whose primary mission is precisely the preservation, valorization and scholarly accessibility of documentary heritage. In the Italian context, we can find this kind of exhibition in a wide range of institutions, from major national libraries such as the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Florence and the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Rome, to smaller, more localized archives, like the Biblioteca di Via Senato in Milan or the Gabinetto Scientifico Viesseux in Florence. Yet, this approach also reveals an inherent limitation: the book, sealed under glass, cannot be handled, touched or leafed through. Only one single page is made visible, while the rest of the text remains materially present but visually and intellectually inaccessible, thus turning the book into a relic rather than a readable work. Needless to say, this exhibition mode is primarily aimed at field experts, bibliophiles and aficionados. It is also the exhibition mode that most strongly reinforces the idea of a one-to-one correspondence between literature and the book object.

There are, however, other modes of exhibiting literature that do not necessarily involve the display of books or manuscripts. This is sometimes the case of exhibitions devoted to an author, a specific literary work or even to an entire literary movement organized to mark and celebrate significant anniversaries, such as the centenary of an author's birth or death or the anniversary of the publication of a famous text. In this kind of literary exhibition, the focus tends to shift from the book and its material features to the broader cultural and historical context of the literary figure or work being celebrated. To take a relatively recent example, one can think of one of the major

literary exhibitions held in Italy in 2023 to celebrate the centenary of Italo Calvino's birth: *Favoloso Calvino. Il mondo come opera d'arte. Carpaccio, de Chirico, Gnoli, Melotti e gli altri* (October 13, 2023 – February 4, 2024) curated by Mario Barenghi and hosted at the Scuderie del Quirinale in Rome.[1]

Interestingly, in this literary exhibition the book object does not occupy a central place. As pointed out by Jan Baetens, "on n'a pas affaire ici à une exposition proprement littéraire" (Baetens 2023) since what takes center stage is not literature per se, or even text, but iconography and visual arts. This visual focus is evident in the exhibition title, where the name of Calvino is associated with those of several artists (Fausto Melotti, Giorgio De Chirico, and others), and is further confirmed by the catalogue's back cover which highlights Calvino's preoccupation with the visual and thus somehow justifies the curator's choice of moving away from the book object or the text:

> La maggior parte delle cose che Calvino ha da dirci hanno a che vedere con lo sguardo, con la dimensione visuale: il che equivale a dire, con idee di spazio. Spazi reali, ambienti e luoghi della sua esperienza vissuta; spazi immaginari, frutto di trasfigurazioni fantastiche; oggetti concreti, ora descritti con puntigliosa accuratezza, ora sottoposti a ingegnose interpretazioni simboliche; e ancora lo spazio per antonomasia, il cosmo, e gli spazi virtuali evocati o inventati da opere d'arte.[2]

In *Favoloso Calvino*, the curator chose to materialize Calvino's literary universe through objects and exhibition devices other than the book. To this end, the exhibition brings together artworks, archival materials, photographs and scenographic elements – including theatrical lighting, sound design and associative juxtapositions of objects – that evoke the atmosphere, imagery and spatial dimensions of his fictional worlds. In this case, literature is materialized – or rather, re-materialized – through visual references and contextual elements that move beyond the book as its privileged material support, yet can never fully coincide with the literary work itself. These vicarious material forms, like the book itself, function as mediations rather than substitutes for the literary text. They do not seek to reproduce the work, but to create the conditions for encountering it indirectly, allowing the exhibition to function not as a substitute for reading but as one of its possible points of departure.

---

[1] See: https://scuderiequirinale.it/exhibition/favoloso-calvino/, last consulted on July 8th, 2025.

[2] "Most of what Calvino has to say concerns vision, the visual dimension – in other words, concepts of space. Real spaces, environments and places drawn from his lived experience; imaginary spaces shaped by fantastic transfigurations; concrete objects, described either with meticulous precision or through ingenious symbolic interpretations; and above all, space in the abstract – the cosmos – and the virtual spaces evoked or invented by artworks." My translation.

Not all literary exhibitions, however, succeed in balancing the material presence of vicarious objects with the inherent immateriality of literature. A case in point is the exhibition *Manzoni 1873–2023. La peste "orribile flagello" tra vivere e scrivere* (May 4 – July 8, 2023), hosted at the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense (Milan) in 2023 to mark the 150th anniversary of Alessandro Manzoni's death. The exhibition promises to celebrate Manzoni while also exploring the theme of the plague, a central one in Manzoni's *oeuvre*. As one would expect from a literary exhibition organized by a library, the display included several glass cases with annotated manuscripts and first editions of Manzoni's works. However, a closer look – still possible today thanks to a digital viewing tool[3] – reveals that the exhibition in fact only partially focuses on Manzoni and his works. Instead, what emerges as the true center of the exhibition, is something other than literature: the theme of the plague. This is hardly coincidental, given that the exhibition took place in 2023, right after the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. The press release itself seems to support this orientation:

> Il tema naturalmente è centrale negli scritti dell'autore: la peste, insieme a guerra e carestia, rappresenta un interrogativo cruciale nel pensiero manzoniano […]. Soprattutto, però, il tema è apparso centrale rispetto al nostro tempo, che solo recentemente – e con fatica – ha intrapreso il cammino di rielaborazione della drammatica esperienza vissuta durante gli anni della pandemia Covid-19.[4]

The structure of the exhibition further confirms this shift of focus from the author to the plague. While some of the cases are indeed devoted to Manzoni and his works, many others adopt a broader historical or iconographic lens. Among them are cases titled "Omero. La peste nel mito" ("Homer. The Plague in Myth"), "Dal mito alla storia. La peste nel mondo antico ("From Myth to History. Plague in the Ancient World") or "La peste in ecfrasi. Simboli e allegorie" ("The Plague in Ekphrasis. Symbols and Allegories"), to mention just a few. This example illustrates the delicate balance involved in organizing a literary exhibition: while vicarious objects and contextual materials are necessary to make literature accessible within the museum space, they can also redirect the focus of the exhibition. In this case, the historical and cultural resonance of the plague – particularly in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic – ultimately overshadows the author and his literary work.

---

[3] See https://bnbrai-lapesteorribileflagello.movio.it/it/1/manzoni-1873-2023_-la-peste-orribile-flagello-tra-vivere-e-scrivere, last consulted on July 8th, 2025.

[4] "The theme, of course, is central to the author's writings: the plague – alongside war and famine – represents a crucial point of inquiry in Manzoni's thought […]. More importantly, however, the theme has also emerged as highly relevant to our own time, which has only recently – and with difficulty – begun the process of coming to terms with the traumatic experience of the Covid-19 pandemic". My translation.

A final example of how literary exhibitions can materialize literature through a museum's tools and languages can be found in writers' house museums. If Calvino and Manzoni's exhibitions reveal the tensions involved in exhibiting literary worlds, writers' house museums address the problem from another perspective: rather than attempting to materialize literature itself, they materialize the conditions of its production. These institutions, often established in places where an author lived or produced part of their *oeuvre,* employ several museum strategies to materialize and make visible and tangible not only the literary work itself, but also the physical, domestic and historical conditions that made the production of that work possible. In writers' houses, it is not rare to find cases with precious manuscripts, letters or other archival materials, but the real protagonists of these literary realms are the author's everyday objects. These objects are hardly presented as museum objects: instead of being arranged in vitrines or in proper exhibition spaces, they are often, whenever possible, integrated with the rest of the *décor*, thus giving the impression that the author has used them for the last time just now. Clearly, these are *mises en scène,* but their primary aim is not so much to immerse the visitors in the fictional or poetic universe of a writer – as in the cases of Calvino or Manzoni – but rather to invite them into the author's intimate and historical world. By exhibiting ordinary objects that may bear little or no direct connection to literature, curators of writers' houses seek to create a sense of proximity with the author and convey what the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga called the "historical sensation", i.e. a vivid and immediate feeling of contact with the past. If, in the previous examples of literary exhibition, the inherent immateriality of literature resulted in an (arguably excessive) emphasis on the book object and on iconographic or visual vicarious elements, here the focus shifts from literature to the everyday environment of the author.

These different examples reveal that literary exhibitions are never neutral translations of literature into museum forms. They are instead acts of mediation that inevitably redefine the relationship between text, materiality and experience.

Literature Unbound: Reimagining Literature's Materiality

While the contemporary Italian cultural landscape includes numerous practices – such as literary exhibitions – that strive to re-materialize and give a new tangible form to literature, there also exists a parallel tendency aimed at questioning literature's dependence on traditional material supports. Many examples of this trend can be found in contextual or site-specific literature. Under the umbrella of site-specific literature, one can find a wide range of hybrid, multimodal, and intermedial literary practices that arise within non-literary settings, museums in particular, often through cross-

pollination with other artistic languages – most notably, the visual arts. Authors and institutions embracing this approach are often willing to experiment with new technologies and to adopt more ephemeral and immaterial modes of literary production and circulation. This is the reason why such practices tend to result in literary products that emphasize the uniqueness of the situated creative act at the detriment of its reproducibility and endurance over time.

A compelling example of this approach is the 2021 initiative *Arte per ispirare, parole per raccontare* ("Art to Inspire, Words to Tell") launched by the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice. The museum invited the five finalists of the Campiello Giovani Literary Prize to visit the museum, select a painting from the collection and write a short story inspired by it. To give some examples, someone was inspired by Salvador Dalí's *Birth of Liquid Desires* (1931–32), someone by the *Enchanted Forest* (1947) by Jackson Pollock, and someone else by Joseph Cornell's *Setting for a Fairy Tale* (1942). When the time came to publish the texts, however, the museum made an unexpected choice. Rather than publish the texts in a traditional format, the Peggy Guggenheim Collection opted for a series of animated videos, each featuring one author reading their story aloud.[5] These audiovisual fragments were only made available on the museum's website, thereby bypassing the traditional publishing circuits but also the book as material object and, with it, the printed word. Even though in each video the audio is supported by small subtitles, the emphasis is clearly on the author's voice and on a sequence of illustrations created *ad hoc* by art history student Kanon Ida. In this format, literature circulates through a medium (the Internet) and a verbo-visual language that, combined, offer an experience that is profoundly different from that of reading from the printed page. In this context, literature acquires a multisensory dimension, shaped by sound and moving images alongside the written word, which is not abandoned but repositioned within a broader sensory and performative framework. This example of contextual literature is a particularly interesting one because it showcases the extent to which a non-literary context – in this case, a museum – can affect not only literary creation (which in this case happens through a form of commissioning), but also its very modes of production (digitally and in association with visual elements) and circulation (via the Internet). In this case, literature is the result of a situated and performative encounter between an author and an artwork. This encounter, however, happened within a very specific spatial and institutional setting and thanks to cultural policies that allowed such intermedial cross-pollination and experimentation. This is confirmed by the Peggy Guggenheim Collection press release, where we can read that the initiative allows the museum to be a "laboratorio di ricerca per nuove idee […], servendo il futuro invece di registrare il passato"

[5] See https://www.guggenheim-venice.it/en/art/in-depth/art-and-literature/art-to-inspire-words-to-tell/, last consulted on July 9th, 2025.

("a laboratory to research new ideas […], serving the future instead of recording the past", my translation). Therefore, in this framework the museum is not simply a background element or a narrative frame. Instead, it functions as an active co-agent, arguably even a co-author, that shapes the very conditions under which literature is conceived, produced and even experienced.

A similarly striking case of contextual literature conceived, produced and disseminated in collaboration with a museum is the 2020 exhibition *Museo per l'Immaginazione Preventiva: Editoriale*, curated by Luca Lo Pinto to mark the reopening of the MACRO – Museum of Contemporary Art of Rome. Deeply "meta" in nature, this exhibition sought to launch a broader discussion and reflection on the identity and missions of the museum as a contemporary cultural institution. To develop this reflection from as many different perspectives as possible, the MACRO invited ten renowned Italian writers and poets to visit the exhibition and react to what they saw and felt through the writing of a short literary text. Among the authors involved was the poet Valerio Magrelli, who contributed with a poem titled *Chiederemo alla polvere* ("We Shall Ask the Dust", my translation), in which each stanza evokes one of the artworks on display through sensory allusions and synesthesia. The opening stanza is particularly striking as it directly responds to an audio installation, namely the transmission, in loop, of the recording of laughter performed by Vittorio Bignardi, the brother of the artist Umberto Bignardi. The recording was originally made in 1971, first exhibited at Gino De Dominicis's show at the Galleria L'Attico in Rome and here included in the first room of the *Editoriale* exhibition. Magrelli's poem is deeply rooted in the physical and sensory experience of the exhibition, it describes this "riso ripetitivo e infinito" ("repetitive and infinite laughter", my transaltion, Magrelli 2021, 19) as a "sghignazzare […] che gracchia e stride ininterrottamente" ("snickering […] that caws and screeches without pause", my translation, Magrelli 2021, 19), or as a "fisarmonica disarmonica di ragli beffardi" ("a discordant accordion of mocking brays", my translation, Magrelli 2021, 19). Interestingly, in this case it is not the materiality of objects that provides a substitute for literature's immaterial dimension, like in literary exhibitions. Quite the opposite: literature, here, strives to capture and reproduce the material, or rather physical presence of an artwork which, complicating matters even further, is made of the most invisible matter: vibrations. Although the text can certainly convey the idea and be read and appreciated independently, it is hard to deny that it only gains its full meaning when it is recontextualized within the original creative and performative framework in which it was conceived.

Unlike the short stories produced for the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, the texts written for the *Editoriale* exhibition were eventually published in a small anthology titled *Editoriale* (Lo Pinto 2021). However, the book object should not be seen as the ultimate goal. Rather, it should be regarded as one small piece of a much broader curatorial and institutional operation that

aimed at rethinking the very role and identity of the museum. In this context, literature is not conceived and produced with the specific intention of generating a permanent publication. Instead, it is mobilized as a complementary language, one that not only reinforces the museum's image as a space of contemporary creation but that also offers an alternative lens through which to access and engage with contemporary art. Literature, in this more ephemeral and site-specific form, enables also new ways of feeling and experiencing the museum. From a physical monument, the museum is in fact turned into a narrative or poetic space where meanings, emotions and stories that the museum, alone, could not possibly convey, can unfold.

An example of contextual literature that more radically questions the materiality of literature can be found in the field of visual poetry. A particularly compelling example is provided by the artistic installations of *Numero Cromatico*, an Italian avant-garde collective active on the international scene since 2011. Renowned for its interdisciplinary and multimodal approach, *Numero Cromatico* seamlessly blends visual arts, traditional craftmanship, architecture, design, and literature with scientific disciplines such as neuroscience and neuroaesthetics. From an aesthetic point of view, *Numero Cromatico* explicitly positions itself in the avant-garde line that starts with Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and that extends throughout the 20th century, passing through Russian Constructivism, Marcel Duchamp, Cinetic Art, Piero Manzoni, Mario Schifano, Yves Klein and Pop Art. It owes, however, a great deal also to the 1960s and 1970s neo-avant-garde movements of concrete and visual poetries, to Italian *arte povera*, and to Sergio Lombardo's *arte eventualista*, from which they draw the essential points of their conception of art (Gagliardi 2021). What *Numero Cromatico* retains from all these movements and artistic experiences is essentially the idea that artistic experience is not a passive act of contemplation but rather an active phenomenon that engages the audience both emotionally and physically. The main purpose of *Numero Cromatico* is in fact to provoke a physical and emotional reaction in the viewer through exposure to art (Numero Cromatico 2023). Text occupies a central role in *Numero Cromatico*'s artistic production. However, it is important to emphasize that, for the collective, text is never there to convey a specific message. Text is rather conceived as a tool that can activate the viewer and spark deep and personal thoughts in them. Just like for neo-avant-garde visual poets, for *Numero Cromatico* the message delivered by the text plays but a background role and should be considered as nothing more than an element of the composition. It could just as much be looked at as something abstract. It is precisely to reinforce this idea that, for their works, *Numero Cromatico* tends to use fragments of texts generated by three different types of artificial intelligence designed, developed, and trained by the collective itself to produce poetry.

One of their most intriguing projects is *Eternal struggle of my desire*, a site-specific installation conceived and realized by *Numero Cromatico* in collaboration with Spazio Taverna, a Rome-based curatorial collective, and inaugurated in November 2022 at Crypta Balbi, one of the various sites of the Museo Nazionale Romano in Rome (Numero Cromatico 2022). This site-specific project featured the exhibition of fifteen handwoven tapestries crafted by the collective using traditional artisanal techniques. Drawing inspiration from the colors of the ancient mosaics within the site, the tapestries reproduced verses of love poetry written by I. L. Y. (I Love You), a specific kind of AI conceived, developed and trained by the collective to generate love poems. It is interesting to notice that, with this project, *Numero Cromatico* engages with a literary genre as old as human history, love poetry, and radically reimagines it by reshaping its materiality on multiple levels. In terms of creation, the love fragments used by *Numero Cromatico* represent a non-human product and as such, they actively undermine the very idea of human authorship. In terms of production, the verses produced by I. L. Y. are not printed on a page but handwoven and embroidered into tapestries, thus transforming the poetic text into a unique visual and tactile object. Finally, in terms of reception, these verses are conceived and presented to be looked at rather than read and can only be experienced through the exhibition medium within a public and shared space, that of the museum.

One last example of contextual literature that further challenges the material boundaries of literature can be found in literary parks. Although not strictly museal, this example is nonetheless closely connected to the heritage sector and with practices of exhibition (Di Gregorio 2021). Whether or not officially recognized and classified by the Italian *Parchi Letterari* association,[6] the expression 'literary park' refers to a wide array of cultural initiatives aimed at engaging visitors with literature beyond the act of reading or the materiality of the book, through the immersion in natural or urban settings carefully conceived to foster a connection with an author's life or imagination. Literary parks are not necessarily delimited and may include houses, ruins, entire villages, walking paths or landscapes referenced in or connected to famous literary works. One of the most emblematic examples of literary park is the Parco del Colle dell'Infinito in Recanati, Giacomo Leopardi's hometown. The park offers a walking itinerary that leads the visitor along the hill that supposedly inspired his famous poem *L'Infinito* and through the famous Piazza del Sabato del Villaggio, right in front of Casa Leopardi, described in the *Il sabato del villaggio* poem. Unlike house-museums, whose primary goal is to immerse visitors in the private universe of an author, literary parks wish for the visitor to experience literature otherwise, through space rather than words. Visitors are in fact invited to dive into a natural or urban space that is as much physical as it is

[6] See https://www.parchiletterari.com/, last consulted on July 10th, 2025.

literary, a space that actively demands to be read as well as explored through walks and hikes – indeed it is no coincidence that most of these paths and trails are punctuated by panels with quotations strategically placed at key locations. What emerges is a layered and multisensory reading experience, offering a physical yet almost wordless experience of literature.

These few examples of contextual literature show that literature does not always need to take shape through print or even through language alone. Instead, it can become a digital, textile, embodied or even spatial practice where meaning arises from the most unexpected encounters in equally unexpected settings. In this perspective, the book is no longer the centre of the literary experience but one of its many possible expressions – supplanted, or rather supplemented, by the materiality of the world itself.

Conclusions

This article has examined how contemporary Italian practices at the intersection of literature and the museum world offer new ways to interrogate, reconfigure, or even challenge the materiality of literature across its processes of creation, production and dissemination. The first section considered exhibition practices as a means of giving a new and alternative tangible form to something as inherently immaterial as literature, exploring how specific material objects – books and manuscripts, but also artworks and everyday objects – may be mobilized to evoke, translate and in some cases even enhance literary works. The second section shifted focus to cases where the insertion of literature into museum or heritage contexts prompted an opposite situation, one in which literature is conceived, produced and disseminated through hybrid, performative, or spatial forms that actively undermine the book's longstanding centrality. Together, these approaches suggest not only a growing diversification of literary media and an increasing cross-pollination of discourses and practices, but also a profound and ongoing reconfiguration of the literary field, one that encourages us to explore deeper what it means for literature to exist, to be shared, and to be experienced today.

The Italian case should not, however, be understood as an isolated phenomenon. Similar dynamics can be observed in other linguistic and cultural contexts, particularly in France, where the dialogue between museums and the literary field has developed earlier and more systematically. What initially emerged as a space of artistic experimentation and field renewal has, in many cases, evolved into a domain increasingly aligned with institutional and market logics (one may think, for instance, of the blockbuster publisher's series "Ma nuit au musée" launched by Stock in 2018, but also of the endless literary initiatives launched every year by the Louvre or the Musée d'Orsay).

Practices that had originally been conceived to actively challenge the boundaries of the literary field and to open it toward other artistic and cultural forms have thus become normalized, even instrumentalized, within the programming of museums and other cultural institutions ranging from large national museums to small regional institutions.

The specificity – and therefore the significance – of the Italian case lies precisely in the fact that these processes remain at a relatively early stage. Hybrid literary practices continue to appear as experimental forms, often addressed to specialized audiences and still negotiating their position within the broader literary field. This makes Italy a particularly productive vantage point from which to observe how literature is redefining its relationship with materiality, institutions and audiences. Whether these practices will eventually become fully integrated into literary culture, remain peripheral experiments, or generate new forms altogether, they already demonstrate that literature can no longer be understood exclusively through the paradigm of the book.

Bibliography

Baetens, Jan. 2023. "Favoloso Calvino. Il mondo come opera d'arte, Carpaccio, de Chirico, Gnoli, Melotti et gli altri." *L'Exporateur. Carnet de visites*. https://www.litteraturesmodesdemploi.org/carnet/favoloso-calvino-il-mondo-come-opera-darte-carpaccio-de-chirico-gnoli-melotti-et-gli-altri/.

Barenghi, Mario. 2023. *Favoloso Calvino. Il mondo come opera d'arte: Carpaccio, de Chirico, Gnoli, Melotti e gli altri*. Electa.

Barthel, Wolfgang. 2009. "Letteratura in mostra nei musei." In *Esporre la letteratura*, edited by Axel Kahrs and Maria Gregorio. Clueb.

Benvenuti, Giuliana and Ceserani, Remo. 2012. *La letteratura nell'età globale*. Il Mulino.

Benvenuti, Giuliana. 2014. "La letteratura italiana sulla scena del mondo: problemi e prospettive." *Narrativa* 35-36: 35-49. https://doi-org.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/10.4000/narrativa.1118.

Bisenius-Penin, Carole. 2023. *La Résidence d'auteurs. Littérature, territorialité et médiations culturelles*. Classiques Garnier.

Bond, Emma. 2025. *Curating Worlds: Museum Practices in Contemporary Literature*. Northwestern University Press.

Bricco, Elisa. 2015. "De la porosité des frontières." In *Le bal des arts,* edited by Elisa Bricco, Quodlibet. https://books.openedition.org/quodlibet/463.

Brulon Soares, Bruno. 2015. "L'invention et la réinvention de la Nouvelle Muséologie." *ICOFOM Study Series* 43: 57-72. https://doi.org/10.4000/iss.563%0a.

Demanze, Laurent (ed.). 2025. *Les musées imaginaires de la littérature contemporaine*. Quodlibet.

Di Gregorio, Luca. 2021. "Quand exposer, c'est paysager. L''effet parc littéraire' à travers l'exemple de

Gabriele D'Annunzio." In *Culture & Musées* 38: 197-223. https://doi.org/10.4000/culturemusees.7078.

Ferroni, Giulio. 2010. *Scritture a perdere. La letteratura negli anni Zero,* Laterza.

Gagliardi, Dionigi Mattia. 2021. "Numero Cromatico: la nascita, la ricerca e gli scenari futuri." In *Rivista di Psicologia dell'Arte* 32: 25-40.

Heilwagen, Oliver. 2009. "Sull'impossibilità di esporre adeguatamente la letteratura." In *Esporre la letteratura*, edited by Axel Kahrs and Maria Gregorio, Clueb.

Korteweg, Anton. 2009. "Esposizioni letterarie: dove i lettori devono guardare." In *Esporre la letteratura*, edited by Axel Kahrs and Maria Gregorio, Clueb.

Lo Pinto, Luca (ed.). 2021. *Editoriale*. Humboldt.

Magrelli, Valerio. 2021. *Chiederemo alla polvere*. In *Editoriale*, edited by Luca Lo pinto, Humboldt.

Marras, Margherita, Giuliana Pias, and Lucia Quaquarelli. 2014. "Introduzione." *Narrativa* 35-36: 7-17. https://doi-org.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/10.4000/narrativa.1099.

Martens, David. 2021. "'Ouvrir une boîte comme on ouvre la bouche'. L'écrivain-commissaire dans les cartes blanches de l'IMEC." *Littérature* 203:118-136.

Martens, David. 2022. "Un écrivain dans les couloirs du Louvre." *Recherches & Travaux*, 100. https://doi.org/10.4000/recherchestravaux.5094.

Martens, David and Roussel-Gillet Isabelle. 2026. *Exposition de la littérature. Enjeux, pratiques et Histoire*. PUR.

Nachtergael, Magali. 2023. *Quelles histoires s'écrivent dans les musées? Récits, contre-récits et fabrique des imaginaires*. MkF.

Numero Cromatico. 2022. *Eternal Struggle of my Desire*. Numero Cromatico Editore.

Numero Cromatico. 2023. *Arte falsificabile e assenza di significato. Principi estetici e fare collettivo nell'azione di Numero Cromatico*. Numero Cromatico Editore.

Peter, Vergo (ed.). 1989. *The New Museology*, Reaktion Books.

Pontillo, Corinne. 2022. *Musei di carta. Esposizioni e collezioni d'arte nella letteratura contemporanea*. Carocci.

Ravelli, Louise J., Ravelli. 2006. *Museum Texts: Communication Framework*. Routledge.

Régnier, Marie-Clémence. 2015. "Ce que le musée fait à la littérature. Muséalisation et exposition du littéraire." *Interférences littéraires/Literaire interferenties* 16: 7-20. https://interferenceslitteraires.be/index.php/illi/article/view/870/711

Rosenthal, Olivia and Ruffel, Lionel. 2010. "Introduction." *Littérature* 160 (4): 3-13.

Ruffel, David. 2010. "Une littérature contextuelle." *Littérature* 160 (4): 61-73.

Van den Bossche, Bart. 2024. "Cacciato dalla porta? Autori e autorialità negli studi di letteratura italiana degli anni Duemila." *Narrativa* 46: 63-78. https://doi-org.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/10.4000/12x3j.

Van Vyve, Camille. 2023. "Singuliers: Signes, tracés, textures." *Culture & Musées* 42. https://doi.org/10.4000/culturemusees.11083.

Van Vyve, Camille. 2024. "Le Lieu de l'archive (IMEC): (ré)écrire l'archive entre cimaises et vitrines." *Études littéraires* 53 (3): 77-99. https://doi.org/10.7202/1114949ar.

Van Vyve, Camille. 2026. "Exposer le patrimoine littéraire. Sur certaines tendances traditionnelles dans la programmation." In *Exposition de la littérature. Enjeux, pratiques et Histoire*, edited by David Martens and Isabelle Roussel-Gillet, PURennes. https://doi.org/10.4000/165nm.

Zampieri, Chiara. 2023. "Commissioned Museum-Literature." In *E-Dictionary of Literary Tourism*, Edited by Rita Baleiro, Giovanni Capecchi & Jordi Arcos-Pumarola. https://www.unistrapg.it/en/commissioned-museum-literature