

Rethinking “Live”: Creative Practice of Art Exhibitions in the Post-Pandemic

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Abstract. Exhibiting is a method of sociological practice that has been widely concerned and discussed following the COVID-19 pandemic. The reason for this is that exhibitions have the potential to create “live” public encounters. Creative dialogue and collaboration can provide people with great psychological support, particularly during restricted movement. At the same time, exhibitions are about caring and gently relieving anxious minds, and art has great cultural resilience in times of crisis. From a practical perspective, museum or gallery practitioner all over the world create discourse spaces through online platforms. In addition, new curation methods based on public participation and community cooperation models have increased in the three years since the coronavirus outbreak. Therefore, this paper explores how art museums can innovate after suffering abnormal losses and discusses how art exhibitions in the post-pandemic era can establish “live” public encounters. From the specific perspectives of the innovation of online platforms and the construction of daily space, how exhibitions reflexively construct “live” in curating practice regarding creative cooperation, publicness, and other related issues will be analyzed. The author thinks that combining the flexibility an online platform provides and the sensitivity of physical space to create a creatively engaging exhibition in a limited community can help the public establish “cultural resilience” for navigating through times of uncertainty and rapid change.

Keywords: Live Public Encounter; Creative; Everyday Life; Online Platform; Community curation; Care.

1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is on how art exhibitions can establish “live” public encounters in the post-pandemic world where isolation can be faced at any time. Since the initial COVID-19 outbreak towards the end of 2019, it has become normal for public cultural venues such as museums, galleries, and art institutions to close temporarily or limit the number of visitors that are allowed in their buildings, particularly in China, with its strict pandemic prevention policies. Reflecting on the last three years, social distancing has inspired the creativity and potential of museums all over the world to find more innovative forms of access and approaches for influencing the public.

Climate change, sustainability, and the ability of society to operate museums in a post-pandemic world are currently widely discussed topics in museum research and curatorial practice. The majority of museum practitioners and curators have discussed new ways of innovation for art museums after they suffered great losses. Some have discussed the interactive possibility of online exhibitions from the perspective of technological development and user experience [1-2], and some have discussed how to conduct art activities from the perspective of educational organizations [3]. There is also action research where exhibitions are used as a method for collecting and storing the memories of people from the pandemic [4]. Generally, the use of exhibitions as a method of sociological practice has been widely discussed following the pandemic, and researchers have also explored many different ways of communicating with the public. However, at the micro-level, observations and analyses of the value of curation as a type of social activity are rare, and there is a particular lack of discussion from the perspective of the public on the ways in which exhibitions can create a “live” audience participation during periods of lockdown.

By focusing on the development trend of art exhibitions and excavating a series of exhibition cases, this paper aims to analyze the ways in which art exhibitions reflectively create a “live” experience through these cases, considering issues including creative cooperation and the publicity of exhibitions.

2. Live and creative

The 1980s witnessed what Paul O'Neill (2007) has critically labelled as the “curatorial turn”, where the curator’s role changed from that of guardian and organizer to that of the active producer. Through innovations made by generations of curators, the curatorial process tends to be a process of creative collaboration and knowledge production. For example, the work method of Hans Ulrich Obrist is based on dialogues and interviews, and in his exhibition “Take Me (I’m Yours)”, he invited the audience to take the exhibition home. Such a display method breaks the relationship between the organizer, display object, and audience, in addition to their relationship with the time and space of the display.

In the last decade, popular terms, including curatorial sociology, curatorial anthropology, and news curation, have emerged. Puwar and Sharma believe that an important reason for the sociology of curatorial studies roaming to curatorial studies is the “live” public encounter [5]. Communication scholars have called for a change in dialogue through the form of traditional newspapers and reviews. Allowing social media users to collect, combine, interpret, and share the news information they come into contact with shows the enthusiasm for audience information dissemination in the mobile network media environment [6-7]. The scope of museum anthropology can also extend from exhibits to audience, reflecting on the relationship between “things” and “people” that a museum space construct [8-9]. As the distance between the museum and the audience decreases, the audience is no longer a passive museum visitor but an active participant in the writing of exhibition culture. Through these elaborations, the importance of “live” public embodiment can be seen.

What is “live”? It is literally neither dead nor immutable. Instead, it emphasizes dynamics and change and requires the participation of others for the constant generation of new voices. In the article “Curating Sociology” by Puwar and Sharma, the methods of establishing “live” are mentioned, including creative collaboration, publicity, and exhibiting as a research [5]. Publicity in the field of curation is reflected in the potential for creative public participation and the series of creative knowledge production that results from this. Generally, “creative” is considered to be the most important keyword in the curation field and even in humanities and social sciences since the curatorial turn. When considering how “live” public participation can be established, the meaning of “creative” in the context of curation must first be clarified.

In the context of curation, there are two aspects to “creative”. Firstly, the creative, collaborative process is not transmitted to the public by power parties (including curators, artists, or funders) in a pre-modern way but in a post-structuralist way. This means that the collaborative process is participatory, fluid, and co-creative and grows from local contexts. Therefore, in creative public participation, “creative” emphasizes the subjectivity of the public. Meanwhile, “engagement” emphasizes direct public participation rather than through an agent, and the entire process is autonomous. The second aspect is creative knowledge production. In addition to emphasizing subjectivity, in this situation, “creative” also refers to constantly changing data, which is a collection of constantly expanding and enriching exhibition information. The realization of creative knowledge production can be in many forms, including interdisciplinary, interracial, transgender, and other practical ways, all of which are topics art exhibitions regularly touch upon. This attempt to explore the boundaries of the discipline is a way to make the original discipline come alive.

However, the “live” aspect of an exhibition has encountered unprecedented challenges during the pandemic. Although art museums and galleries have continued exploring the use of online exhibitions, the effect they have has received criticism from many members of the public and art practitioners. Since the 1960s, the avant-garde movement has influenced curators who have constantly rethought exhibition spaces and questioned conventions through critical practice and various media formats. The narrativization of the exhibition and the sensitivity of the “live” aspect to the shape of the physical environment have prompted an increased awareness of the performance of the exhibition environment. Exhibitions can be presented by means of a website, video, or social media release, but they may lose the interpretation of the physical space. Moreover, online exhibitions ignore social attributes, and the social experience of being able to meet in a museum is the key to establishing the “live” aspect.

The meaning and value of “everyday space” was revealed during the lockdown. “Everyday space” is a familiar space that evokes the daily memories of the public, making them more relaxed in terms of socializing. During the pandemic time, the best everyday space became the community itself, and this does not need to be deliberately created within the walls of museums. Online platforms and everyday spaces must both be reshaped and repurposed.

3. Live in online exhibitions

In January 2020, several months before COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization; several Chinese cities faced lockdown. The Chinese government issued a letter that instructed museums to “enrich people’s spirits during the outbreak through cloud exhibitions and cultural life” [10]. Since then, art museums and galleries all over the world have rapidly expanded their digital content as many countries are in lockdown.

Extensive and rich online exhibitions can generally be categorized as either archival or game. Such categorization is obviously an unavoidable simplification in nature, but the process of arranging and categorizing provides a basis and structure that helps people think critically about the possibilities of online exhibition iterations that became increasingly obvious during the COVID-19 era.

Online exhibitions were prevalent before the pandemic, particularly archival-style exhibitions. They often have a physical predecessor, such as the UCCA Art Gallery, which provides online versions of every exhibition. Such online exhibitions are more of a network archive, which is a record and one-way output. Archival-style exhibitions generally combine text and images, and many do not even include audio and audiovisual components. Art is only presented and explained to the audience in a two-dimensional plane, and there is no immersive viewing possibility. Generally, online visitors are only able to explore objects through titles and tabs, swiping backwards or forwards sequentially to change screens. A further example is the Virtual Museum of Canada (VMC), whose website has a catalogue of over 3,000 Canadian heritage institutions and a database of over 600 virtual exhibitions [11]. However, as people were restricted from engaging in personal activities during the pandemic, they lost interest in passively received information, and this exhibition experience was considered a “complete loss of presence”.

Game-style online exhibitions provide more experiential, immersive, and multimodal public engagement than archival-style exhibitions. The pandemic accelerated the pace at which galleries and art institutions used real estate and virtual tourism technology to create digital simulations. Visitors can now pretend they are roaming freely through a three-dimensional exhibition space through the use of visual means, and they are able to examine exhibits, texts, and related media more closely by zooming in. This type of viewing experience is somewhat similar to a personal exploratory game such as “The Legend of Zelda”. Another example during the lockdown, perhaps inspired by the game “Pokemon Go”, was the release of the project “Prisme 7” by the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2020, which cannot be essentially classified as an online exhibition or a video game. Online “guests” of “Prisme 7” can walk through the aisle and corridors of the iconic architectural space and connect “face to face” with artwork and related texts while they search for hidden gems and power-ups [12]. While this type of public participation has greatly increased audience interest, there is still a lack of creativity. The public is involved as an audience and players, but the content and procedures are already determined. Although interaction and spatial interpretation are achieved through this experience, the generation of creative voices under a definite feedback mechanism is difficult.

Accordingly, while the public was eager to find online cultural content during the initial period of lockdown, their interest has since waned [13-15]. A reason for this may be the archival style of many digital exhibitions, where the public still consumes passively by seeing, listening, and reading. Even game-like exhibitions largely replicate the “real” rather than exploiting the hyper mediation potential of the digital realm as a means of capturing the multidimensional aspects of the exhibition environment [12].

As time progressed, several art institutions began exploring internet publications and online clubs as a means of maintaining the creative engagement of the public, as well as entertaining them and satisfying their desire for communication and cultural nourishment during periods of social distancing and self-isolation. In China, the first virtual curatorial competition for college students was held by the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Nearly 1,200 groups of students from all over the world took part, easing the anxiety of students at home while promoting exchanges between universities throughout the world. ONCURATING magazine hosted the first “Hashtag” Biennale on Instagram, involving all works from Internet publications, and millions of people participated [16]. The Tate Gallery in London organized the “Soapbox” project, a special internet club for people over 60, the group that was most vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19. This project aimed to lift the spirits of people through a discussion of art and life in a friendly atmosphere [17].

To enable live public encounters, museums must reimagine digital exhibitions and create innovative and hybrid events combining conversations, talks, visits, and participatory activities (games) as a means of reproducing real feelings rather than replacing them. Although virtual can never truly replace the feeling of reality, this should not stop exhibitions as a creative practice providing “live” encounters for the public.

4. “Live” in community curation

From the case “Soapbox” of the Tate Gallery, the unique cultural resilience of art could be seen throughout the crisis situation of the pandemic. Art museums have become places for displaying artworks and a public platform for the discussion of current topics, in addition to a space for stress relief and spiritual healing. According to Paola Antonelli, the curator of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, cultural institutions such as museums must play a key role in civic life by providing inspiration, trust, and a sense of community, while also addressing the most urgent issues with honesty and sympathy that can be provided by art and artists.

During the pandemic, many people had a fear of death, but they also suffered from loneliness due to the limited opportunities for direct contact with others, leaving their homes, or visiting public places. In addition, there were many disturbing emotions caused by uncertainty and the unpredictability of the future. This harsh physical and psychological truth led to many institutions promoting individual and community well-being [4].

In such extreme times, online events and content can play quite a limited role. It may be easier to understand this when comparing it to psychological counselling work. A patient sits on a comfortable sofa, drinks tea, and smells the fragrance of flowers. The effect of a conversation with a counsellor is more significant than communication on both ends of the network, as “partnership” and “everyday space” play crucial roles in it. “Partnership” refers to the relationship between friends who can face and solve problems together, while “everyday space” refers to places that provide a familiar environment in which the emotions of people will more likely be relaxed. In “Art as Experience”, Dewey considers art to be a “full experience” that occasionally happens, sometimes not even in an “artistic” setting (such as concerts or museums), but in unexpected everyday circumstances. Therefore, public engagement and partnerships in “everyday space” are considered to be meaningful. During periods of lockdown, communities in cities became everyday spaces where the public could come together. In New Zealand, the pandemic brought together long-disconnected art museum educators who conducted multiple online meetings to discuss the possibility of art education in museums [3]. It was mentioned multiple times that art activities organized by community art institutions or jointly with schools could improve the professionalism of students, reduce the burden on their parents, and contribute to the harmony of family relationships. From this perspective,

COVID-19 has expanded the social function of art museums somewhat and redefined the meaning of community engagement during times of extreme coercion [12].

This type of community-based, co-creative exhibition is not uncommon, particularly in Latin America. For example, the first “#00Bienal” was held in 2020 to make up for the fact that the biennale

could not be held in Havana during the pandemic, and it had the theme of “one studio, one biennale”. The exhibition was divided into parts, and a new and self-contained way of organizing exhibitions from the bottom up was explored. “Resistance Biennale” in Guatemala was based on the concept of “community curating”, and people from the art system were invited to engage in lateral dialogue with external agents. This promoted communication within communities and between different cultural circles through exhibitions, actions, and critical demonstrations in the public spaces of Guatemala City.

In August 2022, the author’s team conducted a renovation and beautification activity of a cottage in Longwan Village, Xinhua, Loudi City, Hunan Province, China. However, with the sudden lockdown that was imposed, team members remained in the village for seven days. The team organized a temporary participatory-curating activity, “My Idol”, in rural communities and invited local elderly people and children to join, cooperate, and co-create through music, dance, and graffiti. Through this community curating experience, the curatorial team completely loosened the reins and invited the community to decide for itself what was relevant, how, and when. When the focus was shifted from the “plan” and struggling with implementation obstacles stopped, the value and hope of cultivating unexpected local connections and the natural insight and potential of residents could be seen. Such creative collaborations and knowledge production facilitate “live” public engagement with caring emotions.

The cultural resilience of art and culture in special times is dependent on the “live” public encounter that exhibitions provide. In this regard, museums respond dynamically to the actual needs of people, assuming a new role as a place of social significance, where anxieties and concerns can be freely expressed, where individual and universal human problems are understood, and where healing can help people feel comfortable and regain their confidence in a crisis situation [17]. Such moves are both admirable and essential in times of unprecedented social upheaval.

5. Conclusions

The coronavirus crisis highlighted the importance of the Internet for facilitating communication with local communities and the public. Hard work is required for maintaining the quality of connections with communities, as the emotional connection between communities is now more important than ever when operating in isolation across the archipelago. Museum practitioners can combine the flexibility an online platform provides with the sensitivity of physical space as a means of creating a creatively engaging exhibition in a limited community. The Centre of Democracy (CoD) is a distributed museum with headquarters in Adelaide, South Australia, that has a permanent gallery that increases its presence through online and temporary physical spaces. The mission of the museum is to share stories about democracy in South Australia and to inspire and support people and communities to assume an active role in facilitating change.

Various aspects, including technical and emotional needs, needed to be considered during the pandemic by art institutions such as museums and galleries, and it was found that both daily space and online platforms are indispensable. The development and exploration of these two aspects provide a material basis for creative public participation and creative intellectual practice. After developing a solid material foundation, the author hopes to propose a final suggestion through this article that art workers could use “care as a strategy” when they conduct curatorial work. This could help the public establish “cultural resilience” for navigating through times of uncertainty and rapid change. In the future, museums will become symbols of the reinvention of social closeness.

Rethinking “live” issues and exploring community curation and online exhibitions, even if no further lockdowns occur in the future, can serve as an effective methodology for curatorial practice. It enables an exhibition to be brought to the public, rather than insisting that the public visit an exhibition.

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