Participatory Curatorial Practices: An Online Approach

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Abstract

This article explores how participatory online curation can be used as a tool for understanding and researching contemporary art practices. With online networking becoming more relevant in the lives of both students and artists this research investigates how we can create connections with artworks using online technology. Through the possibility of changing or altering meaning by creating artwork in response to the theme the participant takes an active role in knowledge creation, and the process become a collaboration of all involved, rather than solely the curator's vision. This accessible way of viewing and displaying artwork helps juxtapose a wide range of different art practices and creates new ways of understanding art. The Pillow Exchange: An Experiment in Art and Sleep co-curated by Stacey Cann and Jasia Stuart will be discussed as an example of online curation as well as The Fountain Project: Duchamp as Muse curated by Stacey Cann.

Keywords: Participatory Curatorial Practice, Art education, Dewey, Museums, Postmodernism

This article explores how participatory online curation can be used as a tool for understanding and researching contemporary art practices. With online networking becoming more relevant in the lives of both students and artists this research investigates how we can create connections with artworks using online technology. Through the possibility of changing or altering meaning by creating artwork in response to the theme the participant takes an active role in knowledge creation, and the process become a collaboration of all involved, rather than solely the curator's vision. This accessible way of viewing and displaying artwork helps juxtapose a wide range of different art practices and creates new ways of understanding art. *The Pillow Exchange: An Experiment in Art and Sleep* co-curated by Jasia Stuart and Stacey Cann will be discussed as an example of participatory online curation as well as *The Fountain Project: Duchamp as Muse* curated by Stacey Cann.

1. The Curator

In both Museum and online practices the role of the curator is ill defined and this lack of definition makes it difficult to establish criteria for good curatorial practice as well as making it hard to determine who can legitimately call themselves a curator (Charlesworth, 2006, O'Neill, 2005).   This shift in roles of the curator has allowed for divergent practices to take place. Contemporary curatorial practices, including online practices, have radically shifted the ways that art is exhibited. Christophe Kilm (2010) suggests in *Que font les commissaries?/ A study of curators and curating* that the position of curator cannot exist without the institution and its hierarchy among the administrators, curator and artists. However, the rise of independent curators, those who work in community spaces and those curators that have online practices, are challenging the hierarchy of the museum by circumventing its authority.

An important question to consider when thinking about the relationship between curatorial practices and pedagogy is "Who claims to curate, on behalf of whom, and on what terms?" (Charlesworth, 2006, p.5). The relationship between the artist, curator and audience is important when considering how exhibitions can be used to create understanding in the arts. When the voice of the curator is authoritative and presented as the one correct interpretation it does not allow room for the exploration of multiple voices and the voice of the audience within the exhibition (McLean, 1999).

2. The Artist

Artists learn from each other, both in formal and informal setting. Bringing together artists to create work that deals with diverse themes not only exposes audiences to their thoughts regarding the subjects but also allows artists to consider how their peers view these topics.

Having the work accessible online allows the artists to debate and consider how others view their work as well as consider the work of their fellow artists in relationship to their own. Having an open call for submissions where all work is accepted further this pedagogical strategy.

3. The Viewer

The viewer's role is also important when considering online practices. How does the relationship between the curator's "knowledge and [the viewer's] knowledge" (Rogoff, 2010, p.38) play out online? Online the curator, more than in the physical gallery space, is "seeking to produce public through exhibition" (Sheikh, 2010, p.70) rather than catering curatorial projects to an existing public. It creates a community based on shared interests rather than physical proximity. The online forum allows viewers from different physical and social locations to view the same work and obtain different understanding and knowledge from the information. The problem is without a physical space how do we create interaction between the viewers and the work and create a dialogue in the same way that the physical presence of the work does?

4. Networked Aesthetics

Networked Art, that typically includes mail art, faxed art, and email art, (Kusina, 2005) has played an important role in my thinking about my curatorial practice. Not because of its materiality, form or even method of exchange but because it privileges communication over aesthetic concerns (Kusina, 2005). It is accessible to nearly everyone and involves creating a correspondence between creator and viewer and then vice versa which is the interchange that I hope to cultivate within my curatorial work. Privileging communication over aesthetics opens new possibilities for thinking about education in the arts. It allows for learning that goes beyond the formal elements of an image and draws on how it speaks to its viewer.

5. Postmodernism and Museum Education

Despite the fact that online curatorial projects in some way reject the notion of the museum, my curatorial research relies heavily on developments within museum practice and museum education particularly those that occurred during the postmodern era. Postmodernism has also challenged the role of the museum visitor in relation to the notions of interactivity and interpretation (Mayer, 2005). Interactivity is defined as the viewer being able to manipulate the exhibition or displays (Mayer, 2005). However interactivity in and of itself does not create dialogue.

Melinda Mayer looks at how the attitudes of museum educators have changed during the postmodern period, some of these findings provide insight into why curators may choose an online exhibition space. In the postmodern era the role of the interpretation of artwork changed from finding the authorial or curatorial meaning to finding meaning as it relates to the life of the viewer (Mayer, 2005). This is an important shift in the way learning takes place in the gallery, from a transmission to transformative method of pedagogy. Visitor participation became a key component of this pedagogical model creating "active interchange" (Mayer, 2005, p.358) between artwork and viewer. This allows curators to no longer fully control the environment in which art is presented. Many contemporary curators use this type of pedagogical model, that of interchange, rather than passive knowledge acquisition, in particular those who curate works that deal with relational aesthetics. As postmodern theorists began to question the idea of a positivist view of knowledge, it opened what is considered knowledge, allowing for more room for the viewers' experiences in the interpretation of artwork (Mayer, 2005).

The juxtaposition of work and the way that the interpretive panels are written and laid out within the site, whether physical or online, are important aspects in how the viewer comes to meaning within the artwork (Mayer, 2005). Rather than having interpretive panels that are highly didactic, that is, that tell the viewer what to think and give only one interpretation of the significance of the work, text is presented that guides the viewers' questioning, allowing the audience the space to come to their own understanding (Mayer, 2005). In the past many exhibitions as well as education programs within museums used a transmission method of interacting with the audience. The museum held the power as it was the keeper of the one true meaning and significance of the artwork (Robbins, 2005). The curator's job was to make meaning between works and the education department to impart this meaning to the audience (Mayer, 2005). However, in a collaborative model, the audience is seen to hold the same power as the curator and the artist, creating context and connections between the works and the outside world (Mayer, 2005).

This is the model that I have employed throughout my curatorial practice, both online and in gallery spaces. I attempt to guide viewers to find their own understanding of the artwork that is presented through posing questions that help them link the work to their past experiences. This involves creating a dialogue between the work and the viewer.

Dialogue is an important part of my practice. This dialogue is created between the viewer, the work, the artist and the curator when "[v]iewers pay close attention to the works in front of them, drawing from their lived experiences to make sense of what they see" (Hubard, 2007, p.18). To do this I use open-ended questions, space for written comments and diverse navigational strategies, to allow the audience to draw on their experiences as well as controlling the way that they view the work. This creates personal relationships with the work. On the other hand information regarding the artist's meaning and historical data can stunt this relationship by setting up a right and wrong interpretation of the work (Hubard, 2007). This contextual information can have the ability to enrich the experience if it is used to engage the viewer in their own thinking, privileging the viewers' experience as primary (Hubard, 2007). Consequently, I feel that it is important to provide such information but that it should be kept in a distinct location on the site away from the artwork to privilege the viewers' experience of the work above that of the curator or artist.

Online curatorial practices question the role of the museum by presenting art in a way that is more accessible. The viewer is able to access the work within their own time frame and within whatever physical location they choose where they have access to the internet. They are able to comment anonymously and directly on the site, where their comments can be read by other viewers, the artists and myself.

In the past, the curator's conceptual framework and scholarship has been privileged, and exhibitions have been designed around their desires; the visitor has been largely ignored by the curatorial department of the museum (McLean, 1999). Because online the audience needs to be cultivated and does not exist in one physical location the audience cannot easily be ignored. I consider how the audience may come to create meaning through posing open-ended questions and by allowing them to largely control the way in which they view the work.

My curatorial projects are largely collaborative and their meaning is shifted through the desires not only of the curator but also by the artists and viewers. I, as the curator, suggest a framework for the creation of work and the artists control the interpretation of that framework. Unlike traditional curatorial projects I accept all works that are submitted as I feel that each artist has an important voice in defining the parameters of the project. Because space is not as large of a concern online and in a physical gallery it becomes easier to do this. Giving up some control of the exhibition is largely drawn from Alberto Eco's concept of the open work. Therefore I "do not know the exact fashion in which [my] work will be concluded, but [I am] aware that once completed the work in question will still be [my] own" (Eco, 1962, p.32) as well as the artists. This collaboration happens among the artists, curators and audience as they think about, define and work towards an understanding of contemporary art. The rejection of the notion of the lone genius opens the door to multiple readings and understandings of artwork. This gives the viewer the ability to go beyond the artist or curator's intent. By encouraging the audience to bring their own significance to the artwork , the curator supports the viewers in creating a stronger connection to the art as it becomes integrated into their experiences and knowledge base.

6. Pedagogical Intentions

In traditional museum education exhibition display is largely ignored as a site of learning and traditional didactic methods are the norm (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). These didactic methods are inappropriate for the changing audiences who have diverse cultural backgrounds and social characteristics (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000), this is especially true of online curatorial practice as it can be accessed from a variety of geographical locations. The viewer creates meaning with an exhibition mainly with the objects on display and the narrative formed by the juxtaposition of objects within an exhibition (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). "Objects are subject to multiple interpretations, some of which may be contradictory" (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 3). When the work is presented with no one correct interpretation it allows the viewer to be confident in their own interpretations and stronger connection can be made to the artwork.

"Within [exhibitions] the phenomenon of display… is the major form of pedagogy" (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p.4). The pedagogy of exhibitions can be separated into two categories: the content of the exhibition or collection and the style of the curator (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000).

The content is what is being said and the style is how it is being said (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Eileen Hooper-Greenhill (2000) suggests that a constructivist model of pedagogy is best suited to the contemporary exhibitions, and that meaningful interaction with the work is key in creating understanding and knowledge. The audience's interpretations and reactions to the work need to be heard and be as privileged as the curator's texts and analysis (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Online this is simplified by the ability for the audience to create comments directly on the site. These comments then be seen by all future audiences.

It is important to remember that art cannot be separated from the everyday experience of the viewer even in the most traditional viewing environments (Dewey, 1934). John Dewey (1934) believed the work of art should reflect and build upon the experiences of the viewer, therefore connecting it to their lived reality. The work should create an experience for the viewer, which can be differentiated from experience because it has a beginning and an end, as well as it must stand out in one's memory (Dewey, 1934). These experiences are singular and individual, and are built on the basis on past experience (Dewey, 1934). "For "taking in" in any vital experience is something more than placing something on the top of consciousness over what was previously known" (Dewey, 1934, p.42) and an experience can change the way that we relate to other experiences, both emotionally and intellectually. It is the relationship between the object and the person who is experiencing it that gives an experience meaning (Dewey, 1934).

"The work of art tells something to those who enjoy it about the nature of their own experience" (Dewey, 1934, p.86). This connection to the viewer's experience is essential when considering how curatorial practice and pedagogy intersect. Rather than privileging the meaning of the artwork as determined by the curator or the artist, it is the viewer's meaning that becomes significant. The artwork rather than merely representing reality, represents an experience (that of the artist), and the viewer must experience it to understand its meaning in his or her own context (Dewey, 1934). This amplifies and shifts the viewers' experience of the world and the meaning of their past experiences (Dewey, 1934).

To create an educational experience, however, the situation must allow for the growth of other possible memories and understandings (Dewey, 1938). This involvement with art occurs within the framework of a community, and past realities help shape current ones (Dewey, 1938). It is the job of the curator, to create situations where positive participations can take place (Dewey, 1938). The factors that will create these situations are dependent on the learners and must be adapted to each set of learners; there is no formula that will work universally (Dewey, 1938). Viewer centered learning is a very important factor in my curatorial practice. I do not consider the viewer as an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge but as a responsive participant filled with lived memories that the curator has a chance to build upon. This view allows the understanding of the viewer will be greatly improved (Dewey, 1934).

In the traditional museum model the curator had the interpretive power as she alone controlled the narrative being constructed, but through the process of decolonization and feminism these narratives were called into question, and the voice of the viewer began to be heard (Garoian, 2001, Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). It is important that curators take pedagogical risks and give up part of their authority to the viewer (Garoian, 2001).

For the audience to engage the artwork in an active way they must truly perceive the artwork, taking the time to absorb its qualities and create a dialogue with the work (Garoian, 2001). "Viewers' performances of memory and cultural history in response to works of art represent a disruption of the museum's dominant historical pedagogy" (Garoian, 2001, p. 242) and allow space for the viewers' identities to be expressed.

7. Examples of Online Curatorial Practice

To better understand the possibilities of online curatorial practices I have created or collaborated on several online curatorial projects. Two of these projects will be discussed today.

The Pillow Exchange: An Experiment in Art and Sleep was co-curated by Jasia Stuart and Stacey Cann. This exhibition used both real objects and online blogs to create a dialogue between the artists. Each artist created a pillowslip with the goal of affecting each other's dreams. These pillows were exchanged between the participants and they used a blog (http://pillowexchange.wordpress.com) to document their dreams both in writing and images.

This experience was both Jasia Stuart and my first experience creating a multi-user blog. Although there were some initial technical difficulties registering the users on our side so that they could post to the blog, none of the users reported difficulty using the technology once the blog was correctly set up.

Conceptually this work was set up as a pseudoscientific experiment. Playing off the scientific method and the push for visual arts to be considered research we marketed the exhibition as experiment, despite its inherently flawed nature of it as such. Jasia Stuart and I therefore became pseudoscientists although in the end we concluded that no generalizations could be made without further research.

The artists from diverse areas of Canada, Australia and the United States were able to have a dialogue with each other through a very intimate experience of each other's artwork. This dialogue became part of the public realm through being posted on the internet. The viewers of the sites are able to add comments or questions of their own on the site. Allowing the viewer to actively take part in the exhibition through posted comments on the work allows for a difference experience than that of the traditional gallery. Although some artists choose to show images of their pillowslips the main content of the artwork as in fact their dreams.

Within the exhibition *The Fountain Project: Duchamp as Muse* this interaction takes place within the questions that are posed below each artwork. Instead of giving the viewers more contextual information about the artwork these questions give the viewer an "in" to the artwork, a place to begin their thinking about the works. This promotes critical thinking and multiple interpretations rather than one interpretation from the 'authority figure' in this situation, the curator, which might stop further inquiry on the part of the viewer.

The placement of each work on its own page allows the viewer to contemplate each piece individually but by scrolling through the work they can make connections between each piece. The viewer is also able to navigate the website in multiple ways, by artists name, by thumbnail images of the work (except for the audio and video works which appear as a white box) allowing them to take control of the way that they view the work, rather than by the prescribed order. Like the gallery setting the majority of the viewers will view the work in the order most easily available (in sequence) but other options for viewing the works are there as well.

All works submitted were accepted into this exhibition because of the historical exclusion of Marcel Duchamp's The Fountain. This forces the viewer to consider what is good and bad art and what are their criteria for determining this. In this way online curation not only undermines the authority of the museum by getting rid of the physical presence of the Museum but also undermines the authority of the curator by forcing the viewer to make decisions regarding the validity of the art through the curator's act of non-choosing.

By using a platform that is accessible to anyone, a free blog, one must reconsider where the authority of the curator comes from. Although anyone could access the tools to create an online exhibition the work of the curator becomes building relationships with and access to the artwork that is being produced. This mirrors the traditional role of the curator in the gallery. It differs because of its heavy mediation by technology. Instead of doing studio visits and seeing what work is being produced the curator must create a clear yet open prompt to which artists can respond. This creates a relationship where the curator is as vulnerable as the artists.

The viewer is able to change the meaning of the exhibition by both their interpretation of the connections between the works and by submitting work of their own that provides a new interpretation and understanding of the contemporary artist's relationship with conceptual art and Marcel Duchamp. Whether this relationship is troubled or at ease is up to the artist and the viewer to decide.

8. Conclusion

Online curatorial projects allow for the expansion of participatory works. Online the curator can easily bring together artists and audiences from various geographical and social spheres. This allows the curator to build communities based on shared interests without shipping and travel costs. It also allows viewers to communicate with the curators, artists and other audience members, allowing them to share personal connections with the work. This audience investment in contemporary art is important to creating understanding of contemporary art.,

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