

The Space Between Us

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Abstract

This article investigates how to integrate the collaborative creation of contemporary art exhibitions, and how to transform exhibition works into contemporary language and novel visual art materials, thereby generating cultural exchange between Australia and Spain. The Space Between Us (2017), co-initiated by Australia-based curator Wilson Yeung and Spanish artist Estefanía Salas Llopis, resolves these questions by examining the contemporary art exhibition. This research project explores how artists and curators participate in the collaboration of contemporary art exhibitions, how the relationship between curators and artists changes during the collaboration, and what potential collaborative curatorial practices have in creating successful artworks and exhibitions.

Keywords: *art collaboration, contemporary art exhibitions, artists and curators, collaborative curatorial practices, Australia and Spain .*

1. Introduction

The Space Between Us is a site-specific collaborative exhibition that focuses on artistic collaboration and cultural exchanges between artists and curators in Melbourne, Australia and Valencia, Spain. The purpose of curating this exhibition is to provide social and material spaces for creative practitioners from the two places to participate in this transitional cross-cultural collaboration and allow them to consider collaborative curation in contemporary art production. The exhibition was held at RMIT's First Site Gallery from August the 9th to 18th, 2017 [Fig. 1.]. It included an opening ceremony, performance event, artist talk, and artist-in-residency program. In addition to being jointly developed by us (Yeung and Llopis), the exhibition also involved two artists from RMIT University and Universitat Politècnica de València, Maria Camila Quintero Arango and Agustin Moreno Garcia.



This practice-based research project took the contemporary global process as the theme. It explored the ideas of the art innovation, with particular attention to artistic collaboration and how creative practitioners of different cultures and backgrounds work collectively in art production. As co-creators, we have been repositioned as „action researchers“ and transformed the exhibition space into an experimental laboratory to test the actual process from artistic collaboration to collaborative curating to collective creation. This paper presents the key concepts of *The Space Between Us*. It demonstrates that creativity can be regarded as a positive contribution, and exhibition production can be referred as a kind of cross-cultural collaboration to establish new artistic creation methods.



Fig. 1. *The Space Between Us* exhibition at the First Site Gallery, 2017

2. Exhibition as Research

German Jewish philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin proposed that the function of the exhibition is to free knowledge from the limitations of professionalism (Bjerregaard, 2020). We argue that exhibitions can effectively play a „research“ role. In other words, exhibitions can not only serve as a way to communicate past knowledge but also create research opportunities. *The Space Between Us* exhibition brings together the ideas of the participating artists and curators and creates a „research“ that combines individual and collaborative practice. The idea of the „exhibition as research“ is to examine the

contemporary definition of exhibition production and to define exhibition as a collective representation and expression from an individual to a group and then extends it to the public. By presenting artworks and stories in different spaces in the gallery, the participating artists and curators created a series of installations for specific locations in the gallery. We showed the selection of symbolic art objects and the production process of new artworks. Creative themes include the deconstruction of identity, fear, obsession, sexuality and dreams. These art installations reflect on the intuition of creative practitioners on exhibition spaces and our artistic practices as well as reveal personal and social issues. During the exhibition, we used First Site Gallery as a venue for collective research innovation - we organized intensive workshops for artists to create and discuss art and invited the audience to interact and collaborate. We turned the exhibition space into a „laboratory“ in which curators, artists and visitors can explore stories about all aspects of the exhibition and participate in ongoing exhibition production to deepen our understanding of the relationship among creativity, artistic practice and cultural exchange.

3. Exhibition Space as Laboratory

Regarding the curating of „experimental“, „real-time“ and „face-to-face“ collaborative work, the concept of „laboratory“ is introduced in *The Space Between Us*. In contemporary art, the idea of using an exhibition space as a laboratory is nothing new. In fact, it is increasingly common that artists and curators actually work together to create exhibitions. Swiss art curator Hans Ulrich Obrist stated that “the truly contemporary exhibitions should express the possibility of connection and make propositions in the true sense. Moreover, perhaps surprisingly, such an exhibition should be reconnected to the age of laboratory practice in the 20th century” (Obrist, 2001, p.129.). British artist Liam Gillick, referring to his solo exhibition at Arnolfini in Bristol, said “it is a situation in a laboratory or workshop where he had the opportunity to test some ideas in combination for relational and comparative critical processes” (Steed, 2000, p.16.). In Documenta 13, Italian American curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev also used the „art laboratory“ approach to invite artists to create pluralistic and open-ended art shows at the festival (Gilbert, 2012). In connection with the above approaches, in *The Space Between Us*, we intended to explore how to use the exhibition as an open art form to create a fluid and variable space for discussing, planning, developing, and producing of artworks. Fluidization and changeability are the main production states in this contemporary art exhibition. These concepts connected the thinking and practice of art creation and exhibition production. In the absence of an exhibition design layout, we focused on investigating curatorial strategies and art

collaboration methods. The way of collaboration was important to us and the participating artists because it will provide creative methods for the exhibition.

4. Collaboration

Collaboration is a common method of contemporary art exhibitions, where a group of people work together to develop a concept together, rather than one person (artist/curator). It can also be seen as an extension of the relationship in artistic creation. In visual art, collaboration can be traced back to Dada, a European avant-garde art movement in the early 20th century. Dadaists believe that the value of art lies not in work produced, but in the act of creating and collaborating with others to create a new vision of the world (MoMA Learning, 2020). Dadaism inspired us to reflect on the relationship between contemporary art exhibition production and artistic creation. We chose „collaboration“ as the primary method of *The Space Between Us* exhibition; there is an exchange of value between collaborations. Collaboration involves sharing knowledge, connecting with people and enhancing creativity [Fig. 2.]. These elements assist us to create a collaborative culture in the exhibition space to promote innovation. We consider that a collaborative culture is an interactive and purposeful communication method that is conducive to collective creation. In this kind of communication, collaboration does not just happen when someone initiates a collaboration. Instead, it combines the way creators work every day and their attitudes towards work. In essence, a collaborative culture cherishes our ideas for getting better. It centres on collective intelligence to drive the most creative solutions. During the process of exhibition production, we learned that artistic collaboration and curation could complement each other. As Obrist said, “good curation is working with someone who can do something you can't. That goes for any good collaboration. The best is when you're making a show together and finding it all out as you go along” (Jeffries & Groves, 2014). The combined use of the art collaboration and curation can encourage artists and curators to create new experimental works during the exhibition production process and increase everyone's trust and conceptual transparency so that artists and curators can have the opportunity to curate art exhibitions jointly.



Fig. 2. A group discussion in *The Space Between Us* exhibition laboratory

5. Collaborative Curatorial Methods

According to Katrina Cashman, Australian curator of Mosman Art Gallery, “what „collaboration“ offers is much more than simply sharing costs or marketing resources. It is a meaningful opportunity and provides a testing ground for trusted colleagues to incubate curatorial ideas” (Fairley, 2017). In *The Space Between Us*, we used continuous questions, actions, discoveries and responses as collaborative curatorial methods. From preparation, production, display to the end of the exhibition, this cycle is repeated at each stage of exhibition production [Fig. 3]. In the practice of collaborative curation, we observed that curatorial discourse runs through each step. From curatorial discourse to artistic collaboration, this has become an effective method for curators and artists to plan, design, and produce exhibitions. This collaborative process encourages artists and curators to link innovative strategies and methods to establish experiments in exhibitions. During the exhibition, our team stayed in the gallery every day and discussed with different visitors. We set up various discussion methods to consider each other's issues, such as how to display artworks in the exhibition, show interesting art concepts to the audience, and plan art activities to attract the attention of the audience. These organic and lively dialogues have activated the form of art display and the method of rearranging exhibition installations. These discussions have also changed our understandings of exhibition creation, made us

reconsider the relationship between creative practice and exhibition making and consider the concept of „social practice“ in art exhibitions.



Fig. 3. Application of collaborative curatorial practice, by Yeung, 2017

6. Public Participation

How to shift the theme of the exhibition from the attention of the individual (artist/curator) to that of the public (audience/community) in order to attract more people to participate in the creation of the exhibition? This is the question we have been considering in *The Space Between Us* exhibition. The French curator Nicholas Bourriaud published a book called *Relational Aesthetics* in 1998, in which he defined the term as “a set of artistic practice that takes the entire interpersonal relationship and social background as its theoretical and practical starting point, rather than an independent private space” (Bourriaud, 2009, p.113.). Bourriaud considers that artists can be seen as not only makers but also facilitators, and art can be considered as information exchanged between artists and audiences. In this sense, artists provide the audience with power and ways to change the world. Bourriaud’s idea prompts us to think about the ideological relationship between individuals and society in exhibition production. We think that an exhibition is a display of ideology. As a hierarchical structure, the exhibition produces a specific and universal form of communication. Through our previous art experience, most of the hierarchy of the exhibition is top-down (from curators to artists to the public) or one-way, which rarely can be developed in reverse or parallel. We regard public participation in exhibition production

as a feasible way to change this top-down power structure. The attempt to change the power structure is one of the reasons why we try to work collectively in the gallery space. Collective practices can change the ownership of individual authors. Artists and curators collaborated on installing artworks, naming artworks, cleaning up the gallery, preparing for the opening ceremony, and then opened up the exhibition space and lead the public to participate in the exhibition production [Fig. 4]. Learning modestly, giving up the individual identity and power of the curator or artist, and participating in the creation process of each work are the principles of collaboration established in the exhibition. By focusing on the relationship between curators, artists and audiences on the one hand, and the connection between people and artistic creation in the exhibition space on the other, we regard exhibition production as thinking and reflecting on collective actions. The transition from „we don't know we don't know“ to „we know we don't know“ to „we know we know“ to „we don't know we know“ is to learn to collaborate with different creative practitioners and the public in exhibitions process.

7. Become a Collective

In *The Space Between Us* exhibition, collaboration is the means, and the collective is the expectation. We consider that the concept of collective is the integration with others, and art exhibitions can practice „common work“. Thinking how to work collectively and then applying the collective creation approach to the visual art exhibition are the roots of the curatorial approach to this exhibition. The idea of collective practice in art is not new, but there are still many controversies about how to use collective creation methods in the production of visual art exhibitions. In many curatorial projects, artists and curators use techniques of co-curating and co-development to generate ideas, concepts, and directions for the exhibition. „True collaboration“ may not happen quickly in collaboration, and it is not easy to occur in the earlier art collaboration (Kelly, 1996). It is because artists and curators always miss an essential element – „coexistence“. It stemmed from the practical experience in the production of *The Space Between Us*. During the two-week exhibition, our team have worked, eaten, studied, played, and learned new things together, and established a lot of conversations about the idea of artistic and curatorial practices. During this process, our team have realized the instability of collective creation. This instability enables the team to share other tasks so that each team member has a series of tasks and guides the team forward. We do not want to be rigid or hierarchical. If it is not something unstable and opened, it does not belong to the collective. In those intensive weeks, our team collaborated in galleries and studios and conducts an overall exhibition creation between the „life-stage“ and art spaces.



* During the exhibition time we presented an Instagram page First site play and display where we worked with the concept of laboratory, changing the disposition of the pieces as an exercise of reflection around the gallery space. We showed from the 8 to the 18 of August on the Instagram page First site play and display the process and change inside the gallery is going to be documented and uploaded. https://www.instagram.com/play_and_display/

Fig. 4. Public participation in the exhibition production at RMIT's First Site Gallery.

8. Conclusion

The Space Between Us demonstrates the idea of contemporary art exhibition as research. It introduces how artists and curators can collaborate and discuss the use of exhibition space as laboratories. In the exhibition production, the participating artists and curators examined different methods of artistic collaboration to develop a new model of collaborative curation. Through the continuous establishment of curatorial dialogues and collaboration as well as reflection and negotiation during the production of the exhibition, artists and curators have transformed individual artistic practices into collective practices. This artistic transformation provides a potential for the development of true collaboration to explore further how to establish valuable cross-cultural exchange projects. This research found that contemporary art exhibitions should not only focus on displaying a single artwork or a group of artworks, but also provide curators, artists and audiences with opportunities to participate in collaborative learning and to promote cross-cultural artistic innovation experiments.

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