

Original Research Article

Contemporary Curatorial Practice: A Case Study of Curation on Site-Specific Consideration—Research and Practice Based on Birmingham City, UK

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Abstract: This evaluation relates to the “...publication as a site” and contemporary art exhibitions for artists held on website and portfolios. I will discuss the concept development in the project within my role, through to the management of artists and the publication of design. This will also give consideration to “site-specific” curatorial practice theory and obtain comments from artists and audience. Moreover, the commissioning process is the significant considerable elements.

Keywords: Site-Specifics; Contemporary Art Exhibition; Group Project; Artists; Publication

1. Concept and project development

At the beginning of our group project, we shared diverse ideas about the topic and context, due to the “site -specifics”. I shared my ideas that the two U.S. Cellular commercial events¹ could also by rich imagination be reality shows and a hand “Shadow Puppets” in a city deducing lovely fairy tales. Secondly the “fish”, they could also represent the world under the sea being released as balloons to rise above the tall buildings in the city. They are simple concepts but full of imagination and make people feel hidden happiness. Why can we not see ourselves as kids. These images take us away from the stresses and strains of our adult daily life. We can create exhibitions in public spaces to encourage performances to bring the happiness and light relief. It might be a popular topic and bring pleasure to the masses.

Emma had suggested “site-specific” considerations, during the lecture² as the tutor had mentioned publications and websites as a venue for exhibitions. She shared various sources and ideas about interaction design and showed examples from newspapers, online and paper-based.

After our ideas, Sarah came up with the concept “Art Therapy”. And then she shared some links to it. So we did various research about art therapy realizing that art, the purpose is to make individuals feel happy. There are many people who support the idea that ordinary art seems superficial. No art is without a profound meaning. A famous saying from Luogeng Hua³ states that: “When reading books, start from the easy to the difficult, and then from the redundant to the concise.” Which means we know everything is plain initially, then through the research and understand, we will digging deep. Highest, we can concentrate profound to ordinary in daily life. It is for this reason, similar to reading, studying art is a process of extracting essence, draw inferences about other cases from one instance. Hence, sample art is ordinary at first glance, actually, it is after numerous studies. It can presents a relaxed state. It can rescue people from stressful states. That is the meaning of Art Therapy. Art is used as a catharsis, an emotional journey to which self-enjoyment and discovery are the end result⁴.

According to research and my reflections, we chose the topic “Happiness”. Emma also proposed three different languages to explain our topic. Due to the international curators and artists, this is the satisfied suggestion. Finally, our main title is SASTA KEGEMBIRAAN 幸福.

In line with the topic of “Happiness” Emma Byrne, a peer and group member, first suggested a publication and website for our presentation and exhibition. Thus following the brief, we need to consider the flyers, blog and ebooks. Thus, it was essential to

1 In 2010, Agency Publicis and Hal Riney came up with the delightful concept of ‘Shadow Puppets’ and ‘Fish’ which star a pair of shadow puppet bunnies and an inflatable octopus filmed in live street art events for U.S. Cellular in Wellington, New Zealand. Director of Photography, Ellen Kuras.

2 On 2nd October 2013 in the lecture talk about “site-specific” and “off-site”. The various evidences to show the exhibition on website, publication, and public space.

3 A famous Mathematician stated the famous remark in 1985.

4 Macalester College in 2012.

further dialogue during each steps and make decision with the communication online and regular meeting.

2. Site

This project needed to consider “site-specific” requirements and the publications and website as our site to make the art exhibition. It was not the first attempt at making the publication as a site. During the famous Cream⁵ the publication as site exhibition attracted people’s attention with its unique glamour. Following the footsteps of Cream, Fresh Cream⁶ and Cream 3, and then Ice Cream: Contemporary Art in Culture⁷ is a global phenomenon with far-reaching influential publications showing the artists’ work. With hundreds of international artists and global curators, the Cream series book explains the new trends to the arts and curatorial world. At the same time, all of the art products are visual forms including performances. Moreover, there is also several limitations of the publication as site to make an exhibition.

All in all, the exhibition-in-a-book has the unique characteristics to attract people. Images and texts in a publication can never replace the thrill of first-hand viewing however they can familiarize readers with the media, the ideas, the concerns, the images with which artists are currently involved.⁸ Thus, the book evokes memories. Additionally, there are some unique treatments for artists. In contrast to an actual exhibition space, a book offers a kind of flexibility and “democracy” - every artist is given an equal number of identical ‘rooms’, four pages each, and has been simply arranged in alphabetical order and can gather together in a single space many voices.....⁹ There is no doubt that the publication exhibition has an advantage over actual shows, so it can continue with such a series. It is definitely a “site-specific” exhibition to change traditional opinions and abandon mid-set.

Similar to the Cream series, we decided to make a publication exhibition however there were also struggles to face that there is a stress on process rather than product, with significance placed on the “doing” and taking part, as much as the finished product, should there be one¹⁰. This was relayed to me in a lecture and the tutor suggested to do some simple and cheap publications, and the most information was online, such as QR codes, and links to blog¹¹. So we did a blog to provide various information and some of images, a QR code print on the flyers linked to blog, and finally published a book.

Initially we considered public spaces to make an exhibition related to our topic. We chose “Happiness” because the initial topic was about killing stress in the modern society. We can make a show within the public space for people living in densely populated areas but due to the considerations of the cost by the city council the idea was canceled.

3. Artists

There were ten artists¹² involved in the Exhibition, and I located five artists, Crystal Wang, Anita Mann, Zecheng Hao, Lirang Yang, and Yiman Fu. Sarah found Azmizi Omar and Shafiq Khairy. And Emma located Aimee Nolan, Davina Pogson and Amy Templeton. This is an international group of artists from China, Malaysia and Ireland. Some of them are also Art and Design or Fine Art students at BCU. It was incredibly rewarding to converse with international artists and BCU artists. All of them loved the topic “Happiness” and they were all willing to participate in this exhibition and make unpaid contributions to their art works. The international collection of art work also makes us curators joyful. Because the international artists absolutely have different art theory and aesthetic style, we can appreciate and collect dissimilar artworks. It is fascinating to explain our topic by global human artworks, it also means our “happiness” is an international element.

One of the artists, Davina Pogson, who is Birmingham based, is interested in the wearability of objects but not their functionality. She has submitted work for this publication and engages with both digital and traditional processes to produce objects which if worn would distort the body in order to accommodate it. Pogson looks at women’s dresses and the rituals of women (ie. applying make up and getting dressed) as influence to her work. For this project she has created a series of images which look at repetition within her work. She wishes to be a creator to make beautiful objects which can be worn.

Aimee Nolan is an Irish artist who is currently working at the Talbot Gallery. She has recently exhibited work at the Clarendon Open Exhibition where Aimee Nolan was awarded funding for her installation. Nolan’s work is a collection of research, drawings and installations based on the exploration of her surroundings. She uses found materials from particular sites and displays them in alternative spaces. She conveys an aesthetic by combining gathered materials and displaying them in response to the particulars of the space. She is interested in creating relationships and connections that occur between the works and impersonates a sense of place. She has submitted multiple works for this publication from drawings to Gouache and Photo-grams.

Amy Templeton’s work blurs the line between making people laugh and making them comfortable. Which is the absolutely related to our topic “happiness”. She uses collage and drawing to create works and often uses images she finds from magazines and newspapers. For this project Amy Templeton has made three new pieces for our publication, responding to media manipulation of happiness and her views as art as a therapeutic experience. We are really looking forward to curating this work alongside the other artists.

Crystal Wang is currently studying in the Birmingham Institute for Art and Design for her MA in Art and Design. Her work focuses on the miniature, and microscopic. She digitally creates miniature Utopians as she believes this is big world in which we live, with all of our possessions and material objects to be not so beautiful. In her previous work she created miniature Utopians

5 The exhibition-in-a-book, Cream, 1998.

6 The exhibition-in-a-book, Fresh Cream, 2000.

7 The exhibition-in-a-book, Ice Cream: Contemporary Art in Culture, 2007.

8 Fresh cream, introduction, 2000.

9 Cream, introduction, 1998.

10 Kermode, D. Watkins, J. *From Arkhipov to Zittel: Selected Ikon Off-Site Projects*, 2002, Birmingham: Ikon Gallery.

11 The lecture at school of art by Wendy Law, October 30th 2013.

12 “<http://xinfusastakegembiraan.wordpress.com/>” The information from blog. December 13th 2013.

for ladybugs. Her work represents her views of the ideal world, what it beautiful and happy. All of her pictures looks joyful and exciting due to the colourful within dreamy animals and plants. It is like a dream inside of every girls, which makes people feel happy.

Anita Mann is an artist who studies her perception of subjects in her drawings. Also she is currently studying in the Birmingham Institute for Art and Design for her MA in Art and Design. She does not draw in the traditional sense, but she records her processes, analyzing the details of every mark, thought and move. Her process begins with a definitive mark and as she goes along she begins to pause and resume at numerous points. These processes of stopping and starting are recorded and she ensures that the motion of her drawing, backwards and forwards, is consistent in how she draws. Her works make people find happy inside of calm, and guide people to thinking our life.

Yiman Fu is an artist based in China, her work is traditional in style. She is interested in the traditional Chinese figure painting. Additional, she combine two diverse style in traditional Chinese figure painting to create a very interesting question. Her paintings are beautifully made with precision techniques. Yiman Fu has submitted two very different pieces for the publication which will illustrate her methods perfectly. The traditional Chinese figure painting makes people happy because of the beauty and meticulous characters.

Lirang Yang is a China based artist who is interested in the transitions of people from country to country, how people no longer remain in their home country. He always focus on the children and older people who are unattended live in the remote areas. Children and older people are the character to represent the emotion in individuals, we can feel the happy and sad through their eyes. He describes people who live in their home towns through painting and drawings using traditional Chinese methods of painting and use of colour. His work is highly detailed and contains beautiful colour palates and simple white backgrounds.

Shafiq Khairy bin Mohd Shariff is a Malaysia photographer who creates stunning landscape photography. His career started with wedding photography and he has now perused a career as a full time multi-disciplinary photographer. The work which he has submitted captures the natural beauty of the world. It is obvious that people will feel satisfied with beautiful landscape and attractive actual world.

Azmizi Omar is a Malaysian photographer and graphic designer. He has a keen interest in Landscape Photography and Photojournalism. He spends most of his time studying and photographing in the Asian weather, particularly in relation to seascapes and cityscapes. He has submitted six stunning photographs documenting scenes which make him happy, they capture sunrises, seascapes and tranquil moments in time.

Ze Cheng Hao is currently studying the BA Fine Art in BIAD. His work focuses on the physical beauty of people and nature around us. He did various research around surrealism and wish to develop it. His work also use diverse material and different style. His primary medium is painting and he has submitted some images for the publication which range in context but focus mainly on beauty as a physical appealing asset. He had made 6 pieces of new works to respond our concept and site. He is the one who provided the most of products, and supply several relevant feedback.

In modern society, pretty much all artists are presented with offers to produce works of art on commission in their careers. The commissioning process is not only provide income for artists, but also supply much aligned artworks for exhibitions. The previous art works from these artists are really excellent. However some of them also provide new works after our brief. Although the existing work no doubt brilliant, if they can sponsor to new work in respond site and brief is much better.

To begin with, in the process of commissioning artworks is for the artists and curators to choose artists who will be asked to develop a proposal for an exhibition. In addition, to check the website to see whether or not they do commission, and affirm the fund is expensive or not. This is an important element for budget and marketing and we do know the charge what they do, it will help us to budget before communicating with artists.

The key to successful working on commissioning artwork is the curators's ability to contact and flexible with whoever you cooperate. A commission relationship only succeeds when you respond effectively to the other party's concerns, requests, and needs (which hopefully aren't too numerous and demanding). Put another way, if you don't work well with people, don't take commissions.¹³ Whatever, watch how the other artworks react to your exhibitions, discovery which pieces suitable at most and the least. And tell them we desire to certain they are satisfied with the final products and exhibitions.

Moreover, write a contract for the commission. The contract document should refer to the original proposal and brief, outline any changes made, and define a payment schedule to avoid any issue. The artists also have responsibility to make sure the quality of the final products. The artists must approve the quality of all work and choose the subcontractors. Barring that, a trail of paperwork noting the artist's approval of work done is essential¹⁴. Additionally, the intellectual property of the artworks is always owned by the artist, so that means we cannot change anything without the consent from artists.

After this relevant research, we contacted the ten artists. An email was sent to the artists of whose work I love. They were really pleased to help us to create the exhibition and it was also a significant chance to market the young artists' artworks. Fortunately, almost them were our friends and students, so they did not charge a fee for their products. This reduction in fees helped our budget and we also hope they can supply artworks relevant to our topic. So the relevance of the brief is definitely necessary to artists. The most exciting thing is some of them have responded to the brief with new work.

4. Marketing and funding

Marketing was simple as we advertised to the public. I designed the flyer, and after discussed this with our group we printed them. Emma designed a blog to support publicity our exhibition. We put flyers in various public places, such as Margret Street, the

¹³ <http://www.artbusiness.com/privcom.html> Articles and content copyright Alan Bamberger 1998-2011.

¹⁴ http://www.aia.org/aiaucmp/groups/ek_public/documents/pdf/aiap037407.pdf Contributed by Lisa Austin, March 2008.

School of Art; Parkside building, Millennium Point; The Kenrick Library and other public spaces belonging to Birmingham City University. Emma said she would print a poster in the print room, but it was canceled for some reasons. We were not contacted by TV or radio or newspaper.

The design concept of flyer was to refer to our topic “Happiness”. And according to ten artists and three curators have a common dream as the clue, make the cartoon image to bring happiness and joyful to public. In addition, the bright blue colour is a relaxing colour encouraging people to feel happy.

The intention of this exhibition project was to explain the context, and our specific site was publication and website. So the marking of the flyers and the blog was the initial stage of our programme. The whole process refers to our site, from the initial promotion and I believe this is appropriate and negotiated to our process and context of the show.

During this exhibition, we just spent less money on flyers and ebooks. The 500 flyers totally cost £ 33.96, each person cost £ 11.32 separated. I printed 3 ebooks, totally cost £ 39.34 depending on different the delivery address, the three members of the group paid different fees.

5. The allocation of roles

There was the initial difficulty in agreeing to specific roles, we started by discuss the topic and context of exhibition, and gradually we play different roles. After 23th October the first group tutorial, we defined our topic and context, and exchange our text about the topic and intention, at the same time three of us separately to choose different artists.

Emma Byrne wrote the relevant brief. She developed our concept and invited artists to make new artworks to respond to our topic and show. After the suggestion, she improved the brief. It is important to mention our topic and purpose and provide the deadline to artists’ works. Throughout Emma made numerous interesting ideas about our exhibition. According to ebook design, the sequence of artworks and the text through the publication these ideas are absolutely unseen in my previous career. Sarah and I believed the sequence of artists should be arranged by first letter but Emma suggested that I mentioned before I don’t think it needs to be like a portfolio book where we have the name and picture and details of the artist all together¹⁵. So in the end we had an amazing and distinctive publication. Diverse art works were combined with dissimilar works and without artists’ names.

I designed flyer and Sarah made the ebook. Of course, all of these were discussed and through consensus of the three of us. Our connection measured always online through the email. It is easy to communicate and share any sources. And have enough time to consider the value if not already mentioned in the meeting.

6. Evaluation

The main problem was the publication. Due to the lack of the professional design of the graphic design, the artists asked whether, the colour and measurements had been changed. The intellectual property of the artworks always owned by the artist, so we can not make such changes. Additionally, the criticism about the composing and colour of text. This is important to attract people and also reflect the quality of publication. Thus, some artists were not satisfied with their artwork in the publication. Some of colour of artworks was changed through print on paper, also the size had been changed.

The painting on the publication did not have enough impact and force shown it in the gallery. Some of the paintings were really long up to 2 meters, but on the publication, it was just a tiny picture. It is difficult to achieve the value. And it is weak power to show our topic “Happiness”. The publication did not make artists and audience happy enough.

Unfortunately, our project was only on publication and website. There were not any more dynamic and high impact artworks to make people feel happy. All of the work was saved onto a folder without actual art products being produced. The audience and artists provided various valuable suggestions to make up the regret which we did not care about.

7. Documentation

Documentation was through a documentary style which described the process and feedback from audience and artists. Because of the publication as a site, it is easy to collect the documentation. All of stuff can in written form. To start with the discuss about context and topic, all of the group emails, the brief website and ebook also can print out. The marketing process included taking pictures of different public spaces. Interestingly questions from the audience and artists were collected. All of these were saved as an archive folder for the project.

8. Conclusion

Whilst this was intended as a site-specific exhibition, the group were been offered a brilliant opportunity to take part in a publication and a website. This will present other challenges, and due to the international cooperation, enables develop our knowledge and enrich our horizon. There are various new perspectives never seen before this, which has contributed to curatorial research. The exhibition was successful in the form of a publication site, through the context the group devised, and this series presents it apart from the popular contemporary exhibition examples. Further success in this project as audience and artists included written questionnaires as feedback. As a curatorial debut I have enjoyed the opportunity to develop this programme and enrich various my horizons with my peers.

Potentially, I aim to improve more professional design of publication, and whilst the context will be same, my concern is next publication try to avoid the defects about the artworks, and try to reflect the real appearance of artworks. One of the question is how to reflect the original powerful works of art and help people to always remember them. One of the designers suggested that we should consider more of the graphic design elements. It is an essential element to show the powerful and amazing about the art. In my opinion, this is not radical enough in term of the publication context, and the move needs to be considered more carefully and seriously.

¹⁵ Emma Byrne, mail message to group, December, 2nd, 2013.

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