

Mediating Exhibitions via Audience Participation on Social Media: Collectivist Curatorial Approach in One World Exposition 2.1 Exhibition

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ABSTRACT: The integration of social media into daily life is one of the most distinct demographic features of younger generations, especially among Generation Z (born between 1996 and 2015). For museums and other cultural institutions to engage with this audience group efficiently, their exhibitions have to take social media into the consideration of mediating strategies. This paper aims to address the challenges and opportunities of such practice, by analysing and assessing the effectiveness of Collectivist Curatorial Approach to mediate exhibition context via audience participation on social media. Purposefully curated in different curatorial approaches for comparison, two major media art exhibitions in the series *One World Exposition 2* were curated in Hong Kong in 2017 and 2018. While the second exhibition *One World Exposition 2.2: #YOU #ME #ourSELFIES* (2018) will be analysed and compared at a later stage in a separate paper, the first exhibition *One World Exposition 2.1: #like4like* (2017) is analysed and assessed in this paper, using the Engagement Process identified by E. A. Edmonds, L. Muller and M. Connell [1] with stages including Attractor, Sustainer and Relator. Through observation, focus group and data extracted on social media, the effort of the Collectivist curatorial strategies to intentionally manipulate audience behaviour showed generally successful result in activating audience participation on social media. While recognising its limitations including the institution's position and motivation towards social media, this paper raises critical implications of social media and exhibitions, such as the influence of social media celebrities, social media posts as audience's interpretations and the concern of curatorial strategies overshadowing the artworks.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early 20th century, reaching a wider audience has been one of the core missions for most major museums. With the rise of Generation Z (born between 1996 and 2015) [2] [3] and their unprecedented dependence on social media since childhood [3] [4], the curatorial strategies to mediate exhibition context require significant changes to accommodate younger generations. To address the generational shifts, this study analyses the effectiveness of the Collectivist Curatorial Approach to mediate exhibition context via audience participation on social media, in the first exhibition in the series *One World Exposition 2* in Hong Kong in 2017-18.

One World Exposition 2 (OWE2) is a two-part exhibition series, organised by Videotage, a non-profit media art organisation in Hong Kong, co-curated by Isaac Leung (Chairman of Videotage) and Kyle Chung (Independent Curator). The exhibitions showcased media art by Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese artists born after 1980, featuring Chen Tianzhuo (CN), Chen Wei (CN), Double Fly Art Center (CN), Hu Weiyi (CN), Lu Yang (CN), Sun Xun (CN), Carla Chan (HK), Chris Cheung (h0nh1m)/XCEED (HK), Tang Kwok Hin (HK) and Morgan Wong (HK). With the same selection of artists, the first exhibition in 2017 comprised all existing artworks responding to 'social media culture' as the unifying theme; the second exhibition in 2018 showcased all

newly commissioned artworks by individual artists/ artist group based on the reflection of their own artistic practice since the first exhibition. In response to the setup of the series, the two exhibitions were curated in two distinct curatorial approaches, the Collectivist approach and the Individualist approach. This study describes and analyses the mediating process of the first exhibition in the Collectivist approach, using the Engagement Process identified by E. A. Edmonds, L. Muller and M. Connell [1] with stages including Attractor, Sustainer and Relator. The effectiveness of the curatorial approach to mediate exhibition context via audience participation on social media is assessed through on-site observation, focus group as well as social media posts and statistics, such as tags, geotags, etc. Discussing the success and limitations of the curatorial approach, this study demonstrates the power structure of social media in relation to audience participation in physical exhibitions, the depth of engagement and other contributing factors among the exhibitions' stakeholders, such as artist's interpretation and institution's intention towards social media.

2. METHODS

Given the aforementioned setup of the OWE2 exhibition series, the first exhibition was curated in the Collectivist approaches in order to test the effectiveness in mediating exhibition context via audience participation on social media. The Collectivist curatorial approach is, as concluded by M. Lind [5], "inspired by the Russian Revolution and by Einstein's theory of relativity. It encouraged a varied and active experience through dynamic exhibition design, where things looked different from different angles, while simultaneously emphasising the totality of the installation." [5, p.87] Aiming to deliver a shared experience in the exhibition, the Collectivist curatorial approach focuses on the collective encounters with art.

The effectiveness of the curatorial approaches is described and analysed using the Engagement Process identified by E. A. Edmonds, L. Muller and M. Connell [1]. Based on the study on visitor behavior and usage models within the museum space by A. Bollo and L. Dal Pozzolo [6], this Engagement Process includes three stages. The first one is Attractors, which are attributes that encourage the audience to start the experience. They possess, as Bollo and Pozzolo call it,

"attraction power", aiming to grab people's attention among other distractions in a public space [6]. The second stage in this Engagement Process is Sustainers. They are features that hold the audience engaged throughout the process [1]. They carry "holding power" to sustain the audience's interest, generating exhibition hotspots where the audience stays and interacts with the exhibition [6]. The last one is Relaters, which are factors that extend the growth of relationship between the exhibition and the audience to after the experience. They aid a continuing experience as long-term audience engagement [1].

To assess the effectiveness of the curatorial approaches in mediating exhibition context via audience participation on social media, three methods were used for evaluation, including observation, focus group and social media posts and statistics. Extensively used by museologists such as E. S. Robinson on museum visitor behaviour [7] and B. I. Gilman on "museum fatigue" [8], observation as a research method was used to collect qualitative data, where the researcher does not appear to be an observer from the audience's perspective [9]. While acknowledging the potential bias, emotions and thoughts the researcher might experience that could influence the results, qualitative data from on-site observation was recorded through descriptive field notes, reflective memos and detailed journaling [9] [10]. This is particularly useful for empirical studies on museum audience behaviour and interactions between the audience and the exhibition, since valuable insights into the on-site experience can be generated as the researcher puts themselves in the same time and space [10]. Also, focus group was conducted to cross-reference the interpretations and analysis of the facts and observational data. After the exhibition experience, six visitors were invited to participate in semi-structured focus group discussions, as a comprehensive way of learning the audience experience and analysing the resulting implications [6] [9]. In addition to observations and focus group, the primary materials to evaluate the Relator stage in the Engagement Process [1] are the social media posts and statistics. The audience response to the exhibitions on social media directly reflects the level of effectiveness of mediating exhibition context via audience participation on social media. Trends and patterns were

analysed and identified, in order to draw implications on the factors that trigger audience's input on social media, as well as the ways in which the audience interprets and displays exhibition context via social media.

3. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Using the Collectivist approach, One World Exposition 2.1: #like4like was curated in chi K11 art space from 21 March to 21 May 2017, co-organised by Videotage and K11 Hong Kong.



Figure 1: One World Exposition 2.1: #like4like

As an Attractor element in the Collectivist approach, this exhibition was designed to present the vision of being an attention-seeking entity. Instead of a conventional white cube display environment, the exhibition design was heavily decorated with bold, sharp, fluorescent colours in order to deliver a controlled environment, which aimed to be a captivating psychedelic experience (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Dynamic exhibition design in One World Exposition 2.1: #like4like

Another Attractor element was the strategic positioning of the eye-catching artworks. For instance, the fluorescent green neon light artwork Unprecedented Freedom (2016) by Chen Wei was positioned in front of the big windows facing one of the busiest subway stations in Hong Kong (Fig. 3), as a tactic of “street marketing” to draw attention from general public [11]. Also, the platform and the windows create a distance from the artwork (Fig. 3 & 4), suggesting a different perspective

and experience than just looking from outside, as another way to drive people into the exhibition.



Figure 3: Unprecedented Freedom (2016) by Chen Wei

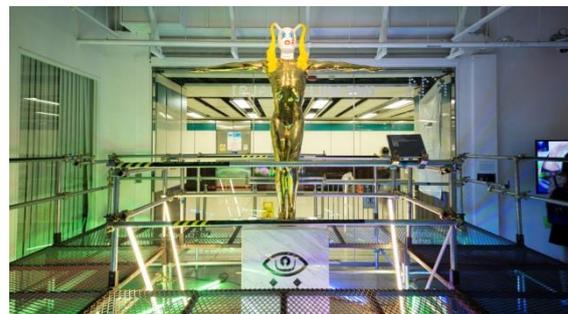


Figure 4: Platforms integrated in exhibition design for the sculpture; YOGAMAYA (2016) by Chen Tianzhuo

As an Attractor element specifically targeting to encourage photo taking as an interactive experience, the exhibition was branded as a selfie-friendly social environment. There were “selfie point” signage throughout the exhibition to encourage the audience to take selfies (Fig. 5). This selfie-taking behaviour yielded a by-product of the exhibition, the photo image, that served as triggering materials for potential online distribution on social media (Fig. 6) [12] [13] [14] [15].



Figure 5: Selfie point signage



Figure 6: Instagram posts about OWE2.1 [12] [13] [14] [15]

At the Sustainer stage, the primary effort was made through the exhibited artworks. To easily sustain the audience's interests, especially for the non-exhibition goers, one of the criteria for artwork selection was bold, edgy visual and artistic context. The video work PICNIC (2014) by Chen Tianzhou was an obvious choice, which depicts the worship dance for a fictional androgynous god (Fig. 7). Another example was the 5-channel video work, One day perhaps there's discovery of that un beauty (2013) by Tang Kwok Hin (Fig. 8 & 9). It was an artwork based on the artist's intimate self-reflection on time and boredom, with video content such as melting wax on a palm, self harm to bleed, vomiting, etc. Existing in this collection of artworks, the exhibition adds another layer of context to the artwork that portrays the sinister aspects of the visual. These worked in line with the curatorial vision to present the exhibition itself as an "attention-seeking" entity, and strengthened the totality of the exhibition experience in the Collectivist approach as a Sustainer element.



Figure 7: PICNIC (2014) by Chen Tianzhou, screenshot (image courtesy of the artist)



Figure 8: One day perhaps there's discovery of that un beauty (2014) by Tang Kwok Hin, installation shot



Figure 9: One day perhaps there's discovery of that un beauty (2014) by Tang Kwok Hin, screenshots (image courtesy of the artist)

Also, a peephole installation was created for the crystal sculptures Hearse Delusional Mandala (2015) by Lu Yang to seduce the audience to walk up for a look (Fig. 10 & 11). This not only aimed to sustain the audience's interest by enabling the interaction performed by the audience to discover the artworks in the mysterious boxes. This also streamlined the audience's visual perspective towards the artworks, creating the active but shared collective encounters with the artworks.



Figure 10: Peephole installation (outside)



Figure 11: Peephole installation (inside), *Hearse Delusional Mandala (2015)* by Lu Yang

As another Sustainer element, the exhibition route was restricted into a single path, along with strategic positioning of artworks, to guide the audience through as a controlled mechanism (Fig. 12). Particularly so, a long corridor was created from one end of the exhibition space to another, in order to showcase artworks that were in linear form in a linear space. One instance was the 9 metre long neon light artwork *Unprecedented Freedom (2016)* by Chen Wei, hung higher up on the wall for the audience to view when they had to make the effort to walk up and along the platform (Fig. 3) Another instance was the 5-channel video installation *The Melting Black (2016)* by Carla Chan (Fig. 13), displaying a large-scaled synced video of a digitally manipulated and distorted scenery of sea waves across the corridor.



Figure 13: *The Melting Black (2016)* by Carla Chan

At the Relator stage, the exhibition reviews after the exhibition experience indicated sufficient engagement to catch media attention, especially among art professionals, such as *The Standard* [16], *Art Radar* [17], etc. However, these types of response were the work of the art scene's insiders. Specifically in relation to the conscious effort in the Collectivist curatorial strategies to guide the controlled manner of engagement, social media entries by the general public played a major role in the Engagement process [1]. For instance, during the 8 week exhibition period, there were over 5,000 posts on Instagram by the audience with geotags and hashtags generated for this exhibition (Fig. 14) [18]. Also, it's worth noting the variety of social media entries. The audience reacted differently to different artworks via social media posts, for instance there were humorous images with the sculpture *YOGAMAYA (2016)* by Chen Tianzhuo (Fig. 15) [19] and serious images with the video work *Delusional Mandala, Delusional Crime and Punishment (2015)* by Lu Yang (Fig. 16) [20]. Other than the images, the text captions on social media can be considered as content production and interpretation activated and driven by the context of the artworks, regardless of the original interpretations by the artists and curators. For instance, some of the social media posts by the audience attached paragraphs of captions, including the Instagram post shown in Fig. 17 [21] responded to the artwork *Unprecedented*



Figure 12: Long corridor across the exhibition space. *Unprecedented Freedom (2016)* by Chen Wei (left), *The Melting Black (2016)* by Carla Chan (right)

Freedom (2016) by Chen Wei with 483 Chinese words of caption about the ephemeral aspect of love and relationships, while Chen Wei's interpretation focuses on the embedded political implications of the artwork he recreated from the same neon light sign in a dance club in China; and, the curators' interpretation is to put the artist's original idea forward and ask what "unprecedented freedom" means to Hong Kong in the postcolonial context.



Figure 14: Instagram posts tagged for the exhibition [18]



Figure 15: Humorous Instagram post [19]



Figure 16: Serious Instagram post [20]

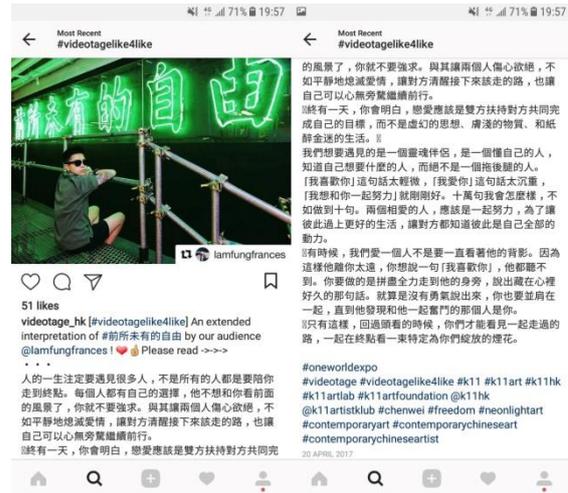


Figure 17: Instagram post with a caption about reflective interpretation towards an artwork [21]

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Collectivist strategies applied to purposefully guide audience behaviour in the One World Exposition 2.1: #like4like exhibition was generally positive in activating audience engagement on social media. Also, high attendance of the exhibition reflecting in the high social media attention suggests that the Attractor and Sustainer stages in the respective curatorial approaches resulted consistently in the Relator stage throughout the Engagement processes [1]. For instance, the exhibition OWE2.1: #like4like had the highest attendance for Chi K11 Art Space in 2017, with approximately 2,500 visitors per week and over 5,000 geotags and hashtags on Instagram within the exhibition period. Despite the consistent results, this study recognises its limitations, such as the institution's position towards social media as a variable factor. Since OWE2.1 was in collaboration with Chi K11 Art Space which is both organisationally and physically within the K11 shopping mall, their profit motif understandably fueled their financial support for the curatorial angle to expand audience base to the exhibition and social media presence.

Another implication noted from the social media presence of the exhibition is that social media celebrities are a significant stakeholder in this mode of engagement. They play a major role in distributing information on social media. For instance, Poortravellers, an Instagram "influencer" with 314,000 followers, posted an image about the OWE2.1 exhibition which gathered over 9000 likes within 24 hours [22]. As a result, the

exhibition in the following weekend had over a thousand visitors each day. This also indicates that the post-experience engagement on social media in the Relator stage can act as an Attractor element, creating a potential cycle to encourage more people on social media to attend the exhibition.

In addition to the audience participation, the artists in the exhibition series had concerns over the Collectivist curatorial strategies overshadowing the context of their artworks. Although all curatorial decisions were agreed upon between the artists and curators, and no parties involved were offended ethically and legally, it took a significantly long time and effort to negotiate with the artists on exhibition design in OWE2.1. For instance, in the OWE2.1 exhibition, the artist of The Melting Black (2016), Carla Chan, originally disapproved of the red light track under her 5-channel video installation (Fig. 13), suggesting the dynamic exhibition design as a distraction. The artist eventually understood and was happy about the exhibition design as a linking device to achieve a cohesive, shared audience experience.

This study analyses the Collectivist Curatorial Approach for activating the potential of social media as a form of engagement for exhibition context mediation. Future research can focus on the depth of this mode of engagement and how it can be best used to serve the various objectives of different institutions. As theorists D. J. Sherman and I. Rogoff [23] pointed out that all exhibition display strategies involve assumptions about the audience an institution aims to address, and those assumptions carry inherent contradictions about the institution's objectives, such as the delivery of education and pleasure. Since social media is becoming an inseparable part of life for younger generations [4], it is necessary to rethink and further understand the impact of social media towards the existing models of audience engagement and curatorial strategies.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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#k11artistklub #K11Me #前所未有的自由 [Peter Tam.K.T Petter·Litter on Instagram: “One World Exposition 2.1: #like4like Exhibition @ Chi K11 Art Space #petertamktstyle #K11HK #k11artistklub #K11Me #Unprecedented Freedom] [online], Available from: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BTCE7BCFQz4/> (Feb 8, 2018).

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