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Future Programming: Gallery learnings through pandemic times

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Introduction

The pandemic continues to impact an arts industry in crisis. The circumstances have improved, galleries are open. This paper examines what galleries learnt from the pandemic through the processes employed in navigating this crisis, and how these learnings can assist in moving forward. Strategies employed to engage a locked-down, socially distanced (artists and viewing) public, using old technology in new ways, are explored in this paper to assess how galleries remained available and relevant to the public, and what this might mean for future programming. The authors of this paper, Lyndall Adams and Nicola Kaye, are the Director and Deputy Director of ECU Galleries (referred to as *we* or *our* throughout this paper). What we do is guided by our understanding that 'Art galleries are important educative entities, [they are] sites of public pedagogy' (Clover and Sanford, 2019), they provide 'plays of force...[that] influence the public' (Steeds, 2014). Exhibitions 'actively construct, shape and mobilize our understandings of the world through carefully choreographed' (Clover and Sanford, 2019) works of art that shape our collective and individual identities. 'Scholars in this area of public pedagogy draw attention to public memory, the ideological nature of display, the epistemological influence of historical forces, embodied and affective forms of learning beyond language, and historical sites of public discourse' (O'Malley et al., 2020). This paper examines one such exhibition as a case study for future programming. Firstly, we outline the context of the case study, followed by the public the galleries are intended for, in order to answer the question: What did galleries learn from the pandemic and how can we develop those pedagogic learnings for the publics that galleries serve?

Context

The case study in question was an exhibition conducted in July 2021 in Perth, Western Australia (WA). Perth went into lockdown for two of the four weeks scheduled for the exhibition. When the gallery was open it was to a very limited and socially distanced public. By 2021 Western Australians had watched the unfurling nightmare from one of the most isolated cities on the planet, for more than a year.

Premier Mark McGowan's response from the outset in April 2020 was to shut the state's border, asserting: 'In effect, we will be turning Western Australia into an island within an island. Our own country' (as cited in Poloni, 2020). McGowan and the State Labor Government continued to take this stance, and acted with little tolerance until March 2022 when the border fully reopened. In addition, supply chains already stretched due to COVID-related staff shortages were severed after floods in South Australia washed away parts of the railway linking the eastern states with Western Australia and the Northern Territory for a month in 2022 (May, 2022). About 80 per cent of freight transported on land into WA from the eastern states arrives by rail with Pacific National, which usually runs 50 return rail haulage services each week between Adelaide and Perth (Wiggins, 2022).

Galleries

Galleries internationally and across Australia closed their doors (Eltham, 2020; Eltham and Verhoeven, 2020; Pennington and Eltham, 2021; Flore et al., 2021; Gibson, 2020; Greenberger, 2020; King et al., 2021; Noehrer et al., 2021; Burke et al.). Internationally 'New York's Metropolitan Museum Art, the MoMA and Guggenheim museums...closed indefinitely in a bid to contain the spread of coronavirus in the city', expecting the closures to last a few weeks (Gibson, 2020, para. 1). Nearly six months later MoMA (Museum of Modern Art) was the first in New York to reopen ('New York's Museum', 2020). In Europe, the 2021 Venice Biennale was postponed by a year (Greenberger, 2020). When it did open, curator of the main event, Cecilia Alemani, stated:

Today, the world seems dramatically split between technological optimism—which promises that the human body can be endlessly perfected through science— and the dread of a complete takeover by machines via automation and artificial intelligence. This rift has widened during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has forced us even further apart and caged much of human interaction behind the screens of electronic devices. (2022, para. 6)

Many of the world's most celebrated art events, such as the Venice Biennale and Documenta were postponed to 2022. Speaking about realising the curatorial programme, Cecilia Alemani noted, 'Suddenly we had much more time to think about what we were all doing in this universe. We opened ourselves up to a deep reflection on the role of art' (Benhamou-Huet, 2022, para. 5). Rather than postponing, many

galleries opted for remote, virtual or online access, including: Musée d'Orsay, the Louvre, the Musei Vaticani, the Van Gogh Museum, and the Stavanger Art Museum (Burke et al., 2020), amongst many others.

Australia fared somewhat better, however its largest art event, the Sydney Biennale, opened for 10 days in 2020 before being forced to close ('The 22nd', 2020); the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney closed for 88 days in 2020 and another month or so in 2021. The Art Gallery of South Australia similarly closed for over 80 days, while the National Gallery of Victoria closed for over six months in 2020, with 500,000 visitors attending their triennial exhibition when they did open, despite restricted capacity. People seemed to want to be in physical spaces, professing their tiredness for online galleries (Pickup, 2021). As early as May 2020 it was predicted that as much as '26 per cent of Australian workers could be out of work as a direct result of the coronavirus shutdown', including many in the arts (Coates et al., 2020, para. 1). WA had much the same story for 2020, followed by an increasing sliding scale of how many could gather and at what distance.

ECU Galleries

ECU Galleries consists of Gallery25 (G25) and Spectrum Project Space (SPS) and both are located on the Mount Lawley Campus in WA. With little time for reflection, our agenda was to ensure public programming went ahead wherever possible. G25 closed on the 6th of April 2020, reopening on May 31 for a Master of Arts examination, which remained installed with the gallery closed through June and July. The remaining exhibitions in 2020 were extended, with one artist cancelling, filled by an ECU Art Collection exhibition. SPS closed 30 March and reopened 27 July to a much-changed program, with an additional three artists or groups cancelling exhibitions to be filled by a three slot (15 week) ECU staff exhibition. Through 2021 both G25 and SPS went into lockdown for one week in February, one week in April, and one week in June/July. SPS saw one extended exhibition due to a group cancellation. When the galleries were open through April 2020 to mid 2022, COVID protocols were strictly adhered to.

We responded in a disruptive manner, with the intention of creating diverse spaces where the digital and the physical could collide. This was not to create a seamless space, rather a site for *human connection* because the *business-as-usual* approach felt increasingly untenable. At the time, we had no budget, and *ad hoc* technical staff (i.e. we did almost everything ourselves). What sounds totally mad but began as a

simple agenda of keeping ECU galleries open in order to keep the arts community alive and engaged, and to ensure artists had a context to show their work, became a slow dawning of possible new futures.

We have many artists to thank for the generosity we received through this time; they are collaborators in many ways, and assisted our thinking through/with the ideas that were germinating. We had the great good fortune of artists Sieglinde Karl-Spence and Hazel Smith, Leora Faber, Merrra + pdot and Diana Chester offering us exhibitions that could be cloud transferred.

Karl-Spence's practice since the late 1980s has focused on installation and performance, including works of a site-specific, transitory nature. Smith is a poet, performer and new media artist. The exhibition in Gallery25 *Heimlich Unheimlich* by Karl-Spence (visual images) and Smith (text) (2021) was an installation of collages and poetry that explored through family photographs the post-World War II period, personal and historical trauma, belonging and migration. It was composed of digitally printed polyester chiffon banners, a multimedia video, and hand-stitched objects reminiscent of body parts. The artists' sent this work in a very well-constructed box from Sydney to Perth at their own cost.

The ambiguous relationship between heimlich and unheimlich (homely and unhomely) underlies the piece, which fictionalises the contrasting childhoods of Karl-Spence (German-Australian) and Smith (British-Jewish). The exhibition featured a video combining spoken poetry, visual collages and music with computer processing of the voice and images recorded live when *austraLYSIS* premiered the piece at the MARCS Institute, Western Sydney University, in 2019, with a studio rendering of image animation and montage included. The creators of the video work are Sieglinde Karl-Spence (visual images), Hazel Smith (text) and Roger Dean (musical composition and image processing). The performers are Hazel Smith (text), Roger Dean (image processing), Sandy Evans, (saxophone), Phil Slater (trumpet) and Greg White (electronics), and the work is available online at:

<https://projects.cah.ucf.edu/mediaartsexhibits/uncontinuity/Smith/smith.html>

The video, also titled *Heimlich Unheimlich*, was an initial impetus that gave us the idea that whatever the future might hold, we might just be able to support artists and viewers.

Leora Faber, a Johannesburg-based bio-artist, academic, writer, curator and editor also exhibited in Gallery25 in 2021. Faber's *ghosted matter, phantom hurt (and other chimera)* (2021) was a digital media exhibition of videos showing fleeting *impressions* of domestic objects made through an experimental combination of biomaterials and microbes. In the videos, the impressions appear and disappear, hovering restlessly in a liminal space of constant becoming. In their initial forms as material matter, they already inhabit an ever-changing state of in-betweenness, slipping in-between life and death, visibility and invisibility, human and other-than-human, actuality and imagination, being and non-being, (semi)living and non-living. This sense of liminality is heightened when the impressions are translated into digital media, which foregrounds the transientness of light, time and space.

United Kingdom-based Meera + pdot also exhibited with us in 2022. They had been scheduled to exhibit in 2021 but COVID-19 intervened. Meera is a filmmaker, lecturer and emerging artist with a passion for using film as both a documentary medium and experimental approach. Meera is a Senior Film Lecturer at St Marys University and Coventry University with five-plus years of experience in teaching immersive practice, documentary cinema, experimental praxis and digital media. pdot is a writer, philosopher and emerging artist using focused research in phenomenology, the sensorial experience and existentialism to create experimental physical and digital art.

Qualia by Meera + pdot (2022) is an exhibition that examines the phenomenological conception of *qualia* which is defined as sensations that our subconscious cannot define other than through the experience of that feeling itself. The combination of film, art and phenomena provokes the viewer's senses, and interprets the notions of the subconscious upon the viewer's experience of it. Each of the artists, although predominantly screen based, describe their work differently, including our case study Diane Chester.

Case study—Diana Chester

We met Diana at the ACUADS 2020 conference (locked down and locked in). An international exhibition cancelled so we contacted her. Diana's 2021 exhibition in Gallery25 was installed alongside Leora Faber's installation. Diana Chester is a digital media artist, scholar, and musician. Her creative work is an exploration and analysis of the power of the creative response to elements of everyday life and attempts to address questions about the human condition. Chester is fascinated by

recorded sounds, their interplay with visual environments and their ability to capture sonic snapshots of place.

Sounding Nature (Chester, 2021) was an installation of Sonic Visualizations created during the pandemic. The pieces were meditations on nature, the ocean, and loneliness. These works attempted to create spaces where visitors could get lost in the mesmerizing appeal and absurdity of the visual environments. The compositions in these pieces were original and improvised. The work was mostly inspired by the solitude and reliance on inner strength that emerged, particularly for those living alone during the pandemic. The musical pieces were inspired by a desire to collaborate with musicians in different geographies, all of whom lived alone, to bring a form of togetherness and connectedness while in our own isolated places. The exhibition consisted of two works *Two by Two* and *Coogee* (Chester, 2021).

Two by Two combines 2D animation and live action footage from Sydney, New York, and Singapore with a composition created by artists in Sydney and New York (collaborating with New York flutist Francesca Hoffman). It is a ludicrous animated video that explores partnership, loneliness, and the relationship with oneself. *Two by Two* is about the human dance, about interaction and touch and joy and confusion, about the inward looking and outward facing self, and sometimes looking right at oneself.

The second exhibition, also exhibited in Gallery25, *Sonifying COVID* by Diana Chester (2022), was created in collaboration with Julian Belbachir, Benjamin Carey, Luke Hespanhol, and Sonya Holloway and Melody Li, centred on art made from and about the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on how sound as a tool of expression and vibration could shed light on the *other* somatic impacts of the pandemic—the bodily anxiety, stress, and tension we internalized. The exhibition was sound forward, using sonification and vibration as the nexus that brought together two independent but interrelated works, both created from data of the pandemic over a two-year period.

In order to reflexively engage with the experiences, and with what has become our modus operandi, we seized upon an opportunity to interview Diana, asking a series of questions pertaining to her experience of exhibiting at ECU Galleries in 2021 and 2022, remotely and in person respectively. This was a fantastic opportunity to provide

insight into her experiences and assist us in developing pedagogic learnings for the publics ECU Galleries serve.

After receiving Human Research Ethics clearance from the ECU Committee, we interviewed Diana, asking nine face-to-face semi-structured interview questions (Opdenakker, 2006)(question 3 did not apply):

1. What was your experience of exhibiting remotely with ECU Galleries?
2. We remoted you in for the install. Can you talk about that experience? Will you use this strategy again?
3. How was your experience of conducting artists floor talks remotely with ECU Galleries? Certain technologies were employed. Were they effective?
4. How did the experience differ from previous In Real Life (IRL) exhibitions and artists talks?
5. Did you have other experiences like this through the pandemic and before or after?
6. Has the experience changed to way you practice? Will you continue to exhibit in this way?
7. The acceleration of new technology through this time seems to have been exponential. Can you talk to this notion?
8. How do you think galleries have changes as a result of the pandemic?
9. Is there anything else you would like to add?

The following outlines Diana's direct responses to our interview questions, which continue to inform our future programming and gallery possibilities.

1. What was your experience of exhibiting remotely with ECU Galleries?

DC: in 2021...the experience was...very...positive for me as an artist to be able to do something to show? Which of course was really hard to do because a lot of places weren't doing anything that was physical?

... at the same time, I felt super removed from most of the process. So, I was excited about it, but I also felt really distanced from it.

Critically, Diana articulates the conundrum of artists being afforded opportunities through the digital, and yet not experiencing their work in situ, and all the benefits that come with this. In future programming we aim to circumvent such feelings of

distance by providing as much information regarding the installation process and the physical experience of the work for the artist, so they feel a greater sense of agency and empowerment in the process.

2. We remoted you in for the install. Can you talk about that experience? Will you use this strategy again?

DC: it's hard when you've never been to the space. You don't have a sense at all of how it's going to be received so to have all that back and forth in exchange, and it could be this space, it could be this screen. It could be this size. It could be this resolution. I think that helped me begin to better visualize it and made me feel comfortable about the work being taken seriously and the install being taken seriously so that was really nice.

I ended up showing two works that were both screen based that had sound. But they presented on a screen, and I think that limited the complexity, so for something like that I would do it again. I sent digital files. It didn't cost anything. I was able to present the work without having to take time off or, you know, do any of that. But as we could tie it to the exhibition in 2022, it definitely meant I was limited in what I could attempt to do in this space.

I've started moving toward collaborating more heavily with people who do VR, people who do different kind of visualization, like using processing to create data visualization, like what Luke did for the show that was at ECU Gallery in 2022 and exploring with visual creation, myself, which was the ACUADS Conference piece I presented in 2021, so this just became kind of...an organic outcome.

4. How did the experience differ from previous In Real Life (IRL) exhibitions and artists talks?

DC: A huge piece of where the in real life differed dramatically with ECU galleries because of the in-person was the artists talk. Because of being able to speak with people but also because of obviously being able to set up. So that the major differences were the 2021 show was all screen based and relied on just stereo audio from a screen. ...The 2022 show was a quadraphonic 4 channel sound piece with two.

5. Did you have other experiences like this through the pandemic and before or after?

DC: being there and setting up the show was critical [in the shows I have done in 2022] ...because of the complexity of the work.

In questions 2, 4 and 5 Diana raises issues around the integrity of the work and how it can be compromised if there is not the technical software or knowledge to exhibit certain kinds of work. There is a need, therefore, for galleries to have the capacity to show technologically sophisticated work, and, if they do not, being transparent about a lack of infrastructure is critical. For us, transparency is paramount, regarding each project's viability, and in reaching consensus with the artist in a collaborative, ethical and responsive manner, thus arriving at the best outcome in our striving for excellence.

6. Has the experience changed to way you practice? Will you continue to exhibit in this way?

DC: at the end of the day COVID has made us all really tired. ... So, what I realise is whereas before I might have thought, oh, yeah, I can do kind of a few different shows a year, actually now I like the idea of being able to do a show that I'm not there for because a collaborator takes on the bulk of the setup or it's done remotely because of the medium.

7. The acceleration of new technology through this time seems to have been exponential. Can you talk to this notion?

DC: you still need to have the ability to run this technology. It is always limited by how high your technical capacity is, so if you wanted to do a show simultaneously at the Observatory and at the new ECU campus, for example, and go as far as even to synchronise them you could do it.

... it's just a matter of do you have the people, right, that could work on the back-end infrastructure to make sure that that goes off without a hitch, which is different from: I'm just going to put a projector in each place.... there's so many implications, there's environmental implications of people traveling in tin cans through the sky everywhere versus not having to do that.

8. How do you think galleries have changes as a result of the pandemic?

DC: ...it's gone, two different ways. One is some galleries have gotten much more local.

... [or] bringing people in via Zoom instead of in person and, you know, doing all these types of things, having hybrid panels where some people are in person and some people are remote.

9. Is there anything else you would like to add?

DC: I have one question for you, which is I'm just curious what your lessons learned, like what has happened for you as galleries who are running this space during the pandemic that has changed the way you're thinking about how you run your space.

Pertinently, Diana's question to us is precisely what we are asking ourselves in moving forward.

Conclusion

There were many productive aspects to what we learned through the tough times afforded by the pandemic in keeping galleries open and viable: providing connection, keeping community together, and, the most important for us, ensuring we continue to engage our publics no matter what. This has complexity, however, and such learnings from the exhibitions we have outlined have brought about new awareness and understandings regarding our focus on projection and sound works throughout this time. Although projection as a strategy can enable works to be shown that circumvent the physical, there are issues in projecting works in spaces not designed for them. Also, in many cases it's easier for a digital artist to translate their works into projection, but when projection is used as the only fall back, the integrity of the work and the experience can be jeopardised ethically. Furthermore, projection has its own specificity, its own *raison d'être*, that when used as a one-size-fits-all model can have problematic consequences. And as our case study affirms, the question for us is how we navigate beyond these limitations.

There is no doubt that future programming will contain the digital, in ways that we may not have conceived of pre-pandemic, however, it will be with a greater awareness of the nuances brought about by the collisions of the physical, the digital

and the virtual. Importantly, such mitigating circumstances have us questioning how we can best serve both the artists and publics through devising programmes that afford the best experience through best quality. We are asking, how can we engender experiential modes of engagement with artworks that are openly not seamless or could be contested?

We saw the potential. It gave us confidence.

Moving forward and as we move to the city gallery, media can be streamed across the seven-storey building. The kinds of questions we asked through the pandemic have been invaluable in traversing how a gallery can activate a different public. Our role in ECU Galleries is about programming, about diverse identities and diverse publics. Future programming is not about filling the space, it's about excellence and courage, which both come in many forms. It's not about the digital alone but the added value of digital art installation in galleries. It's for those that walk by and have either felt locked out of the white cube or are apathetic. It's to activate dark city spaces at night, notwithstanding the ethics around such a visible intervention into this complex location, and how this serves those that inhabit it willingly or through lack of choice.

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