Exhibitionary Practices at the Intersection of Academic Research and Public Display[1]
Joasia Krysa

In their edited book *Curating Research*, Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson describe two modes of research through curating: "researching within the exhibition-making" and "exhibition as a research action itself."[2] Simon Sheikh further develops the latter proposition in his chapter, "Towards the Exhibition as Research," in the same publication, arguing that:

> The curatorial project—including its most dominant form, the exhibition—should thus not only be thought of as a form of mediation of research but also as a site for carrying out this research, as a place for enacted research. Research here is not only that which comes before realisation but also that which is realised throughout actualisation. That which would otherwise be thought of as formal means of transmitting knowledge—such as design structures, display models and perceptual experiments—is here an integral part of the curatorial mode of address, its content production, its proposition.[3]

To position the exhibition "as research" necessitates consideration of the various contexts in which exhibition-making takes place and the impact on how meanings are produced. One such context to consider is that which situates exhibitionary practices at the intersection of academic research and public display, with particular reference to exhibition venues in academic institutions where research naturally takes place. While there is a wealth of historical and contemporary examples of "university galleries" one can point to, I am trying to argue for a distinction here as in the case of Exhibition Research Lab (ERL)—an academic research centre and a public venue located at Liverpool School of Art and Design.[4]

This essay explores the relationship between research and curatorial practice, focusing on exhibition-making practices and the understanding of exhibition as not simply the display of objects of research but as the site of research, and consequently as a form of critical inquiry and knowledge production in itself. Taking ERL as a case in point, the essay extends the discussion to consider the specificity of the context within which such practices take place.

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[1] This text is the second expanded iteration of an earlier text of the same title, originally commissioned for the edited volume: Anita Seppä, Henk Slager and Jan Kaila, eds, *Futures of Artistic Research: At the Intersection of Utopia, Academia and Power* (Helsinki: The Academy of Fine Arts, 2017).
[2] Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, eds, *Curating Research* (London: Open Editions, 2015), 17.
[3] Simon Sheikh, "Towards the Exhibition as Research," in *Curating Research*, eds Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson (London: Open Editions, 2015), 40.
[4] ERL was established in 2012 (originally as "Exhibition Research Centre") as part of Liverpool John Moores University's School of Art and Design and was developed in collaboration with a Tate Liverpool-funded post holder, at the time Antony Hudek. See: "Exhibition Research Lab: Institute of Art and Technology," *Ljmu.ac.uk*, accessed January 18, 2020, https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/research/centres-and-institutes/art-labs/expertise/exhibition-research-lab; http://www.exhibition-research-lab.co.uk/; and "The Big Interview: Antony Hudek," *The Double Negative*, April 30, 2013, http://www.thedoublenegative.co.uk/2013/04/the-big-interview-antony-hudek/.

Increasingly, such exhibition-research spaces are not only linked to, or explicitly located in, academic institutions but also have become underpinned by more formalised partnerships with cultural institutions—offering a particular model of applied research, knowledge production, and dissemination, with demonstrable wider impact. In the specific case of ERL, a number of university-funded academics are embedded directly within specific cultural institutions in the city, including Tate Liverpool and Liverpool Biennial. Such a university-cultural partnership model provides the context for practice-based, applied research through curatorial practice. A feedback loop is activated where research is applied to the institutions' artistic programmes—which in turn impacts upon practice—and at the same time the activity feeds into the overall research output of the academic institutions as well as its public engagement, and the artistic programme at ERL.

FIG 1. Exhibition Research Lab home page screenshot, https://www.exhibition-research-lab.co.uk/.

However, rather than delivering a regular artistic programme as other cultural institutions in the city do, ERL generates a programme that is overtly research-focused and driven by agendas related to the activities of the embedded academics in partnership with cultural organisations. Although such a focus on research is not new in the cultural field, ERL aims to articulate its practices differently. Firstly, it attempts to bring together academic and non-academic (cultural) contexts resulting in what can be described as a circular research-knowledge-public display model. Secondly, it attempts to rethink the idea of a public venue itself, shifting from the notion of a typical (university) gallery to something closer to a public-facing laboratory, where the process of research, knowledge production, and display are somewhat conflated and operate in public—thus evoking, to some extent, the idea of transdisciplinary methodologies in action.

Against this backdrop, the question becomes how such an approach might advance more general thinking about research as a way of addressing urgent cultural questions. What makes exhibition research a distinctive proposition? Thinking about curating in this way would seem not only to have the potential to facilitate non-regulated relations between human subjects but also to demonstrate the potential for new epistemological and ontological insights into subject-object relations more broadly and, thus, to break down the separation between curatorial subject and curated object.

To reflect a range of approaches this could take, I will refer to specific examples of projects from my own experience working in an embedded capacity with Liverpool Biennial and simultaneously leading research activities and public programme of ERL. These projects are: Liverpool Biennial 2016; The Serving Library's discursive programme for Liverpool Biennial 2018; the doctoral research thesis exhibition "Catch | Bounce: Towards a Relational Ontology of the Digital in Art Practice" (2017); and, most recently, a prototype exhibition project "Recurrent Queer Imaginaries" (2019–2020).

Exhibition as an Episodic Instance: Liverpool Biennial 2016

Liverpool Biennial 2016 (LB2016) was developed by a curatorial team, who took the idea of simultaneity—as opposed to linear narration—as the grounding principle of the exhibition structure and the curatorial method.[5] It was constructed as a story in six "episodes," with various fictional worlds sited across galleries, public spaces, and disused buildings, as well as online including within the videogame, Minecraft.[6] Many of the artists featured in the Biennial made work for more than one episode, some works were repeated across different episodes, and some venues hosted more than one episode. ERL itself hosted a portion of one of the episodes (the "software episode"), thus becoming a node in distributed research. Responding to the episodic structure of the exhibition, the former Cains Brewery building—one of the main exhibition venues—was organised around the architectural structure of *Collider* (itself a new commission from the artist Andreas Angelidakis), which acted as a "connector" between works by various other artists and demarcated different episodes.[7]

Consideering how research was intrinsically embedded in the curatorial process, it can be claimed that the 2016 Biennial exhibition became one large research site. At the same time, the Biennial pointed to the wider issue of how the transnational biennial format more generally represents the world as an amalgamation of different cultures, operating episodically across times and places, in a dynamic relation between the local and the universal. In this respect, the Biennial can be understood as engaging with notions of "contemporaneity," a key concept in envisioning the temporal complexity that follows on from the coming together of different times, not only in terms of the processes of globalisation but also in light of what has been described as planetary computation. In this scenario, both biennial exhibition-making and its temporal form became an active site of research during LB2016, with the discursive element further reflected in the conference and a special issue of the online journal *Stages*.[8]

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[5] The 2016 Liverpool Biennial curatorial team comprised: Francesca Bertolotti-Bailey, Polly Brannan, Steven Cairns, Rosie Cooper, Joasia Krysa, Raimundas Malašauskas, Francesco Manacorda, Sandeep Parmar, Sally Tallant, Ying Tan, and Dominic Willsdon. "Liverpool Biennial 2016," *Biennial.com*, accessed January 18, 2020, https://www.biennial.com/archive/2016.

[6] For a more detailed description of the "episodes," see: "About," *Biennial.com*, accessed January 18, 2020, https://www.biennial.com/2016/exhibition/about/. The research expertise of one of ERL's staff members contributed to the curatorial team specifically by feeding into the conceptualisation of the "software episode," which included a project by the artist Suzanne Treister entitled "HFT The Gardner," which was presented at ERL. See: "HFT The Gardner, Suzanne Treister, part of Liverpool Biennial 2016," *Exhibition-research-lab.co.uk*, accessed January 18, 2020, https://www.exhibition-research-lab.co.uk/exhibitions/hft-the-gardner-suzanne-treister-part-of-liverpool-biennial-2016/; "Minecraft Infinity Project," *Biennial.com*, accessed January 18, 2020, https://www.biennial.com/minecraft-infinity-project; "Online," *Biennial.com*, accessed January 18, 2020, https://www.biennial.com/2016/exhibition/online-2016; and "Creating the World's Largest Virtual Sculpture in Minecraft," *Biennial.com*, accessed January 18, 2020, https://www.biennial.com/blog/28/09/2016/creating-the-worlds-largest-virtual-sculpture-in-minecraft.

[7] This issue is discussed in more depth in "The Biennial Condition," volume 6 of the Liverpool Biennial's journal *Stages*, particularly in the opening text of the volume: Joasia Krysa "Introduction: The Biennial Condition," *Stages* 6 (April 2017), https://www.biennial.com/journal/issue-6/introduction-the-biennial-condition- ; and in the conversation between Francesco Manacorda and Raimundas Malašauskas: "- Chris, Where Have You Been? - I Don't Know!!!," *Stages* 6 (April 2017), https://www.biennial.com/journal/issue-6/-chris-where-have-you-been-i-dont-know.

[8] The Liverpool Biennial 2016 conference "The Biennial Condition: On Contemporaneity and the Episodic" took place October 7–8, 2016. See: "The Biennial Condition: On Contemporaneity and the Episodic," *Biennial.com*, accessed January 18, 2020, https://www.biennial.com/events/the-biennial-condition-on-

FIG 2. Suzanne Treister, *HFT The Gardener*, 2014–15, installation view, Exhibition Research Lab (ERL), Liverpool Biennial 2016.

Exhibition as Discursive Event: The Serving Library

The next example further challenges traditional ways of thinking about exhibitions and exhibition venues, and leads towards a more dynamic research form. For the 2018 Liverpool Biennial (LB2018), ELR was transformed into a discursive space by The Serving Library (TSL). Founded in New York in 2011 to develop a shared toolkit for artist-centred education and discourse, TSL comprises an annual journal (*The Serving Library Annual*), an archive of framed objects on permanent display, and a public programme of workshops and events.[9] Prior to participation in LB2018, TSL was invited for a year-long residency at ERL, 2017–2018, during which the ERL "gallery" space served as a satellite seminar room to host occasional classes for university-level students from art schools across the world, a regular series of public talks, and exhibitions built upon TSL's ever-expanding archival material. Occasionally drawn into TSL's activities, the display of these artefacts becomes effectively a pedagogical resource. For LB2018, TSL curated a series of interdisciplinary events by speakers from diverse fields programmed in amongst TSL's "collection" of displayed objects. It turned the speakers into a part of the collection as much as the artworks, and the exhibition into a discursive format.[10] Again, as in the previous example, the results of this were published in an edited volume of LB journal *Stages*.[11]

FIG 3. The Serving Library, installation view, Exhibition Reseach Lab (ERL), Liverpool Biennial 2018.

Exhibition as Thesis: Catch | Bounce

"Catch | Bounce: Towards a Relational Ontology of the Digital in Art Practice," is an example of a project operating in the space between an artwork and a doctoral research thesis. Presented to the public at ERL, the work was developed by James Charlton, an artist and researcher based at Colab, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand, who spent six months at ERL working on the project before its public presentation and examination.[12] Building on New Zealand's "Post-Object Art" practices of the late 1960s, the project proposed an expanded sculptural practice in order to interrogate the ontology of "the digital." On view at ERL was a series of twenty ceiling mounted mechanical systems that raised and

contemporaneity-and-the-episodic.
Stages 6 (April 2017), https://www.biennial.com/journal/issue-6.
[9] The Serving Library is an artist-run non-profit organisation founded in 2011: "Introduction," *Servinglibrary.org*, accessed January 18, 2020, http://www.servinglibrary.org/; "The Serving Library, 2017/18," *Exhibition-research-lab.co.uk*, accessed January 18, 2020, https://www.exhibition-research-lab.co.uk/fellowships/the-serving-library-2017-2018/.
[10] For more details on the programme of talks see: "The Serving Library," *Biennial.com*, accessed January 18, 2020, https://www.biennial.com/2018/exhibition/artists/the-serving-library; "Beautiful World, Were [*sic*] Are You? Talks programme for Liverpool Biennial 2018," *Exhibition-research-lab.co.uk*, accessed January 18, 2020, https://www.exhibition-research-lab.co.uk/events/beautiful-world-were-are-you-talks-programme-for-liverpool-biennial-2018/.
[11] *Stages* 8 (January 2019), PDF, https://www.biennial.com/journal/issue-8; https://www.biennial.com/files/pdfs/7799/stages-8-combined-web.pdf.
[12] "James Charlton, 2016/2017," *Exhibition-research-lab.co.uk*, accessed January 18, 2020, https://www.exhibition-research-lab.co.uk/residencies/james-charlton-2016-2017/.

dropped basketballs; self-service swipe card terminals that served texts; a looped video; and life-sized CNC dogs. Together, the exhibited project operated "as a structurally discrete event that exists only in continuous co-emergent relations with the analogue; a discrete relational structure."[13]

A particularly distinctive aspect of this collaboration between ERL and the artist-researcher, was the simultaneous use of ERL as a residency space, a studio, and a lab where exhibition-prototyping, production, and public-unfolding of the project took place. Furthermore, the specific nature of the research entailed in this project also lends itself to this discussion in that it questions the idea of what constitutes an object—that is, an art, curatorial, or research object—and an exhibition of such object(s) as a sum of parts or totality.

FIG 4. James Charlton, "Catch | Bounce: Towards a Relational Ontology of the Digital in Art Practice," 2017, installation view, Exhibition Research Lab (ERL).

Exhibition as Prototype: Recurrent Queer Imaginaries
"Recurrent Queer Imaginaries," is an exhibition of queer manifestos and the new artificial intelligence (AI) entity "Motto Assistant," developed by artist-researchers Helen Pritchard and Winnie Soon.[14] Presented at ERL between November 2019 and December 2020, the exhibition included printed manifestos, a projection, onto a wall, of the "Motto Assistant" continually writing mottos, a line of code printed on the gallery wall, and another wall projection of a diagram from the project's website underlying the process of development. The project takes as its starting point "the histories and uses of queer manifestos found in the radical book shops and libraries of the Kings Cross and Euston areas in London, sites of historical significance for queer spaces affected by the changing urban fabric of London. The AI entity "Motto Assistant" was developed using manifestos and zines (the earliest written in 1971) as source texts for machine learning and generative processes: it uses "recurrent neural networks" to train and process sequences of collective voices, as well as a "diastic algorithm" to establish a poetic structure for the generated texts.[15] The seed text "Not for self, but for all" is used in different parts of the text generation. As new manifestos are added to the system remotely, the project is continually in developing while also inviting the audience to interpret mottos anew each time they visit.[16] As such, the project is presented as "research in progress" with the underlying quality of a prototype—a research exhibition in generative form, and a prototype for future versioning.

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[13] Ibid.

[14] "Recurrent Queer Imaginaries, Helen Pritchard and Winnie Soon," *Exhibition-research-lab.co.uk*, accessed January 18, 2020, https://www.exhibition-research-lab.co.uk/exhibitions/recurrent-queer-imaginaries/.

[15] The term "diastic algorithm" draws upon Jackson Mac Low's notion of the "diastic technique" or "diastic method" in relation to poetry, see: Michael Peverett, "Mac Low's diastic process (in Gale Nelson's stare decisis)," *Intercapillaryspace* (blog), accessed January 18, 2020, http://intercapillaryspace.blogspot.com/2012/03/mac-lows-diastic-process-in-gale.html; and "eDiastic," *Eddeaddad.net*, accessed January 18, 2020, http://www.eddeaddad.net/eDiastic/.

[16] "Recurrent Queer Imaginaries," *Exhibition-research-lab.co.uk*, accessed January 18, 2020, https://www.exhibition-research-lab.co.uk/exhibitions/recurrent-queer-imaginaries/.

FIG 5. Helen Pritchar, Winnie Soon, "Recurrent Queer Imaginaries," 2019, installation view, Exhibition Research Lab (ERL).

In considering these examples, one might ask: what happens to our understanding of research, exhibition, and lab practices when we draw the spaces in which they are performed together? What might it mean to curate and/or research that which is non-propositional? To what extent can the exhibition venue simultaneously be conceptualised as a research lab, and to what effect? How does this change our understanding of the experiment and of research forms that are non-hypothesis-driven?

In situating exhibitionary practices at the intersection of academic research and public display in such a way, traditional notions of the gallery are expanded to the idea of the "lab," where experimental thinking and making can take place and where curatorial knowledge is enacted, produced, and made public. These conditions also challenge straightforward relationships between the curator, exhibition, and context, where curators can be understood as becoming involved in the delivery of research activities as objects for public display. Curatorial practice becomes a dynamic process of setting up frameworks for the experimentation and dissemination of ideas in non-propositional and speculative forms. In this sense—if indeed this is a lab of sorts where research is undertaken—it is one where artistic, not strictly scientific (as the notion of a "lab" might suggest), experimentation takes place.[17]

The exhibition lab would seem to acknowledge itself as a complex site of mediation, where research and practice come together and where phenomena are excavated or constructed for their underlying discursive and non-discursive layers. This indicates the potential of curating as a research action itself, where the relations between curator, exhibition, and the social and public context in which curating takes place can be seen as an active site of knowledge production in the making. In this model, research questions are not necessarily answered but recombined in the very act of curating and making research public, thus emphasising the actualisation of experimental forms of curatorial research.

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[17] For an extended discussion on the notion of 'lab' across diverse disciplines see the forthcoming book: Lori Emerson, Jussi Parikka, and Darren Wershler, *The Lab Book: Situated Practices in Media Studies* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, *forthcoming*), https://manifold.umn.edu/projects/the-lab-book; and the project website "A Proposal," *Whatisamedialab.com*, accessed January 18, 2020, https://whatisamedialab.com/.