

# EXHIBITIONARY PRACTICES AT THE INTERSECTION OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND PUBLIC DISPLAY

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This text responds to the situation of the field of Artistic Research by drawing attention to the recent shift of discussions towards curating, and more specifically exhibition making, in terms of research practices. The intention is to reflect on the current transformation of contemporary exhibitionary practices and point to an understanding of exhibitionary formats as forms of critical inquiry and knowledge production. The question becomes how exhibition research might advance more general thinking about research as a way of addressing urgent questions, and what makes exhibition research a distinctive proposition? Thinking about curating in terms of research 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.

In their edited book *Curating Research* (2014), 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' (O'Neill and Wilson 2014). Expanding on the latter, Simon Sheikh writes:

*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. (Sheikh 2014.)*

Developing this further, to position *exhibition as research* would further necessitate consideration of the various contexts in which exhibition making takes place and the impact on how the meanings are produced. One such scenario is to situate exhibitionary practices at the intersection of academic research and public display, for instance by placing exhibition spaces in

academic institutions where research naturally takes place. However, this is not new and there is a wealth of historical and contemporary examples of ‘university galleries’ one could point to.<sup>1</sup> A more recent phenomenon is emerging though, where such spaces are not only linked or explicitly located in academic institutions but also become more closely linked to external cultural institutions, often through more formalised partnerships, offering an interesting model of research, knowledge production and transmission.

One such example I can introduce to the discussion is the Exhibition Research Lab (ERL), an academic research centre and a public exhibition venue founded as part of Liverpool John Moores University’s School of Art and Design in 2012.<sup>2</sup> What is perhaps distinctive about ERL is that underpinned by so called collaborative posts held by staff with key cultural institutions in the city - Tate Liverpool, Liverpool Biennial, FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology), and RIBA North (The Royal Institute of British Architects). The establishment

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- 1 In the UK alone there is a rapidly increasing number of exhibition venues attached to HEs, some organised as part of the specialist professional networks such as CHEAD (The Council for Higher Education in Art & Design) Gallery Network: <http://chead.ac.uk/become-a-member/gallery-network/>
  - 2 Exhibition Research Lab: <https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/research/centres-and-institutes/art-labs/expertise/exhibition-research-lab>

of such a partnership model involves embedding academic posts in arts organisations, with their time and research activities shared between both academic and cultural institution. The intention is to develop a dynamic approach to applied research, in which the work becomes the context for post holders own practice-based research. The specific research is applied to the programmes of cultural institutions, impacting upon their practice. At the same time, the practice based activities generated by post holders in cultural institutions feed in turn into the overall research of the academic institution, as well as generate public engagement programme for the ERL's exhibition venue.

This way of thinking about curatorial knowledge production and exchange, which operates as a circular model not dissimilar to what cyberneticians would describe as an open system feedback loop model, also points to the possibility of reconfiguring the traditional ways of thinking about the public exhibition space, or a gallery, as a site of public display of exhibitions/objects towards the idea of a more dynamic and transformational space where experimentation can take place. Situating exhibitionary practices at the intersection of academic research and public display thus expands the traditional remit of a gallery – as the privileged site for staging exhibitions or pedagogical resource – to the idea of a 'lab' where experimental

thinking and making can take place and where artistic and curatorial knowledge is enacted, produced, and made public.

In this scenario, curators become involved in the delivery of activities as forms of knowledge which may not necessarily produce exhibitions as objects for public display in a traditional sense, becoming additionally a researcher and educator involved in both knowledge production and public participation strategies. Practice is not dedicated to an exhibition as object-making activity per se, but rather to a dynamic process of asking questions and setting up frameworks for experimentation and dissemination of curatorial thinking in non-propositional forms. In this sense, if indeed this is a lab of sorts where research is undertaken, it is one where artistic, not strictly scientific, experimentation takes place.

When applied to science disciplines in general, the lab is understood as a neutral space where repeatable and measurable experiments can be performed, but of course they are not neutral spaces at all. As we know from cultural approaches to science (e.g. the writings of Bruno Latour) scientific and technological research is socially constructed, imbued with creativity and critical comment like any other cultural activity such as art. In his book *Science as Action* (published in English in 1988), Latour argues that persons, organisations, funders, and materials

combine to shape scientific theory. He develops the methodological statement that science and technology must be studied 'in action', or 'in the making.' (Latour, 1988.)

With the now commonplace tendency to refer to 'labs' in the context of the arts, art historian James Elkins has called for a close study of the 'artroom', 'studio', or 'gallery' in parallel to the science lab (cited in Holert 2009). This can be extended to the exhibition as a specific set of material practices and lead to thinking about the ambiguous meaning of experimentation more closely. And if science tends towards proving or falsifying something (through repeatable experiments) then how might we characterise artistic experimentation as a more speculative endeavour? From the arts, there is a general emphasis on work in progress; open-ended rather than prescriptive modes; means and process rather than ends or end-products; not simply the logic of cause and effect, but rather following different kinds of methodologies that expose the material-discursive conditions through which exhibitions are produced and make meaning.

In considering the more specific forms this could take and advancing possible future models that take into consideration the spatial-temporal context where and how this takes place, one might ask: What happens to our understanding of research, exhibition, and lab practices when we draw them together? What might it mean

to curate and/or research in a non-propositional way? To what extent can an exhibition simultaneously be conceptualised as a research lab, and to what effects? How does this change our understanding of an experiment, of non-hypothesis driven research forms? Furthermore (and this is my own specific research interest), if technology is introduced in the curatorial process, how does this re-mediate social relations? Furthermore, what new collaborative modes of curatorial production are to be imagined that involve non-human, machinic/algorithmic processes and agencies? Do we need human subjects at all to curate or indeed to carry out research?

The exhibition lab would in this way seem to acknowledge itself as a complex site of mediation where theory and practice come together and 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 context in which it takes place can be seen to be an active site of knowledge production. What is then proposed is not the result of the curatorial or research process but the proposition that curating is research in itself, where questions are not answered but recombined in the very act of making.

## Literature

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