EVALUATION IN PUBLIC ART: THE LIGHT LOGIC EXHIBITION

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Abstract

This paper discusses evaluation in the context of public art and specifically of interactive digital art. The study reported is of 'Light Logic', an exhibition of retrospective and current drawings, paintings and interactive digital works by the second author. The study was conducted by Site Gallery Sheffield in association with UK and Australian researchers. A survey of evaluation practice amongst artists and groups working in digital art is described briefly.

Keywords: Digital Art; Interactive Art: Participation; Evaluation

There are many dimensions to the question of what is evaluation in the context of public art, a term that we use to apply to art that can be freely viewed by the public. We are at an interesting point in the development of new forms of interactive art that has been accelerated by advances in computing technology. These new forms are having an impact on how we approach the difficult business of evaluating quality. For artists making interactive works, it is important to understand the kinds of audience or viewer experience that arise from the interaction with the work: "as behaviour is central to its very existence, the artist can hardly ignore audience engagement within the making process. Evaluation, in some sense, of an interactive system in action is the only way to understand its full dimensions." [1].

Background to Evaluation in Public Art and Interactive art

There is an increasing drive towards finding more systematic ways of embedding evaluation into institutional art programs and funded projects. Traditionally, evaluation has been associated with measuring impact often through simple quantitative measures such as footfall and visitor satisfaction indexes. Public policy and institutional approaches to evaluation have predominated and, until recently, there has been less attention to the role evaluation can play in the creative process of the artists themselves. The public art think tank, IXIA, funded by the Arts Council of England [2], was set up to promote and influence the de-velopment of art policies and strategies. In 2004, it commissioned OPENspace to carry out research into ways of evaluating public art [3] and produced a guide to evaluation that is useful for scoping the main issues that organizations and individuals need to take on board when contemplating evaluation. Nevertheless, there is a considerable gap between advice and actual practice: practice requires methods and methods need to be learnt and tested. Whilst the IXIA initiative is important and welcome, it nevertheless forms only one aspect of the evaluation requirements for public art. An important dimension of evaluation is the need for advice and methods that address the specific needs of creative practitioners undertaking novel and often high-risk types of art projects. This is especially so in the digital interactive art field where practitioners are often working in collaboration with academic researchers whose frame of reference for evaluation may arise from different value sets and concerns. The work may also involve risks that lead to dead ends, or outright failure to achieve the initial aims, and it is only through adopting an evaluation strategy that these kinds of experiences can be turned into positive learning. As the Wellcome Trust's advice to grant applicants indicates, it is important to anticipate the possibility of failure when striving for innovation and thereby to learn from it.

Digital Art Evaluation Survey

Evaluation involves mixed methods and many layers of richness and complexity in aims, motivations and scope. In order to establish a better understanding of the current situation with regard to the role of evaluation in public art, we have carried out a preliminary study of existing practices and the methods and documentation available to practitioners and institutions. We identified a range of methods used for gathering information of which the questionnaire survey format is the most common. Evaluation is done mainly through general questionnaires which helps to provide feedback for the curator and the artist to measure success in terms of audience attendance and general attitudes: for example the company, Thresholdstudios uses questionnaires, social media and reviews such as the ones made by students in the blog of their Frequency Festival [5]. The feedback from this information was used to evaluate audience responses to the work and to share some of this with the artists informally [6].

It is important to distinguish between evaluation that functions mainly for institutional and policy purposes and that which functions for individual artists and groups. We noted a difference between what institutions require from evaluation and what artists do; for the latter, the emphasis is on collecting data about specific aspects of the work in order to inform practice. This varies according to the complexity and goals of the artwork, the exhibition, and the role of the audience. Some works use immediate feedback from the audience informing their work directly, such as the work *Audience*, created by rAndom International and Chris O'Shea, exhibited in the Victoria and Albert Museum's 'Decode' exhibition in 2009 [7]. Other works involve the audiences as participants in research processes, where they become co-creators of interactive artwork. In *Day of the Figurines* (Blast Theory), audiences are involved as performers of an experimental work crossing boundaries between the physical space of the gallery, the public street space, and the virtual space. The Blast Theory collective, whose works are hybrid forms of participatory interactive digital art, have used complex ways to evaluate the experience: for instance, to evaluate *Day of the Figurines* they carried out a public test over 24 days, the duration of the artwork. This involved testing interfaces, running trials of varied types of content, exploring narrative, critiquing the semiotics within the work and tracking the routes through the work in chronological order. Ethnographers from the Mixed Reality Lab, University of Nottingham, worked on the evaluation of this process which informed the project's development [8]. The artists claimed that this artwork shed light on several contemporary issues of HCI, as their goal was to understand how players interweave the experience of playing the game with patterns of their daily lives. Feedback, mixed with an analysis of log files of messages sent to and from the game, indicated to them: 'that the majority of players exhibit an episodic style of play, sometimes playing intensively and sometimes not playing at all for several days before returning again' [9].

Mixed methods for evaluation were needed to explore 'when and where people prefer to engage with a mobile experience'…to explore how people experience and engage in a narrative that is delivered and constructed through text messaging'; there were also technological issues such as the exploration of

'new techniques for making maximum use of the limited bandwidth of each text message by aggregating information about several events into a single SMS message' [9].

Other evaluation methods were used to support interactive artworks in what can be understood as participatory work. This form of evaluation fits into the category known as 'formative', where the aim is to explore, generate on the fly understandings and develop the works as a result of that process. Theatre Sandbox, a national scheme for theatre makers to research and develop experimental pieces of performance that use pervasive media technologies, devised and delivered by iShed in Bristol, adopts a formative approach to evaluation by seeking to understand the value of this project as a developmental process. The evaluation explored 'the impact of the scheme on innovation in artistic practice, interdisciplinary collaborative working and the integration of digital technology and live theatre'. It focused on the process (rather than on individual performances) and used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative methods included semi-structured interviews with Theatre Sandbox participants such as 'artists, host venues, iShed and advisory group members'; 'documentary analysis of Theatre Sandbox Grants for the Arts proposal, applications to the scheme, selection interview notes, websites, blogs, Twitter feeds, videos and online workspaces'; 'observation of three salon workshops'; 'test performances, and Theatre Sandbox showcase'. Quantitative methods included: analysis of iShed's evaluation and monitoring forms, completed by participants in the five introductory workshops; 'follow up online survey of workshop participants six months later'. [10]

The IQ (Intelligent Questionnaire) system, originally developed to interact with job seekers, was designed to respond intelligently to answers given by respondents rather than just presenting a list of pre-existing, pre-ordered questions, in order to get a deeper level of feedback. Sophy Smith and Mario Gongora recognised its potential as an evaluative tool for arts organisations and in summer 2012 the IQ system was trialed at Phoenix digital media centre, Leicester, as a tool for obtaining a deeper-level of audience feedback about specific exhibitions. This system was also used by Ximena Alarcón to measure visitors' engagement when listening to her sound exhibition 'Migratory Dreams'; here

experimental evaluation was used to understand the experience of listeners who shared the experience of migration, focusing on evaluating connectivity rather than interactivity. For the artist, using this questionnaire helped her to imagine how, in the future, this evaluation could become the catalyst of audience's narratives, helping the user to reflect on the experience creatively, poetically and collectively. It also helped the artist find collective narratives that bring traces of the connections established in the virtual network of dreams.

A number of conclusions from these experiences have been identified. For institutions, evaluation focuses on general feedback from the audience measuring success of the exhibition. For artists, evaluation supports different aspects of their creation and research and is interdisciplinary and experimental. An interesting finding is the emphasis on mobile phones, as a technology that expands the museum experience, involves audiences as co-creators of content (Theatre Sandbox), and acts as performers in hybrid artworks (Day of Figurines). Also, sociological issues regarding the use of mobile phones are being evaluated through artworks, making it an interesting case of evaluation influencing artwork. On the other hand, evaluation tools that have been designed for other purposes, when used by an artist, acquire different connotations, and stimulate reflection about the purpose of evaluation and the creative use of collected data. Using social media has been shown to stimulate the exploration of technological aspects of the art practice. The evaluation experiences that have been identified have involved audiences in different roles (e.g. participants/co-creators/performers), expanded the reach of the museum/gallery space, and with it, explored the innovative uses of technologies.

The survey of evaluation experience discussed here contributes to establishing an evaluation framework that involves institutional concerns, such as engaging audiences in artworks, and artists' intentions for the interactive artworks, understood as 'art systems', and the extensions that new communication technologies offer, either as part of the artwork or as supporting devices for evaluation.

The Light Logic Exhibition

We now move to an example of evaluation that focused upon the exhibition 'Light Logic' at Site Gallery Sheffield [11], which examined the nature of audi-

ence experience in a way that provides insights into the deeper levels of art experience. The main aim of the study of 'Light Logic' was to gather information about audience response to the artworks and installations exhibited in the Site Gallery, Sheffield during January 2013. The objectives were to:
•To evaluate the curatorial design of the Light Logic exhibition
•To evaluate the audience experience of the artworks and installations
•To develop a framework for gallery and museum staff to facilitate the embedding of evaluation into curatorial practice.

Gathering and Analysing Audience Information

'Light Logic' included paintings, drawings, time based work and interactive art. There were four main areas of focus that were represented in different areas of the gallery space as follows:
•Documentation: the artist's development through time
•The Art: the relationship between digital works, prints and paintings
•Interactive Installation: the Shaping Space light sculpture
•Interactive Artwork: ColourNet for influencing a Shaping Form artwork

The study included a range of aspects of the art and its exhibition including the audience experience of the work and being involved in research. It included the curatorial and artist perspective in the kinds of issues being explored. It used observation by video and person in combination with interviews for close attention to individual responses. The information gathered also included documented reflections by the gallery researchers that focused upon the experiences of learning new processes and acquiring new skills in evaluation methods. All members of the evaluation team were prepared for the study through trial runs of the procedures and methods. This involved conducting trial exercises during which each researcher played the participant visitor and observer at different times and the outcomes were then evaluated and the process refined.

25 participants were recruited by gallery notices and from regular visitors on the basis of age range and gender, in order to have as diverse a range of participants that could, in a certain sense, be typical of a gallery visiting public. Inevitably, there were more people involved in creative works of some kind than, for example, office or service workers, so they cannot be considered to be fully representative of the public at large. All

participants were asked to give written consent to the gathering of data about their activities in the study environment including specific agreement to being video recorded. A statement regarding the anonymity of the data collected was also provided.

Information was collected by video recording whilst people freely explored the exhibition. This was followed by a semi-structured interview based on a set of pre-determined questions. Video cued recall was also used to remind the subjects of what they had just seen and done. In addition to the audience, other perspectives were included in the outcomes of the research, principally, the intentions of the creative curator and the voice of the artist. These voices in particular guided the questions that were asked in interview. The data consisted of interview transcripts and video data which was analyzed using keyword allocation and collation by two researchers acting separately. The audio and video data has provided a rich source of information about the responses and experiences of the participants.

The data analysis is ongoing and at this point the findings should be regarded as preliminary. Outcomes may be grouped as follows:

Curatorial Design

Most participants mentioned the following:
•the importance of an open airy and naturally lit space for appreciating the work
•the value of digital and painted forms juxtaposed in a historically accurate way
•the archival documentation for what it revealed about the artist's way of working.

The documentation archive consisted of the artist's working documents arranged by the curator to reveal a certain narrative. There was a timeline on a wall at the entrance to the exhibition that placed the work in relation to other developments from the 1960s onwards, which many participants commented on as being very helpful. One or two people wanted more 'explanation' but for this kind of work it was a surprisingly small number. The general attitude seemed to be – 'I want to look and judge for myself first'.

There was an order implicit in the design of the spaces: main art room followed by documentation room and then hidden behind a curtain the dark interactive space. One person only opted to turn right into the documentation room before going into main open art space.

Audience Response

There was a distinction between audience response to the interactivity elements and experience of the whole exhibition itself. In a certain sense, the comments about interactivity arose from an attempt to analyze it. There is a clear contrast between the 'analytic' comments that denote thinking about the interactivity itself rather than being immersed in it, and the 'affective' descriptors denoting emotional and sensory responses. For example, here is a selection of the participants' descriptors:

Analytic:
"Not obvious it was interactive"
"Went behind the projector"
"Did not realise it was interactive"
"How did the interaction work?"
"Had a sense of being in control"
Affective:
"Calming effect"
"Mesmerised"
"Scary"
"Soaked it up-dangerous"
"a womb space"

This suggests that a focus on the quality of interactivity by itself can be misleading especially where the audience is puzzled having had no prior experience of it. On the other hand, from the artists' perspective this puzzlement may be a very positive element that can be exploited in some way. By contrast the felt experience of an interactive artwork or installation can work in different dimensions as the widely contrasting responses to the work indicated.

Therefore, if we only try to understand interactivity in terms of observations of what people do (their actions, movements, outward behavior) this is only a partial view of the way that interactive art engages audiences. Going further into the deeper aspects of audience response –and evaluation of interactive art in general, requires enquiry methods that are directly informed by audience experience. It means that what they experience can be elicited by observation complemented by conversations. This has implications for the way we conduct evaluation in museums and galleries and research studios.

Embedding of evaluation into practice

As can be seen from the survey, the embedding of evaluation, in some form, into curatorial and artistic practice is a growing trend. The 'Light Logic exhibition' case study points to the development of a framework that can be used to implement public art evaluation: in this

case, the development of a guide to evaluation is being carried out by the curatorial team in collaboration with the researchers. Whilst public funding bodies need to learn about matters that influence policy, it is also necessary for both curators and artists to learn about aspects of their practice that can inform their future work and also public policy. As with some of the examples from the survey, the Light Logic evaluation is leading to reflections that will have an impact on future practice.

Conclusions

The type of evaluation study described here is one in which evidence about the curatorial, artistic and audience dimensions of a public art exhibition is acquired and then used to establish the value of a particular artefact or experience. This kind of approach to evaluation lends itself to the creation of shared values based on agreed evidence because it involves an exploration of situational knowledge. The gathering of information about what takes place, how audiences respond to the art exhibition and what curators and artists learn from the designing, making and reflecting process contributes to an understanding of what makes a successful or otherwise exhibition of art in the public arena. From the analysis so far, the findings promise to contribute to establishing a framework that can be applied more widely in public art evaluation.

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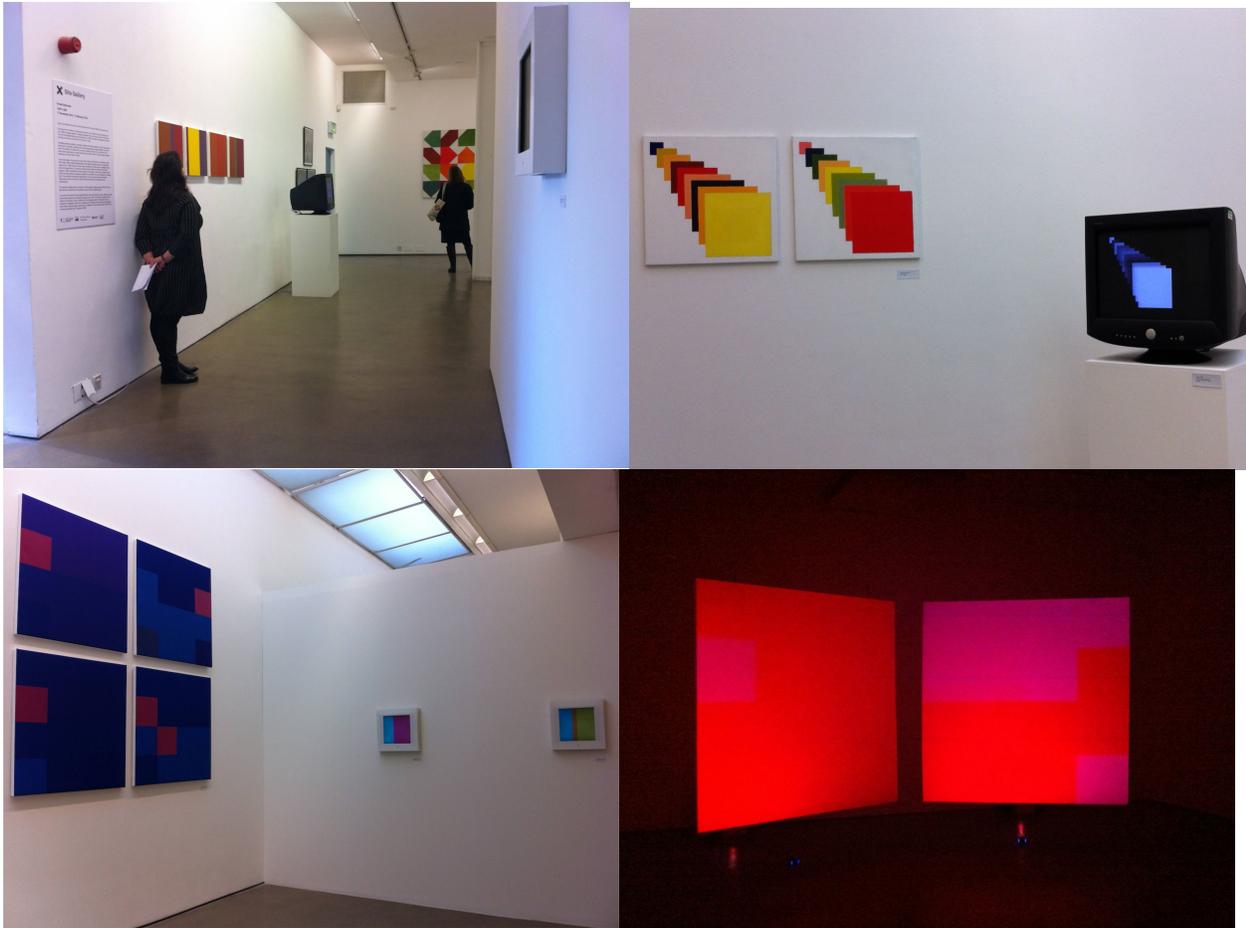
Fig. 1. Installation shots of Light Logic Exhibition © Ernest Edmonds