



## **Designing Curation: The Exhibition in Art, Design and Architecture**

Throughout my career I have used exhibitions to develop my research, my teaching and to support the works of colleagues and external collaborators. I approach exhibitions not as a rarefied opportunity to display work, though it can be that, but as a practical and effective means to generate, develop, assess and disseminate ideas and practices. Exhibitions come in many shapes and sizes offering various degrees of opportunity, but an exhibition of any kind offers the possibility to engage with a piece of work, a space and an audience. Exhibitions are a way of supporting practice, but they can also be a form of practice in their own right. In this text I will contextualise my own exhibition practice and show how it is part of wider set of aspirations that critically engage with research within the School of Art Design and Architecture and the development of cultural practices in the town of Huddersfield.

### **The Exhibition as a Site of Privilege**

The privileging of the exhibition as an exclusive means of display principally dates back to the academic traditions of 18th and 19th century Paris, when selected works were chosen for the Paris Salon to represent officially sanctioned neo-classical culture of the Ecole des Beaux Arts.<sup>1</sup> The role of the Salon exhibition was to perpetuate models and values of type, connoisseurship and academic elitism. While the Salon reinforced norms of received taste, this was increasingly opposed by independent exhibitions, such as the Salon des Refusés, which resisted the mainstream pronouncements on what was good and worthy, though they still tended to adopt many of the same formal tropes of presentation.<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the 20th century, particularly in reaction to the horrors of World War I, this sense of opposition was further heightened by more radical elements rejecting the values of the ancient regime altogether and transformed the exhibition through lampooning its format and structures. Many of these exhibitions have subsequently become iconic within the avant-garde canon. The second half of the 20th century saw the rise of an institutionalised model of art practice where the role of the gallery became akin to a secular place of worship, pandering to an expanding consumer culture, but once again privileged the dominant values of the haute bourgeoisie. The typological model for the gallery space, the 'White Cube',<sup>3</sup> developed an ascetic context within which the supposedly neutral surroundings allowed for an unfettered contemplation of the art object, or in some cases the absence of the art object.



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The elitist model of the gallery should be understood alongside its other principle contemporary function, the gallery as a place of economic exchange. The American art critic and gallerist Dave Hickey has argued that art should not receive public subsidy for this reason, and in his disdain for an institutionalised art culture, argues that the vested interests that maintain the hegemonic view of art culture has led to sterility and a lack of risk taking.<sup>4</sup> Another common tendency that fixes the elitist model of art practice is the way that galleries are created as the vanity projects of rich individuals, or status symbols of culturally rapacious organisations that set up foundations, so-called ‘hubrispace’,<sup>5</sup> and commission ‘starchitects’ to design object galleries every bit as rarefied as the work on display.

### **The Exhibition and its Social Function**

The consideration of the exhibition as a format in its own right has been part of art practice since Dada and Surrealism, and further developed through Conceptual art.<sup>6</sup> These tendencies helped to lay bare the formulaic vectors of art as commodity, exploding the conception that the exhibition is an innocent participant in the dissemination of art practice, and reframing it as one of art’s legitimating structures. While the conceptual strategy of negating the honorific status of the exhibition through parody or opposition has itself been recuperated as part of the contemporary spectacle,<sup>7</sup> opportunities to develop ideas and practices outside of the corporate art complex are still an important part of creative activity.

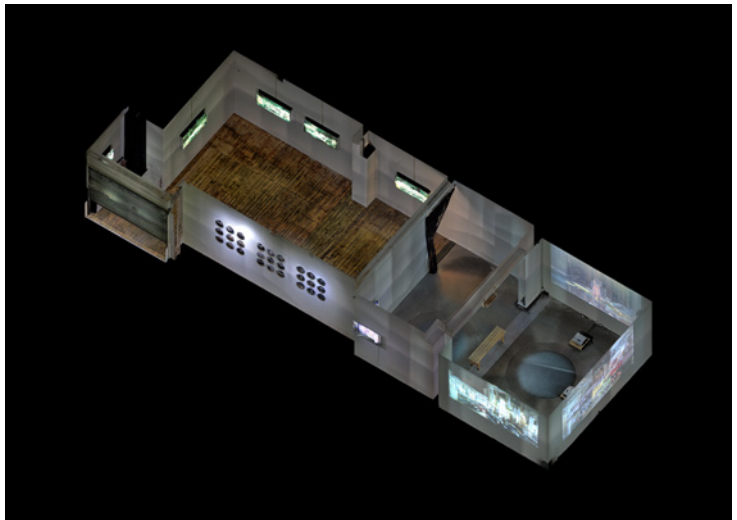
Not all galleries are constrained by the straightjackets of elitism and commerce, many do challenge commercial stereotypes and construct models of gallery practice that are anti-elitist, inclusive, not principally concerned with commerce, and eschew the mythology of the gallery as a place for ‘high-seriousness’. These spaces help to promote the idea that exhibitions can have a wider social function, while producing work that is meaningful and engaging to a wider set of audiences.<sup>8</sup>

I first became involved in galleries as a year-out architectural student when I found regular employment as an art technician to supplement earnings as a freelance architectural designer. I enjoyed the work, more than architectural drafting, as it could be intellectually stimulating, physically engaging and posed challenges of working creatively with others. As a result of my experience as a technician I have been using exhibitions as an integral part of my practice, as both a teacher and designer,

and given that one of my principal architectural interests has been to engage with concepts of spatial practice through the construction, design and realisation of projects, the design of exhibitions gives an opportunity to directly engage with this. Through my experiences I began to view the exhibition less as an end in-itself, but as a tactic in the creation, development and dissemination of ideas and an opportunity to meet and collaborate with existing practitioners and to find ways to create new connections within a wider constituency of practices.

Since my arrival at the University of Huddersfield in January 2018 I have been actively involved with the *Temporary Contemporary* initiative, both in terms of my own practice, as a researcher and teacher, but also as the Head of the Department of Architecture & 3D who sees the opportunities afforded by *Temporary Contemporary* for both staff and students to display work and engage with the local community. Exhibitions should work at many levels, the role of the gallery and the exhibition in a context such as Huddersfield can educate and entertain and hopefully contribute to a vibrant cultural base.

This is a 3D laser scan of the Market Gallery as part of Nic Clear's and Hyun Jun Park's ongoing research.





Undergraduate student work from BA (hons) Photography on display in the Market Hardware space.

## The Exhibition in Teaching and Research

Throughout my teaching career I have used exhibitions as part of my teaching practice; exhibitions can be a powerful tool to enable students to engage with the impact that their work can have beyond the institution. There are four principle areas where exhibitions can prove to be of great importance in supporting student development:

1. To give students a deadline that emulates real world practice.
2. To enable students to understand the importance of ‘framing’ their work for external audiences.
3. To disseminate the work outside the narrow confines of the immediate academic context within which it was produced.
4. To encourage learners to see themselves as participants in culture rather than observers, especially as social media channels now play such a big part in the dissemination of the work. Through this process learners can develop important skills of curating their own real-world and online spaces.

The Market Hardware space showcasing student works as part of *Temporary Contemporary* interventions in Queensgate Indoor Market, has been used by a variety of student groups for a range of activities from a pop-up gallery to a space for peer-to-peer critical feedback (‘crits’). This diverse group of students from year 1 undergraduate to Masters students have been engaged at different times and in different ways and the feedback from students around the actuality of seeing work in a public space has been overwhelmingly positive.

Much of the research that I have produced over the last 20 years has been developed through the use of exhibitions as an integral part of my practice. Many of these have been self-initiated and the exhibition itself is considered as part of a wider design practice. During this period I have also produced a number of commercial exhibitions. The role of the exhibition is often to set deadlines, forcing me to produce work. It also gives me an opportunity to receive feedback on work and will often provide opportunities for future outlets of my work. *Exhibitions are machines for making work.*

In the last five years I have set-up, organised, designed and installed over 30 exhibitions, nationally and internationally, but I do not consider myself a curator in any traditional sense.



The term curator comes with specific associations and implications, and the role that I take does not just consider the themes of the show and selecting the works, but thinking, in Lefebvre's terms, about the production of the space of the exhibition: the conceived, perceived and practiced.<sup>9</sup> It would perhaps be more accurate to say I design exhibitions, but hopefully that design constitutes considerably more than the spatial layout and the visual forms, which can also incorporate graphic material such as posters and signage. While all exhibitions are designed, and the spatial organisation of any exhibition constitutes a conscious aesthetic intervention within a gallery space, I also design the concepts and often the content as well. Whereas curation and design are usually considered separate activities, my practice consciously integrates the syntactical structures of how the artefacts are assembled and presented, alongside the semantic relations between works and between the works and the audience.

### **The Exhibition as Case Study**

The series of exhibitions that form the *Synthetic Spaces* project serve as an example of how an exhibition can be used as a way to expand practice through the creation of new content, both in terms of the visual works and accompanying written texts. Also, how an exhibition can facilitate establishing the development and dissemination of a body of work leading to an integrated portfolio of research activity.

The project started with an opportunity to exhibit in the Market Gallery, the invitation was made at the beginning of December 2018 with the show scheduled to open at the end of January 2019. My colleague Hyun Jun Park and I had been working with 3D laser scanning images for some time and rather than exhibiting scans that we had already produced, as was expected, it was decided to create new work based on ideas that we had been discussing and specifically locating the work within Huddersfield and featuring three of its iconic landmarks: Castle Hill, the Railway Station and Queensgate Market itself.

3D scanning is a technology that offers powerful ways of capturing and representing space through the creation of evocative point-cloud models, though it is currently used principally as a tool for surveying. *Synthetic Spaces* was an opportunity to develop a scanning project with a more narrative focus, through the creation of an immersive video installation and a series of graphic pieces utilising complex layered compositions.



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The fact that none of the scan data existed at the time the exhibition was initiated meant that the task of creating the works was principally based on what we felt was required for the exhibition itself. An initial layout was developed using one space of the gallery as the projection area and the other space to install the graphic pieces. We initially used conventional photography to develop an overall idea of what we wanted in the show, and then created a timeline of what we would have to do to produce those works in time for the exhibition. The design of the work considered the access we had to each site as well as the time it would take to capture and process the scan data, which would determine the final resolution of the works. Once the parameters of what was to be exhibited were fixed, the production of the work was quite systematic. The scans were undertaken, test images were produced to develop the exact look and feel of the work, including the production of a series of composite images for each site that were created to produce clear ideas for the animation sequences. Once complete the stills and animated sequences were rendered off, the videos were edited and graded and a soundtrack for the sequence was composed which reinforced the themes of how our perceptions of spaces are composed of shifting layers which seem to operate through highly subjective conceptions of time.

One of the animation tests developed from footage of the interior of Queensgate Market was so successful that it was decided that this could function as a stand-alone piece and the only decision that had to be made was exactly how to display it. The final layout and organisation of the show was decided only when we came to install the works prior to the opening, with several works not selected, though worked up version of those pieces have been used in subsequent exhibitions.

During the exhibition we submitted some of the graphic work to the CSESC 5+2 Biennial Exhibition of Environmental Art and Design in Yunnan Arts University, these were accepted for the exhibition and won the Excellent Project Award in the Comprehensive Design Award Section. A visitor to the Market Gallery from the Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand, who we were due to visit as part of a research exchange in June 2019, asked us if we would be interested in putting the show on as part of our trip, and we were obviously delighted. The show had to be slightly modified and was accompanied by a public lecture and scanning workshop. We also decided to make additional works that gave more general information about Huddersfield's location and contextualising the project.

Hyun Jun and I were also due to curate a show in October 2019 as part of the Shanghai Urban Space Art Season where we had been given quite a large space. We had already agreed a group show titled 'Sensorium', but redesigned the space to incorporate a reworked version of *Synthetic Spaces*. In both Auckland and Shanghai, rather than the immersive video installation, the films that we had made for the original show were exhibited as three video triptychs.

The work produced for the *Synthetic Spaces* exhibition has also been the catalyst for a number of lecture presentations and written works, including a keynote lecture at Leeds School of Architecture's symposium on film and architecture 'Scene and Sequence: On Cinematic Urbanisms', a version of which was also presented at a symposium in Huddersfield on perspective. We also submitted a paper to the annual RIBA Research Matters Conference at the University of Nottingham alongside the public lecture in Auckland. Most recently a more formal version of these ideas has been accepted for the IASTE conference in September 2020. Four of the composite images have also been on display in Huddersfield town centre.

In just under 12 months an essentially impromptu body of work has been the subject of four exhibitions (three of which were international), four lectures with another refereed conference presentations and paper to come.

### **Exhibitions: a conclusion**

Exhibitions can often feel intimidating as there is pressure for many practitioners to think that such a context should only be used for 'finished' work. For 'professional' artists and designers the necessity of making work for commercial purposes does mean that the exhibition can potentially make or break implications. As part of an academic context this imperative is less pressing; the nature of research encourages speculation and allows for mistakes and reversals in a way that work produced in a commercial context may not. Also, as educators if we are encouraging our students to be ambitious and take risks then we have a duty to be ambitious and take risks as well. Finally, as part of a University whose fortunes are bound up with the town in which it is located, the School of Art Design and Architecture has a further incentive to contribute to the cultural life and identity of Huddersfield and be an integral part of its future.

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<sup>1</sup> Crow, T (1987): *Painters and Public Life in 18th Century Paris*, New Haven - London: Yale University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Clark, T.J. (1986) *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*. London: Thames and Hudson.

<sup>3</sup> O'Doherty, B (1982) *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Santa Monica - San Francisco: The Lapis Press

<sup>4</sup> Hickey, D. (2009) *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>5</sup> Day, J (2007) *Hubrispace: Personal Museums and the Architectures of Self-Deification*, in Davis, M., Bertrand Monk, D. 'Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism', London-New York: The Free Press.

<sup>6</sup> Crimp, D. (1993) *On the Museum's Ruins*, Cambridge-London: MIT Press.

<sup>7</sup> Canjeurs, P., Debord, G. (1960) *Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program*, in Knabb, K. (ed) (1981) 'Situationist International Anthology', San Francisco: Bureau of Public Secrets.

<sup>8</sup> Willats, S. (1986) *Audience and Intervention*, London: Coracle.

<sup>9</sup> Lefebvre, L. (1991), *The Production of Space*, (trans Nicholson-Smith, D.), Oxford: Basil Blackwell.



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