

Between the Discursive and the Immersive: Curating Research in the 21st Century Art Museum

Editorial

Marie Laurberg and
Margriet Schavemaker

How can exhibitions function as mediums for research? How can artistic research contribute to art museums? What is the research value of immersive exhibitions? What is the role of the sensory experience in gathering and disseminating knowledge in the museum? What is the function and position of public programs as curatorial models for research and knowledge production? And how does the public contribute to the museum's knowledge production?

These were some of the core questions addressed at the conference *Between the Discursive and the Immersive: Research in the 21st Century Art Museum* (3–4 December, 2015, co-organized by the Louisiana Museum in Humlebaek, the University of Aarhus, and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam). This issue of *Stedelijk Studies* contains a selection of the papers that were delivered at the conference. Some are more lengthy and academic than the talks the authors presented at the Louisiana Museum, a few of which were given in the form of short Pecha Kuchas. Others are closer to how they were originally delivered, but are then augmented with footnotes and cross-references in keeping with international academic standards, and as such comply with university ethics of accountability. In other words, this edition of *Stedelijk Studies* is the most “academic” or “discursive” outcome of the conference.

Interestingly, it therefore also serves very well as an illustration of one of the contemporary developments that inspired this conference, the *academic turn* taking place in the museum world. From a certain perspective, research is now occupying a greater and more autonomous role in modern and contemporary art museums. No longer restricted to supporting the collection or specific exhibitions, an independent and often interdisciplinary form of

programming has emerged, with lectures, publications, symposiums, and other discursive activities forming part of the overall museum program—the conference (and this journal) being a case in point. It is a tendency that art historian Miwon Kwon, among others, has called a “discursive turn” in the museum sector.

Concurrently, a major part of the knowledge production in twenty-first-century art museums results in the creation of spectacular exhibitions and collection displays, designed to offer audiences unique, immersive experiences. Whereas more sterile “white cube” exhibitions have previously predominated, museums are increasingly embracing a synesthetic dispositive—an experiential model of curating—to engage their publics. One could claim this tendency is inspired by the incessant need for museums to grow in terms of audience; a spectacle is needed to attract and please a larger crowd, as well as generate greater income. The artistic strategies of environments, user involvement, and performativity, which formed part of the “theatrical turn” of art in the 1960s and ’70s, and were originally conceived as critical strategies challenging the institutional givens and ideological assumptions of the white cube model, are today fully embraced by many institutions as methods of attracting and engaging publics whose habits are shaped by a broader culture of entertainment, events, and interactivity.

In this context, what can we make of the public’s growing participation in the selection, presentation, and interpretation of art in museums? And what of the increasing use of new media technologies, such as online videos and blogs, and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, to share curatorial knowledge? In other words, knowledge production in museums of modern and contemporary art oscillates between the discursive and the immersive, in turn resulting in a wide tender of curatorial and research models.

In this landscape of changing paradigms of museum programming and institutional outlook, the alliances between museums and universities are becoming more solidified. In recent years, governmental policies have encouraged, if not demanded, that academia depart from its ivory tower and “valorize” itself by collaborating with partners beyond the conventional outreach of the university. Thus, the modern and contemporary art museum has become an increasingly interesting partner for academic teaching and university research programs.

In many ways, this is a welcome and timely development; however, museums should consider that this does not merely lead to an “academic turn” in terms of measuring the research output of a museum solely on the number of peer-reviewed articles published by its staff. On the contrary, it should result in more knowledge and development of the specific potentialities of museums, in order to produce knowledge at the intersection of academic discourse, artistic inquiry and research, the display of objects, and the broad publics addressed by museums. In short, the institutional specificities of the modern and contemporary art museum.

In a recent publication devoted to this tendency, *Curating Research*, edited by Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson (Open Editions, 2015), curator Simon Sheikh endeavors to stimulate the debate by closely examining two meanings of the word “research,” both of which are crucial to this expanded notion of the curatorial as a way of presenting ideas, research results, and project outcomes that contribute to a general culture of knowledge production and research. The first is the French term, *recherché*, which indicates when a reporter searches for sources, witnesses, and stories, whether by fact-checking, researching a topic, delving into an archive, and so on. The other is the German word, *Forschung*, which implies that a thesis or a proposition is presented, and suggests that the exhibition space is regarded, in a certain sense, as a laboratory. While the first is indispensable to any curatorial process, when considering the research exhibition the latter meaning, that of *Forschung*, is implied—also when it comes to discussions about research-based exhibitions in the present publication.

The authors who contributed to this fourth issue of *Stedelijk Studies* come from various backgrounds, from art schools to museums and from artistic research to hard-core academia. In their quest to arrive at an analysis of the significance or definition of research in twentieth-century art museums, the key terms that we brought into play—the immersive and discursive—are frequently deployed. That is not to say they serve as clear beacons framing the territory. They pop up in various disguises, and do not remain unquestioned. We are confident, though, that these “traveling concepts” do serve as a common ground, allowing readers to relate the various arguments to one another and arrive at their own critical analysis.

A majority of the essays in this issue focus on exhibitions. What are the new best practices regarding research-based exhibitions? What kind of conventions of display need to be addressed and/or subverted? What kind of knowledge is being produced, by whom and for whom? And how do we learn both with and from the public?

In the first essay, Mark Wigley offers a critical reading of the discursive and the immersive exhibition. This division, according to Wigley, is based on a division between the logic of reading—and with that, the primacy of vision—versus the logic of experience, which is the domain of multisensory experience (the “lesser senses”). Wigley questions the legitimacy of this divide from different angles, arguing that discursive exhibitions are (or can be) actually immersive as well. Think of research exhibitions that overwhelm the viewer with data, documents, and information, or Hans-Ulrich Obrist’s “Marathon Meetings” that become an immersive, corporeal experience. He also claims that immersive exhibitions or art installations, like Olafur Eliasson’s *Wheather Project* in the Tate Turbine Hall, are in fact “framed” discursively, explaining what it is supposed to do, or *how* the installation is *about* immersiveness, and *about* the way in which we experience the world.

Drawing on the outcomes of two surveys on visitor experiences, held in conjunction with two exhibitions organized at the Design Museum London, Helen Charman agrees with Wigley, namely, that the presumed duality between the discursive and the immersive is unproductive. Charman suggests that both modes are concerned with ways of knowing and understanding, however differently their emphasis is placed. In particular in exhibitions of design and the aesthetics of material culture, both the intellectual and the affective faculties work commensurately as modes of cognition. Charman concludes that curatorial strategies that balance moments for immersive engagement with those for discursive reflection can effectively create intensely rewarding exhibition experiences in which visitors are able to move between the immersive and discursive modes of engagements.

Emilia Sitzia, however, asserts from a narratological perspective that the discursive and the immersive exhibition design *do* present different modes of addressing the viewer. Sitzia claims that discursive exhibition spaces “foster negotiation and debate, polarize and politicize space, and invite discussion fraught with contradictory views,” whereas immersive exhibition designs aim to create knowledge in the realm of experience and affective information.

The complex, hermeneutic quality of exhibitions and the relation between sender-text-receiver is used by Francesco Manacorda to analyze exhibitions as texts that are “written”—or rather, *encoded*—by curators, and to be read, or *decoded*, by their audience. Observing that most exhibitions today are written for our academic/curatorial peers, Manacorda argues it is an ethical duty of the curator—especially the museum curator—to facilitate the various possible actualizations of exhibitions for audiences of different backgrounds. Manacorda proposes to engage in a form of co-authoring: “Can we entertain the possibility to have exhibitions whose complex text is open-source and co-authored with the museum’s public?” The museum would then become an institution that co-produces knowledge together with its public.

That this is not an easy task becomes especially clear in the essay written by Angela Bartholomew. Through a detailed description of the *Play Van Abbe 4* project, Bartholomew critically examines the curatorial rationale informing the exhibition, in which every visitor could chose his/her frame of reference (which would in turn impact the interpretation of the art on display). These clearly scripted experiences stimulated two kinds of self-reflection: to look at yourself looking, and to draw attention to the practice of the museum. In Bartholomew’s view, the consequence is an instrumentalization of visitors in a research project conceived for academic peers and professionals. The mechanisms of mediation took precedence over the artworks, and Bartholomew concludes: “it might prove more effectual if it [art] were entrusted to breathe on its own.”

Sarah Ganz Blythe also asks museums to “allow objects to be more active and expansive in the formation of knowledge.” Blythe proposes a shift in “the museum’s habitual role of the possessor and purveyor of knowledge (what Jacques Rancière referred to as the *Ignorant Schoolmaster*), to a provider of conditions for yet unimagined creations, exchanges, and scenarios.” This implies a changing role for art objects that can play an active role in learning and making processes (the inanimate that animates). Saara Hacklin works from a similar mindset, using a 2016 collection presentation at Kiasma, which departed from the notion of *touch*, as her case study. The selection of artworks from the collection were not based on thematic/theoretical correlations, but instead whether the artworks “touched” the curators and the spectators. Thus, embodied spectatorship and knowledge production triggered by immersive curating.

Of course it is not only the (experience of) objects that lead to a specific form of knowledge production in the museum. The relation between objects in space is just as significant. Christel Vesters analyzes how the “elective affinities” and “iconology of interspaces,” qualities that were at the core of Aby Warburg’s *Bilderatlas*, are put to work in contemporary exhibitions that aim at a more transversal and multiperspective engagement with the objects on display. In the case studies she discusses, a new way of thinking with and through exhibitions opens up—one where knowledge is not produced according to a logocentric and monoscopic model, but “takes place as events unfold.”

Monuments can lead to a similarly unfixed knowledge production, as becomes clear in the essay written by Margrethe Troensegaard. The text centers on the different examples of monuments, a form that, in its very essence, bridges the triad so crucial to any curatorial discourse: the relation between institution, artwork, and audience. By drawing lines between a so-called official monument (*Le Monument de la Renaissance Africaine*, in Dakar), and two artworks as monuments (Danh Vo’s *WE THE PEOPLE (DETAIL)* and Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Gramsci Monument*), Troensegaard sets out to define how the contemporary condition of the monument oscillates between immersion and discursion as two complimentary modes of communication.

The fact that museums of modern and contemporary art do not only present exhibitions but also program a wide variety of academic and learning projects is being dissected by Barbara Mahlkecht. In her essay, she discusses this “educational turn” in which research is curated in the form of a ceaseless amount of debates, lectures, and conferences. Via a critical review of the project *Learning Place*, organized by Boris Buden for the conference *Former West*, Mahlkecht ends up concluding that the setup, dramaturgy, tight schedule, and spatial organization of the seven-day, twelve-hours-per-day conference “provokes the effect of

estrangement and defamiliarization.” In other words, the discursive has an immersive, affective significance as well.

The question of what this educational turns means from an institutional point of view is undertaken by [Victoria Walsh](#), who focuses on the “increasing morphing of the academy with the art museum and the hybrid practices that are emerging.” Walsh argues that if both institutions are to retain their relevance in the public sphere and contribute to new or useful forms of knowledge production, we need to reconceptualize the notion of research and develop new collaborative, inter/transdisciplinary research methods.

[Annette Jael Lehmann and Anna-Lena Werner](#) set out to develop possibilities for research collaborations between universities and museums. The project they developed was inspired by the experimental, collaborative learning strategies employed by the Black Mountain College. They coined the method/model they developed *performative research*, being “a disposition of experimentation and a dynamic network of sharing knowledge with unpredictable results, including failure and conflict, but not fierce competition.” The essay concludes with a critical assessment of challenges faced by co-research and collaboration between universities and museums, stemming not in the least from the cultural policies and creative economy that have turned “collaboration” into a key-strategy of innovation. The authors look critically at this trend in the light of the neoliberal reshaping of both universities and museums. “In turn, the spheres of art, academia, and the cultural sphere at large have become increasingly bound to post-industrial economic structures, where terms such as ‘collaboration’ and ‘interdisciplinary’ now circulate as hard currency in the branding of museums and universities alike.”

In contrast to this “hard currency,” we may best conclude with Mark Wigley’s final remark. Wrapping up his analysis of the current ideological workings of museum spaces, he states that “the most important art is the art of hesitation. The best artist and the best thinkers provoke a hesitation, which as it were obliges you, it gives you the space to make decisions or to think.”

Last but not least, we would like to thank a few people who have been working very hard to help us completing this fourth issue of *Stedelijk Studies*. First of all, [Etienne Turpin and Anna-Sophie Springer](#) who have created a special article for this journal. In 2015, the first exhibition - as a result of their ongoing curatorial research project - *125,660 Specimens of Natural History* opened in Jakarta, Indonesia. For *Stedelijk Studies* they 'curated' an online version of this exhibition, with many images and informative captions that give a very good impression of their project that makes curatorial research more than visible. Secondly, Christel Vesters, who has been actively reading with us to help us select the best authors and provide them with feedback. And thirdly, there’s the team of the Louisiana Museum who initiated and flawlessly co-organized the conference *Between the Discursive and the Immersive*:

Research in the 21st Century Art Museum, together with the University of Aarhus and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

Marie Laurberg is Curator & Head of Research at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark, where she most recently curated the retrospective exhibition *Yayoi Kusama – In Infinity*. Editor of the anthology *Utopia & Contemporary Art* (Arken/Hatje Canz 2012).

Margriet Schavemaker is Manager of Education, Interpretation and Publications at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. She writes on contemporary art and theory, organizes lectures and debates (e.g. *Facing Forward: Art and Theory from a Future Perspective* (2011-2012)) and creates exhibitions with a strong focus on history and archival research (including *The Stedelijk Museum & The Second World War* and *ZERO: Let Us Explore the Stars*, both 2015).