The Cartography project: documenting participatory practices in museums and art galleries DCH2017 Berlin International Conference

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Since the 1960s, renewed efforts have been made to promote a culture of participation. These have affected most areas of social activity, from research to art, architecture to business. However, rarely have these been documented in relation to each other. This paper describes the genesis of a prototype platform for the documentation of participatory art practices in museums and art galleries, which intends to facilitate and indeed even privilege the creation of subjective viewpoints, for example by showing disagreement, thus not only respecting but foregrounding the complex ethics of the field.

The platform will consist of two parts, a web application responsible for enabling participants to input data and generate visualizations, and an associated server that will store all the relevant data and allow for collaboration among users. These will be able, by using an online interface, to enter data, including text, image, video and audio commentary pertaining to artworks, artists, participants, spectators, institutions, festivals, installations in the field of participatory art practice in museums and art galleries. The primary purpose of the platform is to visualize the rich and burgeoning history of the field. To this extent, users will be able to specify relationships between entries especially in relation to the field of 'artistic influence'. Moreover, to facilitate the production of multiple points of view, the platform will encourage users to confirm or disagree with what others have stated, leading to visualizations of divergence as well as, more canonically, convergence.

One of the earliest studies in the field was conducted by Sherry Arnstein who at the time was working in the Department of Housing, Education and Welfare at Washington DC. In the study Arnstein describes the now well-known "ladder of citizen participation" also sometimes knows as "Arnstein's ladder". Using examples from federal programs, Arnstein's ladder foregrounds what she described as the citizen's "power" in "determining the plan and/or program" [01]. To make sure that the platform was developed so as to empower users, a set of workshops was conducted in 2016 and 2017 in which leading practitioners from the field of participatory arts contributed their ideas to the design of the platform. This iterative way of researching and developing the platform made it possible for us to consider a number of cartographic models and finally select a 2D model that was neither geographically nor organizationally led. This was deemed to be especially significant by the team so as not to privilege a particular geographical area or organization but rather make visible the range of processes and practices that operate in this field.

We aimed to reflect the fact that, as art historian Claire Bishop indicated, participatory artists often produce situations rather than objects; that works of art tend to be conceived of as projects, rather than performances; and that the audience is reconceived as co-producer or participant [02]. So we decided that it was important that situations could emerge through the platform (by facilitating debate); that the visualization of lineage would also show long-term projects by association (across countries and organizations); and that not only should, right from the research stage, practitioners in this field be brought in, but also that they should be enabled to generate entries even when they were not associated with any existing element in the cartography. The latter, in particular, was considered, by the participants to the first workshop, as particularly significant for those artists whose work may not as yet be in any museum or gallery collection. Workshop participants also quickly identified potential difficulties, summed up by the comment: "how will/can my grandma contribute? Especially if she doesn't have a computer. This project needs ambassadors and community leaders to broker the information gathering". To ensure participation, a range of parallel activities seems crucial. This suggests that the production of digital heritage, in a participatory context, should perhaps not happen purely online. Tate's work on the five year HLF-funded Archives and Access project confirms that, in practice, facilitated participation is essential for many audiences new to the material or the online format.

As the art historian Grant Kester suggested, a number of participatory projects could be described as "dialogical practices", i.e. practices 'organized around conversational exchange and interaction" [03], so it was important to us that in designing the platform we did not only aim to achieve archival objectives, such as those of data gathering and digital preservation, but that we also facilitated a conversation and indeed fore-grounded this specific dimension of the platform which would therefore remain, at least for a period of time, 'live'. Interestingly, participants to the first workshop suggested that such a platform should have a range of purposes, for example, it should have "an educational, learning, purpose as well as display, absorb, participate" so as to "ensure many layers of possible interaction" through the use of "curriculum packs, wiki links, videos, 'read more', URLs, related orgs […] breadcrumbs + metadata to make all more alive". Quickly it became clear to us that participants to the workshop imagined a whole participatory world that existed not just alongside but through the platform.

We know that the ornithologist Rock Bonney identified different forms of participation by distinguishing between "contributory projects", "Collaborative projects" and "Co-created projects" where the latter are designed by both scientists and members of the public and for which "at least some of the public participants are actively involved in most of all steps of the scientific process" [04]. We also know from Lori Byrd Phillips about the subsequent impact that Open Authority and Community Sourcing have held on museums [05]. In the design of the platform, we intend to involve the public in the enrichment of existing resources and documentations about participatory arts practices in museums and art galleries, as well as in creating new assets about participatory art, overcoming the concept of the public as pure contributor and rather facilitating one in which the public acts as participant and co-producer of knowledge. What the early findings from the project show, is that in designing a platform for the documentation of participatory arts in museum and art galleries we in fact not only need to think about designing a platform but also address the facilitation of participation to the situations that the platform will make possible. Thus the platform not only aims to produce a visualisation of a complex and rich user-generated history but also look at what it meant, and still means, to participate in this field.

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