

Amanda McDonald Crowley

Collaboration and curating new media art: Does collaboration in curatorial practice constitute compromise, act as a catalyst, or infer complexity?

Abstract

There has been much debate in recent times around the benefits or otherwise of collaboration in curatorial practice, particularly as it concerns so-called new media art practice. Does collaboration necessitate compromise? Does it mirror the practice of artists working in this field, or does it mean that curators are objurgating responsibility for their authorial role in the making of exhibitions and events, opting, instead for a role as a collaborator in the artistic endeavour? Do new media curators want to be artists? Are new media practitioners even artists or are they, in line with rhetoric surrounding the recently popularised creative industries, or cultural industries, merely creatives as part of content production teams?

The term culture industry was coined by Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) and Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) who argued that popular culture is like a factory producing standardised cultural goods to manipulate the masses into passivity. [Wikipedia <http://www.wikipedia.org>]. The terminology has more recently been co-opted by bureaucracies, businesses and educational institutions, which the UK department for culture, media and sport, as one such example, describe as “those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property”. If this is the case are artists and particularly those working with contemporary technologies now merely functionaries in this new growth industry?

In an interview with Steve Dietz, I suggested that working with communities is a way to put art back into culture, when the art is embedded in culture and society rather than simply commenting on it. It is a way to ensure that art functions as an imaginative space of society. Fundamental to that is providing a space in which artists and audiences can contribute and participate in the development of new work. Dietz responded that this very concept is native to new media. For artists who work with interactive technologies audience participation and even collaboration is key to the success of the work - without it the work fails. [“Becoming Community” Interview with Steve Dietz, Arte Contemporaneo, Spain, February 2005]

So what is the role of the curator in a collaborative cultural endeavour? In my paper I will make a case that fundamental to this function is process -- in which curators, artists and audiences contribute and participate and in which an exhibition, performance or event is experienced as moment in a cultural journey. The curator or curators can act as facilitators, perhaps even catalysts on that journey; and debate, dialogue and the exchange of ideas is critical to that process.