**Reflective Curatorial Practice**

*Lizzie Muller*

**Introduction**

In the growing field of creative practice-based research there are surprising few examples of projects based on curatorial practice. This is despite a rapidly increasing body of literature about the way that the role of the curator is transforming in response to dramatic shifts in contemporary art. This chapter describes my own experience of conducting a curatorial-practice based doctoral project, and the methodological framework I built to structure this process.

The first challenge I faced was the question of how to integrate qualitative research about the audience’s experience of interactive art into my curatorial practice. This is not necessarily a challenge that would be faced by all curators conducting a practice-based project. However in my case it was a necessary response to the central research question that my professional experience had generated. This question was “how can a better understanding of the audience experience of interactive art inform my curatorial practice”. It seemed to me that the rhetoric surrounding interactive art, from theorists, artists and curators, made frequent reference to the audience, with very little supporting information about the actual nature of the audience experience. I was (and still am) committed to addressing what I saw as an important gap in the foundational knowledge of my discipline. However in the early stages of my doctoral project I realised that there was a danger of embarking on two tracks of enquiry. One track would be “curatorial” – practical work that would generate the material focus for my research. The second track would be “empirical” – a meta-layer of research *about* the artworks, artists and audiences involved. This division, I realised, would not answer my central question. I would end up with a thesis *about* audience experience, not a thesis that explored how audience experience could transform curating.

I developed two solutions to this challenge. The first was to explore and adapt practical methods from human-centred and participatory interaction design to my process of curating. These tools offered methods for applying empirical knowledge to design processes, and led me to develop new curatorial strategies that could integrate qualitative data about audience experience into the creation and exhibition of interactive art.

The second solution, which is the more prominent focus of this chapter, was to question how curatorial practice itself might produce new knowledge that could be articulated with the context of formal academic research. To address this question I turned to
Donald Schön’s “The Reflective Practitioner” to understand how professional practitioners produce knowledge through action. I built on Stephen Scrivener’s application of Schön’s insights to creative practice-based research, to work out how these processes could apply to my own curatorial practice. The result was the development of a research approach that I call “reflective curatorial practice”. Using this approach both the empirical and practical methods I was developing could be mobilised and evaluated within the context of curatorial practice. Reflective practice allowed me to integrate findings and outcomes of these methodological experiments into an overarching cycle of grounded reflection, analysis and practical innovation. The result was a series of new discoveries about the theoretical and strategic value of understanding and working with audience experience in curatorial practice.

In this chapter I want to explicate the framework for reflective practice that I developed during my doctoral project. I begin by making an argument for the importance of practice-based research within the broader landscape of curatorial research. I then describe my own interpretation of the epistemological and methodological foundations of “reflective practice”, based on my reading of Donald Schön. To illustrate the outcomes of this framework I offer some examples of the curatorial insights that reflective practice generated with my own work. I hope that this chapter will provide a useful introduction to Schön’s concept of reflective practice for any researcher seeking to undertake creative practice-based research. In particular, I hope it will serve as a useful precedent for other curators who would like to follow a similar path.

**Reflections on Curating and Research**

The rise of participatory, relational, social and new media art has caused a widespread reconsideration of the practice of curating. The traditional role of the curator was to take care of a collection of objects (von Bismarck 2003). As the emphasis in art practice has moved away from a focus on static objects, the role of the curator has become similarly dynamic. As Paul O’Neill has put it, the curator is no longer simply a “carer and behind-the-scenes aesthetic arbiter”, but rather has a “creative and active part to play in the production, mediation and dissemination of art itself” (O’Neill 2007, p. 12).

Central to many of these artistic developments is the increasingly active role of the audience. In interactive media art the audience is particularly important – an interactive artwork is brought into being by the action of the audience, existing until that moment as an artwork “in potential”. In these increasingly dynamic situations, the role of the curator becomes the facilitation of encounters between audience and artwork. Contemporary curating has become a social and collaborative practice, based on brokering the relationship between an artist’s process of making and the audience’s process of
experiencing. In the case of new media and interactive art, curators also have to deal with the introduction of complex technologies to exhibitions and museums and the audiences’ rapidly developing literacy in technological interaction.

There is a wealth of new research about these contemporary shifts in curatorial practice, but there is a notable lack of literature dealing with the idea of curatorial practice as research. Research based on creative practice in art and design is an increasingly important part of the academic landscape. This growing body of literature examines and demonstrates how the creation of art or design works can be the basis of research that produces new transferable knowledge. So far, however, there has been no concerted effort to look at how the creative practice of curating – of collecting, commissioning, producing or exhibiting artworks – can similarly be the basis for research. This is surprising, as the field of curating tends to place a great emphasis on research, writing and academic engagement. However the proper disciplinary training and focus of curatorial research is usually considered to be art history. Such a focus tends to erase the agency of the curator in a double-edged way. On the one hand a deferral to the authority of art history allows the curator a certain amount of room to operate flexibly, without scrutiny. On the other hand it prevents a lack of reflective development about the decisions and process of curatorial practice that might lead to new innovations and opportunities. As the role of the curator becomes more self-consciously active and creative it inevitably becomes more reflexive. Recent publications, in particular the collections of Paul O’Neil and the interviews of Hans Ulrich Obrist, are based on the reflections of individual curators considering the development of their own practices. It is only a small shift of framing and orientation to read these essays as curatorial practice-based research. Such accounts of personal practice are invaluable material for researcher-practitioners looking to understand and expand the field of curating. However they leave open the question of how to formalise a structure and methodology to turn the individual practice of curating into new and transferable knowledge. This is where I suggest reflective-practice can play a vital role.

Creating a Context for Curatorial Research
It was a challenge to find an appropriate space – both physically and in terms of institutional support – to conduct curatorial experiments. In my own research this problem was compounded by my desire to include empirical investigation into the audience experience into my practice. Despite the growing importance of the audience’s experience in contemporary art, most museological interest in the empirical study of audiences is based in the marketing and education departments, rather than the curatorial departments of museums. There remains a division in cultural institutions
between the research of the curators (which is primarily object and artist focused) and that of the audience-centred educationalists and marketers (Lacerte 2007).

I addressed the need to combine reflective practice with empirical research through the development of Beta_space in partnership with the Powerhouse Museum. Beta_space is a “living laboratory” for investigating audience experience through the exhibition of interactive artworks. The work described in this chapter is based on the work I did in establishing and developing Beta_Space. I exhibited numerous artworks during my curatorial work with Beta_space, but I focused my formal reflections on two case studies Cardiomorphologies, by George Khut and Contagion, by Gina Czarnecki.

Several of the chapters within this book describe how the research methodologies associated with Beta_space developed and solidified over the six years (to date) of its operation. However in its earliest days, developing a modus-operandi was an experimental process of learning by doing. These methods, their background and application are described elsewhere (Muller 2006 and 2007). What is important from the perspective of this chapter is the way in which reflective curatorial practice operated as a structuring framework that allowed me to develop and evaluate these empirical and practical research methods.

Understanding Reflective Practice
To understand how reflective practice can provide such as structuring framework it is important to understand its empirical basis, and the tools it offers to practitioners to consciously recognise and articulate the knowledge produced through their practice. In his book The Reflective Practitioner (1983) Donald Schön was writing in a tradition of pragmatist philosophy that emphasises the value of knowledge which grows from lived experience. Schön did not necessarily intend his work to be used as a methodological basis for formal research. Rather he was attempting to explain and validate the knowledge produced by professionals in their normal daily work. However his writing has been used extensively, particularly in the fields of health and education, as a basis for action-based research.

In terms of creative practice, Stephen Scrivener has done most to apply Schön’s work to formal research. I have drawn a great deal from Scrivener’s work in terms of the disciplined process of what Schön calls “reflection-on-action”. In this section I describe the key ideas from Donald Schön’s description of reflective practice that I have used to structure my own research approach.
**Knowledge in practice**

The practitioner, Schön argues, produces new knowledge as a result of engaging with real situations, rather than creating situations in order to produce new knowledge. Unlike in controlled experimental research, the creative practitioner does not have to continue trying to disprove hypotheses. Rather, experimentation is terminated by useful outcome, by the production of “changes one finds on the whole satisfactory, or by the discovery of new features which give the situation new meaning and change the nature of the questions to be explored” (Schön 1983, p. 151). Central to this is a notion of a “transactional” relationship between the practitioner and the situation (Schön 1983, p. 150). A practitioner’s actions reveal new aspects of the situation, hitherto unknown. The situation then responds to the actions of the practitioner, thus allowing further interpretation based on new revelations. Both the practitioner and the situation are playing active roles. The practitioner is an agent *within* the situation, and changes which she makes to the situation must also cause changes in her. Such a dynamic, of course, differs significantly from the more traditional controlled experimental method of what Schön describes as “technical rationality” – a disinterested model of research which values the “generalisable” over the specific. Schön argues however that the ongoing changes in both the situation of research and the practitioner in reflective practice, are not a “defect of experimental method, but [...] the essence of its success’ (Schön 1983, p. 151), for it is by altering the situation to gain a desirable outcome that the practitioner defines success.

For Schön, the “transactional” relationship between the researcher and the situation is the key to understanding the practitioner’s “stance towards enquiry”, from which flow many of the characteristics of reflective practice. In Schön’s terms, the practitioner must be open to the “back-talk” of the situation (Schön 1983, p. 164), to the fact that the situation has “life of its own distinct from his intentions” (Schön 1983, p. 163).

**The focus of reflective practice**

Based on Schön, Stephen Scrivener describes an iterative creative practice based research process consisting of reflection-in-action (which occurs within the flow of practice) and reflection-on-action (the means by which communicable knowledge can be produced from practice). In reflection-in-action a practitioner responds to the situation and keeps things moving, in reflection-on-action a practitioner learns from what happened in order to consolidate that new knowledge for the future. The natural cycles, periods and pauses of practice provide opportunity for reflection-on-action. This creates an iterative structure in which periods of activity produce new knowledge through reflection-on-action, which is then further developed in the next period of activity (Scrivener, 2002).
In my research, this iterative, cyclic process was manifested in the relationship between my curatorial work on two case study artworks, my overall curatorial practice and the research questions. My reflection-in-action was based in ongoing assessments of how my actions advancing the specific goals involved in my two case-study artworks, *Cardiomorphologies*, by George Khut and *Contagion*, by Gina Czarnecki.

Experiments in Practice

In this section, I describe how Schön’s description of reflective practice can be used for curatorial practice and drawn on two examples of interactive art research: Cardiomorphologies, by George Khut, a physiologically interactive artwork that creates real time visual and sonic representations of the participant’s heart and breath; and Contagion, by Gina Czarnecki, a multi-user installation based on a complex interactive representation of the spread of disease within populations.

Schön argues that the rigour of knowledge produced through practice is generated by the structure of “on the spot experiments” (Schön 1983, p. 141). There are different kinds of experiments including exploratory (taking action without predicting consequences) and move testing (attempting to get a certain consequence). Such experiments can be seen throughout the thesis. For example, the first time I used “Personas and Scenarios” with George Khut in Cardiomorphologies, I had very little idea whether this technique would work in an artistic situation (or indeed within our specific collaboration), this was an exploratory experiment in which the outcome was unknown. On the other hand, running the “Experience Workshop” for Contagion was an example of what Schön calls “move testing”: I already had some idea of how this technique had worked in another situation and I hoped this experiment would help Czarnecki critique her “ideal” notions of the artwork when confronted with the actual experience of the participants in the workshop.

The most important aspect of reflection-on-action is how the practitioner judges the quality and effectiveness of her actions. Unlike hypothesis-based controlled experiments, the creative practitioner does not have to continue trying to disprove hypotheses. Rather, experimentation is terminated by useful outcome, by the production of “changes one finds on the whole satisfactory, or by the discovery of new features which give the situation new meaning and change the nature of the questions to be explored” (Schön
Schön suggests that we judge something “satisfactory” according to our own appreciative system, which is personal, and, whilst not static, relatively constant:

Constancy of appreciative system is an essential condition for reflection-in-action. It is what makes possible the initial framing of the problematic situation, and is also what permits the inquirer to re-appreciate the situation in the light of its back-talk... it is also because of the constancy of his appreciative system that inquirer engaged in on the spot experiment can tell when he is finished. He bounds his experimenting by his appreciation of the changes he has wrought.

My own appreciative system draws upon my experience in curatorial practice and of the aesthetics of interactive art. In my reflections throughout my research I aimed to recognise when my appreciative system was coming into play, and particularly the moments when it shifted or developed. It was also necessary to bring to the surface the appreciative system of the artists involved in the case study artworks, in order to provide a shared understanding and identify a common purpose in the creation and exhibition of the works. To do this, I worked with each artist to describe their experiential goals. These were later used to judge the effectiveness of our actions and outcomes, and to analyse the audience experience.

**An experiential approach to curating interactive art**

The curatorial approach I developed through this process of reflective curatorial practice is based on an iterative process, inspired by the lifecycle of user-centred interaction design. This process makes use of the museum as a laboratory for “prototyping” interactive art as described in the chapter ‘Prototyping Places: the Museum’ by Deborah Turnbull and Matthew Connell.

Because of the generative nature of many of the design methods, and the rich detail of the participants’ descriptions, the audience’s experience took on a tangible presence in the design process as a kind of “material”. The process of audience-centred research revealed the properties and possibilities of this material. It had its own momentum, and offered its own constrictions. The diversity of the individual reports showed that it is impossible to “design experience”, because the agency and individuality of each participant ensures that each experience is unique. However it is possible, through close attention to actual experiences, to facilitate and encourage certain experiential qualities which the artist feels are desirable.

The experiential curatorial approach blurs the boundaries between studio and exhibition, creation and presentation, and between the roles of artist and curator. The methods I developed provide ways to mediate between the concerns of the curator and of the artist, offering audience experience as a shared “resource”. Following our collaboration George
Khut developed this idea through the proposal of an “enquiry based practice” (Khut 2007) that would integrate experiential research more explicitly into interactive installations.

Figure 1: Cardiomorphologies in Beta_space – George Khut. Photo by G Turner.

**Audience experience as a unifying focus in complex projects**

In a complex project like *Contagion*, audience experience creates a communicative link between the many collaborators and stakeholders, and their different levels of creative, technical, intellectual and financial involvement. The question of how an audience will experience an artwork synthesises the different concerns of people involved in the project, such as the programmer, producer, artist and funder, and expresses them in the intelligible language of human perception and action. From a curatorial perspective this means that the exhibition is no longer the last issue considered by the collaborating team, but acts as a common focus throughout the making process.
The role of experience in moving from concept to implementation
In all projects it can be challenging to move from the conceptual stage, where there are many possible ideas for an artwork, to practical implementation, where ideas are increasingly narrowed down through a series of choices and imperatives. Often there is no explicit methodology for making some of these difficult decisions, and this can be particularly difficult if there are many people involved. A focus on audience experience supports the transition of an artwork from conceptual development to production in five ways:

• by offering a shared perspective for artist, curator and programmer;
• by giving a methodology for generating and making decisions;
• by showing the possibilities as well as the limitations of practical solutions;
• by providing a way for the artist to be imaginatively immersed in the material reality of the artwork, not just the ideas behind it;
• by providing a stable reference point during the challenges and upheavals of the design process particularly through the experiential goals.

Reflection-on Action
My process of reflection-in-action during these case studies was focused on producing the best possible experience for the artist and the audience during the production and exhibition of each work. At moments during this process, and particularly at the end of each case study, I took a step back from the situation and conducted a process of Reflection-on-action. At these points I examined what occurred during the case studies and asked, “what are the implications for my future practice and for the research questions which I have set.
As Scrivener (2002) points out, reflection-on-action is a discipline which needs to be planned and consciously conducted. An important part of this discipline is in recognising and seizing the opportunities for reflection that arise within the flow of practice. These might be ad-hoc, e.g. after an important meeting or when something has gone wrong, or more predictable, e.g. after different stages of activity, between cycles of exhibition and importantly at the end of the project.

Disruption in the flow of action often stimulate reflection. For example surprise, and “stuckness”, i.e. when action produces unexpected results, when we are unable to move forward, or we are unsatisfied (Schön 1983, p. 244). These become rare moments when reflection-in-action becomes reflection-on-action, unbidden and during the course of events. In these moments the practitioner “reflects on the understandings which have been implicit in his action, understandings which he surfaces, criticises, restructures, and embodies in further action.” (Schön 1983, p. 50). Reflect practice makes a virtue of difficulty, and allows even failures to contribute to an overall trajectory of development and learning.

**Enlarging curatorial practice**

Schön’s concepts of “repertoire”, and “appreciative system” are vital, for me, in understanding curatorial practice as a cumulative body of knowledge that shapes my way of understanding the world. These concepts demystify the process by which I, as a curator, judge the quality and effectiveness of my actions. Schön argues that over time the practitioner builds up a “repertoire of examples, images, understandings and actions” (Schön 1983, p. 138). In each new, unique situation, the practitioner then applies the knowledge in her repertoire by using past experience as precedent, metaphor or exemplar, “seeing this situation as that one, one may also do in the situation as in that one.” (Schön 1983, p. 139). He suggests that we judge something “satisfactory” according to our own appreciative system, which is personal, and, whilst not static, relatively constant. Its constancy has the power to bring order to a situation in flux. He suggests that we judge something “satisfactory” according to our own appreciative system, which is personal, and, whilst not static, relatively constant. Its constancy has the power to bring order to a situation in flux.

Curators cannot do exactly as they please—they are governed by the active role of the situation, and by their own overarching framework of quality judgements. The curator’s process is **accountable** to the situation and to its own cumulative internal logic. Understanding this does not suggest that the curator is dictated to by uncontrollable
forces. Rather it provides strategies for understanding how a personal practice defines possibilities for action, but also how it can be challenged, enlarged and articulated.

Communicating the knowledge that is generated by this process of enlargement is a challenge. Following Schön, Stephen Scrivener argues that knowledge outcomes generated by practice are valuable to others in their specificity, rather than merely as general rules. Practice-based work does not lead to “generalisations” but to “strategies for action that other practitioners may employ to extend their own repertoires” (Scrivener 2002, p. 42).

Tere Vaden also emphasises the uniqueness of creative experience, and its resulting resistance to "repeatability", and controlled conditions. However he argues this does not mean it cannot be shared. He suggests that in writing about practice we emphasise commonalities instead of universalities, and we do not seek the kind of knowledge that is universally applicable. He makes a distinction between inter-subjectivity (i.e. the possibility of sharing of experience) and universality. Knowledge can be shared, he argues, without being universally applicable, or repeatable.

**New Curatorial Strategies: An experiential approach to curating**

Following Vaden’s advice I want to briefly describe some of the outcomes of my reflective practice. These results do not establish a set of rules to be reproduced by others, but provide an small insight into my own discoveries that I hope will be of sufficient shared interest to other curators and artists to inspire them to a) look up the works in which these discoveries are described in more depth, and b) build on these discoveries in their own practice-based experiments.

The curatorial approach I developed through my process of reflective practice offered new strategies for integrating audience experience into curatorial process (see Muller and Khut 2007, Muller 2008). This process makes use of the museum as a laboratory for “prototyping” interactive art, and developed new methods for working with artists during the creation of their work.

My discoveries “enlarged” my curatorial practice in many ways. I showed how, as a curator, I could support the artist to work with audience experience as a kind of material, with its own properties and imperatives. I developed ways to mediate between the concerns of the curator and of the artist, offering audience experience as a shared “resource”. I showed how I could use audience experience to create a communicative link between the many collaborators and stakeholders, and their different levels of creative, technical, intellectual and financial involvement. I discovered that the question of how an
audience will experience an artwork synthesises the different concerns of people involved in the project, such as the programmer, producer, artist and funder, and expresses them in the intelligible language of human perception and action. From a curatorial perspective this means that the exhibition is no longer the last issue considered by the collaborating team, but acts as a common focus throughout the making process. Perhaps most importantly, I discovered that a deeper understanding of audience experience clarified for me the aspects of my own “appreciative system” that had, at the outset of my career, attracted me to interactive art: It’s ability to reflect and examine the profound transformations of new technologies on human experience.

Reflective Curatorial Practice Beyond the Doctorate

Three years on from the completion of my thesis I find that Reflective Curatorial Practice has become the foundation for all my ongoing research. It has been the basis for further projects with different research questions, different strategies and different kinds of experiment. I have looked at the creation of documentation of interactive art (Muller 2008), ways of encouraging audience participation in environmental issues, and alternative ways of combining art, science and technology in exhibitions. In all of these projects I have critically reflected on my transactional relationship with the situation, thinking of both my context and myself as active participants in research. I have brought to the surface the instances in which I am using and enlarging my curatorial repertoire. I have interrogated the way that my decisions reveal shifts and developments in my appreciative framework. Reflective curatorial practice has proven to be a flexible and rigorous companion as my interests have changed.

Whilst the world of curating is full of reflective practitioners, there are, I believe, too few curatorial practice-based researchers. There is great scope for more curators to take up the challenge that has been so eagerly grasped by a growing number of artists, designers, musicians and other creative practitioners and make their voices heard within the realms of formal academic research. Reflective practice is a valuable way of articulating and sharing the knowledge that exists in the world of professional curating.

Conclusions

My research has shown that the exhibition of “artistic prototypes” offers a new way of engaging with audiences in curatorial practice. Exhibiting artistic prototypes, however, is challenging. It can be difficult for artists, who may feel compromised by the public display of their work in progress, and it can be difficult for audiences who may not know how to respond to this unusual use of the gallery or museum. The curator plays a vital role in ensuring that the prototyping process is valuable for the artist and rewarding for the audience. The crucial task for the curator is to make it clear that the prototype is not
merely an “unfinished thing”. Rather it is part of an ongoing process of dialogue between artist and audience – a way of stimulating and grounding imagination and discussion. It is the curator’s task to support this dialogue, and provide ways for the artist and audience to engage productively with the process of prototyping.

References


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1 The most relevant being Graham and Cook (2010), Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media.