Places, Communities and Knowledge. You’ll be part of an upcoming exhibition

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Abstract: This paper presents the status of research underway on the increasing number of participatory experiences in designing and producing cultural events, and particularly those initiatives leading to the realization of exhibit-events. This phenomenon is part of a broader context of having gone beyond certain aspects of the consumer society through initiatives linked to the social economy. The paper analyzes this trend’s repercussions in cultural management and its impact on the current debate on design.

Keywords: Participatory Design, Exhibit Design, Prosumers, Cultural Management, Curatorship, Sharable Knowledge

1. Beyond Cultural Consumption

A trend has clearly emerged recently in the conceiving and producing of shows and temporary exhibitions involving the redefinition of the relationships between users and cultural managers. In this new paradigm, the traditional separation of roles between those exhibiting and the visitors becomes blurred while the relationship between the two erstwhile distinctly separate actors now comes to be replaced by what has been defined as a prosumer (Ritzer, Jurgenson 2010) involving the type of complicity characteristic of the social economy. Users are thus increasingly perceived as active players in managing cultural events and initiatives rather than (potential) consumers of cultural goods and services (Pistone 2014).

This phenomenon falls fully in line with transformations induced by technological developments over the last few years leading all institutions traditionally called upon to disseminate culture, be they museums, archives, libraries and so forth, to modernize. In fact, while the nature of knowledge remains intangible and impersonal, the supports with which it is distributed and codified are increasingly less tangible, while places specifically equipped for dissemination not only remain lively places for exchange of ideas, but presently show no signs at all of any potential sublimation in the immediate future.

Not only the generation of community but also the role of personal relations and the efficacy of in-person experiences are issues currently hitting hard at the heart of the debate. Take for instance events and Festivals that are gradually taking on a role erstwhile reserved for specialized magazines while fablabs and workshops tend to be increasingly understood as opportunities to work together (Kera 2011).
The open (or libre) philosophy that has already fully asserted itself in several fields of collaborative production (Stallman 2002) is slowly making way for itself in exhibits despite objective difficulties given the singularity of each experience and the high level of professional specialization required both in curating and exhibit design.

Analogously to other fields entailing design, in museography as well, attention seems to be shifting towards the definition of the process. It is no longer so much the detailed pre-figuration of the final design that is of interest as the elaboration of a method able to generate the desired results.

Figure 1. Territorio Archivo Exhibit at Cerezales del Condado - León (Spain): Inauguration day.

2. Sharing usable knowledge

Observing the phenomenon at a greater distance, the research falls within a context characterized by the consolidation of many experiences linked to the social economy. Some serve as sources of imitation for markedly for-profit initiatives. Together with increasing signs of crisis in traditional representative democracy mechanisms, they have oriented part of the political and economic debate towards the “rediscovery” of common goods (or commons) beyond the conventional public-private dichotomy (Ostrom 1990). Insofar as the exclusively political sphere is concerned, it is easy to observe an increasing interest in several types of participatory processes both in traditional parties’ internal mechanisms (i.e. primaries, participatory political platforms, etc.), and in relationships between citizens and institutions (participatory budgets, mediations, etc.)

This research also falls within a longstanding, ongoing debate on design. After a long period in which the history of design has favored an interpretation leaning towards national schools and great masters, the pendulum can be seen to be gradually shifting to spotlight design as being practiced as a popular and to a large extent anonymous activity. (Bassi 2007)
From today’s perspective, the highly specialized professional phase where very a handful of masters were in a position to know future objects’ form (and function) can be seen as being closely tied to a long parenthesis in time during which rapid industrialization did not enable the long periods of conception or formal attributions of products produced in series as did craftsmanship.

It was only a gradual Copernican revolution that allowed the shift from the demiurgue designer at the center of the universe of industrial creation in his role as the main mediator between the production system and the end users over to experiences linked to several types of participatory design (Bannon, Pelle 2012) occurring in a context of a new sensibility regarding users.

At no rate does this mark a return to the pre-industrial phase. Thanks to a great extent to digitization, the separation between artifacts, structures and processes tends to gradually blur. In today’s world, any design, as fleeting as it may be, takes on many of the connotations of Service Design and tends to actively involve a host of stakeholders.

This situation, characterized by a host of players who are not all necessarily professional designers but are necessarily professionals, inevitably entails a redefinition of the “design leader”. Different types of design tend to lean towards two ends of the spectrum ranging from a scenario in which a professional designer will take responsibility for producing, him or herself, a combination of the contributions made by the various stakeholders to a scenario in which the professional will take on the role of a facilitator preparing group process mechanisms that will allow various sensibilities to converge into a single design.

In this latter scenario, a participatory peer design process, one of the professional designer’s main contributions should involve propagating design culture by conforming an ensemble of explicit, conveyable, accumulable knowledge (Manzini 2015).

This somewhat anti-academic approach once again places technology-linked ways of conveying fields of knowledge at the center of the debate in a technological and cultural context that would seem to favor certain knowledge sharing experiences.

Ostensibly, well-known experiences in collaborative software development could develop by themselves in the digital dimension and need no support from community members or in-person meetings or sharing any other type of experiences. But in actual fact, we know that this potential for de-locating is merely an ostensible phenomenon and that even these virtual communities breathe life into countless workshops, hackathons, conferences, encounters... all essential to consolidating personal relations.

When we turn from software creation to goods and service production, collective dynamics are closely liked to where they actually occur. In a sense, the maker community shares not only its praxis and interests, but also space and machines alike. And initiatives tied to the social economy, virtually by definition, are local experiences.

We are therefore witnessing the advent of new spaces equipped for sharing knowledge, new types of cultural management, and new aggregation dynamics that contribute to consolidating what has been defined as cosmopolitan localism.

2.1 Learning Spaces

Museums and temporary exhibits rightfully fall into the category of these new equipped spaces for knowledge. Indeed, rather than a new typology, these spaces are undergoing a deep lying transformation. We believe they can significantly contribute to the dynamics of disseminating know-how and could benefit by becoming more widespread among the public.
For some time now, modern museography and exhibit design have been geared towards in-person cultural experiences reaching beyond mere observation of historical and/or precious items.

As of the 1970s, particularly thanks to science museums, there has been a clear evolution towards new types of exhibits offering enhanced visitor emersion and generating a rich environment of cognitive stimuli.

Exhibit design is currently highly multidisciplinary including a wide range of multi-media resources often coming hand in hand with bold applications of space and lighting at times approaching the sphere of conceptual art and art installations. (Kraus 1979)

Many museums have also broadened the range of their activities and, no longer merely custodians of heritage produced in the past or as guardians of cultural orthodoxy, they now stand as veritable spaces for creation. Oftentimes they are places to visit time and again and serve as a gathering place for members of local communities of interest.

Nowadays, conceiving an exhibit experience requires a great degree of professional specialization. Yet at the same time, its complexity is both needed to express the enormous communicational potential of these experiences, and a serious obstacle for “non specialist” group ownership of this type of communication.

Meanwhile, these initiatives strong spatial and emersion connotations make them refractory to digitization, complex to document, and hard to reproduce.

3. The research

The present research underway aims to contribute to the dissemination of participatory experiences in the conception and production of cultural events, and attaches particular importance to initiatives that lead to the realization of an exhibit-event.

Through the analysis of a fair number of recent experiences in the field of cultural management, the research focuses on the key elements that make these initiatives successful.

The methodology chosen consists of a qualitative analysis of data gathered directly in the field from interviews, direct contact and on site visits to develop a limited yet significant set of case studies (Muratovski 2016). Particularly in this instance, we vindicate an empirical, phenomenological approach to research on design with the modesty needed to approach the players and their first hand accounts of what they consider to be relevant initiatives with a receptive, open mind and a good amount of common sense.

In this initial phase of the research, after having tackled the first case studies, an initial analysis grid was developed to enable us to identify both the best practices among the experiences analyzed and the factors that continue to pose problems.

A case study: TA

An example to illustrate this is the Territorio Archivo (TA) case study. A participatory project still underway on “local memory”, Territorio Archivo was promoted in 2012 by film director Chus Domínguez and initially developed by Fundación Cerezales Antonino y Cinia (FCAYC) in Cerezales del Condado - León (Spain).
FCAYC is a private foundation, located in a rural area close to Leon, in the north of Spain. Established in 2008 as a Contemporary Art Center, over the last few years it has extended its scope to local development and the knowledge transfer through cultural productions and ethnological education.

In the TA project, the inhabitants of the six towns in the Condado district were invited to share pictures from their own family albums. An informal community of ‘domestic curators’ was thus generated and lent itself to be filmed house by house, actually kitchen by kitchen, in free-flowing chats that described the content of the various pictures.

The creation of this collective photo archive was actually a mere pretext to begin to evoke events and experiences linked to collective memory and to implement a series of activities such as rekindling the pleasure of sitting down together to remember the past and using the with the material gathered to produce an exhibit open to the public.

The outcome was the consolidation of ties between the foundation and the local inhabitants. It served as a model for analogous initiatives in other towns and has been studied by various academic institutions. Currently, it is included in the exhibit “Cohabitar entre” (Living together among oursevles) on display at Barcelona’s Centre d’Art Contemporani Fabra i Coats.
4. Conclusions

In our initial hypothesis, the factors for analysis that should be able allow for examination across a series of analogous initiatives, cover essentially the following points:

1. The origins of the gradual inclusiveness and the nature of relationships with users. Why is a given issue of interest to a certain community? Who is involved in the storytelling? To what extent is the process open to other contributions?

2. The types of curating and the catalyzing role taken on by the initiative coordinator in managing quantitative and qualitative aspects of participation.

3. The types of exhibit and the attention paid to making the most of items on exhibit beyond mere observation, and more generally, narrative strategies implemented to reflect the issue dealt with in the exhibit.

4. The impact on the “commons” economy, be it in terms of documenting the process and the reproducibility of the experiences or in terms of the nature of the products generated during the process.

5. Whether or not there are transmedia strategies so as to enable exhibit content to be easily migrated (and integrated) from its physical space to a digital support (and vice versa).

We will attempt to assess the extent to which the measures respond to activities that are strictly political and as such highly linked to their context of origin making them presumably difficult to reproduce in different environments.

Our aim is to highlight “best practice” among the experiences analyzed and to assess an initial set of factors that continue to pose problems with a view to either solve or to make sense of them and contribute to disseminating a new sensitivity in Design.
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Figure 4. Territorio Archivo: Gathering information “kitchen by kitchen”.
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Alfredo Calosci Architect by training, he is now PhD candidate at DADU - Alghero where he has been teaching form the start of the Design program. Based in Madrid since 1992, he works as freelance consultant in the area of web design, interaction design, visual communication and creative coding.