

THE USE OF GALLERY SPACES: A CASE STUDY OF CLINKPROJECT3: COLLABORISM

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"The site of exhibition can be seen therefore not as an auxiliary space for understanding certain aspects of an artwork, such as its social or practical implementation, but the central site for interactive art research – the necessary starting and finishing point for any study that aims to understand how meaning is produced by an interactive artwork."¹

This report explores the way in which the site of an exhibition affects its impact on visitors, using as a case study *CLINKProject3: Collaborism*, a collaborative jewellery-making project. Although not an interactive artwork, *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* provided visitors with opportunities for interaction.

In my capacity as evaluator of the public interaction associated with *CLINKProject3: Collaborism*, I attended Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery in Auckland (Te Uru) on 24 and 25 August 2016 with the project team. I observed the interactions by gallery visitors with *CLINKProject3: Collaborism*, and interviewed many of them about the value of those interactions for them. Quotes given here are from my notes, of conversations I either overheard or had myself with visitors. I was not able to interview all visitors. All photos were taken by me, with consent of all persons photographed. After the exhibition closed on 30 September, the gallery also contributed relevant anecdotal feedback from selected responses to a regulated survey with specific questions after the exhibition closed. Neither the gallery's survey nor my own interviews represent all visitor opinions, or a statistically balanced cross-section of visitor demographics.

SITE OF EXHIBITION

The first collaboration between Hungry Creek Art and Craft School and the Dunedin School of Art took place in 2014. The team called their project CLINK. They experimented not just with collaborative jewellery-making, but also with audience interaction, handing out small plastic bags of materials randomly to members of the public at Auckland's Britomart public transport depot, for people to make their own jewellery. In 2015 the second CLINK project team held a pop-up exhibition on the street, with their jewellery displayed. They found that the audience focus was on the performance rather than on the jewellery. Many of the *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* team had also been involved with the second CLINK project. Their experience in 2015 led to the decision by the *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* team to confine the audience interaction to the bounds of a gallery space, the Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery in Auckland.

The effect of this move was that the exhibition audience for *CLINKProject3: Collaborism*, with the exception of the gallery window space facing the street, was limited to those members of the public who chose to enter the art gallery. The gallery-attending public is not representative of the general public, but has been described as a community of "like-minded art lovers," generally middle class and well educated.² The project team considered that siting the exhibition in a gallery would be advantageous because the gallery-attending public would be seeking to value an art experience, and would therefore be more likely to stop and engage with the exhibition. From

observations and interviews with visitors on 24 and 25 August, it was apparent that while some visitors had chosen to visit because of *CLINKProject3: Collaborism*, other visitors knew nothing of it beforehand. The gallery-attending public is also likely to be accustomed to controlling their physical behaviour in accordance with the constraints normally to be found in a public gallery, and in particular to be familiar with the 'don't touch' ethos that currently prevails.³ Situating *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* in an art gallery may also have given the contemporary jewellery on show a greater chance of achieving the status of art objects.⁴

THE SPACES AT TE URU

Te Uru made a range of different spaces available which were used to site *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* in the gallery. Five spaces were occupied and were used in different ways:

- a window display seen from the footpath outside, used for PEEP
- a landing up three steps on the far side of the ground floor gallery, used for LOUNGE
- a bathroom lobby area past the lift on the ground floor, used for ADORN
- the wall around the stairs leading down to the lower level, and the space at the bottom of the stairs, used for MAKE and
- a plinth in the gallery shop, used for COLLECT.

This arrangement meant that visitors needed to walk between the various spaces to see more than one component of *CLINKProject3: Collaborism*, engaging the muscles (proprioception), the sense of movement (kinaesthesia) and the sense of balance (vestibular sense).⁵ The use of these spaces also meant that visitors might come across *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* naturally in the course of walking about the gallery. In this latter respect, the component parts of the exhibition provided people with something to look at and engage with while they walked about, much as early private galleries hung pictures to give people something to look at while they walked.⁶ The spaces used by the exhibition made a favourable impression on two visitors:

"Affects me emotionally, juxtaposed with Gurmon Sap." (visitor 3/10)

"And another thing that was good, it leads you into the galleries wonderfully." (visitor 4/13)

However, some of the visitors I spoke to who visited the gallery during the period 24 and 25 August did not see any part of *CLINKProject3: Collaborism*. Other visitors noticed only one part of the CLINK Project:

"Just came to see the Janet Lilo show. Saw the guys on the landing but not others." (visitor 2/1)

My observations and interviews indicated that the in-between spaces used for *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* were a barrier to public interaction, because some people did not notice the exhibition or did not recognise that it was an exhibition. The red lettering labelling each space was too discreet to attract visitors' attention. The physical elements of an installation need to have visible clues that attract people's curiosity.⁷ This issue of low visibility may have been compounded by the fact that the artists were working on site, so it did not look like an "exhibition." This was a problem for LOUNGE in particular (see below), but the following comment relate to MAKE:

"I thought they were still setting up" (visitor 1/1).

LOUNGE

From my position in the foyer area by the gallery reception area and the lift, it was apparent that most visitors to Te Uru entered the ground floor gallery first. Most came out the way they went in, but some exited on the other side of the gallery, passing through the LOUNGE space.

At LOUNGE artists were making artworks. Here visitors could engage with the artists and some took the opportunity to do so.

"Interesting to find out what they were doing;"
(visitor 2/4)

"Chatted for a while with ones on stairs. Always interesting to see what other people are doing and talking to them." (visitor 2/9)

Overheard: "What are you doing?"; "What are you going to do with it?" (at LOUNGE) and later; "That's what they said, make part and pass it on." (visitor 3/12)

"cool hangout space" (feedback recorded by gallery)

However, other visitors did not identify that this was an opportunity for public interaction, or were confused about what they saw:

"More interested in looking at the art. So they're just sitting there, is that an exhibit? Did joke with them about being 'art in action'." (visitor 1/12)

"Just said hello and smiled, didn't really notice." (visitor 1/15)

"Thought they were just people sitting there, so didn't want to go and interrupt them." (visitor 3/3)

On the morning of 25 August there were more artists gathered at LOUNGE because the jewellery-making space on the lower level could not be used. Because this was a small space, some artists were standing with their backs to the gallery and partially blocking the exit from the gallery, which potentially deterred visitors from accessing the LOUNGE. I invited the artists to consider how they might encourage visitors to exit the ground floor gallery via LOUNGE.

The need to pack down the CLINK Project during the open hours of the gallery also imposed limits on use of the spaces provided, and hence on opportunities for public interaction; LOUNGE was dismantled by 3.30pm on 25 August, an hour before the gallery closed.

ADORN

In the ADORN space, pieces of jewellery were pegged to lines and a mirror provided. This space was conceived by the project team as a dressing room due to its proximity to the bathrooms. This exploration of an 'awkward' space and how it can be used to engage the public to experience artworks resembles the approach taken by sculptor Phillida Barlow,⁸ although our art jewellery pieces were on a small and intimate scale.

Like the touchable exhibits in "Touch Me" at the Victoria and Albert Museum,⁹ the jewellery here was out of reach of children. Although children also had permission to touch, they could only select an item of jewellery to wear



by pointing or telling an adult, who could then get it down for the child.

Those who did try on the pieces appreciated the experience, while others enjoyed just looking:

“Enjoyed looking at it, what it was constructed out of – don’t see much contemporary jewellery around. Didn’t feel need to try it on.” (visitor 3/10)

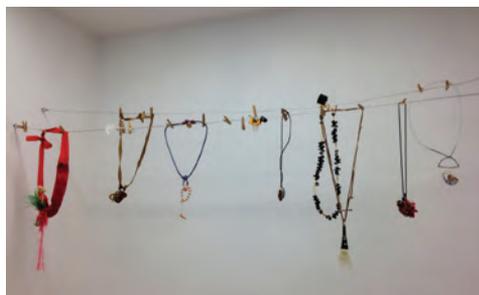
“That’s a cool area to put jewellery.” (visitor 5/15)

Some visitors did not know they could touch the pieces, let alone try them on:

“Thought it was interesting they’d left it there, anyone could touch it.” (visitor 5/1)

“Admired, but didn’t know could try on.” (visitor 5/5)

As a result of the feedback I received from visitors, I encouraged one or two artists to work at the seating opposite the lift and immediately outside the ADORN space. I observed that as a direct result of engagement with the artists or with me, and with encouragement to do so, some visitors participated in ADORN who were otherwise unlikely to have done so. While the design of an exhibition can communicate that visitors have permission to touch,¹⁰ that aim was not achieved in this case and permission needed to be given explicitly, either by myself or the artists, or subsequently by gallery staff. The touching and trying on of jewellery continued to be available to visitors beyond 24 and 25 August until the exhibition closed on 30 September.



MAKE DRAWINGS

From the ground floor foyer to the lower level, the team had permission from the gallery to draw on the outside wall of the stairwell as part of *CLINKProject3: Collaborism*. This was probably the most popular opportunity for public interaction.

For much of the second day especially, artists and members of the public were working at or below the stairwell landing, which meant that visitors in the foyer could not see that anything was happening there. I also gave feedback to the artists about this, again for them to consider how to encourage visitors to enter the MAKE space and take the opportunities for public interaction there.

While some visitors needed to be expressly invited to draw on the wall, for others it was enough to see others writing on the wall for them to infer that they also had permission to draw. For example, when a large number of visitors arrived at the same time for a Minecraft meeting in one of the galleries at 3.30pm on 25 August, five boys and one of their three accompanying adults saw people writing on the wall and seized the brief opportunity before their meeting to make their own contribution. The gallery reported that some later visitors who saw the drawings on the wall assumed, wrongly, that they also could draw on the wall, unfortunately using pens that were not readily erasable. This contributed to the drawings being removed promptly, so that until 30 September the exhibition was limited to the display of jewellery in the MAKE space downstairs and the ADORN component of *CLINKProject3: Collaborism*.

MAKE JEWELLERY

On the lower level, the space under and beside the stairs was set up with three workbenches for jewellery-making. Here members of the public had the opportunity to make jewellery themselves alongside the artists. While the stairs put some visitors off (1/1-2), one person commented:

"It was worth it, going downstairs and up again."
(visitor 2/13)

The use of the spaces within a gallery cannot be considered in isolation, because adjoining spaces can have an effect. A school group had booked to use the lower level of the gallery on the morning of 25 August, which unfortunately meant that jewellery-making could not be offered until 1.45pm that day. The team did not merely avoid the space temporarily, but packed up materials and tools and covered workbenches to avoid the possibility of any person engaging in making at a time when there was not permission to do so. One young visitor that morning (3/9) came specifically for the jewellery-making, but fortunately was able to return in the afternoon to participate (7/6). In the meantime, she had enjoyed drawing on the wall (MAKE) and trying on jewellery (ADORN).

The team had to leave the gallery at the same time that it closed to the public, at 4.30pm, so the removal of materials and tools also limited the availability of jewellery-making for visitors on 25 August, since visitors could not continue with this activity right up until closing time. The jewellery produced was left displayed on the wall above the making space on the lower level of the gallery. One visitor gave feedback to the gallery that this jewellery display, with the drawings running up the stairwell, "looked like the most interesting part of the gallery, and that it really activated that space." During the final week of the exhibition, when items were being given away, jewellery was progressively taken from here to replenish the ADORN display.



COLLECT

On 24 August 2016 a photographer recorded images of *CLINKProject3: Collaborism*. The gallery selected four of these images and printed them on light card in two colours. These were available for visitors to take from a plinth in the gallery shop. A total of 240 postcards were produced, and 200 were taken by visitors during the period from 25 August until the end of the exhibition on 30 September. The gallery observed that people were unsure if the postcards were free to take. This may be because visitors are unaccustomed to getting something for free, but could also relate to the location of the plinth within the gallery shop.

PEEP

The PEEP window installation was finished late on 25 August 2016, and therefore did not provide any opportunity for public interaction until my observations and interviews had been concluded. One passerby on the street commented that she liked the bottle of window cleaner; which was the only thing to be seen in PEEP for the first few hours of 24 August.



Selected pieces of jewellery were suspended in the window display case, but could be seen only through peepholes. The opportunity for public interaction which PEEP provided made it necessary for observers to physically move their bodies to look into each of the six peepholes in order to see what hung behind. The gallery reported that children on their way home from school enjoyed the PEEP window display, with some children being lifted up so they could see into the higher peepholes. This component of *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* successfully used surprise and proprioception to engage visitors and enhance the viewing experience.¹¹

CONCLUSION

This project provides my observations of the use of the gallery spaces for *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* and the ways in which those spaces both helped and hindered the public to take the opportunities for interaction and draw meaning from the exhibition.

The use of in-between spaces at the gallery provided the CLINK Project team with a variety of spaces they could use in different ways. However, these spaces were not highly visible, which meant that some visitors did not notice them. As a result, I suggest that in such circumstances it is particularly important to consider how to attract visitors to the spaces. The team members identified that in this respect I played an unanticipated role as facilitator, as well as evaluator, by drawing visitors' attention to the spaces and opportunities for interaction that the visitors had not noticed. The team members also played a role in engaging with visitors – not simply the designed opportunities for public interaction, but also to overcome the barrier to public interaction due to the low profile of the spaces.

A related problem is that visitors did not readily appreciate that there were opportunities to interact unless and until they were told about those opportunities; examples of this included looking at the ADORN jewellery without trying it on; walking past LOUNGE without speaking to the artists; walking past MAKE without identifying that they too were permitted to draw; and assuming there must be a cost for the COLLECT postcards. The visitors to the gallery generally seemed to be aware that the interaction opportunities provided by *CLINKProject3: Collaborism* to talk with artists, to try on jewellery, to draw on the wall, and to make their own jewellery, did not accord with the usual expectations of behaviour in the gallery. This suggests that it is also important to consider how to communicate to visitors exactly what is permitted. It was observed that once visitors were aware that they had opportunities to interact, they readily did so, and the interviews indicated that these opportunities were valued by most of the visitors who participated in them.

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