

TOWARDS CONSTRUCTIVE INTERACTION IN CONTEMPORARY ART: ARTISTS' AND CURATORS' PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

In the second half of 2024, within the framework of the project *Spatial and Visual-Conceptual Strategies of Artworks in Contemporary Art Exhibition Development of Scientific Activity at the Latvian Academy of Culture*, a group of researchers conducted a focused study on the spatial and visual-conceptual strategies of artworks. In total, 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The process of interviewing artists and curators highlighted an observed issue – the audience's inability to fully comprehend the idea of an artwork, both during its creation and exhibition.

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The objective of the paper is to analyse the data obtained from the interviews in order to identify the methods employed by artists and curators to develop constructive interaction during the creation and exposition of the artwork. Findings emphasise several core themes that shape constructive interaction in contemporary art. One of the factors affecting audience engagement is the expectation of a single, fixed meaning in artworks, whereas artists encourage multiple interpretations. The role of mediation, through exhibition texts and contextual information, proves essential in bridging the gap between artists and audiences. Additionally, exhibition dramaturgy plays a crucial role in shaping interaction. Spatial arrangements can either invite immersion or create barriers to engagement. Moreover, some artists view contemporary art as a social and emotional dialogue, where they hope their work will not only be seen but also provoke reflection and discussion. Findings indicate that accessibility plays a crucial role in this process, with artists and curators using various mediation strategies, such as guided explanations, complementary texts, and spatial design – to engage audiences effectively.

This paper will examine the experiences of artists and curators working in the contemporary art scene in Latvia over the past three years, focusing on the interpretive challenges identified in interviews. While insights from these perspectives highlight challenges and strategies for constructive interactions, further exploration of the viewer's role in interpreting art is essential.

Keywords: *contemporary art, artists, constructive interaction, curators*

Introduction

In the moments when the experience of art has to be stopped or even abandoned due to not comprehending its content or technical execution, there is a possibility that a constructive interaction has not occurred. Between the viewer and the artwork, a two-way communication process occurs in which the viewer's personal experiences, emotions, and interpretations influence their understanding and engagement with the artwork and its experience. This also applies to the process where the viewer directly engages with the artwork, affecting or altering its meaning or form [Bishop 2012; Dewey 1934]. Underlying the artwork are specific intentions and decisions made by the artist and curator, a perspective that serves as the focus of this research. Interaction is a complex concept that can be viewed from a philosophical perspective. For instance, Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that our understanding of the world is fundamentally based on our lived experiences and our bodily interactions with it. This perspective is essential for grasping how we experience art; it is not merely visual or intellectual but is deeply embodied [Merleau-Ponty 1945]. This embodied

dimension of perception aligns closely with ideas of affect theory that highlight how art can generate immediate sensations and feelings that precede reflective emotional responses; they are deeply embodied and can possibly be not easily articulated. Affective experiences in art operate through visceral, embodied sensations that precede language, narrative, or representation [Susan Best 2011: 47–48]. In this context, interaction with art can occur even without full comprehension, as emotional resonance can act as a bridge between the artwork and the viewer. Viewing interaction from a sociological standpoint, authors such as Erving Goffman and George Herbert Mead position it in relation to the mutual presence and reflective processes of the mind. Goffman describes interaction as a set of events that occur during co-presence and by virtue of co-presence [Goffman 1967: 4–6]. Arguing that interaction necessitates a state of uninterrupted mutual presence between the subjects. Furthermore, G. H. Mead interprets interaction from a behavioural psychology perspective, regarding processes of the mind and stimuli-response relations. Mead believes that within the process of interaction, the mind executes a series of reflective actions, identifying and analysing various characters of the object or situation in order to produce a response [Mead 1934]. As hierarchical structures are a part of interacting with art, especially in contemporary spaces, it is necessary to inspect the relationship between curator, viewer, accessibility and freedom of interpretation. Jacques Rancière's (Jacques Rancière) theory of intellectual emancipation redefines the process of learning as interpretation, comparison and construction of meanings that can deviate from artist's original intentions. This theory opposes the view that understanding has to be given by an authority – it has to come by consciously engaging with art, co-constructing and investigating its meanings [Rancière 2008: 8–10].

This paper does not examine the theoretical concept of interaction but is instead grounded in practical experience; however, when exploring interaction in contemporary art, it is significant to emphasise the various dimensions of interaction and the practices of *producing* interaction.

Therefore, the concept “constructive” refers not only to the formed targeted strategies during the creation of the artwork but also during the exposition process as a way to effectively reach, address and engage the art piece's perceiver.

Methodology

Within the framework of this research, qualitative methodology was employed. Qualitative methodology allows the researcher to gain a broader understanding of matters concerning the cause and reason of individual attitudes on the objective of the research, as well as explaining the cause-and-effect relations of certain behaviours and actions [Tümen-Akyıldız 2021]. In this study, the use of qualitative methodology provided an analytical insight into the meaning and diverse interpretations of space

and spatiality within the Latvian contemporary art scene. In order to comprehend these questions and employ them within the local context, 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted featuring various local professionals: managers of institutions and galleries, artists, and curators, representing various sectors such as the private, non-government and public. To ensure the collection of the most eminent yet representative data, participation in contemporary art exhibitions within Riga over the past three years was emphasised as an important criterion for respondent selection. Thus, providing an insightful approach to the utilisation and significance of space and spatiality within Latvian contemporary art exhibitions. A similar approach was employed regarding the development of in-depth, semi-structured interview guidelines. These guidelines incorporated various theoretical concepts such as *site-specific art* and *junk-spaces*, as well as addressed the individual practices of respondents, including their overall professional experience and the contemporary art projects they have participated in over the past three years in Riga. Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed to carry out thematic data analysis. The data was divided and gathered into thematic categories, evaluating the data in relation to the initial research objective – to investigate the meaning of visual and conceptual strategies of space within creating and exhibiting works of contemporary art. However, during the interviews, an additional theme emerged: interaction. The following text explores this theme in more detail, analysing various types of interaction divided into seven distinct categories.

Accessibility of content

Ensuring the accessibility to art-related information is crucial for a diverse audience with varying levels of perception and understanding to be able to fully engage with the exhibition. Most often, it includes the presence of complimentary texts, navigation signs and the use of simplified language. Those are some of the main tools for promoting the understanding of art, and the information available can promote involvement in art. By not demoting anyone but removing unnecessary complications and bridging the gap between art and audience so that the exhibition can create more curiosity, not confusion.

As contemporary art is known for introducing unfamiliar forms of art and challenging well-established social and political discourses [Kakarla 2024], it is important to emphasise the development of communication models that could elaborate on the practices and themes within contemporary art in a comprehensive way. The use of various approaches can be observed when communicating with the audience of the exhibition mentioned above. However, at times, these approaches may be disregarded as complicated, as these points of interaction can be saturated

with unheard terms and concepts. Therefore, the use or new combinations of various communication strategies could be considered when communicating with visitors.

Freedom of interpretation

It is evident that, on the one hand, the visitor must be given freedom of interpretation but at the same time, there is a desire for more direct instructions such as previously mentioned complimentary texts, navigation signs and simplified language use.

It is important to allow a person to have their own experience, where there is no fear of right or wrong. The accessibility of the content is the one which can encourage people who are not familiar with it to experience art, and, for example, the complimentary texts should not indicate the rightness or wrongness of things, or what exactly the artist has in mind. “That you have a reason to see what you see or experience what you experience. That’s good enough. I like that it sets something in motion or prompts something new and perhaps creates potential. That’s what an exhibition is supposed to do. And it’s not about: “The artist wants you to see it, and if you don’t see it, then you’re wrong”.” [LKA-T-16-5]

There should be opportunities and a desire to be knowledgeable about accessibility and its needs, to learn about it so that the information is accessible and understandable to everyone who enters. “When you know that such accessibility exists, not only in a physical space but also in the availability of content, when you are aware of it, then more attention is paid to it, looking for other exhibitions and good examples, also bad ones.” [LKA-T-9-4]

After the interviews, a relatively opposite strategy also emerges, in which the curator himself chooses a deliberate path, giving the visitor complete freedom of interpretation without including many explanatory texts: “I very deliberately did not want to put the descriptions of the works or the names of the artists on the wall in the exhibition and also, let’s say, not to write some kind of curator’s text that long and wide (...) wanted to leave it all up to people. It seemed that many things were quite straightforward to read or understand, and the lesson was – in fact, that no! People really like that many things are told (...) what you should pay attention to and what you should not pay attention to.” [LKA-T-6-5] The need for specific instructions expressed by the viewers could be read as a desire to return to a more hierarchical learning process, where the student learns from the teacher, and the viewer, as a spectator, is rendered passive. However, J. Ranciere describes the spectator as an active participant, because the spectator interprets, compares, and constructs meaning in ways that go beyond the artist’s intentions. He calls this active process emancipation in art, which challenges the assumption that learning can only come from an expert [Ranciere 2008: 8–10]. The ideas expressed by artists

and curators complement this view, which seeks to empower viewers to engage with art on their own terms and to co-construct meaning together.

Since the perception and experience in the space can depend not only on the level of preparation and previous experience of the visitor but also on the type of art, content and structure of the exhibition itself, text interpretation, instructions, and explanations may be regarded as a choice rather than a mandatory rule. Offering an explanation of more in-depth content but giving the opportunity to stay with the simple, in addition, increasing confidence in one's own perception and emotional path, in which there is no single correct interpretation. Leaving room for both deeper contextual understanding and intuitive experience. In order to not limit what concerns the complimentary texts, open-ended questions and including neutral explanations of the topics could be considered, leaving room for different opinions and validating different viewpoints. Since the experience is shaped by a set of knowledge and emotions, accessibility tools could not be mandatory but rather encouraging and empowering. Also, taking into account the fact that each of the visitors perceives new information and creates experience differently – one emotionally and sensorial, the other conceptually. A good way to create a pleasant experience would be to create a discussion, giving space for reflection. Art itself includes an open experience for everyone, and simplified language can be not only a good way to perceive content for different groups of society but also can encourage curiosity, making the exhibition a comfortable place to explore.

New forms, not only in the layout and design of the exhibition but also in the form and method of communication, allows to experience the exhibition and space in an even more accessible way. Freedom of interpretation is one of them. Mediators can play a significant role in ensuring freedom of interpretation, allowing visitors to feel welcome and free. This can happen when faced with a friendly and knowledgeable mediator. It is important to create a conversation where different opinions and feelings are allowed. It should also be understood that not everyone can use the conversation as a form of engagement or reflection. It is important to allow the visitor to choose their own way of engaging in the creation of the experience of the space and art.

The role of art mediation

In recent years, mediators have held an increasingly important role in contemporary art exhibitions and how they are understood and received by viewers. It is seen as a reflective tool and a more personalised approach to general art communication. Art mediators tend to communicate various ideas and concepts to visitors through mutual discussion by drawing parallels to notable events, personal experiences, or ideas. Such practice provides a connection between the visitor, the artwork, and

the mediator and, therefore, provides a more pleasant experience. Similar to simplified language texts, mediation is a tool of choice and can be educational, often serving as an extensive tool – a means of reaching a diverse audience. Mediation can also bridge the gap between art and visitors of different occupations who possess different levels of knowledge, for instance, about art-specific terminology or the general forms of expression within contemporary art. “There are probably two types of visitors – professionals, those who already know what they are coming for, everything is clear to them quickly – there is only one way to communicate with them. The second visitor is the “ordinary person” who is not an art professional.” [LKA-T-9-10]

Therefore, the art mediator takes the role of a *translator* elaborating on a variety of topics to different types of exhibition visitors, occupying a significant function within art communication.

“(...) both with the program of mediators and with the explanatory work, we give an approximate path and let them go along that path. Approaches are different, whether you completely leave the viewer on a sort of autonomous trajectory or try to guide them somewhere. It is also spatial, whether you try to direct them somewhere with some signs or tell that this is how it is and figure out how to deal with it by yourself.” [LKA-T-8-3]

Here, it is important to understand not only the importance of mediators as such, but also to invest time and resources in what this mediator becomes. Adequately allocating both financial support and time to introduce the mediator to everything necessary. “If the mediator is knowledgeable and if he knows specifically, and maybe also something a little more. It is very valuable and very good.” [LKA-T-9-12]

The attitude and desire to have a qualitative conversation with the visitor depends not only on the mediators themselves but also on the space and how much the mediator has been connected to this space and people: “Question – has there been time for mediator training, has the artist of the specific exhibition been present, or has there been an opportunity to meet. Sometimes I have heard that there are mediators who speak a bit of nonsense or their own interpretation.” [LKA-T-9-11]

It is equally important to give mediators the opportunity to participate in the creation of the exhibition, being in close contact with it from the very beginning, thus not becoming only interpreters of the exhibition concept, creating a sense of belonging to the space. Also, creating a more natural dialogue between the place, the visitor, and the mediator: “(...) include the mediators in the installation process, give them ownership, as if for the exhibition, and this also applies to the space, so that they also feel that they belong to this space, that they are part of this space and represent not only the space but also themselves in it.” [LKA-T-16-6] The aforementioned idea of the mediator as interpreter and translator, and as someone

who invites discussion, complements the concept of emancipation [Ranciere 2008: 14], where the mediator is not an authoritative guide, but encourages interpretation, discussion, and the generation of meaning.

The synergy of space and art

Within the interviews conducted various opinions of art professionals can be observed, with only the few admitting that interaction is not highlighted when creating or exhibiting artworks. The majority of respondents believe that interaction is one of the core elements of an artwork or an exhibition, and that factors such as the viewers movement throughout the exhibition space, their feelings and responses are crucial in the creation of a well-arranged exhibition. Factors such as what the viewer first observes when entering the exhibition space and what will be the last object they see, pose a significant question in the realm of interaction with art – how will the visitor view? Furthermore, scholars highlight relevant objects, such as the first or the last object within an exhibition, and their momentary sense, and significance, emerging within a complex negotiation, through which the viewers become at times instantly aligned towards a specific exhibit or an object, emphasising the relevance of the primary and final points of interaction with the artworks [Scott, Hinton-Smith, Harma, Broome 2013: 3]. One respondent formulated the combination of these aspects as *the dramaturgy of viewing*, which combines the scenography of a space, cohesiveness between the space, the viewer, and the artwork, and the factors mentioned above, such as the route of the viewer or the primary and final moments of interaction. The exhibition space can be interpreted as a peculiar playground in the context of interaction. With the interdependent nature of these factors shaping one another within the one variable – the unity between the exhibition space and the artwork.

Incorporating the viewer within the synergy of space and art is a means of identifying the various interaction aspects that take place while experiencing the exhibition or a singular artwork. Synergy refers to the combined power that results when different elements work together, granting that their sum is greater than its parts [Cambridge Dictionary 2023]. When questioned about the viewers interaction with artworks, the respondents emphasised hospitality and the cohesion of the exhibition space and artworks. They positioned both aspects as equally important in order to enhance the exhibition experience.

The hospitality of an exhibition deals with not only physical comfort but also factors that form parallels with accessibility, whether it would be the means of lighting the exhibition or the readability of complementary texts. Nevertheless, multiple respondents believe that in many cases the physical comfort offered at the exhibition space is a crucial factor that can enhance the viewer's experience. As stated by a local

installation artist: "I think hospitality is always sought after, so the viewer can feel at home. There are always places to sit down and designated zones for the visitors. It's not like you view the artwork and scroll further, I think it's wonderful to sit down and spend some more time with the artwork." [LKA-T-11-2]

This emphasises that certain aspects of hospitality are placed with the intention of benefiting all visitors, in order to connect with the artwork on a deeper level and enjoy physical comfort at once. As stated further by the same artist: "The exhibition in some way should be a form of leisure, a place where one comes to think. A place where you don't exhaust your body, in order to employ your brain." [LKA-T-11-2]

Therefore, an exhibition space should strive to construct a physically comfortable experience for the visitor, to ensure a connection between the viewer and the artwork on a cognitive as well as a physical level, constructing a mutual presence, as an aesthetic experience necessitates continuous interaction between a being and art [Penfold 2017]. Furthermore, artists tend to focus on how their artwork could or should be observed, experienced, or what type of experience it should deliver to the viewer. With this combination, another dimension of composition can be formed, that interprets the artwork as an element of the exhibition space, an element of the visitor's experience. This composition covers the physical comfort, routes, and points of interaction of the viewer, including the cohesion of the artwork and its inhabited environment.

Artists employ various approaches to construct a cohesive environment between the artwork and the exhibition space. The dominant opinion among respondents was that the artist should always think of ways in which the exhibition space could enhance the artwork, emphasising that if this collaboration with the space is not established, it may harm the presentation of the artwork, for example, ineffectual placement within the space, giving a sense of an alienated object. Working and attempting to adjust the artwork to the space instead of adjusting the space for the artworks, is a common practice when exhibiting art outside of spaces that are designated for art e.g. white cube spaces, however this practice can be observed within the conventional spaces for exhibitions. When working at an *off-space* or on a *site-specific work*, artists tend to consider various factors, such as the architecture of the space, to ensure mutual unity. As stated by an independent choreographer and visual artist: "(...) we tried to use the natural architecture of the room as a means of unifying the installation and the space, to ensure that the installation doesn't feel like a foreign body." [LKA-T-1-1]

The artwork and space have interdependent relations which tend to fulfil one another's contexts and ideas, enhancing the visitors experience by presenting a unified environment or a *parallel world*. As stated further by the choreographer and artist: "The installation felt like it had been there for some time and, for the viewer, it

seemed like a world that simply exists, that no foreign body has been placed and afterwards would be transferred somewhere else, but that it inhabits this little world.” [LKA-T-1-1]

Emphasising the creation of an alternate environment, the respondents believe that cohesion and various scenographic solutions should be employed in order to ensure a well-made exhibition experience.

The scenography of space

In conducted interviews, respondents describe scenography of space as something that deals with the general setting of the space, regarding the layout, lighting, complementary visual objects and other factors that create the general outlook of an exhibition. However, some respondents see the scenographic opportunities as a means of experience production, as a tool that manifests various cognitive spaces (e.g., visual, audial, cultural) into one setting [LKA-T-14-1; LKA-T-4-1]. Although scenography predominantly involves considerations of visitor circulation and the display of artworks, particular scenographic practice brings a distinct approach to these activities. At times, approaches in exhibition scenography aim to create spatial conditions in order to produce a space within which visitor movements and interaction with art objects are performative events. Furthermore, scenography practice in contemporary art exhibitions can employ other senses, stretching beyond spatial composition and artwork-focused scenography, by creating “aesthetic atmospheres”, which can include audial and olfactory elements [Thornett, Crawley 2022: 4–5]. Within the conducted interviews, respondents mentioned various aspects of a certain place that they employ, in order to work with the given space of the exhibition. These factors generally focus on the daily function and historical contexts of the space and/or the creation of an alternate setting within the space.

When employing various contexts, artists tend to work within the given scenographic framework that the particular space has to offer. This framework can be either limiting or complimentary to the artistic concept for an artwork. As a local artist stated in the context of exhibiting art in an office building: “It was important for me that the given space is somewhat ordinary and everyday-like. But at the same time, I needed it to be freed from some additional imprints, (...), therefore, adjusting to this particular room needed change and additional planning on how we can fulfil the idea without making noticeable changes to the artistic concept.” [LKA-T-1-2]

Implying that exhibiting in a place with a strong presence of the daily function (e.g., an office) can be challenging and contradict the artistic concept of an exhibition; however, at times exhibiting in such places can be fulfilling to the artwork. Making the historical or daily context of a particular place an important factor when working with scenographic solutions. As stated further by the same artist: “It depends on

whether we want to look at the place from the same viewpoint. We either highlight this daily context, or opt to create a different experience, which usually is foreseen on a daily basis, such as a historical imprint, or the historical context, (...) it's like having a conversation with the space, within the given place." [LKA-T-1-10]

The contextual landscape of space can give various scenographic opportunities with options to either employ and highlight the historical or daily contexts within the artistic concept, or to dim them and strive to create an alternate space autonomous from the context.

When creating an alternate space within a room or building, artists and curators tend to create a space that is at once an artwork, a scenographic solution, and a physical/instinctive experience for the visitor. By employing various approaches, the room can be at times dematerialised and made seemingly more dynamic. As mentioned by a multidisciplinary artist, scenographer, and art critic: "I've had many projects where I've created a space within a space directly. These works aren't necessarily visual, you can walk through them, they should be felt with the body, by creating routes through which the visitor can move around the space with different obstacles. (...) or the feeling that the space around you is moving, I've had many exhibitions with textile walls." [LKA-T-13-1]

Emphasising that creating an autonomous space within a room can be an approach for constructing a dynamic, dematerialised space and, therefore, creating an alternate experience for the visitor of the exhibition. Such practice can also make the artistic concept less dependent on the given space of exhibition, by creating a contextually free space, which the artwork inhabits.

Art in public spaces

Unlike works in galleries and museums, public art requires a unique form of interaction, as it is set apart by its accessibility and exposure. As artists often point out, galleries and museums provide a relatively controlled and predictable environment. This is especially evident in the art galleries of Riga, as they are quite small and attract a familiar and somewhat predictable audience – people who regularly visit exhibitions, attend openings and engage with the art world. However, in a public setting, the audience is much more diverse and unexpected.

Consequently, artists and curators emphasise the necessity of more close and intentional communication with society and the specific community. Public art raises various important questions: How does the work affect those who see it? Is it creating an unnecessary disturbance, or does it provide meaningful engagement? As mentioned by one respondent: "It is clear that art can comment on violence, but it must never become violent towards others, the environment or people." [LKA-T-1-11] The everyday traditions of the people inhabiting this public space must be considered.

One respondent illustrates this by highlighting the potential impact on an individual's routine: "Maybe he [a regular person] always sits here on that bench, and you come here with your stupid artwork and ruin some of his daily rituals." [LKA-T-17-5] This emphasises the need to work with the community in order to respect their interests and also to promote a sense of belonging to the specific space. Thus, responsibility emerges as a crucial keyword in the discussion of public art: "In public spaces, one must be especially careful and responsible. I believe responsibility is the key word because we are engaging with a broad audience – one that did not necessarily expect to encounter this work of art. A work of art can have a profound impact: it can educate, nurture, and inspire society. Ideally, when such a work is being created, the local community is taken into account. The best and most meaningful artworks are usually those that consider the community's interests from the outset, allowing them to blend organically into the environment. When this happens, people not only appreciate the artwork but also feel a sense of connection to it." [LKA-T-8-1] Many believe in public art as a tool for creating participatory citizenship, increasing socio-political engagement, fostering a sense of community, and promoting local identity. [Schuermans, Loopmans, Vandenabeele 2012: 676; Knight 2012: 46] While this idea of community building is present in the respondents' comments, the socio-political nuances are not as evident.

In conclusion, the discourse provided by the respondents emphasises that the success of public art lies in its ability to meaningfully engage diverse audiences, requiring thoughtful consideration of the community, its routines, and values, ensuring that the artwork both respects and enriches the public space it occupies.

Physical accessibility

Since 2022, accessibility has been recognised as a key element in the new definition of museums: "(...) open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability." [ICOM 2022] This definition emphasises both intellectual and physical accessibility. In institutional settings such as museums, physical availability and accessibility are governed by legal regulations. Cultural availability and accessibility are defined as key objectives in the *Latvian Cultural Policy Guidelines for 2022-2027* [Latvian Ministry of Culture 2021]. The state is responsible for creating an environment that ensures accessibility in museums and other institutional buildings. This includes allocating funds and controlling the implementation of accessibility requirements. However, in light of Latvia's cultural policy and the ongoing issue of not having a dedicated contemporary art museum, artists, curators, and organisations involved in contemporary art often have to seek spaces outside of established institutions that do not offer any necessary adaptations. Exhibitions are often held outdoors, in abandoned factories, in degraded areas, etc.

In these cases, artists, curators, producers, and others involved face numerous challenges and additional burdens when creating exhibitions and adapting spaces for art. One common issue is the lack of physical accessibility in these environments. The artists interviewed expressed that exhibition curators and producers should prioritise these concerns. However, some argue that such spaces may never fully accommodate the needs of all individuals, suggesting that it is necessary to focus on a specific group for whom physical accessibility is provided. From another perspective, some respondents expressed the belief that considering the physical accessibility of their work might negatively affect the artwork itself: "As someone who is not as young anymore, I find it important to have places to sit. This concern is quite sensitive, as it should not interfere with the overall presentation of the artwork." [LKA-T-12-2]

However, the art professionals interviewed generally agree that physical accessibility – such as ease of entry, the environment, lighting, noise control, management of visitor flow, etc. is essential for the artwork to be appreciated fully.

Methods of creating interaction and experience of space

Conducted interviews show that professionals, whether knowingly or unknowingly, use certain methods of working with the space and creating interactions. Curators and artists in their practice learn to lead the viewer. Their acquired professional visual thinking changes how they look at space and what they do with it, what will be the first thing that the viewer sees when walking in, and what will they see from each spot in the room. The curator begins to think spatially and tries to organise space in the most effective way to achieve their goal of interaction. This unconscious or implicit shaping of audience experience ties directly to the ongoing discourse in curatorial theory about the ethical responsibilities of the curator. As Paul O'Neill notes, curators are not neutral facilitators but active agents who frame how artworks are encountered, interpreted, and remembered [O'Neill, 2012: 45–49]. In this light, the use of spatial and dramaturgical methods – whether intuitive or deliberate – becomes a powerful curatorial tool, shaping how the viewer moves, feels, and responds in the exhibition space. Recognising this agency is crucial, as it reinforces the idea that curators bear responsibility not only for content selection but also for the ethical and affective dimensions of audience engagement.

However, the interaction is difficult to predict. The artwork has to be effective on its own, and that effectiveness can be increased by the space it is in, but the end result is difficult to foresee: "With feeling and experience develops a notion of what could happen in this space when the viewer enters it for example. And other times you can't predict how this action will end. But... yes, with this format [you] can play and create more controlled, open experiences." [LKA-T-14-2]

Contemporary art, its creation, and exhibiting praxis is very intentional, and that intention is revealed in the interviews conducted during this project. The setting of the exhibitions is no accident; it is curated by art and space; the artist and the curator. Viewers entering an art space are influenced by the rules of conduct it implies. Classic rules like “watch and don’t touch” may not apply anymore: “(...) in the end, every viewer does whatever they want anyway, so [you] don’t really have as much power over it, except if you like drawing arrows.” [LKA-T-16-4] Organising of space and movement in it is a constant negotiation between proximity, distance and peace between the viewers and the art exhibited [Christidou 2016: 3].

The professionals interviewed during this project describe different ways to think about interaction and create the space for interaction to occur. Using not only artworks themselves but also their placements, descriptions, lighting, elements of surprise, etc. It may be important to create a space that interests the artists themselves, creating personal intrigue: “[it was important to me] also to create an interesting experience of the space for myself, I like to turn a corner and don’t really know what you’ll see, not like you’re hiding something there, but that it has an unexpected element to it. A dynamic of some kind, a surprise of some kind.” [LKA-T-7-1]

Some expressed not wanting the exhibition to be just something to look at, wanting the viewer to be engaged with what has been displayed. Creating an interactive viewing experience might be crucial to deepen the experience and make it more meaningful. Many of the interviewed noted that they wanted the experience to be longer and not end as soon as the person leaves the gallery, that they could in some way take it with them. Some describe exhibitions’ potential to be a process rather than a static experience: “I didn’t want it to be an exhibition-exhibition; often you come to the exhibition, look at the pieces and you go home and the story ends. I wanted for the people who come to this exhibition to sort of become (...) it to be a process-like event, (...) you can be involved with the pieces, (...) directly relate to them or leave your thoughts, and it’s a process where all together we consider some kind of question.” [LKA-T-6-1]

The viewing experience can be demanding on purpose. Artists note that if the person is determined to be in a rush, it is very difficult, almost impossible, to make them slow down and really experience the exhibition, proposing that some comfort must be given to them if they are to spend a longer time immersing themselves. Some tools include a comfortable seat to watch a long video piece, headphones to make the space shrink and feel more intimate. Interviews show that often the aim is to create a space to interact and experience something in the art and the space at hand, not to convince the viewer of something: “It’s not that you have to understand or that you have done it wrong. Create your own interpretation.” [LKA-T-16-4] Artists and curators offer an experience and a space for freedom and co-creation of meaning.

Conclusions

From the perspective of art professionals – artists, curators, managers of art institutions and galleries – constructive interaction with the audience is part of the artistic experience. Constructive interaction refers to the strategies used for meaningful engagement between the viewer and the artwork, as a two-way communication occurs between the artwork and the viewer, and individual interpretations and emotions can shape the experience of art. Galleries and other art spaces with their available resources provide a path along with cues for possible interaction which the viewer is expected to follow and interpret. Exhibition is both the stage set and the script. [Christidou 2016: 3] Therefore, it is important to consider this aspect at every stage of artwork production, from the initial idea and concept to the exhibition and communication of the final result.

Various elements and discourses emerge from interview data, highlighting the factors that contribute to constructive interaction within art practises. Providing a hospitable environment can enhance the visitor experience by ensuring physical comfort and, therefore, a mutual presence between the artwork and the viewer. A mutual cohesion between the space and the artwork can benefit the general impression of an exhibition and pave the way for constructive interaction. The context or daily function of a space can impact the presence of an artwork by either complementing it or giving the impression of an alienated object. Additional context of the artworks can be added using informative materials that are accessible to the viewer but not overwhelming. Public art engages with a wide variety of audiences, and in order for constructive interaction to take place, it should respect and enrich the community and public spaces it inhabits.

To ensure a more precise understanding of interaction and the role of the viewer as an art experiencer, further in-depth research on the perceiver's experience, expectations and other related aspects is needed.

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