

# Collective Curatorial Statement

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## Curating Connectivity: Towards an Understanding of Translocal Urban Media

What do we take forward from our experiences of this vibrant and diverse network?

The key framing insight is that the issue of co-curation has become central. This is not just because Connecting Cities is an international network, but also because *co-curation is inherent to the translocality of urban media artworks*. Co-curation emerges as a practice because artworks relocate to different cultural contexts or connect such social spaces together in real-time through the integration of the physical and the digital. Here we explore this issue of co-curation and translocality by addressing the following aspects:

### Diversity

From media labs to media institutions to cultural enterprises, the partners vary greatly in their size, agendas, programmes, processes, funding models and available infrastructure (permanent or temporary). Communities and publics are different, both culturally and environmentally. Artists vary in their experience, skills, expectations and practices.

### Curatorial Model

Co-curation of translocal urban media artworks requires a re-think of curatorial processes and the traditional role of the curator. The model for commissioning and co-curation developed for the Connecting Cities Network is based on the idea of the mobility of artists and the circulation of the artists' projects.

## **Engagement**

Insights and lessons of co-curating artworks in diverse environments and local production conditions, in a translocal framework, are shared with a specific focus on engagement and context.

## **Diversity and Translocality**

### **Diversity of Purpose**

We find ourselves repeatedly returning to the issue of purpose. What are these works for and who are they for? Purpose has many meanings and contexts which we have discussed at length. There are many levels including activism, civic engagement, and cultural identity. We may view purpose from a publicly engaged arts practice point of view. Agency, inclusion, empowerment, belonging and engagement will be important dimensions. Another viewpoint is a civic urban design angle, which may include concepts of placemaking, non-place, leisure, and gathering. Artists may self-contextualise their practice within activism, tactical media and various forms of socially engaged practice. Indeed, should we be suspicious of any form of “utility” as an agenda to subvert the intrinsic political and cultural value of urban media art as a public act which transcends categorisation?

### **Diversity of Partners**

The prospect of co-curating with so many different institutions is something completely new and very exciting. It had not been done before and it seemed to be a ground-breaking vision of curating. The scope of the work is extensive and the network engages actors ranging from grassroots, activist, and local groups to internationally leading cultural institutions situated in European Capitals of Culture. Types of organisations include public cultural institutions, creative labs, cultural enterprises, non-profit organisations and other entities of cultural production, each with their own unique practices and interests.

Media labs like iMAL, Medialab-Prado, and Ars Electronica Futurelab may prefer developing and prototyping new technologies themselves. Preferences on socially and politically engaged artworks differ from institution to institution. Riga, as European Cultural Capital, Quartier des Spectacles in Montreal, and the Digital Gallery of the SESI Building in São Paulo are urban media environments at the very centre of the city with huge audiences, and are inclined towards more spectacular types of projects, while others may prefer projects that have small audiences with more concentrated socially engaged risk-taking. Political and

cultural regulations and contexts may imply self-censorship, with a range of reasons and subjects in all involved countries, from Turkey to UK. All these technological and cultural programming differences were taken into consideration while finding curatorial consensus on partnerships and the final choices of the art projects.

### **Diversity of Infrastructure**

Each partner institution of the Connecting Cities Network varies in the technological infrastructure of their urban media environments. Some institutions have built-in media façades: Ars Electronica and FACT have low-resolution screens that can't reproduce video images in detail, but only abstract shapes or low resolution text. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb has a long, thin, horizontal triple screen that can show video images. Some institutions make use of video projections (in high resolution) in public spaces: at fixed locations (Madrid, Linz, Montreal, Liverpool, Melbourne etc.) or temporary locations (Berlin, Helsinki, Marseille, Stavanger etc.). Some institutions make use of existing commercial urban screen infrastructures, such as outdoor screens in Istanbul or video screens in Helsinki's and Berlin's metro. This implies that each chosen art project has to be adapted to at least two different media platforms and formats which may affect its aesthetic, sometimes significantly.

### **Diversity of Contexts**

Producing urban media artworks that are meant to circulate in various urban environments is radically different from the production of exhibitions for the traditional "white cube", the very concept of which is a conscious act of decontextualisation. The canvas for urban media is "place" and each place has its geographic, social and political context. The audience is not an "art world" audience, or not exclusively so, and comes with its own shared codes, histories and norms. To facilitate their encounters with the art projects, various tactics for "audience development" may be needed, including the presence of facilitators to enrich public interaction with the art works.

## **A Curatorial Model for Translocality**

One of the main aims and challenges of the project has been to devise a curatorial structure that works in the context of an international and translocal network. We decided to start from our network as curators, proposing co-curation as the main mode

of operation. We had to test and invent methods and techniques for project selection, production and evaluation.

The curatorial process of the CC Network was not an average curatorial or jury decision making system. We devised a simple approach which repeated the same basic template each year:

- Annual themes of the CC Network are selected to work as approximate common denominators for the programme, which can then be interpreted and adapted for each local context:
  - Networked City (2013), Participatory City (2014) and In/Visible City (2015)
- An international Open Call is held
- Artists are selected
- For each chosen project the establishment of a co-curatorial partnership between at least two institutions to guarantee production and circulation of the projects
  - A principle commissioning institution responsible for creation of the work
  - At least one other institution committed to staging the work
- Connecting Cities Events held internationally
- Connecting Cities Conferences held
- Evaluation Workshops held

Responses to three annual calls for artworks have been stored in an online database that is firstly assessed and evaluated by curators individually. This process is followed by face-to-face meetings, each time in a different city. Fresh and renewed criteria are discussed for shortlisted projects and collaboration and logistic possibilities as well. A project may be realised within the CC Network only if one CC partner institution agrees to take care of production and at least one more partner expresses an interest to “adapt” it. Following this logistic, shared budget modules were developed to support the realisation of the new projects.

We hoped this would be a workable collective curatorial approach, while maintaining a multiplicity of voices. However, the diversity of the infrastructures and contexts made it more and more clear throughout the years that broad consensus was impossible, and would obscure the richness of the diversity. So temporal and situated alliances were cultivated as modes of decision-making.

Our strategy is to explore a large space of creative possibilities with many commissions. Clearly, the guarantee of the circulation of an artwork in at least two cities is fundamental for the artists, who equated quality of the work and visibility. The different contexts are also a source of extra “questioning” for the artists, to make their work evolve. However, although this strategy was successful in producing many good outcomes, it necessarily meant that budgets were relatively small and timescales short. This had the effect that engagement times – to build continuity, trust and depth for artists and to explore issues in their pieces with communities – was quite short. Small budgets also had the effect of biasing commissions towards attracting proposals from emerging and early career artists with some notable exceptions. In the future we may wish to adopt a hybrid strategy of smaller projects and larger ones and perhaps invite commission proposals from both mid-career and established artists whose practice appears especially aligned to the curatorial issues being addressed.

Hidden behind these structural and institutional issues is an expanded and challenging role for the curator. Over time, as we established a stronger network sensibility as curators from different types of cultural institutions, our exchanges and collaborations developed into a kind of constantly evolving process of “research by curation”. Indeed, many parallels can be drawn between co-curation of translocal art works and methodologies such as practice-led research, action research and co-design. All involve cycles of action and reflection which combine the affordances of practice and theory in a breaching process which transcends the limitations of each when used in isolation. This opportunity for cyclic exploration of a work may be present in the long-term practice of artists but rarely for the curator to such a degree.

If we view co-curation as a form of cyclic exploration and enquiry, what is at its heart? When co-curation and translocality become central themes, the focus of the curator becomes one of *relational contexts*. Creating meaning, for example, between “dropped sculptures” and “site-specificity”. Between an object and its context, the role of the curator is to work with the artist to embed the work in a local framework, to create these in/tangible links and attach culturally relevant strings to the work, and make it relevant to the local audience and their needs. Furthermore, translocality places one more challenge before the artist and the curator, that of networks and simultaneity. They must anticipate and translate the instantaneous moment of connection and transformation like the flick of a “Babelfish”.

## Engagement and Translocality

Reaching audiences in public space may seem like an easy task: just drop your media on a big screen or project it on a façade. Usually involved are the expectations of quantity, of huge mass audiences for art on urban screens. But what about the qualities of these audiences? In order to understand audiences in public space, we need to address their agency and the various modes of engagement. Busy passers-by need to be stopped and made into an audience. Traditional audiences, who still maintain a distance to the artwork, will need to be encouraged to become interactive participants, and the artistic, very often experimental interfaces require “user support” in the form of invigilators. Finally there are the socially engaged participants, who in fact become co-producers of the work. The more agency there is, the smaller the numbers of participants – while the work of curating increasingly becomes that of sociotechnical facilitation.

We have found that identical artworks are received very differently depending on, not just the geographic and cultural factors, but also the type and depth of context creation at different localities. Context can involve many things, including the programme and engagement activities of the host institution, the locality of the installation, as well as the involvement and agency given to the local community. There are vast differences between city centres, neighbourhoods and suburban contexts. While the audiences in the visually crowded central areas may seem indifferent to urban art, the local audiences of an off-centre neighbourhood may embrace and engage with the art with curiosity and gratitude. As audiences engage with the art project they actively bring their context into the work. Networked culture brings an extra dimension to this process by enabling an actual exchange between communities and contexts, remotely and in real-time.

How do these social, cultural and technical differences contribute to the idea of *networking contexts*, of connecting the cities? Do differences deeply inhere the potential of relation? Translocality has the unique potential of orientation and change of perception, looking through the eye of another at your daily environment, interrupting the everyday.

## Reflections on Co-curation and Translocality

During this project we have engaged with the challenges and difficulties presented to curators by co-curation of translocal urban media art works. During the process we began to realise

that this very “seamfullness”, the friction involved in translocation from one context to another, may actually be a useful source of insight. Difference is actually *the* source of meaning and understanding.

Whereas every partner has a local culture and is embedded in very specific frame, be it culturally, politically or geographically, the new co-curation means finding the common ground in that moment of “in-betweenness”: between a local context and a European dimension.

The moment of “connecting” communities, audiences, places, and cultures creates links and leaves interpersonal traces in the form of knowledge of otherness, awareness of differences or similarities, shared experiences and common stories/memories, whereas each project (even though temporarily) opens up and creates spaces/places, relations, and meaning. Urban media art simultaneously stages, engages and links public audiences *between the tangible and the intangible*.

Co-curation presents obvious advantages of being able to confront in “real-time”, and test/justify, the choices of an art project within an international context. These exchanges immediately raised questions linked to the “local” context and make obvious the main concerns of a specific organisation such as avoiding problems in the public sphere, as well as other concerns such as audiences and budget considerations. Using the network as an experimental curation space made apparent recurrent challenges/questions, for example: What works well as a long-term installation on fixed infrastructures and what is better staged as an ephemeral event?

This last point returns us to our goals and what we actually want to create and how best to do that. What sort of permanence are we looking for? Do we want to focus on Trace-making or Placemaking? What emphasis do we wish to place on physical architecture versus social architecture and the social fabric? We have found in many instances that the enduring legacy is digitally empowered groups of artists, institutions and local communities. We may therefore, need to move from an infrastructure and event centric viewpoint to a community and engagement-focused viewpoint.

What have we learnt about curating connectivity? That to engage in the new practice of co-curation of translocality means encountering a multiverse of diversities. That co-curation requires new methods and concepts that capture relational contexts. If there is one statement, one insight, that stands out from this project and exemplifies its exploration of this curatorial frontier it is this: “It is not about content creation but *context* creation”.