

Curating/Containing: Exhibiting Digital Art about Mental Health

Vanessa Bartlett and Lizzie Muller

UNSW Art & Design
 Sydney, Australia
 v.bartlett@unsw.edu.au
 lizzie.muller@unsw.edu.au

Abstract

Museums and galleries have always been recognized as creating wellbeing outcomes. This paper builds upon this existing discourse with a study that is specific to the curation of digital art-works addressing the topic of mental health. It documents my own practice based research and audience response to the exhibition: *Group Therapy: Mental Distress in a Digital Age*, held at FACT, UK in 2015. Audience feedback was gathered using a psychosocial research method called the visual matrix, which is designed to capture more affective responses than existing methods of arts evaluation. Presenting this feedback, I focus on a perceived dichotomy between the historical and the digital, where audiences understood the asylum as a place of sanctuary and the digital content as anxiety provoking. I use this tension to propose next steps in my own practice alongside some wider considerations for curatorial approaches to digital art dealing with mental health. Issues of curatorial care are central, as I consider how a curator can support audiences to encounter challenging digital artworks that deal with mental distress. I adapt and test Wilfred Bion's concept of container-contained (also a key theoretical component of the visual matrix method) as a paradigm for this caretaking function.

Keywords

Curating, Evaluation, Audiences, Digital Art, Psychosocial Research, Practice-Based Research.

Introduction

Museums and galleries have always been recognized as creating wellbeing outcomes (Chatterjee & Noble, 2013) and happiness and mental health are burgeoning areas of discussion for many contemporary artists (Watts, 2015). My practice-based research in curating adds to this established discourse with a study that is specific to the curation of digital artworks and objects addressing the topic of mental health in gallery spaces. It is written from a curatorial perspective and is influenced by psychosocial approaches to museums and galleries, specifically the work of Lynn Froggett. Following on from her approach, it borrows selected ideas from object

relations theory to explore the affective and emotive dimensions of audience response to digital artworks that deal with mental health. These approaches are beginning to gain traction in the curatorial field, in the light of increasing interest in capturing the aesthetic and affective work undertaken by audience groups in response to exhibitions¹. These approaches are ideally suited to understanding the impact of aesthetic works addressing mental health, as they employ techniques and theories that are native to the territory of understanding the mind.

The primary research method used here is the visual matrix, a new technique developed by Froggett and her colleagues at the Psychosocial Research Unit at University of Central Lancashire. The method is applied to document audience response to *Group Therapy: Mental Distress in a Digital Age* co-curated by Mike Stubbs and Vanessa Bartlett. This exhibition, held at FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology) in 2015, used media artworks, archival material and digital research to explore the complex relationship between mental health and digital technologies. The arguments presented in this paper pivot around a tension that emerged in the audience feedback generated by one of the visual matrices conducted on *Group Therapy*. Images of the asylum depicted in work by Quintan Ana Wikswo and other objects in the exhibition were juxtaposed against the digital content, creating a perceived dichotomy between the historical and digital. While the group became caught up in the notion of the asylum as a place of stillness and sanctuary, the digital content was interpreted as overwhelming and anxiety provoking. As the group grapples with this tension in the visual matrix

¹ See *Curating Third Space*, an ARC funded research project applying Lynn Froggett's visual matrix method to investigate new knowledge produced by art-science collaborations (Muller, Bennett, Froggett, Bartlett, 2015).

process, it reveals a number of potential insights about the process of curating digital artworks about mental health for the museum or gallery space. In this paper I offer a set of conclusions to be drawn from this material that will inform my own future practice and a second iteration of the *Group Therapy* exhibition due to take place in Sydney in 2017.

As this paper unfolds issues of curatorial care and the institution become a central concern. I evolve ideas from Wilfred Bion, whose ideas also inform the theoretical make-up of the visual matrix, as a means of extrapolating the caretaking function of the curator and gallery. I consider uses for Bion's formulation of container-contained to make sense of the support that audiences require in the process of dealing with exhibitions that address digital mental health. I trace how the original curatorial framing of

the project percolates through audience responses in unexpected ways, creating an opportunity for audiences to do their own 'work' on themes related to mental health care and digital technologies. As I unfold this process it will become clear how the psychosocial research method offered a unique insight into understanding the deep psychological work conducted by audiences when they encounter an exhibition dealing with digital art that addresses mental health.

Background: Curating Digital Art About Mental Health

The first iteration of *Group Therapy* took place at FACT in Liverpool in March 2015. Featuring 13 contemporary artists, alongside digital tools and archival material, the exhibition examined the impact of our digital lives on mental health, selfhood and social relationships, while also exploring increased use of technology for mental health treatment. In several of the works selected for this exhibition, artists integrated technology and artistic inquiry to offer insight into the experience of mental distress or as a tool to elevate symptoms. For example Jennifer Canary Nikolova's *Labyrinth Psychotica* was an immersive installation that used LED lights and directional speakers to simulate the experience of psychosis. The technologies used here helped to create a metaphor for psychosis, of losing and finding oneself, and for how beautiful yet fearful the experience can be. The installation was intended not only to create empathy, but also to highlight the fact that everyone is capable of experiencing the sensations of panic,

anxiety and claustrophobia that characterize a psychotic experience. Other works served to reflect on new paradigms in our mental health created by technological progress. Katriona Beales' *White Matter* explored the seductive and habit forming qualities of mobile digital and online technologies in a work that addressed the emerging diagnostic territory of 'internet addiction'. In this installation viewers were invited to watch moving images projected on the ceiling through the reflection created in a collection of handheld black glass objects. Seductive and mesmerizing in nature, the work recalled the sensation of falling down a rabbit hole of hyperlinks late at night and losing awareness of time and space, an experience that many smartphone users will identify with.

From the outset the curation of *Group Therapy* sought not only to reflect on the relationship between technology and mental health, but to approach mental health systemically, considering social and political factors that impact on awareness and treatment. Issues of care and agency have always been key drivers in debates around how to treat mental distress *and* around the impact of technological progress on individual wellbeing. From antipsychiatry to the service user movement, questions of power and its relation to care have played a fundamental role in projects seeking to modernize mental health treatment over the past 100 years. Meanwhile debates over control and autonomy in online space are a key concern for many users of digital media who value their right to privacy. According to this framework, we selected a number of objects and artworks for the exhibition that referred to asylum histories and the punitive approaches sometimes adopted to mental health care. We hoped this would set a context for a larger debate about neurodiversity and the politics of biomedical approach to mental health.

While the phrase 'digital age' used in the title of the exhibition implies a concern with the present tense and with futurity, the conceptual roots of this exhibition are located very much in longitudinal and historical perspectives. This was intended partially in the spirit of a media archaeology (Parikka, 2013) approach, which understands all 'new' technologies in relation to their historical antecedents. For example, by curating a 1930s ECT machine alongside a set of contemporary mental health apps, the exhibition sought to frame a question about the coercive potential of digital mental health technologies. In doing so, it also sought to suggest some possible ideological synchronicity between punitive

asylum treatments and the current proliferation of commercial mental health technologies that seek to gather data and influence behavior (for more on this see Gardner, 2013).

I collected a large volume of digital artworks, archival objects and research material during the curatorial process. While conscious that presenting a breadth of content including ‘non-art’ objects would be a deviation from traditional curatorial processes, this was embraced as a form of media convergence that reflected the ‘digital age’ of the exhibition title. As technology is increasingly theorized less in terms of its ontological properties and more around the emotional labour it facilitates (Madianou & Miller, 2013; Berardi, 2009), there is scope to move beyond strict definitions of media art to build a curatorial narrative about digital mental health. This approach to curation is not without correlates in the field. Recent biennales and festivals such as DOCUMENTA (13) and the 55th Venice Biennale have adopted a stance that Langill & Muller have termed ‘post-disciplinary curating’, bringing objects and practices from anthropology, science, philosophy and psychology to bear on the exhibition space (Muller & Langill, 2016). At *MONA Museum of Old and New Art* in Tasmania, Muller suggests that gallery displays bringing together historical objects and media art foster an approach that ‘resists the disciplinary object’ (Muller, 2015).

While seeking to position the conceptual foundation of this exhibition I have regularly returned to Berardi’s words on affective labour and cognitive overload as a way of modeling the kind of experience that my curation sought to create. In *The Soul at Work*, Berardi describes new forms of estrangement created by the increasing use of digital technologies for both personal and professional use, in tandem with the increased levels of emotional labour that these technologies demand both at home and at work. This affective work itself is essential to the functioning of post-industrial capitalism and has a tendency to trap users in an endless cycle of affective production. By conflating dense collections of apps, artworks and archival material the exhibition sought to mirror digital space in terms offered by Berardi as ‘cognitive space overloaded with nervous incentives to act’ (Berardi, 2009, p.108). Reflecting digital and online spaces in modes of gallery display has been seen in other recent exhibitions of digital media. In *Electronic Superhighway: From Experiments in Art and Technology to Art After the Internet* (Whitechapel

Gallery, London, 2016) curator Omar Kholief attempted to survey an enormous body of technologically driven artistic production from 1966 to the present day. While earlier works were presented sparingly, areas of the gallery containing works from the ‘post-internet’ period took on a more chaotic aesthetic that one critic described as ‘junk-shop vibe’ (Fuller, 2016). The dense hang of the contemporary period appeared to accommodate the origins of many of the works as online pieces (Jayson Musson’s youtube videos for example) by seeking to mirror the qualities of online space. This exhibition can be understood as part of a wider coming to terms with digital space in the context of the white cube, which Group Therapy is also a part of. In the following sections we will observe how our own decision to work with ideas of media convergence, interdisciplinarity and online space in the curation of the exhibition appears to have influenced audience response to the Group Therapy exhibition.

Research method: The Visual Matrix

As a curator I have an investment in understanding audience experience. This concern comes in part from my interest in curatorial discourses that foreground methodological innovations that give insight into audience experience (Turnbull-Tillman, 2016; Muller, 2011). More crucially though in terms of my own approach to my practice, is a concern with how the impact of visual arts projects are framed in the wider arts and health sector and the problematic assertion of value through mechanisms that derive from clinical rather than artistic discourses (Broderick, 2011). The visual matrix was developed by The Psychosocial Research Unit at University of Central Lancashire to address several major gaps in existing methods of arts evaluation. Most crucial in the context of this research is the capacity of the visual matrix to access preverbal responses to a work of art. The qualities of aesthetic experience are often difficult to verbalise, however most existing arts evaluation models demand that participants do just that. This method works with images to build an impression of the audience’s subjective aesthetic experience. In this way, the visual matrix is highly suited to the task of responding to artworks dealing with mental health, as it provides a supportive environment for processing complex emotions that are hard to articulate.

In a matrix participants sit in a special configuration that is designed to prevent people addressing one

another directly. Participants are invited to ‘free associate’ images, emotions and associations stimulated by the exhibition. The 2-3 facilitators model this process and play an important role in creating the containment required for the process to unfold. If it works well, participants should enter a relaxed state of mind that allows them to create a shared collage of affect and imagery related to their aesthetic experience. The transcript of the matrix is then used as the basis of a series of structured panel discussions conducted over time by the research team. The early panels consider immediate images and their emotional resonance, while panels happening later in time look at broader issues such as social context. The researchers keep the original matrix ‘experience near’ by constantly returning to the transcript and their memory of the matrix itself.

There are three key theories that form an armature for this method; the scenic, the Rhizome and the concept of container-contained. Alfred Lorenzer’s work on the scenic offers a way to understand how participants undertake a group process through the collective unconscious in response to shared cultural material. Lorenzer is essential in defining how the matrix forms a ‘third space’ between the group and the aesthetic stimulus where unconscious processing can take place (Froggett, 2012, p.45; Muller et al, 2015). Additionally, Deleuze and Guattari’s Rhizome is used to describe the collage of imagery produced by the matrix as non-linear traces of meaning revealed through following intuitive, often oblique hermeneutic interpretation processes.

The third theoretical pillar of the matrix and the one that is central to this research is the psychoanalytic school of British Object relations, specifically the work of Wilfred Bion and his concept of containment. Container-contained is originated by Bion and describes both the capacity for processing unconscious thoughts (container) and the unconscious material that is processed (contained). It is a meeting between these two elements that a facilitator desires to create in the visual matrix. To demonstrate how the term functions, Joan and Neville Symington use the example of a distressed client who continually avoids investing effort in finding a job worthy of his intelligence, as doing so would involve admitting he has wasted 33 years on procrastination. The analyst describes this concept of waste as something too painful to acknowledge and asks, could you acknowledge this pain if I was sitting beside you? Here the pain is the material that cannot be contained and the offer of the

analyst to ‘sit beside’ provides the potential beginning for a container (Symington & Symington, 1996, p.55). The relation between container-contained is dynamic, there is always an emotion gravitating towards being processed. In the visual matrix containment is essential as ‘the capacity for moderating anxiety and retaining and processing unconscious affect linked to ideas’. (Froggett, et al 2012, p.12) If the container functions properly participants should enter a state of what Bion would refer to as ‘reverie’, where their pre-conscious, pre-verbal responses to the aesthetic stimulus can come to the fore. However, it is crucial to note here that for Bion, containment enables psychological processing not just of negative experience, but of the full range of human emotions. As Ogden states, the container: ‘with its benign connotations of a stable, sturdy delineating function—becomes a word that denotes the full spectrum of ways of processing experience from the most destructive and deadening to the most creative and growth-promoting’ (Ogden, 2004, p.1349). Containment provides a context or a circumstance in which any affective experience can be held and given expression.

In the next section I will discuss how Bion’s formulation of *container-contained* resonates in my research beyond the practice of collecting evaluative data, to influence the mechanics of my wider curatorial processes. I will describe how my experience of implementing the visual matrix as evaluation, gave rise to a deeper consideration of how containment might be made applicable to the whole curatorial and evaluative process. I will also consider how curators might create containing environments that support audiences in the process of encountering works of art that deal with psychological distress. This concern with creating containing environments is led by my belief that in the field of arts and health it is imperative that practitioners be engaged in making work that deals not with creating ‘feel good’ emotions, but with offering challenging aesthetic encounters (such as works from *Group Therapy* that explored internet addiction and psychosis simulation). Integral to this position is the question of how a curator can offer a supportive environment for this challenging material to be digested and facilitate the personal growth that might emerge as part of this encounter. This research adds to the long-standing museological tradition of creating a suitable backdrop for encounters with objects and experiences, a field in which some psychosocial work has already

been applied. In Froggett and Trustman containment is applied to describe how museums might serve to reduce anxiety in the process of taking in unfamiliar objects:

It is tempting to compare elements of [this account of] human development to the curatorial function of a museum that both holds (looks after) objects and contains them (provides a structure that prevents their loss or decay). Equally important but often unacknowledged functions are to contain the emotional responses of the museum visitor, provide the conditions for attentiveness and, for people who are ill at ease in such environments, assuage the anxiety objects may provide (2014, p.490)

In the context of this research *container-contained* provides a means of considering the enabling function of the curator in both the curatorial and evaluative processes surrounding an exhibition. In the following section we use data from one of the visual matrices to observe how audiences seek containment for their affective responses to the responses to the Group Therapy exhibition.

Audiences Seeking Containment: Responses to Group Therapy

Part of the value of the visual matrix is that it creates a space to observe as audiences test imagery and ideas offered by the artworks and other exhibition content. Images move between participants, transforming and gathering meaning as the process unfolds. The following section tracks the development of the image of the asylum and attendant questions of institutional care as this audience group grapples with its resonance within the *Group Therapy* exhibition using the visual matrix process. The result of this exploration will be a set of assertions about the relationship between the digital and analogue materials in the exhibition and how they led this group to a particular stance on their own anxieties about technology and mental health.

The visual matrix opened with participants expressing a little discomfort with the process and with an absence of the kind of image led and impressionistic responses that should indicate the development of reverie. For example, there were contributions from one or two members of the group who were concerned about their ability to give appropriate feedback as they felt that they had not had enough time to experience the exhibition:

So I rather than try and go in and experience it in a rush I decided I am not going to be able to experience it right now I will come back when it is quiet in the

early morning so that I can experience the whole exhibition, have as much information as I need to so it's a question for you really of just an extra hour to really absorb some of that

While this kind of feedback does reflect a legitimate methodological concern (the time available for participants to view the exhibition was limited) it also reflects the presence in the participants of the kinds of anxiety that containment is intended to ease. This was my first time as a facilitator of this method and my ability to create containment was still developing. This led me to think laterally about my containing role not just in the evaluative process, but also in the making of the entire exhibition. Had the exhibition itself been a containing space that helped audiences to process anxieties arising in response to the more challenging works? Or was the anxious affect that emerged in the matrix symptomatic of emotion that had not been well enough held in the exhibition space as well as the evaluation process? One of the crucial arguments postulated about the visual matrix is its capacity to act as a mirror to its aesthetic stimulus. This isomorphism creates a space that allows participants to some extent to “relieve” the exhibition’ therefore offering researchers the opportunity to glimpse the nature of the ‘perceptual, affective, aesthetic work that is done by the audience within the primary experience’ (Muller et al, 2015). With this in mind I began to reflect on ways that the curation of the exhibition may have served to limit the audience’s capacity for deep engagement. However, as the visual matrix progressed across its one-hour running time, the imagery and emotion that was registered by the group did become more impressionistic, reflecting the increased presence of reverie. The group began to situate their anxiety increasingly within the digital content of the exhibition and as a register of their feeling that the media saturated environment was too much for them to process. The exhibition was later compared to a set of ‘hyperlinks’ or ‘a wikipedia page on group therapy’ in which multiple points of information consumption were presented:

Like you were saying constant consumption on different levels you know you kind of bookmark all these things and never read them it is a bit like that with the exhibition you kind of ‘I want to see all of this’ and then you kind of are paralyzed almost into never seeing anything.

The paralysis highlighted by participants here can be seen as a reflection of forms of fatigue and depression

that are inevitable consequences of overwhelming and affectively loaded digital spaces (Berardi, 2009, p.10). As referred to during my discussion of the curatorial framing of the exhibition, the show sought to reflect Berardi's conception of 'cognitive space overloaded with nervous incentives to act' (Berardi, 2009, p.108). Yet for some audience members this translated so completely to their exhibition experience that it almost started to become a barrier to engagement. While elsewhere the critical and evaluative feedback on the exhibition was positive, the visual matrix gave insight into these feelings of frustration, a fact that serves as testimony to the value of the method.



Figure 1. CARRIE BURIED BENEATH CATALPA BEANS // MOUNTAIN SWEEP, Panorama Detail, Quintan Ana Wikswo, 2014

In response to this sense of paralysis, the group appears to gravitate toward two analogue objects in the exhibition that were singled out as different to the media artworks and multiple screens. These objects opened up the visual matrix to a trajectory of exploration that started as a fascination with 'stillness' and developed as an exploration of the asylum and public institutions more broadly. Coming to terms with the way that the asylum is represented, the group worked through responses of fear and nostalgia to draw a direct comparison between the historical asylum and contemporary new media environments.

Two objects within the exhibition, the ECT machine and New York based artist Quintan Ana Wikswo's photographs of abandoned asylums in West Virginia (Figure 1.) are sited early in the matrix as moments of 'stillness' that are also 'menacing' presences and refer to 'the institution and all the terrible things that go on behind the walls of the institution'. As an artist Wikswo is invested in uncovering alternative narratives

about incarcerated and marginalised people who were admitted into asylums under the cover of moral cleansing by governments that wanted to eradicate non-white, homosexual or other 'undesirable' members of society. Her images for this exhibition show fragments of asylum exteriors and were shot using salvaged government cameras manufactured during the 1930s and 40s using institutional slave labour. At first the group associate this work and the ECT machine with feelings of coercion and are anxious about their own lack of agency in the face of systemic abuse and institutional power. The feeling of being sucked into the centre of something that one is unable to control pairs with a worry about being passively complicit in institutional abuse:

But there's a horrible feeling there of being er coerced into treatment it's like ah you know something really horrible about that isn't there, once you're in this within this boundary its like something that sucks you into its centre and you you've got no power over it

Yeah as an object it kind of has carries a weight of cultural anxiety

So we feel anxious when we see that even though, you know as a society we are complicit in our enabling that to happen when it was happening to a large extent. In the same way we were complicit as a society in allowing people, you know single mothers to be put into asylums

The group works with these objects and their non-digital status and struggles to determine whether they in fact enflame or alleviate their collective anxiety about the way society responds to mental health. The 'weightiness' of these objects and the anxieties they represent reoccurs throughout this section of the text, with much significance being placed on their conspicuous state of belonging to a predigital age. Eventually the group makes a direct comparison between the still and sensorially impoverished atmosphere that they associate with the asylum and the overstimulation of digital environments. The asylum and its firm belonging to the predigital age may be lonely and punitive, but it also has a distinct appeal. In the following passage we can observe the group moving away from their fears around their lack of agency in the face of institutional abuses, toward a stance that this more complicit. This is embodied in the very nostalgic image of the idealized asylum:

Because that's so interesting that that's like kind

of place where you might potentially end up and it's just so isolating and lonely compared to the kind of overstimulation of the with all of the screens and kind of not knowing what to do with all of that information and then not being able to deal with any kind of conditions so it's interesting still that those, the way that the institution is represented was very still, still images and the still object and if you did find yourself in that environment then that kind of stillness is what you would then be in potentially.

I found something really reassuring about this the kind of certainty of an asylum.

You feel like you know what you're getting into You kind of like, that's defined as an object in the space in which all the cultural, all the cultural anxiety or uncertainty is contained, whereas the exhibition represents a much more nebulous erm version of how that anxiety about mental health public secret is distributed now more across different spaces different dialogues and different approaches and different alternative ways of dealing with it

Yes that's like all the apps that were there

Exactly so there is all this technological kind ways of dealing with it and yet the I don't believe it's right but there is a certainty about the physical embodiment of a building which says this is where we contain all that which somehow might perhaps even help society function better

I think there is something quite appealing about being somewhere where your screen time is massively limited and someone tells you what to do

And it's really quiet. Maybe that's just me?

It brought to mind with me the images of the old Victorian mental hospitals that have now been largely demolished with water towers like leper colonies always in beautiful, beautiful countryside.

Associations to the asylum embodying 'certainty' and offering a picturesque outlook in 'beautiful countryside' speak to a moment of idealizing on behalf of the group, as they explore the exhibition for objects that hold and contain their own anxieties. As Foucault has observed, the asylum has throughout history served a source of fear, but also as an image of threat contained (Foucault, 1988, p.65). Creating a site, which embodies the perceived horror of madness permits the rest of society to be separate from it, free from the threat of being 'sucked in' to mental dysfunction and attendant incarceration. As we will see in the following section, observing the

group reach toward this nostalgic image of the asylum has brought about a number of key reflections for the role of digital art about mental health in my research.

Museum, Gallery, Asylum: Implications for Digital Practices

As many curators and specialists in museum studies have noted, there is a degree of symbolic slippage between the spaces of the museum, gallery and asylum. In her essay *Who Cares?* Kate Fowle notes the historical coupling between curating and caregiving when she states that 'from 1362 "curator" was used to signify people who cared for (or were in superintendence of) minors or lunatics' (Fowle, 2007, p.10). From the 16th century the word became more directly applicable to persons in charge of museums and places of exhibition, yet the implications of hierarchy were retained. The museum and the curator's role within it developed into the 18th and 19th centuries as sites for the display of power and as devices for giving order to a complex set of social relations. For sociologist Tony Bennett, author of *The Birth of the Museum* there is an historical link between nineteenth and twentieth century museum practices and the articulation of order and provision of education. He takes a Foucaultian perspective to suggest that visitors were given 'object lessons in power' (Bennett, 1995, p. 62) becoming experts in self-surveillance and self-regulation: 'the exhibitonary complex... perfected a self-monitoring system of looks in which the crowd comes to commune with and regulate itself through interiorizing the ideal and ordered view of itself as seen from the controlling vision of power' (1995, p.69). Not unlike the social function of the asylum, the museum or gallery served as a determinate of moral codes of conduct. In the group's reaching toward the asylum as a site of 'certainty' in the face of the 'nebulous' digital spaces of the exhibition, there appears to be a moment of nostalgia for the social codes presented by museums, galleries and asylums where 'someone tells you what to do'.

While we might see symbolic links between the museum and the asylum as tied explicitly to a more historical vision of museology, we might also consider this proposition in relation to more contemporary perspectives on museums and galleries. For Claire Bishop writing in 2013 the role of the gallery or museum in a post global financial crisis era continues to be controlled by agendas related to wealth and power. She argues in *Radical Museology* that the purpose

of most contemporary museums and galleries is less about preserving a complex research culture around artistic and social issues, than it is about attracting corporate investors, philanthropists and mass audiences (Bishop, 2013, p.11). Moreover she sites the grandiose architecture (or ‘starchitecture’) of many large contemporary institutions as statements of the power and wealth embodied in these buildings, a strategy of course widely employed in asylum architecture. The populist and civilizing function of the art museum perhaps persists today, and in their search for certainty in the image of the asylum the group perhaps brings forward a latent inclination to cooperate with institutions that perform these didactic and containing functions.

Within this turning towards the ‘certainty’ of the physical embodiment of a building is also recoil from the ‘nebulous’ vision of mental health that the group locates within the digital material in the exhibition. While the asylum contains the ‘mental health public secret’ in a stable way, the digital material in the exhibition distributes it across multiple sites and modes of complexity. In contemporary new media curating there has been significant discourse examining the relationship between media practices and the exhibition spaces that contain them. New media art-works have characteristically been framed as open ended, collaborative and distributed by their creators, a remit that does not fit easily into the image of the classical art museum. For curator Christiane Paul writing in 2006 gallery spaces, with their tendency to create ‘a “sacred” space’ (Paul, 2006) for the contemplation of objects do not make conducive containers for media artworks that demand to be touched, interacted with, or broadcast over multiple sites and spaces. As discourses in this area have developed in recent years, new media art has increasingly been welcomed into the musicological sphere. Galleries such as FACT have developed specifically to house digital works and curators such as Beryl Graham, Sarah Cook and Steve Dietz have made significant contributions to integrating the presence of media art in large museums and galleries (Graham, 2010, p.190). With this in mind, there are few grounds on which to claim any real ontological schism between digital media and the institutions that contain it, particularly in the case of an exhibition space like FACT. However, the group’s act of invoking these more simplistic positions on the complexity of ideas around mental health presented by the digital content and the

relative simplicity of the institution, provide insight into how audiences are inclined to respond to challenging or over-stimulating exhibition environments when appropriate containment is not created.

Returning to the idea of container-contained, we can begin to position the group’s initial distinction between digital media as ‘nebulous’ and overwhelming and the comparative sanctity of an asylum as a set of anxieties seeking containment. What emerges in the audience feedback is nervousness about a perceived complexity of the perspectives on mental health presented in the multiple media and digital forms in the exhibition. Moreover, the group expresses concern about the proximity of some of the technological issues to their own daily experiences and the loss of the historical asylum as a way of making mental illness separate. Later in the matrix, the group’s working through the concept of asylum did develop further in the direction of an empathetic relating to the experience of incarceration. Yet this process of testing out the asylum as a desirable space (which is uniquely evidenced by the visual matrix process), speaks volumes about how audiences might process the anxieties brought about by an exhibition of confronting digital artworks that deal with mental health. While our curatorial framing of the exhibition sought to put forward the asylum as a punitive space that represented the darker side of mental health care, it took on significance as a place of refuge for this audience group. Our curation of the exhibition as ‘cognitive space overloaded with nervous incentives to act’ (Berardi, 2009, p.108) certainly succeeded in recreating many of the universal anxious encounters that define the digital age. Yet for this participant group there is a moment of clear desire for the gallery to be a space that holds and contains their anxiety rather than amplifying it.

It is crucial to remember here that for Bion, when containment is created it enables psychological processing of the full range of human emotions. An exhibition environment that induces containment should therefore afford space to tolerate even the most challenging and overwhelming experiences. Difficult emotions aroused by works such as *Labyrinth Psychotica* and *White Matter* should not be outside of the boundaries of containment or of an engaging curatorial strategy. Yet this research suggests that a desire to hold and contain should be integral to all stages of the curatorial approach in order to facilitate deep audience engagement with the topic of digital mental health. It should be stated here

that the object of this wider body of research is not to arrive upon a universal curatorial formula for facilitating containment in exhibitions of digital art about mental health. Indeed, searching for such a blueprint would run counter to the affect centered and context driven nature of the methods employed here. Rather this approach seeks to build curatorial capacity for sensitive and empathetic exhibition making that is informed by a deep engagement with audience experience.

Conclusions: Curatorial Implications

Overall the critical and evaluative reception of the *Group Therapy* exhibition was positive and it was only in the visual matrix that deeper anxieties emerged, a fact that serves as testimony to the unique value of this method. While the next iteration of the *Group Therapy* exhibition will not abandon its interest in reproducing the overstimulation of digital environments, it will seek to pay greater attention to ways that the exhibition environment may elevate or exacerbate anxiety-making experiences, and to question how valuable these experiences are for audience engagement.

Strategies under consideration include reducing the number of objects/works and collaborating with the exhibition designer to create spaces that support deeper immersion with individual works rather than an imperative to digest lots of material simultaneously.

The significance of the image of the asylum in audience feedback on the *Group Therapy* exhibition suggests that while digital media has integrated into gallery and museum spaces over the past ten years, audiences may still fall back on outdated distinctions between the historical museum and digital media. This is perhaps particularly pertinent in the case of exhibitions dealing with health and wellbeing, where the historical museum has symbolic connections to the asylum and its nostalgic connotations of containing anxiety. Although audiences at FACT are well versed in digital media, they still appear in this case to encounter a degree of difficulty dealing with the way that the exhibition escalates anxiety using digital forms.

My application of container-contained provides an experimental paradigm for a curator who wishes to support audiences to experience challenging digital artworks that deal with mental health. Its usefulness resides in its accommodation of both positive and distressing emotions, therefore pushing beyond the traditional 'feel good' sentiments of some arts and health

practices.

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Faculty of Art and Design, Australia.

Authors' Biographies

Vanessa Bartlett is a researcher and curator based between Australia and the UK. She is a PhD Candidate at UNSW Art & Design where her research investigates connections between digital technologies and psychological distress through reflective curatorial practice.

Lizzie Muller is a curator and writer specialising in audience experience, interaction and interdisciplinary collaboration. She is Senior Lecturer and Director of the Masters in Curating and Cultural Leadership at UNSW