Institution: University of Sussex

Unit of Assessment: UoA 23 Sociology

Title of case study: 'Like Shadows: A Celebration of Shyness': Influence on creative practices and visitor experiences of interactive exhibitions, through Shyness research.

1. Summary of the impact

'Like Shadows: A Celebration of Shyness' brought together members of the art and lay-public communities in a lively debate about visitor shyness in contemporary interactive museums and galleries, in relation to wider debates about public engagement and social exclusion. The project informed the working practices of the ten local artists and curators with whom the researchers collaborated, who created new exhibits on the theme of shyness and designed the event to appeal to shy visitors. Their reports [see Sections 4 and 5] show that this experience has made them more aware of the propensity of digitally-mediated artworks to evoke feelings of shyness amongst visitors, and of the need to reconsider the design and presentation of such exhibits to be more 'shy-friendly'. This community-focused event drew in over 7000 visitors, whose feedback confirmed the tendency of interactive, digital media-based exhibits to assume a level of performative confidence and technical knowledge, excluding visitors who felt shy.

2. Underpinning research

The exhibition showcased the results of a collaborative EPSRC-funded project between the Departments of Sociology and Informatics at the University of Sussex, which ran from October 2008 to March 2012, entitled 'Supporting shy users in pervasive computing'. This project was part of Susie Scott's (R5) original programme of research on the 'sociology of shyness', which has explored the ways in which shyness is created by situational factors and social interaction, rather than being an individual personality trait. Scott has demonstrated how shyness is a common experience, particularly in certain kinds of situation that require performing one's identity in public, and where the rules of social behaviour are ambiguous. This has been illustrated by Scott's empirical research on groups of self-defined 'shy' people (R5), university lecturers (R6), ethnographers (R3) and swimming pool patrons (R4). Scott's research agenda aims to de-pathologise shyness by redefining it as a social rather than an individual 'problem', whose creation is contingent upon cultural norms, and whose management is the responsibility of social environments.

The project explored how pervasive computing devices (those that are built into the environment, mobile, hidden or invisible) can affect shyness by either by causing it, heightening the experience, or making it easier to cope with. We studied this in different social contexts, including classrooms, online games and networking sites, and art galleries/museums. The project was a collaboration with the Informatics department at Sussex; the Informatics researchers designed a new technological device, ShineUs (see section 4 below; R2). The Sociology team (Susie Scott, Tamsin Hinton-Smith, Vuokko Härmä and Karl Broome) looked at visitors' responses to interactive art exhibitions that used digital media. We compared an exhibition at Fabrica, a small contemporary art gallery in Brighton, to one at the more traditional Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The methods we used included interviews with visitors and staff, observations of people's behaviour in the galleries, questionnaires, focus groups and an online survey. The primary aim of the project was to understand how interactive exhibitions of this kind, with a high technological and/or performative component, might evoke feelings of shyness in visitors; a secondary aim was to raise artists' and curators' awareness of this as a barrier to public participation, and to encourage them to think more inclusively about their working practices.

Our results (R1) highlighted a common theme in the experience of shyness: the fear about 'not knowing the rules' of a social situation and of 'getting it wrong'. Art can seem like a strange and exclusive world, which is quite intimidating to those unfamiliar with it. Visitors to both of the art galleries said that they disliked exhibitions that did not have a clear explanation or instructions about what the artists had intended or what they were supposed to do when looking around. Many people felt shy about being asked to 'play' with technology or 'perform' in some unspecified way when engaging with

the artworks, especially when other people might be watching. They wanted to be told how to understand the art and give the correct response, so that they would not risk making a fool of themselves. Some people preferred to wait and watch other visitors before having a go, to make sure that they got it 'right'. This conflicted with the ideas of interactive artists and curators, who said that there were no secret rules or intended messages, nor any 'right' way of doing it – their optimistic model of 'visitor self-discovery' encouraged visitors to explore freely and make their own interpretations. We therefore argued that this model was unrealistic insofar as it was not grounded in the lived experiences and situated practices of ordinary gallery- and museum-goers. Artists, curators and gallery staff stand to gain a great deal from listening to such views from their visiting public and by continuing to encourage community engagement in the arts. We also encourage these art providers to be more aware of shy visitors' concerns, and to design exhibits that are more 'shy-friendly'. This is why we organised the 'Like Shadows' event, to disseminate the research findings and generate wider debate on this issue.

Collaborating artists and curators

- Helen Sloan (curator)
- 'Like Shadows' exhibition artists: Anna Dumitiru (Artist in Residence, University of Sussex), Alex May, Alexa Wright, Ben Swailes, Olu Taiwo, Peter Hardie, Tom Keene, Kyp Kyprianou, Jeannie Driver and Tina Gonsalves

3. References to the research

R1 Scott, S., Hinton-Smith, T., Härmä, V. and Broome, K. (2013) 'Goffman in the gallery: interactive art and visitor shyness', *Symbolic Interaction*, 36(4): 417-438.

R2 Chalmers, D., Calcraft, P., Fisher, C., Whiting, L., Rimmer, J. and Wakeman, I. (2013) 'Mediating exposure in public interactions'. Paper presented at the Conference 'Human Factors in Computing Systems', Paris, 28 April 2013.

R3 Scott, S., Hinton-Smith, T., Härmä, V. and Broome, K. (2012) 'The reluctant researcher: shyness in the field', *Qualitative Research*, 12(6): 715–734.

R4 Scott, S. (2009) *Re-clothing the emperor: the swimming pool as a negotiated order.* Symbolic Interaction, 32 (2). 123-145.

R5 Scott, S. (2007) *Shyness and Society: The Illusion of Competence.* Basingstoke: Palgrave.

R6 Scott, S. (2007) "College hats or lecture trousers? Stage fright and performance anxiety in university lecturers." *Ethnography and Education*, 2 (2), 189-205

Outputs can be supplied by the University on request.

4. Details of the impact

The 'Like Shadows: A Celebration of Shyness' exhibition, held at the Phoenix Gallery during Brighton's 'White Night' festival on 29 October 2011 attracted over 7,000 visitors. Beyond academia, the exhibition has had a significant impact on a number of distinct user-groups and beneficiaries, both directly – on the night itself – and indirectly, over the longer term.

Firstly, *gallery visitors in the local community*. The White Night is a major arts festival in Brighton, attracting thousands of visitors and aimed explicitly at widening community participation in the arts, beyond the usual (middle-class) gallery-going population. Thus, by holding our exhibition at this event, we effectively communicated the research to local people; over 7,000 visitors attended over the night [see Section 5, C2]. Importantly, also, these visitors provided us with some useful feedback (through questionnaires and comments via the specially designed 'ShineUs' device; see below) about their experiences of shyness in museums and galleries, and suggestions about how these environments could be made more accessible. There was a clear preference for exhibits that provided some instructions, explanation or 'rules' as to how the technology worked, to reduce visitors' anxieties about

'getting it wrong', and a preference for exhibits with clear signage. Visitors also reported that they enjoyed having some exhibits that allowed for a more passive spectatorship rather than demanding active engagement; the 'relaxation' areas we had set up in the gallery (quiet corners with sofas, refreshments and artworks that could just be looked at) were very popular throughout the evening. These findings were communicated to artists, curators and other audiences, through the dissemination activities detailed below.

Secondly, *curators* benefited from hearing this visitor feedback, and from the impact of the event in general. Our research team collaborated with local curator Helen Sloan throughout the project, and she reported that the experience had positively informed her working practices. In particular, our critique of the 'ideal visitor' model that was implicit in most interactive exhibits (the assumption that visitors will be comfortable and confident with using technology, as well as extroverted enough to perform in public without embarrassment) led her to rethink the design and layout of exhibitions she curated to make them more 'shy-friendly' [C1]. Helen's non-academic dissemination activities, like ours, have encouraged curators to consider a wider range of possible ways of engaging with contemporary artworks, on a continuum from active engagement to passive spectatorship. Helen presented the research findings to other curators through a non-academic conference presentation (Association of Art Historians conference, Open University, Milton Keynes, March 2012), and a book chapter (Sloan, H. (2013) 'Performativity in the art gallery', in Remes, O. and Trench, C. (eds) *Performativity in the Gallery: Staging Interactive Encounters.* Oxford: Peter Lang Ltd), which contributed to debates about the 'inclusive museum/gallery' to the arts and heritage industries more widely. Susie Scott, gave an invited presentation about the research to a workshop of artists and curators at the Museums and Cultural Institutions as Spaces for Participation Symposium (Roskilde University, Denmark, December 2012), which encouraged a lively debate about shyness and accessibility.

Thirdly, the *artists* who exhibited at the event said that they had found the experience worthwhile in informing their own working practices, by learning how to make their artworks more publicly accessible. Several of the artists told us that they had become more aware of the issue of shyness in gallery visitors, and were interested in the theoretical question of shifting the responsibility for 'dealing with' this onto the arts institutions. The Sussex artist-in-residence, Anna Dumitriu, in particular, found the experience helpful in opening up new areas of research and generating ideas for future artworks. She and other exhibiting artists, such as Tom Keene and Alex May, confirmed that the event had been useful to them in building their public profile and leading on to other opportunities for work [C3, C4, C5]. Dumitriu, May and Keene also presented a non-academic paper about the project at the ISEA (International Symposium on Electronic Art) conference in Istanbul, Turkey, in September 2011, thus disseminating the research findings further within the artistic community. Comments from the artists and curator are shown in Section 5.

Fourthly, two of the Co-Investigators (Dan Chalmers and Ian Wakeman) in Informatics designed a new piece of *technology,* which was deployed during the exhibition event and has had a demonstrative impact on software systems in other, everyday settings. This device, called 'ShineUs', allows visitors to leave anonymous feedback comments on a projector screen by scanning QR codes on physical artefacts (in this case, the exhibited artworks) into their mobile phone, from which comments can be sent via SMS text message, Facebook or Twitter. The device was designed to enable consumers participating in discussion forums to control the extent of a) the public visibility of their comments, and b) their anonymity/personal exposure, according to their individual preferences for different levels of sociability, active engagement, trust in the others present, and 'technological comfort zones'. At the White Night, 30 people left comments about the exhibits: for example, 16 users said that they felt less than confident about understanding art, while 18 rated themselves at the higher end of a scale of self-defined shyness. Since then, the device has also been used in other contexts, such as a Farmer's Market (where customers shared comments and advice about the goods available) and an academic computer-science conference (where delegates chose to leave more critical comments about presentations using higher levels of concealment and anonymity).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Participants in the 'Like Shadows' White Night exhibition (and another artist, who heard about the

exhibition after the event) gave the following comments about its positive impact on their work and continuing reach and significance:

C1 "Like Shadows' was extremely helpful to my curatorial practice. I had been working on interaction and audiences for years but this was the first time that there was an opportunity to focus on the less gregarious of us. It really helped me to focus on the layout of the exhibition and the layers of interaction in the chosen work so that they could be exploited by varying degrees of exhibitionism from audiences. This has informed my practice, since, in the design and layout of exhibitions with an interactive component. The artists unequivocally found the experience positive and many said that it had enabled them to think differently about their future work in the context of Shyness. We took the work to two South West venues (Salisbury Arts Centre and Arnolfini), showing it over a few days rather than during one evening. I am continuing to work with most of the artists and, at the moment, most notably with Olu Taiwo, who was artist in residence at Salisbury Arts Centre in 2012 and worked alongside a digital programme including some elements of the Shyness project'. *Helen Sloan (White Night art show curator)*

C2 'On behalf of Phoenix Brighton, I would say the event was an excellent exhibition/event which formed part of the White Night Festival and brought in over 7,000 visitors. Visitor feedback was extremely good, and much centered around the high quality of the work and the exhibition design'. *(Phoenix Gallery, Brighton)*

C3 'In terms of my own practice, the 'Like Shadows' event was fantastic for me, it enabled me to develop my project through working in collaboration the 'Shyness' team and put together a new biodigital performance work which pushed forward my ideas and created, through working with such a great curator, a sensitive environment for the piece. Since the event, I exhibited documentation of the piece at The Galerie Libre Cours in Brussels as part of an EU event called ICT and Art Connect; this also involved a two-day workshop which took place at The European Commission and at IMAL Gallery. I have given numerous talks which discuss the work, including a keynote at 'Arte, Ciencia y Technologia, Tres Pilares, Una Conexion' at Goaz Museum in Bilbao. Most recently [in 2013], the project has fed into my work with social robotics in creating 'My (New) Robot Companion' which has been shown to over 90,000 people now (http://myrobotcompanion.tumblr.com/). *Anna Dumitriu (exhibiting artist)*

C4 'Participating in the show and having the opportunity to exhibit at Brighton White Night was an extremely important opportunity for me, I have since been invited to run two workshops and give a talk at Phoenix Brighton on my digital art practice, all of which have been sell out events'. *(Alex May, exhibiting artist)*

C5 'The project reignited a creative collaboration between myself and Kypros Kypriano where we have continued to devise ideas and explore potential for projects that utilise the reactive painting idea which we developed through 'Blushing Mona Lisa' [the piece they exhibited at the Like Shadows event] (www.theanthillsocial.co.uk/projects/blushing-mona-lisa). The Shyness project also led to a paper presented at EVA London Conference 2012,'. *(Tom Keene, exhibiting artist)*

C6 '[The project] raised interesting questions about the trend of 'interactive art' in general and also for my own practice. I certainly aim to encourage a performative response from viewers and so the study is providing me with another angle from which to examine and reflect upon this element of my work. I have chosen to deliberately make installations which request more of a viewer than the passive experiences of viewing traditional art. Of course it is always important to reconsider these sorts of things and I am finding that your study is a very interesting way for me to do so. I try (and am continuing to try) to find a balance between making work that can offer a little surprise by encouraging some curiosity from the person who engages with it whilst avoiding making something that is intimidating; your study reminds me just how fine this boundary can be.' *(Emma Reid, interactive artist)*