Expanding our Horizons: Innovation, Transformation, and the Future

Annette Mees, Tateo Nakajima
Notes • February 24, 2021

Evolution of the Arts in a Digital World

SYMPOSIUM 2021

JANUARY 6 – FEBRUARY 24, 2021

WINSPEAR   EDMONTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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"Expanding Our Horizons: Innovation, Transformation, and the Future"
Evolution of the Arts in a Digital World Symposium - Session No. 8 Notes
February 24, 2021

Audience Labs at the Royal Opera House doing things differently since 2018.

Exploring how you can make great art using digital technology.

Background: Royal Opera House, London

- 6 years ago, Annette started a capsule project called 'Open Up'.
- The Royal Opera house is typically set up for performances only.
- Current CEO Alex Beard wanted to open the building during the day to welcome people even when there were not performances.
- Doing this made it easy for the building to become part of Covent Garden where it is situated.
- Opening during the day allowed the building to become more transparent - literally!
- What does it philosophically mean to open the organization? For most people, opera and ballet are art forms that are distant and something you only see once in your life.
- Turning to technology can help open up the art form.

Audience Labs at the Royal Opera House

- This is a space for pioneering artists and tech companies to create boundary-breaking contemporary opera and ballet experiences.
- These are places for meeting and working with other artists.
- Artists come first in this space. The technology is secondary.
- Use the Audience Labs to push both the artists and technology to do something new; something of the now.
- These spaces are not about showcasing technology demonstrations. It is about creating great art.

Four Pillars

1. New art, forms, and voices

   o Technology is an expansion of the stages.
   o The Opera House will broadcast pre-existing work. (Annette's department does not focus on this)
   o Technology is a stage for Annette.
   o New forms of art mean engaging with experimentations.
   o Technology allows you to think about who makes art and how they make art.
   o Thinking about diversity and inclusion has become second nature but is still important to consider.

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2. New partners and processes
   o You want to engage with different expertise. Work with local and international companies, such as Google. Can engage some cool mediums such as technology magicians.
   o As you work with partners, you must re-examine your processes. You will need to consider how to bring two different processes together and create a general understanding.

3. New spaces, places, and audiences

   o The fabric of a digital experience is a way to bring audiences within the four walls of your building but is also a way for you to break outside of your four walls.
   o Theatres are the perfect place to house the art form. With digital, it allows you an expanded area to work with. You can reach out to different audiences.
   o Consider:
     ▪ What do you make?
     ▪ Who do you make it for?
     ▪ Who do you want to connect with?
     ▪ What are the stories you want to tell?
   o Digital can bring people together.

4. New money and business models
   o Business models often underpin what we do.
   o In a digital sphere, the business model is relatively new, and it is an investment for innovation.
   o How does our culture respond to our new digital offerings?
   o New philanthropists who are interested in working with cultural organizations in the digital space and culture.
   o Our initial response is to figure out how to get our audience to pay for digital content. Digital content is often seen as another revenue stream. This is not always the case. We need to find a way to balance how digital content is paid for.
   o Cultural organizations are attractive partners for technology companies. They can provide the platform and we provide the experiences.

Experimentation with Purpose

- Experiment with form and artistry.
- Experiment with money and partners in a way that is always geared towards great art.
- Do little experiments that you grow into something great.

Models

- Rehearsals
- Iterative design
- Double Diamond
- Scientific modelling
- Human-Centred Design

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Artistic Exploration

- A task for Arts organizations: Consider what your role is in this digital space. Whether you do one thing or several things in the digital sphere, you should define what you want to do and what you do not want to do. The digital space is occupied by so many different entities.
- It is valid to ignore the digital aspect, but it is a bold choice for the twenty-first century.
- Withe the Audience Labs, Annette wanted to create a space where artists can explore how to make great art using digitals tools that do not necessarily need to lead to an outcome. The art created in this space is not connected to ticket sales. This allows artists to figure out what they want to do, what they want to say, and to create something that has emotional resonance with the audience.

We, Humans, are Movement

- For the Choreographer, this project was a journey to discover what it would mean for him to create a choreography that was meant to be experienced in a mixed reality performance.
- What does it mean to choreograph for a body that does not have to adhere to the laws of physics or the constraint of biology?
- Where do we recognize a body as a body?
- In terms of the 3D environment, if anything can change in a moment, how does that affect emotional connection?
- A never-before-seen performance was the result of this project that featured real dancers mixed with digital bodies.
- It is important to provide spaces for artists to become literate in the digital spaces and to learn how they can express themselves.
- Also, within this project, they started experimenting with the sounds of the body.
  - Ex. A ballet shoe hitting the stage, a scrap of the shoe on the stage, breath sounds.
- These are the kinds of things that you can only learn through doing.

Collaborative Exploration

- Keeping with opera traditions but mixing them with different art forms.
- GUAP
  - A magazine from South East London that focuses on Hip Hop tradition.
  - They are curating and keeping alive a community of diverse artists that congregate around their hip-hop aesthetic.
  - Hip-hop and rhyme are poetry set in motion by music and this resonated with opera.
  - Instead of deciding what the project was, they hosted a lab with 6 representatives from the opera house and 6 from the GUAP community. This group worked and played with technology and through this project created a mentoring program.
  - Groups were formed and they continued to work on ideas that were brought up during the lab. Eventually, these ideas were pitched to compete for a grant. A work focusing on an Afro-futurist narrative around climate change won the grant. That team went to Copenhagen to further work on their project with VISUALISE.

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They created three-dimension musical work that was put into an app that showcased a melding of hip-hop linguistics and operatic music.
- Instead of keeping this project in-house, it has now been passed on to TH!NKFilm.
- The project is a great way to engage young people on the issue of climate change through the rhythm of hip hop and operatic music.
- The project has a life beyond the opera house. The development will go places.
- We do not need to own everything; it is good to be part of a chain of development.

Current Rising - World's First Hyper-Reality Opera

- Hyper-Reality - it is premium virtual reality where participants still wear goggles to experience the virtual reality component, but they also move through an exhibit and can touch things. It is a physical installation with a digital world placed on top.
- These experiences can play with wind, smell, water, and textures.
- At one part of this experience, an entire city grows beneath your feet and this is achieved through a combination of virtual reality visuals and vibrations in the floor.
- Annette first saw this type of technology in a Star Wars attraction and wanted to bring it as an experience to the opera.
- You can receive funding from the government to stimulate the development of new technology. Governments are excited when culture wants to be involved. Normally, the opera house would not go after this type of funding.
- Did this project with an all-female creative team.
- This experience could pop-up in another opera house, in a shopping mall, outside in a public square, or even be shown at festivals. The overall size of the exhibit room is 10x15 meters. This opens so many more possibilities for the opera house to consider as they could have this experience show up anywhere in the world.
- Video: the Making of the World's First Hyper-Reality Opera.
- The hyper-reality technology company that Annette partnered with typically worked in theme parks. They were not familiar with opera.
- Needed to spend a lot of time letting the two creative processes work together and get to know each other.
- She also worked with a University to explore new business models.
- Worked with Figment Productions

Across Disciplines

- Experimentation leads to failure but not a loss.

EVEve PoOC with Google

- The goal of the project was to choreograph something that could be motion captured.
- The choreography was beautiful, but the rendering felt weaker than seeing the real thing.
- With technology, we want to create something that could never be seen on stage.

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- From this experience, Annette learned about what is possible and not possible with motion capture technology, but this did not lead to a tangible outcome.

"The Rules do not apply" with the National Gallery.

- Offered three micro-commissions for artists and creatives to work with technology to make something surprising using digital tools in response to two works: a piece of choreography and a piece of visual artwork.
- National Gallery is not a natural partner for the Royal Opera House. Digital offered the opportunity to make connections and collaborations.

The World is Our Oyster

- Geography is no longer a barrier to collaboration.
- Recently, Annette collaborated with the National Ballet of Canada, Sheridan, Canadian Opera Company, and Sirt.
- In this collaboration, creatives got to explore and connect to propose a short commission. They pushed one of their ideas to work with the technology expertise of Sirt to create a piece of work that builds upon their existing practice but with the incorporation of technology.
- Again, this project allowed for artistic literacy and created a space for experimentation.
- How do we co-create when we cannot be together? Using technology!
- We can create collaboration opportunities literally across oceans. This is a more environmentally sound way to work as it involves less traveling.

Starting Points

- Identity

  o What is it you are trying to do?
  o Your identity is more important in the digital space. Identify:
    ▪ What is your mission?
    ▪ Who do you want to be?
    ▪ What do you want to show?
    ▪ Who do you want to reach?
    ▪ Who do you want to be in dialogue with?
  o In the Building Model, part of your identity is found in your physical building and in the geographical location you are in.
  o In the digital, you can still lean on this, but you can also lean away from that.
  o Choices should come from your identity; give your work purpose.

- Money

  o It is a mistake to start from a point where the money comes first. You should not be creating something in the digital realm if you are only seeing it as a new income stream from your audience.
  o Initially, you should align yourself with partners to explore who will make sure you hit and showcase your identity. This is a much stronger base to start from.

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- o   Money is important, but the opportunity here is to deepen the connection with existing audiences and to reach new ones.

- Programming

  - o   Digital content is programming. Do not leave this with the Marketing department.
  - o   Embed it in your creative departments.
  - o   Use social media to show work and experiments.

- Space for pivots

  - o   Quite often through doing, you find better opportunities to take advantage of by pivoting the project.

- Contextualization

  - o   Tell the story of why you are doing this, how you are doing this, and the story of the journey of getting this piece of work to your audience.

The Politics of it All

- The digital space provides opportunities to create more accessibility to the arts.
- Civic Role
  - o   What is the role of culture in society?
  - o   How do we make the digital a more equitable and diverse space?
  - o   Digital is part of the public realm.
  - o   How can we play a role in this realm and how can we use our arts to contribute to a more positive space?
- Ethics
  - o   Say no to certain money. Consider who you take money from.
  - o   Cultural organizations have a responsibility to bring ethics to the digital sphere.
- Open Models
  - o   Sharing among cultural organizations on how we can do things better.
    - ▪   Ex. Working with Google. Annette disclosed upfront that the Intellectual Property of the choreography will remain with the choreographer.
- Diversity & Inclusion
  - o   This is a moral obligation for arts organizations to bring this type of thinking to the digital sphere.

Digital as an expression and exploration of purpose.
Digital is the start of something. There is so much more to follow.

Q&A Session

We are joined by Tateo Nakajima for the Q&A session.

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How do we begin the reimaging process of creating more accessible art experiences?

Annette Mees' Answer:

- Truthfully, nobody knows.
- The idea of technology as a new stage. We have a lot to offer.
- Arts organizations have the expertise on how to create an emotional experience for an audience that is not next to you.
- With each project, we are getting one step closer to discovering what we want to keep, and what things we need to shift.
- When the Opera creative team started working with Figment, we toured their technology and the team loved some of it and hated other pieces of technology. Some of the technology could feel alienating.
- Figment was excited about being able to make direct addresses using virtual reality, but the Opera creative team found the experience off-putting. Sometimes, technology companies are excited about things that artists are not.
- A shift of horizons - with virtual reality, small spaces can shift into big spaces and this can be mapped onto music.
- For this project, the Opera creative team hooked on the centrality of the human voice. They wanted to preserve those sounds and contemplate how we treat voices in a VR experience.
- Consider what do we NOT want to lose? What do we want to change and push to become better?
- Be confident in what you are good at. Focus on this rather than exploring what digital can do for your art form.

Tateo Nakajima's Response

- None of our art forms were invented in a day. There is a constant evolution.
- Creating the mind space and drive to continually try things.
- People have the impression that to do amazing things, one must have a massive budget when, this is not always the case.

Money and Organizational Culture

Annette Mees' Response:

Organizational Changes

- With the current organizational structure, there is little flexibility in how we do things because it can be costly to make structural changes.
- With Audience Labs, how do you create space for doing things differently?
- There is a well-oiled machine, use it to your advantage and explore when it is a hindrance.
    - Ex. When filming the motion capture project with Google, they realized that they would need a dance floor in the filming studio.

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- Concept of "Lumpy production". Have a production plan be not so streamlined. Instead, have one where there is space for things to happen differently.
- Create space for new companies to come in.
- The Opera House did a ballet show with disabled artists and dancers. They are not always set up to be responsive to artists with different needs and ideas.
- It is a long, hard road for organizational change. We can begin to point ourselves towards a different way of thinking.

Money

- She operates on a budget of £12,000 a year. This is a small percentage of the Opera House's budget.
- Exploration is best done in partnership. Partnerships also usually come with new kinds of funding.
    o Example: When partnering with Google, they paid for everything.
- Digital is an expansion of the stage, but it is important to not cannibalize the physical stage (i.e., taking budget away from the physical stage).

Tateo Nakajima's Response

- Expansion is not just about putting things on a new platform. It is an evolution of what we are doing.
- Rethinking from the ground up: what we are doing?

Why is it called Audience Labs?

Annette Mees' Answer:

- She was attracted to this job because digital was not in the role.
- The focus was on the audience:
    o How do we want people to experience things is as important a consideration as what we have to say.?
    o How does it connect us to audiences? It has never been about technology.
- Part of creating the Audience Labs was figuring out what defined the core of Opera. Typically, Opera is very stuck in the theatre. If you take opera out of the theatre, what does it need to retain to still be opera?
- Answer: Emotional response from the audience.

The pandemic accelerated the exploration of digital, but what potential pivots will we face post-pandemic with the potential hyperphysical socialization and new normal (evolution) that might occur?

Annette Mees' Answer:

- Post-pandemic, there is a huge expectation that we will want to be connected.

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- We will all flock to our spaces to hang out with each other and ~~have~~ experience~~d~~ together again.
- During the pandemic, people had to experiment with how to connect when they cannot be together.
- This digital expansion has created an opening of audiences and a willingness to engage with this type of work.
- There has been a change in behavior in knowing that things can be done differently.
  - Ex. Annette's Mother. She participated in an online escape room with her friends. She probably will not do another post-pandemic, but something has been opened and her mother will likely be more open to experiencing the things she loves in a digital setting with people who are geographically apart.
- Digital should always be a shared experience.

Tateo Nakajima's Answer:

- Some issues that we are facing are not new, they are just accentuated.
- The evolution of cities, while more effective and innovative, they are also terribly isolating and socially challenging.
- We globally live in a pandemic that is incredibly isolating.
- There is a cultural organization in Denmark whose mission is to combat loneliness.
- The digital experience is inherently singular.
- The core mission of using digital should be to bring people together rather than providing an experience for people to experience singularly.

My main takeaway from shows at the Royal Opera House is the value placed in craftsmanship (props, costumes, armory, etc.). How can we offer practitioners of newer technologies and digital tools the same recognition?

Annette Mees' Answer:

- Give different people with different expertise encouragement to learn about each other's crafts.
- Understand each other's limitations and possibilities.
- This takes time. Annette tries to build this time into the project. Important because there is not a shortcut to understanding craftsmanship.

Tateo Nakajima's Answer:

- We are not good at doing this in the Arts.
- We are good at creating community and celebrating the different members of an orchestra, but most orchestras do not celebrate their lighting technician. Even referring to them as 'technician' vs 'lighting artist'.

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Not all the works created through the Audience Labs have been made public. What has been the audience response to these works?

Annette Mees' Answer:

- Using cutting-edge technology has drawn in an audience that is new to the art form rather than the usual crowd of diligent opera goers.
- Many of the Audience Lab works are artist-driven and focus on connecting with the audience.
- We need to learn how to connect those new audiences back to the art form.
- Currently conducting audience research with a university to analyze the response to the hyper-reality experience.
- There are people out there interested in haveing cultural experiences but do not identify as part of the traditional art.
- Entering Arts buildings can be quite intimidating. It takes some effort to step over that threshold.