Sydney Culture Network

Data Salon #6 Briefing:
May 1st 2020

Topic: Cultural data responses to COVID-19
Host/Location: Online

Speakers:
Craig Donarski, Casula Powerhouse
Miranda Carroll and Natasha Henry, Art Gallery of NSW

In our first remote data salon we discussed digital responses from SCN members to the COVID-19 lockdown. Cultural data workers have been on the front line of the sector's response to the COVID-19 crisis, working to keep audiences informed, connected and engaged through online platforms. The salon was a chance to take stock and collectively strategise for what comes next. Casula Powerhouse and the Art Gallery of New South Wales kicked off the session with inspiring insights into their highly successful digital programs, which have been making news internationally.

Casula director Craig Donarski discussed the timing, strategy and infrastructure behind their [Casula Powerhouse Goes Digital](#) campaign. Casula offers 100s of onsite programs a year, including many during the school holidays, so being physically closed severely impacted their ability to support their community. Replicating their onsite strengths, their digital programs focused heavily on arts and music, family and children's programming, food and gardening content, and highlighting the skills and passions of their staff. Critically, the Powerhouse utilised their public programming, education and technical staff - people who have been furloughed or laid off in many organizations during lockdown - to create and deliver this content across YouTube, FaceBook, Instagram, Twitter and their website.

Miranda Carroll, Director of Public Engagement, and Natasha Henry, Head of Marketing and Communications, for the Art Gallery discussed *[Together In Art](#)* - an extensive online program that "opens the Gallery to the world" by engaging artists, musicians, writers, performers and the public. The program has an extensive mixture of internet specific content including "micro" curated offerings such as playlists, "pocket exhibitions" and film collections and art-making tutorials. A key driving component was artists commissions and artist-led content. The Gallery developed a standalone site and partnered with outside organisations, notably the ABC, to disseminate content and activities broadly. Although traffic to the Gallery's main website was down (due to people no longer planning visits), there was high visitation to *Together In Art*, and increased social media engagement.

Discussion Topics:

Topics of discussion around how cultural organisations have responded digitally to the COVID-19 crisis included:

Organisational capacity and values - for some organisations it was possible and desirable to move fast and connect online. For others, including for example the Sydney Film Festival, it was necessary to take a breath and consider how the organisation could address its core values effectively online before engaging with their audience.

Audience research and behaviours - participants reported interesting shifts to their audience's online behaviour - including large increases in web traffic to particular parts of their online offering (e.g. instructionals), and expressed a need to know more quickly about larger patterns in audience behaviour - a topic we will address in Data Salon #7

Successful programming strategies and metrics - audiences are responding well to both pre-recorded and "from the archive" content, as well as special commissions and "live" events. Activity based content aimed at school age children and adults are performing well. Some anecdotal evidence to suggest virtual tours of exhibitions are not proving as popular.

Sustainability and monetization of digital platforms - a huge question for all participants, with no clear answers yet. However there was a strong feeling that there is an appetite for a "gift" economy - where content is given free, and committed and engaged audiences choosing to support their favourite cultural organisations with donations.

Staffing and commissioning - anxiety across the board about the impact of COVID on cultural workers and artists. A sharing of strategies about how to re-direct casual staff (e.g. installers or hosts) to online activities. Ideas - particularly from the AGNSW - of how to commission and engage artists in online content.

Advocacy - a shared feeling that the cultural sector has been in demand and performing an important social service during lockdown. How can this be demonstrated to government? The sector is heading into crisis and needs to make the argument for financial support from the government. A discussion of public sentiment and a feeling that there has been an increase in appreciation for the cultural sector. Can this be demonstrated or proved?

Ways to address digital inequality - discussion of how to reach audiences with limited digital/online access and resources.

The future - The overwhelming message was that there will be no return to business as usual. This experience has changed, and will continue to change, the way audiences engage with and experience culture. We need to plan for a future in which digital platforms play a much larger ongoing role.

About the Data Salon:
The Salon series provides a unique forum to share experiences, strategies, and tools for working with data across the Sydney Culture Network (SCN). With invited talks, discussion and show-and-share opportunities the Salons explore how data-led research and innovation informs a holistic view of audience experience and institutional practices to influence daily decision making, strategic planning and sectoral collaboration.

The data salon is co-convened by A/Prof. Lizzie Muller and Prof. Keir Winesmith from UNSW, with input from the SCN Data Working Group. The salon is held bi-monthly on the last Friday of the month.

Future salon dates, locations and topics for 2020:
If you have topics or speakers you'd like to suggest, or your institution would like to host future salons when social distancing allows, please contact Lizzie or Keir (lizzie.muller@unsw.edu.au and k.winesmith@unsw.edu.au).

Future salon dates for your diaries in 2020: June 26, August 28, October 30

Sydney Culture Network's Data Working Group members:

Tim Girling-Butcher, Sydney Living Museums	Robin Phua, State Library, NSW
Lizzie Muller, UNSW Art & Design	Keir Winesmith, UNSW Art & Design