

Harmonizing Cultural Significance with Economic Efficiency: Sustainable Development in the Global Curatorial Field

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Abstract:

This study focuses on the sustainable development of the exhibition field in the context of globalization and explores the dialectical relationship between cultural significance and economic benefits. It explores how exhibitions can serve as a platform for cultural exchange while generating economic benefits. This study explores strategies for balancing cultural protection and commercial feasibility, aiming to provide insights for stakeholders to enhance the sustainability of exhibitions in a globalized world. By analyzing the conflicts and fundamental contradictions between the two at the levels of goals and marketing and combining international cases such as the Venice Biennale and UCCA's "Cao Fei: The Stage of the Era", it summarizes four typical models and explores economic operation strategies such as cost optimization and value chain expansion. The research aims to provide an innovative path based on a global perspective for the Chinese exhibition industry, while filling the gap in related theoretical research, offering theoretical and practical references for international practitioners, and having both academic value and practical guidance significance.

Keywords: Curation; Cultural Economy; Sustainable Exhibition Management.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Research Focus

In the context of globalization in today's world, the cultural industry is undergoing an expansion stage in line with its natural development. The rapid development of society has promoted the improvement of people's cultural level and artistic aesthetic cog-

nition. Therefore, the social role and positioning of exhibitions are changing. It is evolving from a niche elite culture to a broader and more popular social culture. This means that its audience and popularity are expanding. Meanwhile, the degree to which people need it is also on the rise.

However, in recent years, the contradictions in the development of the global cultural industry have gradually emerged. The public nature of cultural

institutions and the pressure of market survival have become the core contradiction in the field of curation. Various cultural institutions such as art galleries, museums, biennials, art fairs and independent curatorial projects are generally facing financial pressures such as cuts in public funds, rising operating costs and intensified competition [1]. Besides, there is a structural contradiction between the continuous investment required for development and the limited operating funds of public welfare institutions [2].

In the case of limited resources, excessive pursuit of economic benefits may lead to the dilution of cultural values, resulting in phenomena such as excessive commercialization, entertainment, and blind catering to the market. Ignoring economic sustainability will make cultural projects unsustainable or even die out.

1.2 Objectives and Significance

The research objective of this article is to deeply analyze the fundamental reasons for the conflict between the cultural significance and economic benefits of curatorial practice. And analyze and summarize the experiences of different countries, regions and different types of institutions on this issue. To lay the groundwork for a more comprehensive exploration of the dynamic balance between the two. And explore curatorial innovation and value chain management under the guidance of “economic principles” to promote the sustainability of the cultural significance of curation. More importantly, through principle and case analysis, it provides innovative path suggestions for the sustainable development of China’s curatorial industry from a global perspective. Meanwhile, it provides theoretical references and practical summaries for curators and cultural industry workers around the world.

The main significance of this study lies in combining the cultural industry represented by curation with multiple disciplines and analyzing this issue from a global perspective. Theoretically, it makes up for the problem that China has conducted less research on the cultural and artistic industries. Deepen the understanding of the value diversity of the cultural industry and enrich the research contents of cultural economics, museology and art management theories. In practice, it provides feasible solutions for cultural institutions that will encounter economic benefit predicaments at present and in the future. It also provides new project directions for the majority of practitioners in the curatorial industry.

1.3 Methodology and Framework

This study integrates multiple research methods to construct a rigorous argumentative framework. To deeply

analyze the dialectical relationship between cultural significance and economic efficiency in the global curatorial field. And explore its sustainable development path.

In terms of research methods, this paper comprehensively employs the methods of literature analysis, case analysis and comparative study. By extensively reviewing the relevant literature in fields such as cultural economics and art management, sufficient theoretical support is provided for this research. Furthermore, by analyzing several cases of different countries, regions, development stages and types of institutions, a factual basis is provided for this study. More importantly, the pain points should be identified through a comparative analysis of cases. Effectively grasp the development trends of the industry, thereby providing targeted development strategy suggestions.

2. The Dialectical Duality of Curation

2.1 Cultural Value

The cultural value of curation is rooted in people’s spiritual and social needs. Its value is reflected in multiple dimensions such as knowledge dissemination, aesthetic experience, social criticism, value recognition and cultural heritage protection.

Curators are the weavers of culture. They integrate cultural elements with strong storytelling and theoretical connotations into a systematic knowledge system, promoting the dissemination and exchange of cultural knowledge. Exhibits are the carriers of knowledge, and exhibitions are the means of dissemination. The cultural value of curation lies in the most effective dissemination of countless carriers to people through design. Meanwhile, excellent curatorial projects will create unique aesthetic scenarios. This undoubtedly creates an excellent aesthetic experience and an enlightenment opportunity for the audience. It is a good way to guide the audience to feel the charm of art. Furthermore, the themes of some exhibitions focus on social reality and reflect profound social issues. Encourage the audience to think deeply about social issues. The influence of curation on the audience’s value recognition and heritage protection concepts is also a very important part. This is mainly reflected in some exhibitions with local and local characteristics. They often enhance residents’ sense of identity and belonging to the local culture. Some international curatorial activities also contribute to promoting exchanges and understanding among different cultures and facilitating the construction of a global cultural community. Innovative exhibition forms and technical means can rejuvenate ancient cultural heritages with new vitality and vigor, and achieve the inheritance and development of culture.

2.2 Economic Efficiency

In the field of curation, economic efficiency is not simply equivalent to the pursuit of profit maximization. Rather, it is to achieve the optimal allocation of project or institutional goals under the condition of limited resources. To ensure its financial health and sustainable operation.

In a curatorial project, the composition of costs is extensive. It roughly covers the costs of three stages: the preparation stage, the exhibition setup stage, and the marketing and promotion stage. The main costs during the preparatory stage include research expenses, exhibition borrowing fees, insurance premiums, transportation fees, etc. Entering the exhibition setup stage, a series of costs will also arise, represented by venue layout and equipment rental. In addition, the production of promotional materials, personnel salaries and marketing promotion expenses also account for a considerable proportion among them. ArtTactic, a renowned art market research institution, and Art Basel jointly released a research report in 2023. The results reveal the average cost structure of medium-sized contemporary art exhibitions: research expenses account for approximately 15-18% of the total cost, exhibition borrowing fees make up 20-25%, exhibition setup costs are around 12-17%, marketing expenses account for 8-12%, and personnel expenses account for 22-28% [3].

In terms of revenue sources, curatorial projects mainly rely on ticket sales as an important source of funds. Although the type and scale of the exhibition will cause a certain gap in ticket revenue. However, the results show that the average ticket revenue of global art exhibitions accounts for approximately 30% of the total revenue [1]. In addition, corporate sponsorship and government grants are also common sources of income. However, these two are greatly restricted by the economic situation and policy adjustments, and have strong instability.

Therefore, in order to improve economic efficiency, the optimal allocation of resources is something that curatorial institutions need to pay attention to at present. A better approach is to scientifically introduce methods such as cost-benefit analysis and input-output analysis. By rationally planning the budget, controlling cost expenditure and expanding income channels. In this way, while achieving economic goals, a solid economic foundation can be provided for the fulfillment of the cultural mission.

2.3 Conflicts and Key Issues

The conflict and contradiction between cultural significance and economic efficiency in curatorial practice cannot be ignored. At the target level, it is difficult to balance academic depth and public appeal. Exhibitions with strong cultural characteristics often have a limited audience

range due to their professionalism. It will lead to a weaker mass appeal, which indicates that its ticket revenue may not be good. Most commercial exhibitions, however, cater to market demands and attract audiences with strong visual impact and entertainment. This inevitably restricts the display of the cultural significance of the exhibition. To a certain extent, this has led to the work itself and its cultural nature being overshadowed by the gimmicks created by the market, and thus failing to receive good attention.

At the marketing level, the allocation of resources and time pressure are often the key to the conflict between the two. Increasing the initial investment cost and conducting in-depth research planning means the consumption of both time and financial costs. So whether it is worth giving up some publicity and promotion expenses and cultural operation costs for high quality is a problem that most curatorial institutions and curators are struggling with.

The above content reveals that the key issue between the two is the fundamental contradiction between the long-term and intangible nature of cultural values and the short-term and tangible nature of economic indicators. The influence of cultural values may gradually emerge a long time after the exhibition ends and is difficult to quantify with specific figures. However, economic indicators such as box office and derivative sales are intuitive and immediate. This difference makes it difficult to comprehensively and accurately measure the value of curated projects when evaluating them.

3. Case Analysis

3.1 Case Description

3.1.1 Venice Biennale

The Venice Biennale has been one of the most influential art exhibitions in the world since its first holding in 1895. Its core purpose is mainly to showcase the latest achievements of contemporary art and promote cultural exchanges and innovation among countries. This undoubtedly provides artists with an international platform to showcase themselves and also brings rich artistic experiences to the audience. It is precisely because of its authority and professionalism in the industry that the number of its visitors has always remained at a very high level. In particular, the number of its visitors reached as high as 800,000 in 2023[4].

The concept of the Venice Biennale emphasizes the diversity and innovation of art. The way it gives a specific theme to each session leads the most cutting-edge trends in contemporary art. Promote the continuous innovation of curators in culture and constantly generate new oper-

ational impetus in the art market. The exhibition curated by curator Ralph Rugoff in 2019 in combination with the exhibition theme “May You Live in Interesting Times” explored the role and significance of art in social change. From this, it can be seen that the Venice Biennale leads the public to think about current social issues ideologically.

The Venice Biennale also plays a significant role economically. The sales of tickets and derivative products have continuously injected vitality into it. Objective data shows that a large number of audiences were attracted to Venice by this exhibition [5]. This, in turn, has driven the development of the cultural and tourism industry in Venice and even Italy. This achieves the effect of promoting the surrounding economy and brings considerable benefits to the local economy. Naturally, the local government values the economic benefits of the exhibition and will provide it with financial support to promote the economic sustainability of the exhibition.

Overall, the Venice Biennale has achieved a good balance in coordinating cultural values and economic benefits. Part of the reason lies in its position at the top of the industry. The support of the government and the trust of the audience help it avoid most conflicts. Compared with ordinary exhibitions, avoiding cultural homogenization and actively responding to the changing market demands are the current challenges of the Venice Biennale.

3.1.2 UCCA Ullens Center for Contemporary Art “Cao Fei: The Stage of The Times” exhibition

UCCA Center for Contemporary Art is at the forefront of the contemporary art industry in China. In recent years, it has made active attempts in exploring the balance between cultural significance and economic benefits. Since its establishment until the beginning of 2023, UCCA has presented nearly 180 exhibitions to audiences from all over the world [5]. Many important exhibitions of internationally renowned artists are also presented at UCCA.

The exhibition “Cao Fei: The Stage of The Times” to be held in 2024 features strong academic exploration and contemporary foresight. The curator, with her most proficient means of images and media, meticulously depicted the impact brought about by the process of industrial civilization. It has a strong artistic social significance and cultural reflectivity. For instance, the work “Whose Utopia”

presents the daydreams of the industrial worker group [5]. By depicting the state of collective unconsciousness, it shows the contrast between the workers’ yearning for an ideal life and career and the cruel reality. It focused on demonstrating the virtual digital imaging strategy used to achieve the reconstruction of order. Her works are filled with the warmth of women and the subcultural characteristics of Generation Z [5]. Among them, some of the exhibits in Digital Utopia use digital technology to create new visual effects for the audience. This guides the public’s understanding of digital art and also promotes the integration of digital technology and the curatorial industry. Economically, UCCA Center for Contemporary Art adopts a diversification strategy. Economic sustainability has been achieved through ticket sales, sponsor support, membership systems and derivative product development. In addition, the business of collaborating with enterprises to develop co-branded products has further expanded the channels for economic benefits. As mentioned above, UCCA closely follows the development trend of the digital economy. It has expanded the audience range of the exhibition by using digital platforms, launched paid online lectures and increased additional revenue.

Unlike the Venice Biennale, the current core issue of UCCA lies in balancing corporate sponsorship and curatorial independence. Dealing with the controversy over whether commercialization overly affects cultural purity and finding a balance between meeting the demands of sponsor brands and maintaining the academic professionalism of the exhibition is what it needed to further explore

3.2 International Pattern Comparison

3.2.1 Microscopic Comparison

Through the analysis of multiple typical cases, several typical models for dealing with the duality of cultural significance and economic efficiency in the global curatorial field can be extracted. There are four models: “Strong public funding + academic leadership”, “market-oriented operation + branding”, “hybrid ecosystem + community support”, and “elite sponsorship + experimental”.

These four models have differences in terms of the sources of funds and the dominant values. The specific details, advantages, disadvantages and representative cases can be found in the table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Four International Models

Mode	Source of Funds	Core Value	Advantages	Disadvantages	Representative Case
Strong public funding + academic leadership	Government grants, foundations	Academic rigor, cultural preservation	Guaranteeing cultural depth, stable funding	Limited innovation, low bureaucratic efficiency	The Louvre in France, National Museum of the Netherlands
Market-oriented operation + Branding	Tickets, corporate sponsorship, derivatives	Financial sustainability, mass appeal	Wide influence, market adaptability	Content convergence, high ticket prices	The Guggenheim Museum in the United States, the Mori Art Museum in Japan
Mixed ecology + Community support	Government, enterprises, individual donations, members	Local participation, social relevance	Diverse funds, close community ties	Dependence on local networks, scale limited	Istanbul Biennial, Shanghai Museum of Contemporary Art
Elite sponsorship + Experimental	Private foundations, high-net-worth individuals	Art innovation, critical	Pioneering practice, freedom	Affected by the preferences of donors, sustainability is weak	The Dia Art Foundation of the United States, Shanghai Bund Art Museum of China

I categorize the Venice Biennale as a “hybrid ecosystem + community support” model. The UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, on the other hand, features a combination of the “market-oriented operation + branding” model and the “hybrid ecosystem + community support” model.

3.2.2 Macro Comparison

Both the Venice Biennale and UCCA focus on the exploration and presentation of cultural values, but their ementations are different. The Venice Biennale places greater emphasis on the diversity and innovation of art. It promotes cultural exchange and dialogue by showcasing artworks from all over the world. UCCA, on the other hand, pays more attention to the social significance and cultural reflectivity of art. By presenting artworks with social criticality, it triggers the audience’s reflection on social issues. In terms of the path to achieving economic efficiency, both the Venice Biennale and UCCA have adopted diversified strategies. Achieving economic sustainability through ticket sales, sponsor support and the development of related derivative products is the common point of the two. In addition, on this basis, UCCA has also expanded its economic revenue channels by cooperating with enterprises to develop co-branded products and using digital platforms.

3.3 Shared Challenges and Divergent Causalities

The global curatorial field is confronted with a series of common challenges, mainly in the following four aspects: First, in the process of digital transformation, institutions need to balance the development of online exhibitions and the maintenance of physical experiences. Second, it lacks

appeal to young audiences and there is an urgent need to innovate the exhibition format. Thirdly, the intensification of sponsorship competition requires curatorial institutions to innovate their sponsorship models. Fourth, there is a lack of effective methods for comprehensive influence assessment, making it difficult to quantify cultural, social and economic benefits.

There are significant differences among different countries and regions in responding to these challenges. For China, its art market is still in the development stage. There exist problems such as the weak corporate sponsorship culture, the need to optimize the government funding mechanism, insufficient public art education and the scarcity of professional talents. In contrast, the art markets in European and American countries have developed more maturely. Most of them have a complete art industry chain and abundant market resources. However, the traditional sponsorship system has also faced changes in recent years. The reduction of public funds and the deepening impact of social and political issues on the exhibition content. Such a highly competitive environment also forces curatorial institutions to continuously innovate in order to remain competitive.

4. Field Operations Governed by Economic Principles

4.1 Cost Optimization and Resource Circularity

In curatorial practice, cost optimization and resource recycling have become the core strategies for enhancing economic efficiency. Curatorial institutions effectively

reduce exhibition setup costs through modular exhibition design. The standardized display system saves a large part of the resources and enables them to be recycled. This has greatly reduced the cost of exhibition setup. In recent years, the development and application of digital curation have also brought remarkable benefits. The exhibition can be made online and virtualized through digital exhibitions. Exhibitions no longer require actual sets and material waste. Just use technologies such as digital modeling to create virtualized visual effects. It is precisely because the cost of digital exhibitions lies more in technology and design that their operating costs have been saved in actual operation. Meanwhile, some exhibition hall institutions have achieved cross-regional collaboration. The open-source cooperation model has further promoted resource sharing. One of the most typical examples is the “Global Contemporary Art Knowledge Platform”, which integrates the research resources of 50 museums. Resource sharing effectively avoids repetitive research and saves a large amount of human and financial input.

In terms of resource sharing and cooperation, inter-library cooperation has achieved remarkable results. For instance, the museum systems at all levels in the United States, such as local, state, federal and university ones. They reduce costs and increase funds by sharing resources and collaborating. This effectively lowers the overall expenditure of the project [6]. The creation of digitalization is also worthy of reference. “Bestseller Worldwide”, a cross-border export B2B Internet tool and service integration system. Its establishment enables both parties of cross-border exhibitions to achieve alliance marketing and resource sharing [7]. It has significantly improved efficiency, reduced economic costs and human costs for both parties. Moreover, the utilization of digital archives brings long-term benefits to curatorial institutions. The online exhibition archives of the Guggenheim Museum continue to create economic value through paid access and educational licensing.

4.2 Value Chain Expansion and Monetization Strategies

Curatorial institutions are actively expanding the value chain and exploring diversified monetization strategies. The development of high-quality derivatives has surpassed ticket revenue to become an important growth point. Based on the deep integration of exhibition IPs and traditional craftsmanship, the Palace Museum in Beijing generates over 1.5 billion yuan annually through cultural-themed products [8]. The deepening of the membership system has also brought significant benefits. The Museum of Modern Art in New York launched a tiered membership

system, which contributed 8% of its annual revenue in 2020 [9]. The cost of educational activities also has great potential. The online courses of the Metropolitan Museum of Art attracted a large number of paying users and generated considerable revenue [10]. Venue rental is also a feasible approach. Some museums rent exhibition spaces to enterprises to hold events [11]. This not only generates operating income but also maintains the cultural attributes. The innovative sponsorship model injects new vitality into exhibition projects. Taking the digitalization project of the Mawangdui Han Tombs as an example, it drove ticket sales through high-quality content. At the same time, it precisely aggregated differentiated demands and constructed a “data-scenario-IP” resource productization path [12]. The digital project has received over 12 million views, and the offline digital exhibition generated a box office revenue of 23 million yuan [13]. This has achieved a two-way leap in the dissemination of cultural value and the creation of market value.

5. Strategic Pathways for Advancing China’s Curatorial Industry

5.1 For Institutions and Curators

For Chinese cultural institutions and curators, it is of primary importance to enhance the professionalism of curation and academic research, and attach importance to the exploration of local cultural issues. Creating a unique cultural identity is the first step to gaining public recognition. Secondly, embrace the “curatorial +” mindset and expand into fields such as education, publishing, and digital content. Third, do a good job in popular science training and strengthen mass publicity. Especially for the youth group, professional coverage should be carried out. In terms of refined operation, modular exhibition systems and participation in resource-sharing platforms are adopted to effectively control costs. Meanwhile, it is also crucial to build a diversified income structure. Develop membership programs, high-end derivatives and content licensing to enhance the institution’s risk resistance capacity. Deepen the relationship between the community and the audience. Utilize wechat mini-programs for interaction and hold theme salons to cultivate a loyal audience group. To enhance the sustainability of industrial development, digital curatorial models should be attempted and promoted more often.

5.2 For the Government and Organizations

There is still a considerable gap between China’s curatorial industry and those countries that are relatively advanced

in the development of culture and art. The public popularity in this regard in European countries represented by Italy is significantly higher than that in China. Therefore, policy-making and industry organizations represented by the government should attach importance to the publicity and education issues of the curatorial industry in China. To enhance the professional level of the industry, relevant majors should be appropriately offered in universities to cultivate outstanding talents. More importantly, optimizing relevant laws and regulations can clear the policy obstacles and the impact of unreasonable systems on the development of the industry. As a guiding institution, it is also crucial to guide the cultural value direction of the industry. Actively advocate cultural values and launch public education activities. To enhance the awareness of enterprises and the public regarding the social value of countermeasures and promote the sustainable development of the industry.

6. Conclusion

The global curatorial industry is in the process of exploring the inherent conflict and balance path between cultural significance and economic efficiency. The analysis of international typical cases shows that although there are differences in curatorial models among different countries and regions, a dynamic balance between the two can be achieved through innovative strategies. The public-private partnership model in Europe and China's digital innovation practices, among others, have all provided valuable experiences for the global curatorial field. For China, the sustainable development of the curatorial industry needs to be based on local realities, combine global experience with the advantages of the digital ecosystem, and promote the development of cultural diversity through policy guidance, institutional innovation, and industry collaboration. The research also has certain limitations, such as the need to expand the coverage of cases, the difficulty in quantifying the long-term cultural influence, and the insufficient research on the impact of emerging technology countermeasures. Future research can delve deeply into the application of technologies such as artificial intelligence and blockchain in curation, improve the comprehensive influence assessment framework, and enhance the analysis of distinctive curation models such as rural art festivals and mobile exhibitions. Against the background of globalization and cultural diversity, the curatorial field needs to seek a balance between commercial demands and cultural missions to achieve a dual improvement in economic benefits and social value. This will determine the position and role of China's curatorial industry in the global cultural landscape.

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