

# Seeking Attention: Exhibition Related Practices As Sites of Attention Care in the Context of Digital Attention Economies

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## *Introduction*

This article argues for the new role of exhibition site experiences and exhibition related cultural practices as sites of attention care in the context of the attention economies of digital online media platforms. The argument forms part of an ongoing set of theoretical and practical enquiries conducted within exhibition making and related cultural practices such as workshop design and facilitation.

The article briefly outlines the concept of attention economy and proceeds to frame it in the context of attention economy models employed by digital media platforms. More specifically, I discuss the aspects relevant to this query, namely the potential negative effects attention economy models may have on their users' attention. This inquiry looks into specific types of attention that may be thus affected, as identified and described by researchers and writers on the subject. The article proceeds to posit attention care as a new potential role of exhibition and related outreach cultural practices, which, it argues, can be designed to activate processes that counteract the potential negative impact of attention economies.

## *Attention Economy and Creative Attention*

What is attention? A sum of different processes, coming in a range of forms and a wide scope of intensities, attention is our psychological need and our tool for survival. We require attention to be directed toward us, but we also have to employ attention when processing data from our environments. Attention necessarily is a selective process, because there are severe limits to our ability to process information (Carrasco 2011, 1486).

The notion of attention scarcity predates the age of digital media (Doyle and Roda 2019, 12). In 1971, Herbert A. Simon, American political scientist and Nobel Prize laureate who considered new factors in economic theories,

defined the problem as “information overload” and coined the term “attention economy” (Crogan and Kinsley 2012, 4). Commercial online media platforms of the twenty-first century introduced new scale and new aspects to the idea by following the attention economy model, which profits from prolonged attention of the users of their products (Odell 2019, 11). Because revenues of the digital media companies come from advertisers, not users, and user data also is being harvested and monetized, the user’s attention becomes a commodity and a product (Bhargava and Velasquez 2021, 340).

Implications of the accelerating claim of the digital realm on users’ attention have been a subject of debates by specialists working in fields as diverse as business ethics, psychology, neuroscience, media theory, visual cognition, and digital geographies. The issues of attention scarcity and attention economy present questions regarding the nature of attention itself and its different facets. They also point to uncertainties in relation to both immediate and far-reaching consequences and ethical implications of the attention economy models and their projected far-reaching effects on offline realities and physical environments.

Strategic management and public policy expert Vikram Bhargava and professor of business ethics Manuel Velasquez argued in their article on the ethics of the attention economy that the purposely addictive features of attention economy businesses are based on keeping their users “hinged” and active on their platforms for as long as possible, because the time periods of the active use being directly translated into profit for the platform providers (Bhargava and Velasquez 2021, 340). The authors assert that the attention economy model is not new and was in use by radio and TV programming long before the advent of digital media platforms. The main difference in the case of the online media is employment of predictive algorithms continuously adapting and maximizing the addictive potential, in which data collection enables the targeting of users at an individual level, which older types of media could not do (Bhargava and Velasquez 2021, 341). Bhargava and Velasquez conclude their analysis by stating that the digital media platforms *are designed* to be addictive. Based on this conclusion, they surmise that the attention economy model involves a “special kind of wrongdoing” (Bhargava and Velasquez 2021, 345), because the model itself is created to harm its users in a way that is “demeaning” and “exploitative.”

Artist and writer Jenny Odell in her book on resisting the attention economy asserts the importance of the awareness of issues potentially caused or affected by the growing attention economy model (Odell 2019,

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18). She claims that the reliance of social media platforms on the proliferation of unending and relentless data flow results in critique and discourse becoming increasingly irrelevant, which in turn contributes to the “race to the mediocre bottom” and lack of creative and critical stances (Odell 2019, 185).

Elsewhere, Yves Citton, professor of literature and media at the Université de Paris, in his article on attention economy points out that attention crisis, a growing disparity between amount of information and extent of human attention, can be associated with the rapid digital transformation of the first twenty years of the twentieth-first century (Citton 2019, 102). As Odell points out, online media platforms’ financial gain is based on exploiting our interests in other people and need for community. The online platforms are “frustrating and profiting from our most inner desires.” The logic and mechanisms of attention economy make it profitable to keep the users in a state of anxiety, unease, and envy (Odell 2019, 12).

A potential damaging effect of the attention economy model is conceptualized as affecting a particular type of attention identified by Yves Citton as “creative attention.” Citton discusses potential sites and instances of what he refers to as creative attention, which occurs outside the regions of categorization and recognitive attention, which classify objects according to already established categories (Citton 2019, 105). Time factor is a necessary element of creative attention, and to suspend the categorization, a time delay is needed. The time between the moment of perception and reflection is a precondition to thought. This is how we can re-evaluate and create values – through our attention becoming reflective, we become thinking agents (Citton 2019, 110). Importance of spatial and temporal context is also stressed by Odell (2019, 182) as aspects irrelevant for and omitted and flattened by attention economy, but necessary for multifarious perspectives of human agency, like critical reflection and creative evaluation. The agency of human attention may well consist in its very ability to discover new values (Odell, 2019, 150). Rejection of existing evaluations should lead us to question our modes of valorization. Once considered, attention is revealed to be a complex and nuanced process of multifarious aspects and is thus shown to be a precious resource.

### *Attention Care and Exhibition-Related Practices*

Both Jenny Odell and Yves Citton point to experience of art in the context of attention crisis. Odell notes how art can teach us “new scales and tones of attention” (Odell 2019, 21), saying also that the only habit worth design-

ing for is ongoing questioning of one's ways of seeing (Odell 2019, 142). Citton discusses "esthetic attention," which is possible to achieve and can be derived from "going to a museum or to a performance of contemporary art" (Citton 2019, 105), where we can be presented with objects and experiences that may defy or exceed our preconceptions and existing categorizations.

This observation brings me to the heart of the attention ecology, and its possible questions, like that of esthetic experiences or moments of creative attention: Are they possible to be evoked, nurtured, and to become an object of *care*?

Taking these questions as a point of departure, I argue that *attention care* has a potential new role in exhibition related practices, an aim that can be specifically designed for. I see attention care as a set of considerations and debates that acknowledge the importance, heterogeneity, and vulnerability of human attention processes and interrogate possibilities of actions and processes that may have positive impact on their quality and support their continuous potential. These actions may often take the form of small gestures and interventions, because maintenance and care often go unnoticed as unspectacular events and actions.

I argue that both exhibition design and design of outreach activities like art workshops can include consideration for counteracting the effects of attention economies in online platforms. While examining potential sites within exhibition related cultural practices, I also wish to acknowledge my positionality within this subject and set of ideas, as they are informed and draw on my experience as an artist with a background in craft design and digital design, as well as an art and design educator. This inquiry is located at the intersection of exhibition design, phenomenology, gallery and museum outreach and education, care-centric discourses, and concepts of personal, social, and environmental ecologies.

I posit the potential of a lived experience of exhibition related practices as a site of attention care, positioned in the context of fast habit-forming operating extractivist modes of online platforms. My practice- and theory-based inquiry locates the attention care role within the context of care-centric discourses. Kathleen Lynch asserts the human and nonhuman flourishing condition of creating care-centric narratives to challenge the "performance indicator" policies of neoliberal capitalism (Lynch 2022). I argue for the role of the exhibition and outreach-practice experience as a space and time of care.

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### *Multimodal Drawing Workshops*

As part of my inquiry, I currently investigate and construct sites of outreach and engagement as multimodal drawing workshops/events and probe their role in attention maintenance. I draw on my practice as a drawing workshop facilitator to expand and reconsider the elements of a workshop and interweave them with aspects coming from other discourses, like performance, games, or sensory studies. I examine the idea of a workshop as a site of multimodal interpretation, with all its discursive and social aspects.

After testing the pilot versions, I have led several multimodal workshop events at venues such as the Irish Museum of Modern Art (Silent Disco Sketching Club, January 2024), experimental music and sound space Unit 44 in Dublin (Potluck Sound Sketching Jam, March 2024), and Temple Bar Gallery & Studios in Dublin (Drawn to Sound, part of the National Drawing Day, May 18, 2024). The workshops form an iterative series, where each one is designed based on my own reflections from previous events, as well as the participants' feedback. I conceptualize and conduct expanded formats of drawing workshop events, constructing and assembling multimodal sequences as ways to activate non-ocular and non-explicit modes of attention, through interpreting nonvisual input by nonverbal processes of mark making, in an attempt to offset the negative effect of attention economies and hyper-ocularcentrism of eye-to-screen interactions. I consider drawing in all its expanded forms of mark making and as a process of formulating ideas, responding to sensory presences, as an intermodal interpretation and nonverbal expression and communication.

An example of such an event was a group experience of listening to a pre-recorded audio drawing workshop – a listening-and-drawing session, which I designed and led at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in January 2024. Under the title of *Silent Disco Sketching Club* (Figure 1), I recorded a radio program that was broadcast by Dublin Digital Radio. During the one-hour show, I met a group of participants at the Museum, where we all listened to the show on headphones in the Creative Hub space. The radio program was also a listening-and-drawing session that could be listened to as an inspiration for sketching by all of the Dublin Digital Radio listeners at any location. It included sound and music tracks as well as prompts for drawing, which the listeners could choose to follow or not.

Figure 1. Silent Disco Sketching Club, Dublin, January 2024



In the following stages of the investigation that I envisage, I plan to expand Citton's idea of esthetic and creative attention and extend it to all kinds of exhibitions and other exhibition practices, as well as to the impact of built environments of exhibition spaces. I intend to include art objects in my investigation, as well as all other possible artifacts, which may surpass the experience of the viewer, such as natural artifacts or objects of different times and cultures. The following stages of my investigation into exhibition related elements will consider physical spaces where exhibitions take place, as well as their particular existing and added elements and aspects

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like acoustics, textures, odors, spatial features that direct movement, and natural and artificial light conditions.

My continuing inquiry employs a process-driven practice of museum and gallery education and exhibition space design. It draws on theoretical fields of museum and digital media studies, critical theory, and phenomenology. I examine exhibition related practices as multisensory and multimodal events, from individual-subjective and social-intersubjective perspectives. I argue for the capacity of such events to contain, enact, and constitute the function of sites of attention care.

### *Conclusion*

Through experiments in design and strategies for attention care, including an expanded multimodal event-workshop format, exhibition design and exhibit making, and their analysis through a phenomenological lens, I interrogate the hypothesis that design, display, and activity strategies within museum and gallery exhibition spaces can be utilized to actively enhance their potential as creative attention catalysts. I posit attention care and fostering creative attention as a new important aspect of the role of exhibition related practices, counteracting the negative effects that the attention economy is having on human perception and cognition processes.

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