

RECONSIDERING EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE IN THE RELATION OF ART AND SCIENCE PRACTICES

Stine Ejsing-Duun, Aalborg University
Copenhagen, Denmark, E-mail:
sed@hum.aau.dk;

Jamie Allen, CIID - Copenhagen
Institute of Interaction Design, Denmark,
E-mail: j.allen@ciid.dk;
Morten Søndergaard, Aalborg University
Copenhagen, Denmark, E-mail:
mortenson@hum.aau.dk

Abstract

As practice-theory orientations the arts and sciences have often *seemed* juxtaposed. We are interested in how a new generation of artist-scientists think, operate and communicate. We argue that it is crucial to find new forms and formats for engagement and communication in communities of interdisciplinary research and practice. In this paper, we investigate the discursive and communicative relation between different disciplines, in social and experiential events (conferences, festivals, and the like). For this purpose, we will build upon the experiences and observations from various ‘Remix’ situations in which art-scientists meet in conference and festival settings.

Keywords: technology, collaborative, practice, action, situations, communication, theory, art, knowledge sharing

Introduction

Art, technology and media practice are domains that should inspire and provoke through revisionary and self-reflexive methods. A media may in fact be the very concretization of thought. These communities of practice are well poised to provide new ways of mediating and situating more formal means of knowledge production and dissemination. The relation of art and technology has been central to many long-standing debates within contexts of art education, university teaching, and human-centered, lab-based research. This relationship also plays an important role in situating practice as central to the aesthetics of an art form, by highlighting process and collaboration throughout its development.

“One speaking mouth, with many ears, and half as many writing hands - there you have to all appearances, the external academic apparatus; the university engine of culture set in motion” [1].

The above critique of academic event formats is as relevant today as it was when Nietzsche penned it. In this tradition, positively critiquing the appropriateness of formal representations and disseminations available to art/science

and art-and-technology practitioners, this paper discusses the background and foreground of the live, experiential knowledge event. It does so through brief historical and theoretical discussion, related to our experiences conducting sessions at the Re-New Festival in Copenhagen. Also, a situating of the participatory and structural dimensions of these kinds of events is suggested.

The protocols of sharing and communicating practice and thought seem to perennially cement themselves as static forms, requiring rethinking and revisiting. The format of the conference, as a collective moment of knowledge sharing, would seem to have its genealogical roots in our first shared residences as places of testimony, necessitating the retelling of what occurs. We can imagine an antediluvian lecture at ancient paintings at Lascaux, the mineral pigments on these cave walls prefiguring the existence of a “Powerpoint deck.” The plenary mode of our present day conference presumes also a deep history in the performance of knowledge in the West. Such forms of presentation were purportedly being played with and subsequently codified by Pythagoras in 6th-Century BC: Pythagoras’ probationary pupils, the so-called Acousmatics, who had to sit behind a curtain, listening but not able to see, the philosopher-teacher’s voice (spawning a word now used to describe a particular art-technology compositional practice of audio-speaker performance). Such forms of passive learning-as-listening have resulted in the unfortunate diminution of learning-as-action, leading to our present unfitting proscriptions for communicating works. But this idealism in the University waxes and wanes throughout history, as Whitehead points out: “at no time have universities been restricted to pure abstract learning... Universities have trained clergy, medical men, lawyers, engineers” [2].

The relationships between communicative events and the exposition of practice in art-and-technology and art/science relations proves ripe ground for the re-situation and reformatting of such discursive forms. Firstly, these new forms allow us to reposition a ‘techno-aesthetics’ (or ‘production aesthetics’, after Simondon [3]) into the discourse, while providing transitional forms towards hybridized action-research communication and publication. Knowledge sharing formats should appropriately support both the way we think through and use tools. Digital media moves as-

ymptotically towards manifestations of experience in real-time, driving creative practices more and more toward processes and away from objects. Conventional communications (lectures, workshops and panel formats) in conferences have their uses and justification, but proposed herein is a modified format - the remix session - with ambitions to feature participatory, production-aesthetics of art and creative works.

Case: REMIX sessions [4]

At the Interactive Media Arts Conference (IMAC) 2012, four “Remix” sessions were scheduled with two to three artists, with one ‘action-chair’ in each session. These sessions were experimenting with different layers of conventionality in the relation between art and technology. They were intended to create an experimental situation where the coming together of art and science occur on two levels:

1) First, the framing and goals of the Remix sessions create a process and dialogue grounded in ‘non-conventional’ formats and examine the workshop-as-art-work. The format creates, ideally, a different and not-predefined situation that reveals and accentuates relations between matters concerning art and science that were not visible before.

2) Secondly, the Remix sessions create a platform in which the body may play — accentuated, embodied and sensuous situations are more likely to occur. Here, the body becomes implicated in knowledge acquired from beyond the social and technical ‘scenario’ in a direct interaction with artistic practice.

Thus, the intention of the Remix sessions is to achieve / focus on:

1. Proximity to the work – practice
2. Reformatting of formats / non-conventional formats
3. The (techno-)aesthetics of production
4. Sensuous situations

During the remix sessions both the chairs and the artist-participants are asked to reflect on their ‘roles’ and develop a sense of how things are made and knowledge generated *from the work*. The following was announced to the ‘action-chairs’ - and, in the same instant, communicated to the artist-practitioners involved:

"Your role is to run the track according to practitioner and artists' ideas and practice, and to facilitate the involvement of the audience into the process. Any format may be pursued, and you are

not required to stay in the physical space of the auditorium! It might also be possible, perhaps, to have more than one process running at the same time...

But, most importantly, it should all happen according to the artists' own ideas and wishes, of course. It is the artistic practice that takes center-stage" [5].

Remix sessions are acted out in a variety of ways. We have chosen two examples, Remix sessions 2 and 4, which can also help clarify both the strengths and some of the limitations involved in an experiment like this, in order to point out the challenges for future Remix sessions.

Ervax for 2 - Anders Monrad

The first example we want to highlight is the session involving the Danish composer, Anders Monrad who presented his piece, *Ervax for 2*, in Remix session 2 with Jamie Allen as action-chair. *Ervax for 2* is a composer tool disguised, and fully functioning as a computergame. The session was realized as a dialogue between Anders Monrad and Jamie Allen and was centered upon the development of *Ervax*, which was on exhibit at the re-new festival. In an email after the festival, Anders Monrad stated that, whereas the general outcome of the dialogue was interesting, there was a problem concerning the intention and the goal of the remix session, which was not very clear [6]. Also, the proximity of the actual work (only 10ft away) was never used actively in the Remix session.

Here, the importance of and work involved in preparing people for new formats becomes apparent - you have to make people feel it is their own format, not something forced upon them. In creating new formats much of the effort goes into de-normalising people's (conventional) expectations as well - it does not just 'happen'. Also, what plays an important role here is the nature of the artistic practice - and how he/she is conscious about involving the audience. Are they in front of, or behind, the curtain?

Echo Moire - Matteo Mangoni

The second example, from the Remix session 4, accentuates this question even further albeit in a different direction with which we want to conclude this paper. At the session, Matteo Marangoni had robots moving about, "playing" the room as an instrument. Essentially, *Echo Moire* consists of two 'listening robots' that are able to navigate a space based on the acoustics of that space.

The Remix session 4 developed from a 'speaking session' into a 'sounding and hearing' trip through the spaces of the site (Aalborg University Copenhagen campus), revealing the different architectural and functional rooms as spaces of bodily-based sound-cognition. This Remix session, then, was much more sensuously orientated (than Remix session II), to a point where it became almost an art-event in itself. The debate-element did not play as important a role as in the session with Anders Monrad however, measured by the character of audience-participation, which was much more focused, it would appear that this was perhaps the most successful remix-session.

There is a distinct transformation of the way the relation of art and science practices is being communicated in Remix session 4, whereas in Remix session 2 that communication is mainly intellectual and about ideas (excluding the actual work only a few feet away in the same space).

Social Knowledge Sharing Events

The Remix sessions prove an interesting way of investigating the complexity of transferring knowledge about art-science and art and technology relations. In the important essay "On Techno-Aesthetics," Gilbert Simondon writes: "Aesthetics is not only, nor first and foremost, the sensation of the 'consumer' of the work of art. It is also, and more originally so, the set of sensations, more or less rich, of the artists themselves: it's about a certain contact with matter that is being transformed through work. One experiences something aesthetic when one is doing a soldering or driving in a long screw" [7]. It is this complex sensation of practice involved in the art-science relation that the Remix-sessions attempt to render visible. They become, in other words, social knowledge sharing events.

Knowledge sharing events vary in form, and the conference and panel presentation are characteristic of a rooting of academia in the natural sciences (e.g.: The presentation of 'results'). Though conferences are rather structured, the study showed that knowledge sharing happens at different levels:

"Two forms of knowledge sharing were analyzed: formal, guided, planned knowledge sharing in lectures or discussions, and informal knowledge exchange during social events." [8]

Other such events happen more spontaneously — over a meal between colleagues in an informal conversation, others are planned events involving hundreds of participants that follow accepted rituals.

Reychav and Te'eni have conducted research which indicates that knowledge sharing in the formal setting is more intensive than in the informal setting. However, in the informal setting participants can relate their knowledge sharing more to their own situation in relation to job enhancement and initiations of meetings. There are other formats of knowledge sharing, which are less structured and formal. One is the unconference: "Unconferences are gatherings of people united by a passion, where the content and structure of the day is driven by the participants" [9]. In contrast to conventional conferences, the unconference is unstructured, does not have objectives and relies completely on what the participants put into the event.

The Remix sessions described herein clearly show that some kind of clear structure around these types of events is essential. Obviously people need to share knowledge in a structured manner in order to communicate: "[P]eople's need to congregate and confer is one of the things that defines our humanity and, for a multitude of reasons, meetings and gatherings of people have taken place since the nearly days of civilization" [10].

Conferences are one type of knowledge sharing events where people with certain interest come together to discuss a topic or share results in a field. According to Gustavsen and Engelstad: "A conference is a composite of dialogue and work experience where the primary objective is to encourage participants to acquire information through democratic dialogue and participation, in accordance with such notions as activity, equality, and collective practicality" [11]. In this quote, conferences and festivals are defined as overall formal work related events that have objectives and require certain types of behaviors. The most common format is that participants sign up, pay a fee, and often they submit a paper which follows certain guidelines in terms of content, structure, formatting and references. Each paper is given a time in the program for a presentation. Other aspects of these forms include keynotes speeches, dinners and coffee breaks. All of these elements are indicative of conferences are ritualistic formats.

A Spectrum of Knowledge Sharing Formats

By drawing on the Remix sessions and placing this investigation in the context of recent research within the field of these kinds of events, we can begin to draw a spectrum of the types of formats knowledge sharing events have. This is illustrated in Figure 1. The “participation axis” relates to how much participants are involved in contribution to the sharing of their knowledge. A lecture in which participants are merely listening and cannot ask questions is non-participatory. Conversely, examples of ‘Happening’ type events, such as Joseph Beuys’ ‘action’-workshops [12], are examples of a highly participatory event that allow participants to share their knowledge in practice. Beuys had a group of people wordlessly coaxed into the construction of the cage-like structure (in which a Coyote lives) that serves as part of his action-installation “*I Like America, and America Likes Me*”. The workshop functions inside an action-as-artwork situation, showing a possible conference-format in which is highlighted the actual experience of the participants, in an attempt to bring about social transformation and individual insight. The “structure axis” relates to the forms that we need to understand what is expected from us. These vary from the ritualistic forms in which guidelines prescribe how to participate, to the spontaneous forms in which participants must find their own way.

Various strands of media studies and reformatted practices within art and

academia are relevant to and drive the desire to create new ways of understanding and relating practices of inquiry and expression engaged with technology. As a community of communications media users, art-science and art-and-technology practitioners are appropriate interlocutors for a “comparative media study” of academic forms. N. Katherine Hayles’ assertion that literary studies have been “lulled into somnolence by five hundred years of print” is no less true of our event-based forms of communications. Again, as with literary studies, where the “new medium of electronic textuality vibrantly asserts its presence,” communications technologies and networked-presences create both new thinking and new needs for reformatting the way that that art science practices are related and communicated [13].

Conclusions

The Remix sessions discussed in this paper made it possible to frame an investigation of art-science relations *in practice*. Looking at these sessions in retrospect, and contextualizing them in terms of the ritual of the ‘academic’ knowledge-sharing event, we are able to draw some useful conclusions about how our understanding of the complex and real time, process-driven orientation of art-science and art-and-technology practices can be enhanced. Even more importantly, perhaps, is to achieve an understanding of the challenges involved in reconsidering the use of knowledge sharing formats in real art-science relations and designs for another future.

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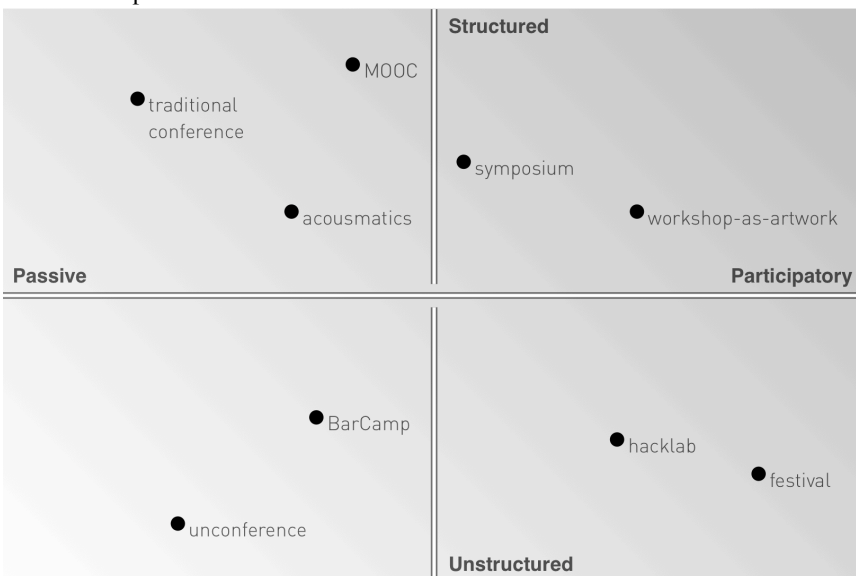


Figure 1 - A matrix representing orientations of social knowledge formats.