

CREATIVE ECOLOGIES IN ACTION: TECHNOLOGY & THE WORKSHOP-AS-ARTWORK

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A shift is occurring, particularly evident in art-and-technology contexts, in which the artist-led workshop is transformed into an important and distinguishable artistic form. Resulting from, and contributing to, the new accesses and relationships people have to information, creative culture, materials and one another, the “workshop-as-artwork” is proposed, outlined and exemplified.



Fig 1. Participants doing a public performance at the Chiptune Marching Band event at the NK House, Berlin, in August 2009. Attribution Jamie Allen



Fig 2. A Sundroids participant at Harehope Quarry UK, presenting his solar powered kinetic work to the participant group in June, 2010. Attribution Rachel Clarke.

ON TECHNO-SOCIAL ART FORMS

Technology situates and constructs what it is to be a creative human being. Our technologies are never "just tools," nor are their effects and resonances limited to the individual practices of artists-as-producers-of-work. Contemporary cultural activity with technologies is not "production," in the classical sense. Understood as both an ecology and entanglement of people, ideas, tools, materials, systems and processes, art-and-technology grows to encompass a complex and expanding set of forms. For example, recent suggestions are of the "artwork as social interstice" would be impossible except through resonances with an ultimately techno-social tool: The Internet. [1] True to its history, art-and-technology and related practices continue to be sites of endeavours that seek to question and escalate the assumptions of art, artist, audience and form. [2]

Resulting from, and contributing to, the new access and relationships people have to information, creative culture, materials and one another, we propose the "workshop-as-artwork": The technology-based artist-led-workshop as the site of an emerging artistic form. This idea seems particularly evident in art-and-technology contexts, where an assumed importance of the transfer of practical information and technical skill often merges with interests and expertise in performance, installation, theatre and on-and off-line communications and media. Positing the workshop-as-artwork as a creative ecology in action provides a way of locating these works along with other strands of ecological thinking and acknowledges that artistic *form* as we have come to know is in many ways unlocalisable.

Such a proposition also calls forth instructive criticisms. The increased frequency with which artists are called upon to deliver workshops can cloud artistic or personal objectives, especially when done in the service of intermittently insincere institutional and political "community engagement" agendas. The workshop-as-artwork may also seem ancillary to more production-oriented, neo-romantic, individualistic notions of how an artist should be spending his or her time. That said, "doing a workshop" now forms such a large part of the average art-and-technology practitioner's activities that discussing its repositioning as a form, developed in its domain of practice, seems productive. We also seek a vehicle for developing better conditions of the co-created meaning that can take place at such encounters. Further, from the artist-interventionist point of view, positing the workshop-as-artwork serves to update notions of legacy, consequence and significance for the art-and-technology practitioner within his or her community.

Drawing on a set of select technology-based art-practice workshops with various communities, we posit the workshop-as-artwork as this collaborative, ecological artistic form and describe some of its attributes and potentials.

SIGNPOSTS TOWARDS A CREATIVE ECOLOGY

The ideas herein are indebted to topics through artistic, techno-social, and pedagogical theory. Our creative practices and thinking have been influenced by the works and writings of Allan Kaprow and his formulation of the "Happening," a social artwork which is at moments performative, relational, environmental and situational. He and others sought to create a form that would encapsulate and elaborate public performance towards an integration of "art" and "life," and further towards the complete dissolution of "art" as a separate category. [3] It is of note that a number of art-and-technology practices (net-art and other interventionist new media work) echo sentiments purporting fuse high and low brow, the aesthetic and the political, gallery and "street" culture - bringing life into art and vice versa. [4]

Joseph Beuys' ideas of Social Sculpture, the possibility of a social organism as a work of art, also outlines aspects of our project. A desired integration of purpose carried over into Beuys' great valuing of pedagogy. Much of Beuys' persona and activity during his career was developed through dialogic lectures, workshops and conversations. As Beuys himself said: "To be a teacher is my greatest work of art." [5] Beuys wanted to blur the line between civic action and artistic techniques, completely and radically transforming the "idea of sculpture... or of art in general." [6] Considering this ontology of the art-object and form, Umberto Eco's Open Work, in which art "determines the limits within which a work can accentuate its ambiguity... while keeping its existence as a work," is a helpful construction. [7] Parallels in materialist thinking have adopted terms like "assemblages," and more recently "hyperobjects," [8] to name a similarly and difficultly described "kind of relation obtaining between the parts of a volatile but somehow functioning whole." [9] Eco lays out a shift which occurred in the 20th Century from origination with concrete, authorial propositions, towards "universes" or "fields" of "possibilities," [10] that could serve to define what is intended by *creative ecology*, as a "properly ecological form of... art." [11]

The idea and importance of "conviviality" as a criteria for technologies and their use, as first outlined by Illich underpins this discussion. Illich explains conviviality as a force opposing industrialisation, as he believed the latter to have grossly distorted our sense of possibility for change in modern society. He imagined, "a society of simple tools that allow men to achieve purposes with energy fully under their own control." This would be achieved via the development of open and participatory technologies and tools, and a "deschooling" of society - an integration of pedagogy and everyday experience. [12] The workshop-as-artwork is sympathetic to these strains of thought. Constructionist approaches to epistemology and pedagogy which emphasise both learning by making and a close engagement with tangible objects form part of our practical approach to these ideas. Any learning that purports creative empowerment should not be concerned so much with the transmission of ideas, but oriented toward the construction and reconstruction of knowledge through experience. [13]

THE WORKSHOP-AS-ARTWORK

Over the past four years, the authors have designed, executed and documented a series of workshop-as-artwork events in art-and-technology festivals, conferences and as part of school-organised activities for young people. These have all emphasized concepts related to renewable energy technologies, as a means of encouraging improvised, public electronic-art making. A sensitivity to the use of electronics as enablers for creative expression in social and public spaces was key to all the events. What follows is a description of a selection of workshops, (Transmisol, Chiptune Marching Band and Sundroids) that express the theoretical goals of the workshop-as-artwork in various ways and to varying degrees.

TRANSMISOL

Transmisol is a 3-day workshop-as-artwork that first took place in Mexico City in the summer of 2008. The event was developed as a collaboration between artist Geraldine Juarez and Jamie Allen, and is inspired by the work of Transmission Artists, such as Tetsuo Kogawa (author of the "Micro Radio Manifesto"). [14] Participants at the event were a group of young people aged 18-20 who were attending the Transitio Festival, a week-long new media and electronic arts festival. The Transmisol group was invited to make a set of solar-powered MP3-player and radio transmitter devices, to be installed in public space as a distributed Transmission Art exhibition. Each attendee was encouraged to scavenge the streets of Mexico City during the evenings to find elements for physical housings to hide and contain the solar

panel and radio transmitter units they hacked and assembled; found items included an orange child's play-stove, and other household items.

Participants' responses to the question of "content" for their micro-radio experiments in many cases involved a selection of revolutionary and anarchist texts read into the provided portable MP3 recorder/players. Discussion with participants clarified their motivations to be, in part, a particular response to corrupt administrative and media-industry practices and related problems with wealth distribution in Mexico. Participants understood that they were creating a solar messaging system which (under the Mexican sun) could potentially broadcast in public, in perpetuity (or at least as long as the electronics and hardware remained functional). Transmission Art, through the workshop-as-artwork, became a subtly political gesture - a modest opening up of an otherwise hierarchical media network.

CHIPTUNE MARCHING BAND (CTMB)

CTMB is a series of workshop-performances, inviting attendees to learn, build and perform together while engaging with local energy generation and public outdoor sound performance. CTMB workshops have been hosted by Maker Faire UK, Pixelache Helsinki, Bent Festival NY, NK House Berlin and Creativity & Cognition (all in 2009), among others, all with 7-20 participants at a time. CTMB is designed as a 3-hour event, during which participants build a small sensor-driven sound making circuit (oscillator), powered by an alternative energy source (hand-crank generator). Contrasting comparable workshops, [15] and the Transmisol workshop, a kit of parts including the majority of what is required to participate is provided at each event. Cardboard tubes, colourful tapes, paint, etc., are also provided for the construction and personalisation of the instruments. With instruments in hand, the "band," parades in the streets of the host city as a public performance and spectacle. At the end of the march, participants take their instrument home, along with a self-addressed stamped postcard and web URL, to be used to report back to the Band as to what has become of their instrument in the weeks following the event itself (Fig 1.).

A second workshop-as-artwork, CTMB materials consisted of simple electronic components and cardboard tubing. This material framework was provided along with extensive online community information, a guidebook, a developed graphic identity and uniform design, as well as a gallery website featuring profile photos of everyone who's ever participated in a CTMB (chiptunemarchingband.com). These informational structures were intended to create a highly coherent aesthetic entity, a resonant structure of invitation, web-presence, event and performance. At the end of the CTMB events, everyone involved becomes part of the Band, both through membership and through performance. This is supported by a belief that an intrinsic intertwining of artwork and social structure happens best where people are "consciously engaged in constructing a public entity, whether it's a sand castle on the beach or a theory of the universe." [16]

SUNDRIDS

Sundroids is a one-day workshop-as-artwork using solar robotics to create autonomous kinetic sculptural works for and within the rural environment. These have taken place at Harehope Quarry, a sustainability co-operative and outdoor creative educational facility in rural Northeast England, and invited secondary schools take part in day long sessions. The sessions explore site-specific and kinetic art through the use of found materials on-site and simple solar powered motor circuits.

Art-practice inspiration came through the work of artists like Jean Tinguely and Arthur Ganson. At each event, participants work together collecting and discussing natural resources while exploring motion concepts and movement, through physical activities and re-animating found objects and materials. Participants are encouraged to scavenge found and natural materials from the site to develop their solar/kinetic work. Once students finish their structures, they present their work to the rest of the group (Fig 2.).

The third workshop-as-artwork developed, Sundroids emphasises an improvisatory and contingent approach to materials, movement and the openness of the encounter itself. The framework for each individuals' process is much less prescribed (in terms of materials) than with CTMB, allowing for more variation amongst individuals, while still presenting a cogent enough concept for the group to feel they were working within and towards an agglomerate artistic form.

CREATIVE ECOLOGIES IN ACTION

Nardi and O'Day use an ecological metaphor to highlight aspects of informational relations, hoping to imbue them with a sense of urgency, evolution, diversity and scale. A set of useful characterisations of ecological structures emerge for the workshop-as-artwork: [17]

- *Keystone species*: Explicitly, the "skilled people whose presence is necessary to support the effective use of technology," "the natural teacher" and "mediators." (p.53) Within the workshop-as-artwork artist-practitioners and educational practitioners assisted participant, primarily helping the technology work effectively. As we have noted, this was not just facilitated through skill *transfer* but also through embodied action and playfulness with materials to encourage exploration in a relaxed and friendly way.
- *Locality*: More than just in the geographical sense, the workshop-as-artwork arises through local context. For an information ecology, *locality* is a description of the "habitation of technology." The workshop-as-artwork is an exploration of a contingent habitation of this kind, and attempts to help people make sense of creativity with technologies on their own terms.
- *System*: Creative ecologies of art-and-technology, much like their biological and informational counterparts, are marked by "strong interrelationships and dependencies among its different parts." (p. 51) Genealogies of art-and-technology practice that cite systems theories (e.g.: cybernetics) as influential are worth noting here. [2]
- *Diversity*: Creative ecologies exist for and through a diverse set of individuals and communities engaged with them. In biological ecologies, diversity manifests itself through a variety of "niches", where the strength of an individual is supported locally by the environment around it, and the diversity of the environment in turn supports this capacity in the individual. In the design and action of the workshop-as-artwork, it is hoped that diverse styles, perspectives and interests are allowed to flourish, as a dynamic and agile support structure is present.
- *Coevolution*: Along with the interplay of individual actors and their local environment - there are the dynamics of their diverse temporal development strategies, rates and scales. "The social and technical aspects of an environment co-evolve." (p. 52) In the workshop-as-artwork opportunities for coevolution exist where and when participants are able to progress and participate, dealing with new technical and social conditions at their own pace, in an environment where performance is downplayed in favour of a valuing of process.

QUESTIONS & CONCLUSION

How might the art-and-technology workshop, conceived as an ecology of technologies, learning potentials, and creative possibilities be even further restructured as a more radical improvisation, Happening, or performance? Claire Bishop develops the idea of a collaborative/relational work which is not judged solely on its moral ("bringing people together") or instrumental ("teaching people to solder") merit. Instead she suggests that "practices need to be thought of in terms other than their ameliorative consequences; they should also question the very terms of these ameliorative assumptions." [18] As objects becomes assemblages, practices ecologies, and information ubiquitous, words like "laboratory" and "workshop" comfortably replace words like "gallery" and "exhibit." [19] In such a landscape, the workshop-as-artwork posits a framework for just the kind of questioning that Bishop suggests.

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