

Creative Ecologies in Action: Technology and the Workshop-as-artwork

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ABSTRACT

A shift is occurring, particularly evident in art-and-technology practice, in which the artist-led-workshop is transformed into an distinct and distinguishable artistic form. Resulting from, and contributing to, the new access and relationships people have to information, creative culture, materials and like-interested individuals, the “workshop-as-artwork” is herein proposed and outlined. As a set of multiple artistic (material), social and learning agent interactions, thinking this new form as an ecology has shown benefits in terms of the aims and design of these new works, as well as their thinking, planning and execution. Further, from the artist-interventionist point of view, positing the workshop-as-artwork and ecological thinking seeks to update notions of legacy, consequence and significance for the art-and-technology practitioner and his or her audience.

Particular attention is given to the links made between the workshop-as-artwork to other historical art forms, the potentials for these structures to provide a means of rendering technologies more convivial, as well as understanding the participative and performative interactions possible within such a form. We conclude with a set of reflections on the artistic context of this work, and possible directions and prospects arising from the “workshop-as-artwork.”

Author Keywords

Artist, workshop, ecology, community, DIY.

ACM Classification Keywords

J.5. Arts and Humanities: Arts, fine and performing

General Terms

Design, Documentation, Experimentation, Human Factors

INTRODUCTION

Within traditional artistic communities, the artist-led-workshop is often regarded as a somewhat subsidiary format for the presentation of ideas, in contrast to papers or artworks. To the organiser (of conferences) or curator (of festivals and exhibitions), the workshop can be an inexpensive, if perfunctory way of declaring and developing attention to “practice,” while lowering the resource commitments inherent to supporting artworks and/or publications. For the artist-instigator, the “delivery” of

technology-based workshops can serve tactical agendas to “engage with communities of users,” clouding the potential and import of artistic, social and pedagogical (in the broadest sense) objectives. The design of content-rich, meaningful and thoughtfully presented workshop-as-artworks have great potential to transform social settings and transcend these cynicism.

“Workshopping” now forms a large part of the art-and-technology practitioner’s activities. As such the value in repositioning this sort of activity as an artistic “form” seems apparent. Not only does such a shift in thinking allow for a developed discourse and a review of the value of these activities, but it can serve to create a vehicle for understanding the conditions of co-created, creative meaning which take place when all involved are invited to become “part of an artwork.”

THE WORKSHOP-AS-ARTWORK

The authors have designed, executed and documented a series of workshop-as-artwork events in art-and-technology festivals, conferences and as part of curriculum-based artistic activities for young people. All of the workshops had as common denominator a sensitivity related to alternative energy sources, and the use of electronic hardware as enablers for personal creative expression in social, public spaces. Each of the workshops, titled Transmisol, Chiptune Marching Band and Sundroids, respectively developed a link to an art-historical material practice or form. Transmisol elaborated ideas from an arena known as Transmission Arts, Chiptune Marching Band developed linked to public music performance and public Happenings, and Sundroids evolved from interests in autonomously-powered Kinetic Art systems. It is important to note that these art-historical reference points were tapped not as an appeal to traditionalist forms, but for their potential to be re-thought in terms of Open Work and convivial/constructionist ideals.

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, partially inspired by the work of Tetsuo Kogawa (author of the “Micro Radio Manifesto”). Participants at the initial event were a group of young people aged 18-20 who were attending the Transitio Festival, a week-long new media and electronic arts event. The Transmisol group was invited to make a set of solar-powered MP3-player and radio transmitter devices, which

were to be installed in public space as a distributed exhibition.

Chiptune Marching Band (CTMB)

CTMB is a series of workshop-performances, inviting attendees to learn, build and perform together while engaging with localised energy generation and a public 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. The workshop-as-artwork was developed by Jo Kazuhiro and Jamie Allen, with further ideas for user contribution and feedback contributed by Areti Galani. 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). At the end of the march, participants take their instrument home, along with a self-addressed stamped postcard, to be used to report back to the Band as to what has become of their instrument in the weeks following the event itself. Many characteristics suggesting the potential of the workshop-as-artwork were suggested via CMTB.

Sundroids

Sundroids is a workshop-as-artwork using solar robotics to create a set of autonomous kinetic sculptural works for and from the countryside environment of Northeastern England. The workshops held thus far have all taken place at Harehope Quarry, a sustainability co-operative and outdoor creative educational facility in rural County Durham, UK. They were delivered in collaboration with secondary schools in the North East of England (Spring 2010), for young people aged 13 to 14. The sessions explore site-specific and kinetic art through the use of found materials on-site and small solar powered motor circuits. Art-practice inspiration came through the work of artists like Jean Tinguely and Arthur Ganson as art-and-technology practice. Participants personalised their collected materials through elaboration with handmade structures (for which bits of wood, tape and glue were provided), which they animated via their solar powered motors. The day culminated in a showcase of autonomous kinetic sculptures, which participants presented to one another, outdoors. Sundroids was designed to emphasise an improvisatory and contingent approach to materials, aesthetics and the run of the event.

Artistic Context

Why conceptualise these events as workshop-as-artworks? We might liken the workshop-as-artwork to a kind of technological knitting circle, in which the common reference point of a set of technologies, and being part of an artwork/event, become a partial solution to the mutual knowledge problem that can make ad-lib and ad-hoc community formation cumbersome and time consuming. In attempts to understand this sociality, we have found positioning these events as distinct artistic forms helpful, as this structure seems to capture the polyvocal, dialogical and ecological messiness which recognises multiple forces at play in any given situation, without feeling overly systematised or technological (as terms like “system,”

“complex,” or “network,” seem to do). The workshop-as-artwork gives artists, artist-initiators, educators and the general public a way to discuss these diverse event structures outside of the language of “audience,” “users,” and “creator.” It is true that each represents a framework devised and somewhat prescribed by an initiating person or artist, but with further reflection of notions of Lifelike Art [1] and conviviality suggests a hybrid form which is minimally assertive of its creators’ intentions (This has been further explored in subsequent loosely-organised performative workshop “structures” organised by the authors).

Insights Into Practice

What workshop-as-artworks demonstrate is a complicated mesh of limitations and support structures, established by a number of situated and related elements, which participants choose to navigate or subvert in their own individual and collective ways. Some of the challenges in discussing such creative ecologies in action in relation to workshops such as Sundroids is how best to capture, document and analyse these structures, as spurious and constantly evolving to respond to the changing dynamics of any given situation. In the instances described herein, participants’ responses were captured through interviews and observations, which sought to measure their personal autonomy and creativity through their sculptures and their personal descriptions of their sculptures. These evaluations did not, however, take account of the artist-facilitator (as participants), but only participants (as artists). The workshop-as-artwork partially addresses the situation, concerns and impetus of the artist-instigator working with creative ecological forms.

How might the art-and-technology workshop, as a particularly contemporary fusion of real-world technologies, learning potentials, and creative possibilities be even further restructured as a more radical improvisation, Happening, or performance? Could pedagogic and artistic goals be a driver of new institutional conventions, cultural forms and everyday interactions which create expanses like those imagined by Kaprow and Illich? 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.” [2] As words like “laboratory” and “workshop” now comfortably replace words like “gallery” and “exhibit” as a description of artistic forms and venues, the workshop-as-artwork provides a framework for just the kind of questioning Bishop suggests.

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