

Take Part: Participatory methods in art and design

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ABSTRACT

The Take Part workshop explores the philosophical, ethical, political and methodological crossovers that exist between artists and designers working with participatory processes. The workshop brings together artists and designers who have developed innovative and compelling methods for collaborating with audiences and end-users. It aims to actively develop shared possibilities for collaborative research between these two communities of practice. The workshop raises the following questions: What opportunities and challenges might be revealed by the comparative examination of participatory art and design practices? How are questions of aesthetics, utility and impact deployed in the evaluative structures of these two fields, and how might the discourses of each shed light upon the other? What might these two communities of practitioners learn from each other in terms of methodologies and strategies of engagement?

Author Keywords

Art, Design, Participation, Aesthetics, Audiences.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation
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INTRODUCTION

Participation has been an important theme and strategy in art since the 1920s. Among many origins, the roots of contemporary participatory art practices can be traced to the authorial experimentations of Dada, the event based Happenings of the 1950s, the process based systems of 1960s conceptual art, and the radical physical experiments of 1970s performance and video works. These multiple lineages have created a rich tradition of participation in contemporary art. Recently terms such as Relational Aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002) and Social Aesthetics (Larsen, 1999) have been coined to describe some of the dominant characteristics of contemporary practice, which emphasise the creation of interpersonal exchange, social engagement, large-scale collaboration and, in some cases, political mobilisation.

Claire Bishop (2006, p.12) has described three main concerns that underlie contemporary participatory art practices. First the desire for “activation” - the impulse to engage an active subject who will be “empowered”

through participation, second the desire to cede authorship in pursuit of a more egalitarian form of art production, and third a “restoration of the social bond” in the face of a perceived “crisis in community or collective responsibility”.

These themes of activation, authorship and community define a field of shared philosophical and political concerns between contemporary art practice and the field of participatory design. There is a dominant phenomenological emphasis in both fields that values and prioritises the experience of the participants above the objects that are produced. The PD movement has largely been associated with a Scandinavian approach that champions the active involvement of users in the design process (Bødker et al. 1993; Greenbaum & Kyng 1991). For practitioners working in participatory design, the emphasis on end-user experience is a political move away from idealised, management-defined requirements, and towards a “bottom-up” design process, in which workers are able to actively participate in the creation of their own tools and systems.

Greenbaum describes this political concern in terms of the “professional responsibility” of designers to “not only build systems that are cost effective but that also improve the quality of work life” (Greenbaum 1993, p. 47). Behind the ethical and political commitment of PD there is considerable methodological innovation. PD techniques such as “Future Workshops” (Kensing 1991), “Personas and Scenarios” (Bødker 2000) and video-based studies (Suchman & Trigg 1991) provide valuable tools for understanding and working with end users, which have also proved useful in the creation and exhibition of artworks (Muller et al 2006, Robertson et al 2006).

This shared philosophical, political and methodological territory gives rise to a series of questions: What opportunities and challenges might be revealed by the comparative examination of participatory art and design practices? How are questions of aesthetics, utility and impact deployed in the evaluative structures of these two fields, and how might the discourses of each shed light upon the other? What might these two communities of practitioners learn from each other in terms of methodologies and strategies of engagement?

This workshop takes these questions as a starting point. It aims to explore the rich territory of shared interests, as well as the provocative tensions and differences that exist between these two communities of practice. The workshop brings together artists and designers who have developed innovative and compelling methods for collaborating with audiences and end-users. The workshop explores the different ways in which creative

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practitioners, both artists and designers, facilitate change in their social, political and environmental surroundings.

GOALS OF THE WORKSHOP

The aim of the workshop is to create a space within the conference programme to focus on the relationship of PD to art practice in an interactive and discursive format. The workshop will seek to actively develop crossovers and collaborations between artists, designers and researchers in both fields. The specific goals of the workshop are:

- To identify and explore areas of commonality and difference between participatory art and design practice
- To identify existing and potential crossovers in methods and strategies of engagement
- To facilitate exchange and discussion between the international Participatory Design community and Australian artists and designers working with participation.
- To explore the possibility for a network facilitating collaboration and exchange between artists and designers interested in participation.
- To identify new avenues for hybrid research that combine expertise from the fields of participatory art and participatory design.

WORKSHOP FORMAT

The workshop aims to bring together practitioners from the fields of both art and design and to actively involve participants in mapping the shared territory between participatory art and design practice.

The foundation of the workshop will be based on two case-study hybrid art and design projects taking place in Sydney alongside PDC 2010—the Remnant/Emergency ARTLAB and the OWL project. These case studies include speculative and provocative art and design activities that are intended to help participants re-think their relationship to each other and their environments.

The half-day workshop will begin with brief presentations of these two case studies, including a tour of the exhibited artefacts produced by these two projects. Participants will give a short presentation of their work. The presentations will be followed by group discussions facilitated by the organisers of the workshop. These discussions will be based around the themes of: politics and ethics; aesthetics and utility; methods and strategies; and authorship and collaboration.

The outcomes of the workshop will provide a platform for editing a special issue on the crossovers between participatory art and design for submission to an international design journal.

HOW TO PARTICIPATE

Please submit a 1-2 page statement explaining your interest in this area including a brief biography, formatted

using the PDC Paper Submission Template directly to lizzie.muller@uts.edu.au by 29 October. Notification by the 5 November. Please let us know if you need confirmation before this date in order to secure travel funding.

ORGANISERS

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