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Media Politics of the Local

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Life on the Trailing Edge

Ten Years Exploring Trash Technology

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At ISEA98 I proposed that artists should engage with recycled, “trailing edge” technology combined with free, open source software as an antidote to the commercialism and exclusivity of digital media. The project that emerged from that proposal, Access Space, has proven to be a robust model for public engagement with networked digital media and has influenced numerous local initiatives. It is now the longest running open access media lab in the UK.

In 1998 open source was seen as marginal. Now the cultural significance of the free software movement is recognised and proprietary software and formats have become marginal for many artists, activists and commentators. Yet proprietary formats, software and practices (which provide convenience at the expense of autonomy) still dominate the mainstream and some artists remain uncritical digital cheerleaders.

Digital technologies tend to manifest as a centralising force: concentrating knowledge, power, skill, information, money, opportunities, resources, and (with the advent of social networking) even friends. If digital media artists only engage at the level, “Hey, this is cool!” they fail to challenge the figuratively toxic social and literally toxic physical effects of an industry which both creates and accelerates the premature redundancy of the tools of their trade.

Art has practical significance. Artistic creation has been a key factor in the success of Access Space’s technology recycling (more precisely re-use). Making art with trash technology inspires computer donations, attracts participants and volunteers, focuses enthusiasm. While others use reasoned ecological, economic and utilitarian narratives to encourage recycling, Access Space attracts a continuing stream of ever more powerful computers simply by showcasing their creative potential.

Creativity transforms value. Defining a four-year-old computer as “obsolete” does not speak to the utility of the object (it’s still a powerful production and communications platform) but indicates its user’s unwillingness or inability to continue to be creative with it. “Trash” is what we call stuff we can’t be bothered with. Our ecosystems are suffering not from an excess of consumption but from deficits of creativity and knowhow.

Artists engaging with technology must better understand their capacity to lead society into a less consumerist, more sustainable, collaborative and

personally empowering mode, in which technology serves to decentralise and distribute positive value, not to concentrate it at choke-points in supply and communication.

Free, open source licenses are key mechanisms to ensure that software distributes knowledge, skill and opportunity. Could Access Space show us something of what a wider “open source culture” might look like?

Access Space operates on a simple principle: anyone who walks in can take part and pursue their own creative projects. These may (or may not) engage with the open access media lab, web hosting, trash computers and peripherals, exhibition space or the social and micro-business networks around the project. The only requirement is a focus, and the only cost is a willingness to share inspiration, ideas and knowledge.

Each project remains entirely the property of its originator – it's their idea and their autonomous domain. Participants' enthusiasm to acquire the resources, contacts and knowhow necessary to progress their idea drives their interactions with the rest of the community. Questions inform and empower the questioned, as well as the questioner. Everyone brings useful resource to Access Space – even if those resources are in the form of problems to be solved.

What grows out of this apparently absurd, utopian giveaway is a network of peer learning and growth which forms a sustainable learning community. It diverges significantly from conventional models of learning.

- The capacity of a peer-learning network to deliver skills increases with demand. Like bit-torrent, people give as much (or more) than they demand. (In “top down” learning, more students require more tutors.)
- Learning is appropriate for the level, context and practical demands of each participant. (Institutions work on a “We know what you need to know” basis.)
- Incidental or off-topic learning becomes significant. (Unlike the academy, Access Space's diverse community is poor at producing narrowly specialised experts unaware of different skill sets, value systems and perspectives.)
- Engagement is not a problem. (Access Space works with what already engages people, challenging them to take it to the next level.)
- There's no glass ceiling. (Participants can engage at a level above the expertise of the organisation.)

It's clear that this DIY way of working is effective, low cost and sustainable. Rather than importing expensive resource (new computers, expert professionals, new software) Access Space mobilises local technological and human resources already present or readily available at no cost.

Access Space has been identified with global networks of similar practice (such as the Bricolabs network) and huge progress in engaging with these ideas has been made in emerging nations, particularly Brazil. In contrast developed market economies may be ill-placed to ride this next wave of digital creativity (in which “old” is the new “new”) unless they fundamentally re-appraise their understanding of “value”

Some Initiatives in Pervasive Games in the State of Santa Catarina

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Focusing on pervasive games, we compare the performative actions of three groups.

Influenced by Allan Kaprow's Happenings and by Augusto Boal's Invisible Theater, *Grupo ERRO* follows the line of performances in the tradition of the group Fluxus. Its familiarity with the concept of *dérive* and of the psychogeography of the Situationist International enabled the group to identify strategies of action, urban space appropriation and displacement, which are confused on the streets with passers-by. The group, coordinated by Pedro Diniz Bennaton, has regional affinities with collective activists of Brazil, like Grupo Laranjas, of Recife, Empreza, of Goiás, and GIA, of Bahia, and also of Latin America, in the actions of H.I.J.O.S. In the urban scenario, which constitutes the group's stage, improvisations are at the same time protest and entertainment. The interventions build a situation with the public and the street, and confuse reality with fiction, questioning certain social standards, like the one of mental sanity in *Carga Viva*. In the context of the strategies and esthetics of the game, *Buzkashi*, an urban intervention of 2004, explores the limits between party and war and abandons the spectacular elements of the theater. Despite the desire to eliminate the frontiers between the spectacle's artificiality as artistic format and the urban scene, and the fact that the group uses the term expectator instead of spectator, to designate the participant as someone who brings their own context and expectations, there is in the game a clear role division between players and reflexes. Launched in 2006, also blurring the spheres of fiction and reality, which is commonly practiced in the esthetics of the pervasive games, *Desvio* invited the street's passers-by to represent a murder. *Enfim um líder*, of 2007, extended the experience

into an action that lasted three days. Using posters and the strategy of marketing and political propaganda, the action simulated the introduction of a political candidate on the streets.

Playing of Transforming Reality

Authentic challenges create greater engagement than artificial challenges. The example of *Oasis* is interesting, because the project stimulates emergency action and the practice of civil society's governability and autonomy in view of the State's lack of efficacy. *Oasis* was created in 2003 by Instituto Elos, a non-governmental organization founded in 2000 by architects and urbanists, which is also responsible for *Guerreiros sem Armas*. The strategy is cooperative social entrepreneurship both in *Oasis* and in *Oasis SC*, of 2008, on which we focus in this paper. Without an esthetic concern, the project uses the social platform Ning on the internet to call for participation, to schedule and distribute collective tasks like the construction of the interface in the platform and the formation of the teams for the collective reconstruction of flooded communities in Santa Catarina. The project has a national scope, creating many work fronts. In an interview, Einstein, a Computer Sciences student of ITA and someone that participated since the beginning of 2009 in *Oasis SC*, highlights in his experience the voluntary participation of all, and the donations, even the technological ones, received without using the propaganda of the logotypes of the involved companies.

Between the Artificiality of Artistic Language and the Participation of the Civil Society

Ciberestuário Manguezais is a development of *Mar Memorial Dinâmico* – an installation that uses tangible interfaces (2009) and Web Art (2008). The call for participation in *Ciberestuário Manguezais* focused firstly on the mangrove swamp of Itacorubi due to easy access and because it is where the university is located, promoting the students' reflection on the occupation. As the physical-chemical parameters that we would collect with the embedded system are monitored by companies that subsidize the production of mollusks in Santa Catarina's coast, the main strategy of *Ciberestuário Manguezais* is now the access to information and the appropriation of diverse means of communication and publicity. The utilization of the social platforms that already existed implied the redirection of the esthetics to the co-authored narratives and the community's appropriations of knowledge about the environment produced by the scientific community, making them become a public property. The investigation's character of pervasive game facilitated the different levels of participation, and also enabled the project to transpose the neutrality of certain esthetic propositions, acting in the sphere of the concrete.

Interacting with the Community

Comparing with the already established genres of pervasive games mentioned by the authors STENROS and MONTOLA (2009,31-45) and like

in *Treasure Hunt* games, *Ciberestuário Manguzeais* promotes the search for data in the physical area to compose the mangrove swamp page in the social platform. *Grupo ERRO*'s actions in the urban space are similar to *Public Performances* games, like *Carga Viva 2002*, *Buzkashi 2004*, *Desvio 2006* and *Enfim um Líder 2007*. *Oasis SC* and *Ciberestuário Manguzeais* use diverse technologies in the colonization of new platforms. Similar to *Real Games*, considered by MONTOLA, STENROS and WAERN a pervasive *Paidia*, and not a game, they promote playful activities and performative actions in the physical world, raising the participants' awareness about the region where they live.

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Exploring Rural Territory as a New Medium

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Among the most relevant phenomena of the last years, knowledge economy has risen in importance. Seen as a development strategy for over-territorial growth, it is strictly linked to the change of vision from global to local and it is strongly influenced by the competitive rules of globalization, among which we can find distinctive elements of a territory that represent an essential benefit. Rural areas, that often suffer for competitive disadvantages in terms of infrastructures, services, knowledge and opportunities, are anyway characterized by some strongly connotative elements such as living sustainability and cultural identity. It is possible, therefore, to consider a vertical overview that is not conventional and alternative to stereotypes or rural tourism, and that is achievable not only through increasing the value of cultural, historical, productive and environmental richness of one territory but as well through improving all peculiar resources of a territory, starting from its history always allowing new languages and new ways in order to preserve and hand them down. Inspired by this logic, Interferenze and Mediaterrae Vol.1 are two projects oriented to firmly re-design the identity of a rural territory. Both of the projects aim at interpreting local dimension in a global overview and putting into practice a way of communication connected to planning and achieving cultural production actions, which interpose, between transmitter and recipient, not only a simple and rational message, but something of unexpected that is not possible to express, but only to feel. Both projects are developed in Irpinia, a rural region immersed in the deep heart of South Italy, enriched by landscapes full of abstract, wind and infiniteness, steeples, towers, narrow and quiet streets, place of an historical metabolism that is slow and almost solemn in its ancestral rituals. Interferenze is a festival which investigates and experiments relations and intersections among new technologies, territorial roots and cultures. In the constant research of connections of elements belonging to technology, tradition and rural landscapes, Interferenze puts forward its own view of an integrated development of territories. It offers an unusual writing of the natural environment which, through rural landscapes, outlying lands and the “inappropriate places” catches a glimpse of the ultimate sense of a complex action of a semantic reclaiming of identity and sustainability of territories. Mediaterrae Vol.1 was a further evolution

of this project' strategy, by extending the basis of the work begun in 2003 with *Interferenze*. The project had involved a network of stakeholders that is operating on Irpinia territory and is working on a series of rural development projects oriented to establish a structured system among the most active and qualified resources in the whole area. Eighteen audio and video artists belonging to digital art scene and coming from different countries in Europe and overseas were invited to confront themselves with the tradition of Irpinia, in a project aimed at documenting the cultural and environmental heritage of a whole territory, between nature and technology, tradition and vanguard, past and future. This residency project, that was also an audiovisual production and a final event, was focused on music tradition of Tarantella from the little village of Montemarano. The Montemaranese is a peculiar form of Tarantella with an ancient and mysterious origin, which is absolutely relevant from an ethnomusical point of view, and is played with popular tradition instruments like ciaramella and zampogna, assisted by clarinet. During the Carnival of Montemarano, the invited artists have been able to join the locals and their rites in which "the forces of tradition are competing with the ones of modernity" (G. Gala), being assisted during all operations of sampling and production of audiovisual material or consulting literary and iconographic sources. The final result was not only an event at Theater Carlo Gesualdo, in Avellino, but mainly a DVD release (10.000 copies printed), containing a film documentary shot during the whole residency project and seven audio-video works. The key factor of projects like *Interferenze* and *Mediaterrae* lies in the relationship with a territorial system available to become a substrate upon which it's possible to insert cultural production actions oriented to extend awareness on rural territory potential as a fruition place of an all-embracing experience. A place in which both the traditional forms of territory knowledge and the possibility of increasing the value of rural context as a new and unknown fruition field of cultural actions can converge. The territory, not anymore as a geographic place or a branding system, becomes an inland space into the media system, transforming itself in a medium: through the event, or its media representation, the space that separates transmitter and recipient is filled and a "distraction" of communication surface happens: a relation is realized, communication is activated. The rural territory is seen therefore not as a product anymore, but as a (new) medium with which to communicate and get in touch in a creative way as long as something unexpected can happen in the space between transmitter and recipient, experimenting unexpected relations through processes, strategies and results of the same communication.

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‘Proticipation’: The Australia Council and Social Media Arts in Virtual Worlds

Proticipation:

The Australia Council and Social Media Arts in Virtual Worlds [1]

In 2007 the Australia Council for the Arts became the first national arts funding body in the world to fund an artist residency in the virtual domain of Second Life. The successful recipients, writer Justin Clemens, visual artist Christopher Dodds and sound artist Adam Nash, proposed a mixed reality, networked project linking people in real life with avatars in a virtual world. Their residency project titled *Babelswarm* was a realtime, 3D sound sculpture grown from the conversion of words spoken and letters typed by people both in a physical gallery and as avatars in Second Life.

This residency generated one of the most successful media responses for any initiative the Australia Council has run to date. The project included several other highlights for the Australia Council, including the first in-world media campaign, the first in-world client meetings, the first in-world artists match-makers RSS feed, the first in-world international artist talk and the first in-world grants assessment meeting.

Babelswarm was a huge critical success, with a nationally profiled launch in regional Australia and Second Life. In part as a result of this success, several subsequent virtual world and social media arts initiatives were developed by the Australia Council to engage with a broader range of audiences, platforms, interfaces and curatorial practices, including the Massive Multi-user Virtual Environment initiative (MMUVE IT!); the *Frontline Media* initiative (involving Muslim and Indigenous Youth in Darwin); *Virtual Macbeth*; *Thursday’s Fictions* and the Australian Centre of Virtual Art Laboratory (ACVA Lab), an interdisciplinary arts space for virtual collaboration.



Fig. 1: Artists from *Babelswarm*, the Australia Council's first initiative in Second Life. L to R: Adam Nash (avatar Adam Ramona), Christopher Dodds (avatar Mashup Islander), and Justin Clemens (avatar S1 Gausman). Courtesy the Australian Centre of Virtual Art (ACVA).

Built into the core of these initiatives' funding criteria were requirements for artists and curators to experiment with new curatorial practices, mixed reality participation and transnational audience development.

Much of the social media art that has emerged as a result, requires what I have termed *proticipation*. Proticipation describes the production of a social media artwork through the participation of users, either as avatars and/or in physical form. I use the term proticipation, as opposed to produsage (another term often deployed for this type of work) as proticipation implies a more active, performative engagement with the act of creation [2].

Although still at the beginning of these new virtual world practices, Australian funding recipients, and more recently major Australian arts institutions such as the National Portrait Gallery of Australia are continuing to develop critically acclaimed, globally engaged, mixed reality projects, where user proticipation is central to the co-creation of art.

Of particular interest is the emergence of a very strong Indigenous presence in these domains, highlighted by the selection of artist Aroha Groves' Second Life work for the inaugural new media arts category of the 2010 Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award, the most significant Indigenous art award in Australia.

References

- [1] Social media arts describes new types of media art that has emerged in social networking sites such as Second Life, Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms. The term social media arts combines the concept of *Social Media* [or social networking] 'an umbrella term that defines the various activities that integrate technology, social interaction, and the construction of words, pictures, videos and audio' with the concept of *Media Arts*, which 'at its simplest level is the application of existing and new technologies within the arts'. Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media Accessed. 16 July 2008; *New Media Arts Scoping Study*, Australia Council for the Arts, 2006, p11; Peach, Ricardo *The Second Life funding Landscape: Keith Gallash Interviews Ricardo Peach, the Inter-Arts Office*, REALTIME, October-November 2008 www.realttimearts.net/article/87/9181 Accessed 19 July 2010.
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