

## 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”.