

Towards issues-based art and design research

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Issues-based art and design research involves bringing people and things together around shared concerns—and it is one means by which we can “spark a public into being” [1]. While questions of public participation, public space and public technologies are well-known discourses in the development of wireless, mobile and context-aware technologies, little systematic attention has been given to what actually constitutes the publics at hand.

Building on early 20th century debates between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey on ‘the problem with the public,’ contemporary cultural theorists Noortje Marres [2] and Bruno Latour [3] argue for a re-assessment of what we mean by ‘public’ and the politics of everyday life. When it comes to developing new technologies, what if we focus on multiple publics that continuously congeal and dissolve around particular concerns? What if we privilege many publics within and around a variety of shared issues? What if we never consider ourselves separate from the publics we work with—and for? Sociologist Mimi Sheller suggests that “it is the capacity for coupling and decoupling in various ways that enables social action and the emergence of persons ... Mobile publics can perhaps best be envisioned as capacitors for moving in and out of different social gels, including the capacity to take on an identity that is able to speak and to participate in specific contexts” [4].

One way to assess current understandings of mobile publics and public mobilities, including the manifestly technological, is to evaluate their capacity to move in and out of different contexts and identities. Interconnected in terms of practice, we can also ask ourselves how well we are able to do the same. By focussing on the ways in which social and cultural research, art and design already work with tangible combinations of ethics and aesthetics, it becomes possible to explore the ways in which new mobile computing applications both shape, and are shaped by, these practices. However, if our goal is to cultivate more critical multi-disciplinary and collaborative practices and products, then we need to articulate and develop methods that are able to flex as much as the uncertainty, inconsistency and instability of our particular situations and concerns demand.

In order to move towards this kind of issues-based art and design research practice, several approaches to, and methods for, collaborative work appear promising. Adapting Bill Gaver and colleagues’ cultural probes [5] to be used ‘internally’ rather than ‘externally’ could be one way to effectively bring a project team together.

Another is to engage each other in what Jane McGonigal calls immersive and collective play [6]. Creative ways of generating ideas and documenting activities within and across fields can also be found in Proboscis' body-storming, storycubes, endless landscapes and everyday archaeology techniques [7]. All of these methods emphasise combinations of embodied experience, material and symbolic culture as means by which we form different identities and manoeuvre different situations. Although each method has traditionally been used as a means of working with users, participants and other publics, they also provide means by which we can produce our own reflexive and local knowledges in the process.

These approaches further challenge practitioners to trust those who may offer us no truth, and consider that tolerance may be all we can offer each other sometimes. Even when we disagree on how things are or should be, by getting to know our shared concerns we create the possibility of convergence without consensus. In the case of urgent or pressing issues this first step may very well be the most difficult one, but it may also be one of the only ways to ensure we come together at all.

References

[1] Marres, N. 2005. "Issues Spark a Public Into Being: A Key but Often Forgotten Point of the Lippmann-Dewey Debate." In Making things public: Atmospheres of democracy, pp. 208-217, edited by B. Latour and P. Weibel. Cambridge: MIT Press.

[2] See above [1] and Marres, N. 2006. "Public (Im)potence." In Open 11: Hybrid space: How wireless media mobilize public space, pp.78-81. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers.

[3] Latour, B. 2005. "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik, Or How to Make Things Public." In Making things public: Atmospheres of democracy, pp. 14-41, edited by B. Latour and P. Weibel. Cambridge: MIT Press.

[4] Sheller, M. 2004. "Mobile publics: Beyond the network perspective," pp. 49-50 in Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 22: 39-52.

[5] Gaver, B, T. Dunne and E. Pacenti. 1999. "Design: Cultural probes." Interactions 6(1): 21-29.

[6] McGonigal, J. 2003. "This Is Not a Game: Immersive Aesthetics & Collective Play." Digital Arts & Culture 2003 Conference Proceedings.

[7] <http://proboscis.org.uk/bodystorming/>, <http://proboscis.org.uk/storycubes/>, <http://proboscis.org.uk/endlesslandscapes/>, and <http://socialtapestries.net/jennyhammond/EverydayArchaeologyReport06.pdf>