



An Investigation Into The Impact Of Collaborations Between The Commercial Digital And Artistic Sectors On The Curatorial Realm

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Abstract

This paper examines the steady rise in collaborations between the contemporary art field, commercial creative media and technology industries and the new media art field and reflects upon how collaborations of this nature are reshaping the 'realm of the curator'. Ways in which theorists, and practitioners have approached collaborations between art and industry are considered and a curatorial project, *Binaudios*, commissioned by the author, is used as a case study for analysis. Here, the project reveals some of the similarities and frictions inherent within the developing relationship and evolving terms of engagement between these three sectors. This paper explores the impact of these tensions upon the evolving curatorial role, the curator's broadening theoretical context and methodologies and practices developing within the proliferation of new sites of distribution and engagement of art.

Keywords

Collaborative Commissioning, Expanded Curating, New Media Art, Contemporary Art, Commercial Creative Media, Collaboration

Introduction

Pervasive media and ubiquitous computing, alongside the convergence of networked, media platforms, global social access and commercial activity on the world-wide-web has catalyzed the startling growth of the creative media and technology industries over the past ten years. The impact of this relatively young industry can be seen in the radical recalibration of global business practices, and networked, digital culture has had a fundamental impact within wider society.

New technologies have also heralded a radical reconsideration of the theoretical and practical role, function and value of art and the wider art ecology in civic society.(1) This has led to new collaborations and partnerships between the arts and other fields including science and more recently commercial, creative media and technology. While not a direct beneficiary, the 'collaborative commission' case study *Binaudios*, is also reflective of recent strategic funding initiatives that support collaborative practice between the arts, media based

platforms and commercial technologies. Examples include the NESTA Digital Arts R&D Fund; a collaboration between Arts Council England, Arts Humanities and Research Fund and NESTA and The Space; a collaboration between the BBC and Arts Council England.

A clear understanding of the evolving curatorial role within the interface between art, new media art and commercial technology is pivotal to articulating contemporary arts position in our new, media universe, in which art is increasingly becoming yet another form of mass culture. Within this space, existing art world concepts, tools and methodologies are found lacking. As such, we have seen developments and new approaches in relation to; funding, commissioning, producing, exhibiting, interpreting, disseminating, critiquing, collecting and selling art, after new media.

The search for common territory between those involved in the arts and those involved in the sciences via curated projects stretches back to initiatives such as Xerox Parc Artist in Residence Programme in the early 1990's. In his book, *Art and Innovation*, Craig Harris highlights the fears of C.P Snow, writing in the 1940's:

"large segments within society were not communicating with each other and were creating language, educational, and social infrastructures that reinforce the gulf between these domains." (2)

More recently, in 1996, cultural theorist Lev Manovich drew a line between computer art and fine art describing the former as Turing land and the latter Duchamp land. Turing land representing the land where technology was taken seriously and is interested in experimental research processes. While Duchamp land satirized technology and wanted a finished art product. (3) In *Rethinking Curating*, Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook highlight the range of artistic and curatorial activity that is successfully bridging these two 'lands'. They posit the art world's interest in process-based art and curatorial interest in the behaviours of new media art practice form this bridge. (4)

Curators working in organisations whom are actively engaged in redefining the curatorial and organisational role within this new context include;

Heather Corcoron (Rhizome), Julia Kaginsky (New INC), Freeman (Open Data Institute) and Irini Papadimitriou, amongst others. All of these curators have highlighted new, theoretical and practical methodologies for curatorial practice within contemporary digital culture. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will focus on a project by Heather Corcoron and her team at Rhizome, which was the inspiration behind my own curatorial experiment.

Binaudios 2014, represents the output of a curatorial experiment investigating activity within the hybrid ecology emerging within the boundaries of the arts, media arts and commercial industries. It investigates the impact of the differences inherent within the three fields in relation to; roles and methodologies, money and value, crediting and intellectual property and marketing and public engagement, upon contemporary curatorial practice.

Rhizome Seven on Seven

A leading organization actively engaged in curatorial bridge building between contemporary and new media art and the commercial creative media industries is Rhizome. The inspiration behind my collaborative commission between an artist and a creative technologist initially came from a series of events programmed by Rhizome called *Rhizome Seven on Seven*. Initiated in 2010, *Seven on Seven* pairs

“seven leading artists with seven game-changing technologists in teams of two, and challenges them to develop something new - be it an application, social media, artwork, product, or whatever they imagine - over the course of a single day”. (5)

It is a high profile, public example of an organisation both curating and facilitating collaborative dialogue between the commercial creative media and technology industry, new media and internet art and art.

The *Seven on Seven* platform creates a particular site of production and discussion for collaborative arts practice, with each participating individual drawing from two distinct, yet merging fields. The tightly curated pairings and open brief create a site that draws from artistic practices and concerns emerging within the terrain framed by Manovich’s Turing and Duchamp art lands and the commercial creative media and technology industry. Each pairing had twenty four hours to ‘develop something new’ and then presented their work at a conference, generally hosted within an arts or cultural venue, to both a live and networked audience. The event is filmed, and then archived on Rhizome’s website.

eeeeemail.com

In 2013, artist Jonus Lund and creative technology entrepreneur Michelle You, presented their project *eeeeemail.com* at the Barbican Centre, in London. Lund creates paintings, sculpture, photography and websites that incorporate data from his studies of trends and behaviours within digital culture and the contemporary art world. You, is the co-founder of *Songkick*, a digital start up company with over eight million visitors a month. Interestingly, it is the artist who is the creative coder in this pairing, rather than the ‘game-changing technologist’.

Unlike other pairings discussed later in this paper, Lund and You approached their *Seven on Seven* collaboration as a ‘hack day’ and produced a live, web-based project for their presentation. (6) Using an existing, email service provider, *eeeeemail.com* randomly pairs logged in participants and exchanges sent emails from their account outbox between them. The work attempts to counter the tight, algorithmic, filtering infrastructure of social media platforms by searching for a way to create a sense of chance and serendipity in online interactions.

eeeeemail.com extends both the artist and the technologists personal interests and seeks to explore how users can present a more authentic ‘self’ online and thus have a more genuine online experience with others. By selecting random emails that have already been sent in the past, the participant cannot modify the email content or their online behaviour. Thus the sent emails reveal an insight into the participant’s true self, rather than the persona they can construct on social networking. Lund explains:

“If you give a part of you that actually matters, maybe the experience and exchange will matter more. Rather than something that is self defined.”(7)

Lund’s interests in seeking to explore how users can present a more authentic self, online, has produced a project that also satisfied You’s interests in developing an opportunity for service providers, such as *Songkick*, to have access to and analyse information that goes beyond that which the user themselves provide.

As mentioned, each individual pairing took established their own approach to how they used their time together. In the same year, Graham Harwood’s and Alberto Nardelli explanation of how they approached their pairing and presentation is telling. Their approach recognises the inherent constraints and differences in discourses that frame each distinct sector’s perspective and practices. While also articulating this need to find common ground and shared points of interest. Thus the

key output for their pairing was to gain a

“a critical understanding of how we are coming to our subject”

and present their efforts to combine their independent methodologies, rather than the ‘trinkets of creativity’ developed throughout their day together. [8]

The *Rhizome Seven on Seven* project bridges artistic and commercial; perspectives and sector discourses, interests, working practices, sites of production, distribution and engagement, all of which are also related to the realm of the artist and curator. While *Seven on Seven* is an interesting programme to attend, experience and reflect upon, the format has its limitations. My case study would need to go deeper into exploring how a resourced, (art) output oriented collaborative commission between the two sectors would be delivered. How would the pairing of an artist with a commercial, creative perspective impact upon the process of conception, development, production, installation and dissemination of the resulting collaborative artwork?



Fig 1. *Binaudios*, 2014 by Dominic Wilcox and James Rutherford, installation shot in the Sage Gateshead, May 2014 (Photography by Karolina Maciagowska)

***Binaudios*, a collaborative commission**

In order to explore Rhizome’s curatorial strategy of ‘pairing’ two creative individuals from the art and technology fields more fully, the decision was made to develop a brief for a collaborative commission that would ‘pair’ an artist and a creative technologist, and task them to create a new artwork that would be showcased as part of the Thinking Digital Arts (TDA) 2014 programme. There were some modifications to the *Seven on Seven* parameters, including; a site responsive brief, an extended timeframe for development and a public exhibition site within a cultural venue.

The commission was conceived as one element of a publically funded arts festival and delivered as part of Thinking Digital Conference (TDC) a commercially

driven, creative technology conference. Thus, these two distinct sector voices framed the commission brief, and informed the development, and delivery and continuing dissemination of the work. The resulting artwork was *Binaudios*, a site- specific commission by Dominic Wilcox and James Rutherford. *Binaudios* playfully responds to the unique architecture of the Sage Gateshead, a major cultural regeneration project by the local authority, Gateshead Council, opened in 2004. It explores the social, cultural, geographical context of this large-scale performance venue via sound.

Both the artist and the technologist were invited individually to take part in the commission. They were chosen as they shared similar attributes including; similar stage in their career, established practice, skills and interests, similar level of experience of collaborations between art and technology, a familiarity with each others sector and both had a connection with the NE. Investigations throughout the commissioning process focused on identifying the key similarities and frictions between each collaborator in relation to; their roles and working methods, money and value and the crediting and intellectual property of the final artwork.

Findings:

Roles and Working Methods

Artist, designer and inventor Dominic Wilcox’s creative practice produces projects that are at once artistically self aware, playful and potentially useful in contemporary society. While he often operates within it, his practice extends beyond the theoretical, art historical and institutional framework of contemporary art. His artistic understanding is instead framed by the much broader context of theory and practice reflective of networked culture. As such, he regularly works to both art/design based commissions and commercial briefs as well as realising his own interests. James Rutherford is a technologist, working in a freelance capacity as a software developer and a start up mentor within the creative media and technology sector. He regularly organises hack events to encourage creative help open local city and scientific data.

A conscious decision was made to try to establish a non-hierarchical partnership within this pairing in order to facilitate a collaborative context for co – creation. As such, while the brief gave each collaborator their title; ‘artist’ and ‘creative technologist’, it deliberately refrained from detailing the roles of each collaborator in this commission. Akin to Lund and You’s *eeeemail.com* project, the potential of the commission lay in the ability for the two individuals to co- create and

share ideas, practices and experiences, that could satisfy both in different ways and to different ends.

However, within the formal context of an art commission, the act of naming each collaborator as 'artist' and 'creative technologist' served to reinforce the sector divide and thus clarify the division of roles from the onset. Thus the artist came to the commission with the expectation:

“To be creative. To deliver an appropriate artwork for the event. To think up the idea, decide how it should work and look”

and the creative technologist:

“To develop a technical solution to realise the commission's concept.”

The brief had immediately framed the project as a traditional art commission, which demanded its key output to be an artwork that would be showcased within a cultural institution and established an expectation and hierarchy of what each individual's role would be within it. As such, throughout the research and development period, the artist took creative lead in driving the conceptual framework of the artwork, and led on all decisions in relation to content, aesthetics and design. While, the creative technologist defaulted to advising on technical feasibility and developing the technical aspects to realise the artwork's concept. The early clarification and almost unconscious acceptance of these fully established roles meant that each collaborator worked independently and autonomously on their own element of the commission. It is no wonder then, that Dominic Wilcox described the experience as being more akin to an 'arranged marriage' rather than a collaboration which fostered an authentic act of co-creation.

As Stephen Wright argues within his paper *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, in the naming of the roles, I had inadvertently utilised the established language and terminology that

“remain operative in the shadows cast by modernity's expert culture.” [9]

By approaching and framing the commission from the existing ontology of contemporary art, a set of predetermined theories, tools, methods and language had been applied to the initiative. While a successful output, the 'art commission', was delivered, the project failed to realise a collaborative site of co – creation for the process of art making to occur.

Money and Value

Like Rhizome's *Seven on Seven* experimental discussion platform, TDA sought to create a range of productive spaces for the co-creation and sharing of ideas, practices and experiences between the arts and commercial media and technology fields. The TDA programme was framed as part of Thinking Digital Conference and delivered in a range of cultural and arts venues across NewcastleGateshead, in the North East of England. The conference is now a private business, however, it had been initially conceived by Codeworks. [10] as one of a suite of initiatives devised to encourage growth and development within the creative media industry across the region.

The conference programme is modelled on the American conference, TED and as such, provides a broad overview of speakers representing the impact of technology on all aspects of society. Its key audience however, remains within the creative media and technology industry. [11] TDA was in part, seen as an opportunity to diversify the conference delegation, provide an art based experience for current delegates that augmented the existing conference offer and in the longer term, increase ticket sales. TDA also needed to address and satisfy the specific requirements of its key funder, Arts Council England (ACE). As the programme was publically funded by the arts sector, it needed to ensure that the programme supported the development of excellence within the arts and access a public audience.

By framing Thinking Digital Arts within a commercial conference, and financing it with public arts funding, inherent differences between established assumptions and concepts within both sectors in relation to money and value emerged. The arts programme was required to both add value in terms of facilitating a range of productive contexts to support the co-creation and sharing of artistic ideas, practices and artworks, which needed to be accessible and experienced by a public audience. It was also required engage the specific delegate audience of the conference and make both a financial and non-economic return for the conference, beyond that of self -sustainability. Within the commission, these tensions played out in various practical ways including; payment, time and value.

The commission was budgeted using benchmarks provided by the arts sector and both the artist and the technologist was remunerated equally. This benchmark immediately highlighted a discrepancy in expected daily rates between the arts and the commercial media and technology sectors. In that the fee was below the regular day rate expected by the creative technologist. However, the value inherent within the opportunity to

collaborate with an artist on a creative commission was acknowledged as enough to compensate for this disparity.

The time allocated to the project by the artist differed in that the technologist saw the project taking

“A couple of weeks work, spread across three months.”

were as the artist stated that he would

“allocate an amount of time that will enable the development of a successful piece of work.”

This distinction in process and perspective highlights a fundamental friction between the two sectors. Time, in relation to output is valued by two separate theoretical contexts. The technologist saw this as a ‘loss leader’ project which he would allocate a defined amount of time to complete, while the artist deemed the project as an opportunity to create an artwork, and would give it as much time as was needed to be realized.

The value of the project was however, seen in a similar way by both and rooted in the experiential opportunity to work creatively with another skill set and learn from a different process. The non-economic values of the project, which were mutually understood, created the bridge that connected this pairing.

Crediting and Intellectual Property

The arts and commercial sectors operate on a differing set of assumptions and concepts when it comes to intellectual property and crediting. While relevant to both, intellectual property is used, perceived and valued in different ways. In recent years, much debate within the new media art field has centred around establishing clear terms of engagement between commercial agencies and brands who are seeking to work with artists or to use existing concepts developed by artists.

As Golan Levin explains to ad agencies, in the arts or within open source creative communities, where financial return is not the key driver or motivation for creating work, it of upmost importance that the intellectual property of an artist is acknowledged and credited appropriately if used or exploited by another (third) party:

“As difficult as this might seem to understand, many artists aren’t in it for the money -- If they were, they’d be working for agencies. For many, CREDIT IS AN ESSENTIAL FORM OF CURRENCY. They want to be known as the inventors of a technique, as having inspired others. It’s understood that their ideas will be

picked up and reinterpreted in the Grand Conversation, even in ways that they don’t prefer. But being recognized for their prior art is important: they’re looking for a place in the art history books. So acknowledge them. Thank them.” [12]

Within a commercial context however, where the key driver for working is the possibility of a financial return, intellectual property is valued in a different way. These different perspectives were reflected in the comments of both the artist and technologist within the commission. When asked what their expectations around Intellectual Property were, the artist answered:

“Not sure, shared credit.”

And the technologist stated that he expected the IP to be:

“Co-held by myself and the artist. Further exploitation possible by either by mutual agreement.”

The brief demanded that the work have equal and shared credit and in many ways this was realised in many contexts. The artwork made the front page of the local North East newspaper, The Journal, and the main image featured both the artist and the technologist, which is unusual within an art commissioning context. [13]

However, within the profile generated mainly by the artist across online art and design platforms and publications, a distinct focus on the artist emerged in crediting the artwork. While the creative technologist was named as an equal collaborator within the main body of the content, many of the headlines and subsequent social networking activity, featured only the artist’s name. [14]

Key reasons for this could relate to the fact that the artist was generating the material himself and capitalising on the profile and reputation he held within the art and design fields, which was driving interest in the work. It also speaks to the skillset for self-promotion that artists in general are required to develop throughout their careers. It highlights that the artist has an understanding of how to frame the artwork in order to attract marketing and PR interest across a range of disciplines, including art, design and technology. And could potentially point to the subconscious hierarchy of self assigned roles that the artist and technologist gave themselves at the beginning of the project, which saw the artist take the lead on many fundamental aspects of the art work, including its conception, aesthetics and design.

Conclusion

Collaboration between distinct fields can be fruitful, if complex. This paper has shown that the traditional curatorial role must evolve to:

Ensure that, while art may be moving into a new sphere of mass culture, the context facilitated for artistic process and production is protected and remain autonomous.

Actively determine the terms of engagement between collaborators within the expanding arts ecology.

Pursue new ways to broker the perceived gulf that separates the arts and (computer) sciences. There is much to learn from the curatorial practices inherent and emerging within the new media art field.

Acknowledge that the impact of this new ecology requires an expansion of the curatorial theoretical context and a potential revision and modification of existing practices.

The assumptions, concepts, practices, protocols and interests that drive the collaborators field must be acknowledged and allowed to inform future curatorial, combined methodologies.

Establish a new, collaborative language that represents and reflects the needs of this new, mixed ecology of art production in order to nurture optimum working contexts, practices and thus the new kinds of art, which are framed by an expanded definition and function of art.

Binaudios, is the latest experiment in a curatorial practice that is anchored between contemporary and new media art fields and the commercial creative media and technology industry. Through the process of practice led research, the author has identified exact areas of similarity and friction between these three fields when they engage in creative collaboration. Interrogating the expanding realm of the curator within these collaborations extends beyond the popular rhetoric that all collaboration between these three fields is positive. It furthers the conversation to reveal the potential for these collaborations to become critical and meaningful for fostering and nurturing new contexts for art.

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