Curating Transdisciplinary Residencies: Time and Place for a 'First Kiss'

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Abstract

Artist residencies offer opportunities for creative interaction between different cultures, communities, and practitioners. Beyond providing time and space, hosts facilitate artists' immersive social encounters with place, allowing them to explore unfamiliar processes of experimentation. Drawing on a case study of a robotics and arts-based residency, which birthed the choreographed robotic installation 'First Kiss' by Melanie Lane, this short paper considers the complex rhythms of transdisciplinary collaboration; their awkward intimacies challenging seamless trajectories of innovation.

Keywords

Art, Robotics, Transdisciplinary, Creative Research, Residency program, Time, Place

Introduction

Across centuries and cultures, artists have been hosted by communities and institutions, who offer them space and time for creative interaction between different social groups, practitioners, thinkers, resources, and infrastructures. Historic models of patronage once afforded artists and polymaths such as Leonardo Da Vinci and Omar Khayyam, time and access to resources that supported transdisciplinary practice, which were nevertheless contingent on the indulgences of a powerful elite, whose appetites for risk were varied. [1][2][3] Today, residency program hosts have expanded beyond the traditional creative academy or institutional context, occurring in varied multi-disciplinary settings such as in hospitals, or with the agricultural or manufacturing sectors. [4][5][6] For media artists, seminal residency programs such as EyeBeam Art + Technology Center, have demonstrated how localized bricks-and-mortar residency models may be decentralized as hybrid networks for transdisciplinary exchange and collaboration. [7] Yet the relative scarcity of such opportunities, means they are often framed as markers of prestige, rather than a time and place transformational experimentation. So, how might we better support the development of transdisciplinary knowledge - as is required in electronic and media arts practice today - through the considered curation of transdisciplinary residencies?

This paper offers reflective insights derived from a practice-based curatorial case study, which sought to provide artist residency participants with immersive cultural and social encounters with place. Reflecting on the encounters between a choreographer artist-in-residence, Melanie Lane, and a team of roboticists, which birthed the installation 'First Kiss' presented at Unchartered Territory Festival (2023), this short paper considers the vital temporalities of transdisciplinary residencies, as their awkward intimacies challenge the seamless innovation timelines that prioritize ease and speed. [8]

A Place to Reside

Since the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, many artist residency organisations have re-examined the benefits of their programs to explore more inclusive models of participation. [9] As the pandemic halted international and national mobilities, online and home-based residencies have emerged as accessible alternatives for resident artists. [10] [11] As key sites for experimentation and inspiration within ecologies of creative practice, we are invited to consider how the role of the residency host has transformed to consider more than just spatial affordances, but also the temporal dynamics of facilitating generative encounters.

To host an artist in residence, implies a thorough understanding of the site of encounter between artists and communities. In many cases, residencies offer infrastructural affordances, such as access to equipment and studio spaces, as well as time for focused creation. However, the hospitality of these places is also linked to the social and cultural relationships they facilitate. [12] [13] The value of these relations often extends beyond the bound temporalities of temporary studio access, requiring attentive care work on the part of the host and resident. This often invisible emotional and social labour reflects broader conversations around care ethics and art. [14] Drawing on the work of Maria Puig della Bellacasa, we contend that the spatio-temporalities of artist residencies as hospitable places, particularly for those working across arts and science disciplines, should not be assumed as "matters of fact", but rather on-going "matters of care" and reflection. [15]

This paper explores how transdisciplinary residencies may be curated as a place of transformational encounter, in light of the University of Canberra's Artist Residency in Digital Innovation, which was supported by the Australian Capital Territory Government's Creative Recovery and Resilience Program. Through it, an established choreographer, Melanie Lane, was hosted within the UC

Collaborative Robotics Lab. The authors have elsewhere detailed the care-centred approach that guided the initial transdisciplinary residency design and evaluation model, which centred relationships, over project development. [16] This paper now spotlights specific questions provoked by observing artists and scientists at work, and an analysis of their emergent transdisciplinary artwork, 'First Kiss.' We suggest that this work provides an apt prism through which to reflect upon the role of artist residencies in facilitating generative collaborations, as they are central to the practice of electronic media arts.

Awkward First Encounters

'First Kiss' sees two robotic arms skinned in black fabric with beautiful human faces perform a looped dance sequence culminating in a gentle kiss. The intimate *pas de deux* of 'First Kiss' explores the subtle complexities of dynamic partnership as it is communicated through seemingly simple embodied movements and acts. In doing so, the work interrogates dynamics of non-verbal communication that intersect with research into perceptions of sexual consent. [17] Furthermore, the collaboration between human and robot actors through its development, engages with the emergent phenomena of digital intimacies, where human encounters are increasingly mediated by technological platforms that complicate issues of ethical consent. [18] Yet alongside these conceptual resonances, the work serves as testament to the deep and complex challenges that bely a seemingly simple task of bringing together distinct, and previously unknown creative agents from arts and sciences. The field of electronic arts is often associated with practices, such as that of ballerina and quantum physicist Merritt Moore, which leverage an individual's training across two disciplines. [19] However increasing access to developing transdisciplinary arts practices across different cultural and social axes, requires we attend to early catalytic encounters, as exemplified through this case study.

At the outset of developing 'First Kiss', there were no shared research frameworks or methods between collaborators from choreography or robotics, as each agent entered the relation with distinct assumptions and ways of working. For our choreographer, approaches to studio research frequently involve exploration unguided by protocols that normally structure scientific research, such as a hypothesis or research design; and it is not uncommon for methods to change during the research process. [20] Instead, choreographic studio research adopts multi-modal co-creative approaches, including sharing images and other evocative source material that invite collaborators to exercise their creative imaginations. Where our roboticists were accustomed to scientific approaches that efficiently pursue a clearly defined and specific outcome, collaborating with a choreographic researcher demands a different skillset, one that is comfortable with ambiguity and the uncertainties that accompany a method that develops its goals at the

same time as possibilities are discovered. Furthermore, the roboticists did not have recourse to research strategies usually used to push robots to the edge of their capabilities and discover novel applications, namely through the implementation of their ideas in simulation. Residency time constraints inhibited the use of simulation, that might otherwise have aided communication by visualising potential movement.

The "frictions" of converging arts and science methods, has been described as involving "changing pre-determined routes into something that connects more deeply with the given environment." [21] Our observations suggest that these detours, missteps and frustrations, are less indicative of an adversarial outlook implied by "friction", but rather reflect what we term the "awkwardness" of early transdisciplinary encounters. We draw on the word's etymological roots in describing movements that appear "clumsy", "the wrong way round" or "upside down." [22] In addition, we embrace the term's connotations with transformative periods and processes, where individuals negotiate uncomfortable relational dynamics as social insiders and outsiders. [23] Indeed, arts-science collaborations often require participants' fumble awkwardly, accepting the vulnerability of exposing limitations to their technical, conceptual, and social knowledge. Importantly, we suggest that awkwardness is disruptive to the smooth temporality of 'seamless' interactions in the contemporary capitalist mediascape. [24] We argue that awkward encounters should be embraced for their generative potential, as well as the ingenuity displayed by collaborators who navigate them.

Figure 1. Robots 'kissing'. © Copyright the artist.

New Embodied Intimacies

Establishing a graceful connection point was the material goal of prototyping 'First Kiss', which served as a metaphor for the broader relational outcomes of this art-science residency (Fig 1). Integral to these processes was a return to embodied meaning-making and communication.

To evoke the tenderness of a first kiss, the choreographed movements had to embody intimacy, requiring robotic arms to move at the right speed, approach each other at the right angle, make contact for the right duration, and move away from each other at the right speed. After initial

frustrations in establishing cross-disciplinary approaches, the challenge was resolved by bringing these awkward robotic arms to life, using 3D-printed custom faces affixed to their robotic claws. The use of humanoid faces immediately rendered them as entities collaborating alongside choreographer and roboticists, which not only supported technical troubleshooting (i.e. ensuring that the lips could meet appropriately when kissing), but catalysed the creative assemblage of artist, roboticists, engineering soft- and hardware, through which the robot's movements became layered with cultural and social meanings (Fig 2).

Figure 2. The artist 'dressing' the robot. © Copyright the artist.

Embodied communication was also vital in facilitating a connection between the artist and roboticists, who increasingly used their own bodies to articulate ideas and generate understanding. During their collaboration, clear differences emerged in the way choreographer and roboticists used verbal language. For example, the term 'effective' for the choreographer required not only that the robots moved through the right points in space, which the roboticists readily achieved, but that every attribute of the movement combined to produce an overall effect that had the desired emotive impact. Such divergences required collaborators to develop a common language that integrated aspects of embodied and verbal communication.

Choreographers frequently lean on the term 'language' to convey their systematic and methodical approaches to embodied movement creation. [25] Trained dancers are used to translating their choreography via words and images, in addition to other approaches. Through shared studio time, the roboticists began to use elements of choreographic communication. This included using their own bodies more fully to describe the movement potential of the robotic arms, as the artist did. Moving one's arms in space to mimic the movement of robotic arms efficiently demonstrated not only the points in space that were being sought, but vital information about the qualities of that movement. Furthermore, these embodied approaches inaugurated an intimate time-place for shared understanding, where the artist, robots and roboticists became less inhibited in their endeavors to connect, sensing rhythmic temporalities quite different from their usual processes (Fig 3) [26].

Although the choreographer and roboticists succeeded in developing a shared embodied language, it is vital to acknowledge the communicative chasms and awkwardness that persisted through the residency. While the embedded choreographer developed enhanced understanding of the technical methods of roboticists, their experiences were akin to the early stages of learning a new complex tongue. This reflects the fact that developing communicative proficiency is not only a matter of vocabulary acquisition, but refining one's understanding of complex cultural, social and economic systems that frame host community utterances. We thus contend that the awkward temporalities of art-science collaborations, which require participants to fumble together in trial and error, requires the support of open-ended curatorial models that value the labour of such processes.

Figure 3. Embodied communication between artists and roboticists. © Copyright the artist

A Safe Place to Move (Awkwardly)

The curatorial challenge of creating meaningful residency experiences, requires a complex understanding of spatial and temporal dynamics of place, which acknowledges the multilayered movements of artists, host communities, as well as the infrastructures and equipment they imply. We contend that these bodies all bring distinct temporalities, which is to say different methods and rhythms of moving through effective work processes and outcomes.

Like other contemporary residency programs, University of Canberra's Artist Residency in Digital Innovation sought to question the seamlessly efficient timelines often associated with innovation, emphasizing instead the value of cultivating relationships of care between artists and the host environment. But this proposition raises its own questions: what kinds of transdisciplinary relationships or encounters are seen as valuable? We suggest transdisciplinary residencies create places for connection, which are not unlike a first kiss. Research into first kisses recognizes how such early milestones have been dismissed as transitory trivialities, despite their impact on a developing sense of self. [27][28] Likewise in transdisciplinary practice, early awkward experiments across art and science often remain hidden or trivialized. Although these encounters can be fleeting, they are rarely inconsequential, as they provoke heightened awareness of collaborators' vulnerabilities, desires and relational contingencies. For collaborations across arts and sciences, those catalytic moments can shape creative trajectories for years to come. Indeed sometimes, these 'first kisses' can be transformational.

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