

UNNECESSARY RESEARCH, WHAT'S THE POINT?

Anna Dumitriu

This panel outlines “The Institute of Unnecessary Research”(IUR) and presents a new paradigm in the way artists are engaging with the world through transdisciplinary practices. It brings together art, science and philosophy by creating participatory audience experiences. Sometimes humorous and sometimes grotesque, our work pushes boundaries and critically questions the means of knowledge production in the 21st Century.



Artists are innovators, if a new piece of technology or a new medium, becomes available; artists want to try it, to experiment with it- from microbiology to robotics; from tissue culture to neuroscience. Some artists take on the role of a scientist in almost a performative way and some scientists become artists themselves. Philosophy and ethics is always at its core and the work unpacks the instrumentalization of science and art for commercial and political ends.

Forms of “connective aesthetics” (Gablik) are used to engage audiences in participatory experiences that extend and generate new outcomes through exhibitions and events going beyond simple interactivity, throwing authorship into question, as members of the audience are inspired to become Unnecessary Researchers in their own rights.

The IUR was founded in 2005 by Artist Anna Dumitriu following discussions at the “Rules of Engagement” Conference on the nature of Art and Science collaboration, held at York University, UK and organized by Arts Council England. The original ‘blue sky’ vision for the IUR was a major research facility where scientists were employed to work with artists, thereby avoiding the common situation of scientists’ lack of availability/time when engaged in art/science collaborative projects. Scientists tend to view a collaborative art/science project as extra-curricular to their ‘day jobs’, whereas to an artist the collaboration is often key to their ‘day jobs’ in terms of being either a grant funded project, commissioned piece

or artists' residency. This inconsistency is one of the biggest hurdles for art/science collaboration to overcome, often far greater than issues, such as funding, audience engagement and linguistic incommensurability. Key to the notion of art/science collaboration are these reoccurring questions, "What is the purpose of it?" "What can an artist offer to science", "In terms of art, why engage with science at all?" "What levels of cross-fertilization should happen" and most importantly "what has art got to do with knowledge anyway?" The IUR attempts to work with these questions.

There are obvious financial issues with building a major research facility for artists to work with scientists (the IUR favours a underground facility carved out of a rocky island that can only be reached by boat or helicopter (for purely aesthetic reasons)) so it was decided that The IUR should initially be started as a hub for artists or scientists working a high levels of trans-disciplinary practice, strongly concerned with the philosophical implications of their methodologies, interested in public engagement and practicing in ways that could be described as 'performative' in nature. A web site was set up in 2005 and a very low-key performance event took place in Dumitriu's studio above The Phoenix Gallery in Brighton, England. Since then the has project attracted wide interest and has grown form there, including further performances and interventions at Sussex University, The Whitechapel Gallery in London, ETH in Zurich and as part of many festivals.

The Institute of Unnecessary Research is now an international hub for researchers and artists working experimentally and deeply engaged with their specific research areas. We present our research through performative and experiential methods, engaging the public and new audiences in our ideas.

The IUR uses performance as a means of conveying research; often events have an interactive component, the audience taking part in experiments and research activities thus changing the direction, development and final outcomes of the artwork. Critical theorist Suzi Gablik discusses in her essay on "Connective Aesthetics" that the traditional relationship of the artist to the artwork has come to be superseded, and that this social role of art has become increasingly important, since there is:

".. a rejection of modernism's bogus ideology of neutrality. Many artists now refuse the notion of a completely narcissistic exhibition practice as the desirable goal for art". (Gablik)

Artists have now come to see the process as equal to, or even more important than the outcome, or the performance is more important than the documentation of it. So the means of production of the artwork as a dialogical and collaborative process is also the outcome of the artwork in this model, which is what makes it so relevant to Art/Science practice, it is an analogue of the typical, natural relationship of the artist to the scientist (and vice versa), the journey rather than the destination. Although not inherent in all Art/Science practice it would seem logical to include the audience in the collaboration, with their own vast tracts of knowledge and experience. Gablik states:

"..there is distinct shift in the locus of creativity from the autonomous, self contained individual to a new dialogical structure that frequently is not the product of a single individual but the result of a collaborative and interdependent process". (Gablik)

This influence of performative, dialogical aesthetics, which comes from the collaborative structure of Art/Science practice makes it a useful technique for reaching out to new audiences in a non-hierarchical way. But these forms of collaboration are not easy and require huge conviction, and effort from all partners involved.

The IUR mimics and subverts the Institutional model it is based on. There are various 'departments' each 'headed' by an unnecessary researcher. The 'department' names are created by the individual artists, scientists and philosophers and based on their personal research areas. When a researcher joins they come up with a 'department' name, if they leave (and the IUR is a dynamic group in this sense) it is likely that the 'department' is discontinued (at least for a while)

For instance the Head of Crockery resigned his role (from within the online cyber world Second Life in 2006), as part of a multimedia performance at Sussex University, the position of Head of Crockery currently remains unfilled.

There is no official selection procedure for department heads, unsolicited enquiries are responded to with a warning that selection procedures "are entirely nepotistic", in fact the IUR grows organically through increasing networks of international contacts. Current departments include: 'Projective Geometry' (Alex May), 'The Digital Simulacra' (Luke Robert Mason), 'Neuroplastic Arts' (Gordana Novakovic), 'Textile Abuse' (Bettina Shuelke) and 'Viral Contagion' (Tagny Duff). There are currently 25 departments across distributed locations and the project is directed and co-ordinated by Anna Dumitriu (whilst working on her own research interests which cross microbiology, artificial life, robotics and ethics).

The name "The Institute of Unnecessary Research" is, in many ways, confrontational. It raises the question what is necessary research? Unnecessary does not imply pointless, it often means going beyond the normal (in the Kuhnian sense of 'normal science') and crossing boundaries, asking where do we draw the line with what we study or with what can be studied? Unnecessary Research encourages eccentric, obsessive, creative working practices and is an antidote to the stranglehold placed on research by central government and the gatekeepers of academia.

References and Notes:

Suzi Gablik,, Connective Aesthetics: Art after Individualism in Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art. Ed. Suzanne Lacy (Bay Press, 1995), p85

The Institute of Unnecessary Research official website www.unnecessarresearch.org (accessed 23 June, 2011)