Curation as Research-Creation: Speculating on the Future of Art and Technology Festivals

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Abstract

This paper explores a renewed approach to curation as research-creation (CRC) through its practical application in the annual art and technology festival. CRC envisions a shift in curation from a care for objects to a care for the emerging social relations of the curatorial project in a shared quest of meaning making.

We set out with outlining the features of CRC as interdisciplinary, concerned with programmatic boundary objects, and centered around the unfolding event trajectory – the forms and methods that facilitate affective encounters. Following we outline how this approach to curation unfolds in practice through the case study of the *Fest-Forward* workshop series that speculates on the future of art and technology festivals. Concluding we summarize how this workshop series showcases the potential of CRC's shift of attention from a mere presentation of artworks towards the facilitation of interdisciplinary and cross-cultural encounters that enroll artists, curators, and audiences.

Keywords

art, curation, science, technology, interdisciplinarity, speculative design, techno culture, festival, research-creation

DOI

Introduction

After two and a half hours of speculating on the future of festivals, one workshop participant remarked:

"Inherent in these art projects is that they already tackle all these big questions. I mostly see the lack in the structures that we as festival makers provide to facilitate the spaces in which these artworks reach their full potential."

This is the central issue that our workshop series titled *Fest-Forward* is addressing since August 2022. The workshops take place in a variety of different formats and localities around the world. Past activations include Canada, the Netherlands, and Japan, and future renditions aim to include wider geographies. Inspired by a reimagined approach to curation as research-creation firmly rooted at the intersection of art, technology, and governance, these workshops explore the transforming role of the art and technology festival as a site of joint-meaning making between artists, researchers, industry professionals, policymakers, and audiences. In other words, by reenvisioning how the festival comes into being and shapes the encounters of people, we seek to address how art can reach its full potential.

The following paragraphs set out with an introduction to the theoretical reimagination of Curation as Research-Creation (CRC), which presents the base considerations for this project. Following, the paper introduces the methodological approach towards these workshops, which are rooted in speculative design and liberating structures. We then venture into describing the case study of the inaugural *Fest-Forward: Imagining Future Festivals workshop*, which took place in August 2022 as part of the 23rd edition of the MUTEK Festival and Forum. The concluding paragraphs summarize key theoretical and methodological findings of this workshop in transforming the festival as a social actor.

Curation as Research-Creation

Curation as Research-Creation (CRC) presents an overall shift from understanding curation as merely an act of 'putting things together 'towards the curatorial project itself being a site of inquiry and meaning making. [1] CRC is thus inherently concerned with, as Loveless puts it, "not only what methods offer at the level of investigation [...], but also what form might best fit the content of the research at the level of publication." [2] This reinterpretation of curation as not only form but method, then embraces the key idea of research-creation as a continuous thinking-making process. [3] Emerging out of the intersection of critical curatorial studies, science and technology studies, and artistic and curatorial practices in the art, science, and technology realm, CRC is specifically attuned to addressing the pressing sociotechnical questions of our time.

Curation is interdisciplinary

CRC ventures away from the centrality of the curator or the artist in the unfolding of the curatorial project. In contrast, curation becomes an interdisciplinary endeavor, equally acknowledging the extensive involvement of people and labor in preparation, as well as the centrality of audience participation in co-creation. Galison, in an investigation of inter-disciplinary encounters in science and technology, framed this sort of space as a trading zone. [4] Similarly, Dekker argues that the emergence of digital art in online, offline, and hybrid spaces marks a shift from the paradigm of collecting and presenting art towards networked co-curation. [5] This networked co-curation fundamentally questions traditional museological values, the participation of publics, and the field of art history. [6] It shifts, as Truman points out, the attention from who produces knowledge towards how knowledge is produced in joint inquiry, which underlines the notion of curatorial practice as an act of caring for social relations. [7]

The curatorial project then becomes an interdisciplinary trading zone of networked co-curation. Defining the festival as a trading zone of co-curation shifts attention from merely the content, which is the artistic and discursive program, towards the methods of exchange that lead people from different professional, disciplinary, intersectional, and cultural backgrounds to come together in joint exploration of ideas at the intersection of art and technology. In summary, CRC presents a shift of focus, as Manning and Massumi suggest, to "more than programmation but catalytic event unfolding", in pursuit of a shared interdisciplinary inquiry. [8]

Program as boundary object

Where does that leave the program—the content—then? While content is still key, its role is redefined from mere display of artistic works towards taking the role of presenting boundary objects. Boundary objects, as put forward by Star & Griesemer, are concrete or abstract objects that structure interdisciplinary inquiry. [9] In Bruno

Latour's words the thing-object as a shared matter of concern is what brings people together. [10] They are general enough in a way that actants from different social worlds can gather around them in joint exploration, while simultaneously acknowledging the specificity they potentially carry across disciplines, professional fields, intersectional and cross-cultural environments. [11]

Boundary objects thus carry the power to assemble people not because there is agreement but exactly because opinions are divided and varied. [12] Rethinking the festival program as establishing certain boundary objects thus frames content beyond mere aesthetic display as an invitation to or a prompt for participants to jointly explore throughout the unfolding of the event. In other words, program as boundary object is better attuned towards mobilizing the powerful meanings and critiques that are commonly explored by the most forward-thinking artists in their fields.

The centrality of trajectory: forms and methods

The way the event is conditioned in terms of forms and methods foster exchange in meaning-making. The event trajectory thus becomes central. Trajectory refers to the temporally emergent configuration and reconfiguration of forms and methods of engagement in the unfolding of the curatorial event. Forms refer to the combination of space (physical, virtual, hybrid, concert hall, club, gallery, auditorium etc.), and format (performance, exhibition, conference, workshop, roundtable etc.). Methods, on the other hand, present the modes of engagement within these interdisciplinary encounters. [13]

Forms and methods are inherently entangled. Certain methods ask for certain event spaces and engagement formats. Simultaneously, certain event spaces and engagement formats urge for certain methods to be employed. [14] It is important to note, however, that these combinations stem from very specific normatively laden histories. [15] The traditional Western concert hall for example not only calls for specific engagement formats, such as chamber music, but also encourages specific ways of performing and listening to music. Addressing these normatively laden spaces by inhabiting them in unconventional ways, such as shifting positionalities of audiences and human/non-human performers thus actively encourages decolonizing efforts of these traditional spaces of artistic engagement. As such,

experimentation with forms and methods transcending physical and virtual spaces, and a variety of engagement formats are central to CRC.

Transforming curation through research-creation

CRC then acknowledges the emergent nature and reiterative processes of meaning-making throughout the entirety of the curatorial project. [16] Especially within the frame of the annual festival curation, which neither has a fixed beginning, nor concludes with the presentation of the festival edition. It is rather a process that continuously unfolds, shapes, and reshapes before, during, and after the annual event. In addition, CRC acknowledges the inherent interdisciplinarity of the curatorial project, in both preparation and presentation. Curation brings together curators, organizing teams, communications experts, artists, producers, researchers, and a wide range of external partners local and international, as well as their non-human counterparts.

Beyond heightened attention towards the forms, methods, and interdisciplinarity of the curatorial project, CRC acknowledges the fact that both thinking and making processes take place and intervene in the real-world. As such, CRC makes the researcher-curator accountable for the need of embracing an ethical responsibility and careful deliberation towards all forms and methods employed, spanning human and non-human subjects in the curatorial project. [17]

Reinterpreting the festival within CRC thus frames the event as a methodological approach towards investigating the world, rather than a mere object of inquiry or an aesthetic display. The following paragraphs outline how employing this alternative approach towards curation in the frame of speculative workshops as part of the MUTEK festival unfolded in practice.

Fest-Forward: Imagining Future Festivals

In August 2022, the 23rd edition of the MUTEK festival took place over the course of 6 days in Montreal, Canada. After two pandemic years, which saw hybrid activities, the festival returned to in-person events including international artists and professionals visiting. On the opening day of the festival, we hosted a

speculative workshop titled *Fest-Forward: Imagining Future Festivals* as part of the professional day time program, the MUTEK Forum.

Workshop design: interdisciplinarity and boundary object

The workshop invited an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural group of artists, curators, technologists, policy-makers, and members of the festival audience to jointly investigate the transforming role of the festival as a social actor in (post-)pandemic times. Employing methods of speculative design and liberating structures, workshop participants were mobilized by the boundary object of an imaginary future festival.

Through three paradoxical, wicked questions the workshop prompted participants to speculate on how an imaginary future festival might address questions of existing structures of oppression, rapid advances in science and technology, and/or environmental and climate crisis. More than being presumptuous in believing that an art and technology festival might solve these issues, the prompts were aimed at inspiring imagination if and if so, what it might be an art and technology festival could do. As Dunne & Raby put it, employing "the idea of possible futures and using them as tools to better understand the present and to discuss the kind of future people want". [18] In other words, how could festivals become sites of collective meaning-making surrounding the pressing questions of our time by speculating about alternative futures?

In keeping with speculative design approaches participants were guided through the materialization of the boundary object in the form of creating a speculative newspaper headline and lead paragraph outlining how an imaginary future festival employs certain concrete tools or activities to address the wicked questions. This concrete output situated the potential, imaginary future in the here and now.

Workshop design: trajectory

The workshop took place at the Hexagram spaces located on the 4th floor of the Pavillon des Sciences Biologiques at Université du Québec à Montréal. The multifunctional space was laid out with three table islands seating seven people each for a total of 21 participants. Each table island was equipped with a whiteboard and crafting materials including article templates, pens, and post-it notes. The workshop was documented via an ambisonic audio recorder placed in the center of the room, by the festival photographer, and the researcher's ethnographic notes.

Manifesting the boundary objects through the wicked questions and the concrete, material output the workshop trajectory unfolded in three distinct, yet interlinked phases. The first 30 minutes were spent with an introduction to the workshop and its methodology both conceptually and in practice. Split into three teams at three table islands, group work was generally structured by the 1-2-Group method. At first participants were prompted to consider posed questions individually for three minutes, followed by building pairs within teams to continue discussion for another seven minutes. Concluding the group would get together to discuss initial findings. The 1-2-Group method is specifically attuned to giving voices to people that might be silenced in larger group discussions. [19] In addition, it presented an effective trust-building exercise, especially in the paired-up phase. We first employed the 1-2-Group method as an ice-breaker during the introduction phase of the workshop.

After sharing the prompts with participants, we employed two phases of 1-2-Group, each lasting 20 minutes. During the first-round participants were to decide upon which wicked question they would address and brainstorm on how they might address it. The second round was guided by trying to answer the six journalistic questions (What? Who? When? How? Why? Where?) in preparation for making the newspaper article.

Following a short break, teams were then tasked with crafting the article. Participants were provided with printed article templates, whiteboards, and digital equivalents to facilitate creation. Concluding, teams presented their articles and thus their imaginary future festivals to the other groups, followed by an open discussion on both resulting speculation and engagement methods.

Joint speculation on the future of festivals

All three groups appropriated the method, prompts and template very differently. The emergent imaginary festival projects reflect the interdisciplinarity of the teams and the ways they appropriated the methods.

Group A's interactions can be described as democratic, consensus-based, and self-organized. As a reaction to the proposed time management, they abandoned the 1-2-Group structure during the second round. Working through the third wicked question "How can future festivals deal with equity, diversity, and inclusivity while continuing to profit from existing structures of domination and exploitation?", this team's output explored how to reinvent the festival spatially to decolonize many of its premises.

Local, decentralized but nonetheless networked is how this team envisioned the future of festivals. The way they proposed this could be achieved is through the invention and deployment of a multimedia campfire toolkit. These toolkits could be distributed to a variety of locations, near and far, urban, and rural and serve as a gathering place for communities to come together. The toolkit would be networked, solar powered, have projection, speakers, live translation, the possibility to video call other chapters of this decentralized festival taking place. Their output emphasized accessibility, the need for communion, and the necessity to decentralize the traditionally urbanite festival. This focus on horizontality would enable, according to this team, oral transmission of knowledges and serendipitous connections. Group A made a point to work through how financially inaccessible urban festival-going and how unsustainable flying to be co-present in festival sites can be, especially at scale. Their article started with "Finally a festival that acknowledges the past, to honor and imagine the future!"

Group B followed the structure rigorously (even as they could hear the other teams abandoning the 1-2-Group method). Participants also made use of all the tools available namely the whiteboard, physical and digital templates. Their discussions were animated and energetic. The output they proposed was rhizomatic, complex with an emphasis on emergent and horizontal organization. This team worked through the third wicked question: "How can future festivals deal with equity, diversity, and inclusivity while continuing to profit from existing structures of domination and exploitation?"

Group B's output emphasized festivals' responsibility to redistribute both power and resources. They also emphasized how systemic justice requires climate justice. If festivals act as platforms for artists, this team emphasized the duties that come with such a role. Diligent archiving practices, redistributing resources as education (legal, financial, and harm-reduction), and ensuring festival organizers reflect the community they serve are all practices this team proposed to implement in their future festival. For this team, the institution of the festival plays a key role—much like museums—in community, public life, shaping and sharing knowledges. It is as such that festivals carry responsibilities and duties to serve the people they represent and engage with.

Group C resisted the methodology and did not follow any of the instructions. Starting with the instruction to choose a wicked question to work on, to the 1-2-Group time management schedule, to the templates; this team can be described as having gone rogue. Professional backgrounds may have contributed to these group dynamics: most of them are used to being in positions of leadership and the proposed method required them to let go and trust the structure. The team struggled to focus on a singular wicked question which exacerbated disagreement within the team.

This team's interactions were marked by strong characters, misunderstanding, and stress. According to our ethnographic notes, this team attempted to think of a future festival that would reduce its reliance on digital technologies and tried to re-incorporate analog activities in their programs, such as bicycles. Either satirically or ironically, their output was algorithmically generated; they used an application based on the Artificial Intelligence (AI) language model GPT-3 to write their article. As they realized they were failing to democratically organize, they turned to technology to flatten disagreements. Nonetheless, this team enacted a certain degree of reflexivity as they titled their article "Festival curators fail to detech their programs." They thus acknowledged and illustrated the gap between their imagined festival and their employed team praxis.

In the collective discussion following the teams 'presentation, the question of the place of the Art in the festival was raised. Two poles emerged in collectively speculating on the future of festivals through the wicked questions. On the one hand, participants decried the need to recenter art and music despite all the broader social, technological, and environmental considerations.

One participant's feedback captures this well: "I felt in the end that the idea of art content was not touched upon, but there were some valuable ideas about reaching out to local and international communities and bringing their voice into the programming." On the other hand, a festival maker raised how for the most part, art and artists are already engaging with these issues and the responsibility of institutions, such as festivals, to create the necessary infrastructure to host and facilitate these broader societal shifts.

Curation as Research-Creation in practice

The *Fest-Forward* workshop series is a practical example of how attention towards curation as an unfolding of trajectories of interdisciplinary and cross-cultural encounters shifts attention from mere content towards how people come together in joint meaning-making. In other words, curation as caring for emergent social relations throughout the curatorial project. The potential of this approach to facilitate these interdisciplinary encounters is reflected by additional feedback we received from participants. As one participant stated:

"I found the format of the workshop was engaging and efficient, and that it probed productive discussions and group dynamics. I've found the process of writing the article and collectively designing the project more interesting than the resulting paper itself."

This underlines how the boundary object of the wicked questions materially represented by the speculative article was effective in facilitating the groups 'encounter. Talking about the interdisciplinary and cross-cultural aspect of the workshop format, another participant remarked:

"I found the exchange experience very rich in terms that we all came from different roles around culture—from festival managers to music and art curators and curious people—and the different tasks exposed each of us to speculate from different roles."

In conclusion, the workshop was successful in raising questions about the transforming role of the festival as both a site of joint meaning making and in taking responsibility as a social actor. For example, conceptualized as a site of empowerment for artists and cultural actors, one group took the festival as a means of highlighting more broadly the social difficulties of the cultural milieu to develop equitably. In a more local and community-centered approach, one group presented the festival by associating it with the metaphor of the campfire. Another participant remarked:

"My takeaway would be that future festivals will need to be collaborative, non-competitive and networked, to work together to make sure their voices are heard in a future that will most likely still be dominated by bigger players' capitalist interests."

This notion is further underlined by the following feedback received:

"Attending the workshop reignited my passion for festival planning and broadened my perspective on initiatives that me and my company can take to make events more inclusive and accessible."

Conclusion: trajectories all the way

While the preceding paragraphs outline the micro-trajectories and their effectiveness during the unfolding workshop, the workshop itself is situated in larger trajectories. Held on the first day of the festival the workshop was aimed at inspiring participants to view the remaining festival activities, talks, installations, performances, and encounters with renewed vigor.

As such, the workshop was strategically placed to interplay with the unfolding festival trajectories and thus presented a perceived reconfiguration of forms and methods of engagement for participants. We tracked the participants ' reshaped perspectives via a festival diary, asking each of the participants individually and at randomly selected times throughout the remainder of the festival to give feedback on how their participation might have shifted their perspective of the festival in its unfolding.

The workshop is part of a series of activations, which under the premise of the MITACS-funded research project Festival as Methodology implements CRC in practice as part of the annual festival edition of MUTEK and its partner festivals in Argentina, Germany, Japan, Mexico, and Spain. Underlining the importance of trajectories this initial workshop thus was not only concerned with the micro-trajectories of its unfolding but firmly embedded within the unfolding macro trajectories of the 2022 festival edition and the 3-year research project.

While all of these unfold in different temporalities what unites them is an underlying concern for their unfolding in terms of the forms they take, spaces they inhabit, and methods they employ. The *Fest-Forward* workshop series thus is representative of Curation as Research-Creation as inherently concerned with the ongoing configuration and reconfiguration of trajectories that facilitate the emergent social relations of interdisciplinary encounters in joint meaning-making.

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