

## **Title**

An investigation into non-academic spaces of inquiry into technology and the arts

## **Overview**

This research seeks to produce a written document, possibly to be supplemented by data visualisations, that gives an overview of similarities between a specific type of arts centre.

The project will focus on places where an individual can explore the use of computers and technology for self-defined purposes, which can include artistic.

At the end of the academic project, any information gathered under the aegis of this research will be released under a Creative Commons license so that the findings are not restricted to the academic sphere.

## **Context and Rationale**

When technology becomes more integrated into contemporary life it becomes commonplace. What television and cars have become to our lives in this contemporary era are a foreshadowing of what technology such as instant messaging and online social networks will become to our descendants. And, within the context of the creation of artworks, pieces that utilize digital technology will not always seem as *outré* as it does today, just as the use of video as a medium no longer holds the same cultural baggage as it did in the seventies and eighties.

What we currently term 'interdisciplinary art' and/or 'new media' are catch-all terms that hold a wide range of creative endeavors. And, as academic venues such as Newcastle Universities Culture Lab begin training cross-sector workers with skills related to technology and the arts, and the barrier for entry in those fields lowers with easier access to networks of support, 'interdisciplinary art' and 'new media' flourish. There is an influx of people being creative in ways beyond the prescriptive bounds of traditional artforms. However, not all interdisciplinary art can be supported by academic centres of research, and there are currently few permanent non-academic centres.

This research looks towards the future, in that it seeks to find out how those non-academic centres support themselves. This is in anticipation of a greater need for similar places. Examples of these non-academic spaces in the UK could be Sheffield's Access Space and the now-closed Backslash in London. Abroad, sites such as new Brooklyn-based NYC Resistor and the long-running Chaos Computer Club of Berlin have a similar focus. Do the survival strategies of these existing non-academic centres share common ground, such as cross-sector funding, of which elements can be repeated in other locations, or does their existence owe more to dedicated workers than shifting funding strategies dictated by political whim?

There will be a period of adjustment while new technology is factored into the working practice of current society. The art sector can not escape that period of adjustment any more than the business sector could reject the wholesale use of email as a communication tool, nor the car industry could escape the process of industrialisation as created by Henry Ford. However, by studying and recreating the sites where the first wave of

experimentation and hybridization is taking place, it might be possible to draw observations on the process of adoption

## **Aims**

Main Aim:

To build a body of data that can be used by practitioners and facilitators in support of founding permanent bases for investigation into computer- and technology-based art forms.

The aims of this project fall into three lines of inquiry, defined below.

### *Inquiry one:*

Define “computer- and technology-based art forms” in order to sidestep ideological issues about the use of similar terms, such as New Media, and to have an inclusive, rather than exclusive, term of reference for relevant art forms that might fall in the scope of this project.

Additionally, inquiry one will look to find any benefits that might have arisen from artistic exploration of these art forms, in the sense of both social benefits (as encouraged by UK art funding bodies) such as inclusion, and technological benefits.

The output of this inquiry is useful in defining the area to be targeted by later research, and as such should not be regarded as a major concern. Other texts will continue to debate the idea of what is or isn't to be considered a relevant art form within New Media. But, for the body of research that will be created within this project, there must be a definition of what is relevant.

### *Inquiry two:*

Why are permanent bases of investigation needed, and is there a special case for their existence within computer/technology art practice? What examples of permanent bases already exist, and what are their influences within the arts, both in the UK and outside?

This line of inquiry will be achieved by both primary and secondary research with organizations that work within the notions defined in inquiry one. That research will attempt to draw parallels between independent institutions, focussing on the list of characteristics below.

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Research Questions</b>
Aims	What are the stated aims of this base, and how are they achieving them?
Objectives	Does the base have short-term objectives that differ from their aims? What areas do these objectives fall into?

Characteristics	Research Questions
Facilities	What facilities does the permanent base offer to it's membership?
Equipment	What technical equipment, such as computers and other technical hardware, is available for use?
Non-academic nature	How can this site be regarded as non-academic? What types of non-academic site are there?
Organisational Context	Is the organization working within a larger framework, as a splinter or subset of another group?
Not-for-profit status	Is the base set up in a way that gives them not-for-profit status within their principality?
Membership types	Are there more than one type of membership?
Community Led	Is there a control mechanism that allows community (i.e., members of the base in whatever form) to control the direction of the organisation?
Access and governance	What type of access is granted to the physical location? Is this regulated in any form by external or internal bodies?
Local Access	What physical location does the base occupy?

*Inquiry three:*

What is a 'base of investigation', within the terms of this project? Drawing upon inquiry two, there will be an attempt to define the forms that these bases take, following up the earlier similarities, and examining what successful strategies these bases take that enable long-term survival.

Research that will link inquiries two and three include finding out what activities are supported by which bases, whether they encourage the creation of artworks, and what international and national networks link these bases. A special attempt will be given to draw out examples of arts-related projects that have had a period of gestation within these bases of inquiry.

**Objectives**

To complete inquiry one, I will undertake literary research into New Media and related fields in order to draw my own definition of artwork which could be situated under the banner of computer- and technological-based artworks. This is to confirm that the descriptive phrase "New Media" is not used to close down any other potential avenues of investigation in later parts of the research.

As stated, inquiry two will be primary research, and will be following methodology used for sociological investigations. This will result in a raw body of research that will then be

shared under a Creative Commons license in order to reach beyond the limits of what is possible within this project.

The research will use ethnographical methods in order to gather data. Sharing this data will be done via the research project website which I will host online, at first using the blog format, but as research collates I will end up using extra forms of data storage and visualisations.

Towards the end of the project it might be possible to draw conclusions from the data using programming tools to drill down into the data, and by allowing the data to exist in the public domain it means that others are able to repurpose those findings for their own needs. This licensing means that the research will be of value to stakeholders of these sites of investigation, and similar organisations that will follow in the future of already existing sites.

Inquiry three will be completed by using data gathered in the first two sections. This data will be presented in such a way as to allow casual 'readers' to become involved in drawing their own conclusions from it, by presenting the research in an interactive form. The best way of presenting that research will be fully defined later on towards the end of the academic period, but it could be that my previous practice in presentation-mannered performances could be used.

Throughout the project, one of the ongoing objectives will be to prove that non-academic spaces that allow interaction with computer- and technology-based art (as the area defined in inquiry one could be termed) are worthwhile for arts funding organizations to consider, as they allow a convenient access point for arts-related activities.

As part of the stated lines of inquiry, I will be shadowing my findings with a series of events that allow guided access to creative technologies, and using these events to gauge tactics tried by larger, already existing, organizations. This is a research platform for issues relating to inquiries one and two, and provides a way of experimentation and learning external to the stricter lines of inquiry laid out above.

## **Outcomes**

The intended outcome for this project is to have not only a final written text, accessible within academic networks, but to have a body of work with a Creative Commons license to enable access to the research in areas beyond the academic circles.

The final outcome should present the findings of the research in a manner that shows the conclusions reached over a period of study.

## **Partial Literature Review**

Some parts of this project suffer from an over-abundance of literary analysis from arts researchers, whereas others suffer from a dearth of relevant material coming from arts-based academic viewpoints.

Inquiry one, which seeks to make a synthesis of arguments around the use of computers and technology in art in order to define a set of practices to be included in later research, is well served by the academic community in terms of texts. Some of the key texts for this section will be Lev Manovich's *Language of New Media*, *MediaArtHistories* (edited by Grau) and *Information Arts* (edited by Stephen Wilson).

Where Manovich's work seeks to codify New Media as a successor to cinema in terms of communication of ideas, albeit a successor that can be infinitely reworked owing to its digital nature, *MediaArHistories* and *Information Arts* diverge from this by offering up histories of work termed "New Media" and parallels that go beyond the computer as the site of creation.

In regards to defining the idea of a base of research and its usefulness to ongoing practice within that area, there is less academic writing to be found that is directly applicable to artistic practice within technological fields. As a historical record *The Media Lab* by Stewart Brand documents the mid-1980s era of M.I.T's Media Lab, from which several important ideas and languages that now hold great influence over the creative culture around computing.

A contemporary version of the vision laid out in Brand's *Media Lab* can be found in *Educating Artists for the Future* (edited by Mel Alexenberg), which takes a more pantheistic approach to education augmented by current cyber-reality, and argues that students have already adopted computer skills into their praxis. Both of these books, however, use academic centres of research as their basis.

Non-academic centres of research into the art seem to suffer from a lack of academic writing, although the Arts Council of England have published some texts that can be referenced. These include *Creative Yorkshire: visual artists in shared workspaces - resources and facilities* (University of Leeds), *Supporting Artists' Workspace* by Janet Hadley, and *Open Studios - a Gem Worth Polishing* (edited by Paul Glinkowski).

Finally, in regard to prior research of "Hackspaces" or "Medialabs" (as some non-academic research bases are termed) the few texts that do mention their existence often stress the activist nature of politics that are attached to European sites. One such text is *Politicised Socially Engaged Art and New Media Art* (by Ele Carpenter) which references sites such as the Sheffield-based Access Space.

The community involved in using and running relevant spaces does have some publications planned, but as they are not published yet it is hard to know how they could be used within the research. The Backslash space is mentioned in *New Media Art: Practice and Context in the UK 1994 - 2004* (edited by Lucy Kimbell) and the activities of fringe member or members of the Chaos Computer Club are described in *The Cuckoo's Egg* (by Clifford Stoll). Hopefully, further texts can be found during a process of research.