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Socially Engaged Arts Practice in HCI

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Abstract

Socially engaged methods are increasingly being used within HCI research, yet arts practice in this context has been little explored. HCI research that aligns with socially engaged arts practices encourages debate around societal challenges; for example discussion of issues surrounding the role of digital technology in sustainability, inclusion, community, identity and the politics of participation. Building on existing research, this workshop will bring together a diverse group of HCI researchers, artists and other creators whose work or interests align with socially engaged arts practice, to foster critical exploration and creative collaboration.

Author Keywords

Socially engaged; arts practice; culture; engagement; making; publics; participation.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m [Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI)]: Miscellaneous;

Introduction

Socially engaged methods are increasingly being used within HCI research to understand complex societal challenges. One intersecting area that has received little attention is socially engaged arts (SEA) practice. SEA practitioners often foster debate around societal concerns such as the role of digital technology in sustainability [8,12], inclusion [5,16], community, identity [5,7] and the politics of participation. Digital technology in this area is positioned critically through

creative exchange between people, materials and contexts. HCI practitioners who draw from SEA often seek to open up questions around technology design and use rather than offer technological solutions [5,6,7,8,12,16] with collaborative making as part of workshops, exhibitions, performances and events. These approaches and epistemologies align with aspects of participatory design and action research methods [5,11]. However, SEA practices specifically foreground the ethics and aesthetics of socio-cultural interactions through negotiation, participation and engagement. While SEA practices can invoke radically innovative and imaginative potential in people they can also generate pragmatic and emotional tensions that need further consideration [4,13,14].

The workshop will outline the existing and future potential of SEA practices in HCI, reflecting and building on growing interests in alternative creative approaches to participatory engagements [2,11]. This timely workshop will draw on recent literature that critically reflects on the politics of participation and design making practices in HCI [1,19].

Socially Engaged Arts Practices in HCI

Arts-based concepts and approaches fostering aesthetic engagements with users and participants are familiar territory in HCI research. For instance designers have explicitly drawn inspiration from the Situationist and Dada arts movements to develop alternative ludic insights to interaction design through cultural probes [10, 20]. Associated critical design has highlighted the value of provocative artefacts and exhibition formats to encourage public debate on societal challenges [9]. Interdisciplinary research across performance art and HCI has also provided alternative ways to re-configure interaction introducing concepts such as discomfort, unwitting and witting forms of participation [3,12,19].

SEA practice has developed similar concerns, while also drawing from a rich community arts heritage, with an emphasis on socio-cultural interactions over extended periods of time. Processes and symbolic action are valued, foregrounding participation and collaboration over the specific production of objects. Terms such as 'dialogical aesthetics' have been used to describe the intersubjective relationships developed through embodied and situated listening and exchange [14,20]. However, conflict, contradiction and dissensus are also valued as important aesthetic qualities of social interactions [4].

Aspects of HCI research have already embraced aspects of SEA practice to inform collaborative interventions in a number of ways. For instance alternative approaches that engage people in research to make findings accessible for those often excluded from technology design [16]. Studies around ecologically engaged arts practices that take a critical position on technology to avoid simplistic renderings of sustainability [8]. Socially engaged practices that underline the importance of negotiating representation and voice on issues of race [5] and gender [7]. Provocative reflexive methods used with artists to highlight the significance of previously underexplored digital art making apparatus in constituting artist-identities [6].

These works suggest potential for researchers embarking on complex and challenging research agendas such as civically engaged enquiry. HCI research can be enriched and supplemented by SEA methods that sensitively combine critical, practical and aesthetic perspectives in multi-and/or inter-disciplinary ways. Conversely, SEA practices can learn from design methods in HCI. However, these intersecting practices bring challenges as well as opportunities in documenting and developing a vocabulary for working

across HCI and communities invested in politics, society and/or the environment.

Workshop Aims and Goals

This workshop aims to draw together a multi-disciplinary group of researchers and practitioners. It will critically build upon prior work to outline an agenda for future research on the role of SEA research in HCI. To this end, we will develop insights for researching complex societal challenges, taking into account aesthetic and critical sensibilities. We will explore the opportunities and challenges of engaging with multiple forms of knowledge production, including making practices, and ways to generate and disseminate new knowledge working with and reaching wider audiences. Our goals will be to:

- Map current practices in SEA, how and where these intersect across publics, participants, digital technologies, places and materials.
- Identify sensitivities, tensions and potential that cut across these intersections, from a socially engaged arts and HCI perspective.
- Propose and make a SEA action and critically reflect on it.
- Identify and propose future areas of research for the *Making Cultures Spotlight*, which align with socially engaged-HCI arts practice.

Questions and Themes

We will reflect on the socio-technical tensions and generative potential of SEA within HCI as a multiple set of practices focusing on four core inter-related themes:

Building relationships: how do SEA practitioners and researchers build and frame their relationships with

participants, while practically engaging people in debates on societal issues around technology?

Methods and materials: SEA practices have informed the social sciences and anthropology, raising critical questions about the over reliance on linguistic representations of experience [15]. Engaging with the materiality of qualitative research offer spaces for researchers to consider alternative, non-linguistic ways of eliciting insights and sharing knowledge [17,18]. What methods and materials are already used to compliment, challenge and experiment with existing ideas of participation, digital interaction and collaboration in socially engaged research in HCI?

Sociability and ethics of making practices: SEA practices are often considered to be creative, generative and open. There can also be complex emotional challenges to consider. For instance, practitioners engaging with such approaches may elicit and give material form to an individuals' private envisionings. These may concern political, socio-cultural and/or emotional sensitivities that may then be made available for others' interpretation. How are socially engaged making practices configured ethically and aesthetically when engaging with people in both critical and convivial processes?

Informing interaction design: socially engaged arts practice has already contributed towards research in HCI, but how can these practices further extend the design of interactive systems? And, what might SEA practices take from the burgeoning body of HCI literature?

Conclusion

This workshop will provide important considerations for research at the intersection of SEA practice and HCI.

We anticipate findings will also contribute to community building, research publications and potential future collaborations in socially engaged HCI research and design, specifically targeted towards the *Making Cultures Spotlight*.

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