

1 Dialogical correspondence of socially-engaged participatory arts research project

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Participating in socially-engaged participatory arts research

Socially-engaged art practice and research involve individuals and communities as the medium or material of the work to transform society and society's impacts. Its intention to impact people and communities directly makes socially-engaged arts different from other types of art. The artworks – outcomes of the collaborative act – are shaped by the intentions and actions of each participant or agent. As a result, it can produce diverse intended and unintended consequences of some significance. Similarly, the artists' and art researchers' methods, processes and projects of knowledge creation are also outcomes of such a collaborative act and could be considered as potential instances for the development of a particular type of art or social sculpture since their results and impacts often act and achieve the same intentions as other types of art activities. This case study aims to establish a theoretical framework for assessing and developing shared understandings around expectations and experiences of participation within and through one particularly complex instance of socially-engaged participatory arts – the externally funded international, interdisciplinary research project called AMASS (Acting on the Margins: Arts as Social Sculpture).

Description of target population

Socially-engaged arts by its nature are participatory and collaborative and can result in sites or situations of great complexity. There is a growing need for artists and art researchers to carefully consider and manage the complexities generated by multicultural and multidisciplinary research projects. Beneficiaries from this case study will include artists, art researchers, communities and organisations who participate in the arts-based and socially-engaged participatory arts research projects. The research advances our understanding of how teams of individuals, partnerships between organisations, agreements among institutions and connections to communities within and outside the specific research context can establish a positive pre-award relationship for gaining funding and producing new knowledge via the activities outlined by the application.

Description of methodology and procedure

This report presents the results of research investigating the application 'dialogical correspondence' model as a means to understand the complexities in establishing pre-project relationships. We first conducted a literature review that analysed ideas of correspondence (Ingold 2015) and dialogical practice (Kester 2000) and highlighted key concepts that

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help to establish research relationships. A wider range of factors were further identified through an auto-ethnographic study (Wilson 2020) with all AMASS project partners and then mapped onto the theoretical model of dialogical correspondence.

Literature review to develop the factors dialogical correspondence

Correspondence

The concept of correspondence reframes ideas of social engagement to view and review interactions in a way that acknowledges the multidimensionality of relationships. At the core of correspondence is the idea of being-with-others (and other things) and, consequently, of a weaving together of the actions, ideas and outcomes that are constituted or result from these acts: correspondence is, fundamentally, a process (of being-with) rather than viewed by a need to arrive at a stable or concrete endpoint or being composed additively by sets of discrete elements (Ingold 2017a). Fundamental to correspondence is an idea of openness as critical to any activity (ibid) where a life lived with others depends upon engagement with all others – and that such relationships are determined by an idea of meshwork, entanglement and movement, of things travelling back-and-forth between participants and of a joining-together (Ingold 2017b). Such joining might often not result in an ordered form for correspondence (or an ordered structure to any situation) but, instead, calls forward a harmony between participants – being attuned to each other and how this is shaped in the process of becoming-with are regarded as critical to correspondence.

Correspondence can be considered as a communicative act of anticipation and response. The word correspondence conjures images of the materialities of meaningful human communication and of a connection and intimacy between individuals, even over great distances. Correspondence is determined, therefore, by a gap between ourselves and others. It acknowledges the potential for some kind of meaningful exchange within these spaces. It calls for us to recognise and embrace how our experiences of being human are co-created within moments of dialogue and reciprocal communication. Gatt and Ingold's (2013) discussion of correspondence can be used as a model to identify things that pass over, between and through scenarios of complexity such as the research relationship. It allows for the identification of the matter of any exchange and for describing the bond formed as a result (between all parties in any scenario). It results in a mesh or network along which such 'gifts' are exchanged as the basis of each scenario's complexities and their respective correspondences.

Within arts, design or creative practices, correspondence acts to generate possibilities to suggest and speculations that are responses-in-process within any such discrete situation or context (Ingold 2017b). Ingold's ideas of correspondence present us with a way to reflect on the types of activities and interactions that are part of a project such as AMASS – correspondence being an inherently social and socialised activity determined by the entanglements and co-existence of all partners who are part of such a relationship (Ingold 2015).

Dialogue

Kester (2000) has outlined a model for an immersive, participatory and community-led art practice within which relationships, aesthetics and ideas of exchange are (re)defined in terms of their being 'dialogical'. He discusses how, an arts-based practice that is established upon ideals of dialogue or discourse stands out for its sense of having coherent values, a utilisation of opportunities for bi-directional communication and the potential

for contribution to a strategy or approach. Such dialogue allows for opportunities to remake not only the artist but also their collaborators, the ‘object’ of any art practice and the knowledge that can be created around and within any dialogical interaction. He identifies the following three characteristics of ‘discursive or dialogical art practice’

Interdisciplinarity

Chiefly, of being ‘between’ (institutions, established discourses), at – or as – an interface between people and between established or emerging knowledge, actively tracing new disciplinary trajectories or routes between, through and around those that currently exist or have been developed.

Operating with/on multiple registers of meaning

Meaning is not held within an object or determined by a viewer but ‘dispersed through multiple registers’, of both space and of time, where it can and should be co-created by particular contexts of reception and the range of ‘discursive systems’ at play. For Kester’s notion of dialogical practice, ‘the work is constituted as an ensemble of effects and forces, which operate in numerous registers of signification and discursive interaction’.

Indeterminacy – but one that is dialogical and not formal

Meaning, however messy or difficult to ascertain, is still something that can be agreed upon or defined – a given in any dialogical process for knowledge production which aims for a degree of novelty or innovation.

An auto-ethnographic study with AMASS project partners

A project like AMASS is a complex hyper-object and challenging to fully understand. We recognised a potential to grasp or represent the relationships among its partners in a way which reflected the needs for, and practices of, dialogue at many levels. The purpose of our study was not just to visualise or communicate this dialogue but also to create instances where we could try and capture ways to understand it from the inside out.

Recognising that Design-led communication has a role to play in helping navigate the complexities of contexts, individuals, institutions, activities and relationships in AMASS so that meaningful and valuable research can result, a novel method for participation making use of a series of bespoke, auto-ethnographic tools (Wilson 2020) was adopted to encourage intra-community communications. These graphic tools were deliberately designed to create experiences of novel participation which, through their use of textual production and dialogical interaction, allowed for an embodied, performative use of memory to recall and identify significant moments or events in the project’s life and in the lives of its members. A four-phase interpersonal relations framework was used to encourage conversation and to elicit narratives of autobiographical memory on the project’s development during the pre-award phase:

- 1 Association: How did you find each other or first meet? How did you establish a common language to discuss your working relationship?
- 2 Build-up: How did you identify common goals? Were there opportunities to bring together pre-established directions for the project?

- 3 Continuation: How did you establish mutual trust? Were there any considerations you had to make with regard to power within the relationship?
- 4 Transformation: Has the relationship changed since your first discussion and subsequent decisions? How have you been able to manage these changes?

Fourteen AMASS project partners from six institutions (two to four participants per country) participated in auto-ethnographic workshops online via Microsoft Teams and using the Miro platform. The insights gathered assisted the identification of the details which would go on to shape our dialogical correspondence model.

Summary of assessment methods and outcomes

The synthesis of Kester and Ingold's concepts allows correspondence to be mapped as a key characteristic (and outcome) of this distinct and particular instance of research-led reflection and dialogue. Three themes and seven subthemes emerged from the analysis of results from auto-ethnographic workshops and revealed examples, moments or suggestions of correspondence.

New knowledge generated at the interstices of collaboration

Meaning develops from motivations and mutual need. Three subthemes connected to Kester's category of interdisciplinary emerged from the participants' narratives of relationship-as-process.

- A value in Embracing dynamism: experiences of relationship are considered as something active and valuable – an action and an intentional (or designed) activity which benefited from (and made use of) a pre-established 'network of networks'.
- No correct ways for proceeding: it recognised that having to work together in ways that are not precise or perfect and which, sometimes, might require the use of creative intuition in response to uncertainty.
- Balancing professional and personal: dialogue must complement but not replace established hierarchies. For dialogue to be sustainable, there is a necessity to both cultivate motivations and recognise mutual need.

Operationally-polysemic meaning was present in the project

For Kester, meaning is situated across contexts and within or between relationships. Our participants' articulation of their experience in forming the AMASS relationships resulted in three notable subthemes.

- Recognising the value in connections: participants' perception of a project's value is situated by the range of constituents that make up its network of networks and the connections between people, and their contexts.
- Agreeing on common understanding: the open-ended nature of the project's call document meant that a deliberate activity of seeking or making meaning was required and could be developed through a series of interactions in response to the call's text.
- Considering people's institutional contexts an individual's motivations and connections between individual partners might not be enough to result in a stable or sustainable relationship.

Uncertainty is a condition of meaningful engagement and dialogical exchange

For Kester, productive, innovative and potentially successful relationships (and their underpinning values) should embrace the ambiguities and challenges which define their dialogical interactions. In the context of an emergent research network, positive or constructive indeterminacy necessitates the co-creation of meaning. Our participants recognised a number of instances of positive or constructive indeterminacy, where ongoing dialogue allowed for correspondence which helped to co-create meaning for the network and its ambitions.

- The establishment of relationships in the AMASS network was frequently a non-linear or interrupted process.
- Negotiating a reliance on others: interdependence was cultivated directly and deliberately through, between and within the relationships which form a network.
- Recognising reasons for success: moments of certainty are often a direct result of processes of dialogue and meaningful exchange.

The dialogical correspondence model

There are clear overlaps between Kester's notions of 'dialogical interaction' and how Ingold determines the characteristics of 'correspondence'. Likewise, Kester's assertion that dialogical practices are determined by their 'ensemble of effects and forces' itself reflects Ingold's discussion of correspondence as being defined as an entanglement and a 'mesh-work' of participants and their relationships, activities, contributions, etc. Our model of dialogical correspondence' has an idea of 'relationship as process' at its heart which recognises that our consortium and project were both processes of 'being and becoming'. The model embraces an idea that our correspondences are formed and take place through shared experiences of communication and we feel our three themes (outlined above) can serve as key pillars in the development of any future-facing, sustainable relationships for research partnerships.

Conclusion

The AMASS project's relationships, status or context as a form or type of fluid, dynamic and emerging social sculpture can be acknowledged and as a consequence of our study of its partnerships a model for dialogical correspondence has been developed – an idea which constructs and shapes relationships where these relationships construct and shape the form the project goes on to take. Within the context of AMASS, such an exchange (at points of correspondence) also presents opportunities at which mutually-beneficial connection can be made and reinforced. Such connections (perhaps particularly when undertaken during the preparation and writing of a project's application) establish a set of attachments which help to develop social infrastructure which has a power in the potential that is brought together through a complex collection of individuals, communities and activities. The dialogical correspondence model recognises and explores a reality where the best likelihood of achieving meaningful impact can be reached through interconnected processes of evidence-based accretion and where a carefully choreographed series of studies, trials, operations or procedures establishes broad concepts of value that can go on to underpin social innovation - impacting upon individuals and their

communities but, ultimately, which hopes to have effects on policy and policy-makers. Our research has applied a critical lens of correspondence in identifying and describing threads or themes which can serve both as useful pillars in the development of any future-facing, sustainable relationships for research partnerships, and in how they might go on to form the basis of meaningful and impactful communications as the project develops and works through its own ongoing processes of becoming.

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