

Considering Co-Creation

An Overview of
Language and History

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An Overview of Language and History

By Patrick Fox

In trying to capture some of the nuances, complexities and subtleties of the field of co-creation, it is unsurprising that so many different terms and descriptors for variations of participatory arts practices are utilised throughout the International community.

Various, and in different eras, Socially Engaged Arts Practice, Relational Art, Dialogical Art, Community Art, Collectivism, Participatory Arts, Social Practice and Co-Creation – to name but a few - have enjoyed and continue to enjoy varying degrees of recognition and indeed critique.

The reality is that artists who locate themselves within these types of practices both escape and sometimes defy easy categorisation. Broadly they engage with people rather than objects and work collaboratively; connecting with a variety of voices in the creation of work. There has been an undoubted shift to the **'social turn'** → in arts and cultural practices in recent years, with more and more artists engaged in working in this way, something which has been amplified more recently by the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate emergency and an increased and necessary urgency to dismantle systemic oppression as a result of white supremacist cis-hetero ableist classist patriarchal structures.

Alongside this broader turn towards the civic, there has also been a broader 'institutional capture' of these ways of working, and a practice that has historically found its voice and validation outside the formal structures of the art world has begun to find more mainstream recognition. This can, in part, be evidenced by the growing number of courses, conferences, funding and commissioning opportunities which adopt and reference the language of these practices. And cumulatively these changes have led to a shift in the discourse from matters of cultural democracy solely, to *cultural democracy and the democratisation of culture*^[2] in relation to one another.

Why then, do we continue to have a problem in finding one shared term to define this practice? The oversaturation of terminology does not necessarily benefit or serve artists, their collaborators or this area of practice. Discussions around the meaning of language can often become highly academic, overwrought and impenetrable or, at worst, can stereotype artists as ersatz social workers and promote a reductive or even patronising view of community collaboration. Yet the importance of reaching a shared understanding of such a wide-ranging and evolving practice at this time cannot be understated.

Despite their limitations, and the complications and contradictions that can often arise around this work, words do help us describe and discuss complexity and enable us to see things we might not otherwise be able to see. A common vocabulary not only helps us share emotions and ideas but also enables us to learn and grow our practice.

It is for this reason that I believe any umbrella term must offer the opportunity to generate a continuum of debate that befits the critical nature of the work.

Less a definition and more a recognition of the varied contexts, artforms, approaches and methodologies at play, and the different kinds of support they require. The central element being the active participation of the collaborator/non-artist/community/audience or viewer in the creation of work. Although even the term 'community' is often contested, and can include communities of place and/or interest as well as communities of 'practice', as defined by social theorist Etienne Wenger – 'groups of people who share a concern for something they do and learn how to do it better through interaction'.

It can be artform specific, such as visual arts, music or dance, or interdisciplinary involving collaboration across a range of artforms. It can also involve collaboration with non-art agencies, such as social inclusion organisations, local authorities, education providers, health authorities and community development groups. The artwork produced can take many forms and due to the collaborative nature of the work there is strong emphasis on the artistic process, so the creation of an 'art object' is not always appropriate/necessary/desirable, an event, a situation or a performance might feel more intuitive. Indeed the process itself can be the artwork.

Any discussion of this practice inevitably raises questions around labour and knowledge exchange, and power dynamics, as well as the need for an aesthetic language that describes the process and the experience as opposed to a final 'single authored' product or object. It also requires discussion about what we mean by the social as invariably this work is about groups of people with different knowledge, views, lived or accrued experience and values coming together and re-imagining the world; drawing on the skills of the artist and their practice.

[2] www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10632929709596961?journalCode=vjam20

History

Tracing the history of the practice it is clear to see a history that largely exists in opposition to trends within 'mainstream' art. There is a clear challenge to the prevailing hegemony, and one of the reasons for its continued relevance for many artists is its ability to respond directly to the issues of its time, allowing for greater power to comment on and reflect upon society. In contemporary art terms its lineage traces back to early 20th century movements such as Constructivism, rejecting the idea of autonomous art, favouring instead art a practice for social return, Dadaism – anti-bourgeois and politicised, and Surrealism – re-imagining the ordinary and breaking from convention.

In challenging the conventional exclusive relationship between the arts and the social elite and limiting definitions of what constitutes art, the radical democratic movements of the '60s raised further questions of authorship and challenged assumptions about the passive role of the viewer; adopting an anti-bourgeois position on the role and function of art. Direct links began to exist between the political and cultural activities of social movements (students, women, working class, anti-racism) and creative expression and radical transformation. Identifying the recent growth of collaborative projects as a "global phenomenon" Cultural Theorist Grant Kester suggests the rise of this practice at this time evidences a "paradigm shift within the field of art, involving an increased permeability between 'art' and 'other zones of symbolic production'".

Technological advances, along with the shift to a digital space in 2020, necessitated by the global pandemic, has allowed individuals and groups to use technology to create their own images and relate their

own narratives. These times have brought into sharp focus the nature and characteristics of exchange, and the tools we use to create moments of authentic collaboration, as well as highlighting the skills and access gaps experienced by many parts of our community. As in these previous periods of social and economic change, the work of those artists engaged in collaboration with community and social contexts is directly reflecting the tumult of our times. The ways in which the work is being presented is increasingly innovative and provocative. The politics of our times have presented us with an unprecedented moment of re-evaluation. Our values, our social structures are in flux. Collaborative art practices present the opportunity to engage meaningfully with these converging agendas and draw audiences into work in new and exciting ways allowing many to add their voices to commentary on these times.

And yet, the ways in which we discuss, describe and critically reflect on this type of work remains problematic. Practitioners increasingly sense there is a need for a new set of registers and descriptors that befit the complexity of the work. How do we best capture the nuances of this ever-shifting practice? Do we have a descriptive register that adequately encapsulates an ongoing continuum where process morphs into product or indeed becomes the product itself? Can the complexity of a rich collaboration ever be captured in an art object – does it need to be? Is there an aesthetic language to describe the experience, the process or the new forms of knowledge that are created? What is the nature of exchange? What are the power dynamics at play in co-created work and a co-creation space? Many of these tensions and considerations are touched upon in the research we have conducted, which has led us, where possible, to include signposts to the current and historic references linked to these themes.

Some suggested further reading:

'Models of Validation' is a two-year knowledge transfer partnership between Axisweb and Manchester Metropolitan University. The aim of this action-research project is to agree principles of validation as the basis for an online platform, which will be made in direct consultation with artists who have a socially engaged practice.

www.axisweb.org/models-of-validation →

Migrants in Culture is a network of migrants organising to create the conditions of safety, agency and solidarity in the culture sector for migrants, people of colour and all others impacted by the UK's immigration regime. They are guided by a vision of culture without borders.

www.migrantsinculture.com →

Unlock was created by Inc Arts UK. **Inc Arts** → is a national collective that champions the creative, economic and contractual rights of the UK's ethnically diverse workforce. They work collaboratively across the arts and cultural sector to create peer-led solutions to redress under-representation and lack of diversity in our creative teams and workplaces.

www.incartsunlock.co.uk/about →

Spectrum of Participation by Chrissie Tiller is a thought piece commissioned by Create, Ireland's national development agency for collaborative and social arts practice in 2014. In this piece, the writer Chrissie Tillers suggests differing approaches and modes of community collaboration.

[The Spectrum of Participation \[PDF\]](#) →

FailSpace — also known as Cultural Participation: Stories of Success, Histories of Failure — is an AHRC-funded research project exploring how the cultural sector can better recognise, acknowledge and learn from failure, particularly when undertaking work intended to diversify and grow the people who are taking part in subsidised cultural activities. The project is led by **Leila Jancovich** → (University of Leeds), with **David Stevenson** → (Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh), **Lucy Wright** → and **Malaika Cunningham** →.

www.culturalparticipation.co.uk →

<https://failspaceproject.co.uk/about> →

Situation Room - Critical Cartographies for Engaged Practice - In this talk from 2012, roughly 30 minutes in length, Dr. Ailbhe Murphy presents a compelling case for a broadening of language and value systems related to engaged practices.

[Watch on Vimeo](#) →

With For About

With For About is an annual conference series produced by Heart of Glass. In the most recent edition, curated by **'The Vacuum Cleaner'** → and **Cecilia Wee** →, **With For About 2020** → responded to the additional challenges that COVID-19 creates for many marginalised people and communities, asking:

- What creative solutions have marginalised people developed to survive before COVID-19?
- What creative ways of being and organising are being made now in response to COVID-19?
- How do we embed and share these solutions, ways of being and organising now and into the future?

With For About 2020 was presented as 4 episodes taking place from 27 May to 17 June 2020. These weekly presentations, performances and provocations brought together a range of voices and experience from across the world and compiled a list of resources.

For information about past episodes of With For About visit:

[With for About](#) →

Care As A Radical Act - Panel Discussion 2020

[Watch on Vimeo →](#)

Moderated by writer and educator Chrissie Tiller with artists Fiona Whelan, Jijo Sebastian, Alexis Maxwell and Gemma Nash, this panel from Create's Networking Day 2020 draws on the recent paper of the same name by Chrissie and discusses what forms of cultural solidarity, practices of (self)care and creative interdependence are needed to see us through and beyond the current crisis. Create's Networking Day 2020 was offered in partnership with Heart of Glass, Creative Places Tuam and Uillinn: West Cork Arts Centre.

A few days after the official COVID-19 lockdown began in early March 2020, Heart of Glass invited Associate Chrissie Tiller to become their temporary writer-in-residence: working together to explore ways to chronicle, and distil the learning, from the strange and disquieting crisis we were all entering. Part of what emerged over this time were a set of reflections and resources - for the heart, body and mind - generated by practitioners which were very relevant to the collaborative and social arts sector. Working together, Create and Heart of Glass wanted to build on Chrissie's initial list. At the Create Networking Day (9th December 2020) close to two hundred delegates came together in a facilitated interactive session, entitled "Connect" which offered a chance to meet, talk, share, and strategise together. Everyone added their recommendations, collectively building a resource pack for the sector; talks, books, projects that have inspired, kept us going and which encourage our work as collaborative artists and cultural and/or community practitioners. This resource, made up of everyone's recommendations, is reflective of a sense of collective wisdom, provocation and support by our field of practice at this time.

[Collaborative Arts Resource Pack \[PDF\] →](#)

Understanding social power and transformation produced by CREA's Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation series.

[All About Power \[PDF\] →](#)

Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons - Silvia Federici

Silvia Federici is one of the most important contemporary theorists of capitalism and feminist movements. In this collection of her work spanning over twenty years, she provides a detailed history and critique of the politics of the commons from a feminist perspective.

Federici provides readers with an analysis of some of the key issues and debates in contemporary thinking on this subject. Drawing on rich historical research, she maps the connections between the previous forms of enclosure that occurred with the birth of capitalism and the destruction of the commons and the "new enclosures" at the heart of the present phase of global capitalist accumulation.

Considering the commons from a feminist perspective, this collection centres on women and reproductive work as crucial to both our economic survival and the construction of a world free from the hierarchies and divisions capital has planted in the body of the world proletariat.

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