

The Institute of Unnecessary Research- Art/Science/Technology Interaction and Socially Engaged Performance

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes The Institute of Unnecessary Research (IUR), an International group of artists working in the field of practice-based research in science and technology. The structure of the IUR is based on a typical institutional model, with various 'department heads' responsible for their own specific areas of research, whilst appointment/selection of artists to the IUR is simultaneously open and highly nepotistic. The artists involved investigate science and technology from a wholly artistic paradigm, making wide and varied connections, but working solidly within their fields in such a way that their research could often be of equal interest to the scientific community as to the artistic one. The research is widely disseminated via performance events and exhibitions within the community in a non-elitist way, with a view that anyone can understand anything, if it is explained in a way that promotes understanding. Audience interaction is also key and often visitors to events participate 'hands on' in the experiments/performances. Not only is the IUR a bridge between scientific research and the wider public, but it also seeks to claim that Art is a form of meta-knowledge, strongly accepting that the Enlightenment's call to rational empiricism makes a unjustifiable claim to 'truth' leaving out more than it includes, such as the inclusion of the rational at the expense of the emotional and the personal. Attitudes to science, technology and art have changed over the last five hundred years, in that whilst Science has become more formalized, Art has become increasingly less so. By stepping outside the testable hypothesis the IUR are free to go off at tangents, to get bogged down in aesthetics and be mavericks.

Keywords

Art, Science, Performance, Paradigm, Meta-knowledge, Hermeneutics, Public Art, Normal Flora Microbiology, Robotics, Tissue Culture, Neurofeedback Music.

INTRODUCTION

The Institute of Unnecessary Research (IUR) was founded in 2005 by Artist Anna Dumitriu following discussions at the "Rules of Engagement" Conference on the nature of Art and Science collaboration, held at York University, UK and organized by Arts Council England. Key to the question of art/science collaboration is "What is its purpose?" "What can an artist offer to science?", "In terms of art, why engage with science at all?" "What levels of cross-fertilisation should happen" and most importantly "what has art got to do with knowledge?" The IUR attempts to work with these questions.

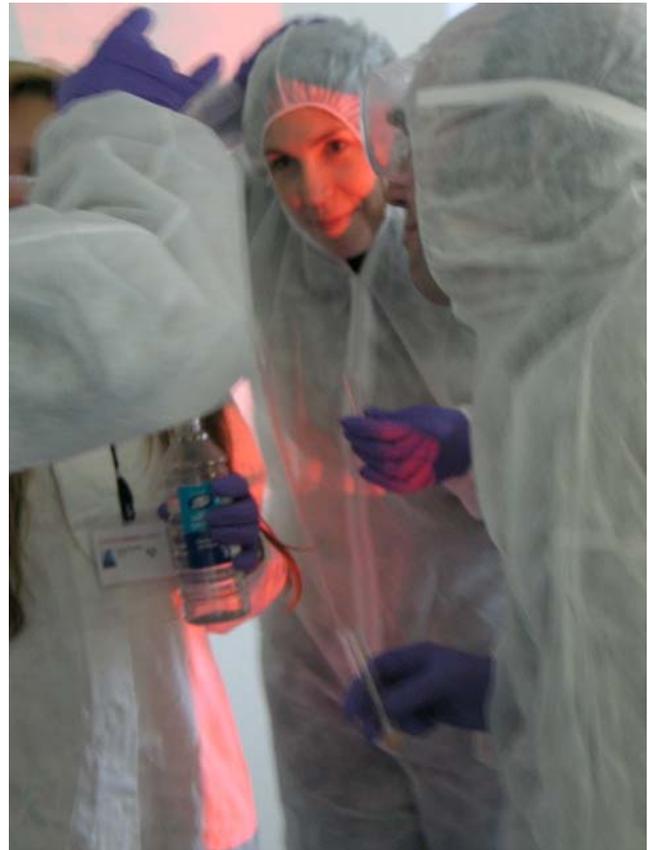


Figure 1 Unnecessary DNA Extraction Performance

The IUR is a hub for artists or scientists working a high levels of trans-disciplinary practice, strongly concerned with the philosophical implications of their methodologies, interested in public engagement and practicing in ways that could be described as 'performative' in nature.

1. KNOWLEDGE AND RESEARCH

1.1 Unnecessary Research

The title "The Institute of Unnecessary Research" is, in many ways, confrontational. It raises the epistemological question, what is necessary research? Unnecessary does not mean pointless, it often means going beyond the normal (in the Kuhnian sense of 'normal science') and crossing boundaries.

Where do we draw the line with what we study or with what can be studied. Since post-modernism the various hierarchies of knowledge have broken down,

1.2 The Enlightenment

The 'claim to truth' that science has made since the Enlightenment is now open to question. Notions of rational empiricism are under attack as unachievable and inappropriate.

The ability of art to express multiple layers of meaning, from the analytical to the emotional makes it an ideal method to investigate knowledge within this new paradigm, acting as a form of meta-knowledge.

2. THE STRUCTURE OF THE IUR

The IUR mimics and subverts the Institutional model it is based on. There are various 'departments' each 'headed' by an artist. The 'department' names are created by the individual artists and based on their personal research areas. When an artist joins they come up with a 'department' name, if an artist leaves then it is likely that the 'department' is discontinued. For instance the Head of Crockery recently resigned his role (from within the online cyber world Second Life), as part of a multimedia performance at Sussex University, the position of Head of Crockery currently remains unfilled.

There is no official selection procedure for department heads, unsolicited enquiries are responded to with a warning that selection procedures 'are entirely nepotistic', in fact the IUR grows organically through increasing networks of international contacts working within research based practice. Current departments include: 'Robotics' (Paul Granjon), 'Tissue Research' (Kira O'Reilly) and 'Neurofeedback' (Luciana Haill). The IUR is directed by Anna Dumitriu, who in dialogue with department heads, undertakes organization and management of events, whilst working on her own research into normal flora microbiology and artificial life (and the links between them).

3. PERFORMANCE EVENTS

3.1 Audience Interaction

The IUR uses performance as a means of conveying research; often events have an interactive component, the audience taking part in experiments and research activities thus changing the direction, development and final outcomes of the artwork.

Critical theorist Suzi Gablik discusses in her essay on Connective Aesthetics that the traditional relationship of the artist to the artwork has come to be superseded, and that this social role of art has become increasingly important, since there is:

"...a rejection of modernism's bogus ideology of neutrality. Many artists now refuse the notion of a completely narcissistic exhibition practice as the desirable goal for art". (Gablik)

Artists have now come to see the process as equal to, or even more important than the outcome, or the performance is more important than the documentation of it. So the means of production of the artwork as a dialogical and collaborative process is also the outcome of the artwork in this model, which is what makes it so relevant to Art/Science practice, it is an

analogue of the typical, natural relationship of the artist to the scientist (and vice versa), the journey rather than the destination. Although not inherent in all Art/Science practice it would seem logical to include the audience in the collaboration, with their own vast tracts of knowledge and experience. Gablik states:

"...there is distinct shift in the locus of creativity from the autonomous, self contained individual to a new dialogical structure that frequently is not the product of a single individual but the result of a collaborative and interdependent process". (Gablik)

This influence of performative, dialogical aesthetics, which comes from the collaborative structure of Art/Science practice makes it a useful technique for reaching out to new audiences in a non-hierarchical way. But these forms of collaboration are not easy and require huge conviction, and effort from all partners involved.

3.2 Past Performances

The IUR attempts to reach out to new audiences in partnership with large-scale commissioned public events including performances at The Whitechapel Gallery in London, The University of Brighton, The University of Sussex and Brighton Marina.

4. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

4.1 Anna Dumitriu

Anna Dumitriu is a visual artist, her work is involved with the nature of trans-disciplinary practice based research. She is currently working on a project about microbiology *The Normal Flora Project*, funded by Arts Council England, which forms the basis of her PhD research. She is also artist in residence at The Centre for Computational Neuroscience and Robotics at Sussex University.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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