

CRITICAL PRACTICE: A CASE STUDY IN “CULTURE IN COMMON”

More indicative than conclusive, the following abstract outlines our general argument and describes areas of focus in our presentation.

Keywords: case study research, collaborative art practice, espoused theory and theory in use, internal interventions, shared knowledge, self-organization/self-governance, practice <> practise

Introduction: Between “Practice” and “Practise”

In response to the question “What is collaborative art practice?” we ask, “What does it mean to practise art collaboratively?” We begin with this rephrasing, both to emphasize *practise* as a verb and to highlight the extent to which *practicing* is the very essence of *practice* as we understand it. So this is a paper about the *practise of practice* and especially the *practise of collaborative art practice*. It seeks, in particular, to trigger discussion amongst Summit attendees and other interested parties regarding the relation between the noun (practice) and the verb (practise) and to speculate about the knowledge produced through this bi-directional shift.

We use case studies to explore this movement as always situated and specific. Moreover, this case study draws on our own experience as members of Critical Practice. Founded in 2004, Critical Practice brings together artists, designers and/or researchers based in London and beyond to consider what it means to co-create knowledge in common. By this we mean knowledge that is not only shared, distributed and publicly accessible but that also encourages the sharing, distribution and accessibility of knowledge more generally. So we are interested in sharing knowledge, as well as the challenges it presents for co-production. In the reportage that follows, we aim to communicate the confusion, struggle and quest for understanding that we hold to be key characteristics of collaborative art practice more generally.

Critical Practice: From Espoused Theory to Theory in Use

We introduce Critical Practice in this section with reference to the history of our collaboration (borne of open source software development) and its recent project *Parade*, which explored the subject of “being in the public eye” (May 2010). We describe the ethos of sharing typical for Critical Practice and its manifestations, both internal (in the self-organization and self-governance of the collaboration) and external, in public events. We focus on the resources, experiences, understandings, etc. that we produce “in common” and discuss what this entails in particular. This leads us to...

Critical Practice: From Espoused Theory to Theory in Use

Here we consider the collaboration’s statement of purpose as it appears on the Critical Practice wiki (www.criticalpracticechelsea.org). This, we argue, exemplifies espoused theory: what the collaboration says it believes, does and is. In a spirit of self-critique, we contrast this with the day-to-day realities of collaborative practice as a practical action situated in a particular context: theory in use. And this anticipates...

Some best practices for collaboration

Returning to the frequent disconnect between espoused theory and theory in use, we discuss some of Critical Practice’s “best practices”. Holding fast to our ethos of sharing, we will compare and contrast the functionality of these practices in *theory* with their impact and how they affect our co-creation in *practice*. These practices include: rough consensus, wiki use and the cluster metaphor. We will also draw on Trebor Scholz’s reflections on social protocols for collaboration as described in his text “The Participatory Challenge.” Scholz’s theory of “extreme sharing networks” is also referenced en route to arguing that the metaphor

of “sharing” knowledge is more apt than the familiar one of “knowledge exchange”. Other relevant theories in this analysis include Jean Lave’s and Etienne Wenger’s communities of practice and the homespun pragmatism that marks Critical Practice’s broader approach. And this brings us to...

Reiterating Critical Practice

Based on the insights gained through our research for sections 1 and 2, section 3 proposes a “new” statement of practice for Critical Practice. This reiteration seeks to open up the rhetoric and groupthink that can cripple collaboration when assumptions are made regarding what knowledge is shared.

By Way of Conclusion: A New Beginning

Our presentation concludes by suggesting the broader significance of this case study for other groups and individuals interested in collaboratively-produced knowledge based on an ethos of sharing. We speculate that case studies conducted by individual members and/or small groups within an organization can be powerful internal interventions for destabilizing assumptions and proposing alternative ways of working, knowing and being together. Hence they can be valuable for an organization’s history and development.

We suggest that one way of interpreting case studies is as a refusal; a refusal to accept that knowledge held in common can ever be codified. For it to be in common—that is, available to anyone - it must confound the proprietary forces that seek to pin it down and make it resonate with partial significance. So, in fact and somewhat paradoxically, what distinguishes knowledge in common (in Critical Practice) is not so much that it belongs to everyone but that it belongs to no one; as such, it can be available to anyone, taken up and explored by individuals in their own way. This openness, we argue, is a political act. When, for instance, individuals and small groups make internal interventions by way of case studies like this one, they frustrate the larger organization’s attempts to instrumentalize its own practice for the sake of stabilizing a shared identity. In this way, these interventions inculcate an ethos of collaborative practice as something that can never be taken for granted. At its best, this hyper reflective and reflexive practice is groundless. Instead of conforming to best practices and/or explicit guidelines, it takes shape through interactions among the differential desires and respective competencies of the various collaborators who bring it into being.