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Spaces of reconnection

In this special issue of the *Journal of Arts and Communities*, co-edited with Agata Lulkowska and Sharon Coleclough, we pick up again the theme of ‘connection’, introduced in the last volume. At that time, as we prepared our editorial in early 2022, we were emerging with some trepidation from the disruptions to daily life and the disconnections from our creative communities provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, these disconnections have loomed large on our horizon: how do we set about reconnecting? For some, this offers a new start, an invitation to rethink habitual practices or conventional approaches. For others, this has highlighted existing barriers or created additional ones. It has become apparent that to better understand ways the arts can connect with communities, we need to pay closer attention to the disconnections. The articles presented in this volume begin this work and explore the nature of these disconnections as experienced within communities, between generations, in institutions, in public spaces and in digital spheres. Authors are writing from diverse perspectives: as designers, artists, curators, photographers, gamers and dancers. All use different lenses to expose and examine these disconnections and simultaneously explore creative ways to adapt and forge much needed, powerful reconnections.

Between and across generations

The disconnections between generations has long been a source of tension within communities, even within families. Communicating across the gap opened up by the different life experiences across generations can sometimes seem insurmountable. In Singapore, the division between generations is not only one of age, but also of socio-economic power, culture and language that Sin Shiu Heng and Lin Xiangting Bernice, in their article *Bridging Generations through Collaborative Artmaking: From Design to Art Therapy*, describe as ‘potentially threaten[ing] family harmony and social cohesion’. Finding ways between design and art therapy approaches using conversation, play and artmaking, they offer a framework for initiating opportunities for interaction across generations. Their interdisciplinary approach explores collaborative artmaking interventions to facilitate the sharing of stories and memories, thereby creating new lines of communication to foster intergenerational connections.

Moving from opportunities for in-person connections at a local level to the possibilities of virtual connections with new audiences across the globe, Benedictus Mattson reminds us, in the article *Instagram - “Bringing You Closer to the Things You Love”: Ghanaian Popular Dance Circulation through Interaction within Current Pervasive Media*, of the connective power of pervasive social media. In this instance, young Ghanaian dancers who, by making short videos of their dance routines and posting them on Instagram, succeed in reaching out from their marginalised communities and across geographical and cultural borders to attain global recognition. A combination of intense creativity and cunning ingenuity allows these dancers to bypass conventional pathways to success and connect with an international audience that would otherwise be inaccessible. In “Bringing You Closer to the Things You Love”, Instagram generates an alternative ‘cultural space’ in which new communities of practice emerge.

Searching for connections

In a very different geographical context, during the COVID-19 lockdown, in Watford, north of London’s sprawling metropolis, photographer Phil Hill uses his camera in the semi-deserted streets in an attempt to bridge disconnections and understand the nature of community in the town where he found himself living. In *More Lonely Ere: Idiorrhhythmic Communities and the Nostalgic Lens* Hill

introduces Barthes' 'idiorrhymy' (2013) to set the scene for this commuter town, whose community pre-pandemic lived lives in parallel: living together in the same place, yet separately as individuals intent on their own journeys. For Hill, the disruption of the COVID-19 lockdown presented an opportunity to pay close attention to these 'normal' disconnections and create a 'fictional document' that searches for connection but never quite manages to find it. Instead, the black and white photographs presented in the article evoke a staged nostalgia for connections that, if they were there, were only ever on the peripheries, in the edgelands.

Different kinds of communities co-exist and search for connections in different ways. Virtual spaces such as online games, continue to create pathways for connecting and bonding with individuals and groups across the world. By analysing the internal game structures of Innersloth's 2018 online multiplayer game *Among Us* through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, Andrew Martin Lee, in his article, *Death by Prox(y)imity: Participation with the Pandemic through the mobile multiplayer game Among Us (2018)*, asserts that new modes of connection are created by the players whilst simultaneously allowing them to process the pandemic's 'state of exception'. In the same way that alternative modes of social interaction were adopted to maintain intra and interpersonal communication during the various lockdowns, game mechanics created the opportunity for new imagined communities or, better still, gave more visibility to already existing virtual imagined communities. For the players, the screen plays a dual role, a connector and disconnecter, in building virtual communities.

Curating as connecting

The majority of articles that make up this special issue originated during the online Communities and Communications conference convened in the summer of 2022 by Agata Lulkowska and Sharon Coleclough from the School of Digital Technologies and Arts at Staffordshire University. In their article, *Inclusive curatorial strategies – a case of an interdisciplinary conference and festival: Communities and Communication*, the authors describe how they sought to bridge the gap between creative practice and academia by dismantling common barriers to participation, such as conference fees, the requirement for institutional affiliation and preconceptions about what constitutes legitimate research, by curating a 'welcoming space', predicated upon 'opportunity rather than control' and 'potential rather than permission'. In advocating for more inclusive research communities, however, the authors warn against paternalistic practices of 'giving access' or 'voice' to underrepresented communities of knowledge, where such knowledge becomes appropriated within institutional practices and discourse.

As co-editors of a peer-reviewed academic journal, we are acutely aware of the contradictions and potential pitfalls in our own desire to create a polyvocal space within the confines of a traditional western-centric mode of knowledge dissemination and value. Yet, our situation is not unique. In *Taking a seat: Curating spaces of (un)learning*, Amy Halliday, Clare Butcher and Helina Metaferia discuss their own experiences of working in the 'uncomfortable intersections' between 'hierarchies of visibility and value, process and product, learning and unlearning, education and representation', as curators, artists and educators. Acknowledging the disconnect between how issues of care and community are commonly performed and practiced by arts and educational institutions, the authors question the transformative potential of artworks which are commissioned to 'redeem or critique the institution, or compensate for a lack of care'. Instead, they advocate for a stewardship mode of curating, where resources are mobilised in support of generative and collective projects that challenge the short-term, output oriented agendas of institutions. As Metaferia says of academia 'It's not that it's an 'ideal' space for my work, but it's a space that has resources'.

In addition, Andrew Wiskowski's *Being Scene-un/seen; Demonstrations, theatricality and community afterlives in technological mediation* explores demonstration and protests as sites for and acts of visibility. Using Extinction Rebellion (XR) as a case study, a protest-demonstration initiative between 2019-2021, Wiskowski examines how virtual space and common fate can connect and provide the opportunity to share ideas, passion and future vision. Particularly, the XR project's success is built on

collective envisioning for change, community and solidarity with a deep need for a shift in the emerging dark ecology. Individuals with joint destiny unite to concretize their shared passion, value and pursuit into action. The act of solidarity, public space occupation, and theatricality becomes a means to connect with like minds, disconnect from unlike minds and share a collective vision through peaceful disobedience. In essence, intercultural, intergenerational and international sharing through disrupting spaces, and an assemblage of peaceful protesters for a better future, gave visibility to people, planet and performance. Beyond communicating, people bonded over ideas, problems and collective vision for a better future.

A similarly tactical approach is also evident within Megan Robinson's account of Shipibo curatorial practices. In her article, *The curation of communities in Shipibo Onanyabo*, Robinson describes how the Shipibo – a Panoan-speaking indigenous group in Peru – extend the logic of ancestral healing, or Onanyabo, to the dissemination of Shipibo artwork via the contemporary artworld of the Global North. Drawing upon Ingold's model of a 'meshwork' (Ingold, 2010), Robinson describes how Onanyabo cosmology incorporates diverse ontologies and perspectives, in ways which allow for divergence and difference rather than the subsumption of identities into a singular experience. By extending this ethos to the curation of their art within New York gallery spaces, Robinson argues that the Shipibo resist binary narratives of power or oppression by 'reworking and reappropriating relationships' with institutions and audiences. Moreover, by connecting with cross-cultural concerns, such as climate change and emergent technologies, they also position themselves as agents within the creation of future worlds.

Conclusion

The varieties of artistic expressions explored in this volume are embedded in and across institutions, communities, and platforms to share and connect ideas, and the desire to create change by disrupting thinking, systems and structures. From digital spaces, to public spaces, private spaces and shared spaces, we have assembled works that reflect and refract our humanity. The creative methods, strategies and tactics presented by the authors also provide a lens through which to explore the potential of this journal as a space of reconnection. We hope our readers find the stories, artworks and the ideas offered inspiring, and that, by attending to the disconnections within our professional and social spheres, we can begin to identify opportunities to create new ways of working and being together.

References

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