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Knowledge bridges as a barrier to a gap: interpersonal art & design

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Abstract. This paper unpacks the paradoxical qualities of some of the knowledge arising, utilized and dispensed from a practice concerned with sparking interpersonal connections. Four interventions that aimed at bringing together people who might not otherwise interact are analysed. These projects all show in different ways that gaps in knowledge can be highlighted as well as addressed through designing.

Keywords. social interaction design: interpersonal art: interventions: icebreakers.

Introduction

Getting to know new people can be quite a challenge, even in cultural settings considered highly social, such as nightclubs, concerts and art galleries. Strangers become known through interacting with them. The projects discussed here all attempted to innovate different mechanisms for fostering mutual engagement amongst unacquainted visitors to cultural venues. These physical interventions were intended to social catalysts through providing a shared common experience.

The interventions

Lycra Headspace

As its name suggests, this intervention was made of stretchy material and carbon fibre poles. This “upside down tent” was loosely hung at shoulder height within a discotheque and featured three head sized holes cut into its lower horizontal Lycra base. The intention behind this design was that club goers would insert their heads through the holes and find themselves in a space for conversation. This shared “headspace” was hoped to provide an sheltered arena in which different appearances of people’s bodies e.g. height, shape, fashion could not inhibit their interaction, whilst at the same time, through restricting people’s position, meant that there was not a worry about others coming too close.

Figure 1
Inside (left) and outside (right) the stretchy fabric meeting fabric meeting place
**Hoop Down**

80 hula hoops were cable tied together to form an 8 x 10 grid, or net of large plastic rings that was suspended approximately 1.5 metres above the heads of standing audience members at concert party. At the climax of the rock band’s performance, the strings that held the hoops were cut and so this colourful net fell upon the closely packed crowd. The hope was to create a physical bond between audience members that were standing near each other (Figure 2).

![Figure 2](image)

*Figure 2*

A grid of hula hoops casts intriguing shadows (left) and at least five minutes after their release (right) still provided a shared obstacle for many gig attendees

**Spin It In It**

From above this contraption looked like a giant doughnut with a single stick joining two sides of the hole. The ring of the doughnut was a wheeled platform on which was mounted a wooden wall which only allowed entry from one point, and access down into the central hole of this doughnut shaped merry-go-round from one other point. The "stick" the hollow centre of the roundabout was a wooden beam, at chest height, which when pushed enable the rotation of the platform. This contraption functioned as a kind of elaborate turnstile. It was sized so that its position in the centre of room meant viewers wishing to circumvent the room faced a challenge. If the gap in the external wall was on their side of the room, they could step up onto the ring shaped platform. If however, the gap in the external wall was not accessible, then they were required to wait until someone within the hollow centre pushed the bar so that the whole structure revolved sufficiently to bring the gap to them. Once upon the roundabout platform, viewers needed either cooperation from someone standing and pushing in the centre, or they needed to walk to the opposite end of the platform, step down into the hollow, push to effect a half-rotation, and then step back onto the roundabout and walk around the platform to access the gap in the external wall.

![Figure 3](image)

*Figure 3*

Turnstile like hollow roundabout conveys one (left) or more (right) visitors on a short journey
Cuppa Hoop

Hot drinks were served in pairs of cups tied together. Across a circular table, a dozen teacups were connected in pairs by thick ribbons tied to the handles of cups. This public event was held in a small art gallery in a remote Scottish seaside town.

Figure 4
Interwoven tea cups (left) provoked bowing amongst tea drinkers (right)

Success for unforeseen reasons

Knowledge gained through a longstanding practice of social interventions (e.g. see Mitchell 2009, 2011) has allowed the author to accurately predict that an intervention can have positive social effects. However, the author remains frequently wrong in envisaging the details of how these positive social effects come about. All four projects were observed to be successful for reasons other than expressed in the original design rationale. These interventions highlight gaps in the authors’ explicit knowledge, but in doing so helped add to them.

Forcing polite body language

An important but unforeseen factor that contributed towards the success of Cuppa Hoop was the length of the ribbon that was tied between two cups. For budgetary reasons, the ribbon was of a length that seemed the bare minimum size to connect a pair of drinkers. Such thrift had unexpected but positive influence on the body language of the tea drinkers. Most members of a ribbon-linked pair chose to bow in order to drink from their cup rather than encourage the person opposite to give them some slack in their ribbons. This bowing provoked good humour and gave the occasion an air of respectfulness.

Also one visitor commented that the physical ribbons in being distinctly coloured and fixing people in place to an extent, meant that it was easier to remember names and other details of individuals they conversed with.

Adopting a roundabout

Once visitors gained get to know the functioning of the hollow roundabout, they were keen to share this knowledge with other visitors and became either guides or physical supporters of their use of the contraption. It was how many visitors took on a kind of ownership or adoption of the structure. Rather than simply and literally passing through, many visitors stayed within the roundabout taking various verbal and non verbal roles. For instance, hanging around on the platform in order to guide newcomers concerning the workings of the contraption or directing and encouraging
those standing on the floor in their pushing. Surprisingly many participants seemed to find the exertion of pushing very enjoyable as attested by their voluntarily staying to propel the roundabout for several dozen rotations,thus ferrying dozens of people. Many of the friendly interactions sparked by the hollow round about were due to a kind of reverse gallantry. Several of the more regular manipulators of the merry go round were females who took to showing that they were capable to turning the structure even when it had several.

*A space for full bodied physical play rather than talking heads*

There seemed many interactions between unacquainted strangers within the upside down tent. However, what was unexpected was how much physical play and activity the Lycra structure provoked. Club-goers stroked and stretched the fabric with many different parts of the body such as heads, shoulders, elbows. Many guests brought one or more hands up into the structure through the head hole, whilst some also poked and shook the base and walls of the structure from the outside. The sensuousness and responsiveness of the material seemed more engaging than its form. The head holes were also stretched in several instances by couples who wished to enter the space through a common orifice.

*Collaborative sculpting followed by social gyrations*

The dropping of the hula hoop net perhaps caused too much of a shock for it to result in any instant bonding between revelers caught together. The aftermath of this trap springing several different and unexpected positive social effects were noted. Most people tried to escape the net immediately, and many fled also the immediate vicinity. However, many others were intrigued by the structure around them and some playful manipulation of the grid was observed. The hoop net was twisted this way, and then that, lifted again above the heads of some, whilst others lowered it closer to the floor and jumped through a hoop as if performing a magic or gymnastic trick. Applause and cheers from both those engaged in such physical play and others watching from outside seemed to encourage further experimentation. After around ten minutes, there was no one playing anymore within the net but the grid of hoops had become more of a lump - messily folded over multiple times in multiple directions to appear like a sculptural structure, around the size of a small car. A few people were observed debating the arrangement of this form, but it was otherwise starting to lose its value as a social object, until someone produced a pair of scissors¹. Snip! Snip! Snip! As the cable ties were cut and hoops liberated and claimed, a small crowd gathered around the swiftly shredded net of hoops. Negotiations between strangers for particular coloured hoops ensued, advice for cutting cable ties was proffered. Then a different form of social play flowered – individual hoops were rolled and spun across the floor, whilst others swirled their hips raucously exchanging views on hula-hooping abilities and techniques.

*Other paradoxes of knowledge*

*Anti-sociality as a route to icebreaking*

Reflecting upon the unexpected success factors above led to the realization that bringing some people together may often simultaneously separate them from others.

¹This event was a music industry showcase concert and thus (it is presumed) normal anti-weapons security measures were not enforced at point of entrance.
The aspects that attracted some people towards the interventions and each other, may have repelled others who did not share their tastes, attitudes or dispositions. For instance boisterous behavior with *Spin It In It* may have caused meeker folk to cower in safer corners. And attracted yet more rowdy and physical exertion seekers towards playing with the contraption. It was also noticeable how those who might be appear obviously overweight people preferred to keep to a minimum their time standing on the platform of this contraption. Although *Lycra Headspace* did not move as fast, as it become more animated, its dynamism and unpredictability may have deterred more timid people from approaching it. Likewise *Hoop Down* may have scared many into leaving the venue. Although a portion of this exodus may have been due to lights going on in an attempt to video record the reactions of the crowd. Witnessing a peculiar looking tea party where cups and drinkers are intertwined by colourful ribbons may similarly have repelled more cautious passers by.

Whether such negative magnetism serves to bring together those mutually repelled depends in part on how far they have to flee. Tea party avoiders had a whole town/island to avoid the intervention. The nightclub and party interventions had much less space (assuming that people wished to stay within the venues, as it appeared they did).

*Monitoring and targeting*

A practice such as mine that attempts to influence the interactions amongst and between other sentient beings is difficult to describe, monitor and evaluate. Providing conditions under which interpersonal interactions might thrive without wishing to manipulate each and every individual introduction is something that is difficult enough to track even when if a consequence of direct introduction, let alone indirect introductions that unfold over time. The real manifestation of this practice is the hoped for later occurrence of positive interactions between previously unfamiliar people when the practitioner is not present.

This presents another paradox in that the practice is concerned with achieving results that cannot be seen. Perhaps then this practice should be described in terms of the probabilities it seeks to influence. For instance, getting a group of strangers into the same room may not result in anything, but it can (probably only slightly) make it more likely that links between people may result. All the other activities that make up my practice seek to increase the possibilities of positive interactions resulting, but their actual occurrence is hard to guarantee. Certainty of resultant positive interactions might be impossible, but the aspiration of achieving such a “toolkit” is a target that the reflections contained in this paper has helped to formulate.

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*References*