EXPERIENCES IN ART + DESIGN COLLABORATIONS

Submission for the DIS'23 Workshop: Towards Mutual Benefit: Reflecting on Artist Residencies as a Method for Collaboration in DIS

Audrey Desjardins

School of Art + Art History + Design,
University of Washington, Seattle, USA
adesjard@uw.edu

STATEMENT

I am an interaction design researcher who speculatively and critically examines how people live with technology. I design interactive artifacts and systems that reimagine the familiar co-existence of humans and things (or data), often in the mundane space of a home. As a design scholar, I believe that the design and making of artifacts is a rich site of knowledge production.

I was trained as an industrial designer as well as an interaction design researcher. I am currently working as an associate professor in the School of Art + Art History + Design, situated in the College of Arts and Sciences at University of Washington. I am also an adjunct associate professor in Human-Centered and Engineering as well as in DXARTS (Digital Arts and Experimental Media) at University of Washington.

While my academic appointments are mostly in Art and Design (and Engineering) departments, most of my work is published in HCI venues such as CHI and DIS. I typically use a Research-Through-Design methodology. In my approach to 'making', I often collaborate with artists.

COLLABORATION MODELS

I have collaborated with artists in various capacity in my design research work over the last five years. Below I briefly describe the various models I have been a part of. I also note that most of my collaborations also involve a group of students (undergraduate and graduate students from design, art, music, engineering, information school, comparative history of ideas, etc.) who join my design research studio (Studio Tilt) via for-credit directed research groups (DRG) [7]. While I describe mostly the relations between artists and I below, they exist within larger collaborative structures.

ListeningCups — Designer-in-Residency

I was invited to be a 'designer-in-residency' by artist and techno-ceramicist Timea Tihanyi at Slip Rabbit Studio. The ListeningCups [4] was a one-week project where we explored the intersection of everyday sound data, data physicalization, and 3D printed ceramics. The goal was to develop a workflow to go from data to data physicalization. In this model, Timea was my host and shared her studio and knowledge in ceramics and 3D printing with me, while I brought my expertise in working with data.

The Inner Ear — A Dynamic and Evolving Collaboration

A few years after the ListeningCups project, I secured NSF funding to engage in a new collaboration with Timea Tihanyi which again touched home data and 3D printed ceramics. The new project, named The Inner Ear [5,6], focuses on capturing and physicalizing vibrations in home environments. In the grant, I had proposed two projects, this one, as well as the Data Epics (which I

ListeningCups
www.studiotilt.design/listening-cup

further discuss below). While I was Principal Investigator on the grant, at the beginning of the project, Timea and I acted as equal collaborators in sharing ideas, vision for the artifact, and managing our team of students in the development of the Inner Ear concept and form. Once most of the design and development was completed, Timea became more in charge of production with clay, while I was managing the electronics portion with students. At that point, I was also taking on the deployment study of the Inner Ear, which was a whole new stage where Timea was less involved. This project included a complex dance between various roles and various stages within the project where our collaboration took different forms at different moments over the course of a year and a half.

Voices and Voids — Equal Principal Investigators

Voices and Voids [3] is an interdisciplinary project by a team of three principal investigators: Dr. Afroditi Psarra, new media artist, Dr. Bonnie Whiting, percussionist, and myself, a designer. We are all faculty members at the University of Washington, in the Division of the Arts. The project responds to current concerns about the ubiquity of voice assistants and reclaims, examines, and ultimately transcodes voice assistant data through performance, embodied experiments, data-driven art, cyber crafts, found-object and traditional percussion instruments, spoken word, movement, visual design, and web design.

In this project, we were equal partners from the beginning: we wrote the grant application together, conceptualized the questions we wanted to ask as a group, and started to build a shared language across our disciplines. We worked closely for over a year to build a series of 12 vignettes which we presented during a live online performance—the vignettes now exist on the web in a site inspired by Net Art. The grant structure also allowed us to invite other artists as artists-in-residence during our process: we collaborated with two human-computer interaction researchers, a choreographer, and two composers. Their participation resulted directly into specific vignettes for the project.

Data Epics — Commissioned Work

The Data Epics [1,2] is a collection of 28 short stories written by seven fiction writers based on people's smart devices' datasets. In this project, I directed a small design research team who helped me structure a project/study plan in which participants (people living with smart devices at home) would send us their smart home data—which we would anonymize and send to fiction writers for them to write short fiction stories. In this model, we recruited 7 fiction writers who might be interested in 'playing' with us and this idea of writing data stories. Each writer was commissioned to write four stories, over the course of a year. We offered them an honorarium (comparable to what they would be paid for short stories elsewhere) and gave them guidelines and deadlines. In the pilot study for this work, we had realized it was hard for writers who don't know much about data to write 'from the point of view of data', something we were interested in exploring. In the new iteration of the work, with the six new writers, we purposefully gave them prompts based on critical writing about data alongside their datasets. In our model of 'commissioned work', we explored the potential for shared thinking and clarified our role in guiding the authors with regards to our design research goals.


The Inner Ear
www.studiotilt.design/inner-ear
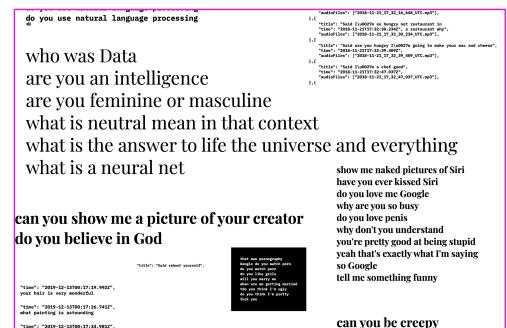
Still from the Voices and Voids website
voicesandvoids.net/

The Data Epics
www.dataepics.studio

A MESSY DIAGRAM

This diagram is messy because collaborations are messy. Benefits and goals change throughout and across collaborations. In the diagram, I centered the **design researcher – artist relations** as well as the **things** produced (including **material things** but also **ideas** and **concepts**). Three key concepts animate and complexify this core process, and should be considered within a mutual benefit approach. (1) **Shared language**: For any collaboration to work, some time is needed to build a shared language between disciplines, but also between practices, goals, values, interests, etc. Sometimes this happens with words, other times with materials. In my collaborations, I have found that this building of a new shared perspective has been not only necessary but also one of the most valuable things to take away from the collaboration. (2) **Disseminated outcomes**: Once things are made, in my experience, each collaborator has aimed at disseminating the work within their own community, via their own mode of dissemination (exhibition, performances, talks, papers, conferences, literary journals, etc.). It has been important to discuss how to attribute credit and how to use materials generated as a team in a way that supports everybody's contributions to the work. (3) **Creative direction**: My collaborations have ranged between equal creative partnership and to commissions. These different models mean that, as a researcher, I may have more or less agency in directing where the project might go. For example, with the Data Epics, it felt like our design research team had more control in orienting the authors (based on our research goals), while respecting their creative process. In contrast, with Voices and Voids, the three of us (PIs) found a middle ground that would support each of our interests and research questions—and it was that intersection that gave direction to the project.
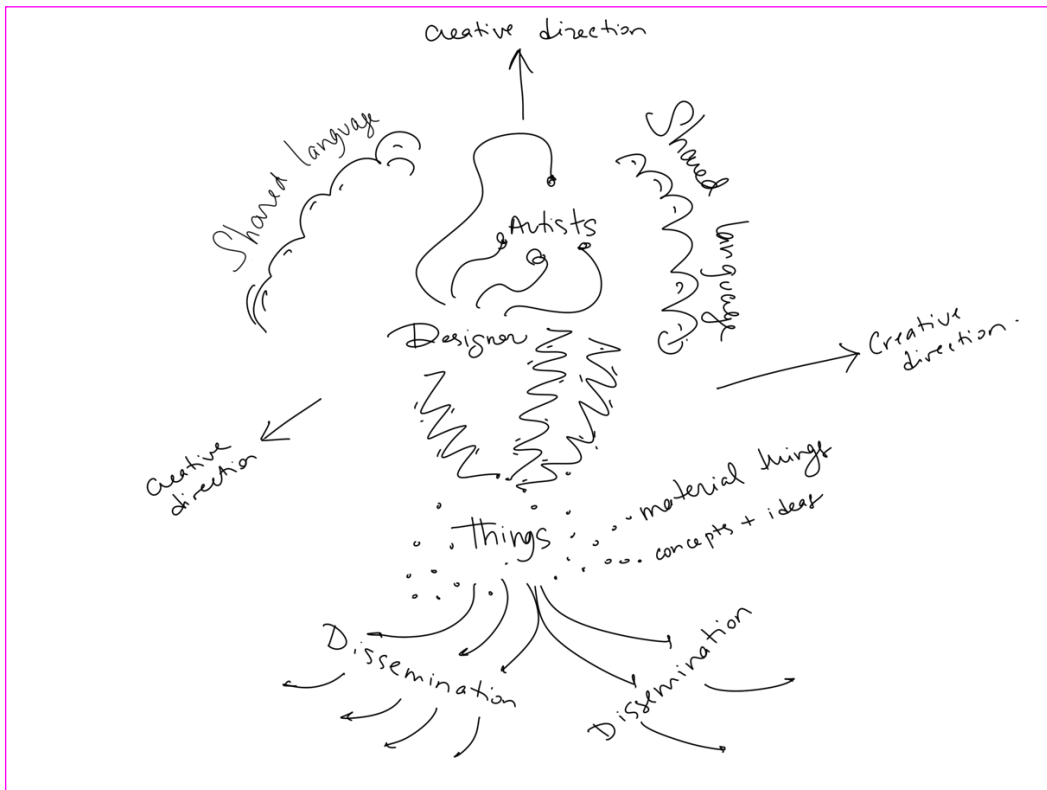
A Messy Diagram: Considerations in Design Researcher – Artist Collaborations

Future work

In the coming year, I have two projects that will involve working with artists-in-residence. I am not sure yet what form each residency will take and I am looking forward to listening and learning for other participants at the workshop. As I prepare for this work, the main questions I have are:

1. What strategies exist (or should be developed) for crafting calls for proposals that indicate mutual benefit as a core value?
2. What are some examples of successful art-DIS collaborations with regards to generating pathways for disseminating work both for the researcher and the artist?
3. What various axis of power and imbalance exist in artist-researcher collaborations (beyond the engineering / art divide)?
4. What is the impact of the length of the collaboration / residency on the potential to achieve mutual benefit?

REFERENCES

[1] Gabrielle Benabdallah, Maya Kaneko A., and Audrey Desjardins. 2023. A Notebook of Data Imaginaries. In *DIS '23*, ACM Press, New York.

[2] Audrey Desjardins and Heidi R. Biggs. 2021. Data Epics: Embarking on Literary Journeys of Home Internet of Things Data. In *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (CHI '21), Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 1–17. DOI:https://doi.org/10.1145/3411764.3445241

[3] Audrey Desjardins, Afroditi Psarra, and Bonnie A. Whiting. 2021. Voices and Voids: Subverting Voice Assistant Systems through Performative Experiments. In *Creativity and Cognition* (C&C '21), Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 1–10. DOI:https://doi.org/10.1145/3450741.3466807

[4] Audrey Desjardins and Timea Tihanyi. 2019. ListeningCups: A Case of Data Tactility and Data Stories. In *Proceedings of the 2019 on Designing Interactive Systems Conference* (DIS '19), ACM, New York, NY, USA, 147–160. DOI:https://doi.org/10.1145/3322276.3323694

[5] Audrey Desjardins, Timea Tihanyi, Freesoul El Shabazz-Thompson, Brock Craft, and Julia R Saimo. 2023. The Inner Ear: Capturing and Physicalizing Home Vibrations. In *Proceedings of Designing Interactive Systems (DIS'23)*, ACM Press, New York. DOI:https://doi.org/10.1145/3563657.3596070

[6] Wyatt Olson, Freesoul El Shabazz-Thompson, Melanie Wells, Janey Yee, Julia R Saimo, Brock Craft, and Audrey Desjardins. 2023. Exposing Tensions in Documentary Filmmaking for Design Research: The Inner Ear Shorts. In *DIS Companion '23*, ACM Press. DOI:https://doi.org/10.1145/3563703.3596633

[7] Jennifer Turns and Judith Ramey. 2006. Active and Collaborative Learning in the Practice of Research: Credit-based Directed Research Groups. *Tech. Commun.* 53, 3 (August 2006), 296–307.