When Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) was officially founded in the late 1960s, a movement towards more collaborative approaches between artists and computer scientists and engineers was already in motion. This movement was in part encouraged by the growing accessibility to recent technological developments by those outside of the traditional academic, military and industrial sectors. Although more accessible, those technologies (mainly in the realm of kinetics and telematics) were still quite foreign to many practitioners in the arts, and thus those emerging artistic practices were inherently collaborative in nature. The E.A.T., founded by engineer Billy Klüver, together with Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Whitman and Fred Waldhauer, was then set from the beginning to be a catalysis for “(...) the physical, economic, and social conditions necessary for the inevitable cooperation between artists, engineers and scientists, and members of industry and labor” (E.A.T., 1969a). They, therefore, sought to pave the way to a foreseen future scenario where artistic and scientific practices collide.

Nevertheless, the group’s founders considered its demise in the 1990s a natural fate. They argued that as soon as those technologies became ubiquitous there would be no need for initiatives such as the E.A.T. (Battista, 2015). Yet, the E.A.T. was more than the apparent idea of a pedagogical project to introduce new technologies to a broader public and groups of practitioners. It was a platform for experimentation in itself, acting within multiple stances of the artistic, scientific and exhibitionary processes.

The organization did not only envision to support the production of artworks, exhibitions and related events worldwide, but also sought to encourage overall advances in technology and in the arts. Moreover, through its experiments, E.A.T. inevitably highlighted the lack of the necessary infrastructure and knowledge of art institutions of the time in dealing with those emerging practices, thus indicating a pressing need to rethink exhibition spaces and existing roles. It, therefore, not only inserted those technologies into a disparate scenario, but, in doing so, questioned the existing conditions of that very context.
Article published in LIFE Magazine in 1966, on the collaborative nature of the emerging practices of the time (E.A.T, 1969b).

Almost 30 years after its demise, the need for collaborative and experimental platforms between art and technology is still very present. The theory sustained by E.A.T.’s founding fathers that widespread accessibility of a given technology would counteract the need for such spaces proved itself false over time. We now see a plethora of “hackerlabs”, “fablabs” and “makerlabs” being implemented at art institutions throughout the world. Those platforms not only bring current practices and technologies to a public now born in the digital age and accustomed to networked cultures and software-based devices, but also apply and acknowledge them as part of contemporary culture itself. As such, they have shifted from a desire to envision and invent futures (of art-making, of technology, but also the future state of the world given the implementation of such practices and technologies) to a desire to grasp the present conditions of an already digital, networked, tech-driven society.

In his recent text The Lab Imaginary: Speculative Practices In Situ, Jussi Parikka underpins this current wave of labs within the arts as a form of “laboratorization of knowledge” (using the Bureau D’Etudes’s concept of a “Laboratory Planet”), in which the world and its social dynamics can be analyzed, tested and quantified as in a scaled experiment. “The world’s a lab, or at least that’s how the rhetoric justifies contemporary smart cities, university institutions, and hack labs” (Parikka, 2017).

The laboratory as an institutionalized space for experiments in science has been adopted for by the arts as a key concept and structure[3]. In this scenario, the exhibition space has been transformed into a life-size scaled experiment where institutions apply evaluation methods through participatory practices and technologies.[4] Those strategies raise questions not only of what does in fact constitute participation, the quality of interaction in museums and so on, but also with regard to ethics and consent in public evaluation methods when every visitor is a subject of scientific investigation.

However, the exhibition space has also employed other forms of laboratorization, going beyond the metrics of public participation. As software-based technologies increasingly inhabit this scenario – be it through the exhibition of software-based artworks or through the implementation of software-based applications as a strategy for public mediation – they are leading institutions to redefine their exhibitions spaces as a laboratory or as an experiment in itself, as the artworks exhibited and, with them, the exhibition space ask for constant reconfiguration.

Based on a controlled consumption culture, the development of such technologies have imposed their very own conditions on the field over the years. Borrowing the term from Henri Lefebvre (1971) and Ted Striphas (2011), Christian Ulrik Andersen and Søren Pold (2014) describe controlled consumption as a business and infrastructure model where (1) the production, exchange and consumption of cultural software-based products are integrated and handled by an all-encompassing cybernetic industrial infrastructure, (2) in which consumer behavior is monitored and tracked, (3) while its durability and functionality are programmed for (controlled) obsolescence, (4) thus having significant impacts on the everyday life practices of those adopting such technologies.

These tech-driven conditions have subsequently asked the field to apply more collaborative approaches to curating and exhibition-making, as agents from multiple disciplines need to work together in order to solve overlapping challenges (a scenario which, interestingly enough, has many similarities to E.A.T’s 1960s context). As the technology applied in those contexts is developed within a motto of the perpetual beta[5], its
systematic shifts asks the field to be also more malleable in their approaches, adopting more “experimental modes” of exhibition-making.[6]

In this context, experimental curating and exhibition-making implies “testing things out” as they go – a process which reconfigures those practices to a less monolithic science. As such, experimental curating and exhibition-making can be perceived as a science in its infancy, as Georges Didi-Huberman (2013) describes it. The French art theorist borrows this notion from Claude Bernard’s seminal book An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine (1865), in which Bernard describes an emerging discipline without axioms. In this context, the researcher, acting by chance and through intuition, disturbs a given context. This interference caused by the researcher’s desire to understand a determined phenomenon creates an “experiment to see” (expérience pour voir), in which an idea of the direction to take for such an investigation is “awakened”.

Paul Basu and Sharon Macdonald (2007) further accentuate this link between the scientific experiment and the curatorial, by arguing that both aim to “make things visible”, as a “knowledge generating procedure”. In this sense, the exhibitionary practice and space not only exposes or displays existing phenomena or artifacts, but becomes itself the site for generating knowledge and experience. It is the very laboratory where “[...] various ‘actants’ (visitors, curators, objects, technologies, institutional and architectural spaces, and so forth) are brought into relation with each other with no sure sense of what the result will be” (Basu & Maxdonald, 2007).

However, Didi-Huberman (2013) talks about the experiments of the sciences of art (aesthetics, art history, and thus, curating) not as a merely scientific process seeking to reach a result, but rather the process of thinking in itself, which is carried out as a ludic experience. Didi-Huberman then invokes Baudelaire’s The Philosophy of Toys (Morale du Joujou) and Walter Benjamin’s interest in the deconstructive and constructive gesture in child’s play, where the child’s curiosity to “see” the “soul” hidden within every toy is the driving force of a researcher’s experiment. By playing this “game”, the researcher observes everything in its infancy in order to produce a “functional disturbance” and to “see” any given phenomena appear.

Hence, in order to experiment in curating and exhibition-making in times of perpetual betas and controlled consumption, one must tamper with the existing structures, so as to identify or understand the current possibilities of the field. In this process, like the experiments once conducted by the E.A.T., one inevitably questions the present scenario, pushing its boundaries and reconfiguring its formats.

REFERENCES

[1] The series of performances presented during 9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering (1966), which preluded the foundation of the E.A.T., had already indicated those. On this occasion, the figure of the “performance engineer” accompanied every artwork, emphasizing also the collaborative nature of such practices.

[2] Parikka (2017) also recognizes these initiatives as spaces for inventing the past, as they can be perceived as places which can “shift the coordinates of what is possible”, stretching towards the imaginary as an equally constructed and institutionalized practice.

[3] As Elke Bippus (2013) recalls, Sigfried Giedion called for an ‘experimental laboratory’ to be created in every public institution as early as 1929. The architectural historian envisioned the experimental lab as a space which would give a voice to “all art forms under discussion”. “With this, Giedion [...] turned against musealisation of art in favour of a ‘living chronicle of time’” (Bippus, 2013).

[4] Projects such as the Beta_space, an “exhibition as a living laboratory” launched by the Creativity and Cognition Studios (CCS) and the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney in 2004, created a space where interactive artworks are used in order to evaluate public participation within an exhibition setting.

[5] The term refers to a model of development where software is launched “in the open”, which means that, although functional, it requires constant updating in order to follow the competitive market and fast-paced technological advances, as well as cultural and user-imposed shifts. It is, then, a model based on the “release
early and release often” motto and on the concept of users as co-developers. As such, those applications and devices are always in the “experimental phase”, which has a significant impact on how artists and art institutions present, preserve and maintain artworks that rely on those technologies.

[6] Alexa Kusber from the recently established Museum of Digital Art (MuDA) in Zurich talks about code-based artworks as living forms, which as such require an equally malleable approach, where curators, artists and institutions can experiment with the space and the artworks collaboratively. “[…] constantly, the artists are updating the code, they are coming to fix the robotics, etc. So the artworks are never finished, in a sense. […] you can come at the beginning of the exhibition and come at the end, and your experience could be a little bit different […]. The best way to describe it is that the exhibition and the artworks are living” (Kusber, apud Carreira, 2017).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


