

## THE E-MOBILART PROJECT: AN EXPERIMENT IN COLLABORATION AT THE INTERSECTION OF ART, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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### Abstract

e-MobiLArt was a project tailored around the process of collaboratively creating interactive installations. This paper presents an introductory overview of the most important activities of the e-MobiLArt project from the perspective of its organizers and briefly discusses the collaborative process that took place among participants, curatorial advisors and organizers.

Art that deals with and incorporates scientific and technological innovation often questions its potential, as well as its positive or negative implications. It often does so, however, by employing different perspectives and conceptual frameworks than those followed by scientific and technological research. Consequently, Wilson [1] suggests that a new kind of “artist-researcher” role emerges, where the artist integrates critical commentary with high-level knowledge and participation in the worlds of science and technology.

The e-MobiLArt (European Mobile Lab for Interactive Media Artists) project was conducted at a time in which many artists from various countries, who have adopted this role, look into science and technology for methods and media that feed into the creative process. Often these artists embark on the risky exploration of sharing the creative process with other artists and sometimes with scientists who view artistic creation from complementary or even contradictory perspectives. Although the process of collaboration amongst artists — or amongst artists and scientists — is by no means straightforward, it can be regarded as necessary. When deciding to incorporate scientific methods and new technologies into the process of creating art, the collaboration of experts from different disciplines is probably unavoidable, since it is very difficult for individuals to possess the knowledge needed to accommodate all different aspects of such a complex endeavor. As a result, we nowadays witness an emerging tendency among new media artists to

work collaboratively. When doing so, group dynamics get into play; the human relationships that emerge and evolve during collaboration become vitally important and may have a significant impact on the process.

The central concept leading to e-MobiLArt was derived from the organizers’ personal experiences in collaborating with other artists and engineers for creating interactive installations. The social interaction aspect of this process, the difficulties involved, the challenges as well as the creative potential and enjoyment that this collaboration may entail have also been significant sources of inspiration that led to the idea for this project. Realizing that many of the project’s participants shared a similar willingness to enter the risky process of collaboration has also been a very rewarding experience. When viewing collaboration in e-MobiLArt from an organisational perspective, it is suggested that the act of handling the complexity of the process, creating a context where all different groups of individuals involved (groups of participants, organizers, curatorial advisors, etc.) would collaborate and maintain an equilibrium among each other, and, finally, solving various issues (artistic, technical, financial, group dynamics, etc.) that emerged in the best possible manner, has been a very demanding but equally informative and rewarding experience.

Creating *installations* is understood as “a kind of art making which rejects concentration on one subject in favour of consideration of the relationships between a number of elements or of the interaction between things and their contexts” [2]. The experience afforded by an installation could also be mediated by certain technological elements (i.e. interactive media, ubiquitous computing, communication networks and mobile or locative media). e-MobiLArt was a project tailored around the process of collaboratively creating interactive installations. It aimed at providing participating artists with a multicultural, interdisciplinary context, ideal for shared artistic practice. The central objectives of this project were to provide its participants with the opportunity to collaborate with each other in order to create interactive installations, as well as to support the exhibition of the artworks they produced and the mobility of both artists and their works within Europe. The participants formed groups and worked together in order to develop their projects. Furthermore, through the co-

operation synergies that would emerge during the 18 months that the collaborative process lasted, the project aimed to create an international network, which would reflect the dynamics of cultural diversity and contemporary artistic expression in the area of interactive art. Thus, an ultimate objective was to start a community of artists, scientists, theorists, cultural operators, academic institutions and ICT-related companies, which would continue to evolve and form new synergies after its completion.

The participants of the e-MobiLArt project have been selected from a large number of high quality applicants from all over the world, but mostly from Europe. An essential prerequisite was that applicants were already experienced in producing interactive art and/or active in pursuing innovative interdisciplinary research. A call for participation in the project was announced in February 2008. 105 artists responded to this call and submitted portfolios and CVs. All applications were thoroughly examined and evaluated by an international committee consisting of 7 members (N. Czegledy, A. Bureaud, C. Galanopoulou, R. Malina, R. Schnell, M. Niinimäki and D. Charitos), on the basis of the quality of the work submitted. Finally, 33 artists from the areas of visual, electronic and interactive arts, some of them with a background in performance, video, architecture and sound art, were selected. Most of them already had a significant presence in the international arena of new media arts, participating in exhibitions and other related cultural activities. Most of the participants had been previously involved in collaborative projects. Additionally, many of them had significant teaching experience in related fields at a university level. However, although it was hoped that some participants would have a scientific background and an intention to be involved in an art-science-technology collaboration, this did not occur, probably due to the way that the call was publicized.

Following the participant’s selection, the activities of the project comprised the organization of three workshops. These workshops aimed at supporting the creative process through a series of relevant presentations and lectures, but most importantly by aiding collaboration within each group, at a theoretical and technical level. The technical aspect of the workshops focused on the use of appropriate hardware (sensors, devices, boards by I-CubeX) and software (MAX/MSP, Jitter, etc.) supporting the design and develop-

ment of responsive and dynamically evolving environments. Artists were also offered theoretical advice throughout all phases of the creative process (conception, design and production) by the members of the curatorial advisory group. Additionally, the workshops featured lectures on specific topics relating to the current discourse emerging at the intersection of art, technology, science and society, by an international team of experts (academics, researchers, artists, curators) active in this field. More specifically, the workshops took place in:

- **Athens, Greece, 2-6 June 2008:**

This workshop was organized by the coordinators of the project and its main aim was the formation of groups. The participants followed a series of brainstorming and collaboration sessions and finally formed groups, consisting of participants from different cultural and artistic backgrounds. M. Novak, P. d' Agostino, D. Aliithinos, I. Zannos, V. Bourdakakis, M. Roussou and Personal Cinema contributed to the event with a series of lectures.

- **Rovaniemi, Finland, 4-8 August 2008:** This workshop was organized by the University of Lapland, Finland (Prof. M. Ylä-Kotola, Rector, M. Niinimäki and B. Schülke). Activities mainly focused on discussing the projects under development at a conceptual level, as well as "hands on" technical support and advice for making initial prototypes of artworks. J. Angesleva, C. Hales, M. Niinimäki and others gave lectures on relevant topics.

- **Vienna, Austria, 9-13 February 2009:** The third workshop was organized by the University of Applied Arts Vienna, Austria (Prof. R. Schnell, Prof. V. Schnell and M. Kusch). A. Nigten, B. Kräftner, T. Fürstner, R. Schell and M. Kusch contributed with lectures on topics relating to interactive art and performance. During this third workshop, the artists were at the finishing stages of developing their artworks, so the main aim was to support the creation of prototypes of the finished installations for testing purposes and to discuss them with the curatorial advisory committee and the organizers, prior to the final production.

The collaborative process aimed to promote interdisciplinary and intercultural dialogue amongst participants, who approached the creative process from diverse perspectives and adopted different media and methods in their practice. An essential condition was that each participant collaborated in each group

with at least one participant from another European (or non-European) country. Contrary to what was expected, however, many of the participants decided to participate in more than one group. As a result, they formed 14 groups (consisting of 2-8 previously unacquainted persons from at least two different countries). Consequently, all participants jointly produced interactive installations, which they presented in two exhibitions. The first one was held in Greece, during the Thessaloniki 2nd Biennale (May-June 2009) and was organized by the State Museum of Contemporary Art. The second one took place in Poland at the Roundabout Art Gallery in Katowice (October-November 2009) and was organized by the Academy of Fine Arts. These exhibitions concluded the project.

Collaboration among group members took place at an interpersonal level during the workshops and remotely during the periods in-between and after the workshops. In several occasions, artists travelled to meet their collaborators and work face-to-face. As this was difficult in most cases, mediated communication was conducted via existing on-line tools (blogs, skype, etc.) as well as through the *on-line collaboration tool* that was developed and maintained for this purpose by the coordinators of the project. Organizers and curatorial advisors also supported this process, when needed.

e-MobiLArt was an experimental project. Its experimental character related to several of this project's levels: the artistic, the organisational, the theoretical, the applied, as well as the level of social interaction amongst all individuals who participated. It was a very complex process, involving a multitude of activities that needed to be supported and carefully orchestrated in the best possible manner by the organisers. As such, it has to be evaluated as an experiment, thus not only by focusing on the artistic result which was presented in the two exhibitions but mainly on the processes that it entailed and on the impact of these processes on all parties and individuals involved. An analysis of the result of this project should attempt to identify what all participants experienced and finally learned through these processes and any new ideas, methods, and strategies for collaboration in creating new media art that emerged as a result. Systematic research on these issues has been conducted via questionnaires and interviews by the project's co-ordinators and will be published in the near future.

Ultimately, the e-MobiLArt project aimed to reflect the intercultural and interdisciplinary character of contemporary artistic discourse in the field of interactive media art, by supporting and investigating the collaborative creation, as well as the exhibition of interactive installation artworks. Furthermore, it attempted to promote future art-science-technology collaboration synergies among new media artists and researchers, academic institutions and cultural operators. Such synergies have already emerged during the project, and there is evidence to suggest that they will continue to emerge, among several of the nomadic and networked members of the e-MobiLArt community.

### Project Credits

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### References and Notes

1. S. Wilson, *Information Arts: Intersections of Art, Science and Technology*, Leonardo Series (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), p. 35.
2. M. Archer, N. DeOliveira, N. Oxley, & M. Petry, *Installation Art* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1996).