



Palankasova, B. and Cook, S. (2023) Incubators: a conversation and critique. *Brooklyn Rail*, 2023, May.

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Deposited on 11 May 2023

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(1030 words + bios)

Bilyana:

In the Notes app on my phone, I keep a list of words like 'liminal' or 'radical' that I feel have been terribly overused in writing about art – often to the point of detachment from the real meaning. No dictionary purist, I wish for more imaginative shaping of language that gets closer to the art. 'Incubator' is a word on my list, not because it's a candidate for inclusion in the International Art English bingo (not yet) but because, to my mind, it sits uncomfortably in an artistic context.

The origins of this weird word trace back to the 17th century, when 'incubation' meant 'to sit on eggs to hatch them' and was later used to name a technology that artificially stimulated hatching. Incubators became a medical innovation when Stéphane Tarnier, having been inspired by seeing one in a zoo, invented the incubator for premature babies. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, incubators complete with babies were compelling objects of display at world fairs and exhibitions, such as the Great Exhibition in London in 1851. Even at Coney Island¹, audiences excitedly queued and paid to observe such scientific and industrial-age life-saving marvels.

¹ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/man-who-pretended-be-doctor-ran-worlds-fair-attraction-saved-lives-thousands-premature-babies-180960200/>

From the 20th century the word 'incubator' began to be used in a business context to describe a space or a programme nurturing the incubation of new business ideas. The Batavia Industrial Centre (BIC) is considered the first business incubator. Founded in 1959 it adopted the term 'incubator' from the hatchery on the same premises. The BIC really is a success story of leasing space to small businesses and ultimately nurturing a community of entrepreneurs and makers, while stimulating the local economy.

The entwinement of 'incubators' with the history of innovation, technology and entrepreneurship, make it no surprise that in the late 1990s and early 2000s big tech companies adopted the term. Google and Microsoft established 'accelerator' programmes for promising startups to nurture the best ideas while encouraging experimentation and investing in the fittest and strongest futures in a highly competitive industry. Ultimately, incubators seek innovation, and the introduction of artistic thinking to technological development offers new opportunities (consider the artist in residence programmes at Facebook or Autodesk).

The history of art and technology crosses the history of innovation with numerous examples of early experiments in collaborative and interdisciplinary works. Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) founded in 1966 by Robert Rauschenberg and Billy Klüver, with support from Bell Labs and IBM, facilitated collaborations between artists and engineers using emerging technology. MIT's Centre for Advanced Visual Studies, founded in 1967, was a manifestation of Gyorgy Kepes' ambition for a 'think-tank-like art-and-science

research institute' (with inaugural fellow Jack Burnham, then editor at ArtForum).² In 1999, Xerox's interdisciplinary Palo Alto Research Centre Artist-in-Residence programme brought media artists to collaborate with scientists and engineers on new innovation projects. So this interface between creative labour and technological innovation is certainly not new, but it's referring to projects like this as 'incubators' that sits uncomfortably with me.

Sarah:

Our first encounters with the new behaviours (or social norms) engendered by the technical and digital world are surprisingly often in artworks (such as my first encounter with the gene editing tool CRISPR-Cas9 in an art workshop led by Marta de Menezes). For me, the issue with today's use of the word incubator (or the verb form, to incubate) in the art and technology sphere, is its techno-capitalist connotation, of transforming something amorphous into something productive, and reproducible. It remains the language of start-ups and Silicon Valley. An (interdisciplinary) arts organisation calling itself an incubator still makes me think it is an organisation that takes corporate/tech industry money (or equipment) and uses artists as raw materials in a petri dish experiment to see what new hardware or software might develop. This was the case at Xerox PARC in the 1980s, and arguably also at media labs sponsored by companies such as Nokia in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Recent shifts towards highlighting the importance of the 'design process' now means that such 'incubating' organisations use artists not as materials, but as protocols. The way in which artists do things (how they think, how they

² <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/25/aesthetics-of-collaboration>

work, often fluidly across disciplinary boundaries and with digital technologies) becomes the product, not just what they make. Business incubators incubate businesspeople.

Bilyana:

This reinforces what I understand as the proprietary conditions of incubators. Businesses claiming that “this idea was incubated here” are signaling their ownership or credit over something, a product or a process, or even a person. Naming it ‘incubator’ gives agency to the objectives of productivity.

Sarah:

I agree. When NEW INC was founded by the New Museum in 2014, describing itself as “the first museum-led cultural incubator dedicated to supporting innovation, collaboration, and entrepreneurship across art, design, and technology” I wondered how it would work out for the artists choosing to work there. Actual incubators are isolation units, yet nowadays business incubators are about sharing business space, hot-desking and networking. The emphasis on turning artists into entrepreneurs in a capitalist landscape is at odds with my (admittedly rose-tinted, if glitchy) picture of the art-technology world: built on inclusion, on sharing, on knowledge exchange, on versioning, and on iteration.

Incubators, it seems to me, by definition, also do not prototype, instead they control conditions for managed growth of already-known entities (because babies are humans, just undeveloped ones). Yet art, particularly digital and new media art (and interdisciplinary art forms such as bio-art) can be thought of as prototypical objects or experiences (heretofore

unknown).³ Making art is an iterative process. Forms of art are remade by other artists, improved, altered, and also abandoned and replaced by other novel forms. If your incubator failed to sustainably develop whatever it was incubating (if all your babies died) it wouldn't be very useful (or well-funded). This is why I would rather not have to see the word incubator used for what is essentially a studio – where prototyping does happen, where new forms of things are iterated, new versions spun off, where art and the tools of its making are entangled. And importantly, where research is collaborative, and made public... but also where things are allowed to die.

Bios:

Bilyana Palankasova is doctoral researcher at the University of Glasgow whose PhD project was initially titled “Valuing festivals as incubators of digital creativity”. She is working on questions of value creation and models of curating and commissioning, looking at the practices of a handful of new media and digital arts festivals undergoing organisational change. Her research is supported by a Collaborative Doctoral Award from the Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities.

Sarah Cook is a long-time curator of media and digital art who has worked with The Banff Centre, Eyebeam, Somerset House and recently, as a Mellon-funded research fellow at Tate investigating the “lives” of art in the museum. She has always wanted to curate a show

³ My argument doesn't hold if you look at INCUBATOR, the bioart research and teaching lab (Hybrid Laboratory at the Intersection of Art, Science, and Ecology), the first biological art lab in Canada, founded by artist Jennifer Willet in 2009.

about chickens and eggs to restage Hans Haacke's 1969 work 'Chickens Hatching'. She is guest professor in Art and AI at University of Umea and theme lead for 'Creative Economies and Cultural Transformations' in the Advanced Research Centre at the University of Glasgow.