

EMPOWERMENT AS PRACTICE

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For the Transmedia conference, we will gather De Geuzen, Matthew Fuller and Bluescreen around the notion of empowerment. We have been inspired by the way De Geuzen link their work to the Open Source Movement. This movement is more than the 'free' sharing of codes to stimulate software innovation. It's also about the idea (ideal) of freely exchanging knowledge, information and skills. It's about a new way of producing (creating) in which one builds on already existing ideas that can be modified or re-used in a new creation.

"Open Source Intelligence, n. 1. a) The ability to learn or understand from open and changing environments; a cognitive ability derived from the presence of open networks. b) The collaborative, transparent gathering and analysis of information by a distributed group; the connection of independent flows of information for collaborative problem solving." (Hirsch)

The first goal of the Open Source Movement is by opening up the source code of software, to add a new dynamic to software development. The sharing of the source code of software gives others the possibility to freely use, modify and copy that software, which is in fact a highly political choice. Open Source Intelligence then, refers to the collaborative principles used in the gathering and analysing of information. These principles are amongst others: peer review, reputation – rather than sanctions – based authority, the free sharing of products, and flexible levels of involvement and responsibility (Stalder and Hirsch).

Peer review, the practice of peers evaluating each others work, is very important in the collaborative process. The basic principle is that consensus has to be reached, it cannot be imposed. "The free sharing of information has nothing to do with altruism or a specific anti-authoritarian social vision", but as Stalder and Hirsch (2001) point out: "it is motivated by the fact that in a complex collaborative process, it is effectively impossible to differentiate between the 'raw' material that goes in the creative process and the product that comes out". Starting from the fact that all new creations are build on previous creations (and stepping away from the picture of the autonomous genius who works in a vacuum) the ability to freely use and refine those previous creations increases the possibilities for further creativity.

There is an interesting link to be established between this collaborative process and the notion of empowerment. To establish this link we first have to explain what empowerment might mean. One cannot understand 'empowerment' without first explaining 'power'. "From Foucault we assume that power is meaningful only in social relations. It is constituted in a network of social relations. 'Power over' is especially relevant here as it refers to those who have access to the formal decision making process" (Melkote and Steeves, 2001). The 'ideal' within the collaborative process is indeed that every participant has a certain amount of 'contribution' to what will eventually be the product.

Within the art practice then, the idea of empowerment refers to the possibility for 'users' – 'audience' to work with the creations of artists and add a new dynamic to it. Instead of being mere consumers of an artwork, the audience gains control and mastery over the art making practice. We are interested in how this way of creating has implications for the user. How is the 'user' – 'participant' empowered by the fact that he has the possibility to 'create'. We are not referring to

the 'every one an author' or 'everyone a producer' idea, we are talking about the active use of a creation of an artist by the audience or another artist. How is art, knowledge and information created by this kind of 'interaction-participation'? What does this mean for the relationship between artist and public? What are the consequences for the work itself? How do artists come to stand versus each others work?

An important point to understand this new practice is to bare in mind that this collaborative approach is established within a network, whether online or as a conceptual space in real-time. This idea of a network is intrinsically connected to the new technologies and the discourses that surround them. If empowerment is a possible consequence of this creative 'networked' practice which takes place within the context of the new technologies, how does it affect the skills to work with and critically reflect upon new technologies? The question whether this social practice established within a network leads to empowerment, can be understood as how it effects the digital skills of a public, artists or art students. More concrete within the art teaching practice one can ask the following questions: How is a creative social learning approach established between teacher and student and how does this affect the technological skills and critical awareness of the students?

This introduction to the conference asks more questions than it gives answers. Indeed there are many questions to be asked about the collaborative creative process of which the Open Source Movement is an example, whether it can lead to empowerment, and what 'empowerment' just might entail. It is very hard to provide answers, probably because there are no simple answers to these questions. The fact is that these practices exist and have consequences for the way art is conceived of and even for the way art is taught. The goal of this conference then is to bring artists who are in some way or another connected to this theme together and letting them shine some light on these questions out of their own personal experience. This may be the best way to understand it. Instead of trying to come up with answers we can see what is concretely happening in the practice of experienced artists. Maybe at the end of the conference we will have an idea of what 'empowerment as practice' might mean.

And no better way to end this introduction than by giving some background info on our guests. De Geuzen is a collaborative group with three members, Riek Sijbring, Femke Snelting and Renee Turner. Around 1994 they started working together while studying at the Jan van Eyck Akademie in Maastricht. In 1996 after realising their collaborations were more than a habit, they officially took on the name De Geuzen. Pooling their various skills together, their practice includes curating, art, design and educational workshop . Brian Holmes is a cultural theorist, art critic and member of the French activist association Ne pas plier (Do not bend). He is also member of the French magazine 'Multitudes'. Since the Carnival against Capital in the City of London on June 18th, 1999, he has taken part in and written about several of the large demonstrations against corporate globalization. Bluescreen is a Net-based Artist.

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