

Generous practices

A fictional conversation, based on emails, physical encounters, IRC and a Skype session.

A CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM

Femke Snelting: Reuse, free distribution and the free flow of ideas are concepts I often encounter on your websites and in your publications. Do you use these terms because you consider culture as an eco-system?

Laurence Rassel: I'm not sure I would use the term 'ecology' literally, but we like to work with open source software for example, because it exposes a network of relations between communities, tools and audiences. Of course, these relations go much further than art, literature, theatre or dance. Culture is embedded in social, economical and technological structures.

Maja Kuzmanovic: Culture is much more than a series of static objects and statements; it is an ongoing process. So naturally you start to think about the interdependency between different elements.

LR: ... and this type of culture has a longer storage life than the modernistic idea that every artist is autonomous and avant-garde, has to do away with history, and destroy and discard everything in order to start again.

MK: What's important is how you interact with your environment; how, as a maker, you are an essential element in a larger system and vice versa, how small differences can determine who and what you are. In our groWorld¹ project we try to reflect on the way you 'cultivate' your cultural milieu. For instance, how do you maintain the conditions by which culture can exist?

Guy van Belle: The interesting thing about a cultural ecosystem is the fact that it's not only about a literal exchange of information and products, but that the system also allows you to share behaviours, approaches, and working methods. The participation of the public also plays an important role.

Thomas Laureyssens: My association is perhaps even more direct, but the fact that digital media literally have a smaller ecological impact, really interests me. As a student, I read Bruce Sterling's Viridian Design Manifesto², and it still has a great influence on the way I approach digital media. 'Replacing natural resources with information', as he calls it, is an important challenge for designers, artists and other creative people. I believe that if we can find a clever way to use these media, we can reduce the use of energy.

FS: Is the use of virtual space actually 'greener'?

TL: Obviously the production of computers does have an effect on the environment... and there's the catch.

Nik Gaffney: I agree with Thomas. Digital media provide a range of options; some of which might be very useful. First of all, they have a wider reach and a lower environmental impact than print for example. Software systems can also help to visualize ecological processes or to regulate those processes, such as with the distribution of electricity.

¹ groWorld: minimize borders and maximize edges <http://fo.am/groworld/>

² The Viridian Design Manifesto <http://viridiandesign.org/manifesto.html>

MK: There is so much in digital culture that could be used to change the unsustainable aspects of our social economy! The culture of open re-sources, for example, is very important. And as we are living in a technological society, the solution to environmental problems should be formulated from a technological point of view. There is no going back to an imaginary agrarian utopia.

COPYRIGHT ALTERNATIVES

FS: In his article Aan auteursrecht heb je niets³, Joost Smiers writes that 'exclusivity' is not an adequate criterion in terms of determining the value of culture. "Copyright nowadays revolves almost exclusively around so-called intellectual property. This is a problem, since the traditional notion of property is largely irreconcilable with intangible concepts such as knowledge and creativity; a tune, an idea or an invention will not lose any of its value or usefulness when it is shared among any number of people."

MK: Creative work consists of so many different media, disciplines, activities and products that if even the smallest part remains closed and is unable to benefit from the free flow of processes, ideas and products, it is precisely here where cancerous growths start to develop.

GB: Media artists do not gain recognition as individuals as such, but more often as a group. The value is not determined by an object or a specific result, but rather by a special moment where artists and public meet. And those moments are more important than individual glory.

FS: Do you use copyleft licences such as Creative Commons⁴ or Licence Art Libre⁵?

NG: Our projects are published under Creative Commons and the General Public Licence⁶ for example, in order to make sure that we share copyright with the people we collaborate with. And since it once got us into trouble, we also categorically refuse to sign non-disclosure agreements.

GB: I use alternative licences especially when I develop projects with other artists and cultural organisations. They are very useful for making agreements about the correct use of each other's material.

LR: Constant often uses these licences as a 'performative' act! When you release a work under a copyleft licence, you immediately address intellectual property issues.

FS: But in fact you add an extra legal document...

LR: You mean that each creative act is preceded by ten or sometimes hundreds of contracts? I know, that frightens me too. It seems as if in the future 'fair use' will only occur very rarely... and that's exactly the opposite of what we want.

FS: Copyleft licences are an interesting alternative to the traditional copyright system, but the individual author still remains the starting point.

GB: For me and many people around me, the copyright system has never really been a solution. If you look at its history, it's a very commercial mechanism and I think for experimental artists who are not market driven, the system has no value at all. I myself refuse to be a part of any copyright system at all.

3 Joost Smiers in: *Aan Auteursrecht heb je niets*, De Volkskrant, 2005

4 <http://creativecommons.org/>

5 <http://artlibre.org/>

6 <http://www.gnu.org/licenses/licenses.html#GPL>

LR: An author never has a neutral position; he or she is an active thinker and player. It's always interesting when creators use their position as an author to give others the opportunity to use their work, instead of protecting everything, but that's just one way of questioning the concept of 'originality', authority and the power an author can exercise.

TL: It's very important to be part of a network where you can profile and represent yourself so that you get invited to give performances and to work on new projects for example.

FS: Is this way of operating inspired by the fact that you work with digital media?

TL: I guess so. I think that new economic structures such as micro payments and a decentralised distribution system based on downloads can be very helpful for media artists. The rules and structures of a long tail economy are more appropriate for small alternative organisations than for large conglomerates.

GB: Today's society is dictated by a whole bunch of contradictory economic principles, and media artists are in a vulnerable position anyway. This kind of experimental art is continually threatened by politicians who exploit culture, so we should be careful.

FS: As an artist, why is it important to think about intellectual property?

LR: We were often asked the same question when we organised CopyCult⁷ in 2000. At that time, you could really start to feel the impact of digital media, for example, in new distribution systems such as Napster and the issues it raised, but also in the work of artists such as Harun Farocki, Jean-Luc Godard or Chris Marker who were busy recycling existing images in an intelligent way. At what price can you re-use an image? That was and still is a very relevant question for artists.

FS: Shouldn't that discussion be left to lawyers?

LR: The law is the law, but there is also the actual practice and that became very clear to us when we started to work with lawyers specialised in intellectual property. We showed them how we felt restrained by restrictions that were seemingly intended to protect us. After that, we started to work out a different way of dealing with copyright. We learned a lot from them, but they also learned a lot from us.

ON COLLABORATION

FS: You are all involved in collective practices. Why do you think these collaborations are so important in media art?

GB: A lot of media artists I work with were already experimenting with music in the early eighties, and via computer music and video they gradually moved over to media art. In music, you have this almost utopian optimistic attitude of "hey, let's play music together!". Someone has an idea and that's how it starts. And the person who has the original idea doesn't feel misused or anything, on the contrary, he or she is charmed by the fact that others want to collaborate.

TL: The habit of collaborating is something I learned gradually, as I moved more from an assignment based design practice towards becoming an autonomous artist. In fact, media art is always multidisciplinary and the complexity of the technologies used makes collaboration practically a must. It just broadens your range, technological as well as content-wise.

7 CopyCult – the original Si(G)n <http://copycult.constantvzw.org/>

GB: You also work on things longer; together you can be much more critical. When you collaborate, somebody can suddenly come up and say: was this me or was it you? And at that point you realize that it's going in the right direction; when you are no longer able to distinguish who is doing what. In my terms, that's a successful collaboration.

MK: It's a way to start off a process that you can't predict, and we happen to like unpredictable projects. Unfortunately, there are a lot of artists whose rhetoric is steeped in 'collaboration' and 'collaborative', but when it comes down to working in a group, a lot of them still want to have their name as the author. On the other hand, we see a lot of scientists and technologists who, surprisingly enough, don't want to take credit for their role as a cultural 'author' in the projects that we develop with them...which I think is an interesting phenomenon.

FS: The subtitle of the sutChwon project is: 'connecting everything to everything else: flexible system for remote collaboration'⁸.

NG: We were planning to pull together all the half formed systems we were using, to get them to talk to each other. There was a lot of overlap because we kept on developing new software, hardware and equipment for specific purposes, so we needed a kind of connection kit. SutChwon is not really a tool as such, but it does have an effect on the way we design software and connect things together.

FS: So you're developing a kind of technological Esperanto?

NG: It's more a protocol than a language. Something like a plumber's van full of gaffer tape. And the instructions are written in a dialect of Esperanto that looks suspiciously like the Perl⁹ programming language!

FREE TOOLS

FS: The free software movement is in favour of computer programmers releasing the source code of their programmes; giving each user the right to study, copy, change and distribute it¹⁰. Is the use of free software relevant for media artists?

GB: When I first came in contact with software, internet didn't even exist (laughs). There was an enormous amount of code circulating. Artists and developers were sending each other disks. If someone would ask me to show them how I did this or that, I would. The idea that it was 'free software' came only later. At that time, we had no idea that code had a market value. Now it's a whole different story.

TL: It really surprises me that subsidised institutions continue to invest in new systems for themselves without sharing them with the community. So everyone keeps on putting in the same data, while you could be using your time for more creative and content related work! That's why I think that all governmental institutions should only use Open Source Software and open standards. This way, smaller organisations can benefit from the investments made by the bigger ones.

FS: Media artists work very intensively with their digital tools. The esthetical and material quality of their work is very much defined by it. What role does software play in your practice?

8 sutChwon uses computers to technically and socially facilitate collaboration.
http://www.fo.am/sutchwon/sutchwon_text.html

9 Perl (Practical Extraction and Report Language) is a popular programming language.

10 "Free software is a matter of liberty, not price. To understand the concept, you should think of 'free' as in 'free speech', not as in 'free beer'." <http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.html>

GB: I like to compare it to playing an instrument. Musicians, no matter how much they practice, they can only reach a certain level. They are physically limited by their instrument. I started programming when I realised that I could suddenly expand my range of expressive operations that way.

FS: You mean that you started to create your own digital instruments?

GB: Exactly. The idea is that you can behave a bit like a clumsy inventor. With software you can really experiment. I'm not a programmer, but in order to go beyond the limits of standard software, you need to be able to perform a few basic interventions. I like to go as far as I can in changing all possible parameters in order to create my own sound. And to come back to your question about collaboration, the limit of your own technical abilities is no longer an issue, because there is always the possibility of collaborating with other people.

LR: For me, software is more an instrument in the metaphorical sense. By asking "who uses what, what for and with who?" it becomes a tool to help you think. I am interested in the fact that each programme also programmes in a figurative sense: it prescribes specific forms, sounds and images.

TL: It's amazing how easily you accept the default settings of a programme.

FS: How would you describe the software that you develop?

TL: For some time now I've been working on a narrative game system¹¹. I think it differs from conventional systems because it allows me to develop my own narrative structures without conforming to existing patterns and the users of the game can also contribute. And of course because it all goes very slowly!

NG: All the software we have developed so far has been an adjustment to existing systems for a specific purpose, or the 'glue' to keep several elements together. For us, software can sometimes be a medium, but usually it's a tool for making connections flexible.

MK: We like to build on existing systems, or actually we prefer to collaborate with people who want to further develop and/or use the software. But it doesn't mean that we are afraid to get our hands dirty, if something doesn't exist yet.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE

FS: Since 2004 Foam and OKNO have been working on X-med-K¹², a series of workshops on the experimental use of new media. Constant is involved with Femmes et logiciels libres¹³, a project in which the participants themselves are responsible for the organisation of the learning process. Can you tell me something more about your interest in sharing knowledge and why it is important as artists to organize these workshops?

GB: For OKNO it's a way to get together with a few people and to investigate a technology or an idea. At this moment, for example, we are working on a workshop around wireless modems. Réseau Citoyen¹⁴ has put up a few of them. Through sensors, they can communicate with each other. We have invited Maxigas and Ákos Maróy join us in making an interactive work with this equipment in a week's time.

FS: You use the term 'workshop'?

11 Lakshmi <http://www.toyfoo.com/lakshmi/index.html>

12 <http://xmedk.be/>

13 Femmes et Logiciels Libres <http://samedi.collectifs.net/>

14 <http://www.reseaucitoyen.be>

GB: I would like to find a different word for it though... it's about doing things together, about discovering how to be practical and creative with technology. It's not about institutional learning, but we do invite experts to work on projects together with participants.

FS: Can learning and collaborating go hand in hand?

MK: That brings us back to the beginning of this conversation. It's important to feed the ecology that keeps you going. We don't consider our work to be the mere production of unique art works, but as the production of *knowledge*. If not shared through an educational process, be it a traditional workshop, a discussion or any form of exchange, this knowledge is reduced to superficial 'information'.

FS: How do you deal with the hierarchical relationship between yourself and the one you are sharing knowledge with?

MK: In the beginning we used to work with workshop instructors who taught something to the group, but eventually we moved towards participatory models where instructors can become participants and vice versa and we find this method to be much more productive.

TL: It's really great when you get this flow where others start to run wild with something you have instigated.

FS: If you want to share knowledge, experience, tools and/or a platform, the 'opening' of sources is just the beginning.

MK: Of course it doesn't stop at the opening of source files. Hopefully, we can change our consumer's society into a responsible participatory culture. One of the people we work with, pointed out that perhaps instead of cultural '*open source*', we should refer to it as '*ajar* (half open) *source*', because it's not about leaving the door wide open.

LR: It's wrong to assume that all free software is automatically open. Because who really has the opportunity to participate? Who has time for it, who does it lend authority to and who gets into trouble by it?

MK: So much 'open source' media works and artistic software are being dumped online, which supposedly makes them 'open' but they are incomprehensible and undocumented, so they remain closed for most people. Participation is the key, and that means that not only the end result is shared, but the whole process.

Guy van Belle (GB) is a developer of creative tools for networked performances and installations. In projects such as *mXHz* and *Society of Algorithm*, he researches modes of collaboration around audiovisual artefacts. Since 2005 he also works in Bratislava under the name Gívan Belá.

Nik Gaffney (NK) is a systems and media researcher and a co-founder of FoAM. Gaffney focuses on biological and physical computer models, generative systems and responsive media environments.

Maja Kuzmanovic (MK) is a generalist and interested in the small miracles of everyday life. As a co-founder of FoAM, she is involved in many different projects, be it commissioned by European research institutes or as an independent artist.

Thomas Laureyssens (TL) develops integrated systems for interactive storytelling. His practice consists of experimental interface design, video work and public installations.

Laurence Rassel (LR) is a cyberfeminist and a member of Constant (Organisation for art and media). She works together with organisations such as Interface3, Arteleku and Fundació Antoni Tàpies, on projects around archive policy, the position of the author and technology.

Femke Snelting (FS) is involved in various projects at the intersection of free software, feminism and design. She is an active member of Constant, De Geuzen (a foundation for multi-visual research) and the Open Source Publishing design team.

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