

A Practice Without Discipline

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In 2005 Peter Moertenboeck and Helge Mooshammer initiated the **Networked Cultures**[1] project, a research platform on the potential of translocally networked spatial practices. Interviews, exhibitions, films and presentations are the many forms they collaborate on architecture, art and theory projects and investigate urban network processes, spaces of geocultural crises, and forms of cultural participation and self-determination. Based at **Goldsmiths College**[2] this project investigates the cultural transformations in Europe through examining the potentials and effects of networked spatial practices. The project interacts with art, architectural and urban practices across Europe and beyond to look at ways in which "contested spaces" allow for a multi-inhabitation of territories and narratives across cultural, social or geographic boundaries.

Sites of alternative urban engagement are collected on a database which serves as a growing archive for research into emerging architectural cultures, including projects such as **United We Stand - Europe has a mission**[3], by Eva and Franco Mattes, the **Trans European Picnic**[4], organised by the New Media Center_kuda.org and V2_Institute of the Unstable Media, or projects like **Cartography of the Straits of Gibraltar**[5] by the Spanish collective Hackitectura. In the following interview Peter Moertenboeck and Helge Mooshammer talk about the network as "the digital age's ubiquitous object of desire", the presentational form of socio-politically engaged creative projects and their own creative processes, defined as a "practice without discipline".

Which are the smallest and the broadest networks you are engaged with?

Networks are highly complex assemblages that enmesh our feelings, thought and action with speculations about an ever-expanding elasticity in terms of cultural involvement, ranging from intimate exchanges to globally orchestrated forms of articulation. From one-on-one networks to the worldwide social movements of our time, each of these networks is presumed to be able to expand or retract in accordance with the urgencies of any given situation. So it is due to an inherent element of myth and fiction and due to the multiplication of such currencies by network actors that the absolute size of networks is indeterminable. In many respects, our research on relational structures and our own engagement in a variety of networked spatial practices has equally remained unconcerned about the empiricist doctrines of determinable quantity and scale. This disregard of determinate dimensions can be traced back to the very nature of the structures and the kind of practices that have been at the heart of our activities in the first place: emerging networks in the field of art and the wider cultural, political and intellectual ecologies they are embedded in.

That said, it needs to be noted that the breadth of any type of organisation is not necessarily linked to the complexity of actions it can perform, nor does it reveal anything about the quality of communications that help to sustain it. If we look at globally dispersed corporate organisations, for instance, their logistics and the globalising connectivity they bring into action may differ significantly from environmental groups or human rights activism operating at a similar degree of pervasiveness. This has to do with the fact that for networks form is not a given. It is a retractable instantiation of what could be or what could be done at any moment in time. This form is best reflected in the potentiality produced by a variable and instantaneous grouping together of different interests. Such is the flexible shape of informal trade routes or the recent upheaval and rioting of citizens in the centre of Athens. Their protest does not draw on a finite and localised number of contributors but on a translocally disaggregated potentiality which could be reaggregated and forced into action because of the shock of distinct events.

As perpetual transformation is a key characteristic of network structures, it has become part of the politics of most networks not to give away their actual ultimate strength. What many people find so attractive with regard to network organisation is precisely this clandestine character: The way networks disseminate information, the way they obfuscate the ins and outs of participation, the way their operations change direction and new forms of cohesion suddenly arise. All this can be attractive for many different reasons. One reason of course is that it allows for a widening of the sphere of cultural participation. And this is not about a range of choices that are on offer. It is about the way in which the lack of centrality and clarity - in other words a high level of structural and content-related indeterminacy - allows for the production of one's own terms of taking part.

A case in point is the network that originated around the so-called **Lost Highway Expedition [6]** in 2006 - an experimental gathering in which several hundred people participated and that brought together a multitude of individuals, groups and institutions in the nine different regions spanned by the expedition along the unfinished "Highway of Brotherhood and Unity" in former Yugoslavia. The idea of the self-organised, collective undertaking was to reclaim the conflicted territory of the Western Balkans as a platform for new cultural practices. When we participated in the expedition as part of our research, none of us felt obliged to collaborate or stay together for any length of time, and yet dozens of projects have emerged and new connectivities have been created. Undoubtedly, this form of participation differs from the way one can participate in the more purpose oriented networks we are involved in, such as the European Biennial network, which connects a range of ten European biennials of diverse profiles, or the Curry Stone Prize fellowship, which aims to promote design projects or innovative ideas that contribute positively to living circumstances for broad sections of global humanity. Still, one can find a whole gamut of indexed moments, in which the potentiality that rests in one network structure crosses over to a different network and certain registers of participation become compatible with one another. The potentiality embodied by an individual and the impregnable potentiality of a thought thus never cease to spark off aberrations and odd penetrations of order. They always constitute what one might call 'potential networks'.

In the book "Networked Cultures" you describe, amongst others, the network as "the digital age's ubiquitous object of desire" promising "a flexibilisation of our relationships and an expansion of our possibilities." Is this still utopian?

It would be easy to argue that the utopia of the network, just like any other kind of utopia, has been doomed to failure as it has been corrupted by the regimes of postmodernity or the aggression of late capitalism or other global currents and everything that comes with it. But instead of dismissing the frail concept of utopia completely, we could try to reroute and align it with the potentiality embedded in the present, amidst the everyday manifestation of social and cultural phenomena. This way utopia would be rendered less the idealised product of a distant future than a form of communicative praxis that draws on the potentiality of the present. Of course, this brings up the question as to how we actually handle our objects of desire: What happens, if desire suddenly turns into fear? If, for instance, the buzz created around an object of desire is taken hostage by an enemy or when it gets detached from its initial arena of signification and moves on to a less consensual field of societal activity, to do with disease, crime, catastrophe or terror? Such shifts highlight the ambivalences of utopian ideas, rendering them far more contradictory objects of both desire and contention.

The treacherous nature of utopias is perhaps not due to the ill conception of their original ideas, but rather to the finality of the reality resulting from such shifts of political and cultural esteem. In particular, the manner in which the centres of late capitalist power have perceived the network has changed. Once viewed as a tool of trouble-free control, it is now feared as a source of uncontrollable danger. In this regard, networks have replaced the most powerful figure of modernity: the threatening figure of the masses in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Elias Canetti's concept of the masses as a symbol of being touched by the unknown has given way to a trope of being connected with the unknown. Increased mobility,

accelerated contacts and the declining relevance of spatial distance - as an expression of our sense of proximity and distance - have allowed new parameters to emerge and generated not only a new connective quality, but also elements of uncertainty and fear: fear of the unchecked spread of global epidemics, fear of terrorist networks and fear of a profound social, financial and governmental crisis in the old centre of world power.

The network has become a diffuse symbol of the enemy, one encrusted with fears - just as diffuse - of disintegration, transmission and contamination. In the widespread talk of a 'war on terrorism', the network has become a useful tool to give fear a place. Of infinite scope, this place can be experienced everywhere - which is why it must also be reorganised, monitored and protected everywhere by political leaders. Fear has become the ultimate mobilising principle in a 'global' society void of overt political struggle. The use of the 'network' concept and the myths of its all-pervasiveness thus cleverly disguise a global policy of expert administration that attempts to control network dynamics on the one hand but must provide space for its expansion on the other to uphold its mobilising powers and to achieve its own goals.

"Networked Cultures" treats Media and Internet-based Art in the same way as it deals with Architecture, Visual Arts and social projects. Is the notion to integrate different artistic practices with the aim to expand the space paradigm or does the choice of projects arise from the topics you are dealing with?

Our point of departure is the spatial logics maintained by the realities of a post-national world as they are produced and lived out on the ground. Architects, artists and media practitioners are some of the actors in this convoluted field where they are joined by many other actors and interests. Through what they produce they act as catalysts of possible configurations of space, substance, people and communication. They disclose possibilities for alternate sets of relations to evolve. This is why amidst the claims for a global sphere of connectivity between multiple incompatible domains art plays an important role in positing new horizons and in opening up a world for meaningful cultural engagement. So it is essentially these practices and projects themselves rather than their conceptual framings which expand the paradigms of spatial production and experience.

Today, an ever growing percentage of cultural production takes place outside the officially designated channels - outside the institutions, protocols and technologies that have been developed and authorised as a way of productively engaging in culture. Of course this is not an isolated phenomenon. It happens in response to the growing instabilities and deregulations in society at large, in response to a climate in which new forms of economic, societal and state organisation evolve and spread globally to an extent at which each of us is affected by these changes in their own forms of embeddedness.

We are not dealing here only with an expanded realm of artistic work or with the overlapping of different sectors of creative spatial production. Something else is at stake: a vital characteristics of our 'globalised' world. This world does not exist in a single form. It is a proliferating set of conditions, furnished with all sorts of spatial products that make up parallel worlds with different territorial demands, conflict zones, relays, intermediaries, strategists, boundary regimes, and so on. Any encounter between these different worlds could nurture opportunities for co-operative engagement, but the difficulty lies with finding the right instruments to maintain these instable spaces of mediation.

On closer examination, though, what is provoked on many different levels by what we term 'networked cultures' is nothing less than a range of circulations between different practices that are not referring to one another through centrally authorised categories - a well-grounded discipline, a solid institution, a common history, a particular geography or the concept of the nation state - but through the way they collaborate to address real urgencies and create platforms of participation in the sphere of culture. Here it is the flow of interactions and not some legitimising point of origin that sets something in place to gradually gain momentum.

That way, networked cultures shift our attention in critical spatial practice from constituting categories to processes of constitution, from stable spatial characteristics to emergent properties of spaces, from the production of objects to the production of relationalities.

One of the dilemmas of (socio-)politically motivated forms of art is the fact that it rarely addresses those who should be addressed. Do you think that the shift of the presentational form of projects - combined with an aesthetic value for the spectators - could lead to a broader distribution and mediation of the contents?

The vision articulated by this extended field of architecture, art and media practices cannot but bring to mind the whole spectrum of collectivised civic engagement aimed to counteract the logics of global capital and its political back-up - urban social movements or human rights activism, to name but two. The conflation of these realms is not only potentially productive for either side, it is also transformative. In very broad terms, art can be seen as a laboratory landscape in which one can invent all sorts of self-produced devices: tools for communication, tools for inhabitation, tools for representation. However ephemeral or vulnerable these tools may seem, they are highly instrumental in adding provisional support, creating sudden discontinuities or yielding unpatterned forms of access. Such acts of denormalisation are an important disposition to loosen the boundaries of knowledge in a world centred around an insatiable politics of inclusions and exclusions.

The Paris based Campement Urbain collective is one of several practices which have successfully managed to induce a mix of art, propaganda, city policies and social relationships in the landscape of urban normality. Manipulating the context prescribed for urban renewal, their long-term Je&Nous project breaks up the boundaries between the inhabitants of a multi-ethnic district, local authorities and planners, not just by advocating a transgression of planning routines on the zero level of politics but by jointly exposing the risks and possibilities of building a communal structure: Who decides on its design? Who controls access? Who takes responsibility for its maintenance? Rejecting singular logics associated with the perfect organisation of such a place, Campement Urbain encouraged the myths and fictions that enable a community to emerge and those in which a community continues to exist. Importantly, work on this project has not been contained by the confines of its physical location in Sevran-Beaudottes near Paris. It has been presented and discussed at many international events and exhibitions, thus raising awareness for the collapse of top-down policies of containment, as well as offering a model for self-authorized participation and citizenry.

One of the most memorable aspects with regard to changing perceptual regimes is that networks don't simply represent an environment but actively create it. Armed with instruments of change, they excel in projecting and multiplying webs of continual communication. The Je&Nous project has been put into circulation on a variety of different levels, including continuous discussions and gatherings of residents, a multitude of collective actions, the project's crucial contribution to the Venice Biennale, or Jacques Ranciere's reference to the project in his lecture/essay on 'The Politics of Art and its Paradoxes.' Each of these levels offers a variety of interdependent entry points for contributors, which is why changes on one level may affect the anatomy of organisation on another level. This is the space of transformation, the space of chafed stratifications, the space of unforeseen externalities that cannot be realigned. And it is precisely here, at the point where this space - in a constant reshuffling of alignments - opens up to multiple logics that the aesthetic value of a project like Je&Nous is both generated and disseminated.

Reasoning the "linguistic turn" from the 1970s, is your project settled within the so called "spatial turn" which was brought on a global level at the end of the 1980s? Where is the theoretical basis for your research on the multiple phenomena of "Parallel Architectures and the Politics of Space"?

Wide-spread recognition of such cultural turns and their interpretative strategies, be it linguistic, spatial, educational or participatory ones, has always effected a flood of attempts to define the ins and outs of these particular turns, furnishing the horizon on which an engagement in culture takes place with all sorts of rules and imperatives and emulations, instead of aiming to keep up the active moment created by unregulated critical engagement. That's why we are a bit wary of attempts to categorise our work with regard to such frameworks. Locating network structures in the arts as a mode of engagement in the world that cannot be anything but political, a key challenge for them today is the way in which they negotiate their role in the development of new forms of cultural participation.

Our theoretical approach is thus less committed to the confines of a particular turn than to the workings of an ungrounding that lies at the heart of these very practices. In other words, it is along the lines of network practice itself that our research is oriented towards disruptions, interventions and fragmentations, and towards the emergent properties that arise from the interactions of various network components. We also try to take on board the fact that these components are likewise highly unstable and shaped by the interactions they are immersed in. Most of all, as our research aims to participate in building up unsolicited networks which design their own processes, the conceptual and analytic tools have to be developed in close exchange with this building process. Of course one has to do a lot of roadwork oneself, but the real benefit of opening up research that way lies in developing a shared basis through practice which might allow for more differentiated views on the production of theoretical frameworks.

When engaging with creative practices we are particularly keen to find out if and how they not only reflect back on existing networks of governance, but how through their work they produce minor transgressions and mutations which shake up the existing order and create something new. Much of the discourse in the Western art world in the late 20th century has been caught up in institutional critique, yet critical interventions of such kind are now felt to be considered too narrowly, given that today's field of intervention accrues from transnational challenges operating outside the boundaries of institutional frameworks. We are rather faced with the interaction of an array of incomplete and provisional systems that increasingly bypass the vertical links around which institutions tended to be built previously. The most important question is: How do such networks manage to mark out a socio-spatial process whose properties emerge from a situation rather than being solely tied to local or historical restrictions?

Nevertheless you turn away from your background in Architecture and Theory; you describe your working methods as "a practice without discipline". Aren't the discourse and the context you are pushing ahead with the discipline itself?

Certainly, one of the challenges of our endeavour lies in producing an account on a subject in formation without either formalising it through particular framings or allowing it to escape any form of critical evaluation by way of naturalising it. What follows is that the space constituted by the discourse, of which our project itself is a vital part, needs to be subject to critical interrogation as are all the entities populating this space. This is not an easy task, especially when you need to make decisions that affect different lines of action, and one has to maintain a certain level of awareness for the risks of such an approach.

Trying to operate within the dynamics of network formations instead of analysing networks from without, our working method is a parallel process of cultural practice and analytic reflection, and perhaps, this parallelism also reflects a degree of concurrency in our present cultural climate. What really strikes us as the pre-eminent characteristic of our contemporary situation is an all-encompassing elasticity of cultural belonging. Most notably, cultures have become subject to a shift from a universal rootedness in territories, disciplines and institutions to a more performative set of socialities and spatialities which are only loosely interlinked yet continuously overlapping and obscuring one another. The boundaries that normally provoke and regulate the collective production of critical work have become

fragmented to a degree that it is now impossible to distinguish between inside and outside in traditional binary terms.

This is not to be confused with axiomatic erosion and weakening of boundary regimes. The realities we experience are in fact infused with an active obfuscation and concealment of power structures; they are transformed by an increasing dematerialisation and flexibilisation of the various apparatuses managing spatial distribution and production. So there is a real urgency to develop new vocabularies and new forms of articulation that match up to the complexities of the new organisational matrix of our lives. Under these conditions the production of 'artistic devices', as Brian Holmes has called the elaborate experimental settings through which contemporary art practices act as catalysts of unforeseen relations and possibilities, offers a form of access to the changing modalities of societal formation: Self-organised camps and expeditions, informal gatherings, autonomous education programmes, makeshift architectural structures, counter-summits and cultural networks are the corresponding contemporary tools. They are focal points that temporarily create spheres of a collectivised critical engagement.

In a situation where the predominant mode of production is not division and confinement but multiplication and mobilisation, these artistic practices propel a multiplicity of entanglements on different levels. They complicate the existing structures rather than abstracting a purified model. What this entails, though, is that not only the artistic position but also the position of everyone and anyone becomes highly unstable, raising the question of how we can draw upon network resources and network capacities to create zones of autonomy within an all-consuming culturalisation of the global economy.

Both of you are not only researchers, but also part of the different networks you are theoretically dealing with. Isn't this a problematic role with too much involvement? Or is this behaviour integral part of your research?

Drifting in and out of various roles is a crucial mode of interaction for participants in networks. The drift allows you to explore different opportunities and epistemic constellations as you experiment with a changing set of relational structures. That way the creation of alternate relationship patterns provokes knowledge to evolve that would not appear otherwise. The same goes for academic research which in a situation of radical ambiguity actively seeks to provoke opaque operations to reveal themselves. Rather than using the network as a testing ground for a priori assumptions, you interact with the network in order to learn about its potential.

Coming back to our previous example of the *Lost Highway Expedition*, participants in this collective investigation were deliberately left to define their own projects, plan their own time and make their own contacts. The concept of swarming perhaps best describes the way in which knowledge of the expedition spread, the way the vaguely delimited groups moved from section to section, converged again and subsequently disseminated the knowledge generated during their journeys in different and only partly interconnected projects - exhibitions, seminars, workshops and publications. What enabled the socio-aesthetic experiment to become more than a self-referential group experience was the space of action that was generated by the collaboration of the project's initiators and that absorbed new actors and formulated an expanded political space. The artistic projects produced during and in the wake of the expedition form archives of knowledge that in turn allow for an extension of the expedition beyond those involved in situ.

While an external observer of this process would have struggled to grasp the dynamics of how transient alliances were formed around project ideas and how these ideas developed and spread along the route, direct involvement in the expedition allowed for gaining first-hand experience of all the minor moves and nudges, the tacit knowledge and the emergent results of local interactions. This kind of knowledge production does not limit its own scope by opting to apply the most elaborate and consensual methodological canon. It favours the

principle of good enough, which is in fact a common protocol of software and systems design to enable a system to evolve and gain complexity as it goes along. Despite potential inaccuracies due to one's own involvement, the benefit of this approach lies in focussing on what is gained in a network process rather than contemplating its formal weaknesses and failures.

What are the future plans for "Networked Cultures"?

Commonplace tropes of geocultural transformation such as urban migrant quarters, diasporic communities, and refugee settlements no longer suffice for understanding the shifting patterns of global socio-spatial organisation. Instead, we need to pay more attention to conditions and technologies that emerge from an ongoing transformation of citizenship arrangements and to the ways in which networked cultures exercise forms of societal involvement that advance our current conception of political and societal participation. Having studied the dynamics of contemporary art and urban networks in terms of network creativity and relational agency, we are now embarking on a series of further examinations of the enmeshments of art, architecture and politics that use culture as a radical dispositive to produce their own referential systems for social encounters and material expressions. In collaboration with various partners we are going to install a series of 'research platforms' of collective knowledge production, which will focus on specific questions of civil society, network transformation and intercultural competence. While it may be claimed that today's global dynamics unhamperedly impinge on the local plane, studying the micro level of network projects, in turn, addresses the much larger quest for new forms of political engagement in a world of global connectivity.

[1] <http://networkedcultures.org/>

[2] <http://www.gold.ac.uk/>

[3] <http://www.0100101110101101.org/home/unitedwestand/index.html>

[4] <http://www.transeuropicnic.org/>

[5] <http://www.fadaiat.net/>

[6] <http://europelostandfound.net/>

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