ORCHESTRATING UNCOMMON GROUND

By Caroline Nevejan

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the eighties I have been involved in creating 'networked events' in which the managing of differences and the orchestration of uncommon ground was the focus of my attention. During this period a number of these key events were realised at the Paradiso, a musical venue of international renown in the centre of Amsterdam, which structurally investigates new developments in music as well as the social and economic circumstances from which these new artistic developments result. The methodology of Paradiso, which has a capacity in finding and staging new subcultures is based on emphasizing the care for the 'direct experience' of the performer as well as the care for the 'direct experience' of the audience.

As a member of staff of Paradiso I had the possibility to initiate and produce events that drew on this collective expertise embedded in the organisation and to develop new kinds of projects which combined and agenda for social change with an emergent networked aesthetic, I have called them 'networked events'. In this essay I am referencing two events hosted by Paradiso, The Galactic Hacker Party (1989), and the Seropositive Ball (1990) as examples of networked events. Both happened before the Internet became a hype and interfaces made the technology disappear, for which reason some of the issues surfaced in a rather 'raw' shape.

"The Galactic Hacker Party" and the "International Conference on the Alternative use of Technology Amsterdam" (ICATA '89). It was a programme with very solid and serious debates as well as being a programme that convened the hacker community. It was explicitly designed, as an event in which different technology orientated communities would meet. We even sent out different press releases to resonate

different with discourses. In hindsight, the Galactic Hacker Party/ICATA'89 can be understood as a conscious design of uncommon ground.[1]

As a result of this 'networked event' new connections between people were made, insights were formulated and it inspired the development of XS4ALL and the Digital City, both highlights in the Amsterdam and European Digital Culture in the years to come.

The Seropositive Ball was a networked event that lasted 69 hours non-stop. It was a shadow conference to the World AIDS Conference, which was held the same days in San Francisco. Because people with HIV and AIDS were not welcome in the USA, both the Paradiso gathering as well as the especially designed 0+net offered a way to show commitment, share feelings and insights, exchange knowledge and art and express political views for many people involved. The 0+net was also accessible in some of the AIDS wards in Amsterdam as well as in San Francisco and New York. The 0+net was a 'demo' for a to be developed HIVnet: it offered an easy intuitive interface (the world wide web had not yet been invented yet), mail and newsgroups, a first online art gallery and many knowledge sources. Participants, contributors and organizers of the Seropositive Ball came from ACT UP, self organizations around HIV and AIDS, the arts, the sciences, the medical establishment and political bodies. Dramatizing the differences in relation to the uncommon ground of HIV and AIDS at the time as well as finding the common ground between all involved were in the focus of our attention and were a great concern all along in the creation of this networked event[2].

The Galactic Hacker Party and the Seropositive Ball were conferences both that facilitated a first time 'technology network experience' for many people involved. At the time Internet had not yet become a mass medium, many things had to be invented while doling them already. In this text I will share elucidate some of the

[1] Co-producers were Patrice Riemens, social geographer specialized in north south relations, and Rop Gonggrijp, founder of Hack-Tic network.
[2] Co-producers were Rolf Pixley (network), David Garcia (visual arts), Heleen Riper (debates), Patrice Riemens (north-south) and Wil van der Meer (performing arts).

issues to be addressed when orchestrating uncommon ground in a territory that is hardly perceivable yet.

DESIGNING NETWORKED EVENTS

The goal of designing networked events, including the applications that were developed, was to create meaningful interactions between its participants. Meaningful is meant to be understood here in the context of the theme, issue or situation in which the event or application functioned. The ambitions were to ameliorate understanding, express commitment and facilitate interaction. By facilitating debate and conversation, by orchestrating the network, a political space was created in which issues were formulated and reformulated. In this sense 'networked events' can be understood in today's political climate, in which people's democratic participation is increasingly 'issue' based and only forms itself at certain moments in certain places (Marres 2006).

When designing events one has to provide a space in which a person can formulate his or her experiences and one has to offer elements that will facilitate the historical contextualization of these experiences. The characteristic of these processes is that participants will influence what happens and contribute to things that cannot be foreseen.

It is like organizing a party. The infrastructure has to be there, one can put a lot of care into extra ingredients like food, an aesthetically-pleasing, exciting environment, music, maybe even a performance. But whether the party will rock, whether the party will become an event that people will refer to as 'meaningful' to their lives, one cannot predict. The quest is to create good infrastructures in which people can act, be challenged and be satisfied.

The Galactic Hacker Party and the 0+ball, were marketed as conferences and festivals. People had to show up at the door and buy a ticket to be physically present. People who attended via the network were invited by publishing the details of how to access the online environment. Network events are complex architectures

consisting of presentations, exhibitions, performances and debates, which take place on- and offline. After gathering people from a variety of countries and practices, the assembled community should be able to acquire insights and perspectives by talking to one another formally as well as informally, seeing each other's work and debating it.

A networked event operating in the public domain must be rigorously conceived and evaluated. This evaluation if different from the way a scientific experiment is evaluated. Audience response and participants involvement is not measured, it is 'sensed'. It is frequently founded upon confrontation with one's own practice and the work of others in ways that triggers deep conversations. The 'contextual reflexivity', which was present in these events, could be useful additional perspective for those seeking insights into the early development of digital culture.

The creation of good infrastructures is an art in itself. It requires a lot of technical insights about technology, finance and the behaviour of crowds. It also demands a grasp of cultures at certain times and places as well as an understanding of how those cultures may clash. Culture is used here in the broader sense: the culture of a class, a scene, a gang, a region, and an ideological or religious group. One has to understand how a culture wishes to express and exchange and how it can transform itself in relation to other cultures. And one has to realize that the designed event or application is a small part, maybe only a moment, in the life of any person who participates. For this reason it has to be very clear why and how a person participates.

When creating a networked event, one is also designing time. Dramatic events change our sense of time. A minute of pain or a minute of a daily bicycle ride feels very different in duration. Time can be very intense and time can just slip away. A choreography of time is vital when designing networked events and it is quite a challenge how to connect on- and offline encounters in a convincing way. This choreography offers the bases for the production plan that people will work with: the technicians, the producers, the artists, the speakers, the network people, the bar and more. Most important though is how the audience will feel. One tries to design

dramaturgic timelines that take account of the different attention modes of the audience during a show. The time design of the physical gathering has to interact with the time spent in online environments. And when connecting online, one connects different time structures because people live in different cultures, which each have their specific time design.[3]

How does the physical communication relate to the online communication, how can one see what happens in the network and in the physical space? The design of natural presence, mediated presence and the design of how and when people can witness each other's natural or mediated presence generate new issues of dramaturgy in communication processes that are only beginning to be explored. Simple questions have become hugely important: how to enter, how to identify, how to meet, how to show yourself, how to leave traces, how to find another person, and many more. In the design processes of networked events, which include the design of the offline as well as the design of the online environment, these questions have been experimented with and are addressed in a variety of ways.

PLACE AND SPACE

To understand why certain programmes are successful I turn to the distinction that is made between space and place in the social sciences. In general terms space is used for the literal coordinates that define a space. Place is the constellation of cultural and historical elements that are expressed in and attributed to a space. "Places are not physical containers of human presence, but the main expression of human presence itself" (Spagnoli & Gamberini 2004, 49). It can be home, a special café, a good playground in a park, the houses of parliament or a school. Some places only exist online in chat rooms like MSN, in online games environments, in companies' intranets and in certain environments on the World Wide Web. All places are also space. Some spaces are also place. When one creates a good conference, one tries to create a true place. The culture of the participants has to be expressed through language, design and orchestration. Only then will a space turn into a place. When it

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[3] In his essay "Werelden van tijd" (Worlds of time) the Dutch philosopher Hans Achterhuis explores how the thinking about globalization is focused on the change of meaning of place, while the effects of globalization on the experience and design of time are as distinct (Achterhuis 2003)

really works, participants remember this sense of place, this connectedness between personal, social and historical awareness of one's own life in connection with other lives, now, before and in the future.

In the context of a venue like Paradiso, the space is changed every time a new show takes place. The sense of place only exists in the specific time frame in which the show is taking place. In this sense Paradiso functions like a classical theatre. Dramaturgical theatre laws may be applied for the creation of the performance place. When organizing a networked event, in which a new sense of place is meant to come about, these dramaturgical laws are also important. They not only have to be applied to the performance elements of the show, but also to the possible participation of the attendants and participants of the event. Many conference organizers do not realize that they are not only staging a play, as a conference organizer one also acts as a 'cultural architect' or 'cultural engineer' of spaces in which participants have to be capable of creating their own sense of place.

When a sense of place has evolved, when people have experienced each other's and their own sense of presence in a profound way, a conference or a manifestation can become an event that people will refer to many years later to explain what happened to their own life as well as to developments in general.

CRUCIAL NETWORK

When organizing a networked event the question about who will participate is of great importance. For a public debate to be a contribution to a subject one cannot just throw some opinions together. When creating a networked event, one also creates its participants and every editor/speaker/performer will bring his or her audience as well. One has to locate and invite the people to whom the insights that may be generated may make a real difference. It is vital to engage with them, finding out where their interests, hopes and fears lie will suggest and what kind of insights are necessary. In a successful networked event 'the crucial network' is gathered.

The concept of 'the crucial network' was inspired by Aristotle's concept of 'Complete Action", which should be represented in every scene of a tragedy (Aristotle 384 BC, van der Ben & Bremer 1986). Aristotle formulates this requirement because he wants the audience to understand what happens. To present 'the complete action' all elements that can change the course of events and all elements that have contributed to the course of events have to be staged. This notion can be usefully applied to the design of networked events. Change is a dramatic moment in a process, when looked upon from a theatrical perspective. What existed previously will be different from what exists later. All people, organizations and businesses that can change the course of events and that have contributed to the current state of affairs, have to be present at such a moment. When significant change is about to occur, all the members of 'crucial network' must be present for the change to have an impact on what occurs next.

3D POINT IN THE 2D NETWORK

Any crucial network consists of differences of interest, political positions, cultural diversity and will include people who may not like each other. To be able to gather the crucial network an important principle is to identify what I want to call 'the third point'. It is a uniting point, a shared concern; it is often related to an ethical position to which all participants in the crucial network can relate. The third point, this ethical position, is often already part of the variety of relationships in the crucial network but not explicitly formulated. For example in the Seropositive Ball the third point was captured in the phrase "How AIDS changes our world". It was a sentence that all participants in the 0+Ball could relate to, and which also touched upon the bewilderment that most people who were involved with AIDS at the time felt. The fact that we added "Living with AIDS" as a major driving force of the conference, made the first sentence all the more powerful. It provided a perspective, which could be understood in personally, socially and economically. It was important in enlisting the involvement of a wide spectrum of actors from people HIV and AIDS, their friends and family through to policy makers, the medical establishment, artists, writers and even USA State department.

If an event has an agenda the organiser will need all stakeholders at the table. The organiser will need to identify what binds them, and to what they all wanted to connect. Taken together the stakeholders can be characterised as a 2D network, so to speak. In this 2D network pro-, contra- and balancing forces are organized. Habits and power relationships have been shaped over the years. By formulating a point in the 'third dimension' that connects to all nodes of the 2D network, one offers a perspective for possible change. This concept draws on Sergei Eisenstein's notion of the third point. In which describes the idea of the contra point. Two lines of meaning, one in image and one in sound, generate a third line of meaning. When one sees flowers bloom and one hears the sound of guns in war, a third line of understanding and meaning evolves concerning the atrocity war generates. The 3D point in the 2D network is intended to trigger a similar emergence of new meaning.

The third point evolves from the space-in-between the variety of nodes in the 2D network. In this intermediary space a shared social need is formulated. It is not an agenda from one perspective; it is the need that evolves from realising all the perspectives. This multidimensional concept of design is a key to success.

STRUCTURAL CONVERSATION: CONTEXTUAL REFLEXIVITY

Designing networked events in theatres requires special skills, but some of the underlying concepts can be applied to and are relevant for the design of communication processes in many organizations today in which people of different skills, disciplines and cultures have to collaborate in moments of creation and in moments of change in on- and offline environments. In such moments the gathering of the crucial network and celebration of the uncommon ground is vital for success as well.

To be able to identify all participants of the crucial network and to identify where a 'third' point can be found, structural conversations are indispensable. In these

structural conversations, a consistent building of an understanding occurs in whichever growing circles of participants, positions and practices are explored.

With us as 'thinking actors' the relationship between 'what would be good to do?' and 'how to do it?' became one conversation. 'How to do something?' and 'What would be good to do?' are closely related terrains of inquiry, as Jeannette Pols also discovered (Pols 2006). Pols conducted an impressive study in which she followed nurses in a psychiatric hospital during their daily washing practice. New accounting procedures wanted to 'streamline' the actions of the nurses when washing the patients. She found that the nurses actually had a deep understanding of what they were doing as long as they had time to discuss what was happening; in these conversations the different practices and the implicit knowledge came to the surface. She calls this process of structured conversation for understanding and adapting a practice 'contextual reflexivity'.

"Putting contextual reflexivity into practice by telling stories to involved insiders as well as outsiders. Outsiders and insiders are both challenged to think for themselves and to become involved. Practice is not justified as good but is opened up to show tragic situations as well as best practices. Wins and losses can be compared and weighed; different ways of thinking can be mobilized to imagine alternatives. This might be an interesting way to help professionals and patients striving for something as complex as good care." (Pols 2006, 427)

Any practice has its internal contradictions and contradictory perceptions of what is good and bad. The confrontation between these visions and experiences provokes debates that can result in the adaptation of a practice. In the different organizations and companies that I have worked with, this 'contextual reflexivity' is organized in different ways. Some organizations use the knowledge of the people who do the work, others do not.

In my own experience the best practice of contextual reflexivity I encountered was in Paradiso. For over 30 years the routine existed in which every Tuesday morning

production values and experiences are evaluated and every Wednesday morning programme issues are discussed. Doing this would take time and demand new ways of working – ways of hospitality, ways of production, forms of technical infrastructure, and ways of how to communicate and to market – and these new ways will be under debate later as well. People wonder how an organization like Paradiso can remain up front and on the edge for so many years, how they can continually find new subcultures and new issues. In my opinion it is the process of structural conversation that is responsible; a conversation that is challenged by inviting new people to join and to interact and to routinely search for 'blind spots' that have been created.

The orchestration of those structural conversations is an important issue to tackle when gathering the crucial network. A group of people has to share some 'common ground' to be able to collaborate. This can be a perspective, the 3D point in the 2D network, it can be a shared morality, or a shared needs to accomplish a task. When collaborating 'uncommon ground' will also surface. One of the difficult facts of uncommon ground is that it highlights the fact that people often do not understand or even recognize each other's language. This fundamental not sharing of an understanding, is named 'incommensurability'.

INCOMMENSURABILITY

When faced with 'interdisciplinary projects' that have the aim of creating new things or structures, then the sharing of insights, the acknowledging of other people's situations and especially other people's language and conceptual lexicon becomes vital if one is to achieve even the slightest success. Apart from the exchange of respect, trust and responsibility, there is also the issue that people use the same words but with different meanings in different disciplines and practices. This is why the notion of "incommensurability", the fundamental not sharing of an understanding, is of vital importance in collaborations. In both of my case studies the Galactic Hacker Party and the 0+Ball the incommensurability between the different participants demanded a great deal of attention.

In 1962 Thomas Kuhn published his book 'The structure of Scientific Revolutions', in which he analysed the way scientific paradigms change, and the way scientific revolutions take place. In his understanding the notion of incommensurability was crucial. In his essay 'The road since structure' he elaborates again on the concept of incommensurability.

Incommensurability is one of the key concepts, according to Kuhn, which can help us to understand the development of science. It is one of the factors with which one can describe paradigm shifts. It also helps us to understand the implications of the process of increasing specialization that characterizes the development of science; new fields of research with new taxonomies evolving over time. Kuhn refers to his own experience with the development of the life sciences; 20 years ago one department in one university started this field of research, and today one can find the subject in many universities with all kind of specializations, which also develop their own taxonomies and which cannot communicate with each other anymore.

Kuhn writes: "Incommensurability thus becomes a sort of un-translatability, localized to one or another area in which two lexical taxonomies differ. (..) Members of one community can acquire the taxonomy employed by members of another, as the historian does in learning to understand old texts. But the process, which permits understanding produces bilinguals, not translators, and bilingualism, has a cost, which will be particularly important to what follows. The bilingual must always remember within which community discourse is occurring. The use of one taxonomy to make statements to someone who uses the other places communication at risk." (Kuhn 2000, 93)

The writer of a book and the operator the printing press share taxonomy and at the same time there is incommensurability between the two practices, which may jeopardize their communication.[4] They share certain concepts and certain materials. . Both are concerned with a good representation of letters, both have a notion of

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[4] I choose to use the example of the writer and the printer because it is easier to understand than an example of incommensurability between a UNIX programmer and an interaction designer, or between computer people and the Paradiso technicians at the Galactic Hacker Party, or between the medical researchers and the people with HIV/AIDS at the 0+Ball.

readers and the readers' capacities, but the processes that they undertake to accomplish their task are completely different. The taxonomies of the writer and the printer do not overlap because the acts that they refer to with the use of a word like 'paper' are very different. And also the variables (size, amount, time to print, time to write, price), which determine how an act with paper is performed, are very different for the writer and the printer.

Yet there is no incommensurability between them when looking at their work from the perspective of their product, the book for example. When the writer and the printer have to collaborate in the production of a book, they have to be able to understand each other at some point. When the writer and the printer discuss their shared product, which is the result of both their acts, they will need to have a certain understanding of each others practice to be able to judge each other's contribution to the end product. They need a shared vocabulary and a shared understanding of the process and product of their work to be able to work together.

BOUNDARY OBJECTS

Several strategies for dealing with incommensurability have been developed and have become deeply embedded in organization and business as standard practices: the acquisition of meta-cognitive skills in education, the structuring of the work by project management and the use of boundary objects at the right time by contributors to the collaboration at hand. Given the space available in this essay I will restrict myself here to looking at 'boundary objects'.

'Boundary-objects' function at a specific moment in a production process in which a certain performance or presentation is made, which all collaborators involved contribute to and from which all the different experts, craftsman and others who each have their specific taxonomy, can derive input relevant to their own work. They function as 'tuning forks' for the various practices: the scale-model, the demo, the use-cases, the drawing, the mock-up, the pilot, the general rehearsal, the trailer, the production bible, the storyboard, the dossier, and others. A boundary-object is meant to provoke discussion and doing so it reveals flaws and misunderstandings

between the different perceptions of the various contributors and their understanding of their contribution to the end product. In this sort of conversation the 'How to' and the 'What would be good to do' are at stake. In this sense such conversations are a practice of contextual reflexivity. Using an appropriate boundary object at the right time with the crucial people (network) involved is key for success in interdisciplinary collaborations.

ORCHESTRATING UNCOMMON GROUND

A person, who is involved in collaboration with other people, will have an image of the other collaborators. Whether it is informed by curiosity and attention, or whether it is just an uninformed stereotypical image, people judge each other's presence in relation to their own presence. Moreover people from different disciplines make different analyses of the same situation. Outside the bounds of their own expertise everybody is a layperson and will formulate 'common sense' insights about each other's expertise. When two or more disciplines collaborate and the process is not clearly structured 'common sense' will dominate the process and influence the results significantly. The challenge for interdisciplinary collaborations that want to innovate is to transcend this level of 'common sense' communication and really encourage the variety of expertises to work together even though the people involved do not speak each other's languages.

I have always found it important to 'dramatize' differences when orchestrating uncommon ground. This has the effect of preventing 'common sense' becoming the dominant dynamic in a collaboration. To create 'uncommon ground' is a delicate process, in which all the layers of consciousness of a human being play a role. There are a variety of strategies available, only some of which I have been able to touch upon here. Underlying all these efforts though is the conviction that differences are to be enjoyed and highly productive when embarking on a quest to design for social change and a better quality of life.

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