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The Importance of Meetspace A Manual for Temporary Media Labs

By Geert Lovink

The idea of a temp media lab, situated within an existing event, museum, or similar institution originates from dissatisfaction with the current forms that presentations of media projects typically take during conferences and other public events. Exhibiting webpages still does not make much sense: their lively, layered complexity gets lost. Even the interactive installation is not the proper medium to express networks. In previous years much has been done to introduce new media to an ever-growing audience. But the networks themselves, their mysterious and seductive aspects, remained invisible. It is hard to represent or even visualize what is actually happening on a mailinglist, a newsgroup, a chatroom. Demo-design can give us a clue, but it remains soulless, empty and too easily turns flows and exchanges into dead information. Now that the varieties of virtual communities are growing, it is no longer enough to merely announce their existence. People demand substance—not only outsiders but, most of all, the members of the groups themselves.

The best way to speed up the process of production is to meet in real space, to confront the loose, virtual connections, to engage in the complex and messy circumstances of real time-space, to and present the audience (and possible future participants) with actual outcomes. And then go back again, in scattered places, on-line.

New media are not merely storing the old. They do not only give access to existing information. Their most lively and attractive aspect lies in their aspect of communication, collaboration, and exchange. This is the essence of today's computer networks. Large media corporations, on the other hand, view these innovations differently. For today's virtual class, new media merely offer new ways of electronic commerce and e-business, efficiency, and flexibilization of the labor force and control over the on-line behavior of the masses. The role of the former welfare state is ambivalent, to say the least. On the one hand, it was the state which did the groundwork and built the costly infrastructure, while this very state now is selling out, cutting social costs to zero, installing a new regime of (private) control, and policing its populations (mainly young people).

Communication means noise to them, empty exchanges that can be studied to maximize their attention profit. Users are being reduced to potential buyers of goods and services, controlled by companies and police units.

This is not a doomsday scenario. It is becoming a reality, despite all naive, neoliberal talks of bright cyberfutures, dating from the early days of the Internet hype. People are indeed becoming aware of this dark aspects of the use of digital technologies. One way not to give up on these positive, utopian aspects is to increase awareness, to fight conspiracy mythologies, and, most of all, to organize scattered users in the struggle against surveillance and corporate takeover. Should we still dream of interactivity and other, more accessible interfaces? Access to what? Are portals with the CNN type of WebTV the only remaining option now that the Net is rapidly approaching its controlled and regulated status of mass medium? And is this return of the real closing down our phantasies? How would we define tactical use of media? Which particular connections between text, audio, image (and noise) do we find useful? In what way could radio, Internet, print and real-time/on-line events be combined?

The idea of temporary media labs were born of the desire to cover events, conferences, festivals, and demonstrations in search of a specifically Internet style of reporting. We could mention here some early examples, such as the live web journals produced during Next Five Minutes 2 and 3 (www.n5m.org), the Ars Electronica festivals since 1996 (www.aec.at), the Euro-protests in Amsterdam, June 97 (www.contrast.org), or the hackers' gathering Hacking in Progress in August 1997 (www.hip97.org). The format of the on-line journal is trying to bridge the real and virtual by building-in interactive elements between on-line audiences and the actual site. Web journals are exploring unusual ways of reporting, with image, sound and text, allowing remote participation, before, during, and after the event. These days web journals are almost standards for all sorts of corporate events, intergovernmental meetings and global summits, conferences and fairs. The websites of such live events now all go with streaming media features, with image and/or sound.

The Temporary Media Lab concept goes one step further. It no longer covers an ongoing event but, instead, targets the hands-on production of content in and around an already-existing group or network of groups and individuals. It is patently clear that networks are good at discussing and preparing but not at actual production—that has to be done on the spot, face-to-face. Only in this setting can we overcome the tensions that so easily build up in virtual worlds and, thereby, produce small multimedia pieces together using available resources.

Conferences are known and respected as effective accumulators and accelerators. They offer ideal opportunities to recharge the inner batteries in the age of short-lived concepts. Temporary media labs are even more effective in this respect: they focus, speed up, intensify, and exert a longer-term effect on local initiatives and translocal groups. Meetings in real space are becoming a more and more precious good for the way they add a crucial stage to almost

any networked media projects, whether in the arts, culture, or politics. Unlike conferences, though, the role of the (passive) audience remains open yet undefined. As with any other concept, the broader public will be confronted with the issue anyway, sooner or later. Temporary media labs are experimenting with social interfaces, visual languages, and cultural/political processes. Though the immediate outcomes can be presented at the end of the session, the real impacts of such small task forces, perhaps, only comes later, elsewhere.

Hybrid WorkSpace (HWS), which took place during the 1997 Documenta X in the Orangerie in Kassel, went on for a three-and-a-half-month period; it received an impressive share of the 620.000 visitors who came to the event. Fifteen groups stayed for a ten-day period each; among those groups were the German Innercities campaign, No One is Illegal, We Want Bandwidth (www.waag.org), some audio initiatives (which later turned into the Xchange real-audio/net.radio network: www.re-lab.net), loosely affiliated or unaffiliated tactical media practitioners involved in focussing on global media (www.n5m.org), the Deep Europe/Syndicate group from former Eastern Europe (www.v2.nl/east), a group preparing the nettime README! book, which has now been published (www.nettime.org), and finally the first Cyberfeminist International, which brought out their own documentation (www.obn.org). The documentation of the Workspace can be found at www.medialounge.net. Medialounge is a database of 250 small European media art labs, a result of Hybrid Workspace and other meetings in which bottom-up networks of European new media culture is being created.

The Revolting Temporary Media Lab in Manchester, which took place for five weeks in August/September 1998, has been a follow up of HWS. Revolting, organized by Micz Flor (www.yourserver.co.uk) took place in very different social environment, compared to Kassel, away from the big art crowds. It had a similar mix of people, themes, and low-tech approaches. It brought together local groups and communities to focus on practical outcomes, small presentations, and debates. Revolting had a special emphasis on spreading specific content via different media, such as a regular free newspaper, local radio, and the Net.

The third Temporary Media Lab took place in the project space on the fifth floor of the Kiasma, the Helsinki contemporary arts museum, which opened in June 1998. The media lab went on for five weeks (october/ november 1999). The name TEMP is a reference to the TEMPOLAB meeting in the Kunsthalle Basel (June 98), a closed session of a distant though neighboring tribe, the global contemporary arts scene, curated by Clementine Deliss. It is of course also reference, and tribute, to Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zones, a reminder that revolts of anger and desire, of passionate bodies and souls, remains an option, despite the overall victory of global capitalism.

Five groups each worked on five different topics (www.kiasma.fi/temp). First came a newly formed European network of groups working on issues of

refugees and illegalized emigrant workers. The group organized and coordinated the demonstration held in Tampere during the Euro summit on this delicate political topic (see: www.contrast.org/border). In december this group again gathered in Amsterdam where this network was officially founded, with participants from even more countries. Balkania was the name of the second gathering. Twenty media artist from South-East Europe discussed the situation in their region after the Kosov AT conflict and drew (negative) utopian images to bypass the current dramatic situation in the Balkans. The third, all Finnish group focussed on the technology policies in Finland itself. "Nokia Country/ Linux Land" dealt with the growing power of this telecommunications giant on the one hand, and a free operating system on the other. What influence is Nokia have on the ever shrinking welfare state? And is power really challanged with the introduction of open source software such as Linux, which originates in Finland? During the fourth group a Nordic/Scandinavian/Baltic network of media labs and media arts institutions was created, with a special emphasis in the program on the difficult situation in Belarus. Two events marked the closing of temp: a one day conference on the urban condition in Asia, organized in conjunction with the opening of the Cities on the Move exhibition in the same Kiasma building, and an environmental web-base game, open for public participation. Temp finished with a small exhibition of the results.

To close with, some general remarks. Some groups and individuals are making a good use of the facilities on offer, others do so in a lesser way. So what? The temp media lab concept is not an army setup or a content factory. It is just a model, connected to similar initiatives and situations, such as the Polar Circuit in Lapland ANAT's summerschools in Australia, the recent workshop in Ljudmila (Slovenia) of Virtual Revolution and obviously Oreste at the Venice Bienale of 99. Digital media arts and culture are all in a flow. Our social networks are unstable media and the outcomes are hard to predict in the short run. But I am convinced that temp media labs are a strong motor behind the networks of digital culture we all envision. The temporary, local truth has made it worth the effort to organise such events. Time and time again, until the format runs out of energy and we all know, by intuition, how to set up networks, servers, sites - and most of all: how to deal with the all too human flaws in communication.

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