

## NETWORKED:

Dialogue & Exchange in the Global Art Ecology

Triangle Network Conference

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# What is a 'Cultural Network' (again)?

By Pauline Van Mourik Broekman



Global Occupy Together occupations (15th October 2011)

Having co-founded a magazine on 'culture and politics after the net' nearly 17 years ago now, I was surprised to find myself feeling like something of a newcomer to the world of 'cultural networks', as described here. I'd initially wanted to request that the organisers offer some kind of clarification of the term Networks, since it seemed to evoke something so generalised as to lose all sense of specificity, clarity, or purpose, but, since reading many more of the blog and forum entries, I've come to realise that there \*is\* actually quite a clear subject under discussion here...

The 'Network', then, sits somewhere between three typologies that have already been mentioned. First seems to be established - and emerging - forms of administered networks mediating a series of globally dispersed, institutional nodes (and associated user communities), somewhat like Triangle itself. Interestingly, these pre-date the archetypal network form of the Internet, but are clearly animated by it. Second, if I'm deducing right, might be these global umbrella projects, initiated by one leading party and mediated through singular online platforms, that 'place in dialogue' a range of individuals associated with one profession - art. Although I'd not come across it before, Illy's 'sustainArt' platform might typify this? And is obviously only the latest in a long line of profession-, artform- or genre-specific platforms that have come and gone (think craft, or video, or whatever) - but with an avowedly global remit, and, in this particular case, an avowedly clear corporate objective. Third might be a sort of State/public sector/philanthropic version of this, where a funder based in a particular region and with particular global objectives determined by it, again initiates global dialogues to support those objectives... Todd Lester's posts and a teeny bit of familiarity with the Dutch funding landscape - which is much less than I should have, being Dutch - make me think this must be typified by

something like The Arts Collaboratory, behind which sit the social-justice/NGO missions of parent partners, Hivos, Doen Stichting and the Mondriaan Stichting.

What's immediately striking to me is that, while I would never discount the way that each of the nodes, and individuals, being placed 'in dialogue' through these projects, transect with 'grassroots' - or just plain localised - communities, \*all\* of these Network types really are a very far cry from the bottom-up, spontaneous, organically evolving figure that the term is used to evoke, and with which each platform clearly wants to align itself, to seek justification/legitimation through a vague and infinitely malleable notion of the global, or equal exchange, or collaboration.

It is pretty much impossible to do, of course, but in assessing the efficacy and usefulness of these network forms, the central question must therefore be to what degree they use their community's participation to further their own development and reproduce existent organisations and power formations, OR allow the type of genuine 'bottom-up' phenomenon that tends to disrupt these... or at the very least present more chaotic, or unpredictable, futures.

Looking at the history of mailing lists is incredibly useful in this context. There, too, the rhetoric of openness, horizontality, collectivity and collaboration was deafening. There, too, a facilitating matrix of personal, professional and institutional economies was crucial to analyse, ditto the falsity of free speech and 'equality' - supposedly granted just by being online and in discussion - so as to deconstruct and properly understand how certain decontextualised individuals and organisations might prominence in a shared space of exchange; and gain a 'voice'. There, too, there \*was\* something ineffable produced among these, a sort of surplus, of energy or capacity, that couldn't be explained or analysed away by mere institutional critique.

As we sit here, there is an experiment going on globally that takes up elements of many of these earlier efforts, using tools widely available, on a mixture of corporate and more genuinely 'grassroots' platforms; a sort of radically ungraspable melee of public, private, uniform and multiform. Citing inspiration from the European and Arab 'squares' movements as foundational, the Occupy movement is also claiming to create direct democracies in urban centres all around...

While they're obviously radically different in scale and purpose (and actually each presents its own contradictions), I do wonder whether 'cultural networks' aren't - wittingly or unwittingly, I don't know - a little behind on the kind of bridging function (between street and web) that Occupy has attempted to provide... I don't know enough about each of the typologies under discussion (and of course web platforms are notoriously bad at granting any kind of proper purview onto the lifeworlds that sustain them), but I do think it will be hard for 'Cultural networks' to prevent being viewed as no more than managerial hothouses if they don't address this.

I'm really looking forward to finding out more.

Pauline