On Cross Cultural Initiatives and Collaborative Practice.
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A comparative investigation and analysis of interdisciplinary projects is presented in a cross-cultural context. The exploration is based on the author's personal experience in international collaborations. Numerous questions arise in the process of a collaborative practice. How do we approach cultural differences in wide ranging media projects? Is there a distinct methodology applied? How does the politics of spatial practices influence this practice? How can technological requirements and access be best addressed in the process? How do we involve our audiences? These and other challenges are illustrated by current case studies. Living and working in the contemporary global environment where the number of interdisciplinary international projects show a phenomenal growth, yet the restrictions of formal business and organizational plans, deliverables and limited funding influence the practice to a great extent, the investigation of these issues is of crucial importance.

In the fall of 2004 a group of sixty professionals gathered in Banff, Canada for the Participate/ Collaborate: Reciprocity, Design and Social Networks summit. The group included an interdisciplinary cluster of artists, computer scientists, educators, researchers, network managers, sociologists and writers who gathered for this event to debate various aspects of collaborative practice. The issues revealed and discussed at this conference, as well as my own cross-cultural collaborative experience inspired this investigative exploration.

Collaborative practice has a long-standing history ranging from epoch making anonymous historical works to contemporary networked art projects. The notion of collaboration and networking is closely related. The history and topology of networks or networking is well documented across various disciplines, however, critical analysis of collaborative practice especially in media arts is less available. Refresh is focused on media art history and methodology, however the inter-cultural collaborative practice I have been involved in has only a short history and in most cases lacks precise methodology. In our working process we are faced with fundamental questions, such as

What exactly is a creative collaboration?
Is there an applicable methodology?
- How do we approach cultural, social and technological differences in our work?

Collaborative practice is best illustrated by contemporary networked art projects. The advent of multimedia tools and the rapid development of information and communication technologies provided fertile ground for growth and as a result interdisciplinary projects escalated at an extraordinary rate in the last decade. Additionally, due to the re-emergence of network

theories the concept of collaboration has been revisited. Consequently, collaboration and the examination of interdisciplinary complexities have found fresh currency in our current technology driven society.

In this newly formed ecosystem the cross-disciplinary cooperation between artists, scientists, designers, programmers, architects and engineers gained are newly appreciated. Global socio-political changes as well as easier access to technology has undoubtedly contributed to the considerable pliability in shaping many of these projects. Notwithstanding the new currency of collaboration further questions arise. Who is involved as a rule? Are there any rules? How can we define the underlying artistic, social and political motivations? What are the ethical concerns of collaborations? How do we define authorship? How are the inevitable cultural gaps bridged? While it is practically impossible to find answers, the Banff summits on collaborative practice over the last years served as benchmark events, identifying "best practices for those engaged in the reality of collaborative research across disciplines, borders and cultural contexts". The discourse on collaborative practice actually began at Bridges the international consortium held in 2001(Bridges I) in Los Angeles and 2002 in Banff (Bridges II). These summits centered on the study and exploration of interdisciplinary collaborative processes in art, culture, science and technology. The detailed summary of these conferences is outside the confines of the current presentation in the following the process of collaboration is discussed mainly through personal experience.

In my own projects, I often collaborate as an artist in a creative team or as a curator in which case I work with other artists, organizations, institutions and the public. I became involved in a pre-historic age (in the eighties) in Canadian/ European cultural exchange projects aiming to bridge the gap between the East-West divide. Over the years the exchanges became complex collaborations and have been extended beyond Europe to other continents. Today most of us work in hybrid environments distributed between physical sites and online collaboration space. The following case studies illustrate various aspects of collaboration, such as modular and nomadic art/science and technology involvement; representation of natural phenomena; access issues; audience participation and networked collaborative formats.

Resonance The Electromagnetic Bodies Project

While art and science projects have only a short history, historical references serve as a point of departure for most of my projects. Three years ago Louise Provencher a Montreal based curator, and I, discovered our common interest in the visionary concepts of Nicola Tesla (1856-1943). The pioneering inventor's work based on the principles of vibration and resonance is closely related to the phenomena of electromagnetism. The electromagnetic environment and its impact on the human body and other living organisms are of great

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interest to both of us and lead to the initial concept of *Resonance The Electromagnetic Bodies Project.* We began by exploring the notion of resonance, based on the hypothesis of the human body as a source, an echo, a transmitter and as a point of resistance to electromagnetic waves. By the same token, we questioned the differences and similarities between what we may call "organic" sensors and man-made constructs. Within the framework of the project we intended to examine the nature of invisible yet discernible material forces and explore how these dynamic energies impact on our sensory perception. The implication of the observer in the construction of reality (in anticipation of virtual reality) as well as the magnetism of bodies was also a topic of Tesla's long-term investigations. Yet most of the effects of electromagnetism still present an enigma to scientists and artists alike. In due course; a flexible modular structure has been developed, allowing a diversity of events and participants in each place where *Resonance* is presented. Artists, working with arts&science projects were invited to collaborate with us. The majority of our Canadian participants developed new art works for the project. After two years of research and development Resonance was launched in the spring of 2005 in Montreal, then traveled to Germany and on to Spain, Holland, and Hungary, concluding in France.

Resonance provides an occasion for the participating artists to reconsider their own practice in the light of scientific research. From the very beginning *Resonance,* has been planned as a hybrid project, involving onsite as well online presentations. Beyond the project concept, the fundamental strength of Resonance is based on the close working collaboration between Louise and myself. Such a working relationship remains the cornerstone of self-initiated projects that mature into extended cross-cultural collaborations. We work closely together with the artists and the local co-curators, who expand *Resonance* presentations with works and events of their own choice, thus extending the range of the interpretation of the thematic concept as well as the scope of the events. Due to freshly emerging interpretations of the project theme, we have been able to see new areas of activities. In the course of our discussions with curators from prospective venues we realized that there is a strong desire to integrate local participants and locally organized events into the thematic tour. The inclusion of local artists provides a powerful local context, inspiring fresh interpretations of the artworks, simultaneously creating a new reading of the whole project by the shifting cultural context. From the audience's point of view the artworks is experienced in a different way at each phase of the tour. The generic project-website further extends the project to global contributions and audiences.

Throughout the project it has been our intention to reflect on the history of science and technology by including documents and experimental models from scientists such as Nicola Tesla or Heinrich Hertz. The artworks in the exhibitions reflect every aspect of electromagnetism from visualizations and sonification of the electromagnetic field that

surrounds us to physical examinations of its influences and possible effects. By a critical examination of scientific concepts as reflected by contemporary interpretations, we hope to gain a better understanding of the issues involved.

The Aurora Project

The Aurora Project mutated several times since the initial collaboration in 1997 between Stephen Kovats and Nina Czegledy. The project was aiming to engage current technology in a dialogue between the natural occurrence of electro-magnetic disturbances and our every day existence, while exploring the notion of changing perceptions concerning the visible and non-visible domains of the electromagnetic spectrum. Since the beginnings, different aspects of the concept have been presented in a various formats including exhibitions, performances, lectures, texts and a CD-ROM. The changes over the years revealed a process of innovation and permutation augmenting the manifestations both conceptually and physically.

The *Aurora Feast* Public Art Project -the most current Aurora edition- presented an interactive, real-time and web-based visualization of personal and cross-cultural interpretations of The Northern Lights in February 2006 at Heureka the Finnish Science Centre, Vantaa. The primary aim of this presentation was to engage and involve audiences in active participation by jointly celebrating the mysterious, dynamic yet whimsical Aurora Borealis. Expectation and sensual pleasure were some of the key requirements for the works. How is this celebration expressed? Partly, by recapturing the mood of traditional feasts, which combined a spectacle of sights and sounds with talk and food. Celebration evokes notions of pleasure, play, delight, insight, surprise, noise, tales and refreshments- in short; an independently perceived yet publicly shared experience.

The concept for a public art presentation originated from personal aurora experiences and research by Luke Jerram and Nina Czegledy in December 2003 at the Sodankyla Geophysical Observatory, Finland. Observing the aurora, it seemed that a gallery based mediated artwork presentation hardly competes with the real experience of the natural phenomena. It was felt that alternative options should be attempted. The narratives of the Aurora experience range from mythical to scientific to social domains. The Aurora seems to be an invisible bond, a way of being together, to share. To reflect on the scientific as well as the public aspects of the concept the event was aimed to fuse the scientific features with celebratory food and audience participation. Consequently the Aurora Feast is not a mediated re-representation of natural phenomena for the confines of an art gallery; it was built by a continuous process of research and development in a non-hierarchical collaboration and became a participatory interpretation of imaginary or actual aurora narratives.

The Aurora Feast included a "virtual wunderkammer" of an interdisciplinary participatory discussion between scientists, artists, anthropologists and cultural historians at Heureka, where participants were able to access by SMS messaging an aurora related interactive web site developed by a group of Toronto based experts. By taking advantage of contemporary technologies the Aurora Feast extended beyond the Finnish venue to the broad world of the Internet.

The Lindart Projects.

Eleni Laperi established the Lindart Cultural Center in 2001 in Tirana. From its very beginning the Center has been noted for initiating pioneering events, workshops and collaborative projects within Albania and beyond. Lindart's mission is to support and promote Albanian women artists in knowledge sharing and to develop collaborative projects within the arts, theory, innovative research and cultural practice across all platforms. "*Dare to be Different*, the first comprehensive art exhibition by Balkan women artists, in Fier (2001) and the first big Lindart project produced was received with great interest and was followed by many successful exhibitions and workshops over the years. Our collaboration with Eleni Laperi began five years ago, within six months after my first visit to Albania; we began working online with Eleni on plans to address issues of access and experience with digital tools. The most self-isolated country in East Europe, Albania opened after '90 'all doors and curtained windows' to other parts of the world. This concept underlines the *Windows and Curtains* digital story telling project, our first collaboration. For the art students in our workshop in December 2002, this was their first time using computers to make an art project and to work collaboratively. Their stories were published on the bilingual Lindart and were presented at international events and festivals including the Cybermaid2003 festival in Montreal, Canada.

Today Tirana is a sunny, dusty, chaotic, rapidly transforming city, where freshly planted trees line the main boulevards, yet power shortages remain part of every day reality. As Eleni recounts it: "after fall of Berlin wall the situation changed even in Albania, an ex-communist country, the most unknown European country in the world. Even now many European people don't know where Albania is situated: the most self-isolated country opened after '90 'all doors and windows' on the other parts of the world. But it was not easy to change the mentality, to be open-minded, to change the quality of life. 'Curtains' were a very important part of the mentality of Albanian people, their impact on the thinking and acting, on communication with others is still crucial in the life-style of Albanians. Prejudices and old fashioned mentality are 'these curtains' and are still influential in the behavior of people." These words summarize the concept of the *Windows and Curtains* digital story telling project – our first collaboration. For the art students in our workshop in December 2002 at Lindart, this was their first time using computers to make an art project and to work collaboratively. Local storytellers augmented

the workshop retelling historical Albanian tales. The participants proceeded to develop their own stories, published on the bilingual Lindart website. Only basic tools were used, including text and still images. In addition to the website presentation of the project, we have promoted and presented it at international events and festivals such as the Cybermaid2003 festival in Montreal, Canada.

In September 2003, together with Maia Engeli, we realized a game development workshop to facilitate the goals of the *Email from the Medieval Ages* Albanian activist group aiding child victims of blood feuds in Northern Albania. In Northern Albania, the practice of blood feud remains a considerable problem. The practice was forbidden under Communism, however lately the vendettas have re-appeared. Now about 1500 families (including 800 children) are affected. The *Medieval Unreality* workshop was designed as a starting point to facilitate communication with the victims. To satisfy several levels of computer expertise we provided participants with a prepared game level that they could modify and expand. While local conditions concerning power cuts etc., required flexibility both by the participants and us, nevertheless, simultaneously with the game development we were able to structure and upload bilingual web pages of our progress. Depending on equipment support and Internet access, the project is expected to continue in the future. Currently, we are planning an oral history project aided by locative (GPS) technology in the remote South.

The following fall in September 2004, the *Girls and Guns* project exhibited a variety of installations by three Albanian and five Canadian women artists at Lindart. The project examined popular examples of the sensationalized power struggle between men and women, and depictions of how women fight back. All of the artists used humor to critique and celebrate the dual role of the 'warrior woman'. This prototype embodies the female sex-ideal suggested by fashion, at the same time taking the form of the heroine who is violent, carries a gun and reverses the traditional male-female roles.

Each phase of these collaborative projects is planned online with Eleni for at least a half year. There is no organizational methodology to the process, no business plan, no hierarchy, no deliverables and only minimal funding. Local needs and probabilities have dictated our collaboration. This is especially significant because media art and digital culture is in an emerging phase in Albania. We aim to create opportunities for increased Albanian involvement in these fields. While each of the projects involved only about ten participants – these were training events aiming to provide further opportunities for locals.

In addition to the projects outlined above, I would like to briefly discuss large virtual networks, which present a recently developed collaborative working format.

UNESCO -similar to other global organizations- is mandated to support a broad range of communication channels. An effective method to achieve this goal is to utilize Internet-based virtual networks, because the open, distributed infrastructure of the Internet makes it easy to transmit information and to create connectivity between sites. DigiArts, Knowledge Portal one of UNESCO's major initiatives, is a community-driven web project, which according to its stated mandate is aiming to promote interdisciplinary research, creativity and communication in the field of media art. Currently the UNESCO networks are focused on specific regions such as Africa or the Arab States and are aimed to build on-site and on-line collaborations between various local hubs towards the development of integrated cultural programs. The first task of the African digiart network was to identify the individual stakeholders in the various communities across the continent. The network connects artists and their audiences, using a wide range of communication options ranging from mobile phones, to text messaging to e-mail.

For the last six months the African DigiArts network maintains and online discussion group. The discussions are aimed "to identify, motivate and engage digital artists from Africa to debate and understand digital art in the continent." It is hoped that the increased interdisciplinary communication in the Africam context will have a significant influence on communication on the continent. The online discussions are moderated by Trinity Sessions, an independent arts production team based in South Africa, directed by Stephen Hobbs and Marcus Neustetter. The network also assists in making communities visible that are currently practically invisible on the continent. Ultimately the DigiArts AFRICA initiative is hoped to have a greater impact on creative practice, promotion and exchange areas through building bridges of communication.

UNESCO, in co-operation with partner universities also developed a master module on Art, Design and Technology for Arab States. The project aims at bridging the gap between academic disciplines of computer science and that of creative practice. The program was remotely developed in collaboration with the advisors of the network. The master module combines computing, design and creative practice. Students from a scientific background (computer science) as well as from an artistic background will benefit from this initiative and from the unique combination of computing and culture. Invited participants in the discussions include several organizations serving as key network agents across Africa. Participation will be open to the public of the network and interaction is encouraged to develop debate and

exchange. The UNESCO virtual networks are coordinated by an interdisciplinary group of UNESCO professionals from different Sectors, both at Headquarters in Paris and in the Field Offices and also assisted by a network of international institutions.

In the beginning of this exploration the question "What exactly is a creative collaboration?" was raised. Despite my long-standing collaborative experience, it remains difficult if not impossible to exactly determine how we understand the creative process in collaborations. There seem to be no code, no rules or regulations, yet the need to describe and compare methodologies has been recognized. Consequently at the Collaborate summit there were extensive open-ended discussions on the methodologies of collaboration. In my experience however, the various elements of collaboration from the initial concept to the involvement of participants, sites and technologies change completely from project to project and place to place. Extensive flexibility, modularity[1] and mutually satisfying professional and personal relationships seem to contribute to the ultimate success of the collaborative process. Some important factors of the collaborative practice, such as ethics or history are often overlooked for periods of time, only to be recalled later. The issues discussed at Bridges were evoked a couple years later in the "collaborate" e-mail discussion list. In her posting (September 7, 2004) on collaboration as a cultural expression Beryl Graham summarized the seven key issues that emerged from the Bridges Consortium and remained valid for further discussion in 2004. These included references to history, ethics, policies, artistic continuum, and training, designing for context and codification of collaborative practice. While all of these points are significant constituents for working together, the point relating to history, quoting African art historian Taki E'Bwenze (Senegal) is very poignant: "The development of new media should be seen as an instrument of passage. One should consider and use history and tradition to enrich new media. What substantive historical models of collaboration have succeeded? What circumstances are different in today's historical moment?"

The complexities involved in interdisciplinary and cross cultural projects are evident. The issue of bridging the gaps in interdisciplinary collaborations presents an especially complex problem. Due to my dual training in the sciences and the arts, I personally acquired an awareness re shared concerns and was also able to adopt the necessary mode of communication in our art&science collaborations. Nevertheless the intricacies of these collaborations cannot be underrated. Cross-cultural activities introduce additional complexities for collaborative practice. Adjustment to local conditions and environment, especially with projects or exhibitions requiring specific technological support can be extremely strenuous. Flexibility and a true democratic approach to collaboration (even if this sounds a cliché) seem to be essential. Some of the collaboration benefits, such as access to technology, and knowledge transfer to

participants are immediate within exchange projects, while other profits including augmentation of digital culture present long-term gains for project participants. It is eminently important to note however, that beyond the organizational and technical management issues of collaborative processes, the importance of the social aspects were considered (by joint agreement) as the most significant feature of successful collaborations at the Collaborative Summit in Banff. It was felt that mutual trust in partners contributes more to the success of a collaborative partnership than many other considerations. This brings us back to the social aspects of creative collaborations. In conclusion it seems that beyond innovative concepts and firm organizational abilities, intuition, enthusiasm, passion and trust are the most significant - albeit often underestimated- components of collaborative practice especially in a cross cultural context.

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