ESSAY

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THE END OF THE MEDIA LAB AS WE KNOW IT

Year:
*2011
(January)*

Place:
Amsterdam

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This text is the result of several talks and discussions between producers and programmers of media labs in the Netherlands. *Annet Dekker* (coordinator of the artist in residence programme at the Netherlands Media Art Institute in Amsterdam, with *Annette Wolfsberger*) and *Angela Plohman* (director of Baltan Laboratories in Eindhoven) initiated these talks because while organising and experiencing the work in media labs over the years, they noticed a change in the functions of the lab, specifically in relation to the artist-in-residence programmes that most labs are running. The context in which they experienced this change was their own working field in the Netherlands.

They wanted to take a closer look at the artist-in-residence programme as a model, to see how this practice has changed and how it affects the roles of the media lab. The goal was not to follow one line of thinking or one person's opinion, nor does this report exhaustively reflect the landscape of media labs out there and all of the different contexts in which they operate. Quite some research has been done regarding those topics. In other words, they are not aiming to present a generic methodology of media labs and their artist-in-residence programmes. What follows is foremost a reflection of a change that they witnessed in their own working field in the Netherlands.

This report would not have been possible without all of the managers of media labs that we know, experience, visit, engage, work and discuss with – in the past, the present and, hopefully, in the future. A large thank you goes to all who are setting up media labs and organising artist-in-residence programmes. Special thanks go to *Floor van Spaendonck* (now director Virtueel Platform and previously manager of De Waag Society lab) for providing space and drinks to discuss with others, *Anne Nigten* (now director of Patching Zone and previously manager of the V2_Lab), *Robert van Heumen* (musician and previously project manager of STEIM), *Jonathan Reus* (project manager, STEIM), *Boris Debackere* (current manager of V2_Lab), *Lucas Evers* (current manager of De Waag lab) for their feedback, and *Annette Wolfsberger* for her final comments.

The ground for many media labs was based on the reflection and analyses of art production processes, as well as artists' positions in society. Over the course of its history, the media lab has changed many times in function and appearance.

Since the first media lab was initiated, questions of what a media lab is or how it can be defined has been food for thought. Similarly, a lot of attention has been paid to how the media lab functions and is organised. [1] Generally, the media lab is thought of as an ongoing experiment, both physical and intellectual, in facilitating innovation, collaboration and critique. In short, the media lab is a place that supports the making of art.

The production of artworks happens in different ways, from commissions, to workshops, to artist-in-residence programmes. In the past two decades we witnessed a change in the focus and structuring of the artist-in-residence model. Although artist-in-residence programmes vary from organisation to organisation, there is a general understanding that an artist-in-residence is provided with time and space, and sometimes funding, to work in the media lab.

Another structure and working space for artists, the "artist's studio," has been a topic of discussion in contemporary arts. Caitlin Jones (director of the Western Front in Vancouver) noticed a move from the artist's studio to collaborative working places, to a laptop studio and a networked studio. These latter two might signal the end of the artist-in-residence programme as we know it. The laptop studio, as Jones explains, reflects the changes in cultural production, where the laptop becomes the main space for production, process, presentation and distribution. Furthermore, the laptop studio exists in a network of other laptop studios, shifting the studio experience from a fixed place to a more dynamic one, according to Jones:

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The legacy of "post studio" art is amplified for artists working with digital forms and online environments. Generally these types of practices are less an overt negation of the "ossifying" element of the studio and more a reflection of how the digital has changed cultural production at large.
What happens when the studio in question is simply a laptop in the artist's kitchen or the local coffee shop? When the studio exists in a network space and is linked to countless other studios, shifting the studio experience from ossifying to dynamic? Or when the site of the studio is the same as that of exhibition and distribution? [2]

Undoubtedly, spaces of production, presentation and distribution have changed.

1   See, for example, the Baltan Laboratories expert meeting The Future of the Lab in December 2009. For more references see their publication The Future of the Lab (2010).

2   Caitlin Jones, "*The Function of the Studio (when the studio is a laptop)*," *Art lies. A Contemporary Art Journal*. Issue 67, 2010. Online source, available: www.artlies.org/article.php?id= 1996& issue=67&s=0 (date accessed January 2011).

These changes are not altogether new, with the rise of the World Wide Web in the early and mid 1990s, net artists started to use other spaces for the production of their work. Some worked from home, others used the computers at their work place or from Internet cafes. For some the Internet itself became synonymous to a shared studio. For more information see among others Josephine Berry (2001) and Josephine Bosma (2011).What does this mean for those who run these spaces? Instead of focusing on the function and the changing role of the media lab from the point of view of the artists, we wanted to explore what often remains undeveloped, hidden and almost invisible: the organisational infrastructure of the media lab.

By moving beyond the obvious strategic, political or economic benefits, we decided to focus on the topic of the artist-in-residence programme, which most media labs offer and we asked several stakeholders about their experiences. [3]

The key question that we asked to facilitators of media labs was if the artist-in-residence programmes that labs provide are still relevant in a landscape of ubiquitous means of production, networked virtual fora where discussion about content and technology are taking place, and of

3 *Floor van Spaendonck* (director Virtueel Platform and previously manager of De Waag Society lab) / *Anne Nigten* (director Patching Zone and previously manager of the V2_ lab) / *Robert van Heumen* (musician and previously manager of the STEIM lab) / *Jonathan Reus* (project manager, STEIM) / *Boris Debackere* (manager V2_Lab) / *Lucas Evers* (Waag Society lab).

course in a world where technology is available for all to play with, use or critique? And if so, in what ways are the specific manners in which artistic work is supported still relevant? Should the media lab change, following the trend from lab to laptop, as we moved from video to new media?

And what would that mean? Should the media lab follow the newest technological developments, depart from hardware and software and step into wetware, the ephemera of holograms, nanotechnology or the next technical developments? Does a media lab provide more than a financial resource and a place to spend some time? What is the meaning of space, time and money in this context? These questions also lead to our second key question: with changing places of production, what is the impact of the artist-in-residence programme on the organisational structure of the media lab?

During a one-evening discussion, skype conversations and some email exchanges, we discussed the needs, conditions and benefits of the residency format with lab managers and programme managers who have been (or are) directly involved in managing residency programmes. To instigate the discussion several questions were posed, not necessarily to answer them one by one, but to trigger issues that might be hidden or to shed light on underlying strategies.

Questions:

- What do media labs offer artists when they are in residence (technical support, a network, time, space, financial means, discourse, presentation possibilities...)?

- Are we satisfied with our roles as facilitators?
- What contribution do we feel we are making to the artistic research and development process?
- What forms of residencies are most relevant now versus 10-20 years ago when technologies were much less accessible?
- How do we best document and disseminate the work done by artists in residence?
- Where does the potential lie in this form of facilitation?
- How can we as labs challenge artists when they are in residency?
- What challenges are faced by the managers of residency programmes?
- What formats and strategies can we think of for the future and why?

What follows is a condensed report of the main topics that we covered and discussed.

Time

Artist residencies can range from one week to a year or, in extreme cases, several years. Generally speaking though, most artists spend two to three months in a residency context. This is often enough to develop one part of their work, and for the remaining development of the work the artists find new residency locations or other means to finish the work. The whole production of a work can take a year or several years. In that period, different phases in the making of the work are approached in parallel: conceptual thinking and technical development happen often at the same time, after which several (beta) versions of the work are presented in the course of the development. This process is visible in almost all new media artworks. From

an organisational point of view, it can be difficult to continue to follow the work's development when you are only partly producing it. Often there is a certain point when media labs lose contact with artists, because their work or plans have changed, or the labs are busy refocusing their attention to new projects. Sometimes the media labs never get to see the final presentation of a work – and only read about it in a review or on a flyer once it is presented. In order to both accommodate the artists in their work process and keep a better overview of the project development, we have recently witnessed initiatives undertaking collaborative artist-in-residencies in which several media labs work together on supporting the development of one project from start to finish, sometimes with the artist(s) travelling from one space to the other. [4] From the artists' perspective, it is very beneficial, as they do not necessarily have to look for other venues to complete their work after they finished one residency. Working in other media labs gives them the opportunity to receive feedback from different perspectives, because most media labs specialise in certain areas, and they are immediately connected to various networks through the organisations.

4 A recent example of this approach was initiated by Netherlands Media Art Institute in 2010 and three residencies following this format have been success fully developed. Online link available: www.nimk.nl/eng/artist-in-residence/ Several other shared processes have been initiated but often these remain within one host / structure, see for example www.crresidency.net, or are more directed towards collaborative writing, for example the Networked book by Turbulence http://networkedbook.org/ or FLOSS manuals http://en.flossmanuals.net.

For the media labs it is interesting because it gives them a chance to extend their network, experience other ways of working, and it gives them in the end a longer involvement with the project. However, this is a new approach and although on paper it sounds promising, it is at this moment in time too early to say if these projects are successful for the organisations involved and if they will overcome the fragmentation in the production of a project.

Another approach that is taken up by some labs is to organise shorter residency periods, sometimes referred to as 'orientation workshops'. [5] It is argued that this approach better reflects the dynamic and process oriented way of working. It gives many starting artists the opportunity to get to know the organisation and vice versa it gives the organisation a chance to spot (new) talent – recruit new artists to introduce into their media lab or to their broader network. It promises a faster flow of people going through the labs, which subsequently gives media labs the opportunity to react quickly to new developments and questions.

5   Orientation workshops are organised regularly as a way to get artists acquainted with the organisation's way of working, and form a first contact between artists and organisation. In the Netherlands these kinds of workshops are offered by STEIM and V2_ (at V2_ these are referred to as Summer Sessions). For more information see: www.steim.org/steim/projectapps.html and http://www.v2.nl/lab/blog/summer-sessions-2011.

Space

The attempt to work together with different labs on one project is not necessarily new. In the past there were also collaborations between media labs. Mostly these collaborations started when artists were selected by one organisation. Sometimes the artists suggested another partner, or another organisation was needed in order to develop specific parts of the project. In some cases this has changed to a situation where organisations are working together from the beginning: starting with a commonly defined theme and/or open call and selection of the project, continuing with the division of the production workload and finances, and finally, working together on the presentation and distribution of the work

One of the reasons for this change could be due to a broader shift in artistic practice. Because of the wider availability of hardware and software, artists are no longer depending on media labs to provide them with technical tools. Instead they are interested in content, networks, space to work and experiment, and time to reflect, discuss and present their work. Although specific or specialist knowledge is still required, in most cases the artists know best where to get that information. This also means that traditional media labs, with specialised staff, have had to adapt their strategy in order to continue to be able to accommodate the artists. Whereas expertise used to be developed based on the already available knowledge in the lab, meaning that artists often had to adjust their plans in relation to the goals of the host organisation, now external people are often needed, and at times hired, to help with specific projects that do not directly relate to the expertise available in the

media lab. For some it has meant a shift in thinking about the residency format by broadening their services: more space for presentations and experiments, or feedback sessions and talks with people from outside the media lab. Keywords in this new set up are: content, concentration, feedback, space and network.

Although the laptop is often the main tool of working, the physical space of the lab is still important despite the fact that the access to technology has become less important. It is a place where direct sharing and exchange of thoughts takes place, alongside experimentation and presentation possibilities. Furthermore, in the case of collaboration between media labs, where artists move from one space to another, such a change of environment can also give renewed energy. Collaborations can be international or take place on a local level. With the latter this often means working with partners outside of the media labs. These kinds of collaborations pose an additional challenge: communication. When dealing with larger numbers of external people involved in the project, from developers to various funding bodies, commissioners or collaborators from arts, science or social backgrounds, the ability to translate between the different fields is a real challenge.

Network

The shift from a technically-oriented approach to a content-oriented one resulted in the growing importance of the network of the media lab and, in some cases, the extension of the network. On a local level, the networks of media labs have functioned sustainably for many years. Organisations that collaborated with each other on a

practical and sometimes financial level came to feedback sessions, and podia or exhibition spaces presented the final work. Now that the emphasis of the media lab has changed from technology to content development, or at least guidance and support, a different kind of network is needed.

More than before, many labs are approaching this by organising feedback sessions with different audiences or by reporting progress to outsiders, from professionals to novices, from school children to business people. Still, other labs are hesitant to become too educational and focus more on the professionalisation of their lab, both in terms of technological development, network potential and content. Although there seems to be a larger gap between these two approaches, a common interest is found in the aim to organise different kinds of presentations in order to stimulate thinking about works-in-progress. This benefits both the artists as well as the organisation. For the artists, it may involve more work because they need to spend time to prepare presentations. At the same time, such a "distraction" also helps to refocus on what is important in a project. [6]

For the organisation it is a chance to broaden their network by reaching different audiences that might come back another time or start thinking about investing and funding. And by being more absorbed in different local networks, the labs and the artists will be better informed about the local "knitty-gritty".

6   See also Blueprint Page ???// for the interview with the makers of *Naked on Pluto*

In some cases, the local context informs and influences the practice in media labs - this is often the case in smaller media labs or in the case of commissioned projects. And vice versa - the local context can be influenced by the practices of the media labs. Similarly, it is important for the organisation to be engaged in an international network in order to ensure further development of the artist-in-residence's work, broaden knowledge of international trends and directions, and share methods, management, tactics or resources.

Finances

With regard to financial matters, it was interesting to note the different budgets and fees that different labs allocate to artists-in-residence. Almost all labs offer free space and facilities, like basic computers and software, and most of the labs are working with open source software. Some have special workspaces for more "traditional" work, such as soldering and woodwork, or specialised spaces for audio recording or the build-up of installations. Oftentimes, housing is organised or even provided as part of the residency agreement and budget, but with high rents to be paid and scarce accommodation in the bigger cities, this is now often something that the artists need to arrange themselves. Most labs will cover additional staff, such as technical engineers or programmers, or other production needs, but this depends on the budget as a whole.

Artists do not always get paid - for example, in the case of sound artists, it was argued that they often have other performances in the city that pays for their time in the lab. In these cases being

able to do the residency and benefit from the network connections, knowledge etc, is enough to have people want to come. Similarly, media labs will try to encourage coupling an artist-in-residence with a time when they know an artist will be in the vicinity for other work. These opportunities are most often possible when dealing with sound artists or performers. For most contemporary artists this is slightly different because they will most likely not be able to present their work anywhere else, and if so, will often not get paid for showing their work. The media labs that are based in more arts-oriented organisations or fields therefore usually offer the artist a minimal fee. This in itself is a remarkable difference but goes beyond the financial schemes of media labs.

Most media labs have a minimal budget available and in the case of large projects or collaborations, additional funding is sought. The possibility of European funding has been a point of discussion, and most media labs have some past experience. Although these structures are very beneficial for artists, as their funding and work period is secured from the beginning, the insecure nature of these projects makes it extremely difficult to obtain funding. Residency periods tend not to be very predictable, outcomes vary, and in long-term collaborations, partners might leave the organisation leading to miscommunication or loss of interest and knowledge. A more formalised residency, in order to accommodate larger funding possibilities, is often also more difficult because the experimental and explorative nature of the residency format does not fare well with fixed deadlines and end results that have to be accounted for by the minute or euro.

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Documentation

In order to share knowledge, media labs think that it is important to document the process and results of the artist-in-residence. Although everyone agrees that this is indeed vital, media labs often lack the means, the time, or the knowledge to best document the work. Because there is no agreed-upon standard or even best practices or recommendations, often documentation is either done in overabundance or in the worst case, not at all. More and more artists are asked to keep records of their own processes, as a way to ensure the documentation of the process, which can also be part of a contract that is put in place with artists as part of the residency. At a minimum, what is required is to point out and clarify key points in the process when crucial decisions are made.

To encourage the creation of documentation, labs sometimes make small publications, blogs or

documentation videos. This in turn benefits the artists as well as the organisation on the level of publicity, visibility, and maybe even sustainability, especially when dealing with works that depend on hardware and software that will become obsolete in the near future – documentation in this sense is often the only remaining record of the work. Nevertheless, the making of documentation often remains a problem. One way to solve this problem might be to find new ways of actually using documentation, by the organisation or others who expand on the work. Another problem that occurs in many organisations is that a great deal of knowledge often departs with the person in charge at the time – well-made documentation could alleviate this loss. Needless to say, it is important for each organisation to keep a critical mass of knowledge at its organisation, and documentation is one way of ensuring just that.

Future

It is clear that the artist-in-residence programme within media labs has changed over the last ten years. Residency programmes have been adapted in order to better accommodate artists' needs. In most cases, it meant a shift from the technical to the content of the work and its development, or from a static to a more modular way of working in which the media lab is set out to offer more flexibility. This led us to the question if the term "media lab" is still appropriate when looking at the "new" residency format? From the outset the media lab is seen in the context of (high-tech) technology development. However, the practice shows that the media lab provides more than "just" hardcore technology.

BALTAN

LABORATORIES

Arie Altena

Within the context of its artist-in-residence programmes, the media lab functions as a broker, communicator and context provider. People working in a media lab provide feedback on ideas, concepts and technical issues that artists are dealing with and at the same time they open their network to the artists, and present the artists and the work to other various networks. The human hardware seems to have taken over, or as some said we have made a change from hardware to software. In terms of space and time, the media lab is a place to explore and experiment with different ways of thinking and presenting the work. This happens more often now in shorter residencies, which take place several times a year or in sprints.

One could argue that the media lab functions more as an artist studio. But from the talks we had, it became clear that this is not the case - the specific knowledge and expertise that a media lab has accumulated over the years is important in the development of the work and of even greater importance in the broader cultural field as no other organisations will have this type of history and knowledge. More importantly, media labs organise meetings and presentations with external people that are very valuable in the development of an artwork.

These meetings can also in turn generate more interest in the domain of art and technology. In the end, the media lab has the most knowledge and expertise on issues of technology and art thanks to years of working in the field. This gives them ample opportunity to introduce new approaches to a broader field of artists and others interested in art and technology. For most artists the no-

tion of the changes in the role and function of the media lab does not present a problem to be dismantled or questioned. For the organisations themselves, it means a shift in attention, resulting in a more complete and broader framework of possibilities. At the same time, the shift brings a deepening and expanding of the lab's involvement in the development and dissemination of the work created in the context of the residencies. More than before, this means that the media lab is working in the middle of things, [7] by working flexibly at different speeds, in different spaces and with different people, and exploring them in unexpected ways. It is a process of learning for artist and organisation alike, but moreover it embeds this learning in practice by not taking the residency for granted, by trying out different models, methods, strategies and collaborations. The multi-layered nature of the work under development is reflected in the ways the artist-in-residence operates.

7   Wendy Chun suggested the term *'media res'* – in the middle of things to reflect a way of working that is especially visible in new media, and in particular software cultures. " 'In 'media res' is a style of narrative that starts in the middle as the action unfolds." (Wendy Chun, "*On "Sourcery*," or *Code as Fetish*," *Configurations*, Vol. 16, Nr. 3, Fall 2008, pp. 299-324). See also Matthew Fuller, *Thinking in the Middle of Things. Real Projects for Real People.* Vol. 1, *The Patching Zone.* Rotterdam: V2_ Publishing, 2010, pp.41-46.

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