NODE.London: Getting Organised Openly?[1]

by Ruth Catlow and Marc Garrett[2], Furtherfield.org,[3] November 2008

The first NODE.London Season of Media Arts in 2006 was conceived as an experiment in tools and structures of cooperation as invented or adapted by artists, technologists, and activists, many (but not all) of whom were committed to ideas of social change through their practice[4]. It was to be an experiment in radical openness. Not just to be confined to participatory artistic processes and events but also applied to the method of organisation. We believe that through creative and critical engagement with media art people can be inspired and enabled to become active co-creators of their cultures and societies. So it was an enchanting notion: any self-selecting practitioner (artist, software developer, curator, free data or IP activist) might become an equal co-producer in the meaning and value of a media arts festival for London. It promised to connect people, groups, institutions (and their activities) who may otherwise be in competition for resources or attention in the noise and sprawl of London; to generate new ways of working together and to support work for a new kind of participating audience.

NODE.London still offers an important reference point for these practices as well as generating a certain level of activity. It points to ways in which grass-roots methods of taking hold of culture from the bottom-up might make all kinds of art forms accessible to a wider audience. However, as committed Voluntary Organisers[5] for the first 2006 season, it has been difficult for us (and many of the other original organisers) to continue to contribute to NODE.London's development and we want to understand why this is.

In March 2008, a new group of volunteers (with just a few of the original participants) organised and staged the second NODE.London season at a smaller scale. In keeping with the original aims of the NODE.London venture, participants organised on an open and cooperative basis, toward raising the visibility of contemporary media arts practice in London. The principles and processes were much the same as in the first season and organisers' investment of time and energy resulted in a programme of media arts events and exhibitions in venues around London. NODE.London Spring '08 was promoted by an informational poster and website to spread the word[6]. At this point in time, it is uncertain what form a third season might take (if any) and how it would be resourced and organised.

---

[1] Published under creative commons sharealike-attribution for the second NODE.London reader

[2] Thanks to Anna Colin for proofreading and to Lauren Wright for discussion and editing.

[3] Furtherfield.org is a media arts organisation which provides physical and digital platforms for creating viewing, discussing and learning about experimental practices in art and technology.

[4] Marc and Ruth wrote a short (and largely optimistic) text about the early development of the project in 2005 called *NODE.London: States of Interdependence.* Available online at http://publication.nodel.org/States-of-Interdependence

[5] Voluntary Organiser for *NODE.London*. According to the Evaluation Report, in July 2006 there were 80 VOs: "media arts practitioners, curators, media activists, venue representatives, producers, academic figures, writers, and others supportive of *NODE.London*'s aims." Anyone could become a VO since March 2005 by attending VO meetings and subscribing to the VO email list.

[6] The NODE.London website http://www.nodel.org was developed in the run up to the first season in 2006 and repurposed for the second season. It is discussed in greater detail later in this text.

The question of infrastructure for media arts takes on a renewed relevance and urgency in the context of the weird, recent assertion by the Director of the ICA that media art is just no good[7] (as his justification for closing down the media art programme along with Live Arts). Recent debates in public forums[8] reveal robust arguments against his claims that this art form lacks depth and cultural urgency, providing evidence of a complex, critical and lively international culture of media arts. His decision is especially peculiar given the ICA's role in supporting the developing the art form over the last 40 years. But the ICA is not alone. An important element of the discussions following his statement was the (possibly) inherent difficulty of media art's relation to institutions, a situation NODE.London's radical approach to organising addressed with its very fibre. With a few honorable (if under-resourced) exceptions[9], the larger arts institutions in London currently struggle to make media arts available to the mainstream.

The ongoing precarity of the NODE.London venture may be understood solely as a consequence of under-investment. NODE.London Spring '08 drew heavily on the resources of its participants (as with the first season), as well as its existing electronic infrastructure and reputation, but unlike the first season, it received no direct public funding. However, stretched resources are also symptomatic of a systemic problem with a particular approach to getting organised. "A characteristic disease of human thought is to mistake the vehicle and the objective, or the instrument and the aim"[10]. Early organisers (ourselves included) attempted to deploy isomorphic, networked openness in all aspects of artistic activities, infrastructure and organisation, which prevented effective tools and strategies for cooperative organisation from being adopted. This continues to affect NODE.London in many ways, limiting both its ability to plan and to articulate the value of its work to potential new participants, audiences and funders.

This text is a reflection on the NODE.London "experiment", its context, its cultures and the make-up of its events, infrastructure and organisation. It points to some earlier grassroots media arts festivals in London and gives a bare-bones description of the components of the NODE.London 2006 season. Taking Felix Stalder's analysis of the difference between Open Source and Open Culture[11], this text looks at how different ideas and approaches to networks and openness were played out in the first season. With a focus on organisational matters, it further makes some judgements about where these were fruitful and where they were problematic. Finally it looks at the work of Open-Organizations[12] as one example of alternative frameworks for grassroots organisations and suggests that by directly addressing the particular problem of organisation, it might be possible and worthwhile to support the development of grassroots media arts infrastructure in London, including the possible iterations of a NODE.London season.

---

[7]Emma Quinn (2008) Live and Media Arts at the ICA. NEW-MEDIA-CURATING Oct 17, 2008 [Internet discussion list]. Available from: http://tinyurl.com/5nxj9n [Accessed 11 December 2008]

[8] Notably the New Media Curating email list and the Guardian online.

[9] e.g. The Tate's Intermedia Programme (and earlier series of net art commissions) and the Science Museum's media art *commission* and community outreach programme

[10] p. 142 Shah, I., *Learning How to Learn*, 1978 Arkana, Penguin Group

[11] *On the Differences between Open Source and Open Culture* by Felix Stalder
http://publication.nodel.org/On-the-Differences

[12] http://www.open-organizations.org/

The briefest history of (since-Internet) media arts activities and festivals in London

In his introduction to the Takeaway Festival of Do It Yourself Media[13] in March 06, Armin Medosch reminded those present that NODE.London was not a stand-alone occurrence that had arrived out of nowhere. He proposed (in this speech and in his earlier introductory text for the DMZ publication in 2003[14]) that the first outings of new media and net culture in London could be traced back to conferences between 1993 and 1998 organised by Lisa Haskel at the ICA[15]. Later in the 1990s in London, Backspace[16] provided a vibrant and open digital production and cultural hang out space. Community networks and wireless, free networks such as Free2Air[17] and Consume[18] were thriving and in 1999 media artists and activists gathered for the Expo Destructo Open Festival[19] organised by Matt Fuller of I/O/D[20]. In November 2003, the DMZ media arts Festival ran for two days at Limehouse Town Hall[21] and included among its 'stakeholders' the University of Openness (as the host of the event), Mute Magazine, MAP (Media Arts Projects), Digital Guild, SPC (evolved from Backspace), Film London and Arts Council England, London. It also featured media arts projects by eleven commissioned participants[22] and a series of panel discussions. Many of the approaches, themes, politics, ideologies, technologies and people associated with DMZ can be traced forward into the development of NODE.London.

What was NODE.London 2006 and what did it do? [23]

> "NODE.London is a speculative infrastructure for organising an open season of media arts in London".[24]

---

[13] Takeaway Festival of Do It Yourself Media organised by the Ravensbourne Postgraduate community at the Science Museum's Dana Centre as part of NODE.London http://www.takeawayfestival.com/

[14] *London.ZIP – Digital media art in London mapped and compressed by Armin Medosch* (Medosch, 2003).

[15] Including Technophobia and Terminal Futures.

[16] Backspace cybercafe was situated on the River Thames on Clink Street, London Bridge http://bak.spc.org/

[17] Free2Air, Open Distributed Public Wireless Networks developing in Berlin and London, especially flourished in small artists communities in the East End of London. http://www.free2air.org/

[18] Consume spread its Free Wireless across London http://www.consume.net

[19] Expo Destructo, Charing Cross Rd, London. Furtherfield.org had a stall at Expo Destructo and met some early contributors there. The researcher also created one of the few art installations for the fair called Love Match with White Noise http://www.furtherfield.org/rcatlow/cv/web%20cv/whitenoise.htm

[20] I/O/D "a hyperactive electronic zine" also produced Webstalker, a web-browser in the form of a Macromedia Director projector that imitates the structure of the Internet. I/O/D slogan "Software is mind control - get some"http://bak.spc.org/iod/

[21] Limehouse Town Hall http://www.limehousetownhall.org.uk/lth_about

[22] Those listed on the publication include ambientTV.net, container-project.net/Container, digitalguild.org, hi8us.co.uk, low-fi.org.uk (with Simon Faithful, Amy Cunningham, Bureau of Inverse Technology, Corby and Bailey and Node Drawing) mediaartprojects.org.uk, metamute.com, mutantfilm.com/wireless, piratetv.net, spc.org, talkaoke.com and thomsoncraighead.net (Medosch, A., 2003).

[23] Most of this information is drawn from the NODE.London Evaluation report produced the evaluation team. Lots of reference materials about NODE.London 2006 are (at time of writing) available here. http://wiki.nodel.org/index.php/NODE.London_2006

[24] http://wiki.nodel.org/index.php/NODE.London_2006_in_a_nutshell

The activities of NODE.London aimed to develop an infrastructure and to take a decentralised approach to curating a media arts festival according to the ethos and methods of open cultural production, on the understanding that these had always been a source of inspiration to media arts practitioners. They were funded from a relatively small, strategic grant for developing media arts in London. Between December 2004 and March 2006 NODE.London produced two distinct programmes of events:

Open Season, took place across 10 days in October 2005, in collaboration with a range of partners, sponsors and supporters. It contained three events:
- The World Summit on Free Information Infrastructures (WSFII)[25] held at Limehouse Town Hall
- Open Congress[26] held at Tate Britain
- Future Wireless[27] held at the Science Museum's Dana Centre

The Season of Media Arts in March 2006
150 media arts projects took place in over 40 London locations, as well as online in the form of exhibitions, installations, software, participatory events, performance-based work and "many other self-defining forms". The organisational strategies and elements created and used to coordinate the season included the following:

- Voluntary Organisers (VOs) met once a month and subgroups met as necessary. Minutes from meetings and the forum discussions that followed were publicly documented using online community tools and resources provided by OpenMute.
- Voluntary Subscribers meetings were also held once a month. Artists and project organisers presented their work to each other and to VOs for feedback. These meetings also facilitated brainstorming of technical problems and the matching of work with venues, organisers and resources.
- A Project Coordinator and PR Coordinator were both recruited to paid, part-time positions.
- Two email lists[28] were used to organise and disseminate news about the season.
- A node network of participating venues and their local communities was established to act as distributed, local points of facilitation, outreach and advocacy – to share knowledge and resources.
- Online software tools (discussed later in this text) were created to allow artistic project organisers to input information about their project(s) and link to other relevant projects, venues and people. This displayed in a public facing website, provided context, a calendar and a map for the season. See http://www.nodel.org
- A printed catalogue and flyer was produced and distributed through the network, giving information about the season's events.

Notions of NODE.London

---

[25] http://www.wsfii.org/

[26] http://opencongress.omweb.org

[27] http://www.cybersalon.org/content/future-wireless-practicaldiscoursecreative

[28] Still running – subscribe via http://wiki.nodel.org

Notions of networks and openness[29] were hardwired into NODE.London (it's in the name: Networked, Open, Distributed, Events in London) and were the shared fascination of many VOs for the 2006 season. NODE.London was inspired by the scale-free networks of the Internet and World Wide Web whose topographies combine distributed and decentralized networks of hubs (see illustration), to which a new node (e.g. personal computer or server, web page or media file) may always be added.
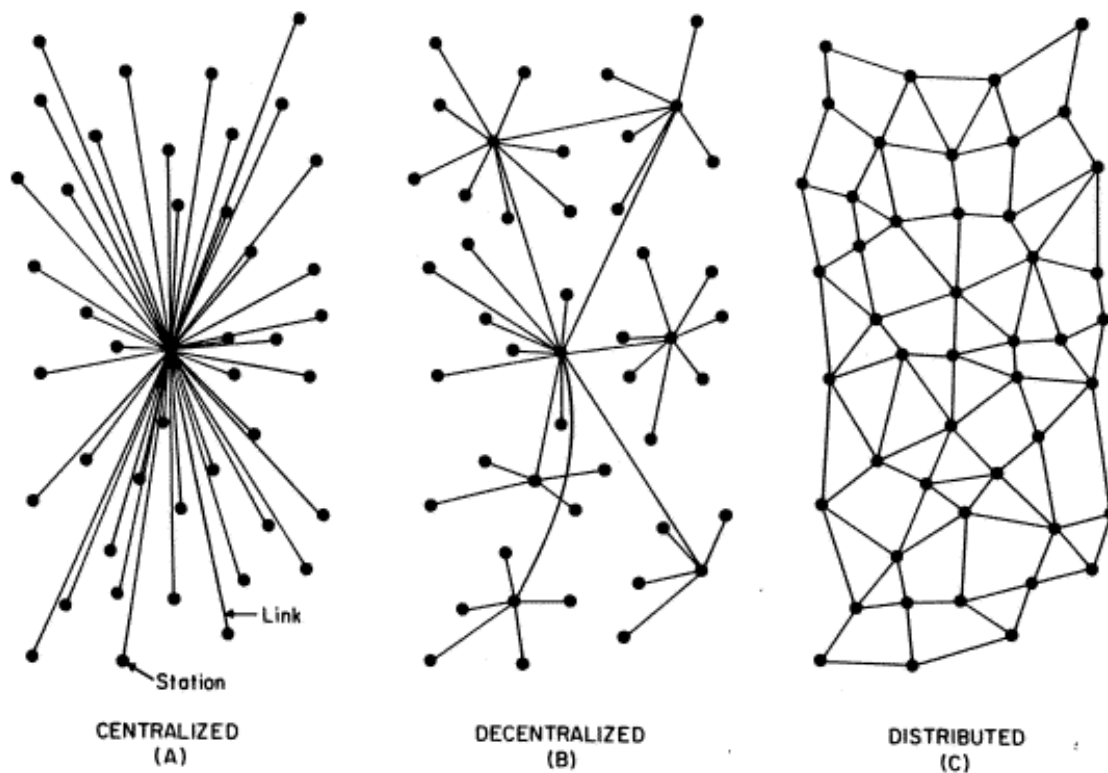

FIG. I — Centralized, Decentralized and Distributed Networks

From *On Distributed Communications* by Paul Baran, 1964. [30]

Network science says scale-free networks maintain levels of connectivity regardless of their size. They do this by linking small clusters of locally networked hubs to more massively linked hubs, which are in turn connected to each other. It is possible to move from one small, local hub to another, distant, small hub by taking a couple of steps through the big hubs, creating what is known as the "small world" phenomenon. [31]

---

[29] This section is developed from a presentation at a NODE.London Subscribers' Group meeting in Autumn 2006 entitled *What did Openness Mean to NODE.London,* by Ruth Catlow: Slides and notes available online http://wiki.nodel.org/index.php/Ruth%27s_Script_and_Slides

[30] From *On Distributed Communications: MEMORANDUM: RM-3420-PR,* by Paul Baran 1964, the Rand Corporation. Online at: http://www.rand.org/publications/RM/RM3420/

[31] Barabasi, A., 2002 *Linked: How Everything Is Connected to Everything Else and What It Means,* Perseus Publishing, Cambridge MA

Social networks can serve to reroute information, knowledge, resources and opportunities across the ordinary boundaries of groups, institutions and class. Digital communication networks can support social networking by providing infrastructure for speedy, easy and efficient exchange across distances. They can also operate as the site for both the co-production of media files and computer programmes, as well as a means of distribution and exchange for both. Perhaps most significant though is the way our conception of scale-free networks impacts our imagining and thinking about openness and getting organised.

The participants (the organisers and the audience) of the NODE.London 2006 season were drawn from three cultures: Art, Engineering (software development) and Activism (for social change).[32] At its inception (reflecting the shared interests of these constituent cultures) the Voluntary Organisers of NODE.London committed to organising 'Openly'. All decisions would be made in open meetings (open in that anyone could come along at any point and have their say – after all, networks are open in as far as you can always add a new node) and would be made consensually, without leadership, hierarchy or voting. The season of events and exhibitions would be open to all self-defining media arts practitioners rather than being selected by a centrally appointed curator. Some people had practical reservations (e.g. some of the larger institutions found it hard to accommodate or integrate the programming of events at short notice) but for the smaller organisations and individual practitioners it promised a level platform for our work whilst offering an opportunity to engage with and learn from each other and from the progressive practices of the Free and Open Source software movement. However, throughout the build up to the first NODE.London season in 2006, tensions and controversies arose as it became clear that openness had very different connotations in each of the constituent cultures. What follows is a rough sketch of three distinct approaches and the practices that arise where the cultures intersect.

---

[32] Stalder, F., On the Differences between Open Source and Open Culture. Available from http://publication.nodel.org/On-the-Differences

What did Open mean to the Three cultures of NODE.London?
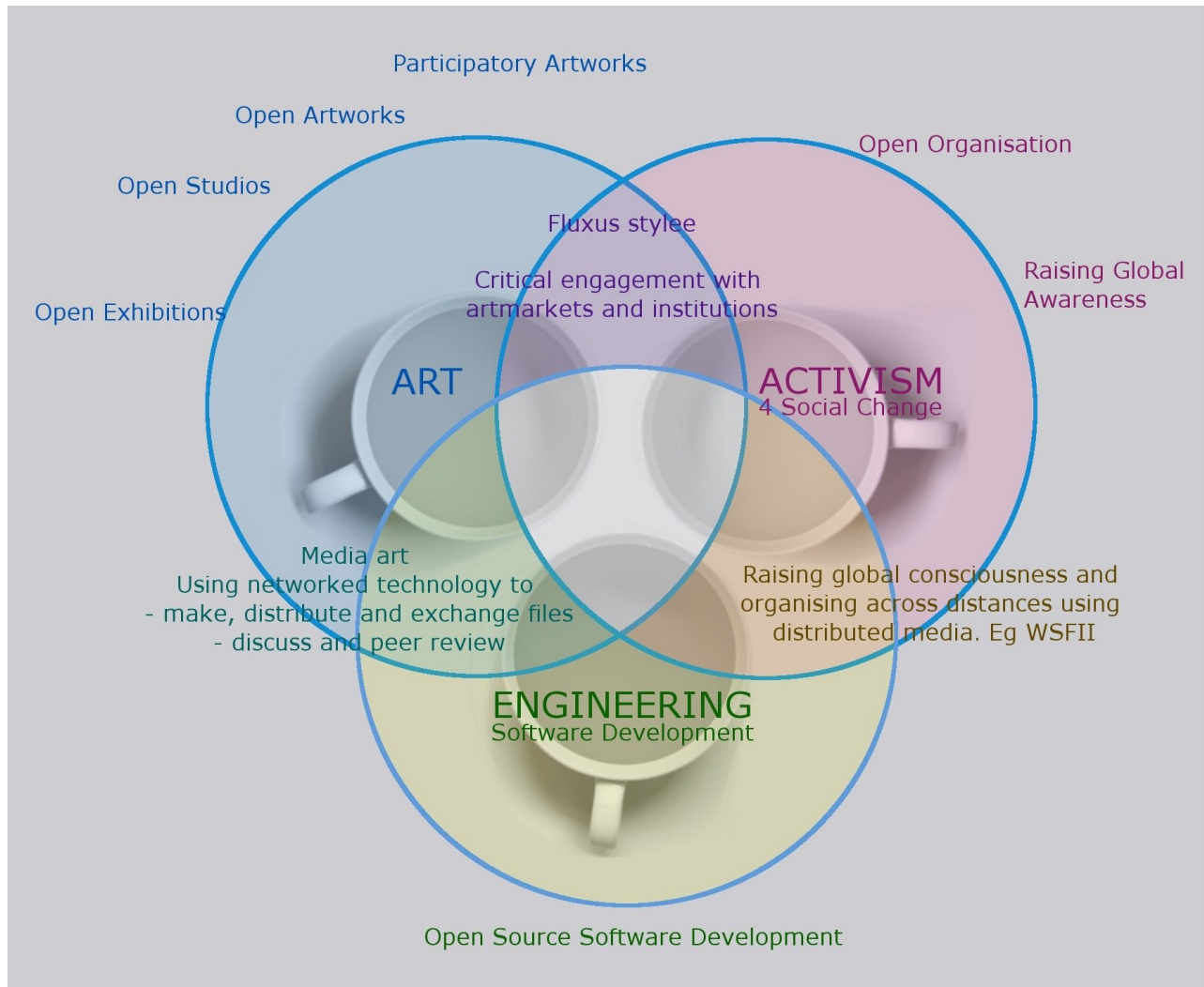
Media Arts- Three Cups of Tea: Three Cultures[33]: Drinking tea together suggests a base level of informal openness, to being together, to conversation and conviviality.

Openness in art is associated with:

- A conceptual approach to art that frees the work from the associations and constraints of the unique art-object and its associated value as a commodity. *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c.1970*[34], an exhibition at Tate Modern in summer 2005, included work by international artists like Martha Rosler and Hans Haacke who were said to have radically rethought the art object in the late 1960s and 1970s, in connection with the 'urgent political developments of the day'.
- Participatory arts: the meaning and value of the work is always open and mutable, created

---

[33] From *What did Openness Mean to NODE.London,* by Ruth Catlow: Slides and notes available online http://wiki.nodel.org/index.php/Ruth%27s_Script_and_Slides

[34] http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/opensystems/

in tandem with the viewer(s) or participant(s).
- Accessibility of art to diverse, always growing audiences.
- Equality of opportunity for practitioners.

Openness in activism is associated with:

- The influence of social movements, anti-capitalist and anti-globalization movements like the G8 summits in Genoa and Geneva who used the virtues of networked and open organisation to their advantage.[35]
- Models for Open Organisation: are intended to support collective action, shared responsibility and transparent decision-making that do not privilege an elite group.

Openness in Engineering (specifically software development):

The association of Openness with software development arises with the Open Source Software movement. In connection to this (and with a fuzzy interchangeability with *Free, Libre* and Open Software (FLOSS) Development), notions of open collaborative processes of development and production became tied up with progressive ethical stances.

But aside from these considerations, the pragmatic success of the openness is particularly dramatic in this context. To create open source software, developers collaborate with each other on the code that makes the software work. It is particularly successful because:
- Software development is modular.
- There exist objective, widely accepted criteria to assess the value of a new bit of code.
- Evaluation is efficient because developers use the same tools to evaluate as to produce the code.

Neither art nor activism has such a neat and efficient way of evaluating their practices. In addition to this, open source software development often comes with its own built in frameworks of economic sustainability in that developers are often already working for academic or commercial institutions and by sharing their work they raise their own profiles as well as those of their institutions and hence the market for their services. However, the actual openness of the process is more limited than is usually understood. Not everyone can contribute to shaping software to their needs, as users need to at least have had the free time and/or educational opportunities to develop their programming skills, knowledge and experience. Also, development does not take place solely in an ad hoc, bottom-up manner, but is most usually carefully controlled by a central manager of high reputation.

At the intersection of the three cultures lie some fertile grounds bringing about rigorous practices:

- Art and activism give rise to Dada, Fluxus and Situationist-inspired practice; critical engagement with art markets and institutions and socially engaged practice.

- Activism and engineering/software development give rise to distributed media platforms, which raise global consciousness and organise across distances to effect global change e.g. Indymedia. Also decentralized distribution offered by peer-to-peer networks (file

---

[35] King, J., *The-Packet-Gang*. Available from http://publication.nodel.org/The-Packet-Gang

sharing systems such as BitTorrent and Gnutella and social organising software such as that created by we.riseup).

- Art and engineering/software development give rise to critiques and explorations of technologically-inspired structures, metaphors, relations; new tools and processes for production, critique, distribution and participation, e.g. distributed composition facilitated by wikis, software art as platformed by runme.org.

Events, Infrastructure and Organisation:
Where Openness intersected for the three cultures of NODE.London

Events: To reiterate, the first NODE.London took place over two main seasons. *Open Season*, October 2005 was a programme of critical discussion and conferences. Here, Openness meant an exploration of the parallels and crossovers between FLOSS and Open culture (through its organisational methods, talks, presentations, participatory art events and performances by artists, programmers, theorists and activists). For the *Season of Media Arts* in March 2006 Openness meant a season or festival on the model of open-exhibition or open-studio event, not centrally curated but generated by artists, venues, producers, and facilitated by a group of Voluntary Organisers.

Infrastructure: The vision was for an open social network, supported by open web-based tools that would:

- Allow communities to connect and share resources (printers, sofas, spaces, technical know-how, etc.).
- Provide an event calendar-cum-catalogue for conferences and media arts events in London long into the future.

In spite of the best and protracted efforts of some VOs, the original open software architecture was never realised as intended. This was probably our first major encounter with the effects of an inappropriate organisational approach and it had unfortunate consequences for the integrated vision and mutual respect of participating artists and software developers. It also limited the scope for marketing activities for the March event. However, the deep discussions about the use-cases of various stakeholders of the NODE.London community led to the development of a bespoke tool/website in PHP and MySQL, which enabled many practitioners (artists, programmers, producers and curators) to raise the visibility of their work to each other and to interested audiences.

Using this system:

- Participating media arts practitioners were able to submit details of their projects and exhibitions in their own words.
- The NODE.London catalogue of all participating projects could be printed with a very short lead time.
- Audiences were able to navigate the events, projects and people of NODE.London to see how they were connected to each other and to use this information to plan their visits to different events and venues.

Organisation: The organisation was very loosely modeled on the organisational principles of

movements for social change (although this was never openly stated or discussed), attempting to run by consensual decision-making. The structure of organisational openness was inspired by scale-free networks of the Internet and used wikis and email lists to communicate and record the minutes of meetings. The fluidity of this approach gave rise to dramatic benefits and pitfalls, discussed at length in evaluation processes that followed after March 06[36], with the most important questions remaining around issues of:

- Power and transparency: Who makes decisions and where do they actually get made? Where does control and accountability lie within the organisation?

- Wastefulness of inadequate and inefficient organisational processes, poor deployment of skills and experience and insufficient planning.

- The lack of coordinated documentation and contextualisation of media arts practice in London limited the accessibility of the work and its ideas to a broader audience.

- Many participants were effectively excluded by the demands on "free" time; only those who were able to dedicate the time could afford to contribute and benefit.

Legacy: When tea-time is over

Back to the three cups of tea in our earlier illustration. When us artists, activists and engineers are drinking our cups of tea together, we look towards each other to consider what we might achieve together. But what happens when the last drop is drained, if the arguments have been too fierce, the disagreements too disagreeable, the mutual benefits not sufficiently established?

There are various tensions that act between the collaborators of the three cultures of NODE.London. The cultures are in many ways antagonistic to each other, easily drawn apart and scattered by diverse forces. This is not necessarily just about arguments between individuals from different tribes though. Many individual participants of NODE.London straddle the three cultures and therefore experience the tensions between them internally. Engineers, artists and activists operate in different models of the world, take different approaches to life and have different modes of survival available to them. These differences impact their free time, values and priorities, which in turn give rise to some tensions in how they view each other.

For the Engineers/Software Developers:

- Artists and activists do not fully appreciate their work because they do not fully understand what it involves. They may have unrealistic expectations and make unreasonable demands.
- Many artists may appear ill-informed and superficial in their approach to technology. Some use tools without any critical engagement or understanding of their application, or they develop ill-conceived technologically-inspired metaphors.

For the engineers and activists:

- Artists may appear selfish, concerned primarily with their personal profiles and ownership of Intellectual Property.

---

[36] Also at PLENUM, an alternative, collective and performative mode of evaluation and "agenda setting" was offered by the artists of *Kingdom of Piracy* available online http://kop.kein.org/plenum/

- All art is associated with the suspect cultivation of rare commodity through the dark arts of marketing, spectacle and art market speculation.
- The value of art appears arbitrary and corrupt: assigned by the market in collaboration with cultural imperialist institutions (galleries and public funders) and career academics.

For the activists:

- Art may appear superficial and to have no positive social or political function.
- Artists and engineers appear to lack urgency in response to social and political crises.

For the activists and artists:

Engineers are sometimes unable or unwilling to communicate enough about the issues they are dealing with to facilitate deep collaboration.

For the artists:

- Activists may appear to be strident and self-righteous ideologues.
- Engineers and activists may appear over-instrumental, rigid and intolerant in their approaches to collaboration.
- Engineers' and activists' assumptions about what motivates artists can be unexpected and puzzling, especially to those artists who have long been involved with alternative, participative (non-object based) art practice.

On the whole, these antagonisms had some surprisingly productive effects on the events and – to a lesser extent – on the infrastructure of the first round of NODE.London 2006. The diversity and quality of artworks and events platformed during the season of media arts is not the subject of this text although we are sure that a survey of work created would provide a compelling panorama of media arts practice in London.

NODE.London 2006 also caught the imaginations of media arts practitioners elsewhere in the world. The Medienstammtisch in Linz hosted visits by NODE.London organizers, inviting them to share their approaches to organisation and infrastructure towards "developing a more open and networked media arts community"[37] in preparation for 2009, when Linz will be European Capital of Culture as "City of Media". Some aspects of NODE.London 2006 suggested a way for different media arts organisations within one city or town to work together, rather than in competition with each other for money and attention. NODE.Stockholm was set up as a non-profit organisation in 2007 and ran its own season of media arts in January 2008. "Nobody owns the projects, the participants own it together and share the credit. This means that big and small institutions can work together, the nodes will make the work and this gives maximum momentum to the project at low cost."[38]

A Black Hole

Despite all of this, after March 2006 a black hole opened up in the decision-making process.

---

[37] From a report by Luci Eyers http://www.servus.at/xchange/archives/2006/06/entry_7.html

[38] Notes by Bjorn Norberg, Mejan Labs and instigator of NODE.Stokholm www.nodestockholm.se

Numerous, very well attended and seemingly well conceived meetings of various formats intended to set out the future direction of NODE.London yet, there still appeared to be no available mandate to make decisions or for experienced organisers to hand over responsibility. There was therefore no effective way to move forward with the experiment and organise efficiently, collaborate, build on and learn from previous work. One of the most disabling effects for the group was an inability to acknowledge and therefore activate roles of individuals key to the functioning of the group's dynamic. Consensual decision-making, had many attractive effects and useful associations for participants (as described above). However the unspoken dogma of 'flatness', which attempted to equate the apparent self-organising properties of a flat network of abstract nodes, to the group of (living, breathing, human) Voluntary Organisers, made it unseemly to differentiate between their different contributions and levels of experience. The resulting frustration made it more difficult to reassemble to produce an energetic dynamic for the evolving group.

The notable tendency to perceive the NODE.London organisation as a verb rather than a noun (perhaps in some attempt to sidestep controversies around power, control and ownership) simultaneously created and masked problems that made it impossible to develop the Organisation (noun). Over about six months of monthly meetings attended by old hands and newbees, many interesting discussions took place but no decisions were made. Frustrated and too busy with other things, the black hole swallowed us up and we stopped being so closely involved. We followed the discussions and meetings via the email lists[39] but it was difficult to discern the aims of the group.

The ad hoc, open, collaborative and consensual approach to organising (the original NODE.London way) did give rise to opportunities for many levels and types of learning, skills and knowledge sharing. However, any learning that occurred, resided largely in the individuals and those individuals could wander off at any time (with no formal hand-over of knowledge) so depleting and disabling the organisation. The lack of a robust and reliable way for organisers to deploy organisational memory, knowledge and experience, impacted on its continuity and accountability which in turn again eroded attempts to build infrastructure. For example, whilst the current wiki links to lots of good resources including some texts about 2006 and subscription details for mailing lists, many of the extended, unprocessed records of NODE.London's early development process through discussion and development (wikified minutes, discussion forums and collaborative timeline) which represented the full diversity of opinion and contribution are no longer available online. The fact that only a few of the original Voluntary Organisers continued to be involved with the coordination of the second season also   represents a serious loss of resources (skills, energy, critical engagement) for NODE.London as an organisation.

Rather symbolically, after a number of thwarted attempts to describe and pull in resources for the next season of media arts one attempt to reboot in June 2007 took the form of a ritual "Burning of NODE.London"[40]. This involved setting fire to the NODE.London evaluation report. This act was clearly intended to be cathartic and liberating this may have conveyed a 'burn don't learn' attitude to past and future participants (this report represented an investment of hundreds of person-hours by the group of paid and volunteer evaluators), a notion that in some way the existence of information and reflection on previous experience was trapping. It also suggested an exorcising of

---

[39] Email lists remain an excellent source for London-related media arts announcements subscribe here http://wiki.nodel.org/index.php/Main_Page (thanks to the ongoing good-will of a couple of unacknowledged individuals.)

[40] http://wiki.nodel.org/index.php/Burning_of_NODE.London

the spirits of past controversies.

In December 2007, after another six months of agonizing attempts to galvanize, fundraise and reboot, the announcement of the Spring '08 season was made by one of NODE.London's original founders. It wasn't clear how the decision had got made but it is hard to imagine how, in the circumstances, anyone else in the group could have fired the starting gun with equal authority and effectiveness, regardless of the capable, experienced and energetic engagement of lots of other people over the previous two years. It appeared that the form of decision-making we had adopted, had served to conserve the original power dynamic of the project: the original founder was still the (reluctant) initiator of something called NODE.London. This announcement did serve to galvanise people's efforts. The second season was impressively swift off the blocks, but from our perspective, the sidestepping of organisational issues of ownership, control and participation reduced the impact of the season.

Getting Organised Openly

In our view NODE.London's original aims are still timely, London still hosts many energetic practitioners and some kind of open approach to organising may still be worth persisting with, but first an organisation (noun) needs to be formed and developed.

Organisers would need to be careful that it did not replace the old glass-ceilings of hierarchical organisational structures with new glass-roots. If an imperceptible mesh of interpersonal dynamics are allowed to govern decision-making and action-taking, and if the knowledge produced is unevenly distributed and partly hidden, no matter how expert the individual people are, all participants will be unable to perceive either the possibilities or limitations of their agency in relation to the project. These factors set the current limits for the scope and value of this experiment in tools and structures of cooperation.

In our view, a new attempt at open, distributed, bottom-up, organisation would need some careful thought. The economies that sustain each of our 3 cultures are quite different. Therefore it would be a mistake to assume equal levels of surplus time and energy amongst participants. This would need to be considered when clarifying participants' responsibilities and terms of engagement in order to enroll and harness all participants' enthusiasms, energy, skills and experiences towards agreed common aims.

The charters and resources of open-organizations.org[41] may supply some useful starting points. They draw on concepts of self-organising systems and emphasise the value of well-defined processes to establishing transparent, accountable and truly participatory organisations. These documents provide the tools to be both open (in the ways which are valued by our three cultures of art, engineering and activism) *and* effective at decision-making and action-taking. They offer ways to organise through laterally arranged heterarchies, to maximize communication and coordination between groups with well-defined (if temporary or evolving) purposes and so ensure transparency, accountability and organisational learning. An Open Organization values the diversity of participants and their connection with each other and to the processes. It acknowledges the need to recognise the roles, commitment, specific skills and experience of individuals within the organisation.

---

[41] http://open-organizations.org

This approach, which appears to have sprung from the intersection of our 3 cultures, may be the most useful one if NODE.London still wishes to operate openly, drawing on the work of the same communities. It may need to temporarily adopt a lighter model on its way there – one that acknowledges who is doing what to develop the organisation (noun) and why. It may need to draw on other models that reflect the needs of its participants even more closely.

A functioning organisation will not automatically solve the other important question of resources and funding for media arts in London. That is, and should remain, a separate question. Sometimes in the past these issues have got mixed up as people marvelled at the apparent low cost and efficiency of the first season, failing to spot that work was most likely being self-subsidised or subsidised from invisible sources and was therefore, while appropriate for a one-off experiment, not so sustainable in the long term.

We are not nonchalant about the fate of media arts in London, but this text is not an argument for or against the continuation of NODE.London's activities. It may take new people with different motivations and in different configurations to make this work. However, the intersection of the three cultures of art, engineering and activism that the text has highlighted is a fruitful one; it usefully clashes and challenges different practitioners' models of the world by obliging them to communicate and collaborate outside of their silos. By organising events and projects together around notions of networks and openness practitioners are faced with the various (otherwise hidden) interdependencies of their practices[42] and audiences are offered alternatives to passivity inducing closed art objects and cold and cryptical technologies. This in turn supports creative, philosophical and critical approaches to contemporary technologies and the cultures that surround them. Work at this intersection facilitates those who engage with it to think about the changes that they can affect in the world with their processes, values, skills and tools.

It is clear that the enduring controversies that arise between these cultures and their engagement with networks and openness have afforded the NODE.London venture much of its dynamism as a context for developing media arts practice in London. However, the question of how to get organised in a way that sustains the criticality and potency of its work and makes it available to Londoners remains open.

Published under creative commons sharealike-attribution[43] for the second NODE.London reader

---

[42] i.e. the production and conception of work by most artists, activists and programmers (whether they choose to think about it or not) is contingent upon (or at least derived from) the work of others
[43] http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/