

Can Organized Networks Make Money for Designers?

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My interest in this talk is to consider what the political concept of organized networks might mean for designers wondering how to make a buck. I know for sure that I won't be able to offer a one-size-fits all business model, so if that's what you were hoping for, then be disappointed now. Instead, I will focus on what I consider the primary conditions that attend the practice of collaboration in an era of network cultures and informational economies. My hypothesis is that without paying attention to the way networks are built and what makes them tick, you can forget about the rest, which includes whatever money-making potential you might glean from your design activities. This is a matter of structural and organizational fundamentals that underpin collaboration.

Having said there's no magic-bullet for money-making in this talk, in the second part I will sketch one proposal: the creation of new institutions for design education that reside outside the formal system of the art school and university. For it is in new modalities of education, I believe, that designers have a particularly strong contribution to make in terms of advancing knowledge and practices in their field, while creating an open resource that serves as a means of income generation and research financing. This is my proposal for a new business model.

Organized Networks and Creative Collaboration

First, let me briefly outline the concept of organized networks. Over the past 30 years or so we have witnessed the institutions of modernity - universities, governments, firms, unions - struggle to reconcile their hierarchical structures of organization with the flexible, partially decentralized and transnational flows of culture, finance and labour. There is much phenomena, in other words, that escapes the managerial gaze of modern institutions. In other ways, of course, we find increasingly sophisticated technologies of surveillance and data tracking deployed to determine our movements and practices. But this does not result in increased efficiencies or productivity in terms of the management of people and things. Just the opposite, in fact.

Accompanying these moribund technics of what can be called networked organizations is the emergence of organized networks. Whereas networked organizations can be understood as modernity's institutions rebooted into the digital age, organized networks, by contrast, are social-technical forms that co-emerge with the development of digital information and communication technologies.

Organized networks do not need to try and recalibrate existing institutional practices into social-technical dynamics of digital media. Instead, they need to

undergo a scalar transformation that enables the possibility of sustainability for the proliferation of practices across numerous social-technological platforms, many of which are highly unstable and fragile.

Let me give some examples. Putting aside all the hype around Web2.0, there's no question that the rise of social technologies have enabled a massive increase in the number of people experiencing new forms of creative collaboration. There's an exceptional busyness to online social life and, it must be said, exhaustion. The digital elite can do two things: log off and outsource. Welcome to the Cult of Wilderness 2.0. Where Nature was once packaged as a Sacred Tour in the 19th century as a means of restoring health to upper-classes tired of the city's industrial lungs, today it reappears in the form of a holiday from the keyboard and the capacity to earn money from another sucker who crunches the code.

This is the plight of creative labour. Indeed, it is the common that, in its exploitation, also enables the possibility of refusal. The precondition for escape, however, is organization. The challenge for the loose relations of network cultures - within which creative labour resides - is to find the social-technical means through which new institutional forms may emerge. But don't get me wrong: I am not suggesting unionisation as a panacea for creative labour.

Collaboration is the key resource for the invention of new institutional forms. German media activist Florian Schneider understands collaboration as 'working together with an agency with which one is not immediately connected'. [1] Importantly, such a notion of collaboration does not assume participants share something in common; rather, it recognises 'the common' as that which is constructed precisely through relations of difference, tension and dispute.

What, in other words, constitutes the common of creative labour when different capacities and conflicting values and interests are brought into relation? And how might creative practice be open to conflict and the expression of difference as constituting the common of collaboration? These questions are necessarily left open, since it is only in the situation of creative collaboration that specificities may be found. I now wish to turn to the topic of new education models, which I consider as one of the more obvious ways in which organized networks, in their scalar transformation, may obtain economic resources.

New Design Education Models are New Business Models

As government funding for higher education has diminished over the past decade (or longer, in some national cases), universities have found themselves increasingly positioned within a market economy. This structural relation alone locates education as a commodity object. Inevitably there will be barriers to access learning in such instances. An alternative – open access learning – has great merit, but there are some fundamental issues to do with cost of delivery (labour, production, infrastructure, etc.) and technological modes of communication that must be addressed. Key here is the connection between peer-to-peer collaboration and new business models.

The glacial temporality of university curriculum development and subjugation of teachers by the life-depleting demands of audit cultures sets a challenge for

design education programs that wish to synchronise their curricula with the speed of popular media literacies. To distinguish market and user hype from quality that makes a substantive difference is near impossible. Consensus will not be found beyond the fleeting moments of micro-adoption among A-list bloggers and their links, or whatever other community of users you care to name. Ratified standards for design education within the cultures of networks do not exist.

As the university increasingly loses its monopoly on the provision of knowledge as a result of neoliberal governance and the advent of peer-to-peer and user-producer media systems, design education is in crisis mode. Best practice is frequently found outside of university degree programs. Expertise has become distributed across a population of practioners and everyday users. How, then, might such knowledge feed back into university programs? Can formal accreditation for autonomous education be extended to non-university actors? Are such processes even desirable?

Crucial here are the different temporalities afforded by research platforms positioned outside of the temporal order of the market and its post-Fordist modality of just-in-time production, which underscores the habitus of the university today. [2] In a recent posting to the edu-factory mailing list – an initiative by mostly young activist researchers associated with uni-nomadi (an informal teaching program across a network of media and social centres in Italy involving key participants such as Antonio Negri) – Taiwan based academic Jon Solomon phrases the predicament of time and the university as follows:

‘The students have been so disempowered by the compulsory national primary and secondary education system (which favors the production of an elite) that when it comes to the university organization of their own temporal rhythms, they are completely passive in their forms of resistance (and the faculty doesn’t provide any relief or alternative resources)’. [3]

How, then, to create different temporalities which enable processes of counter-subjectivisation? A number of core elements come into play in the repositioning of research and teaching outside of the university. And these, I would add, are not without precedents: think of the mechanics institutes as sites of popular learning for the working classes in the 19th century (albeit enframed by the morally uplifting values of the middle-classes), adult education classes after the second world war, the rise of alternative schooling movements such as Montessori in the 60s and 70s, and so on and so forth. [4]

My point is that counter-sites of learning at the current conjuncture are imbued with qualities special to the social-technical dimension of network cultures, and conditioned by the political economy of the informational university.

Collaborative practices within the creative industries and network cultures are now well established as the primary mode of production and communication. The business models which sustain the combination of service labour and innovation as they are located on the margins of industry are less understood. Primarily comprising of ‘informal economies’ (symbolic, voluntary, word-of-mouth) and sustained economically by various forms of financial support (parental, small government funds such as the ‘citizen wage’ or grants,

associations with universities) and wealth generation (e.g. Anderson's 'long tail' [5]), there is great scope for further development and understanding of new business models. [6]

Sketches of Networks of Design

As far as design practice and research goes, there is much to be gained, in my view, through an exploration of a form of radical empiricism that intrigued Deleuze in his study of Hume and throughout his life, where 'relations are external to their terms'.

How, in other words, can an ontology of design be understood in terms of its social-technical arrangements that operate in trans-scalar ways, where micro-practices and macro-forces interpenetrate each other, and where the power of design subjectivisation is instantiated in the very moment when the form of design connects with the particularities of social practice and in so doing brings borders into question?

If there is an ontology to be found in design networks, it consists of the trans-scalar capacity of networks to traverse the complex field of institutional codings and practices of subjectivisation. In this trans-scalar movement one finds the potential for new institutional forms to emerge. And the tensions that subsist within such movements comprise 'the political' of networks.

Berlin's creative industries and urban transformations furnish just one of many possibilities for such an exploration. But what is at stake in such undertakings, beyond a seemingly benign intellectual curiosity? Let me close with three suggestions.

First, as I noted earlier in my talk, there is a great urgency for new institutional forms. Tactical media holds a tremendous reservoir of practices and social-political experiences. Yet tactics are prone to mirroring the short-termism of the enemy, as found for instance in the managerial culture of the informational university and, more broadly, post-Fordist capital. How to communicate the sociality of tactics in trans-generational, transnational and transcultural ways is a strategic challenge for design networks, and one that will assist, in my view, in the invention of new institutional forms.

Second, it is all very well to accumulate repositories of open knowledge for design, but how to mobilise them? This is the problem and politics of translation. Along with inconsistencies that will always exist at the level of technical standards (without inconsistency there wouldn't be innovation, after all), there is the additional and perhaps deeper complexity of culture. A politics of translation is always a multi-way street of incommunicado. [7]

Finally, there is the question of time. Time as exhaustion that underscores the uncertainties of labour and life. Time as the 'vanishing mediator' (Balibar) that attends the imminent crisis of climatic transformation. And time of the decision that individuates the action of refusal, or the refusal to act. This, I submit, is the social-political territory of design theory and practice today.

Notes

This paper was first presented at Design Mai Digitalability Symposium: Tools, Talents and Turnovers: New Technologies in Design [<http://www.designmai.de>], Berlin, 12-13 May, 2007.

[1] Florian Schneider, 'Collaboration: Some Thoughts Concerning New Ways of Learning and Working Together', 2006, <http://roundtable.kein.org/node/525>

[2] See Jon Solomon, 'Knowledge Conflicts, Self-Education and Common Production', posting to edu-factory mailing list, 22 April 2007, <http://www.edu-factory.org>

[3] Ibid.

[4] As Julian Kücklich has alerted to me: 'In the German context, there's also the model of the "Volkshochschule" (higher education institutions without access restrictions)'. My argument for teaching and learning outside of the university should not be misconstrued as a plea for this somehow outdated and unsuccessful model of the dissemination of knowledge.

[5] Chris Anderson, 'The Long Tail', Wired 12.10 (2004), <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html>

[6] For a study of working conditions and experiences of new media workers in Amsterdam, see Rosalind Gill, Technobohemians or the New Cybertariat? New Media Work in Amsterdam a Decade after the Web, Network Notebooks no. 1, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2007, http://www.networkcultures.org/_uploads/17.pdf

[7] See Incommunicado 05: Information Technology for Everybody Else, organized by Geert Lovink, Soenke Zehle and the Institute of Network Cultures, De Balie, Amsterdam, 15-17 June, 2005, <http://incommunicado.info/conference>

Related Readings

Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter, 'Dawn of the Organised Networks' [http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/lovink_rossiter.html], Fibreculture Journal 5 (2005).

Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter, 'Ten Theses on Non-Democratic Electronics: Organized Networks Updated' [<http://summit.kein.org/node/888>], in Marco Berlinguer and Hilary Wainwright (eds), Networked Politics: Rethinking Political Organisation in an Age of Movements and Networks [<http://217.72.98.112:8080/test/Networked%20politics%20in%20Berlin%20Reader.pdf>], Berlin: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2007, pp. 61-65.

Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, 'From Precarity to Precariousness and Back Again: Labour, Life and Unstable Networks' [http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/neilson_rossiter.html], Fibreculture Journal 5 (2005).

Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, 'Towards a Political Anthropology of New Institutional Forms' [<http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/6-4/6-4neilson-rossiter.pdf>], ephemera: theory & politics in organization [<http://www.ephemeraweb.org>] 6.4 (2006): 393-410.

Ned Rossiter, *Organized Networks: Media Theory, Creative Labour, New Institutions* [http://www.naipublishers.nl/art/organized_networks_e.html], Rotterdam: NAI Publications, 2006.

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