The Patching Zone: Collaborative Practice and Practice-Based Research

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in conversation with
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The Patching Zone is a transdisciplinary laboratory for innovation where Master’s students, postgraduates and professionals from various fields create meaningful content. Anne Nigten, the initiator of the Patching Zone, discusses the ‘Process patching’ approach used by the Patching Zone as the primary methodology for creative research and development.

Anne Helmond
What inspired you to start the Patching Zone?

Anne Nigten
I was concerned with the question of how artists active in the realms of art and technology can optimise cooperation with technicians, computer scientists and designers. I noticed that this has been a recurring problem for the last few years at V2_ in Rotterdam and therefore decided to write my PhD thesis on this subject. The greatest and most obvious problem appears to be cooperation, which ultimately prompted the question: which methodology and approaches do artists working in the areas of art and technology and electronic art utilise? Even today, I still encounter the same situation in the education sector: you can see that creative practice is increasingly becoming collaborative, and extremely difficult to adapt to college curricula. Even if it involves working with people from different branches, almost

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1 V2_, Institute for the Unstable Media is an interdisciplinary centre for art and media technology in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, http://www.v2.nl/.
all of them are branches of the same tree. Frequently there is also an existing educational model that inhibits collaboration between people with very different backgrounds. I wanted to establish a practice-oriented laboratory where I could further shape these ideas; I wanted to examine how cooperation between people working together can be optimised and how the gaps can be filled by the colleges themselves, thereby making a contribution for future artists. Although we do work with students and researchers from diverse disciplines, our origins are in the art world. This is the core issue. The approach that has emerged from our own backgrounds and our experience at V2. The Patching Zone sees art and design as having paramount importance.

**AH:** The Patching Zone works with students on a project basis. How do students apply?

**AN:** Applicants for Patching Zone projects come from a wide variety of backgrounds, but it is usually the better students that feel up to it. It is noteworthy that there is more interest from abroad than from the Netherlands. This can be partly explained by the fact that the Netherlands is still catching up in the area of dual education: there are as yet no Master degrees and PhDs in the arts-and design sectors, and Master’s and PhD courses at technical colleges are generally more focused on themselves. We have some extremely talented students from many European countries for our upcoming project. Applications from abroad were generally of a higher quality than those from the Netherlands.

**AH:** Do you actively seek affiliations in your own region?

**AN:** Insofar as it is possible, I try to involve local universities and colleges, but ultimately it also has to fit into the curriculum, as well as in the academic roster. Notwithstanding that a Master’s and PhD approach is developing in the Netherlands, one Master student may be working on a single project from September to June, while another is allocated a fixed number of months to complete the final paper. Moreover, students frequently have to attend a mandatory number of seminars and lectures. It would not be correct to state that people are not interested, because the most important factor is the problem with scheduling. This will be addressed so that, as much as possible, all future projects will start in September, to ensure that they are concurrent with college rosters. Of course, it won’t be possible to perfectly synchronise all the courses.

We have just started an active information campaign for all courses in the Netherlands that is not limited to one region only, but is intended to fulfill a national role. This initiative is thus not restricted to Rotterdam. We intend to start working at a European level as soon as possible.

**AH:** How does the Patching Zone relate to practice-based research?

**AN:** As most of our students are from the arts and design worlds, they work according to one of the variants of practice-based research, which knows a number of trends. Students attending courses having a more technical and theoretical orientation, i.e., reflective studies, obviously work in a completely different way. The issue of cooperation has also made inroads in practice-based research relating to electronic art and the creative industry. We hope that it will gradually become clear that the role played by artists and designers in innovation teams is also extremely interesting if it involves cooperation, and that this gives their work added value. In this way we hope that we can refine the image of practice-based research, and demonstrate that it does not always have to be a solo endeavour – while the model of scientific PhDs in particular is far more focused on the individual.

I think that this is an interesting complement, especially for courses focusing on innovation. It will be far less well received by autonomous artists; it is meant for those who have mastered the process. Being helped to increase awareness of their methodology provides interesting new opportunities for artists and designers in collaborative projects. This really gives a practice-based PhD enormous extra value. This is something I am trying to achieve at the Patching Zone. We are not particularly concerned in this regard with a courses such as the PhD in Leiden. They are now collaborating with the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture on a course which is much more rooted in a variant of the scientific academic model that has held sway since the Enlightenment: the model of the individual, creative, contemplative artist.

We aspire to a somewhat different approach at the Patching Zone. We ensure that practice and theory run parallel so that they can nourish each other and more knowledge becomes available about the working process and the methodology, and any shortcomings can be identified. These are extremely valuable components when shaping theory. The power of many art and design processes is derived from the fact that theoreticians also actually involve themselves in the practical aspects during the process, and not only retroactively. This is a completely different way of reflecting on one’s work if you are really in the thick of it: combining the first and third person means that, sometimes, you are directly involved, while at other times you observe from a distance, and it is easy to alternate these roles. This is an issue I would like to explore further with the students and my colleagues at the Patching Zone – to be involved with much more awareness that you can also benefit more from the process.

**AH:** How does the Patching Zone intend to disseminate the knowledge produced by the projects?

**AN:** One example of how we intend to document our activities is with leaflets. This is general documentation for a broad audience that is conversant with the creative field. We also frequently produce scientific publications, both academic papers and popular scientific works. Students are involved as much as possible in writing these papers. Several papers relating to our previous project are currently being prepared. Already, various PhD chapters and Master theses have been written by students, either as PhD chapter, papers, or as a case study – and we assist them with these as well. We will also post some superb video footage on our website: short films documenting the
We erected a lovely, large, red flavouring. Our friends were our test subjects. Recipes and these were brought up to date as the project basis of the project. They selected several books written in Old Dutch, which included some beautiful 16th- and 17th-century recipe The archive employees told us that they had as the project that all the basic components were included and the project is now completed. The most interesting result of the entire project was that one of the employees was assigned a new job: previously an archivist in the Regional Archive, he is now the innovation manager. It

We always work on the basis of assignments, and two important criteria are evaluated when selecting students. Firstly, the appropriate knowledge must be represented in the team to ensure that the assignment is carried out in accordance with the expectations. Secondly, there must be a healthy balance between the members of the group: not only between the relative numbers of men and women, and between theory and practice, but also between the various disciplines themselves.

The composition of the team is of vital importance. We always start by assessing our requirements, firstly by evaluating what we require, and then by ensuring that there is a good balance between theory, practice, design and implementation.

We want people with a theoretical background to play an active role at the start of the project but not at the end, or when compiling the report. We now have a theory-based participant, who joined the team at its inception in January. This is an important factor. In general it is much easier for theoreticians to look back and reflect on a completed project than to accumulate sufficient knowledge to analyse the working process while it is in progress. I think it is important that this reflection does not only occur retroactively. You need retroactive analysis, too, but if it is nurtured throughout the entire project in which people play an active role, theory and practice can flow among the people involved.

With whom do you collaborate, and in what kinds of formal or informal networks do you collaborate?
The Patching Zone has a network of ‘ambassadors’. These are people who operate purely out of interest and without financial reward on our behalf to create alliances with the industrial, scientific and governmental communities. We have several partners and are funded by Creative Challenge Call, a collaborative programme between the Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science; the The Go-for-IT! project is commissioned by Rotterdam South Pact in close collaboration with city district Feijenoord and Stichting Welzijn Feijenoord in south Rotterdam.

Do you have European ambitions?

We are currently in the inventorying phase and are actively ensuring that we have a robust base in the Netherlands. We are going to closely monitor our operating procedures because we want to work on an assignment basis as much as possible and do not want to become affiliated with one particular university. That would create obligations and we would rather develop a workshop or seminar model that we can use to cooperate with several colleges, instead of creating the impression that we are obliged to accept a given number of students from a particular college each year. We want our selection procedure to be determined by the quality of the students and their suitability for the project.

We are organising a meeting at ISEA in Belfast in Northern Ireland in August 2009 to advance our European alliances. This encounter will consist of a panel that will on the one hand provide a platform for our students, students from elsewhere and researchers, and on the other hand, provide them with an opportunity to discuss our approach and their experiences within both a scientific and an artistic context. In a new field such as this, it is extremely important to safeguard quality and create a portfolio. The Patching Zone is a unique concept, and it is therefore impossible to compare our activities and progress with other initiatives, which perhaps emphasises the importance of precisely defining quality criteria. This is the first thing we want to do.

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