

The Patching Zone: Collaborative Practice and Practice-Based Research

Anne Nigten

<http://patchingzone.net>

<http://processpatching.net>

in conversation with

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Anne Nigten is the director of The Patching Zone, a praxis laboratory where Master, PhD students and professionals work together on meaningful creative content. Prior to her current position, she was the manager of V2_ Lab, the aRt&D department of V2_ Institute for the Unstable Media in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. She lectures on research and development in the interdisciplinary field from an art perspective. She advises several media art and science initiatives in the Netherlands and Europe. She completed her PhD at the University of the Arts London (UK), and frequently publishes papers on art, engineering and (computer) science collaboration and software development. Before her current position at V2_ she worked as an independent media artist, and simultaneously fulfilled several management jobs for the media art sector in the Netherlands.

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.¹ 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

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 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 fulfil 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

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PhDArts is joint programme of The Faculty of Arts, University of Leiden, and the Royal Academy of Art (RKA) in The Hague. Certain modules are also carried out in partnership with the Research Institute at the KU Leuven. For more information see <http://www.lectoraat.kabk.nl/nl/phd-in-de-kunst/index.html>. The programme has been extended to include a PhD in partnership with the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture (Fonds BKVB).

are not particularly concerned in this regard with a courses such as the PhD in Leiden.² 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, so 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

process and how people reacted, which also demonstrate that this curious approach can sometimes elicit a very interesting and disarming reactions.

Finally, a book that we published in cooperation with The Hague University: *Het Woudlopersboek voor de Cultureel Erfgoed Medewerker 2.0* was presented during the Digital Heritage Netherlands Congress in December 2008.³ It is a report on the *Cultuur Lokaal* project,⁴ and is written from the perspective of an employee working at a cultural institution.

The assignment for this project was to create a training course for employees at three cultural organisations: the library, museum-goudA and the Regional Archive. Employees apparently had great difficulty anticipating the changes that new models and interaction with the public could have on their professional work. How were their roles going to change and how could this be stimulated or shaped? How can you play a pro-active role to avoid alienating your audience? Employees must be able to adapt to present or future expectations. The Hague University and *Web in de Wijk* (web in the neighbourhood⁵) collaborated on a formal training programme. We took care of the informal training programme in which a group of Patching Zone students conducted a series of interventions in the public space that were all based on topics suggested by the employees of the cultural organisations, such as the project *Vergeten Eten* (forgotten food). The archive employees told us that they had some beautiful 16th- and 17th-century recipe books written in Old Dutch, which included regional recipes that they wanted use as the basis of the project. They selected several recipes and these were brought up to date and prepared using ingredients that are available nowadays, and with our current notions about flavouring. Our friends were our test subjects. We erected a lovely, large, red *Vergeten Eten* tent on the Gouda market square and employees from the Regional Archive cooked and served the food. Many visitors to the market came and sampled our wares. Diners were asked to leave a recipe behind, thus ensuring that all the basic components were included in the project: giving, sharing, creating an

environment, and engaging in discussions. It was an extremely enjoyable event. We also created a layout for putting the recipes online in a small network. Neither the interventions nor the website were intended as end products, as such, but they were important facets of the training programme. It enabled project participants to make contact in an entirely different way with people who we couldn't have known in advance would be interested in doing something with food. We received recipes and knowledge about the city from people with whom we probably would not have come into contact. It was not a formal topic provided by the cultural organisations, but a pleasant public event which enabled people to learn a great deal by applying a method between art and research. Moreover, it was not a high profile event, and we did not create brouhaha about it. Some of our participants walked around the market inviting people into the tent, which involved a 'canvassing' function completely different to a supportive function behind the counter at an organisation.

We have organised a number of events that started with the basic principles of social networking and co-creation and gradually introduced elements of a technically oriented approach. Each step involved an additional technical aspect, which required the intensive practical application of various design and development principles – especially from the areas of ethnographic field research and social sciences. It was an interesting combination of context research and design research. It's important to note that they were extremely pleased with our efforts. Four events were held 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 is extremely encouraging that a training course can lead to a transformation in the professional lives of these employees.

AH

When selecting students do you also consider the balance between theory and practice?

AN

We always work on the basis of assignments, and two important criteria are evaluated when



'Vergeten eten', The Patching Zone (2008)

³ The publication *Het Woudlopersboek voor de Cultureel Erfgoed Medewerker 2.0* can be ordered from the Research group for Information Technology and Society of The Hague University of Applied Sciences

⁴ Cultuur Lokaal is a collaboration between the Waterwolf laboratorien (Haagse Hogeschool lectoraat Society and ICT by Dick Rijken and three cultural institutions in Gouda: the Public Library Gouda, the Regional archive Central-Holland, Museum GoudA) and The Patching Zone in the Netherlands. <http://cultuurlokaal.patchingzone.net/>.

⁵ *Web in de Wijk* is an initiative aimed at improving neighbourhood life, by making it easier for residents to find out more about their neighbourhood, become acquainted and plan activities together by means of the Internet.

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 process and not only 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 process in which people play an active role, theory and practice can flow among the people involved.

AH

With whom do you collaborate, and in what kinds of formal or informal networks do you collaborate?

AN

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.

AH

Do you have European ambitions?

AN

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.



Workshop Go-for-IT!, The Patching Zone (2008)

Credits

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CREATIVE COMMONS

Publication: Virtueel Platform 2009

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all the authors for their contribution to this book.

This book was made possible due to the support of the Netherlands Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

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Puck de Klerk (Dutch summaries)

DESIGN
Novak, Amsterdam

PRINTING
Lecturis, Eindhoven

VIRTUEEL PLATFORM
2009