

Project Observatory: The Patching Zone

Own practices are rarely analyzed by the institutes that are busy with projects themselves. This process does not only involve documentation, but also contextualisation and analysis. Virtueel Platform initiated the Project Observatory in 2009, which aims to analyze a select number of projects that comply with the following criteria: they have to involve a transdisciplinary work process, be innovative, and enable the transfer of the process to other practices. Each year Virtueel Platform will select a number of projects from the Netherlands and abroad that meet these criteria with the intention of offering best practices to the cultural sector in the Netherlands. In this way Virtueel Platform establishes links between various different projects and e-culture practices as a way of fostering knowledge exchange between disciplines and sectors.

The Patching Zone has the role of catalyser during the preliminary phase of innovation and during the process of transformation within or between organisations or neighbourhoods. Virtueel Platform has observed the activities of The Patching Zone with great interest since it was founded in 2006. We believe this is a worthwhile project because of its transdisciplinary work process. The aim of this Project Observatory is to investigate to what degree innovation takes place in relation to the transdisciplinary work process and if the procedures followed in the project can be remodelled for other practices?

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1. Introduction: The Patching Zone

The Patching Zone is a transdisciplinary innovation laboratory based in Rotterdam. The Patching Zone lab offers places to Masters, Ph.D. and post-doctoral students on a project basis in variable 'practice-based' research projects that apply technology and digital media in creative ways. By so doing, The Patching Zone integrates an explicit educational component. The participants come from a variety of educational fields: art academies, design academies, social sciences and computer science, the technical field, and the business world. Supported by professionals they work in a transdisciplinary team and apply artistic research to create innovative 'products' that are commissioned by parties outside the arts sector, such as social and cultural organisations, the government, and industry. This means that The Patching Zone uses an artistic and creative form of research and development, abbreviated as aRt&D.

The 'Processpatching' method as formulated by Anne Nigten is used as the methodology for this type of aRt&D. In this informal and intuitive bottom-up approach to artistic research, discipline-specific methods, as well as the materials used, are interrelated in experimental and creative ways. In other words, this is an approach in which various fields of knowledge, theories and practices from a variety of disciplines are remixed. In this way, a meta-method opens up during the interaction that creates bridges between the multiple disciplinary backgrounds. At the same time, the participants use it to step outside the familiar terrain of their own discipline, and they move as a group into 'uncommon ground', a place of conceptual disorientation where the participants operating as collaborating 'processpatchers' will be able to create unanticipated connections in an ongoing dialogue with the intended user. New combinations of methods, themes and techniques create fertile ground for innovation - this is the essence of The Patching Zone.

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The Patching Zone is largely financed by the Creative Challenge Call, which is a collaboration between the Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. In addition, separate financial arrangements are made for each project with the client, and various partners frequently make a financial contribution to the project.

1.1. The Patching Zone projects

The Patching Zone conducted research into social interaction in the public space in the recently completed (pilot) project Cultuur Lokaal (2008) and in the ongoing project Go for IT! (2009).

Cultuur Lokaal specifically focused on public participation in art and culture. This line of approach arose from the

requirements of the client, Laboratory Waterwolf, an initiative of the Gouda Public Library, museumgoudA, the Regional Archive Central Holland and the lectureship Information, Technology and Society at The Hague University. In the Laboratory Waterwolf these cultural institutions collectively try to define their new roles in the local Gouda society in relation to their changing position in the current era of digital media. The Patching Zone was asked on a one-off basis to participate in the research relating to Cultuur Lokaal and develop 'products' that would encourage public participation in close cooperation with their fellow workers during the first half of 2008. This resulted in five public events that were held in Gouda during the first six months of 2008. For more information, see: <http://cultuurlokaal.patchingzone.net/blog/>.

The Go for IT! project was commissioned by Pact op Zuid in Rotterdam, and ran for the duration of 2009 in Rotterdam. Pact op Zuid is a collaboration between the Rotterdam municipality, three Rotterdam boroughs (Charlois, Feyenoord and IJsselmonde) and four housing corporations (Vestia, Woonbron, Com·Wonen and Woonstad Rotterdam). These parties collectively initiate projects that are intended to help combat the social deprivation in Rotterdam South. In order to achieve this, The Patching Zone investigates the possibilities of co-creation and cooperation in the public (urban) space, and the role that creative technological applications can play in this. This project is specifically aimed at youngsters. The Patching Zone organized a variety of workshops and public events in the field of modern technology such as 'wearables', e-fashion and mobile communication to stimulate youth culture and the creative use of media. The result of the workshops and events will eventually form the basis of a new interactive 'Urban Game' that will be played in the Feyenoord neighbourhood in Rotterdam. For more information, see: <http://go-for-it-rotterdam.nl/>.

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Currently, three new projects are scheduled for 2010; see <http://www.patchingzone.net/?q=node/40>.

2. The Patching Zone Practice

2.1 Issuing a commission

How are commissions issued? Did you have to pitch for the commission? Who took the initiative in the projects? What were the requirements? Was the planning of the project realized in consultation with the client, and did the client approve?

There are two reasons why The Patching Zone works with external commissions: they are either part of the funding model, or the client is a paying party. In addition, The Patching Zone works with external commissions because this ensures that each participating student and stakeholder has an equal opportunity to become a co-owner of the product. This also reduces the possibility of a hierarchy developing that would disrupt the group process. An important requirement that The Patching Zone specifies for the commissions is that they satisfy to a (social) need, and are rooted in a specific local context. The requirements of the client increase the chances of a project's success.

Up to this point very open agreements have been made with the client for both commissions, which allowed a great deal of freedom during the research process. In Cultuur Lokaal, for example, the client requested that a first step be taken during the innovation process, and that the employees of the cultural institution be advised on how to tackle this. This question is an open one, and is more focused on stimulating a process, rather than creating a new product.

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This openness is then also vital for an innovation lab. If the form of the product is too rigidly defined prior to the assignment, it allows no room for experimentation and thus reduces the chances of unanticipated innovation. Anne Nigten acknowledges that some guidelines may have to be more rigid in the future, and besides its role as a catalyser, The Patching Zone will also be more involved in the implementation.

2.2 Selecting students and courses

Which measures contribute to setting up a project/study? Is enough consideration given to the Research and Development aspects of the project? Are the disciplinary backgrounds, and the possible combinations of these that are required for the project specified beforehand? What are the most important criteria for selection? How is the transdisciplinary team shaped during the selection procedure?

After the commission has been issued and before the students begin, the permanent staff from The Patching Zone outlines the project's approach, specify the goal and formulate research

questions arising from the client's initial requirements. This is followed by a call for participation aimed at students, and the selection procedure. At the moment, this mainly occurs by evaluating work submitted by the students. In the future, however, The Patching Zone will work towards creating a model in which the student's personality will also play a greater role.

The most important consideration when assembling the team is achieving a good balance between theory and practice. And, of course, the correct combination of personalities can exert a positive influence on the team process. It is also important that the necessary knowledge that was established at an earlier stage is reflected in the make up of the team working on the project. In the Cultuur Lokaal project this resulted in a well-balanced group of people from different backgrounds, varying from music technology, media/interaction and performance art, to more theoretical specialisms such as art history, information science, game theory and philosophy. Despite this variety of backgrounds, the project groups are currently dominated by students with backgrounds in 'art and design', in the broadest sense. The Patching Zone would like to see students from other disciplines join the team, including, for example, students studying economics or social sciences. Officially, The Patching Zone is not a course and it does not strive to be one. While it is true that there is an overlap with education, there is also an overlap with science and media lab practices (e.g., V2_, Waag Society). The profile of The Patching Zone is thus somewhat diffuse. An important educational aspect is, for example, teaching students how to collaborate with people from diverse backgrounds in practice, but the students are not attending a school. Unlike traditional education there is no rigidly defined curriculum. Instead, this is more like a lengthy workshop, which, while being very educational, focuses on creating a product that meets the client's requirements. The Patching Zone does, however, play an important mediating role between the students and their own courses, and students can integrate the practical knowledge gained in their own Ph.D. or Masters research. The supervisors from The Patching Zone support the students in this by helping them to harmonize their activities in The Patching Zone with the course they are following. They also assist the students during the writing process.

3. The (transdisciplinary) work process: internal

What is the processpatching method and which techniques are used during the process? How are new combinations of methods, subjects and techniques ultimately shaped? Where are the processpatches? And to what extent does a processpatch that is produced define the process?

The processpatching method provides a specific methodological way of working and conducting research that shapes the work process in broad outlines. Nevertheless, a group is formed comprising students from various disciplines for each new project, which means that the group dynamics and the work processes change too.

When beginning a transdisciplinary work process the first task is to establish common - or neutral - ground as the basis for communication.

Unlike a multidisciplinary collaboration where each participant represents his own speciality, and where one discipline asks another discipline to solve a problem, the participants in a transdisciplinary collaboration find themselves in a place that is new for all parties. The group also shares responsibility for the process. Each project starts by trying to help the students gain an understanding of each other's competencies. Various techniques are used to facilitate the understanding of each other's approaches and ways of thinking, so that these can be brought together afterwards. This also means that students have to take distance from their disciplinary backgrounds.

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The supervisors play an important role during the first phase. Firstly, they help the students get on the same page, or complement each other's competencies. The ongoing 'translation' between the various disciplines and the students' intentions is also an important task in this context. Often, students from different backgrounds, in this instance, both disciplinary and cultural, can interpret the same assignment in completely different ways. According to the supervisor Kristina Andersen, 'If, for example, a commission involves making a prototype as preparation for a project, then one of the students will try to express his ideas on paper, while another student will immediately go outside with a piece of chalk.' Moreover, the permanent staff also has a defining role in allocating responsibilities to the students. Obviously, use is made of each student's discipline-specific knowledge, but this does not mean that experience and educational specialism play a role when allocating roles. The student is assigned tasks that he or she can do well, and this does not necessarily have to correspond with their educational discipline. As Kristina says, 'What people study is not always what they're good at.' The work process then goes through a number of phases as part

of an innovation cycle. The first phase involves determining the thematic content. In the Cultuur Lokaal project this meant that the (international) students had to familiarize themselves with Gouda and its inhabitants, as well as get to know the employees of the institutes that were closely involved with the process. In Go for IT! the students lived in the neighbourhood concerned, so that they could get to know it firsthand.

3.1 The (transdisciplinary) work process: external

What role does public participation play during the development of a project? How is the 'user' involved in the development of the product, and what role does he/she play in the design?

A specific theme is chosen in close cooperation with the public, which can - as in the case of Cultuur Lokaal - also include the employees of cultural institutes. In the Cultuur Lokaal project 'playing' was defined as the processpatching method, i.e., conducting research through play. During Cultuur Lokaal the participants literally left the building. Detailed artistic and ethnographic research was conducted by visiting the neighbourhood, by observing and asking questions, and by assessing the concerns of the inhabitants. Techniques from the performing arts, such as improvisation, play an important role in this process. In the case of Cultuur Lokaal this helped liberate the employees from the rigid thought patterns that are belong to their functions.

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'A frequent question is, how do you spur people to action? In Cultuur Lokaal we decided to organize a number of interventions with the employees of the various institutes - by simply going outside. The employees were trapped in a work model that meant they were locked into a pre-determined framework. One of them is a curator, another is an archive specialist, etc. It was difficult for them to relinquish control, and working with them in unpredictable ways was a challenge too. These turned out to be indicators that could be applied to working with improvisation and the 'real' world. This led us to, for example, prepare old recipes at a market and to observe exactly what lay behind these recipes that are preserved on paper. At the same time we also introduced the employees to the basic principles of Web 2.0. In other words, sharing, contributing, giving something, daring to ask for something in return - these types of exchanges and dialogues are vital to ensuring that people communicate with each other, and work together.'

Anne Nigten, 25 August 2009.

Each interesting thematic line is then discussed in brainstorming sessions, which are also used to gain access to new insights and outcomes. A theme is not fixed immediately, as these

sessions can also lead to a different theme. As described in the *Buiten Spelen* booklet that was published to accompany the Cultuur Lokaal, 'Nothing is certain, nothing is what it appears to be, the dynamics and unpredictability can lead to confusion and a great many complications.'

The theme is then translated into tangible outcomes and events. For example, 'eating' was an important thematic line in Cultuur Lokaal. This theme was realized in the 'Vergeten Eten' (Forgotten Food) event, in which old recipes that are preserved in the Archive were prepared on the Grote Markt (Great Market) in Gouda. Visitors to the market could exchange recipes and sample various dishes. This is an example of how institutes can share some of their 'forgotten' collections in an innovative way and establish contact with the public.

Engaging in discussions with the public is also an important part of the process. The product must have local significance, and likewise address the intentions and desires of the local community. To achieve this, it must be possible to bridge any barriers to the public, otherwise the end result will be yet another meaningless product. This appeared to be easier to do in the Cultuur Lokaal project than in Go for IT! because the employees from the cultural institutes formed an important part of the public for the former. They were well informed about the project, and easily accessible. Reaching out the younger public in Go for IT! in the Feyenoord neighbourhood was more problematic. These youngsters had to be more actively approached, and encouraged to participate. This is all the more difficult in a neighbourhood such as Feyenoord, where there is more social control. But it seems that once the target group is convinced and is prepared to participate there is a high level of involvement.

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The final phase of the process involves executing the project, supplemented with a critical evaluation of the result. This evaluation has been problematic for both projects because it was difficult to get in touch the public - the inhabitants of Gouda and youngsters in Feyenoord. The Patching Zone therefore focused on indicators such as the willingness to participate, how much fun people had, the amount of public participation, and the turnout at the events. To date the public seem to be more than willing to participate in the projects.

3.2. (Transdisciplinary) innovation

When and how do new and unanticipated connections between methodologies, techniques and materials give rise to innovation? At what stages does innovation occur - during the process, in the method and/or in the efficiency in the transdisciplinary collaboration?

Innovation within the transdisciplinary collaboration at The Patching Zone occurs through processpatching in the zone where unanticipated connections between methodologies, techniques and materials used (e.g., technology) are remixed to create new combinations. But where exactly does innovation lie in practice? Can tangible changes be identified that can be realized through the projects?

Although the collaboration in both projects under discussion resulted in a tangible product - the five interventions in Cultuur Lokaal, and the Urban game in Go for IT! - it is not only this product that gives substance to innovation. Innovation is contained in these new approaches, which stimulate interaction in the public space. In fact, these are temporal products; they are interventions. It is thus particularly the process preceding the realization of these products that make the project innovative. Besides tangible products The Patching Zone also creates an experience.

The system of collaborations between students and the public help the latter group become increasingly aware of - or break with - established patterns of thought. For example, becoming aware of changes in their own urban environment, as in Go for IT!, or of the rigidity of their own work process, as in Cultuur Lokaal. In the latter, many participating employees from the cultural institutes in Gouda also became aware of the idea that innovation can occur from within their own departments by engaging in discussions with members of the public, for instance. This awareness resulted in a number of concrete and less concrete changes in the institutes in Gouda. Firstly, it engendered a positive outlook on new and future practices among the employees and the permanent staff. It also resulted in changes in the job descriptions and responsibilities of the employees, both of which are now less rigidly defined. Furthermore, at least one of the institutes has appointed an innovation manager, whereby the institute has taken on a more pronounced role when it comes to innovation in the cultural field.

Unlike Go for IT!, which involved an unknown number of people, Cultuur Lokaal involved a limited number of participants. Effecting social change and solving social problems is not something that The Patching Zone pretends to do, and not only because of its limited budget. Therefore, in the case of Go for IT! there will be none of the concrete changes seen with Cultuur Lokaal. It is more a process of giving direction to the realization of the interactive Urban Game that enables youngsters to experience their local environment in a refreshing way. Including youngsters in the creation process helps them discover that they have a voice. They become aware of the changes occurring in their neighbourhood, and it also increases employment opportunities for youngsters interested in creative media applications.

4. Development, points of attention, the future

What are the complexities and challenges facing The Patching Zone and what are its future ambitions? What efforts are being made towards ensuring sustainable knowledge transfer and dissemination? In what ways are projects documented and archived?

To an extent one could speak of innovation in the practices of The Patching Zone itself. The knowledge and experience gained from the projects is continually used to improve the procedures and structure of future projects.

This applies, for example, to the processpatching methodology, which is gaining an ever more coherent form. The techniques used, such as improvisation, ethnographic research and performance given more substance, while being further refined, and the preconditions for an effective application of the methodology are also specified. The Cultuur Lokaal project made clear that, to benefit the process, students should be housed in the locations they are researching so that they become members of the community. In addition it appears that, in the Go for IT! project, the decision-making process in the group was sometimes laborious. The supervision will henceforth be more carefully organized. This requires a greater leading role, and earlier interventions if and when a process starts going awry. To improve the decision-making process the issuing of commissions relating to The Patching Zone will also be more rigidly defined in the future.

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Preserving the knowledge gained by the teams during the projects and applying this to new projects appears to be a challenge for The Patching Zone. Different students work on each project, and the only stabilising factors are the team of supervisors. The supervisors are not concerned with transferring knowledge and developing a methodology, while these are extremely important for The Patching Zone. The students themselves have no long-term expectations from their participation in the projects - they are intent on realizing the best project they can, and in gaining as much practical experience as possible to supplement their education. Preserving continuity in transferring knowledge between the projects is thus an important consideration. At the moment an internal and an external blog are maintained for the duration of the project, but this is not an optimal form of documentation. Based on experience to date, outcome and evaluation criteria for each component of each project have been introduced so that the results and outcomes can be monitored and documented.

Another point of attention is realizing sustainable change (innovation). The Cultuur Lokaal project made it clear that informing colleagues who did not actively participate in the

project of the outcomes was an unnecessary step. This also applies to the practical implementation of the outcomes within the organisation. And indeed Cultuur Lokaal was a pilot project that was meant to shake things up within the organisation. In future projects the idea is to also include the implementation phase in the project, and to make definite agreements about this with the client. The intention is to further supervise the implementation to ensure that the changes that take place will not be too cautious. The Patching Zone was recently invited to participate in a follow-up phase involving the structural implementation of the methodology within the institute.

The next point for consideration is the funding model. As mentioned earlier, The Patching Zone receives its funding from a variety of sources. When seeking funding, an organisation with as many different overlaps as The Patching Zone - art/culture, societal, education, creative industries - has to run the gamut of various funding organisations.

What does the Patching Zone's future hold? It is in any case not the intention that it becomes a fully-fledged and independent course. Quality is paramount, and if that means that only two projects can be realized each year with groups of highly talented students, then so be it. The Patching Zone is currently holding discussions with a variety of partners in the Netherlands about up-scaling The Patching Zone to a national level. The Patching Zone is also looking further afield with a view to collaborating with partners in other countries. An initial collaborative test project is aimed at exchanging knowledge and experiences, after which we will work out if there is enough room for any satellite projects within Europe.

Summary

Virtueel Platform is convinced of the unique character of The Patching Zone. It differs from other approaches in a number of ways: the long-term presence of the team in the location where the project occurs; and striving for change and transformation and not focusing solely on participation, as is frequently the case with other cultural projects. The Patching Zone emerged from an artistically minded and conceptual approach; the expertise of the permanent team in this area can be detected throughout the entire process. It is not based on an individual artist but on a young and varied team. Furthermore, The Patching Zone constantly tries to connect with other sectors, such as academia, and to continue building on this robust foundation.

The transdisciplinary work process is highly dependent on the interaction within the team. Moreover, continually changing teams offers opportunities as well as risks. The projects chosen by The Patching Zone are another area of consideration. The projects seem to vary widely when it comes to their goal and the target group. Because The Patching Zone has until now limited itself to depending on external demand instead of determining its own agenda, it could be said that they innovate from this limitation. Working on a project-by-project basis can lead to continuity problems. The teams within The Patching Zone are continually reconstituted (with the exception of the permanent staff) and need to be continually re-formed and re-enthused. More attention should therefore be paid to creating a suitable documentation strategy to ensure that information is preserved and can be transferred.

A meeting is held to thoroughly evaluate if the process patching method functioned in an effective way. The criteria for success with such projects are not easily quantifiable but they must be related to the goals that The Patching Zone sets for itself. One area that is well documented in relation to effectiveness is the personal experiences of those involved in the project, for example, the participants involved in Cultuur Lokaal. These have been included in the publication *Buiten Spelen. Woudlopershandboek voor de erfgoedmedewerker 2.0*, and elsewhere.

Benefits with respect to traditional collaborative approaches:

- A varied make up of both the team and the supervisors leads to new perspectives. At the same time this kind of team make-up and its temporary nature produces several problems: the lack of context, the changing profile of the teams, and the difficulties involved in focusing the participants on the same goal, makes many demands on the organisation.
- A transdisciplinary and international team result in added value: people join a process without pre-conceived ideas,

and the presence of a wide range of knowledge and backgrounds creates the environment for refreshing and unexpected lines of enquiry that can break down traditional and seemingly impermeable barriers. For example, more time will be spent on correctly formulating the problems to overcome any language barriers or misunderstandings, which results in accurate definitions and focused discussions in which assumptions are avoided.

- Demand-led operations ensure a sense of urgency within the project; there is a clear 'owner of the problem'/client and a clear goal.
- The Patching Zone is focused on solution-oriented thinking, in theory, in practice, and especially in the combination of the two.
- Students gain deeper insights and have more tools at their disposal to experiment and solve problems.
- The organisation is extremely flexible - it can reorganize and/or relocate itself for the short-term: 'we have a small permanent footprint'.

Challenges:

Establishing project management at meta-level that ensures:

- Tighter decision-making during the group process. Closely monitoring the role of the client.
- Translating the individual work of the students for the supervisors(s) at the academies and universities.
- Creating alliances between culture, creative industry and science that are frequently lacking in existing funding models.

At the moment The Patching Zone is more of a catalyser; in the future it could also play a greater role in implementation.

This text is partly based on interviews with Anne Nigten and Kristina Andersen from The Patching Zone, August 2009.

Further reading

Kuiper, Else Rose and Dick Rijken (eds.), *Buiten Spelen. Woudlopershandboek voor de erfgoedmedewerker 2.0*. Waterwolf, The Hague 2008.

Nigten, Anne, 'Processpatching. Defining New Methods in aRt&D', Ph.D. thesis SMARTlab Programme in Performative New Media Arts, Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design. University of the Arts, London 2006.

Brickwood, Cathy, Bronac Ferran, David Garcia & Tim Putnam (eds.), *Uncommon Ground*. BIS Publishers, Amsterdam 2007.

Websites

<http://cultuurlokaal.patchingzone.net/>

<http://patchingzone.org/>

<http://www.waterwolflab.nl/>

<http://processpatching.net/>

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Quotes

In an ideal world The Patching Zone would be a practical course for higher education - a centre for creative research.
Anne Nigten, 25 August 2009.

What we can do is make systems that don't solve any problems, or affect developments, but that are maybe able to mark the changes. To indicate, and make visible the transition that is happening.
Kristina Anderson, 25 August 2009

Don't give me five million euro's. If you give me access to every single old folks home in Amsterdam then that's much more interesting. I can't do anything with money. It will buy you streets and houses, and computer courses. But I really want access to a particular group, a particular situation.
Kristina Anderson, 25 August 2009

We take the idea of a living lab very seriously, but with the emphasis on 'LIVING'.
Kristina Anderson, 25 August 2009