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Laboratories of the in-between

LABtoLAB in-between art, research, education and new medias

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OUTLINE

LABtoLAB is a cooperative project set up by 5 European organizations that are active in the field of new media : Crealab, Nantes (FR); Area10, London (UK); Medialab-Prado, Madrid (ES); Constant, Brussels (BE); Kitchen, Budapest (HU). The project researches informal ways of learning by analysing the notion of media-lab from the perspective of day-to-day practices of the initiating partners and those of organisations that are invited to participate in the project. There is a tendency in our society to favor a professional working force with specific properties: flexible, swift to respond to changes, willing to be informed / reformed and re-trained if so desired. The traditional vision on working life positions the process of learning before the professional carreer, and this birth, school, work, death logic still applies to most working situations. But increasingly the relationship between learning and work has started to blur and has become less linear. Workers are now often required to regularly update their skills, to stay informed, to keep in touch with their field and to listen to what is going on in remote corners of their profession. Digital tools and the integration of technology in our daily life offer new perspectives in terms of knowledge production and distribution. The marriage between the free market and the Internet seems to tick all boxes of a society looking for technological answers to its socio-economical problems. Clearly new ways of learning, less formal, and maybe uncertificated, are on every organizations' mind. 'Knowledge exchange' is a valuable tool to increase an organizations' viability. LABtoLAB is rooted in this context. As workers in a quite specific branch of the media art field, we feel there is a need for new spaces, other types of institutions and informal initiatives that are open for the participation of anyone. Spaces (and by 'spaces' we don't mean only four walls and a roof) that take advantage of the hybridisation of specialism, that dare to tick outside the box and that are willing to create a critical approach to the culture of technological work.

ROADMAP

LABtoLAB started in December 2009 with a 5-day workshop in Kitchen Budapest and will end in June 2011 with a European meeting hosted in Nantes. As organisations we are quite different in character, ranging from privately funded to institutional labs, artists based collectives with activist strategies to local networked organizations and government supported media spaces. To get acquainted with each other's ways of working during the first meeting in Kitchen we started a mapping session to visualise the workflows, structures and fields of operation of our organizations. A broad spectrum of interrelated practices, different skills, facilities, methodologies, experiences, expertise and interests that were present in our work started to show itself. Our organisations all had developed different types of informal spaces dedicated to sharing expertise, to experimentation and innovation. Many of these involved border-crossing between

sectors and disciplines to enter terrains that are valuable for the work we do but not generally recognized as such. Now, a year into the project, we can see several concrete outcomes of the collaboration. One result is that next to the scheduled workshops, exchanges are taking place in several forms : there have been residency programs set up and also the first moves into 'job shadowing' initiatives are taking place. In the course of the project, many other organisations are engaging in the workshops. For example: in Medialab-Prado Madrid there was a large presence of Latin American media-labs. Participants also share their expertise through participation in conferences, contributions to publications, etc. This chain of information exchange, of discussing with colleague organisations and being informed by others transforms what started as an exchange between a few core partners into a broad investigative platform. The final meeting in Nantes will be the opportunity to share practices and reflections we will have developed over the two years during which the project took place. There we hope to present the potentials of collaboration and networks of exchange that could be pursued, extended, and the lessons we and others have learned from this process. It will be open to a wide public of professionals and amateurs, active in European labs and local networks, with an individual, institutional, activist or academic background, representing a diversity of laboratory-organizations. This meeting will be the final step of LABtoLAB as a project but will interrogate a potential, both a common and networked space, that can and will continue to exist.

COMMON GROUND

The investigation of the before mentioned 'informal spaces for learning' forms a common ground on which the LABtoLAB cooperation is based. It is in these informal spaces where we locate our research, where we try to expand the notion of the contemporary 'media-lab'. A testing ground where we investigate, explore, discuss, describe and enhance its values. LABtoLAB exploits 'in-between spaces'. Unlike clearly paired opposites such as amateur-professional, beginner-expert, art-science, success-failure, fields of operations such as experiment, improvisation, playing, collaboration, tinkering are open to be re-appropriated for multiple purposes. They continuously re-position themselves in the in-between and serve as a sand box, a testing ground, a drawing board for the improvement of media related skills and professions. A media lab is a tool in the middle, a mediator, a space that can be openly approached, that can serve as a breeding ground, an incubator of thought and experiment. The lab positioned in the 'in-between' has a bridging function, it functions as a connector space. By situating our workspace 'in between', we explicitly attribute mediating values to our practice. Furthermore, LABtoLAB partners share an interest in free/libre open source software tools. Some partner organizations work exclusively with F/LOSS tools out of ideological reasons, some have a more liberal approach and mix proprietary and F/LOSS software in their work. We acknowledge the huge potential of F/LOSS software for artistic and educational purposes and engage in its production and use. The most important aspect of F/LOSS and the Internet is its cultural significance. How it has affected other spheres of culture and society. In a way, LABtoLAB participants could be seen as a 'community of curiosity'. A community that involves members of organizations that are curious to learn from each others practice. Also within our groups there are different expertises to learn from, since many people connected to LABtoLAB are at the same time teacher, student, DIY amateur and specialist. We are artists, cultural operators, project managers, educational programmers, workshop leaders, researchers, trainers, computer scientists, administrators, mediators, and as such we can learn from our mutual perspectives. LABtoLAB is a demo that prototypes a network between laboratories-organizations looking for challenging fields of exchange through art, education and technologies.

POTENTIAL

In order to understand the values of what we call 'media lab', we have to take into consideration the specific historical conditions of the time in which we live: the so called 'information era'. The media lab that exists nowadays is preceded by several historical workspace typologies and forms of research institutes. For example: the production workshop, the artist studio and the research lab, but also the museum, the civic center, the library and the school. We currently understand media labs as research organisations that seek responses to the needs of the information society. These 'needs' are not fixed assets nor known and defined in character. They depend on context ; what is the object of desire, who or what is the asking party? They can be considered from political, social, cultural and educational perspectives. The rise of the Internet and digital culture generated huge expectations because it occured at a moment in time when the notion of pulic space was hollowed out and devalued. The Internet has reformed the public space paradigm. A great part of the Internet, specifically all that is linked to free culture, has become a collective lab where users can become collaborators in the production processes, where users are in charge and concerned about the contexts and the tools they are using. One of the biggest challenges of the information era is to replicate the open systems of the Internet, as for example free software, in the physical space, that is to say in the cities. It is here where media labs may offer an extraordinary potential as generator of public space for public experimentation, where citizens can explore new ways of organization, can think together about their neighborhoods and can take more control over the contexts that define them as citizens. From a social and cultural perspective media labs offer public tools for knowledge sharing, socialization and experimentation. The media lab does not work as a mere content provider; media labs are platforms where people meet to exchange ideas and experiment together in the development of prototypes. Media labs enhance the citizen science, the knowledge generated by communities of doers that are not recognized experts. The media lab offers a system where recognized professional experts collaborate with amateurs, where beginners can become collaborators, where participation can be strong or weak. At media labs, as in the Internet, the division between fields of knowledge becomes blurred and it is the experiment, the prototype, that determines the skills that are needed in its development. The media lab is based on doing, on collaborative prototyping. This is why media labs offer inspiring and generous learning contexts where participants learn by doing, by getting involved in actual projects. The spirit of the Internet as a 'network of networks', is mirrored in the LABtoLAB objective to be a 'lab of labs' : LABtoLAB is a meeting space, a network of organisations, an accessible hub in which the notion and function of media labs can be scrutinized, contested, refined and adapted. Where experiment and thought goes into thinking out new prototypes for future lab structures.

for the LABtoLAB network ;

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