

## EVENT SUPRASTRUCTURALISM

### - programming events in the field of new media culture

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#### PRECONDITION

One of the most unreflected activities in the field of new media culture is programming or structuring of events (it's programs, participants and contexts), be it a workshop, conference, festival, seminar, fair or any other form of "communication oriented media gatherings" (exhibitions and performances are obviously excluded from this). Being a fairly new part of cultural production - developed in-between trajectories of visual/performative/media arts, media & telecommunication technologies as well as critical/cyber/media theory & activism - one has to wonder how these facts influence distinction new media culture from other older cultural fields (music, visual arts, theater, dance, literature, film) and if these belong to the same level in hierarchical division. In the past decade production of new media events became so widespread that most of the European states by now have at least one annual festival that deals with this field along with smaller events (usually within film festivals). However a great number of pioneers from the scene feel reluctant to take part in them as they feel that quality decreased drastically and there is little benefit in attending these. How did we arrive to this point where 'The Importance of Meetspace' has decreased so drastically?

#### new/unstable media -> new/unstable formats:

The process of developing programs for cultural events is usually taken on by the curators/editors responsible for the content, who then coordinate with producer and technical staff, often neglecting specific issues like social dynamics among participants, spatial design of interaction, attention capacity of audience, overall context for communication and many other related issues. In most cases within traditional cultural forms (with inherent structures) this would still be sufficient, but for new media culture this system fails as:

- content usually doesn't fit well in existing cultural infrastructure (white cube galleries, black box cinemas or staged venues for theater - as all are developed with specific formats in mind from which new media tends to distance itself), both in terms of technical part and ambience of the venue
- audience is rarely versed in the "language" of new media and therefore needs extra attention/guidance, benefiting from presence of authors presentations - so articulation on mediating new media is still very much needed,
- forms of works to be presented can vary radically depending if they focus formally on articulating spatial, temporal or interaction aspects of new media.

Old recipes fail to work here and new ones expire almost as soon they get established.

#### MOTIVATION

How to read this?: Being unaware of any in-depth reviews/assessments (at the point of writing), analysis of events from this perspective or texts that dissect existing models in more depth, this is an effort to open the field to discussion and maybe consolidate some of experiences from known events, rather than being a complete guide or theoretical/rhetorical tractate on this issue. Hoping that this would prove useful for future organizers (though it won't make anyone ultimate producer of new media events overnight) I hope to receive feedback and include it in future versions of text.

It is important to state that some of the best lessons were learned (by many people I discussed this with) from bad or "less

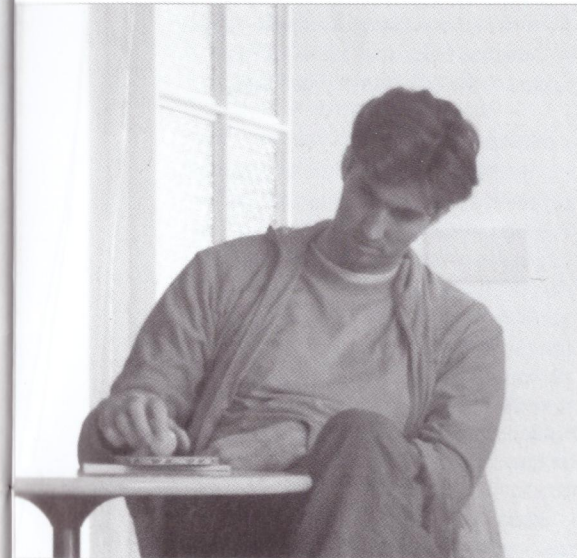
successful" events and personal mistakes. Additionally one can make use of this information only up to a point (and with a grain of salt), since a lot of events happen with numerous compromises on the way and within limitations of local contexts, so the number of creative choices tends to be "reduced".

As the whole field is fairly new, it is hard to have an experienced professional at one's side to help one in the process of making structural decisions without being intrusive on the concept.

Level of expertise of participants varies greatly and though few years back most of the events were attended predominantly by experienced and educated audience (sometime almost exclusively by producers themselves), in recent years more outsiders are lurking into this field with an interest to be informed (educated?) on the new and hip media culture trends (especially true for bigger festivals).

For all of these reasons and specially for ability to discuss ideal event forms and inability to execute them at the same level in practice made me interested in initiating discussion. In labeling this process I named it: **SUPRASTRUCTURALISM** - referring to the theoretical possibility of perfect/lossless conducting of electricity, which can not be archived in real world applications.

The event, when discussion was first initiated, was a brief meeting during RAM4 workshop "Survival Kit" in Helsinki (organized by Oleno and NIFCA), over a very early and slow breakfast - later also presented at the summary session where some people showed additional interest, that eventually made me decided to try to write a text and moderate a discussion on the topic on-line as follow-up.



## FORMS & FORMULATIONS

For the sake of making statements and arguments as clear as possible (and opening them for possible discussion) I developed sets of: **formats** (most usual forms of events) and **problematic issues** (to be addressed) which is slightly arbitrary division - but hopefully useful. Additionally some **tips & tricks** (to bare in mind) were developed.

**Predominant models of events nowadays can be categorized in 6 forms: workshops, conferences, seminars, exhibitions, performances & festivals.**

Forms of events that are not taken into account at this point (due to a personal lack of experience in organizing/managing these), but should definitely be discussed, are a kind of hybrids that depend highly on specific context: **geek-meets** (like: hacklabs, dorkbots, chaos computer camps...), **media actions/shows** (like: Italian Teletreet actions, London's famous live talk-show events...), **mobile programs** (like: REBOOT, ATOL...), fairs (like: media culture fair in Amsterdam), **protest events** (like: border camps and "counter" events), **lab-events** (like those @ Bootlab, Times UP!, The THING...).

To avoid vagueness in terms, I tried to look into how are they interpreted (rather than look for original meaning) and frameworks within which they appear in the field of new media culture.

- **workshops**  
(practical collaborative work over several days) {organized by organizations/initiatives who proactively take part in the scene, by promoting, developing or educating in good practices or tools}
- **conferences**  
(formal arenas for presenting different perspectives on issues in a structured system of lecturers, moderators and audience) {organized by institutions of bigger capacity usually with aim to give overview of a larger issue to wider public}
- **seminars**  
(1 or 2 day event of semi-formal presentations & panel discussions) {mostly organized by organisations who are coming from institutional background, with interest to introduce topics that are temporarily related to the activities of organisation}
- **exhibitions**  
(formal expressions of curatorial ideas about certain topic/issue or with aim to give overview of certain type of practice) {organized by formal and informal entities}
- **performances**  
(staged actions formulated with relation of performers-audience in mind) {organized by formal and informal entities in venues that have a controlled ambiance and are

equipped with sound/video system)

- **festivals**  
(concentrated integration of several previously mentioned forms in short time span, usually reoccurring periodically) {produced by organizations of big capacity or coordination of smaller ones, that work in different fields of cultural production}

...and what are their usually flops.

- **artificial symmetry in structuring program** - While trying to put "order" in the structure and make it simple and easily comprehensible for participants/guests, artificial symmetry is developed and proportions no longer suite individual parts of program, but are shaped to simplify ideas of overall structure. These are most obvious in conferences and festivals that group all different types of personalities as they fail to accommodate them (artistic egocentrism - presentation of personal projects regardless of context; geek autism - inability to separate technology and cybernetic abstraction of it; designers' exhibitionism - where form overtakes any concept; academic phlegmatism - where all is less relevant since there are even more daring theories than any practice). General rule : Flops tend to be bigger as forms are more rigid.

- **attention spans ?** - Fixed presumptions on participants being able to dedicate 100% of their attention or none, rather than working with values in-between is common practice. That is why you often have "multimedia equipped spaces" with single function and

role. When stimulation is not at maximum there is no option of staying connected on peripheral and ambient level. Most obvious examples are text-reading lectures in tight auditorium space, or video screening rooms bare of furniture.

- **successfully forms should not change?** - Tradition rather than innovation and experiment is already appearing (even though the scene as such has existed for a decade or so). Questions of abolishing romanticized and distant past are often regarded as unfriendly and malicious, while reflection on just past event are pure torture to organizers who just went through hell to make it happen. When is the good time to be critical ???
- **providing escape routes** - If audience is not interested in specific content/speaker of the moment there should be a way to organize escape route, since only audience which is worse than passive one is the one that sleeps or distracts others. Unlike other field of culture, when doing new media event you can get alternative solutions to clear pathways to exit or food/drinks by providing power plugs and net access to all those equipped with digital gadgets (laptops, smart-phones, hand-helds ...). Never underestimate power of bored, creative and technically skilled person ;-)

## ISSUES

Important issues to decide on when **organizing a communication process** (or to be more politically correct "environment for open communication to occur") in NMC scene, that don't have fixed answer and need your creativity and intelligence (separate things) for most adequate solution:

**problems of commonality** (*common ground*) among parties involved in process:

- different backgrounds of participants (art/design/theory/technology/activism/media) and their different models of presenting work
- lack of fixed/agreed-upon terminology (interpretation is often bending meaning of words) (a lot of terms carry heavy stigma of past uses for some while are new and fresh for others)

**problems of size** - *more complex than just quantity/quality decision:*

- problems of representing (when individuals or works can be representative of social groups, cultures or even regions?)
- "DO-ers" vs. "TALK-ers" (when to give preferences to practitioners, rather than those who research/articulate their findings to specific issues?)
- "stars" and "familiar faces" (do you want to attract attention of outsiders or do you want to have established and known standpoints to interact with)
- "size matters" (for more festive atmosphere it is important to reach critical size, but for productive atmosphere it is more important to create strong moment of cohesion which is possible only within smaller group)

**problems of language** (*although English is regarded as standard there is little discussion on how this influences communication:*

- between native speakers it is presumed that with English language others have access to all the cultural references and subtle phraseology, one is used to when speaking
- those who are fluent in English can still suffer from lack of expressiveness,
- most preparatory material is usually provided exclusively in English (which is no longer treated as foreign language understood by many, but standard language to all)
- finally non-fluent speakers have trouble thinking in foreign language and reacting promptly in direct/real-time communication)

**problems of argumentation**

- lack of overview of possible historical references (obvious generational gaps additionally expand as only access to historic facts in this field are still personal experiences. The older you are, the better chance you have of having deeper overview of past, until someone really takes time and resources to write one of the possible histories and others agree on it being useful and referential)
- lack of critical practice (or lack of critique in general is proven to be the most specific issue that distinguishes new media art from its older predecessors - music, performance, cinema, visual arts... How many bad reviews have you read so far?)
- multiplicity of simultaneous perspectives (for example "software art" can be formally discussed from the aesthetic standpoint through its visible/audible/tangible output, from its code functionality and from its relations to the other works of art or software culture)

## TIPS & TRICKS:

This section may seem banal, but it only seems so...

- **different situations need different solutions**, so learn from local experiences
- **make sure you \_target\_ audience**, having in mind that you can only fit so much in the target, in relations to your armory, rather than abstract goals
- **leisure/food/chat-meet spaces...** can be most important spaces of interaction, so make plenty of space for this to occur in natural and stimulative way
- **diversity of media stimulations**, employing different senses over a longer period of time, rather than just hearing or just vision

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