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e-Culture: Crossovers and Challenges

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e-Culture: Crossovers and Challenges

e-Culture?... Only five years ago nobody had heard of the word 'e-culture' – at least not in Holland, where I
come from. Yes, there was much talk about ICT, information and communications technology and ist implications for economy and society. And when it came to arts and culture, government ministers spoke of "ICT and culture" as a new policy issue, focusing on
the use of ict in the arts and cultural sector.

But today, e-culture appears an established phrase. With a wink towards such words as 'e-commerce' and 'e-learning', the idea of 'e-culture' signalled a new period, a new phase, where developments in arts and culture are given their place in the digital domain. Above all, the idea of 'e-culture' gave voice to the observation that since the mid-1990s something
significantly new and different had been happening. Strange-looking as this novel word 'e-culture' appeared at first, I do think it made explicit that the rise of information society and digital media, did not only bring new tools and technologies, but that a new context was emerging for arts and culture.

Digital media and internet are creating a new cultural arena. A new context, where we can no longer speak simply of the application of ict in art or culture. The
word 'E-culture' suggested quite rightly that something more fundamental was at stake. Digital media and the Internet were transforming the cultural sector – as they are opening the doors to new forms of artistic expression, creating different roles for cultural institutions and placing users and audiences increasingly centre-stage. In other words, digital media were changing what we used to call 'culture'. From the arts to libraries, from media to museums, from design to broadcasting, the digital domain changed our ways of making and consuming culture. Let's call it eculture. And now, in the context of digital media culture and beyond, the talk is about so-called 'creative industries' — indicating how the cultural sector and the commercial fields are becoming increasingly intertwined. e-Culture has an important role to play here, as I will come to later. But first something on how the idea of e-culture was taken up in cultural policies in the Netherlands.

The Dutch e-culture perspective

So how do we view 'e-culture'? Let me outline briefly the perspective of the Netherlands' advisory Council for Culture of which I was a member until the end of last year. In 2003 we submitted an advisory report to the Dutch government. It was called "From ICT to Eculture"
and focused on — as the subtitle said — 'the digitalisation of culture and the implications for cultural policy'. [1]

The report underlined that digitalisation affects the entire spectrum of culture production, distribution, representation. The Internet and digital media have an impact on how artists express themselves; how our cultural heritage is presented; how libraries make information accessible to the public; and how information, public debate and culture is treated within media. e-Culture, was taken to mean all processes of "expression, reflection and sharing in the digital domain".

The policy perspective on e-culture developed in the Dutch advisory report was based on three lines of argument:

• One, that in a network society, where experiences and developments are increasingly defined by (digital) media technologies, the cultural sector —and indeed our idea of 'culture'— must be re-cast in that very context.

• Second, that in the new arena of e-culture, policies for the arts, libraries and cultural heritage institutions and for public media broadcasting can no longer be developed in separation. Put differently, what was called for is an integrated cultural policy perspective.

• And third, that e-culture goes well beyond the instrumental application of information technologies in the field of arts, museums, libraries and broadcasting. It involves both cultural innovation and changing roles for cultural institutions in the context of the digitalisation society.

In this manner, the Dutch perspective on e-culture move the discussion from the instrumental use of ICT, to a fundamental re-think of cultural activities in the digital domain. Hence the title of our advisory report: From ICT to E-culture.

Crossovers

So what are the defining features and challenges of this emergent e-culture? Some observations. One characteristic of e-culture is that developments in digital media have lead to a process of cultural convergence, between different disciplines and domains in the field of arts and culture. We have seen new collaborations and new cross-connections between fine art, music, architecture, industrial and graphic design, fashion, television and radio, but also, for instance, in relation to computer games, software development, online education, advertising, libraries and so on. In e-culture the boundaries between all these fields are blurring.

What's been happening in society and culture is that developments in different cultural domains and disciplines have increasingly become intertwined. We are seeing more and more 'crossovers' made possible because of digital media. We see the emergence of cross-fertilisations between disciplines be they visual arts, audiovisual production, design, or museum displays. Nowadays artists clearly no longer work in their individual lone studios: they are creative producers in a broad domain, where they mix and mingle with media, but also with advertising, popular culture, design and entertainment. In part because of this new working context, in the world of e-culture, artists and cultural workers produce new forms of content and novel forms of expression. That is what's happening when ICT becomes e-culture.

In e-culture we see novel linkages between domains, knowledge fields and institutions. The
emergence of crossovers in e-culture, are visible in the new practices which are emerging. The appear not just as connections between different sectors, but as hybrids that are more than the sum of their parts. We see new forms – of communication forms, media forms, but also forms of expression, of collaboration, of interaction. They surpass traditional categories
and institutions; and we call them e-culture, for lack of a better word.

E-culture opens up new opportunities, for example through the possibilities of interactivity. The new cultural forms in e-culture also give impetus to new cultural communities, as boundaries between 'artists' and 'consumers', or between 'authors' and 'readers' increasingly fade away. The new cultural communities that result, regularly show up in hybrid forms themselves. Think, for example of the many meeting places on the web, the Wikipedias, the rise of Blogs, YouTube, Second Life, and the development of interactive 'Gesamtkunstwerken'. And of course, many of the things that are being talked about

today; and also the Wissenskünste that are shown in the Neuen Museum Weserburg. All of that is what's now happening within e-culture.

On a more aggregate level, when we look at the cultural sector as a whole, and the workings of our cultural institutions — media companies, design and visual arts libraries and museum, broadcasting — we witness more and more 'crossovers'-practices. That's the breeding ground for all those new hybrid forms and crossmedia developments. An important focus in my perspective on e-culture — which we as Council for Culture adopted — was to recognise the importance of overlapping fields in the cultural sector: that is, the crossover areas between arts and creative production, media and cultural heritage (see Venn diagram). And similarly, we also see new linkages emerging between creative production and business, as well as education. We could easily draw another Venn diagram, with circles for 'economy' and 'culture', and talk about crossover areas in the same way. In this sense, digital media and eculture are at the very heart of what nowadays are called the 'creative industries. In the context of eculture, my view had been that the greatest cultural innovations will take place in the crossover-areas where new connections and mixtures between domains are allowed to take place. A media lab working together with a museum, a broadcast organization with a school, a library with an internet design company. That, I
would claim, is also happening in the so-called 'creative industries': innovation centred around crossover areas and collaborations between different disciplines, working fields and institutions.

Strategies for 'creative innovation'

Crossovers, in this perspective, are the key to innovation in both e-culture and for the creative industries. It suggests that this is where our strategies for 'creative innovation' should focus on.

Indeed in the context of the debate on how to make Amsterdam a 'creative knowledge city', I have advanced this line of thinking. And I would be surprised if in many cities, such as Bremen, similar arguments would not apply also. The idea is two-fold. One that the cultural sector, plays a key role in finding thee crossover areas where cultural innovation can take place. And second, that policy-makers concerned with making a 'creative knowledge city, should design specific policies for connecting the cultural institutions to those working in business, commerce, education and other knowledge fields.

One example of such a strategy for creative innovation in city politics — which I will briefly mention, but have no time to expand on — is the so-called 'Creative London' programme, with ist idea of 'Creative Hubs'. These Creative Hubs are centres where local business initiatives are linked to creative communities and developments. They connect local industry to cultural institutions and to research and education The Hub is a place, a node in the network, a 'crossover' area in my words, where people and developments are matched in support of creative innovation.

Of course, these kinds of places could be nurtured in different forms, as part of our creative innovation strategies. They could be designed and tailored to local circumstances. Such strategies embrace the idea that creative innovation requires new forms of collaboration, new communities of practice and new experiments .The challenge is how to orchestrate the new linkages and alliances that make this happen.

E-culture revisited

Phrased in this way, it becomes clear that developments in e-culture may well pave the way for new models and practices that establish meaningful links between the world of arts and culture on the one hand and business and science on the other. One conclusion in the Dutch report on e-culture was that cultural institutions increasingly become intermediary institutions, as connectors to other fields in society and the economy. It emphasises the

importance for cultural institutions, old and new, to look for collaborations and crossovers with fields outside their own domains.

In the context of 'creative industries', we can learn from the practice of e-culture. The reality is that those working in institutions of e-culture – from crossmedia labs, to digital design research groups and new media arts centres – have been working like that all along.
We only have to think, for example, of the games industry, to realize that its success is built upon a mix of disciplines, fields of knowledge and professional practices. The gaming industry is one of those crossover domains where culture, technology, media, arts and business combine in a 'natural' way. It's the 'natural' way indeed, if we acknowledge how e-culture actually works.

But having said all that, we're still trying to get eculture into a proper perspective. We are still searching for the right concepts and and seem to be lost for words to capture what's going on. We are still talking of 'new' media, when clearly they are no longer new. We speak of applying technologies in the existing arts, whilst the very meaning of cultural practice, in our new media environment is changing under our eyes. We're still searching for firm ground, whilst boundaries are blurring between the arts, media business and research in the digital domain. I have done little more than to provide some pointers for trying to see what the future holds for e-culture?

One problem we have with the word 'e-culture, has to do with the very word 'culture'. Going back to what the anthropologists say, 'culture' is used both for what we make, and what we belong to. We produce culture, but at the same time culture is what we live in. The idea of e-culture similarly reflects this dual character. It is both how we engage with digital media to produce culture, and at the same time it is our a new environment, in which we experience and give meaning to culture. We have to learn to appreciate both. The first, by supporting specific developments in digital media; the second by re-thinking our ideas
of culture in the digital domain.

On that note, I'd like to finish, recalling the words of computer pioneer (and one-time jazz guitarist) Alan Kay, who raised the following rhetorical question:

'Is the computer revolution more like a musical instrument or more like the printing press?. And the reply he gave himself: 'If it's like a musical instrument, then we don't have to worry about it too much, because people who are tuned to the music will find it, and good things will happen as a result. But if it's more like the printing press, then we absolutely have to understand what it is about the music and what it takes to learn that music.'

In our thinking on the cultural development around digital media and the internet, we do well to take both frames of thought seriously: and to direct our attention simultaneously to the instruments and 'the music' of e-culture.