

## The ABC's of Conferencing Experiment, Play, Reflect

By Trebor Scholz & Geert Lovink

People love conferences. They can't get enough of all the offline events on offer. Like festivals, conferences are venues where you can meet future collaborators, debate ideas and artworks, party intensely, get inspired, provoked, learn, make new friends, and then occasionally carry on the dialogue in the sauna. These days, the event industry is an integral part of the shopping-driven locative spectacle. Conferences are also an opportunity for people who can't meet otherwise, to spend a few days together away from their obligations, zooming in on ideas. Whereas, socially speaking, conferences may be exciting, most events use conventional, unreflected formats. In this essay we investigate why this is the case and what alternative models are available to disrupt the everyday consensus machine. Beyond good or evil, conferences are here to stay, so they better be good.

### Critique of Panelism

For a moment let's not focus on what people like or do not like. We were always looking for conferences free of keynote speeches and panels. It's a relief to see speakers argue freely, be brief - leaving ample time for questions from the audience, and focus on the points raised by the chair of a session. Formats and the vocabulary used lock us not only into structures but also impact the way we develop content. In the age of the Internet 'rhetoric', we can feel free to move on, away from reading a 'paper' to more distributed and collaborative forms of discourse production, discussion and dispute. The ritualized academic structure of panels and the non-communicative form of the keynote speaker feed into the celebrity system reinforcing hegemonic paradigms that get in the way of genuine dialogue and of diverse, emerging voices being heard. Some will read this criticism as an attack on the scientific community as a whole. We disagree. Academics are not a species in danger of extinction and it is time to get out of the defensive mode. Panelism is part of the dark side of 'academism' and needs to be addressed, exactly because it is spilling over to other contexts such as the arts, culture, new media and even activism.

A good example of well meant but misplaced panelism is the Intersociety for Electronic Arts (ISEA), a bi-annual conference, a somewhat tragic event in which artists have to participate in scientific formats in order to contribute. In part this is an effect of the forced 'edufication' of the arts, particularly in the United States, but increasingly also in countries such as Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom. Within the American 'university of excellence' (1) language and research formats in the arts are modeled increasingly after the business logic of the sciences. People who decide about grants in turn are looking at the military-industrial complex that supports them to an ever-growing extent. The possibility of failure, even in the sciences becomes almost impossible due to an all-powerful result imperative. Instead of addressing this topic directly, a culture of academic simulation is being introduced in which a wide range, from designers, programmers and activists to net artists are persuaded to respond to 'call for papers,' motivate each other to submit a 'proposal for a panel' and even have to buy into the dirty business of (blind) peer reviewing, enforcing lengthy citations, in order to get something 'published' on a website.

Increasingly, dull formats of the sciences are imposed on the arts. Mind you, these are mostly unnecessary, 'alien' formats that no one would come up with on their own. There is by no means a 'natural' desire amongst artists to sit in panels and write 'papers.' In fact, these formats are despised-- but nonetheless hard to resist. We do not suggest that artists cannot speak for themselves or should not be involved in practices embracing theory and production, or arts and sciences. But we do question the forced adaptation of scientific formats and argue that it is high time to start public awareness, openly talk about it and label the occurring tendency by its proper names: paperism and panelism.

What's so bad about three or four people, each sitting on their individual hobby horses, introduced by an ill-informed chair of the session far distant from the divulged audience? The fact that the panelists do not know each other and have not seen let alone read each other's 'papers'? The fact that there was hardly time for questions? Who cares? Exactly. Who cares? We do. We, the audience, are those who care. We have to say no to the supermarket mentality in which both audience and presenters are merely shopping around, not showing up on panels, are clearly programmed in the

wrong section of the program or have no ability, or even wish, to addressing the handful of people in the hall in a clear manner.

The source of 'panelism' has to be located at conference organizers, not speakers, let alone the audience. What panelism expresses is laziness and a lack of creative thinking as to which format in what (discursive) situation will work best. Panelism is often an indication that too many people have been involved in the decision making process. The panel structure is the flipside of justified attempts to be more inclusive and have as many speakers as possible. But that doesn't always result in interesting events. The best conferences are being produced by a small team of both researchers and producers that closely collaborate. Events curated by one individual, such as Ars Electronica, have the tendency to become narrow and repetitive and develop an informal circuit of guessing and gossiping around the intentions of this one person, much like Documenta and the biennial system with its small group of circulating curators.

The worst panels are those when speakers really have no clue why they are in the same session. Or take this situation: a competitive, slightly irritated atmosphere arises when the first speaker goes over her time limit, then the second as well, leaving no time for the last one. A variation of this would be the case in which the last speaker 'eats up' all the remaining time for questions. Another general pattern is the fact that the last speaker gets most of the questions as the audience has forgotten what the previous panelists had to say. These problems can only partially be solved by a good moderator. The key issue here is not the all too human qualities of certain subjects but the deep liberal, unfocused approach in which the topics might, at best, be described as a cloud of question marks. The audience in response develops a liberal, 'surfing' attitude towards the 'collage' of information that is presented, a mechanism so precisely described by Marshall McLuhan. There is no compelling reason why panel members would have to discuss with each other. Usually they have been introduced minutes before they start and can barely remember each other's name. And while all this happens the audience sits as a silent block in the dark.

Maybe we missed something and only have been at events where there was nothing at stake. Perhaps there is a universal human right to present one's paper in public. We are being told that in this democratic idea science

should be seen as a bazaar full of mediocre but necessary products in which it is up to diehards to find the precious gems. Noise to signal ratios are varying greatly and one has to learn to filter in order to get through. Keynote speakers do not make up for the tragedy of panelism. They only mirror the problem and try to compensate for the middle of the road methodology that creates artificial celebrity. Reputation does not exist, it has to be made, and the keynote system is an ideal vehicle to do so.

### The Search for Alternatives

Before we slide into radical negativism, let's focus on alternatives. The FreeCooperation conference that we recently organized (2) took place on a campus of the State University of New York, late April 2004. The topic of the event was the art of (online) collaboration. From cell phones to email, and multiplayer online games, mailing lists, weblogs (3), and wikis (4) our everyday lives are increasingly enmeshed with technology. This at least is true for societies benefiting from the globalization of the information order. The necessity to examine what happens when we collaborate in these technological channels through which we communicate will soon become more apparent. How can we find independence and more freedom in a context of networked collaboration?

To this conference we invited the Bremen-based media critic Christoph Spehr who coined the term 'free cooperation' in his essay "Gleicher als andere" (More Equal Than the Other). Most of Spehr's writings are not translated into English and this event was an opportunity to introduce his ideas into anglophone media discourses. Spehr's writings use references to 1960s Sci-Fi movies to think about contemporary cooperation insisting on the option of refusal, independence, negotiation and re-negotiation with alien corporate or state monsters. Focusing on these ideas of equality and freedom the conference asked how they can be made useful for alternative networks of learning and the university.

We designed the FreeCooperation conference scenario after the dramaturgical structure of a Brechtian play. The somewhat staged environments of the event were rather theatrical. In order to make way for new structures there it was a crucial need to crush all hope amongst possible followers of panelism. The mantra "no lectures, no panels" took a long time to sink in. Yet, at the same time the event had to be as open and

participatory as possible. There is a wide range of alternative formats one can choose from nowadays. To state that keynotes plus panels is the only possible way of doing a conference is pure nonsense. All it takes is the willingness to experiment, undaunted by the prospect of failure.

At FreeCooperation, in a talk show-style session participants impersonated sci-fi filmmakers, scientists, and "flexible personalities" and were accompanied by musical intermezzos on Tony Conrad's "phonarmonica." (5) Remote guests commented on the debate via Internet Relay Chat. In the staging process we included an intimate talkathon (four hours, one room, two speakers, eight people in the audience at a time), a few dialogues, performances, a conference radio, a video conference in tandem with remote desktop, a game about games, streamed net radio discussions, brainstorming sessions, film screenings, a small exhibition, several workshops, a turntablist collaboration, and one monologue. There were no keynote speakers and, obviously, no panels, which worked well in particular because the topic was collaboration. We explicitly asked participants not to deliver long lectures aiming at a more dialogical format. This approach caused concerns for participants who usually walk on red carpets but was perfect for those who were willing to contribute to an event, the success of a debate as a whole, for those who could briefly present a summation of their thoughts and are then open enough to engage in debate responding to others.

Venues at the FreeCooperation event were organized with seating in circular shapes, no top-down auditoriums. Large gatherings like this are good opportunities for students and other locals to create their own networks-- relationships that may become fruitful for them in the future. Here, encounters with other students, artist friends or cultural critics may in the end even turn out to be more formative than regimented course work.

On the outset of the organization of an event the question needs to be asked if this is a half-day, one day, two day or week-long event or if it can better be realized as networked program, for example on the AccessGrid (6). Don't underestimate the amount of work that it will take: you will need help. It's pertinent to be very clear about the pay-off for all involved-- the host institution, volunteers, participants and organizers. For us, this event-

based cultural practice was rewarding as it gave the opportunity to highlight urgent issues, play with formats, to create discourse and resources about online collaboration.

How can you avoid overloading individuals with work and maintain a sense of more-or-less free cooperation in a context of next to no funding for culture in the United States (7)? In the enthusiasm of organizing one can get carried away and might make promises that will cause disappointments later.

Event planning needs to start early. But how early? Discussions and fund raising should start at least one year before a large-scale event. We began by carefully deciding on a date, cross-checking with university calendars and public holidays. Often in US academia the planning time for big conferences takes up to two years. The problem with organizing a new media event in this manner is that the topics may not be as current this far ahead. When deciding on a city for the event location does not always matter. People are willing to travel to off-the-map places to have good discussions. At the crux of the success of an event, however, is that all parts of the conference take place in one location. That is not always possible but organizers should be aware that splitting event venues gets disorienting especially for jet-lagged international participants. They will find it tiring to take costly taxis to get around, see which sessions start up at what time. In addition, many sessions may be on at the same time, which makes it hard to see what one came for and to meet other participants.

Arriving at events with hundreds or thousands of speakers, it's a challenging task to connect with those attendees with whom one wanted to talk for a long time. Nametags are half-concealed by bags or coats making for a strange detective game. A simple piece of software could help here. A Twiki (8) or proximity area network could be a space in which people can read each others' texts before they attend the event, then being able to jump right into the discussion after a short summation of their argument. People would also have an easier time finding each other as photos in the wiki, one could see where others are at a particular time during the conference, and allow for brief exchanges to arrange meetings. This requires attendees to prepare the conference and take part in pre-conference exchanges still leaving things to debate for the event itself.

Some conferences use commercial social software platforms such as ORKUT (9) to meet in. Using wireless networks one could also adapt software such as ActiveCampus (10) or "Wifi Bedouin" (11) for personal data assistants (PDAs) or wireless enabled laptops. Best, we should write a free/ open source application that serves the described conference needs.

When organizing the FreeCooperation conference we were overwhelmed by the large numbers of proposals that we received in response to our call. We read the submissions deciding based on their relevance to what we set out to organize. Like Phil Agre, media critic at The University of California Los Angeles, who remarks this in a text about the organization of conferences (12), we were uncomfortable selecting on the basis of already established reputations in the field or nepotism because this simply re-inscribes the circulation of a virtual class, the same voices are heard over and over. We decided based on proposals which led us to program undergraduate students next to established media artists and critics. We also choose participants whom we got to know on the preparatory mailing list. The main question was if the proposed presentation would fit into the thematic framework of the conference. We emphasized that we look for reflection on collaboration rather than mere descriptions of projects.

Our advice: be careful when you consider and re-consider whom to invite. Which format suits the personality of the participant best-- a more intimate setting of a workshop or rather the polemic format of the roundtable? Try to imagine the best number of people for each workshop or session. This is a difficult task when you don't know how many people will attend the overall event. It is administratively difficult to invite international speakers in the current political climate in the United States. We focused our finances mainly on participants who are not employed in American academia.

When drawing a chart of the dramaturgical flow of the conference, we oriented ourselves on the structure of Brechtian plays. A big concentration of energy (talk show, debate-intensive sessions) was planned for the first day, and again towards the end of the second. When setting up a list try to have full control over it, and also to secure the list archive. Don't use list services offered by commercial enterprises as this has the potential for

disaster (ie. unbearable amounts of advertisement are suddenly added to posts). Shortly after we initiated the mailing list we announced that we'll close it down a month or two after the event not intending to run this as a mailing list beyond the conference preparation. Seven months prior to the event the mailing list became a useful tool to enter into debate. People briefly introduced themselves, posted texts, pointed to collaboration theory, and collective art projects. Short posts containing one argument seemed to best start up discussion. But, even one or two critical or hostile voices on a mailing list can taint the overall perception of an entire event-- a problem of list culture in general.

Funding. Ask yourself if your event really can get (or needs) outside sponsorship. We wrote countless letters to local businesses. As a trade show or any other corporate presence at the conference was not an option because of the politics of the event we could have saved the energy that we put into those applications. In US academia one has to first demonstrate that one is dedicated and already in full gears working on the organization of an event to get funding for it. You should consider the costs of your event carefully and make contingency plans in case you'll get less money. Alternate plans are also important all throughout the organizing process.

Another pivotal question in the organization of a conference or other event is that of outcomes. What do you want the participants to take away from the event beyond the participation experience? Positive networking and the exchange of ideas always take place but what can you do to go beyond that? For the FreeCooperation conference we edited a theory newspaper, simply designed, that was launched on the first night of the event. We printed a large number of copies, some of which participants took home with them and the rest was distributed locally and throughout new media institutions. We also created a DVD that besides short video impressions of the conference sessions also included interviews with conference participants, and a video by Christoph Spehr and Jörg Windszus. The conference website, created with the helpful free software package Open Conference Systems (OCS) (13) simplified some of the registration issues but was also limiting as too many non-customizable features were based on the needs of traditional academic conferences. The conference Wiki became a rich repository for ideas, and a growing archive about (online)

collaboration. Out of the conference emerged the Institute for Distributed Creativity (14) and the Institute for Network Cultures (15). We are currently editing a book on the art of (online) collaboration that will be published by oe/b\_books by the end of spring 2005.

We can't wait for the moment that complex, stable, and powerful open source tools for presentation become available. How many times have we tried to replace proprietary software such as "Powerpoint" or "Keynote" but had to surrender as packages such as OpenOffice (16) did not have the necessary features or were not reliable enough?

Many conference organizers, based on a few topics start to invite a range of participants. They make sure that they are good speakers with engaging presentations, and that they are geographically diverse (local vs. inter/national) to avoid an isolated alien landing of a conference crew star ship. In this balancing act between ideas, equal representation of gender, minorities and available finances the focus on a few specific topics easily gets lost and events become unfocused.

The challenge is to avoid the tokenism of the multicultural spectacle while still achieving the much-needed balance. Globalization has yet to arrive in many cultural/new media arts events. One of the ways to speed up diversity is to question dominant organization formats and introduce basic forms of interactivity and dialogue.

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(2) The "networks, art, and collaboration" conference, a.k.a. FreeCooperation, took place in April 2004 at the Department of Media Study, The State University of New York at Buffalo. The conference was organized by Trebor Scholz (New York/ Buffalo) and Geert Lovink (Brisbane/Amsterdam), assisted (in more or less free cooperation) by Dorothee Gestrinch (now Banff Centre) and Orkan Telhan (Ankara/ Buffalo), Tom Leonhardt (Toronto/ Buffalo) and Arzu Telhan (Ankara/ Buffalo). Trebor Scholz. (2004). *networks, art, & collaboration*. Freecooperation. Available: URL <http://freecooperation.org>. Last accessed October 5, 2004.

(3) "A weblog, or simply a blog, is a web application which contains periodic, reverse chronologically ordered posts on a common webpage. Such a web site would typically be accessible to any Internet user. Part of the reason "blog" was coined and commonly accepted into use is the fact that in saying "blog", confusion with server log is avoided."  
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(4) "A Wiki or wiki (pronounced "wicky" or "weeky" or "viki") is a website (or other hypertext document collection) that allows any user to add content, as on an Internet forum, but also allows that content to be edited by any other user." (2004). weblog. Wikipedia. Available: URL <http://wikipedia.org>. Last accessed October 5, 2004.

(5) Tony Conrad's Phonarmonica is an update of Benjamin Franklin glass armonica- an instrument that spun glass bowls and was played with finger tips. Conrad's DJ version uses a power drill to spin a stack of 78 RPM records at increasing velocity while they are played by a manual contact with a pair of phonograph tone arms.

(6) Access Grid

The Access Grid™ is an ensemble of resources including multimedia large-format displays, presentation and interactive environments, and interfaces to support group-to-group interactions across the Grid.

The AccessGrid Project. AccessGrid ([accessgrid.org](http://accessgrid.org)). Available: URL <http://accessgrid.org>. Last accessed October 5, 2004.

(7) "While France pays an average of \$17 per capita on international cultural programs, the United States spends 65 cents."

The Globalist. The Globalist| Global Diplomacy-- Europe's Soft Power. Available: URL

<http://www.theglobalist.com/DBWeb/printStoryId.aspx?StoryId=3886>. Last accessed October 5, 2004.

(8) Twiki

"TWiki is a WikiWiki TWiki also enables simple form-based web applications, without programming, and granular access control (though it can also operate in classic 'no authentication' mode). Other enhancements include configuration variables, embedded searches, server side includes, file attachments and a plugin API that has spawned over 130 plugins to link into databases, create charts, sort tables, write spreadsheets, make drawings, track Extreme Programming projects and so on."  
(2004). weblog. Wikipedia. Available: URL <http://wikipedia.org>. Last accessed October 5, 2004.

(9) Orkut is an online community that connects people through a network of trusted friends. We are committed to providing an online meeting place where people can socialize, make new acquaintances and find others who share their interests.  
Orkut. Orkut. Available: URL <http://www.orkut.com/>. Last accessed October 5, 2004.

(10) ActiveCampus  
The ActiveCampus project aims to provide location-based services for educational networks and understand how such systems are used. activeclass enables collaboration between students and professors by serving as a visual moderator for classroom interaction. ActiveCampus Explorer uses a person's context, like location, to help engage them in campus life.  
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See also:

Geert Lovink (2002). Dark Fiber. 1st Edition Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press.  
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(13) Open Conference Systems (OCS) is a free Web publishing tool that will create a complete Web presence for your scholarly conference. (2004). Open Conference Systems. Open Conference Systems (OCS). Available: URL <http://www.pkp.ubc.ca/ocs/>. Last accessed October 5, 2004.

(14) Institute for Distributed Creativity (IDC)  
The research of the Institute for Distributed Creativity (IDC) focuses on collaboration in media art, technology, and theory with an emphasis on social contexts. The IDC, founded by Trebor Scholz in May 2004, is an international network with a participatory and flexible institutional structure that combines advanced creative production, research, events, and documentation. While the IDC makes appropriate use of emerging low-cost and free social software it balances these activities with regular face-to-face meetings. (2004). Institute for Distributed Creativity. Available: URL <http://distributedcreativity.org>. Last accessed October 5, 2004.

(15) Founded mid 2004 by Geert Lovink, this research institute, based at Polytechnic/University of Amsterdam (UvA/HvA), will look into the (internal) dynamics of online networks by organizing lectures, conferences, research programs and, most of all, both offline and online collaborations. (2004). Institute for Network Cultures. Available: URL <http://networkcultures.org>. Last accessed October 5, 2004.

(16) OpenOffice  
OpenOffice's mission is to create, as a community, the leading international office suite that will run on all major platforms and provide access to all functionality and data through open-component based APIs and an XML-based file format. <http://OpenOffice.org> : Homepage. Open Office. Available: URL <http://openoffice.org>. Last accessed October 5, 2004.

