

Thinktank 0.1

A groupware research and development project
Initiated by Inga Zimprich 2005

<http://www.thinktank.con-gress.net>

Outline

The Thinktank project intervenes at the meeting point between social development, artistic practice and technological possibilities. It develops an online working structure (group ware) for collaborative projects. Embedded in a user-friendly interface the Thinktank will offer new functions, which derive from research into collaborative dynamics.

Motivation

Since 2002 I am engaged and concerned with practices of socially engaged art in my own projects and through exchange with other artists. Social initiatives as the for-free movement and alternative economic systems as swap-rings have my genuine interest. My own back-ground in curating, co-coordinating an artist-run space, as much as working voluntarily for an art-newspaper and an artists-initiative has given me an eye for the amount of day-to day administrative work, depending completely on the engagement of volunteers. Essentially the projects, which I conducted and initiated myself, or which I joint out of interest have taught me to be aware of the energetic currents voluntary, self-organized collaborations are often confronted with.

On one hand self-organized projects offer space for spontaneity and the pleasure of self-determination. On the other hand collaborators often exhaust themselves in provisory working environments in which they work often beyond their abilities, but try to manage everything at a time (multi-task workers). Self-organized initiatives often lack the network where skilled assistance can be requested (administration, translation, design etc) and the courage and knowledge how to avoid self-exploitation.

Concept

In my experience artistic insights can offer a different views on and understandings of working processes, from the pressure of efficiency to process-oriented instead of result-oriented working. My background in a socially oriented art practice encourages me to try to transport this artistic collaborative knowledge into a medium accessible for society.

New technologies / programming fascinate me as a tool, which offers the realm of the structural through which and in which society creates. To be able to integrate artistic thinking into these structures is for me a relevant step of artistic intervention and innovation.

The Thinktank intends to carefully observe the areas, which it aims to interconnect; artistic, social and technological development. Therefore the Thinktank offers the process of developing a groupware as a negotiation field, in which partners from all involved areas are invited to contribute to its creation.

Aim

- The Thinktank aims to respond to re-occurring difficulties in collaborative projects. It invites an interdisciplinary team of developers to improve these conditions by offering structural solutions in an online environment.
- The Thinktank aims to interconnect related projects, which allows them to profit from each other's expertise, resources and knowledge. This can be a vital improvement for projects that operate with little financial and structural means.

- The Thinktank aims to close a technical gap between cultural and social producers and the available Internet applications supporting group-work, taking into account that the state of current Internet applications is mostly oriented on the requirements of web-development projects.
- Though the Thinktank is conducted as an artistic project it aims to develop an applicable tool, which can support the work of collaborating groups in their daily practice.

Target Group

The Thinktank targets self-organized, voluntary, de-centric projects in the cultural, social and political field, such as: Project-spaces and artist-initiatives, neighborhood and community work, transnational networks, small-scale collaborations and group-work, remote collaborations, theoretic and artistic collaborative projects, foundations and non-governmental initiatives.

In the research phase the Thinktank invites its potential users to communicate their needs. What are wishes, expectations and requirements towards the Thinktank? How simple does the Thinktank have to be to match its users daily practice? Which functions have to be prioritized? Which grade of complexity is welcome and which unnecessary?

By integrating its potential users in the development of the Thinktank (during the research phase and while testing and improving the group ware) the Thinktank aims to match the requirements of its users as closely as possible.

I

Conceptual Development

The Thinktank offers a groupware development and research project in which users and creators work together. In the public research period (Dec 2005 – March 2006) artists, designers, programmers, architects, social practitioners and cultural workers are invited to contribute their ideas, needs, requests and suggestions to the Thinktank conceptual design.

This investigation circles around issues which constantly re-occur in collaborations, such as trust, motivation, expectations, compensation, evaluation, efficiency and decision-making.

- How can reliable agreements be made if money and contracts are not yet or: no longer valid negotiators?
- How much negotiation is necessary between different partners to collect the necessary assets & energies to develop a successful initiative?
- Which project stages can be activated to deepen the understanding of collaborative work and thereby generate more satisfactory working processes?
- How much internal communication is necessary to create stable internal conditions (as for example trust), where objective rules do not regulate tasks, aims or working hours?

The experience gained in participatory art projects, in dialogue between heterogeneous groups, insights that artists have developed in interdisciplinary projects, as for example on economy (art & economy, interventionist practices), architects that engineer social structures of exchange (soft architecture) are invited to share their knowledge and make suggestions for functions, which the Thinktank can develop.

Format

The research and dialogue with different participants will take place through different formats: Through questionnaires, interviews, lectures, public talks and collaborative work physically as much as online.

During the month of February the Thinktank opens a public office in the project-space Public Space With A Roof in Amsterdam in which guests engage with the development of the Thinktank. In collaboration with participants of the design-research project The Tomorrow Book, the Thinktank research will constantly be published online.

To conclude the research phase a publication of the previous research into existing groupware tools and the emerging research into collaborative practices will be launched by March 2006.

Conceptual Design

In dialogue with programmers the descriptions and proposals that emerge from the research phase conclude in a conceptualization of functions that the Thinktank groupware should contain.

II

The Groupware

The Thinktank wants to offer free online production space to self-organized projects from the cultural, artistic and social realm:

1. The Thinktank is web-based, and requires no installment.
2. The Thinktank offers a very simple and intuitive user-interface, which makes this groupware attractive for regular computer users without advanced computer knowledge.
3. The Thinktank offers tools facilitating four important aspects of artistic, cultural and social production:
 - Administrative Tools (as agenda, task-manager, contact manager and book keeping)
 - Structural Tools (as internal communication, decision making, evaluation, brainstorm, structural changes)
 - Archiving Tools (as Library, Documentation, and Archive)
 - Communicative Tools (as participatory interfaces and publishing)
4. The Thinktank is modular, so that a working group can easily add to, adjust and extend its working environment.
5. The Thinktank interconnects autonomous projects to enable exchange of relevant information, resources and knowledge and thereby assists them to profit from each other's structural and methodological achievements.

6. The Thinktank helps to deepen the awareness for collaborative dynamics. Based on experiences gained in artistic participatory practices it offers functions, which respond to re-occurring difficulties at work in groups and offers constructive ways to implement them in collaborative processes.

Technical Implementation

The Thinktank proposes to attach its development to an existing, well-functioning content management system. Two existing group ware / content management systems are potential candidates for the Thinktank:

- The group ware Plone (written in Python)
- The group ware Drupal (written in PhP)

Therefore the Thinktank develops an easy to understand interface, which integrates functions of the existing group-ware. Programmers develop additionally those functions that were formulated in the research phase by artists and other practitioners. These functions, as decision-making, public participation, trust, inefficiency or project-evaluation are compatible with the existing groupware and thereby enrich the scope of online-applications. Available as an online-service and via the new interface this combination creates the Thinktank.

This technical implementation offers the opportunity that the Thinktank connects to an existing developer's community, which makes it possible that the Thinktank is constantly updated as its programmer's community improves the original groupware.

Programming

A team of 2 – 3 programmers will be commissioned to create the functions, which are conceptually developed during the research phase. Additionally it creates the new Thinktank interface.

After a concentrated period of development, the Thinktank groupware will be released, tested and criticized by the conceptual developers of the research phase.

The Thinktank will

- Be released in English
- Apply to world wide web standards
- Be compatible with Macintosh, Linux and PC

Though released under the GNU public license declared as open software, it is possible to install filters to restrict unintended usage of the Thinktank group ware.

Launch

In order to reach non-advanced computer users in the social, cultural and artistic field a brochure will give an easy introduction to the Thinktank. This brochure will be distributed to foundations, cultural institutes and cultural innovative scenes European-wide. Announcements will be placed in relevant net-, and net-art related media as much as in printed media, which can attract the target group of social, cultural and artistic producers. The economists magazine brand eins, published in Germany, which

introduces alternative models of entrepreneurship with social responsibility is a targeted media-partner.

Translation

In cooperation with local partners (media-institutes as mi2, Zagreb, REX, Belgrade, InterMediaArtSpace, Sofia) the Thinktank should be translated into other languages from 2007 on, as for example Serbo-Croatian. Bridging organizations such as the transnational WITT-project, which operates transnational in Southeastern and Balkan countries, will be relevant partners to promote & distribute the Thinktank.

Integration:

The Thinktank aims to connect to ongoing, parallel and overlapping projects to integrate their different perspectives and achievements. By inviting different partners to co-create the tool, which can support their practices, it invites them to extend the Thinktank's applicability into their own working fields. The Thinktank also aims to connect interests, to create a broad base for producing the Thinktank with different individuals, initiatives and institutes.

Time Line:

2004–2005 research into group-ware has been done privately.

Dec 05 – March 06 Conceptual Development / Research Phase

April 2006 – September 2006 Programming Phase

November 2006 – Launch

From 2007 on – Translations & Follow Up Projects

Team:

Inga Zimprich, project lead, artist & curator, Jan van Eyck Researcher Fine arts Department, Maastricht, NL

Elske Rosenfeld, European Anthropologist, research coordinator, based in Berlin, D

Wietzke Maats, project coordinator, artist (requested), based in NL

Arman Rijsewijk, developer of the prototype, artist and PHP-programmer, designer of manageable websites, NL

Advice:

Jouke Kleerebezem, advising research Jan van Eyck Academie

Jeanne van Heeswijk, socially engaged artist, NL

Partners:

Jan van Eyck Academie

Het Blauwe Huis

Public Space With A Roof

Proposed participants of the research phase:

Art & Economy / Interventionism

Henrik Schrat, Mari Brellochs organizers of Produkt und Vision, interventionists artists, D

Kent Hansen, democratic innovation, artists, DK

Philippe Maraisse, access-local, artist, FR

Barbara Steveni, artist, GB

Louwrien Wijers, artist, NL

Orgacom, creates dialogues with companies and addresses specifically group-identities, NL

Participatory Art Practices / Participatory Interfaces:

Jeanne van Heeswijk, socially engaged artist, NL

Emma Hedditch, London based artist working close with the queer-coomunity in UK

Esther Polak, visual artists, winner of the ars electronica prize 2005, NL

Filia den Hollander, artist and democracy activist, Everyone's A Citizen, Baby – A

People's EU Constitution, NL

Dominic Hislop, Big Hope, artist, GB

Collectives:

Nikolaus Gansterer & Vegetable Orchestra, artist, AU

Project Architectures:

M7, architecture collective, Buenos Aires, AR

Architecture of Interaction (Yvonne Dröge-Wendel), research into interactive structures, NL

Raumlabor, architecture group, Berlin

Discussion about an artwork, Nebojsa, Milica Tomic, independent artist group, Belgrade, YU

Visualizing social and information networks / mapping interactivity:

Auke Touwslager, Informationlab, www.govcom.org, www.anderemedia.nl

Creativity & 'Creative Class':

Doris Rothauer, theorist, author of Kreativität & Kapital

Multi-Media, Internet Innovations:

Wilfried Houjebek, psychogeographer, NL

Richard Vijgen, the Tomorrow Book Project, Gutenberg Project, NL

Sandra Fouconnier, V2, ubiscribe researcher Jan van Eyck Academie, B

Matthew Fuller (PZI, Rotterdam), UK

Auto-authors

Arie Altena, writer and editor (metropolis m), NL

Printing on demand / self-publishing:
Simon Worthington, metamute.com, UK

Knowledge-sharing
Copenhagen Free University
University of Openness
Free Universities

Exchange networks:
Heidemarie Schwermer, Das Sterntaler Experiment, D
Fernwaerme – Überlebensstrategien am Rande des Machbaren, artist group, D

Online Decision Making:
Mikael Nordfors, vivarto.org, DK
M7, Cosmotools & Autogov.0.2
Worldparliament

Bookkeeping:
Mi2 (Zagreb) developed a book keeping software for NGO's

Media-art-spaces
V2, media art space, Rotterdam, the Netherlands
Constant vzw, media art space, Brussels, Belgium
Mi2 multimedia art-space, Zagreb
Montevideo Research & Development, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Net-activism / feminism:
WITT-Project (Milica Gudovic), transnational organization promoting ICT as strategic tool for women, Belgrade, YU
Ascii, hacker organization, promoting open software as a tool for sharing information, goods and the city, Amsterdam, NL
Genderchangers, feminist hacker organisation, organizing hard-ware workshops for women, Amsterdam, NL

Design:
Jouke Kleerebezem, advising researcher JvE Academie
The Tomorrow Book, a.o. Richard Vijgen

Self-organized projects / Artist run spaces:
Public Space With A Roof, Amsterdam, NL
The Blue House, residency for the mind, Amsterdam, NL
Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, Berlin, D