NETZNETZ OR DIRECT DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

A conversation with Joanna Pianka, an architect from Vienna and the coordinator of the Netz Netz group

Roman Pawłowski: Where did the idea for the Netz Netz system come from?

Joanna Pianka: It was a response to the new media in digital art and culture. Initially the Viennese government wasn't sure what to do and how to support artists who work online. They started out with the old method – they directed all their financial support to one institution, which was called the Public Netbase. It was managed by two professional curators who would decide who got funded and exhibited.

This is the current Polish model where most of the money for artists goes through galleries and institutions, such as the Centre for Contemporary Art (CSW).

Digital artists started to rebel against this arbitrary decision-making. In 2004 there was held the Coded Cultures conference, which brought about the idea of the Netz Netz association. In that same fall, the first spontaneous exhibition took place in the Künstlerhaus in Vienna, showing the works of over 240 artists. They brought their own equipment, projectors and even furniture. The total cost didn't go over €3,000 – the cost of leasing the space. The exhibition met with huge success and was recognized by the city officials, who then decided that they would designate a separate budget for digital art and culture. There were rules that had to be set up to manage the division of these funds. In 2005, 200 of the most active participants put together the basic system for direct distribution. In that same year, the plan was accepted by the Art Parliament, organized by the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna and implemented the following year.

How did you manage to convince the Viennese officials to hand over some of their authority to the artists?

They understood that the old rules weren't working for the case of digital art and culture. There are a lot of projects that deal with timely themes in this field. Artists want to put a project together quickly and move on to the next. They can't wait 3 months for the committee to decide on a grant because during that time they can start 3 new projects. On the other hand, there was a need for a distribution system that would be entirely transparent and coherent, with the decisions being made by professionals and not by arbitrary individuals. Each applicant has the chance to get a detailed evaluation of their project. It was all about making better projects and giving them more exposure. That's why, the city decided to hand the decision over to the artistic community. In 2006 the Public Netbase was shut down (their funding was not extended). The first contest took place that year.

How did the system work in the beginning? What was the budget?

At first we functioned with no money and without the assistance of the government. The participants got together, presented their projects and voted. It was about testing out the system, along with working out the criteria. People eagerly took part because they could get a professional evaluation for their projects. The actual money came later. The city dedicated €500,000 to divide up, out of which €100,000 was meant for the Annual Convention – a yearly exhibition of the entire digital art scene.

Initially the contests were held for projects as well as infrastructure (space, servers, equipment). All the projects are presented online at the netznetz. net site. The voting process takes place twice a year and includes artists, curators and producers, who applied to the group and were accepted by the validation committee, selected by the entire community. At its biggest, there were 600 participants, and now there are about 430. They award their points (each individual has 100) to individual projects. The results are announced right away – this was one of the conditions that had to be met for the whole system to succeed. Next, the winning projects are handed over to the city to confirm the group's decision and to write up the official contracts with the artists.

How many projects get the funding every year?

About 50 – that is, 20 projects from the field of digital culture and another 20 from the field of digital art, along with 7-8 infrastructure projects.

After the first year some changes were made to the system. Why?

It turned out that the projects put together by individual artists don't get the same level of support as the projects from the field of digital culture that were created within the community of artists which gathered more votes. This is why, we established the "super-trustees" whose job was to supervise the distribution and to balance any unfairness. They had half of all the points to divide up. Still, this didn't solve the problem. Digital artists finally asked for a regular jury to divide up their grants. The city accepted this, which proved that the system allows for choices.

What are the most serious problems that came about after the first few years of operation?

There were a few. The system became increasingly complicated. People who tried to get in for the first time didn't understand it. For me to even explain to someone what Netz Netz was took half an hour, even though I was its coordinator and understood it perfectly. Limited funds were also a problem as €500,000 per year for the whole Viennese community was not that much. For his film "The White Ribbon," Michael Haneke received more – €600,000 from Vienna. In the field of digital art, there was about €80,000 to divide up among 20 projects, an average of €4,000 apiece. Of course, some got more, others less, but, all in all, the sums were quite small. I knew people who waved their own fee goodbye in order to get a project completed.

But you didn't have any influence on the budget. I'm asking rather about the process of direct democracy. Did it work perfectly?

Not entirely. There was a drop in the group's activities – there were fewer people taking part in the meetings. It's natural that people have to work. They can't keep talking about how to divide the money. On the other hand, there were those who were unhappy, who sidestepped the system and appealed to the city for funding. The city then started to make changes to the system without consulting the organization. This caused a great deal of frustration and unhappiness among the participants. In 2008 we were presented with a choice: either we could agree to an external audit that would pinpoint the weaknesses of the system, or we would have to resort to a traditional jury to make the decisions on distribution. We agreed to test the system, even though that meant we had to spend €30,000 from our overall budget.

What did the study show?

Nothing that we couldn't have known before within the group. It confirmed that the association wanted greater autonomy and the direct distribution of funds, and that it wanted greater transparency for the decisions made outside the group. It also showed that we needed to improve the communication between the group and its leaders. The most important conclusion was that the officials in charge of culture within the Viennese government should manage the system rather than make decisions. The conflict with the authorities was based on the fact that the municipal employee in charge of culture began to decide independently who would get the money and how much, which was then approved by that official's supervisor.

So it wasn't a lack of activity, but rather an excess of activity on the part of the municipal officials that was the source of problems?

Yes. We sat in the office of a city employee who was responsible for the contacts with Netz Netz and discussed a project that hadn't received any funding, even though it had gotten a positive review from the group. Her response was that it was a hegemonic decision – it means that the city itself had made such a decision, and it could not be questioned.

Will the system continue? What are the plans for 2010?

Certainly the budget will stay on the same level. The only thing that will change is the voting process. There is a proposal to separate new projects from those that have been ongoing for years. The new ones would continue to be judged by a direct democracy procedure because this brings in fresh energy, while the existing projects that have come into their own would be reviewed by a jury consisting of 3 representatives chosen by Netz Netz and two city officials.

Netz Netz will become a school of sorts, one that is completed in order to move on to the next stage of growth?

You could say so. We haven't made the final decision, but we are determined to make the system work. The city wants it to continue. The elections take place next year, and they want to use it to their advantage.

Artistically, how do you evaluate the effects of Netz Netz's four years of activity? Have the projects that came about through the program brought something new to Vienna's art scene?

I'm not a critic, so I won't evaluate the artistic integrity of the projects. I can say that what pleased me the most was the creation of a whole new network between diverse groups of artists. People from all different environments are involved in the system: visual artists, musicians, DJs, hackers, programmers. Thanks to the system of bilateral review, everyone could witness the fruits of many joint undertakings.

I believe that the most important is the definition of digital art and culture. One asset of this project is the introduction of projects into the scope of digital culture that hadn't been included before and had had no chance for support. Alongside more typical art projects that can be see at the ars electronica exhibition, there are brand-new things, such as the reprap.org project – a system for building inexpensive printers for three-dimensional output that can also make its own parts. You buy the primary parts and the machine creates the rest – you just have to find a group that already has the machine. Another unusual project is www.bigbrotherawards.at – an organization that hosts its own annual anti-awards ceremony for web monitoring, data control and internet tracking. The idea behind it is the protection of human rights in the age of digital civilization. The city of Vienna agreed that it is a part of digital culture and is very excited about the project. There are also some truly off-the-wall projects, such as www.roboexotica. org, a festival of cocktail-making robots and www.wienerbeschwedechor. at – the Viennese Complaint Chorus, a portal that allows users to post their complaints about traffic, customer service, even the weather. The system is evolving dynamically, as is the entire scope of digital culture.

Why would you recommend this system to Polish artists and governments?
The most important reason is transparency and, secondly, direct democracy, which always brings about "problems." Our biggest accomplishment is the clarity of our procedures. It's important for a decision to be announced as soon as it is made, regardless of whether it's a decision made by the association or a traditional jury. In the second case, the city official calls the party of interest the same day that the decision is made and informs them of the verdict. We have our own delegates in the jury, who give their opinion of a project and make sure the procedures are followed. This greatly improves the effectiveness of the entire system.

Do artists who work in other forms of the media envy you? Have there come about ideas for similar systems in other genres of art or music?
Musicians can join us if they have a project that involves the net, so can other artists. Within the framework of Netz Netz, the portal play.fm got funding, where DJs perform sets and exchange information. Just as we're witnessing the development, there's a visible revival in the field of architecture. We discuss the contest procedures. There are already local community representatives sitting in on the committees for architecture contests when there is a new project being planned. The Netz Netz idea is expanding.

Joanna Pianka was interviewed by Roman Pawłowski