

Following article was published in June 2006 in the Rotterdam based Arts Magazine Pages (<http://www.pagesmagazine.net/>)

## **Almostreal...**

Initiated by the European Cultural Foundation (ECF), ALMOSTREAL is a three year international support project for the arts (2005-2008) which aims at exploring the realities and possibilities of artistic practice within unique social fabrics in different European regions. The ECF is one of many European cultural organisations embroiled in a complex of political, social, economic and cultural systems. Yet, due to its independent, NGO status, the European Cultural Foundation also retains an advantage, a flexibility to re-position itself between these systems - theoretically, it can afford to experiment with the way it chooses to support independent cultural scenes in Europe. As a practice-based experiment of sorts, the ALMOSTREAL project has been conceived as a framework of support for the arts that operates in-between the abstraction of a project envisaged at the office desk and the acute reality faced by artists inside a particular set of circumstances. Between a set of project ideals and its adaptability to uncertainties inherent to artistic practices, ALMOSTREAL can, by its ambition always and only be just that - almost real.

In 2005, four media and art organizations from Bosnia and Herzegovina ([Pro.ba](#)), Serbia and Montenegro ([kuda.org](#), [PRELOM](#)), and Croatia ([WHW](#)) initiated different forms of exchange with the others. During 2006, partners in realization of the ALMOSTREAL will be the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts [Ashkal Alwan](#) (Beirut) and [Alcantara](#), a contemporary dance platform from Portugal (Lisabon).

The following text is a sequence of magnified views of five interdependent areas within ALMOSTREAL from decision-making **policies** and **outline**, to **support** strategies, to the **activities** and the **skills** which artists develop as a result of the new undertakings they initiate. As a thread of intertwining fragments, this text reflects the changing dynamic between proclamations and incidents and how the incidents have generated new diversions from the projects original intentions.

## **... proclamations, diversions and incidents**

[1]

**OUTLINE: The thematic focus of the ALMOSTREAL outline progresses through five stages from Confrontation, Story Telling, Research, Hospitality to Intimacy. This thematic progression is a frame for understanding otherness and moreover, for discerning how the notion of otherness is broached in arts practice itself.**

*"I think my major problem here - again - is the top-down nature of it and the almost pedantic representation (I know that this is not the intention, but that is how the formulation comes across). It's almost like: dear others... please be happy because we will make an effort to acknowledge you, listen to you, be nice to you and if you're lucky be close to you. I think the whole idea propagates difference to such a great extent that finding connecting bridges is a priori almost impossible. In addition focussing solely on the other as an overall umbrella is not enough... I think it needs something more... but I am not sure exactly what." (correspondence Nat Muller, 25 March 2005)*

*"What if I correct you and say: lets be happy because we will together make an effort to acknowledge each other, listen to each other, be good to each other, and if we are lucky, at the end get close to each other. We will not deny that we are full of prejudice toward each other but we will find a way to walk, as if through a mine field, THROUGH these prejudices and THROUGH these misconceptions about each other in a hope that maybe we will get to the other side where we will, by being hospitable toward each other, in an act of intimacy, finally realise that we are not so different from each other at all. What we will not do is to pretend that there is no journey to be made, no effort to be exercised, no insights to be reached." (correspondence Igor Dobricic, April 2005)*

**Misrecognition of curatorial intent. Amsterdam, 2 July 2005.** On ALMOSTREAL's invitation, 16 artists and cultural figures gather around a table in de Balie in Amsterdam and proceeded to grapple with ALMOSTREAL's outline and potential as an alternative funding model. But as soon as the meeting commences, one thing becomes clear, the 'plan' of ALMOSTREAL seems to be caught in the murky fold of misrecognitions: one misrecognition in particular is that ALMOSTREAL has a co-curatorial stake in the practices it supports. Some of the getogether participants express their unease and concern that the appropriation of the role of a curator by a funding body only serves to fabricate the illusion that the practitioner and the funder are on equal ground. Indeed, miming the identity of the curator is an increasing phenomenon and possibly even a disguised tactic for cultural programmes to boost their own profile and visibility, and more cynically, a way to claim co-authorship and therefore possession of artistic research and creative interventions. ALMOSTREAL therefore, unlike the more immediate involvement of a curator,

needs to remain peripheral to the practice it supports. Yet the project also aims to peripherise itself from the control of the ECF. Ideally, this two-way distance could also be exploited by artistic practitioners to act on the nature of the institution and consider more closely the sets of power relations in which they are entangled. So, rather than miming a curatorial role or for that matter, accumulating credit for an array of project-oriented policy-affirming 'outcomes', this critical albeit distanced gaze is what defines ALMOSTREAL. (Wietske Maas)

## [2]

**RE-DEFINING POLICIES: The policy objective of ALMOSTREAL is to re-interpret the relationship between arts and society in terms of (inter-cultural) communication and collaborative strategies rather than (cultural) identity and individual authorship. In this way, the project spotlights new narratives that could change how artistic practice is identified, understood and accommodated in European cultural spaces.**

*"It is good to re-assess the use of our language. We have constant meetings on our internal understanding. The first question among colleagues is always: do you really believe in that? Are there taboos which are not publicly negotiable in the foundation? It is fascinating to see how deep the rift is between the 'reality' and the 'belief' for the language. For example the expression "intercultural dialogue" or "intercultural competence". The term intercultural dialogue [...] presupposes there is still a strict otherness, which can only be addressed by dialogue; a dialogue that would not accept that there are more similarities and equalities than differences. Otherness [...] therefore is criticized as an ideological phrase. The way out is to use the phrase intercultural competence, which is another useless attempt to solve the problem, because competence is a very technocratic expression like 'managing diversity'." (interview with Gottfried Wagner, director ECF, June 2005)*

**Risk to Foundation?** Amsterdam, 10 January 2006. A meeting with ECF management is held to review one year of ALMOSTREAL. In good management tradition, a detailed overview of the activities is presented, and once more the litany of ECF keywords circulate during the discussion, almost like a drill exercise. Towards the end of our discussion, the profile of ALMOSTREAL is explained as a platform that is directly formed by the research and articulation of the conditions and insights generated through art practice across European localities.

Suddenly, a light sparks in the eyes of Gottfried Wagner, the ECF director. "I now start understanding what you are getting at with this project. I think it is highly interesting - but also potentially very dangerous for the Foundation." And with this, he rushes out of the room, leaving us all somewhat bewildered at the table. Indeed, it is intended as a risky enterprise - so do we regard this exclamation as a sign of encouragement? Does the project open a much-needed relationship between the institution and practice? Or does it go too far and cross the limits of ECF's scope? The sense of perplexity persists. (Marc Neelen / Ana Dzokic)

### [3]

**BECOMING ACTIVITIES: ALMOSTREAL reconsiders confirmed criterium such as "socially engaged art" used for determining and judging heterogenous art practices. Rather, through assorted activities, ALMOSTREAL hopes to bring forward the social relevancies inherent to artistic practice beyond fixed categories such as "engaged" or "high" art.**

*"Increasingly, new-media circles around the world are basing their work on and within alternative media/communication strategies. Indeed, the fact that this form of working could itself be considered as an art work, is particularly interesting when applied to the situation in the Balkans. Against a backdrop of the communication collapse that happened during 1990's, the exploration of means of communications as artistic materials and how they can be re-modelled in a radical new way is becoming a practical necessity rather than an abstract form of critique. We could even go so far as to say that "communication art" (or art of communication) as an aesthetical and ideological proposition is profoundly challenged and tested in the region of former Yugoslavia." (correspondence to ALMOSTREAL1 participants **Pro.ba**, Sarajevo, **PRELOM kolektiv**, Belgrade, **Kuda.org**, Novi Sad, **WHW**, Zagreb by Igor Dobricic, September 2005)*

#### **Models for different radio usages: from Germany to Serbia. Novi Sad, 18 December 2005.**

The radio collective Ligna (Hamburg) organises a workshop and action in a public space to demonstrate the possibilities of social interventions by radio. A group of 'activist' workshop participants gathers on top of an apartment block in one of Novi Sad's residential neighbourhoods to mount a pirate radio broadcasting transmitter and to install the antenna on the roof. We take care not to be seen by the neighbours.

The radio is installed, antenna mounted. But to our dismay, there is no space on the radio dial to

fit our transmission! Here we get the ironic situation that a Hamburg radio group who has legal broadcasting space guaranteed by German law, finds that in Novi Sad there is no space for an alternative 'free' voice. The media space is droned by commercial radio stations. With difficulty, and an hour later, we find a void to fit the transmission. The result: the public intervention can be heard up to 100 metres, after which it is taken over once again by a plethora of commercial radio noises.

Belgrade, 20 December 2005. In the public debate, Radio aRtivism, several practitioners of radio-based project explore to what extent their method is related to activism or to an aesthetic practice. Both 'local' and foreign guests take part in the forum. The group of participants is (intentionally) divided up according to their geographic origins: The German radio collective Ligna and the French curator Claire Staebler on one side, the guests from Belgrade and Novi Sad on the other. Accidentally or on purpose, this division prefigures the schism between the views of the participants that becomes reinforced as the debate unfurls. While Ligna explores what could arguably be one of the most radical uses of radio intervention in contemporary German society, their intervention is seen as too dislocated from the political context of Belgrade, where radio was used to depose a government, and not for 'artistic' performances in railway stations or at the doorstep of a shopping mall. The division culminates when one of the debaters refuses to speak English. Unexpectedly, the exchange of views about radio as an actively democratic medium reveals some striking differences in what is thought to be a transferrable practice actually has an entirely other meaning in different political and cultural situations. (Marc Neelen / Ana Dzokic)

## [4]

**ADAPTIVE SUPPORT: ALMOSTREAL is rendering the relations between the ECF and the ALMOSTREAL participants transparent. This requires that both the ECF and the participants become involved in a discussion which examines the support tactics of ALMOSTREAL and the consequences of support on the practices themselves.**

*It is not only that institutions are used to execute their plans without further considerations for what the real interests of artists in the practical field are, it is also that the practitioners have become accustomed to play the role of unwilling servants, victims and enemies of the institutions and their plans. (Igor Dobricic)*

*To simultaneously serve the interests of the funder and the interests of the artist is, some would say, a doomed plan. But it is the precarious process of bringing into light conflicting realities of*

*specific cultural contexts and their power structures and the interactions between them that defines ALMOSTREAL. The ambiguity and uncertainty needed to imagine a new set of realities also evokes the projects name. Yet, to get this far, the project needs to also be prepared to confront and deal with its own misprision so that it can proceed with the effort to know and be affected by the identities and possibilities of other cultural realities. (Wietske Maas)*

**Is there a space for negotiation?** 20th of February 2006. “[...] And indeed, the first phase of the project is finished and it was undoubtedly of great benefit for all of participants. The 4 nodes [participants in ALMOSTREAL1, ed.] have been working together and collaborating on different themes – research of historical concepts of art critique, re-evaluating and re-inventing the position of West European contemporary art from the viewpoint of East European practitioners, alternative media usage, collaborative publishing, etc. What is supposed to run alongside the activities in the next phase of ALMOSTREAL project is, on one side, a process of “extraction” of potential discourses or “toolkits” and, on the other, support strategies that should lead to establishing new policies inside of the funding structures. This definition corresponds nicely with one of the starting points of the ECF, that this is “an experiment that endeavours to investigate its own parameters”.

On the one hand, there is turmoil on the side of the one funding the experiment and interfering with the structure and the content of the financed project, almost the position of co-curating. On the other hand, fundees are those given more of an open door to influence the general policy of the foundation towards its objectives. [...]

This constellation leads to many questions: Where is the balance of mutual interests between the fundees and the funder? Who is, and under which circumstances, governing who? And we can even go further on: How critical we can be towards “the hand that feeds us”? Should we “bite” it or “obey” it? Those questions are important if we are following what has been said in the report of Funding opportunities for South-East Europe, that “after a period of strong investment in the region (after the fall of communism and the wars in Yugoslavia), there has been a weakening of financial support” and starting from 2000, “the general tendency towards the retreat of important funders or a reorientation of their priorities which are no longer include culture”<sup>6</sup> could be seen. The space for negotiation should be somewhere in between “biting” and “obeying”. (from How Much of Cultural Imperialism?, by Branka Curcic, Kuda.org, <http://transform.eipcp.net/correspondence/curcic-cp01en>)

**RECOGNISING SKILLS: ALMOSTREAL draws attention to artistic skills that play an integral part in the process of re-defining the relationships within the cultural and social contexts in which independent artists and cultural institutions function.**

*'Intellectual and artistic creativity, like new social practices, have to conquer a democratic affirmation which preserves their specificity and right to singularity. This being the case, intellectuals and artists have got nothing to teach anyone [...] they produce toolkits composed of concepts, percepts and affects, which diverse publics will use at their convenience.'* [Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, pg. 129]" (correspondence with Sher Doruff, ALMOSTREAL advisor, 27 April 2006)

**Shared tools?** Zagreb, 17 January 2006. Media, art and theoretical practitioners --mostly forerunners in open-source and neo-Marxist practices who have carried out the projects in the first phase of ALMOSTREAL, are seated around the table to discuss with us how the experiences of this common project can be 'shared' through a web-based platform to benefit future funding schemes by the Foundation as well as future participants in the ALMOSTREAL project?

Gradually, the atmosphere grows stifling. Nice, this idea of sharing knowledge, but isn't it the ECF who wants this so badly, and who in fact owns the platform? "The money issue keeps cropping up as though the intent of ALMOSTREAL can only be reduced to this simple transaction, any relationship based on a monetary transaction forecloses a true collaboration, because the willingness is not there from a genuine incentive, the incentive to work together is contractual and therefore collaboration will always be tokenistic. How to enter into a mutual dialogue that encompasses a "more" another level of support that goes beyond the reductive calculation of time in monetary terms, to terms of empathy?" (notes Wietske Maas)

Thus the prospective platform to share experiences and discover the tools developed through this project ricochets swiftly back to the prerogative of the Foundation. (Marc Neelen / Ana Dzokic)

## **Uneasy shifts**

To understand the uneasy shifts taking place in ALMOSTREAL, one could draw an analogy to the relationship between hypothesis and experiment. Whereas the proclamations as outlined in official foundation documents are hypothetical, the unexpected deviations and incidents which occur as the activities unfold are an uncontrolled experiment. The new perspectives that this experimental material exposes, urges us to re-think assumptions and to draft more suitable hypotheses so that we can continue exploring the (almost)real.

Though ALMOSTREAL ([www.almostreal.org](http://www.almostreal.org)) has been conceived within the European Cultural Foundation the project is conducted and researched by a team - most of whom are not Foundation employees. This text reflects the nature of our relationships to the project and between ourselves and our independent interests in cultural forms and practice. As an uneasy experiment adrift between the harbour of the ECF and the open-waters of cultural practice, the ALMOSTREAL project is demanding a constant redefinition of our tasks and positions. It is from this quite uncomfortable position that makes us both nervous and immensely curious as to what can be achieved in this project.

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