

Rethinking Communities

Interview with Tatiana Bazzichelli
and Lieke Ploeger by Jodi Rose

KEEP
FIGHTING

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Imagine
Europe

Tatiana Bazzichelli and Lieke Ploeger of Disruption Network Lab explain how their vision of ‘examining the intersection of politics, technology, and society, to expose the misconduct and wrongdoing of the powerful’, is achieved through bringing together communities of trust in highly focused conferences and meet-ups. In this interview with Jodi Rose they also discuss the strategies they use to organise and curate community events, and reflect on how these could be adapted and used to bring about change worldwide.

Cover Photo
Keep Fighting, 2015

Disruption Network Lab

Disruption Network Lab developed from a combination of highly engaged critical practices in media art curating, investigative journalism, hacking and open knowledge production. Informed by the history of activism in alternative cultural underground centres, Disruption Network Lab offers a platform that amplifies diverse voices across interdisciplinary and networked knowledge. It questions structural dynamics and reveals imbalances of power. The programme of Disruption Network Lab's conference series is a conceptual artwork in itself that is intertwined with its community programme and meet-ups. Building networks of trust around very specialised communities has given Disruption Network Lab a framework to have a significant impact on society. Disruption Network Lab exposes inequalities and power imbalances through a combination of creative activism, knowledge exchange and critical analysis that involve non-profit organisations and experts, as well as grassroots networks locally and globally.

Networked Disruption

Founding artistic director and curator Tatiana Bazzichelli and her team have built an impressive ecosystem of engaged practitioners who not only speak openly about strategies for contesting abuses of power and corruption, but actually hold those in power accountable, while activating the conditions necessary to provoke long-term and real world change. Disruption Lab is not an ivory tower think tank for academic exercises, but a laboratory for experimentation and networked disruption in the scientific sense of the word. Disruption Network Lab offers possibilities to create genuine shifts in power and perception through an inherently interdisciplinary approach, remaining closely connected to grassroots activism by harnessing the energy of the collective skills, knowledge and networks of those involved.

Artist and writer Jodi Rose asked Tatiana Bazzichelli and Lieke Ploeger, Disruption Network Lab community director, to unpack some of their strategies, and figure out how these could be adapted and potentially used as models for change worldwide. Their vision of 'examining the intersection of politics, technology, and society, to expose the misconduct and wrongdoing of the powerful', is achieved through a particular set of curatorial methodologies they have developed that bring together communities of trust in highly focused conferences and meet-ups. If you can never be truly outside the institution, as artist Andrea Fraser claims in *From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique*¹ then it's high time to create and build our own alternatives.

¹ Andrea Fraser, 'From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique', *Artforum*, September 2005, XLIV, No. 1, pp. 278–283.



Lecture Racial Discrimination in The Age of AI: The Future of Civil Rights in the United States by Mutale Nkonde, AI Traps Conference, 2019

Jodi Rose: How did Disruption Network Lab come into being?

Tatiana Bazzichelli: My activity on the discourse of networking goes back to the 1990s when I started to be interested in the discourse of art and technology. The first time I was at Ars Electronica in 1996, and started to research this subject, it was still not mainstream. I was living in Italy studying Sociology of Media and Communication. I was part of a hacker collective in Rome (AvANA at the Forte Prenestino social centre), where I was trying to connect the discourses of art and hacking. I began working with grassroots networks in Italy, like *Strano Network* in Florence, another group of artists, activists, and hackers. When I moved to Berlin in 2003 I found that I was raising these networks to an international level. The first exhibition I organised in Berlin was *hack.it.art – Hacktivism in the Context of Art and Media in Italy*, at Kunstraum Kreuzberg, Bethanien – about the connection between art and hacking in Germany and Italy.

Moving to Denmark in 2008 for my PhD at Aarhus University, and then back to Berlin as a curator at transmediale festival from 2011 to 2014, I brought together a network of project spaces connected with the festival, the reSource transmedial culture Berlin. I was trying to understand how the festival could benefit from the local communities in the city. This was an important moment in which I was connecting with the local context of the free independent scene in Berlin working with art and technology, as a curator at the festival.

At transmediale I also worked on the subject of art and whistleblowing. The activities of whistleblowers started to become very important from 2013 on, in the context of the Snowden's disclosures. I was trying to connect the hacker and whistleblowing communities with the activist, artist and queer communities. I always had the idea of connecting these different networks, elevating the discussion to both an international and a local level, with network meetings in spaces around the city during the festival.

When I left transmediale festival in 2014, I decided to found Disruption Network Lab. We are expanding the networked structure by having conferences that are international, and develop the community meet-ups in Berlin with Lieke. We systematised some ideas that I was already trying to bring together inside transmediale, and we did it independently by creating our own organisation and conceptual framework.

My PhD was about the discourse of network culture and media criticism. I developed a theory around disruption as art, and as a result of my PhD research, I wrote the book *Networked Disruption: Rethinking Oppositions in Art, Hacktivism and the Business of Social Networking*². My research focused on how disruption was used tactically as an artistic methodology to dismantle hierarchy in the technological, political and artistic fields. For example, I connected interventions of resistance by Neoism and Luther Blissett to mail art and queer critical practices, leading to the present critique of commercialised social networking platforms. Reflecting on how disruption as art could be viewed as a new form of political criticism led me to study the ways in which certain networking- and community-building practices have been co-opted by tech corporations. This also helped me to understand how to break this circle of co-option related to network structures.

Disruption Network Lab emerged from the desire to disrupt systems from within – how to provoke change that is unexpected inside a closed system? We try to expose a power mechanism as a form of art. Disruption then becomes an action interfering with a system from within, to generate the unexpected and create a change inside this closed structure. This is what we do at Disruption Network Lab, following the motto of 'exposing systems of power and injustice'. We bring together artists, computer experts, whistleblowers, investigative journalists, hackers and activists to discuss issues and actions that provoke constructive disruptions in social, technological and political systems.

Lieke Ploeger: I started working in this area in the early 2000s. I was involved in the freetekno scene in the Netherlands. One of the strongest influences for me was this feeling of community building and belonging. It was a tight knit group of people focused around specific sound systems, who organised parties, events and did things together. I found this sense of cohesion and people doing things together inspiring; it originated in the squatter movement and frames ways of doing things yourself outside established systems.

I studied culture, literature and translation studies – and started working at the Royal Library in the Netherlands, digitising information and archives, and bringing this knowledge to wider networks and people. I also worked on giving people access to the technical platforms we used there. It was important to work together and not just be at your own

² Tatiana Bazzichelli, *Networked Disruption: Rethinking Oppositions in Art, Hacktivism and the Business of Social Networking*, Aarhus, Digital Aesthetics Research Center, 2013.

library. I wanted a change and moved to Berlin, where I continued the same work, but now for the Open Knowledge Foundation with OpenGLAM, a specific working group around cultural data. We advocated the access to open cultural data, not only from the library, but also from museums and archives. I became the community manager of OpenGLAM, and it was my task to develop the online community. We organised events and defined principles around how to open up digital content. The Open Knowledge Foundation is a virtual organisation, and is mainly active online.

I felt it would be a nice change to move into direct community work. A year after moving to Berlin, I started an art and community space with a friend, SPEKTRUM Berlin. Having a physical space is a great way to connect with people, mix-up different crowds, bring together artists and scientists and people interested in different things. We brought these people into the space and engaged with different community groups. That's when I met Tatiana, as we hosted a screening of Disruption Network Lab. It was one of the more interesting communities. I found a lot of connections between my work in open data and knowledge sharing and the interests of the people who came to the Disruption Network Lab events.

The conference programme of Disruption Network Lab involves people who are trying to provoke change on a social and political level in specific areas both local and international. Since 2015 we organised twenty conferences, covering topics such as the drone war, whistleblowing, counter-surveillance, and artistic and activist strategies in times of increased geopolitical control. Our speakers come from different backgrounds and have different expertises, but they all work on exposing injustices in politics and society, and also some of the imbalanced structures of the art world.

The Activation Programme is the community work of Disruption Network Lab. It is not just about connecting local groups; it's also about fostering exchange between local and international networks of trust, exposing systems of power and injustice. We do this through the conference programme, community programme, and the streaming online programme that we started during the Corona pandemic, called *Disruptive Fridays*.



Panel and Screening *Never Whistle Alone*, 2020

Jodi Rose: How do you connect with a specific community, and how do you build a community?

Tatiana Bazzichelli: First, we have to define what communities are. We have our own perspective on community building. It makes sense to speak about network development in relation to all the events and things we do. This is in the name of organisation: Disruption Network Lab. Having the word *network* in the middle signifies, both philosophically and in our practical approach, that for us the key activity is creating communities of trust.

Our philosophy informs how we approach people, communities, networks, and our speakers. We start from the idea of enabling networks of trust. There are many different kinds of communities and networks that we build up; they all come together in a conceptual framework. We see the idea of *creative connection* as something that is really at the core of our programme. This manifests in a sharing experience with our audience and the people who participate in our network development.

On one side are the direct and personal connections with people who are part of different communities and on the other side are new ideas and relations that we develop in our programme. This approach creates a montage of practices, and becomes a *thematic networking structure*. We are always aiming to engage with topics that are current and relevant to society. We also learn about new topics thanks to our networks of speakers, collaboration partners, and audience.

By connecting different areas of expertise we establish a solid network of trust with whistleblowers, hackers, investigative journalists, artists, and critical thinkers. So at the same time we generate a *network of networks*. Our programme deals with disruption and tries to expose injustice from within the system. This is also an experimental methodology of curating, that's why we are called a lab.

The interaction between the networking structure of the conference and the communities is important for the development of our own programme identity. During the conferences people are very engaged, and there is usually a lively debate. The community programme allows us to develop our topics before and after the conferences, to reflect with people and follow up in a very practical way what comes up in the panels and keynotes. People also start to cooperate with other people they meet at the conferences. This happened among whistleblowers and artists, investigative journalists and data analysts as well as the housing activist groups that we connected to people doing research about housing that had data – allowing them both to improve their own research and connect with our communities.

Our partnership with Transparency International is really inspiring. They do critical work on investigations, and they do research analysis and policy-based projects with an international focus. From our side, we can work with a global organisation that is doing great investigative research. We invite speakers from their network, while they connect with our networks and audiences, and to the city in a different way. Thanks to our events they can reach people who will benefit from the data they have uncovered. This creates ongoing in-depth content sharing.

Lieke Ploeger: The word community is a challenge, as it is overused in corporate jargon. I see the meet-ups as a way for people to interact and practically engage with our network. We focus on two angles. The first one is strengthening the community that already exists around the Disruption Network Lab. For our meet-ups we focus on inviting specific local communities around the conference topics. Defining the groups as a community is a nice way of setting the tone, of nurturing a feeling of belonging and of people working together. It's a mental state, something people feel they can join and easily contribute to.

Meet-ups are a great way to discover local perspectives on specific issues and create connections. The conference topics incite a lot of discussion and bring together many people, but there isn't always time to go into details. We hold workshops, teach people a specific skill and host discussions to explore the topics in more depth. We see people at meet-ups who don't go to the conference. They feel more connected to each other when the group is smaller and the space more intimate.



Conference Borders of Fear, 2020

Jodi Rose: Have you seen any changes in the ways people engage or connect during the Corona lockdown?

Tatiana Bazzichelli: When the Corona outbreak started at the end of March we were supposed to do our *Evicted by Greed* conference. We moved it to the end of May and held it

online. However, in between we didn't want to be silent in the face of the closing down of all cultural venues in Berlin. We hosted many online concerts, lectures, classes and streaming events, and we wanted to use the occasion to develop our approach to digital culture. We therefore started *Disruption Fridays* in early April as an online panel with a maximum of three speakers. This allowed us to experiment with the streaming format before the conference in May, and connect with our network and the people who had been part of the conference and community programme in the past.

We could address topics happening in these months, and offer fresh perspectives, as these events were organised quite spontaneously each Friday. Everybody in the team could propose a *Disruptive Friday* topic, and activate their networks of trust. This allowed us to see the range of expertise and interests we share as a group, and develop the presence of members of the team who aren't curators, along with generating ideas for our outreach programme.

They also gave us a constant presence in the cultural scene, in a time when presence and physical meetings were lacking, and when the fear that we might never be able to meet in person again was pervasive. Together with our streaming partner Boiling Head Media we developed a digital tool to host the streaming session, working with the Mix software, which is based on open-source technology and does not have the same privacy concerns as proprietary platforms. It also allowed us to customise the interface, to create something that represents the graphic look of Disruption Network Lab.

We had a community meet-up just before the lockdown, and we decided to continue these also with online formats because we wanted to stay connected to our community. Some hot topics came up during the pandemic. Eviction was a big one, so we organised a meet-up in April about housing evictions in times of crisis. We used the open source online tool Big Blue Button for the online meet-ups. We started each one with everybody introducing who they are, why they are joining, so that the event would be a two-way thing. We also organised a workshop about real estate data, with presentations giving an overall picture, and a discussion between the communities we invited and the speaker. There are benefits to online meet-ups too – it's nice to have people from communities outside Berlin taking part, and you can still chat and speak.

We also organised an online workshop with the '*Steal This Poster*' group on subvertising connected to the *Evicted by Greed* conference. They were supposed to come to Berlin from Italy and London, but couldn't due to the pandemic travel restrictions. We invited one member of the London collective to hold the workshop online. It was interesting to use this format, and see how he shared his knowledge with slides, discussed subvertising with participants, and explored how this could be applied to the discourse of housing and eviction. In September we followed up with a real-life workshop, with four members of the collective from Rome, London and Paris, held at Supermarkt Berlin. This was part of the Data Cities conference about smart technologies, surveillance and human rights.



Steal This Poster by Hogre

Jodi Rose: How could people in, for instance Africa, India, or Australia benefit from your experience?

Tatiana Bazzichelli: It would be really interesting if people started to organise events related to disruption and technology in other parts of the world. The methodology has to be interdisciplinary, and try to bring together different communities as we do: hackers, activists, data scientists, researchers, whistleblowers, trans and queer communities. These are areas that interest us, also personally.

The idea of trying to open up systems and their logics, and exposing the power of these systems unites the different approaches. All these communities are engaged with opening up systems. A hacker opens up technology and advocates for freedom of speech and open codes. Whistleblowers expose misconduct within systems, either on a government or a corporate level. An activist does it because politics and power are part of everyday life, but also because of the challenge to bring about change creatively.

We also know artists who open up artistic codes to expose the power of artificial intelligence or what goes on behind the interface of corporations. Some people, who are part of queer

and trans communities, do the same with their own sexual identity – they open up the codes of their sexuality to try out a fluid way of experiencing their bodies. All these people do disruption very differently. At Disruption Network Lab we do it on a different level through our events.

Lieke Ploeger: The community programme has been running for two years now. At Spektrum we wrote a guide on our community-building process after three and a half years.³ It outlines what we were doing with all the different groups, and what we learned from it. We met three times a year with all the communities and reflected on our working methods, thought about what was going wrong and what was going right. Since all these groups were working in the same way, they could all connect with and learn from each other. I thought the most interesting part in creating this guide was going through the lessons learned on how to solve some of the shared problems in the community: how to interact with people, and how to stimulate people to do something. We started to understand some aspects of how communities work, and we put all the lessons learned in the guide. But it is important to be aware that there is always a specific context in which you work, and some things don't translate well.

Meet-ups should always be two-way conversations. Everybody introduces themselves to say why they are there, what they want to learn, and everybody allows space for everybody to speak. Everyone should feel welcome. You don't need to be a computer scientist; it's not about knowledge being spread from 'us' to 'them'. We also host events that are more hands-on, like workshops. People really start to talk during the socialising that happens around them. At the conference we always organise a dinner to conclude the day and this is an important moment, as the speakers can start talking with each other and participants can find a common ground. It's a more intimate setting to start sharing ideas, and you already know the people and what they are working on.

Tatiana Bazzichelli: I always try to talk with each speaker individually before the conferences, to help them understand the concept behind our event. When you are a speaker at Disruption Lab you are ideally not just coming in to give your speech and then leave. We hope our speakers are open for an experience of connection, and are willing to really participate. We are trying to answer a question with the conferences, and the answer becomes stronger if we develop it collectively.

Sometimes speakers suggest other people who can give a lecture, and that expands the network. We trust the suggestions of others, and try to create an inviting environment in which people already know each other's work, and want to be on the same panel together. It might be people who've been following each other for years but have never met. Organising a conference is really about creating a network.

³ The guide is available at https://re-imagine-europe.eu/resources_item/how-we-can-all-make-it-to-the-future-a-guide-to-offline-community-building-in-art-science-2/



Visiting the Invisible: A Berlin City Tour to Anonymous and Aggressive Real Estate Investors, 2020

Jodi Rose: How would you like Disruption Network Lab develop in the future, in terms of themes, network, and the communities you're creating?

Tatiana Bazzichelli: We've developed a format of organising a conference every three months, combined with the structure of the regular community meet-ups. We can be timely and address issues that are burning at the moment because we have ongoing events. We aim to expand beyond our geographical borders to address issues that are impacting other countries. We organised a conference on ISIS's media propaganda and its influence across the Middle East and Europe. Next year we will focus on Asia. We aim to be more global and try to understand how our topics could be an inspiration for analysing practices of digital culture, and for political and media critique in different contexts.

Lieke Ploeger: I'm excited to continue the meet-ups, and develop the community conference. Holding a community day on the Sunday right after the conference gives us a way to connect quickly and directly to the conference. It's a three-day event, so we have to make the Sunday interesting otherwise people won't come. I'm excited to see what will happen with all the groups when the conference is longer.

Jodi Rose: What's the most surprising thing you've learned?

Lieke Ploeger: You always wonder who is going to show up and what their background is. We even had a retired police officer in the audience at one meet-up. I'm interested in knowing who are the people who find us, come back, and ask questions in the conference.

Tatiana Bazzichelli: To give visibility and support to people who are doing critical work is really important. Brandon Bryant, a former drone operator in the United States Air Force who turned whistleblower, was speaking at Disruption Network Lab in front of a large public about the Drone War in 2015. It was very important for me to meet him, because it completely changed my perspective. I wouldn't have met him twenty years ago when I was involved in Italian activism, because we were in different circuits. I would have considered him the enemy. Meeting him and hearing about his whistleblowing experience helped me to shape the future direction of the programme. I learned about the impact of changing opinion, and about the value of connecting people who work on social justice and whistleblowing in very different fields and levels.

The boundaries that separate us are almost non-existent. We can connect with people from different backgrounds and have a common mission. Meeting Brandon Bryant made me understand how important whistleblowers are as people who decide to act within their systems. They are really able to re-orient what is happening in society. What they do comes with great personal risk and a possibly a huge devastating impact on their life. They suffer isolation, persecution but at the same time they provide a wonderful change of mind. This encounter with the unexpected still inspires how we work at Disruption Network Lab.

BIOGRAPHIES

Tatiana Bazzichelli (IT/DE) is founder and artistic director of the Disruption Network Lab, an organisation in Berlin working on information technology, network culture, hacktivism and whistleblowing. In 2011-2014 she was programme curator at transmediale festival, where she developed the year-round initiative reSource for transmedial culture and curated several conference events, workshops and installations. She is the author of *Networked Disruption* (2013), *Networking* (2006), and co-edited *Disrupting Business* (2013). She curated exhibitions such as *Samizdata* (2015), *Networked Disruption* (2015), *HACK.Fem.EAST* (2008), and *Hack.it.art* (2005).

Lieke Ploeger (NL/DE) is the community director and administration officer of the Disruption Network Lab in Berlin. Her core interest lies in building and developing both online and offline communities of interest, with a focus on sharing knowledge and expertise in an open way. Previously, she co-founded the independent art space SPEKTRUM Berlin, and worked for the Open Knowledge Foundation, where she was involved in various European research projects in the areas of open cultural data, open access and open science.

Jodi Rose (AU/DE) is an artist, writer, producer, and creative director of Singing Bridges, an urban sonic sculpture playing the cables of bridges as musical instruments on a global scale.

CONTEXT

This article is part of the *Re-Imagine Europe* publication. The publication collects articles, essays, interviews and reports about audience engagement for interdisciplinary arts organisations. It aims to share knowledge gained throughout the *Re-Imagine Europe* project with professionals in the cultural sector who would like to gain a deeper insight in audience development and capacity building.

Re-Imagine Europe (2017-2021) is a four-year project of ten cultural organizations from across Europe, responding to the current social and political challenges. With a programme of residencies, commissions, symposia and workshops, the project partners stimulate both artistic production and audience development. They experiment with new ways of reaching out to their audiences, motivated by the ambition to develop a broader and more engaging approach to audience development and capacity building.

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