Platforming as practice

Introduction

A question that is put to me will haunt this text – as it connects and troubles different aspects of my practice. This question is: "Do you want to design our platform?" Even though this question is frequently asked it still brings about more questions than answers. I will recur to it, as it reminds me of my discomfort with being a designer, and the unease I sometimes feel when being asked as a designer to design *things*. The alleged *thing* here is a digital object referred to as a platform. I will discuss the platform in concrete terms, drawing from experiences of designing digital infrastructures[1] and I will also consider the ways the platform is referred to metaphorically – to describe forms of collective organizing. One example is the collective Hackers & Designers – which is also referred to as a platform. I explore these different facets by looking closer at the notion of the platform as an organizational device – structuring and formalizing messy informal collaborative practice.

As a user and a designer of platforms – if one would want to make that distinction[2] (Stappers) – I am interested in the ways technical and non-technical platform structure collective organizing and how being implicated with a platform, one is able to attune to – or resist it. By looking at the relationships unleashed through what I call *platforming as a practice,* I will problematize the notions of platform, design, and organization not as isolated entities but in relation to one another.

Referring to design as a form of boundary-making (Suchman) – a practice of creating stable units (Tsing), I argue that the platform-design configuration and how its commonly understood, misses out on addressing the unpredictability of socio-technical relationships and their non-scalable effects. That is, consequences of a transformative design process that cannot be anticipated and formalized are rendered invisible in a request such as "Do you want to design our platform?". Such request presupposes a certain fixedness – a beginning and an end of a platform and the possibility to foresee a platform's trajectory.

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[1] Referring to digital infrastructures I mean websites, digital publications and environments that cater to managing content, also referred to CMS (Content Management Systems) or file online sharing systems.
[2] There have been a manifold of designers and design researchers doing important work to challenge the dualistic user-maker divide. For example in: *Open Design Now*, see: "Creation & Co-User Participation in Design", Pieter Jan Stappers.

Theoretical framing

My aim with this chapter is to discuss the relationships that platforms establish, sustain and disrupt. I will argue that this can be achieved only when challenging the notion of a platform as a fixed object that can be designed.

The platform cases delineated here are socio-technical environments that are contingent and messy and render design's involvements illegible. I draw from theories in and outside of the design theoretical discourse to remain attentive and oriented while being involved in different ways with platform projects. It became useful to draw from my experience as a designer, which I come to relate to as a practice of 'boundary-making', as proposed by Lucy Suchman, Professor of Anthropology of Science and Technology at Lancaster University. The notion of design as put forward here is furthermore informed by anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's work on non-scalability. Tsing characterizes design as a form of control, which I will relate to in my consideration of translating informal collective organization into a programmable digital environment. Scalability projects are relying on the creation of self-contained, standardized units that can be expanded, reproduced, scaled up and down. They are standardized on the basis of a normative scale so they don't change the underlying system in the process of expansion.

As a negative of scalability the notion of non-scalability as put forward by Tsing is particularly relevant to my thesis. As I am striving for a non-affirmative discussion of design the concept of non-scalability may provide a non-utilitarian and non-solutionist framework. By looking at non-scalable side-effects of platforms I propose to consider platforms as living environments – as "affective infrastructures" as proposed by Lauren Berlant, professor of English at the University of Chicago who writes about of queer and affect theory. By moving attention away from platforms as fixed objects to their modes of transitioning, the ways they take part in producing and affecting relations (for instance work relations between people, but also other digital infrastructures) I intend to take into consideration their highly contextual configurations, their implications in and outside of their intended existence.

From the perspective of a designer the pressing question that I want to deal with in this chapter is: To what extent can platforms (technical and non-technical) – after a reading of

my own platform experiences through the theory of non-scalability – be considered designed or designable?

I will speak to that question by discussing three main elements – platform, design, and organization – in relation to each other. I will try to sketch the specifics of the environments from which my understanding of collective organizing has developed. Followed by a trajectory of building a physical installation that has influenced my thinking around platforms as an organizational device. I will furthermore discuss the process of designing a digital platform that was designed with the intention to formalize collective organization.

But first I want to attend to my understanding of design – including my problems with it.

Design as boundary-making

Coming from a visual communication background (also referred to as graphic design or communication design), I came to relate to design as a practice of – what Lucy Suchman calls *boundary-making*. According to Suchman: "The boundaries that constitute things as separate and different are treated not as pregiven, but as enacted, and practices of boundary-making and the enactment of difference are inevitably political"[3]. As a designer I identify as a boundary-maker. I draw distinctions. I consciously and subconsciously engage in processes of selecting, ordering and prioritizing information. My boundary-making affects others. I decide in what ways information becomes eligible. Inevitably the boundaries drawn between what gets included and what gets excluded – the enactment of difference – prompt questions of accountability. Regardless of whether I design a book, a website or a more complex digital infrastructure I ask myself: How to locate accountabilties within the inevitable process of discrimination – also called a design process?

Suchman who draws connections from agential realism to practices of technology design and system development offers a point of view from within working relations and sociomaterial connections that make up the design and use of technical systems. According to Suchman the question of accountability of a designer – the boundary-maker, can only be approached while considering the work relations a designer is immersed in. She directs attention to "the labors (especially those previously ignored) that are essential and ongoing

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[3] Lucy Suchman, "Located Accountabilities in Technology Production" in: Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems: Vol. 14: Iss.2, Article 7.

aspects of sociomaterial assemblages and the capacities for action that they enable"[4]. Agency within Suchman's depiction of technology design is an ongoing reconfiguration rather than an attribution. The question of accountability can therefore not be answered without unsettling the configuration of 'platform-design' from within.

In the following sub section I try to sketch out the environment in which I encounter collective organization – a group I have worked with since 2013 and which has shaped my understanding of collaborative organization and disorganization.

The H&D Platform

The notion of the platform has become a common concept – also within the work of the collective Hackers & Designers (H&D). I am an active member of H&D since its beginnings in 2013. H&D is a non-profit workshop initiative with an emphasis on technology, design, art, and cross-disciplinary exchange. Besides developing digital infrastructures referred to as platforms[5], at H&D the notion of the platform is also used figuratively, addressing social and organizational aspects of the collective.

To describe the characteristics of H&D's organizational practice is challenging. A lot of it is implicit, not written down, or agreed upon formally. H&D is one of those collectives that never intended to be a collective. It seemed as if it grew and matured by itself into what is sometimes referred to as a platform. Together with a few peers we were running a project space in the east of Amsterdam, hosting art and design initiatives. It was one of these spaces that was vacant that allowed us, recent art school graduates, to organize parties, exhibitions, markets, and workshops. The space offered opportunities for encounters and exchange with peers. One of those encounters was with a computer programmer called James who was an organizer of another community called Hackers & Founders[6]. James seemed intrigued by our ad hoc way of organizing our events. We started talking. We talked about the differences and commonalities of our communities.

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[4] Lucy Suchman, "Located Accountabilties in Technology Production" in: Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems: Vol. 14: Iss.2, Article 7.
[5] Digital infrastructures designed by H&D that were referred to as platforms:
https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Publishing/p/The_making_of_hackersanddesigners.nl
https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Tools/p/Hackers_&_Designers_Coop
https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Tools/p/Free_Wiki
[6] https://www.meetup.com/de-DE/Hackers-and-Founders/

The conversations with James (software developer) and Selby, an artist whom I was running the project space with at that time, resulted in a series of bi-monthly meetups, informal yet public meetings. James created a meetup page[7] with the title *Hackers & Designers* – a pragmatic title that described our proposition clearly. We invited the two communities to come together, to meet and exchange. We wanted them to experience different ways of 'making things'[8] than they were used to. The meetups were informal, yet we set a few rules. Every time we invited two workshop facilitators[9], optimally one with a technical background and one with a design or art background. Both workshop hosts would share or teach something by means of short hands-on workshops. In these 'lightening workshops' we learned how to make plants tweet when they needed water[10], drew calligraphy with self-made tools[11], built drawing robots, programmed browser animations[12], planted dead drops[13], created generative typefaces[14], and learned about tricks for color separation[15]. It was the very practical approach that people seemed to be drawn to. These encounters and exchanges taking place during the workshops allowed people to connect and explore new collaborations.

Referring to H&D itself as a platform, speaks to the collective's positioning as an initiator and facilitator of encounters and exchanges between different practitioners. As a 'platform', one could say H&D attempts to inspire others to start new initiatives, create new collectives that meet, exchange, work and learn together.

This first brief depiction of the organization of H&D and how it evolved into what is referred to as a platform is representative of the way the story of H&D is commonly told. It also shows where my own understanding of collective organizing comes from, and my questioning in how far collective organizing can be formalized. In this depiction it indeed seems as if H&D has undergone a somewhat natural process of evolving into – what is referred to as a platform. While it is through frequency and recurrence of events that H&D started to gain recognition it still felt as if one thing led to the other – an assumption that I have been

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[7] https://www.meetup.com (page was taken offline in 2017)
[8] 'Making' is used her as an umbrella term to describe the work and practices of practitioners from different fields
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[10] https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Activities/p/Hardware_hacking lightning workshop by Arjan Scherpenisse
[11] https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Activities/p/ICalligraphy lightning workshop by Stefan Schäfer
[12] https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Activities/p/ICalligraphy lightning workshop by Jonas Otten
[13] https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Activities/p/NSA "'Dead Drops' is an anonymous, offline, peer to peer file-sharing network in public space. USB flash drives are embedded into walls, buildings and curbs accessible to anybody in public space." https://deaddrops.com/
[14] https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Activities/p/So_if_you_are_so_smart... Lightning workshop by Moniker (Luna Maurer and Jonathan Puckey)
[15] https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Activities/p/Hardware_hacking lightning workshop by Karoline Swiezynski

sustaining myself throughout the history of H&D. Taking the concept of the platform seriously I want to question that assumption and continue thinking *with* platforms by looking at translations of the platform metaphor into other forms, for instance a spatial installation and a digital infrastructures. And how those translations had implications for the collective itself.

Platform *Infra-structures*

In 2018 Hackers & Designers received an invitation to curate an exhibition. Our initial response was: "Sorry we aren't curators. We just organize workshops". However, the question triggered us as we have been struggling with finding appropriate means to represent the practice of H&D to a more general public. For a long time I was the designer of the collective. I always found it rather challenging to design for H&D. Any poster, website, flyer that I made felt like taking out the steam of the actual experience of being at an H&D event. In order to share what H&D does with a wider audience, we have made attempts to put together prototype exhibitions[16] and tried out different ways of showing unfinished work. The focus on processes has always been important to us. Most of what we do lives within workshop moments, which might be the reason that our exhibition and presentation attempts have never been satisfying. It is difficult to share the practice of H&D with a wider audience who we cannot engage with directly. Nonetheless the invitation for the exhibition challenged us to think about representing H&D spatially, thus to think differently about our work. We accepted the invitation as we hoped for new insights deriving from this unfamiliar process. We asked the spatial designer and scenographer Thomas Rustemeyer to work with us on the exhibition. Thomas' involvement as someone standing outside of the organization allowed us to discuss aspects about H&D, which we would not have addressed if we would have worked with people closely involved with the collective. Thomas patiently proposed many possible directions. He proposed to display some of the tools H&D developed in the past, outcomes of workshops, websites, publications. However none of us at H&D felt comfortable including past workshop output in the exhibition. The idea of showing the workshop results seemed inappropriate. But why is that? While we were so enthusiastic about creating a publishing karaoke machine[17], turning toy cars into self-driving cars[18], and performing bodily interfaces[19], why does the idea of showing these projects in a public context seem inappropriate?

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[16] Dublin Science Gallery in 2019 and H&D Summer Academy 2017 'On &/ Off the Grid at Mediamatic and De Ruimte in Amsterdam
[17] https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Publishing/p/Momentary_Zine
[18] https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Activities/p/Self-Driving_Car_in_Basel
[19] https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Activities/p/Interfacial_Workout https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Activities/p/Body_Electric

Another consideration for making the exhibition was to show work produced by the individual members of the H&D collective. Afterall, many of us pursue artistic practices, and it is due to the variety of practices and perspectives that H&D evolved. Most of us have experiences in exhibiting works in galleries and project spaces and H&D workshops are often starting points for new projects. We entertained the idea for a brief moment, but soon acknowledged this would be a terrible exhibition, an incohesive, random potpourri. We started talking about the core values of H&D. Why are we doing what we are doing already for such a long time? Slowly we came to realize that H&D might consist of individual practitioners who all bring in their own questions related to their own practices. At the same time, H&D could also be seen as a practice in its own right. We are hosting others and another to do the things we would usually not do in our daily practices. We experiment, without the pressure of creating precious artifacts. Instead of exhibiting our own works, we decided to use the exhibition as an occasion to connect to other artists and art collectives from the wider H&D community and started imagining a spatial translation of the *H&D platform*[20]. Thomas made many drawings depicting spatial structures that would support, carry, and shine light on different practices and make connections between them. We imagined the H&D platform as a space that could be activated at different moments in different ways. But most importantly, the platform would be used rather than looked at.

The platform metaphor and the recurring conversations with the spatial designer, who is usually not closely involved in the organization of H&D, has helped us to step back and take distance from our convoluted involvements in the organization. We were able to think differently about the work we do. The spatial dimension of the platform metaphor worked for us as an orientation device – a term used by Rita Felski, scholar in the fields of literary and feminist theory and cultural studies. According to Felski metaphors are "orientation devices that yoke abstract ideas to more tangible or graspable phenomena, intertwining the less familiar with the already known."[21] Working with the platform metaphor to bridge the concrete and the imaginative allowed us to address – with a new kind of attention the ephemeral aspects of H&D's work. That is, the organizational maneuvers that allowed us to include other artists in our budgets and plannings, but also the many – often brief encounters during workshop moments that might live on, in known and unknown ways. Sometimes these encounters live on in anecdotes, like the ones written down here. Sometimes they transform into projects or artifacts after a workshop. Sometimes they live on in a classroom, as

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[20] Documentation and translation of the platform to the website: https://bodybuilding.hackersanddesigners.nl/
[21] Rita Felski, "The Limits of Critique"

reiterations of the educational formats we experiment with at H&D. Sometimes they transform into a giant blue colored platform construction. The translation from ephemeral aspects of H&D to building a literal physical platform made explicit what often remains implicit in collective organization, and therefore – to a certain extent – gives footing to a discussion about intentions, possibilities and limitations of collaborative structures.

Yet, for someone who encounters this massive blue structure without much context or insight into the processes that brought it into being, it might be a misleading encounter. The platform might come across as a solid spatial design project that aims to represent rather than discuss the H&D collective. It could also be read as a display system that came about through processes of determining functionality and eligibility of the different works it accommodates. Both readings are not entirely incorrect. The platform fulfils certain functions. For instance it needs to be reliable and lasting for the duration of the exhibition period. It needs to carry people without collapsing. It needs to be self-explaining and communicative in order for people to interact with it. However, I consider the practices and processes that evolve from the platform and feed back into it, the most crucial point and most aligned with H&D's practice.

While the boundaries between H&D's actual work and its representations are blurry, the platform[22] as it was exhibited is a remainder – a left-over of a process that has shaped our understanding of H&D as a collective. Initially[23] the platform would be used as a workshop site, a reading room and hangout space. It would host people during workshops and be open for other initiatives to host their own sessions. A digital library[24] gave access to resources that informed the different works and the coming into being of the platform. The library was accessible on and around the platform through local Wifi hotspots.

The pertinent way of relating the physical structure of the platform to the collective practice of H&D would be a reading of H&D's practice through the process of creating this platform, including the detours and failed attempts, as well as the processes that followed from there. In that sense the platform should be considered through its modes of transformation from an

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[22] https://wiki.hackersanddesigners.nl/images/8/81/Nazanin.jpg
https://wiki.hackersanddesigners.nl/images/3/3e/Meditationannikaa.jpg
https://wiki.hackersanddesigners.nl/images/3/32/Annika.jpg
https://wiki.hackersanddesigners.nl/images/e/e4/Anjapresbook.jpg
[23] The current situation of the global pandemic challenged our plans for following through with our plans for in-person encounters with the platform. We translated some of our activities and process documentation into a website and built a live-stream for H&D to be able to stay connected to the community and still exchange.
[24] Resource library: Local networks (hotspots) that visitors could log into while being in closer proximation to the exhibition https://wiki.hackersanddesigners.nl/images/1/19/Hotspots.jpg

envisioned structure to the actual encounters it intended to accommodate, and further transitioning into other (digital) spaces for encounters (livestream platform[25] and platform project website[26]). In these transformative modes I relate this continuing platform experience to the workings of infrastructures. According to Berlant infrastructures are made from within relations[27].

> *An infrastructural analysis helps us see that what we commonly call ''structure'' is not what we usually call it, an intractable principle of continuity across time and space, but is really a convergence of force and value in patterns of movement that's only solid when seen from a distance. Objects are always looser than they appear. Objectness is only a semblance, a seeming, a projection effect of interest in a thing we are trying to stabilise.[28]*

In this chapter the object is the platform and it is indeed looser than it might appear. The platform that some encounter in the guise of an exhibition design, did not end with the planning, designing and building of the platform structure itself. However it temporarily provided us with a distance that makes it seem as if H&D functions as a platform – while we are actually still *plat-forming*.

Although the metaphor of the platform can be useful as a point of reference for thinking about the work of collective organizing, its everyday use can also be limiting. The way the platform metaphor is often used it generalizes the particularities and implications of collective organizing. While in the previous example the process of designing the large physical structure allowed us to reflect on our modes of organization – our practice – from a distance. At the same time it's appearance generalized and rendered invisible the complexities and subjectivities of collective organizing. The use of the term platform tends to subscribe a presumed value to the platform as being supportive and enabling. In the exhibition the platform literally became a "support structure" and reproduced the common platform trope. The 'hub' or the 'network' are other akin tropes that are used in the fields of design, art, technological production, and education, which is where the work of H&D is situated. The

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[25] https://live.hackersanddesigners.nl/
[26] https://bodybuilding.hackersanddesigners.nl/
[27]   Lauren Berlant 'The commons: Infrastructures for troubling Times'
[28] Lauren Berlant 'The commons: Infrastructures for troubling Times'

generalizing effects of these kinds of tropes results in the presupposition that any form of collective organizing could be considered a platform.[29]

Platform inclusions and exclusions

The platform is often envisioned as a horizontal, uplifted structure. In *Sad by Design. On Platform Nihilism* Geert Lovink describes the platform as a plateau, which "is always situated on a higher level"[30] referring to the ancient military strategy of "positioning fortifications around churches, palaces and castles on hills to detect enemy movement". Deriving from Middle French (plateforme) – as a 'flat form' or 'flatscape'[31], the platform today can be understood as a plan or a design, "a declaration of principles on which a group of persons stand"[32]. H&D activities are organized with a horizontal approach. That is, the way we organize is up for discussion and the intention is to accommodate as many voices as possible, through for instance the distribution of efforts and resources necessary for organizing amongst the larger H&D community.[33]

However, the horizontality of such a platform does not circumvent discriminatory effects. A platform elevates – thus, differentiates. There is an 'on' the platform, consequently there is also an 'under' or 'behind' the platform. In the context of H&D activities there is a clear sense of being part of something, committing to a specific moment or task. Situating ourselves as part of the platform we implicitly agree on focussing and concentrating on a shared activity, and a common approach to organizing those activities. Having participated in many activities since the first H&D meetup in 2013[34], the phrase: "You had to be there" makes apparent the growing sense of belonging that comes with repeated participation, and shows how involvement over time also creates a clear distinction of newbies.

An example I relate to platforms' inclusion and exclusion mechanisms is a digital environment built in the context of H&D organizational work in the beginning of 2018. One

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[29] https://www.platformbk.nl/ ("Platform BK researches the role of art in society and takes action for a better art policy. We represent artists, curators, designers, critics and other cultural producers.")
https://thehmm.nl/ ("The Hmm is an inclusive platform for internet cultures.")
https://v2.nl/organization ("V2_ offers a platform for artists, designers, scientists, researchers, theorists, and developers of software and hardware from various disciplines to discuss their work and share their findings.")
https://pub.sandberg.nl/information ("PUB functions as a hub and a platform…")
https://www.li-ma.nl/lima/about ("LIMA is the platform in the Netherlands for media art, new technologies and digital culture...")
[30] Geert Lovink, *Sad by Design. On Platform Nihilism* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), p 67.
[31] https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/platform
[32] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/platform#h1
[33] H&D Summer Academy 2020: Open call for distributed workshops:
https://hackersanddesigners.nl/p/Open_Call!_HDSA2020:_Network_Imaginaries
[34] https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Activities/p/1st_edition

core member of the H&D collective prompted to fundamentally restructure the organizational model of H&D and the equal distribution of finances. The proposal: Let's build a digital platform that allows us to decentralize and partially automate the organizational efforts of the H&D collective!

The H&D COOP platform divides available funds equally amongst the members of the coop. Projects can be proposed to the coop by one or more members. Other coop members review the project proposal, which they can either fund, reject, or they suggest how the project should be improved. Within this workflow anything the cooperative does, any activity or purchase, needs to be described as a project, or as part of a project – including structural activities such as administration, bookkeeping, communication and writing funding applications. A project cannot be funded by the members who initiate it, which means coop members cannot fund their own projects. They can only contribute to others.

While the H&D COOP platform was proposed as an experiment it has become an essential organizational workflow and conjunction of the collective. The platform functions well as an organizational tool and has introduced important questions. Discussions about projects but also the way H&D is structured as an organization, have become more active. Members of the collective seem to be more informed and involved in each other's activities. Yet the initial idea of introducing more transparency and possibility for discourse about activities does not resonate with all H&D members equally. As a result there are members of the collective who have become less active. Subscribing to an ad hoc working style, they don't formulate their tasks clearly or have difficulties with the workload that comes with constant formalization and quantification of work. That leads to the situation that some members are not able to safeguard a budget for their involvement with the consequence that they become less involved.

The H&D COOP platform is a translation of collective organization into self-contained, stable units[35]. The dynamics of collective organizing were translated into static digits and fields for describing and quantifying one's contribution to the collective. Another example of such a translation would be a content management or backend systems – platforms that cater to organizing digital content for display on a website. A unit could be a field that is dedicated to a specific content type or category, such as a title or a keyword. In both instances the platform users themselves could be described as units. As units their existence on the

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[35] Tsing

platform becomes plannable.

The example of the H&D COOP platform shows that a platform can hardly be taken for granted as a useful tool, which acts in service of those who use it. Platforms are inherently unstable and moving. Especially when looking at moments in which platforms act up, when their glitches confront commonplace expectations we are able to recognize what can hardly be generalized or anticipated – like contextual nuances of collective organizing.

Side-step: *Platformization*

Being trained in graphic design *platformization* – the ubiquity of platforms – became apparent when my everyday tools – media design software such as Adobe InDesign and Photoshop became Cloud services delivered over the Internet by subscription.[36] The move from owning to renting software felt like entering an expensive membership-only club. From purchasing (or pirating) a product to becoming member of the Creative Cloud community, I was forced to adhere to more frequent software updates (for better[37] or worse[38]). Adobe's transition to a platform-based business model caused anxiety within the utterly reliant Adobe user base. The transition meant platform-exclusion for those not considered – that is, small scale businesses and independent designers, who were put down as hobbyists[39].

The notion of the platform is intricate and spans a multitude of fields of study and discourses such as Digital Humanities, Science and Technology Studies or Economic Sciences. The platform phenomenon is often discussed in relation to large technology companies, their influence on the global economy and society at large. In *Platform Capitalism* Nick Srnicek, writer and lecturer in the fields of political philosophy and digital economy differentiates the platform sphere into categories, of which most known the category of *advertising platforms* such as Google and Facebook that extract and analyse information of platform users, to sell space for advertisement. There are *cloud platforms* such as Amazon Web Services or the

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[36] Initially hosted by Amazon Web Services and then, in 2017 by Microsoft Azure
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adobe_Creative_Cloud
[37]
https://venturebeat.com/2014/06/18/adobe-launches-creative-cloud-2014-its-first-massive-update-since-killing-the-creative-suite
https://www.pcmag.com/news/adobe-ditches-creative-suite-for-cc-creative-cloud
https://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2013/05/adobes-creative-suite-is-dead-long-live-the-creative-cloud/
[38] "In May 2014 the service was interrupted for over a day due to a login outage leaving graphics professionals locked out of Creative Cloud." https://www.thedailybeast.com/adobes-creative-cloud-goes-offlineand-takes-a-million-designers-with-it
[39] "It feels like the Creative Cloud has become more exclusively focused on the business user and abandoned its hobbyist fans."
https://www.forbes.com/sites/amadoudiallo/2013/06/17/adobe-cc-subscription-release-big-upside-and-risk/#6e8e861819c6
https://www.macworld.co.uk/news/apple/adobe-creative-cloud-reactions-responses-reassurance-3446802/
https://mashable.com/2013/05/13/adobe-creative-cloud-top-comments/?europe=true
https://www.digitalartsonline.co.uk/news/creative-software/analysis-real-reason-adobe-ditched-creative-suite-for-creative-cloud/

previously mentioned Adobe Creative Cloud that own and rent out server infrastructure to digital-dependant businesses, and there are *product platforms* such as Spotify that collect subscription fees. *Lean platforms* like Uber, Airbnb and Taskrabbit position themselves as platforms upon which users, customers, and workers can meet, and form the 'gig economy'. Their platform model is profitable through hyper-outsourcing.

Techno-social[40] (Turner, 2006) platform projects such as Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp are designed for emulating and enhancing (making efficient) social interaction. Platforms are often depicted as artificial. Their boundaries are planned, designed and enacted with a presumed purpose. Predefined protocols anticipate, determine and organize participation of those on the platform.

The sociologist, architecture and design theorist, Benjamin Bratton blurs the confined boundaries of platforms. He defines platforms as powerful hybrids – as *organisations* that take on important institutional roles.[41] Rather than doing the work of organizing Bratton refers to platforms as organizations themselves. He suggests that platforms on their own obtain a certain ambition and act self-determined.

Although the depictions of platforms by authors like Bratton, Srnicek and Lovink offer a critical perspective on the implications of platforms' ubiquity, they also reproduce the common fable of 'bigness as progress' (Tsing). The notion of platforms as megastructures – as portrayed by Bratton, takes their scalability for granted as a necessary tool of progress and in my point of view, paralyzes the question of accountability.

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[40] In *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* Fred Turner, author and media historian delineates the rise of digital utopianism in relation to the work of Stewart Brant and the Whole Earth Network. Turner describes Brant as an "exemplary promoter of a new, networked mode of techno-social life" (p 8). The notion *techno-social* is here used to describe the productions of the Whole Earth Network which modeled "the sorts of relationships between technology, information, the individual, and the community favored by network members", and furthermore refers to terms such as *virtual community* and the *electronic frontier*, that were rhetorical constructions supported by Whole Earth forums. – Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).
In more recent books such as *Sad by Design* by Geert Lovink the term techno-social is used in the context of investigating internet culture. – Geert Lovink, *Sad by Design. On Platform Nihilism* (London: Pluto Press, 2019).
[41] Benjamin Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

Platform-design configurations[42]

Building forth on Lauren Berlant's affective infrastructures and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's theory of nonscalability I will proceed with paying attention to my own experiences of encountering digital platforms as a designer and organizer and return to the haunting design request. "Do you want to design our platform?" I was asked the question by different kinds of initiatives, mostly organizations, collectives, groups of practitioners in the fields of art, design, technology and academia. And as I am writing this text in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic the desire for reliable and accessible online platforms increases. Online platforms keep us connected and sutain collaboration in times of social isolation. However, I also witness an increasing frustration of platformers around me. The frustration derives from large scale corporations that profit from their user's reliances in times of crisis, by selling their data [43]. While the need for accessible tools for collaboration grows the desires for alternatives to proprietary, data stealing online platforms becomes more and more apparent.

Especially in these current contingent times I recognize the urgent need for online platforms that facilitate collaboration. However, the question whether or not I would like to design someone's platform leaves me repeatedly confused. Why would someone suppose I could respond to such a request in a meaningful way? I am also puzzled by my own discomfort, and wonder about my lack of confidence in responding either: "Sure! Let me design your platform!" or "No sorry, I am not interested." Why is it that being addressed as a potential *platform designer* confronts my positionality as a designer more intensely than, for instance the question of designing a book or a website?

For a start it's difficult to respond to the question with a straightforward answer because the platform is a rather nonspecific notion as I have already laid out. Nevertheless, the request for platform design emits a certain ambition. When referring to platforms we often talk about complex technical infrastructures – that anticipate and structure how platform users interact without becoming aware of the platforms complexities. The request for platform design furthermore presupposes a user base, a community or group of people who want to be part

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[42] Lucy Suchman, "Agency in Technology Design: Feminist Reconfigurations"
[43]
https://www.theverge.com/interface/2020/4/2/21202984/zoom-backlash-zoombombing-encryption-exploits-consumerization-of-it
https://www.cyberscoop.com/zoom-fbi-teleconference-hijacking/
https://www.techradar.com/reviews/zoom

of the platform, work with the platform, and accept to do the work the platform asks from them.

The question: "Do you want to design our platform" presupposes a relationship and the configuration of roles within this relationship seems to be distinct. There is the role of the designer ('you') and the group that formulates the request ('our') who position themselves as a kind of commissioner. The 'our' implies an expectation of ownership of the platform. It would be 'their' platform I am designing, not mine. My reluctance to responding with a straightforward answer lies in the uncertainty whether or not it is actually possible to get involved in such a project without becoming – and remaining implicated in different ways than the presumed distinct relation of a designer – the one who *creates* the platform, a commissioner – the one who *owns* the platform who might, or might not be the user – the one who *works with* the platform.

I recognize my discomfort with the platform design request might lie in my inability to align with the implied fixedness of roles and the division of accountabilities assumed in the envisioned platform. The platform here is proposed as a discrete technical object, one that can be controlled and its implications can be anticipated, which in my experience is not possible.

Platforming

While moving attention to aspects of 'becoming' inherent in collective organizing[44], I hope my attempt to turn *platform* the noun into the verb *platforming* will be read in different proximities, and engaged with in reflective as well as practical terms.

The exhibition structure that took the shape of a massive platform structure was an extraordinary organizational effort, which took us – the H&D collective off guard. Building such a large structure, coordinating the collaborating artists while managing the expectations of the gallery space proved a new challenge for H&D. However it allowed to publicly show the work of H&D not in its entirety or its usefulness, neither in its individual parts. Instead the platform, and more so the process of thinking with the platform, created an environment for H&D to practice, to test, to question, to learn something new together. As H&D we facilitated

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[44] In *'What's the story?' Organizing as Mode of Existence* Bruno Latour addresses the impossibility of speaking about an organization and its type of agency "without losing the specific ways in which it would have appeared had you attempted to participate in its organizing".

the collaborating artists and designers in their process of thinking with us and the platform, producing work for, with, under, or on the platform.

The H&D COOP platform brings together problems of collaboration *by design*. The H&D COOP platform inhabits and carries on many ambitions, of which the main ambition is the automation of work. However the promise of automation – making efficient as well as transparent the work of collective organizing couldn't be realized. In a sense the H&D COOP platform could be regarded as a failed platform project in different ways. The technical infrastructure utilized the Blockchain technology Ethereum, and proved impractical and too difficult to maintain. However, the cooperative organizational workflow persisted with the help of a shared spreadsheet and a protocol on how to use it. The H&D COOP turned from an ambitious platform project into an unambitious, ongoing, never ending prototype. The challenge of maintaining such a cooperative workflow in an inclusive manner remains. The COOP platform's functioning relies on an individualised and compartmentalised approach of depicting collective work. It resists relational aspects through quantification mechanisms. The H&D COOP platform shows that it is not ours to own[45] and to control but that it has its own agency. The H&D COOP platform changed the H&D collective. It changed how members of the collective relate to each other and the platform. In the words of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing we might have been *contaminated* by our encounters with the platform and each other. "Because relationships are encounters across difference, they have a quality of indeterminacy."[46] In my words: We might have been *platformed*.

While the intention of a platform might be to enhance collective organizing, it also disrupts forms of organization in a sense that it artificially introduces structure and distance. A platform introduces another point of view – an overview of organizational work. However the organization becomes something else through that point of view.

By turning platform the noun into *platforming* the verb I intend to move attention to the relationships platforms establish and disrupt, their inclusions and exclusions, their contingencies. It is through disruption, through stepping out of organizing that we are able to question our organizational routines. It is when platforms act up that we get to pay a different

[45] Reference to Trebor Scholz, Nathan Schneider 'Ours to Hack and to Own. The Rise of Platform Cooperativism, a new Vision for a Fairer Internet' 2016, OR Books, New York and London
[46] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, "On Nonscalability: The Living World Is Not Amenable to Precision-Nested Scales", in: *Common Knowledge*, Volume 18, Issue 3, Fall 2012, pp. 505-524

kind of attention to our organizational workings. To think with a 'platform' might lead to the realization that what has been considered as organization is actually disorganization.