

Research summary and question

This research project dismantles and problematizes the trope of collaboration within the contemporary design landscape. By looking at specific cases that dilute the position of the designer, such as the *workshop*, the *platform* and the *tool* this research aims to develop and foster articulations around design that do not assume or affirm design.

In my inquiry of different positionalities within collaborative environments I build upon theories of design that refer to Chantal Mouffe's work on agonism, advocating an approach to design that privileges difference. By paying attention to processes of design (rather than final results or products of design) these adversarial¹, dissenting² and contestational³ approaches to design call attention to the importance of incorporating different positions in a design process.

While the pluralist lens offers means of resisting generalisation it also presupposes that positions are clearly defined, and apparent. The way this pluralist lens is applied by design theoreticians and practitioners positions design as an instrument for (social) change and as it would argue takes part in reproducing the common assumption of design's ability to solve issues. In order to fundamentally question design however, design itself needs to be moved away from the center of attention.

To complicate the pluralistic approach of understanding collaboration in design – being and working together in difference, this research is pursued from a multilayered position. It is from a position of convoluted involvements, transgressing boundaries of disciplines, methods, formats that I investigate the conditions and implications of working with *others* – including other human beings but also digital objects.

The central question that underlies this research is: What happens after the dilution of design?

With this dissertation I intend to develop a grammar of sorts that allows me and other design practitioners to approach fundamental questions such as: Are we still designing? If we are not, or we can't be sure, how do we define, defend and critique our practices? How can we hold and be held accountable? And if we are, don't we need to expand our understanding of design and the ways we articulate it?". Drawing from three cases from my own experience with collaborative practice, I investigate how situations during which design blends together with other practices, experiences, and subjectivities.

Key terms

In my thesis I work with three key terms, which relate to, but do not presume design. The key terms inform my observations and reflections however, as for now they have not become explicit concepts or definitions. At the moment they operate in the background as a scaffolding for my thinking and writing.

¹ Carl DiSalvo

² Sofia Bemepeza, Mahmoud Keshavarz, Ramia Mazé

³ Tad Hirsch

Sociality

My research is informed by various interdisciplinary collaborations, of which many evolve from my work with the collective Hackers & Designers (H&D). The non-institutional, noncommercial environment of H&D allows us to temporarily disregard pressures of designing functioning and precious things. The temporary gatherings of people from different backgrounds provide occasion to pose open questions, address something unresolved, something they want to start exploring.

In my case studies I reflect on relationships that occur within different collaborative environments and their implications for the ways a design process is envisioned or pursued. Other than the notion of pluralism, as proposed by Chantal Mouffe, the notion of *sociality* encompasses the possibility – but not the necessity of different positions to occur in such collaborative configurations. In sociality there are no presumed positions as there is no fixedness, no standing still. For instance in the case of the workshop chapter, I discuss the ways a workshop situation is – and is not considered productive – taking into consideration different criteria, different histories from which the notion of the workshop derives, different experiences, expertise and expectations. I look at the ways workshop situations have shaped the understanding of productivity through the specific constellation of the workshop situation – including aspects that were not planned or designed beforehand. Thinking through the dynamics of sociality I aim to take notice of those contingent, unplannable, non-scalable, unreproducible influences and outcomes as they emerge, evaporate, settle, disrupt – without instrumentalizing them.

Informality

Design is usually understood as a practice of formalization. As a graphic designer – trained in European art and design schools – with modernist legacies, I seek uniformity when I treat images, text and illustrations before I place them in a book, a poster or a website. I regulate their appearance, – the way they are made legible. By introducing a level of abstraction, I apply form to something that didn't obtain that form before and by doing that I create new relations, new meanings. In this process of formalization I anticipate the encounter of a viewer/reader/user with the content. In the platform chapter I refer to a digital environment – an interface that formalizes a collective's organizational workflow. This formalization process produced standardization on the basis of which any form of activity within the collective would be described and evaluated. This formalization process produced problems, related to the collective's reliance on informal modes of functioning. These modes are informal because they cannot be made explicit in a way that can be described as a unit, as a self-contained element, which can be reproduced.

By introducing informality in the context of this dissertation I want to take notice of the evaporation of form and the implications of such process. In my experiences of informality's workings – for instance the socially informal atmosphere within my own collaborative environments – informality can potentially create a relaxed mode of coexistence. However, this might not be the case for everyone, and not at all times. Informality should not be regarded as a means to an end. Assuming informality is a shared and positive experience – would be an attempt to formalize informality with the result of rendering invisible complex subjectivities that underlie experiences of collaborating – take for instance societal identity constructs that are always also present in a collaborative environment, such as age, social class, gender, ethnicity. Informality can be intended or unintended, have good or bad

consequences. Informal gestures, taking the place of words can be significant for collaboration. For instance creating an informal environment might be an intended or unintended maneuver to obfuscate accountabilities within collaborations.

Digital Object

A digital object is a concrete object, which has not yet been built, taken apart, questioned or instrumentalized. Digital objects don't yet know what they become, they don't have a purpose or a destiny yet. Digital objects might become useful objects, or objects of study. Either way, digital objects always take part in, and therefore relate to, affect and are affected by the situation in which they are being imagined, built, taken apart, questioned or instrumentalized. Similarly to the other two key terms the digital object is implicated in all case studies discussed in this thesis. The case of the *Platform* puts forward the relationships that social and technical environments – referred to as platforms establish, sustain and disrupt. In the case of the H&D COOP platform – the digital object is characterized as an unambitious prototype, that is, the digital platform was abandoned rather than fixed or improved. But it retained in different forms, and workflows. The question put forward here is in how far a digital object can be designed, that is, formalized as a stable unit or a constellation of stable units.

In the *Tooling* chapter I pay attention to the transformative process of imagining, building, discussing and iterating a digital object entitled the Feminist Search Tool. While this collectively imagined tool took more and less concrete forms, it never fulfills the common characteristics of a tool – a device or instrument that helps someone in accomplishing a predefined task, activating and controlling a particular function. In that sense it cannot be handed out, given away,

Cases: Summaries and findings

Introduction

Status: 1st draft for APE1 in January 2020 + additions from APE2 (2500 words) November 2020

Workshops

Status: Text written for the individual writing assignment and published on Open! And in an iteration in German in Bauhaus Now, June 2019 -> plan to flesh out for final thesis

In the Workshop chapter I discuss the popular format of the workshop as it can be found within extra-curricular activities, such as symposia, incubator programmes, and innovation labs. In the chapter I refer to the workshop as a site and situation that hosts groups of like-minded people to meet and work intensively on a specific technological topic in a defined timeframe.

By looking at the workshop as a collaborative situation, this text explores the workshop's capacity, or lack thereof, to create critical, constructive conditions for collaborative modes of production. The hands-on aspect is important in that context. Touching, soldering, breaking apart, deploying code, are means of acquiring new knowledge and skills, but also confronting assumptions of dominant technological constructions in a temporary social and semi-public context.

While publicly exposing making processes, workshops that cater to collaborative and cross-disciplinary exchange can bring about contingent byproducts of a design process, such as social orders, differing positions, and frictions.

If understood as sites where differences between makers and their ways of making might unfold, workshops can facilitate temporary critical publics, which potentially disrupt the otherwise isolated and individualized design process, and challenge someone's assumptions about how things should be done.

Platforms

Status: Written for APE2, November 2020, earlier version will be published in The Dynamic Archive publication, 2020/2021

In this chapter I discuss the relationships emerging from digital platforms and challenge the notion of a platform as a fixed object that can be designed. I draw from my experience of different design processes. One example is an attempt to translate the work of collective organizing into the form of a digital environment. In the case of the H&D COOP platform the organization of H&D was transformed into units and digits. H&D was 'platformed'.

Being embedded in the organizational reality of collective work one is subjected to a constant movement of thinking *about* organisational structure (the collective represented as a platform), and being *embedded in* and *intertwined with* the organizational structure (platforming – being part of a collective body). The logging in and out of collective organizing often goes without notice. The platform as a digital object – translates and formalizes such movements – but also takes part in these movements. *Platforming* – the part-taking of the platform in collective organizing always also produces unforeseen relations, contingent, non-scalable byproducts. The formalization of the alleged horizontal organization structure of H&D into a digital object produced discriminatory effects, which became only visible after the fact.

I argue that the platform-design configuration misses out on addressing the unpredictability of socio-technical relationships and their non-scalable effects. That is, effects of a transformative design process that cannot be anticipated and formalized are rendered invisible. Designers have not found articulations to address non-scalable effects and affects of such scalability projects. That is, they cannot be addressed through conventional methods of design as they are contingent and messy.

Tools – Outline

Status: Outline and planning written for APE2, November 2020, will be followed by a structured conversation, recorded, transcribed and edited + contextual introduction, reflective part and conclusion.

The *tool* similarly to the *platform* is a rather nonspecific notion and is used and appropriated in various fields and practices. In this chapter the tool will be discussed through its making process and its different moments of articulation within that process. It will become specific through the examination of the context it emerged in. The tool project I will be focussing on is entitled "Feminist Search Tools", and will be delineated and discussed in this chapter by means of a conversation with the different collaborators involved in the project.

By bringing in different voices into my thesis I attempt to draw attention to the encounters that informed the tool-making process – and the different ways the notion of the tool was understood and problematized. The format of the conversation has become a driving force in the process of imagining, making and problematizing the tool and therefore is put central in this chapter.

Other relevant texts:

Status: These texts, most of which published in some form are byproducts of this research and might be partially used in the final dissertation

- “Towards a Critical Collaborative Practice” (in: Design Dedication)
- “Unsettling Individualized Design Practice Through Collaboration” (in: Critical by Design)
- “Design Friction” (in: Modes of Criticism. Radical Pedagogies)
- “Hacking & Designing. Paradoxes of Collaborative Practice” (in: Critical Makers Reader)
- “The Workshop and Cultural Production” (in: open!)

Reflection: Insights & Challenges

Collaborative practice

It might have been obvious all along but while collecting the material for this process evaluation, it suddenly struck me that all of my published articles are revolving or even putting central collaboration and collectivity. In last year's evaluation I wrote about the challenges of collaborative practice in terms of its complexity and subjectivities emerging from the diverse perspectives and positions within my collaborations. I was worried about the fragile and constantly moving structure of certain collaborations, dynamics that I cannot control and that might jeopardize the position I take in my research.

My main point of concern and self-consciousness was related to theorising experiences of collaborative work – as an individual. This year I found more ease with my own position in those collaborative constellations. I furthermore found different ways to open up my writing and thinking to people outside of academia, and could connect my research more frequently and more explicitly to my daily practice of organizing, designing, and teaching. Research and practice have synchronized – feeding each other, which is a rewarding experience.

Sharing the platform text with my collaborators from H&D was a relief. Although some thought it was boring, and some didn't agree with points I made in the text, it made me realize that it is the potential for plurality – and not the certainty of differences in opinion and position that inspires this research.

While in H&D collaboration seems to emerge, and informality of our organization was always part of the way we understand and run the collective, it became quite important this year to communicate what we expect from participants and take charge of creating a safe environment, by making explicit what that means to ourselves and others. The transition

from often ad hoc, improvised, informal physical encounters to online formats that are more anonymous and disembodied – forced us to break with our habits, clarify and formalize the intentions behind organizing certain activities. One of the concrete actions taken was to write a Code of Conduct – a document that serves as a reference point – a guideline for accepted and unaccepted behaviour.

I also realized that H&D is not the only collaborative structure that my research is feeding off. Drawing from the experience of working with the Feminist Search Tools group for instance, including new members, and also entering different context, forced this group to position the project as a collective. Also the Making Matters workgroup has been influential for my problematization of design's relationship to collaboration. The recent collaboration with my research fellows Eleni Kamma and Pia Louwerens has been a delightful exchange and gave me new perspectives on how the approach of artistic research influences and challenges my way of understanding research through practice.

Positioning

While meandering for too long in the platform text, which I have been writing and rewriting for the largest part of this year, it became apparent that clarification is needed when it comes to positioning my research. The topics I am exploring have the potential to develop new articulations for design. However they potentially encompass many fields and practices. Thus there is a risk they become too general or vague if I don't position the writing more clearly. I would therefore like to start with a chapter on positioning the research in parallel to writing the tool chapter. I notice when writing I encounter the generalizations that I need to make more specific. I therefore consider a parallel writing trajectory – parallel at least to start with – as an entrance point into clarifying, zooming out, exposing my arguments to a larger context than my own personal experiences. The platform text still needs to become more specific and sharp in terms of its argumentation. For now I decided to put it aside as I have been writing on it for too long. I hope the positioning chapter will eventually help me return to the platform and other chapters in order to deepen and expand them in a way that they connect to the main argumentation of this thesis.

My intensified commitment to art and design education hints at a potential positioning of my research within this field. From within education I also sense a craving for clarification and positioning of the notions of design, research, writing. There seems to be a discrepancy between design research and artistic research and I think it could be fruitful to attend to the role of design within the field of artistic research and in return contribute to the field of design education with the specific angle of artistic research.

Tone of voice: Internalizing theory

At the beginning of my writing trajectory at PhD Arts I tried to write without really knowing who I was writing for and from which position I would be writing. I guess you could say I had not found my tone of voice. I am still searching and there is a lot of work to do. But I recall it was the combination of writing summaries and reviews of what I have been reading in combination with writing personal practice reviews, anecdotal reports that eventually helped

me find a more sincere style of writing. The summaries of books and papers I read are useful as a first step to translate what I read into my own words and to draw first connections to my research and the topic that I want to write about. The writing of anecdotes helps me to 'see' aspects of my work that oftentimes remain hidden and implicit within the everyday chaos of practice. Thus, it would be not entirely accurate if I would state I chose for a personal style of writing. It would be more accurate to say my research necessitates a more informal style of writing in order for me to pay attention to crucial aspects of my practice and make important connections.

Last year I presented a scaffolding consisting of 3 main concepts that structure my research and which derive from connections I found between theory and my practice experiences. While these concepts are still relevant and do help me to focus my research I am struggling with internalizing them. Similarly counts for theoretical concepts that I come across and that seem useful to my research. Weaving in theory into my writing is something that needs further development. Only recently I started to speak more freely about theoretical concepts and realized that by simply verbalizing, speaking my mind about the abstract theoretical concepts, I started internalizing them and drawing connections to my own experiences rather than reproducing them untouched, in a more descriptive manner – as is the case in my current writing.

I find myself drawn to texts by authors that are generous in a sense that they do not assume preceding knowledge or familiarity with specific disciplines or discourses and would like to follow that path myself. My goal is to be clear and understandable and I think that I can succeed by practicing to *speak* – out loud – with my own words. It is important to me that my writing is contextual and transparent when it comes to my own positionality in the depiction of whatever I am writing about.

Lesser Public

Staying focussed and staying with my research was certainly the largest challenge this year. There have been many moments in which I was disappointed about the slow pace of my progress. However looking back I gained a lot of new insights – mostly deriving from the enstrangement of ways of working and organozing, moving all our activities online, building digital platforms that more or less successfully facilitated the communities I am involved in to stay connected, work together, share moments together. There have been so many transitions and translations, moving of an exhibition that has barely seen the public, negotiating expectations... In terms of collaboration it has been an incredible experience to see how collective ties are challenged and strengthened. While all of that has been energizing and makes me grateful, reading and writing have been not exactly the modes that these conditions allow for. For the next year I have undertaken concrete redistribution of tasks and responsibilities within my work relations (within H&D and also at Sandberg) that will hopefully allow me for longer focus periods. I furthermore have decided to not accept any invitations for public talks for a while as I experience these engagements – especially the public exposure as tremendously stressful and the return / exchange / feedback is usually very minimal. I seek encounters in smaller, more informal circles with peers for a while.

Outlook / Planning

January-March

Chapter: *Tooling*

- Finalizing conversation
- Conversation & editing
- Building theoretical framework
- Finalizing tool chapter

January-June

Chapter: *Positioning*

- Mapping the fields and practices my research touches upon
- Positioning my argumentation in relation to them
- Draw connections to John Dewey
- Positioning research in relation to the field of (design/art) education
- Positioning 'artistic' part of the dissertation

April-November

- Working / tooling the Making Matters Book with Hackers & Designers
- Writing about Method and positioning within the field of artistic research

June-August

- Revisiting, strengthening Workshop chapter

June-December

- Positioning 'artistic' part of the dissertation

September-December

- Preparing for APE 3
 - Reviewing the structure and argumentation of my dissertation
 - Reviewing and strengthening theoretical framework