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Perspectives On Socially And Politically Oriented Practices In Design.

A discussion-based workshop

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Abstract: This document is a report on the structured discussion workshop at the EAD 2017 Design for Next (Society) conference in Rome, Italy. The workshop was hosted by Bianca Herlo and Andreas Unteidig from the Berlin University of the Arts and joined by İdil Gaziulusoy from Aalto University and Wolfgang Jonas from the University of Braunschweig.

Keywords: Communication Design, New Media, Image, Organizations

1. Introduction: About the workshop

Design has been discussed, reflected upon and interpreted as a political actor in many ways for more than a century, from various perspectives and with different nuances. Design history is saturated with a diverse array of stances, as different schools, collectives and individuals have addressed the entanglement of design and social transformation. Nevertheless, in the last couple years it seems we are witnessing a renewed and strong interest in a political reading of design. Increasingly up for discussion are terms and theories such as Design Activism, Design for Social Innovation, Social Design, Adversarial Design, Transformation Design or Transition Design. All of these approaches hint at a shift in the relationships between design and the social, as we increasingly frame the social as the immediate object of design, which, instead of being altered via the design of products, services or signs, becomes the transformational subject in and of itself (cf. Unteidig et al. 2017 in these proceedings). At the same time, policymakers are increasingly taking up design as a promising field for partnerships and methodologies.

In this session, the discussion revolved around practical, theoretical and normative approaches in an effort to critically reflect on socially and politically oriented practices in design today. We contextualized these developments in a complex mesh of socio-political tendencies and processes of transformation that are increasingly mediated by digital technology, e.g. a renewed interest in the much-debated global significance of local commitments, alternative forms of knowledge production and collaborative practices. Starting off from our perspective on and through current design research projects undertaken by our research cluster “Civic Infrastructures”, we are very interested in debating design’s agency at the intersection of bottom up processes, public institutions and formalized politics. “Civic Infrastructures” builds on discourses such as “Design as Infrastructuring”

(Binder et al., 2011; Ehn, 2008) and refers to discourses of civic tech and the open source community as well as to urban studies.

Through various research projects, we explore how we as designers and technologists can construct structures, frameworks and resources that potentially enable others to work on their own problems and develop civic technologies that are a result of a long-lasting and intense collaboration with the citizens in specific local environments.

Hence, the objectives of the workshop were:

- to discuss frameworks and narratives that help specify our role(s) and self-understandings as designers, as we are increasingly involved in transdisciplinary processes that are committed to rising societal complexity;
- to debate design's modes of agency and theoretical framings at the intersection of bottom up processes, public institutions and formalized politics.

2. Positions

İdil Gaziulusoy

The intention to merge backgrounds in design and sustainability science and to describe the knowledge generated by this leads to the identification of three important emerging “politics of possibility” in the field of design for sustainability:

1. creating solution spaces (rather than solutions per se, which is traditionally what design/designers are predisposed to do) with a transdisciplinary and theoretically pluralist approach;
2. devising potential future options (rather than early closure of alternatives) to tackle uncertainties associated with the long-term unfolding of socially relevant, complex issues with openness to value and epistemological pluralism, which are widely acknowledged as necessary in sustainability science;
3. working with power structures as they arise through reflective and reflexive practices (to enable non-anthropocentric, non-white, non-male futures).

The last of these emerging politics is what design can contribute to sustainability science, whereas the former two are exercised in sustainability science to a larger extent than in design.

Wolfgang Jonas

Why do design and designers actually feel so vehemently responsible for and – surprisingly – capable of living up to this role with regard to society and its wellbeing? Design has not, or only in a very limited way at best, participated in the modern differentiation of social functional systems. Thus, it obviously claims to possess a systemic interface character, which professes to bridge causal gaps between disciplinary phenomena in life-world situations; this results in major ethical questions.

Referring to the opening question, we should clearly distinguish between politics and the political: Luhmann offers the notion of politics as a formalized mechanism of processing socially relevant

decisions. Referring to the German political theory discourse, politics has been conceptualized as a social functional system (e.g. state, government, parties) dealing with the question of how to organize politics and how this organization can be justified. On the other hand, the broad concept of the political points to questions about the nature of the political and deals with the political dimension of the social. Two tradition lines can be distinguished in the concept of the political: the associative and the dissociative line, which can be related to Hannah Arendt and Carl Schmitt. Arendt formulates an associative theory of the political, which defines the political as a free, communicative space of co-operation; whereas Schmitt, on the other hand, emphasizes the dissociative aspect that conceives the political as an arena of power struggle and conflict (based on the notion of antagonism). Chantal Mouffe offers a third view with the concept of agonism in which opponents recognize the legitimacy of the other opponents, envisioning the implementation of the opponents' projects. Against this backdrop, central questions emerge within academia: How political can/should design education be? And how does it work in practice? These questions are addressed in the MA Transformation Design at Braunschweig University of Art. Training competencies to reflect, to (co)design and to initiate change processes are claims that clearly touch the political. But then again, societies are complex and full of paradox and conflict, and designers tend to overestimate the effects of their projects and their own contributions – and often neglect the complex nature of the human psyche and of social communities with all their stupidity, selfishness, hegemonic struggles and power conflicts.

With respect to the political in design, there are two important aspects:

1. Boundary judgement: How to define the design field in contrast to the context (scope) – a classical topic of systemic design.
2. Value orientation: How to formulate a well-founded, non-trivial ethical attitude (stance).

Reflections on the roles and power relationships between the researcher and the client/community/society open up a continuum between the one extreme of the Cartesian observer/expert designer and the other extreme of the inquiring community (Dewey's ideal of epistemic democracy): Design might act as a consultant/contractor to politics (with regard to science policy advice) or play a role in developing options, designing narratives, moderating or facilitating decision-making processes for others; or the individual design researcher understands himself/herself as a politically and socially acting individual. The latter implies role conflicts between the professional and the citizen that are new and have to be reflected upon: between the poles the citizen designer and the designing citizen (re-enacting utopias of the 1970s in the digital age?), and the vanishing of expert cultures (see John Chris Jones: "creative democracy"). Therefore, current conclusions imply that design is political but does not make politics. When regarding design as a tool for understanding as well as for acting among other tools such as science (Simon), the balance between thinking and acting in design must be rethought. Still, there is a great skepticism regarding design as social activism.

3. Discussion and outlook

The differing positions and discussion during the one-hour workshop naturally opened up more questions to be answered in the future, as well as exposed new situations that confront the

discipline. Design therefore needs to substantially differentiate between practical, factual, theoretical and normative approaches or stances.

The discussion also highlighted the discipline's limitations and challenges with regards to defining boundaries. This is particularly so in relation to questions concerned with the (re)location of design's potential, roles and limits – when considering design as a “game changer” among many other “game changers” – being raised. Against the backdrop of increasingly complex and interdependent problems and also with regards to an ongoing polarization of our societies, those deliberations seem to be central to the renewed discourse on politically and socially oriented practices.

We will continue the discussion in various institutional contexts. Specifically, we will pose the question of what a “Civic Design” could entail today as the topic of the next conference of the German Society for Design Theory and Research (DGTF) in October 2017.

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