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## **Figuring things out together: on the relationship between design and collective practice**

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# Introduction

## Figuring Things Out Together: On the Relationship between Design and Collective Practice

### Context

I make websites. I teach. I design platforms. I host workshops. I write. I organize events. I build tools. I make books. I am involved in an array of activities at various organizations, institutions, and in the context of self-organized groups. It can be disorienting and difficult to speak about my work in a way that is easily packageable. All of the activities that constitute what I do and the contexts I do them in, come with their own specific vocabularies, manners and expectations.

There are many of us who work this way—people who blend practices rather than choosing one specialization or one fixed definition of their practice. Sometimes we form collectives; conglomerates of ambiguous practitioners who come from domains that may seem ostensibly separate. By coming together in this manner, we diffuse disciplinary boundaries. We challenge the divisions between user and maker, product and process, friendships and work relations, student and teacher.

For nine years, I have been working closely with the collective Hackers & Designers (H&D). Due to my close involvement with this collective, it has become central to my practice-based inquiry into the relationship between design and collective practice. H&D started as a workshop-based meetup series in Amsterdam in 2013.<sup>1</sup> Since then, we have been organizing workshops, sometimes

<sup>1</sup> I have been organizing workshops with H&D since its inception in 2013. H&D started as a meetup-series organized by James Bryan Graves (software developer) and Selby Gildemacher (visual artist) and myself (graphic designer). Since 2016 other members have joined, such as André Fincato (2016), Juliette Lizotte (2018), Heerko van der Kooij (2019), Karl Moubarak (2019) Loes Bogers (2019), Margarita Osipian (2019), Christine Kappé (2020), Pernilla Manjula Philip (2022). James left the collective in 2018. Margarita left in 2021.

self-organized, sometimes by invitation.<sup>2</sup> H&D workshops are informal get-togethers and usually follow a hands-on practical approach. Attendees mostly work at the intersection of technology, design, art, and education. Along with organizing workshops people involved with H&D produce on and offline publications and build open source tools and platforms.

Collective design practices, as I discuss them in this thesis, lean into the complexity of issues while resisting the impulse to ‘solve’ anything. Moving through a variety of contexts (from institutional to grassroots informal) such collectives are responsive to changing conditions. They are mutable and at times fragile structures that, notwithstanding, manage to hold together fragmented practices, multiple places, schedules and economies. Such collectives are constantly in-the-making, and along the way, they develop “terms of transition”<sup>3</sup>—socio-material conducts that help them navigate, and ‘stay in touch’ in uncertain times.

Open source spreadsheets and notepads become administrative tools for decentralized collective organization, subject or site for a workshop, and design and publishing tools. Shared anecdotes, distributed documentation practices, asynchronous writing of workshop scripts, unstable technical infrastructure are all part of what holds collectives together. Such relational utter-

ances cannot be considered products or examples of collective design in the sense that an example could be a blueprint. Collective design practices are site, context, and time specific, and so are their expressions.

## Research Question

This research investigates the relationship between design and collectivity. I argue that this relationship is one of mutual entanglement and therefore requires situated perspectives on working and designing together that resist linearity, and a progress-based understanding of the design process. The central question that I will return to throughout this dissertation is: How to design *for* and *with* collectivity? I propose the notion of ‘designing *with*’ (rather than through or by means of) to open up design approaches and perspectives towards processes of designing with *others* (other people, other things, other environments) that are non-successive and contingent as they are constantly emerging.

## Problem

Collective design is difficult to align with conceptual, material and organizational confinements currently upheld in the field of design and formal design education. I found that conventional design vocabularies are not capable of expressing and accounting for collectivities’ resistance to fixation and stabilization. In existing design discourses much attention has been paid to modes of designing together. Yet, in my view, these accounts fall short of addressing the nature and meaning of collective design practice. For instance, there is a difference between collectivity and collaboration or teamwork. Collectivity is not a design method, or an antidote to an individualistic design approach. I argue that collectivity should be considered a condition that

2 A recurring activity for H&D, which usually involves all members of the collective, is the H&D Summer Academy, a self-organized 1-2 week-long workshop program that takes place in the summer, in Amsterdam since 2015. [https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Summer\\_Academy\\_2015](https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Summer_Academy_2015), [https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Summer\\_Academy\\_2016](https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Summer_Academy_2016), [https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Summer\\_Academy\\_2018](https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Summer_Academy_2018), [https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Summer\\_Academy\\_2017](https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Summer_Academy_2017), [https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Summer\\_Academy\\_2020](https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Summer_Academy_2020), [https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Summer\\_Academy\\_2021](https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Summer_Academy_2021), last accessed March 2022.

3 Lauren Berlant, “The commons: Infrastructures for troubling times\*,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34, no.3 (2016): 393–419.

is intertwined with certain issues and their material consequences such as fragmentation and flexibilization of cultural work, in addition to the economization of art and design education.

## Contribution to design discourse

Design approaches such as ‘participatory design’, ‘cooperative design, and ‘co-creation’, have been discussed at length,<sup>4</sup> in urban planning, industrial design, and human-computer interaction design.<sup>5</sup> Participatory Design (PD) derived from the 1970s Scandinavian labor movement, and shifted attention from top-down design approaches to the “politics and ethics of ‘workplace democracy’”.<sup>6</sup> PD introduced methods of joint decision-making regarding the implementation of new tools, technologies and organization models in the workplace. These decision-making processes involved those most affected; the workers in a factory for instance. The workers were to use the newly introduced technologies in their daily work routines. The PD approach brought into focus how collaborative processes, across different positions, organizational hierarchies, and diverging skills, can be considered an essential part of the design process. It also introduced social questions into the design process, actively involving different perspectives in order to improve design objects and their implementation.

4 Erling Bjgvinnsson, Pelle Ehn, Per-Anders Hillgren “Design Things and Design Thinking: Contemporary Participatory Design Challenges,” *Design Issues* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2012).

Susanne Bødker, Kaj Grønbaek, and Morten Kyng, “Cooperative Design: Techniques and Experiences From the Scandinavian Scene,” *Participatory Design: Principles and Practices*, Aki Namioka and Doug Schuler, eds. (New Jersey, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995).

5 Tad Hirsch, “Contestational Design: Innovation for Political Activism” (PhD diss., Media Art and Sciences, MIT, 2008), 23.

6 Mahmoud Keshavarz, Ramia Mazé, “Design and Dissensus: Framing and Staging Participation in Design Research,” *Design Philosophy Papers* 11, no. 1 (May 2013), 7–30.

PD has been critiqued by design theorists<sup>7</sup> for only inviting some to participate in the process while excluding others. Furthermore, it is argued that PD builds upon consensus models for decision-making, which can be implemented in ways that affirm established power relations,<sup>8</sup> while maintaining the appearance of an inclusive process. Design theorists such as Ramia Mazé, Mahmoud Keshavarz, Carl DiSalvo and Tad Hirsch, have problematized PD, building upon the work of political philosophers such as Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière, and have advocated for design approaches that privilege difference over consensus. Like PD, their propositions for adversarial,<sup>9</sup> dissenting<sup>10</sup> and contestational<sup>11</sup> design pays attention to design processes rather than products, and the politics inherent in such processes. Yet they emphasize the importance of sustaining the possibility for different positions, including potential friction and conflict as part or even an aim of the design process.

Furthermore, Mazé and Keshavarz offered useful tactics for resisting generalization around tropes of collaboration in design by challenging the presupposition that positions, identities and preferences are pre-consti-

7 For instance Tad Hirsch wrote that in some contexts, participatory design processes only reinstate the division between experts and laypeople (“In most cases, designers’ status as experts confers relatively greater authority in decision-making than laypersons.”) Tad Hirsch, “Contestational Design: Innovation for Political Activism” (PhD diss., Media Art and Sciences, MIT, 2008), 23.

8 Furthermore, Keshavarz and Mazé wrote that “to approach design in ways that do not merely affirm the current constitution of society, along with exclusions and differentials, we seek alternatives to concepts such as consensus.” Mahmoud Keshavarz, Ramia Mazé, “Design and Dissensus: Framing and Staging Participation in Design Research,” *Design Philosophy Papers* 11, no. 1 (May 2013), 7–30.

9 Carl DiSalvo, *Adversarial Design* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2012).

10 Mahmoud Keshavarz, Ramia Mazé, “Design and Dissensus: Framing and Staging Participation in Design Research,” 2013.

11 Tad Hirsch, “Contestational Design: Innovation for Political Activism” (PhD diss., Media Art and Sciences, MIT, 2008).

tuted and well-defined. Drawing on Rancière's concept of 'dissensus', as "a process concerned with the potential emergence of new political formations,"<sup>12</sup> Mazé and Keshavarz argue "for increased criticality—and dissensus—in contemporary practices of design and design research."<sup>13</sup> Other design theorists have put forward design philosophies such as Ontological Design or Xeno Design, which displaces the human/designer as the apex of the design process in an attempt to fundamentally question the complexity of designed worlds and design's implications for social, economic, and ecological issues. Design theorists such as Anne-Marie Willis, Johanna Schmeer, Danah Abdullah, and Tony Fry further complicate the pluralistic design approach of being and working together 'in difference', by appealing to a multilayered design perspective that transgresses boundaries between disciplines, timelines, geographies, scales, human and non-human entities. Such theories call for "new imaginaries and design approaches that question human-centrism, and open up paths towards alternatives."<sup>14</sup>

All these critical design accounts have contributed to greater self-reflexivity in design perspectives and articulations, and as such, have also been important orientation guides for my research trajectory. Yet, these design theories—perhaps because they evolve within and respond to the established design discourse—are in my view still too attached to, and therefore insufficiently question, the notion of a 'purposeful' relation between design and collectivity.

12 Mahmoud Keshavarz, Ramia Mazé, "Design and Dissensus: Framing and Staging Participation," *Design Research*, 2013.

13 *ibid.*

14 Johanna Schmeer, "Xenodesign—Towards Transversal Engagement in Design" (PhD diss., Royal College of Art London, 2020). <https://johannaschmeer.net/johanna-schmeer-phd>, last accessed January 2022.

As I will discuss in my first chapter 'Design and Collectivity', it is often during moments of crisis, for example increasingly porous disciplinary boundaries and specialization in design, that collectivity becomes an alternative proposition, or a potential resolution to the issue at stake. The tropes of design and collectivity, in their various interpretations and meanings, tend to uphold each other.

## Approach and scope of the research

Throughout the different chapters I will make the thresholds of collective design legible. I will do this by discussing the ways collective design weaves together a range of places, legacies, objects and people across practices and disciplines, and timelines.

To forestall rushing into generalizations about collective design *as such*, my analysis focuses on people, objects and situations, which I have been closely involved with, in different capacities. Thus, in this written part of my research I chose an approach to theorizing collective design that draws to a large extent from personal experiences. I would argue it is due to their subjectivity, and the attempt to locate that subjectivity, that the cases discussed here offer a perspective on collective design that is specific rather than generic.

More specifically, the focus on the case of H&D and the wider ecosystem of collective practices that H&D is connected to allows me to pay attention to the details, the marginal and mundane aspects of collective design. Such personal, everyday tales are often remaining invisible within existing frameworks of analysis for instance as defined by design's disciplinary frameworks.

Drawing from personal experiences and my involvement in *collectivity-in-action*, I will analyze different formats, utterances and social-technical conduct, in order



to critically question how collective design practices can negotiate their relationships with the material conditions of everyday life.

There are many examples of collective practices that could have served as interesting case to analyze and compare. For instance, at date of publishing, widely discussed is the ecosystem of collective art practices presented at, and evolving from documenta fifteen in Kassel, Germany. Examples are the collective *ruan-grupa*, the curators of documenta fifteen, and invited collectives such as Question of Funding collective, the Nest Collective, Atis Rezistans, Nhà Sàn Collective, Party Office and Jatiwangi art Factory amongst others.<sup>15</sup> Another example is the Turner Prize which selected in 2021 for the first time a shortlist consisting entirely of artist collectives. Nominated collectives were Array Collective (winners), Black Obsidian Sound System, Cooking Sections, Gentle/Radical, Project Art Works.<sup>16</sup> Also within the wider ecosystem of Hackers & Designers, a manifold of collectives can be found and studied, each of which developing their own context-specific vocabularies and practices<sup>17</sup>.

Yet, I chose not to pursue a comparative study of different groups but commit to the vantage point of H&D and pay attention to collective conditions, the ways a collective may be not a self-contained entity, but is intertwined with various interpersonal and socio-technical relationships. Other voices and viewpoints are brought into discussion through the wider scope of the research, the different social, technical, and economic topics introduced through the different chapters.

## Chapter 1: 'Design & Collectivity'

The chapter 'Design & Collectivity' sets the scene by locating my personal affinities with collective practice. I trace the ways in which my understanding of collectivity has changed over time, and is intertwined with personal experiences and frustrations with the established design field. I will contextualize the main research question of this thesis (How to design *for* and *with* collectivity?) by approaching collective design not as a result of successive or comprehensible processes, but as resulting from and implied in particular socio-economic, socio-technical conditions that pervade and shape collectives, often in unforeseen ways. Collective design practice therefore requires articulation that does not presume collectivity to be a resolution to a problem.

In the following chapters, I will discuss three concepts: "Workshop", "Tool" and "Platform", dedicating a chapter to each. They are all ubiquitous and hazy terms that travel through a manifold of contexts with ease. They are also implied in the ways the H&D collective has been (mis)understood and actualized. All these terms—workshop/tool/platform—have been overused and so these chapters seek to clarify their meaning specifically in the context of collectivity.

## Chapter2: Workshop production

The chapter 'Workshop production' interrogates the pervasiveness of the 'workshop' as a concept and format within a vast range of fields and raises the question: "Why and how are workshops valued and practiced?" As a format for time-boxed collaboration, as well as temporary and dynamic learning environments, 'workshops' cross many boundaries, for instance between art and activism, between different disciplines and institu-

<sup>15</sup> <https://documenta-fifteen.de/lumbung-member-kuenstlerinnen/>

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.metropolism.com/nl/news/43380\\_shortlist\\_turner\\_prize\\_bekend\\_alleen\\_collectieven\\_genomineerd](https://www.metropolism.com/nl/news/43380_shortlist_turner_prize_bekend_alleen_collectieven_genomineerd)

<sup>17</sup> A list of collectives that are in close proximity to H&D can be found in the acknowledgement of this dissertation.

tions, between commercial and educational contexts. Supposedly, workshops can be applied to any context. In this chapter I will discuss the different perspectives on workshops including the workshop as a site for specialized material production, in addition to its meaning as a format for bringing together groups of like-minded people; to meet, spend time together, work on a specific topic, or explore new techniques or tools. Furthermore, I will address the tension between, on the one hand understanding and practicing workshops as egalitarian learning formats, and on the other hand workshops' role in reinforcing neoliberal conditions. I will argue that the workshop is a format that is implied in the economization of education and the learning economy, and perpetuates a culture in which self-employment, self-improvement, and self-reliance is normalized. Drawing on different workshop situations I will exemplify how possibilities and pitfalls of the workshop as a format for cultural production are being dealt with within collective practice. Central to this chapter's inquiry is the question; can workshops can be organized responsibly? Can they resist this neoliberal impulse?

### Chapter 3: Tool building

In this chapter I will discuss the question: Are other-than-utilitarian relationships to tools possible? If they are, how can such relationships be articulated? H&D hands-on workshops feed off and nurture communities of tool users and makers who consider it relevant to 'open up' tools and tool-building processes, to learn about the ways tools are constructed in hands-on practical and often playful ways. The practical and experimental approach to conceptualizing and building tools *differently* allows for imagining and testing out other

scenarios for tool-designer relationships and interaction. The chapter 'Tool building' analyzes different understandings and functionings of 'tools'. More specifically, I will discuss an ongoing / non-conclusive process of collectively imagining, building, and modifying a set of digital tools entitled 'Feminist Search Tools', that yields a growing repository of prototypes, workshops, documentation, and recordings of conversations. In this chapter I argue that the articulation and actualization of 'tools' within the context of the Feminist Search Tools project, is driven by a certain resistance towards tools as merely practical and discrete objects.

### Chapter 4: Platform-design issues

The starting point for the chapter 'Platform-design issues' is the question "Do you want to design our platform?". This request, as it has been recurrently posed to the H&D collective, extrapolates the complicated relationship between design and collectivity. That is, the way platforms are discussed in this chapter, puts into focus the manner in which technical objects and context-specific social conducts are composed together and are therefore deeply intertwined with a collective's characteristics and functioning. These self-made platforms involve and converge content management systems, chat applications, collaborative writing tools, online spreadsheets and file sharing systems. They are actualized on-the-go and in a manner that caters to the particular needs, curiosities, and abilities of the collective, which makes it difficult to separate them as technical objects from that context. The question that will be discussed is: If such platforms-in-the-making are inseparable from a collective's functioning, including their characteristic of constant emergence, spontaneity, and unreliability—can such platforms be designed at all?

The title of the dissertation “Figuring things out together” evokes the collective effort of working through the complexities of our times, as well the effort required in disentangling and disambiguating certain metaphors and tropes that occur in the context of collective practices. Living and working conditions are increasingly complex, fragmented, and precarious. Can collective practices like H&D develop, uphold and support critical, ethical, and sustainable ways of working and being together?

Each chapter will take a different approach in order to ascertain what binds us together in collective practices. While these chapters appear in a linear order, they are also intertwined with each other. For instance, I will discuss workshops that took place on experimental platforms and I will discuss platforms and tools that took shape in and through workshop situations. The structure of the thesis resists a linear narrative of collectivity (forward-moving, progressing, improving, innovating) and invites the reader to remain alert, and on the lookout for *other*, multiple, and parallel collective utterances.

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