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

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Workshop space





H&D Summer Academy 2018

<https://wiki.hackersanddesigners.nl/index.php>

[/HDSA2018_budget#DEVELOPMENT_28MAINLY_PRIOR_TO_THE_SU](#)

€ 4000.00 / 5300.00

General affairs - Selby

https://wiki.hackersanddesigners.nl/index.php/General_Affairs_Jan-

[Aug_2018_-_Selby](#)

€ 2559.96 / 2560.00

Server Maintenance (2018-09)

<https://wiki.hackersanddesigners.nl/index.php>

[/Hackers_and_Designers_Server_Maintenance](#)

€ 160.00 / 160.00

Basic Communication 2018 part 2

<https://wiki.hackersanddesigners.nl/index.php>

[/Basic_Communication_2018_part_2](#)

€ 3000.00 / 3000.00

Administration

<https://wiki.hackersanddesigners.nl/index.php>

[/Financial_management](#)

€ 10560.00 / 10560.00

Create activity

Add member

Logout

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coinbase: 0x4e858efead
at block: 6185000 (Wed
datadir: /home/ubuntu
modules: admin:1.0 cl
c:1.0 txpool:1.0 web3:
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> eth.getBlock("latest")
{
  difficulty: 2,
  extraData: "0xd88301
9ce8d6574baf7d87fb85a3
5e9a788c2e511543ddc542
gasLimit: 4735434,
gasUsed: 0,
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#general

in Brussels time?

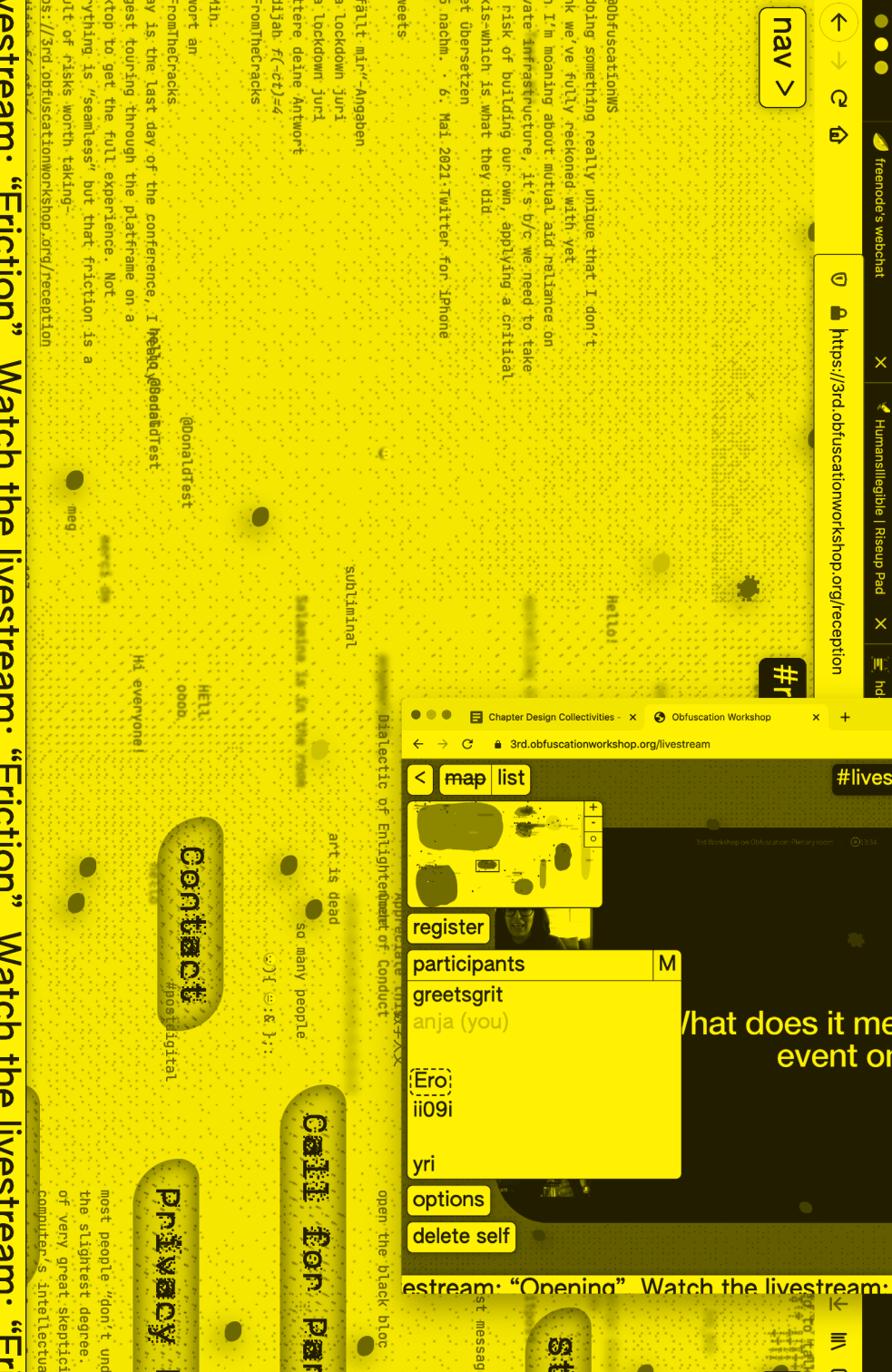
wasn't a panel supposed to start at 14:30?

i clicked and was alone in the room?

??

ok i thought it was over.i was
the email. so it will be the s
brussels time?

ok, thank



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How can new and radical pathways be carved in design education, while still providing the structure and guidance that many students are specifically looking for? Questioning the admissions process, what does it mean to “have potential”?



Prep talk 19 July, 18:00 @Otis, Galef building.

pilar
Hector
Tina test
Mandy
dameon
MJ :)

- Walk through the schedule:
https://workshopproject.wiki/free_schedule

Introduction

Chat 0

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*WPW
→ FREE,
A Design
Educators
Workshop
Contact*

wpw → *free_a_design_educators_workshop* → **free_lexicon**

FREE Lexicon

A

- Academic Artifact
- Agonistic
- Alterity
- Anti-authoritarianism
- Anti-disciplinary
- Authentic
- Automation

B

Body

TOC +[illegible]

LINKS:
The Story of OJ by Jay-Z*
<https://youtu.be/BM7lw0Qvzq0>
Lemonade / Beyonce*
Trendlist
<http://trendlist.org/>

153 "There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning, boys, how's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'What the hell is water?'"

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historiography>
design a historiography,
To design methods of recording and transmission
Historiography is the study of the methods of historians in
developing history as an academic discipline, and by extension is
any body of historical work on a particular subject.

The shape of time.
Kubler

"A carefully reasoned and brilliantly suggestive essay in defense of the view that the history of art can be the study of formal relationships, as against the view that it should concentrate

Chapter 4:

Platform-design issues

The evolving monoculture of platforms for online gathering demonstrates the fast pace at which socio-technical conducts for online interaction emerge, are normalized, and create conditions in which it is difficult to imagine online collaboration otherwise. Such fast-paced socio-technical developments are invasive and impact ways of working, learning and being together with and through digital tools and technical infrastructure.

Drawing on Isabelle Stengers work on “problematization” and Celia Lury’s concept of “problem spaces,” this chapter investigates whether collective platform-design experiments can develop and sustain *other* possible ways of designing and working together with and through technical objects that are neither utilitarian/solution-driven nor antagonizing.

Introduction

Situating ‘platform’ in the context of the H&D collective

In the previous chapters, I discussed the concepts of the ‘workshop’ and the ‘tool’ and the ways in which they are understood and put into practice in and around the H&D collective. In this chapter, I will investigate the concept of the ‘platform’ by means of various case stories. I will analyze the circulation of the platform and posit it as a means of articulating and actualizing technical and non-technical, social and economic aspects of working and being together.

With these platform stories, I offer yet another angle on collective practice—that of designing, using and maintaining technical infrastructures that cater to on-line collaboration, self-organization and self-publishing. Such self-made platforms combine tools in a manner that caters to the particular needs of a given collective. They involve (combinations of) content management systems,¹ chat applications,² collaborative writing tools,³ online spreadsheets⁴ and file-sharing systems.⁵ The difference between ‘tool’ and ‘platform’ is subtle.

- 1 The H&D website uses MediaWiki as a content management system: hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Publishing/p/The_making_of_hackersanddesigners.nl, last accessed March 2022.
- 2 ChatterPub is a publishing tool that utilizes the open-source collaboration and chat application Zulip hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Tools/p/Chatterpub, last accessed March 2022.
- 3 The Free Wiki converges Wiki software with the open-source collaborative note taking software Etherpad hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Tools/p/Free_Wiki, last accessed March 2022.
- 4 Ethercalc is an open-source online spreadsheet software: hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Tools/p/H%26D_Ethercalc, last accessed March 2022.
- 5 Hyperdrive is a peer-to-peer file sharing tool developed by H&D member Karl Moubarak: hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Summer_Academy_2020/p/Becoming_a_Server, last accessed March 2022.

However, drawing a distinction is useful. Other than tools, platforms bring into focus the manner in which self-made, appropriated or hacked tools are composed together and, as such, are deeply intertwined with a collective’s evolving socio-technical characteristics and functioning. H&D’s technical infrastructure continuously evolves, and at times fails, or acts unexpectedly. H&D shapes and reshapes its modes of working together around the possibilities and limitations of these self-made platforms.

Relevance

The process of collective platform-making is pertinent as it points towards *other* possible socio-technical scenarios of designing and working together that are neither utilitarian, solution-driven or antagonizing. During the period of writing this dissertation, dependencies on easy-to-use digital tools increased. For example, due to the global COVID-19 pandemic the importance of staying connected and sustaining social and work relations while physically distancing intensified. The evolving monoculture and monopolization of platforms for online gatherings such as Zoom,⁶ Google Meet⁷ and

- 6 Zoom is a company providing “videotelephony and online chat services through a cloud-based peer-to-peer software platform used for video communications (Meetings), messaging (Chat), voice calls (Phone), conference rooms for video meetings (Rooms), virtual events (Events) and contact centers (Contact Center), and offers an open platform allowing third-party developers to build custom applications on its unified communications platform (Developer Platform). Zoom software was first launched in 2013” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoom_Video_Communications Zoom has been widely critiqued for its privacy and corporate data sharing policies: <https://www.consumerreports.org/video-conferencing-services/zoom-teleconferencing-privacy-concerns-a2125181189/>
- 7 Google Meet (formerly known as Hangouts Meet) was launched in 2017 as a video-communication service developed by Google. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google_Meet, last accessed March 2022.

Microsoft Teams,⁸ demonstrates the fast pace at which socio-technical conducts for online collaboration emerge and how quickly they are normalized, creating conditions in which it is difficult to imagine online collaboration otherwise. Such rapid developments are invasive and leave impressions on ways of working, learning and being together with and through digital tools, in addition to the ways technical infrastructure is perceived and practiced. Therefore, it seems urgent to pay attention to in-practice inquiries into different, contextual ways of articulating and materializing ‘platforms’ differently.

Problem

In recent years the H&D collective has been frequently approached by organizations and initiatives that work at the intersection of art, design, technology and academia with the question: “Do you want to design our platform?” This recurring design request became the starting point for this chapter and a central issue underlying this dissertation.

Similar to the concepts of ‘tool’ and ‘workshop’, ‘platform’ is a term that signifies different meanings, practices and materializations and it is used in various contexts. ‘Platform’ may refer to technical infrastructure, environments in which software applications are designed, deployed or used, in addition to computer hardware, operating systems, gaming devices and mobile devices. The word ‘platform’ is often used metaphorically. For instance, an organization may be referred to as a platform if it supports individuals or groups in addressing an audience. The original meaning of the

term ‘platform’ refers to it in an architectural sense, “human-built or naturally formed physical structures whether generic or dedicated to a specific use: subway and train platforms, Olympic diving platforms, deep-sea oil rig platforms, platform shoes.”⁹

The ambiguity of the term ‘platform’ seems particularly amplified when articulated as part of a design brief.¹⁰ Resistance to responding with a straightforward answer to a request for platform design lies in platform’s ambiguity, but also in the hesitance around the distinctive role of the designer and the platform can or should be presumed. Platforms seem to expand the realm of designed things—there is no fixedness, no beginning or end to a platform and no certainty in foreseeing a platform’s trajectory. This leads me to the central question of this chapter: If the ways in which platforms take shape is enmeshed with a collective’s functioning, including their characteristic of constant emergence, spontaneity, and unreliability—can platforms be designed at all?

Structure

I will approach this question by analyzing how platforms are articulated and actualized in the context of collective design practice. I begin with the examples of two platform design requests that were posed to the H&D collective. These requests were interpreted, materialized and put into action in the context of art and design education. Both platform projects were intended as online collabora-

9 Tarleton Gillespie, “The politics of ‘platforms’”, *new media & society* 12, no. 3 (2010): 349.

10 Jane Guyer: “According to Gillespie (2010), the Oxford English Dictionary lists fifteen different referents for “platform,” and the Wikipedia “disambiguation” page directs us to twenty-two different entries.” Guyer, Jane I., “From Market to Platform: Shifting Analytics for the Study of Current Capitalism” *Legacies, Logics, Logistic* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016): 115.

8 Microsoft Teams is a proprietary business communication platform initially released in 2017 by Microsoft, “offering workspace chat and videoconferencing, file storage, and application integration”. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microsoft_Teams, last accessed March 2022.

tive learning environments and developed different kinds of affiliations amongst the people engaging with them and each other. The Englishes MOOC was initiated by Dutch artist Nicoline van Harskamp, who asked the H&D collective to collaborate on developing an interactive online learning environment on the bases of existing course material. The *Workshop Project Wiki* was a collaboration between H&D and a collective of design educators called Workshop Projects. It converged different digital tools, into what I refer to as a self-made platform, for the occasion of an annual workshop series for design educators as well as a growing repository of syllabi, course material and workshop documentation. In both cases, the platform became a central reference point for collective learning and collaboration with groups that were not always present at the same physical location. I put forward these two digital environments to question the various implications of collective platform making and their functioning as a tactic to combine and permeate different, usually separate, contexts.

I will continue with ChattyPub, a platform evolving from self-organized activities that are at the core of H&D, such as organizing workshops and experimenting with self-publishing. ChattyPub is difficult to define as either a design software, a workshop or a tool for collective organization, yet it encompasses all these characteristics and has continued to play an important role in the way the H&D's collective has evolved. I will then continue with tracing different yet intersecting meanings of the concept 'platform', including a physical platform structure, the platform as a metaphor for collective organization and an online live stream platform. More specifically, I will pay attention to the ways in which different platform materializations and articulations respond to changing conditions and environments and how they carry material-discursive potential.

The example of the H&D COOP platform intersects technical and organizational aspects of the H&D's collective with the longer-term effects (at times indeterminate) that such experimental platforms have on the way a collective evolves. Therefore, I cast doubt on the way the practice of collective platform making can establish 'unquestionability' towards socio-technical incompatibilities. In the last section of this chapter, I discuss an experiment in collective platform-making referred to as 'platframe'. The example addresses collective platform-making as a means to build and work with platforms, while simultaneously problematizing relationships that evolve and are hindered by and through the emerging platform. The question that will be discussed is; how to consider platforms as problematic, unresolved and uncomfortable from the outset?

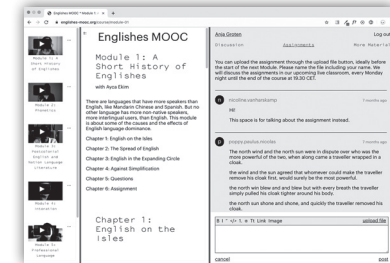
Plat-formatted learning: Englishes MOOC and Workshop Project Wiki

In the following section, I will discuss two platform projects. In both cases, H&D (more specifically André Fincato and myself) were invited to collaborate on developing a digital environment, which would accommodate online collaboration and learning. While there are many aspects of these projects that could be discussed, in the interests of remaining within the scope of this dissertation, I will focus on the way in which the two different approaches to conceptualizing and materializing 'platform' established their own ways of connecting people with each other and the platform. In the first example, H&D worked with preexisting course materials that were translated into the context of an online learning environment. Roles and tasks were clearly divided throughout the process. In the second example,

the divides were not demarcated as clearly. Materials evolved along with the platform. I am drawing a distinction between these two projects to problematize H&D's involvement in 'external' design and web development projects, arguing that they are indicative of the thresholds of collective design practice. That is, boundaries are drawn anew with every new context and collaboration. The first example was a more conventional design commission, 'executed' by two H&D members. It did not feed back into the collective in the same manner as is evident in the second example, where technical aspects and excitement about them derived from and fed back into H&D's collective practice. To clarify, I do not intend to exemplify these two projects as good or bad platform-design examples but rather to distill aspects of their processes in order to question the ways in which collectives implicate themselves in the environments we pass through with our work and the boundaries we draw or fail to draw in the process.

Englises MOOC

In 2018, H&D was approached by Dutch artist Nicoline van Harskamp to collaborate on developing an online learning environment, which she referred to as a 'MOOC' (Massive Online Open Course). At the time of this inquiry (before the COVID19 pandemic), I had not familiarized myself much with online learning platforms, such as webinars or MOOCs. Besides remote seminar-style university education, online learning was not yet a common



Screenshot of the interface of the Englises MOOC (logged in)

practice in art education. During our first meeting, Nicoline brought a large folder with physical course materials that she wanted to have translated into what I will refer to in the following as a 'platform'¹¹—a website that allowed a committed group of participants—mostly students and educators within an international art school context, to access and engage with learning materials and interact with the course material,

¹¹ The project description by Nicoline van Harskamp contextualizes 'platform' slightly differently. It refers to one specific feature of the website and infrastructure as a platform—the discussion feature "[The MOOC] also features a platform for live discussion between its participants." <https://www.englises-mooc.org>, last accessed April 2022.

with Nicoline and each other.¹² In our initial meeting, Nicoline explained that she had been recurrently invited by various organizations and educational institutions to teach this workshop sequel and she wondered how she could respond to the increasing demand. In her motivational statement on the website, she described how she had “discussed the topic so often as an educator, that she decided to develop a curriculum and choose an online teaching format that maintains the qualities of a multilingual classroom environment: the Massive Open Online Course. [...] Actresses from different language backgrounds perform Van Harskamp’s classes [...]. Students and alumni from the institutions affiliated with the project, perform the process of learning.”¹³

It may not be intended as such, however my reading of the motivation for developing an online learning environment is as follows. It reflects a common narrative around platforms’ capacities to enhance processes of human interaction, to make such processes—here processes of learning and teaching—more efficient in an economical sense (reaching more people, avoiding repetitive labor). In reality, there was still a large amount of human labor involved in developing the platform, and perhaps even more so in pursuing the course once the platform was supposedly completed. In particular, there was labor involved in sustaining a committed group of participants and keeping them involved and engaged over a longer period of time. For instance, the live chat feature was initially one of the most important technical features that the ‘Englishes MOOC’ platform was developed

around.¹⁴ It was designed to accommodate exchange between participants. In the event that they had questions, participants could post these in the chat. Yet many participants preferred to use email to ask questions and to send in their assignments. The upload feature and the discussion forum were barely used, generating the considerable work of communicating with participants and helping them orient themselves on the platform.

Whether or not actualized in the way we had anticipated, the MOOC platform traveled widely, propelled by the narrative of it as a stable, online learning environment that accommodates large numbers of people. The project was featured on websites, newsletters, exhibitions and in public talks at various educational and cultural institutions and attracted many participants. In the guise of a ‘MOOC’, the platform attracted many people and, just before the COVID19 pandemic, it was perceived as a unique way to present an artistic practice and as an unusual format for art education. Through its aesthetics, teaser videos, the description texts, the institutions and networks that announced it, the project had potential. Perhaps it did not fulfill its promises in a technical sense. However, by piggybacking on certain platform analogies (aesthetically, through features and through the narrative that evolved around it), the project managed to cut across disciplinary and institutional boundaries. Through its perception of an innovative project (involving the development of ‘self-made’ tech-

14 The platform was built upon an open-source forum software called Discourse, that allowed for the creation of different channels, which we repurposed to differentiate the course modules within the structure of the website. The functionalities of the forum software allowed us to create more and less public areas of the website, some of which could be accessed by anyone with a link, and some only with user logins and once modules were released. Eventually, when the course took place, the chat function was barely used by the participants. Neither was the upload button (to submit assignments and exercises). <https://www.discourse.org/>, last accessed April 2022.

12 The platform became an enclosed environment that participants could access after receiving a login. The course was divided into different blocks and course materials (videos, preparatory readings, schedules, assignments) would be released one block at a time, over the course of six weeks. The platform offered the possibility for discussions in a live chat room and participants could upload their assignments.

13 <https://www.englishes-mooc.org/>, last accessed April 2022.

nology), it also tapped into funding sources that would usually not be available for projects evolving in educational institutions.¹⁵

The conceptual framework of the ‘platform’ was an essential part of the narrative evolving around the project and contributed to its mobility and actualization. It became an effective tactic for connecting the different realms of art, education, research and web development.

Yet it seemed to me the Englishes MOOC’s implications as a technical project actualized within the specific context of the H&D collective were not questioned sufficiently. That is, the project could have been challenged more in terms of its technical ambitions and the platform-image it (re)produced.

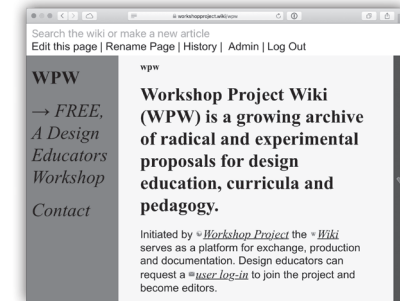
In retrospect, it seems the manner in which tasks and roles were divided in its development is indicative of how the platform ‘as such’ became inevitable (the artist as platform-commissioner, H&D as designers and developers realizing the platform, and participants as ‘users’ of the platform). The short timeline of the project caused pressure to finish the platform. Leading up to the launch of the first course cycle, pressure increased, over-hours were worked. On the one hand, the intention for the platform was to function as a way to make processes easier and more efficient. On the other hand, it required an immense amount of labor to keep up the platform image as a technical infrastructure that reduces human involvement. Throughout the process, there was not much space for problematizing the evolving technical infrastructure and preparing ourselves and others for the expectations and demands it may produce. For instance, we did not question if the envisioned digital

¹⁵ The Englishes MOOC was funded by the Creative Industries Fund NL and supported by Sandberg Instituut Amsterdam and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Creative Industries Fund usually does not fund projects evolving in educational institutions.

platform, in terms of aesthetics, features and the manner in which it was contextualized through certain platform-analogies (liveness, reliability, efficiency, user-friendliness), misaligned with the conditions of its development.

Workshop Project Wiki

The Workshop Project Wiki (WPW)¹⁶ is another platform-project, developed with André Fincato (H&D) who I have also been working with on the Englishes MOOC. The WPW builds upon different open-source software tools that H&D had been working with since 2014.

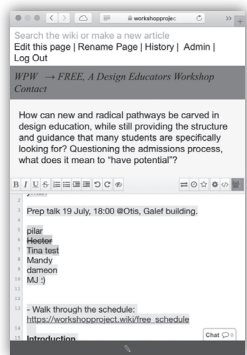


Screenshot of the interface of the Workshop Project Wiki.

The WPW converges DokuWiki software¹⁷ and the online collaborative real-time editor Etherpad.¹⁸ Similar to the MOOC the WPW bridged various institutional boundaries and brought together different learning communities.

- ¹⁶ The Workshop Project Wiki converges DokuWiki—an open source wiki software that doesn’t require a database, and Etherpad, a real-time collaborative note taking tool. I developed this Wiki-Pad mesh together with H&D member André Fincato. Editors can read, edit and create articles. A new Etherpad is automatically generated along with and bound to every new Wiki article. The pads other than the Wiki articles are only accessible with a user account.
- ¹⁷ “Designed for collaboration while maintaining a history of every change” <https://www.dokuwiki.org/dokuwiki>, last accessed March 2022.
- ¹⁸ Etherpad allows editing documents collaboratively in real-time <https://etherpad.org/>, last accessed March 2022.

It became a central digital workspace for developing and pursuing a workshop series organized for and by design educators. Reflecting on the development of the two platform-design processes (Englisches MOOC and the WPW), there were subtle differences in articulation of roles, responsibilities and expectations, all of which are pertinent. In comparison to the collaboration on the Englisches MOOC, the role of H&D in the process of developing the WPW was less distinctive. For instance in the case of the WPW, the technical aspects introduced were already tightly interwoven within the collective of H&D.



Left: Screenshot of the interface of the Workshop Project Wiki
Right: Participants at the workshop working in the Wiki

The proposition for combining certain tools that were already part of our tool ecosystem, in particular bringing them together in different ways seemed natural and exciting. Another point of contrast with Englisches MOOC, was that I had been in contact with one of the initiators of the Workshop Project collective before on different occasions. Yasmin Khan was one of my teachers in an exchange semester in Los Angeles and we have since sustained contact.¹⁹ Her approach to

teaching resonated with me and inspired me in my own evolving practice as a design educator. Therefore, I did not consider working on the WPW as a new project or a commissioned work, but rather, as an occasion to reconnect and continue our ongoing exchange. Furthermore, the WPW was an occasion to combine resources and energy for imagining and building a growing repository of experimental teaching methods and materials across and beyond institutional boundaries. Together, we filled and edited the WPW and got used to the syntax together.²⁰

Rather than *plat-formatting* pre-existing content, workshop materials, pedagogical resources, prompts and syllabi evolved together with the evolving digital environment. By writing and publishing an elaborate note addressing our choice to work with certain tools, documenting and publishing the source code, the WPW was contextualized as a technical project. As such, it did not only display content and offer features, but was an evolving technical object that took active part in the exchange between the two collective practices of Workshop Project and H&D. Both collectives aspired to consider practices of using and building self-made tools and platforms as an inherent part of design education. During the first edition of the workshop in Los Angeles, I was able to join as a co-host and participant, and was therefore able to introduce and contextualize the WPW. I introduced the practice of H&D, demonstrated how the WPW came into being, how it worked and was present for questions.

In the article “From Market to Platform” (2012), Jane Guyer described platforms as “made up of built components and applications, from which actions are

¹⁹ I was invited to Otis College of Art and Design, as a visiting student in the summer of 2010, and as a visiting lecturer in 2012 and 2014.

²⁰ With syntax I refer to the hypertext markup language used to format Wiki articles.

performed outward into a world that is not itself depicted.”²¹ I relate this quote to the two platform projects, in the ways they became active in the world in different ways. The Englishes MOOC, in the way that it was imagined and actualized, depended on a certain resolved appearance, on unquestionability. It became active in the world through the stable image around its existence. At the same time, its unquestionability also caused a misalignment with the actual experience of building it, working with it and using it. In my view, its unquestionability also hindered its duration as a technical object that could live on, beyond the framework of the artistic project Englishes MOOC. Similar to the WPW, the Englishes MOOC was also built with open-source software. Thus, in theory, it could be repurposed across various contexts. However, due to its ‘resolved’ forms of expression, it is difficult to imagine how it might be used differently than its initial purpose. For instance, some visual elements, such as the elementary colors, were drawn from the colors of the whiteboard markers that were also featured in some of the videos portraying the artists’ workshop reenactments. Thus, there was a close resemblance between the appearance of the ‘platformed’ materials and the structure and appearance of the different elements of the interface. For instance the background of the website is an image of a whiteboard, which derived from one of the artist’s videos, as well as the colors of the lines that structure and divide content into different columns.

21 Jane I. Guyer “From Market to Platform” (first published in 2012)
Jane I. Guyer, *Legacies, Logics, Logistics* (The University of Chicago, 2016): 110–127.

In studies and discussions about the so-called ‘platform economy’,²² platforms are often described as designed for emulating and enhancing interaction. Theorists such as Guyer, Gillespie, Srnicek, Star and Lury discussed how platforms have fundamentally changed how work is perceived.²³ They seep into a collective vocabulary and imaginary. It is perhaps far-fetched to connect theories on the platform economy to self-made artist projects, such as the Englishes MOOC. However, I wonder whether there has been a rise of platform economy semantics and models within the creative sector (perhaps more intensely since the COVID19 pandemic). On the one hand, the increasing interest in self-made platforms is indicative of a necessity to self-organize; to take matters into ‘one’s own hands’, making our ‘own’ self-made, artist-run platforms. On the other hand, such a tendency perpetuates expectations around professionalism, efficiency and reliability that people are used to confronting in the guise of those platforms we

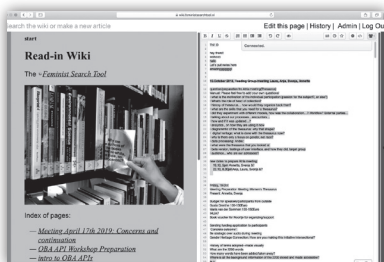
22 Social and cultural anthropologist Jane Guyer proposes the term ‘platform’ as an alternative to the term ‘market’ and ‘platform economy’ as an alternative to ‘market economy’. Guyer, Jane I., “From Market to Platform: Shifting Analytics for the Study of Current Capitalism,” *Legacies, Logics, Logistic* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

23 Platforms are widely discussed, particularly their implications in 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 sphere of platform capitalism. Most ubiquitous is the category of advertising platforms such as Google and Facebook that extract and analyze the information of platform users, in order to sell space for advertisement. There are cloud platforms such as Amazon Web Services that own and rent out server infrastructure to digital-dependent businesses, and 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 take part in the ‘gig economy’. Their platform model is profitable through hyper-outsourcing and keeping costs as low as possible. Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Cambridge; Malden: Polity, 2017.
“Bowker and Star say, ‘infrastructure does more than make work easier, faster or more efficient; it changes the very nature of what is understood by work.’” Celia Lury “Platforms and the Epistemic Infrastructure,” *Problem Spaces. How and Why Methodology Matters* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021).

aim to replace and build alternatives for. In my experience, demands for efficiency are usually articulated in a subtle manner, yet they lead to high expectations of self-made, technical artist projects that are in reality developed under meager socio-economic conditions. These expectations tend to reproduce and normalize such precarious conditions.

By juxtaposing these two platform projects, I ask whether there are other ways of making experimental platforms that do not fall into the efficiency trap, but are inventive in the ways in which they reflect on and respond to the particular contexts they evolve within.

In comparison to the MOOC, the visual design of the Workshop Project Wiki was rather rough. This roughness was demonstrated for instance by its use



Screenshot of the interface of the Feminist Search Tools Wiki

of system fonts,²⁴ or by disclosing signatures of the various software and practices it combined. These small instances of unresolvedness make it, in my view, possible to imagine the WPW being used differently, in different contexts, repurposed and continued. In fact, in the context of the Feminist Search Tools project, the WPW took on another, parallel life as an online collaborative

workspace and process archive.²⁵ The wiki-etherpad convergence introduced a culture of documenting and note taking to an otherwise chaotic and fragmented collective process. It helped those who could not attend every meeting to catch up and follow the conversations asynchronously.

In her article “Located accountabilities in technology production” (2002) professor of Anthropology of Science and Technology Lucy Suchman proposed drawing new kinds of boundaries within processes and roles of technology-design. According to Suchman, accounting for technology production means being able to locate oneself in socio-material relations, but also to surrender control. Furthermore, foregoing control does not mean acting irresponsibly. It means seeing oneself “as entering into an extended set of working relations.”²⁶ Suchman’s proposition resonates with how some platform design processes, such as the WPW, seem to better reflect the manner in which they are part of various socio-material relations. Rather than imposing predefined roles, tasks and expectations, such a collective design process redraws boundaries with flexibility and according to the limits and possibilities of the present.

To summarize, self-made platforms and the processes of conceptualizing and actualizing the ‘platform’ can become an effective tactic for connecting different disciplines, practices and (institutional) contexts. By means of two examples, I have shown how experimental platform projects that involved the H&D collective dealt with the specific socio-economic / socio-technical con-

25 The FST Wiki is used to take notes during meetings, to write and edit outlines for conversations and interviews, to accumulate resource lists, to write workshop outlines and to structure the clusters of library categorization. <https://wiki.feministsearchtool.nl>, last accessed February 2022.

26 Suchman, Lucy (2002) “Located accountabilities in technology production,” *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems* 14, no. 2 (2002): 7.

24 System fonts are the typefaces already installed on a computer through its operating system. These typefaces do not require licenses and are usually considered inelegant.

ditions they were evolved within. A question that arose from these projects is how collective platform making can critically and reflexively negotiate the particular contexts they evolve within in order to avoid the ‘efficiency trap’. That is, upholding an image of self-made platforms to be efficient, reliable and functioning, while the opposite may be the case.

In the context of WPW, sustaining a certain unresolvedness, led to new openings and continuations in other contexts. While it derived from a specific context, the platform did not remain a singular technical object but emerged from and fed back into long-term collaborations between two collectives and expanded into other collective practices as well. The design and development process of the WPW included many exchanges, as well as co-editing and co-hosting workshops that included the platform as a central component, a technical object to learn from and with. In this sense, the WPW is not solely a platform for collaboration or a workshop accessory, but an ongoing collective process that converges, supports and challenges different socio-technical practices.

Rethinking platform boundaries: ChattyPub

In their text “Platform Seeing” (2019) McKenzie and Munster describe the mode of operation of platforms as “transversal, thus its boundaries are not clearly distinct, or to be observed or discussed from one single vantage point.”²⁷ The evolving (individual and collective) habits around the use and construction of certain tools and tool combinations and their resonance in collective organizations can be difficult to trace, precisely because

they cut across different registers of collective work and social relations.

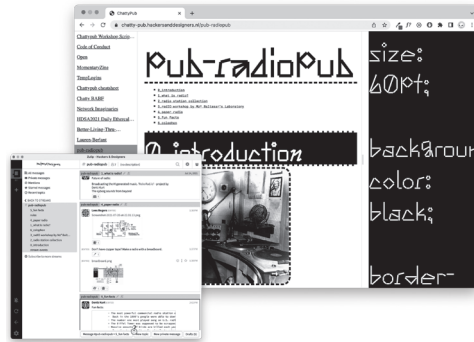
‘Platforms’ usually presuppose the existence of a community, or the potential of the forming of a community—a group of people who share some kind of common ground, who agree to be part of the platform, work with the platform and who accept to do the work the platform asks of them. Within a collective design process, there can be less of a distinct or causal understanding of platforms in which the characteristics of certain platforms, such as those facilitating collaboration, are not being inscribed into a technical artifact, i.e. a website or content management system. Socio-technical relations evolve *with* a platform, rather than *on* or *because* of a platform.

In the following section, I will draw on an example of a project referred to as ‘ChattyPub’. ChattyPub evolved from various workshop situations, as well as the need for a central online workspace for the H&D collective. In my view, ChattyPub as a platform operates as, what McKenzie and Munster’s described as, transversal. Its boundaries are not clearly distinct. In terms of its purpose, it cannot be solely defined as, for instance, a chat application, a workshop, a design and publishing tool or an archive. Yet ChattyPub inherits all of these characteristics and has become an essential component of H&D’s collective practice. Through its multiple modes of operation, its changing meanings and different materializations it developed and strengthened ties through and with the H&D collective. ChattyPub could be discussed from various vantage points. As a starting point, I consider a workshop that was facilitated by two design educators XinXin and Lark VCR during the 2020 of the H&D Summer Academy (HDSA). 2020 was an exceptional year for H&D. Due to the global pandemic, we decided to host the intensive workshop program for the HDSA online for the

²⁷ Adrian MacKenzie and Anna Munster “Platform Seeing: Image Ensembles and Their Invisibilities,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 36, no. 5 (2019): 3–22.

first time. The program consisted of fifteen workshops, which were hosted by different designers, artists and programmers from various geographic locations.

The Experimental Chatroom workshop particularly resonated with H&D members due to its attention to detail and the commitment on the part of the workshop hosts to respond to the different needs and levels of



Left: Zulip interface / book stream + chapter topics,
Right: ChattyPub CSS preview and book spread.

knowledge of a diverse participant group who were distributed across the globe and across time zones.²⁸ The workshop impacted H&D in various ways. We referred to XinXin and Lark VCR's workshop script many times as an example of a 'perfect workshop'.²⁹ The subject of the workshop, designing and building experimental chat rooms, sparked the idea amongst H&D for co-designing a publication utilizing a chat environment. This would allow for several people to participate in the design process at the same time.

28 Workshop outline of the Experimental Chatroom workshop on the H&D website: https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Summer_Academy_2020/p/Experimental_Chatroom, last accessed March 2022.

29 Experimental Chatroom workshop script developed by Xin Xin and Lark VCR: <https://experimental-chatroom-workshop.glitch.me/script.html>, last accessed March 2022.

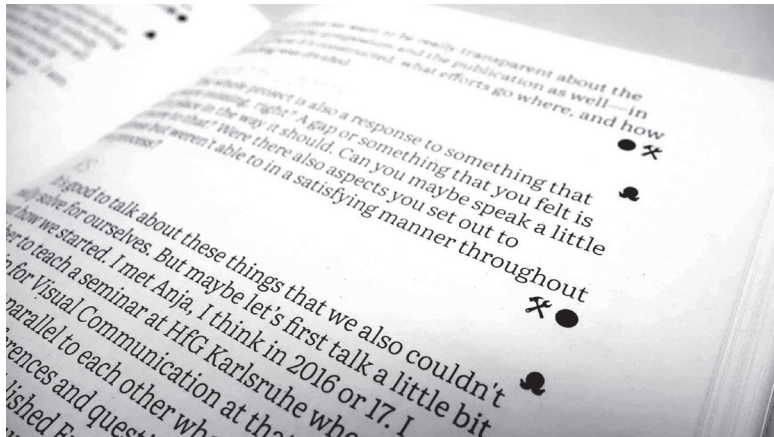
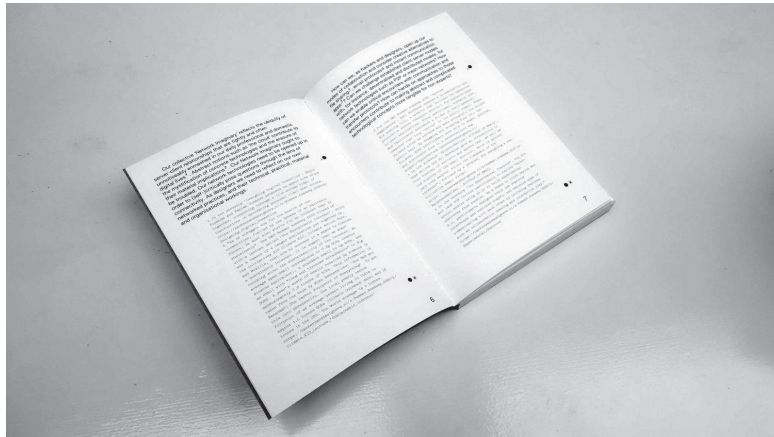
In the next iteration of the H&D Summer Academy in 2021, which was organized as a hybrid format on and offline and in four different locations, we started using an open-source chat platform called Zulip³⁰ to streamline communication with workshop participants and co-hosts. The Zulip software combines real-time chat functions with an email threading model. Along with the practical desire for a central community chat platform, the idea of co-designing a publication using a chat interface was revived. ChattyPub became the name of a self-made publishing platform that builds upon the chat interface of Zulip. The text input fields for posting chat messages were used to edit and layout the contributions to our publication—some were text-based and some visual contributions. Different CSS styles³¹ (font-families, font-sizes, font-styles, margins, text alignment and colors) were applied through Emoji reactions.

ChattyPub was developed in preparation to a workshop taking place during the H&D Summer Academy 2021, and was further developed in different workshops hosted in other contexts afterwards.³² In autumn of 2021, H&D self-published the book *Network Imaginaries*, which was designed with ChattyPub. Among others, contributors included Lark VCR and XinXin, who wrote

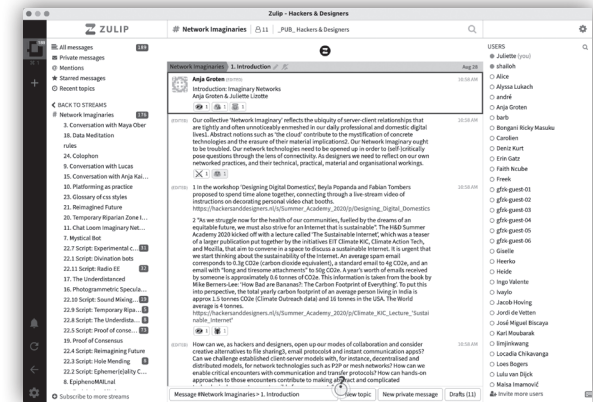
30 Zulip is an open-source software application that combines the immediacy of real-time chat with an email threading model. <https://zulip.com/>, last accessed March 2022.

31 CSS stands for Cascading Style Sheets. It is "a stylesheet language used to describe the presentation of a document written in HTML or XML. CSS describes how elements should be rendered on screen, on paper, in speech, or on other media." <https://developer.mozilla.org/en-US/docs/Web/CSS>, last accessed March 2022.

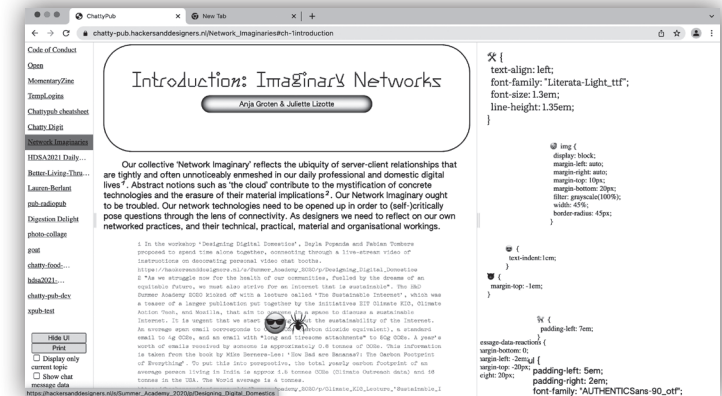
32 For instance, in 2021 at GFZK Leipzig 'Digit' <https://digit.gfzk.de/de> and the self-organized H&D symposium 'Open* tools for collective organizing' in 2021 https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Activities/p/Open%2A_tools_for_collective_organizing and at Bergen Art book fair in 2022 <https://babf.no/program/workshop-chattypub-hackers-designers>, last accessed April 2022.



Example of page spread of the printed book with visible emoji reactions



Zulip interface / book stream + chapter topics



ChattyPub CSS preview

a contribution about their ‘Experimental Chat Room’ workshop, within the various chat rooms that were built in their workshop.

To sum up, ChattyPub functionalities were/are manifold. As a platform it congregates and activates various aspects of collective practice transversally. It is a socio-technical object, emerging from and intertwined with collective organization; it traveled through and connected various contexts and practices; it served as a technical object to learn from and with. It has been the subject, tool and context for workshops and through its different instantiations, affords continuation of various collective design processes. ChattyPub, along with the installation of Zulip on H&D’s server and the different workshop occasions, thrived off shared, energizing moments and a contingent collision of diverse individual and collective curiosities. As a platform ChattyPub evolved and functions despite, and because of the fragmented and chaotic character of H&D’s collective design practice.

The figure of the platform

Referring to the example of ChattyPub, I demonstrated how platform characteristics, as they are defined and actualized as part of a collective design process, cannot be inscribed into one distinct technical artifact, one distinct moment or one distinct group of people. Instead, different platform meanings and materializations are indistinctly intertwined in (distributed) collective work and shape what may be perceived or articulated from the outside as a solid and functioning technical object that serves a predefined purpose. Such inscriptions of purpose and intentions are often detached from collectivity-in-action; for instance they are articulated after time has passed or by people who were perhaps not directly involved in the process and interpret the socio-technical functioning of the H&D collective at a distance.

Tarleton Gillespie wrote that the term ‘platform’ “depends on a semantic richness that, though it may go unnoticed by the casual listener or even the speaker, gives the term discursive resonance.”³³ Semantic richness, in my reading of Gillespie, means that the term ‘platform’ is equally vague as it is specific and therefore can obtain meaning across various fields and multiple audiences. Gillespie delineates four distinct yet intersecting semantic territories for the meaning of the term platform (‘architectural’, ‘political’, ‘metaphorical’, ‘computational’) “‘Platform’ as a descriptive term for digital media intermediaries represents none of these, but depends on all four.”³⁴

Thinking with Gillespie’s observations on and theorization of the semantic rich ‘platform’, I will follow intersecting platform meanings and the ways in which they were and were not actualized as part of a collective

33 Gillespie, Tarleton “The Politics of ‘Platforms’.” *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (May 2010): 349.

34 *ibid.*

design process. The manner in which platforms materialize within and due to collectivity, seems to carry discursive potential. They are altered and produced by their various instantiations and contexts. In the following, I will trace the genealogy of the concept of ‘platform’, at first taking the shape of a physical platform structure, which was meant to facilitate workshops, yet was not actualized as such. Instead it became a metaphor for collective organization and then took yet another form, that of a kind of TV set accompanied by a live-stream platform. Furthermore, the H&D live-stream platform took on a life on its own.

Installing a platform

In 2018, H&D accepted an invitation to organize an exhibition. I hoped for new insights deriving from a process of putting together this exhibition and perhaps to find new ways to articulate in a cohesive manner what it really is we do. I asked a friend who is a scenographer, Thomas Rustemeyer, to work with us on the exhibition design. The involvement of Thomas—who was familiar with but not actively part of H&D—allowed us to reflect about H&D’s collective practice with some distance. Thomas patiently proposed many possible directions for the exhibition by means of different drawings. At one point, he proposed to showcase and demonstrate some of the tools H&D had developed in the past, outcomes of workshops, websites and publications. However, while we were always enthusiastic about creating publishing karaoke machines,³⁵ turning toy cars into self-driving cars,³⁶ and performing bodily interfaces,³⁷ the idea of

showing such objects in an exhibition context created discomfort. The resistance to exhibiting these objects may have derived from the fact that most of these objects/prototypes are developed in the context of workshops and have the status of idea sketches or tryouts.³⁸ They are not meant to be exhibited and are also often disposed and decomposed. Components are reused for other purposes.

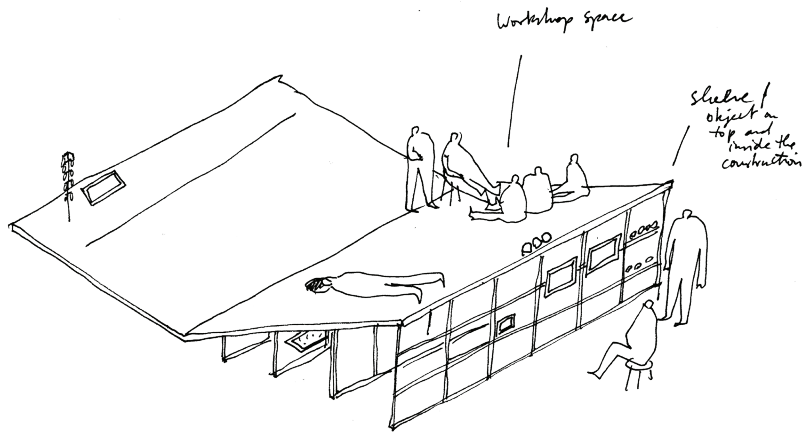
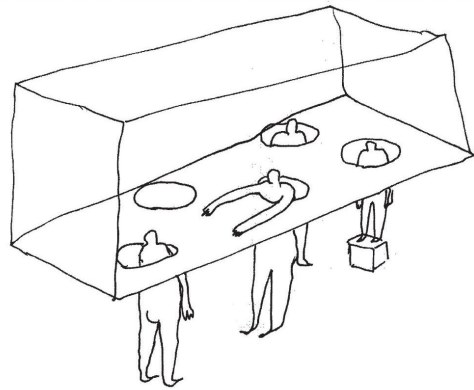
Another consideration was to exhibit works produced by individual members of the H&D collective. We entertained the idea for a brief moment, but soon acknowledged this would be a terrible exhibition, an incohesive, random potpourri. We started to discuss the core of H&D, our individual and collective values. Slowly we came to realize that H&D might consist of individual practitioners. However, H&D should be seen as a practice in its own right. H&D brings together people (including ourselves) to do the things we would usually not do in our individual practices. At H&D we get to experiment without the pressure of creating precious artifacts. Thus an exhibition seemed to counter what we do as part of H&D. Finally, we decided to use the exhibition as an occasion to collaborate with other artists and art collectives that inspire us and started imagining a spatial structure, a ‘platform’ that would function as a place and occasion to accommodate different kinds of encounters with makers, through workshops, performances and talks.

35 https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Publishing/p/Momentary_Zine

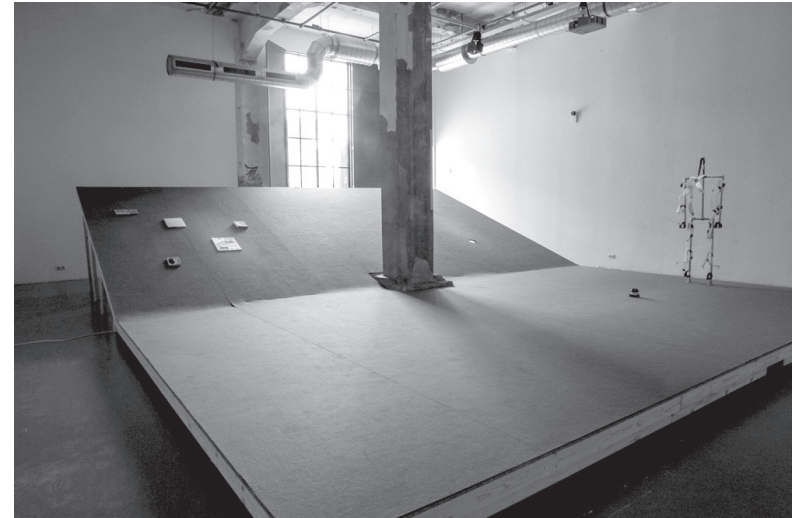
36 https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Activities/p/Self-Driving_Car_in_Basel

37 https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Activities/p/Interfacial_Workout
https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Activities/p/Body_Electric

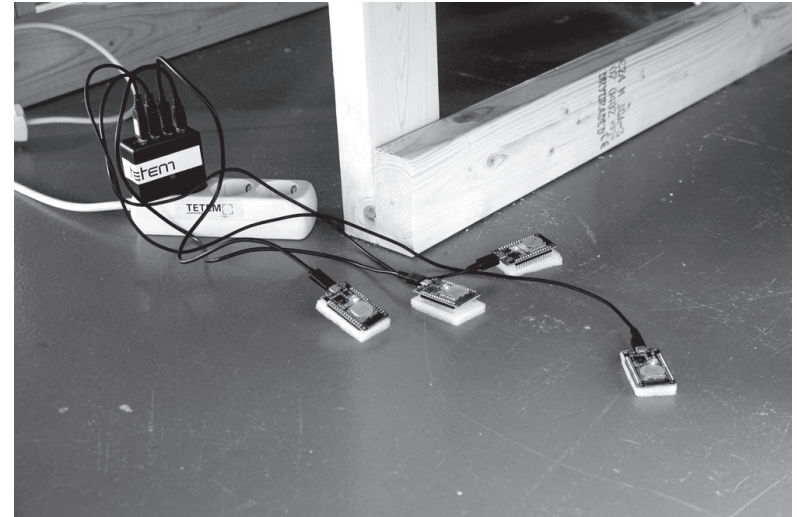
38 We tried to organized prototype exhibitions at Dublin Science Gallery in 2019 and H&D Summer Academy 2017 ‘On &/ Off the Grid at Mediamatic and De Ruimte in Amsterdam.



Drawings by Thomas Rustemeyer



Platform installed at Tetem, Enschede, 2020.



Platform metaphor

Although the platform was built, it was not put into action as we had initially envisioned it—as a physical site that could be activated through workshops and in-person events. Shortly after the exhibition opening, the Netherlands went into its first lock-down and physical gathering became impossible for the duration of the exhibition. Nevertheless, the image of the platform circulated and became an image representing the H&D collective. The physical platform intended to serve the purpose of gathering also became a metaphor—as the term ‘platform’ is often used to refer to organizations and tends to imply an assumed value to the ‘platform-organization’ as supportive and enabling.³⁹

Without the activation of the physical platform, the image of the platform seemed to flatten the socio-material particularities and unresolvedness of the H&D’s collective. As an image, a shape and a figure, it seemed too finite. Yet, the ‘platform’ as a metaphor and its coming-into-being as a physical structure also set into motion a reflexive articulation process about

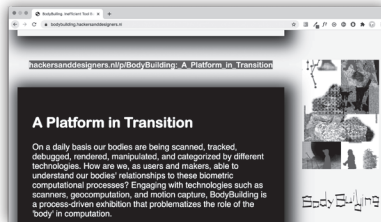
the at times intangible experience of a collective design process. Involving other artists and artist collectives in the process of developing the installation and having to readjust together to new emerging conditions, we had to (re)articulate the ways we understand and question the role and function of H&D in relation to other (collective) art and design practices, both in and outside of the Netherlands. Exhibition-making seemed an odd thing to do for H&D. At the same time, it also offered an occasion to find ways of expressing and questioning our resistance towards showing final results. There were points of friction in the process that challenged us in our ways of working, including our ways of financing what we do. The budget offered by the organizers of the exhibition space catered to one artist or artist collective to produce and present a new work. In the context of H&D, we felt the need to include more people, to be able to convey that H&D is not an art or design group, with the goal of producing art works together. It was important to us that we could convey the manner in which H&D brings together and mingles with *other* artists, designers and developers to do things we would not usually do. The collective practice of H&D, as we came to understand it through the process of making this exhibition, also became increasingly incompatible with the economies around the making of this exhibition as it was thought about by the organizers of the exhibition space that invited us. The intention to host workshops and events as an essential part of the exhibition was not only a conceptual choice, but also a way of co-financing a collective project that involved more people than were accounted for by the hosting organization. By organizing a workshop program, other financial sources could be accessed from H&D’s annually subsidized activity program that is funded by Dutch Creative Industries fund. Simultaneously, by introducing more and more activ-

39 An organization might profile itself as a platform when it gives stage to individuals or groups to address an audience or gain recognition. In that context, a platform is often seen as a support structure from which to speak or act.
<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...”)

ities, we increased a sense of obligation towards the hosting institution.

Moving the platform online

Responding to the global pandemic's challenge to in-person exchange and collaboration (a promise made), H&D developed a different means for continuation. We built a website for showcasing the works of the contributing artists, which were initially installed on, under and inside the platform.⁴⁰ The works were shown and contextualized on the website along with accompanying



Translation of the exhibition into the digital realm, bodybuilding.hackersanddesigners.nl, June 2020

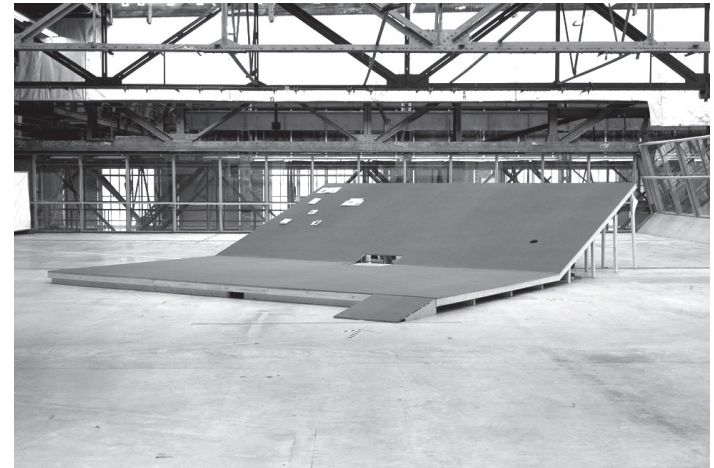
research and reading materials. Furthermore, we built a live stream platform, which converged a streaming service with a chat interface.⁴¹ The physical platform was moved and reactivated as a set from which we broadcasted events, and whenever possible also hosted smaller audiences to join us in real life.⁴²

As aforementioned, the desire for alternative, self-made, self-hosted platforms for online gathering increased during the pandemic. The H&D livestream

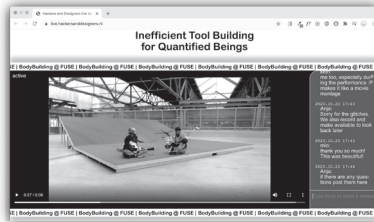
⁴⁰ <https://bodybuilding.hackersanddesigners.nl/>, last accessed May 2022.

⁴¹ <https://github.com/hackersanddesigners/the-hmm-livestream>, last accessed May 2022.

⁴² "Inefficient Tools for Quantified Beings", exhibition and public program at NDSM FUSE in Amsterdam: https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Activities/p/Inefficient_Tools_for_Quantified_Beings_Exhibition_and_Public_Program_at_FUSE, last accessed May 2022.



platform resulted in many new ‘opportunities’, including platform-requests by cultural organizations in the Netherlands.⁴³ Yet, when hosting larger events on the livestream platform, especially those events that included people who were less familiar with the way the H&D collective is organized, I noticed the ‘inefficiency’ and unreliability of our technical infrastructures were not always appreciated. These DIY platforms materialized within the context of H&D, are not easily disconnected



Left: H&D livestream platform

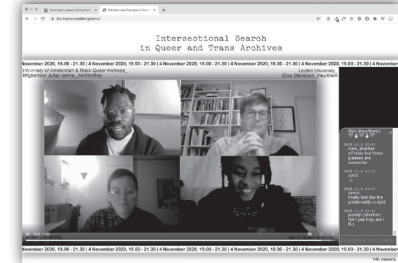
Right: 2nd iteration of the exhibition at FUSE NDSM, “Inefficient Tools for Quantified Beings,” Amsterdam, September-October 2020

from the socio-technical conducts developed alongside their emergence. I recall a particular event hosted by the FST group that attracted 180 viewers and hosted a number of speakers, some of which I had not met or spoken to before. Most of them were used to environments such as Zoom and Teams for live events, and did not interface with other, more experimental formats for live streaming. We tried to ‘prepare’ speakers before the event by offering an onboarding meeting though a few speakers did not attend.

The experience of the event was rather chaotic and stressful. One of the speakers wrote to us a day after the event took place, informing us that it took

43 The initial livestream platform was developed by André Fincato in collaboration with Karl Moubarak, both members of H&D. Karl also installed and developed the livestream for two Amsterdam-based organizations ‘The Hmm’ and ‘Sonic Acts’.

him a while to recover from this stressful experience. It became apparent that the kind of discomfort that accompanies self-built technical tools and infrastructure, requires special care and attention towards different experiences and expectations. I have been asking myself who is responsible for this kind of work? How can we—within the collective design process—interface with diverging experiences and expectations? How can



Feminist Search Tools livestream event, “Intersectional Search in Queer and Trans Archives,” November 2020

we create conditions in which technical projects such as the H&D livestream platform are not just assumed to be functioning in the same manner as platforms that are developed by large commercial companies such as Google, Zoom, Teams. The desire to articulate what H&D is about derives from a feeling of responsibility on the part of the H&D collective.

We cannot assume that our experimental platform projects are ‘harmless’. We had anticipated different experiences and abilities to deal with discomfort that comes with the digital space, and tried to address the experimental character of the platform in the introduction text of the event, in the welcome speech and by offering an onboarding meeting to try out and contextualize the platform. Yet it seemed like these attempts did not sufficiently account for the platform experience and did not prepare people to approach the platform with

curiosity and openness. The pressure of being watched by a rather large amount of (anonymous) people viewing, paired with a lack of familiarity on the part of the speakers and viewers with the context and conditions they would encounter, turned this event into an overwhelming experience.

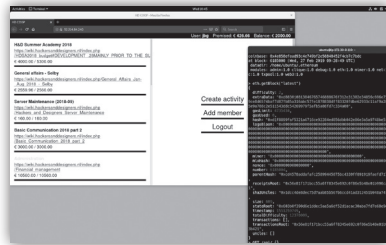
To summarize, the platform, first envisioned as an installation and physical workshop space, took on different meanings, materializations and scales. Due to the changing conditions and different relationships, responsibilities and obligations, the platform was defined and redefined (as metaphor, as workshop space, as technical infrastructure) while trying to hold together a multiplicity of activities, people and objects. Furthermore, the development of the livestream platform showed how different proximities and scales of groups are rather significant for the ways such unconventional platforms are put into practice, and are experienced. On the one hand, the H&D livestream platform was easily accessible from any location, through an open link to anyone. Yet the particularities of the different contexts it combined, required particular contextualization, care and attention. I question the capacity on the part of a self-organized collective such as H&D to handle this, especially if the contexts are not familiar or exceed the size of a workshop situation.

Platformed organization

A platform can also be understood as a plan or articulation of organizational principles on the basis of which a group operates. In the context of H&D, such principles can be expressed rather implicitly. From my own perspective, I would describe H&D's organizing principles as non-hierarchical. For example, the organization of activities is up for discussion while the intention is to accommodate as many voices as possible. This accommodation is made possible through the distribution of efforts and resources amongst the group. H&D's modes of organizing have developed over the years and are performed through subtle gestures rather than declarations. Yet, there were moments in which attempts were made to enforce more explicit organizational rules and conducts.

At the beginning of 2018 one of the core members of H&D at the time, James Bryan Graves, proposed formalizing organizational aspects of H&D, including the distribution of finances. At that point, the H&D collective was organized informally and ad hoc, which led to frustration at times. Some people took on too many tasks, others felt left out. The lack of structure led to unbalanced involvements and divergence of expectations on what H&D as a collective necessitated. James' proposal was to build a website that would help to decentralize organizational efforts and would make decision-making more transparent. The platform was inspired by 'cooperative' models for organizing groups and administering financial aspects of working together.

The H&D COOP Platform divides available funds equally amongst the members of the coop.⁴⁴ In its initial realization by James, the platform built upon smart contracts deployed on a self-hosted private Ethereum blockchain.⁴⁵ James chose this implementation because of the transparency of distributed ledgers as well as the immutability of blockchain technology, both of which, he believed, would be potentially valuable features for



Screenshot of the interface of the H&D COOP platform

https://wiki.hackersanddesigners.nl/index.php?title=Hackers_%26_Designers_Coop

collective organization. The immutability of transactions but also the high maintenance required by the platform proved not to suit the organizational culture of H&D. The platform was a technical as well as organizational experiment of which the technical aspect was discontinued after about one year because it required too much technical maintenance. Yet, the cooperative model

continued as an organizational principle and in the form of an elaborate spreadsheet.

The H&D COOP platform served as a concrete occasion to bring to the fore concerns and observations about how we worked together as a group and set into motion new collective imaginaries and plans for collective self-organization. Discussions became more active amongst members of the H&D. Around the time of implementing the H&D COOP platform, in 2018, H&D also opened up to welcome more members. People seemed more informed about and involved in each other's activities. Yet the organizational change did not resonate with all H&D members equally. Some became less active. Subscribing to an ad hoc working style, they seemed unable to, or were perhaps uninterested in formulating their tasks clearly and regularly. Perhaps, they had difficulties with the workload that comes with constant formalization and quantification of activities.

The H&D COOP Platform evolved from the desire to open up organizational work and decision-making to all members equally by offering an interface and process that is comprehensible to all. However, the attempt to formalize the rather disorganized collective working mode by introducing a more intentional and explicit structure, also introduced new obligations. All activities had to be distinctively described. The fact that everything had to be formulated as a 'project', solidified the collective into a structure that was inclusive to all members in theory but not in practice. Aspects that were not describable within the H&D COOP platform logic, were left aside. For instance, how would one describe and quantify someone's contribution to the general atmosphere or the mood of a collective? Another question is how activities can be quantified within the H&D COOP platform if they simultaneously involve many other practices and economies?

44 Explanation about the functioning of the H&D COOP platform: Projects could 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 can suggest how the project should improve. Within this workflow anything the cooperative does, any activity or purchase, needs to be described as a project, including structural activities such as administration, server maintenance, communication and writing funding applications. A project cannot be funded by the members who initiate it. That means H&D COOP members cannot fund their own projects but only contribute to others.

45 Ethereum is a decentralized, open-source blockchain with smart contract functionality. <https://ethereum.org/en/>, last accessed May 2022.

A platform like the H&D COOP platform is designed in a manner that takes for granted that involvements are determinable and comparable. The platform, in more and less concrete ways, went on shaping the ways members of H&D interacted with it and with each other, including the indeterminable effect of refusal and exclusion of some. I relate this relational aspect of H&D to Jane Guyer's misgivings about the ways platforms establish relationships. She wrote, "bursts of rule-making [...] are beginning to establish protections and obligations."⁴⁶ Those participating "must carve out a role and a set of expectations that is acceptable to each and also serves their own interests, while resolving or at least eliding the contradictions between them."⁴⁷

The continuously evolving relationships between a collective, its members and its technical companions produces advantages as well as disadvantages, and it depends on who you ask as to how such socio-technical relationships are experienced and expressed. If we consider platforms as 'infrastructural things', then it is often in their glitches that they become tangible. Lauren Berlant (referring to sociologist Susan Leigh Star) used the term 'glitchfrastructure', which describes the moment "when infrastructural things stop converging [...] they become a topic and a problem rather than automata of procedure. [...] When things stop converging they also threaten the conditions and the sense of belonging, but more than that, of assembling."⁴⁸ I relate Berlant's delineation of glitchfrastructure to the aforementioned moment of slow, gradual disengagement on the part of some H&D members with the H&D COOP platform

and the H&D collective. The glitch that occurred in that moment is not solely a technical *or* organizational malfunction, but a result of socio-technical re-configuration that might be expressed subtly and unnoticeably. Such a glitch may not even be perceivable as a problem that needs fixing.

Sociologist and cultural theorist Celia Lury proposed that "platforms are mediators in the composition of problem spaces; and as such, they 'transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning of the elements they are supposed to carry.'"⁴⁹ According to Lury, a problem space does not 'contain' problems but is a steadily changing composition of problems.

The composition of a problem space is an ongoing, forming and transforming activity and therefore cannot be presumed in advance. As a socio-technical mediator in the composition of problem spaces—a platform such as the H&D COOP platform, cannot be assumed to be a discrete or self-contained object but is rather interconnected and co-dependent in the various ways members of a collective organize themselves through the platform, relate to, and resist it.

The H&D COOP platform, despite its discontinuation as a technical object, had a lasting impact as an organizational principle. It marked an attempt to formalize what had been only talked about before in implicit ways. For example, organizing ourselves in an egalitarian manner. It introduced a new discursive culture into the collective ethos. And yet, to some extent, it also illuminated another angle on collective platform making. Such platforms, as they gradually evolve, do not always work in our favor, especially not if the conception and definition of 'working' is left to us. If such DIY platforms,

46 Guyer, Jane I., "From Market to Platform: Shifting Analytics for the Study of Current Capitalism," *Legacies, Logics, Logistic* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016): 125.

47 *ibid.*

48 Lauren Berlant "Infrastructures for Troubling Times," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3, (2016): 393–419.

49 Celia Lury "Platforms and the Epistemic Infrastructure," *Problem Spaces. How and Why Methodology Matters* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021).

themselves shaping socio-technical relations in collective practices, stop converging while their incompatibilities also become increasingly inextricable from new collective routines, their exclusions may not be perceived anymore as problematic but rather become an unquestionable part of their development and functioning.

Platform contours

In my readings on digital platforms and the platform economy, I came across many boundary concepts. Terms such as 'edges', 'contours', 'separations', or 'confinements' seem significant in comprehending and articulating platforms and their effects on technical, social and economic spheres. They are expressed through, for instance, intellectual property law, the licensing of source code, restricted access, or technical dependencies. Such boundaries determine the threshold of who or what is in or out. They can also be conceived as encompassing a specific way of perceiving and experiencing technical infrastructure.

In the following section, I will analyze a platform-design project, which points at the manners in which collective platform making can be articulated and pursued as a process that is simultaneously generative and problematic. At the beginning of 2020w1 I worked with one of my H&D peers, Karl Moubarak, on an online environment that has also been referred to as 'platform'. Jara Rocha, who was one of the collaborating artists of the aforementioned exhibition project, had seen and experienced the H&D livestream platform. Jara approached us with the proposal to develop an online environment together, which she explained to us as a convergence of online tools (a phrasing that has become very useful in the context of this research). The occasion was an upcoming online workshop, which she

developed with a group of researchers, some independent and some affiliated with academic institutions, from different fields of studies.⁵⁰

The request was to develop a technical infrastructure and interface that would accommodate the presentation of diverse media content such as videos, text, images and pdfs and would facilitate about 150 participants to watch and listen to live as well as prerecorded



H&D livestream platform. The online event was co-hosted with The Hmm and was an occasion to present and speak about the works of the exhibition that could not be opened due to the global COVID19 pandemic, April 2020..

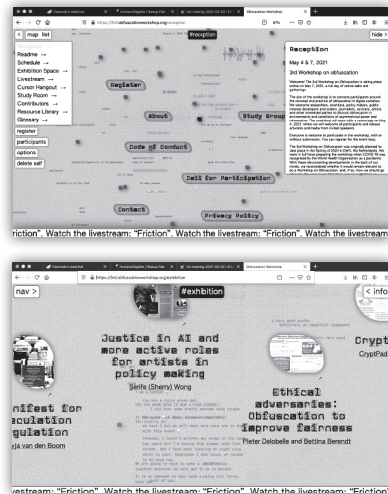
live.hackersanddesigners.nl, April 2020,

https://hackersanddesigners.nl/s/Events/p/The_Hmm_%40Hackers_%26_Designers
<https://thehmm.nl/event/the-hmm-hackers-designers-2020/>

presentations and interact with each other in real time. Next to accommodating presentations, and live chats, the goal was to facilitate more informal encounters between participants and speakers, that would usually occur during coffee breaks in a hallway had meeting in person been possible. While negotiating what might be achievable in a limited timeframe and within the limitations of our technical skills, the website became an increasingly complex and large canvas, consisting of various so-called 'regions' that could be navigated either as a map or as a list view. The different regions encoded different functions that referred to physical

50 The 3rd Workshop on obfuscation was organized by Ero Balsa (Cornell Tech), Seda Gürses (TU Delft), Helen Nissenbaum (Cornell Tech) and Jara Rocha (independent researcher).

spaces one might find at a symposium or conference, such as a reception, an exhibition space, a library and a study room. The large canvas, which could be explored by scrolling or moving and dragging the mouse cursor, also functioned as a ‘spatially’ distributed chat on which the many cursors of other website visitors were visible in real time. Messages could be left and live discussions



Screenshots of the interface of the ‘platframe’ for the “3rd obfuscation workshop”, May 2021.

could be held anywhere on the large canvas. Seeing the cursors of other visitors move around the canvas created a lively image and reminded visitors that they were not ‘alone’ on the website.

It is often when platforms act up, that they stop converging. One becomes aware of them through problems that occur. However, as I have discussed in previous sections, it cannot be guaranteed that such ‘platform issues’ can be anticipated, nor are they always explicit when they occur or perceived in a similar manner. A question that reoccurred to me during the process of working on this project was; what does it mean to build

and work with platforms? Simultaneously, how can one problematize the way relationships evolve and are hindered with and through the emerging platform? How to consider platforms as problematic from the get-go? Or in Lury’s words, what are “vocabularies by which to understand the form of problems emerging in relations of continuity and transformation across a problem space.”⁵¹

The rephrasing of ‘platform’ to ‘platframe’ effectively illustrates how the process of developing a digital environment can, to some extent, sustain a question around its emerging ‘edges’—it brings to attention the limits of the ‘platframe’ but also its possibilities. Throughout the process of imagining, building and activating the digital infrastructure, the edgy term ‘platframe’ reminded me that this online environment we are building together consists of many parts, which do not necessarily blend together nor are they experienced as seamless.

The notion of the ‘platframe’ underlines an evolved collective understanding and vocabulary that enabled us to approach and express to others, this technical object can be conceived of as unresolved, ‘framing’ it as an experiment with the potential to fail. Leading up to the most active moments of the platframe (the day of the online exhibition opening, the workshop and conference days), many (not always easy) exchanges prepared us—along with the potential conference participants—for a bumpy collective online experience accommodating 150 people moving through streams, channels, chats, and maps of this self-made, self-hosted technical infrastructure.

I produced a ‘copy’ of the website in the form of a PDF that could have been sent to participants via

51 Celia Lury “Platforms and the Epistemic Infrastructure,” *Problem Spaces. How and Why Methodology Matters*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 47.

email, in case they weren't able to access the platframe anymore. Furthermore, we collectively wrote a Readme section that was published on the platframe, which incorporated reflection on the making process, instructions on how-to use the distributed chat and a list of potential soft and hardware (in)compatibilities. Karl created a guided platframe tour and Jara Rocha edited an elaborate document that incorporates different ways of dealing with the experience of 'digital discomfort'.⁵² Below is an excerpt of the Readme section:

*"This platform might challenge participants more than the by now habitual experience of meeting on Zoom, Teams or Google Meet. As the conference on obfuscation raises questions about inner workings, the ethics, and the socio-technological entanglements, this platform too, aims to trouble our expectations towards the platform. At times, the platform will therefore ask a bit more patience and endurance than you may be used to."*⁵³

In her article "Putting Problematization to the Test of Our Present", Stengers described problematization as "the creation of problems and the activity of learning required by them."⁵⁴ Problems can thus be understood, not as hurdles to overcome, or in need of fixing, but as setting "thinking, knowing and feeling into motion."⁵⁵ Problematization is thus "a form of experimentation, which implicates ourselves in our present, requiring that

one allows oneself to be touched by what the present presents in the form of a test."⁵⁶

To summarize, the unresolved and experimental character of the platframe has been interwoven and written into its narrative from the beginning within the context of the group of collaborators, but also as part of announcements on social media, newsletters and websites of the various partner institutions and in the introduction speeches during the workshop and on conference days. Along with the evolving technical object, a collective vocabulary evolved that allowed those involved to prepare themselves and others for an unusual, perhaps slightly uncomfortable platform experience.

Conclusion: Platforming as a practice

The term platform—in its manifold meanings—has become general vernacular. It is widely discussed across disciplines and fields of knowledge and has also seeped into the everyday habits, economies and social conducts of collective practices, affecting their various spheres of life and work. Instead of offering another universalizing definition, or coining an alternative term, I argue for the material-discursive potential of collective platform-design processes that evolve from their changing meanings and materializations, attuned to the manner in which platform-design processes intersect different spheres, how they change and are changed through varying contexts and conditions.

I propose that collective platform-design processes foreground the manner in which platform characteristics can be articulated and put into practice in a contextual and distributed manner. Thus, platform-design should not be located in either the technical object, or an orga-

52 <http://titipi.org/projects/discomfort/CatalogOFFDigitalDiscomfort.pdf>

53 <https://3rd.obfuscationworkshop.org/readme>

54 Isabelle Stengers "Putting Problematization to the Test of Our Present", *Theory, Culture & Society* 38, no. 2 (2021): 71–92.

55 Celia Lury "Platforms and the Epistemic Infrastructure," *Problem Spaces. How and Why Methodology Matters* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 14.

56 Isabelle Stengers "Putting Problematization to the Test of Our Present," *Theory, Culture & Society* 38, no. 2 (2021): 71–92.

nizational model, or a group of people. Such platforms emerge along with specific quirks, requirements and curiosities of collectives, including those that are indeterminable and perhaps even undesired.

As a starting point, I asked whether platforms as unresolved and unreliable technical companions, and as inherently part of a collective, can be designed at all. The different platform-cases touched upon in this chapter focus on the possible approaches in dealing with 'external' platform-design requests, as well as platform-design processes that evolved in a less distinctive manner. The two platform projects (Englishes MOOC, WPW) both combine various contexts, such as different educational and cultural institutions. Yet, both platform-design processes developed various kinds of affiliation between those involved, to the technical object in-the-making and to each other. While creating the Englishes MOOC platform, the roles of designer / developer, commissioner / end-users were rather distinct and similar to a traditional design commission, the Workshop Project Wiki shows other kinds of affiliations. The process of collectively imagining and actualizing a platform, brought together the two collectives and highlighted what they have in common.

These collective design processes evolve, operate and develop connections in a transversal manner, and therefore, cannot be articulated or 'designed' from just one vantage point. A certain unresolvedness in the manner in which platforms are conceptualized and put into practice can offer openings for them to be carried into other contexts. The characteristics and purpose of platforms then, can be considered through various registers and timelines, which also require them to be defined and designed in a relational manner. For instance, Chatty-Pub is a publishing platform *and* a design tool *and* a workshop *and* a central organizational tool. Chatty-

Pub evolved along with the H&D collective by way of an accidental collision involving an energizing workshop that was harbored in the collective's memory. ChattyPub was also informed by H&D's curiosities about unusual publishing tools and formats, as well as the collective's desire to establish a central communication tool.

Collective platform-design processes are put into practice by challenging distinct boundaries and established design notions, even those that incorporate and consider collaborative processes, chance, contingency and interdisciplinary approaches. In my view, designing such platforms requires an expanded understanding and articulation of design, one that locates what it is to be designed (whether an object, a process or a context) across different spheres: different people, objects, contexts and timelines. Collective platform-design also requires taking into account several distributed 'platform' meanings and materializations and their material-discursive potential. The various intersecting platform meanings and their material-discursive potential is here demonstrated through the transition of a physical platform installation, which was intended to function as an exhibition and workshop space and evolved into a DIY livestream platform necessitated by the global Covid19 pandemic. Platform metaphors can hold together people and objects throughout turbulent times and throughout the struggle to find the right words, as well as the appropriate visual, material, and technical means to articulate collective design. The material-semantic transitions of 'platform' are also indicative of the manner in which collectives pass through and engage with different contexts, their limits and possibilities to respond to such different (on and offline) environments. For instance, H&D's resistance to fixed definitions and finite products makes it, on the one hand, malleable and receptive to diverse contexts. On the other hand, the

mutability of collectives can also create situations in which the diverging organizational, social and economic conditions generate increasing obligations and responsibilities. The example of the H&D livestream platform is demonstrative of the limitations of H&D's adaptability. Collective platform-design, as it has been discussed in this chapter, cannot accommodate anyone in any context, but requires specific attention and commitment to collectively developing context-specific, socio-technical conduct along with a design process.

Platforms, as they are discussed here—conceived as actively involved in collective design practice—cannot be described in either spatial, figurative, organizational or technical terms. There is neither a blueprint for designing such platforms, nor a recipe for a fruitful process of collectively working on and with platforms. Rather, they take shape and change shape in action and through interaction, which, in my view, also makes it impossible to uphold a user-versus-designer distinction. The analysis of the H&D COOP platform—even though it was discontinued as a technical project—had long lasting effects on the organizing principles of H&D. Its making process served as a concrete occasion to reflect on concerns, desires and new imaginaries for the manner in which members of H&D wanted to work together and introduced a new discursive culture within the collective. Yet the H&D COOP also enforced new administrative obligations and new necessities of articulating involvements in a determinable, comparable manner. These forms of articulation became gradually part of new collective routines and stimulated active exchange and discussion of some members on the one hand, while simultaneously resulting in disengagement of others. The question that arises from the case of the H&D COOP platform as well as the discomforts caused by the H&D live stream, is whether it is conceivable that

such experimental platforms-in-the-making, along with their evolving socio-technical conducts, can be designed in a manner that takes their potential for being potentially problematic, exclusionary and alienating into account. It is my view that an expanded design vocabulary is necessary in order to approach such a question in a manner that does not center the figure of the platform-designer or the self-contained object 'platform' as an entity that can be controlled and managed. Building on my analysis of the platframe, I propose *other* possible articulations that offshoot from the notion of designing one singular technical object into various forms of expressions. Such formats and practices may be unresolved and distributed, but stable enough to hold together people and objects. They are utterances indicative of a shared commitment and responsibility towards the articulation work required to prepare ourselves and others for the platform-issues potentially awaiting us.

To summarize, 'platform' is a capacious concept that holds the potential for collective design processes to trespass and connect a manifold of contexts, practices, economies and timelines. Along with different interpretations and materializations, such platforms can challenge pre-established design conventions that assume roles as distinct, processes as successive and determinable and outcomes as purposeful in a generalizing sense. Collective platform-design processes, as they are interwoven with multiple contexts and conditions, can foreground, in a concrete and material manner, other possible scenarios of working, learning and being together with and through digital tools and technical infrastructure. If such processes are taken as an occasion to learn *from* and *with*, and to collectively articulate context-specific vocabulary and socio-technical conduct, such collective platform-design projects can uphold a critical collective awareness about the relationships they may enable, or disrupt.

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Relevant links

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“A catalog of formats for digital discomfort” edited
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