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

I began this dissertation by claiming that many design theories are still too attached to, and therefore insufficiently question, the notion of a 'purposeful' relation between design and collectivity. As I have explained in the first chapter 'Design & Collectivity', it is often during moments of crisis and disorientation when desires for collectivity are articulated. Designers and design theorists are calling for collective approaches as a form of disciplinary disobedience,[1] to counteract permanent insecurity,[2] and to redesign economies and interdependencies.[3] Collectivity is proposed an organizing principle that embraces care[4] and resists exploitative forms of life.[5]

However, these ongoing calls for collectivity within the field of design do not so often address how exactly this structure shift might occur? *How* precisely is collective

1   "I propose the decolonial concept of border-thinking within design as a method of disciplinary disobedience for moving design towards more collective approaches." Danah Abdullah, "Disciplinary Disobedience. A Border-Thinking Approach to Design," in *Design Struggles*, Nina Paim and Claudia Mareis, eds. (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2020), 228.
2   "Yet, despite all the flexibility and ever-changing styles and modes of production, what lacks is the collective design of a subjectivity that would overcome permanent insecurity" Geert Lovink, *Foreword,* in Silvio Lorusso. *everyone is an entrepreneur. nobody is safe*. (Eindhoven: Onomatopee, 2019), 12.
3   "It becomes possible to collectively redesign economies and interdependencies in ways that defy, resist and/or exit precarising ways of organising and designing." Brave New Alps, "Precarity Pilot", 2015, https://modesofcriticism.org/precarity-pilot/, last accessed May 2022.
4   "To embrace care as an organizing principle in every part of life, we must do so collectively." Complaint Collective, "Does Design Care?" Cherry-Ann Davis and Nina Paim, 2021, https://futuress.org/magazine/does-design-care/, last accessed May 2022.
5   "The collective determination toward transitions, broadly understood, may be seen as a response to the urge for innovation and the creation of new, nonexploitative forms of life, out of the dreams, desires, and struggles of so many groups and peoples worldwide." Arturo Escobar, *Design for the Pluriverse* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 7.

design put into practice? My thesis has focused through-out on the 'how' of collective design, and to some extent, this dissertation is a counter-proposition to the notion of a 'purposeful' relationship between design and collectivi-ty. In this concluding chapter I will summarize and reflect on the findings of my thesis, which were initiated and directed by my central question: How to design *for* and *with* collectivity? To gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between design and collective practice, I have discussed the various ways in which collectivity and design are understood, articulated and practiced in the context of the Hackers & Designers collective. My analysis of different in-practice examples demonstrates how collective design processes can be conceived of and put into practice in a manner that is distributed over people, objects, conditions and timelines.

The desire for collectivity may occur during mo-ments of uncertainty, frustration or (dis)orientation, I argue that collectives are not and should not be framed as a panacea to the issues at stake. Collectives are often (rhetorically) used as stand-ins for what is not function-ing or cannot be immediately addressed. My argument is that collective design should also be considered a result of and a reason for, unstable, unreliable social, technical, and economic conditions. Collectives may be fragile ecosystems that operate on the basis of a semi-com-mitted engagement on the part of practitioners who are all, individually and collectively, trying to uphold a bal-ance between their diverging socio-material conditions. Thus, collective design, in the way it is problematized in this thesis, is not fully deliberate, at least not in the same way as for instance 'teamwork', 'the commons', or 'cooperativism', are purposeful organizational frame-works for living, working or being together. Collective design processes, as discussed here, take part in and are a result of particular (often fragile) socio-economic,

socio-technical conditions that pervade and shape the ways collectives function. They also signify the formats and conducts they resort to, such as short-lived work-shops and chaotic ways of working and being together. The fragmentation of social and work relations is as much a characteristic of collective design as the effort to sustain long-term relationships. As fragmented and permeable configurations, collectives are not enclosed entities. They take shape in response to the various contexts within which they travel, and in turn are impli-cated in such contexts.

To clarify, I am not proposing a turn away from collective practice, nor am I disregarding the efforts and accomplishments of the many collectives that have inspired me to engage with and write about the relationship between design and collectivity. The ubiq-uity of collectives are indicative of our times. They can be incredibly inventive, critical and reflective in the ways they manage to organize themselves and others, despite their often sparse resources (i.e., little time, money and space) while dealing with unstable, unclear and uncertain conditions. On the one hand, this inven-tiveness plays into the unstable condition of diverging socio-economic realities, while on the other hand, collectives simultaneously develop formats and practices that resist fragmentation and sustain continuity. A workshop's instantiation is not simply a single instance of gathering, but is rather a component of an expan-sive, distributed and iterative process of building a tool or making a publication.

Nonetheless, the double bind of collectivity requires critical attention and articulation that moves beyond general, positive and container definitions. This disser-tation has examined this double-bind throughout. I pro-pose (and have put into practice throughout my thesis) actively working against the stable and fetishizing image

of collectives, instead paying critical attention to the inefficient and convoluted ways of organizing, designing and programming. The refusal of efficiency, usefulness and finality also carries potential for subtle but effective forms of resistance against a general acceptance and normalization of such unstable, precarious times and working conditions.

I have proposed and contextualized several subtle tactics throughout this thesis; ways that collective design processes critically negotiate socio-material conditions, which point towards a (desirable) future for collective practice. Such tactics are not necessarily deliberate. They evolve within and are responsive to specific collisions of people, tools, contexts and should therefore not be read as recipes but as an invitation to others to consider their meaning within the site/context-specificity of their respective collective environments, perhaps inventing their own maneuvers.

Making oneself understood through collective design

Throughout the various chapters of this dissertation, I have paid sustained attention to the different manners in which collective design processes assemble people, tools, infrastructure and offer occasions for those involved to make themselves understood—for instance in workshop situations or through the collective process of imagining and making a Feminist Search Tool.

Workshops, as peculiar temporary spaces, require a certain openness and flexibility in order to attune to their contingent socio-material dynamics. The divergence between practitioner's ways of doing and making becomes itself a condition that requires attention and explication of what usually goes without saying (i.e.

skilled practice).[6] These workshops are occasions for trying and testing articulations of other practices, experimenting with making oneself understood and understanding the *other* through different registers; verbal, aesthetic, technical, methodical utterances.

I have also proposed the format of the 'workshop script' as well as a 'workshop about workshops.' Both explicate and interrogate the otherwise ambiguous format of the workshop as it has become unquestionably accepted in a manifold of contexts, crossing boundaries between art and activism, between different disciplines and institutions, between commercial and educational contexts. A 'meta' workshop about workshops opened up the workshop as a format to be questioned and unleashed a process of collectively reimagining and reiterating workshop propositions and methods within the very context the workshops would take place. Participants were workshop hosts and vice versa and could together articulate and put into practice a desirable, context-sensitive workshop atmosphere that worked against fashionable workshop rhetoric (rapid, sprint, agile, marathon), which insinuate high-velocity, hyper-efficient and result-oriented production.

The chapter 'Tool-building' discusses the collective tool-making project 'Feminist Search Tools' (FST), a fragmented and non-conclusive process, marked by the different (some rather precarious) socio-economic realities of those participating. As such, it required *other* ways of working together that resist linearity and teleological understandings of the design process. Through the slow and fragmented making process, the 'tool'

6　Isabelle Stengers wrote: "It should be unnecessary to emphasize that making divergences present and important has nothing to do with respect for differences of opinion, it must be said. It is the situation that, via the divergent knowledges it activates, gains the power to cause those who gather around it to think and hesitate together." Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 143.

along with its meaning and actualization, was questioned constantly, conceptually, technically, ethically, though not necessarily conclusively. Personal desires, frustrations, observations and issues were expressed throughout the process of imagining and making a tool. Various aspects of the tool-in-the-making, including technical problems, discomforts, personal hopes and desires for it to become 'useful', were repeated and rehearsed in the different contexts and at a pace that included all participants, regardless of whether they would be able to attend every workshop and meeting.

Conscious inefficiency

'Slow collective processing' is what I call the process of narrating and testing the FST through various workshops, meetups, in various contexts and different constellations. Within this non-conclusive process, the same issues were revisited repeatedly. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's exploration of the concept of 'use' and the metaphysical meaning of 'tool' as developed by Graham Harman, Bruno Latour and Karen Barad, I argue that the inefficiency of such a process can be generative and inventive in and of itself. It can emphasize other-than-utilitarian relationships to tools, as well as various context-specific criteria and articulations for usefulness or usability of such tools, which I have summarized with the phrase 'broken-tool-in-action'. This approach which I call 'conscious inefficiency' is explored throughout the various chapters and is distilled here in this concluding chapter as yet another subtle tactic for collective design practices to critically and inventively negotiate their specific socio-material conditions. For instance, the lens of 'conscious inefficiency' highlights the resourceful and thoughtful manner in which collective design connects different people, environments, tools and technical infrastructure.

The chapter 'Platform-design issues' discusses different collective experiments in 'platform-making'. For instance *ChattPub*, (an experimental publishing platform) could be regarded as inefficient and convoluted if considered a mere design software. Yet as I have argued, such self-made platforms can become inherently part of a collective's functioning. As part of ongoing collective actualization, collective platform-design processes bring about contextual and critical socio-technical conducts and articulations, which in turn are significant for their 'functioning'. As such, collective platform-design experiments resist and readjust generalizing perceptions of what is inevitable and what is useful.

Leaning into friction: Problematization as experimentation

Throughout the various chapters I have recurrently referred to the writing of feminist scholar and physicist Karen Barad. Barad wrote in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*: "the point is not merely that knowledge practices have material consequences but that practices of knowing are specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world. Which practices we enact matter—in both senses of the word."[7] Technical objects, as they are conceptualized and materialized in and through collective design, *matter*. They are not alternatives for 'seamless' proprietary tools, or 'easy-to-use' commercial platforms. They are also not merely speculative or illustrative. The practical and experimental approach to conceptualizing and designing tools and platforms *differently* matters in material ways. Such

7   Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durhan, London: Duke University Press, 2007), 91.

experiments enable collectives to concretely and imaginatively test out and put into practice other socio-technical relationships.

I have argued that self-made platforms, as they are imagined and materialized in and through collective design processes, are somewhat unreliable, unresolved and may create discomfort. Simultaneously, they put into practice *other* possible platform-design scenarios. Drawing on Celia Lury and Isabelle Stengers work on problematization[8] and problem spaces[9] I argued that such platform-design experiments are remarkable in the way they can sustain a collective awareness of platforms as potentially 'problematic' from the get-go. Those who are imagining, building and using such platforms, can develop a critical consciousness of their potential failures, and together learn to lean into their frictions. In my view, such an approach differentiates a collective design processes as theorized in this dissertation from, for instance, participatory design, adversarial,[10] or contestational design[11] or from critical/speculative design.[12] I argue that collective platform-design processes imagine and put into practice *other* possible ways of designing and working together with and through technical objects that are neither utilitarian/solution-driven nor antagonizing.

8   Isabelle Stengers "Putting Problematization to the Test of Our Present," *Theory, Culture & Society* 38, no. 2 (2021): 71—92.
9   Celia Lury "Platforms and the Epistemic Infrastructure," *Problem Spaces. How and Why Methodology Matters* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 14.
10   Carl DiSalvo, *Adversarial Design* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012).
11   Tad Hirsch, 'Contestational Design: Innovation for Political Activism,' (PhD diss., Media Art and Sciences, MIT, 2008), 23.
12   Anthony Dunne & Fiona Raby, "CRITICAL DESIGN FAQ" http://dunneandraby.co.uk/content/bydandr/13/0, last accessed May 2022.

Collective vocabularies: Invented words and ambiguous concepts

Made-up terminology

In the chapter "Platform-design issues" I refer to the word 'platframe', a term made-up during a collective process of designing and building a digital environment for collaboration, and how its recurrent use contributed to sustaining a collective awareness and questionability of the limits and possibilities of the platform-in-the-making. Such word inventions underline how collectives are able to express socio-technical relationships as problematic on the one hand, and on the other, build and sustain a somewhat supportive relationship with the evolving technical object and with each other.

Collective practices often develop their own vocabulary. The invented term 'nautonomy' by Raqs Media Collective[13] is a good example, which they define as

"more than autonomy. It is nautical, voyaging and mobile. Nautonomy re-articulates and re-founds the 'self-organizing' principle inherent in what is generally understood when considering the idea of autonomy, while recognizing that the entity mistakenly called 'self' is actually more precisely an unbounded constellation of persons, organisms and energies that is defined by its capacity to be a voyager in contact with a moving world."[14]

13   Raqs Media Collective, "Nautonomat Operating Manual. A Draft Design for A Collective Space of 'Nautonomy' for Artists and their Friends," *Mobile Autonomy. Exercises in Artists' Self-organization,* Nico Dockx, Pascal Gielen, eds. (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2015), 100.
14   ibid.

Constant Association for Art and Media[15] also work with invented terminology.[16] Words such as 'ex-titutions', 'DiVersions' and 'cqrrelations', are reminiscent of and relate to familiar terms.[17] Yet, they are invented when familiar terminology does not fully suffice or encompass all the attributes and idiosyncrasies of continuously evolving collective practices. Alternative dictionaries, lexicons, 'contradictionaries'[18] attend to these invented collective vocabularies. The book *Making Matters—A Vocabulary of Collective Arts* is an example of such a repository, which this research has contributed to and benefited from.[19]

Piggybacking on ambiguous concepts

In the chapter 'workshop production' I propose that concepts such as 'workshop', 'tool' and 'platform' blend seamlessly into the trajectories of contemporary pre-carious cultural workers and have also become part of a common vocabulary around collective practices. Yet there is a risk of obscuring the implications of collective practices that come with ambiguous terminology and

flexible definitions. Nevertheless, I persist with 'work-shop', 'tool' and 'platform' and throughout the various chapters, I disentangle and disambiguate their meaning and functioning for collective design processes. I argue that these ambiguous concepts and formats are indica-tive of the inventiveness of collectives. As boundary objects (Star Giessemer) they are equally loose and stable enough for collectives to interact with different contexts and to keep those involved connected, while simultaneously defining and redefining what that means. Persisting with 'workshop', 'tool' and 'platform' to ar-ticulate and practice collectivity means to always take into account the fact that such concepts and formats require critical attention. For instance, it is my view that organizing workshops responsibly requires context-spe-cific interrogation of how a workshop should be actual-ized and its implications for the specific context in the long-term. This question cannot be answered in general terms. Thus, it must be revisited again and again and should be answered in accordance with the particular composition of people, resources, tools, infrastructures and environments involved.

Designing for and with collectivity

As I have argued, the relationships between design and collectivity cannot be presupposed as relationships of utility. Therefore, it requires relational approaches for articulating collective design practice. Designing *with* collectivity proposes a relationship between design and collective practice that is reciprocal and mutually en-tangled, and differentiates collective design from other modes of working and designing together.

15   The activities and practices of Constant "depart from feminisms, copyleft, Free/Libre + Open Source" and encompass for instance programming, organizing exchanges and learning environments, making performances, writing, publishing, making installations https://constantvzw.org/site/, last accessed May 2022.

16   Femke Snelting, "Undisciplined," in *Making Matters. A Vocabulary of Collective Arts*, Florian Cramer, Janneke Wesseling, eds, (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2022), 300.

17   "With the neologism "DiVersions" we wanted to allude to the possibility that technologies of "versioning" might foreground divergent histories," Élodie Mugrefya, Femke Snelting, "DiVersions. An Introduction," DIVERSIONS / DIVERSIONS / DIVERSIES https://diversions.constantvzw .org/wiki/index.php?title=Introduction#introduction, last accessed May 2022.

18   Lucy Suchman, "Configuration," in *Inventive Methods,* Celia Lury; Nina Wakeford, eds. (London; New York : Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 48–60.

19   Florian Cramer, Janneke Wesseling, eds., *Making Matters. A Vocabulary for Collective Arts* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2022).

Designing with others

Designing *with* collectivity means to be involved in design processes that are distributed over various people, objects, diverging timelines and conditions. It is a process, not a method or a goal, in the sense that a participatory design process would follow a goal by involving others, i.e., to improve design processes or outcomes. Designing with collectivity is not about designing better. It is an imaginative as well as concrete material process of being and doing things together differently from how it would be usually done. It is about imagining and putting into practice 'terms of transition', forging collective imaginaries for "managing the meanwhile within damaged life's perdurance."[20]

Designing for continuity

Gaining a deeper understanding of the relationship between design and collectivity goes hand in hand with learning to design *with* collectivity—that is, attuning to collectives' unpredictabilities. As fragile and unreliable ecosystems, collectives are reflective of our unstable times, and as such, also offer possibilities for those involved to develop subtle tactics to address and counteract technical and economic uncertainties, flexibilization and fragmentation of work and life. Designing *for* collectivity is indicative of the effort to keep those involved connected, while upholding critical, ethical and sustainable ways of working and being together.

Collective design practices develop context-specific social and technical conduct, which I have also compared to the manner in which workshop instructors take care to maintain their workshop spaces, in terms of both facilities and hospitality. While formats and utterances of collective design seem dispersed and never resolved, they are significant for their continuity and long-term commitments. As I have demonstrated throughout with reference to various examples, designing for and with collectivity is an artful balancing act, which cannot be prescribed as a design method but contributes to the larger field and discourse of design, precisely through its requirement of continuous practice and problematization. In persisting with this sustained effort, collective design practices offer the opportunity to readjust and rearticulate generalizing perspectives to relational, context-sensitive and iterative approaches to designing with others.

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

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