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

This dissertation explores matters of collectivity, drawing from the experience of working with the Amsterdam-based collective Hackers & Designers (H&D). H&D self-organizes educational activities at the intersection of technology, design, art, and education with a focus on hands-on learning and collaboration between practitioners from the different fields. Along with organizing workshops people involved with H&D produce on and offline publications and build open source tools and platforms.

The main thesis of this research is that conventional design vocabularies are not capable of sufficiently expressing and accounting for collectivities' resistance to fixation and stabilization. Collective design as it is discussed here challenges notions of individual authorship, differentiations between disciplines, between product and process or between the user and maker. While collectives shape particular affiliations and commitments, design approaches and aesthetics, they also require perspectives on working and designing together that resist linearity, and a progress-based understanding of a design process.

Thus, collective practice is not to be misunderstood as a design method, or an antidote to an individualistic design approach. By means of several case studies, it is argued that the fragmentation of social and work relations is as much a characteristic of collective practice as the effort to sustain long-term relationships. As fragmented and permeable configurations, collectives take shape in response to the various contexts within which they travel, and in turn are implicated in such contexts. Thus, collective practice is not fully deliberate, at least not in the same way as for instance 'teamwork', 'the commons', or 'cooperativism', are purposeful organizational frameworks for living, working or being together. Collective design processes take part in

and are a result of particular (often fragile) socio-economic, socio-technical conditions that pervade and shape the ways collectives function.

Taking H&D as a central study case, the relationship of design and collective practice is discussed through the three main concepts 'workshop', 'tool', 'platform'—all ubiquitous terms that travel through and change meaning in manifold contexts.

The workshop is examined as a site for specialized material production, in addition to its meaning as a format for bringing together groups of like-minded people; to meet, spend time together, work on a specific topic, and explore new techniques or tools. Paying critical attention to the tension between, on the one hand workshops as egalitarian learning formats, and on the other hand workshops' role in reinforcing neoliberal conditions, it is argued that the workshop is a format that is implied in the economization of education and the learning economy, and perpetuates a culture in which self-employment, self-improvement, and self-reliance is normalized. Drawing on different workshop situations it is exemplified how possibilities and pitfalls of the workshop as a format for cultural production are being dealt with within collective practice.

An 'inefficient' collective tool building process brings to the fore other-than-utilitarian articulations of tools. The concept 'tool' here refers to digital tools, software or hardware that are discussed through a distributed process of collectively imagining and building different tool versions that are referred to as 'Feminist Search Tools'. The FST project moved through and fed off short-lived formats for working together across different contexts. The manner in which purpose and meaning are continuously rearticulated contributes to the possibility of context-specific and relational understandings, and articulations of tools-in-the-making.

I argue it is through a certain slowness and fragmentation of the collective process that the tool can be questioned conceptually, technically, ethically and not necessarily conclusively readjusting general perceptions of what is inevitable and what is useful in conceptualizing and actualizing tools.

Yet another angle of collective practice is discussed through the concept of the 'platform'—that of designing, using and maintaining technical infrastructures that cater to online collaboration, self-organization and self-publishing. Several collective platform projects bring into focus the manner in which self-made, appropriated or hacked tools are composed together and are deeply intertwined with a collective's evolving socio-technical characteristics and functioning. While evolving monocultures of platforms for online gathering created conditions in which it is difficult to imagine online collaboration otherwise, processes of collective platform-making point toward other possible socio-technical scenarios of designing and working together that are neither utilitarian, solution-driven or antagonizing.

Collective practices are situated. They are site, context, and time-specific, and so are their various expressions. This dissertation makes the thresholds of collective practice legible by discussing the ways collectivity weaves together a range of places, legacies, objects and people across practices and disciplines, and timelines.