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Post-critical potentials in experimental co-design

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the idea of post-criticality, and hinges on a critique of critique as developed by science scholar Bruno Latour. The paper explores the post-critical as some thing or some constellation, which may exceed from experimental and collaborative co-design events. Through a recounting of a co-design experiment, the paper seeks to characterize the post-critical as a situated and collaborative experimental possibility that may take many different non-descriptive forms. Drawing on the work of Philosopher of Science Hans-Jörg Rheinberger and science scholar Nortje Marres, the paper reflects on the difference between experimental reasoning and empirical analysis. In so doing, the paper seeks to open a discussion on how experimental and collaborative design research and analytical movements like science and technology studies and actor network theory may cross-fertilize one another.

Keywords: Post-criticality; actor network theory; co-design; design experiments

Introduction

In 2004, Bruno Latour asked; what has become of critique? He called on researchers to develop modes of analyses and engagements that didn't rest on debunking or deconstruction. Through his extensive work Latour has tied broad programmatic statements about critique and post-critique (Latour, 2004, 2005, 2010) to the methodological aspects of conducting research (Latour, 1997, 2005), specifically social research, as he has questioned the status of theories and methods. The relation between the post-critical program; a plea to give objects of study the opportunity to object to what is said about them (Latour, 2005), and how this can be done in a practise of research; the methodological aspects that would allow us to realise such ideals, is what I wish to discuss in this paper. In short, I will attempt to tentatively articulate an experimental and co-designerly response to Latour's methodological instructions.



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According to Latour, a critical perspective evoked by traditional social research, is a mode of analysis that imposes some order on the field beforehand, as if from the outside. But the job of the analyst, Latour argues, is not to order the world, at least not in the first instance; ordering and patterns must be located one step further into abstraction, after actors have been given the opportunity to unfold their own differing cosmos (Latour 2005, p.23). By situating the analytical ordering and patterning one step further into abstraction post-criticality becomes first and foremost a reflexive move; a move made by the researcher during the analytical process. But post-criticality, I contend, may take many other forms and may be sparked by other kinds of events. In this paper I make the case that co-design events offer a particular interesting platform for exploring what a contemporary post-critical engagement with the social could look like. It is a post-criticality that is inherently experimental, always orientated towards what could be, but first and foremost, it is collaborative in nature.

Collaborative design research and Science and technology studies

In recent years, design researchers, especially within the field of Participatory Design (PD) and co-design, have become increasingly interested in the social as a kind of design material (Akama & Ivanka 2010; Binder, Brandt, Halse, Foverskov, Olander & Yndigegn, 2011; Björgvinsson, Ehn & Hilgrenn, 2010; Di Salvo 2009; Ehn 2008; Halse, Clark, Brandt & Binder 2010; Lindström & Ståhl 2014; Manzini & Rizzo 2011; Seravalli 2012). In today's practices of co-design the objects of study are as much relations and social infrastructures as they are bounded objects and artefacts. With this shift in focus from the design of systems and workplace technologies to prototypical practices of everyday life and social innovations, design researchers interested in collaborative formats have become increasingly interested in theories, concepts, and methods that circulate in the constructivist social sciences (Binder, De Michelis, Ehn, Jacucci, Linde & Wagner 2011; DiSalvo 2012; Halse 2008; Jönsson 2014; Leenskjold 2015; Storni, 2012 & 2013; Storni, Linde, Binder & Stuedahl 2012). At the same time, in the field of science and technology studies (STS) design as object, site and process has become a potent object of research (Pedersen 2007, Danholt, 2005 & 2012, Yaneva, 2009). But although the inventiveness of methods and their role in epistemic practices (Lury & Wakeford 2012) has gained considerable attention in some parts of the social sciences, it seems design and sites of design remain primarily an object of research and study rather than a resource for developing new ways of knowing (see for example Suchman 2011). It is as if both experimental design researchers inspired by STS and actor network theory (ANT), and science scholars interested in design and design methodologies have a tendency to equal analytical work with very particular descriptive forms of accounting and mapping. It is therefore my suggestion that practice based design researchers interested in collaborative formats should become more attentive to their own epistemic practices of knowing and making, simply because different forms of knowing afford different forms of post-criticality.

Experimental design research as eventuation

One way to explore the post-critical edge of contemporary co-design is to adopt a radical event based understanding of knowledge making informed by experimental practises in other disciplines and knowledge regimes. German philosopher of science Hans-Jörg Rheinberger (1997, 2010), for example, through his studies of experimental practises in the life sciences, has characterised the difference between empirical-descriptive modes of knowing and experimental practises as follows: In the primarily descriptive and systematising sciences, emphasis is on the process where the researcher extracts the objects of study from what Rheinberger terms their “natural” ambiguity, and places them into a theoretical or conceptual order. The result could be for example a rock collection or a herbarium. Objects in such research practises become perceptible, in the first place, thanks to this recording (Rheinberger 2010 p. 233). In the experimental sciences, by contrast, focus is persistently on a series of experimental “here-nows”, configured against each other. Knowing in such epistemic practises is inevitably tied to action, materiality and change. Much like in co-design events, the not yet known emerges as experimental arrangements come to overflow themselves. Any surplus thus produced is neither predetermined by theory, nor inevitably generated by the practical system of experimentation. Rather, experimentation becomes fundamentally a process of externalisation and excorporation (Latour 1990). This is central in any experimental practise, Rheinberger argues, because unless difference is distributed in time and space, it can’t be rendered visible, and unless it is given form it can’t be known. Evidently, the set-up of any given co-design experiment circumscribes the potentialities of post-critique. The forms and reconfigurations that emerge as a result of such events are always particular and situated. At the same time co-design processes of knowing and making, precisely because they focus on design as collaborative process of proposal making, and because they are rooted in the everyday practises of non-designers also have a quality to them of a more general kind. Post-critical engagements in co-design are not only controversial and contradictory. They work from within the mundane and routinized, and therefore often they come across as only slightly agitated versions of the everyday. To articulate this further, in the following paragraphs I will set out to recount a co-design experiment that I took part in staging, in a public library in the western part of Copenhagen. The experiment was not in any way unequivocally successful. Nor was it aesthetically or methodologically controversial. It was, in many ways, what could be called a classic co-design engagement. Yet it explored, I argue, the post-critical potentials for creating openings in everyday routines, not as big ruptures or particular ideas imposed on the field from the outside, but rather as the cautious and constant work of trying to stay in an on-going dialogue about what could be.

A set-up and constellation slowly emerges

The co-design event that I will report from was part of a research project that took an experimental co-design approach to explore new formats for collaboration between citizens and cultural institutions in the municipality of Copenhagen. The aim of the project was to

build new relations between three institutions and the citizens and local networks they are surrounded by, and through this process, to render visible new images of both citizens and institutions that could feed into the on-going debate about change in this sector. Before I turn to the event itself, I will briefly sketch out what led up to the event.

During the first few weeks of my stay at the library, I met Ina, a cultural worker, who had worked in the basement of the library, in a now in-formal drop-in centre, which hosted a group of 30 to 40 youngsters. This place had been established as a result of conflicts that kept erupting between neighbourhood kids that occupied the library space and the employees. Many years ago, librarians were experiencing recurring problems with a large group of young kids, who used the library space after school. As a response the library management offered the space in the basement, and Ina was subsequently hired to do cultural work with the kids. Most of these kids have Middle Eastern backgrounds, they live in small apartments, in large families, and many of them struggle with different social problems. The basement became a pragmatic solution to a then urgent problem, but the conflicts that were the whole reason for establishing this somewhat unusual library space persisted. Kids were still banned from the library above the basement on a regular basis, the door between the library on the first floor and the basement was now kept locked, and there was a real lack of communication between what was going on in the basement and in the rest of the organisation.

During the first period of my stay, I also happened to meet Camilla, a project manager of a local urban renewal project, assigned to renew squares and parks over 5 years in western Copenhagen. Camilla and her team had just moved their activities into an open office space above the library. A big challenge for the team was how to include the many young kids who used the nearby park on a daily basis in the renewal process. The representational formats like hearings, public meetings and steering groups somehow excluded some of the most important actors, namely the young kids that hung out in the park after school, the same kids who occupied the basement of the library. Around the same time I was also introduced to Hans. A month after my arrival he was employed to a new position at the library, formally as a librarian, in the youth library above the basement, but he was really more interested in doing outreach projects and in finding ways to open up the library space to the kids from the neighbourhood. During this period I started to spend a lot of time in the basement. Through Ina, who functioned as a sort of gatekeeper, I got access to the community space. The kids were very talkative, once we got to know each other. They took us around the neighbourhood and the park, and offered their time. They willingly shared their stories of everyday life in the neighbourhood and the basement, yet I also sensed how some of my questions came across as puzzling to them. It was as if they were trying to figure out what I wanted from them. I in turn didn't precisely know what I wanted, but clearly I became interested in the kids in the basement, initially as a special case of a library space. This space and the community that it hosted seemed to form at least potentially some sort of controversy or situation in the periphery of the institution, which was not unproblematic, but perhaps potentially potent in relation to the overall program.

Building multifarious instruments

The constellation of the kids, Ina, Camilla, Hans, and I emerged through the first period of my stay. As I have briefly sketched out above we were all of us invested with different concerns and interests, not quite the same but partially connected interests and concerns. We may characterize such a situation as pretty un-extraordinary, insofar as new relations and issues tend to emerge whenever a researcher sets out to engage with everyday life. The question that this brief recounting raises, however, is what would be a possible post-critical response in this situation?

If we appreciate that the post-critical is not a move that imposes some orders on the field of study from the outside, and, if we want to explore epistemic alternatives to Latour's methodological proposal of stepping one step further into abstraction, we need a set-up, which facilitates some kind of shared articulation. A set-up that refuses to already conclude how the relation among the kids in the basement, the staff, the urban development project, the overall research program and the rest of the institution really ought to look like.

Nortje Marres, in an article titled "The experiments in living" (2012) engages with the concept of multifarious instruments. In her work of analysing sustainable living experiments, she describes this proliferating media genre for exploring sustainability as notable device of social research. Insofar as these experiments tend to involve the meticulously recording and reporting of everyday practises, e.g. when social actors document how they clean their house with vinegar or unplug their fridge, they provide a format or a protocol for investigating forms of life. In Marres view, sustainable living experiments must be understood as critical and contested sites for social research, because this particular genre of social experimentation, carried out by non-scientists, extends an invitation, or a challenge, to social researchers to come to terms with the current transformations in the field of social research. These experiments work to bring into view the environmental and social consequences of everyday living, quite literally by making everyday living accountable. Marres describes these experiments as multifarious instruments, since many of them are performed by a variety of agencies, e.g. governmental, scientific and for-profit organisations, and they are staged to serve a multiplicity of moral, political, and economic purposes, which may not always be clearly distinguished. This variability of purposes, Marres suggests, is perhaps what make these experimental forms potent (2012, p. 81). We may point to multifarious instruments, and to experimental set-ups in general, as devices that do ontological work. As Marres points out, the device, which performs the experiment, is attributed a capacity, which is normally attributed to theory, namely the articulation of the entities that make up the world. But whereas Marres, from the position of a primarily descriptive research practise, outlines two different possibilities; either, that social researchers set out to impartially describe the ontologies that are emerging in practise, or, that they actively commit to particular ontologies over others (2012, p.84), for a co-design researcher it seems alternative questions emerge. Instead of choosing between impartial descriptions or descriptive formats for particular ontological politics, practise-based researchers interested in participatory formats could take the current transformations in

both social research and contemporary society in general, as an invitation and a challenge to build multifarious instruments. The question then, is no longer exclusively how everyday experimental forms can be rendered productive for research, but rather also how research can be rendered productive for the social. This has always been a key concern for co-design and PD, and often this activist impulsion has been problematized for lacking both critical and epistemic edge. In contemporary Co-design and PD especially with the intake of ideas from STS, PD work from the 70s and 80s has sometimes been problematized for promoting too simple conceptions about groups of weak and strong stakeholders (Björgvinsson et al 2010; Lenskjold, Olander & Halse 2015). From this position the idea of post-criticality emerges in a complex socio-material landscape that the researcher through her explorative efforts takes actively part in shaping. Yet this work is not located one step further into abstraction, instead it is a work that attempts to actively push knowing and critique out into the field encounter.

One step further into the real

In the early stages of my visit at the library Ina and I engaged with the kids, Camilla, and Hans through a longer series of encounters and events, but the emerging constellation that I have just sketched out above was barely yet visible. It is beyond the scope of this article to lay this process out in detail, but during this part of the project Ina and I functioned as a sort of story collectors. Slowly but surely we accumulated a pool of questions, concerns, and images of everyday life in and around the library and the park. As our engagement grew we saw the potential for opening and expanding the dialogue among the different actors, but for that we needed some kind of platform that could handle an open and shared speculation with these stories; a kind of multifarious instrument that could mobilise the different actors and open a possibly constructive and post-critical space for how things could be otherwise. We were precisely at the intersection where the imagination meets the friction of materials, and ambition rub up against the hard edges of the world (Gatt & Ingold, 2013, p.146). We had to look for a set-up that was practically possible, both in relation to mobilising the kids, Camilla, and Hans, in relation to time constraints of the overall research project, and, in relation to getting the experiment sanctioned by the management of the library, who had invited me inside. After many considerations and preparatory arrangements, we decided to invite the kids up into the library space above the basement, to make a book about their stories. We also invited Hans and Camilla to the event. This set-up was chosen for many different reasons. First, there was the dispute about the locked door, which leads from the basement and up to the library. With the invitation we had an excuse to literally open the door, and keep it open, at least for the duration of the event. We had a feeling that Hans would be an important future person for securing a better integration between the basement and the rest of the library. Many of his future working hours would be placed in the space above the basement; therefore, we placed the event deliberately on his shift. Camilla had never met the kids, but was eager to find a way into a dialogue with them, to establish some kind of relation between the citizen-group that she had already mobilized to

participate in the redesign of the park. Like Camilla, we saw this as an important task, both the dialogue itself, and also the work of developing new formats for local democratic processes. Ina wanted the rest of the institution to acknowledge the value of the community space in the basement. She hoped for a more open discussion in the organisation on what cultural work could be about. What the kids wanted, and how their everyday lives in the periphery of the library could be articulated productively in relation to what was going on in the rest of the institution, I was not at all sure. I didn't assume that they wanted anything in particular, other than maintaining opening hours in their community space in the basement, and that was precisely why we staged this event. We wanted to stay in the conversation, but to do that we did need to expand and distribute the dialogue, and come up with some format that could take the process a bit further. We were not at all sure if anybody would show up in the end, and we were admittedly rather relieved as the kids came scrambling up and down the staircase from two-o'clock in the afternoon.

For the event we produced a pile of different photos from the basement and the neighbourhood, and statements from the kids, collected from our many talks. We asked the kids to take turns in groups of two and three, so that each group would produce four pages from the materials. We set up a table in the far end of the room with our piles of material; the kids and Camilla on the one side, Ina, Hans and I on the other side. We used the format of a blank scrapbook, and on top of each page we put in a statement. One would say: "The best thing about life in the basement is:" another would say: "My favourite spot in the park is:". We did not want the dialogue to be structured primarily around some future design goal, as we had already experienced how our sometimes too goal-orientated questions, for instance questions about the redesign of the park, could be counterproductive for keeping the dialogue open. We did however, on the last page, pose a "what if" question, a question about how things could be different. Here we asked the kids to imagine how the community space in the basement could be imagined at other sites in the neighbourhood. We encouraged the kids to use colour pens and scissors to rearrange and distort the material as a response to the statements. Whenever a photo or a statement was selected, we asked the kids to tell us why this material was chosen, and why it would fit the statement on the page. This spurred many themes, questions, and conversations among the kids and the rest of us during that afternoon. The statements captured in the book externalised and expressed the quality of the community space below the library. For instance, that this place was very special to the kids because it was okay to make mistakes, and that the basement possessed a certain quality compared to other institutional spaces, because it was not structured around some goal for learning or performing. Using the platform of the book to stage the conversation prompted the kids, and the rest of us, to reflect on everyday life in the basement. But the event can't be characterized mainly as a reflexive exercise one step further into abstraction, although obviously reflection was part of it.

Using a scrapbook as format

The format of the scrapbook, on the one side, can be said to be very restricting. In this case, it ordered the process of the dialogue beforehand. It both circumscribed and simultaneously contained the potentiality of the possible. The experimental co-design researcher, like any researcher, always depends on a particular tool box, a set of approaches, methods and formats, which are not reinvented from scratch in relation to every new research project, rather, they are in a certain sense relied upon, but also always modified, as they are activated at specific sites (Lury & Wakeford 2012). Rheinberger (1997) has conceptualised the dynamics of experimental arrangements as an on-going oscillation that plays out between epistemic things and technical objects. Technical objects are the relatively stable identity conditions, technologies and instruments that any experimental engagement will have to depend on in order to make sense of the process of reconfiguration and displacement. Much like an STS researcher that relies on a technology of description. What is important to understand however, is not only that to get to a workable set-up is a demanding and non-mechanical process, but equally that the researcher, in order to get the set-up to work as a generator of surprises, must acquire knowledge and familiarity in handling her own epistemological inventory. What looks very repetitive and in some ways non-spectacular from afar, may unleash epistemic and post-critical excess, precisely because of the constant working over and tweaking and twisting of the set-up. That is also why, Rheinberger points out, experimenters usually stick with their experimental set-ups in an almost affectionate fashion. We may say, in this particular case, that the scrapbook became the very precondition for externalising, distributing and rendering visible the stories, hopes and dreams of the kids. But the point is, that although we invited the kids to participate in a carefully scripted dialogue, we didn't know in advance how they would respond. We didn't know which stories and images would emerge in the "here-now". As explained, we didn't converge over some unified agenda from the outset, and we didn't precisely know what we were looking for either, we did, nonetheless, commit ourselves, to keep the possibility open that some excess would emerge from the encounter, which could potentially destabilise the absence, or rearticulate the presence, of the kids in the library.

Post-criticality as diverse and uncontrollable excess

In the series of events that formed and informed my research engagement at the library, the scrapbook came to take a prominent position. One reason was, that the scrapbook was a shared tangible outcome that we were all left with after the event. The advantage of such a tangible outcome is of course the fact that it can be circulated. Ina and I made a series of prints of the book, which we gave back to the kids, as we wanted to stress the importance of what they had produced that day. Camilla took the book back to her team and the citizen-group, and I presented the book at a staff meeting in the library, where we discussed both the format of the workshop and the basement as an alternative library space. As such the book came to serve many different purposes after the event, and of course these different purposes can neither be fully known nor fully controlled from the "here-now" of the

experimental event itself. In relation to the overall research program the book became a vehicle for raising new questions about the role of the library as a local meeting place. Most Copenhagen libraries have experienced challenging situations with so-called hang around kids that use the library as meeting place after school, similar to the ones in the western part of Copenhagen. To explore these challenges, we used the pages from the book as raw material for generating ideas for new work practises, in a workshop with librarians and cultural workers towards the end of the research project. By employing the book, we were able to turn some questions around and ask if the commitment of these kids, to their local libraries, shouldn't be taken to be a huge success? We were able to show how the formats we employ to stage dialogues do matter, and that a less goal-orientated approach to cultural activities is sometimes needed to engage productively with this particular group of citizens. At the same time, some of the comments that followed my presentation at the staff meeting in the library showed that the book could also be appropriated differently. After the meeting one librarian commended our work with these kids, because in her opinion it was very positive that some real cultural production and education was finally induced into the community in the basement. We did not consider this work to exemplify real cultural production as opposed to not so real cultural production, e.g. hanging out in the basement for the sake of it, but we had to accept, like any experimenter, that the stories, traces, and insights produced in the process of experimentation may be employed to serve other purposes than the ones we originally intended.

Staying with the “here-now” is the critical position

In the co-design engagement I have recounted here, post-criticality emerges as some sort of flickering that is both speculative and unsettled. The edge of the constructive and critical in such experimental engagements can never be a final resolution. What matters for a co-designer is to keep the space of action and critique open, to see if the exploration can be taken to a next step or not. In this case we did manage, if only momentarily, to literally unlock the door, to reconfigure the library space and to rehearse some new constellations. Through the meeting in the library, and the making of a book, Hans, Camilla, and the kids did establish a new and emerging relation; a relation that took off from the concerns of the kids rather than institutional agendas and public design goals. Yet, as I concluded my engagement at the library I was still left with a bit of an uneasy feeling. We didn't succeed, metaphorically and literally speaking, to keep the door to the basement open in the way that we had hoped for. Perhaps this experiment was set back by a general lack of time and interest in the organisation, even if the management had formally sanctioned our intervention. The organisation, during my stay, was preoccupied with the process of implementing new working routines, and in the middle of a stressful reorganisation. Perhaps, we experienced a lack of response within the organisation simply because this was a poorly staged experiment. Perhaps this experiment was not tied convincingly to the past “here-nows” that preceded it, and the future “here-nows” that came after. This is certainly possible. I will argue, nonetheless, that the alternative to a not completely successful

experiment must be another experiment; another material-conceptual engagement with change enabled by another set-up and configuration. However, from the position of the co-design experimenter, such experiments, unless shared among a collective that emerges as a result of the speculative engagement, run a real risk of repeating the same critical perspective that Latour is so disapproving of. Because to occupy a critical position inside a given practise, and to be part of the field, is not a given; it is a practical and experimental accomplishment, and therefore always only a possibility. At stake, I argue, is not only the expansion of the researcher's capacity to imagine new orders one step further into abstraction. Other stakes and the stakes of others need to be brought into the equation as well. Post-criticality can be collaboratively explored as something forged yet not fully controlled through the constant work of trying to stay a dialogue about how things could be different. Such work can inform constructive design researchers and STS scholars alike, and the starting point, I suggest, is the practical work of building a platform where actors and their differing cosmos can be rendered visible and distributed in time and space.

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