

# ENGAGING WITH GHOSTS, IDIOTS & – OTHERNESS IN PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

## ARTICULATIONS

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## ENGAGEMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is an experiment to engage with ghosts, idiots, with the unspoken ——— and with the notion of ‘Otherness’ (Law 2004). By understanding writing as an enactment, a practice in-the-making, we invite you to join us in this experiment.

We describe experiences of Otherness from our design-research and show how the roles of ghosts, idiots and Others can unsettle participatory design events, while helping to address existing hegemonic structures, including the ones we create as design-researchers. On a second level, this contribution is a reflection of the ghosts we create through re-presented experience in writing about co-design events, and on how to possibly invite Otherness also in the re-presentation of research. This is a risky and troublesome process, but we invite you to ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway 2016).

## INVITATION

This paper invites you to think not about ghosts, but with ghosts, idiots and Others. A call to “‘slow down’ reasoning and create a slightly different awareness of the problems and situations mobilizing us” (Stengers 2005: 994). Instead of aiming at including marginalized voices, which is a common topos in participatory design and that assumes a kind of colonizing move to decide who is marginalized and how to include ‘them’ – we would like to shift our view to the notion of *engaging with Others*. We will further argue for this framing as a reflexive move to respond to unexpected choices of involvement. This approach helps to unpack the richness of diversity that those made absent, silent, invisible or Othered, bring into co-design events and into design-research.

There are not precise approaches to engage with and invite the shadows that populate the political arena of those ‘which does not have a voice, cannot have or does not want to’ (Stengers 2005: 996). On the contrary, we found that the appearances of these \_\_\_\_\_ are situated, emergent always different. *Things* (Binder et al 2011) play a key role in these participatory encounters: mediating interactions, facilitating engagement in anonymous ways, and voicing through the material what the participant does not want to say with spoken or written words.

*Designerly public engagements* have been framed by Stahl and Lindström (2016) as an essential re-articulation of participatory design

processes. Participants are not invited to solve a problem or represent an issue, but to co-articulate issues that emerge through socio-material encounters. In addition, Pihkala and Karasti propose *reflexive engagement* to account for the ‘plurality of participation’ in design practices (2016: 21), ‘simultaneously embracing this plurality as a source of creativity.’ (ibid: 22). We engage with these notions and present two cases from our research in which we have engaged with unexpected invitations from participants.

The first is a vignette from a long-term involvement and ethnographic design study at a second-hand charity shop in Melbourne, Australia. The second vignette describes an issue creation through the staging of a Cycle-Hackathon in Wuppertal, Germany. In both cases, these figures were central in the creation of issues. They created disruptions of existing power configurations that were generative for the participants and for the issues at stake.

We are still wondering about the possible ways in which these Others can be enacted consciously in design processes, perhaps as a counter-hegemonic tactic. In doing so, we are aiming to open \_\_\_\_\_ the writing *about* these design research processes, in an experimental way of writing *with* these Other participants. We therefore used the typographic tool of intentional blank space \_\_\_\_\_ to open places for inventive intervention for these Others to appear in between the lines \_\_\_\_\_ and for you to have a space to perhaps reflect on similar experiences.

## GHOSTS

Since 2014 I have been involved in the routines of a charity shop in Melbourne with multiple roles, from Saturday manager and week volunteer, to design-researcher. This has been the context of my PhD that has aimed to uncover latent practices of designing for reuse and revalue.

A combination of Participatory Design and Sensory Ethnography (Pink 2015) approaches, have guided the study, and have helped me to engage as design-researcher, but also as a participant and practitioner of the shop routines. In practical terms, this resulted in series of everyday design interventions to address emergent needs from the place.

However, I will focus here on a sequence of interventions that I did not orchestrate as part of my research approach. In contrast, this vignette presents interventions I was unexpectedly drawn into by another participant who identifies as the Ghost. This ghost figure was introduced by a volunteer that works at the shop four days of the week. Whom usually, expresses her position in unspoken ways when discussing matters of common concern to the staff that relate with the functioning and working routines of the place.

In a ghostly manner, the ghost emerged as a nickname after the flower vase at the center of the table for staff use at the tea-room disappeared during the weekend. After a week of wondering what had happened, we met again on Saturday to reconstruct the events. She asked me ‘have you been able to check the cameras?’. This question led us to confirm that there were not any security cameras in this room, setting the scene to the forthcoming events to remain anonymous. And opening the possibility for all the staff from Saturday to be suspects. She then continued the conversation by saying in a joking manner \_\_\_\_\_ ‘well it might be a ghost’.

Once the ghost was introduced, it enabled us to continue speculating about the intentionality of such ghostly moves, instead of focusing on who was responsible. In conversation, together with another volunteer he said, ‘that’s a clear message, it is saying to the manager: you do not control everything’ he continued to say, ‘whoever did that is very intelligent’. With a slight smile, she followed his comment by saying ‘it’s vendetta’.

This dialogue uncovered a political agenda. It opened intriguing dialogues for me to follow as design-researcher. However, as Saturday manager, these evidences did not give me explicit signs of where the flower vase was. Neither easy answers to respond to the week manager who responded to me regarding the situation by saying ‘as far as I know I am the manager of this place, including the flower vase’. And so, a week later, we found it.



With this example, I want to bring attention to three points: silence as choice for communication, the role of things in mediating unspoken dialogues, and in the opening playful negotiations. I suggest, with these unexpected ways of participation the design-researcher not only can respond-to, but learn-from the ghostly actions to develop further its own practical and relational skills.

What puzzled me as Saturday manager, intrigued me as design-researcher to uncover some of the hidden messages behind these mysterious ways of participation. I engaged with the uninvited game and played the role of being a ghost suspect myself. This resulted in maintaining a dialogue with both the manager and the other ghost suspect to wonder about and around such acts. While conversations with the manager were direct about the visible evidence and possible meanings. With the ghost were indirect; with few words and many silences that gave us enough information and space to speculate around the issues, \_\_\_\_\_, always left incomplete and open \_\_\_\_\_ to ~~miss~~-interpretation. In the long term, some unspoken matters surfaced, particularly related with feelings towards power structures and management approaches; evidencing positions of resistance.

The flower vase, a whiteboard for policies, the new locker key #11, a soft toy possum, water cups, the tea-room's door and a Turkish eye were some of the things at the center of these interventions. Beyond their specific roles in each intervention, overall, the use of things mediating these playful interactions, enabled us to negotiate more than situated issues. We challenged each other's boundaries and, developed new limits. And, while these games did not guarantee immediate clarity, overtime, they did foster spaces for honest communication. \_\_\_\_\_ ?

As a researcher, the ghost reminded me to engage with the journey and the relationality of the process, rather than relying on the fixed goals and design expectations previously planned for the research. This processual perspective resonates with Akama's suggestion of 'attuning' to 'betweenness' and 'relational sensitivity' (2015). In doing so, I joined in the shifting of routines towards unplanned and uncertain directions. And together with the ghost we created imaginary bridges to make collective sense of tricky events.

## IDIOTS

In 2015, I organized a Hackathon with the students of my interaction design class in Wuppertal. As part of my PhD research that aims to uncover the political potential of co-making practice, I was interested in the difference between activist and designerly political practices. So, we worked with the approach of the CycleHack (2014). The aim of this 48h design event, that runs at the same weekend in cities around the globe, is to collaboratively work on the question: 'How can we reduce the barriers to cycling?'

The barriers in Wuppertal seem to be many: The city has been repeatedly awarded as the least bike-friendly city in Germany. Some have been addressed during the last few years by cycling-activists and the city council itself. The event was conceptualized as a co-making platform for these different stakeholders.

The concept of 'agonistic design things' (Binder et al. 2011) has helped to guide the research. As co-designers, we would meet dissensus \_\_\_\_\_ by engaging in a tense local issue. Still – it was unexpected how we got drawn into the creation of an opposition: An 'us' as naïve designers and problem-makers \_\_\_\_\_ and, 'them', a group of cycling-activists as professional, local problem-experts \_\_\_\_\_.

What became helpful in the reflection of this process was to frame the becoming of the opposition and our role as designers with the role of the idiot. This figure that has been used in literature and philosophy (Dostojewski, Deleuze/Guattari), has been reintroduced in a more political framing by Stengers (2005) and in the context of speculative design research by Michael (2013).

'In ancient Greek sense, an idiot was someone who did not speak the Greek language and was therefore cut off from the civilized community.' \_\_\_\_\_ The idiot 'is the one who always slows the others down, who resists the consensual way in which the situation is presented and in which emergencies mobilize thought or action' (Stengers 2005: 994-995).

When I invited the cycling activists to the first seminar meeting (via social media), I hoped that these groups would be willing to introduce their projects to the students and could even become part of organizing the event. \_\_\_\_\_ Their response suggested that this seemed to be an idiotic proposal to them. They warned us not to go on with the organization of the event: 'We are already working on the most pressing issues regarding cycling in the local context' and 'it would harm our and your own ambitions to work on parallel issues' (personal message on Facebook, translation by the author).

The main argument from the opposition was that most of the students were not cyclist. As non-experts to the issue of cycling our endeavor as designers was framed as 'naïve', \_\_\_\_\_. Although in the end the students organized a collaboration with the local Fablab, the murmurings of the activists group went on. They never really appeared in person to discuss the issue, \_\_\_\_\_ but shared their disagreement in talks with the collaborating members of the Fablab or online – also during the CycleHack weekend itself:



It was never clear who and how many persons were behind it, but this non-manifest absence clearly led us to Other \_\_\_\_\_ ‘them’ (Law 2004: 84-85). They became an entity that constructed the ‘us’.

I was bothered as a designer and organizer of the CycleHack, because they clearly aimed at making us look incompetent. I was intrigued as a researcher by their framing of us as naïve non-experts, as idiots to ‘their’ problem space. It made ‘us’ think about our roles as designers and at some point, we accepted the framing of being idiots, outsiders to the consensual way the issue of cycling was presented. We could focus more consciously on the Not-Yet-Users, the Not-Yet-Cyclists.

One could frame the reaction of the invited cyclists as a ‘misbehavior’ of participants (Michael 2013: 76) or simply ignore their interactions \_\_\_\_\_ also because they were hardly traceable or recordable and even not influential for the general success of the CycleHack. But the ‘murmurings of the idiot’ (Stengers 2005: 1001) stuck with me and made me re-think my role as a researcher, as someone who unconsciously sets certain parameters for ‘good’ participation. ‘The idiot \_\_\_\_\_ its emergence is always surprising because at the moment it has managed to ‘force’ one’s thinking [...], to slow it down, to open it up, it is also transforming the thinker.’ (Michael: 79).

Even more, the idiotic disruptions re-opened the framing of the CycleHack event itself. It revealed how far the construction of an issue is a political power game, in which groups like the cycling-activists have a stake to defend, their capital is their expertise in the problem. The idiotic proposal of the CycleHack re-opened that closure which excluded other formulations of the issue as well as other non-expert participants \_\_\_\_\_.

## ENGAGING WITH OTHERS

With these two examples of engaging with Others we illustrated how the concepts of reflexive engagement (Pihkala and Karasti 2016) and designerly public engagements (Stahl and Lindström 2016) are related:

1. The ghost opens its way to uncover issues that would have otherwise remained unspoken. It encourages negotiations of relations between human and non-human actors as matters of power.
2. The idiot allows to (re-)ask questions no one else dares to ask. While the cycling-activist tried to Other the designers as a way of remaining powerful in the articulation of the issue, playing with the role of the idiot helped the designers to re-open the co-articulation of issues.

Ghosts, idiots and Others \_\_\_\_\_ have an agenda of their own that is challenging. They are contributing to the richness of the encounters, and to the plurality of participation (Pihkala and Karasti 2016). These figures create a generative distance that could help to reflexively engage – also with the disruptive roles design researchers play when bringing their design interventions into contexts with already consolidated structures.

As Akama and colleagues propose, disruptive encounters in design processes can be difficult to articulate as ‘too often, the incremental details of transformation remain hidden by their very nature of being silent, internal, layered, ephemeral, dispersed’ (2015: 144). We felt how staying with the trouble and staying with the silence – can be unsettling. The ghost and the idiot enabled us not to rush into action, but to stay present and to further entangle with the situations as these unfolded.

## OTHERS IN CO-DESIGN RESEARCH

What we suggest here is a ‘slow method’ (Law 2004: 85), one that is always a contestable becoming. The figures we introduced could never be fixed, but are indeed appearing and disappearing. We cannot just reveal the ghost or the idiot or \_\_\_\_\_. It is necessary that they remain what they are: ghostly, idiotic, \_\_\_\_\_; speaking in their uncommon manner.

Reflexively engaging with Others \_\_\_\_\_ allows the discovery of alternative realities and the ambivalent co-existence of these multiplicities (ibid: 98). It allows to negotiate positions, to invent new ways of relating and create Other paths of action. In that sense, it is more than mutual learning, it is mutual transformation. It opens ‘ways of knowing in tension’ (ibid).

As design researchers, we are setting certain expectations of how to participate, by creating design events and inviting others to participate in these. We argue that we should acknowledge that sometimes we are idiots and ghosts as design-researchers to certain settings and that we can simultaneously trigger idiotic and ghostly responses from Other participants. This can challenge our assumptions and remind us of the subtle politics of the everyday contexts we intentionally join. Our involvements are ‘in no way innocent’ (Lindström and Stahl 2016: 194).

Engaging in action and in writing with the figures of the ghost and the idiot helped us to challenge ourselves and our own research agendas and it helped to address tricky hinterlands of our engagements that all too often remain unspoken in design academic writing. The figures became a matter of slow research, even long after the events happened:

the *ghostly* and the *'idiotic'* reading of the original event – which itself amounts to a domestication – likewise should remain open and contestable' (Michael 2013: 77). We hope to encourage you too, to take up the adventurous undertaking of thinking with ghosts, idiots and \_\_\_\_\_.

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