

Jun 25th, 12:00 AM

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### Citation

Olander, S. (2018) Critique and Post-Critique in Social Innovation Projects: between speculation and realism, in Storni, C., Leahy, K., McMahon, M., Lloyd, P. and Bohemia, E. (eds.), *Design as a catalyst for change - DRS International Conference 2018*, 25-28 June, Limerick, Ireland. <https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2018.529>

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# Critique and Post-Critique in Social Innovation Projects: between speculation and realism

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doi: 10.21606/drs.2018.529

This paper discusses notions of critique, post-critique, speculation and realism, as it reflects through a practice-based design research project, which worked as part of a bigger Danish public innovation program with the involvement of citizens in the design of a new library and cultural house under construction. Specifically, the paper sets out to challenge what seems to be a dichotomous “either-or” thinking in the descriptions and analyses of practice-based design research projects. Accounts of design research that operates in overlapping landscapes of academia, public sector and business are often depicted as too solution-orientated and therefore not reflexive, too engaged and therefore not analytical or too pragmatic and therefore not speculative. Such dichotomies, the paper argues, tend to obscure the “in-discipline” of much contemporary participatory and constructive design research. The paper seeks to problematize this over-simplification of what it means to engage in critical knowledge work, as it draws on recent discussions in design research, science and technology studies and feminist techno science.

*post-critique; critique; practice-based participatory research; feminism*

## 1 Introduction

This paper investigates ideas of critique and post-critique in design research. The notion of post-critique, in the following, does not refer to one particular understanding of the concept, rather, it points to a landscape of ideas and dispositions interested in exploring new critical forms as alternatives to, or extensions of, notions of critique associated with particular methods, theories and traditions. Specifically, the paper deals with practice-based design research that works with public sector innovation, social innovation and participatory approaches informed by ideas from anthropology, science and technology studies (STS) and feminist techno science (FTS). The paper asks; what does a contemporary critical or post-critical approach look like from a practise of making many different things? How does critique take form in a direct engagement with partners outside academia, and how can the commitment to a change program of public innovation still allow for a



critical investigation of becoming otherwise? These questions will be explored from what could be called “the complexities arising from dichotomies” (Redström, 2017, p. 1), complexities and entanglements probably familiar to most practice-based design researchers:

*Sometimes the intellectual instability of being in the middle is so overwhelming that we are tempted to give in to the at least academically much more convenient position on either side: to choose between theory or practise, art or science, and so on. But design can also be remarkably resilient and willing to commit to all that which is neither black nor white, but complex and colourful. (Redström, 2017, p.1)*

The musings of Redström are perhaps especially true for researchers working in project set-ups that transgress boundaries between academia, public sector and private partners. Here conditions of evaluation must be handled between explicit change programs of non-academic partners that the researcher commits to, and the often not fully conceptualised epistemic and critical ambitions of the researcher. Moreover, design researchers who stretch notions of design beyond questions of form, function, aesthetics and discrete products, and who choose to work practice-based, rather than attending to design as cultural phenomenon and object of analysis, may complicate discussions on critique even further. Critique and post-critique is not just a question of theories and concepts, some of which may circulate rather freely among design researchers invested in exploring design as a social process, and constructivist social researchers who emphasise the performative element of any method (Law, 2004). Inevitably, an exploration of critique and post-critique in design research becomes also a question of methods and how they participate in drawing lines among research traditions and even disciplines (Lury & Wakeford 2012). It is precisely in this contemporary mix of academia, public sector, business, independent activist organisations, theories, methods and concepts that critique and post-critique in constructive and participatory design research, is shaped and takes form. The aim of this article, however, is not to fully define or circumscribe concepts of critique and post-critique, nor does the exploration of what critical and post-critical engagements can mean for a practice-based research agenda start with a fixed and clear understanding of those same concepts. Rather in the following, ideas of critique and post-critique, in their different guises, will be related to questions of speculation and realism in design engagements that collaborate with non-academic partners under the auspices of an explicit change program.

## **2 Critique and post-critique**

Concepts of critique and post-critique, in some disciplines, for example in literary and cultural studies, may be thought of as a genre, and for some, critique may even be a shorthand for theory. Traditionally, critique in the humanities is associated with Marxist thought, Kant, the Frankfurt School, and post-68 French Theory (Anker & Felski, 2017, p.13), but new post-critical positions are also emerging, retaining perhaps a critical ethos, but giving the critical disposition new forms. The proposition that critique has run out of steam, posed by Bruno Latour in 2004 (Latour, 2004), has led to intense debates. In a recently published collection on the “post-critical turn” in literary studies, editors Anker and Felski sketches out a landscape of positions. While some scholars construe the post-critical turn as a precarious sign of defeatism (Anker & Felski, 2017, p.18), the current objection to critique, they contemplate, is perhaps a consequence of the way that critique nowadays has become mainstream and normalised within academia. Critique in present-day may perform as nothing more than yet another research method in the neo-liberal university (Anker & Felski, 2017, p.13). This leaves much to be desired when it comes social and political transformation. One defining trade of a more traditional critical approach, is a preoccupation with revealing presumed underlying structures, and a fundamental scepticism towards anything essentialised, institutionalised or naturalised. By the same token, there seems to be a general suspicion towards ordinary social actors, language, and thought, and a taken-for-granted lack of reflexivity of everyday settings. This has led to critique of critique; problematizing the suspension of the commonplace, while construing critical thinking as the exclusive provenance of intellectuals in academia (Anker & Felski, 2017, p.14). Post-critique on the other hand, moves forward, this at least is a popular indication, by way of a

deep empiricism and realism. Tracing in quite a dis-encharmed approach a sort of relational objectivity of “what-is”. But as pointed out by Heather Love (2017), Latours’ encouragement to cultivate a “stubbornly realist attitude” (Latour, 2004, p.51) rooted in a technology of tracing, may have a tendency to foreclose important discussions. Love draws on feminist scholar Donna Haraway’s “Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium (1997) to reflect on for example categories of gender. In a feminist critical engagement, it is not enough to simply describe matters of concern against a static background of dominant categories and technologies. A critical engagement must involve acts of both stabilisation and de-stabilisation because everything is constituted in action and “in-the-making”, not before action starts (Love, 2017, p.57). Following Haraway, one cannot judge in advance, which methodologies will do justice to the research objects nor which will open for social transformation (Love, 2017, p.54).

### 3 Design and Critique

Thinking on how notions of critique and post-critique are laid out and debated in the humanities and the constructivist social sciences, in practice-based design research lines may be drawn in alternative ways. First of all, design as a broader field may be said to be inherently speculative. Precisely because design as practise and profession works by making proposals, sketches and models of what could be. Therefore, in its outset design is never solely concerned with a realist “what is”, even if the design process may harbour all sorts of realist research methods, like for example planning, data collection, modelling and such. Similarly, and in the broadest sense, design is rarely associated with critique. The legacy of design and its relation, not only to modernity and progress as ideals (Bürdek 2005), but also to industry, production and commercial interests seems fundamentally at odds with classical critical practises. And yet, particular trajectories of artistic avant-garde practises, design education and design research projects have employed different strategies of design with the specific aim of raising critique, open up debate and create social transformation. Prominent examples are design research traditions like critical design, centred around the milieu of the Royal College of Art in London (Dunne 1999, Dunne & Raby 2001, Dunne & Raby, 2013), but also various forms of speculative design projects (Ward & Wilkie, 2009, Galloway, 2013, Gaver, Michael, Kerridge, Wilkie, Boucher, Ovalle, & Plummer-Fernandez, 2015, Wilkie, Michael & Plummer-Fernandez, 2015) and critical making in academia (Ratto 2011). Matthew Malpass, in his doctoral thesis (2012), traces schools and practises of critical design from the artistic avant-garde practises that formed the movement of radical design in the 50ties and 60ties in Italy, over the Bristol School of Construction, to the anti-design movement with groups such as Superstudio and Archizoom (Malpass 2012). Contemporary speculative design projects, according to Malpass, may be seen as a particular form of critical design (Malpass, 2012, p. 50), albeit more interested in deploying speculative prototypes in domestic settings than provoking critical thought in galleries. Interestingly, speculative design research projects are usually strongly influenced by ideas from analytical movements like STS and actor network theory (ANT) (Wilkie & Michael, 2009, Gaver, Boucher, Bowers, Blythe, Jarvis, Cameron, & Wright, 2011), and also typically orientated towards developments in the field of interaction design; bringing advancements in technologies to bear on creative and critical approaches to human computer interaction (HCI) (DiSalvo 2009, 2012). Another and different trajectory within practice-based design research, which is also informed by discussions in the social sciences and advancements in new technology, are research projects that work from traditions of participatory design (PD). Here, a once more explicit emancipatory and critical agenda, which focused on involving workers, whose jobs would otherwise be lost to technology (Ehn, 1988, Blomberg Simonsen & Robertson, 2012, Kensing & Greenbaum, 2013,) is also gravitating towards a less “classic” critical disposition. This is evident in more contemporary versions of PD that are taking participatory strategies out of the workplace (Björgvinsson, Ehn & Hilgren, 2010, Hilgren, Seravali & Emilson, 2011, Ehn, Nillson & Topgaard, 2014) to engage with both public and private partners around open social innovation. Such engagements may take forms closely related to service design, for example related to the design of welfare technologies. Or they may work with independent

organisations and NGOs to support entrepreneurship and social change in diverse cultural domains (Ehn, 2008) While yet others, may take on more artistic inspired approaches and with less commitment to an explicit change program of design. For example, where invitations are carefully crafted to pursue participatory strategies, not with the aim making specific design proposals, but rather to open up dialogues on the complexities of living with technologies (Lindström & Ståhl, 2014). Thus, the question of critique and post-critique is vibrant in different trajectories of design research, as well as in different design research environments. Manifest in a variety of design projects that exhibit different styles and aesthetics, which however also overlap sometimes.

### **3.1 *Between speculation and realism***

The interest in this paper, is the critical and post-critical potentials in practice-based design research projects that work from within quite explicit change programs that are typically formulated outside of academia. This is for example often the case in participatory and co-design research projects. This kind of research is sometimes criticised for buying into dominant ideas of usefulness and instrumentalism, and being unreflexively co-opted by the utilitarian regimes of present-day universities (Anker & Felski, 2017, p.19, Zuiderent Jerak & Bruun Jensen 2007, p. 230). But interestingly enough, participatory strategies in constructive design research are also sometimes criticized for being too naïve about their own ability and power to change facts on the ground. Because while they claim to be making a difference for “real life” actors, in reality most participants are enacted to fit the program of the research project (Pedersen, 2016, Yndigegn, 2015, Palmås & von Busch, 2015, von Busch 2017b). This conflict and dilemma can be described through the positions outlined in two recent publications.

In the collection “Speculative Research – The Lure of Possible Futures” (Wilkie, Savransky and Rosengarten, 2017), the speculative inclination inherent to design, is turned into a topic for cultural and social research. Speculative research, the editors argue, is a mode of research and knowledge making that goes beyond business-as-usual approaches. In order to wrestle futures and possibilities from dominant visions of singular futures associated with planning, calculation and the probable, speculative research opens for (im)possibilities and alternative futures that does not presume the future to be, just a prolongation of the present. Invoking speculation as a contemporary critical gesture, the editors want to challenge the presumption that time moves linearly, along a modern arrow of progress. What matters is how we think time and stage time because possible futures are not objects of knowledge, but rather vectors of risk and creative experimentation. This realisation, the editors argue, should compel us to reclaim speculation from the shadows of probability, by cultivating a temporality that the editors refer to as eventful.

A quite different perspective on speculation has recently been offered by Otto von Busch and Karl Palmås in an article titled “Social means do not justify corruptible ends: A realist perspective on social innovation and design” (2017). Here speculation, embodied in the quite small and unpretentious “what-if”-question so often associated with design is problematized for lacking realist impact. Through a critical account of literature in the field of social design and innovation and based on a survey of the literature on micro-finance, the authors question the “real” social and positive effects of social design and innovation. The appraisal of social processes in design, often staged through strategies of participation and a focus on users, should not lead us to believe that such processes automatically lead to positive social ends. The problem, as Busch and Palmås conceive it, is that in the literature on social design and social innovation, beneficially social outcomes are implicitly expected to somehow automatically follow from a socially focused design and innovation process. To meet these shortcomings, von Busch and Palmås call for a cultivation of a realist attitude and propose that designers draw inspiration from political theory to observe how lines are drawn between realism and idealism. In a very simple model, the idealist works by posing “what-if” questions, whereas realist questions would focus on who and how. Busch and Palmås derive a so-called realist “who-whom”-question from a series of questions they recommend to be posed at the start of any social innovation project. Questions such as; “who is the user”, “how is the social re-

distributed” and “who earns what in the end”, should be posed to provide clarity and realism in processes of social innovation and design.

To sum up, Wilkie, Savransky and Rosengarten stage speculation as a much-needed virtue, that neighbouring disciplines may appropriate from the practice of design. A speculative strategy raises critique of the manageable, calculable and probable and the conditions of evaluation that researchers have to answer to. Von Busch and Palmås point to realism and inspiration from political theory as a possible pathway for design, to overcome its idealist tendencies. The realist strategy raises critique of good intentions and idealism in process-orientated design and innovation. This is design that is not probable enough, so to speak. It lacks impact, and impact here must be understood as a critical gesture, insofar as it constitutes an over-turning of for example dominant economic systems or prevailing social forms.

Thinking through a constructive design research project that dealt with social and cultural innovation in the context of the Danish welfare sector, I suggest that much process-orientated and practice-based design research that transgress boundaries between academia, public sector and private partners, proceed through a kind of speculative pragmatism. This can be described as a sort of unsettled middle position that is both realist and idealist. It works quite pragmatically from encounters in the field, and at the same it tries to reach out to alternative futures, through a committed and direct engagement with the plurality of the present. To further elaborate on this, in the following I draw on experiences from work conducted around an informal maker space below a small library. The maker space was part of a bigger public innovation program that focused on the involvement of residents living in an international urban neighbourhood, in the design of a new high-profile library. In one way, the temporary maker space worked in line with dominant ideas of library institutions, citizens and users. At the same time, it formed a speculative alternative to prevailing ideas about maker activities in public libraries, and the citizens they are intended for.

#### **4 It all begins and ends with making and fixing**

A group of residents in the social housing project and international neighbourhood, Tingbjerg, on the outskirts of the Copenhagen metropolitan area, has gathered in a basement below their local library to participate in a three-day festival of fixing and making. Olli and Ahmed are sitting next to each other at the big table close to the window facing the street. Ahmed is in his early twenties, of Syrian descent and works as an electrician. Olli is an elderly lady and senior citizen, of Danish descent. She has been living in the neighbourhood of Tingbjerg since she was young, and she is now well over seventy. Ahmed is teaching Olli how to wire a plug. They are in the centre of the open room, amidst a lot of buzzing activity.

*Ahmed: “Just gently, don’t worry”. Olli is getting ready to cut the wire, concentrating as she prepares to get the cut just right.*

*Ahmed: “Like that, that’s right”. Olli finally cuts through the wire and as if in surprise of herself, makes a small jump in the chair.*

*Ahmed: “That’s perfect, just perfect”. Ahmed smiles. Olli smiles as if relieved, then she looks at Ahmed.*

*Olli: “Where is your family from?”*

*Ahmed: “They are from Syria”*

*Olli: “Syria? That’s the place with all that trouble going on all the time”*

*Ahmed: “Yes, it’s sad”*

*Olli: “Yes, it is”*

*Ahmed: “But we don’t have family in Syria anymore”*

Ahmed and Olli don't really know each other. Although they have both been living in the same neighbourhood for years. Olli is very active in the community. She takes part in all sorts of different cultural activities whenever she can. Ahmed doesn't really visit the local Tingbjerg library that much. But one day, as he passed the big window panes facing the main shopping street, he fell into conversation with Martin, a master student of co-design who is hosting the informal maker library. One thing led to the other, and now Ahmed is hosting a workshop on how to wire a plug, as part of the fixer festival program. The fixer festival is a culmination of a longer series of events around making and fixing that has been taking place for several months in the space below the library. Design researchers, design students, staff at the library and local residents have been working to establish a public space where the diverse community in Tingbjerg can meet around activities of fixing, making, redesign and upscaling. All these events, from the weekly repair café to the well prepared cultural program of the fixer festival, are part of a larger development process related to the future combined library and cultural centre that is currently taking shape at a construction site somewhere else in neighbourhood. But during the fixer festival no one is really discussing the future. Residents, librarians, design students and researchers are too pre-occupied with what is going on in the present.

#### **4.1 Working on the margins of the pre-scripted process**

The fixer festival running over three days in May, 2016, may be seen as an experiment, a prototype or an open full-scale rehearsal in situ. In hindsight, this seems a precise enough description. However, this event, formed around a well-prepared program involving local residents, library staff, local businesses, youth clubs, the public school, managers, researchers and design students, is all the time working on the margins of a larger planned innovation process, into which the informal maker space is folded. The future vision of the new library, which can be found in municipal strategies, policy papers, and the renderings of architects, is part of a bigger developmental plan to lift the area over the next 15 years. The long-term plan is to restore the area and transform it. From a neighbourhood, which is home to a diverse migrant community, and figures with high unemployment rates and widespread social problems in national statistics, to a gentrified vibrant neighbourhood that will attract new businesses and new groups of middle class citizens. The temporary maker space that has been set up below the old and worn-down library, may be seen as taking part in this pre-scripted work of transforming the international neighbourhood. Because the new library is promoted as a first important step to turn things around. And the idea of a maker space is central to the plans of the new library. In many ways then, the maker space aligns perfectly with the cultural strategy that has been issued by the municipal administration. But the provisional maker space may also be seen as a critical speculation. A makeshift space that tries to slow down the acceleration of future visions in the housing projects. By taking seriously the richness of everyday life in the neighbourhood.

#### **4.2 The entrepreneurial citizen and the individual maker**

There is a lot to be said about maker spaces in libraries (Burke, 2014, Moorefield-Lang, 2014) and not all of it goes well with a critical disposition and a healthy scepticism towards managerial lingo and IDEO aesthetics. Browsing through online descriptions of maker spaces hosted by public libraries in Scandinavia, they are usually promoted as spaces that provide access to high tech equipment like 3D printers and laser cutters, where everyone can sign up for tutorials, to learn the latest DIY production techniques. Maker spaces and Fab Labs are sometimes praised as the future drivers of public libraries, bringing Arduino kits to the people and providing free platforms for citizens to unleash their innovative and entrepreneurial potential. In times where libraries are trying to find their feet, with the decline in loans and digitalisation pervading library services, the ethos of the maker movement (Dougherty, 2012) and the promise that everyone can be a maker, sits well with a more classic and individualised enlightenment project. One that is still mobilised as identity marker in the library debate. In a classic definition, a library is a building containing a collection of books, periodicals and recorded music, yet many public libraries are transforming themselves into cultural

centres under the popular motto “from collection to connection” (Audunson & Aabo 2013). And still singular ideas of citizens and users permeate policy papers and strategic visions. As noted by Ramia Mazé: “The future is by no means empty – it will be occupied by built environments, infrastructures and things we have designed” (Mazé 2016, p.37). Whatever methods and dispositions we work by as researchers, we are somehow plunged down into the middle. For example, In the strategy for Copenhagen libraries (2014-2019), two distinct and yet quite opposing images of citizens are hypothesized; one is the remote citizen, completely self-reliant and efficiently provided for by new digital library services. The other one is the ever-present citizen. Engaged and active, innovative and entrepreneurial. When local smaller libraries are transformed and reorganised into bigger cultural units; promoted as local hubs where users become producers and project makers, while digital solutions and unmanned opening hours are replacing face to face interaction, these are the citizen-models they are providing for. But perhaps, in order to work as strategic tools, policy papers and architectural renderings have to stretch the singularity of future visions to the stereotypical. Simply because, that is precisely how they become operational for politicians, managers and decisions makers. And of course, despite digitalisation and strategic models for transformed futures, everyday life at public libraries and cultural centres unfold in much richer and more interesting ways than policy papers can convey. The Tingbjerg library, for example, is a library with a strong social profile. The staff, in the face of cutbacks, still emphasise the personal encounters with residents over efficiency and loan of materials. This is also why citizens keep coming to the library for many different reasons. Residents tend to seek assistance with all sorts of things; like writing an application or reading a letter from the municipality. But most residents visit the library simply to hang out, meet with others, and talk to librarians and cultural workers.

### **4.3 *Inviting for the un-heroic citizen***

Contemplating on the meeting between Olli and Ahmed at the fixer festival, which was captured on film and made to travel among managers and decision makers in the research project, we may notice that they are not really performing as project makers or omni-competent citizens. Olli is definitely being taught how to wire a plug, and Ahmed is taking on the role of the encouraging teacher, in that sense they resonate convincingly with the images of citizens and users that dominate policy papers and future visions. But what was noticed when this small snippet was edited into a two-minute film that showed different maker activities going on below the library, was this dialogue between a young man from Syria and an elderly Danish resident. From a distance, this encounter is conventional and commonplace. There is hardly anything more mundane. It is not doing much to charge the future. But for some reason, this encounter reverberated as truthful and important, when showed at panel debates and workshops related to the future of the public library and the neighbourhood. Perhaps because it reminds us of the plurality of the present? As researchers, we may need to be reminded. The same goes for designers, managers, policy makers and politicians.

For example, when we embarked on the research project, we soon discovered that maker spaces in Tingbjerg are not exactly something new. As it turned out, the neighbourhood already had quite a rich culture of making and several maker communities. Many of these communities were well-established, like seniors doing needlework at the local church, or Muslim women running a café and doing Henna designs, or a group of fathers meeting once a month to cook together. All these different groups were the ones we had been commissioned to involve in workshops and debates on the future of the new library. But the original and genuine intention of involving a diversity of residents in a design process that could feed directly into the design of the new library was not practically possible. We did not have access to or control with the overall progress of the new library project. Furthermore, many decisions around the design of the new building had already been made, and the time schedule, because of the complexity and tight protocols of the overall plan, was constantly being changed. I don't think the scenario described here is unique. It is probably quite often the case that pre-conceived plans for user-involvement and innovation, which look doable on



paper, turn out to be much messier and complicated in real life. In the Tingbjerg case, we found it increasingly hard to invite for workshops and debates when we didn't have the means to channel those ideas further. We did however, slowly begin to see an opportunity in latching on to the concept of a maker space. Even if we knew, it had to be a different kind of space for making than the one projected by architects, managers and politicians.

#### **4.4 Complicating the idea of maker spaces**

Looking back, I will describe the shift, from the initial focus on a more classical user-involvement process, to a series of rehearsals in situ, as simultaneously a pragmatic and necessary move, but also as a critical-speculative move. In a team of design researchers, design students and library staff, we worked through a process of exploring what was already there. Working from an anthropological ethos of the everyday as meaningful. During the first period of the project, we had learned that workshop facilities for knitting, sewing, needlework and different kinds of arts and crafts was something that many residents in the neighbourhood longed for. And we were told by many, and could see for ourselves, that the local library was in fact the only public meeting place in the neighbourhood. Despite the diversity of maker activities and communities in the area, most of these activities were centred around the social and cultural life of particular groups, for example, seniors, schoolkids, fathers or Muslim women, and there seemed to be very little exchange among them. What we started to envision, in conversation with residents, maker communities, and library staff, was "making" as collaborative activity of sharing across ethnicities, gender and differences in age and religion. Our common vision, based on the library as an important public space, was a public studio format of sorts; an open frame for low cost, non-expert fixing and making. Therefore, we worked out a cultural program for the space based on a few simple rules:

- The space is open for everyone, and no special skills are required.
- Anyone can drop in as they like, even if just for a cup of coffee.
- Maker activities start with materials at hand and grow from the interest of residents.
- Activities and things produced in the space are documented, celebrated and circulated by library staff and design researchers, to communicate to managers, architects, and decision makers what is going on in the basement.

This was the very simple program we prototyped over a period of around six months leading up to the fixer festival. What we ended up with, besides a mixed community of everyday makers, were only slightly agitated versions of the everyday. Because in the end, the important thing is not that Olli can wire a plug, although this can be a very useful skill. What is important is the encounter itself, and the surprising unlikeliness of it, in a neighbourhood where different groups live so close to each other. In that respect, the provisional maker space is not spectacular, radical or particular future-oriented. But from its mundaneness and its appreciation of collaboration and dialogue, it does comment on and alter the way we can talk about and think about the future. Trying to show, not tell, that the future of public libraries and the engagement of citizens is not all about self-service or full-service. Whether or not these tactical and to some extent, practical and opportunistic moves can be seen a critical, is difficult to decide once and for all. And so is the impact and realism of our participatory endeavour. Today, almost a year after the research project has ended, the informal maker space is still running open repair cafés and workshops, and the community in the basement and the library staff are still waiting for the grand opening of the new library.

### **5 Engaged and critical: The paradox of a practice-based approach**

Working on the auspices of explicit change programs that promote prescriptive and singular visions for the future, does not necessarily thwart a critical stance, but it somehow makes it more complicated. In a practise-based research engagement there can be no simple answer to the reassessment of critique, besides perhaps, a realisation that the somewhat romantic image of the critique as heroic dissident that manages to keep her distance in the rarefied space of the academy is no longer productive. As noted by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa in her compelling account of care:

“Thinking in the world involves acknowledging our own involvements in perpetuating dominant values rather than retreating to the sheltered position of an enlightened outsider who knows better (de la Bellacasa, 2017, p.10). In present-day universities, with funding programs relying on modern planning schemes, linear methodologies of innovation, and simple models for evaluation, practice-based design researchers are often enrolled as partners in cross-sectional innovation work to offer creative experimentation that can inform the overall project vision. Design researchers after all, are rarely invited to obstruct and intervene directly in decision making and policy design. In a very practical and pragmatic sense, such conditions challenge any attempt to draw simple lines between critique and composition, reflexivity and action, slowing down and caring about the usefulness of one’s own design interventions. And just like critique in the humanities is indebted to linguistic models and tied to particular epistemologies; like analytical models of interpretation and certain genres and styles, so is critique in design research often associated with particular aesthetics and forms. This is perhaps why vectors of experience that exceed such frameworks are rarely counted as critical. The richness and complexity of everyday stories and low-res images in municipal leaflets and quickly edited video clips, may look a lot like more of the same, and not at all like critique. Compared to for example highly aestheticized design objects, exhibited in galleries or staged through a series of professional photo shoots, in a full synthesis of how things, technologies and futures could be otherwise. Wilkie, Savransky and Rosengarten talk about the lure of possible futures, as something more than a mere extension of the present. As some inventive and experimental engagement, that can confront the impasse of the present (Wilkie, Savransky and Rosengarten, 2017, p.2), without simultaneously submitting them to logics, rationales, and habits that govern the problematic of the present. This challenge, I argue, thickens in any research projects that commits to an engagement with change, and insists on critique as generative and productive, not only for researchers in the university, but also for collaborators outside of academia. This requires, I contend, an approach that works with dominant visions of modern planning schemes, quite a bit of the way. But still with a cultivated sensibility, that no matter how pervasive the impasse may be, it can never exhaust the unrealised potential of the present (Wilkie, Savransky and Rosengarten, 2017, p.8). In a strange way, this attention to and caring for the situated engagement of the present, necessitates a pragmatism, if not opportunism, that is also highly realist. Working through a series of quick contextual experiments, and from the materials at hand, is not very idealist. So, while Busch and Palmås (2017) may be right, that social innovation projects can learn from political theory, realist question that focus on who and how, can never be fully answered, not matter how strategically one enters a social innovation project. Instead, as Anker and Felski propose; in a rethinking of critique, we may need to forge stronger links between intellectual life and the non-academic work. And we should not accept that such stronger links are automatically a matter of capitulation (Anker & Felski, 2017, p.19). Rather this is perhaps where we will find new openings and surprising companions among social actors, public servants and decision makers who are also invested and critically engaged in creating the conditions for change.

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