



Design and Dissensus: Framing and Staging Participation in Design Research

Mahmoud Keshavarz & Ramia Maze

To cite this article: Mahmoud Keshavarz & Ramia Maze (2013) Design and Dissensus: Framing and Staging Participation in Design Research, Design Philosophy Papers, 11:1, 7-29

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/089279313X13968799815994>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 204



View related articles [↗](#)

Design and Dissensus

Framing and Staging Participation in Design Research

Mahmoud Keshavarz and Ramia Maze

Mahmoud Keshavarz is a design researcher with a BA in industrial design from Azad University of Tehran and an MFA in experience design from Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm, Sweden. Currently, he is a PhD student and teacher in design at the School of Arts and Communication (K3) of Malmö University, Sweden. His current work focuses on various forms of ‘the political’ as interventions through the materialistic language and sensible potentiality of design actions in the particular space/time of statelessness and undocumentedness.

Ramia Mazé specializes in participatory and critical methods for designing systems and products that alter social practices and public life. At the Interactive Institute in Sweden since 2001, she has led and managed interdisciplinary

A range of alternative formulations of design, such as ‘social’, ‘activist’, ‘critical’, ‘relational’, ‘humanitarian’ design, are amassing.¹ Instead of focusing on form and function, such formulations typically focus on what design produces. At stake in the social turn within design is reconsideration of what design is about – not in terms of its objects but, and perhaps even more fundamentally, its subjects. Further, contemporary design oriented toward the public realm in multiple contexts involves a diversity of possible subjects and political subjectivities.

‘Participation’ has been an approach to addressing social questions in design. Participation has been linked, for example, to “a mindset and attitude about people”² and a kind of ‘design humanism’ aimed at reducing domination,³ which meets the human ideal of mutual support for altruism, a ‘collective instinct of humanity’.⁴ In a range of associated projects and practices in recent years, methodologies have been applied to involve more or different people directly in product development processes. Indeed, participation may itself be seen as the objective of design processes.⁵ Concern, however, often tends towards methods for improving design objects,

and international research projects in the areas of sustainable design, smart materials, tactical media and social innovation. She lectures at postgraduate art, design and technology programs and is on the experience design faculty at Konstfack in Stockholm. Her latest book, co-edited with Magnus Ericson, is *DESIGN ACT Socially and politically engaged design today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press/laspis, 2011).

with certain questions about its subjects left under-examined or posed in overly general and loaded terms that might be further interrogated.

In this paper, we query participation in design in order to discuss some of the problematics of relating to ‘others’ in practices of design and design research. We argue, as do other design thinkers, for practices involving “micro-political participation in the production of space”,⁶ in which design frames and stages the (re)production of social as well as spatial relations. We argue for increased reflexivity about how others participate in design and the political implications. Here, ‘the political’ refers to the issue of who is identified and represented as a subject in studies and practices of design. Concerned with the social organization of everyday life, the design role is always engaged with “confrontation of power relations and influence by the identification of new terms and themes for contestation and new trajectories for action”.⁷

Design as Framing and Staging Participation

In terms of participation, we relate to some design issues at stake in the Scandinavian countries since the 1970s.⁸ Scandinavian Participatory Design movements were oriented towards the politics and ethics of ‘workplace democracy’. Many projects took place in sites of work in the context of trade union struggles for a better and more equal work environment, in which participation was often carried out as joint decision-making in the development of new technological systems and organizational practices. Design approaches to participation often demonstrated two important concerns – first, methods for the direct engagement of those who should work with and use the new technologies.⁹ Secondly, tools and techniques supported co-development of the technologies through mock-ups, prototypes, scenarios and games in order to establish a more egalitarian regime amongst diverse participants.¹⁰ Design processes could be understood to involve the framing and staging of relations among diverse participants, including those with very different starting points than designers, with distant positions within an organizational hierarchy and with heterogeneous skills and interests.

Early Participatory Design was considered as a political matter, though attention in design discourse has since been almost exclusively focused on the practicalities of its methods and tools. Pelle Ehn argues:

“Participatory design started from the simple standpoint that those affected by a design should have a say in the design process. This was a political conviction not expecting consensus, but also controversies and conflicts around an emerging design object. Hence, participatory

design sided with resource weak stakeholders (typically local trade unions), and developed project strategies for their effective and legitimate participation. A complementary reason for participation, and in the long run probably the strongest motivation for its use in many organizations, was to ensure that existing skills could be made a resource in the design process".¹¹

As a matter of political ideology, workers' struggles were taken up on principle in a range of approaches by those "from the political to the ethical system developer".¹² As a matter of political philosophy, consensus was recognized as potentially irreconcilable with change processes involving emancipation from oppressive norms and traditions.¹³

In our work, we explore approaches to design in terms of contemporary concepts of the political. By 'the political', we refer to the term as employed in political philosophy, as concerned with how society is constituted and organized. In this, we also make a distinction from 'politics', which serve to regulate the 'law and order' of society through, for example, institutions, and political parties. The political is concerned with how society is constituted as the organization of human coexistence. This includes a concern for how identities, subjectivities, and collectivities are posited – including how these are instituted by design, as one of the practices that organizes human coexistence. As some political thinkers argue, the political is the space/time through which democracy can emerge, as processes of 'agonistic pluralism' or 'dissensus' that address the conflictuality inherent in coexistence. We, as design researchers, engage in framing and staging processes among those coexisting in society whose differences cannot merely be resolved or managed. Design can be understood as a form of intervention in which a particular social order may be confronted with others.

To explore the political implications of participation in design, we propose and explore design research practice oriented around 'dissensus'. Within current consensus-based politics, an interventional act could take the form of dissensus by framing and staging a diversity of subjects as adversaries to confront and engage. In a series of experimental design activities within the project 'Forms of Resistance', we deploy concepts such as 'indisciplinarity' and 'free translation' to reflect upon our experiences of participation in design. In a general sense, and as exemplified in Forms of Resistance, it is necessarily a designer's role to be concerned with how others are understood and engaged in design, with the communicative actions among or across those in one or more spaces/times, and with how these worlds confront each other. In this, we argue, the design role is that of a reflexive and situated translator.

The (Design) Issue of Consensus

Participation in design is often oriented to the practical matter of achieving consensus, or agreement upon and stabilization of a particular set of social relations, norms and courses of action. Indeed, consensus can be understood as a predominant orientation within societies characterized by participatory democracy, in which, as Jacques Rancière articulates, “[consensus] desires to have well-identifiable groups with specific interests, aspirations, values, and ‘culture’”.¹⁴ Rancière and other contemporary political philosophers do not ignore nor reject the fact of participation, but query how forms of participation constitute the identities and subjectivities of participants. Consensus, for example, can be seen merely as a temporary result of a provisional hierarchy, a stabilization of power, which always and inevitably entails some form of exclusion.¹⁵ While ‘agonistic pluralism’ and ‘dissensus’ approach the practice of democracy in slightly different ways, both are concerned with possible forms of politics that make democracy meaningful as an ongoing struggle rather than as a fixed state or goal.

We share with some of the Participatory Design proponents of ‘workplace democracy’ an understanding of participation as engaged with struggles among those characterized by differentials in skill, representation and power. We also argue for conflict as necessary and productive, in contrast to a prevailing culture idealizing harmony.¹⁶ This is particularly acute with respect to contemporary design that takes place in the public realm, which is constituted by widest range of possible people and groups that may or may not be pre-constituted in relation to particular issues. There may be extreme differentials in how they are identified by others, in their possibilities for communication, and in how they are distributed across different or multiple space-time situations. In order to approach design in ways that do not merely affirm the current constitution of society, along with exclusions and differentials, we seek alternatives to concepts such as consensus.

Consensus and its Discontents

In political philosophy, meanings and forms of participation are continually challenged and developed. According to thinkers such as Chantal Mouffe and Rancière, participatory politics, as practiced today, is based on a consensus or agreement among representatives of actors or, ideally, among actors themselves. This dominant form of politics creates a situation resulting in an absence of ‘political frontier’ – which parallels a wider ‘crisis of political identity’ within individuals or social groups in Western societies. As Mouffe argues, a lack of political struggles facilitates ethnic, nationalist, religious, or antidemocratic identities in forming and establishing themselves.¹⁷ Similarly arguing that xenophobia in consensus-oriented democracies is not an exception but is endemic to such

political systems, Rancière argues against the logic assumed within the dominant political notion of consensus:

Consensus does not mean simply the erasure of conflicts for the benefit of common interests. Consensus means erasing the contestatory, conflictual nature of the very givens of common life. It reduces political difference to police-like homogeneity. Consensus knows only: real parts of the community, problems around the redistribution of powers and wealth among these parts, expert calculations over the possible forms of such redistribution, and negotiations between the representatives of these various parts.¹⁸

Consensus suppresses the contestatory nature of common life, reducing political subjectivization to rational debate among parts of a community. This prohibits various political forms and identities from taking form, impulses that may then be transferred into more extreme or violent forms.¹⁹ Consensus-oriented democracies have conflicts and contradictions, but these are labeled as threats rather than understood as the essential condition of democracy itself. In this way, consensual forms of political participation can be argued to be incapable of achieving more equality and emancipation.

Those criticizing such consensual politics also propose alternative approaches. Mouffe suggests the concept of 'agonistic pluralism'.²⁰ She posits antagonism as the basic condition of human coexistence, proposing a form of politics that would transform 'antagonism' between potential enemies to 'agonism' or 'conflictual consensus'. While consensus-oriented politics is concerned with regulating law and order among antagonistic entities, Mouffe states that, "the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs".²¹ She is concerned with the political space/time through which passions and conflicts fundamental to human coexistence can emerge.

The concept of conflictual consensus might still be understood as a product of consensus, however, as a presentation of conflicts between interest, opinions and ideas. Rancière proposes the more radical concept of 'dissensus'. Dissensus is formulated in relation to an aesthetical regime, a 'sensible order' that identifies and defines who is qualified to speak and about what, who is heard and in what way. It concerns a break in the sensible order, or a 'gap in the sensible',²² in which the established framework of perception, thought and action is confronted with the 'inadmissible', ie. a political subject, or political forms and identities. As a process, rather than an achievement, dissensus is always underway, resisting the politics of law and order by questioning the givens of a particular situation. In this sense, dissensus is not the opposite of consensus,

but, rather, a process concerned with the potential emergence of new political formations.

While taking slightly different approaches, both ‘agonistic pluralism’ and ‘dissensus’ affirm that equality in consensus-oriented politics can only ever be that among individuals within a well-identified group. Further, consensus is understood as premised on a model of ‘communicative action’²³ in which participants in a communicative exchange are pre-constituted within a space-time that is either shared or that can be identified by those participating. There is also the issue of how new forms of the political could interrupt such pre-established frames of consensus across identified groups. Also at stake is how subjects and identities that are not formed or identified can participate or break into an order or regime. As Rancière formulates an approach to dissensus:

Dissensus is not the confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the manifestation of a distance of the sensible from itself. Politics makes visible that which had no reason to be seen, it lodges one world into another (for instance, the world where the factory is a public space within the one where it is considered a private one, the world where workers speak out vis-à-vis the one where their voices are merely cries expressing pain).²⁴

Framing and Staging Dissensus in Design

The framing of a design project is typically premised on the definition of a problem or task by the initiators of a project (designers and/or their clients and commissioners). The first instance of consensus is already evident in an agreement upon a problematic, which ‘they’ have seen in ‘their’ own way. While certain of the concerns of the designers may overlap with those of potential participants, nonetheless the origin and framing of the problematic presupposes but is not done by ‘others’. As Dave Beech articulates, “participation always involves a specific invitation and a specific formation of the participant’s subjectivity”.²⁵ Further, it is project initiators that generally determine the approach, methods, scope and resources. Participants are typically engaged and even selected afterwards, as project initiators determine and pre-constitute those who may participate, even in cases in which participation may be extensive and open-ended. Thus, to some extent, dissensus is prevented in advance, as presuppositions about subjectivity govern the selection, terms and means of engagement for participation.

The staging of a design process involves not only the framing of the problem and the social organization for addressing it, but a realm of materiality and sensibility within the design process that may also endure long after. Rancière discusses the ‘distribution of the sensible’,²⁶ in which the visible and invisible, the audible

and inaudible, the sayable and unsayable are manifested in the distribution of time, space and experience. It is through perceptible means, for example, that communal or shared situations in space/time take place. In everyday life, this realm of sensibility is predefined and pre-established, in which some sensory possibilities can be perceived and others cannot. Sensible orders reproduce and enforce divisions within society – who is qualified to see, listen or discuss, and who is not. For Rancière, this is not a matter of good taste, but about the sensible, through which some parts of society come together while others are excluded or ignored.²⁷ That is to say, there is an established ‘community of sense’, though others are not recognized or valued, resulting in the invisibility of these others. Further, excluded from the prevailing sensible order, others have no common space/time to experience other possibilities for the distribution of the sensible – to see what is supposed to remain unseen to them, to listen to what is supposed to be inaudible to them, to discuss what is not supposed to be discussed by them.

Implemented by institutions, sensible orders are established and reinforced through various practices, including design practice. Designers take part in forming a regime of sense, sensory perception or a sensible order, which take place in space/time. While there are many possible ways in which designers may approach the sensible order, much of design is involved in (re)producing how established regimes distribute space/time, thereby affirming the power and the politics of current institutions. In contrast, other approaches, such as those oriented around dissensus, could intervene within an existing or established sensible order. In this, the identification and subjectivity of participants cannot be presupposed nor, indeed, the form of communicative action. Identities and subjects may become recognized through design practices that are framed and staged in other ways. By actively redistributing the sensible order, those participating in dissensus-oriented design could thereby also intervene in the political order. An intervention, interruption or break in the realm of materiality and sensibility can thus institute a new aesthetical regime, other forms of politics to come. A break in regimes of sense also produces the potential for thinking and acting in new ways – it is a matter of proposition rather than (re)production.

Dissensus in Design – Reflecting on an Example

A range of questions might be asked if we consider design in terms of dissensus. How, for example, might the identities or subjectivities of un-established or unidentified people or groups be considered in design? How might the ‘political frontier’ between unequal people/groups be considered? In what ways may they be considered or constituted as participants in design? In what ways might different participants interrupt a particular order and redistribute the sensible? How might such forms of participation open an experiential

realm that does not merely include those excluded in an already established order but, rather, constitute a break? How might breaks in the established order of meanings, value and territories, the order of sensible, take form? How may 'framing' and 'staging' in design and research be based on dissensus, in which the problematics of participation may be queried and alternatives investigated? Such questions were at stake within the Forms of Resistance project, of which we give an account below, along with retrospective reflections on how participation was framed and staged.

Forms of Resistance follows a practice-based research tradition,²⁸ in which experimental design activities in different settings ground reflection-in- and -on-action. By 'experiments', we refer to design activities involving forms of communication and materiality that both probe into conditions 'in the field' as well as into research questions and methods.²⁹ Following a brief account, we elaborate on concepts of 'indisciplinarity' and 'free translation' that emerged from doing the project.

EXAMPLE: Forms of Resistance

Framing – an 'Indisciplinary' Approach to Participant Relations

An experience of the problematics of 'framing' was evident in Forms of Resistance from the first experimental design activity, in which I, Mahmoud Keshavarz, entered into the world of the women activists, into their places of habitation and occupation. As a male, middle-class designer coming from Sweden, it was evident I was the 'other', and I quickly realized that I needed to rethink my role within the situation. Initially, I had thought about my role as a designer to 'help' and 'facilitate' their activities, as a kind of 'design thinking' in which I would draw upon my familiar 'toolbox' of design methods and skills for conducting design research. In the field, however, I reconsidered how to enter into their space/time of knowledge and experience. Rather than setting out from a position of authority, and involving others only afterwards in the 'how' and 'what' of a presupposed problem, I considered how to do problem-framing from within their world and on their terms.³⁰

An example of this was the issue of how and among whom communications took place. Besides ever-present security issues,³¹ there was an issue of who participated in the setup and organization of activities. These communications took the form of e-mail discussions among those interested in initiating a 'creative' protest regarding violence against women (see Figure 3 for a screenshot of the e-mail threads). The planning and arranging of meetings was done by e-mail, and sometimes nobody replied for 4–5 days at a time. As I entered into the ongoing communications within this context, I was conscious not to lead the communications which,

'Forms of Resistance' is a project collaboration with two groups of women activists, one in Tehran (Iran) and one in Gothenburg (Sweden). While the project evolved as a series of practices that took place and shape over the course of a year, it can also be described in terms of three experimental situations, characterized by distinct forms in the space-time distribution of social and situated activities. Experiences within each experiment informed how the next was framed and staged.

The first experiment took place in November, 2010, in Tehran based on experiences of violence or resistance against violence in everyday life. The activists set up three writing workshops in three cities, in which the activity of writing was understood as a performative tool to make a common sense of women's experiences. Around 100 short stories were written, most of them based on an object, image or space, as requested by activists. Each was a story of an object/image/space that actualized the experience of violence or resistance for the author. Some of these stories were selected by the activists and were exhibited in a café, in which they were encountered by others in the course of their everyday lives.

The second experiment was a collaboration that took place in February 2011, with an activist group concerned with violence against 'undocumented' women in Sweden. It took the form of documenting the experiences of these women, a process that the women themselves initiated in order to overcome the temporariness of their situations, their 'bare life'. The idea of documenting undocumented lives came from one of the women who felt that by keeping her own documents, she could still live her life. The process was primarily an individual process done by two women who have been living 'hidden' for several years in Gothenburg. The outcome of the collaborative activity was a pocket book including photos taken by one of the women and materials that she gathered from her everyday life, such as notes, diaries, etc.



The third experiment involved the staging of the two previous experiments for those outside the experiences, cultures, communities and space/time of the others' participation. This took place as an exhibition and a series of workshops at a graduate school of art and design in Stockholm, Sweden, on May, 2011. The physical installation consisted of a low table and three vertical boards, to which a series of transparent papers were attached. The papers were in a standard 10x10cm dimension, depicting pictures or texts from the first two experiments. The images and texts were a version (an abstract translation) of the original materials. The exhibition and workshops were set up for people to view, search, and read the materials. After a brief introduction, participants in the workshop sessions were invited to select and sequence some of the papers in the blank pages of a book provided. Five sessions were conducted, in which about 45 pages of the book were produced, co-authored by the participants with the materials provided.



Figure 1



Figure 2

inevitably, involved their awareness and plans around my being 'there'. Even though some might have expected it of me, I did not initiate new discussions about my project by e-mail requests, for example. In relation to reflexivity about my own role, I felt that asking questions and making requests would constitute ownership or project management.

Taking this approach meant that the process of communicating and collaborating stemmed from their own and existing way of working, which was evolved to the new circumstance of my being there. In the form of the e-mail communications, this resulted in a space of action where the potential authority that I or my discipline might represent was dissipated, so that it was not a matter of 'they' and 'I'. Furthermore, there was no phase of setting up an experimental activity, as might be typical in design or research work. This meant that there was no space/time for legitimizing disciplines, for 'educating' or 'convincing' the activists how 'design' is relevant 'there', with potential pitfalls of privileging an incoming person or discipline in relation to the others already present. I had the experience that my discipline diminished in relevance. Instead, what mattered was implementing ideas and plans based on their previous experiences and ongoing agenda, which were emerging from the discussions. The space/time of virtual communications could be understood as a sphere of actions and reactions, dialogues and conflicts, which, in some ways, broke down the frontiers between or hierarchies among us.

This experience prompted me to conceptualize an approach in terms of '*indisciplinarity*'.³² I use this term to describe a shared space of action/reaction, where no one imposes her or his voice, knowledge or discipline. This is in contrast to *interdisciplinarity*, in which there is always a risk of exclusion, discrimination and repression. When multiple disciplines are identified, classified and measured in relation to one another, each participant and discipline might too easily be reduced to calculations of which is most suitable, who is more relevant and who is not, who has the most effect and who has less. The danger is that collaboration, rather than crossing over and breaking apart the hegemony of any single discipline, as intended in interdisciplinary approaches, instead produces hegemonic divisions on the basis of disciplines. My experience was of becoming part of an environment generated by activists whose desires for political change took precedence over any specific discipline such as social work, sociology, political science or design.

From my experiences and reflections on the first experiment, I conceptualized *indisciplinarity* as an approach to framing collaborative activities in ways that avoid the hierarchy or domination of one discipline, one form of knowledge, or one person/group over another. This informed how I approached the second experiment from the first day that we began collaborating in Gothenburg. There,

Figure 3

A screenshot of an e-mail discussion during collaboration in Tehran (November 2010). This particular screenshot is of a discussion about what concepts we should think about when working with the idea of violence. Various interested people contributed, even if some of them did not participate in project later.



the project was almost entirely in the hands of the women who the activists were working with. It was the women that generated and implemented the ideas, in contrast to the first experiment, in which an idea and the method originated with the activists and was then put into the hands of participants (women in the writing workshops). From an interdisciplinary point of view, I could now query the framing of the experiment in terms of new questions about the premise of story-writing as an idea and method, and how it was related or relevant to the participating women.

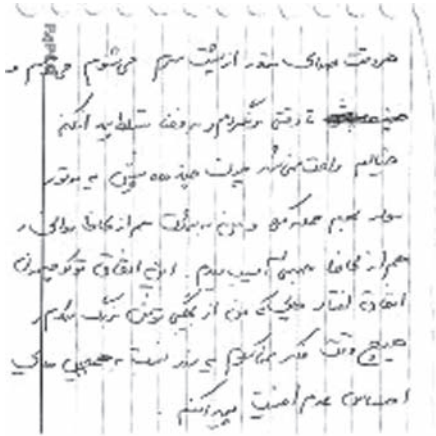
Staging – Participation and the Materiality of ‘Free Translation’

Particular issues of ‘staging’ surfaced in the third experiment within Forms of Resistance. This took the form of bringing experiences from the first two experiments, with their particular situations in terms of space/time and subjectivities, to another situation, which was preconditioned by the terms of an exhibition, constraints in material and other resources and a particular audience. I conceptualized this in terms of the ‘sensible order’, as discussed above. Here I saw my role, as a designer, to take, and translate materials from the first two experiments into other material forms in a new situation. In other words, the previous sensory worlds in which the materials were created, in those particular ‘communities of sense’, would be staged within another sensory world of an exhibition for spectators that were well-established and well-identified in cultural, social and political terms. I considered how to stage the sensibilities and materialities of one field into another, which also entailed the translation from a world of experiences and communities that tend to be invisible or marginalized into a world of factual spectators.

The confrontation, or frontier, between these two worlds can also be understood in the terms of dissensus, understood not as a conflict between ‘enemy and friend’³³ but “a total break with the existing state of affairs in order to create something absolutely new”.³⁴ The potential could be for the design role – that is, myself and the design materials – to propose an interruption, a break within one world, seen and realized as ‘factual present’ in which another that might be invisible, excluded or not present could somehow be represented. Conflict need not take the form of confrontation among opinions and interests but a break in the way we perceive and experience the world in which we are presently located and its taken-for-granted sensible and social orders.

In design terms, I thought of the ‘community of sense’ concretely in terms of the “combination of sense data such as forms, words, spaces, rhythms and so on”³⁵ but also in terms of multiple meanings of the term ‘sense’. Given the collected materials from the first two experiments, words and images of experiences of violence and resistance, I considered how to stage participation in terms of two regimes of sense, two sensory worlds, two sensible orders. In my approach, I adapted and developed a conceptual approach based on Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the task of the ‘translator’³⁶, an approach of expanding the translation beyond the translation of images and texts. In between these two worlds, a translator does not dismiss the contradictions and mismatches between the two but acts to ‘intensify’³⁷ a dissensual situation in order to open a space for political subjectivization.

More specifically, I reflected on the role of the designer as translator within a process proceeded by participant’s storytelling (in Tehran and Gothenburg) and followed by participant’s storytelling



Text from the image: Story told by _ (Mashhad, November 2010): *"I panic whenever hear a motorcycle, I have to turn around I won't calm down til I feel secure and dominate the space. A couple of months ago, a biker attacked me and injured me physically and psychologically. This happened in our alley, the place that I grew up in, the place where I was raised since childhood. I never thought that such a thing could happen here, and I feel unsecure in that place."*

Figure 4

An example of 'free translation'. The approach involved detaching an image from its original story and extracting one sentence from the story.

(in the exhibition in Stockholm). Between the experiences of the original creators of the text and image forms (in the first two experiments) and factual spectators (in the third), I developed my role in terms of a politics of translation formulated as 'free translation'.³⁸ My concern was to develop a designerly approach to translation, in which part of my intention was to leave space for spectators to make their own meaning out of given materials. Rather than attempting direct or transparent translations, I chose to make the original stories

Figure 5

The 'free translation' as staged in the exhibition (Stockholm, 19 May 2011). The images and text excerpts were presented to spectators in the exhibition on separate pieces of paper on the installed boards and table.



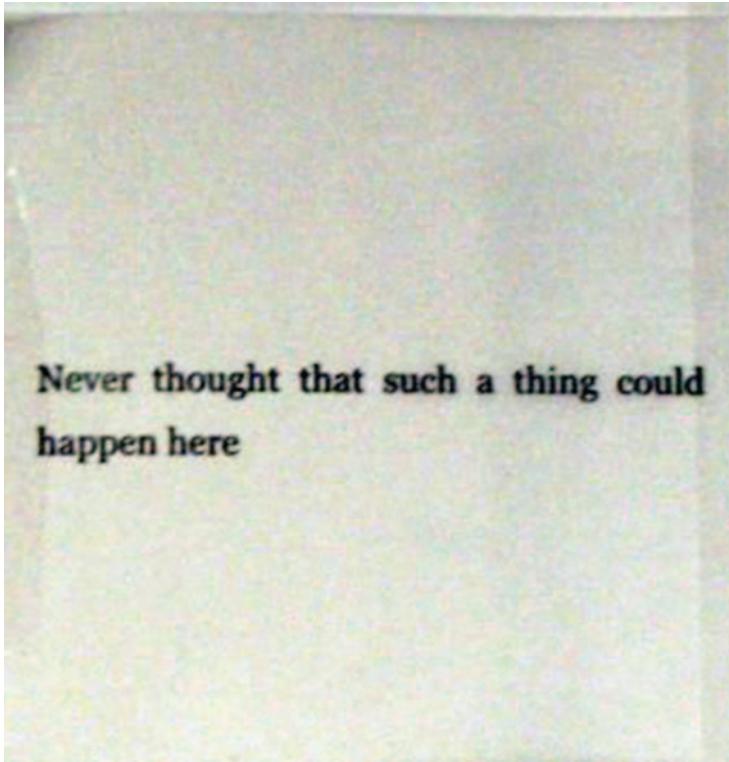


Figure 6

A page resulting from storytelling in a workshop session. The image and text pieces were interpreted and redistributed by a workshop participant.

more and more abstract (for example, see Figure 4). A spectator, by placing and staging a piece of text close to another text or image that is unrelated in terms of its original sources or meanings, might experience a dissensual situation in the 'system of meaning', since it is presented in an unfamiliar way. Produced outside the field of the spectator, the order of meaning is both interrupted, and it produces a disruption within the process of staging. It introduces an act of interpretation, personalization and subjectivization by the spectator.

My intention in rendering the materials more abstract, in this instance of 'free translation', was to provoke a void in meaning, a space to be filled by a spectator who sees the materials, tries to make sense of them and does so in terms of her or his own experience. In this way, he or she becomes a participant, engaging her or his own story within the space/time of materials within a given situation. Outside the field of the material origins or translation, a spectator enters – not the others' field – but a new situation in which they also become active in interpreting and storytelling in relation to the shared theme human experience on violence. A free translation results in materials through which a spectator relates to the theme and becomes a participant by staging images and words of someone else's story in their own terms. If the spectator edits the material by deciding how to place an image or word and in relation to the others, she weaves her own

sensory world into another world. In this situation, my design method acted to intensify mismatch or break between two sensory worlds. For me, free translation was developed as a critical engagement with the politics of the situation, as one way of staging an encounter between two worlds, in order to make a community of storytellers and translators.

Discussion

Revisiting Forms of Resistance in terms of how participation was framed and staged, we can begin to elaborate upon how design may orient toward dissensus. An experience of being 'other' prompted reconsideration of the role of design researcher 'in the field'. Entering into a world of specific, ongoing socio-political practices, the researcher's gender, culture and class were put at stake, along with the knowledge and authority typically presumed and exerted by the institutionalized practices of design and research over those who may have very different terms for identifying, involving and collaborating with others. The subjects and their political subjectivities came into focus as the primary and determining issue in the situation, fundamentally reconfiguring the original research plan and its pre-constitution of how things might proceed and what might be produced. The politics of communicative actions were reconceived in terms of how they were embodied (by the researcher and participants with diverse cultural identities, forms of knowledge and political subjectivities) and mediated (as access, opportunity and control within socio-technical systems such as email). Indisciplinarity conceptualizes a reflexive attitude toward the dimensions of power embodied in researcher-participant relations and enacted in communicative actions – in this case, breaking disciplinary hierarchies took the form of reticence, of refraining from initiating, directing or determining communications.

Forms of Resistance evolved across multiple cultural and spatial/temporal settings, characterized by different sensible and social orders. Throughout, a guiding question was how to make sense of and how to make sensible, to other and perhaps dominant 'communities of sense', the experience of those perhaps considered as 'unqualified', 'illegal', 'amateur', 'weak' or 'undeveloped'. As a practice concerned with the 'distribution of the sensible', design oriented toward dissensus engaged a politics of 'redistribution', in which the unseen was rendered visible and the un-said discursive. This was staged as an encounter between worlds without resorting to a false ideal of a 'common' ground (and the undesirability of merely rendering a temporary stability in the form of consensus). In this specific situation, we also wanted to avoid the sensible order of reportage journalism, which attempts to make one, marginalized world as fully and transparently present in another, but in which there is only a one-way model of communicative action without reciprocity or conflict. Free translation is an approach that intervenes

within another regime of sense – in this case, a systematic approach to abstracting and staging materials that does not merely reproduce one world in another but interrupts both the original and factual systems of meaning by provoking new interpretations and experiences of subjectivity.

Indisciplinarity and free translation have been generated out of the communicative and material tactics of Forms of Resistance. However, we foresee that these may be instantiated differently (or ‘resituated’³⁹) within other examples and future work. This is only one example of how design might query, intensify, break down and reconfigure established sensible and social/political orders. In this, Forms of Resistance can be understood not only as a ‘community of sense’ but as a ‘dissensual community’, in which communities of translators (designers) and storytellers (participants) interrupt experiences configured within a dominant, pre-established sensory world. As such, it is also perhaps an example of the radical shift in political discourse around the terms of ‘democracy’ – indeed, Jesko Fezer proposes this political project as one of design:

“For Mouffe, the major obstacle to democratic politics, that is, to politics based on conflict and contradiction, lies particularly in neoliberalism’s self-image: its fundamental assertion that there is no alternative to the existing order. She calls for a common symbolic space that would facilitate confrontation. To create such a space would be a design task in the widest possible sense of the term.”⁴⁰

Concluding Remarks

The problematic of participation that we have explored here resonates with more general issues in design and design research. Contemporary formulations of design oriented toward society and the public realm take place in relation to heterogeneous conditions and contexts. While early Participatory Design found a common ground within a shared space/time frame of the workplace, the times/spaces of contemporary practices are often distributed widely and unevenly (for example, as the ‘immaterial production of goods’⁴¹). While there was a certain common ground within the social democratic premise of organized labor in Scandinavia, participation in design today may involve more diverse socio-cultural practices, distances between social locations, and political regimes. The role of the designer and researcher simply cannot be pre-constituted, nor its terms of participation. Design must be queried at the ‘political frontier’, in which other, situated forms of knowledge are embodied in social- and change-oriented practices. Concepts such as ‘dissensus’ open onto a range under-explored issues and approaches that may be interrogated within and through design research.

However, our approach raises further issues about the politics of design research. Practice-based research approaches, such as that exemplified here, develop theory in the context of design practice, through active de/construction of theoretical concepts brought into practice as well as the generation of new concepts from within practice. In this, we argue that the challenge is not only to understand and incorporate critical-political theories from without, but to build an intellectual basis for design on the basis of its own modes of operation.⁴² However, *Forms of Resistance* surfaces the problematic (and perhaps contradiction) of claiming a role for design, of strengthening its intellectual and ideological foundations, by means of which it is differentiated and defined as a discipline, apart from others, in terms resonant with those of in/exclusion, authority and power.

In response, we argue that a critical role of the design researcher is to better understand his or her sensitivities, relativities and limits in situ, in relation to other forms of experience, knowledge and practice. This is not merely about recognizing others, which might echo an ethics of cultural pluralism, but, as Ross Birrell⁴³ has argued, a more political, or disruptive and even destructive, form of indisciplinaryity. In the area of artistic research, related arguments are made as, for example, Kathrin Busch articulates how art might function to disturb both its own and other established knowledge structures, to reveal innate power structures through forms of knowledge and practice that are ambivalent, incommensurable, and singular.⁴⁴ Arguing for the potential of an interdisciplinary space of action to facilitate “democracy of experience”,⁴⁵ we seek to develop a non-hierarchical design research that leads into the ‘de-compartmentalization of each discipline’.⁴⁶ We do not posit a new discipline, category or genre of design, but argue for increased criticality – and dissensus – in contemporary practices of design and design research.

Acknowledgements

The *Forms of Resistance* project was developed by Mahmoud Keshavarz during 2010–2011 with participants Samaneh Abedini, Delaram Ali, Hoda Aminian, Elnaz Ansari, Parvin Ardalan, Azadeh Faramarziha, Setareh Hashemi, Andrea Hjalmarsson, Nahid Jafari, K.K., Helena Parsmo, Maryam Rahmani, Maziar Rezai, Trifa Shakely, Maryam Zandi and as a collaboration between the ‘Change for Equality Campaign’ in Iran and, in Sweden, ‘Ain’t I A Woman’ in Gothenburg and the Interactive Institute in Stockholm. Jenny Althoff, Christina Zetterlund and Ramia Mazé were the main advisors of the project, which was conducted as a master’s thesis project at Konstfack College of Arts, Crafts and Design. Thanks to Konstfack and to the Helge Ax:son Johnsons Foundation in Stockholm for a grant that supported part of the field work. Further reflection on the project and the writing of this paper by the authors have been supported by the *Forms of Sustainability* project at the

Interactive Institute, which was funded by the Swedish Research Council (project number 2008–2257). We are grateful to Johan Redström for his comments on a draft of this paper.

Notes

1. See, for example, Magnus Ericson and Ramia Mazé (eds.) *DESIGN ACT: Socially and politically engaged design today*. Berlin: Sternberg Press/laspis, 2011; Ramia Mazé and Johan Redström, Difficult Forms: Critical practices of design and research. *Research Design Journal*, 1 (1). 2009, 28–39.
2. Liz Sanders and G. K. Van Patter, in conversation, 'Science in the making: Understanding generative research now!', NextDesign Leadership Institute (NextD), 2004: www.nestd.org/02/05/01/contents.htm, accessed august 2011.
3. Guy Bonsiepe, *Design and democracy*, *Design Issues*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2006, 27–34.
4. David Stairs, *Altruism as design methodology*, *Design Issues*, vol 21, no 2, 2005, 3–12.
5. For example, see Erling Björgvinsson, Pelle Ehn, Anders-Per Hillgren, *Participatory Design and 'Democratizing Innovation'*, Proceedings of Participatory Design Conference, Sydney, Australia, December 2010; Victor Margolin and Sylvia Margolin, *A "social model" of design: Issues of practice and research*, *Design Issues*, vol 18, no 4, 2002, 24–30; Sanders and Van Patter, in conversation, 'Science in the making!'.
6. Markus Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation: Cross bench praxis as a mode of criticality*. Sternberg Press, 2010, 20.
7. Carl DiSalvo, *Design, democracy and agonistic pluralism*, Proceedings of the Design Research Society Conference 2010, Montreal, 2010, 6.
8. Susanne Bødker, *Creating conditions for participation: Conflicts and resources in systems design*, *Human-Computer Interaction*, 11, 1996, 215–236.
9. For example, see Gro Bjercknes, Pelle Ehn, Morten Kyng (eds.) *Computers and Democracy: A Scandinavian Challenge*. Aldershot: Avebury, 1983.
10. For example, see Joan Greenbaum and Morten Kyng (eds.) *Design at Work: Cooperative design of computer systems*, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991, 169–196.
11. Pelle Ehn, *Participation in design things*, Proceedings of Participatory Design Conference, Bloomington, Indiana, USA, 2008.
12. Judith Gregory, *Scandinavian approaches to participatory design*. *International Journal of Engineering Education* vol. 19, no. 1, 2003, 64.
13. Pelle Ehn, *Work-Oriented Design of Computer Artifacts*. Stockholm: Arbetslivscentrum, 1988.

14. Jacques Rancière and Davide Panagia, *Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière*. *Diacritics* vol. 30, no. 2, Summer 2000, 125.
15. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*. London/New York: Verso, 2000.
16. For example, see Morten Kyng, *Users and computers: a contextual approach to design of computer artifacts*, *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems*, vol. 10, no. 1–2, 1998; Pelle Ehn, *Scandinavian design: on participation and skill*, in D. Schuler and A. Namioka (eds.) *Participatory Design: Principles and Practices*, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1993; Judith Gregory, *Scandinavian Approaches to Participatory Design*. *International Journal of Engineering Education*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2003.
17. Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*. London/New York: Verso, 1993.
18. Jacques Rancière, *Introducing Disagreement*. *ANGELAKI Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2004, 7.
19. Indeed, Rancière states: “From here it is possible to understand how consensus is able to engender new forms of identitarian passion. The core of consensus lies in suppressing supernumerary political subjects, the people surplus to the breaking down of the population into parts, the subjectivations of class conflict superimposed onto conflicts of interest between parts of the population. At the core of consensus is the dream of an administration of affairs in which all forms of symbolising the common, and thus all conflicts over that symbolisation, have been liquidated as ideological spectres” (*Introducing Disagreement*, p. 7–8). He goes further to argue that consensus endangers the very possibility of democracy itself.
20. For example, see Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*; Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*.
21. Chantal Mouffe, *Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism*. Vienna: Institute for Higher Education, 2000, 103.
22. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum Press, 2004.
23. Jürgen Habermas’ *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Boston: Beacon. 1981) criticizes the consequences of modernism which brought about representative democracy in our societies. He argues that democratic public life cannot develop where matters of public are not discussed by citizens. Calling for an ‘ideal speech situation’, in which participants have the same capacities of discourse and their words are not confused by ideology or other errors, he maintains that truth is what would be agreed upon within an idea speech situation. Within design discourse, Ehn (*Work-Oriented Design*) discusses a communicative

- action model based on the Habermasian idea of democracy within work-oriented design. This also shows how an idea in the political sphere was already taken for granted in design discourse, in this case as an argument for participatory design, though design scholars today are moving away from that idea and model for democracy. For example, see Thomas Binder, Giorgio De Michelis, Pelle Ehn, Giulio Jacucci, Per Linde and Ina Wagner, *Design Things*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011.
24. Rancière argues: "This is precisely why politics cannot be identified with the model of communicative action, since this model presupposes the partners in communicative exchange to be pre-constituted and that the discursive forms of exchange imply a speech community whose constraint is always explicable. In contrast, the particular feature of political dissensus is that the partners are no more constituted than is the object or the very scene of discussion. Those making visible the fact that they belong to a shared world that the other does not see cannot take advantage of the logic implicit to a pragmatics of communication. The worker who argues for the public nature of a 'domestic' matter (such as a salary dispute) must indicate the world in which his argument counts as an argument and must demonstrate it as such for those who do not possess a frame of reference to conceive of it as argument. Political argument is at one and the same time the *demonstration* of a possible world where the argument could count as argument, addressed by a subject qualified to argue, upon an identified object, to an addressee who is required to see the object and to hear the argument that he or she 'normally' has no reason to either see or hear. It is the construction of a paradoxical world that relates two separate worlds." Jacques Rancière, *Ten Theses on Politics*. Theory and Event, vol. 5, no. 3. 2001, 10.
 25. Dave Beech, *Don't Look Now: Art after Viewer and Beyond Participation*. In Jeni Walwin (ed.) Searching for Art's New Publics. Intellect Pub, 2010, 27.
 26. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*.
 27. Mahmoud Keshavarz, *Opening the Space of Experience: On Political Forms of Aesthetics in Design*, Proceedings of International European Academy of Design conference, Porto, Portugal, 2011.
 28. Christopher Frayling, *Research in Art and Design*. Royal College of Art Research Papers vol. 1, no. 1, 1993–4, 2.
 29. Eva Brandt et al., *Xlab*, Copenhagen: The Danish Design School Press, 2011.
 30. Mahmoud Keshavarz, *Forms of Resistance: the political and re-situated design*, MFA thesis in Experience Design, Konstfack University College of Arts, Craft and Design, Stockholm. 2011.

31. See my diaries in Keshavarz, *Forms of Resistance: the political and re-situated design*.
32. See Jacques Rancière, *Thinking between disciplines: an aesthetics of knowledge*. Trans. Jon Roffe. *PARRHESIA: Journal of Critical Philosophy*, no. 1, 2006, 1–12; Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetic community, Aesthetic Separation*. *Art & Research* vol. 2, no.1, summer 2.
33. Jacques Rancière and Steve Corcoran, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. London: Continuum, 2011.
34. Chantal Mouffe, *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Space*, *Art & Research*, vol.1, no. 2, summer 2007, 5.
35. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetic Community, Aesthetic Separation*, *Art & Research* vol. 2.
36. Walter Benjamin argues that translation is an irrelevant and inappropriate task. Translation is a mortal act, which is the result of a contemporary and mortality fact itself. The translator clearly exists, and the light of the content (text) crosses through her body and language, but the cracks and shortcomings of her language are visible as well. “The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect [intention] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original,” *The Task of The Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire’s Tableaux Parisiens*, in Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt (eds.) *Illuminations: Reflections and Essay*. London: Pimlico, 1999.
37. Otto Von Busch, *Fashion-able: Hacktivism and engaged fashion design*. PhD dissertation, School of Design and Crafts at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, 2008.
38. Previously, I have used the term ‘bad translation’ to explaining my idea of translation borrowed from Benjamin (for example, Keshavarz, *Forms of Resistance*). Now, I prefer to use the term ‘free translation’. The idea still is the same, but this term may better avoid the misunderstanding of the term as ‘bad’ in the sense of ‘improper’. Instead, I understand this kind of translation as a ‘good’ thing. Moreover, ‘free translation’ resonates with related ideas in poetry, in which the translation of a poem is not possible except by engaging in a more free-form translation by another poet in the destination language. In effect, another poet in another language translates the poem of the original to create a third poem, which is related to my idea of storytellers and translators.
39. Mahmoud Keshavarz, *Forms of Resistance: the political and re-situated design*.
40. Jesko Fezer, *Design for Post-Neoliberal city*, *e-flux journal*, no. 17, June-August 2010, 2.
41. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude*, New York: Penguin, 2004, 103–115.

42. Magnus Ericson and Ramia Mazé (eds.) *DESIGN ACT*; Ramia Mazé and Johan Redström, Difficult Forms.
43. Birrell, Ross, Jacques Rancière and The (Re)Distribution of the Sensible: Five Lessons in Artistic Research, *Art & Research*, vol. 2, No. 1, summer 2008.
44. Kathrin Bush, *Artistic Research and the Poetics of Knowledge*, in Dieter Lesage and Kathrin Busch (eds.) *A Portrait of the Artist as a Researcher*, *AS Mediatijdschrift/Visual Culture Quarterly*, no. 179, 2007, 41.
45. Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta, and Tere Vadén, *Artistic Research: Theories, Methods and Practices*. Helsinki: Academy of Fine Arts, 2005.
46. Mahmoud Keshavarz, *Forms of Resistance: the political and re-situated design*.