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## SPECULATIVE SPACES OF DEMOCRACY. DESIGN AT A TURNING POINT\*

**Abstract.** Design, often unreflectively, transmits role models and values, hence it is unavoidably political. Thus, design is an effective force in shaping not only material culture, but also societal values and human behavior. Design as a “critical practice” appears for instance in the context of social engagement, political activism, or civil disobedience. This paper is concerned with speculative as well as activist dimensions of design both as social action and political agency. The central question is what role speculative design activism can play *in* and *for* an open, inclusive and therefore socially sustainable society. I will discuss how to envisage designerly strategies and practices in politics and political strategies in design. This shall help us to derive arguments for the (not least socially and politically) transformative potential of design.

**Keywords.** Activism, Democracy, Design Research, Discursive Design, Speculative Design.

The design of things, namely products, technologies, services, systems, virtual worlds and tangible objects automatically transmits role models and values. Design and the images it disseminates, often unreflectively, are hence unavoidably political<sup>1</sup>. Thus, design is

\* This paper is an abbreviated and revised version of my book *Design (& Activism. Perspectives on Design as Activism and Activism as Design* (ed. by T. Bieling, Milan, Mimesis International, 2019) as part of the DRLab book series «Design Meanings», and the chapter *Design and the Politics of the Everyday*, in Michael Erlhoff and Maziar Rezai's book *Design and Democracy. New Critical Perspectives* (ed. by M. Erlhoff, M. Rezai, Basel, Birkhäuser, 2020,

an effective force in shaping not only material culture, but also societal values and human behavior<sup>2</sup>. Design as a “critical practice” appears for instance in the context of social engagement, political activism, or civil disobedience<sup>3</sup>. This paper is concerned with speculative as well as activist dimensions of design both as «social action and political agency»<sup>4</sup>. The central question is what role speculative design activism can play *in* and *for* an open, inclusive and therefore socially sustainable society<sup>5</sup>. To substantiate my arguments, I shall first provide some theoretical background for understanding the meaning of the concepts “speculative” and “activist” – especially in a design context. Based on that, I will discuss how to envisage designerly strategies and practices in politics and political strategies in design<sup>6</sup>. Design has always been an important part of political articulation, while at the same time the role of design in social and political movements has always been ambivalent, which makes it difficult to «Simply associate design either with the inhumane or with

pp. 57-68). It was developed during my visiting professorship at the Design Research Lab of the University of Trento.

<sup>1</sup> In this context, “political” refers to action that influences the community. Not only in the recent design discourses, there has been failures to distinguish between the political and politics. As Toni Fry states: «Politics is an institutionalised practice exercised by individuals, organisations and states, while the political exists as a wider sphere of activity embedded in the directive structures of a society and in the conduct of humans as ‘political animals’. Politics effectively takes place in the sphere of the political wherein the agency of things – material and immaterial – is determined and exercised as they are perceived, and become directly or indirectly influenced, by a political ideology. There has been a general societal perceptual failure to distinguish between the political and politics, in large part because, as Claude Lefort has pointed out, the latter acts to conceal the nature of the former.», T. FRY, *Design as Politics*, London, Berg, 2010, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> M. ERICSON, R. MAZÉ, *Design Act. Socially and politically engaged Design today: critical roles and emerging tactics*, Berlin, Sternberg, 2011, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> B. MAGRINI, *Beyond mere Tools*, in D. Landwehr (hrsg. v.), *Political Interventions*, Basel, Christoph Merian Verl., 2014, pp. 140-51: p. 144.

<sup>4</sup> G. JULIER, *Design activism as a tool for creating new urban narratives*, in *Changing the Change. Design, Visions, Proposals and Tools*. Proc. of the Conference (Turin, 10-12 July 2008), Torino, Allemandi, 2008, pp. 813-822: p. 814.

<sup>5</sup> E. MANZINI, *Politics of the Everyday (Designing in Dark Times)*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> C. MOUFFE, *Artistic Strategies in Politics and Political Strategies in Art*, in *Design (&) Activism*, cit., pp. 53-59: p. 55.

the humanistic and ethical side»<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless (speculative) Design (Activism) works to disrupt social relations, hierarchies and power structures. Here, I propose to critically discuss the matter of activist/social movements, and possibly scrutinize the role of design (or more general: the role of the “artefact”). At this point, the circle closes to the relationship between design and democracy mentioned in the title. For the – not least social – question(s) of power in design apply top-down as well as bottom-up. Eventually this shall help us to derive arguments for the (not least socially and politically) transformative potential of design<sup>8</sup>.

### 1. *Design and Democracy*

Democracy<sup>9</sup> and design form an interwoven relationship that is difficult to separate. Just as design comes into its own through use<sup>10</sup>, a democratic society without a public sphere is hardly conceivable. And both are all the more true if one considers democratically conditioned design aspects such as access to information, participation, codetermination and the associated negotiation processes between collective and individual. There is reason to believe that design takes (or can take) an important role in the social fabric by affecting, motivating, arguing or even preventing social forms of behaviour and role distributions through its artefacts – in the form of products, services or interventions<sup>11</sup>. Consequently, a central responsibility of

<sup>7</sup> M. ERLHOFF, *Yellow Submarines – Design against Normality and Information*, ivi, pp. 47-52: p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. A. FUAD-LUKE, *Beautiful Strangeness revisited – Generative, disruptive, fabulative, design-led Activism*, in *Design (&) Activism*, cit., pp. 173-188; and T. MARKUSSEN, *The impure Politics of Design Activism*, ivi, pp. 35-46.

<sup>9</sup> Etymologically the term “democracy” (from the ancient Greek *demos*, people; *krátos*, power/violence/rule) goes back to the principle of power emanating from the people (rule of the people). A term that is in turn closely linked to three other terms: freedom, equality and justice. Although the concept of justice is very complex in itself and a question of viewpoint (e.g. liberal vs. socialist understanding of justice), it also becomes clear how closely these concepts are linked to the understanding of social innovation.

<sup>10</sup> U. BRANDES *et al.*, *Design by Use: The Everyday Metamorphosis of Things. Board of International Research in Design*, Basel, Birkhäuser, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> T. BIELING (hrsg. v.), *Gender (&) Design. Positionen zur Vergeschlechtlichung in Gestaltungskulturen*, Milan, Mimesis, 2020.

designers lies in the fact that they inevitably create social<sup>12</sup> contexts. In other words: Design influences the form(s) in which a society arranges its coexistence.

The source of strength for the continued existence of democratic communities lies not least in the permanent reinterpretation and further development of the concept of “the public”, and not least in the appropriation and bordercrossing<sup>13</sup> of public spaces for discourse and action by changing actors. This applies even more against the background of numerous attacks on democracy, which are currently increasing in many places – even where democracy has long seemed unshakable<sup>14</sup>. Especially in times in which complexity often seems to be overwhelming on the one hand, and (fake) oversimplification, fear and superficiality in hyper-accelerated media on the other, threaten democracy<sup>15</sup>.

From this perspective, the implications of everyday politics also reveal the potential for what Manzini calls “Project-centered Democracy”<sup>16</sup>, in which the projective and pragmatic nature of design is exploited in order to initiate ideas for a better future (“making things happen”) and at the same time to prototype such futures, which means to take them a bit closer into the present in order to develop a sense of what the future might actually look like, or even better: how it might feel. This applies even more, as it is «Design’s ability to operate through ‘things’ and ‘systems’ that makes it particularly suitable for dealing with contemporary societal, economic and environmental issues»<sup>17</sup>. Manzini describes the necessity for cultural change that can be propelled by a new awareness in society and by establishing new models of behavior<sup>18</sup>. Design can play an

<sup>12</sup> The concept “social” is understood here in its general sense as concerning what is common and related to aspects of cohabitation and coexistence.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. B. HOIDN, *Demo: Polis – The Right to Public Space*, in *Design (&) Activism*, cit., pp. 87-96.

<sup>14</sup> V. MARGOLIN, E. MANZINI, *Open Letter to the Design Community: Stand Up For Democracy*, Chicago, 5 March 2017.

<sup>15</sup> K. KROIS, *Make Transformation tangible*, Introduction to the *By Design or by Disaster* Conference (Bozen/Bolzano, 11-14 April 2019), conference paper.

<sup>16</sup> MANZINI, *Politics of the Everyday (Designing in Dark Times)*, cit.

<sup>17</sup> A. FUAD-LUKE, *Design activism: beautiful strangeness for a sustainable world*, London, Earthscan, 2009, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> MANZINI, *Leapfrog – designing sustainability*, «Domus», 01, 1997, pp. 43-51.

important role here in that its artifacts can create awareness and can motivate alternative patterns of behavior. As such, design is required to reflect on the scope of its actions and on the responsibility of the designed artifact's possible effects<sup>19</sup>.

## 2. *Designing as Activist Practice*

Over the last decades, the number, diversity and vigour of popular movements has increased<sup>20</sup> and the world has witnessed a global rise of a comparably new activism, in which political protest often takes the form of impulsive, non-institutional, mass action<sup>21</sup>. Frequently empowered by networked communication these social protest movements (and individuals) manage to succeed in interrupting established systems of power<sup>22</sup>. The increasing use of designerly tools, creative methods and artistic expressions by these movements sometimes culminates in a kind of *artivism*<sup>23</sup> or what Peter Weibel calls *performative democracy*<sup>24</sup> which he considers to be perhaps the twenty-first century's first new art form<sup>25</sup>.

In recent years, under the banner of design activism, an emerging and increasingly popular approach to the intersection between civic engagement and various facets of sustainability is being

<sup>19</sup> T. BIELING *et al.*, *Social Dimensions of Design Research*, «Baltic Horizons», 21/118, 2013 (EuroAcademy Series Art & Design, Euroakadeemia, Tallinn, Estonia, II. *Social, ethical and political Aspects of Research in Design*), pp. 35-40: p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> T. HARDING, *The Video Activist Handbook*, London, Pluto, 2019, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> P. WEIBEL (ed. by), *Global Activism. Art and Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Cambridge (MA)-London, ZKM Karlsruhe and MIT Press, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> A combination of the words "art" and "activism". Currently most well-known representatives are artist-/activist-groups such as *Zentrum für politische Schönheit* ("political beauty"), *Tools for Action*, *Peng Collective*, *Enmedio*, *Etoy*, *Jody*, *Dashndem*, *the Yes Men* or some of the works by John Jordan, James Bridle, Artúr van Balen, Liam Young, and Ai Weiwei. Cf. W. ULLRICH, T. BIELING, *Die Kunst als fünfte Gewalt im Staat? Ein Gespräch über Artivismus*, «Die Referentin – Kunst und kulturelle Nahversorgung», 5, 2016, pp. 10-13.

<sup>24</sup> «A new form of public art is emerging, namely public politics. We are witnessing the evolution of a 'performative democracy'», WEIBEL (ed. by), *Global Activism – Art and Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, cit., p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

pushed into the foreground. Assembled under this concept are various activities that share the outlook that design can and should create socially, politically, economically and ecologically sustainable processes.

Ann Thorpe defines activism as «taking intentional action to instigate change on behalf of a neglected group»<sup>26</sup>. Social change should be supported here in that challenges to society can be addressed within a community and can thus receive more public attention. This perspective on the social sustainability of design makes use of methods that do not touch upon the societal consensus but are rather often disruptive and provocative, to make some of the social wrongs clear by other means. According to Ann Thorpe, design directly borrows techniques from activist practices and develops them further<sup>27</sup>. Design activism wishes to develop a “counter narrative” to demonstrate alternative proposals for the future and to furthermore provide impetus for their implementation<sup>28</sup>. In doing so, design activism uses the «language of design to address, provoke and create political debate. Instead of solving problems in the manner of industrial design, or organizing forms as in graphic design, activist design might create a series of questions or proposals using artefacts or media for unresolved ends: to provoke, or question, or experiment in search of new political conditions. It might use and enrich different tools located in the field of visual communications, material cultures or practices of social, political and campaigning movements and organizations. The point of these artefacts is contestation, discourse and action, not a tidy fix»<sup>29</sup>.

### 3. *Design as Speculative Practice*

This raises attention to the discursive, critical and fictional practices of design, as historical and present strategies of civil rebellion often

<sup>26</sup> A. THORPE, *Design as activism: A conceptual tool*, in *Changing the Change*, cit., pp. 1523-1535: p. 1524.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> BIELING *et al.*, *Die soziale Dimension*, in K.-S. Fuhs *et al.* (hrsg. v.), *Die Geschichte des nachhaltigen Designs*, Bad Homburg, VAS, 2014, pp. 218-229.

<sup>29</sup> S. HENDREN, *Notes on Design Activism*, Accessible Icon, 2015 <<http://accessibleicon.org/#notes-on-design-activism>; accessed 03/2020>.

come along with a narrative, speculative and interrogative design methodology. In the recent years, a growing number of research and knowledge fields from within and beyond design research have been devoting themselves to “questioning” design, representing approaches such as “Critical Design”, “Speculative Design”, “Design for Debate”<sup>30</sup>, “Design Fiction”<sup>31</sup>, or “Discursive Design”<sup>32</sup> in which it is primarily a matter of underpinning social, cultural, technical or economic controversies and debates with the help of “critical”, “speculative” artifacts. These do not necessarily have to be functional, real design objects. Rather, the approach of a critical, speculative design consists in stimulating social discourses with the help of fictitious artifacts<sup>33</sup>.

These – sometimes fabulative<sup>34</sup> – complexes form an epistemic confrontation with different hypothetical futures, which are actively dealt with by design, and which are subsumed as design for debate to trigger discussions. Within these, future scenarios can be developed, and speculative possibilities can be experienced sensually – a method of combining abstract scenarios and comprehensible mod-

<sup>30</sup> A. DUNNE, F. RABY, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> A. COLES, *EP, 2. Design Fiction*, Berlin, Sternberg, 2016; SDN-SWISS DESIGN NETWORK (hrsg. v.), *Negotiating futures. Design fiction. Proc. of the 6<sup>th</sup> SDN Symposium* (Basel, 28-30 Oktober 2010), Basel, Swiss Design Network, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> B.M. THARPE, S.M. THARPE, *Discursive Design: Critical, Speculative, and Alternative Things*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2019. Similar approaches circulate among the concepts of “Design for Provocation” in S. BARDZELL *et al.*, *Critical Design and Critical Theory: The Challenge of Designing for Provocation*, in *Proceedings of the Designing Interactive Systems Conference. DIS '12*, New York, ACM, 2012, pp. 288-297; or “Provocative Design”, in D. OZKARAMANLI, P. DESMET, *Provocative design for unprovocative designers: Strategies for triggering personal dilemmas*. Proceedings of DRS-Design Research Society 50th Anniversary Conference (Brighton, UK, June 27-30, 2016), conference paper.

<sup>33</sup> Speculative and interrogative Design is not to be seen as an objective, but rather as a “reframing” tool, whose primary goal is not to generate “solutions”, but to put alternative futures up for discussion. The narratives conveyed may appear dystopian, but at the same time open up positive visions, which might inevitably pave the way for solving present or future challenges.

<sup>34</sup> D.K. ROSNER, *Critical Fabulations: Reworking the Methods and Margins of Design*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2018.

els, this kind of design thinking and acting has meanwhile been used in design studios, departments and agencies<sup>35</sup>.

While initially many of such approaches had often been located in galleries or universities, not least in the context of recent public protest movements we can observe tendencies of manifesting themselves in real-life context, also being able to intervene there. Other than the – often elitist, abstract critical/speculative design projects that have no real impact, these seem to offer opportunities for collaborative approaches with and amongst different communities.

#### 4. *Political expression and collaborative approaches*

There is of course a difficult position, minorities, the socially weak, peripheral regions, and people or topics that “have no lobby” are often confronted with. As Heissenbüttel states «democracy aside, they remain underrepresented in a dual sense, because their concerns are not sufficiently visible, and they lack representation of their interests. [...] The first step for mobilizing the public consists of drawing attention to a topic»<sup>36</sup>. Designerly (sometimes artistic) use of methods, tools, products and materials might help people in expressing themselves, communicating with a wider public, and building up as well as supporting networks inside and outside social movements<sup>37</sup>. Some popular examples we find in the distinctive images of resistance – posters, graphics, stickers, t-shirts, memes, street art, paintings, murals on walls, that hold a prominent place in the world’s visual heritage. Yet, the visual culture seems a bit like an obvious, almost classic design field of operation. Of course, design engages not only with graphic or physical forms, but also architectural, explorative or strategic, among other forms. It encompasses not only visual or tangible objects, but also user interfaces, infor-

<sup>35</sup> C. ZÖLLNER, *From Fiction to Action – Design im Ausnahmezustand, Project Documentation*, Halle a.d. Saale, Burg Giebichenstein, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> D. HEISSENBÜTTEL, *Protests everywhere?*, in *Global Activism – Art and Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, cit., pp. 462-482: p. 474.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. M.R. ZİK, *Raising Resistance: Reinterpreting Art within the Gezi Movement*, in *Global Activism – Art and Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, cit., pp: 535-543: p. 536.

mation architectures<sup>38</sup>, public spaces, or service structures. Amongst these fields design has the potential to provoke strong, controversial, or subtle social reactions, covering a broad range of expression. We have seen many of these more recently, in the protest movements from *Occupy* to *Gezi*, from *Tahrir* to *G20*, from Artúr van Balen/Tools for Action's *Inflatables* to the Hong Kong *Umbrella Movement*.

A prominent feature of many of these actions and movements is the extensive use of design strategies and artistic practices – on a rhetorical level often combined with humor, satire and irony, and on a technical level operating with state-of-the-art (social) media, documentation and distribution channels. This obviously embraces more functions than a mere communication strategy. Another characteristic feature of these movements is the collaborative approach. Often “professionals” and “non-professionals” (e.g. in terms of political or design-professional experience) act together and learn from each other. Sometimes not least driven by designers providing appropriate tools and formats, which can be regarded as both a social and technological phenomenon.

## 5. Transformative Potential of Design

Against this background, one of the central potentials of design is to develop concepts for sustainable, resilient, inclusive and socially equitable processes and, at the same time, to make them accessible, comprehensible and experienceable (as prototypes or “real products”)<sup>39</sup>. For behind the visible things that surround us there is an invisible, social dimension<sup>40</sup>, and we are inevitably involved in shaping this, too – whether consciously or unconsciously. Thus, we have a mirror situation: On the one hand, we have an effect on the envi-

<sup>38</sup> P. ANTONELLI, J. HUNT, *Design and Violence*, New York, MoMa, 2015, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. T. BIELING, *Inklusion als Entwurf. Teilhabe orientierte Forschung über, für und durch Design*. Board of International Research in Design, Basel, Birkhäuser, 2019; and Id., *Design and Inclusion – An Approach to Aspects of Integrative Design*, in R. Michel (ed.), *Integrative Design: Essays and Projects*. Board of International Research in Design, Basel, Birkhäuser, 2019, pp. 97-112.

<sup>40</sup> L. BURCKHARDT, *Design ist unsichtbar, Entwurf, Gesellschaft und Pädagogik*, Berlin, Schmitz, 2012.

ronment. On the other hand, the changed environment has an effect on us. Here, reciprocal processes of transformation can be identified. This is not least one of the initial positions for the concept of Transformation Design.

Transformation Design<sup>41</sup> focuses on recent social developments towards a more sustainable, socially fair and inclusive way of life, work and production. It questions both the consumption and production patterns of late-capitalist growth societies from a cultural, social, technological and ecological point of view and initiates corresponding processes of change from the perspective of consumers or users. It describes the search for new ways of changing behavior and thus provoking a change in society on the basis of new forms of design discourse and design practice. Not least, it underlines a kind of paradigm shift, that runs as follows: get rid of a “user-centred” (or even worse: consumer-centred) Design and focus on a rather community- or society-centred Design instead<sup>42</sup>. A tendency, which has been identified by some protagonists from within and beyond design research as a “social turn” – with a broad variety of labels such as *Social Design*<sup>43</sup>, *Design for Social Innovation*<sup>44</sup>, *Transition Design*<sup>45</sup>, or what Bazon Brock and Lucius Burckhardt discussed as *Socio-Design* in the 1970s<sup>46</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> W. JONAS, S. ZERWAS, K. VON ANSHELM, *Transformation Design – Perspectives on a New Design Attitude. Board of International Research in Design*, Basel, Birkhäuser, 2015; B. SOMMER, H. WELZER, *Transformationsdesign – Wege in eine zukunftsfähige Moderne*, München, Oekom, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> T. BIELING, *Designing Utopia – Designers as Catalysts for Transformation*, «Designabilities Design Research Journal», 5, 2019 <<https://tinyurl.com/y6ampxfr>; accessed August 2019>.

<sup>43</sup> C. Banz (ed.), *Social Design – Gestalten für die Transformation der Gesellschaft*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2016.

<sup>44</sup> E. MANZINI, *Design Research for Sustainable Social Innovation*, in M. Ralf (ed. by), *Design Research Now*, Basel, Birkhäuser, 2007, pp. 233-245.

<sup>45</sup> T. IRWIN, *Transition Design: A Proposal for a New Area of Design Practice*, «Study and Research. Design and Culture Journal», 9, 2015, pp. 229-246. Cf. also T. IRWIN, G. KOSOFF, C. TONKINWISE, *Transition Design: An Educational Framework for Advancing the Study and Design of Sustainable Transitions*, 6th International Sustainability Transitions Conference (Univ. of Sussex, UK, 25-28 August 2015), conference paper.

<sup>46</sup> B. BROCK, *Ästhetik als Vermittlung – Arbeitsbiographie eines Generalisten*, Ostfildern, DuMont, 1985, p. 446.

This surely also raises the question, what roles the «personal value systems of designers play in the design process and its methods. Should they be suppressed in favor of enabling the widest possible range of diverse perspectives?»<sup>47</sup>, which might be in itself an ideological program<sup>48</sup>. Obviously, what exactly political design is, what it wants and can accomplish, is always an object of a wider social negotiation<sup>49</sup>.

## 6. *Speculative Spaces of Democracy*

In urban contexts this can often be localized in public space. A space that continues to be the venue for protests and that is currently in an increasing hybridization with virtual space, which in turn brings with it its own mechanisms for disseminating information and at the same time adopts practiced strategies and viewing habits.

Design and its conceptual, functional, aesthetic, speculative and interventional concepts can assert an oppositional public sphere<sup>50</sup>, it can actively interfere in common definitions, understandings and opinion making, and it can create effective outrage through critical, alternative and interrogative concepts, thoughts, and prototypes. Here, it becomes obvious how many (different) actors have to sit at the same table in order to really be able to take action against the multiple crises of our time. The grassroots movement alone is not enough; new alliances are needed. Bottom-up and top-down must cross. Municipal governments, non-profit companies and NGOs must work together with citizens' initiatives and activists. There is no doubt that terms such as "collaboration" and "participation" are

<sup>47</sup> W. JONAS, *Social Transformation Design as a form of Research Through Design (RTD): Some historical, theoretical, and methodological remarks*, in W. Jonas, S. Zerwas, K. von Anshelm (eds.), *Transformation Design: Perspectives on a New Design Attitude. Board of International Research in Design*, Basel, Birkhäuser, 2015, pp. 114-133.

<sup>48</sup> B. HERLO, A. UNTEIDIG, G. JOOST, *Community Now? Conflicts, Interventions, New Publics*, in *Unfrozen – a Design Research Reader by the Swiss Design Network*, Zürich, Triest, 2018, pp. 215-230: p. 228.

<sup>49</sup> A. HOFFMANN, *Tactics of Appropriating Reality*, in D. Landwehr (hrsg. v.), *Political Interventions*, Edition Digital Culture 1, Basel, Christoph Merian Verl., 2014, pp. 176-185: p. 178f.

<sup>50</sup> Ivi, p. 184.

becoming the focus of interest here at the latest. Of course, new challenges also arise from this.

### 7. *Design and Dissent*

Manzini demands a creation of an environment as “enabling system” here, meaning that design not only provides things, but also creates framework conditions for people and communities to be able to work on their own solutions that lie beyond direct intervention by designers. He calls this “Improving the Space of Possibilities”. A kind of help for self-help, a design as infrastructure, as Pelle Ehn would call it<sup>51</sup>. Such systems of empowerment can exist, for example, in the form of digital or analog platforms, hybrid forms of knowledge exchange, personal networks or the like. Another point that could be of significance here, would be the attempt to support people in their individual or collaborative projects, which also involves teaching them design skills (“Skill Empowerment”). And not least other forms of direct or indirect participation, such as citizen participation platforms, are important here.

All this inevitably raises questions. How do designers currently assess the significance of their work for the state and prospects of democratic development? Who formulates the requirements for this? And what effects does this have on the self-image of the design disciplines? For this it will be necessary to understand the fields of expertise in design in such a way that it is not necessarily a matter of addressing and designing this field of experimentation (in terms of rethinking democratic principles, opening up spaces of articulation and participation), or to support it through symbolic or communicative objects, but perhaps also to actually accept that democratic debate also means that there are different positions that legitimately communicate their interests. Design can be under-

<sup>51</sup> P. EHN, *Design Things and Living Labs. Participatory Design and Design as Infrastructuring*, in M. Botta (a c. di), *Multiple Ways to Design Research. Research cases that reshape the design discipline*, Proc. of the Swiss Design Network Symposium (Lugano, 12-13 November 2009), Milano, Et al. ediz., 2009, pp. 52-64.

stood as an actor in agonistic<sup>52</sup> spaces. Dissent, of course, is an essential part of keeping democratic societies alive. As Milton Glaser states: «Our ability as citizens to voice our opinion is not only our privilege but our responsibility. Without this dialogue, the backbone of what we have fought so desperately for could easily crumble»<sup>53</sup>. Perhaps the task for designers is to actually focus on such concrete conflicts and controversies. Recognizing, involving and acknowledging them in the process of democracy, also means to make an essential contribution to ensuring that democracy does not only function as a structure, but remains an evolutionary, vibrant process. One that provokes and requires practical conflicts and positional disputes, as well as an epistemic<sup>54</sup> (e.g. visual, tangible, informative) representation of both. Undoubtedly this is what design can deliver. And technological progress opens up completely new possibilities here (and at the same time poses dangers).

## 8. Outlook: Fields of Action

To what extent design (activist) projects should be rather classified and valued as design projects or political action, is not always easy to say. In fact, this can often be regarded as part of their strategy,

<sup>52</sup> Carl DiSalvo builds his concept of *Adversarial Design* (MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2012) when examining design through the lens of agonism, a political theory that emphasizes contention as foundational to democracy. See also: C. DiSalvo, *Design, Democracy and Agonistic Pluralism*, in D. Durling (ed.), *Design and Complexity*, Proc. of the Design Research Society Conference (Montreal, 7-9 July 2010), Montreal, Université de Montreal, 2010, pp. 179-176.

Chantal Mouffe has discussed several perspectives on the relations between art/design and politics in terms of two separately constituted fields: the aesthetic dimensions in the political, and the political dimensions in art. Cf. MOUFFE, *Artistic Strategies in Politics and Political Strategies in Art*, cit.

<sup>53</sup> M. GLASER, M. ILIC, *Design of Dissent: Socially and Politically Driven Graphics*, Rockport, Beverley MA, 2015.

<sup>54</sup> Anke Haarmann describes design practice as a speculative-epistemic procedure – a knowledge-generating and future-shaping activity. Cf. A. HAARMANN, *Zum erweiterten Designbegriff*, in D.M. Feige, F. Arnold, M. Rautzenberg (hrsg. v.), *Philosophie des Designs – Schriftenreihe des Weißenhof-Instituts zur Architektur- und Designtheorie*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2020, pp. 214-228: p. 226.

too, because eventually they are both<sup>55</sup>. Understanding and applying such mechanisms, logics and activities of design offers opportunities for ideological engagement – in a good or in a bad sense. This has to be considered especially against the background that the potentials of design/activist mechanisms have meanwhile also been recognized and practiced in anti-democratic movements as a necessary instrument of political struggle. Examining the fields of action in which design practice meets forms of political radicalization will help us to better understand the rituals, structures and meanings of both design and activism, as well as the possibilities and limits of political design decisions. And it shall help us to derive arguments and examples for the transformative potential of future design activism.

Thus, the theoretical as well as the practical development of the above-mentioned fictional concepts of design in an activist context is also consciously critical. In view of the growing number of speculative design projects, their actual social relevance has recently been increasingly questioned. The accusation: too many of these projects arise from a naïve, unreflected attitude, move closer to art than to design and are all too often merely located in galleries, instead of manifesting themselves in actual, everyday use and being able to intervene there<sup>56</sup>. However, we shall consider that the one does not

<sup>55</sup> ULLRICH, BIELING, *Die Kunst als fünfte Gewalt im Staat? – Ein Gespräch über Artivismus*, in «DESIGNABILITIES Design Research Journal», 9, 2017. PDF download [https://designabilities.files.wordpress.com/2017/09/designabilities\\_wolfgangullrich\\_tombieling\\_artivismus\\_sept2016-17.pdf](https://designabilities.files.wordpress.com/2017/09/designabilities_wolfgangullrich_tombieling_artivismus_sept2016-17.pdf). [Full version of a shorter text initially published in ULLRICH, BIELING, *Die Kunst als fünfte Gewalt im Staat? – Ein Gespräch über Artivismus*, cit.]

<sup>56</sup> «There is a lack of general transferability for the various works that are created under the labels design fiction and speculative design at universities and in design studios. They are usually characterized by bulky, avant-garde aesthetics and neither by use or observation comprehensible. The promise to transfer the lost discussion competence of art from the galleries into a broader context, which is more accessible to the public, namely the consumer cosmos of the product world, remains unresolved. After all, debates, which are to be triggered by the use, conversion and appropriation of the designed products, are often pale, because the objects do not allow a real use. The reasons for this are manifold: too bizarre, too complex, fragile [...] This leaves speculative scenarios an intellectual niche sport, a *deduit savant* that is cultivated within a bubble and has hardly any connecting points with a general reality» (ZÖLLNER, *From Fiction to Action – Design im Ausnahmezustand, Project Documentation*, cit., p. 17).

necessarily have to exclude the other. It might surely be possible for designers to generate “tools” or “spaces for empowerment”, and (perhaps precisely because of this) to make existing states critical in question and socially debatable with the help of design. This would also mean that designers can explicitly take political positions with their work.