

DESIGN PARTICIPATION AS POSTDRAMATIC THEATRE

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ABSTRACT

In our struggle to better understand and facilitate design participation we have turned our attention to the novel genre of Postdramatic Theatre (Lehmann 2006). In particular, this paper explores the intersections between Postdramatic Theatre and Participatory Innovation (Buur & Mathews 2008). Two important themes have emerged from this research: The theme of *switching roles* as a negotiation between directing, acting and watching; and the theme of *losing control* as a paradox of planning and improvising. To discuss how these concepts inform the process of participating, we report on theatrical experiments conducted with design students in their exploration of roles and interactions with objects.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the last two decades experimental forms of blending theatre and design have offered powerful techniques towards innovative performances and products. In design, the widespread use of scenarios has demonstrated the value of acting out existing or imagined use situations to create and evaluate ideas for future products (Ehn & Sjogren 1991; Binder 1999).

In Theatre and the Performing Arts, new types of physical props, objects and large scale constructions have been used as a medium to convey *metaphorical meanings independent of the context of use* (Lehmann 2006; Carlson 1996). Technical development has also been manifested on the theatrical stage as audiovisual narration. In this path, video and sound design have been merged into productions to serve the overall

dramaturgy and storyline as an equal or even heightened part of a performance (Carlson 1996).

Although these and a number of other examples illustrate where Design and Theatre meet, in this paper we claim that a more fundamental relation can be drawn between them. We look at their tendency towards participation as a theme from which we see a meaningful research done to entwine.

THEATRE AND DESIGN STRIVE TOWARDS PARTICIPATION

In their own ways, Theatre and Design have developed principles of collaboration. In Figure 1 we compare how different approaches emphasise participation and polyphony in the creative processes.

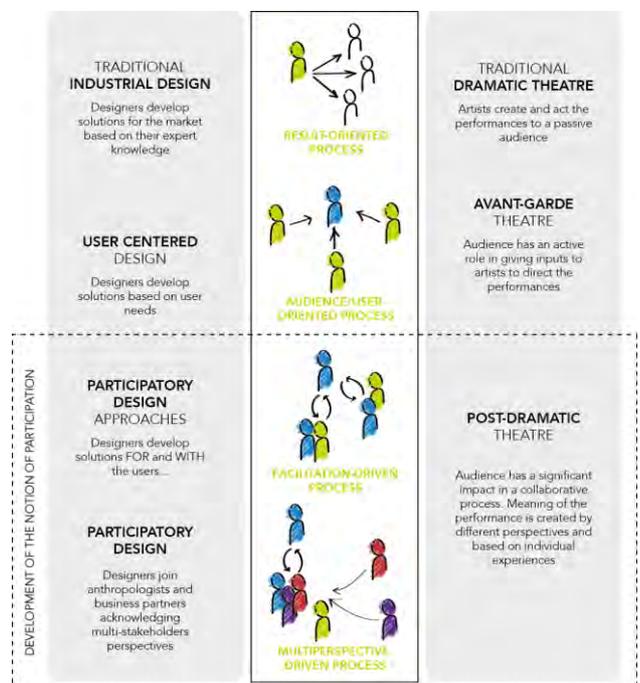


Figure 1. Both Theatre and Design develop formats of participation.

Industrial Design emerged in the mid 18th century from the Industrial Revolution changing how objects were conceived and produced. At that point Design as a practice was called for to allow producers to develop market-specific solutions in contrast to the standard

mass-produced objects. Just like industrial designers were lead to focus on niche markets based on their own ‘expert knowledge’; the 19th century directors and artists in dramatic theatres would strive to create performances by staging dramatic literature to fulfil their artistic visions.

In the early 20th century, the awareness of the value of non-expert interventions gave the concept of ‘audience’ a more active role. In Avant-Garde Theatre the target of performance developed towards engaging audience. However, rather than working in collaboration with participants towards a third common, artists would seek to shock and provoke actions (Carlson 1996). Both User-Centered Design (Norman & Draper 1986) and Avant-Garde Theatre (Carlson 1996; Lehmann 2006) were driven by designers and artists with techniques to grasp users/audience perspectives and provide them with polished creations.

The active participation of users in Design has historical roots in Participatory Design (Schuler & Namioka 1991), later expanded to Participatory Innovation (Buur & Mathews 2008). Participation is seen as a means to ensure that products and innovations emerge from the collective intelligence of all stakeholders.

Many varying theatrical forms of participation have been introduced in the 20th century. Besides Postdramatic forms, the notion of Participatory Theatre is historically attached to the Drama Education and Theatre In Education (Heathcote 1984; Jackson 1980; Rifkin 2010). Theatre activities become participatory to the extent that the leadership and facilitation of the activity is given to the members of the participating group. Another way to understand participation in Theatre comes from the Boalian approach Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal 1995). It has given Participatory Theatre the overt purpose to remove the “fourth wall” which Dramatic Theatre maintains between the audience and the actors on the stage (Rifkin 2010; Boal 1995; Sloman 2011).

POSTDRAMATIC THEATRE

Lehmann (2006) suggests the concept of Postdramatic Theatre to describe a particular genre of theatre in which the audience is given shared ownership of the situational, real-time performance event. Improvisation is essential in enabling Theatre to develop into momentary, non-textual and collaborative forms (Lehmann 2006).

Postdramatic Theatre breaks free of the limitations of Dramatic Theatre, such as time structure, plot and dramatic form, engaging the audience in a presentational form. With a multitude of impressions, it calls for active interpretation and collaborative sense making. Though operating in a collaborative way, it still acknowledges the individual meaning-making. The performance is considered an extended process – the discussion starts before and continues after the happening itself. (Carlson 1996; Lehmann 2006).

From Dramatic Theatre	To Postdramatic Theatre
Artist-based theatre piece	Collaborative social happening
Dramatic narration, conflict	Multi-form narration, lacking conflict
Representational, in fiction	Presentational, real-time
Passive audience, watching	Active participants, experiencing
Text-based, scripted	Can take starting point from anything
Rehearsed, repetitive	Improvisatory, unique event

Table 1. Stylistic differences between the Dramatic and the Postdramatic Theatre.

Table 1 compares the main characteristics of Dramatic and Postdramatic Theatre. While Dramatic Theatre rests in the Aristotelian form of storytelling with a fictional world, plot, archetypal characters, an escalating conflict and a moment of catharsis. Whereas Postdramatic Theatre may operate without pre-set limitations.

A POSTDRAMATIC PERFORMANCE BY DESIGN STUDENTS

This paper draws on the practical work of an intensive two-week seminar on “Object Theatre in Design”, organised by the authors with 16 graduate design students. This exploratory project focused on how formats known from theatre can support designers in understanding product interactions and ultimately to design new forms of interaction. The graduates were split into four teams and each assigned an existing product to re-design: an electronic door sign, a projector remote control, a student desk lamp and a coffee vending machine – all products that featured prominently in a new university building.

The project work was guided through four perspectives: Agency, People, Space, and Movements. By applying these perspectives to the products, we hoped the teams would develop a strong view to social and contextual interactions. Following each of four theatrical workshops, the teams were encouraged to produce a 90-second unedited video to document their experiments. The final assignment was the creation of a



Figure 2. The performance “Life of objects - in four acts” engaged participants to interact with novel design concepts.

Postdramatic Performance (see Figure 2), which would present the redesigned product ideas through a theatrical approach, and engage an external audience in making sense of the performance as well as directly influencing it. The graduates named the performance “Life of Objects - in four acts” in which each of the teams acted out their specific product functionalities and interactions in different explorative ways. The performance was improvised together with the audience – a mix of other students, researchers and administrative staff from the university. Participants experienced the new design concepts through a live performance.

PARTICIPATION AS SWITCHING ROLES AND LOSING CONTROL

The case study leads us to reflect on two crucial aspects of participation that seems to relate to both Design and Theatre. By analysing video recordings from the final performance, we found verification for moments that we have categorized under two themes: *switching roles* and *losing control*.

SWITCHING ROLES - NEGOTIATION BETWEEN DIRECTING, ACTING AND WATCHING

While the students had agreed upon positions and roles to be taken before the performance, an organic negotiation of relations seemed to be going on in the background of the performances. These occurrences, often unnoticed or taken for granted, become part of what we believe constitutes the essential process of designing and performing Postdramatic Theatre. We illustrate these organic role changes in Figure 3: People in the “Life of Object” performance seemed to switch between the three roles Directing, Acting and Watching. These roles contribute on different levels of actions (decision making) and reactions (influencing the performance).

We noticed that the initial roles started rapidly to diffuse and change, once the performance started. For instance, from the design students of “Act I – Outgoing Coffee”, a human sized coffee machine, Figure 3. Three members of the student group were placed inside a massive cardboard construction representing a coffee machine. They acted out the functionalities and voice of

the machine. The coffee machine served real coffee to participants if they would perform the tasks set by the machine.

In the beginning of the act the roles were quite clear: the design students were directing and taking control over the decisions that took the performance forward. One of the directing team members, “student-actor” in Figure 3, started the performance by asking people to gather together. He continued by introducing the “coffee machine”. Right after this, the “student-actor” withdrew and passed the directing role to the students performing as the “coffee machine”, who in turn began to give tasks to participants. The trajectory of an audience member is illustrated in Figure 3 as “Participant B”. Their role switched from watching to acting each time he or she wanted to have coffee, and accepted the instructions given by the “coffee machine”.

At times participants started to affect the course of the performance by posing questions to the “coffee machine”. This action changed the position of the participant to a directing role, illustrated with the line “Participant A” in Figure 3. We observed one situation where a participant questioned the gender of the low-pitched voiced machine after “milking” the machine in order to get milk for her coffee. The student acting the voice of the “coffee machine” reacted to the question by answering with a high-pitched voice, which had an impact on the course of the performance and lifted the participant to the role of director.

In one extreme we can say that Postdramatic Theatre obviates the separation of roles between the director, actor and participant. Their roles might be constantly changing in the performance according to the decisions taken and (re)actions that each decision generates.

LOSING CONTROL - PARADOX OF PLANNING AND IMPROVISING

Theatre practices have much to say about the paradoxical relations between planning and improvising. Performances can move forward with various levels of rigidity in their structures, while allowing the emergence of the un-planned. The element of improvisation enables interventions from the audience. It thereby benefits from particularities of the surroundings.

While most designers acknowledge the value of improvising, many struggle to establish a fruitful balance between creating fixed structures and changing plans on the go. In a playful loop of actions and reactions the notion of temporality calls for a practice-based skill from designers: to be responsive and accept the possibility of losing control in the present moment.

We saw an example of this in “Act IV – Social Engaging Projector” in which the directing student group performed their concept of a hologram projector system. During the dress rehearsal a participant suggested a functionality that had not been thought of previously in the design discussions. Through a very

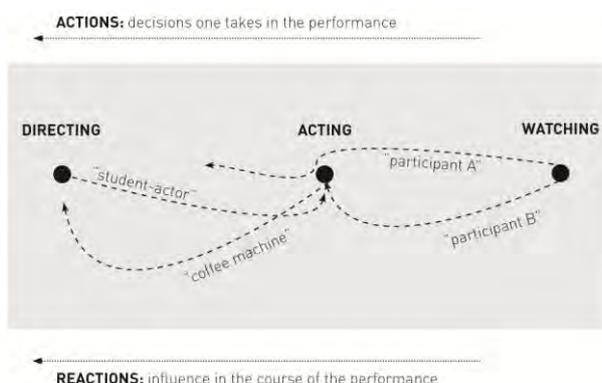


Figure 3. Switching roles in the final performance Act I.

simple question, “Can I scan this document with the projector?”, a request for a collaborative act of improvisation was made. Because this possibility had not been discussed in advance the act of improvising was inevitable. While the answer “no” would have landed in a safer position, the “yes” required the projector (played by a student) to react accordingly and so a chain of improvisation was triggered.

While breaking away to improvise, one strives against the wish to control a particular situation. The awareness of one’s desire for control constricts the ability to improvise as outcomes are uncertain and the risk of failure increases.

Whilst the means of losing control in processes of performing and designing is enabled by the action of switching roles, a hierarchical allowance of shifting roles is highly dependent on a loss of control. We ultimately argue that these emerging themes touch crucial aspects for the practice of design participation. At the same time, we acknowledge that experiments of the kind presented here are not limited to or by them.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we argue that Theatre and Design can learn from each other beyond the trade of methods often highlighted in the literature. There is an ongoing process of shifting the perception of Theatre from entertainment and drama to applied forms of expression; and we believe design has a stake on this move. We see the notion of participation, which shapes and is also shaped by this process, as an element that holds strings of actions to enhance a mutual relationship of learning. The ability to master forms of participation seems to intersect with an ability to facilitate and move seamlessly between different roles and levels of control.

Switching roles between directing, acting and watching seems to have a profound influence on how a Postdramatic Performance – and how design decisions – unfold. Losing control is a fundamental precondition for improvisation, enabling participation and creativity in Theatre and Design.

As for next steps into this research, we have recently established a Theatre Lab integrated within a design department of the university in which we can develop student activities in parallel with research projects.

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