Intersectional Perspectives on Design, Politics and Power
School of Arts and Communication, Malmö University
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Conflictual design artefacts reveal vertical power relationships

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary issues of occidental society are multi-faceted and addressing them needs bringing multiple points of views around the table. However, making every voice heard is a challenge, especially voices in the margins. On the other hand, the concept of intersectionality allows one to consider how various categories – including sectarian ones   as race, gender, age, ability… – simultaneously compose traits of one's identity. Here, rather than focusing on how identity is constituted or intersections of various categories, I address "domination" as a common attribute to these vertical relationships. In fact, many of these oppressions remain silent, because of being untold, unthought-of or unknown. They remain embedded and hidden in everyday life and everyday objects. Indeed, human-made objects often support these states of power – as they involve many actors and assumptions in their making and using. But objects also allow for interference in the silence, opening a space for horizontal discussion. I argue that "Speculative and Critical Design" (SCD) artefacts have this potential when thought of as objects of "dissensus".

The present text is a work in progress. Its main contributions are: a case study using a conflictual artefact to trigger participant responses, using SCD in a collective discussion context; empirical results; and the future research directions that emerged from them. These research leads – based on new connections between existing academic works – are open to discussion with the symposium members before further development. I argue that the case study does not directly avoid oppression to take place, neither does it unveil it publicly. Rather, it allowed me to spot it; it allowed the participants to talk about the conflictual artefact, but most of all it allowed them to talk to each other despite variable present states of power in the room. Based on this I briefly enumerate research directions and related literatures, under two main strategies: seating in-between; and breaching the norm. And I promote the use of the "dissensus" in "Participatory Design" contexts.[1]

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1 This is a work-in-progress paper. Ask maxmollon[at]gmail.com for more.

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INTRODUCTION

The conflicts arousing from discriminant behaviours do so under many different topics – racism, sexism, homophobia – and they appear under many different contexts – in social media, at work, down to the street. Human made objects and services – i.e. design artefacts – seat among all these contexts and often support and enable these discriminant behaviours. Which is why topics such as decolonialism, gender study, (dis)ability study recently drew the attention of design scholars – leading, for instance, to the present symposium.

The concept of intersectionality allows one to consider biological, social and cultural categories as simultaneous and inextricable constituent traits of one's identity. This includes race, gender, age, ability, nationality, class, religion, sexual orientation and other sectarian axes of identity. My personal interest in intersectionality and in these conflicts, resides less in identity constitution matters than in the emergence of these categories (e.g. race, gender), and in their polarised oppositions (e.g. white, man, able v. black, woman, disable). I especially focus on an attribute common to most of the conflicts evoked above: the vertical dominant power relationships between these polarities – which is inherited from the enlightenment era and the modernity thinking.

What about mute-conflicts? Although many people and events bring political confrontations to the public realm – from the "black lives matter" movement to the recent scandal linked to "burkini ban" on French public beaches – so many other conflicts remain silent, embedded and hidden in everyday life and everyday objects. Vertical power relationships peculiarly remain mute, because of being untold (inhibited by social pressure), unthought-of (lack of projection into a scenario that is not actual or experienced, yet), or unknown (invisible and unquestioned as part of a normative majority). My focus, here, is on these subtle situations where conflicts are veiled.

Design's relation to intersectionality raises my interest as (design) artefacts not only enable discriminant behaviours through their use, but crystallises (or embeds) such complex intersections – as they involve so many actors and assumptions in their making and using. Indeed, design can be understood as a contemporary form of rhetoric – where design communicates beliefs and incites actions through arguments. Design therefore "employs rhetorical doctrines and devices in its work of shaping products and environments" (Buchanan, 2001 p.187). In other words, "all products [...] are vivid arguments about how we should leave our lives" (Buchanan 2001, p.194). I therefore interrogate how this unconscious process of loading assumptions in artefacts, might be a way to unravel and discuss dominant vertical relations. And I argue that one means is the making and collective discussing of an artefact which is conflictual.

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CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

The approach presented here originated from an afterthought on my current Ph.D. research, which focuses on bringing speculative and critical design (SCD) (Auger, 2012) to the field of participatory design. While trying to identify design methods that use conflictual artefacts to start political discussions, my first empirical results suggest that conflictual artefacts could not only be used to unveil social, political and ethical conflicts of specific situations – which are not always linked to discrimination problems; – but, they can also be used to disturb dominating relationships among actors of these situations (that actually participate in their veiling). For instance, a conflictual artefact, used as collective discussion starter, would allow identifying points of interests (ethical, societal, political conflicts); and would allow patients and medical experts to exchange opinions regardless of levels of expertise or credibility.

CASE STUDY
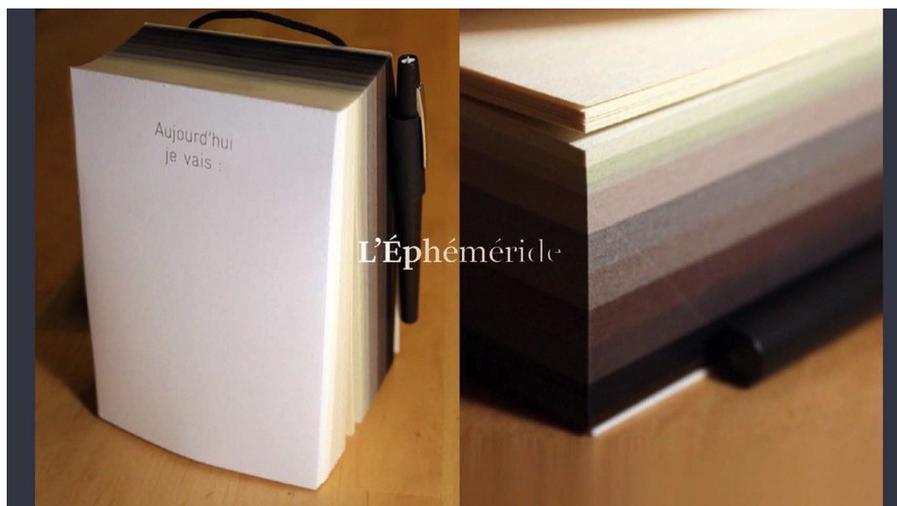
Find more info, pictures and movies of the project here: http://bit.ly/lephemeride

What if persons affected by moto-neuron chronic diseases would be regularly reminded of the weight of time passing by? One could therefore reflect on the ephemerality of their condition and take action against fatalism. This is what "L'Éphéméride" proposes. This project was conducted with EREIDF ("Espace de Réflexion Éthique Île-de- France"), an independent ethics commission in Paris, addressing health related questions. The main demand was to help them explore ethics issues related to the incorporation of MND patients into society (Moto-Neuron Diseases), through a participatory process with members of the MND community (patients, health-care professionals, etc.). The project's deliverable is the prototype of a product, along with a series of communication material – logo, pictures, and a (made up) user's testimony video. These were shown to start a collective discussion workshop, during a public conference on "MND & society", hosted in Nantes (France), September the 15th 2015.

"L'Éphéméride" is an unusual calendar – used by MND (Moto- Neuron diseases) patients and their relatives. It does not give any dates, but the gradient made by its pages' colours symbolises time: the first one is white, the last one is black. Each page, even the dark ones, display the message "Today I will: " as an invitation to fight adversity of patient's health situation.

In this testimonial video, Françoise gives her feedback of fifteen years living with multiple sclerosis and "L'Éphéméride".

After twenty years spent exploring health related issues and more than five years devoted to researching and mediating ethics recommendations on Alzheimer's disease, EREIDF was commissioned by the French health ministry on a new research plan about MND (Moto-Neuron Diseases), for 2014–2019. In order to answer recurrent difficulties to engage non-professionals into ethic consultations, we agreed on running a series of SCD-driven workshops to trigger participant reactions. This collaboration started after six months of residency in their offices – observing and discussing their research methods – and was conducted in the field, with myself as a full member of their team. The design choices leading to "L'Éphéméride" arised out of a polymorphic ethnographic study, ranging from vulgarisation articles, testimonial videos, cinema movies, art exhibitions to interviews of doctors, families, ethic commission members and, most of all, patients.

The hypothesis was that a "conflictual-enough" artefact would trigger participant reactions. "L'Éphéméride" is the final choice among a series of a dozen propositions. It aims at one conflictual topic (identified and sectioned with the commission): the patients' time perception. Why time? The six chronic diseases addressed by the ministerial plan are non-curable and mainly affect the ability to control movement (either to trigger or to refrain it) – namely: Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, Multiple Sclerosis (MS), Huntington's disease, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) and Friedrich's Ataxia. MND patients might have very different and intimate perceptions of time passing by, because the evolution pattern and life span

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estimation of these diseases can broadly be defined statistically – from 30 to 3 years. This raised the question, how might one react and project into the future when facing such a heavy diagnosis? Does "non-curable" inevitably connote a sense of fatalism? Is the normative duration of a day still relevant for a patient's calendar? These are issues "L'Éphéméride" addresses. Or in other words, it questions: the representation & perception of time; the ephemerality of life, and; the fatalism often paired with non-curable diseases.

Based on previous research (Gentès & Mollon, 2015), I aimed at balancing the provocation by confronting attractive and repulsive design choices to arouse a conflicted feeling in the audience. For instance, on the one hand, the size, shape and weight of the note pad allows an easier use for people with gesture disabilities; and its name refers to traditional French block notes calendars – from which the 360 pages, must be taken off each day. On the other hand, "L'Éphéméride" comes with a black pen only (and an empty white pen holder); and its logo, as much as the colour of the last pages, evoke the ephemerality of life. As expected, according to potential-user individual interviews that ran prior to the collective workshop, the linear gradient could represent time, symptoms evolution or psychological state. Nevertheless, these representations were usually rejected as they do not correspond to their everyday experience of the disease.

The collective discussion involved 60 people (philosophers, doctors, care-givers, relatives and patients and non-patients) for a period of an hour and a half, sitting in an approximate hemicycle. It was documented with video, audio recording, questionnaires and private informal interviews. The event moved along three main steps: introduction of the project (giving motivations to create the "Éphéméride" and displaying

pictures); circulating prototypes among the audience; showing the testimonial video, and; filling questionnaires. Between every step a collective discussion time took place.

"Why making such calendar?", "Why this colour and gradient?", "Who's the designer, is that you?" After some clarifications Q&A, participants quickly turned their focus to arguing the design choices of the dark colour and the linear gradient. Some (quite upset) people strongly expressed their disagreement. Questions and discussions kept flowing along the different steps of the session. After the video testimonial was played, however, most of the participants who talked stopped rejecting the project. Some started proposing different interpretations of the notepad colours. They also suggested alternative uses: "What if black was 'the night', we could draw stars on it". They finally proposed different designs: binding it with a spiral to be able to pick a colour everyday depending on one's mood; ordering the colours in a cyclic or random way to better fit the diseases relapses.

Further analysis of the experiment material is proceeding. In the meantime, here are initial empirical results. Facing "time" and "degeneration" (getting old) is an experience common to anybody, still, non-ill people demonstrated more outrage during the session and talked a lot on the patients' behalf, suggesting they might have a different perception of the disease, of time, and of fatalism. In addition to this, once the session ended, a couple of crowd members queued up to talk personally to me; while others wrote their unexpressed thoughts on the back of the questionnaire sheet – which was unexpected. Some were concerned about the session's setting as a hindering presence and that the behaviour of the conference chair (the ethics commission's director) strongly inhibited them. On the one hand this specific topic of reputability is common in collaborative practices or participatory design, it could have been avoided. On the

other, despite this, the artefact did spark reactions and discussions between different members of the audience (doctors, patients, care-givers), about the product's features and patients' everyday life experience.

DISCUSSION & RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Using conflictual artefacts does not aim at solving dominant power relationships. It rather disturbs it and opens a space for horizontal collaboration; as well as bringing conflictual issues to light.

In order to understand conflictual artefacts' contribution to this issue, I briefly propose broad research directions and related literatures, under two main strategies: seating in-between; and breaching the norm. Prior to this, one main reference underpins this work, which is Carl DiSalvo's understanding of the notion of conflict. He names "Adversarial Design" as a kind of cultural production that uses products of design to rise issues, question dominant views of the world, contribute to public discourses and open a space for political confrontation. This is allowed through making and experiencing artefacts of which the design qualities cultivate dissensus. By arousing contestational relations and experiences, these artefacts enable a particular political perspective known as "agonism," which fosters the questioning, challenging and reframing of the current (dominant) state of things. Those are said to be essential ingredients for a democracy that congregate plural points of views, and yet, avoids third-way politics and consensus as the basis for decision making. Thus, power relations are always being put into question, avoiding immovable power structures between dominants and servants – or constantly taking them into account (rephrased from (DiSalvo, 2012) p.2, 7 and 125.). Aside from adversarial design, this mobilisation of political theory allows one to appreciate the value of these conflicts, as tools for constructing society; and offers a theoretical ground on top of which the current research can be furthered (including some methodological contributions).

Seating in-between

From the start of "L'Éphéméride's" design process, I remained among the persons who would be the final targets of the debate, in order to take in consideration their points of interests and to spot latent conflicts. But moreover, I identified communities supporting different interests (here: ill & non-ill people) and designed an artefact that seats in-between them.

This product, in the first place, was a wristwatch dedicated to MND patients, displaying messages at the wearer's attention. The evoking, striking and often shocking nature of the messages displayed were given as stimulus to the wearer – who is invited to make the most out of their abilities before they fade away (Sample message: "This might be the last time you: 'run', 'walk', 'go shopping', 'groom on your own'" these last bits change over time). This was praised by the ethic commission as a great vulgarisation and introduction means to these diseases, but was merely unacceptable for some patients. The final note-pad version dimmed

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the provocation to avoid full rejection. It became an object that brings dissensus towards itself, the designers choice, and in-between people.

This state of seating on the edge of the dominant normative referent point echoes Esteban Muñoz's concept of "disidentification". His theory is here extracted from its usual field (the study of queer and colour performance art). Disidentification "examines how those whose identities render them a minority (i.e. queer people of colour), negotiate identity in a majoritarian world that punishes the existence of those who do not fit the normative subject (i.e. heterosexual, cisgender, white, middle class, male). [...] The disidentificatory subject does not assimilate (identify) nor reject (counter identify) dominant ideology. Rather, he 'tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against, a cultural form.' (Muñoz, 1999)" (quoted from Wikipedia 2016).

This state of being "in-between" also echoes Moraga's feeling of both belonging to two origins and fitting to none of them – in her book "This bridge called my back" (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015).

Breaching the norm

Once the dissensus towards self, the artefact and other participants is triggered, the dominant relationship still remains invisible – as doctor's and expert's superior credibility remains unquestioned. "L'Éphéméride" brings a representation of time that was considered (at first) unacceptable. By doing so it supports a political position which is under-represented. This is similar to what DiSalvo calls reconfiguring the "remainder" – what is left out of focus, out of the dominant thinking. (DiSalvo 2012, p.7).

Showing the remainder in a conflictual way, is an action of breaking the norm in order to reveal it. This ethnology method called "breaching experiment" was quite successful (and critiqued) among Garfinkel's students (Garfinkel 1963). More approaches were taken using an artefact instead of human behaviours to breach and reveal the norms, under the label of "techno methodology". I am currently furthering work on considering SCD as a form of breaching experiment, which makes visible the invisible.

CONCLUSION

Finally, this is not about clear zones of conflict, this is neither about negotiating reconciliation after a conflict started, but rather about revealing it, or making it blossom. The conflictual quality of SCD could be used to develop scholarly work and design practice methods on how to address vertical power relationships through collective debates. The final step of this research's snap shot could deliver methods for opening spaces for horizontal participatory spaces; and for revealing societal and political topics of conflict.

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UPDATE: Based on reviewer's comments and the Q&A session

- **on the decolonisation of time (in SCD).** L'Éphéméride could have been an occasion to promote a decolonised conception of Time, why not mentioning it? First, L'Éphéméride aims to trigger people reactions. Announcing the decolonisation topic would have imposed a frame to the debate. Second, the paper could have made a link between the "normativity of time representation and of diseases representations" – addressed by L'Éphéméride – and the normativity of relationships between experts and non-experts, all inherited from modernity. As this is a work in progress, future work may include this. Third, this research does not mention the decolonisation of SCD because L'Éphéméride already demonstrates a speculation happening in the present (there is no colonial conception of the future). Moreover, decolonisation is crucial to all design and must not be restricted to SCD. Once this said, SCD takes Time as a medium and must develop an alternative use of Time, via speculations that do not happen in the future, or by breaching the linearity of time representation – as shown by Pedro Oliveira and Luiza Prado (2016), Breaking the cycle of Macondo: Design and decolonial futures, in XRDS Vol.22 n.4.

- **on the teaching of SCD.** "Is it really relevant to train designers to SCD if they cannot use it in a conventional (non-SCD) company? What space for designers as game-changers in society?" Participants proposed that designers' activist intentions may be hidden until being in a power position, in order to steer, advise and impact companies strategies – even at the scale of mere graphic design choices, or reframing the brief. We argued that designers could either not hide and get fired; or not use their title and work in other fields, where designers are not expected, but where there is room (and need) for critique, debate, and mutual understanding.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Max Mollon is a designer researcher, teacher and Ph.D. student by design in Information and communication sciences, with a MFA from the HEAD–Geneva's media design program. He employs empirical means to establish design methods and theoretical grounds for designing provocations that foster people's participation within societal debates. This more largely interrogates designers' role in society.

#critical_design, #participatory_design, #dissensus, #the_political

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