Design and storytelling: on weaving fragments

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1. Workshop Organiser/s

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2. Context of Workshop

2.1 The DESIS philosophy talks[1]

The workshop rises from discussions taking place in the framework of the DESIS philosophy talks, partcularly on the value of story-listening and storytelling in design practices seen as an experices of weaving together fragments of the mainstream.

Nowadays we are encountering many different ways in which designers are telling stories. Within the DESIS philosophy talks we started a reflection on the philosophi-

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cal value of storytelling in our daily practices as designers. Issues researched have been for instance the multiple possible definitions of storytelling, ethical issues connected to it, the poetic value of telling stories as means of empowering the public realm, the idea of storyteller as story-listener, and the value and meaning of time in telling stories.

A peculiar attention has been paid to the value of fragments resulting from the destruction of the ego-centric big narratives characterising Western 20th century society. This destruction is something that we are witnessing on a daily basis. The consumeristic ways of thinking that have been produced by contemporary Western society are often manifested to be a failure. However, there are many examples of alternatives to these mainstream narratives - such as for instance alternative ways of producing and consuming - which are nowadays rising on a global scale. These fragments can be considered as signals of a positive change, that inspire works of designers worldwide.

2.2 Theoretical background

The German philosopher Hannah Arendt speaks of storytelling as the act to collect the fragments of the destruction of the mainstream and wave them together in a narration. She believes that storytelling is in essence the act to recognise the potentiality that is hiding behind the mainstream, and be able to read this potentiality, to translate it, to tell its story. This act of telling stories is what she recognises as the real political action that opens up the idea of public space, where everybody is invited to take part in the discussion of which the decisions upon the polis, in the common realm, are made together. This act of telling stories brings together the act of telling and the one of making, as it used to be in the Greek world "poiesis", or poetry. Storytelling is to Arendt poetry: an action that takes place through words. Through storytelling the potentialities of the past, what was already there and not yet manifested because of not belonging to the mainstream, finally has the chance to become actual, to show its value for present and future.

2.3 Workshop proposition

Stories have been always part of human history, as one of the means to make sense of the chaos of human existence. Therefore, stories have been - and still are - a

way to share meanings and values amongst humans. The German philosopher Hannah Arendt says that the act of telling stories is basically that of weaving together loss elements, "fragments" resulting from the breakdown of manistream narratives, and of costructing new narratives by connecting thiose fragments. As designers, we also can be considered storytellers, as we are often also inspired by "fragments" of manistream ways of producing consuming and living - what is normally not look at - and create with them new stories, new narratives. When we tell stories of fragments resulting from the failures of mainstream narratives, we also look at what is already present in society, but did not have the chance yet to make explicit. The act of telling these stories makes them visible, tangible, and allows existing initiatives to grow and further develop and for new ones to take shape. It is, in its essence, a political and poetical act.

Within this workshop we will explore how to invent stories which are alternative to the mainstream narratives, starting from the leftovers and the fragmented elements of reality which we dsigners can recognize, "collect" and use as building blocks for creating new stories. We will reflect - through poetic explorative actions - on the activity of waving fragments together in stories, stressing the values and meaning of the potentialities already present in those fragments and how the act to tell their stories can bring these unexpressed potentialities to the surface.

How to do such an exploration? How to connect those shared fragmented experiences, avoiding building theories and systems, but embracing them as little intuitions useful in our designers' rough path? This workshop is an experimentation meant to become more aware of how we are storytellers in our daily design practices - collecting and weaving togther "fragments" of mainstream narratives, and how we can eventually learn from each other's peculiar ways of being storytellers.

3. Planned Activities and Expected Outcomes

3.1 Pre-trask

Each participant is asked to bring 10 "fragments" - objects, artefacts, pictures, examples of projects - collected in her/his journey as a designer and a story about them, closed in an envelope. They need to be collected from each participant's journey (professional, personal, metaphorical, physical) and represent one's own poetics, values, inspirations. The story has to be short (max. 250 words, half a page). The story can be, for instance, about how those fragments have been found, about how they dialogue between each other, a collection of micro- stories of each

fragment, etc. Participants can come with their little bag of fragment and their stories, with a notebook, pencils, pens, videocameras, video-phones, computers,… anything they typically use when they sketch and design, and that they can use in order to create the new stories.

3.2 Workshop description

During the workshop, we will use these "fragments" as a way to enter into a discussion about how narrative matters in design and to ultimately reflect on the designers' practice. At the beginning the sets of 10 "fragments" will be tagged and showcased on a table, so that all participants can look at them, and choose the set of fragments she/he will use as inspiration for creating a new story connecting the chosen fragments together.

Later on, the stories created (using any possible kind of media) will be "told". Only after listening to all the new stories, we will open together the sealed envelopes placed on the table at the beginning, revealing the other stories related to the fragments and from whom they came from. This will lead to a dialogue between the poetics of the "owner" of the fragments and that of the participant who constructed the new story. A discussion will be made on the unexpressed potentialities brought to the surface in the two differnet stories generated from the same fragments. The meanings, values and political implications of both stories will be put into dialogue and become food for thought.

3.3 The programme in a nutshell

- Leaving the story and fragments from the personal journey on the table / preparing the materials (bags, envelopes) / instant portraits

- Introduction / Rules of the game

- Creating stories, weaving fragments / Each participant takes somebody's else bag full of fragments and invents new stories based on these fragments

- Creating collective story-worlds

- Sharing the stories (the one in the envelopes and the new ones)

- Collective reflection and wrap up

4. Intended Audience

The workshop is open to design researchers and practitioners of any age.

Max numbers of participants: 15

5. Length of Workshop

Half-day length (4 hours)

6. Space and Equipment Required

We need a large table and chairs. We can work in different kinds of spaces: inside, but eventually also outside (in case of good weather).

7. Potential Outputs

Each story and reflection produced during the workshop will be documented and collected in a field book of this journey. This field book will be shared, in a first step, with the workshop participants, who will be also invited to contribute with further reflections and ideas, and later on with the larger public.

The workshop process will be documented through video, audio recording and photos. The outcomes will be integrated in the ongoing research project of the DESIS Philosopy Talks on storytelling and social innovation.

Being part of a larger research project, our idea is to test this workshop in different contexts, observing similarities and differences that will arise from this experience. This will be the second workshop following the one held last year at the NORDES conference. [2]

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[2] E. Bertolotti, H.Daam, F. Piredda, V.Tassinati, S*tories from fragments. Design as a political agent.* Nordes 2015: Design Ecologies, Challenging anthropocentrism in the design of sustainable futures / Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design. Stockholm, Sweden /No 6 (2015): Nordes 2015: Design Ecologies, ISSN 1604-9705 - www.nordes.org

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About the Organisers:

Susan Yelavich is Associate Professor and Director of the MA Design Studies program at Parsons School of Design, a division of The New School. She is a Fellow of the American Academy of Rome. Her most recent book is Design as Future-Making.

Virginia Tassinari is assistant professor at LUCA Arts (Belgium), board member of Cumulus Association and of DESIS network, and founder of the DESIS philosophy talks, an initiative in which design for social innovation and philosophy are brought into dialogue. She is currently working at co-editing the volume "The pearl diver. Storytelling and design for social innovation".

Elisa Bertolotti explores how experiences from apparently remote fields can enrich the culture and practice of designers. Her work deals with the encounter between different disciplines, where Communication Design meets stories, drawings and moving images, both through her practice as a designer and as a researcher.