

Abstract

Management is an integral aesthetic-political-economic aspect of design practices, whether conducted as research or as part of a professional practice. It includes situated coordination of partnerships made up of heterogeneous socio-material entities. Such coordination through modes of assembly and decision-making is essential when devising more democratic forms of co-design and collaborative critique.

The article compares and contrasts assemblies that operate within dominant social systems through consensual processes with assemblies that operate outside of the dominant regime. Those that operate within dominant social systems through affirmative and additive critique have difficulty accounting for substantial change, and at best can engage in minor reformist aesthetic-political changes. Additive and affirmative ways of working also tend to hide the violence they produce. Those that operate outside of the dominant social system by negating, delinking and disaffirming established infrastructures through the development of new formations – re-assembling and re-infrastructuring – account for the violence of their critique and can empower marginalised positions. The article also contrasts collaborative critique through assemblies that focus on local dense actor-networks with those that acknowledge meso-level issues related to wider aesthetic-political-economic relations. What type of assemblies are devised, how does the scope of the site of intervention and the level of analytical abstraction orient what aspects of the issue worked on can be re-made?

Managing Collaborative Critique in Times of Financialisation Capitalism

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“STOP MAKING US INTO laboratory rats” writes Nabila Abdul Fattah in *Etc* on 16 December 2014.¹ She continues: “I am tired of experimentally engaged people who exploit the system for their own profit, that can tick off that they done an asphalt safari and done ‘good’.” Fattah then refers to the *Sydsvenskan* article “Mycket babbel – lite verkstad”, which describes that between 2000 and 2011 a total of 345 research and development projects were started in Rosengård in Malmö, costing 319 million SEK without resulting in improved schools results and employment rates.² The latest deadline for one such project was 18 November 2016, which was announced by the Van Alen Institute in collaboration with a host of Swedish housing and constructing companies, an energy company and the municipality of Malmö:

Responding to Europe’s migration crisis, Opportunity Space is an international design-build competition to create a temporary mobile structure that will foster economic opportunity and social inclusion in Malmö, Sweden. The winning team will receive a \$10,000 prize and up to \$25,000 to implement its proposal in and around Malmö’s Enskifteshagen Park.

*The competition will bring new and established residents together to produce a public space hub for education, job assistance, and social inclusion programs that benefit everyone in Malmö. Opportunity Space is the first in a new Van Alen Institute series of Flash Competitions: challenges that bring together multidisciplinary teams of designers and other experts for short, intense projects in cities around the world to take on urgent societal issues through design.*³

Like any research and development, design- and art-based research and development is historically situated. They are entangled and dependent on complex collaborations through overlapping and intertwining infrastructures, as the call just described shows. In the above outline, who is in

need of participatory support and who can provide the solution by what means is made clear. The perspective put forward is that a set of benevolent partners in the form of an institute, together with a municipality and affluent companies will save migrants through competition and quick fixes. In short, what is announced and believed to solve the identified issue is a local market-driven assembly, without acknowledging how the issue addressed is produced by global economic forces entrenched in financialisation capitalism. Although the above call is in the form of a competition, it is reminiscent of many research and development announcements and partnerships. Every epoch inevitably produces specific relational material-discursive practices that affect how we see and orient ourselves in the world, intervene and produce in it, and narrate and depict those interventions and productions. Design productions of any sort are thus entangled and dependent on managed infrastructures, including the production and management of their own infrastructuring processes.

On a general level, infrastructures can take the form of chains of production, chains of distribution and/or dissemination, and selling and/or funding. These processes are socio-material and are made up of knowledge perspectives, institutional and economic arrangements and relations, norms, forms of communication, and technological assemblages. A central concern for any designer or artist is therefore what infrastructures one is forced to relate to and is framed by, what infrastructure to engage in and to what degree these infrastructures need to be re-structured. Alternatively, what new infrastructure needs to be built?

If a new infrastructure is created, it can either operate within an established paradigm of relations by building upon, extending and affirming established and dominant infrastructures, or challenge established infrastructural relations by disconnecting and disaffirming dominant and established relationships. A new infrastructure that comes about

by disaffirming dominant relations is understood relationally as delinking and disaffirming from a specific dominant regime. Disaffirming can lead to the making of “minor” infrastructures that partially connect and intertwine with established infrastructures, and at times it can lead to dominant relations becoming subordinated and subsumed by a new infrastructure. It is precisely for that reason that practice-based researchers and designers have to consider how to position a new infrastructure and the work conducted in it in relation to existing local as well as meso-level infrastructures. What infrastructures and infrastructure arenas are acknowledged and included in the design work affects how the work is conducted. Attending only to local dense networks and infrastructures, as favoured by co-design, participatory design and Actor-Network-Theory, will lead to different productions than if meso-level issues are acknowledged. In addition, aiming to include all those who have a stake in the issue concerned, which participatory design has favoured, will result in different forms of design work than if a few partners work together and operate outside and in opposition to dominant partnerships and regimes. Participatory design has tended to operate within dominant infrastructure where marginalised partners and perspectives are brought into dialogue with dominant relationships to change them from within. Actor-Network-Theory, which has influenced design research and participatory design research in particular, has tended to focus on strong actors in processes of stabilisation. Both perspectives have therefore focused on and advocated for additive and affirmative strategies in relation to change.

Neither perspectives have focused on working with marginalised groups that create political agency that operate outside dominant regimes of power and put pressure from the outside on the normative and dominant ways of understanding and acting in the world in order for them to change. Acting from the outside should not be confused with the possibility of an objective and distanced position when it comes to knowledge. Instead, it should be understood as acknowledging the situatedness of knowledge and power and how they connect to wider social systems. Both are situated, but acting from within or from the outside are two distinct aesthetic-political strategies. Thus the act of positioning is central to how collaborative critique is conducted, as the critical production and the infrastructure it is intertwined in, even framed by, cannot be separated from it.

Many of us within design research subscribe to the idea that design concerns historically constituted techno-cultural formations, as Anne Balsamo argues.⁴ Such formations, she states, come about through the interaction between people, artefacts, institutions, and due to economic and political change. Design and objects are never discrete or free-standing, but rather participate in assemblages of infrastructures. For design to be comprehensible it must build upon accumulated articulations, knowledge and existing connections between practices. Design and design research is thus always in a dynamic dialogue with an already articulated, assembled and infrastructured world. To make design therefore means to remake, redesign, reshape, reassemble, which also takes apart previous

1. Fattah, Nabila Abdul. “Sluta göra oss i förorten till labbråttor.” *Etc.* 16 December 2014. See <http://www.etc.se/ledare/sluta-gora-oss-i-fororten-till-labbrattor> (Accessed 2017-02-23.)

2. Mikkelsen, Jens. ”Mycket babbel – lite verkstad”. *Sydsvenskan*. 5 April, 2012. See <http://www.sydsvenskan.se/2012-04-04/mycket-babbel-lite-verkstad> (Accessed 2017-02-23.)

3. See <https://www.vanalen.org/projects/opportunity-space/> (Accessed 2017-02-23.)

4. Balsamo, Anne. *Designing Culture: The Technological Imagination at Work*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2011.

assemblies and connections, as Mahmoud Keshavarz argues.⁵ This means that, according to him, design always has a violent side to it, since it simultaneously affirms and disaffirms.

That design is a collaborative effort distributed among various partners and competences has been explored and debated explicitly for a long time by co-design and participatory design researchers through investigating how various competences (and not only design ones) can explicitly participate in design processes and take over the design process through design after design.⁶

My design research colleagues and I started to explore how collaborative design could be conducted within the making or reforming issues in various public spheres in an effort to engage with wider social issues ten years ago in Malmö. Given the diversity of perspectives, concerns and interests in public spheres, we argued for the need to create common spaces where differences and conflicts related to an issue in a particular public sphere could be negotiated – be it the public sphere of urban development, film, music, or literature. This in turn demanded first of all a move from viewing “things” as discrete objects to “thinging”⁷ or producing/entering socio-material agonistic assemblies.⁸ Secondly, it implied moving away from discrete projects involving referenced and sampled participants to the long-term infrastructuring of design activities through active co-production. Central to the infrastructuring perspective was to move away from typical project structures with predefined partners and given aims and goals. Our aim was to establish a milieu where various partner constellations and productions could occur. Our hope was that this would allow us to get away from governmentalisation through projectification, which is the common way to govern research, economic activity, and social life where aims and goals are clearly defined. The fundamental question addressed was: who should have a say in forming new or reforming existing public spheres? We considered it important

and a democratic obligation to include a multiplicity of actors, not just the resourceful ones who have obtained resources and privileged positions in society.⁹ This work was done through an aesthetic-political perspective, specifically the design-material-power relations and figurations devised, that favoured additive and affirmative ways of working, were marginalised perspectives where brought into partnerships with established strong actors.

Given that I argue that design and collaborative design are historically constituted I want to point out briefly that engaging in collaborative artistic and design endeavours is entangled in a quite different political and economic landscape than co-design did in the 1970s and 1980s. Current collaborative design efforts are situated within the epoch of financialisation, where the size of the financial sector has grown massively in the last thirty years.¹⁰ It is also defined by a massive critique of centralised state bureaucracy, while we have seen the proliferation of decentralised private micro-control bureaucracy, deregulation of finance, increased shareholder power, monetisation, the spread of finance from banks to corporations, and the massive extension of credit and debt economics. It is a time of network fluidity and perpetual mobility where flexibility is believed to be good and has led to the increase of just-in-time labour contracts.

Managing Infrastructuring and Assembling of Critique: The Pirate Bay Collaboration

How to form partner constellations, how to position your partnership and orient it in relation to other partners? How to handle the connecting of partners and deal with the ongoing configuration of power among partners when working together? These are fundamental questions facing anyone working with collaborative art and design processes.

In 2009, after having put together and worked in coproduction constellations where it turned out that more powerful partners, typically large IT and media companies, would frame the direction of the work that diminished the decision-making power of cultural producers and NGOs, we changed how we would form partner constellations and position ourselves in relation to more powerful actors. It was a small cultural production research lab at the School of Arts and Communication, Malmö University, which I was heading.

The early co-productions clearly pointed to the limit or impossibility of combining consensus and dissensus perspectives.¹¹ That more powerful partners decide the direction is to be expected and

considered just in certain forms of consensus politics since those in majority, the largest party – or here, the largest partners in the initial co-productions conducted by the research environment – should have larger influence, which tends to force smaller partners to align to the majority agenda so as to reach consensus. In essence this is a view of justice where that which is just is that agreed by the largest number of people.

Still, our approach wrongly believed that consensus and dissensus processes could be combined by gathering vastly unequal partners with different value systems, where, to some degree, local needs could be upheld while attending to shared needs as the partners gained in various degrees from the

5. Keshavarz, Mahmoud. *Design–Politics. An Inquiry into Passports, Camps and Borders*. Doctoral Dissertation New Media, Public Spheres and Forms of Expression, School of Arts and Communication, K3, Malmö University. 2016.

6. Participatory design was to begin with closely tied to the introduction of computer technology into workplaces where designers worked with workers on envisioning more democratic, just, and skilled future work practices through prototypes, partially in an effort to fight deskilling and automation. See, for example, Ehn, Pelle. *Work-oriented design of computer artifacts*. Stockholm: Arbetslivscentrum.1988; Greenbaum, Joan and Kyng, Mårten (eds.). *Design at work: cooperative design of computer systems*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 1991; Schuler, D. and Namioka, A. (eds.). *Participatory Design – Principles and Practice*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc.1993; Simonsen, J. and Robertson, T. (eds.). *Routledge International Handbook of Participatory Design*. Oxford: Routledge. 2013.

7. Latour, Bruno. “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public”. In *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2005. pp. 4-31; Latour, Bruno. “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern”. *Critical Inquiry*. No. 30. Winter 2004. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago. 2004.

8. Our research perspective drew heavily upon Actor-Network Theory and Science and Technology Studies (STS) and in particular the notion of Thinging, infrastructuring, but also agonism. A “Thing” or socio-material assemblies where matters of concern were addressed we likened to workshops and public design interventions. Infrastructuring, we interpreted to connote the long-term building of partnerships and shared milieu, where multiple design processes could happen rather than one planned project, through ongoing negotiations and socio-material configurations where local needs, or each partner’s needs, are adjusted and aligned to overarching shared needs while maintaining local flexibility and certain autonomy, as explicated by Star and Bowker and Helena Karasti. Our belief was that both Thinging and infrastructuring were different

forms that would allow for what Chantal Mouffe terms agonistic encounters, where passionate engagement with differences could play out and where each partner could maintain their local needs and perspective while working with others on a shared issue. The forms of critique we imagined to begin with thus assumed that consensus and dissensus perspectives could be combined. It also favoured conducting affirmative critique through local sites and micro-politics, as argued by Bruno Latour. See Björgvinsson, Erling, Ehn, Pelle and Hillgren, Per-Anders. “Design Things in Design Thinking: Contemporary Participatory Design Challenges”. *Design Issues*. Vol. 28. No. 3 Summer 2012.

9. Björgvinsson, Erling, Ehn, Pelle, & Hillgren, Per-Anders. “Design Things and Design Thinking: Contemporary Participatory Design Challenges.” *Design Issues*. Volume 28, Nr. 3, Summer 2012, 101-116. 2012.

10. Nigel Dodd states: “In Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century, the largest three banks had assets worth 7 per cent of GDP; by mid-century, the figure reached 27 per cent, and by 2007, 200 per cent of GDP (See Haldane, A. “Control Rights (and Wrongs).” Wincott Annual Memorial Lecture, October 24. *Economic Affairs* 32 (2): 47–58. 2011; Haldane, A. “On Being the Right Size.” Speech to the Institute of Economic Affairs 22nd Annual Series, The 2012 Beesley Lectures, October 25. 2012). These changes form part of a broad underlying trend whereby the financial sector has grown significantly in size relative to the real economy.” Along the same lines Christian Marazzi states: “In order to account for this paradoxical anthropological metamorphosis of the postmodern citizen (almost to the level of mass self-affliction), and to explain the immense increase in financial flows (today for every dollar of goods exchanged there are 55 dollars of financial assets in circulation.” See Marazzi, Christian. *Capital and Language. From the New Economy to the War Economy*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e). 2008. p. 22.

11. Björgvinsson, Erling. “Collaborative Design and Grassroots Journalism: Public Controversies and Controversial Publics”. In *Making Futures: Marginal Notes on Innovation, Design and Democracy*. Pelle Ehn, Elisabet M. Nilsson, and Richard Topgaard (eds.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2014.

collaboration, including the smaller ones. A consensus-driven approach nevertheless led to a specific issue becoming drawn into the political order – an order that, as Jacques Rancière argues,¹² defines what is right and polices and corrects trespassers of that order – and is therefore essentially politically reductive. Consensus-driven perspectives in art and design aiming for social cohesion through infrastructuring processes come at a price. Such an approach does not in my experience reduce hierarchies, which social cohesion is believed to be dependent on,¹³ but rather reduces politics to policing and destroys the possibility for political subjectivisation processes where “new ways of making sense of the sensible” are produced.¹⁴ Critically questioning existing social structures by rearranging them or by revealing a conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, which involves both social and aesthetic processes, becomes therefore near impossible if a consensus driven approach is taken.

Central to our infrastructuring approach was that a fundamental aspect of democracy is to attend to those in the minority and not only to cater to the majority rule. This led me to acknowledge the importance of creating spaces where smaller partners, engaged in film and literature, together with the researchers, would make their own spaces in subsequent collaborations, and if needed only connect to more powerful partners that shared similar values. Or, if not, that such partners were recruited later on, when most decisions were in place to guard the needs and wishes of the smaller partners.

The first co-production to deploy a different aesthetic-political strategy of assembling was the formation of a partnership and subsequent collaboration between the small independent film company Tangram Film, the production company Good, The Pirate Bay, and researchers who explored a new form for film distribution.¹⁵ The collaboration happened because the researchers had worked with

Good for several years and Good thought that we could work with Tangram. Tangram had made an independent film, titled *Nasty Old People*, without any funding from the Swedish Film Institute (SFI). Given that the film was made outside the official funding system it had a difficult time getting distribution deals. Together with students, the researchers presented a number of distribution scenarios, one of which was to distribute the film through a peer-to-peer file sharing service. The initial partners decided therefore to contact The Pirate Bay with the aim to have them distribute and promote the film through their peer-to-peer file-sharing service, which they agreed to do. The researchers and the students, in dialogue with Tangram, thereafter detailed and launched the online marketing and communication strategy and the donation campaign.

Nasty Old People thus became the first Swedish feature film to be distributed for free under a Creative Commons license. Within five days, the film had been downloaded 14,000 times, translated by volunteers into thirteen languages, blogged about around the Western world, and was covered in traditional media channels a few weeks later. The exposure at The Pirate Bay and in the blogosphere, and a vivid social-media buzz, led to screenings in small theatres across Europe. A year later, Swedish public television (SVT) broadcast the film. In conjunction with the release, a donation campaign was launched that paid back the bank loan of 10,000 Euros the director had taken out to fund the production of the film.

The collaboration tried out a new model for the financing and sharing of film, which is tightly connected to forms of ownership. It also suggested a concrete new form of infrastructure for the sharing of cultural products and knowledge in the form of cultural commons and thus it redistributed the sensible, as it bypassed traditional “bottlenecks” and gatekeepers such as film distributors, theatre owners, and film festivals. It also led to the founding of the Creative Commons Film Festival.

Although I find consensus-oriented assemblies of value, I also value participation based on gathering people who share values and that acknowledges the need for “creating a room of their own”, where reassembling what is perceived to be sensible is possible. This means acknowledging that any form of gathering, as Keshvaraz points out, simultaneously puts together and partitions, as we decide who should and who should not be on board.¹⁶ In the film distribution collaboration we felt the need to make a room of our own, rather than to involve all those that the issue concerned through a consensus process. The likelihood of getting them together would have been minimal. Furthermore, it would have been undesirable since a consensus process would not work, as such participation would be far from equal or flat. Instead, as Keshvaraz states, while building on Sara Ahmed’s “Willfulness Archive”,¹⁷ we need to acknowledge that any form of participation happens in a partitioned dynamic environment in which we need to decide what duty we are willing to take on to uphold the happiness of the whole body – be it in the form of a gathering or an assembly – so that we can frame the problem differently than those larger forces that want to involve us to suppress, exclude or dilute our political agency. As Ahmed states, parts become parts by being assigned the duty to preserve the whole body.¹⁸ This in turn demands that the different parts making up

the whole body need to be sympathetic and obedient to each other. Consequently, if a part refuses to be obedient and be governed by the whole, it threatens to break from other parts as well as break the whole body apart by refusing to take on duties demanded by the whole so that it can continue to produce fluid participation. A central concern before or during participating in any form of constellation is to identify in what way things are flowing and who perceives it to be fluid and who is considered to be going against the flow.

In the collaboration on film distribution the agency of forces was not only made up of a local dense network, but connected to national and international cultural politics related to struggles over copyright and piracy. Nationally it was apparent that Swedish films were heavily state subsidised, yet that the Swedish film agreement favoured a few private companies that neglected their distribution obligations. Internationally the struggle over ownership was carried through various trade agreements and lobbying by strong film associations. This struggle, as Lobato shows,¹⁹ is defined mainly through occidental concerns related to ownership rather than how the locking down of knowledge and cultural products makes them inaccessible to poorer countries, as pointed out by postcolonial, legal and developmental studies.²⁰ The collaboration

12. Rancière, Jaques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. London: Continuum. 2010.

13. See, for example, Kester, Grant. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 2013.

14. Rancière, p. 139.

15. Björgvinsson, Erling. “The Making of Cultural Commons: Nasty Old Film Distribution and Funding.” In *Making Futures: Marginal Notes on Innovation, Design and Democracy*. Pelle Ehn, Elisabet M. Nilsson, and Richard Topgaard (eds.). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2014.

16. Keshvaraz, *op. cit.*

17. Ahmed, Sara. “A Willfulness Archive”. *Theory & Event*. Vol. 15. No. 3. 2012.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Lobato, Ramon. *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution*. British Film Institute. 2012; Lobato, Ramon. “The Six Faces of Piracy: Global Media Distribution from Below”. In *The Business of Entertainment*. Vol. 1: Movies. R. C. Sickels. Greenwood (ed.). New Haven, CT: Greenwood Press. 2008.

20. See, for example, Sundaram, Ravi. “Recycling Modernity: Pirate Electronic Cultures in India.” In *Sarai Reader 1: The Public Domain*. New Delhi: Sarai/CSDS. 2001; Philip, Kavita. “What Is a Technological Author? The Pirate Function and Intellectual Property.” *Postcolonial Studies*. Vol. 8. No. 2. pp. 199-218. 2005.

on film distribution thus pointed at how our new infrastructure related to larger infrastructure arenas. It meant that we needed to work with reductions and larger abstractions through what Clarke and Star call infrastructure arena mapping.²¹ Such mapping locates the main discursive perspective and meso-level communities and organisation in order to identify commitments and how different actors frame and interpret an issue, which opens up to different political-aesthetic perspectives rather than dense local actor-networks.

The Site of Intervention and the Level of Analytical Abstraction

The level of analytical abstraction has political-aesthetic implications, both when it comes to understanding what the scope of the site of intervention is and how the work conducted at the site can be understood. In his critique of Bruno Latour, Benjamin Noys shows how in Latour's supposedly neutral stance (by upholding a view of the world as a flat ontology where everything is treated equally real), some entities such as critical left politics (focused on macro-explanations such as capitalism and general equivalents) are less real.²² Latour thus applies his valid critique of positivistic views of science (as neutral and universals) to Marxism. Accordingly, to Latour, Marxism and leftist thought in general, pays too little attention to the details of capital and operates with abstractions that are too large. Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle point out that Latour does not think that capitalism exists.²³ In fact, already in *The Pasteurization of France* he argued that capitalism does not exist and that we would soon discover that it was a fiction of the imagination.²⁴ However, in *Reassembling the Social* he states that capitalism is the dominant mode of production, but that we should not focus on it.²⁵ As Toscano and Kinkle claim, Latour simplifies too much when he asserts that critics of capitalism believe that capitalism has a command-and-control-centre. Marxism and leftist thought have had

problematic sides, as is widely acknowledged (for example, its focus on progress and universal explanations) but Marx and Marxists do not see abstraction as pure intellectual products, but as produced by social relations and social forces. What is at stake is thus both Latour's dismissal of macro-explanations and the political force of abstractions, and how it translates into a dismissal of capitalism and the critique of it.

The shift Latour makes from capitalism to capitalisms, co-authored with Callon,²⁶ leads to what Latour calls the "pixelisation of politics".²⁷ A shift of scale that, as Noys observes, at first may appear to deflate the power of capitalism and open up for political critique. However, the attention to micro-politics undermines critical interventions, since it does not acknowledge "the function of real abstractions and real subsumption in shaping forms of agency."²⁸ Furthermore, the attention to dense actor-networks where objects operate and are actualised through networks makes it difficult for us to account for change, as Noys points out. Likewise, Graham Harman has shown that an internal problem to Actor-Network-Theory, is that given that actants exist due to the sum of actualised alliances, disengaging or separating becomes impossible.²⁹ And as Harman argues, without separation we end up with a holistic cosmos. Noys similarly states that it results in a "... fantasmatic totalisation of the world".³⁰ What this view of the world leaves out, Noys claims, is "an immanent conception of negativity, which has been replaced by the flat world of ontological positivity and affirmation."³¹

Latour's answer to this problem, which both Harman and Noys discuss, is to argue that reality has only to a small degree gelled into stabilised form, while most of reality consists of an ocean of unformatted uncertainties, which he calls plasma. Given that postcolonial Science and Technology Studies (STS), as Lucy Suchman points out, has shown that newness is a local concern located in particular regimes of capitalism, Latour's gesture

of primal emptiness is deeply problematic, as it disengages and dehistoricises landscapes and thus portrays the world as a vast unexplored frontier. This is a rhetorical gesture, as Suchman argues, frequently made in innovation discourse and practices.³² She states:

*Such projects involve, among other things, disengaging landscapes from already existing forms of life so that they can be figured as an emptiness waiting to be filled – a process that has been well documented with respect to earlier settlements of the American West.*³³

The additive and affirmative gesture upon a positive, new and innocent world is thus highly violent.³⁴ And as Noys notes, Latour consistently occludes and suppresses his own violence as he engages in reductive simplifications and reifications of mainly leftist thought and practices, which he associates with twentieth-century destructive aesthetics and politics, while the violence of science and technology is brushed over. Noys is worth quoting here at length:

*First, Latour's work operates a suppression of social and intellectual violence in terms of its own intervention to re-shape the intellectual field, and in the "violence" necessary to its own segmentation and selection of networks. Second, the potential violence of networks is largely left to one side and we are encouraged, in an affirmationist vein, to simply accept the existence of networks whatever their violence. This is linked to the minimisation or dismissal of network forms of violence, as macro-networks such as capitalism or imperialism disappear into localisation. Third, the question of violence, in quite typical fashion, is displaced onto the political violence of "communist" terror.*³⁵

The accusation that critical thinking is fanatical and destructive has, as Toscano and Kinkle state, "a long and distinguished pedigree in the counter-revolutionary writings" of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth century.³⁶ An example can be found in the writings of Edmund Burke, when he "allegorised the evils of equality in the destruction of aristocratic buildings and their transformation into revolutionary nitre."³⁷

21. Clarke, Adele E. and Star, Susan L. "The Social World Framework: A Theory/Method Package." In *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*. E. Hackett et al. (eds.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007. For more in-depth description see Clarke, Adele. *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Postmodern Turn*. London: Sage, 2005.

22. Noys, Benjamin. *The Persistence of the Negative. A Critique of Continental Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

23. Toscano, Alberto and Kinkle, Jeff. *Cartographies of the Absolute*. Winchester: Zero Books, 2015.

24. Latour, Bruno. *The Pasteurization of France*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. p. 173.

25. Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. p. 167.

26. Latour, Bruno and Callon, Michel. "'Thou shall not calculate!' or How to Symmetricalize Gift and Capital". Trans. Javier Krauel, from "Comment peut-on être anticapitaliste?". *La Découverte, La revue du MAUSS*. No. 9. 1997.

27. Latour, Bruno. "We are all reactionaries today: interview to Konstantin Kastriassianakis". In *Re-public re-imagining democracy*. 2007.

28. Noys, *op. cit.* p. 86.

29. Harman, Graham. *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*. Melbourne: re.press, 2009.

30. Noys, *op. cit.* p. 88.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Suchman, Lucy. "Striking Likenesses to Difference". Paper presented at annual meeting of Society for Social Studies of Science. Rotterdam, 2008.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Latour, Bruno. "The Enlightenment Without the Critique: A Word on Michel Serres' Philosophy". In *Contemporary French Philosophy*. A. Phillips Griffiths (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. pp. 83-97.

35. Noys, *op. cit.* p. 93.

36. Toscano and Kinkle, *op. cit.* p. 94.

37. *Ibid.*



Fig. 1 "Plenty of space for fantasy", the Western harbour, Malmö.



Fig. 2 Stills from the films "The Aid Party", "The Frustrated Small Business Owner", and "Is there Swedish Coffee in Panama?"

City Fables: Follow the Money

In a current practice-based research project, *City Fables: Follow the Money*, a broader perspective on participation has been developed, including a wider analytical view of what a site is and what level of abstraction to operate on. We have considered elements from other places that influence, affect and contribute to our context. Furthermore, we have decided to engage in making an alternative chain of relations through ways of working in which academics, artist and an economic controller worked together and through the production of counter-narratives. When working we created a “room of our own” rather than an assembly in which all stakeholders having a claim upon the issue are present, because the world is not flat and having all on board would have meant that our rearrangements in the form of counter-narratives would have been considered too critical of companies, public and political institutions and therefore would most likely have been vetoed if representatives from those spheres had participated actively in producing the counter-narratives.

In *City Fables: Follow the Money* we engaged in studying, exposing as well as counter-narrating the public and private narratives that frame city life. Using the “fable” as organising metaphor, we have inhabited the shadowland between fiction and documentary as the site for mapping strategies and counter-strategies to highlight critical phenomena in the contemporary computerised, digitised, and quantified proceduralised city. In *Follow the Money* we have shown interest in current capitalist place production and the language of capitalism (the latter not addressed here to any large extent) that is characterised by increased global flows of capital and people, segregation, mediation, data logging and quantification.

Much media attention and research and development projects have focused on the so-called poor and troubled neighbourhoods of Malmö. Likewise,

many researchers focus on those that suffer under neo-liberal place production rather than studying those that profit from it. Very little critical research has been conducted on what produces the “successful” side of Malmö. If it has, such research has focused on the green and sustainable aspects of the Western harbour. The lack of analysis of the “successful” side of Malmö and what produces that success led us to study the finance and new media district, where a sizeable part of Malmö University is also located, which played a central role in reinventing Malmö after a post-industrial decline (see Fig. 1).

When studying the “successful” side we have focused on corporate taxes, because corporate taxes are a central instrument for allocating and distributing financial resources and thus foundational for deciding what should belong and be funded by the state and belong to the common good.³⁸ They form therefore a central intersection where politics and business economics meet. In the project we have conducted interviews with politicians, government agencies, companies, auditing companies, and activists in order to gather their voices on taxes. We have analysed economic data, in particular corporate taxes, from 2000 companies and 200 annual reports related to businesses located in Malmhattan, together with a few artists, journalists, an economic controller and concerned citizens in what we called a “taxathon” over one weekend. Later the company data was analysed in more detail together with the economic controller. We have also documented aggressive tax-planning products in our everyday lives.

We have experimented with how to narrate our findings through blog posts, cut-out animation films and hand puppet play performances. What we did not want to do was copy the dramaturgical and visual language typically used when dealing with tax avoidance, which often uses a murky, mysterious and thriller-like language. Neither have we been interested in reverting to simple stereotypes – the

evil corporate guy, the conjugal family marred by the latest financial crisis – or communicating that contemporary economics is incomprehensible, which many documentary and feature films do, as Toscano and Kinkle observe. Instead we have aimed to unearth the social life of money and taxes by connecting the abstraction of capital to the sense-data of everyday perception and experiences.

Given that big companies engage in market analysis, transaction and restructuring analysis, mining data from customers and clients, one strategy has been to use their own tactics, namely engaging in data mining and analysis. Specifically, we have filtered, reshuffled, and restructured grey, dull, boring documents such as an economic spreadsheets bought from Alla Bolag, a Swedish company that sells company data, which gave us an overview of the companies' economic activities and access to the companies' annual reports.

Our work builds partially on Fredric Jameson's³⁹ notion of cognitive mapping and is indebted to the work of William Bunge's⁴⁰ collective counter-mapping carried out by the Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute that functioned as an alternative higher learning education space for researchers and African-American workers for the collective mapping of historical, spatial, graphic, biographical, and poetic aspects of an African-American resi-

dential neighbourhood in Detroit.⁴¹ Given that we live in a time dominated by capitalism, Jameson argues, any aesthetic, cultural and representational endeavours are based on social spaces and class relations generated by capitalism. He therefore argues for an aesthetics that addresses the legibility and imageability of such spaces and relations. Following Jameson we have asked ourselves how we can “connect the abstractions of capital to the sense-data of everyday perception,” as Toscano and Kinkle phrase it.⁴² Specifically, this means dealing with the rhythm and geographies of capital and the narrative disjunction between abstraction and everyday life full of inequalities as experienced by people. Like Toscano and Kinkle, our wish has been to make the capitalist systems intelligible while acknowledging that they are a “properly unrepresentable totality”.⁴³ Toscano and Kinkle argue that such representation would need to be didactic and pedagogical – although not only – where we ask ourselves how such representations and political teaching can shape and affect political action by identifying “nerve-centres or weak links in the political anatomy of contemporary domination.”⁴⁴ As Toscano and Kinkle argue, the difficulty is to attend to how we are puppets of value subjected to abstract forces, while avoiding treating this abstraction as mystification or as a natural force that cannot be narratively reversed.

38. We started working on our *City Fables: Follow the Money* before both the Luxembourg leaks and the Panama Papers leaks, but we were well read into the issue of aggressive tax planning.

39. Jameson, Fredric. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. 1995.

40. Bunge, William. *Fitzgerald: Geography of a Revolution*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press. 2011.

41. In *Fitzgerald: Geography of a Revolution* Bunge and colleagues through their work in the Detroit Geographic Expedition and Institute show for example that the narratives on housing and rent in Detroit were racialised. The dominant narrative claimed that African-American neighbourhoods were sustained by the wealthy through their tax burden. Detroit Geographic Expedition and Institute

counter-mapping showed, however, that African-American slum neighbourhoods commanded the highest rents per land unit and travel costs. The low-income tenants, crammed into the area, were forced to live there, as the rent per acre was highest in Detroit while per individual the rent was the lowest.

42. Toscano and Kinkle, *op. cit* p. 7.

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

gaps. This has led to, among other things, a sizeable increase of the service sector, whose precarious working conditions are addressed to a little extent, which has provided the middle classes with cheap services. These binaries reproduce and increase spatial differences and inequalities. Rosengård is thus seen as an immigration district and problematic, while the Western Harbour has come to stand for the bright future. They have become taken for granted truths, rather than political processes that produce the city, as Mukhtar-Landgren states, referring to Massey.⁵²

Sensible Violence: The Infrastructure of Taxation

Our interest in corporate taxes, beside that we considered it an important nerve-centre, is because taxes could be a way to ensure that governments receive money from companies to pay for debts generated by companies, which have increas-

ingly been socialised, as we saw with quantitative easing and bailouts after the crash of 2008.⁵³ Those willing to take large risks, and through it damage the economy, should pay for the cost, as Gunilla Andersson, Lars Pålsson Syll, Hans Abrahamsson, and Hervé Corvellec argue in *Sydsvenskan*.⁵⁴ As they point out, this is closely related to more recent ideas, often termed the Tobin tax, which hark back to ideas John Maynard Keynes put forth after the crash in 1929.⁵⁵ Namely, that general finance tax should be implemented so that the market would take responsibility for some of the instabilities and imbalances they produce themselves. We are also interested in the topic, because we noted in newspaper articles that tax evasion was a considerable problem, locally and internationally.

When approaching the topic of taxation we have struggled to understand contemporary economics and the workings of companies, accounting and tax laws. At times it felt incomprehensible and the complexity obfuscating, for example how companies

45. Toscano and Kinkle point out that with the advent of complex technologies we can with ever-greater precision and scale map atomic and molecular elements as well as map the earth through composites produced by GPS and satellite sensors viewed seamlessly through, for example, Google Maps and Google Earth. However, although some of these technologies can be highly useful for the military, they argue that we need to ask to what degree they give us an intelligible overview of social and economic conflicts. They also state that the art of dealing with global logistics often in the form of photographed containers that update minimalism, tends to make social relations invisible, which Ranciére also argues in relation to the container photographs of Frank Breuer. See Ranciére, Jacques. "Notes on the Photographic Image". *Radical Philosophy*. No. 156. 2009. p. 12.

46. Mukhtar-Landgren, Dalia. "Den delade staden - Välfärd för alla i kungsstaden Malmö". *Fronesis*. 2006. pp. 120 -132.

47. Sassen, Saskia. "Strategic Instantiation of Gendering: global cities and survival circuits". In *Managing Urban Frontiers: Sustainability and Urban Growth in Developing Countries*. M. Keiner (ed.). Farnham: Ashgate. 2005.

48. Bohlin, Rebecka. *De osynliga: om Europas fattiga arbetarklass*. Stockholm: Atlas. 2012.

49. Hörnqvist, Magnus, Hansen, Anders Lund, Pettersson, Hanna, Unsgaard, Olav and Wennerhag, Magnus. "En öppen stad, ej en befäst stad". *Fronesis*. No. 18. 2005. pp. 8-19.

50. *City of Malmö - a diversity of encounters and opportunities within Europe*. Malmö stad. 2003. p. 7.

51. *Malmös väg mot en hållbar framtid. Hälsa, välfärd och rättvisa*. Malmö: Kommission för ett socialt hållbart Malmö. 2013.

52. Massey, Doreen. *Space, place and gender*. Cambridge: Polity. 1994.

53. Taxes, as Nigel Dodd points out, relate strongly to money's social function and what social relations money should support. Intriguingly, Dodd points at how various myths of origin of money exist. One myth is closely tied to the notion that money came about due to taxation and thus to the need of creating institutions that would bind together social relations. This is in stark opposition to the prevailing origin-of-money-myth, which is taught in business schools and believed by most. This myth claims that money emerged out of bartering and therefore emphasises that money emerged out of human need independent of social institutions, which promotes the idea of little government interference, laissez-fair mercantilism and today's financialisation capitalism. The taxation myth can be connected to a significant amount of historical and archeological evidence, while the bartering myth is based on shakier evidence. Dodd, Nigel. *The Social Life of Money*. New Jersey, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2014.

54. Andersson, Gunilla, Syll, Lars Pålsson, Abrahamsson, Hans and Corvellec, Hervé. "Debattinlägg: 'Återerövra demokratin'". *Sydsvenskan*. 21 October 2011.

55. Keynes, John Maynard. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 1936.

are structured and how transactions between mother and daughter companies flow, which generates complex geographies. At times it makes one wonder if part of the “game” some companies play is the production of sophisticated smokescreens.

In counter-narrating and counter-mapping the data we aimed to redistribute both through practice and mediation the sensible, by devaluing and revaluing the elements that make up the unification of meaning and through it produce fissures and cracks in normative representations and practices. One of our films, titled the *Aid Party*, counter-narrates subsidies (see Fig. 2). Currently we think of the sick, the old and migrants as those receiving most subsidies from the state, draining our shared resources. As we all know the sick and the old are now pitted against the migrants. But what if corporations that put themselves cunningly into debt and thus lower their result and their corporate taxes can be seen as getting substantial subsidies from the state? This, we argue is similar to how individuals and families that have large house loans receive substantial subsidies from the state and through it make debt attractive. This counter-narrative coheres to an established discourse that has broadened what should be counted as welfare. Mimi Abramovitz argues that welfare should include not only social welfare, but also fiscal, occupational and corporate welfare.⁵⁶ Her research on US welfare shows that social, fiscal and occupational welfare favours the middle and upper-middle classes, which receive higher benefits and face less cuts than the poorest segments of society that are viewed as draining the public purse, as they are seen as undeserving, lazy and immoral. Furthermore, these social policies reinforce ethnic and gender divides. Abramovitz shows how corporate welfare, which includes tax reductions, research and development funding and government grants and protection from competition, has dramatically increased since the 1950s and has led to what she calls a “shadow welfare state”. On the other hand, “Although ‘nearly everyone is on welfare’” as Abramovitz states, programmes for poor people and low-income working people are

more visible and more heavily criticised.⁵⁷

Sweden differs quite a bit from the US, but its policies still favour the wealthier segments in society. Also, the visibility and criticism on welfare spend on low-income groups is reminiscent of the US perspective on welfare spending. The general picture held in Sweden is that it is a social welfare state. However, as Kevin Farnsworth shows, Sweden, as well as Denmark, Hungary, Norway, the Slovak Republic, and the UK, are social-corporate welfare states, since they spend equal amount on social and corporate funding.⁵⁸ Corporate welfare states include the US, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Canada and New Zealand, given that state policies in these countries spend sizeably more money on subsidising corporations than citizens. Austria, France, Greece, Germany, and Luxembourg are defined as social-welfare states since they spend sizably more on social than corporate welfare.

The film shows how mainly large IT, media and housing companies in the area we studied are able to lower their annual results through complex corporate structures, internal lending and borrowing, and at times through placing brands and IPRs in Luxembourg. Year after year 30 per cent of the 2000 companies in Malmö pay no corporate tax, and 60 per cent very low corporate tax. A few company trails lead to Guernsey, a well-known tax haven. The complex company structure, where a set of daughter companies are owned by a mother company that in turn is owned by a mother company placed in another country, allows the money to flow more freely between different jurisdictions and tax laws and internally between different companies. It also allows the companies to play a sophisticated game of internal lending and borrowing between companies and through acquisitions. And although recently a ban was placed on transfer mispricing, which means that the companies cannot deduct the interest rates generated by internal loans, the companies can still lend and borrow from each other, where the validity

of such borrowing and lending is hard to trace and some companies appear to use this opportunity to aggressively lower their taxes. One company with revenue of 4.3 billion SEK, for example, paid back 89 million SEK in one year on a loan taken from the firm, lowering the annual result by 50 per cent, which lowered their annual tax considerably. Yet another company bluntly lists the same sum as a debt to a mother company as the annual result, which leads to zero taxes and heavy state subsidy.

In another film, *The Frustrated Small Business Owner* (see Fig. 2), we play with the idea that advanced tax planning should be democratised so that even small companies can play on the same level as bigger corporations, with complex company structures and sizeable budgets for advanced accounting and legal advice. This would allow them to engage in trickery and manipulation of the complexities and grey areas of tax laws, which larger companies exploit. We have also considered starting a Democratic Neutral Taxation Service.

In another film, *Is There Swedish Coffee in Panama?* (see Fig. 2), we make the counterargument that politicians are not in any sizeable manner fixing base erosion and profit shifting, which they claim to be doing for example through the OECD instigated project BEPS (Base Erosion Profit Shifting).⁵⁹ Instead we argue that Swedish politicians support and enable profit shifting on municipal, national and international level.

On a global level the Swedish government, through their Treasury, helps Swedish companies negotiate

tax agreements between governments. Eurodad has pointed out that Sweden, following the OECD recommendations rather than the UN's recommendations, is one of the most aggressive OECD countries in negotiating low source taxes on the continent of Africa.⁶⁰ In an interview we carried out, the Vice-President of the Swedish government tax committee (a Social Democrat) bemoans how big companies aggressively plan tax, and the lack of interest from journalists in covering tax issues. Furthermore, he makes the case for the need to address global tax justice, which aid organisations have brought to the attention of politicians. Regarding this issue, the Vice-President of the tax committee argues that Sweden – given that according to him the country has a high tax morale – could help developing countries that need to minimise tax dodging to build up their administration. Embarrassingly, it turns out that in a hearing arranged by the tax committee on global tax justice, the Vice President had not read the Eurodad report that was on the agenda and was therefore unaware of how the Swedish government has systematically negotiated low source tax deals, as was exposed by the Swedish public radio programme *Kaliber*.⁶¹ In light of that, and if Swedish companies paid fair taxes in these countries where the sum of the tax revenues would diminish their dependence of aid considerably, his reasoning does not only show that he is badly informed, but that he adheres to a neocolonial way of thinking, in which Sweden is portrayed as a fair country with strong morals and willing to help through humanitarian aid, while pulling the rug from under these countries' feet. Apparently, even politicians can be ill-informed and have a limited

56. Abramovitz, Mimi. "Everyone Is Still on Welfare: The Role of Redistribution in Social Policy." *Social Work*. Vol. 46. No. 4. pp. 297-308. October 2001.

57. *Ibid*, p. 306.

58. Farnsworth, Kevin. *Social Versus Corporate Welfare. Competing Needs and Interests within the Welfare State*. London: Palgrave MacMillan. 2012.

59. This is also an argument that Gabriel Zucman makes in Zucman, Gabriel. *The Hidden Wealth of Nations: The Scourge of Tax Havens*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 2015.

60. Eurodad. *Fifty Shades of Tax Dodging. The EU's role in supporting an unjust global tax system*. 2015.

61. Palm, Jesper. "Jakten på Afrikas försvunna skatt". *Kaliber*. Sveriges Radio. 2015.

understanding of capital relations. It also shows the value of analysing and counter-narrating the workings of meso-level infrastructures rather than only focusing on the aesthetic-political sensibility of local dense actor-networks and their pixel politics.

What has been put forth here is that management is an integral aesthetic-political aspect of design practices, whether conducted as research or as part of a professional practice. It includes situated coordination of partnerships made up of heterogeneous socio-material entities. Such coordination can be understood and analysed as a dynamic aesthetic-political management of infrastructures. The management of infrastructure, here termed infrastructuring, through modes of assembly and decision-making, is essential when devising more democratic forms of co-design. How such decision-making assemblies are devised – who participates and how decisions are made – affects how change is achieved. The devising orients what aspects of the issue worked on are acknowledged, how we understand it and how it can be re-made.

A fundamental issue when it comes to who should participate, is if one should aim towards having all those a particular issue impacts on board or devise an assembly of selected partners which operate from outside the dominant regime and that delinks from and disaffirms established normative relations. Participatory design and Actor-Network-Theory, given their emphasis to working within established and dominant social systems through consensual processes rather than from the outside, introduce a reformist aesthetic-political stand. This way of working is additive – where marginalised voices are brought into established assemblies and affirm those in power, which dilutes the political agency of those marginalised. Change and critique at best is achieved through reformist socio-material aesthetic-political gestures.

Given the emphasis on collaborative critique as affirmation and addition, rather than delinking and disaf-

firming makes it difficult for Actor-Network-Theory and participatory design, which builds on Actor-Network-Theory, to implement change. Additive and affirmative ways of working also tend to hide the violence they produce when marginalised partners are brought into established assemblies, as they affirm and legitimise through their participation established regimes of power. It is therefore important to ask if it is at all productive to engage marginalised parts of society to become part of the “whole” body, as it easily leads to policing, consensus and thus disempowerment of subjects’ political agency.

The violence of critique and change and critique needs to be acknowledged, as well as the fact that it always involves a dynamic aesthetic-political relationship between assembling and disassembling, affirming and disaffirming. I argue that negating, delinking and disaffirming established infrastructures through the development of new formations, re-assembling and re-infrastructuring can be a productive strategy, since it can empower marginalised positions and does not dilute their political agency. It also opens up for different political-aesthetic perspectives on how we are to understand a particular issue and how that issue can be changed through the re-making of socio-material relations.

Participation and collaboration needs to be seen in the wider sense, as a question of the distribution of the sensible and not – as is so often done now – as a question of achieving and measuring the level of agency of particular social events or how local dense networks can be reformed. The devising of assemblies also needs to be understood in relation to wider social systems, not least in relation to aesthetic-political-economic systems they are entangled in, which produces particular class, gender and ethnic relations. Relations that privilege dominant systems and classes, where the scope of their privileges tend to remain invisible if not acknowledged, while they need to be made visible and legible through counter-narratives and counter-practices.

