

FUTURES ORIENTED DESIGN PEDAGOGY: PERFORMING A SPACE OF POWERFUL POSSIBILITY

ENGAGEMENTS, RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Where is the futuring power in performative design pedagogy? How do we, as educators and researchers, engage with pedagogical approaches in design learning that are flexible and responsive to changing times? These are questions we ask relating to an experimental teaching project that took students into a space for learning possibilities within the context of a creative desert festival. Our pedagogical impulse had been to firstly relocate design students and educators into a space where the environmental extremes would be experientially immersive, so as to bring their social ecology in step with the environmental ecology. Secondly, it had been to situate the design learning activity within a sociocultural microcosm over a week, where embodied, performative engagement with all participants would provide feedback and give momentum to the groups praxis – through lived reflection in, and on their actions. We refer to performance in design pedagogy as imaginative meaning-making performatively produced. Our findings suggest that pedagogy that is enabling of performative event spaces in radically different

settings, can expose and empower ontological relations between design students and their co-created world and hopefully prepare them to become power-ful actors in design futuring. Keywords: Learning spaces, design pedagogy and power relations, deterritorialisation, performativity, sustainable futures, climate change.

INTRODUCTION

Once a year if you drive northeast of Cape Town out into the arid Karoo semi-desert you will come across a festival called *Afrikaburn* that hosts a creative community of people who have chosen to live for a week in the austere beauty and extreme climate of the Tankwa. Entering a public, cultural and performative space that celebrates difference, everyday lives are suspended and are oriented to principles for participation that demand a culture of respect, sharing and a zero environmental impact. One can “experience a different world where creativity, self-reliance, self-expression and communal effort are championed. Ice is the only commodity for sale and everything needed for survival, including tents food and water has to be brought in. The festival aims to be radically inclusive and accessible, bringing a community of participants together who create art, costume, performance, theme camps, music, mutant vehicles, and burning structures (Afrikaburn, “What is Afrikaburn”, n.d.).

This is the public performative festival space that we, a group of design educators, researchers, and students, chose to explore for its pedagogical potential in exploring relations between design and power. Our paper presents this as a second part of an experimental



Figure 1: The festival playa, a space for performative possibility.

design project with the quest of investigating and offering designerly ways of scaling up climate change awareness. The party to *Afrikaburn* 2015 consisted of five design educators, 20 Industrial Design Bachelors students and 40 Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) Architecture and Interior Design students, all from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) in Cape Town, South Africa. A choreographer assisted with the performative naissance of *We Are Water*, the co-created installation piece designed as a site-specific event by this group for *Afrikaburn*. Central to this was Fiscilla, the fictive story gatherer in the shape of a physical fish, who had accompanied us on a journey from Cape Town to Namibia six months earlier (Snaddon et al. 2016, in press). She had functioned as a mediating design artifact (Morrison & Chisin 2017), used as a means of gathering stories from water stressed communities and destined to be an interactive installation at a *Participatory Design Conference* in Windhoek, Namibia. As a continuation of this, she now shifted shape to become the centrepiece of an ecological message portraying the indispensable role of water for the survival of all species.

FOCUS AND METHODS

In this paper we draw on conceptual research perspectives from sustainable futures oriented design, performative design pedagogy, and power relations in design learning. These we connect to the following aspects of learning – *ontological* enactment of learning within enabling *heterotopian* spaces, and mutual *agency*. Consequently, the main question is: What role can performative design pedagogy play in creating dynamic learning spaces that are futures oriented?

We present this research as participatory action designer educators and researchers who took part in the event, but also as research colleagues working and writing together through a qualitative enquiry process. This constituted a living enquiry where social processes were given time to develop as exploratory pedagogy that is democratically and publicly productive of knowledge building, exchange and critique (Koskinen et al. 2011; von Busch 2015). In moving beyond the studio environment we explored the pedagogical possibilities for participatory sustainable design in the culturally defined yet egalitarian space of *Afrikaburn*, seeking ways to empower ontological agency away from the dominant logic of design for economic growth (Tham, 2014: 331).



Figure 2: Documentary film aided processes of reflection and analysis in this research. Here students engage with other festival participants through playful use of water-like fabric.

In pursuing such perspectives, the data we assembled consists of a documentary film, photographic imagery, field notes, and transcribed interview reflections during workshops held post the event. Analysis involving a variety of modalities has elicited a multivocal and reflective dialogue of a cross section of participating staff and students, indicative of the diversity of the group in terms of gender, culture, race, level of study, and design discipline (Tracy 2010). The documentary video aided the process of elicitation to stimulate recall and as a basis for reflection and conceptualisation (Jewitt, 2009). In a discursive and performative process of thinking our way through “data, theory, words, images, and lived experiences” (Holbrook & Pouchier 2014: 755), we have conceptualised and themed the analysis around the emergent phases of the event. In so doing, this offers an analytical method that is evocative of the methodological approach of the event: to design, develop, implement, document, observe and investigate relations in a performative pedagogy. Research writing done in this way provides thick description of the phenomena so that the resultant text can be evocative and convincing enough for other educators as “a tipping point towards new capabilities to act” (von Busch 2015: 232). As such, this research is a means of understanding, for ourselves and others, the potentials of performatively experimental design pedagogy that disrupts the status quo in order to engender powerful agentive selves through collaborative exploration.

CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES

Conceptually, we position this design pedagogy using the following perspectives on sustainability in design education, performativity and power relations inherent in design learning.

DESIGN EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

The design industry - embedded in capitalist epistemological, ontological, and ideological assumptions - is in conflict with design practice viewed as a socially beneficial activity engaged with creating a better world for all (Boehnert 2014). A more urgent focus is required orienting pedagogies towards “being-for-uncertainty”, as preparation for students entering an

increasingly fast paced and connected world in an era of material limits (Barnett 2014: 232; Manzini 1992). Wider framing of design as problem exploration in the creation of products, services and systems, has challenged design schools with already full programmes resulting from a curriculum-by-accrual approach (Davis 2013).

Calls for design education to respond to uncertain sociocultural, economic and political t es, are not new. These accentuate graduate dispositions of thoughtfulness, carefulness, humility, receptiveness, resilience, courage and stillness (Barnett 2014). Many cite the need for change based on the potential for further damage to the environment if we do not acknowledge our human place as a subsystem within the vast ecological system of nature (Buchanan, 1985; Manzini 1992; Margolin 2007). Fry strongly critiques liberal democracy and blind anthropocentrism as constructs that de-future by encouraging assumptions “that humanity advances simply by increasing productive and consumptive capacity” (2009: 93). Inciting designers to redirect their practice in an act of futuring that is born of ‘commonality in difference’, he emphasises that creating sustain-ability can only come about if pursued in socioculturally plural ways (ibid).

Irwin (2012: 2) draws attention to wicked problems such as climate change, water scarcity and poverty as having the same intrinsic principles as living systems, and that they are comprised of countless relational strands between “people, the environment and the things that people make and do – a relationship triad”. ‘Respectful design’ is proposed by Tunstall (2013: 245) as an alternative way of being for design education, “something akin to the creation of preferred courses of action based on the intrinsic worth of all human, animal, mineral, fauna and flora and the treatment of them with dignity and regard”.

These are matters concerning how we construct and enact our design pedagogies when they are futuring of structures, processes and enactments in the present that project designers’ and researchers’ agency towards the future.

PERFORMATIVITY AND DESIGN LEARNING

Concerning design learning, educators performing as facilitators of knowledge creation can be likened to theatre directors whose major goal is to “devise a performance by making it emerge with minimum control, and being ready to take advantage of the unexpected” (Binder 2011: 114). If the concept of performance taken in its broadest logic, entails “the production of a subject through the performance, then design practice and the designed work is the effect of a performance” (Dong 2007: 1). Performative design pedagogy can therefore be described as imaginative meaning making performatively produced.

Designers need to be highly honed observers that “understand performance: improvisation, character, expressiveness and self-awareness” (Tonkinwise 2013: 219). To the notion of improvisational performance, Binder et al. (2011) highlight the importance of the interpretive and participatory process that brings about a completion of the collective endeavour. Completion is emergent as offerings within the space such as actions, symbols and artefacts that are reacted to by all present. These authors propose that meaning, as experience for someone, is never fully complete until it is intelligibly communicated or expressed to others, and that culture can be seen as an ensemble of such expressions.

Drawing on techniques from the arts, and performative approaches to collaborative design, performativity in design education can open up dialogue in ways that are imaginary, playful, and disruptive of hierarchy (Lock, 2013). Ehn (2008: 93) questions “how the object of design is made into a public thing and open[ed] to controversies among participants” inside and outside of the project. The term ‘spect-actor’, coined by Boal (2002) refers to active spectators in audience participation within improvised performances where solutions to certain sociocultural, ethical and moral problems can be co-created.

POWER RELATIONS IN DESIGN LEARNING

Acknowledging relations of power within ontological ways of being and becoming is key to this study on learning and pedagogy. This resonates with notions of nomadism in pedagogy, defined by “a double movement where learning practices are displaced (becoming mobile) and where learning itself is its own form of displacement (i.e., a change in one’s worldview)” (Fendler 2013: 788). The nomadic metaphor within educational discourse on learning mobilities (ibid:792) enriches conceptions of displacement or deterritorialisation as it is performed by students. Movement in learning is well conceptualised by Deleuze and Guattari who describe territorialities as being “shot through with lines of flight testifying to the presence within them of movements of deterritorialization and reterritorialization” (2005: 55). We understand these lines of flight as threshold crossing opportunities for students as they negotiate and enact

their becoming, as they “enter into unfamiliar territory, in a process of discovery” (Fendler 2013: 787).

Teaching according to Heidegger is “to let learn” (1976: 15), a view that augments Freire’s argument for democratized education allowing for a “dialogical relationship” between both educators and students that ensures content is situated within people’s “reading of the world” (Freire 2004: 280). Reading and re-reading how and what is taught becomes pertinent here. How might we open up learning spaces for “multiple ways of storying the past related to the nation-state or any community” (Den Heyer 2011: 611)? In developing design pedagogies that offer space for students to learn about how to negotiate power, change and design as co-creative knowledge production in the future we point to Mainsah’s (2014) concept of ‘critical design literacy’. Design educators, he argues, do not place enough attention on the value system inherent in design approaches – they need to develop students’ capacity to “be creative and transformative subjects and not just objects of domination and manipulation” (ibid, 2014:296).

Speaking to the exigency of the common and of sharing, Mbembe (2016) makes the point that “we humans are not as special as we once thought”, we are not as disentangled from other species as we once imagined. This takes on the modern knowledge project and its focus on the human, and proposes a decentering of the human through sharing not only *agency*, but also the capacity to *know* with nonhuman entities, organic as well as technical. Here we link to the fish, Fiscilla, and her mediating influence as a diagenetic artifact that brokered shared and emergent meaning making.

“Powerful learning arises from weaving between different knowledge processes in an explicit and purposeful way” according to multiliteracy scholars Cope and Kallantzis (2009:187). They describe the micro dynamics of meaning making as processes of “negotiating discourse differences” (2009: 166). These differences lie within the hegemony of hidden framing of *who* generates innovation along with its underlying values (Tunstall, 2013). Diethelm warns of the colonising metaphor of design intervention and how little thought is given to its “metaphoric bloodline of knowledge as power” (2016: 169). This connects with Mainsah’s notion of critical design literacy and how performing this approach will demand educators to skillfully negotiate the tools, attitudes and values of any given context with their students, and “depend upon students’ and teachers’ everyday relations of power, their lived problems and struggles” (2014: 296).

The event we analyse here has to do with a staged artifact that was part art object and part interactive installation. It is therefore relevant to consider views on the topic of art as they pertain to locating design pedagogy within a wider creative, public, cultural festival event that is expressive, affective and performative. For we are caught up in the hegemony of

the spatio-temporal register we find ourselves in, “we only see what we have already seen” (O’Sullivan 2001: 127). Art’s function, in this view, is to switch our register, transforming (if only temporarily) our sense of self and world view. Performative design pedagogy, as transformative and potential scoping of future practices, may thus be seen as expressive enactments and use of designed things to mobilise current stasis and publicly co-create shared meaning that is responsive to the culture of the heterotopic space (Snaddon et al. 2016, in press). Agency, in this view is mutually generated through deterritorialising moves that are exploratory and performative. Conceptions of decentering, revealing and bringing forth are axial to the argument of this paper, and we now proceed to apply these in the analysis of the experimental event.

ANALYSIS

WHAT WE THOUGHT AND BROUGHT

Preparatory to relocating to *Afrikaburn*, studio processes echoing given disciplinary differences and expectations had shaped the students conceptual designs. Workshops had been held to encourage inter-disciplinary crossovers between industrial design and architecture, but expectations of staff and students in these two domains remained unreconciled. Fiscilla the fish and the concept *We are Water*, developed by the industrial design students differed from the cultural African icons conceptualised by the junior ECP architecture students.



Figure 3: Concepts and sketches brought by the multidisciplinary team into the arid desert.

On arrival at *Afrikaburn*, an underlying power dynamic crystallised in the first day or two. Partly because of the layout of the campsite, senior students situated to one

side of the support vehicle and junior students on the other, this spatial ‘divide’ seemed to encourage a social divide. Some expressed dissatisfaction with this and became distracted by the festival activities while others participated more actively. One junior student said “...with us being cooped up in our ECP mindset, they [senior students] kind of took over the project, but it wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be... it was OK giving them the platform to lead” (Khanyiso 2017). In adapting to their role as mentors to the juniors, senior students shared their knowledge about construction and power tool operation – “as soon as they realized what they could learn from us and what we could learn from them, things started moving quite quickly” (Mikhail 2017). More than mentoring, this also presented an opportunity for project management of building logistics and the social skills inherent in such an exercise.

No grading, no taps, no money – these were some of the characteristics of the event space that presented both constraints and opportunities. With less competitiveness amongst the students there was no “platform to be better or for other people to be worse, you just brought what you had and that was enough” (Lizanne 2017). Our aim in taking students out into a challenging space was to consciously disrupt and democratize the space of learning so as to liberate ourselves (staff and students) from the constraints of studio practice where; competitiveness, grading and separation between staff and students can create tense divides. The radical shift from the norm prompted one student to remark on the sense of freedom (Lizanne 2017), “We were working with a concept and not a specific plan – we weren’t told, you do this and... check it off the list, you developed your list as you go.”

MAKING DO

“It’s interesting to say we are water in the desert” (Devan 2017), a place where “... there were no taps” (Iska 2017). The anomalous nature of the message being presented in such a context bound by very real water constraints was part of the pedagogical rationale for being there. What remained to be seen was how the experience would pan out in the moment. Making do and working with multiple materialities in the social space as well as the physical started to affect the relational dynamic within the group. The choreographer in our facilitation team expressed what she saw as “on-site teamwork, on-site management and on-site thinking” and how “everything changed from that very first meeting where we sat down and spoke about how everything wasn’t as we expected” (Danielle 2017).

A student remarking on how the group drew on its diversity to mutually negotiate in a more generous way said “If you put [students] in such a different environment they open up their network and they start sharing information which otherwise would have been kept to themselves” (Lizanne 2017).

You've spent four years with these people and you've got to know them in a certain way, and then you put them in this completely different environment and they open up to you in this weird caring, empathic way, that you aren't used to (ibid).

These explorations of power and authority so central to performativity became evident as the group negotiated limits and possibilities for viable courses of action through re-iterative performances (Dong 2007). An example of this is the consternation when faced with the reality of the old wooden palettes we had to work with. Realising previously conceived ideas would not be possible using this material a frenetic work session ensued to salvage usable wood. A design Masters



Figure 4: On site adaptations to original concepts, and Fiscilla suspended as part of the *We are Water* installation.

student, who had managed to move more nomadically between the two groups came forward and said, “Let’s try something out” (Corbin 2017). Conscious of the gathered crowd of students and staff he sketched out in the dust a simple wave profile requiring the least amount of material and nails to construct – then using the sketch he laid out planks and nailed them together. He remembers thinking “I have to make this work” (ibid) as he lifted the shape and found it held together – a second one was made and a prototype for a three dimensional wave shape containing a seat was born. This process whereby someone came forward and performed within the problem space, enacting a solution in front of the assembled group appears to have been a seminal moment when the social dynamic of the event shifted. The moment had been fraught with tension, the ‘stand off’ between design and architecture staff compared by a student to a “clash of the titans” (ibid).

True to design’s process consisting of heuristic iterations this became a stepping stone out of a difficult problem space, where making do and performing a conversation with the materials of the situation (both things and people) provided a way out and a way into what followed (Schön 1992).

LETTING GO

Letting go of habitual modes of being with one another as design students and adapting towards finding fit within the learning space became increasingly evident after initial acclimatisation. Participants not only found their place within the teamwork but also became aware of their own emergent agentive selves, one saying how it “triggered another inner self that I didn’t know about...” (Khanyiso 2017). Through deterritorialising moves born of the challenging situation, students nomadically reterritorialised in a give and take mode of learning.

Guided by the task at hand the groups diffused through social osmosis, one student remarking that the process of figuring out who would do what as involving “bumping heads” and “...dancing around a bit [before] we fell into our positions. Another noted how this performative dance in the radically different context mobilized the collective imaginary of the group while sharply delineating constraints. Mobilities of opening out, feeling the constraints, and again reopening that are typical of the design process became lived and embodied as students felt their way forward (Binder 2011).

But the public festival space presented opportunity for wider participation. One student noted that in not putting their intention into words, and simply using a piece of shimmering water-like fabric, they engaged with other festival participants in a playful conversation. By introducing something unfamiliar to the desert setting, they played with a familiar element in a liminal recombination. In liminality this sort of ludic play is inherent in the “work of the collectivity in performing symbolic actions” (Turner 1982: 32). This marks a shift from internal performative processes to the inclusion of other ‘spect-actors’ from the festival playa (Boal 2002). This decentering was pivotal, as suddenly the festival offering had taken on a new life as it started to draw attention to itself. The conversation had started.

Another performative factor was the activity of body and face painting, which one student described as becoming “a second being because you’re painted up and masked... you can just be whatever avatar you had on that day” (Corbin 2017). Fiscilla too was dressed with colourful scales to breathe new life into her persona. This embodying of the moment changed according to the disposition of the group and the type of contact with the festival community as the staged space became more inviting for interaction. One student remarked how other festival performers gifted their time and adapted their performance around the theme of water. A water bar also attracted people while costumed

and painted students passionately advocated the importance of water and the consequences of a lack of water security.



Figure 5: Students played with their identities as they explored performative possibilities within the public festival space.

Factors mentioned here, as well as others helped the transition from oppositional discourse to co-operative discourse, from atomised individual inputs to collective endeavours. Students noticed the lack of coercion to contribute and that participation had to be willingly offered. The festival theme *GIFT* found expression in these incidental and more deliberate actions. Initial narratives of “your fish” (Fiscilla), and “our concepts” (developed back in the studio) gave way to “our installation” and “our burn” as Fiscilla eventually went up in flames in the tradition of *Afrikaburn*.



Figure 6: The final burn drew thousands of festival participants at sunset. Here, a student oversees Fiscilla’s rite of passage in a poignant moment of letting go and gifting the message that we are all water.

Reflecting on the final performative act of burning Fiscilla, students commented on how this cathartic spectacle heightened revelations of inner self and agency (Corbin 2017; Lizanne 2017; Khanyiso 2017).

One remarked on the eeriness moments before the burn, where he experienced a mental playback of his learning experience and how he’d found so many “elements and traces about [his] role as a designer to contribute to society in a more constructive way” (Corbin 2017). All student alumni interviewed post the event commented on how they now apply knowledge gained through the experience of flexibly solving problems on the spot, and value co-created generously through openly performed expressions of intent.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Students co-designed and experienced their creative offering as invested fellow community members, in two related ways: 1) to actively cultivate their “response-ability” through an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the environment (Haraway 2016; Braidotti 2013), and 2) to engage deeply with the sociocultural and physical materiality of design. In de-coupling from a consumer-centric mode of designing, we experienced a certain spatio-temporal shift beyond workaday activities (OSullivan 2001). This shift, accentuated by contextual resource constraints emphasised the ontological quality of learning in design that gives credence to the biographies of all participants – personal ontological lenses magnified epistemological depth. This heightened awareness of emergent, discursive value negotiation through the design process, as a means of translating value into tangible experience for all (Tunstall 2013).

The following three propositions and their associated implications highlight the main take out of this research.

1. *Immersion in a radically different environment opens out learning as experience that empowers students’ agentive selves in relation to others, both human and non-human.* Through immersive engagement in the context of the event space, the requirements of the project emerged as roles became defined through a process of self-organization and dialogue inclusive of people, materials and the environment. Implications are that consideration given to the embedded and emergent knowledge within an extreme project location can reveal to all participants diverse knowledge that is generative of unexpected outcomes. This draws on concepts of a pedagogical kinetics and the performative enactment of meaning making in an eventful space, where students are freed up from the hegemony of design solutioning for a consumerist world (Fendler 2013; Tonkinwise 2013). We propose this conceptual framework as a deterritorialising move that empowers knowledge creation for stakeholders in such a setting, and specifically in this case, the ability for design students to experience the generosity in sharing and creating *with* rather than merely *for* a distant audience. The question remains whether these results are achievable only in these extreme conditions – how do we create learning spaces with similarly nomadic qualities when we aren’t able to physically travel? The following propositions probe this question further.

2. *Performativity understood as meaning making in the moment enables learning that is more fluid and open to momentary feedback loops that guide the process in a more responsive manner to contextual requirements.* Being exposed to the apparent freedoms of the creative space, students quickly had to define the parameters of their activity – by acknowledging their skill sets and the requirements of the situation they found their fit. They did this actively by ‘dancing around’ one another (4: 2017) to sense abilities, interests and passions amongst themselves, and other festival participants. Making meaning publicly through “collective creative action” (Binder et al. 2011: 115) is what this event was about. Expressions in the form of performance and design aided the process of co-creating actions responsive to the culture of the event space. This implies that reflection in the form of performed expression of ability and interest within the activities of making, verbalizing and playful improvisation makes learning immediately explicit and apparent to students. Results of these learning performances can be immediately applied in the next moment in a feedback loop that completes a cycle of meaning making for a student.

Pedagogical enabling of spaces conducive to learning that is dynamic and nomadically explorative, requires a firm but light touch. It is about finding strategies to make things happen without over prescribing, and about adapting to the spatio-temporal register that is emergent if learning is allowed to happen in its own space and at its own pace (Binder 2011; OSullivan 2001).

3. *Deterritorialisation of power relations to democratise pedagogy, counters hegemonic value imposition external to the context.* Freed from normative, processes based on prejudged outcomes, students evolved appropriate means of deciding what value they deemed worthy of the space and context. The performative dance enacted by participants which animated hidden relations of power within the multi-disciplinary group, pointed towards a mode of being that was appropriate to the context and values of the community festival. Implications are that for pedagogy aimed at enabling redirective practice (Fry, 2009), consideration needs to be given to how to disrupt the norm if we are indeed to radically redirect our educational practice to allow students to become designers who are deeply aware of contingency in designing and its outcomes. This can be a painful process and requires being up front about what to expect from a deterritorialising process, which is the very disruption that allows learning to take place (Fendler 2013: 792). The ability to harness opportune scenarios by being open to the unexpected remains paramount.

To conclude, we return to the original intent of this exploratory pedagogy grounded in scaling up climate change awareness. We argue in this paper that by doing an immersive performative pedagogy around the issue of climate change and by addressing the climate of the pedagogy itself we can come up with enactments and

performativities that directly address, but aren’t directed by hegemonic hierarchies that defuture. In performing this co-created process, all players as participants themselves, act in the moment as it unfolds in iterative ways that involve making, thinking, doing and being to develop a futures oriented design pedagogy. We see that the connection between design and power is one that is concerned with ways to shape and enact means to sustainable futures. This may also offer approaches to design pedagogies that reveal the power and potential of changing climates of knowledge building together.

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