Some aspects and characteristics of design anthropology as a post-critical practise

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Introduction

In 2004, Bruno Latour asked; what has become of critique? He called on researchers to develop modes of analyses and engagements that didn't rest on debunking or deconstruction (Latour 2004, p. 226). Through his extensive work Latour has tied broad programmatic statements about critique and post-critique (Latour 2004, 2005, 2010) to the methodological aspects of conducting research (Latour 1997, 2005) specifically social research, and questioned the status of theories and methods. In this paper I attempt to tentatively articulate a post-critical design anthropological response to Latour's methodological instructions.

Design anthropology, a still emergent transdisciplinary field, comprised by a multiplicity of research practises, evidently can't be engaged with as some coherent whole, nonetheless, design coupled with anthropology has already suggested some promising paths to articulate new forms of post-criticality.

The discussion in this paper will be staged around a co-design experiment, which dealt with opening a dialogue among a group of youngsters in a library in Copenhagen, members of staff, and a project manager from an urban renewal project. Through a recounting of the experiment, which was not in any way unequivocally successful, the paper seeks to characterize the post-critical as a practical, situated and experimental possibility; as the potentials that lie in producing specific material difference and situated alternatives distributed in time and space. The paper highlights knowing essentially as specific forms of eventuation, and points to the differences between experimental reasoning and commentary.

New invitations to social research

The starting point for Latours constructive and post-critical project is the commitment to a flat ontology and a performative orientation. From this perspective, theories, methods, and researchers are always located as part of the wider world, with no privileged vantage point from where to intervene. The consequence, for Latour, is a critique of critique. Traditional critique and traditional social research is a mode of analysis that imposes some order on the field beforehand, as if from the outside. This results in debunking and deconstruction. But the job of the analyst, according to Latour, is not to order the world, at least not in the first instance; ordering and patterns must be located one step further into abstraction, *after* actors have been given the opportunity to unfold their own differing cosmos (Latour 2005, p.23).

In line with Latours performative orientation Nortje Marres, in an article titled; *"The experiments in living"* (2012), proposes to view sustainable living experiments, a proliferating media genre, as notable devices of social research. Insofar as these experiments tend to involve the meticulously recording and reporting of everyday practises, e.g. when social actors document how they clean their house with vinegar or unplug their fridge, they provide a format or a protocol for investigating forms of life. In Marres view, sustainable living experiments must be understood as critical and contested sites for social research, because this particular genre of social experimentation, carried out by non-scientists, extends an invitation, or a challenge, to social researchers to come to terms with the current transformations in the field of social research. These experiments work to bring into view the environmental and social consequences of everyday living, quite literally by making everyday living accountable. Marres describes these experiments as multifarious instruments, since many of them are performed by a variety of agencies, e.g. governmental, scientific and for-profit organisations, and they are staged to serve a multiplicity of moral, political, and economic purposes, which may not always be clearly distinguished. This variability of purposes, Marres suggests, is perhaps what make these experimental forms potent (2012, p. 81). With a performative orientation we may

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point to these multifarious instruments, and to experimental set-ups in general, as devices that do ontological work. As Marres points out, the device, which performs the experiment, is attributed a capacity, which is normally attributed to theory, namely the articulation of the entities that make up the world. But where does this leave the knowledge practises of social research? Marres, from the position of a descriptive practise, outlines two different possibilities; either, social researchers set out to impartially describe the ontologies that are emerging in practise, or, they actively commit to particular ontologies over others (2012, p.84). The central question for Marres becomes; how everyday experimental forms, like sustainable living experiments, can be rendered productive for social research? Design anthropology, I will argue, attempts to fundamentally turn this question around, by asking; how can research be rendered productive for the social?

Caroline Gatt and Tim Ingold have proposed the idea of an anthropology-by-means-of-design instead of an anthropology-by-means-of-ethnography. Such an approach, as Gatt and Ingold argue, stress the importance of what is produced *during* fieldwork (2013, p.148). It is of equal value to, if not greater than, what is produced *after* fieldwork. This may be seen as a deliberate move towards an experimental practise, an attempt to locate the anthropologist, and the moment of knowledge production, in the midst of things, in the real-time prospective correspondences with the people among whom the anthropologist work. In a practise of anthropology-by means-of-design the material conditions and the pragmatic is inevitably tied to the possible, while in a practise of anthropology-by means-of-ethnography the link between material constraints in the field and a post-critical response is much less clear. Similarly, Joachim Halse (2013), has argued for an extension of the ethnographic gaze. To expand the ethnographic gaze he calls for a reorientation towards situated, bodily and material experiences of the possible. Whereas conventional ethnographic methods hinges on a recounting of practises that are already given, he points to the design event as a central site for knowledge making, in particularly to design events, which seek to establish and explore credible and meaningful practises around a particular issue, in the environment *of* and *by* the people it addresses.

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These positions suggest that researchers, instead of choosing between impartial descriptions and descriptive formats for particular ontological politics, could take the current transformations in both social research and contemporary society in general, as a challenge and an invitation to build multifarious instruments, and, that the intervention point, for a post-critical practise, should be an experimental engagement with the happening of the social.

A set-up and consteallion slowly emerges

The co-design event that I will report from took place at a library in the western part of Copenhagen. It was part of a research project that took an experimental co-design approach to explore new formats for collaboration between citizens and cultural institutions in the municipality of Copenhagen. The aim of the project was to build new relations between three institutions and the citizens and local networks they are surrounded by, and through this process, to render visible new images of both citizens and institutions that could feed into the on-going debate about change in this sector. Before I turn to the event itself, I will briefly sketch out what led up to the event. During the first few weeks of my stay at the library, I met Ina, a cultural worker, who had worked in the basement of the library, in a now in-formal drop-in centre, which hosted a group of 30 to 40 youngsters. This place had been established as a result of conflicts that kept erupting between neighbourhood kids that occupied the library space and the employees. Many years ago, librarians were experiencing recurring problems with a large group of young kids, who used the library space after school. As a response the library management offered the space in the basement, and Ina was subsequently hired to do cultural work with the kids. Most of these kids have Middle Eastern backgrounds, they live in small apartments, in large families, and many of them struggle with different social problems. The basement became a pragmatic solution to a then urgent problem, but the conflicts that were the whole reason for establishing this somewhat unusual library space persisted. Kids were still banned from the library above the basement on a regular basis, the door between the library on the first floor and the basement was now kept locked, and there was a real lack of

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communication between what was going on in the basement and in the rest of the organisation.

During the first period of my stay, I also happened to meet Camilla, a project manager of a local urban renewal project, assigned to renew squares and parks over 5 years in western Copenhagen. Camilla and her team had just moved their activities into an open office space above the library. A big challenge for the team was how to include the many young kids who used the nearby park on a daily basis in the renewal process. The representational formats like hearings, public meetings and steering groups somehow excluded some of the most important actors, namely the young kids that hung out in the park after school, the same kids who occupied the basement of the library.

Around the same time I was also introduced to Hans. A month after my arrival he was employed to a new position at the library, formally as a librarian, in the youth library above the basement, but he was really more interested in doing outreach projects and in finding ways to open up the library space to the kids from the neighbourhood. During this period I started to spend a lot of time in the basement. Through Ina, who functioned as a sort of gatekeeper, I got access to the community space. The kids were in fact very talkative, once we got to know each other. They took us around the neighbourhood and the park, and offered their time. They willingly shared their stories of everyday life in the neighbourhood and the basement, yet I also sensed how some of my questions came across as puzzling to them. It was as if they were trying to figure out what I wanted from them. I in turn didn't precisely know what I wanted, but clearly I became interested in the kids in the basement, initially as a special case of a library space. This space and the community that it hosted seemed to form at least potentially some sort of controversy or situation in the periphery of the institution, which was not unproblematic, but perhaps potentially potent in relation to the overall program.

One step further into the real

The constellation of Ina, Camilla, Hans, the kids, and I emerged through the first period of my stay. As I have briefly sketched out above we were all of us invested

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with different concerns and interests, not quite the same but partially connected interests and concerns. We may characterize such a situation as pretty un-extraordinary, insofar as new relations and issues tend to emerge whenever a researcher sets out to engage with everyday life. The question that this brief recounting raises, however, is what would be a possible post-critical response in this situation?

In the process of designing a set-up that could take our explorations further I worked closely together with Ina. Obviously several different approaches would be possible, and probably more inventive proposals, than the set-up we came up with, could have emerged, but we were precisely at the intersection where the imagination meets the friction of materials, and ambition rub up against the hard edges of the world (Gatt & Ingold, p.146). The constellation that I have just sketched out was barely yet visible. Ina and I depended on the toolbox that I arrived with, the different co-design methodologies, and continually worked to develop it further. We had to look for a set-up that was practically possible, both in relation to mobilising the kids, Camilla, and Hans, in relation to time constraints of the overall research project, and, in relation to getting the experiment sanctioned by the management of the library, who had invited me inside. After many considerations and preparatory arrangements, we decided to invite the kids up into the library space above the basement, to make a book about their stories. We also invited Hans and Camilla to the event. This set-up was chosen for many different reasons. First, there was the dispute about the locked door, which leads from the basement and up to the library. With the invitation we had an excuse to literally open the door, and keep it open, at least for the duration of the event. We had a feeling that Hans would be an important future person for securing a better integration between the basement and the rest of the library. Many of his future working hours would be placed in the space above the basement; therefore we placed the event deliberately on his shift. Camilla had never met the kids, but was eager to find a way into a dialogue with them, to establish some kind of relation between the citizen-group that she had already mobilized to participate in the redesign of the park. Like Camilla, we saw this as an important task, both the dialogue itself, and also the work of developing new formats for local democratic processes. Ina wanted the rest of the institution to acknowledge the value of the community space in the basement.

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She hoped for a more open discussion in the organisation on what cultural work could be about. What the kids wanted, and how their everyday lives in the periphery of the library could be articulated productively in relation what was going on in the rest of the institution, I was not at all sure. I didn't assume that they wanted anything in particular, other than maintaining opening hours in their community space in the basement, and that was precisely why we staged this event. We wanted to stay in the conversation, but to do that we did need to expand and distribute the dialogue, and come up with some format that could take the process a bit further. We were not at all sure if anybody would show up in the end, and we were admittedly rather relieved as the kids came scrambling up and down the staircase from two-o'clock in the afternoon.

Using a scrap-book as format

For the event we produced a pile of different photos from the basement and the neighbourhood, and statements from the kids, collected from our many talks. We asked the kids to take turns in groups of two and three, so that each group would produce four pages from the materials. We set up a table in the far end of the room with our piles of material; the kids and Camilla on the one side, Ina, Hans and I on the other side. We used the format of a blank scrapbook, and on top of each page we put in a statement. One would say: "The best thing about life in the basement is:" another would say: "My favourite spot in the park is:".
We did not want the dialogue to be structured primarily around some future design goal, as we had already experienced how our sometimes too goal-orientated questions, for instance questions about the redesign of the park, could be counterproductive for keeping the dialogue open. We did however, on the last page, pose a "what if" question, a question about how things could be different. Here we asked the kids to imagine how the community space in the basement could be imagined at other sites in the neighbourhood. We encouraged the kids to use the colour pens and scissors to rearrange and distort the material as a response to the statements. Whenever a photo or a statement was selected, we asked the kids to tell us why this material was chosen, and why it would fit the statement on the page. This

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spurred many themes, questions, and conversations among the kids and the rest of us during that afternoon. The statements captured in the book externalised and expressed the quality of the community space below the library. For instance that this place was very special to the kids because it was okay to make mistakes, and that the basement possessed a certain quality compared to other institutional spaces, because it was not structured around some goal for learning or performing.

The library above the basement: A meeting about a book

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A "here-now" configured against past and future "here-nows"

Using the platform of the book to stage the conversation prompted the kids, and the rest of us, to reflect on everyday life in the basement. But the event can't be characterized mainly as a reflexive exercise one step further into abstraction, although obviously reflection was part of it. The format of the scrapbook, on the one side, can be said to be very restricting. It orders the process of the dialogue beforehand. As pointed out by Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, any talk of a "true" beginning in science is problematic. Because scientific activity never begins with a one-dimensional movement that simply derives knowledge from the empirical (1997, p.12). Scientific activity assumes always some abstract ideas or concepts from somewhere other than the still unsettled, in order to arrive at the forthcoming new "observation" or phenomena. The new simply cannot be derived from the new experience or observation in itself. Scientific activity requires active material-conceptual interference with the world, in the first instance. This is where Rheinberger distinguishes between the experimental sciences and the primarily descriptive and systematising sciences. In the descriptive sciences, emphasis is on the process where the researcher extracts the objects of study, from what Rheinberger terms, their "natural" ambiguity, and place them into a theoretical or conceptual order. The result could be for example a rock collection or a herbarium. Objects in such research practises become perceptible, in the first place, thanks to this recording (2010 p. 233). In the experimental sciences, by contrast, focus is persistently on a series of experimental "here-nows", configured against each other. Knowing in this kind of knowledge practise is inevitably tied to action, materiality and change. The not yet known emerges as experimental arrangements come to overflow themselves. Under the right conditions they may produce difference, displacement and change, which exceed the instrumental boundaries of the experimental set-up. This process of externalisation is central in the experimental practise, because unless difference is distributed in time and space, it can't be rendered visible. Unless it is given form, it can't be known. Experimentation is the situated attempt at reconfiguring the world; it

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is neither predetermined by theory, nor inevitably generated by the practical system of experimentation.

We may say that with this particular set-up the scrapbook became the very precondition for externalising, distributing and rendering visible the stories, hopes and dreams of the kids. It both circumscribed and simultaneously contained the potentiality of the possible. The point is, that although we invited the kids to participate in a carefully scripted dialogue, we didn't know in advance how they would respond. We didn't know which stories and images would emerge in the "here-now". As explained, we didn't converge over some unified agenda from the outset, and we didn't precisely know what we were looking for either, we did, nonetheless, commit ourselves, to keep the possibility open that some excess would emerge from the encounter, which could potentially destabilise the absence, or rearticulate the presence, of the kids in the library. The scrapbook took a prominent position, because it was also what we where left with, in terms of tangible outcomes, after the event. The advantage of such a tangible outcome is of course the fact that it can be circulated. We made a series of prints of the book, which we gave back to the kids, as we wanted to stress the importance of what they had produced that day. Camilla took the book back to her team and the citizen-group, and I presented the book at a staff meeting in the library, where we discussed both the format of the workshop and the basement as an alternative library space. As such the book came to serve many different purposes after the event, and of course these different purposes can neither be fully known nor fully controlled from the "here-now" of the experimental event itself. In relation to the overall research project the book became a vehicle for raising new questions about the role of the library as a local meeting place. Most Copenhagen libraries have experienced challenging situations with so-called hang around kids that use the library as meeting place after school, similar to the ones in the western part of Copenhagen. To explore these challenges we used the pages from the book as raw material for generating ideas for new work practises, in a workshop with librarians and cultural workers towards the end of the research project. By employing the book we were able to turn some questions around and ask if the commitment of these kids, to their local libraries, shouldn't be taken to be a huge success? We were able to show how the formats we employ to stage dialogues do matter, and that a less goal-

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orientated approach to cultural activities is sometimes needed to engage productively with this particular group of citizens. At the same time, some of the comments that followed my presentation at the staff meeting in the library showed that the book could also be appropriated differently. After the meeting one librarian commended our work with these kids, because in her opinion it was very positive that some real cultural production and education was finally induced into the community in the basement. We did not consider our work to exemplify real cultural production as opposed to not so real cultural production, e.g. hanging out in the basement for the sake of it, but we had to accept, like any experimenter, that the stories, traces, and insights produced in the process of experimentation may be employed to serve other purposes than the ones we originally intended.

With Rheinberger we may recognize that the potency of an experimental set-up depends on its ability to produce a series of "here-nows" strung up against each other. Even in the natural sciences, he observes, it is extremely uncommon that an experimenter will be dealing with one single experiment, which confirms or annuls a clearly delineated theory or hypothesis (1997, p.27). This insight, I believe, should lead us to focus on the relation among staged encounters, and calls for a careful consideration of both the *before* and the *after*, both the preparatory arrangements and the distribution of results and insights, of any staged encounter. But it also forces us to pay close attention to the staged encounter itself.

Staying with the "here-now" is the critical position

The meeting with the kids didn't exist in a vacuum, and yet the meaning of the meeting was the meeting itself, in the first instance. Because there is no other place to look for difference and displacement than in a "here-now" that makes new configurations and forms possible. The format of the meeting did matter, insofar as both Hans and Camilla, through the event, established a first and new relation with the kids. They were able to approach this emergent relation with a focus on the stories of the kids, rather than with a main focus on their own concerns, through the production of the book. With this particular set-up we did manage, if only momentarily, to literally unlock the door, to reconfigure the library space and to

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rehearse some new constellations. It is true that in this particular case, the event that we staged, the constellations that became visible, and the issues that were raised didn't gain as much traction as we have hoped for within the local organisation itself. In some ways I was left with a slightly uneasy feeling, both with respect to the kids, and with respect to Ina. We didn't succeed, metaphorically and literally speaking, to keep the door open in the way that we had hoped for. Perhaps this experiment was set back by a general lack of time and interest in the organisation, even if the management had formally sanctioned our intervention. The organisation, during my stay, was preoccupied with the process of implementing new working routines, and in the middle of a stressful reorganisation. Perhaps, we experienced a lack of response within the organisation simply because this was a poorly staged experiment. Perhaps this experiment was not tied convincingly to the past "here-nows" that preceded it, and the future "here-nows" that came after. This is certainly possible. I will argue, nonetheless, that the alternative to a not completely successful experiment must be another experiment; another material-conceptual engagement with change enabled by another set-up and configuration. However, such alternatives, unless staged in relation to the practical and material possibilities in the field, in my opinion, would have remained irrelevant. They would have formed completely different experiments, in completely different fields, with completely different concerns.

As Halse has pointed out, anthropologists have often sought a critical position of analysis from where the given order of the world can be challenged (2013, p.191), for example by revealing how dominant assumptions rest on socio-historical contingencies. But if this position can only be articulated, one step further into abstraction, then post-criticality becomes essentially what is elicited as the researcher manages to bypass his or her own ideas and assumptions. The point of the reflexive exercise, in the first instance, is the expansion of the researchers own capacity to imagine new orders. The overall aim, usually, is to participate in a sustained theoretical dialogue with other researchers who propose other orders and concepts. But to occupy a critical position inside a given practise, and to be part of the field, just like the new observation or the new phenomena, is not a given; it is a practical and experimental accomplishment, and therefore always only a possibility. Consequently,

from the position of the "here-now" in the library, such reflexive and theoretical experiments would not have presented themselves as experiments, but rather as commentary. Therefore, to develop modes of analyses and engagements that go beyond debunking or deconstruction, the design anthropological post-critical response is not to leave the world alone, rather, the starting point is the practical work of building a platform where actors and their differing cosmos can be rendered visible *and* distributed in time and space.

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