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Knowledge creation in conferences through design and practice
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of over 200 artists, academics, and activists around the globe, with new local research projects, exhibitions, publications, and collaborations constantly emerging. I conceive of the SenseLab not as a better way to do conferences but as a necessary alternative, allowing an intense sharing of practices and open-ended forms of research through experience.

« 10 » Coming back to the question of knowledge in relation to the proposed more-than-human sensuous and bodily elements of experience, I would like to close with Isabelle Stengers's definition of constructivist philosophy, which links to collective thinking immanent in ecologies of practices:

“To try to think together, while knowing that we are, should be, and must continue to present ourselves as unable to transcend the actual limitations of this togetherness or to escape toward some dreamed of universality, is [...] the very stamp of constructivist philosophy. Speculation thus becomes not the discovery of the hidden truth justifying reality, but a crucial ingredient in the construction of reality.” (Stengers 2002: 239)

In the spirit of constructing situated realities of shared practices and their speculative tensors, we might want to tell ourselves over and over again “we do not know yet what a body or conference or event can do.” Making such speculative work an integral part of our practices immediately affords us the capacity to transgress the disciplinary boundaries of epistemic enclosure or make a reductive distribution of the sensible.

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Timeframework, Diversity and Etiquette: Fostering Collective Knowledge Creation in Conferences through Design and Practice

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> Upshot • This commentary supports the author's statement of the value of the design of a loose and solid timeframework for conferences in order to facilitate the collective development and consolidation of knowledge. It also points out the importance of the selection of a diverse range of attendees for the formation of communities of research. The main aspect that is added is the fundamental role of fostering a culture of generosity and trust to allow for honest and in-depth discussions. This is done through the encouragement of an etiquette of constructive behaviour during these events.

« 1 » As one of the Ph.D candidates and ADAPT-r fellows mentioned by Johan Verbeke (§§31–36), this commentary is the point of view of a presenter as well as an enthusiast of this Ph.D methodology in general and, for the purpose of this commentary, the bi-annual conference that forms the keystone of its process. What follow are simply a few thoughts that came to mind whilst reading the article. The aim is to expand the list of tools described by the author that support the collective development of knowledge during conferences. After expanding on what the author has already said about the design of what I call the “timeframework” of the Practice Research Symposium (PRS) conferences, we will mention the importance of a diverse range of attendees to give opportunities for the development of new communities of research. We will then discuss the importance of the creation of an atmosphere of intellectual generosity to create an appropriate atmosphere for learning. We will describe behaviours that foster such environments during the events. These can be seen as a form of etiquette main-

tained by the organisers through a regime of care similar to gardening, an editing out of what is not welcome. In other words, as well as designing the conference prior to the event through the organisation of time and selection of people, it also is necessary to facilitate a constructive culture during the event.

« 2 » It is important to point out that my architectural and landscape practice-based research is neither related to the organisation and design of conferences nor constructivism. There are some concepts I use in my research that resonate with what is discussed here; they have probably shaped my understanding of what matters. These revolve around the themes of buildings as flexible frameworks for the life of the inhabitants, the use of regimes of care as a design tool, improvisation, rhythms, a focus on the relation between behaviour and structure, and a belief in the value of supporting diverse ecosystems. There is no space to clarify the parallels here.

Timeframework

« 3 » The PRS conferences are run with a very clear timeframework that is both rigorously applied and has sufficient slack within for the development of conversations and growth of communities. The clarity of the structure maintains efficiency and rigour whilst the slack allows for informal development of ideas during the conferences and beyond. The time structure works on three scales, that of the hour-long presentation/discussion, that of a conference over a few days, and that of the entire Ph.D process over more than three years.

« 4 » The author has mentioned “the generous time” allocated to discussion after the presentation and its role “to develop a shared understanding amongst Ph.D candidates” and “deepen the understanding of methods and appropriate ways of communicating” (§33). In order to demonstrate the value of this, it is useful to compare what happens when a presenter overruns their presentation time – despite the excellent time-keeping of the chairs – and ends up with a short feedback, and when the half hour for each is followed. When shortened to 10 to 15 minutes, there is no time for discussion; each panel member makes a few comments in turn and at best the presenter has the opportunity to answer once. The exchange is essentially binary, can be

perceived as adversarial, and might lead to misunderstanding, as there is no time for clarification. This is sometimes corrected informally between presentations on a one-to-one basis but it misses the benefits of collective thought and is missed by the audience. Less is learned and less is shared.

« 5 » When half an hour is used in full for the discussion, there is time for clarification of the panel's comments as well as "collective learning" (structured abstract) in order to sketch possible next steps. This means that the discourse gains in precision and clarity and constructs possible directions for the presenter. This is built as a group, primarily between the panel members and the presenter but also some members of the audience. The presenter leaves the event with a sense that there are elements ready to be taken on afterwards. A collective consolidation of knowledge through the exchange gives a sense of having stronger bases for moving on to the next stage.

« 6 » This form of presentation and feedback is almost identical to a traditional mode of learning in architectural education and practice – the crit. This learning methodology is similar in timeframe and number of panel members but is usually a more private occasion with a small audience. It is also a tradition in the arts and other design subjects. I assume that as this Ph.D process was created originally in an architecture school, it is this tradition that was integrated within the PRS conferences. This co-mentoring structure is particularly useful in developing the knowledge and skills of design practice.

« 7 » It is worth briefly pointing out the importance of having some spatial slack as well as slack in time. My only profound criticism of the PRS conferences is that some spaces are too small to use a broad range of artefacts or accommodate the entire audience that wishes to attend. As Verbeke mentions for another conference, the use of artefacts and props as a support for conversation in front of the audience is key to reaching a "deeper understanding" (§24). This is not to say that space should be overly abundant, as in a similar way to words in an article, concision is beneficial.

« 8 » A conversation can be had over years, as ideas grow, as Verbeke mentions for the Ph.D researchers' own work in §32. But it also happens in discussions that grow within

these communities, not only on methodology but – most interestingly – in the discussions of subjects relevant to multiple researchers. The combination of duration of the conferences and the regular attendance of a relatively constant group of people doing the same Ph.D over a number of years allows the informal development of communities of interest around shared topical subjects. Discussions are pursued within the gaps between the presentations and gradually outside of the conferences (it is notable that the care given to the design of these in-between moments fosters an atmosphere of warmth and openness). For example, an interest in improvisatory processes shared with landscape designers has led to an unexpected development of a community across design fields; my – professional – practice is primarily architectural. In this sense, over time, through these regular conversation over years, trust builds between researchers, and communities of practice develop informally within the gaps, the in-between moments.

Diversity

« 9 » This leads to the importance of the curation of a diverse and eclectic group of attendees. The conference is a microcosm of the design world, with representatives of the main current positions. The growing program is still relatively young in Europe and therefore not yet large. But the RMIT Australian events (<http://www.rmit.edu.au/about/our-education/academic-schools/architecture-and-design/research/practice-research-symposium-prs>) – where this Ph.D process was created (van Schaik 2005; Rattenbury 2014) – have already reached a much larger scale. I have not yet attended one of these, but I assume that their scale offers more opportunity for multiple communities to grow within them.

Generosity

« 10 » It is the atmosphere of intellectual generosity that impressed me most when I first started to attend these events, the generosity in the presentations as much as that of the comments. This quality is key to encouraging honesty. As all the attendees are in a process of making explicit the innovative skills they have developed, they must analyse and present the successes as much as the challenges and failures. As an attendee,

one needs sufficient trust in the panels and the audience.

« 11 » It is worth pointing out that the architectural world, its practice, at least in London where I am located, is not renowned for its generosity. There is much competition and when architects meet, their main purpose is to sell and present themselves in the best possible light. Our discourse in such context is far from a neutral description of events.

« 12 » A culture of intellectual openness might be more usual in the collegiate world of universities and therefore seen as a given, but in the world of design practitioners, and especially architects, it requires action to produce it.

« 13 » The author mentions "an atmosphere of trust" in another conference (§29), where trust comes from curated "small fixed groups" working closely for an entire week. This is a rigid structure fixed prior to the event that creates trust within predefined small groups – the attendees do not have the opportunity to choose their group nor change between workshops. The PRS, by comparison, is more informal and less structured. Participants choose which presentations they attend and it is not possible to see them all as there are a few streams running in parallel.

Etiquette

« 14 » Trust grows here partially from the generosity in time allowed for discussion and the repeated meeting of the same individuals discussed above. The main factor is the active fostering of an etiquette during the conferences, a way of behaving, a set of – unwritten and unspoken – rules. Generous feedback is encouraged and any non-constructive criticism is interrupted. It is achieved here through interventions during the symposiums by the main organisers as soon as unwelcome behaviour happens. I have clear memories of Leon Van Schaik, Richard Blythe, and Marcelo Stamm reacting firmly to any non-constructive criticism or lack of generosity from commentators – each in their own style from outburst to humour, often in tandem. And these rare – and short – good cop-bad cop reactions, which momentarily freeze the audience, are extremely effective at maintaining the open and generous culture that collective learning demands.

« 15 » Generous feedback does not equate with only positive comments, and the most successful panel reactions are those that mix negative comments with supportive ones in such a good cop-bad cop reaction. I have a clear memory of Paul Carter's reaction in my first PRS, who offered sharp – yet generous – criticism and I thank him for it. It was key to my progress and is still to this day helpful in order to locate, develop, and present my research. The combination of positive and negative helps to define the boundaries.

« 16 » For the discussion to work successfully, it is also key that the presenter does not take the comments made as personal attacks. (S)he should not react in a defensive manner, so that (s)he can listen with an open mind and understand how the comments are trying to help the development of the research. Such discussions break down as soon as defensiveness or territoriality starts. It succeeds when all work together constructively towards the production of knowledge. (S)he should ask for clarifications if this is not clear, add elements that seem necessary for a broader understanding, and help the conversation move along as well as ask questions about the challenges experienced. I realise that as my trust has increased over time, I have been better at doing this and am now gaining more from the conversations.

« 17 » The conversation in my last and third PRS was the most successful. Those present who spoke (all panel members: Mauro Baracco, Kate Heron, Jo Van Den Berghe, Johan Verbeke, Tadeja Zupancic; myself; and in the audience, Marti Franch Batilori) engaged in a communal discussion, building on each other's comments. It is worth pointing out that this meant that each person left space / time for others to speak. Although they started commenting in the seating order, they subsequently reacted when their intervention was most useful. There is something close to the art of conversation at play that allows ideas to grow like a relay; this functions on a form of politeness that balances the benefits of intervening at a specific point when it is most useful whilst allowing other commentators to make their point. The rule is what is most productive at this point. When commentators are primarily territorial, it is necessary

to make them speak in an ordered fashion to avoid one over-dominating the discourse. Here also, a degree of informality in the practice is beneficial.

Conclusion

« 18 » This commentary reinforces Verbeke's point on the importance of designing a conference timeframework, as well as a spaceframework, with enough slack to give time for "active learning" (cf. subtitle of Verbeke's article). We have also seen how a diverse range of attendees is key to the formation of new communities of practice. Our main focus has been on how an appropriate culture of constructive and honest exchange is created through fostering generous behaviour. This is not to say that the situation is perfect – it of course cannot be – but my experience shows that the interaction of these three factors – a diverse group of people interacting in a timeframework in a spirit of intellectual generosity – is what makes these conferences successful.

« 19 » I would like to finish with the importance of creating a setting that is open to unpredictability and improvisation. Knowledge creation happens in part through chance, and the conference's main role is to bring multiple researchers together to allow their meeting to lead to new insights and the development of communities that will expand beyond the confines of the conferences. This includes panel members as well as members of the audience. It is not possible to predict who will benefit from whom, or in what way, or exactly when this will happen. A lightness of touch and a loosening of control is beneficial. This is why the PRS are such great environments for learning; they maintain a productive balance between order and informality.

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Afterthoughts on the Sensuous Knowledge Conferences

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> Upshot • As one of the organisers of the Sensuous Knowledge conferences I take this opportunity to supplement Verbeke's presentation and discussion of the format of these conferences with some information about three topics: the inspiration for the distinctive format we chose; one point where we changed the format because we realized that it did not work; and finally some features of the conferences that Verbeke does not mention, but that may also have contributed to what seems to be generally accepted as our success.

« 1 » Responsible for the academic and social features of the seven Sensuous Knowledge conferences, organised by the Bergen Academy of Art and Design 2004–2013, was a small, rather tight, and over the years slightly changing group of people attached to the Academy. However, two of us took part and had a leading role every time: Nina Malterud (vice-chancellor of the Academy most of those years) and myself (the Academy's advisor for artistic research during the whole period). We did not want to arrange what we saw as a traditional conference with lots of participants hurrying between the supposedly most interesting presentations of papers in lots of compact parallel sessions with time only for a couple of short comments. As Verbeke makes clear, we wanted what we called "working conferences," with only a few keynote speeches and other joint events and with most of the work done in rather small groups of participants (about five presenters and about eight more group members plus an active group leader) – and here we introduced the specific feature that has been noticed the most by colleagues who have taken part in these conferences: the participants had to stay in their assigned groups through the three days of each conference.

« 2 » This was not in every way our own invention, and many readers may have