Manifesto on Art, Design and Social Science - Method as Speculative Event

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Abstract

Proposes that techniques from art and design can be used within social science research as part of a speculative methodology. Provides a set of heuristic principles for speculative method, characterizing it as processual, performative, playful, promising and propositional.

Keywords: speculative, method, art, design, social science, research

Within the social sciences there is a growing concern with the performative dimension of social methods - the ways in which they are generative of their objects of study [1]. While this might be an occasion for epistemological lament, it is also an opportunity for ontological exploration and experimentation [2]. We take this opportunity to conceptualize method as a speculative event and to suggest ways that this can be realized through art and design.

The implementation of a social scientific research method is an event that entails the coming together and combination of innumerable, heterogeneous elements, including the researcher [3]. The array of these constitutive elements includes the human and nonhuman, the social and material, the cognitive and affective, the macroscopic and microscopic. A research event is characterized in terms of the mutual transformation of those elements. In Fraser's treatment of the notion of the event in Whitehead and Deleuze, she describes how the constituent elements 'become-with' one another [4]. This processual account implies that the research event itself is no longer knowable in any simple sense. As the constituents change, so too does the event, becoming constitutively open, emergent, and unfolding in relation to the 'virtual' [5]. In other words, it becomes chronically problematic to find a solution to what the event really 'is'. Accordingly, the analytic relation to the research event is necessarily a speculative one and it follows that the researcher's task cannot be to derive a better representation of the event in question. Rather, it becomes one of posing more interesting questions about it – to speculate in the sense of engaging in 'inventive problem making' [6]. Such a 'speculative methodology', which takes into account both the constitutive, constituting and constituted aspects of the research process, "affirms the possible...actively resists the plausible and the probable targeted by approaches that claim to be neutral"[7].

This paper advocates the use of techniques derived from art and design as means of realizing this speculative methodology. "Good art…can be said to promote the enhancement of uncertainty"[8]. Similarly, for Bochner and Ellis art can be a form of narrative inquiry and "[t]he product of research, whether an article, a graph, a poem, a story, a play, a dance, or a painting, … [is] not a closed statement but an open question; not a way of declaring 'this is how it is' but a means of inviting others to consider what it (or they) could become" [9]. As an example, Bill Gaver's speculative design develops artifacts that are functionally opaque, playful and ambiguous, in effect, speculative devices. Take 'the Local Barometer' prototype: it displays advertisements scraped from the web, whose source is a function of wind speed and direction. This turns out to be less about tracing mental maps of the socioeconomic character of neighbourhoods, and more about asking interesting questions on the very 'meaning' of neighbourhood as a techno-natural entity [10]. People's responses are far more open with respect to the issues with which these speculative devices are ostensibly concerned. Speculative design, then, affords inventive problem-making about the possibilities that extend from a research event.

How do we decide on what method serves as a speculative event? Here we sketch a series of parameters - heuristic principles - that might inform the use of art and design in social research events that engage with openness and the virtual.

a. Prospective/Possible/Processual/Performative

A speculative research method is concerned with performatively enabling an inventive engagement with a particular issue at stake (eg around energy consumption, HIV prophylaxis, or direct-to-consumer genetic testing) in such a way as to access the virtualities of that issue at stake. A speculative method, whether it be a prototype from speculative design, or a particular form of art practice, would need to be sufficiently oblique, playful, under-determined. This would (ideally) allow participants to engage with the issue at stake in unexpected ways, opening up potential routes to reformulating what, indeed, counts as the 'issue at stake'.

These potentials are not always immediately accessible within the research event. Thus, key to the research event is the provision of a space to allow participants to 'express' these potentials. Such expressions are at minimum practical or discursive and will need to be registered in some way (eg graphically or ethnographically), though this too needs to be treated as a performative part of the process of emergence.

b. Play/Promise/Pain

A speculative method that deploys a design prototype or a particular art practice can be variously described as incomplete, ambiguous, playful, opaque. However, there are no guarantees that such a method will 'work': it is always liable to being rejected on various grounds (irrelevant, wasteful, impracticable) - whatever the efforts of designers or artists. By the same token, this under-specification means that the method can be shaped through the relations established between researchers and participants. In speculative design, initial ethnographic visits to potential participants often set up relations that allow a challenging device to hold far more 'promise' than might otherwise be expected [11]. This is a crucial element in the performativity of the speculative research event.

c. Practice/Proposition/Preposition

A speculative device operates at manifold 'levels': discursive, corporeal, aesthetic, affective. As such, participant practical engagements with the device will straddle dichotomies, for instance, individual and collective, discursive and aesthetic, expressive and instrumental, conscious and unconscious. These levels can be brought under the aegis of 'practice.'

According to Stengers' discussion of the 'ecology of practices'[12], practice connotes at once tacit skill and embodied knowledge, and a responsibility toward the collective values by which such skills and knowledge are assessed. In this formulation, such values are part of that practice, such that those values also emerge through the practice. In the context of speculative method this means that the practices that manifest

around, with, and through that method entail the emerging values by which they are assessed. However, given that the method promotes the opaque, playful, ambiguous, what these practices and values might be is under-determined, open, unfolding.

Put another way, such methods are like 'prepositional machines' enabling the potential emergence of odd and unexpected relationalities [13]. Indeed, they might even be called 'propositional machines'. Following Latour, propositions can serve as "occasions for interaction (that) allow the entities to modify their definitions over the course of an event" [14]. In the present case, these entities are the heterogeneous elements that make up a speculative research event. A speculative method, then, is one that sets up practices that proposition new relations with other entities (that is, draw up new prepositions) and thus proposes new prospects.

d. Product/Pattern

At a basic level the social scientific product of a speculative method is the material (eg ethnographic interviews, observations, artworks, photographs) collected once the method has been implemented, participants have engaged with it, and the social scientists have 'visited'. Traditional social scientific analysis searches for patterns in these data [15]. If the speculative method has 'worked', then it should have generated a series of new relationalities, propositioned unforeseen prospects, and allowed more inventive problems to be posed by participants about the 'issue at stake.' One could then look for similarities and differences across these 'more inventive problems'. Perhaps, the analysts could even derive the primary 'inventive problem'.

The irony here is that this analysis of participants' 'inventive problem-making' would not necessarily be subject to the same speculative practice and ethos. Yet, in relation to the standardized ways in which the 'issue at stake' has been framed (eg energy consumption, the neighbourhood), pointing evidentially to inventive ways of articulating 'the problem' is not necessarily a 'bad thing' – after all, it might have some purchase within a wider population or constituency. Nevertheless, it is possible to address the 'occasion of analysis' as itself a speculative event. Here, fieldwork materials are themselves treated in terms of complex relationalities to other materials (eg derived from art or design history, or attached to emergent social issues). The speculative research event is, in other words, expanded to encompass both the implementation of research method and the process of 'data' analysis. Finding patterns in the fieldwork material is no longer the 'issue at stake'; rather, the analytic event becomes a speculative occasion in pursuit of another layer of inventive problem-making.

e. Proviso/Politics

The openness of both a speculative method and the analysis of the material that it yields raises political issues for the researchers. Because the speculative method is focused on the processuality of research and aims to facilitate emergence, the whole point is not to second-guess what form that emergence might take. As such, what emerges might well be anathema to the researchers' political or cultural sensibilities. This evokes a quandary: does the researcher treat this anathematic as an inventive challenge to their own framings of the 'issue at stake'? This is a practical matter, especially as it is difficult to know what sort of values will emerge or become relevant.

This all suggests a series of provisos. Such speculative methods are not abstractly 'innocent'. They do not sit in neat counterposition to more traditional social scientific methods. In some cases, they might be less useful – say in empirical fields where 'what is at stake' is already contested and ostensibly emergent, or where there are endogenous entities sufficiently opaque to introduce the speculative into a more traditional method. More broadly, speculative methods can be connected to late capitalism's valorization of play, creativity, inventiveness which are central to many managerial and executive training programmes [16]. This does not somehow 'corrupt' the idea of speculative research; rather, it prompts, fittingly, inventive problem-making around method as a speculative event.

Concluding Remark

Inevitably, in so short and programmatic a piece all manner of byways have remained underdeveloped: the role of affect and the aesthetic; the variety of art and design practices; or the relation of speculation to experimentation. Hopefully, the preceding parameters can serve as heuristic prompts for further engagement with the idea of social method as speculative event, even as these parameters are themselves 'open', emergent, in process.

References and Notes

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