OPEN EXPRESSION SUPPORT

Making openings to support individual expression.

This essay contextualises the project Open Expression Support.

Open Expression Support (OES) is an experimental project, starting individual trajectories with members of the public to come to an experience of expression. An open service for those who would usually not come into contact with creative and expressive practices. It's about experimenting together and providing mutual support to reach a creative mode. To engage in a meaningful experience and to hold space to discover something new. OES is free and executed in public, for the public.

Contents

The collective search for creativity

1. Participation, a field in expansion

In 2021, it seems common sense to include the people affected by a design in the design process. Still, the contrary is the default. Designers, architects, business executives, politicians continuously make decisions without consulting those affected. Therefore, human-centred design is on the rise, creating awareness by steadily representing the user, client, participant — human — in decision-making processes.

Participation goes beyond mere consultation but involves stakeholders' active cooperation across different steps in the design process. Projects tend to become increasingly complex when including a variety of perspectives over as many stages, which might explain why active participation seems a challenging endeavour to undertake.

The idea of participation has made its way into design. Participatory Design (PD) initially began by involving users in the making of their own workplaces, whereas contemporary PD has become more political, aiming for equal distribution of decision-making power in the design process. (Hirscher, 2019, p. 41)

When engaging in participation, the designer is often more concerned with guiding the process and setting the stage for stakeholders to progress together than designing a solution. Hence, the focus shifts to the process and participation becomes the objective itself, leading to a great deal of attention going to the consideration and development of tools to structure a process, both in academia and the industry. Tools as a means to facilitate a moment. Tools to retrieve and collect information from individuals to inform a design.

At the end of my second year in Product Design at the Glasgow School of Art, several people, including myself, made a tool as the outcome of the final personal project. Almost all students working in a social, participatory context were designing tools to enable others *to become the designers of their situation.*

2. Searching for the implicit

One reason for developing tools is to provide the designer with strategies to get to know new information that would be difficult to unveil through a normal conversation. Designers have been practising dozens of techniques to get closer to the user to understand what they say and how they do things, uncovering the needs and desires which Sanders (1992) calls *explicit and observable.* But to uncover and search for what is tacit and latent within people, is still a much less explored path for designers, especially in the industry. Researchers Sanders and Dandavate (1999) state that

> The ability to not just know, but also to empathise with the user comes only at the deepest levels of their expression. By accessing people's feelings, dreams and imaginations, we can establish resonance with them. Special tools are needed to access the deeper levels of user expression. (p. 2)

The authors argue that to reach these *deeper levels of expression,* tools that facilitate non-verbal expression and generate emotional artefacts that tell stories are necessary. Through engagement artefacts and other creative methods and tools, designers attempt to depart from traditional means of communication for sensemaking. Because when engaging in participation, inclusion is not necessarily achieved by staging an open debate between stakeholders. Participatory practices continuously look for ways to mediate a conflict of interest within a group of people who ought to collaborate towards a solution.

You only have to think about discussions you have had between friends, family, or within your organisation to realise that power relations are always in play. The rational argument rules, meaning that a discussion can not take place without some form of exclusion. But is it possible to overcome that and mediate such a conversation?

3. Searching for the unfamiliar

Considering the field of spatial planning, where local interests must be equally represented among residents, there is an increasing number of cases in which artists are invited into the planning process to do exactly that: to mediate participation between the responsible planners and the affected residents. Metzger (2011) refers to using art(ists) as

> What art has to offer is to bring about a novel vehicle for communication, such that may invite stakeholders to re-think the problems, challenges, and possibilities. (p. 216)

Metzger (2011) further refers to the potential use of the *Verfremdungseffekt* and the creation of strange spaces as techniques to defamiliarise stakeholders from their habitual modes of reasoning to form new grounds for a more open dialogue. He states that

> Artists, in contrast to planners, could be said to have a clear mandate to conjure up strange and unfamiliar/defamiliarising situations that in the best of cases can create a verfremdungseffekt among the audience or participants (in the case of planning, the stakeholders) and thereby enable them to look upon themselves and their situations with new eyes. (p. 222)

Metzger (2011) suggests a sincere collaboration between artists and planners, creating settings and situations that shake up the regular ways of working, pulling people out of their assumed roles. An activity that should benefit the planning practice, aiming for a more honest and inclusive climate for dialogue.

The author admits that the application of such an approach remains challenging. When embarking on a collaboration with artists, where they implemented alternative methods in planning workshops, the event was evaluated with mixed feelings by various participants. Although it became a space where political opponents could momentarily leave their roles to raise uncertainties and chances together, there was a common sense of frustration due to the lack of closure, the lack of tangible results and final consensus.

Which seems sensible as embracing the uncertain, the search for more openings and questions characterises the artistic practice.

Whereas for many, the acceptance of new experiences and openings only becomes truly meaningful when there is a sense of closure. A final decree, ritual or consensus that can inform the next steps. Because that's what is expected from such a gathering.

Rannila and Loivaranta (2015), who experimented with using dramaturgy to stage a debate between residents, politicians and planners in Finland, argue that such alternative methods cannot be evaluated in the same way as traditional planning templates as they produce different outcomes that are often hard to measure. Concerning the impact of theatre approaches, the authors write

> The open process of drama allows participants to overcome the limitations of instrumental rationality and argumentation as well as the limits of seemingly consistent identities. At best, antagonistic situations may be safely discussed freely and with respect, as they are not deemed to be personal. (p. 804)

Taking everyday conflicts and situations, and treating those like acts, is a simple yet powerful way to create an entirely different dialogue with very similar means. And to circle it back to the design practice, Fisk and Grove (2016) have drawn parallels between, e.g. the creation of a service, and a theatre piece as both designers and theatre directors lay out a journey to be experienced by an audience or user, referring to scripts and rehearsals as powerful tools to perfect the service' performance.

In the planning context, theatre techniques are not used to improve performance, but to cause a Verfremdungseffekt. A term initially coined by theatre-maker Bertolt Brecht where *Verfremdung* refers to the desired effect he wanted to elicit among the audience with his theatre as he saw the duty of theatre not just in entertaining the public but also in breaking through habitual ways of being. Brecht ought to keep the audience critical and sharp by time and again sabotaging the illusion of reality. Jameson (2000) describes the effects of Verfremdung as "[w]hat history has solidified into an illusion of stability and sustainability can now be dissolved again, and reconstructed, replaced, improved, 'umfunktioniert'." (p. 220)

Enacting a conflict and taking on a new role, representing, thus empathising with someone else's perspective and engaging the body in an unusual space, encourages *new narratives* to emerge.

What I take from this, is that planners, facilitators (together with artists) are trying to 1. create a situation in which participants can express themselves emotionally (possibly through the use of artistic methods) and 2. capture, balance and mobilise the expressions of everyone involved towards a common goal.

4. Searching for the common

A fine project to illustrate the use of artistic methods to mediate a participatory situation is KHOR II by theatre-maker Gert Jan Stam and architect Breg Horemans who together form TAAT (Theatre as Architecture, Architecture as Theatre). KHOR II took place in the village of Rimburg in the Netherlands and was centred around the question: how do you build a community? It existed out of three phases.

In the first phase, the village residents had to put together a pavilion (designed by TAAT) using a single manual. Since the construction took place on a public square, anyone keen could lend a hand. A second manual, acting as a script, took the participants through an hour-long theatrical experience of their community in Rimburg which Gert-Jan Stam created through local inquiry. In the final phase, the participants were invited to come up with their own ideas and solutions on how to build a community, for which they offered a last manual with concrete handles and exercises.

TAAT succeeded in letting the participants build their own space in which they perform a play, exposing conflicts in the community to finally provide a moment where the residents can engage in dialogue about what is going on in their neighbourhood. Whereby the artists themselves only provide the materials, such as the wooden beams for the pavilion and the manuals to mediate the different phases, to remain present and observe, but not lead.

The project focused on *unlocking the creative (and collaborative) potential in the participants* by letting them build their own stage and perform a play to eventually discuss local conflicts.

5. Searching for what is to come

When Speculative Everything came out in 2013, the authors Dunne and Raby and their students in the Royal College of Art had been trying out and developing these speculative techniques for over a decade. The book charted a discipline that sprung out of critical design, a field that first began in the 90s and "uses speculative design proposals to challenge narrow assumptions, preconceptions, and givens about the role products play in everyday life." (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p. 39)

Critical design began as a response against the kind of design that merely affirms the status quo. What differentiates it from critical studies is that the critique is materialised beyond the written word. It is critical thinking through designing. The rationale behind thinking speculatively, meaning thinking about what could be, is to allow the imagination to flow freely, to open up new perspectives on complex problems and to make space for discussion and debate.

When opening this book for the first time, I felt enlightened. I sat in the library of Aalto University, and I remember my heart beating faster when reading certain sentences and examining the many examples of projects. I thought I had found a form where I could be free, where I could let my imagination run wild. And it was cool too. To dream my own world and then cleverly pour it into a product that represents it. It felt abstract and triggering.

But it is the cunning translation of a speculative vision to the material world that I have never been able to understand and thus pursue properly. Too often the speculative work seemed dependent on a *smart little find* transformed into an overly aestheticised object that ought to represent exhaustive research and vision. Such projects quickly feel far-fetched, abstract, and therefore sweet cake for a designer looking for a license to create freely. If you don't want to make products or services that nobody needs nor produce work for companies you don't believe in, including you won't settle for just moving pixels but seek intellectual challenge, the guise of speculation might have you covered.

Speculation as an act of liberation, allowing a kind of pondering that requires a different type of justification than when bound to physical contexts and social realities—creating a paradoxical situation where you are trying to temper the inner critic to find

imaginative ways to exhibit a critical stance. Generally, I found the speculative works to be too conceptual, often lacking the social dimension.

Design contributes to speculation in the conversion to the physical, employing the skills and semantic knowledge inherent to the design practice to materialise future scenarios into physical prototypes, stories and experiences. Critical and speculative design has its place in provoking other makers and thinkers to become aware of their power as creators. This kind of work also uses the Verfremdungseffekt to induce something in the spectator that they haven't considered before. Speculative design can be both critical, amplifying present-day behaviours and its possible impact, as well as provide openings. Being a loosely defined discipline, designers appropriate tools, methods, models and metaphors from various fields, including the interdisciplinary and systematic study of futures: Futures Studies.

Foresight, Futurism, Futurology, Futures Studies and eventually Futures Thinking, are many names for a shared practice of thinking about futures in a structured way. Scholar Michael Marien (2010) puts the identity struggle as

> The fuzzy entity of 'futures studies' is thus quite unlike any field or discipline, because it is easily entered by specialists who identify with the entity weakly, while many of the most important futures-thinkers are outside the entity. (p. 190)

The use of *futures* instead of the singular future refers to the widely adopted pluralistic view of not having one but rather an infinite range of alternative futures. Although originally a discipline belonging to experts who'd spend decades studying the development and course of social, economical and technological trends, thinking about futures is undergoing an emancipatory transformation. Ramos (2017) posits that the field has evolved through five primary stages since the 50s: Predictive, Systemic, Critical, Participatory, and Action-oriented. Where speculative design is mainly concerned with materialising critique and showing an alternative reality, the participatory process assumes and confronts contrasting perspectives on the future to each other. Ramos states that

When participants can co-develop new narratives, authentic visions, and intelligent strategies, people can feel a sense of natural ownership and commitment. Group-based inquiry that leads to collective foresight with an understating [sic] of shared challenges and a common ground vision for change, can call forth commitment and action. (p. 827)

6. Searching for truth

Anno 2020, the call for new narratives seems to be omnipresent. *"We need new narratives to overcome climate change! We need new narratives for a more inclusive society!"* In short, we need new narratives for change. It seems like much of the *old ways of doing* have led to the most significant threats the natural world has ever faced. Meaning that setting the conditions for people to merely express themselves is not sufficient as new narratives come forth from the capacity to break loose from a given reality. To dream up and imagine worldviews that do not paralyse action, but motivate it. But how to make someone break loose from a given reality? How to make someone know what they want, to then dream up a desirable world? How to unlock the imaginative potential in people, let alone in myself?

Besides being an exercise of anticipation, it seems as if thinking about the future helps to figure out what we want today. And I have to be careful with using *we.* Let me rephrase and say *what each individual and community wants.* I understand that in such a participatory futures situation, the initiators are trying to unlock the imaginative potential in people to have them create those new narratives that ideally drive autonomous action. But how to unlock the imaginative potential in an afternoon workshop setting? I am convinced that it's virtually impossible to truly develop that potential in such a short timeframe. Methods such as making roadmaps, scenario planning and game playing are well-intentioned activities but only make out a small part of a slow, laborious and individual journey of developing one's creative potential. Let aside eliciting that potential among a greater and more culturally diverse group of people.

7. Searching for imagination

Is imagination different from creativity? When looking into the field of creativity studies, psychologists Gotlieb et al. (2018) argue in the article Imagination is the Seed of Creativity, that imagination, the ability to see what is removed from the here and now, is at the base of creative thinking. And although a crucial component, imagination alone is not enough to produce creativity as it also requires a sense for context and other executive abilities to realise what is imagined. (p. 710)

Gottlieb et al. (2018) separate two main branches of imagination, the socio-emotional and temporal imagination. Under socio-emotional imagination, they allocate abilities such as perspective-taking and polycultural thinking, both examples of what is often referred to in the design and business context as *empathy.* Empathy as the capacity to imagine what another person might feel or think and to take the perspective of not only human but also non-human entities. This is where much of human-centred design lies, in exploring and understanding the user/human through empathy to build better products and services.

Whereas futures thinking draws more on the other mode of imagination called *temporal imagination.* According to Gottlieb et al., temporal imagination is characterized by "one's ability to engage in mental time travel ... [which] includes such processes as prospection, episodic memory construction, counterfactual thinking, and mind-wandering." (p. 716) Without going into what constitutes those processes, I want to point out that the authors believe none of these different modes can adequately unfold when there is not the right environment to support people in becoming and being imaginative. They conclude by questioning how to create such cultural and educational institutions that foster imagination and help it turn into creativity, stating that

> imagination is the seed that may ultimately produce the rare fruit of creativity. If this is so, it is also the case that cultural context is the wind and angle of the sunlight affecting the direction in which the imagination tree grows. (p. 723)

8. Searching for diversity

Despite a growing desire from the general population in most Western European countries for uniform and traditional narratives, academics agree on the need for a multitude of future visions. Rather than one collective narrative, the call goes for a diversity in narratives. At the forefront of this pluralistic view is Belgian scholar Chantal Mouffe. Mouffe (2013) proposes the concept of *agonistic pluralism,* suggesting that antagonism, having conflicting forces, is a necessary condition for human coexistence. She posits that a consensual politics that idealises harmony and carries aversion towards confrontation ignores the basic requirement for democracy and cannot lead to further emancipation.

Instead of antagonism, seeing the opponent as the enemy, Mouffe introduces the concept of *agonism,* suggesting to look at the democratic struggle as a struggle between adversaries "whose ideas might be fought, even fiercely, but whose right to defend those ideas is not to be questioned." (p. 36) An agonistic practice she calls conflictual consensus. Mouffe states that

> The prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilise those passions towards democratic designs" (p. 21)

Rather than interpreting conflicting passions as threats needing to be tamed through reason, opposing beliefs and opinions should be seen as the steady fuel for democracy. Mouffe sees public space as an arena where different hegemonic projects can continuously challenge each other, without considering a final consensus possible. Taking this idea of conflicting forces as a fundamental principle for a participatory (futures) situation, every individual of every social group can be enabled in their ability to dream their future, to come out for their passions and to act on them.

9. Searching for learning spaces

As Participatory Design is extending into new contexts such as makerspaces, the focus indeed shifts to providing openings and opportunities, *mobilising passions from the sphere of the public* instead of working in a problem-related manner where stakeholders are sought out and often coercively involved. Makerspaces are usually part of a bigger centre or library where various public activities are happening, providing open access to facilities and support to create an environment that allows people with different backgrounds, skills and knowledge to mingle and tinker together.

In a way, I could personally compare it to the learning environment that I was provided with in the past five years of studying at a design school. Open access to facilities with peers and tutors providing both technical and conceptual support, making life meaningful through social exchange and manual occupation. It's a utopian ideal to empower people in their agency by making open spaces where someone can genuinely hang out, fabricate something, express themselves, tinker together with others and become a designer of their world. Especially to establish a diversity among the individuals and collectives that entrust and make use of such a space. *A place to play* may sound like a redundant luxury when considering the growing inequality, as for many people, there is absolutely no mental space to engage in tinkering activities. Yet I believe that over time, by continuously doing open invites and becoming a local fixed value, such making and learning places can eventually appeal to a wide range of people. But only if there is general confidence in others' capacity to learn and act in their own way.

Then what about design? Design's role in the participatory environment is what Maze and Keshavarz (2013, p. 9) call *a reflexive and situated translator,* arguing that the designer should be concerned with how others are understood and engaged in design. Hence, in the participatory context, an essential function would be setting up and opening such spaces that allow making, collaborating and learning.

10. Searching for solutions

A project in the field of design that brought the idea of learning and proceeding together to the core of its activity is Öffentliche Gestaltungsberatung (Public Design Support) by Jesko Fezer and the students of studio Experimentelles Design of the HFBK.

> The offer of free, regular, and easily accessed Public Design Support allows us to find new clients, who in turn bring new needs, new places and new forms of knowledge to the design process. All of this both demands and enables alternative approaches, competencies, and modes of self-understanding. Public Design Support is an engaged form of design, since it makes other people, problems, and spaces into the actors and objects of the design process. (Fezer, 2016, p. 19)

What makes this project exciting is its openness. Firstly, Jesko Fezer and his students completely open up the understanding of what design can be because they argue that any issue or problem can become an object of a design process, which means that people can come by with almost any situation. As no one is an expert in everything, this proposition casts the designer's role as one who anticipates, learns and works together to move forward, in contrast to the perception of the expert who conceives, makes and finally sends an invoice.

Secondly, the service they provide is free of charge and is an ongoing live project. Public Design Support has a physical and visitable space tied to a local context in St. Pauli, Hamburg, and has been there for many years. It is simple yet powerful in its existence. Connecting the students to a local community's realities creates a win-win situation and a sincere exchange between a diverse range of actors. Also effective in their practice is that they do not approach individuals themselves and offer help - but spread the word and wait for people to take the initiative to come by.

What if the concept of a Public Design Support were to be expanded, and it was no longer about offering design services to solve problems free of charge, but it became an open service where people could go and get support in discovering their creative selves?

11. Searching for the essential

At the root of human-centred design (HCD) is the human and its surroundings. Design researcher Richard Buchanan (2001) describes the first principle of HCD as

> ... fundamentally an affirmation of human dignity. It is an ongoing search for what can be done to support and strengthen the dignity of human beings as they act out their lives in varied social, economic, political, and cultural circumstances. (p. 37)

It might be defined as an affirmation of human dignity; HCD is mainly applied to make better services and products in a bid to maximise profit. As HCD carries an open structure with unclear borders, its use has been interpreted differently across organisations and is practised today within government and NGOs, the public sector and every possible area of the industry. Putting the human being and its surroundings central in the design process ended up defining the corporate branding and communication of businesses towards customers in order to position themselves against competitors. It seems as if companies which do not promise to customer centricity will have a hard time remaining above water. The obsession with the user is leading to the rapid birth of new design fields and innovation theories. Whereas on the other hand, user insights are being discarded as it evidently does not guarantee innovation, especially not the desired radical or disruptive kind.

Even one of its founding fathers, Don Norman (2013), has demonstrated that HCD only leads to incremental innovation. He could not find any evidence of radical innovations that happened by taking a person or a society's needs into account. (p. 13)

"If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses." A quote falsely attributed to Henry Ford, often used in business talk to argue against considering user insights when wanting to *innovate*. Human-centred design seems far from being written off, but criticism of the anthropocentric approach is mounting as it excludes non-human entities, nor is it considered sufficiently imaginative. Therefore, once again, I hear the call for new narratives reverberating, disguised as the demand for novel methods that either take more complexity into account and are systemic or, are radical, free and artistic.

12. Searching for profit

The integration of design and its methods into organisations has paved the way for the advent of designerly creative problem-solving approaches with design thinking as its biggest commercial hit. Design thinking is not anchored in academic discourse and is rather a well-marketed mishmash of all kinds of tools and methods used by designers to solve problems. Business consultancies and managerial staff have observed and adapted these methods into templates for design(erly) thinking, allowing anyone to feel and think like a designer for an afternoon. The design thinking approach became associated with the promise to create an environment that would unleash creativity, guaranteeing *that creativity will take place.*

And so shifts the focus of the innovation discourse to its actual deliverable: creativity. Bruce Nussbaum, one of the early advocates of design thinking, has left the approach behind, calling it a *failed experiment* and directing his attention instead to dismantling the creative act. In his book Creative Intelligence (2013), he proceeds from the premise that creativity is all around us, arguing for recognising it more and fostering creative competencies within organisations. However, he also sees the necessity to capitalise on those creative competencies to build a new economic model for the 21st century. In the final chapter, Nussbaum writes

> Creativity is the source of economic value. Creativity transforms what money can't buy into what money can buy. It taps the pools of our aspirations and turns these hopes into products and experiences that have economic value. Profit derives from generating and scaling creativity into marketable commodities.
> (p. 246)

Capitalism feeds on novelty, and that novelty is in turn fuelled by creativity. The emphasis on unlocking the creative potential is but an extension of the innovation culture, where solutions to problems always lie in more innovation, ideally in the shape of something marketable. The increasing demand for creative competencies in the professions is what writer Oli Mould calls *the creatification of all jobs.* (p. 23) In his book Against Creativity (2018), Mould unpacks how the rhetoric of creativity is deployed to justify endless economic growth, eventually leading to more precariousness and inequality among society.

13. Searching for potential

Thinking about human capacity in terms of potential has its consequences. If there is a general belief in the inherent potential of human beings to act, then there is also a latent responsibility attached to living up to that potential. Consider the American dream, a set of ideals in which every individual deserves their position in society – as prosperity supposedly comes from hard work and not the nest you were born into. Apart from the fact that these ideals are basically serving as a justification for inequality, the American dream is a vivid example of potential-thinking, promoting a worldview that consists out of possibility.

Now the dark side of potential is that there will always be a judgement associated with the failure to realise that potential. And the same goes for creativity, as it suggests an inherent capacity that only requires to be unlocked. Not wanting to unlock that potential therefore seems incomprehensible. Along with the desire to be creative exists the expectation of being creative. This is what sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (2017) calls *the creativity dispositif.* Reckwitz (2017) too observes that creativity has become a ubiquitous demand in all professions. He argues that if human beings are considered as both innately creative and desirous of being creative, there is a pressure to develop those competencies and engage in creative expression to be worthy individuals. Exactly because creativity is closely connected to two crucial cultural values – individuality and authenticity. Subsequently, the inability to grow creatively comes at a price. Reckwitz states that

> A deficiency or absence of creative achievement not only leads to a withdrawal of social recognition but also indicates that the deficient individual no longer fulfils their own ideal of themselves, and their whole self-image is undermined. The person is then damaged not only in their social identity but also in their personal identity. (p. 697)

Being creative has been added to the list of demands made to the modern human. With calling out a creativity dispositif, Reckwitz (2017) does not describe how creativity became a system of domination but rather lays out how a once elitist activity became institutionalised. Creativity as a competency came to be both desirable and, to an extent, obligatory for all. And yes, the economy

plays a big part in that - capitalism's grip is firm. Or as Oli Mould (2018) puts it

> Any movement (be it a countercultural group, protest movement, meme or activist ideology) that is looking to destabilise capitalism is viewed as a potential market to exploit. (p. 14-15)

14. Searching for meaning

Apart from the creativity imperative associated with industry, there are many who say that the creative act is precisely one of the most meaningful activities. Belgian psychiatrist and philosopher Steve A. Velleman argues in his book De Maakschappij en het Ego (2018) that love manifests itself in care and creativity. He says these form two fundamental experiences of meaning where both in care and the creative act, an attitude of 'gelatenheid' (which loosely translates to acquiescence, meekness or equanimity) fits better than that of self-will. The original passage by Velleman (2018) in Dutch

> De liefde manifesteert zich in de zorg en de creativiteit. Die vormen twee fundamentele ervaringen van zin, eigen aan de menselijke existentie die we samen met de ervaring van hun afwezigheid de 'zinservaring' noemen. In beide handelingen - zowel in de zorg als in de creatieve daad - past beter een houding van gelatenheid dan die van eigenwilligheid. (p. 50)

Velleman also states that both care and creativity are temporary experiences of meaning that don't refer to some permanent source of meaning that would be given to our human experience.

15. Searching for flow

As someone educated to be creative, I can strongly identify with the (self) pressure to develop my creative potential. And yet, I have experienced that giving way to creative expression is incredibly valuable as it keeps me in balance, provides meaning and just feels good. Whether I am playing music or dancing, it helps me to get out of my head.

The experience I am referring to is known in psychology as flow, studied and introduced by Csíkszentmihályi (1990). The flow experience is characterised by total engagement in an activity and examples of it have been found in different domains such as sports, games and crafts, and the creative act.

But flow is only an aspect of the creative act. For something to be creative, there must also be a product that can be evaluated for originality. My self-worth is currently not dependent on how my expressions are evaluated, but I do feel the urge to turn my creative endeavours into products that others can enjoy. As only then it comes full circle. Partly indeed because society would reward me for that and it would increase the possibility of being admired, but also because I believe the desire to share and leave something behind is innately human - to bring about the experience of a common world.

And I am convinced that everyone has the ability to express themselves creatively and retrieve meaning from that experience. Whether others will enjoy this personal outing of self-expression is secondary. I am interested in what creative expression does to a person and their environment, if it increases their sense of belonging and openness to new experiences.

For its sake, creative expression is a kind of play, a discovery taking place with the self, the self and an object, the self, an object, and another person. And something happens in between, in that interaction, that is meaningful.

16. Making openings for individual expression

So if there is such an omnipresent search to unlock the creative potential of ideally a diverse range of people, we should create chances for that potential to develop. Because there is no such thing as unlocking, there is only developing. Since engaging in creative expression is an infinite journey where everybody is at a different stage. It's a slow and individual process, which nobody can be forced into. But you can keep on *creating as many openings as possible* for people to get involved voluntarily, to organise time, space and support for those already keen. To engage in what Reckwitz (2015) labels as profane creative practice.

> Profane creative practice is always *locally* situated, producing delight and discovery for the participants in the here and now. Profane creativity has no recipients, nor is it producer-based. It takes place in the sequence of practice and within networks of subjects and objects. (p. 715)

To organise time, space and support somewhere local, accessible to all who want to participate, regardless of age or any other qualification. A place without predefined curricula or educational objectives. Where different formats are possible, individually or in a group, with or without much support, to accommodate personal processes. Where nothing has to happen, but a lot can happen. An open place that regularly sends invitations so that it may become an established local value over time, appealing to a variety of people.

A place that tries to document the chaos of creative expression and discovery, to collect traces of what we share in our common search as human beings. Archives of materials with exercises, techniques and testimonies that are accessible to all, whether to guide the process of others, or your own. A place where one can set out to experience the unknown, practice and repeat a preferred activity, or edit and finish something already existing.

I call it Open Expression Support. A concrete utopia. A place for both collective and individual creative expression. A form of open practice of self-organisation which artist Marion van Osten (2020) characterises as "understand[ing] collective creativity not

as a control technique to gain better employability, but as a tool to change the everyday living experience for citizens in very concrete ways: creating solidarity networks, closing cycles between production and consumption." (p. 365)

For it is in creating openings and setting up such initiatives for anyone to join, that there is a chance to mobilise the human potential. The imaginative, creative and learning potential that seems to belong to us all. To make way for passion, unconditionally.

And then, something can happen. As people can retain their raison d'être, feeling empowered to shape their personal narratives and become agents of change. But it has to be open. Because as soon as it becomes selective and compulsive, it loses its purpose.

Well-founded beliefs about humans and their learning process would be fundamental to establishing such radically open initiatives. Because at the root of this openness lies the belief that everyone is equally capable of learning something new. And that's where there is support to be found in the words of educationalist Paulo Freire and the philosopher Jacques Rancière, who have encouraged me to make my own opening.

To start with Open Expression Support – an environment I created, symbolically at the end of my studies, to support others with what I have learned while putting those learnings to the test.

Closing note on searching for equality

It doesn't happen very often, but it was an internet search that got me to Paulo Freire's writings. Although many of my peers are already familiar with his thinking, I learnt about Freire through Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, while investigating forms of political theatre. I finally read Freire's book <u>Pedagogy of the Oppressed</u> (2017/1970) during the first lockdown in March.

After being in education for almost all my life, it was enlightening to hear someone make a case against what Freire calls banking education, a pedagogical model that propagates oppression by producing distance between the teacher and the student and between the student and what is to be learnt. The banking education I was once part of, rewarded me on my ability to study and consume facts rather than my ability to explore and reflect, to be critical, emotional and curious. The ability to craft my own route between what I already know and what I don't know yet. The feeling of discontent I left high-school with, motivated me to search for other educational environments and approaches. As for me, the teacher-centred classroom can not encompass the beautiful complexity of learning.

Freire's influence is not to be underestimated. It is partly due to pedagogues like him that I have been able to enjoy an educational model in which the student and their process are central, as they repeatedly promoted forms of problem-based learning. Crucial in this, is that Freire acknowledges that the learning process is inherently strenuous and uncertain.

> Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. (p. 45)

Freire recognises that *tension* has to be part of the learning process to complete it. He contrasts the textbook consumer with the image of the seeking and ignorant human, integrating the active aspect of learning along the passive consumption of knowledge. It is precisely this passive form of learning that creates a distance between those who know and those who do not know, operating as a mechanism to maintain the current power relations. Freire also reduces the

distinction between the teacher and the student, saying that both are jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (p. 53) For it is in dialogue and confrontation that learning unfolds, but only if the teacher's efforts "[are] imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power" (p. 48)

Continuing this school of thought is the work of Jacques Rancière, who, like Freire, argues for intellectual emancipation. One of the most powerful arguments Rancière uses to illustrate that all are of equal intelligence is of the child learning the mother tongue. In The Emancipated Spectator (2010), Rancière writes that

> The human animal learns everything in the same way as it initially learnt its mother tongue, as it learnt to venture into the forest of things and signs surrounding it, so as to take its place among human beings: by observing and comparing one thing with another, a sign with a fact, a sign with another sign. (p. 10)

What both Freire and Rancière are arguing for seems so simple – that every human being is capable of learning something new just by trying. And yet we are reminded throughout that we are not equal, that some are capable and some not, creating distances in communication that only experts can bridge. Therefore, the proposition of intellectual emancipation, for which no proof can be found, feels so refreshing because it goes against society's focus on describing and distinguishing intellect. Although it might not be very actionable, such thinking helps to reconsider the relationship between teacher and learner repeatedly, serving as an enduring reminder to look at the world through children's eyes and connect to others from one's being and not only from one's professional identity.

Their words helped me overcome my built-in self-doubt and believe in every individual's capacity, including my own, to lay their own path to knowledge through applying personal means of sense-making. It informed the attitude which I would carry forward in the project and influenced the way I try to look and relate to others. To keep believing in an equality of intellect and remaining as much a student as a teacher. And as much a participant as a coach or initiator. Because what does it mean to participate?

. . . to participate means to live and to relate differently. It implies, above all, the recovery of one's inner freedom, that is, to learn to listen and to share, free from any fear or predefined conclusion, belief or judgement. . . . To live differently implies, that change be perceived as a process which starts from within, and defines as one pursues one's creative journey into the unknown. It does not mean to conform to a preordained pattern or ideal designed by others, or even one designed by one's own illusions and conditioned ideals. For changes to happen and to make sense, it should represent the open-ended quest and interaction of free and questioning persons for the understanding of reality. (Rajid Rahnema, 2020, p. 147)

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