Design Microprotests

Ella Rebecca Barrowclough Cutler, Jacqueline Gothe, Alexandra Crosby

Abstract

Introduction

This essay considers three design projects as microprotests. Reflecting on the ways design practice can generate spaces, sites and methods of protest, we use the concept of microprotest to consider how we, as designers ourselves, can protest by scaling down, focussing, slowing down and paying attention to the edges of our practice. Design microprotest is a form of design activism that is always collaborative, takes place within a community, and involves careful translation of a political conversation. While microprotest can manifest in any design discipline, in this essay we focus on visual communication design. In particular we consider the deep, reflexive practice of listening as the foundation of microprotests in visual communication design.

While small in scale and fleeting in duration, these projects express rich and deep political engagements through conversations that create and maintain safe spaces. While many design theorists (Julier; Fuad-Luke; Clarke; Irwin et al.) have done important work to contextualise activist design as a broad movement with overlapping branches (social design, community design, eco-design, participatory design, critical design, and transition design etc.), the scope of our study takes 'micro' as a starting point. We focus on the kind of activism that takes shape in moments of careful design; these are moments when designers move politically, rather than necessarily within political movements. These microprotests respond to community needs through design more than they articulate a broad activist design movement. As such, the impacts of these microprotests often go unnoticed outside of the communities within which they take place. We propose, and test in this essay, a mode of analysis for design microprotests that takes design activism as a starting point but pays more attention to community and translation than designers and their global reach.

In his analysis of design activism, Julier proposes "four possible conceptual tactics for the activist designer that are also to be found in particular qualities in the mainstream design culture and economy" (Julier, Introduction 149). We use two of these tactics to begin exploring a selection of attributes common to design microprotests: temporality – which describes the way that speed, slowness, progress and incompletion are dealt with; and territorialisation – which describes the scale at which responsibility and impact is conceived (227). In each of three projects to which we apply these tactics, one of us had a role as a visual communicator. As such, the research is framed by the knowledge creating paradigm described by Jonas as "research through design".

We also draw on other conceptualisations of design activism, and the rich design literature that has emerged in recent times to challenge the colonial legacies of design studies (Schultz; Tristan et al.; Escobar). Some analyses of design activism already focus on the micro or the minor. For example, in their report of social change within organisations as an experimental and iterative process, Lensjkold, Olander and Hasse refer to Deleuze and Guattari's minoritarian: "minor design activism is 'a position in co-design engagements that strives to continuously maintain experimentation'" (67). Like minor activism, design microprotests are linked to the continuous mobilisation of actors and networks in processes of collective experimentation. However microprotests do not necessarily focus on organisational change. Rather, they create new (and often tiny) spaces of protest within which new voices can be heard and different kinds of listening can be done.

In the first of our three cases, we discuss a representation of transdisciplinary listening. This piece of visual communication is a design microprotest in itself. This section helps to frame what we mean by a safe space by paying attention to the listening mode of communication. In the next sections we explore temporality and territorialisation through the design microprotests Just Spaces which documents the collective imagining of safe places for LBPQ (Lesbian, Bisexual, Pansexual, and Queer) women and non-binary identities through a series of graphic objects and Conversation Piece, a book written, designed and published over three days as a proposition for a collective future.

A Representation of Transdisciplinary Listening

The design artefact we present in this section is a representation of listening and can be understood as a microprotest emerging from a collective experiment that materialises firstly as a visual document asking questions of the visual communication discipline and its role in a research collaboration and also as a mirror for the interdisciplinary team to reflexively develop transdisciplinary perspectives on the risks associated with the release of environmental flows in the upper reaches of Hawkesbury Nepean River in NSW, Australia. This research project was funded through a Challenge Grant Scheme to encourage transdisciplinarity within the University. The project team worked with the Hawkesbury Nepean Catchment Management Authority in response to the question: What are the risks to maximising the benefits expected from increased environmental flows?

Listening and visual communication design practice are inescapably linked. Renown American graphic designer and activist Sheila de Bretteville describes a consciousness and a commitment to listening as an openness, rather than antagonism and argument. Fiumara describes listening as nascent or an emerging skill and points to listening as the antithesis of the Western culture of saying and expression.

For a visual communication designer there is a very specific listening that can be described as visual hearing. This practice materialises the act of hearing through a visualisation of the information or knowledge that is shared. This act of visual hearing is a performative process tracing the actors' perspectives. This tracing is used as content, which is then translated into a transcultural representation constituted by the designerly act of perceiving multiple perspectives. The interpretation contributes to a shared project of transdisciplinary understanding.

This transrepresentation (Fig. 1) is a manifestation of a small interaction among a research team comprised of a water engineer, sustainable governance researcher, water resource management researcher, environmental economist and a designer. This visualisation is a materialisation of a structured conversation in response to the question What are the risks to maximising the benefits expected from increased environmental flows? It represents a small contribution that provides an opportunity for reflexivity and documents a moment in time in response to a significant challenge. In this translation of a conversation as a visual representation, a design microprotest is made against reduction, simplification, antagonism and argument. This may seem intangible, but as a protest through design, "it involves the development of artifacts that exist in real time and space, it is situated within everyday contexts and processes of social and economic life" (Julier 226). This representation locates conversation in a visual order that responds to particular categorisations of the political, the institutional, the socio-economic and the physical in a transdisciplinary process that focusses on multiple perspectives.
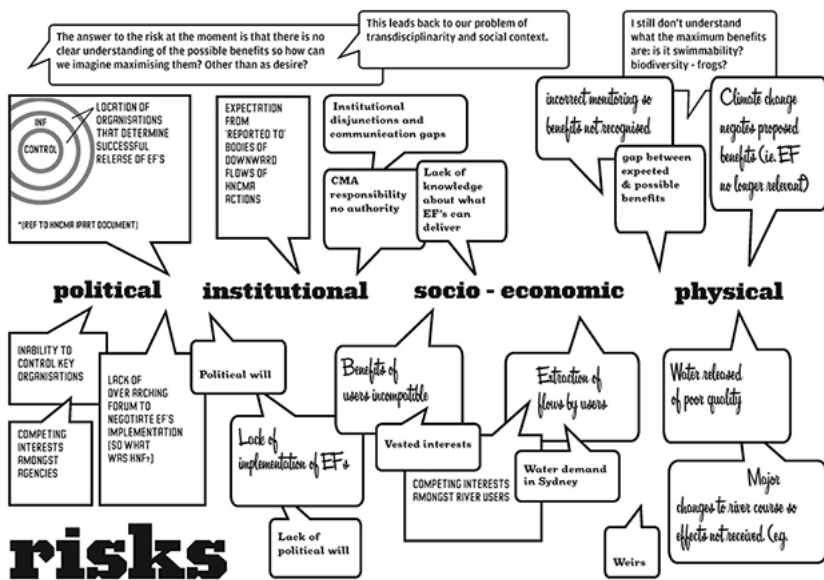

Figure 1: Transrepresentation of responses by an interdisciplinary research team to the question: What are the risks to maximising the benefits expected from increased environmental flows in the Upper Hawkesbury Nepean River? (2006)

Just Spaces: Translating Safe Spaces

Listening is the foundation of design microprotest. Just Spaces emerged out of a collaborative listening project It's OK! An Anthology of LBPQ (Lesbian, Bisexual, Pansexual and Queer) Women's and Non-Binary Identities' Stories and Advice. By visually communicating the way a community practices supportive listening (both in a physical form as a book and as an online resource), It's OK! opens conversations about how LBPQ women and non-binary identities can imagine and help facilitate safe spaces. These conversations led to thinking about the effects of breaches of safe spaces on young LBPQ women and non-binary identities.

In her book The Cultural Politics of Emotion, Sara Ahmed presents Queer Feelings as a new way of thinking about Queer bodies and the way they use and impress upon space. She makes an argument for creating and imagining new ways of creating and navigating public and private spaces. As a design microprotest, Just Spaces opens up Queer ways of navigating space through a process Ahmed describes as "the 'non-fitting' or discomfort .... an opening up which can be difficult and exciting" (Ahmed 154).

Just Spaces is a series of workshops, translated into a graphic design object, and presented at an exhibition in the stairwell of the library at the University of Technology Sydney. It protests the requirement of navigating heteronormative environments by suggesting 'Queer' ways of being in and designing in space. The work offers solutions, suggestions, and new ways of doing and making by offering design methods as tools of microprotest to its participants. For instance, Just Spaces provides a framework for sensitive translation, through the introduction of a structure that helps build personas based on the game Dungeons and Dragons (a game popular among certain LGBTQIA+ communities in Sydney).

Figure 2: Exhibition: Just Spaces, held at UTS Library from 5 to 27 April 2018.

By focussing the design process on deep listening and rendering voices into visual translations, these workshops responded to Linda Tuhiwai Smith's idea of the "outsider within", articulating the way research should be navigated in vulnerable groups that have a history of being exploited as part of research. Through reciprocity and generosity, trust was generated in the design process which included a shared dinner; opening up participant-controlled safe spaces.

To open up and explore ideas of discomfort and safety, two workshops were designed to provide safe and sensitive spaces for the group of seven LBPQ participants and collaborators. Design methods such as drawing, group imagining and futuring using a central prototype as a prompt drew out discussions of safe spaces. The prototype itself was a small folded house (representative of shelter) printed with a number of questions, such as:

> Our spaces are often unsafe. We take that as a given. But where do these breaches of safety take place? How was your safe space breached in those spaces?

The workshops resulted in tangible objects, made by the participants, but these could not be made public because of privacy implications.

So the next step was to use visual communication design to create sensitive and honest visual translations of the conversations. The translations trace images from the participants' words, sketches and notes. For example, handwritten notes are transcribed and reproduced with a font chosen by the designer based on the tone of the comment and by considering how design can retain the essence of person as well as their anonymity. The translations focus on the micro: the micro breaches of safety; the interactions that take place between participants and their environment; and the everyday denigrating experiences that LBPQ women and non-binary identities go through on an ongoing basis. This translation process requires precise skills, sensitivity, care and deep knowledge of context. These skills operate at the smallest of scales through minute observation and detailed work. This micro-ness translates to the potential for truthfulness and care within the community, as it establishes a precedent through the translations for others to use and adapt for their own communities.

The production of the work for exhibition also occurred on a micro level, using a Risograph, a screenprinting photocopier often found in schools, community groups and activist spaces. The machine (ME9350) used for this project is collectively owned by a co-op of Sydney creatives called Rizzeria. Each translation was printed only five times on butter paper. Butter paper is a sensitive surface but difficult to work with making the process slow and painstaking and with a lot of care.

All aspects of this process and project are small: the pieced-together translations made by assembling segments of conversations; zines that can be kept in a pocket and read intimately; the group of participants; and the workshop and exhibition spaces. These small spaces of safety and their translations make possible conversations but also enable other safe spaces that move and intervene as design microprotests.
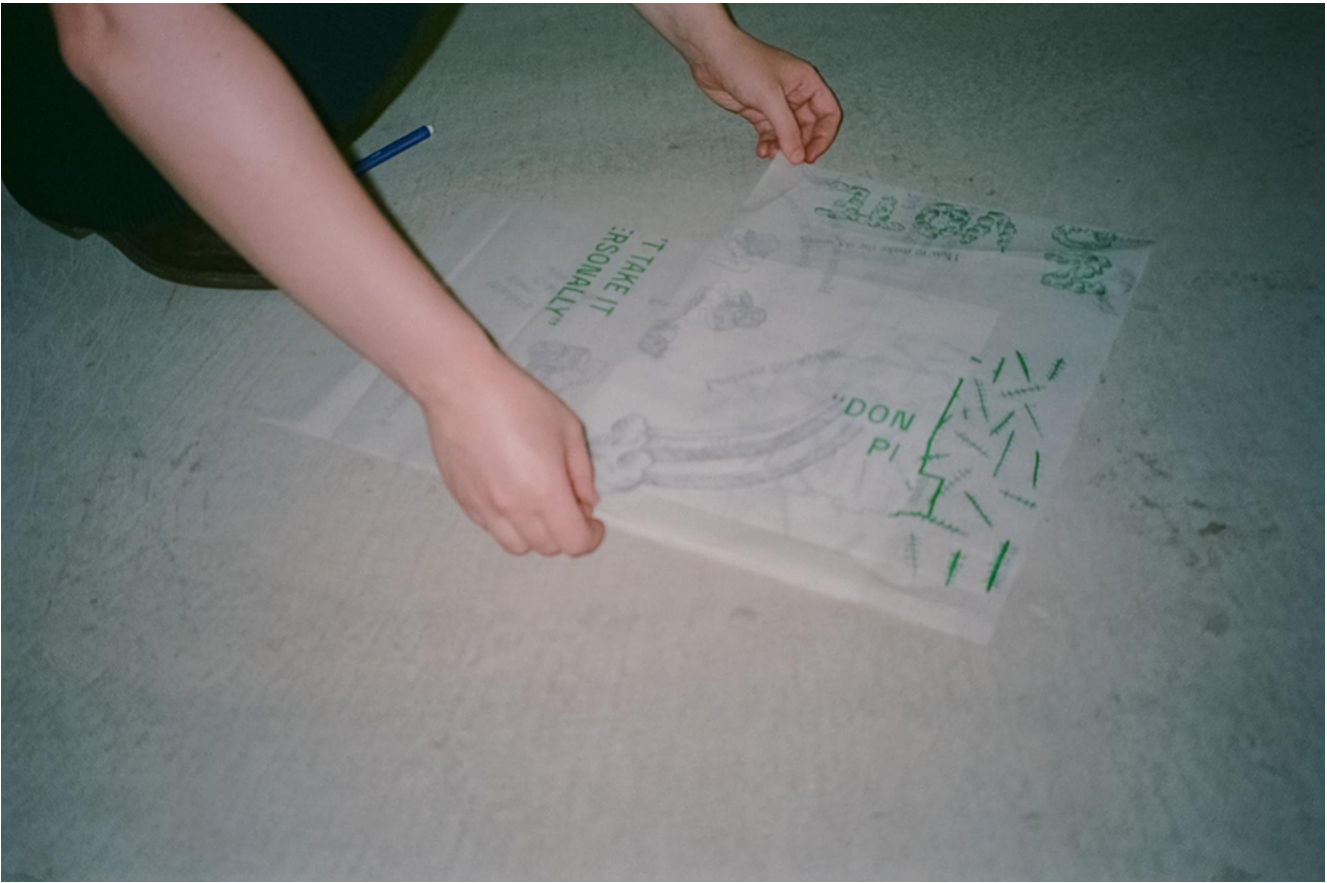
Figure 3: Piecing the translations together.

Figure 4: Pulling the translation off the drum; this was done every print making the process slow and requiring gentleness.

This project was and is about slowing down, listening and visually translating in order to generate and imagine safe spaces. In this slowness, as Julier describes "...the activist is working in a more open-ended way that goes beyond the materialization of the design" (229). It creates methods for listening and collaboratively generating ways to navigate spaces that are fraught with micro conflict. As an act of territorialisation, it created tiny and important spaces as a design microprotest.

Conversation Piece: A Fast and Slow Book

Conversation Piece is an experiment in collective self-publishing. It was made over three days by Frontyard, an activist space in Marrickville, NSW, involved in community "futuring". Futuring for Frontyard is intended to empower people with tools to imagine and enact preferred futures, in contrast to what design theorist Tony Fry describes as "defuturing", the systematic destruction of possible futures by design. Materialised as a book, Conversation Piece is also an act of collective futuring. It is a carefully designed process for producing dialogues between unlikely parties using an image archive as a starting point.

Conversation Piece was designed with the book sprint format as a starting point. Founded by software designer Adam Hyde, book sprints are a method of collectively generating a book in just a few days then publishing it. Book sprints are related to the programming sprints common in agile software development or Scrum, which are often used to make FLOSS (Free and Open Source Software) manuals. Frontyard had used these techniques in a previous project to develop the Non Cash Arts Asset Platform.

Conversation Piece was also modeled on two participatory books made during sprints that focussed on articulating alternative futures. Collaborative Futures was made during Transmediale in 2009, and Futurish: Thinking Out Loud about Futures (2015).

The design for Conversation Piece began when Frontyard was invited to participate in the Hobiennale in 2017, a free festival emerging from the "national climate of uncertainty within the arts, influenced by changes to the structure of major arts organisations and diminishing funding opportunities." The Hobiennale was the first Biennale held in Hobart, Tasmania, but rather than producing a standard large art survey, it focussed on artist-run spaces and initiatives, emergant practices, and marginalised voices in the arts.

Frontyard is not an artist collective and does not work for commissions. Rather, the response to the invitation was based on how much energy there was in the group to contribute to Hobiennale. At Frontyard one of the ways collective and individual energy is accounted for is using spoon theory, a disability metaphor used to describe the planning that many people have to do to conserve and ration energy reserves in their daily lives (Miserandino). As outlined in the glossary of Conversation Piece, spoon theory is:

> A way of accounting for our emotional or physical energy and
> therefore our ability to participate in activities. Spoon theory can be
> used to collaborate with care and avoid guilt and burn out. Usually
> spoon theory is applied at an individual level, but it can also be used
> by organisations. For example, Hobiennale had enough spoons to
> participate in the Hobiennale so we decided to give it a go. (180)

To make to book, Frontyard invited visitors to Hobiennale to participate in a series of open conversations that began with the photographic archive of the organisation over the two years of its existence. During a prototyping session, Frontyard designed nine diagrams that propositioned ways to begin conversations by combining images in different ways.
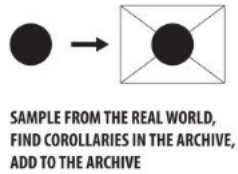
Figure 5: Diagram 9. Conversation Piece: p.32-33

One of the purposes of the diagrams, and the book itself, was to bring attention to the micro dynamics of conversation over time, and to create a safe space to explore the implications of these. While the production process and the book itself is micro (ten copies were printed and immediately given away), the decisions made in regards to licensing (a creative commons license is used), distribution (via the Internet Archive) and content generation (through participatory design processes) the project's commitment to open design processes (Van Abel, Evers, Klaassen and Troxler) mean its impact is unpredictable. Counter-logical to the conventional copyright of books, open design borrows its definition - and at times its technologies and here its methods - from open source software design, to advocate the production of design objects based on fluid and shared circulation of design information. The tension between the abundance produced by an open approach to making, and the attention to the detail of relationships produced by slowing down and scaling down communication processes is made apparent in Conversation Piece:

> We challenge ourselves at Frontyard to keep bureaucratic processes
> as minimal an open as possible. We don't have an application or
> acquittal process: we prefer to meet people over a cup of tea. A
> conversation is a way to work through questions. (7)

As well as focussing on the micro dynamics of conversations, this projects protests the authority of archives. It works to dismantle the hierarchies of art and publishing through the design of an open, transparent, participatory publishing process. It offers a range of propositions about alternative economies, the agency of people working together at small scales, and the many possible futures in the collective imaginaries of people rethinking time, outcomes, results and progress.

The contributors to the book are those in conversation – a complex networks of actors that are relationally configured and themselves in constant change, so as Julier explains "the object is subject to constant transformations, either literally or in its meaning. The designer is working within this instability." (230) This is true of all design, but in this design microprotest, Frontyard works within this instability in order to redirect it. The book functions as a series of propositions about temporality and territorialisation, and focussing on micro interventions rather than radical political movements. In one section, two Frontyard residents offer a story of migration that also serves as a recipe for purslane soup, a traditional Portuguese dish (Rodriguez and Brison). Another lifts all the images of hand gestures from the Frontyard digital image archive and represents them in a photo essay.

A third party gets involved.

Figure 6: Talking to Rocks. Conversation Piece: p.143

Conclusion

This article is an invitation to momentarily suspend the framing of design activism as a global movement in order to slow down the analysis of design protests and start paying attention to the brief moments and small spaces of protest that energise social change in design practice. We offered three examples of design microprotests, opening with a representation of transdisciplinary listening in order to frame design as a way if interpreting and listening as well as generating and producing. The two following projects we describe are collective acts of translation: small, momentary conversations designed into graphic forms that can be shared, reproduced, analysed, and remixed.

Such protests have their limitations. Beyond the artefacts, the outcomes generated by design microprotests are difficult to identify. While they push and pull at the temporality and territorialisation of design, they operate at a small scale. How design microprotests connect to global networks of protest is an important question yet to be explored. The design practices of transdisciplinary listening, Queer Feelings and translations, and collaborative book sprinting, identified in these design microprotests change the thoughts and feelings of those who participate in ways that are impossible to measure in real time, and sometimes cannot be measured at all. Yet these practices are important now, as they shift the way designers design, and the way others understand what is designed. By identifying the common attributes of design microprotests, we can begin to understand the way necessary political conversations emerge in design practice, for instance about safe spaces, transdisciplinarity, and archives. Taking a research

through design approach these can be understood over time, rather than just in the moment, and in specific territories that belong to community. They can be reconfigured into different conversations that change our world for the better.

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