

OBJECT THEATRE IN DESIGN – WORKSHOP

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In this workshop we will demonstrate a set of techniques from the post-dramatic genre of Object Theatre and discuss how they can enrich design practice and design research. The work brings together a design tradition of engaging objects in co-design and a theatre competence of improvising action with objects. With the participants we will inquire into:

Object puppetry (exploring objects from ‘within’),
Improvising movements (action before thought),
Staging objects (context dependence), and
Multi-stakeholder drama (object perspectives).

REGISTRATION

To pre-register for this workshop, please sign up here:
<http://doodle.com/rvd3e8egg6878hfu>

PROGRAMME

1. Introductions

Participants introduce themselves

2. Setting the Scenes

The facilitators bring forth the theme of ‘Object Theatre in Design’ and provide an overview of their own work.

3. Exploring Object Theatre

Four sets of theatre exercises and how they relate to design

4. Relevance to Participants’ Practices

Based on the work above we characterise object theatre and how it applies to participant’s own experiences.

5. Acting a Research Agenda

In groups we work out suggestions for Object Theatre research, and we improvise experiments and exchange of views and experiences.

6. Discussion

We will close the workshop with a reflection on the progress we have made.

INTRODUCTION

In our design research environment at the University of Southern Denmark we have a firm tradition of engaging tangible objects in co-design: Designing games, prototypes, provotypes, business models etc. as boundary objects (Star 1989) that encourage inventive collaborations. We have also developed a competence of using theatre to investigate the organisational challenges of innovation with a departure in the forum theatre tradition (Boal 1979) and anchored in a theory of complex relations (Friis 2004). In an attempt to combine those two competences we have experimented with *Object Theatre* to enhance both our design teaching and design research. Object Theatre is a particular genre in which actors use everyday objects in storytelling to create a performance. Objects are utilised either as they are or they are transformed into fictional characters, to express something new. Actors use objects as triggers to improvise (like in the TV show ‘Who’s line is it anyway’), or as puppets, or as creative stage designs.

The work with Object Theatre helps us better understand what it means to take other perspectives than our own (which is at the core of user-centred design), and to ‘act before we think’ rather than assume co-design processes can be planned ahead in detail. Object Theatre also challenges us to shift from the distanced ‘aboutness’ to the engaged ‘withness’ (Shoter 2011) of how we think of design. Working with Object Theatre seems important in two other respects: It provides a new theoretical perspective on product interaction and design process; and it offers a set of very practical activities and exercises that convey these perspectives.



Passing on a movement to inspire design interactions.

THEATRE IN DESIGN

Theatre has served as inspiration for many years already in interaction design, primarily as a tool to create and evaluate *use scenarios* with future digital systems (Macaulay 2006). Designers have acted users to imagine future technologies in use. They have engaged users in acting themselves to tap into their creative potential. Designers have even acted components to better understand the inner workings of technological systems. Object Theatre helps us both to expand these experiences, and to add theoretical ground for understanding how they contribute to design. Here is a brief overview of what we have learned through engaging object theatre in design:

1. EXPERIENCING OBJECTS 'FROM WITHIN'

Object theatre nudges designers to move beyond observing objects from the outside towards being able to experience an object from 'within'. This is a challenge to product design, which largely relies on the understanding that designers convey their intentions through their design. To work with this we turned to *object puppetry*. While puppet theatre in the classic sense employs puppets specially constructed for theatrical effects, object puppetry takes everyday objects as its starting point.

2. ACTION BEFORE THOUGHT

It is in the interaction between players with different intentions that the possibility of breaking well-known patterns and creating the new and not-yet-known appears. Designers are similarly challenged to break patterns and come up with yet unknown ideas and solutions. To improvise, actors learn to be present and react spontaneously to what is happening in the interactions with other people - and at the same time be conscious of what they are doing (Friis 2004). We may call this 'action before thought'. Object theatre has a profound tradition of *improvising movements* and meanings.

3. CONTEXT INTERDEPENDENCE

Space plays an important role in theatre. This is not just about scenography, but about the spatial relationship between the characters, the room and the items in the room. We use object theatre exercises of *staging objects* to explore the relation between space and object. We each create our own images and perceptions of objects and the relations between space, object and action. The meaning of the object does not lie in the object itself but in how we each see it, and in our mutual negotiations of meaning.

4. TAKING OBJECT PERSPECTIVES

In user-centred design it can be quite a challenge for designers to take the perspective of the 'other'. We use the term '*stakeholder drama*' to describe exercises in which we consciously shift between the perspectives of a range of people with stakes in the design. Adding to this the perspectives of the objects we are designing can introduce surprising experiences.

Object Theatre belongs to a family of *post-dramatic theatre* forms, which break free of the limitations of conventional drama, such as time structure, plot and dramatic form (Lehman 2006). Post-dramatic performance, rather than working from a text, can take its starting point in, for instance, a sound, a theme, an experience, or an object. Post-dramatic theatre doesn't necessarily build on conflict; it is presentational, rather than representational. The stage becomes a generator of shared experiences by engaging the audience to interact and participate rather than to watch. In this way it is a good match with co-design approaches.

WORKSHOP ORGANIZERS

We build the workshop on these experiences:

PREBEN FRIIS is head of 'Theatre Lab', SDU Design Research at the University of Southern Denmark. Theatre Lab has for some years played an integrated part in research projects and in the design education of master students in SDU. Preben Friis worked as actor and theatre director for 20 years.

MERJA RYÖPPY has an M.Sc (tech) from Tampere University of Technology and is an undergraduate drama instructor. Merja Ryöppy is combining those two educations in order to develop more embodied and socially constructed approaches for facilitation of design processes.

JACOB BUUR is professor of User-Centred Design at the Mads Clausen Institute, University of Southern Denmark, and research director of the SDU Design Research Environment. Jacob Buur takes a keen interest in methods for studying and involving users in design, and in particular he has developed video techniques for bridging user studies and innovation.

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