

The political body as a fulcrum for radical imagination in metadesign

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ABSTRACT | The political role of the body in metadesign is often underestimated, due to a lack of imagination regarding contemporary body and identity politics. This research reports on a democratic design experiment organized by design students to unleash radical imagination in metadesign. Students imagined a socially engaged design practice that welcomed dissensus as a source of creativity and diversity. This empirical concept emerged from the activation of the political body as a fulcrum for collectively imagining future scenarios.

KEYWORDS | **Metadesign, Political Body, Radical Imagination, Dissensus, Collective Manifesto.**

1. INTRODUCTION

Metadesign was first discussed as a scientific approach to industrial design characterized by the application of systems thinking to determine the appropriate visual-form language to communicate the design intentions (ONCK, 1963). This concept was subsequently taken by adjacent research areas: philosophy, art, biology, and urban planning. The concept has thus evolved to encompass any conceptual production aimed at understanding and intervening in ecosystems where humans produce artificial entities (VASSÃO, 2008).

Although the homo-sapiens are part of natural ecosystems and, thus, unavoidably defined by them, the artificial entities created by humans shape the human body in a much more pervasive way, even aggressive sometimes. Entities such as technology, culture, and urbanity condition human life by creating structured behaviors to reach certain cognitive and physiological effects, at a massive scale. Through abstract structures, metadesign reaches thought and imagination. In this way, Design practices contribute to scale up and aestheticize the production of narratives that populate cultural imaginaries (NOGUEIRA, PORTINARI, 2016).

This aesthetic production takes place at the microsphere of politics and subjectivity, as the political regime depends on it to perpetuate its influence over the everyday life of the citizen (GUATTARI, ROLNIK, 1986). In this way, design is implicated in the construction of subjectivities related to the body (NOGUEIRA, PORTINARI, 2016). In metadesign, these subjectivities are explored by the technique of scenario creation, which is borrowed from the practice of strategic planning in corporate administration (HINDRICHSON, FRANZATO, 2012). In this practice, processes and functions are elevated above the political bias of the constructed human ecosystems. Human bodies are mainly seen as abstract machines, treated in a statistical way.

Political metadesign heads towards a different direction, aiming at social change on a massive scale (VASSÃO, 2017). The same conceptual tools used by strategic metadesign are supposed to be used by political metadesign to liberate people from their condition of alienation. However, without considering the political body, we believe these tools will probably follow their inherent restrictive bias. The imagination turns into a conservative element when the political body is absent, a fact that diminishes the potential of political metadesign.

To avoid the erasure or loss of the body in metadesign, social movements have explored the political nature of the body when collectively imagining the future of society. A specific proposal in this regard is radical imagination, which can provide “a conception of the world as comprised of inextricably interconnected, interdependent, and interrelated fields, but it also creates a sense of ethical obligation to foster health in these relationships and to ameliorate harm when it is present” (MYERS, 2013, p. 108).

Radical imagination is, therefore, a way to build a collective imagination engaged in an actual movement for liberation (KELLEY, 2002). To explore the political body in political metadesign, we speculate how the body can harness its potential to ground radical imagination in the possibilities of the present, capable of creating design scenarios and, at the same time, as an ontological reality that justify the existence of political metadesign.

2. THE BODY AS A FULCRUM IN METADESIGN

According to the theory of metadesign, the contemporary human body finds itself alienated when considered as a mere instrument for work and everyday activities (VASSÃO, 2007). This alienation stems from a dichotomy and segmentation of the body between the concrete body and the abstract mind. This dichotomy is also reproduced in the way collective bodies and minds are conceived, for example, through the social development of the individual body as a modular piece of a collective production system body. The abstract mind is put at a higher level of value and order, suppressing the irrational energies that come from the body. In this situation, the mind loses its potential to embrace complexities and deal with its political condition, in particular, with this alienation from the body.

Nevertheless, when the body realizes its concrete existence, it becomes a fundamental agent of transformation in metaspace. Understanding the concreteness of the body is a construction that starts from the understanding of language as an instrument chewed and scattered from one human body to another (VASSÃO, 2007). Through language, the bodies affect each other and change at a constant pace.

Drawing from the “Phenomenology of perception” of Merleau-Ponty, metadesign as seen by Vassão is founded on perception and intuition. Cognition and rationalization only consecrate the state of “being” a body and all human construction is made from the body (VASSÃO, 2008). The body

emerges from the environment and its spatiality is born from the perception of concrete sensations from living experiences (VASSÃO, 2008).

The relation between body and environment grounds our concrete position over the surroundings. From this notion of the expanded body, it is possible to recognize the body as a fulcrum for the development of runaway concreteness (VASSÃO, 2008). Like the support point upon which a lever pivots from one side to the other, the body works as a foundation and support for human actions in the world (VASSÃO, 2008). Vassão believes that the body works as a fulcrum both for material and immaterial actions, though the author does not discuss the political aspect of the body in the imagination that precedes action.

3. THE POLITICAL ROLE OF THE BODY IN RADICAL IMAGINATION

Thinking of the body beyond functionalities and modularization opens up the possibilities of being that has been denied by current economic and political paradigms, as well as desiring to become someone completely different from what one was expected to be. According to Augusto Boal, imagination depends on the body's freedom to desire (BOAL, 1996). Desires trigger goals that transform into human intention, as the creation of intention generates objectives to be achieved which are fundamental to prospect and also speculate on possibilities and new perspectives (BOAL, 1996).

To embrace this abstraction from the body without losing concreteness, there must be some non-neutral mediation available for the creation of the desire (BOAL, 1996). Critical educators typically mediate imagination dialogue to aid in social change work, as a way to envision new horizons of social-political possibilities (MYERS, 2013). These acts of radical imagination can be conceived as embodied actions derived from the perception of the body and its surrounding realities (MYERS, 2013).

Through the proposal of specific ways to think imagination: “perception,” “vision,” and “action” (MYERS, 2013), radical imagination encompasses hope and inspiration to boost imagination in a collective manner, allowing people to *perceive* existing circumstances and their relations to enable new ways of contributing to the pursuit of social justice (MYERS, 2013). When imagining future scenarios, people can stay open to the many possibilities for social change and create sound *visions* of their dreams and their desires for a better world (MYERS, 2013). The *action* encompasses strategies to materialize the envisioned change, including the hindrances that will prevent the visions to become reality too easily (MYERS, 2013).

In this perspective, radical imagination is fundamentally a product of struggle, of victories and losses, crises and openings, and endless conversations circulating in a shared environment (KELLEY, 2002). While individual imagination stems from an internal construction of connections, the social body on the exterior is affected by the outside forces of rules to be lived. The political role of the body is to search for a society in which everyone can be able to fully and freely develop its

potentials (KELLEY, 2002). As radical imagination suggests, in the last step, the action, an attitude towards collectivity, the totality of the body performs a central role in the search for the ideal of freedom. Radical imagination emerges from the internal condition of the subject and then transforms into social engagement as a collective lived experience. Understanding the body as a fulcrum for political metadesign seems to be fundamental for radical imagination, however, to the best of our knowledge, no empirical research on this topic has been conducted.

4. EXPERIMENT DESCRIPTION

To explore the role of the body in political metadesign, an experiment is set up for this research. Students in the bachelor course "Projeto para Pessoas: Design e Inovação Social" participated in a democratic design experiment (BINDER *et. al.*, 2015) that deployed the concept of radical imagination. The experiment rose because design students felt the need to construct their political manifesto as a way to reflect on the social impact of the design profession. To unleash radical imagination for this purpose, the experiment consisted of the construction of a patchwork quilt composed of various political statements (Figure 1). The goal was that, when finished, they could literally dress the ideas constructed in a collective manner with the wearable manifesto.

Figure 1. The patchwork quilt (2019)



At the beginning of the experiment, students appropriated the classroom with their own bodies in different positions and places, in small groups or individually, sitting or standing. Each student tore a piece of fabric to think and write what they would like to say in the manifesto. When everyone finished this step, the scraps were arranged and displayed on a table. After becoming familiar with the pieces written by colleagues, the next task was to bring together connected ideas and secure connections through safety pins. Until then, the students were shy and split into small groups based on previous experiences and interests. From the moment the pieces were connected, a collective atmosphere emerged through the conversations about the political statements.

The latest connection decisions led students to solve problems collectively, as they needed to talk with each other to complete the task. When the connections were finished, there was a certain euphoria regarding the result obtained, initially called a patchwork quilt alluding to its divergence of ideas. The patchwork quilt was then worn as a manifesto by all students, one at a time. To fit each body (Figure 1), the colleagues adjusted the safety pins on demand, reconfiguring the statements and so the final form on the body. Students performed with the quilt and took pictures of each other to celebrate the making of the wearable manifesto. After this experience, students became familiar with working in collectives and also with promoting dialogue in conditions of fragmentation.

The last step of the experiment consisted of writing a final collective manifesto. The written manifesto was constructed in an online shared document. Although the students were excited, the blank page stood as a strong barrier. In order to overcome it, one of the students proposed to buy a big ice cream pot so the class could share and split the costs between students. The collective decision on the flavor took a while but resulted in the most inclusive option: a vegan half-açaí, half-strawberry pot. The act of sharing the ice cream allowed the fragmented collective to arouse its potentialities as an acting body.

5. THE EMERGENCE OF DISSENSUS AS AN EMBODIED RELATION

The embodied approach provided the inclusion and participation of their own bodies in a democratic manner. Despite the divergent political ideas manifested in the statements, each student could express their individual beliefs and remain author as well as participants of the experiment. In the democratic design experiment, there was no imposition of an artificial form of consensus or alignment, as it is typically done by strategic metadesign (BALBINOT, 2016). This dismissal enabled the recognition of each other's political body, as students could understand each other's complexities and the relations to culture, moral, and ethical issues. This hailed acceptance and respect towards differences and recognition of the surrounding realities.

The body performed a fundamental role — a fulcrum — of the integration of abstract singularities in a concrete collective body that accommodated dissensus. The wearable manifesto was a unique patchwork quilt that had to be shared between students for each body to dress, exploring the multiple configurations enabled by its design. This process became like a ritual of group integration. Each body exhibited a different shape and, therefore, ideas expressed through the act of remaking and redressing it all the time. The adjustment of the safety pins required the aid of nearby colleagues (Figure 2), emphasizing the collective support for the individual manifestation (Figure 3).

Figura 2. The collective support for the individual dressing (2019)



Figura 3. The unique shapes and performances (2019)



This can be seen as an abstract-concrete realization of the concept of dissensus (RANCIÈRE, 1996). When students noticed the strong and aggregate presence of dissensus they decided to put the word in the title of the final written manifesto (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Manifesto Design Dissenso (2019)



Dissensus played a central role in the radical imagination of this political metadesign activity, as it was applied to the process of thinking different scenarios for proposing approaches for the design profession, as expressed Figure 5.

Figure 5. From the Manifesto Design Dissensus, page 4 (2019)



It was possible to recognize also the presence of the political body in the final written manifesto, as expressed by bodily ideas in radical imagination. This brought up criticism about the design

process. The students proposed sharing metadesign power with others, to free them from the typical impositions created by designers.

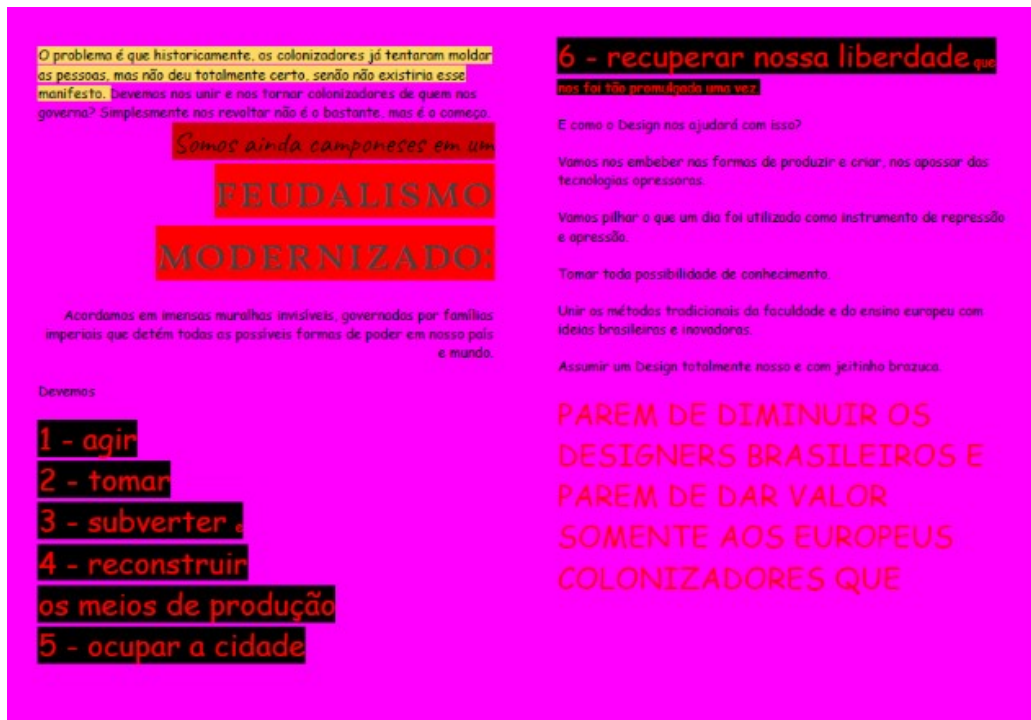
“Why to interfere when we can let it go? Why think about how to shape for the other and how to shape them, when we can give others the means to shape themselves?” (p.5)

The written manifesto pointed to the relations of power constructed from social inequality, in which body loss is a sign of the continuity of the relations of power between workers and capitalists. The radical imagination of the students proposed to increase the awareness of designers for designing with people as part of people in order to create a collective affordable, popular design.

“Designers are needed in any project. Behind every Design there is always an owner. We must design for people and not for business owners! Owners always generate an unequal relationship between those who can own something and those who do not own anything, who only have their own bodies. In some cases, the living conditions are so bad, that even that cannot be said that people have. Design will only be freed from its shackles when it commits itself to free those who do not own themselves. When this happens, Design will serve to generate equity and not just elitist distinction. Design should not be elitist, but a collective, popular, and accessible struggle.” (p.10)

The manifesto contributed to the need of assuming a non-neutral place to the design practices, against colonialism (Figure 6).

Figura 6. From the Manifesto Design Dissensus, page 6 and 7 (2019)



It was possible to recognize the presence of radical imagination as utopias and the search for a different future through actions in the present (Figure 6).

More than a simple class assignment, the written manifesto was a breath of relief, as they called, “an outburst” against colonization and against any form of oppression, a shout of revolt.

“We are inserted in the capitalist world that we cultivate and, later, we criticize. We are tired of serving the conditions that favor some groups and underestimate others. Unfortunately, we were, are, and will always be, under capitalism, the product of our own conditioning! Therefore, we must organize the transition to new economies, a bridge between today's society and the diverse future societies.” (p.10)

Students also proposed a collective perspective when designing. As designers, they thought they needed to listen and to have dialogues on differences in order to welcome important information related to the political body.

“Be and allow yourself to be. Respect the differences. Designers cannot be part of projects without understanding, with research and effort, the needs of the society being served. It is not putting yourself at someone's feet following a sentimentality based on empathy, because you will never be able to BE that person, but listening to each person what they need and what they feel. Reflect, it's not just about you; it's about the other too, it's about us!” (p.9).

6. CONCLUSION

Dissensus emerged as an empirical concept because each student could remain who they were, starting from the concreteness of their own body. There was no imposition of an abstract logic or categorization of the body, as typically done in strategic metadesign when people are often defined as personas or people-types, which is the crossing of information from the data collected and the realization of an Empathy Map (BALBINOT, 2016). In strategic design, personas are the development of an abstract frame to contextualize scenarios. This construction of boxing personalities emphasizes an idealization of realities that silences identities and universalizes cultural matters, depleting the body from its political content.

The work contributes to the political metadesign by bringing forth the bias of the body concreteness. Vassão articulates metadesign (VASSÃO, 2017; 2008) and runaway concreteness (VASSÃO, 2007) in different publications, which are here taken together. Another element that contributed to the political metadesign and had not yet been related was to think of the body as the intermedium for radical imagination to emerge in the political metadesign.

In the described democratic design experiment, the dissensus emerged from the discovery of these abstractions, yet from a political perspective. The different political visions were substantial to unleash the radical imagination in order to achieve a concreteness of the political body expressed in the final written manifesto, created by and from the political bodies of the students.

The political body reached for a set of complex entities accrued from the lived experience of the body in the ecosystem. We collected further evidence that the political body is in constant movement and transformation, even if it can be first understood as an abstract conception derived from snips of the political reality lived by the concrete body. The democratic design experiment with the wearable manifesto confirms the possibility of including metadesign within the scope of a design politics based on the political body as a fulcrum for creating and speculating radical scenarios of diverse, concrete, bodies.

When the body becomes aware of the political enclaves that permeate the ecosystem, metadesign becomes a concrete possibility for changing reality. In the case of this research, the students have politicized their political body through the experiment, becoming even more aware of their political differences. The body emerged, thus, as the activation of a fulcrum for radical imagination to ground plural ideas and then contribute to the writing of the manifesto. The presence of dissensus and the political body in the final written manifesto demonstrates the political body as a concreteness for politicized design students.

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