

EXPLORING POWER WITH OBJECT THEATRE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Object Theatre as an approach to address power in design. We understand power as a relational activity that emerges and is upheld through particular ways of relating (Elias 1991; Stacey 2007). The spontaneity in participant actions through Object Theatre exercises renders processes of relating tangible and negotiable. In this study Object Theatre was applied in exploration of a new walking aid for elderly people. We argue that the shift in perspective that Object Theatre allows designers to achieve can be effectively harnessed to explore issues arising from power relating amongst people – and between people and objects.

INTRODUCTION

Today a growing population of elderly people is encouraged to live at home, with limited physical possibilities to move around self-sufficiently. This requires more effort from the relatives and people around to help the senior member in the family (Burrows, Mitchell and Nicolle 2010). Designers can aid the elderly to maintain their physical abilities at home by introducing new mobility devices. However, to design for such context requires sensitivity towards the people's changing physical abilities and the social relations where power interdependencies are (re-) negotiated (Langdon *et al.* 2012).

During a one-week summer school 'Theatre in Design' held in Denmark 2016 a group of design researchers and theatre practitioners explored themes of balance, role-reversal (helper – being helped), dignity and empowerment in the design of a novel walking aid for the elderly. A particular focus was set to explore new designs for the user group without victimising them or forgetting their sense of dignity.

In this paper we present initial design explorations, which were conducted with techniques inspired by Object Theatre. Different approaches to Object Theatre have been recently developed to complement the exploratory design process. Buur and Friis (2015: 1) define Object Theatre as "*a particular genre in which actors use everyday objects in storytelling to create a performance.*" It relates to a broader emergent tradition called Postdramatic Theatre (Lehmann 2006) to enhance audience participation, experience, and the meaning of objects.

The contribution of the paper is two-fold: Firstly we underline the key characteristics that make Object Theatre useful for exploring power-relating in design, when power and objects are seen as relational and negotiated entities (Mead 1934; Elias 1991; Stacey 2007). Secondly, we concretise different forms of Object Theatre that can be utilised methodically to explore power relating beyond our initial study.

OBJECTS AND POWER AS EXPERIENCE

According to Stacey (2007), two foundationally different ways to approach power exist in Western thought; one deriving from the philosophy of Kant (although through misinterpretations), and another from that of Hegel. According to the first view "*not only can individuals change and control themselves by design but that they can also change societies and control nature in the same way*" (Stacey 2007: 293). Control, understood in this way, is about the use of some innate power of reason in devising plans and realising these.

The Hegelian view, in contrast, promotes the idea of *essential interdependency* where ideas and individuals are constituted, and that they emerge in and through interaction. “*As the moves of interdependent players intertwine, no single player nor any group of players acting alone can determine the course of the game no matter how powerful they may be.*” (Elias 1991: 146) Nobody can set oneself outside the game, make plans and control it from there. Instead, plans emerge as responses to on going interaction. “*Individuals pursuing their plans are always in relationship with each other in a group or power figuration*” (Stacey 2007: 296).

Objects can similarly be thought of in terms of them being relational entities, human tendencies to act, which can be experienced only in local social acts. This way is perhaps best captured by (Mead 1934: 131n):

Although external objects are there independent of the experiencing individual, nevertheless they possess certain characteristics by virtue of their relations to his experiencing or to his mind, which they would not possess otherwise or apart from those relations. These characteristics are their meanings for him, or in general, for us.

Building on Mead’s understanding, Blumer (1986: 10) suggests: “*An object is anything that can be indicated, anything that is pointed to or referred to.*” Objects can be categorized in three classes: 1) physical objects, such as a chair, a tree, or a bicycle; 2) social objects, such as university, money, a mother or a friend 3) abstract objects, such as moral principles, ideas or laws (Blumer, 1986). Stacey (2000: 361) derives from Blumer and discusses the difference between physical objects, which are to be found as things in nature, and social objects, which do not have any existence outside of particularising complex social acts. For example, the meaning of a bank note is more than a piece of paper. Different people can relate similarly to objects due to human tendency to act towards the generalised other. However, people’s appreciation of the bank note can change over night if the currency changes, but more simply, a rich person acts differently towards one-dollar bill than a person begging in a street corner. Each object has a possibility of transformation, which arises out of spontaneous local interactions.

For Elias power forms an integral element of all human relationships and is upheld in and through everyday occurrences in human interaction. “*From the day of its birth, a baby has power over its parents, not just the parents over the baby. At least, the baby has power over them as long as they attach any kind of value to it. If not, it loses its power*” (Elias, 1998: 116). Similarly, objects can be said to have power over us through the ways in which we relate to them. He (ibid. 119) also speaks of how different groups relate to each other in terms of power and defines the idea of ‘power differentials’: “*When a person (or a group of persons) lacks something which another person or group has the power to withhold, the latter has a function for the*

former.” Also objects have functions for people, resulting in ‘functional interdependence’ (ibid. 121).

Through Object Theatre we try to break free of patterns of interpreting and acting with objects in a particular habitual way, and thus challenge the existing relational power dynamics. This is done through ‘empathising’ with objects, i.e. thinking and acting as if the object would be a living being. This breaks the typical patterns of actions that we have with objects and fosters the emergence of novel ways of relating.

OBJECT THEATRE

Object Theatre is a form of theatre where actors or performers use mundane objects to tell a story. Myatt & Watt (2012) describe Object Theatre being often understood as performances on stage with puppets or figurative objects, but it can take many other forms.

“*In object theatre often the use(fulness) of the object is brought into question, altered, and made quite different.*” (Myatt and Watt 2012)

It originates from modern puppetry and visual arts, such as object trouvé, and it also features some traits of Postdramatic Theatre described by Lehmann (2006). In Postdramatic Theatre the performance is not necessarily actor-driven and based on dramatic text, but can take starting point in anything, for example, in an object. It values presentational and abstract forms, where objects and artefacts can become ‘actors’ on the stage. The improvised and devised nature of object theatre can be seen as a major difference to traditional (text based) drama. According to Lehmann (2006: 73):

One could almost say that the verbal dialogue of drama is replaced by a dialogue between people and objects.

Jurkowski (1996) goes beyond by suggesting that Object Theatre replaces the actor with an object at the centre of attention. This kind of use of objects departs from the use of physical objects as props. An extreme example is one where the spectators were seated in a chair and the performance was happening on their skin. They experienced different materials and objects, such as silk, frozen sponges and leather, being rubbed all around the body to evoke different sensations. (Myatt and Watt 2012) Object Theatre, however, is more commonly used as a means of improvisation with different objects and materials. A performer discovers sensory qualities, movements, and associations that the object generates for a person. Objects can range from *everyday things*, such as bottles, toys, household objects or souvenirs to *shapeless play materials* such as clay, sand or cloth (Callesen 2005).

POWER WITH OBJECTS

When talking about ‘objects’ we address entities that are defined through how we relate to them. Objects emerge to us as objects in and through interaction. When considering power with objects in Object Theatre we

emphasise three ways of working to ‘objectify’ objects differently: 1) objects used as physical props, 2) objects as a means to express symbolic qualities, and 3) objects as animated characters. These promote different aspects of power; props relying perhaps the most on the physical qualities of objects, symbolic objects drawing on people’s conceptual understandings, and animated objects building on both the physical and symbolic aspects of interaction. Let us consider some prominent examples in the field of design research.

Props. In theatre props are commonly used to support the creation of real-like stage-designs where actors mimic realistic actions with objects on stage. A well-known example of the use of props is the comedy “*Who’s line is it anyway*” where actors improvise new meanings for known objects. A black leather shoe becomes a phone once the actor lifts it on the ear and ‘calls mum’. The prop is taken into the play, and its physical characteristics inspire and guide how the improvised action emerges. Within design research, Binder’s (1999) props and the ‘magic thing’ (Iacucci, Kuutti and Ranta 2000) are famous examples of the use of props. Props are also often used in improvised scenario-acting to generate new design ideas (Ylirisku and Vaajakallio 2007).

Symbolic Objects. Puppets, such as Playmobiles and Legos, and other tangibles are often used as ‘external’ objects to think with, in order to represent new ideas (Brandt and Grunnet, 2000; Mitchell and Buur 2010). When using objects as puppets, the actor assigns physical things with symbolic meanings. The objects become expressions ‘about’ something, i.e. they stand for something else than what they are. In terms of Proschan (1983, p. 4) these become “*material images of humans, animals, or spirits that are created, displayed, or manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance*”. Objects may become symbols even without having physical resemblance with the expressed idea. For example, Gosh (2016) performs the story of Romeo and Juliet by using a ballpoint pen.

Animated Objects. Performers may also use objects in a way as if to express them being ‘living creatures’. Buur and Friis (2015) argue that when objects are used as animated objects, they may enable designers to change their perspective in the design process and design ‘from within’ the object’s point of view. Interactions with animated objects draws upon both symbolic meanings as well as on improvised physical interaction. Consider, for example, a black men’s leather shoe, which a performer turns into a demanding man. The performer uses low and dark voice to ‘speak as the shoe’. She/he uses slow and heavy movements, polishes the cover but after making a sniffing gesture into the inside and reacting with a grin, it becomes apparent how hollow and stinky the ‘living creature’ is.

CASE: THEATRE IN DESIGN

We used these three ways to define objects in interaction in the exploration of power relating in design. Our design experiment took place in the ‘Theatre in Design’ NORDES Summer School 2016 organised by SDU Design Research at the University of Southern Denmark. With 70 participants, the summer school formed an international and multidisciplinary mix of design researchers, PhD students, theatre researchers and actors. We present how Object Theatre was used to explore power relating in connection to the design of a novel moving aid for the elderly people. The first and the second authors were facilitators and co-explorers in four variations of Object Theatre, which are investigated below.

The exploration started with a case presented by three elderly participants (ages 80-85 years) who had identified a common problem to them; a high number of elderly people have difficulties getting up from a chair due to weak leg muscles and kneecap problems. Combined with excessive body weight, it adds to their need for assistance. The elderly men had worked with a new solution and wanted to challenge their existing idea of a pneumatic walking stick. They participated to the workshop as co-explorers observing the activities done by summer school participants. The design task was to come up with possibilities for a personal support, ‘a moving aid’, that can help a person to rise from a chair on their own without stigmatising him/her as a patient.

OBJECT DATING

The first exercise explored *objects as questions*. The participants were asked to investigate a set of objects spread on a table through the following five steps:

1. Select one object that stirs your curiosity.
2. Explore interaction qualities that the object enables or triggers: How does it move? How does it smell/feel/sound like? What movements it enables? How does it extend or block your senses, or become part of your body? When you feel familiar with it, start again to do something different.
3. Move around with the object and make its interaction qualities visible to others. Pay attention to the other object-participants.
4. Start to date the other objects. Try to pair-up with one and improvise interactions in these pairs. Try to meet as many objects as possible.
5. Choose the final ‘date’ of one or more objects and form pairs or small groups.



Figure 1. Participants exploring interaction qualities with objects.

The participants experienced their objects in a new way through interaction. A rubber bicycle tire became a movement constraint, a cardboard tube was used to amplify sounds, and plastic tongs turned into a springboard for small objects (Figure 1). In object dating the participants interacted through their objects e.g. by catching, tangling, and surrounding each other (Figure 2). The exercise served as a sensitizer to transform the perception of what objects are.



Figure 2. Two object-participants dating.

By choosing one object over the others and relating to it in new ways, each participant let their object to gain a more powerful role; it became consequential for what was perceived possible in the acting and dating. In terms of power relating this is curious, as the way the participants animated their objects was actively both including and excluding other participants in the improvisation. The forming of groups is one of the essential forms of power relating (Stacey, 2003).

OBJECT MACHINE

The second challenge was to investigate the theme of ‘balance’. The groups, formed through the object dating, were asked to create an Object Machine by using all the objects and bodies available in each group. The process included four steps:

1. Build an object machine where you explore the contrast between “balance – counter-balance” with your group of objects, bodies and movements.
2. Rehearse a 30–60 second performance to show your “Object Machine”.

3. Perform the Object Machine to other groups.
4. Reflect on what happened in the interaction between objects, bodies and movement?

This exploration unfolded largely without talk through a physical, interactive negotiation. Some objects gained a more dominant position than others, for example, the long and string-like objects became connectors of objects and people (Figure 3). This allowed for subordinate roles to emerge for some object-performers, such as those, which were tangled in the long objects and that functioned as tightening instruments in the whole. One of the machines was based on the idea of letting a marble roll through the installation, and this overall idea guided how each object-performer joined into the functioning of the whole.

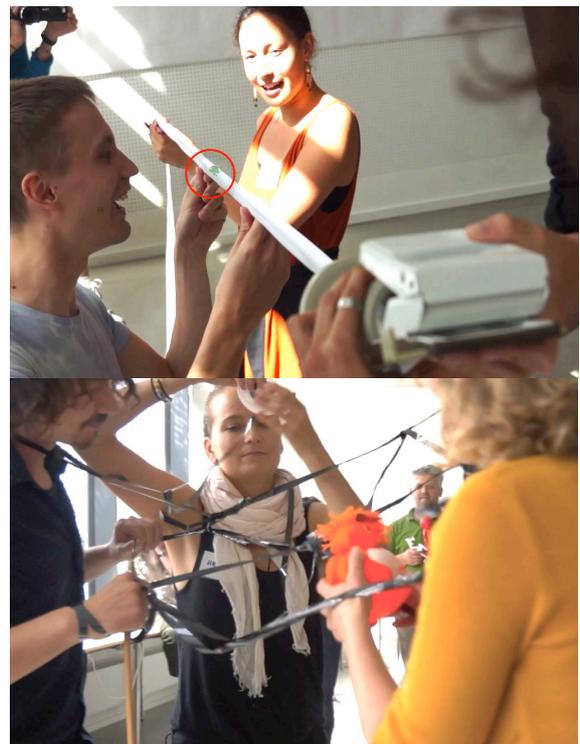


Figure 3. Longer objects connecting small objects and bodies.

In terms of power the task to create an Object Machine is interesting in two ways: Firstly, it made the participants establish the machine as a whole comprising of parts, and secondly, in addition to making the machine to express the theme of balance – counter-balance, it made them think of an utilitarian idea – the ‘function’ of the machine. Underlining the utilitarian perception of Object Machine, some performers, essentially those whose objects did not appear to fit the whole, were left outsiders. For example, a hole puncher became side-tracked in an Object Machine where its punching mechanism was obsolete (Figure 3). The participant animating the hole puncher argued that she had a strong feel to “find a purpose” for her object, even though it did not work out. Hence, it seemed that some of the animated objects gained more power, which made the others to appear weak.

OBJECT CHARACTER

The third exercise was about helping an Object Character move. Groups gathered around tables with a ground plan of a living room, a bedroom and a corridor and two eggcups – one in the ‘living room’ with an egg inside and another empty one in the ‘bedroom’ (Figure 4). The table was set on a slope, so that the egg would roll off the table unless supported. The participants were asked to use other objects placed on the table (e.g. a spoon, a stick, a bra) to move the Object Character from the ‘chair in the living room’, through a ‘corridor’ into the ‘bed in the bedroom’. The steps were:

1. Choose an observer and two ‘helpers’.
2. Use the available objects to lift the egg (= person) out from the cup (= chair) and move the egg from the ‘bedroom’ to the ‘living room’. You are only allowed to touch the egg with the other objects.
3. If the egg gets broken – start over again with a new undamaged egg.
4. Once done, change the roles and try again.
5. Reflect on what happened. Was it a dignifying experience for the egg?



Figure 4. Helping the egg through the ‘corridor’ with knitting needles.

This activity generated a shift in attitudes towards the objects. In reflections the participants projected interactions with the egg onto their own experiences, such as being depended on somebody else or the awareness of fragility and dignity. For example, the egg that ended lying in the chair (Figure 5) triggered discussions of how undignified it might feel for the person. When an egg was put into a sock, the participants talked about how it might be both comforting and disempowering at the same time.



Figure 5. The observer notices how the egg ends up ‘lying’ in the chair.

In terms of power, the egg can be viewed as a hopelessly powerless object that does not have a say on the way it is handled. However, once the egg was thought of as a person who had to be moved across a space safely, the egg actually got quite powerful. The

physical tilt of the table also added to how the participants made subtle movements and paid attention to ensure that the egg remained intact. The helpers were constantly reacting to the ‘actions’ of the egg, as it started to roll down the table or slipped out of their grip. The Object Character appeared to gain in power when it was able to challenge or resist the actions of the helpers.

OBJECT BODYSTORM

In the Object Bodystorm the participants explored with bodies and objects the challenge of not being able to rise from a chair. The participants split into two groups of five, and they were asked to plan an activity for another group. The initial goal was to create solutions for the person to get up. The process consisted of four steps:

1. Plan an “Object Bodystorm” activity for the other group where you explore the challenge of not being able to get up from a chair (on your own).
2. Introduce your activity to the other group and try it out with them.
3. Explore possible solutions or strategies to get up by using bodies, objects and movements.
4. Make a 30-60 seconds performance to sum up your findings.

Both groups first started to explore how it feels when one cannot get up on their own. One group bound an inner tube around a person’s waist while the other participants were holding the person’s knees down. The other group explored it by trying to get up from the floor without touching the floor with hands. A great difference was experienced when the person was lifted up versus when she rose up while using the others as her support (Figure 6). After this experience the both groups wanted to develop something that enabled a person to feel more power over the situation, not having to ask for help.



Figure 6. The difference between lifting the participant up and supporting her to rise up herself.

Over the exercise a helper object, which could be used to pull oneself up was defined (Figure 7, left), and walkers with different personalities were enacted (Figure 7, right). The personalities included ‘a trainer’ (demanding), ‘a motivator’ (humorous and encouraging) and ‘a friend’ (appealing and loving).



Figure 7. The object helper and the anthropomorphic walker in play.

During the reflection, the person who had been lifted from armpits stated that she felt the power was out of her control, in the hands of the helpers. The whole situation changed when she could use the ‘helpers’ and their bodies for support in lifting herself up. A participant commented this eloquently:

What happened was a complete shift in power. In the first instance the device had taken the control, had all the power. When it was lifting the person up. What they did then, which we felt much more comfortable with, was the shift of power, the agency, to the person.

In terms of power, the exercise rendered visible how people but also objects can work for or against a person. Different object interactions were perceived as empowering the user or, in contrast, controlling and limiting the user.

DISCUSSION

Building on Mead (1934), Blumer (1986) and Stacey (2007), we made the distinction between physical things and objects in that objects become objects to us through interaction. The physical things exist even without anyone attending, whereas, the objects are a phenomenon of human interaction. The objects are what we constantly negotiate them to be in and through our actions. The power relating that develops in connection with objects happens in a complex process of relating between spontaneously interacting mix of people and physical things. Through the studied exercises with Object Theatre several aspects of power relating became expressed and reflected on.

In Object Theatre people treat objects in an extremely malleable way. A physical thing, such as an egg, may be defined as a person, and thus becomes a social object (Mead 1934; Stacey 2000). It may even gain a novel existence as an object, escaping Blumer’s (1986) categories of ‘physical,’ ‘social,’ and ‘abstract’ objects. Consider, for example, *animated objects* that emerge in the experience of interaction rather than being conceptually defined. The new function of the object is discovered in interaction, and it may become a desirable

–and competed for– characteristic, and hence, new ‘power differentials’ (Elias 1998) may arise.

The exercises of Object Dating and Object Machine made several aspects of power relating visible. Participants animating an object were included in and excluded from groups and they attained both superior (or dominant) and inferior positions in the groups. The roles were formed in the interaction where both the way to animate an object as well as the physical characteristics of the things influenced the undertaking. The emerging interactions between the participants trying to create the Object Machines created functional interdependence (Elias 1998) by the means of serving a common purpose and establishing a sense in connection with the theme of ‘balance – counter-balance’.

We also witnessed how seemingly everyday objects gained power through physical and symbolic staging. During the Object Character exercise the participants started to relate to the egg as a cherished, dignified and fragile entity in the need of assistance in a hostile environment. The effect on the participants is essentially similar to that of taking care of a baby, which was presented by Elias (1998) as an example of someone having power only in the effect of others’ actions.

The Object Bodystorm functioned as a study of how people could have power over what happens, i.e. being in charge. This was explored through physical props (the object helper) as well as symbolic object interaction (the walker). A concrete design insight from the exercise was the experience of empowerment by being able to initiate and control the unfolding of the action.

The interactions were characterised by improvisation, where new plans emerged as the result of participants responding to each other’s gestures and pursuing their plans. The complexity and emergent character of the interactions underlines the significance of Elias’s (1998) insight that there is no alternative to addressing power relations without setting oneself in interaction with others making plans and interweaving these through material engagement. Emergent transformations arise out of spontaneous local interactions (Stacey 2000), and Object Theatre allow for novel interactions to take place.

Where theatre approaches, such as forum theatre and improvised theatre, are increasingly adapted to design and used to explore complex power relations with a large group of participants (Kankainen *et al.* 2005; Shaw and Stacey 2006), these approaches are typically shallow on the exploration of power of materiality in the context of design. In relation to previous works with theatre, props and puppets Object Theatre provides a new way of discovering social meanings of objects that seems potential for design. Object Theatre attends on various qualities of physical things, and utilises the ways in which they function physically, e.g. resist, constrain, and enable action, as well as how they appear to people, e.g. hostile, gentle, and rigid.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we studied how Object Theatre functions as a means to address power relating in exploratory design. We attended on how objects emerge through interaction, and how they influence various power-related phenomena, especially group formation, power differentials, and functional interdependence. We built on the Mead's pragmatism its extensions in process theory by Elias (1998) and Stacey (2007).

We investigated how power was made visible and negotiable through a set of Object Theatre exercises during the Nordes Summer School 2016. Based on our findings, it is possible to argue that Object Theatre has potential for enabling designers to discover, address and challenge power relating that arises unexpectedly in the spontaneous interactions with people and objects. We suggest that further research should be conducted by applying Object Theatre exercises with users and other stakeholders to investigate power relating 'in the field'.

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