

Preface

This book is initiated by Social Spaces and KULeuven Cultural Studies, in collaboration with BAM (Flemish Institute for Visual, Audio-visual and Media Art), Valiz Publishers, supported by the Flemish Art Fund ‘Kunstendecreet’ and the Dutch Mondriaan Fund, to gain more insight into the characteristics of participatory projects in art and design. Social Spaces is a research group that researches design methods, artefacts and tools that allow social exchange. The group is based at the Media, Art and Design Faculty (associated with LUCA School of Arts, University of Leuven) in the city of Genk (BE). Here, the mining industry with its large number of immigrant workers was the basis of a rich multicultural society. When, as of the 1960s, the coal-mines were forced to close down (resulting in fierce and violent social uproar), this city was confronted with a high level of unemployment. In 1964, the car factory Ford started production in Genk, offering new job opportunities. In 2012, however, the factory announced its closure in the near future, which will (again) lead to high unemployment rates. In search of an economically thriving conversion of the coal-mining heritage, the city of Genk established a creative centre (C-mine) on one of the mining sites. Social Spaces is situated at this site, once the beating heart of the region’s industry. Involved in the study and practice of social design, the research group does not want to isolate its practice from that daily social context, but engages closely with it.

Over the past years, Social Spaces has been looking into how artistic, media art and design projects can

be developed in participatory ways. Besides exploring the meaning of participation, the research group researches and creates approaches for designers and artists that can be used to enable participation in their projects. Working in an institutional context wherein design and art is taught, Social Spaces often finds that a participatory way of setting up projects is (often) not part of the skills of designers or artists. To support artists, designers and their participants in setting up participatory projects, the goal of this book is to describe the negotiations that designers and artists engage in when setting up participatory projects with both familiar and strange, public and private, professional or amateur and other participants. We define these negotiations as risky trade-offs, to stress that participation is a multidirectional process that is determined by the designers and artists as well as by the participants. We use the term 'risky', since it reflects the artists', designers' and participants' experience of uncertainty in participatory contexts. Working in participatory projects is often not integrated in educational and research training programmes, which results in little familiarity with participatory work. Even more experienced participatory designers and artists, who are already enjoying participatory work, need to deal with the inherent uncertainty of a participatory situation that changes repeatedly. Participatory projects thus always involve 'risky trade-offs' between — on the one hand — makers and participants taking actions with an eye on increasing participatory exchange and — on the other hand

— uncertainty about the results of this exchange. We define risk in a positive and qualitative manner (which opens possibilities to innovation), but also as something that cannot be calculated or avoided (since it is inherent to participatory projects that have uncertain and undefined outcomes). This book stimulates artists, designers and participants to engage in risky trade-offs in their participatory projects. This may occur through a conscious choice of the maker and the participants, but may also happen unintentionally. The forms which these trade-offs take (whether they occur consciously or unconsciously) depends on the artists and designers themselves, the project in question or the group of participants involved. For example, in the case study *Uncle Roy All Around You* (which is described at the end of this chapter), the art collective engaged in a specific risky trade-off when they decided to work together with different disciplines. This turned out to be a productive factor in the game they were developing, but also led to some difficult negotiations.

Based on a review of the literature and case studies of real-life participatory projects, this book will offer an overview of some of the risky trade-offs that designers, artists and participants are regularly confronted with when setting up participatory projects, art works, designs, et cetera in a hands-on way. The first chapter provides an introduction in what participatory projects are and in what sense they can be characterised by risky trade-offs between makers (designers and artists) and participants. The second chapter discusses

participatory projects in design and art wherein makers and participants collaborate intensely in making new concepts, products or art works. It describes how participatory projects with a hybrid character are good facilitators of exchanges between makers and participants. The third and final chapter gives an overview of how makers set up infrastructures wherein participants can self-organise their participatory exchanges. It discusses these types of participatory projects in light of the concept of generativity. The book concludes with an overview of the risky trade-offs that are described in the previous chapters and provides some points for reflection and further research.

The book is combined with a playful participatory toolkit designed by the design collective Conditional Design, part of the Amsterdam-based design and technology studio Moniker, visualising some of the principles discussed in the book in an experimental way.¹ This toolkit can be viewed via <http://conditionaldesign.org> and www.socialspaces.be. Both the book and the toolkit are set up in an open way — instead of proposing ‘recipes’ (or determinants or prerequisites) for participatory projects — in order to allow designers and artists to interpret and use them in their own way.

¹ Conditional Design is a manifesto, an experimental playground as well as a collaboration between the artists and designers Luna Maurer, Edo Paulus, Jonathan Puckey and Roel Wouters. Conditional Design focuses on designing processes rather than products. Its members design logic-based environments that use external influences to aid the development of their projects. By publishing the results of the workshops online as well as in print, the members attempt to give practice an equal footing to that of the written manifesto.