

Abstract

Anthropology and explorative design are converging in some aspects. This dissertation discusses the widespread employment of ethnographic techniques for interview and observation in an increasing number of design fields such as interaction design, IT system design and product development, as well as in the broader programme of user-driven innovation. The central problem is that the challenge of the employment is articulated as *a gulf to be bridged* between observations and interventions. The distinction between descriptive practices (of ethnographers) and prescriptive practices (of designers) is, however, both unproductive in terms of design results and predicated on the false assumption that there is a clear path to follow from an interesting observation to an interesting design suggestion.

On the basis of three research and design projects within the field of participatory design this dissertation lays out elements of a design anthropology—a hybrid approach that combines insights and practices from design and anthropology. By recourse to post-modern anthropology and the acknowledgement of ethnographic representations as cultural re-creations I contest the stale opposition of observations and interventions.

The collective challenge, I suggest, is to articulate possible alternative realities from the very outset of a field inquiry. This is what the dissertation sets out to do through a range of diverse empirical encounters: with service technicians who improvise possible alternatives for their work practices on the factory shop floor; with emergency nurses who play metaphorical board games and juggle virtual realities; and with software developers who confront and generate their design by imitating the practice of their users. To establish and analyze these encounters I deploy notions of *performance* from the performing arts and post-structuralism.

The dissertation offers suggestions for carrying out collaborative design work, as well as concepts to address the ephemeral character of those design ideas that lie beyond the point where they can be fully articulated by any participant but within the horizon of collective imagination.