

Synthesis 2

Picnic table actor networks: self-sustaining object agency as creative success

Creative activity is a kind of love: when we're in the midst of it, we suspend our critical faculties. The object of our affection is fed and cared for unconditionally, if not uncritically. But at a certain point, things move on, willed or not: a new lover, teenage rebellion, death, Tik Tok, another muse, another spreadsheet, another tune, another idea. Time passes. But at some later point, we may return to look for the former apples of our (minds') eyes, notice that some have prospered, some have survived, and some disappear. We might ask why. One of the key ideas in Actor Network Theory is that objects - and indeed media artefacts, or abstract ideas - have agency, just as people do. In these days of ubiquitous artificial intelligence and fitbit connected fridges doing the shopping for us, it is perhaps less contentious an idea as it might once have seemed: but given a post-enlightenment rationalist education, the idea that a rigorously inanimate object such as a table has intentions might seem a little far fetched.

After reading up on Actor Network Theory though, I think the idea is a useful one, and here I intent to argue that the idea of creative artefacts being emeshed in networks of actors, and having agency insofar as they can affect these networks, is a useful and productive one, which has helped me to understand why some artefacts persist and succeed, and why others fail. Otherwise put, for an artefact, power in a network consists in having autonomy beyond the presence of its creator. I will analyse one artefact in particular, a picnic table which has been placed at the end of my street since the spring, making passing references to some other artefacts and ideas I covered in the curation and research phases of this project. In particular I compare with activities of the company Cycle Hoop, arguing that their example is a good one to follow if our artefacts are to be effective (or affective) in the world. The aim is to provide a framework of thinking to support what will hopefully be a number of experimental interventions in actor networks which are local to me, aiming to test the idea that artefacts that persist have agency - or that they are able to effect changes in the world, or motion in the networks in which they exist.

I should start by introducing the picnic table, and some details of the network which surrounds it.



Since March this table has been chained in the middle of four birch trees which form a small pedestrianised square at the end of my street, where it meets the major Victorian artery of Great Western Road, generally busy with traffic, pedestrians and shops. The neighbourhood is formed of late 19th century tenement flats, but the building opposite mine is an early 21st century version of the same format, and part of the conditions attached to its planning consent was that some trees should be planted in the street to replace one cut down for construction:

The scheme of landscaping shall include provision of four extra heavy standard trees within the pedestrianised area of Montague Street, and ground level climbing planting with supportive fixings to the Montague Street elevation of the building. (Glasgow City Council 2012)

The corner of the new building is home to a café, which has outdoor tables, and on the opposite side of the square is an advertising column. The actual land on which the table sits is therefore of somewhat ambiguous ownership: it is not quite a public square or park, nor part of a public road or pavement, nor owned by the new modern building, though its developers paid for the new trees. Perhaps it is a liminal space: from the sketch above, we can see the beginnings of a network of various entities and people who may have an interest in it.

Next, the table itself. It appeared in the spring of this year, roughly when restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic had first been imposed. It is a normal wooden picnic table of a sort you can buy for approximately 200 GBP¹, made of treated pine, and big enough for four or maybe six people. There are two small logos saying “wood lands square table” etched into either end of its main surface (“Woodlands” is the name of this particular area of Glasgow). A galvanised steel chain is used to lock one of the table’s legs to one of the trees, enough to prevent casual theft, but not determined removal. I have not been able to find out who installed it, despite having asked. Common opinion is that it might have been done by the local Woodlands Development Trust², who have done similar improvement projects in the area (tree planters, mosaic bollards), or by the City Council. The continued presence of the table after some eight months suggests that its presence has not yet met with significant resistance from “interested parties”.

Since its installation, the table has been well used. During the Creative Coding course, I did a data visualisation project which made a bad job of demonstrating the obvious: that people are more likely to use the table when the weather is good³. As I mention in the notes on this project, the more interesting observation was about the variety of people who use the table: sometimes neighbours meeting for coffee, sometimes cyclists, sometimes young people with skateboards, sometimes delivery people resting. I have used it myself for meeting friends, and in particular for cooking pizza with a portable oven I have, and have noticed when I use it, conversation with passers-by tends to ensue. In other words, the table functions somewhat like a medium of communication: its presence makes certain chance network connections happen. There’s also a gentle effect of oversight in the neighbourhood: not something oppressive, like the presence of CCTV, but something more like the “eyes on the street” that Jane Jacobs talked of⁴.

Over the eight months that it has been there, the table seems to have become an integrated, accepted and well used part of the streetscape. It is precisely this quality which interests me about it, and that I think Actor Network Theory gives an interesting explanation for it. In short, I think it makes sense to say that the table

1 See for example at <https://www.rutlandcountygardenfurniture.co.uk/category/garden-furniture/picnic-tables/>

2 See <https://www.woodlandscommunity.org.uk/>

3 See sketch at <https://www.openprocessing.org/sketch/946370>

4 See for example <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-07-22/a-new-way-of-understanding-eyes-on-the-street> for background.

itself has agency, because the entity which put it there is unknown, and apparently does not maintain it, and without it certain communication would not present otherwise. Some of these examples have affected my own life: for example, I was recently recognised as “the guy who made us pizzas” in my street. These are subtle effects of communication. We could of course offer a materialist explanation: the table is inert, and it is only the natural desire people to talk to one another that makes this communication happen. Or we could say that the communication derives from the (creative?) vision of the agency which put the table there, and possibly their training in architecture, furniture design or otherwise. But there are no usage instructions on the table, and no direct communication with this agent. It makes more sense to argue that the table as an object is a node in a network of entities through which behavioural patterns flow, as these patterns would have existed irrespective of what put the table. This idea is summarised by Zell (2011), who in turn quotes Latour:

“The central distinguishing feature of Actor-Network-Theory is the role that objects play in its redefinition of the social realm. The method embraces objects as participants or actors in creating, sustaining, and extending social ties, and thus is an effort to overhaul notions of society as being constituted exclusively of human interactions. In his 2005 book Reassembling the Social, Bruno Latour, leading spokesman for ANT, writes that ‘face-to-face interaction is not a plausible departure point to trace social connections... because they are being constantly interfered with by other agencies.’. Conversely, as he has elsewhere insisted, “things do not exist without being full of people,” and so the study of humans must also entail the study of objects.”

It is clear that the agency of the table has created social connection in this case. Furthermore, the idea that “things do not exist without being full of people” is perhaps a good way of expressing part of my argument about successful creative work: good works are still used, in some sense (seen, listened to, manipulated, copied, used, run on somebody’s smart phone processor, as appropriate), even once their creator has moved on.

Actor Network Theory in part suggests that the identity of actors, be they people or things, in part comes from the network of entities which they connect to. Cresswell et al. (2010) cite Law’s example of the artefacts surrounds in a manager in an office being part of a power structure:

“... objects such as a big office, a computer and a phone can serve to create the manager in an organisation as the source of power. The manager studied in isolation (as a person or “naked ape” as Law calls him i.e. without objects), as opposed to as part of a network, is viewed as relatively powerless”

In the case of the picnic table in question, it has power because it is regularly surrounded by (used by) people, and thereby facilitates communication. It is interesting to compare it to other tables in the area. In our tenement back garden, there is a yellow Ikea table which has encouraged sociability between our neighbours. Some of the tenement front gardens have tables in them, but there are generally the private property and not open to public use. There has been a clear increase in cafés and bars having outdoor seating since restrictions on indoor socialisation came into force, something that has persisted into winter despite the generally unpleasant weather. In all these cases, it is only to a limited extent the material of the table which dictates its power and use: rather its power is determined by its position, and the right of access which exists to it.

In that sense, the creative act here is not so much the design of the table (which is not original), but the decision to put it in a liminal and ambiguous public space - an act which has in turn had some subtle transformative effects on its surroundings (physically, but mostly in the broader network sense). Essentially, I would argue that the table as given focus small scale public communicative arena, or forum. This is “communication conceived as the establishment of a network” rather than as “the transmission of a message or an ideology” (Wieser & Teulings 2013 p106, quoted in Spohrer 2016)

(From this might follow an interesting question about class distinctions between the public table and the more private ones provided by the cafe on the same square, where some sort of paid consumption is necessary to use them: thus choice of seating might become a signifier of social position, or perhaps a barrier of exclusivity, regulating access to certain networks only to paying customers... I will not develop this idea fur-

ther here, but note only that it was notable as I analysed the photos I took of the square for the original data visualisation.).

One of my purposes here is to set a framework of thinking for interventions of my own in local networks, inspired perhaps by this table. We can already draw out some abstract ideas: an idea of permanence, use of liminal spaces, facilitation of communication between strangers in the public domain, the use of existing artefacts, perhaps in new contexts, and perhaps an idea of disguise, or the impression of belonging. I would like to finish the essay by examining the works of the British company Cycle Hoop from the point of view of Actor Network Theory, as I think it gives further useful pointer for how to think about the agency of artefacts.

Cycle Hoop's (n.d.) website expresses their aims:

"Cyclehoop specialise in innovative cycle parking solutions and infrastructure. We are committed to making cycling safer, secure and convenient by breaking down the barriers to people cycling."

Their original product was a metal loop, designed for attaching to signposts, to which bicycles can be locked. When I first saw this design, I thought it was somewhat pointless: if a signpost is there (and tall enough, or topped with substantial enough a sign), you can already lock a bicycle to it without a loop. But I noticed I tended to use them where they are available, and wondered why. It might be a physical effect: the hoop provides some stability to the supported bicycle. But the more powerful effect I think is a communicative one: the loop signals that it is legitimate for a bicycle to be locked there. Essentially, the hoop is an object in the network of permission which regulated our streetscapes, and one which influences this network favourably for cyclists (and, presumably, under Actor Network Theory's notion of symmetry between people and objects, bicycles). Thus, we can argue the loop is a communicative medium, whose purpose is to legitimise the parking of bicycles, even in their absence. This idea is perhaps made more clearly by their design of a red "love heart" loop, explicitly a communicative gesture:



To this notion of permission, or validation, as a form of communication, I would add the point the Cycle Hoop explicitly pay attention to the the larger network which surrounds their product. They sell products for on-street parking of bicycles. This in itself is nothing unusual: many companies supply these products, which are generally bought by local authorities or private companies rather than the public (or cyclists as private individuals). This presents a network asymmetry: the people who benefit from provision are not the same as those who can give permission for it (and pay for it, in some cases). What makes Cycle their operation stand out is that they explicitly provide details of how to contact actors such as local councils to campaign for such provision⁵, allowing their customers to act as agents for their own products. Furthermore, they address one of the points of difficulty for the network involved in supporting such cycle parking schemes - the difficulty in administering access and rental of parking - by running the service on behalf of councils, who might otherwise find it not worthwhile to run. This touches on another idea: good creative acts facilitate their own duplication (or imitation). As a creative agent, Cycle Hoop appear to be effective in promoting the agency of their products within the networks in which they operate.

It is certainly arguable that, unlike the table, the cycle parking rental scheme does need continued input from its creator, but on further analysis, it is interesting to note that artefacts such as digital mapping and a website are used to remove the need for human intervention from many of these processes. This is perhaps the idea of translation that Actor Network Theorists describe: objects can take on agencies formerly expressed by people. (Teaching on Ed-x is another example of this: the agency of the ed-x system is to some extent responsible for this essay, for example!)

To conclude, I would argue that successful creative work is characterised by its fruits becoming established on their own, capable of persisting in whatever networks they operate in without significant input their creator. Fenwick (2011) expresses this idea in relation to Actor Network Theory:

“Eventually these dynamic attempts by actors to translate on another can appear to become stabilized. the network can settle into a stable process or object that maintains itself” Like a black box, it appears naturalized, purified, immutable and inevitable, while concealing all the negotiations that brought it into existence”

In this quote, there is an idea of asymmetry between the process of creation, and the appearance of normality once an artefact is accepted and starts expressing agency itself. Creation is an act of negotiation with the networks of beings and objects which combine to make up reality. Success is the production of a stable change in these networks. Failure is a lack of stability, in whatever sense is significant (YouTube hits or otherwise). In my own work, I have not always found it easy to predict the success of an artefact I have made, but studying Actor Network Theory has given me a useful perspective on why some work I have done has given me particular pleasure when I have seen them become a stable part of networks I am no longer part of. What is perhaps absent from Actor Network Theory is a clear moral sense of what is a good network change to produce, a theme echoed by Spohrer when he compares the neutrality of Actor Network Theory with the work of Foucault on power relations, inter alia. This moral theme is a theme for another day though: the aim for me now is to produce some interventions in actor networks local to me, and see if they learn to persist.

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