

Creation 2 - Two Duplicated Actor Network Street Furniture Installations

SUMMARY

My creation for this project consists of street furniture installations, both of which are inspired by existing street furniture installations in my city, Glasgow. One is a public picnic table, installed in a “liminal space” on a street ending. The other is a public bicycle pump, installed in a similar location.

These were both informed by my understanding of Actor Network Theory, which I developed last week in my synthesis essay “Picnic table actor networks: self-sustaining object agency as creative success”. The installations are essentially attempts to test the idea that relatively banal objects installed in suitable locations in a city can have an effect (agency, therefore) on the actor networks in which they interact, and independently of their creator.

Since both installations were carried out today, and network effects generally take a long time to happen, it will be difficult to assess the effectiveness or effects of the installations here, beyond a few immediate observations.

I should also note that these are both unashamedly analogue and physical installations. What is of interest here is the choice of where and how to apply basic technologies like wooden tables and bicycle pumps. The media involved are perhaps two primarily: the creation of a forum for contact, in the sense of “this is “communication conceived as the establishment of a network” rather than as “the transmission of a message or an ideology” (Wieser & Teurings 2013 p106, quoted in Spohrer 2016) ; and secondly the use of text and signage to justify the presence of the objects where they are: perhaps understood as a form of media disguise necessary until “the network can settle into a stable process or object that maintains itself” (Fenwick 2011).

REFERENCES

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FENWICK, T & EDWARDS, R (2011) “Introduction: Reclaiming and Renewing Actor Network Theory for Educational Research”, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 43:sup1, 1-14, DOI: 10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00667.x. Available at <https://dspace.stir.ac.uk/bitstream/1893/3589/1/ANT-introduction.pdf>

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FIRST OBJECT - ANOTHER PICNIC TABLE

The first installation is a wooden picnic table which I installed in a liminal space where a blocked-off street meets a busy road, where there is a vague notion of public space, encouraged by the presence of a cafe, a park opposite, and a church frontage.



This installation is essentially a replica of the table (below) which I examined in my essay: a wooden picnic table which was installed at the end of my street some eight months ago, the network(s) of which I examined.



I commissioned the new table from a local joiner, and installed it with the help of a friend during the night.

Similar to the original table, it is chained to a nearby bicycle stand:



The original table has an engraved logo, naming it “Woodlands Sqaure Table” (Woodlands is the name of the area of Glasgow the table is in).



Similar to this, I had a plastic name badge made for this table, saying “Park Road Square Table” (Park Road is the street at the end of which the table is now installed):



The labels are in different materials, but the common naming theme of “square table”, where square is either an allusion to the rectangular shape of the table, or to the “square” as in the public space the table is located in (or, at a stretch, to the Knights of the Round Table....). This common naming links the objects, intentionally suggesting the new one is a replica of the old one.

Since the new table has only been installed for a day, it is hard to comment much upon its effects on its

surrounding networks. During brief observations during the day, I noticed two sets of people using it, both couples who were consuming take away coffee. The first is pictured on the first picture of the table (above); the second is shown below, in a panorama (in the rain) which shows a little of the new table's context, with a cafe on the right hand side, and the park in the background, beyond the busy road.



From this brief description, it should be possible to see that I have roughly replicated the original table, in a similar but different context - a liminal space on a street ending in a busy victorian neighbourhood - and with similar but slightly different materials. The questions now are whether the table will become an accepted part of the city's street furniture - and social / actor networks; and also if it will have any effects on social groups or networks, as I observed on the other table (e.g. dog walkers meeting, cyclists congregating, friends meeting for coffee).

SECOND OBJECT - A PUBLIC BICYCLE PUMP

In the second half of my essay, I looked at the company Cycle Hoop, and suggested that their approach to their products could be understood in the light of Actor Network Theory: they pay particular attention to the network of actors which surrounds their products and the decisions to install them, making it easy for their potential users, for example, to contact their local councils to campaign for installations, and using some digital media such as mapping, which may in turn

I discovered that a local community council has recently had a public bicycle “track” pump installed in a nearby district of the city¹, with the aim of encouraging cycling in the area, a sort of actor-network



manipulation. On closer inspection, I found that this installation had been done by Cycle Hoop. You can see that the pump is solidly installed in the ground using bolts, and that its construction is rigorous.



1 See <https://www.glasgowlive.co.uk/news/glasgow-news/glasgows-first-public-bike-pump-13193687> for background

I contacted Cycle Hoop and discovered that these pumps can be installed for a cost of 500 GBP (UK pounds, approx 650 USD). They also commented that generally permission is required to do an installation in a public street (and that city councils normally grant this).

Based on this, I wondered if I could install a public bike pump myself, without altering the pavement (side-walk) and so without requiring permission. I decided to try this in the locaiton of the orignal table discussed above, as this is close to my flat, and easy for me to observe (from a purely personal point of view, it's also very practical to have a bicycle pump in the street, as I usually only notice more air is needed in my tyres once I've left my flat (appartment)).

To this end, I bought a consumer grade bicycle pump from a local shop for 22 GBP (28 USD approx.). The pump had its manufacturer's logo on it, which I scratched off, and replaced with my own:



I painted on the text "Pro Bono Glasgow" in its place. This is I suppose the name of an immagined organisation or movement which installs things for public good in the city of Glasgow...



Finally I installed the pump by chaining it to a tree next to the original picnic table. This was done after dark tonight, and the image is consequently of poor quality: but you can just see the table and the pump chained in front of the tree:



This pump shares various characteristics with the picnic table installation. Again, it has a label (“Pro Bono Glasgow”) which tries to justify the presence of the object, as if an organisation had put it there. The installation is also a copy of an existing (and accepted, “network embedded” object, with the experimental purpose of finding out if it will have similar effects on networks. Also, again there is a theme of permission: this time the log is chained to a tree, and therefore does not damage the ground, and so less clearly would require formal permission.

The intent of the pump is similar to the original pump: to encourage cycling and cyclists in my neighbourhood. In particular, I’m interested to see if cyclists - who already use the table for resting - will use it. This includes the increasing numbers of food delivery cyclists who work in all weathers to deliver food. Again, in this case because the installation has just been done, I’ve not had sufficient time to observe the pump in use, nor to know if it will become a permanent installation.... (it may simply be stolen or vandalised). This will become apparent in the coming weeks!

REFLECTIONS

In my synthesis, compared the acquisition of agency by objects in actor network, as postulated by Actor Network theory, to the creative process, whereby a creative person (artist, designer, programmer, citizen....) nurtures an idea, before letting go of it (to move on to something else. I hypothesised that successful creations are ones which do acquire this kind of agency as objects, no longer requiring the support of their designer-parent, and able to interact with their networks with their own agency. I realised that this idea cohered with some of my own experiences of my own creative work.

In the case of the two interventions presented here, it is too early to know if they will be successful in acquiring this agency. However, it is clear that I have had to invest effort into getting them into existence - even though in this case the ideas are essentially borrowed or adapting from existing installations. In other words, my own agency has been very much part of the process of the objects' creation and initial integration into their contexts (physically, and to some extent socially / "networkly").

As mentioned, only time will tell if either or both of the objects manage this transition, such that "like a black box, [they] appear[] naturalized, purified, immutable and inevitable, while concealing all the negotiations that brought it into existence" Fenwick (2011).

That said, the fact of having replicated existing installations does give some sort of testability of the process: if in the spring we see people queuing to use the new table, as we do the old one on sunny days, then it will have been a success. If we see certain kinds of sociability and random social connection happening at the new table, as I have witnessed at the existing one, then there will have been success. And if "pro bono Glasgow" were in any measure to become a more real entity than the figment of my imagination it presently is, then there will have been success in networking an idea.

I also discussed the idea of permission in the synthesis. Both of these installations are notable for the fact that they flirt with the boundaries of what is permitted: since both are chained to existing street furniture, they cause no permanent damage. The "pirate" nature of these installations avoids the need for negotiations with public authorities such as city councils. This is a risk: perhaps they will be removed. But it also allows for quick prototyping of ideas!

In both cases, labels are explicitly used to make this permission or acceptance more likely. This is perhaps one of the more interesting aspects of the project. In general, if people see a label or text on an artefact, perhaps one that suggests an authority behind the installation, it is more likely to be accepted. In the case of the original table, for example, I asked around to find out who had installed it, and people were not sure, but they mentioned the logo, suggesting it meant that either the council or the local development charity had installed them. In these two installations I have added labels in the hope to encourage the acceptance of the artefacts into their local networks. (e.g. maybe the city council's employees will assume the table was put there by a development charity, and vice versa).

Another theme which became apparent as I tried to find materials to change the logo on the bicycle pump was that it is much easier to find pre-made slogans than it is to create and publish your own. This was typified by a visit to Paperchase, looking for lettering with which to write "Pro Bono Glasgow". I found an advert for notebooks saying "...colourful prints and slogans make these true stationery statement pieces". (see over) I found it curious that it should be considered enough to buy a premade statement to make it. There's some parallel here in my mind to the use of political statements (or academic ideas) for the purposes of identity. Though I have not had time to investigate, I wonder if Actor Network Theory has something to say about the use of language for posturing within networks.... this is an effect I have tried to exploit by suggesting agencies behind the labels I put on the table and bicycle pump. I worry somewhat

about a world where the only ideas available are pre-made ones.... the process seems a lot like the business of liking or forwarding memes on social media: superficial, and without significant commitment. In contrast, I found it hard work to create verbal (media?) identities for my objects - even though I largely copied the one for the table.



There's an interesting idea of fictional agency at work here, and a slightly complex notion of the relation between fiction, imagination and reality. Since with both objects I have been slightly devious with my own agency, not admitting to it, and trying to attribute it to either unknown organisations or to existing objects, there is a question as to what extent this is the process all artefacts - or network actors - go through, and as to whether or not it is honest, or manipulative. (for example, we could compare with manipulation of public elections by social media campaigns, where the purported agent of campaigns often is not the same as their actual authors: as with the Cambridge Analytica scandal, or suggested Russian interference in elections.