

Rules of the particular: an investigation of exceptions in bureaucratic institutions

Isabella Brandalise¹, isabella.brandalise@student.rmit.edu.au

¹RMIT University, Australia

Abstract

This PhD research investigates how institutional structures (as ecosystems for service encounters) can be opened up and re-configured through imagination exercises by insider and external participants.

Emerging from experiences as a service designer working within social innovation in government agencies, and departing from the overly optimistic rhetorics of design in this space, my aim is to engage with a political design perspective towards institutions (Mazé 2021), exploring the slippery tension between rules and exceptions. Exceptions are events that negotiate with the given circumstances and demonstrate that which can be different (Dilnot 2013).

In a systemic and transdisciplinary conceptualization of the field of service design (Vink 2021), my methodological approach is infused with a pataphysical twist (Jarry 1996) to give shape to outlines of imaginary institutions. These institutions – the Cabinet of Bureaucratic Wonders and the Patadesign School – are collaborative research artefacts that engage with socio-material infrastructures of bureaucratic institutional frames, i.e. branches of the Brazilian federal government and design schools in their modern legacy, and involve generating propositions, prompting conversations, and enacting alternative ways of knowing. In that way, I am accounting for socio-material configurations as matters of service design (Kimbell and Blomberg 2017), discussing the agency of institutional components and the virtualities created by given structures. Instead of trying to solve the situation, this approach aims at enacting ways of collectively dealing with paradoxical entanglements of the present, encountering institutions as sites of contestation and imagination from within (Mouffe 2013).


Tentative learnings include exposing dynamics of powers, spaces of possibilities and dangers, and traces of contingency in apparently marble-solid institutions, understanding institutionalisation as a contested ongoing process. Following from there, at ServDes 2023 I am looking forward to engaging in conversations about structures that enable and constrain transformative processes within both the Social Innovation and Technologies and Futures subthemes.

Keywords: institutions, pataphysics, exceptions, socio-material infrastructures

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