

Towards a Political Design Through Feminist Ways of Movement-Making

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From the understanding that design is a complex force of political and cultural expression, I argue that in the design field we need to be with and learn from social movements, advancing collaboration between erudite and popular practices of creating and shaping worlds. In this freely reflection I present some thoughts from my experience as an educator-militant in a political organization of the Brazilian feminist movement. From this background, I seek to reimagine knowing-doings in design by means of principles systematized in feminist practices within social movements. Through these principles, I aim to reflect on possibilities for a design that is able to build utopias subverting itself as a tool for exploitation and oppression.

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In this essay I would like to share some reflections I made about my practice as social educator and a militant in the feminist movement and how it can be entangled with design.

Recently many theories and approaches in design with political and social concerns have been emerging and being criticized by the community from different perspectives and experiences. From the understanding that design is a complex force of political-cultural expression, I postulate this reflection as a way to deepen the questioning on the fundamental bases of the design field so that we can think about other ways of relating to design research and practice.

I have been active with the feminist movement in Brazil since 2016. The practice that constitutes being a militant and the exercise of becoming politicized in the process of political struggle has allowed me to reflect on different issues that also permeate my action as design researcher, educator and practitioner.

I have been thinking a lot about politics and the process of politicization and how we can tackle the ongoing depoliticization in the design field of theory and practice. Based on my experience of feminist praxis, within a social and political movement, I try to think about possible articulations of politicized

practice in design and the transformative engagement I have been through within feminism in a peripheral country, fighting a fascist government and a conservative population.

The design field would gain a lot if we paid more attention to social struggles and their historical learning processes. Social movements have been reinventing their forms of organization, of articulation and decision making. They are historical experiences that can be inspiring in the way they respond to different conjunctures, to the advances in technology, to the different material contexts and to the subjectivities of their political subjects. I think the encounter between designers and social movements could be a space to think about possibilities for a design that is able to build utopias subverting itself as a tool for exploitation and oppression within the capitalist, hetero-cis-patriarchal, racist, colonialist and capacist system.

In the following pages I will share some perceptions and freely present some thoughts in an attempt to reflect on political learnings in feminism and how they can be related to design. I'm not particularly concerned with the academic depth of reflection that one would expect from an article. I write these lines to provoke reflection, in the hope that by sharing some of these questions, we can make shared progress on these issues. Here we go!

Feminism can be understood as three distinct proposals that combstantiate each other. Feminism is a way of being in the world, a kind of ethic that guides the actions and choices of a given person. But more important than being a way of constructing oneself, feminism is a social and collective movement built from the social demands and struggles of women. The third engendering, which links the two previous ones and gives support to individual and collective practices, is the feminist theory, a theoretical, critical and analytic thought in movement that renews itself every day from the confrontations experienced and systematized learnings.

In the feminist movement I organize myself in Brazil, we work based on an intersectional analysis of the Brazilian social formation as a capitalist society, based on the exploitation of labor and its division and hierarchization by sex and race; on patriarchy, as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women in all spheres of life; and on racism, as a system of dehumanization of black and native people (Silva, 2016).

In the experiences within the feminist movement, through the political actions, we identify characteristics that guide practices towards a social transformation with emancipatory purposes. Based on the work of Branco and Silva (2019) and Lima (2021), I present some of these issues and put them in dialogue with the field of design so we can rethink design structuring elements from a popular and feminist practice.

Feminism shows us the need to understand **political action as an everyday practice**. This means that in feminism, politics is not only done in the public sphere, in dialogue with the state or within the state. In order for us to build a reality of greater social justice and equality, we need to change social relations in different spaces and broad spheres of society. You may be familiar with the feminist maxim "the personal is political," which became recognized as the movement's motto in the 1960s. The main issue that feminists brought into the debate from this motto was the need to treat as political the issues that were silenced because they were tied to the private sphere, such as family relationships. The spaces of affection and family relationships are spaces of reproduction of oppressions, so feminists understand that these spaces also need to have their relationships collectively transformed.

If we can understand the design process as a process of shared knowledge the understanding of the relationships politics can be determinants for the project. In our field, we see a growing concern with the development of products and services to promote greater inclusion of use. More rarely do we see a concern with the configuration of design spaces. What design methodologies are mobilized? Where do

they come from? Which knowledge is valued? How are people heard? What people are considered part of the process? Who is involved in the design and production of these artifacts? Who will profit? Who will benefit? Who will be prejudiced? It is imperative to reflect on what and who we mobilize in design processes and projects while questioning our role in strengthening oppressive relations and practices.

The **questioning of universality and the defense of plurality** is another feminist principle that can assertively provoke design. One of the founding facts of feminism is the denial of universality from the understanding of the "other" (woman) of the universal subject (man). The idea of universality is based on the particularities of the white European male. This division excludes issues of private life from political debate, excludes women's participation by implicitly conceptualizing public life as the sphere of men, and creates a false independence between the public and private spheres.

Feminists argue that we cannot think in watertight social categories because these determinations are arbitrary and always leave aside singularities of a certain political subject. This leads us to the understanding that even in the negation of the universal subject (man), we cannot affirm a category "woman". There is a plurality in the experiences of being a woman and these experiences are marked by inequalities and differences.

For a long time we have heard that the feminist struggle is a struggle for equality before men. However, I see this as a fallacious debate. We need to recognize the differences in order to be able to deal with the contradiction of difference. The social structure benefits and empowers a universal subject, the contradictions that place one subject as oppressed and another as oppressor is promoted by the structures of exploitation, oppression and domination that organize our social life. We do not wish for more women to achieve equality to the universal subject in this posited social order, gaining the "right" to oppress others (other women) in this achievement. Our desire is that relations be profoundly changed. For this, it is necessary to fight against inequalities and recognize the material differences that organize our lives.

In relation to design, we can figure out which is the "universal subject"? How are we claiming equality? The Western design model is predatory and participates in the construction of weakened subjectivities in peripheral spaces. How can we value the differences that constitute "design-making" in the world, while confronting the inequalities posed by systems of oppression at the local level? How can we engage in making design theory regarding other kinds of practice, modes of production and understandings of design? The intellectual and material production of design in peripheral spaces is always seen as eccentric and fetishized in countries central to capitalism (and to design production). How can we understand these formulations as equally valid, valuable and necessary to local and global developments in design thinking and practice? Likewise, how can we not romanticize the technological backwardness imposed by dependent capitalism that plagues material production and keeps peripheral countries away from a possibility of real inclusion? It is necessary to understand that, if on the one hand our differences need to be respected, on the other hand our inequalities need to be permanently combated.

To make this process of openness to existing differences possible, it is necessary to draw inspiration from **the commitment that feminism has to self-reflection and self-criticism**. When talking about the beginning of her feminist militancy in one of her books, bell hooks (1984), a black US feminist, tells us something important: before we can change the world, we need to change ourselves. In feminism, it is imperative that we build the critical capacity to observe our relations and the inequalities that permeate these relations. A careful look at these inequalities enables the creation of alliances and articulates the possibility of overcoming oppressive relations. The self-critical capacity of the feminist movement makes this movement one of the main political subjects disputing for strength in different places of the world.

It is a movement that renews itself, revises itself, and creatively proposes other forms of organization and struggle (Lima, 2021; Gago, 2020).

The capacity for self-criticism is fundamental if we wish to build other ways of acting in facing reality. For too long designers have advocated a solutionist vision, where designers, endowed with much technical and social wisdom, propose products and services capable of dealing with the most complex problems faced by social groups. For too long we have pretended to help the oppressed while enriching capitalist companies. For too long we have been "valuing local cultures" by fetishizing practices and remunerating producers unequally. We have been for years producing normative theory, "dos" and "don'ts" that homogenize and kill everything that is richest in the diversity of material struggles and resistances. Those kinds of theories depoliticize our practice and instrumentalize knowledge from social and political areas to produce better design methods that continue perpetuating oppressions. We need to have the courage to look at our place in the production system, reflect on what relationships we are strengthening, and act creatively to change what is needed. Do designers have this compromise?

To consolidate reflective and critical processes that are, in fact, emancipatory, it is essential that this **construction be based on collective organization**. Feminism can be understood as a way of life and of being in the world, something the people take into account to make their decisions and construct their subjectivities and relationships. Even though feminism can be related to a personal ethics, there are structural transformations that can only be achieved when women organize themselves collectively, therefore, feminism is, above all, a social movement.

It is by this collective organization that women fight for a project of society where all oppressions dimensions are fought. We understand that even though a woman can escape an oppressive lived situation by herself, the only way we can make society realize the unfairness organization of social relations is collectively. In a social movement, when we combat injustice, we are not only changing our own lives, but the possibility of a better life for all women. Feminism, as a social movement, is plural and decentralized, but it has amplified its capacity of collective action, whether in mobilizations, direct actions, or in networks of solidarity and political articulation.

In design it seems we are always trying to protect our own thing. Either the intellectual property or the creative genius and the avant-garde idea. What are we hoping to achieve by that? Profit? Prestige and glory? The days of the eccentric and genius inventor are gone (was it ever this guy's era anyway?). We need to establish other ways of dealing with the contradictions of our profession. None of us will do it alone. There is also no one method to follow. But it is necessary that we observe with care some things that are already systematized and that we start transforming our actions based on the knowledge already organized and the new learnings that will arise from the collective practice. From where I see it, we can get glimpses of possibilities drawing on anti-colonial practices, popular struggles and social movements organizations. But also in design there are some clues on the way participatory design processes are conceived. The design space in participatory practices are to be understood as spaces capable of forging alliances and building political forces. Can we think about a space where there is commitment to a project of society and the construction of collective values and which is also a design space rooted in effective participation processes? This exercise is a practice of continuously modifying ourselves and our own making-world and also educating and politizing a broader society about socio-material injustices and how design and designers are capable (or not) of dealing with that.

Finally, I propose to debate **care as a strategy for world-making through design**. A feminist political understanding of care requires that it be understood as a responsibility, and it is a responsibility because we understand care as a necessary part of social relations and not as a benevolent action. When the feminist movement creates spaces of care, it is creating another possibility of political articulation

between different political subjects within the movement. In this way, care is not a feminine attribute, but as a feminist practice and ethics.

Some feminist experiments have managed to advance the operationalization by seeking to include concern for care without eliminating the centrality of conflict in the political arena (Lima, 2021; Gago, 2020). Caregiving should not be seen as a way of easing conflicts, but as a way of opening up the way to think about the inequalities that are involved in these conflicts. We need to carry out the task of revolutionizing the concept of politics, reconfiguring the boundaries between the public and private spheres, so that care is no longer understood as a private matter, but as a responsibility for all.

It is necessary to fight the understanding of the masculinized political organization dominant in political spaces (as design spaces, for example), which denies one's responsibility towards other people and does not accept attachment, solidarity and care, attributes historically relegated to the private and feminine sphere. We need design spaces where all manifestations are present and where it is possible to act in solidarity (Serpa & Batista, 2020). Valuing the concern for care does not mean eliminating conflict from the political debate in design spaces, but being able to do so affectively and in a way that strengthens individual and collective processes of subjectivation and world-making.

By presenting these five feminist issues and trying to relate them to design concerns, I am claiming a learning from the concrete political practice of feminist militancy. When I claim here an articulatory proposal from feminism I am proposing that this is a field that has been successful in overdetermining the demands of different political subjects, reinventing its borders continuously. It is a process of continuous openness, where self-criticism plays a central role. So in defending a manifesto from a feminist perspective, it is this capacity for feminist reinvention that I have in mind.

Through these principles, I want to reflect on design constitutive elements and envision new orientations that can politically qualify design. Freire (2007) says that we are conditioned by our experiences, by the reality we access, but we are not determined by it. Therefore, we cannot deny the material, cultural, political, economic, and social conditions that directly affect our construction as subject-objects in designing. But it is important that reality be glimpsed as possibilities and not determinations, that the driving force be hope and not discouragement, and that the utopian capacity for creation be directed to conscious choices and guided by a design praxis committed to transforming the world with popular forces.

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Bibiana Oliveira Serpa (she/her/hers) is a PhD candidate in Design at ESDI/UERJ and a co-founder of the Design and Oppression Network. She is a small-town girl from the rural interior of southern Brazil, who always felt out of place in the conservative environment where she grew up. Since college, she has participated in political organizations of the student movement and currently she is a feminist militant and a social educator at the Universidade Livre Feminista, a popular education initiative focused on promoting political education among women belonging to social movements in Brazil. She has a vast experience in developing participatory projects in different locations in Latin America, which includes design for community emancipation and other approaches. Her research brings participatory design closer to politicization actions within social movements to realize new pathways for engaged design practices based on popular education, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist feminism. She is also co-editor of the International Journal of Engineering, Social Justice and Peace, an interdisciplinary project that seeks, through multiple languages, to disseminate scientific reflections informed by practices within popular technology movements.