

Fernando Obieta

LETTERS

to

bias

and

Formalisations

In the early 1980s, the first standard was defined for the calibration of radio towers for mobile telephony (GPRS – General Packet Radio Service). To ensure that different radio masts did not overlap in their transmission range, a system was developed for field technicians to adjust and record the different towers’ outputs. Based on the largest possible status message from a radio mast, a package size of 270 bytes was demarcated for these communications. This system is generally used to establish a connection between a mobile phone and the nearest radio tower, which happens several times a minute and allows calls to be made and received. After implementation, it was found that the overwhelming majority of these packages are near empty as they merely establish a connection. For this reason, developers came

up with the idea of using this empty space for a service: Short Message Service (SMS—also known as “text messaging”). From the total 270-byte allowance, packages containing a status message require just 130 bytes, leaving 140 bytes of unused space. Using the GSM character encoding standard this results in the space for 160 characters in a single SMS. The package size could have been defined differently—since it was the next version of the standard—either reducing the size for more performance or increasing it for longer SMS messages. However, it was left unchanged. This decision was made opportunistically from the perspective of then-existing technologies. It was not considered that this decision could have far-reaching consequences and implications for interpersonal communication.

In the series of artworks titled “LETTERS” I investigate a variety of perspectives on the normative qualities and social effects of text-messaging. The character limit of 160 is one of the many contours that define this medium and the numerous usages and practices that have emerged from it. The aim of my works is to cause irritation and reflection through the dissonance between what is shown and the individual’s understanding, and expectations, of the system being negotiated—in this case text-messaging. The goal is not to create *better* solutions for problems or to convey a specific understanding, rather it is to signify aspects and elements of how a system constitutes itself and informs the perspective of its observers.

For this series I have developed four works over the past twelve months and exhibited them at the offsite space *MATERIAL* in Zurich from 1st–14th March 2021 (a short video documentation of the exhibition can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/529270574> and further information on the exhibition and more detailed descriptions on the works here: <https://www.fernando-obieta.com/letters>). The works deal with *I.* the social and technical synchronisation of text message conversations (Fig 1), *II.* the parallelism of text-message conversations between different people (Fig 2), *III.* the temporality, sequentiality, and abstraction of text message conversations (Fig 3), and *IV.* the voyeurism and the translation and interpretation of excerpts of text message conversations (Fig 4).

My artistic practice is heavily research-based, to understand the technical and social characteristics of a topic before moving forward to create an artwork. The subject of text-messaging has raised pivotal questions on the implications of digitalisation and the shapes and media it produces to investigate the *technologisation of culture* (Stalder, 2018) further.

My artistic practice is heavily research-based, to understand the technical and social characteristics of a topic before moving forward to create an artwork. The subject of text-messaging has raised pivotal questions on the implications of digitalisation and the shapes and media it produces to investigate the *technologisation of culture* (Stalder, 2018) further.

Starting as a designer and programmer, my undertaking has a transdisciplinary approach which goes in a direction of Media Arts and Conceptual Arts and integrates topics of ethics, media philosophy, computer sciences and engineering, as well as social sciences, cultural and communication studies, and connects different notions from across these fields. I establish the arts as a place of action and reflection on technological innovation; moreover, to reflect that *designers aren’t only designing materials and objects alone, but thereby always also influencing historically understood contexts, processes and relationships* (Siegmund, 2020)—intentionally and unintentionally. The political dimension of the arts can enable others to understand *that the work of designers requires a political stance, because their designs intervene in the physical and tangible experience of the world* (Von Borries, 2016).

Designers—by which I mean designers, engineers, architects, and programmers, amongst others—are engaged in creating accessible formal and normative artefacts to deal with problems and opportunities. In design discourse, one commonly refers to the term “artefacts”, which opens up a perspective

onto the relationship between the human and the artefact and what the artefact could mean in its relation to people. Another common term is “product”, which sheds light on the socio-economical structure surrounding the object; it highlights the kind of people that have the means to buy a product, as well as the kind of products they want—or that they can be persuaded to purchase. Both of these terminologies mainly concern the relationship between *object* and *user* whilst bracketing the *creators*. The creators are only present through branding, like logos or other specific characteristics of the objects themselves. The fact that these things are man-made objects is present, but it does not raise the questions of *who* and *how*, which is in contrast to archaeological and museal artefacts, where these questions are at the forefront. Especially with products, answering *why* (to use it) is often part of the advertising efforts of the organisations distributing them. However, this still primarily concerns the *object-user-relationship* and does not answer why the organisation is providing and selling these products beyond the obvious economic reasons.

These objects are the intermediary between creators and users. Thus, to take a closer look at the triangle of *creator*, *object*, and *user*, there is the need for a wider terminology that focuses on the act and process of actively creating these objects, and addresses the people involved. The focus is on the parameters of analysing, researching, and locating the existing assumptions regarding a problem or question; the selection and decision; the abstraction; the act of giving it a form that can be understood by a larger group of people than before. I call the sum of these design decisions *formalisations*. The act of abstracting is a crucial

moment here because this act is not only one of logic. Abstraction is also an aesthetic act; one that is always influenced and guided by the cultural resources, discourses, and ideologies, of the individual conducting it. The abstraction itself is also always situated summarily to the process of creating it, since they both pose a reduction of a larger question in a smaller one that becomes easier to handle. *How* this is being conducted, and which variables are being defined, is the decision of the *creator*. Thus, formalisations, like the process of creating them, are always situated.

Morals

Through their use, these formalisations become *delegates of our morality* (Latour, 1996) which normatively shape and guide our thinking as well as our views on the circumstances being negotiated. However, it can no longer be determined from the formalisations themselves whose morality exerts these influences or what their motivations were. This factor is also called *design stance* (Crilly, 2011)—where users perceive each and every aspect

of a formalisation as intentionally designed, even though parts of them will always be unintentional and based on the intuition, perception of the world, or morals of their creators. The user is tempted to *submit to* these morals (Deleuze, 1992), which manifests in a form of control over the users, regardless of whether it was intended or not.

Biased

The contemporary discourse in computer science, and more precisely in data science, gives attention to the implicit biases within algorithms and machine learning. With the wide-ranging implementation of algorithmic systems for a variety of decision-making processes, it has become apparent that the vast majority of these algorithms have tendencies to reproduce the biases of their input data, which reproduces the disadvantages for already disadvantaged populations. One underlying problem is that there is a widespread assumption that systems based

on mathematical methods produce ‘logical’, ‘objective’, ‘rational’ or—to make matters worse—*unbiased* results. This problem is not only limited to the biased data on which these algorithms are trained but extends to the comprehensive formalised objects that they are embedded into. Even the act of ‘data gathering’ itself, and consequently the selection of variables and parameters, is biased. Subsequently, there is no such a thing as an *unbiased* system: Each and every formalisation is built by people who have biases.

Situated

The practice of creating formalisations is there to create a manifestation of knowledges that can be picked apart whilst being little understood, or traceable to their origins, meanings, and intentions. A productive notion—instead of biased—is to think of formalisations as a manifestation of *situated knowledges* (Haraway, 1988), as a perspective of partiality which is always grounded in a position. This includes the positions of the creators, origins of the formalisation, and the users. This leads to the precise problem of the perception of formalisations. As long as they are not understood as being situated, and absent of the need for potential moments of irritation, formalisations tend

to produce the impression of rationality and therefore parts of their position will be reproduced through the receiving person, thus creating a normative effect. Like the “Gesture of Searching” (Flusser, 2014), the *Gesture of Formalising* is also in crisis since it does not pose a way of gaining ‘objective’ truth and making headway. In times of digitalisation and the increasingly rapid technical formalisation of more aspects of daily life, there is a need for awareness of, and reflective approaches towards, the techniques, formalisations, and processes that are being developed, used, and submitted to.

Artistic

In my work, I use a recursive methodological approach that makes it possible to theorise through an artistic practice by researching normative posits, disassembling them, changing parameters, recomposing them, exhibiting the artwork, analysing the feedback from visitors (and the difference between artistic and design practice), theorising the findings, and starting over. What distinguishes art from design is the specific *unsettling of implicit references*—by situating perception in perception, by turning the medial against itself (Mersch, 2015)—in the observers of the artworks and the artists themselves and opening up room for reflection and possibility in the dissonance between what is shown and what is known. The change of context from

use to art thus creates the possibility to critically question formalisations. They lose their appearance of ‘objectivity’ and the designers—now artists—gain the possibility to ask questions regarding the morality of formalisations directly. It is a different perspective on formalisations and allows one to take a critical stance towards established formalisations as well as one’s own biases and to reflect upon them. This formulates the goal that designers and users must learn to understand formalisation as situated, to accept that there can be no unbiased design, that formalisations have a normative effect, and that a more reflective approach in the creation and use of formalisations must therefore be achieved.

Hypotheses

The introduction of the terminology formalisations creates a different perspective—in comparison to artefact, product, service, protocol, etc.—which helps to negotiate the effects of the biases and situatedness of design practices.

Formalisations that seek critical reflection rather than a new solution can push designers to understand the bias and situatedness of their work, to question their own as well as collective normative processes, and to acknowledge the crisis in their practice.

The insights gained through this practice could open up further ideas for designers about how things could be different. It would allow for speculation on what other implications these formalisations could lead to; to weigh up the relations of design decisions in the everyday life of the market economy; and to discover a practice-based approach to the morality of design practices.

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Fig 1, "to clock", Material, Zürich, 2021, <https://www.fernando-obieta.com/to-clock>



Fig 2, "to direct", Material, Zürich, 2021, <https://www.fernando-obieta.com/to-direct>



Fig 3, "to lave", Material, Zürich, 2021, <https://www.fernando-obieta.com/to-lave>

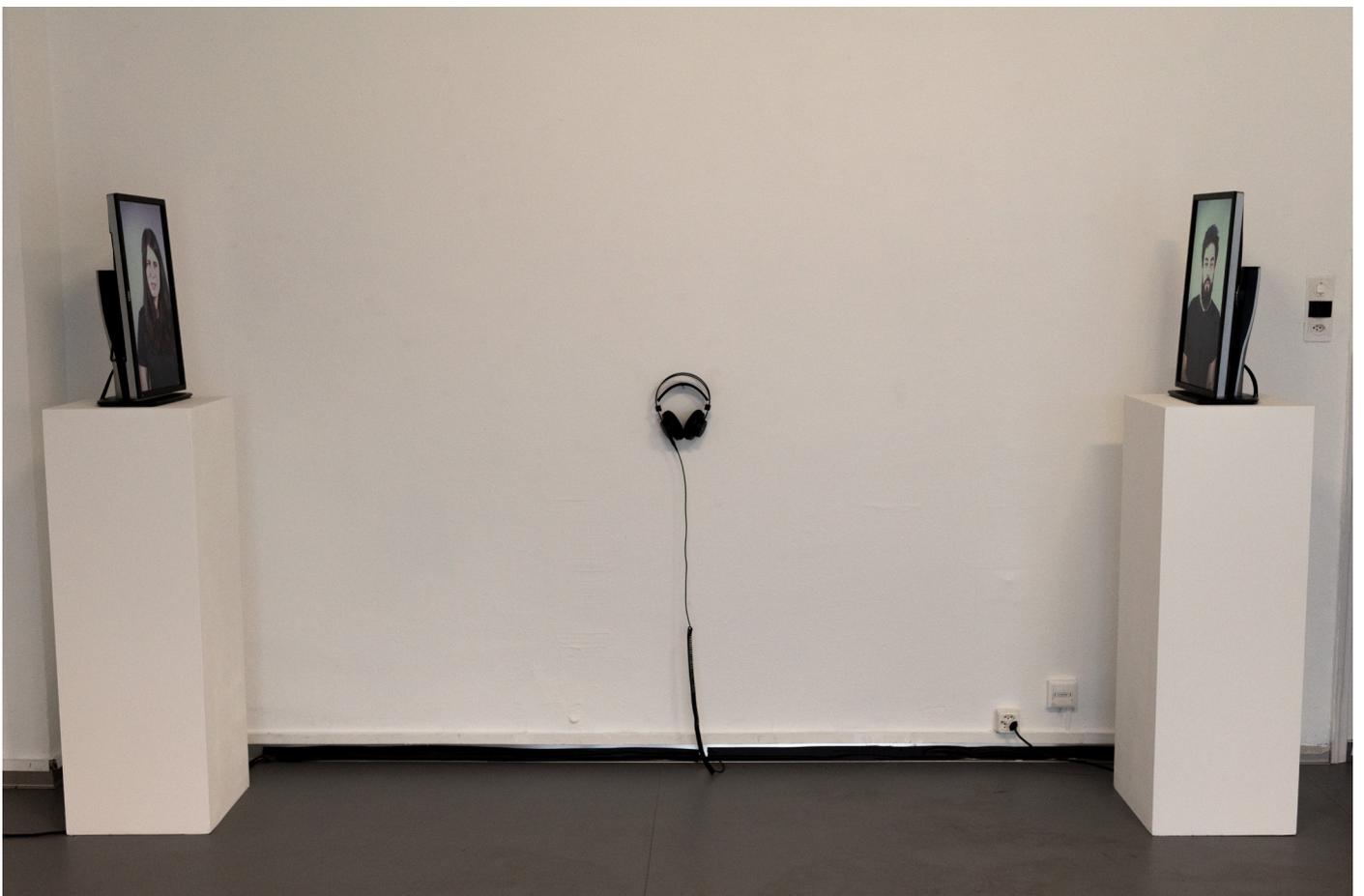


Fig 4, "to face", Material, Zürich, 2021, <https://www.fernando-obieta.com/to-face>

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Transdisciplinary Studies
in the Arts