Lexicon

The intention of this lexicon is to better understand how social artists and designers can collaborate effectively with companies and organisations while working in a social practice. This list was created during the research project SOCIALDESIGNFORWICKEDPROBLEMS (SDFWP) (http://socialdesignforwickedproblems.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/) and was called 'In-between language'. In-between language is language that is needed in order to create a shared space and mutual understanding within both worlds to cater to the specific needs of social art and design. Each of the different worlds operate using their own lingo, rhetoric and value systems. These included new terms as well as terms with different connotations in both the artistic and organisational contexts.

This is ongoing research: any additions and improvements will be gratefully received. Contributing authors so far:

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AGENDA-FREE

Social designers are generally in the position of being able to work without an agenda and look for 'what the situation demands'. As a rule, employees in an organisation follow an agenda: the organisation has expectations about the targets its employees need to reach. When dealing with wicked problems, people are required to think outside the existing framework. This is exactly what is expected from social designers (also see Artistic mentality).

ALIBI

The reason that a social designer needs to come up with to gain entry somewhere in order to soak up all available information from the participants. Only when you've digested a problem to its very last fibre can you find new opportunities. You need an alibi when you don't have an agenda (see Agenda-free).

AMBIGUITY

Ambiguous is the opposite of unequivocal: something is ambiguous when it means multiple things at once. Ambiguity is an important quality of most art, but it's also an established characteristic of wicked problems. Artists have been trained to deal with ambiguity and are well versed in leaving room for multiple interpretations. This is a practical skill needed when dealing with wicked problems.

ANTI-ACQUISITION

Raising questions about why the customary approach isn't working properly for wicked problems automatically raises the value of the alternative approach put forward by social designers. Looking at it like this, there isn't much to lose when opting to experiment alongside social designers.

ANTI-LANGUAGE

It is often tricky to describe what a social design project will amount to in unequivocal terms. We discovered, however, that it is possible and even useful to describe what it is not. We can predict what a social design project won't amount to, that is, more of the same which has already proven to be ineffective. Anti-language is a tool for creating the space for not-knowing*.

ARTISTIC MENTALITY

Contrary to a project-based mode of operation with pre-conceived goals, social designers often work as if they are guided by an internal compass, reacting in an unstructured, intuitive way to everything that happens around them. Chance is admitted into the design process. Other characteristics of the artistic mentality include: people matter more than systems; associative thinking; sensitivity to aesthetics and emotions; the quality of the process is at least as important as the quality of the product. By setting out without a preconceived goal, social designers can freely search for 'what the situation demands' (also see Agenda-free and Author-driven).

AUTHOR-DRIVEN

An artistic process is generally author-driven: the personal motivations and preoccupations of the artist play an important role in achieving the results. Artists take responsibility for their subjectivity and attempt to make it imitable for others. In the realm of wicked problems there are no comprehensive solutions and subjective observations are inevitable. In such situations it can be productive if the designer isn't afraid to take responsibility for their subjectivity and holds on to it during the design process. The quality of being author-driven can be used as a fruitful strategy for developing an approach for a wicked problem.

AUTONOMY

A prerequisite for a valuable artistic process – and for good art, too – is that the artist is able to work from an autonomous position. From this point of view, there may be risks involved in teaming up with an organisation: the artist's autonomy may be under threat if he/she is bound to the client's agenda. For SDFWP we used a different notion of the potential autonomy of art and artists in an attempt to create space for a way of practicing art which can also be meaningful outside of the arts sector. Autonomy with regard to SDFWP is a condition which the artist can achieve within a certain context. It is not an a priori state that should be safeguarded.

BUILD-MEASURE-LEARN

The Build-Measure-Learn loop emphasises speed as a critical ingredient to product development. A team or company's effectiveness is determined by its ability to ideate, quickly build a Minimum Viable Product* of that idea, measure its effectiveness in the market, and learn from that experiment.

CHANGE

The goal of a social design is to change something. It is often thought that developing a new perspective is enough to effect change. Change is only brought about when the old behaviour and/or system that kept the problem in place is also included in the approach. In many cases social designers do not have the required tools at their disposal for this part of the change process. For this, teaming up with a change manager could be helpful (see change management).

CHANGE APPROACHES

Over the past decades, the realisation has grown that there is no single change approach that will solve everything. This led us to identify various schools that make different assumptions about change approach and whose assumptions take different forms (see change management*). Each school has its own adherents. In the Netherlands, change approaches have been categorised by means of colour thinking: five contrasting ways to understand and achieve change. These are: change based on power and interests (yellow); change based on rational research and planning (blue); change based on motivation and attention (red); change based on learning and experimenting (green); and change based on evolution and signification (white). In the case of complex change, it's often necessary to switch collectively between these approaches, even though this sometimes proves too much to ask from the parties involved.

CHANGE MANAGEMENT

An umbrella term for the knowledge, craftsmanship and tools used by the people who see realising change as their job. This can, in principle, be done by anyone who takes (not has) the responsibility to effect change and makes the effort to pull it off. As a field, it was primarily defined and claimed by organisation advisers and trainers twenty years ago. Important divisions of the domain include distinguishing various change approaches*, shaping (iterative) diagnostic stages, planning and intervention, involving relevant parties and focusing on signification.

CHANGE PARADOX

You would expect that organisations struggling with a wicked problem would be hungry for new tools to set loose on the problem, but this is actually not the case. It is precisely when dealing with wicked problems that we see a paradoxical inclination to reach for familiar methods even if they are proven ineffective. This can be partly explained by unfamiliarity with other options, such as social design.

In general, however, we can recognise the change paradox in this: the more wicked a problem gets and the less clear we are about the right approach, the greater becomes the penchant for assurance.

CLIENT

When an organisation decides to engage a social designer, it creates a client-contractor scenario. This scenario gives direction to the relationship, which can be problematic if, for example, the client is used to working in a very hierarchical way. No Academy consistently calls its clients 'partners.' This is a friendly way of framing the relationship from the start.

CO-CREATION

We use the term co-creation for design tracks in which people who are part of the problem can also become part of the solution. Co-creation is a collaborative, interactive process which involves making use of all the participants' expertise and creating support for the outcomes.

CONTEXT BUILDING

Organising the environment around a problem in such a way that space is created for the social designer's artistic input and for the design's impact on the problem, the participants and the apposite (institutional) system. Creating this space requires using language that is not only recognisable to the participants but also offers space for the idiosyncratic quality of the social design process. This is what in-between language is meant to accommodate.

DEDICATION

Social designers are dedicated first and foremost to the problem and not to an organisation's interests or to any individual employee. If dedication to the problem starts to clash with dedication to the petitioning organisation, the time has come to debate this issue seriously (see Context building). This is the moment when the social designer should reflect on whether there is sufficient space to remain dedicated to the problem.

DISRUPTION OR DISTURBANCE

Breaking through a certain status quo. Developing a social design project with its participants requires space for innovation. It can sometimes help to first disrupt existing systems, as a way of opening the space of not-knowing*.

EFFICIENCY

Expressions that signal a need for efficiency, such as lean management and risk management, should be called into question by a social designer as soon as possible. Efficiency can also stand in the way of the space of not-knowing* which is required for a successful design process (also see First-time-right).

EMPATHY

The ability to sense other people's feelings and thoughts, even if their perceptions differ strongly from your own. Empathy helps in trying to gauge how the design will influence the participants' daily practice.

EPIPHANY

An epiphany (from the ancient Greek ἐπιφάνεια, epiphaneia, "manifestation, striking appearance") is an experience of sudden and striking realisation. Generally the term is used to describe scientific breakthroughs, or religious or philosophical discoveries, but it can apply in any situation in which an enlightening realisation allows a problem or situation to be understood from a new and deeper perspective. Epiphanies are studied by psychologists and other scholars, particularly those attempting to study the process of innovation.

EXTREME LISTENING

The willingness and skilfulness to continue listening beyond your own beliefs and opinions.

FAILURE

Sometimes the biggest value does not lie in an outlined approach, but in an unintended side-effect of the approach. Failures are opportunities. The best innovators frequently ask themselves the questions: 'Is enough going wrong?' and 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.' – Samuel Beckett

FIRST-TIME-RIGHT

A first-time-right culture dominates in many companies. In essence, failure is outlawed. This means that when a new product or a new service is offered to customers or employees it needs to be completely finished and in full working order. Social designers are more used to working with prototypes* and experiments and learn on the job.

GROAN ZONE

Social designers cycle through a design process by repeatedly diverging, casting a broad view and creating options.

This is also the objective within organisations when new ideas need to be generated. The groan zone is the moment when diverging becomes uncomfortable, when the question arises 'What does this still have to do with my problem?' When change-makers steer clear of the groan zone they are not casting a sufficiently broad view.

IMMUNE RESPONSE (DOUBLE)

Artistic interventions in domains outside the arts (for example in companies and governments or in the public domain) are usually not appreciated in these places on artistic grounds. If the value of an intervention is even recognised, it will be for different reasons ('It sure did shake things up again,' 'It improved the mood'). If an intervention has a disruptive effect this can cause annoyance or be perceived as sabotage. The most dangerous reaction is 'Oh, it's art.' In effect this is an immune response: the disruption is isolated from the ordinary state of affairs in order to prevent reality from being questioned too much (let alone transformed). In the art world we witness an opposite reflex that also resembles an immune response. As long as an artwork disrupts an external system effectively it's thumbs up all round. But the moment that it does more than comment on social reality and actually transforms it – so when it really 'works' outside the art system – the work faces the question: 'But is it still art?'

IN-BETWEEN LANGUAGE

A language that is needed in order to create a shared space and mutual understanding within the domains of organisations and social designers for the specific characteristics of social design. Also see strangeness*.

INCOMPLETE

Part of a social design process is co-creation* with various stakeholders. In order to execute this productively and inspiringly, stakeholders need to feel invited to contribute to the result. A proposal that has been consolidated too definitively can give the impression that the final result cannot be influenced any more. Designs need to be convincingly incomplete if it's important that participants still contribute to them.

INTUITION

During the second half of the twentieth century people reacted to scientific problems based on a belief in social engineering, supported by scientific objectivity. In the twenty-first century we have begun to understand the complex nature of problems better. With this also came the realisation that we can't solve them by merely pondering them more. A combination of intuition paired with thinking capacity seems to be the necessary path to reaching new approaches.

LEAN START-UP

This is a method for developing businesses and products first proposed in 2011 by Eric Ries. Based on his previous experience working in several U.S. start-ups, Ries claims that start-ups can shorten their product development cycles by adopting a combination of business-hypothesis-driven experimentation, iterative product releases, and what he calls "validated learning". Ries' overall claim is that if start-ups invest their time in iteratively building products or services to meet the needs of early customers, they can reduce the market risks and sidestep the need for large amounts of initial project funding and expensive product launches and failures.

LOOKING FOR TROUBLE

Social designers are interested in the moment when things 'grate'. In the grey area of where things are and aren't allowed, valuable information can be found about the positions and interests of the participants (also see Groan zone).

MANDATE

The design task should be embedded in the organisation to such an extent that the people with hands-on positions in the social design project will have sufficient freedom to do what is necessary. This avoids the legitimacy of the social design project being disputed the instant tensions rise (and they will!).

MINIMUM VIABLE PRODUCT (MVP)

A minimum viable product has just those core features that allow the product to be deployed, and no more. The MVP differs from the conventional market testing strategy of investing time and money early to produce a product before testing it on the market. The MVP is intended to ensure that the market wants the product before major time and monetary investments are made. The product is typically deployed to a subset of possible customers, such as early adopters that are thought to be more forgiving and more likely to give feedback. (See also prototype*)

MIRRORING

Organisations are often part of the problem they want to solve. Confronting them with this can lead to an immune response* (also see Disruption).

NEW RELATIONSHIPS

This is one of the aspects social designers focus on. The design causes the participants to relate to each other and to the problem in a new way (also see Opportunity owners).

OPPORTUNITY OWNER

Unexpected stakeholder. Somebody who can contribute different, potentially productive approaches to the problem in their capacity as a new participant.

PERSPECTIVE FOR ACTION

A social design will only lead to the desired change if it enables a new way of thinking and acting for the participants. A new perspective for action is then created.

PIVOT

A pivot is a "structured course correction designed to test a new fundamental hypothesis about the product, strategy, and engine of growth". A notable example of a company employing the pivot is Groupon. When the company first started, it was an online activism platform called The Point. After receiving almost no traction, the founders opened a WordPress blog and launched their first coupon promotion for a pizzeria located in their building lobby. Although they only received 20 redemptions, the founders realised that their idea was significant, and had successfully empowered people to coordinate group action. Three years later, Groupon would grow into a billion dollar business. (Source: Wikipedia)

POTENTIAL FUTURES

Designers and artists are generally well-equipped to put the effects of current decisions in an experiential light by telling stories or showing images. This provides a richer insight into the meaning of the subject matter than when only financial or other quantitative data are used.

POWER

In a power-driven environment, matters like an agenda-free approach, openness* and punctum* will be regarded as threats and a social designer will have a hard time gaining access to the heart of a problem and the stakeholders involved.

PREFIGURATIVE INTERVENTIONS

Protest movements are seeing a resurgence of prefigurative interventions. "Prefigurative interventions are direct actions sited at the point of assumption — where beliefs are made and unmade, and the limits of the possible can be stretched. The goal of a prefigurative intervention is twofold: to offer a compelling glimpse of a possible, and better, future, and also — slyly or baldly — to point up the poverty of imagination of the world we actually do live in" (Andrew Boyd, Beautiful Trouble: a toolbox for revolution, p, 82). Prefigurative interventions are glimpses of a potential future. You might even call them the activist equivalents of the lean start-up.

PROBLEM OWNER

It is unclear who the owners of many types of problems are, but usually they are the people most bothered by them. A characteristic of wicked problems is that it's not perfectly clear who is predominantly affected by a problem. In SDFWP terminology, a problem owner is somebody who feels that they have to take responsibility to solve a problem or at least to develop a new perspective for action.

PROCESS DESCRIPTION

A stakeholder will be disinclined to put much faith in a social designer who says: 'I don't know yet what I'm going to do and how it's going to turn out.' How can they give each other a foothold without reining themselves in too much? A good process description offers a foothold, which makes it easier to divide the process into convenient parts, while not being a binding blueprint. Process descriptions like these make it possible to reach agreements for every phase, for example about how to involve stakeholders, the duration etc.

PROJECT BUDGET VERSUS CULTURE BUDGET

What kind of money matters more than how much money. Designers and artists are used to being paid from the client's culture budget. However, this money usually isn't meant for achieving the organisation's key targets but rather its ancillary targets. In contrast, the project budget is meant for key targets. If the social designer is paid from the project budget he/she is expected to have a direct impact and will therefore gain easier access to the core of the matter. The labelling of the budget provides a good clue for the immune response* that needs to be taken into account.

PROMISE

A proposed reframing* holds specific promise for a potential future*. The more closely this potential future meets the stakeholders' interests, the greater the likelihood that they will want to investigate the proposed reframing.

PROTOTYPE

A prototype is a testable design proposal. Actually running a trial creates an opportunity to learn what can be adjusted or improved. Making prototypes may be normal practice for designers, but organisations are often unaccustomed to it. This can give rise to tensions in an organisation with a first-time-right* culture.

PUNCTUM (JUNCTURE)

In his book 'Camera Lucida', the French philosopher and culture critic Roland Barthes describes the perception of photography using the two concepts, studium and punctum. The studium is the reasonable interpretation of possible cultural, linguistic and political information provided by a photo. The punctum is the personal, emotional point in the photo that touches the viewer and which he or she can point out exactly. The punctum is the aspect of the image around which the viewer's feeling of involvement revolves. At SDFWP we use this term as a metaphor for the point of application of a complex problem field upon which the social designer chooses to base the design. Recognising the punctum is a type of action artists feel familiar with: a subjective choice which also draws on their own preoccupations (also see Author-driven).

REFRAMING

A frame describes a way of looking at a problem. Reframing proposes a new way of looking at the problem. This creates space to discover which solution pathways are feasible in a joint process with the participants (see Space of not-knowing). A good reframing is usually brought about after the problem has been made much more complex (Groan zone). Since wicked problems as a whole are difficult to chart, everybody involved inevitably has a different perception. Designing new shared perceptions is a productive way of creating support for the project's outcomes.

SHOW, DON'T TELL

As an artist or designer you don't say things should be different, you show that there's a different way. Mahatma Gandhi: 'Be the change that you wish to see in the world.'

SOCIAL DESIGNERS (FOR WICKED PROBLEMS)

Designers and artists who want to impact social problems with their work. 'Social' carries meaning on three levels. 1. It is testimony to the designer's mentality, the fact that he or she wishes to work on social problems. 2. The design manifests itself in the social domain and focuses on a desired change in behaviour and building new relationships*.

3. This type of designer uses social processes as a design method (see Co-creation). 'Design' means that the intent is to purposefully create an artefact that is to function in a specific context.

SPACE OF NOT-KNOWING

Just like ambiguity*, professionals in organisations usually try to avoid not-knowing, even though not-knowing encapsulates space to view and deal with things differently than you have always done. Not-knowing also has space where something different can happen than what you had foreseen. Recognising that you're in a space of not-knowing (and that this is good) is no easy task in most organisations. Accepting and embracing the space of not-knowing is an important condition for the joint discovery of new solution pathways.

STAKEHOLDER

People or organisations with an interest in the status quo, transformation or solution of the problem. Reframing* brings unexpected stakeholders or opportunity owners* into view.

STRANGENESS

Broadly speaking, the artistic world and the world of commercial organisations are estranged. It's this mutual strangeness that enables a renewed perspective. This strangeness is valuable and should not be blotted out. In-between language is not intended to cancel out the strangeness, but to make it productive.

STUDIUM

See Punctum.

SYMBOLIC Much art and design are meant to have a symbolic effect: questioning things, stimulating debate or creating awareness. This is the essential first step for behavioural change, but social design – according to our definition – also focuses on the next step: to actually effect behavioural change.

TRACTION

Business traction refers to the progress of a start-up company and the momentum it gains as the business grows. There is no one way to measure traction, though companies usually rely on customer response and revenue as indicators of their success. The reasoning behind developing traction is to grow the business while meeting specific company goals and objectives. While traction may be a seemingly abstract concept, it is important and helps a

company understand where it stands in an industry and where it would like to be.

Importance of traction. While the concept of traction is important for the company founders and employees, it is of equal importance to investors or other stakeholders who have an interest in the organisation. The higher the traction, the more investors are attracted to the organisation. Consequently, the more investors, the more funds available to help the business succeed. Therefore, developing a high level of business traction is important to any start-up and should be a major part of its business growth plan.

TRUST

Since it is impossible to reach concrete agreements about the nature of the final results of the design process (as this would shut the door on the space of not-knowing*), trust plays a major part in the joint effort of social designers and organisations. Integrity and openness are important qualities of the social design process (also see Power*).

WHITE CUBE

For the greater part of the twentieth century, the place where the artist's work was deemed to be shown to its advantage: a white space, devoid of any context, in a museum or gallery. The white cube has become a metaphor (metonym) for that which most people think of when they hear the word 'art'. The white cube is becoming an unsatisfactory place to an increasing number of artists because it isolates art from society. The white cube is a conceptual tool that can be used to indicate what social design is not about, which turns it into anti-language*.

WICKED PROBLEM

A problem about which there is both insufficient knowledge and insufficient consensus. A different way of characterising a wicked problem is open, complex, dynamic and connected. Wicked problems usually don't have one obvious problem owner*. In order to take action it is essential to work together one way or another, since there are many stakeholders involved with the problem.

Read online at:
http://www.beyond-social.org