5 Events and Quasi-Events

Practicing designers, educators, and scholars often make distinctions within design by referring to different fields of design. Within most Western histories of design, those fields are organized around the kinds of objects made and the mediums in which they are made. Graphic designers tend to make visual media, and industrial designers tend to make physical artifacts, including both professional tools and consumer goods. While these labels are useful, the borders of these fields are also dynamic, as designers strive toward the new and novel and the landscape of technologies shifts boundaries and horizons. This flux is simply the condition of design, and it may be shared among all the fields and disciplines of the artificial. So it is not surprising that categories continue to blend, such that graphic design becomes communication design and includes physical and virtual artifacts, and industrial design becomes product design and includes all manner of media. To these fields we can add other fields, such as those of interaction and service design. Whereas interaction design began with an orientation toward human-computer interfaces and service design began with an orientation toward intangible goods such as banking and healthcare, these too now blend. Service design is a framework for digitally enabled products, and interaction design is common across all fields as interfaces are integral to media, professional tools, consumer goods, and services.

I have no interest in labeling yet another field of design. In fact, to do so might limit the scope of democratic inquiry, which occurs across the many fields of design. What I am interested in is understanding design experiments as a practice of making. To do so, it helps to cast the experiment as something made. The category of "events" is a useful way to do this. Conceptualizing the design experiment as an event is inclusive of all

fields and mediums of making. Conceptualizing the design experiment as an event also begins to draw out characteristics of its practice as a particular mode of democratic inquiry. In colloquial terms, an event is an incident or "happening." Within an event, something transpires. What transpires, how it happens, among whom, and with what effects are vital questions to design experiments in civics. Because while not all events are experiments, all experiments aspire to be events.

The event has received significant attention in contemporary theory; Deleuze and Whitehead are progenitors of event thinking. As Mariam Fraser (2006) notes, "thinking the event" is part of a larger project of resisting reductionism and emphasizing relations. More specifically, I employ Isabelle Stengers's (2000) framing of the experiment as an event to consider the design experiment also as an event. Similarly drawing on Stengers, other scholars of design have seized on the event to capture the work of design in prototyping (Wilkie 2014), processes of "thinging" (Binder et al. 2011), and the concept of "design events" (Jönsson 2014). To this scholarship, I add the work of Elizabeth Povinelli (2011). Her feminist anthropology of late-liberalism and idea of "quasi-events" provides another perspective to quell grand narratives of the achievements of design. My hope is to draw from these intellectual wells and help their ideas flow into design experiments in civics.

In this chapter, I develop the concept of the event to understand the design experiment as a particular mode of making and a kind of made thing. Casting the design experiment as an event draws out a set of features and themes for appreciation. As I have argued from the start, the design experiment is a particular endeavor: although much of what comprises the design experiment is familiar to design, the design experiment is still distinctive. For instance, scenarios, games, sensors, maps, and apps are all familiar things that designers make across multiple fields, but in the context of the design experiment, these familiar things do different work and should be described and judged differently.

To begin with, the design experiment-as-event is not merely functional—a quality we usually ascribe to products and services. *The experiment-as-event changes the purposes and outcomes of design*. The purpose of the experiment-as-event is to spark knowledge and imagination. Knowledge and imagination initiate interest and chart courses of action. The making of the design experiment-as-event is also different from familiar practices

of conceptualization and form-giving. *The experiment-as-event changes the activities of designing*. Gathering and orchestration are the activities of making that characterize the design experiment-as-event. Finally, the design experiment-as-event evokes different feelings and reactions than we presume of design. *The experiment-as-event changes the affects and expectations of design*. The affects of the design experiment include frustration, longing, and endurance. These meaningful differences cast the experiment-as-event as a particular kind of design thing, and lead us to distinctive design principles.

The Scope of the Event

The structure and presence of events are varied and often dispersed. This poses a challenge for thinking about events in relation to design, because most design practices and discourses are disposed toward definite and delineated objects and representations. We can point to a toaster and distinguish it from other toasters or a blender. We can diagram the service experience of a visit to the dentist and compare it to a visit to an oncologist or a bank. But the boundaries of events are blurred and their composition is mutable. Confounding factors further, events extend beyond familiar activities of designing and use. As Stengers (2000, 66–67) remarks, the scope of the event includes all the futures it creates, all of those who are and may still be affected by the event. The expansive and fluctuating scope of the event changes how we understand and describe the experiment as something designed, and in turn, expands our perspective on the activities and outcomes of designing.

Returning to *Fruit Are Heavy* and the use of simple sensors to detect the relative ripeness of fruit in trees by measuring the bend in the branch as the fruit grows, we could ask: What is the scope of this event? When does it begin and end? Over the course of the experiment, there were a series of happenings, each with a before and an after. For instance, there was a happening when a forager and a designer went out to a tree, climbed it, and strapped a sensor to a branch. This is clearly an identifiable episode in time and space, involving people engaged in an activity, using made things. So, we could speak of installing the sensor as an event. We could also speak of the event of sensing itself—the moment when software on the timer signals the microcontroller, which registers the change in voltage across the circuit

as a stream of numbers and writes that number to the memory card along with a date and time stamp. In these cases, the before and after is readily evident, if rudimentary. There was no sensor strapped to the tree, and then there was. There was less bend in the branch, and then there was more. The bend was not previously recorded, and then it was, marked by writing data to a new line in a file.

The before and after of such incidents are important moments for describing *Fruit Are Heavy*, but they do not express the whole of the experiment-as-event. The whole of the experiment-as-event both precedes and outlives designed things and their use. It begins in the selection and crafting of the situations through which the experiment will happen. For *Fruit Are Heavy*, the experiment began with the decision to muddle precision agriculture and foraging. Before any word was scrawled on a sticky note and stuck to a wall or any use case was drafted, the experiment began in the conceptual work of opting for and fashioning some situation. This material and conceptual situation enables subsequent making, use, and interpretation.

The experiment-as-event then continues with a familiar aspect of designing: framing a phenomenon so that it is addressable through design. Designers choose which methods, techniques, and materials to use in designing. Throughout, the activities of making mingle with activities of use. In a human-centered design process, this blending occurs through iteration and testing. Prototypes are made and evaluated, offering lessons that advance the design of the artifact. Then more prototypes are made, toward a finished thing. This span of activity is most often considered the standard work of design because it emphasizes the immediate agencies of the designer and the artifact or system, and the immediate desires of users.

But the effects and affects of the experiment-as-event extend well beyond those agencies and desires. They stretch well beyond the roles of the designer and the user, and the capacities of any artifact or system. What's more, as previously discussed, those standard processes of design often do not really describe how design unfolds through these events. Design experiments also include nonuse, resistance, appropriation, misuse, obsolescence, and forgetting, accompanied by the subjectivities that express those agencies and desires. Concepts such as "de-futuring" and "designing away" bring attention to the ways the work of design might be undone, and that also should figure into the scope of the experiment (Fry 1999; Tonkinwise 2014). Practices of undoing or unmaking prompt us to consider a reparative approach

to design that seeks to address prior harms done by design and work toward a redirective practice (Fry 2007; Lindström and Ståhl 2020b). Similarly, maintenance and repair reconceptualizes our understanding of the life of designed things and the diverse subjectivities of those who encounter the objects of design (Houston and Jackson 2016; Jackson 2014; Russell and Vinsel 2018). All these variations of making and use alter who is involved with the experiment-as-event and when.

The effects of the experiment may also linger or reappear, sometimes delayed, other times punctuated in effect. The experiment-as-event may continue having effect and provoking affect well after one might consider it done. For instance, if the concept of *Fruit Are Heavy* is revived and mobilized in a discussion on the potential value of municipal wireless networks years after the sensors are removed from the trees, then the experiment continues too, or rather once again has influence.

In these ways, the experiment-as-event expands the temporal frame of designing. Casting the design experiment as an event demands that we reconsider "design time." In theorizing the span of participation, Pelle Ehn (2008) offers the conceptualizations of "design before design" and "design after design" as labels to describe how creative activities of making occur both before and after the formal production of a product or service, often by people not referred to as designers. For Ehn, expanding the "when" of design is important in expanding our appreciation of who participates in design and how. Such an expanded temporal frame prompts us to consider participation anew and to recognize the creative agencies of making that occur beyond professional practice. With regard to the design experiment, understanding the expansive scope of the experiment-as-event also prompts us to consider inquiry anew and recognize a broader array of effects and affects, of purposes and outcomes of design.

Imagining the World Differently

Stengers's notion of the experiment-as-event is useful because she identifies and describes qualities and purposes of the experiment that I take to be applicable to many modes of inquiry—not only those that are scientific. One such quality is that the event is transformative; there is a difference between before and after the event. That difference produces knowledge as both a purpose and an outcome of the experiment. In other words, we

know the world differently after an experiment. This outcome of knowing the world differently spans kinds of experiments, regardless of field: controlled inquiry occurs in the arts as well as the sciences. The knowledge produced also has consequences; it affects how we perceive and understand the world, and it begets further activity. Regarded as an event, experiments are the impetus for ongoing inquiry, and they have the capacity to affect the routines and character of that inquiry. As Fraser (2006, 131) succinctly summarizes Stengers's argument, "For Stengers, a scientific experiment is an event only if it makes a difference before and after, that is, if it is able to invent new practices, and new ways of thinking and feeling about a problem." Building on this idea, I want to suggest that in addition to knowledge, imagination is *also* an outcome of the design experiment. We imagine the world differently after an experiment. And imagination too begets further inquiry.

The experiment-as-event thus changes the purposes and outcomes of design. Within dominant discourses and practices of design there is an obligation to functionality and effectiveness. In part, those obligations are bound to a perceived need to demonstrate a market value to design, such that design continues to be a service and profession of commercial merit. This is also often the case in government and civil society, where design is cast as a means to innovate and achieve instrumental ends to sustain politics and society as we know it. But when the use and value of designing are not beholden to such logics or discourses (at least not only or entirely beholden), the outcomes and purposes of a design experiment may be otherwise. In the case of these design experiments in civics, which are intended to contribute to diverse civic imaginaries and practices, one purpose and outcome is imagination. That is, not only does the experiment involve imaginative making and use, the experiment also produces imagination.

Returning to *Fruit Are Heavy*, how might the design experiment be understood and appreciated as an event that generates knowledge and sparks imagination? In the experiment of *Fruit Are Heavy*, we can ask and answer questions to understand circumstances differently after we conduct the experiment. We can ask and answer whether the sensor worked. Specifically, we can ask and answer if this configuration of parts was able to register a bend in a branch over time (it was), and we can ask and answer if the housing kept the rain from the electronics (it did). We can also ask and answer whether this configuration of parts was able to stream the data (it was not). These are the obvious results of the experiment that speak to notions of functionality

and effectiveness. But the value of the experiment derives from more than determining whether any single part worked. Following from Stengers's and Fraser's interpretation, the value of the experiment lies in whether our perspectives on a set of conditions and possibilities were affected. Did the experiment invent new practices, ways of making, or ways of thinking about a problem? (Fraser 2006, 13). In this case, how did the experiment-as-event change how Concrete Jungle thought about and imagined foraging and commoning as civic practices?

As a design experiment, *Fruit Are Heavy* did affect our collective conceptualizations and practices of commoning. In the processes, we, as designers together with members of Concrete Jungle, considered how the use of sensors to monitor fruit in trees around the city would affect the practices of foraging. Through our collaborative activities we considered how we would need to—and whether we wanted to—account for the new kinds of labor needed to attend to these sensors, and the new kind of labor needed to integrate the sensor data into existing practices. We began to imagine, together, new practices of foraging that folded data into work routines. We also began to imagine, beyond that particular instantiation of foraging, possibilities for using other technologies and techniques of precision agriculture for foraging. This led to considerations of the implications of inflecting data and more-than-human agencies in commoning and inspiring new figurations of the smart city that emphasized local practices of care and community economies.

The sparks of knowledge and imagination from such experiments can ignite interest and courses of action. After we know and imagine the world through the experiment, we can consider how we might differently act in the world. This brings about conundrums through our experience of emergent and unfamiliar conditions and unsure potentials, inciting further inquiry. Fraser (2006) refers to this as "inventive problem-making." As part of inventive problem-making, the experiment expresses possibilities and problematic conditions that might be attended to. Just as often as setting horizons, experiments also identify limits and boundaries and redirect action and interest. As I will discuss in the following chapter, inventive problem-making is not only a primary characteristic of the design experiment—it is also how design experiments participate in care.

There is a tension in this description of the event because there is the presumption that designing inherently contributes to problem solving.

Yoking design to operative ends remains prominent in design practice and discourse. This is particularly true in domains of design that intersect and overlap with the contexts and practices of civics—such as social design or social innovation. In these areas, addressing "social problems" is often the focus of making, and notions of "change" bubble through the expressed intentions of practitioners. Instrumental orientations can be a challenge for appreciating the uncertainty of events. At the same time, the backlash against problem solving can itself be problematic. It is true that the rush to solutions limits the scope of design and often unduly and sometimes unjustly delimits design. But it is also true that knee-jerk accusations of pragmatic design as solutionism can express positions of privilege, suddenly putting designers and design things beyond accountability.

Daniela Rosner (2018) orients her work around a non-teleological practice and theory of design, which does not reduce design to being defined and judged by rote functionalism. Such an approach retains an ethics and politics of designing that is located and accountable (Suchman 2002), while also not reducing design to a positivist project that claims to resolve issues through making alone. From a different perspective—but sharing an interest in design—Celia Lury and Noortje Marres (2015) argue for a post-instrumental notion of designed things, also drawing from pragmatism. They assert an approach to valuation that emphasizes the multiple valences of designed things. These reorientations charge designers and those who study design to be open to the things and processes of design working in more varied ways.

Whether we believe an experiment has "worked," then, does not depend upon the resolution of some circumstance, although that is an outcome one should aspire to for outcomes of the experiment to be of value in the moment and for the future. This was certainly the hope of the experiments described in this book. It is also a responsibility that we, as designers, have to our partners. That spark of imagination, that igniting of interest, and those courses of action should affect more than the field of design and the work of the designer. As an example, consider *Careful Coding* as an experiment-as-event that attempted to address conditions in the now, while also kindling desires for what conditions might become. *Careful Coding* explored how resident-led activities of collecting and managing data might draw municipal resources to a neighborhood and help residents assert which issues were attended to and prioritized. The experiment was both an attempt to enable

aid in the present and to probe possible reconfigurations of authority and responsibility in local politics that might manifest in the future. Through the design experiment, residents and code enforcement officers came together with designers. Collectively, through material and embodied endeavors, we experienced how the mandates for data collection, accountabilities for the veracity of information, standards of expertise, and charges to act might be redistributed. Our process of making and using data generated knowledge about how the current processes worked. As we expressed and trialed alternative political relations, we elicited potential reconfigurations of civic institutions. Paper forms and maps, digital applications, spreadsheets, and walks through the neighborhood—all these design things comprised events through which we, collectively, produced and explored diverse civics. The experiment-as-event affected the immediate situation, while also refracting possibilities beyond the imminent functionality of use. The significance of *Careful Coding* as an event, then, is not bound *only* by whether it produces inventive modes of data collection or draws attention and resources to the municipality. The significance of the design experiment *also* lies in how it prompts us to envision how we might differently configure authority and agency within the neighborhood.

To say that the purpose and outcome of designing are the production of knowledge and the sparking of imagination shifts our expectations of what designing does and what designing might be for. Some might argue that other modes of designing contribute to knowledge production, and even that much design sparks imagination. And perhaps that is true. But what distinguished the experimental event as a mode of democratic inquiry from other practices of designing is that the production of knowledge and the sparking of imagination are a primary purpose and outcome—not secondary or tangential to some other logic or function.

When we describe and judge design experiments, then, the emphasis should be on whether knowledge and imagination were brought forth, and what courses of action they illuminated or enabled. This is not abstract or apathetic knowledge and imagination. It is situated, directed, and committed. Moreover, that knowledge and imagination are produced together with collectives of people and institutions. It is not the knowledge and imagination of designers alone, nor does it give preference to designers (Manzini 2015; Steen 2013). To achieve this requires the work of gathering and orchestration.

Gathering and Orchestration as Activities of Designing

Another question we should ask is, "What does making events entail?" Events are collective affairs that require gathering and orchestration. Gathering assembles a plurality of peoples and institutions, values, desires, facts, beliefs, objects, and experiences. Through orchestration, this plurality is bound together to produce a meaningful happening. What makes these happenings meaningful is not a matter of the quantity of things so much as it involves composing with and among the differences between things (Stengers 2005).

The experiment-as-event thus changes the activities of designing. Appreciating the work of the design experiment-as-event requires recognizing and valuing activities of gathering and orchestration as activities of making. Attention to these relational activities of making has emerged from contemporary participatory design and its interactions with science and technology studies. For Binder and colleagues (2011), this notion of gathering is basic to practices of making public things that cohere together humans and nonhumans alike toward the articulation of issues. This echoes and amplifies earlier work by Pelle Ehn and Richard Badham (2002), which expressed the idea of the collective designer: an idea of designing as both a collective endeavor and toward the construction and renewal of collectives. Both the concepts of design things and the collective designer are themselves influenced by a collection of ideas from the contemporary theory, including Lucy Suchman's artful integrations (1993, 1996), Bruno Latour's compositionism (2010), and Isabelle Stengers's cosmopolitics (2010). While quite different, these ideas share a perspective that worlding involves endeavors of assembly and arrangement, done in part through activities of making and the use of made things. Recently, designers expanding the traditions and theories of participatory design have sought to further characterize the activities of gathering and orchestration through concepts such as patchworking (Lindström and Ståhl 2014) and design events (Jönsson 2014).

In the context of democratic inquiry, the purpose of gathering and orchestration is to construct conditions for inquiry by bringing together people, artifacts, institutions, discourses, and practices, so they might intermingle, affecting one another. That interaction and affectation then sparks people's imagination, helping them envision and act on the world differently. The selection and assembly of those dissimilar, constituent parts is crucial to the

experiment. These components of the experiment include the familiar materialities of design, as well as less familiar things—what is present and what is absent, the human and the more-than-human.

For instance, in *Fruit Are Heavy*, fruit, trees, sensors, microcontrollers, plastic boxes, vinyl backpacks, designers, researchers, and foragers are conscripted to explore different practices of foraging and forms of commoning. These are the constituent parts that were present and composed through the experiment. But in cataloging the constituents, we should also recognize absences, such as nonexistent municipal Wi-Fi service in *Fruit Are Heavy* or the missing data in *Careful Coding*. These absences shaped our collective experiences in these experiments and altered what was gathered together. The void they left contributed to the shape and rhythm of the event.

The more-than-human factors of an experiment also demand consideration when cataloging these constituents and describing the experiment. Although the *Fruit Are Heavy* project was motivated by our human desire to collect and distribute wild-growing fruit as a practice of care through commoning, the qualities of the nonhumans involved in foraging influenced the event. These nonhumans include fruit, trees, and environments where they grow. We might also include the capacities of batteries, energy draw of the circuit, and length of the sensor as factors that exerted influence on the making and use of the device. Subsequently, they also affect the staging and consequences of the experiment. This confluence of factors and agencies is common to the experiment and practices of making. Research into scientific practice and the sociology of scientific knowledge repeatedly demonstrates that tools and techniques are not separable from the experiment—they are constitutive of the experiment. Practices of craft also involve constitutive parts. The origins of the clay, the potter's wheel, and the materials burned within a kiln all contribute to the aesthetics of the vessel made. The design experiment—as an experiment of and through making—similarly happens through the collection and interaction of an assortment of more-than-human qualities and agencies, which individually and collectively should be accounted for.

Working in collaboration, Tau Lenskjold and Li Jönsson (Jönsson and Lenskjold 2014; Lenskjold and Jönsson 2017) have explored how humans and nonhumans might be brought into new relations through staged encounters. This attention to the more-than-human constitution of events is part of a broader conversation in design on more-than-human encounters

(Forlano 2017; Wakkary 2021). Through a series of self-described experiments, Lenskjold and Jönsson explored how we might create devices that bring together seagulls and humans in playful ways, to rethink and potentially refigure the relations between humans and nonhumans in the city. This leads Jönsson to the articulation of a concept of "design events," which very much influences this discussion of design experiments as events. Jönsson (2014, 217) describes the more-than-human perspective of the design event as "a means to invent polite ways of entering into new relationships with nonhuman others. . . . It is a material addition that makes possible, that gives chance to expanding the repertoire of possible choices, and to explore how design can intervene and allow for different hybrid formations to emerge by moving away from a purely humanistic focus."

For Jönsson, those formations include assemblages with cameras, elders, and seagulls. In the context of *Fruit Are Heavy*, such formations might be extended to apples, bend sensors, Wi-Fi, data, and databases. The disparate character (Stengers 2000, 97) of all involved in the experiment is important because variation brings complexity and potential to the experiment and fosters a conversation between materials and practices. For instance, part of the work in *Fruit Are Heavy* was making a sensor that operated outdoors, strapped to a tree for weeks on end. The conditions of foraging exert certain burdens on the construction and use of the sensing device. Making the system work in those conditions was a knottier task than making a prototype of the system work in an engineering lab. In tandem, another part of the experiment of *Fruit Are Heavy* involved remixing the routines, motivations, and cultures of foraging with those of precision agriculture. Here the work of design experiments involved refiguring practices by piecing together seemingly contrary concepts and activities to create a sociotechnical hybrid.

The significance of the disparate character (Stengers 2000, 97) of constituents becomes more charged and promising in some experiments than others. *Fruit Are Heavy* brought the materialities and practices of precision agriculture and smart cities together within the world of foraging, and the experiment happened mostly among foragers. As such, the practices of foraging were more influenced by the practices of precision agriculture or smart cities than vice versa. In other experiments, however, practices are brought into closer relation with another to intermingle, affecting one another in uncertain ways.

PARSE was an attempt at such an intermingling, an attempt to rouse positions and perspectives and have them move one another. The project brought together people from different backgrounds, with varied interests and commitments, to collaboratively envision how they would use smart-city technologies in their everyday routines. The project used a design game to elicit ideas and fragments of stories. These fragments were then interpreted and compiled as scenarios to be shared. In this design game and storytelling, city planning, pedestrians, bicycles and cars, sensors and data, hustles and hobbies, infrastructure and its maintenance were jumbled together with the myriad identities of residents and workers. Both the activities of the design game and the subsequent scenarios were intended to animate the relations between these varied constituents of a smart Atlanta.

Similarly, the *Careful Coding* project gathered together varied constituents through the making and using of civic data. Not only was there an intermingling of materialities in this design event, formal and informal institutions also intermingled. Residents and designers collaborated with code enforcement officers, municipal information services, community organizations, and philanthropic foundations to collect local data and create civic data tools and processes. The standard way of reporting issues is through government websites and apps. For instance, the 311 app, common to many cities, provides a mobile and digital conduit between residents and municipal services. But not all residents want to use such services. Other modes of data collection might support collective rather than individual efforts. They might not solely rely upon digital platforms or provide discretion in reporting so that residents can choose to report some things and not report others. These modes of action enable residents to assert agency in shaping formal and informal institutions.

In the *Careful Coding* project, the social and political frictions between resident activists, municipal workers, professional planners, and designers imparted a distinctive feel to the experiment. The gathering together of these constituents, and their contrary temperaments, commitments, and responsibilities, had meaningful consequences. As these constituents interacted, they transformed the civic environment and affected one another. Residents came to understand municipal regulations and the structures of governance. Code enforcement officers sympathized with the concerns of residents. Designers were enrolled into the work of residents. Together, they explored and trialed what might be possible with and through data as a conduit for other relations

of authority and action in the neighborhood. In the best of such situations, a conjoined literacy develops through mutual learning. This literacy is both factual and affective; it is a literacy that informs and is moving, a literacy that inspires toward apprised action.

Orchestration

As the event spans and enfolds multiple people and institutions, designing becomes a way of orchestrating associations. Orchestration, then, is a necessary complement to gathering and gives coherence to what is assembled. The work of orchestrating design experiments involves surveying and distinguishing what material and experiential aspects of one practice might affect another practice, and then combining them in ways that prompt interaction. Such attention to materialities and experiences is a practical concern because the activity of design involves rendering and manipulating materials and experience. Of course, design is also a conceptual and intellectual affair—these material and experiential aspects are expressions of ideology and values. But even these conceptual and intellectual aspects are usually explored and manifested through material and experiential demonstrations. In no way is this meant to either denigrate or valorize one mode of making or another. Nor is it meant to compartmentalize or establish borders of what is or is not designing. It is simply and humbly (with the intention of acknowledging limitations to design) to recognize that acts of design are acts of making. In this way, we can think of orchestration as form-giving. This mode of form-giving is distinctive because what is being shaped are the potentials for engagement between diverse constituents.

For example, *Careful Coding* explores the qualities and consequences of data in contemporary civics. Of all the projects discussed, it was most obviously an experiment in democratic values and conditions. Within practices of local government in Atlanta lay sets of entwined ideals and values relating to citizenship and governance. These shaped the design and use of civic technology. As in many cities, service and efficiency figured prominently in the espoused politics of the municipality. Equity was also prominent in the political discourse of city leadership. To explore these ideals and values in relation to data, the *Careful Coding* project attended to a particular instantiation of these ideologies and values: how data about the built environment is collected, managed, and acted upon. These material and experiential means expressed collective ideas about and values of civics and governance.

Similarly, *PARSE* explored the stories we tell about what smart cities are and might be. It attempted to craft stories that express more varied subjectivities than usual. This effort was both nestled in, and in tension with, ideologies about smart cities advanced by industry and government. The narratives and subjectivities they advanced tend to cast residents as passive producers and mere consumers of civic services. They tell stories of entrepreneurship progressing within formal economies, and of technology as stable and secure. The *PARSE* project sought to surface other narratives through making. These other narratives spoke to the specifics of smart-city technologies and services and also told stories about the civic conditions residents wanted to create and inhabit.

Making is thus one way to explore the interplay of values, desires, and the made world. Through the design experiments we can ask: If other means were made and used, would other values and desires manifest? Will other politics manifest, or will other modes of political action be possible? We should not presume the answer is yes; it may be no. Or likely, the results of making and use will be varied, even vague. But through making and use, we can express these questions concretely, even if we cannot answer them definitively.

Although within design experiments diverse things are gathered together, they are not fully assimilated. They remain varied, even divergent. In these particular design experiments, terms common to civic projects such as "community" become complicated. As Iris Young (1986) argues, "community" is a term that too often elides difference. It obscures that the desire for community is also what drives racism, ethnic chauvinism, and political sectarianism. Rather, says Young, "a more acceptable politics would acknowledge that members of an organization do not understand one another as they understand themselves, and would accept this distance without closing it into exclusion" (1986, 14). Difference is meaningful and should be sustained. Gathering together does not require integration or consensus.

The character of these gatherings, then, is striated, not smooth, and comes with friction (Korn and Voida 2015; Tsing 2011). It is not as if those gathered to the experiment have been crafted to fit together. Instead, the process of joinery is often a messy, seamful affair (Vertesi 2014). In some cases, such as with *Careful Coding*, the intent might be to construct such agonistic space of encounter (Björgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren 2012; Mouffe 2013). In other cases, such as *PARSE* and *Fictions of a Smart Atlanta*, the friction might be subtle and subdued. And at times, the friction of these

gatherings leads to moments of eventfulness that are incomplete or fall apart. In fact, incompleteness and fragility are aspects of the relational work of design experiments, which gives them a character different from the often-grandiose narratives of design. The event is not always as eventful as one might hope or as designers might claim.

Different Affects and Expectations of the Design Experiment

Much of what is marked as events are dramatic happenings with vivid affects and effects. But there is a danger to emphasizing drama because designers and those who study design can become enthralled with the spectacle of events. There is also a danger in setting expectations that every event must achieve a threshold of extraordinariness. This concern is particularly relevant within contemporary design, which tends to breathlessly pursue innovation. A drive toward the exceptional is exemplified by the fascination with "disruption" in consumer products and services, medicine, education, government, and civil society. Disruption is a rallying cry for one grand event after another. But not all events are spectacular. While the before and after of an event is marked by shifts in discourse, material environments, and practice, they need not be spectacular to be consequential. Many events are discreet and mundane. Events can be partially successful or fall apart. Understanding and appreciating design as partial, fragile, and often lacking is contrary to the heroics of much of design discourse. But the design experiment-as-event evokes different feelings and reactions than we anticipate and presume of design.

Elizabeth Povinelli's (2011) feminist anthropology of late liberalism provides a vantage point on events that recognizes the mundane and engages with "the minor" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986). Povinelli speaks of "quasi-events" that do not reach the threshold of spectacle but nonetheless are meaningful. The outcome of quasi-events may be only a modest shift. Eventfulness may deny change or mark a moment that thwarts desire. Unlike the grandiosity of so much that is claimed about design, quasi-events are often "ordinary, chronic, or cruddy," and even liminal (2011, 11). The tentative nature of the experiment-as-event appreciates uncertainty—the fractional and provisional character of so much of contemporary life.

As an example of a quasi-event, Povinelli recounts moving a washing machine from one town to another, among the aboriginal Australian

communities she worked with for decades (2011, 138–139). The washing machine holds the potential for providing relief from the sores and rashes and general discomfort that comes from the inability to adequately clean clothes. In the process of moving the washing machine in the back of a pickup truck, unbeknownst to Povinelli and others, the lid flies off the machine. They return later looking for the lid, only to find it along the roadside, flattened, unable to be reattached. Due to its design, the machine will not function without the lid. This has a cascade of consequences: without a functioning washing machine, clothes will not be adequately cleaned, and the sores that accompany dirty clothes will continue. Despite a desire for things to be different, and despite acting toward making things different, change is thwarted. The loss of the lid is, in all its mundaneness, a quasi-event.

> Quasi-events are a general condition of human social life. (My shoestrings snap all the time.) They are widespread (quasi-events occur across every actual and conceivable organization of social life); they confound response (their slightness often occurs below the level of accountability); they resist cause and effect characterization (it is hard to say when they occurred let alone what caused them). (Povinelli 2011, 144)

Such quasi-events differ from events more familiar to design discourse. Quasi-events occur in the context of the everyday, drawing attention to the routines of life. The commonplace becomes a site of happenings that are ordinary rather than spectacular. In some cases, the imperfect and unfinished things of a quasi-event may be closer to the actual work of design than grander, more spectacular notions of events. But the contingent nature of quasi-events makes them difficult to connect with specific outcomes. This is a challenge with regard to design because design practice and discourse tend to exude confidence in the capacities of design to effect change. Both practice and discourse in design strive for the definite. As an example, consider that in most discourses of design the prototype is distinguished from the product. The product, as a finished thing ready for sale and use, is considered the result of design. The prototype is a waypoint en route to the product. The partial and incomplete are valued primarily as means to a more permanent final state. Such latent assumptions reinforce values and beliefs about what the work of design is, should be, or strives for. However, in developing an appreciation for the design experiment—toward thinking and doing design otherwise—the imperfect and unfinished need to be given more consideration as modes of design and designing.

While design experiments strive for a significant effect, what just as often occurs is merely partial eventfulness. With *Fruit Are Heavy*, aspects of the project functioned as expected and produced meaningful insights across sites and scales. Yet, the event was thwarted and did not come to the sought-after conclusion. Technical limitations prevented the sharing of the data beyond the device. Such quasi-events are common in design experiments in civics and can be found in all the projects discussed so far. For instance, in the *PARSE* project, workshops were held, design games played, narratives crafted, and stories shared. There was interest, excitement, and plans for what should come next. However, such plans can be stymied when the administration changes, a new mayor is voted in, the former chief information officer is recruited to another city, or a public system is privatized. In the case of *Careful Coding*, tools were made for collecting data, residents collected the data, and the data was organized and analyzed. Data sets were sent off as email attachments, then councilmembers and officers emailed back to set up meetings. But over time, some residents tire of slow-moving bureaucracy, a councilmember starts their own data collection project, and a new app for data collection is developed by the city. Like the washing machine lid in Povinelli's ethnography, the stories, devices, tools, and data sets of so many design experiments sit alongside the road, separated from the machines they were made to fit with. Designers can look for what caused these disarticulations. Perhaps it is the fault of the designer or the design process, or stems from a flaw in the things made. Regardless, there will be a cascade of effects and affects.

Though the effects of quasi-events are partial, something does happen; there is a before and an after. Beyond this phenomenological fact, the effects may be diffusely distributed. Certainly, there were happenings in the workshops in *PARSE*, the sensing in *Fruit Are Heavy*, and the encounters in *Careful Coding*. However, the accomplishments of those experiments remained indefinite. As the stories from *PARSE* sit as a file on someone's desktop, planning and procurement will go on as before. While the data from *Careful Coding* waits as an unopened attachment in someone's email, the established procedures will continue. Institutions will be unaffected, and existing relations between residents and government continue unchanged. Matters of concern and care continue to be overlooked because they are unattended to, leading to disappointment and resignation.

These blurred and fragile qualities of the quasi-event are at odds with the authoritative and bold discourses and affects of contemporary design. This difference is what makes the quasi-event so pertinent and poignant; it attunes designers and those who study design to more varied outcomes, expectations, and affects. The intentions and wants of designers and their partners are hardly destined to be realized through making; experiments often disappoint. As we tell the stories of designing and use, it is important to convey moments of incompleteness, missteps, thwarted desires, and limited effects. These are not tales of "fail early and often" or worse, "move fast and break things." Rather, I am trying to describe and theorize making and use in ways that, with humility, recognize the complexity of contemporary conditions and the limitations of design. In the context of design discourse and practice, these are "new ways of thinking and feeling" (Fraser 2006, 131). Those new ways of thinking and feeling are not always joyous. Such a realization opens designers and those who study design to other affects and aspirations. Endurance is one such affect.

The outcome of a design experiment in civics is not inevitably some preferred condition. At times, the outcome is enduring—continuing to persevere and persist. To endure is itself a significant end of contemporary civics and a meaningful mode of togetherness. How peoples endure is a central theme within Povinelli's scholarship and her idea of quasi-events. As we explore what other worlds might be possible through design experiments in civics, we repeatedly confront the structures and processes of contemporary politics and economics that often work against those other worlds. It is in such moments that endurance and enduring become necessary. With *PARSE* there was initial interest in the stories created through the design game and in using the design game to facilitate more public engagement. These goals were not achieved. This was not any one person's fault; it was simply a matter of the circumstances of bureaucracy. Despite our goals not being achieved, we continue to advocate for more public engagement, share the design game, and retell the stories of what else a smart Atlanta might be. Whenever we have the chance, we remind ourselves and others of the diverse subjectivities that work and live here. Or consider the *Careful Coding* project, in which residents collected data on the built environment to advocate for responsible neighborhood improvement. The data was collected, sorted, verified, packaged, and shared. Code violations were registered in a database—and likely

still reside there, awaiting action. But the change has yet to arrive. In some cases, something happens in a piecemeal way. An abandoned lot is cleared here and a dilapidated building is razed there, but still the residents live among worn conditions in their neighborhood. Yet we still work together to collect and share the data. Against uncertain odds, still we design to support these endeavors.

From the outset of this book, I have sought to identify terms and themes to describe and judge design experiments in civics. Inspired by Povinelli's notion of the quasi-event, I suggest that those terms and themes must embrace a more diverse set of affects and actions. Endurance is just one such theme. Of course, there are more themes that craft and express other collective subjectivities of design. Taking the time to notice and develop these themes is an important trajectory for future research and practice. The conjoined identities, activities, and principles of designing to endure and "struggle along with" are distinctive. They are not necessarily opposed to more familiar subjectivities of design, but they are different from the brashness that characterizes much design discourse.

One way to think about and perform more varied subjectivities of design comes from feminist and queer theory, which abandons prescribed, singular, normative positions in favor of expansive ways of being and becoming. A source of inspiration is the work of Sara Ahmed (2014, 2017) and her embrace of figures such as the willful subject and the killjoy. For Ahmed, part of the work of being a feminist is to live subjectivities such as the killjoy. By inhabiting them, we can acknowledge and indulge in figures of feminism that have been denigrated because they are "difficult." These figures produce productive frictions, rather than simply fitting in. Nassim Parvin and Anne Pollock (2020) call attention to the importance of the killjoy in relation to the unbridled enthusiasm for technology, using, in fact, smart cities as an exemplar. Beyond the killjoy or willful subject, what other identities, activities, and principles of making might vary the subjectivities of design? Cindy Lin and Silvia Lindtner (2021) call our attention to this question and its relation to an assumed trajectory of progress that aligns to positive affect. For designers working through experiments in civics, shaping different subjectivities requires alternate habits of making and ways of inhabiting the world as a maker. These may be comprised of much more varied affects than the often naïve optimism that tends to characterize design. For critics or scholars, different subjectivities of design—the diverse affects and

actions that characterize design experiments in civics—change and expand what counts as design, and how we describe and interpret design.

Contingent, Provisional, Probative, and Yet Also Concrete

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, not all events are experiments, but all experiments aspire to be events. All experiments aspire to produce effects and affects that prompt new practices of making and doing, that usher in new ways of understanding and feeling about conditions and potentials. While designers might desire for ensuing effects to be definite and distinctive—and affects to be confident and positive—that is not always the case. In fact, we should question these desires, perhaps feeling them as the residue of notions of achievement and mastery that are counter to thinking and doing design otherwise, counter to design as democratic inquiry. Drawing from Povinelli, event making also involves engagement with the "ordinary, chronic, or cruddy," and many experiences of the event are liminal. The quasi-event, then, is an apt frame for many design experiments. The experiment might cause a spark, or it might smolder. But from the start it has been clear that the design experiment is a contingent affair, provisional and probative (Ansell 2013). As Binder and colleagues describe, "When probing into futures that are inherently unpredictable, plural and sometimes impossible, it is a matter of enabling collective action in the face of uncertainty: rehearsals, attempts and failures—all are ways to try and come to terms with prevailing ambiguity" (2015, 162). Taken together, these aspects of the experiment-as-event are important in the context of civics because they provide a basis for appreciating an expanded field of designing that strives to participate in exploring new modes of togetherness, to contribute to diverse civic imaginaries and practices, in ways that often sidestep the familiar rote instrumentalism of design.

While it is contingent, provisional, and probative, the event makes the subject of the design experiment—and democratic inquiry—concrete. Rather than referring to abstractions, activities of designing instantiate a set of conditions. Through use—as well as nonuse and failure—those instantiations are questioned, disputed, and embraced, through twisting, folding, and unfurling considerations. In Alex Wilkie's work on prototyping as event, the subject of design is a disease: obesity. Obesity is a complex and contested concept in both popular and medical discourse. While that

complexity and contestation remain in the design work, Wilkie (2014, 487) argues, "There is no abstract 'obesity,' because it is constantly being actualized as an event, whether through discursive envisioning or hands-on prototyping, obesity is always being specified as *this* particular form of obesity." The same could be said of the examples discussed throughout this book. The experiment-as-event does not produce an abstraction of the smart city; it produces a particular narrative of *this* smart city. The experiment-as-event does not yield a general theory of commoning; it leads to *this* particular occasion of commoning. The experiment-as-event does not produce a universal model of democracy; it produces *this* particular and inescapably local set of encounters and infrastructures of governmentality. Through the design experiment we can work to manifest civic imaginaries, if only momentarily. As they make these diverse civic imaginaries experiential, the design experiment can be understood as a kind of prefiguration—the lived expression of a politics in minor form (Asad 2019; DiSalvo 2016; Lenskjold, Olander, and Halse 2015).

Design as Democratic Inquiry

Putting Experimental Civics into Practice

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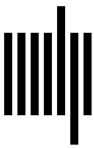

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