DESIGN (&) ACTIVISM

PERSPECTIVES ON DESIGN AS ACTIVISM AND ACTIVISM AS DESIGN

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MIMESIS
INTERNATIONAL

CONTENT

"Whenever anyone asks why I am so passionate about activism,
I ask them to consider the alternative: passivity."

Anita Roddick 2001, XIX

THE IMPURE POLITICS OF DESIGN ACTIVISM

Thomas Markussen

Design activism is the topic of a growing number of publications, networks and design conferences. As a result, there exist today various notions of what design activism is and not least what can be expected of design activist practices, which are the two issues I will be primarily interested in here.

It is not unusual to find general assertions made of design activism's overlap with social design and participatory design, approaches that are likewise engaged with the needs of marginalized groups and designing for non-commercial ends (See e.g. Armstrong et al. 2014; Banz 2016; Björgvinsson/Ehn/Hillgren 2012, 127–44; Thorpe/Gamman 2011, 217–30). Moreover, design activism is often presented as the antidote to the unsustainable condition of living resulting from unruly forces of Neoliberalism, global capitalism and over consumption (Julier 2013, 215–36). In this sense, design activism easily gets conflated with design for sustainability and social innovation (See e.g. Fuad-Luke 2009; Manzini 2015; Thorpe 2012). However, just because designers critically engage with the political or the social does not *per se* make their practice activist. Hence, in spite of a common goal (a more sustainable environmental and social future), there is a key difference between design activism and these other design practices' engagement with the political and social (See also Markussen 2017, 160–74). Notably, this difference hinges upon what I will refer to as the 'politics of design activism', i.e. its ability through critical aesthetic practice to contest and unsettle existing systems of power and authority.

Several authors have delved into this topic, some of whom explicitly speak of 'design activism' (Fuad-Luke 2009; Fuad-Luke 2013; Julier 2013; Markussen 2013; Thorpe 2008; Thorpe 2012), while others use cognate terms such as 'design as politics' (Fry 2011), 'adverserial design' (DiSalvo 2012) and 'agonistic participatory design' (Björgvinsson/Ehn/Hillgren 2013). Yet, there are subtle variations in how design's potential for effecting change is conceptualised.

In order to account for these variations, Fuad-Luke has proposed a coarsely grained meta-theoretical framework, where current theories of design activism are divided into one out of two approaches (Fuad-Luke 2013). More specifically, Fuad-Luke makes a distinction between theories conceiving of design activism as working *within* a paradigm of power and control and design activism working *outside* the paradigm. When design activism works within the paradigm it *"adopts a consensus*

over dissensus approach, while outside the paradigm the approach is one of dissensus over consensus" (Fuad-Luke 2013, 471).

In what follows, I will demonstrate that we need to be cautious in making such spatial dichotomies because they easily lead to two incompatible ideological representations of design activism, both of which, although dominant in current design research, are not at ease with the actual practice of design activism. While the consensus over dissensus approach enslaves design activism to the hegemony of existing systems of power, the dissensus over consensus approach often leads to overblown claims of design activism being able to obliterate that power through revolt and anarchy.

To substantiate my argument, I shall first provide some theoretical background for understanding the meaning of the concepts 'dissensus' and 'consensus'. This theoretical background will be modelled upon the philosophical work of Rancière's, notably his distinction between 'politics' and 'the police'. The basic tenet of Rancière's thought is that critical aesthetic practices – whether in design activism or critical art – can truly call existing paradigms of power into question, and for this reason they enact dissensus and politics, but these practices are inescapably bound up with these paradigms. Hence, for Rancière, it does not make sense to speak of an 'inside' and 'outside' of a paradigm. The politics of aesthetic practices is an 'impure politics', as I will show below. For now, suffice it to say, that the notion of impure politics allows me to position design activist practice in-between hegemony and anarchy and, in so doing, to make the theorization of design activism more attuned with design activist practice.

Theoretical background: Pure and impure politics

The offer of Rancière's philosophy to design research is a valuable explanation of how design in general and design activism in particular can be understood as an inherently aesthetic and political practice. Aesthetic for Rancière refers not to "a theory of sensibility, taste or pleasure" (Rancière 2004, 22). Instead, aesthetics refers to those forms that "determine what presents itself to sense perception" (ibid., 13). Rancière therefore asserts that aesthetic is about "the distribution of the sensible". Such a distribution entails that a sensible space and time are given as shared, and at the same time, divided and partitioned among the entities (people, artefacts, systems, institutions) identified as forming part of it (Vallury 2009, 229). Through this distribution a perceptual field is configured so that it enables certain social orders, ways of participating, doing, making, speaking, acting, and being. Politics, on the other hand, occurs when the sensible is redistributed, when culturally entrenched ways of being, saying and doing are disturbed so that it opens up for new modes of subjectivization and inscription" in a shared space (ibid). In this way politics enacts what Rancière refers to as *dissensus* (Rancière 2010, 38). Yet, to fully grasp what dissensus means, it is necessary to understand that politics and dissensus in Rancière's work are defined in diametrical opposition to the notions of 'police' and 'consensus'.

'Police' is used by Rancière to denote the organization of powers and a broad set of procedures that allows a specific system to govern. Formally, the police can be manifested through the passing of acts and laws, the organization of political parties into parliaments, election procedures and so on. However, orders of the police are not reducible to the arena of political science. The police permeate the whole of a society and are often only implicitly felt in how a social formation distributes bodies and things into places and roles in certain ways. Policing takes place everywhere: through the organization of healthcare services, educational systems, urban planning, and policy-making, but also in how people daily interact and communicate with each other. What is characteristic of police orders is that they are structured hierarchically into a social order, which sets conditions for who has the right to speak and to listen, who is excluded and included, and what is deemed right and wrong. To establish such conditions the police perform ways of counting empirical parts of the social formation. People are divided into actual groups by their difference in birth, ethnicity, different functions, locations and interests that are counted as constituting the social body (ibid., 35). Although such ways of counting can only be conventional the police works through sophisticated processes of naturalization that seeks to legitimize and make self-evident this counting and distribution of parts (cf. Chambers 2013, 66). This is how the police are tightly coupled to the notion of consensus: that which is taken as univocal, but which could be otherwise (cf. Rancière 2010, 149).

Politics is the disrupting of the police order. A moment of dissensus that disturbs the self-evidence of the given order of domination so that a reconfiguring of positions, roles of identity and power can take place (ibid., 37). But there are divergent interpretations of what exactly this disruption consists in and how one should conceive of its potential for changing the police order. For the sake of clarity, let us say, that among Rancière scholars there exists a *pure politics* and an *impure politics* interpretation.

According to the pure politics interpretation, which can be found, for instance, in Tood May's work, politics is the actions of a wronged group or individuals who protest against the inequalities of the hierarchically structured policing order (May 2008). In this account the police are conceived of in pejorative terms and is often associated with repressive orders of domination or Neoliberal government. Politics is the force of the people, a way for them to radically call into question the injustices of the police (through revolt, riot and protest) and eventually to obliterate it by reclaiming total equality. Although May argues convincingly that politics is the way of safeguarding democratic politics there is a short distance from his notion of total equality to anarchy. Moreover, politics and police in his account come to represent what Sloterdijk elsewhere refers to as "a fire of pure burning oppositions": good versus evil, friend against enemy, the people versus the state, and so on (Sloterdijk 2005). Politics and police cannot co-exist, only one survives by overturning the other.

The impure politics interpretation is set up against and as a critique of this account. One of its proponents is Chambers who argues that for Rancière *"politics*

cannot be uncoupled from police; it only appears in this blended form" (Chambers 2013, 49). Note however that for Chambers this blending should not be taken in the sense of 'merging' (ibid., 49). Politics is a moment of rupturing the police that makes a "wrong" or "miscount" perceivable in the policing order. It's potential for changing the police order lies precisely in letting this dis-sensus be acknowledged, but what comes after cannot be predicted. Politics occur as *"a possible event with repercussions that can never be anticipated"* (ibid., 8). This means that Chambers does not subscribe to the idea that politics is a conflict between the people and the authorities; nor that it can be instrumentalised to achieve certain political goals or state of affairs, e.g. the overturning of the police. Because, as he says, *"Politics can do nothing else than this: renegotiate and reconfigure the police order"* (ibid., 65).

In this account, the police are taken in a neutral and non-pejorative sense based on the assumption that "police orders are not only bad" (ibid., 10). Whether a reconfiguration of the police order happens relies on how dissensus – the making perceivable of a wrong – is accommodated by the police. The central critique of Neoliberalism as a policing order is that it seeks to eliminate every occurrence of dissensus by cordoning it off into a confined and controlled space in its prevailing order of counted parts (ibid., 29). This does not lead to change, but to sustaining hegemony as the status quo.

Why is this disagreement in philosophy relevant for design research? In what follows below, I demonstrate that it is important, because it allows for increasing understanding of how dominant ideas and theories of design activism diverge.

Design activism as pure politics and anarchy

In *Design as politics*, Fry provides a discouraging account of the miserable condition of our world at large, identifying the true causes of the crisis and why the model of what he appropriately terms 'defuturing' is only going to make things worse. The entire project of the book is described as *"the transformation of design and of politics combining, for all agents of change, to become the means by which the moment and process of Sustainment (the overcoming of the unsustainable) is attained"* (Fry 2011, viii). For this transformation to happen, designers need to shift attention from institutionalized politics to action in "the realm of the political". This is what 'design as politics' stands for: *"an engagement with the political nature of the world around us"* (Fry 2011, 102–3).

Notwithstanding Fry preferably speaks of 'design as politics' and not 'design activism', it goes without saying that his proclamation can be seen as being explicitly concerned with the question that I have set out to explore. What can we expect of design activism? According to Fry we should expect massive change. Faced with mal-functioning democracy, as the existing system of governance design must be used as means for exceeding and replacing democracy, because it is "unable to deliver Sustainment". [1] Drawing upon Carl Schmitt's political theory, Fry asserts

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1   Fry uses 'democracy' in the singular to denote Neoliberal democracy.

that a "superior form of politics" must replace democracy. The shaping of such a politics is placed in the hands and minds of 'creative communities' who *"should put themselves before the challenge of developing new realizable (rather than utopian) political imaginaries"* (Fry 2011, 103). Further, to support the implementation of this politics, we need to invent a new kind of institutional form: a planetary institution – like the United Nations, but entirely transformed.

Disregarding the question of whether this is a utopian or realizable project, I shall focus on how such an account can be seen as a vivid example of pure politics. Thus, basing the discussion on the theoretical backbone extracted from Ranciére's philosophical work, one can argue that democracy for Fry is conceived of as an ill-functioning policing order. It is a system of power exercised through unsustainable logics of marketization and capitalism weighting economic value over environmental and social value. By claiming that the aim is to contest and replace democracy, Fry represents design as politics as the elimination of democracy. Or to use the wordings of Fuad-Luke: Fry takes an overtly "dissensus over consensus approach" (Fuad-Luke 2013, 471). But what does such a notion of design entail?

It is hard to avoid seeing Fry's "superior form of politics" as yet another police order with the 'creative communities' acting as a new ruling class and a sovereign planetary institution. Creativity is in this way instrumental to securing this order. As a matter of fact creativity becomes the instrument for exercising power and inevitably there will be those allocated positions, roles and places for deeming what counts as Sustainment and what not. One could of course counter argue that such a hierarchy would be avoided if one declares that everyone of us is recognized as being equally creative or capable of designing. However the radical consequence of such a view would be a creative anarchy of DIY freaks and not Sustainment with a capital 'S', but endless political imaginaries of sustainment.

The point here is not that I do not share Fry's acute diagnosis and frustration with Neoliberal democracy. It is rather to question the ideological representation of the politics of design as consisting in the complete overturning of this political system. Neoliberalism and the growth model of economics can surely be held much responsible for the miseries of the status quo. But, as Julier remarks, it is rather doubtful whether design activism is actually capable of effecting massive change *"to a post-neoliberal environment where power relations, the role of capital, and care for the environment are radically different"* (Julier 2013, 227). The reason is, Julier says, that Neoliberalism is flexible and "adept at exploiting crises".

What Julier is hinting at here is a common observation in political theory, namely that political uprising and protest, due to crises, is used affectively by capitalist power to uphold and outmanoeuvre all kinds of opposition, so that it "continues to function, its institutions and power still intact out" (ibid.).

Alternatively, as mentioned in the beginning, Fuad-Luke suggests that design activism can also work within the existing paradigm of power adopting a consensus over dissensus approach. As a proponent of this approach, Fuad-Luke points out Ann Thorpe's book *Architecture & Design versus Consumerism* with the telling subtitle *How Design Activism confronts Growth* (Thorpe 2012). This line of thought would

seem to be consistent with Julier's emphasis on design activism being inextricably bound up with Neoliberal forces and deserves further scrutiny.

Hegemony and the taming of design activism

In her book Thorpe provides a thorough analysis and diagnosis of the current state of the world that is almost identical with Fry's, but her account of how design activism can effect the necessary change are both tempered and exemplified in abundance with numerous projects within architecture and design. Generally, Thorpe defines design activism as taking *"action on an issue that is neglected or excluded, but socially or environmentally important"* (Thorpe 2012, 190). Insofar as the bringing about of social and environmental values are used as her primary classification criteria, design activism ends up being a rather vast category for Thorpe, including i) design activism "that focuses on making the business case for social and environmental design", ii) design activism that takes place "in non-profit groups as well as public or government arenas" and iii) design activism taking the form of design for sustainability and social innovation organized in networks such as DESIS[2] (Thorpe 2012, 7). However, at stake here is a hotchpotch of approaches that, although sharing a concern for the social and environmental, clearly needs to be differentiated.

Elsewhere I have demonstrated that "making a business case for social design" lives up to what is commonly understood as social entrepreneurship and not design activism (Markussen 2017, 163–65). Thus, in their systematic review of 122 articles on social entrepreneurship and social innovation, Philips and her colleagues found that social entrepreneurship is essentially defined by the attempt not only to perform socially to help a needy group, but also financially (Philipps et al. 2014). In addition other authors see social entrepreneurship as a result of what is referred to as a 'market error' (Christensen/Morgen 2010, 7–23; Dees 1998; Hockerts 2006; Weerawardena/Sullivan 2006). The assumption here is that commercial market forces are unable to meet social needs, either because those needing services cannot pay for them (Austin/Stevenson/Wei-Skillern 2006, 2) or because the nature of social problems are too wicked to be addressed from a business and profit seeking approach (Weisbrod 1975). As examples of social entrepreneurship one can think of Muhammad Yunus' micro-credits or Internet platforms such as MyC4, which supports peer-to-peer investment to help underprivileged people in developing countries set up a business.

Social innovation, on the other hand, arises because of a 'system error' or organizational inertia that make a society respond to its challenges in a delayed, insufficient or erroneous manner (Lawrence/Lorsch 1967). Social innovations are the result of complex collaborative processes *"shaped by the collective sharing of knowledge between a wide range of organizations and institutions that influence*

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2   DESIS is an International Design Network for Social Innovation and Sustainability founded by Ezio Manzini.

developments in certain areas to meet a social need or to promote social development" (Philipps et al., 449). Another defining trait is that social innovations are usually the result of a new combination or hybrids of existing elements or services rather than new in themselves (Manzini 2015; Mulgan 2014). Although social innovation and social entrepreneurship may thus be regarded according to different premises, they are likened to each other in their ability to achieve large scale transformations enabling others to copy the idea and distribute it through a number of significant imitations and implementations (Christensen/Morgen 2010; Martin/Osberg 2007).

This is unlike social design, which is usually confined to fostering change on a micro scale for a limited group of disadvantaged people. The notion of social value in social design refers to the improving of interpersonal relations and well being at the level of the individual, family, or community, and is most often not transferrable to large-scale transformations (Markussen 2017, 165–69). For the same reason, Thorpe and Gamman argue for lowering expectations to "good enough design" rather than massive change (Thorpe/Gamman 2011).

In spite of their differences, social entrepreneurship, social innovation and social design are all subjected to certain logics and powers of instrumentalisation. Taking Europe as the geopolitical focus, social entrepreneurship is spurred by the logic of commodifying social needs thereby exploiting a missed market opportunity; social innovation by the logic of fixing recurrent system errors in shrinking welfare states to maintain welfare services and infrastructure; and social design is harnessed by a logic of founding new partnerships between the public sector and civic society to retain basic delivery of welfare services.

Ann Thorpe (2012) conflates design activism with these three other approaches. As a consequence, design activism ends up being represented as a design practice tamed by the very same orders of domination and hegemony that are criticized in the first place for having caused the urgent need for change. This becomes perhaps most evident in her use of two examples from architecture. More specifically, Thorpe highlights OMA's Seattle Public Library[3] (Thorpe 2012, 93) and Renzo Piano's California Academy of Sciences (Thorpe 2012, 159) as two architectural projects that have been capable of attaining respectively social inclusion and eco-friendliness. The measures and hard facts certainly does not belie the social and environmental achievements of the two buildings: In the first instance library usage has increased more than 65 percent, drawing in people from Seattle's two largest communities, African American and Hispanic; and it must be appreciated, in the second instance, that a natural science museum produces 50 percent less waste water or that it uses natural lighting in 90 percent of occupied spaces. What is questionable though is whether these projects made by two starchitect companies are exemplifying design activism confronting growth.

What is forfeited here is that the idea of design practices taking a consensus over dissensus approach yields an image of design activism being enslaved to the hegemony of the existing system of power and growth. Clearly, the two architectural

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3   OMA is short for Office for Metropolitan Architecture, co-founded by Rem Koolhaas in 1975.

projects must be seen as parts in a wider economic system of clients and architects, cities using iconic buildings competitively for branding purposes and to boost their event economical bottom lines and livability index. Returning to the thought of Ranciére, one can see such a system as a very powerful policing order that delimits social inclusion and environmental values to confined corners in the economy and existing system of production. If we understand the politics of design activism as referring to the enacting of dissensus, then design activism introduces a logic that, although bound up with it, is entirely heterogeneous to that of the policing order (Rancière 1999, 31). In what remains, I shall elaborate on this third view.

Design activism in-between anarchy and hegemony

Drawing on previous work, I argue that design activism should be recognized as an aesthetic dissensual practice of its own. Because design activism also engages with the political and social does not make its practices identical with, for instance, social design or social innovation. Furthermore, by criticizing a pure politics interpretation of design, I also argue that design activism is not about an institutional overturning or taking over of power. Rather the aesthetic dissensus lies in the subtle way design activism is able *"to cut across and expose hierarchies – hierarchies that control both practice and discourse – so that zones can emerge where processes of subjectivization might take place"* (Markussen 2013, 45). By introducing the notion of impure politics, I aim here to elaborate further on this interpretation of design activism.

First of all, design activism involves a messy clash between two logics. It is a practice where an individual or a collective assert their position in a way, to cite Davide Panagia, "that ruptures the logic" of the existing social order (Panagia 2001). Such a rupture holds a potential for emancipation, but not a promise that it will actually happen. Emancipation begins with a perceived wrong that let us understand that what is hierarchically structured as an apparently self-evident order can be undermined or contradicted by a logic of no structure, of equality (cf. Rancière 2009, 13). It is by introducing this second logic heterogeneous to that of the existing order that design activism - unlike social design and social innovation – is able to wrist itself out if the instrumentalising logic of governance and policy-making.

Secondly, it is important to notice that the disruption of the social order through aesthetic dissensus should be considered as a "short lived" moment or event (Chambers 2013, 8; Corcoran 2010, 5). Nevertheless, this does not make design activism less valuable than social innovation and social design, where outcomes are often said to have long-term effects. Design activism effects a momentary dis-identification or opening up of a gap between prescribed ways of doing and making and unanticipated ways of doing and making. In this opening up established roles, spaces and practices become malleable to renegotiation and new identities and silenced subjects can make themselves be heard.

Thirdly, the politics of design activism is an impure politics. It may reveal and contest the exclusion of the poor, the vulnerable, the homeless, the refugee, the

discriminated, etc., but new processes of exclusion and inclusion and the exercising of power will inevitably follow. At best, the repercussions of design activism lead to police orders doing good and not bad things.

An example from the field of urban activism will allow me elucidate this view and bring these theoretical reflections down to street level. In 2011, the design activist collective Bureau Detours installed Dennis Design Center as a temporary urban installation on Prague's Boulevard in Copenhagen for about two weeks. Dennis Design Center, which was part of the Metropolis festival, consisted in two freight containers fully equipped with wood, tools, bicycle barbecues and around 20 carpenters, designers, artist, architects, teachers, among others, who invited local citizens in to take part in "designing useable designs inspired by local demand and site specific issues".[4] According to a newspaper article published at around the time of its opening, in a few days Dennis Design Center had led to a transformation of a toxic site to a place where the locals took part in reshaping the area, discussions on contemporary urban planning and collective street cooking events (Kjær 2011).

Playing deliberately with the similarity in English between the pronunciation of Dennis Design Center and the Danish Design Center, Bureau Detours' installation contested the national institutionalized promoting of design in business and industry. With a tongue-in-cheek hoax Dennis was presented as the founder of the Design Center, depicted with a portrait of a knight-looking design hipster and described as "a weird, but most clever, 2.20 meter tall design enthusiast from Rotterdam in the Netherlands", who had asked the collective to collaborate with him (Haack/Aude/Muchenberger 2012, 26–27). Dennis was of course unable to attend the opening, but a fictional speech authored by him was read aloud. In Dennis Design Center citizens met design at street level and they collaborated with the activist collective in the making of free DIY furniture or the welding together of tall bikes. In this way, Dennis Design Center became a momentary zone where new processes of subjectification and ways of making and doing took place. Local citizens were actively engaged in processes of making and manufacturing their own products under the label Dennis Design. Through such activities Dennis Design Center contested and revealed as hollow the glorified branding image of Danish Design being promoted by the Danish Design Center as socially inclusive, rooted in true craftsmanship and design for the people. The free DIY furniture coming out of Dennis Design Center made perceivable a wrong or disjunction between Danish Design Center's naming of Danish Design as democratic and the expensive furniture classics of Danish Design put on display as status symbols on pedestals in glamorous showrooms and magazines. In the gap that was opened up by this aesthetic dissensus, it became possible, if only for a moment, to let Danish Design take visible and audible form as furniture being designed not for an equalized notion of a unified people, but for and by a multitude of local residents.

This project also provides a paramount example of the impure politics of design

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4   See the Bureau Detours website located at http://www.in-situ.info/en/artists/bureau-detours/works/en/ dennis-design-center-39.

activism. On the 20th of August 2011, on the day of the closing of Dennis Design Center, Bureau Detours officially received an email from the Danish Design Center, demanding that the collective would stop using the name Dennis Design Center and erase it on their website (Gudme 2011). Allegedly, this was because 'Dennis' phonetically sounds like 'Danish' in English, and Danish Design Center claimed the copyright. Bureau Detours was then given an ultimatum until the 6th of September. If they did not live up to this demand, they were threatened that the Danish Design Center would withdraw their invitation to the collective to exhibit work during the Copenhagen Design Week later that year. After an open meeting, the parties agreed however that there was "room for yet another design center, a practical of the kind" (Haack/Aude/Muchenberger 2012, 21). So, when Dennis Design Center re-opened its freight containers for a wider public at the Milan Design Week in 2012 it was with the acceptance of the Danish Design Center.

I will leave it an open question whether or not aesthetic dissensus here is cancelled out through a forceful global design event economy. Suffice it to say, that what the example so brilliantly shows is that in design activism politics and policing are unmistakably intertwined in a messy and impure way. Dennis Design Center does not enact its contestation in the pure anarchistic form of an institutional overturning of the Danish Design Center, nor it is enslaved by it. It enacts aesthetic dissensus through a momentary interruption of the hierarchies and ways of doing and making allocated by this policing order.

Concluding remarks

By introducing central analytical concepts from Rancière's political philosophy I have attempted to clarify some of the discrepancies characteristic of the current theorization of design activism. Notably, I have demonstrated that caution should be taken in not overestimating the politics of design activism; nor is design activism's engagement with the political and social reducible to that of social design and social innovation. To avoid ending up in either a pure politics interpretation or a hegemonic taming of design activism, I have tried to position a third interpretation. A critique of this interpretation could be that because it is concisely modeled upon Rancière's conceptual apparatus, it risks becoming too narrow and unable to exhaustively account of the multifaceted ways in which design activism is practiced and conceptualized. True, this is only a point of departure that needs to be reworked, criticized and challenged by the outcomes of actual activist practices.

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