

# **JEG ER STATEN – I AM THE STATE**

## **Investigating a Relationship through Design**

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### **Abstract**

*This project investigates the relationship between the Norwegian State and its citizens through design with an approach grounded in participatory design and critical design. The goal is firstly to investigate the relationship between citizens and the State, and secondly to create a space that generates a discussion and an examination of this relationship for citizens as well as representatives of the State. The practical result is a series of exhibitions, which were first displayed at the public library. Subsequently, they were displayed at the master graduation exhibition at the Bergen Academy of Art and Design in 2016 and at the Tax Office in Bergen. Both analogue and digital media were used. In addition to the exhibition, a seminar was held at the public library. This included a film screening, lectures about how the relationship between the State and citizens has been portrayed in novels, and how the relationship can be examined through the computer game “Papers Please.”*

### **Keywords:**

*Interaction design, State-citizen relation, participatory design, critical design, participation, exhibition design*

## **EXPLORING THROUGH DESIGN**

The relationship to the State can definitely be difficult to grasp, and the discussion concerning this relationship started a long time ago. Both Solon (640-558 B.C.) and Plato (428-328 B.C.) started to reflect on the theme early in European society about 2,500 years ago. Over the years, the state as a concept as well as a democracy has been investigated, examined and developed through the eyes of philosophers, political scientists, sociologists and, in our days, by journalists. The stories we hear are often told in the news, and many times they are the same stories told over and over again.

In the study “Predicting Cross-National Levels of Social Trust: Global Pattern or Nordic Exceptionalism?” (Delhey and Newton, 2005), two researchers concluded that in a comparison of 60 countries, Norway (closely followed by Sweden and Denmark) has the highest level of trust between people. With trust between people, great trust in the State also seems to follow. The basic idea of the State has to do with fellowship as well as solidarity. To some extent, we are equal and entitled to the same things, such as security, rule of law, health and education. In this project, the research question is the following:

“How can design be used as a tool for exploring the relationship between the Norwegian State and its citizens?”

By looking at this topic through the eyes of design, there might be new ways of exploring as well as telling new personal stories connected to the theme. My goals for the project were to understand and experience, from a practical standpoint, how design can be used as a tool to

create reflection and shed light on this specific topic. I wanted to generate an alternative view on this particular theme and create new ways of thinking about how to deal with this relationship for the audience and the participants, two groups that sometimes consist of the same people. Because of the scope and depth of the project, several media have been used, both for telling and for exploring.

## **Design Approach and Methodology**

In this project, the two main approaches used are *critical design* and *participatory design*. In the book *Speculative Everything* (Dunne and Raby, 2013), the authors describe the concept of *critical design* as a way to use design to create discussion around contemporary, everyday life and society and a way to question old patterns and preconceptions. Initially, Dunne and Raby enumerated a short list of key words connected to *critical design*:

Critical, problem finding, asks questions, designing for debate, design as medium, in the service of society, functional fictions, for how the world could be, change us to suit the world, social fiction, parallel worlds, the “unreal real”, narratives of consumption, implications, humour, provocation, conceptual design, citizen, make us think, rhetoric, ethics, authorship (Vii, preface).

It has been of great importance to maintain a curious and questioning attitude throughout the whole project. The speculative design approach has given me the opportunity as a designer to ask more questions than to give answers. This has had a deliberate influence on the project as it turns away from market focused design and looks into the reflective and discursive area.

The group “citizens” is a huge group represented by the whole nation. Because the group is so massive, participation by citizens and representatives of the State was of great importance. All individuals in the nation have their own personal connection to the State, since this particular relationship is impossible to end. In the article “A Ladder of Citizen Participation” (Arnstein, 1969), the author describes levels of participation between citizens and power holders in eight different steps, as shown in Figure 1. The power holder can be someone in a municipality or, even wider, in society. In the model, the first steps (1 and 2) describe a relationship in which citizens are informed about what is happening, but there is no participation. In the second group (step 3-5, Tokenism), there is some interaction, but mostly as a way of appeasing the target group. In the top levels (6-8, Citizen Power), citizens are invited to take part in the project, are empowered and visible, and have the possibility to take decisions. In this project, citizens and representatives of the State were invited to be active partners in the different stages of the process. By inviting citizens from different backgrounds, not only in the research phase but also in the execution of the project, the audience were given much more power than a control group to consult all the way to the end of the project. One of the goals in the project has been to present several views on the actual theme. One way of making that possible was to invite people to tell their own stories and present their thoughts. See picture 3-4 and 6.

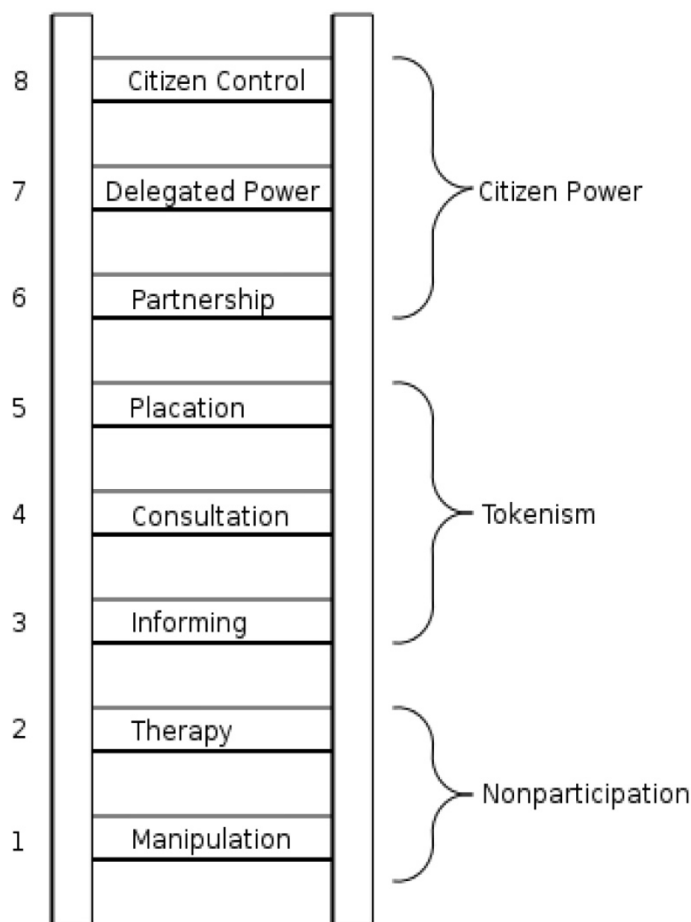


Figure 1: Levels of participation between citizens and power holders. Adapted from S. Arnstein (1969).

Several qualitative methods were used during different parts of the process. To gather information about how different groups experiences their relation to the State, interviews were conducted. These included employees at the Tax Office, in the Police Department and at the City Archive of Bergen as well as academics from the fields of literary studies and media studies. Also included were people working in the field of curating and, of course, ordinary and less ordinary citizens. I also studied literature such as *The Trial* (Kafka, 1925), *1984* (Orwell, 1949), *Kallocain* (Boye, 1940) and *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932). In addition, observations were made through drawing and more classical observations when visiting, for example, the Department for Property and Evidence and the Police and City Archive of Bergen.

The methods used are all connected to the key question of examining a relationship through design or to the goal of trying to reveal less ordinary stories and thoughts connected to this specific relationship.

### Example Studies

The artist Lars Arrhenius, along with the designer Eric Ericson, has created a series of works examining the State and the relations between citizens, State and society as a wider

concept including the private sector. Through playful media, the two artists have presented their works in the board game “Välkommen till samhället” (“Welcome to Society”, 2012) as well as the album “Sånger till samhället” (“Songs to Society”, 2014). On the album, nine tracks are presented, including “Infrastruktur” (“Infrastructure”), “Import Export” and “Vi är samhället” (“We are Society”). Ericson and Arrhenius, in their collaborative works, present rather dry content in a stripped down and simplified way through pictograms (see Picture 1). These pictograms can be found on the album as well as in the board game.



Picture 1: Screenshot from the music video “Infrastruktur” broadcasted on YouTube (Kalle1210, 2014).

In the book *To Mr. Cheng* (2008), Eric Ericson explores the relationship between the postal service and society by sending objects to a fictional person with a fake address in Germany.

In the foreword to the book, *Korrespondens* (2010), Ericson writes:

“The entire postal system reflects, in different ways, the society and polity in which we live” (my translation from Swedish).

“Hela postsystemet återspeglar på olika sätt det samhälle och statsskick vi lever i” (Original text).

As an example of the above, he describes how the size of the mailbox openings testifies to the level of unease and concern in a country. Ericson uses the post's most basic function, sending letters, but extends this action over and above normal use. By doing so, he highlights both the mundane in the action of sending mail as well as the astonishment when items actually arrive. By examining authority in such a playful way, Ericson shows us new ways of using design to examine themes and unravels untold stories to the reader, whether true or not.

The works of Arrhenius and Ericson and Ericson on his own reveal something important

in the choice of media in contrast to a theme that can seem rather tedious and connected to everyday life. The clashes that occur between the theme and media in the songs, board game and book are humorous and fun. In this particular view, the “I Am the State” project is closely connected to their expression, since one underlying thought in the project was to search for poetry and humour in ordinary everyday relationships. What distinguishes the Arrhenius/Ericson projects from the ambitions in this project is mostly the way citizens are portrayed as pictograms (see Picture 1). This seems to be a shallow way of describing people, as the pictogram describes people as equal, but on the other hand as similar and without personalities. Here, the “I Am the State” project looks for personal stories and diversity, even though this can sometimes also be done with a sense of humour.



Picture 2: Spread from the book *To Mr. Cheng* (2008).

## The Exhibition

During the research period of this project, it became clear that the relationship between citizens and the State is a rather complicated story. Along with starting to understand the complexity of the theme, thoughts about visualising the project as an exhibition became clear. The exhibition as a medium has many beneficial qualities, and it also demands a high level of cooperation with institutions, experts and audience, which are all considered advantages for this project. The most important characteristic of the exhibition was the possibility to use it as a communicator of ideas and as an arena where interaction can occur between participants. In addition to showcasing my research and findings, the exhibition provided an opportunity to use the audience as a resource to ask new questions and create participation and dialogue surrounding the theme. The “I Am the State” exhibition has been displayed three times: first

at the Bergen Public Library (14-18 March 2016) and subsequently at the master graduation exhibition at the Bergen Academy of Art and Design (30 April-8 May 2016) and at the Tax Office in Bergen (23 September-2 October 2016). In this paper, the exhibition at the library is the main focus.

## Finding the location

The requirement for the exhibition location was that it had to be a public space to receive visitors of all social and economic classes, genders, ethnicities and ages – reflecting the State itself. One location that actually has this quality is the public library in Bergen, so the first version of the “I Am the State” exhibition was held there. The library, as a governmental institution, has several functions according to Norwegian law. In addition to lending books, public libraries shall also be an independent meeting place and forum for public discussion and debate (Folkebibliotekloven, 1985, § 1). The public library in Bergen has, according to its own calculations, around 27,000 visitors weekly (2015). Besides Norwegians, other nationalities such as Polish, Swedish and Spanish are represented as public library patrons.



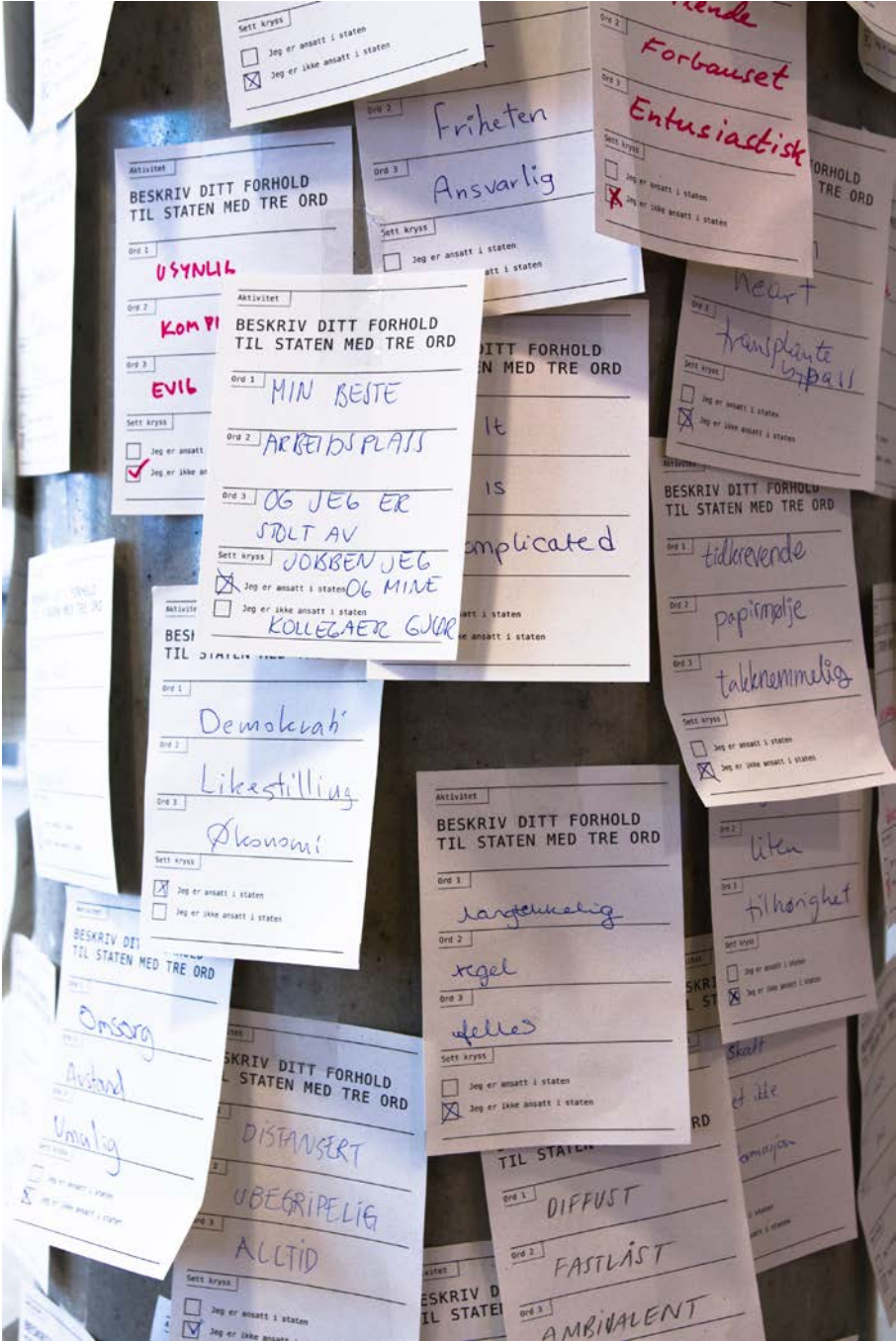
Picture 3: Overview of the “Jeg er Staten” exhibition in the Bergen Public Library.

The exhibition as a medium is an extraordinary resource to use in a project like this; it invites participation, provides opportunities to display and collect, and can have a transformative result. An exhibition also provides the opportunity to repeat the experience time and again with each exhibition capable of supplying new aspects, artefacts, stories, participants, media and partners.

## Mediation through the Exhibition

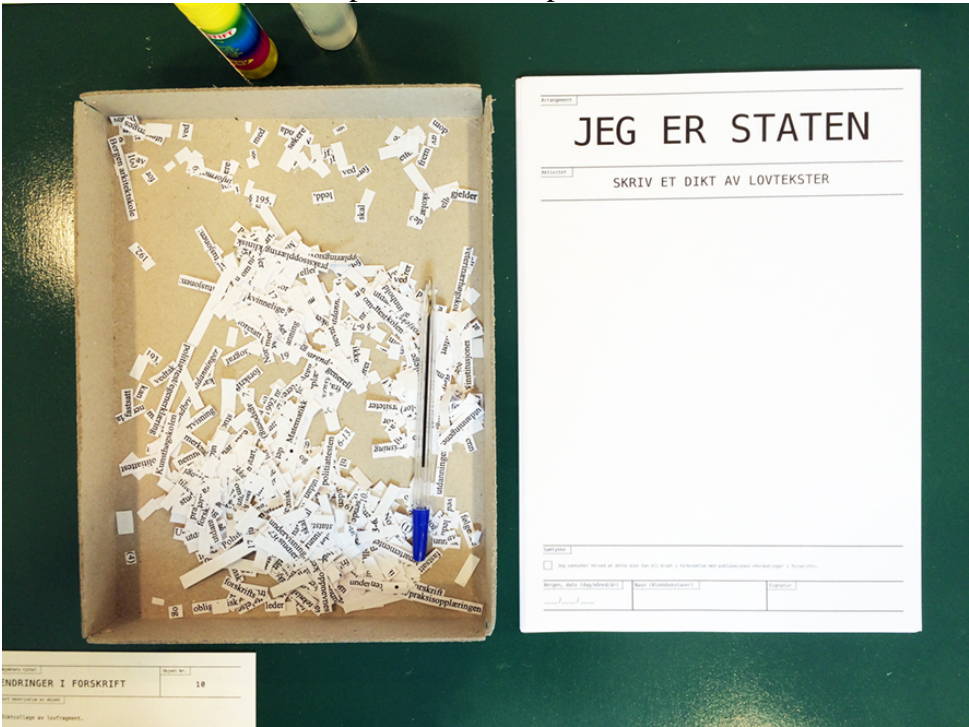
It was of great importance to show different personal experiences connected to the State-

citizen relationship in the project. As shown in Picture 3, these various stories were displayed through a lot of different media, both digital and analogue. In addition to this, several artefacts were shown such as a plant (on loan from the Tax Office), a series of sculptures made at the Statistisk Sentralbyrås (Norway's central institution for producing official statistics) weekly information booklets on Norwegian statistics from the 1970s and 1980s, and a photograph showing a pile of bicycles gathered by police in Bergen. There was also an OH projector showing a story about losing your social security number. To invite the audience into the exhibition to share their own thoughts about the theme, there were elements for the visitors to interact with, mostly analogue. Some of the interactive parts are presented in Pictures 4-6.

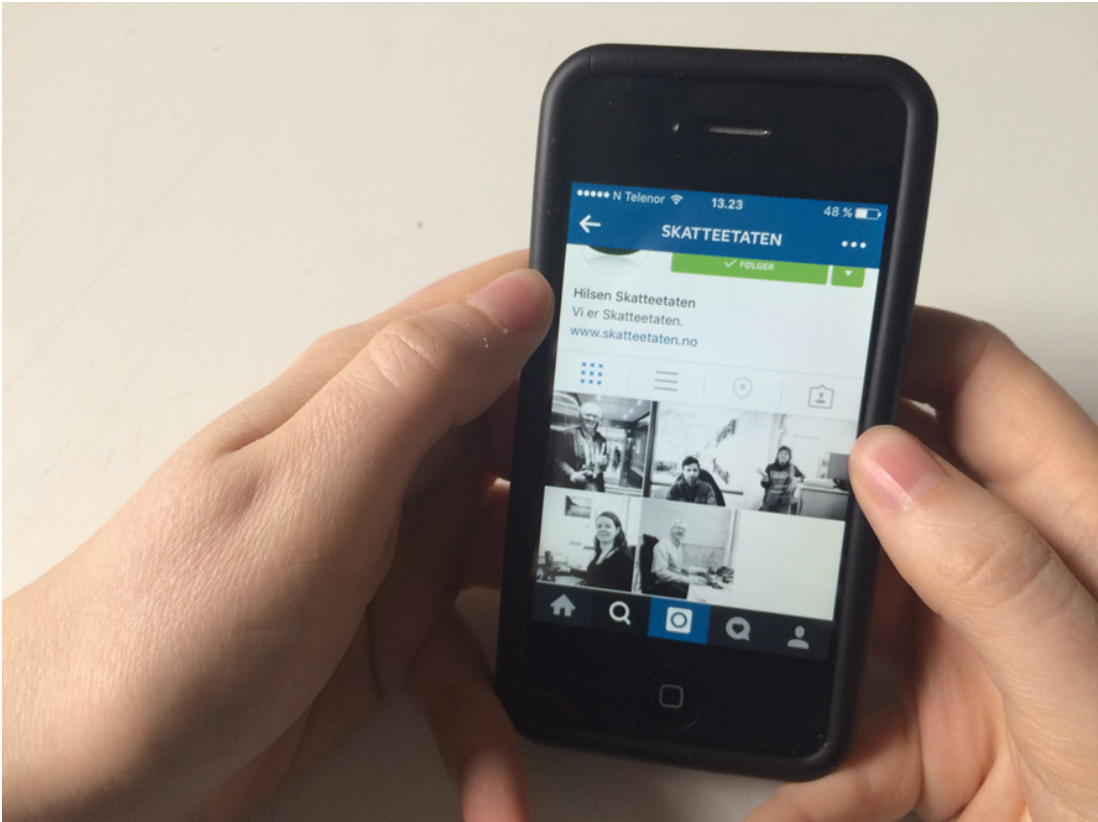


Picture 4: Notes by visitors describing their relationship to the State in three words, displayed in the exhibition. Words written on the notes include equality, economy, time consuming,

gratitude, democracy and someone describing himself or herself as a State employee, ambivalent, forever, incomprehensible, impossible, care, diffuse and it is complicated.



Picture 5: Detail from the exhibition showing how to create a poem from the Norwegian School of Law, participant view. The submitted poems were all published in a fanzine and given back to the participants.





Picture 6: The official Tax Office Instagram account displayed on an iPhone. Tax Office employees were portrayed in their daily work.

In addition to the main exhibition, a seminar was held with lectures and a film screening. This seminar was incorporated into the library's regular activities, such as their weekly movie nights and literacy lectures. To host these lectures, experts were invited. Frode Helmich Pedersen presented "Utopia or Dystopia? Literary Representations of the Relationship Between the State and Individual", which was authored for this special occasion. Tobias Staaby preformed an evening lecture with a public discussion focusing on the computer game "Papers Please." The lectures were all connected to objects in the exhibition. The literary presentation was accompanied by a small 'governmental library', and the computer game was presented on an iPad with the opportunity to try it out. After the seminars, both lectures were uploaded on the internet through accounts connected to the library. The literary lecture was uploaded as a podcast on Sound Cloud, and the lectures concerning "Papers Please" were uploaded as a YouTube video.

## Experiences

Working with a lot of different medias in the same project can be really demanding. The designer has to keep her overview and in the same time manage design in every detail, in every media. But using a variety of medias really has been adding something to this project. By doing this new stories were told, not only by the media and content itself, but also through the way artefacts were presented and matched to each other. One example is the surveillance file of Norwegian citizen Agnete Strøm, with content collected and archived by Politiets Sikkerhetstjeneste (the Norwegian Police Security Service) between 1970 and 1994. The main object was a huge file in A4 format presented on a small table. Accompanying the file were headphones with which participants could listen to Agnete herself speaking about how it felt to be under surveillance. In addition to the file and the soundtrack, a screen broadcasted a view from the largest square in Bergen in real time, shot from a web camera. By connecting media and objects from different eras that called on different senses – sight, hearing and touch – a new story was presented. Both fascinating and scary at the same time.

By using a critical design approach, a certain freedom appeared during the process. Instead of working with a traditional course of action, for example by describing target groups and finding the perfect way of reaching out to these groups, the library was chosen to exhibit the project. Here, a wide spectrum of citizens representing different social and economic groups, ages and political convictions as well as State employees can be found. Their interaction with the project became voluntary and unconstrained as a participatory audience. In retrospect, the project as a piece of design can be placed in the category "Citizen Power", using the ladder model in Figure 1. This is because the power in the project is shared between me as a designer, the library and the audience. Although the project, in my opinion, did not reach the top score (8, Citizen Control). To achieve that, citizens have to be given more direct power from the very beginning of the research phase. This is definitely something to continue working with.

Cooperation with others, both audience and co-organisers, was mostly a pleasure throughout the process, even though collaboration with the State itself sometimes can be a difficult way of working. During the Instagram project, reactions from the Norwegian Tax Office came out in various ways. Initially, the Tax Office national communication department showed great interest and curiosity, embracing the project and happily lending out their official Instagram account. As time went on, their openness turned into scepticism. After the account was up and running with several uploaded pictures every week, the Tax Office

national communication department decided to end the collaboration without giving a clear explanation. I was informed by official correspondence to shut down the account because of orders from the *highest level*. During this mail correspondence the language used by the Tax Office changed from being open and helpful to something straight forward and definite. In this situation the inequality of the relationship between me and the State became clear. For the designer a big part of using participatory design as an approach is about the acceptance of giving power away to others.

During the exhibition, evidence of participation was collected for example in the shape of notes describing the audience's different relationships to the State and as poems written by the audience using law texts. After the exhibition all the poems were assembled in a publication and printed in 75 copies. To thank the participants contributing with poems, 35 persons, they all got a printed copy back. In the publication all participants showed their own interpretations of the language used in laws. Here the audience also becomes a co-designer. This last example shows us that it definitely is possible to investigate and examine a relationship through design. By using different medias several stories can be told side by side. A public room can be created to house discussion and create personal reflection. All done with the help of some extra ordinary librarians, employees at the Tax Office and an enthusiastic audience.

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