

Non-local Situations: Speculating About Future Response-abilities of Postindustrial Design (Research)

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1. Catalyst Information

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2. Conversation Description

Design touches every aspect of life and human environments. Human activity is now the main geological force shaping the planet and the artificial is the effective horizon of human existence (Dilnot, 2015). Design deals with the material, social, political, cultural, economic, and more, and in relation to history—past, present, and (possible) future(s) (Fry, Dilnot, & Stewart, 2015). At the same time, the objects of design are becoming less traditionally thing-like and rather connected, dynamic, ‘smart’ components of product and service ecosystems. We need, then, to find ways to grapple with (eco)systems, contextual specificities, new forms of technologies, and societal needs in a changing world where we have yet to even begin to adequately come to grips with the implications of our dwindling resources and



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impending climate collapse; political structures are often woefully ineffective; and advanced capitalism seems to be spinning disastrously out of control.

Industrial design has had a certain character because it was called into being in order to serve new forms of production and consumption. Now, design (research) is being called on to “frame and address the societal problems that face us” and “shape our lives in more responsible, meaningful, and open ways” (<http://www.drs2016.org>). This means addressing complex, large-scale, non-local (but locally manifested) challenges. But design—particularly when it has aspirations of being democratic and participatory (e.g., Ehn, Nilsson, & Topgaard, 2014; Manzini, 2015)—is typically highly local and situated.

The aim of this conversation is to speculate about future articulations, practices, and contexts of postindustrial design (research), and in the process to prototype the inclusive, rich, realistic yet hopeful discourse among passionate partial perspectives that is necessary to support it. This is a process of developing our ‘response-abilities’—our ‘collective capacity to respond’ (Haraway, 2015)— as we face what challenges and calls on us to act.

3. Organizing research question

Working with the concerns outlined above entails several challenges, including at least 1) articulating what it is that needs to be done in ways that are specific enough to enable concrete action but that also connect to higher level challenges; 2) developing appropriate (postindustrial) practices that are adequate for meeting these challenges; and 3) considering the resources, contexts, and other practical requirements for these practices to work effectively, and the constraints and opportunities that shape what is possible.

The overarching question to be addressed in the session is: *What are the response-abilities of design (research) in relation to large-scale, non-local challenges?* More specific sub-questions that we will use to structure the conversation are 1) How is design (research) implicated in the challenges we face? What/whom do we care for? 2) What practices do we need to develop in order to adequately address these challenges? And 3) What do these practices require in concrete, practical terms?

4. Set-up of your session

4.1 Physical set-up

We would ideally like to have all participants seated around a large table (or clusters of smaller tables), which we will have covered in paper. There will also be a variety of crayons or similar available, as well as a number of physical objects (details on those below). We might also have a few posters displayed on the walls, if possible.

4.2 Structure

The session will be structured as follows.

- 1. Context and framing [presentation].** A catalyst will begin the session with an initial framing based on the context outlined above and also including a few concrete 'calls' on design (research) to deal with large-scale, non-local concerns. These will include quotes and the key questions posed by the DRS 2016 organisers but also calls from even non-humans (such as a sea bird that is affected by plastic waste that ends up in the ocean). Key areas or concerns represented will likely include the anthropocene and the hyperobject (Morton, 2013) of global warming, problematic aspects of product lifecycles (particularly manufacturing and disposal), the ongoing refugee crises (and political failures they represent), and histories and futures in the temporal scale of nuclear cultures (<http://nuclear.artscatalyst.org>). These calls, and objects corresponding to each that will be distributed around the tables, will serve to ground the following discussion.
- 2. Implication and care [discussion].** After presenting these calls, the catalysts will then open it up to the participants to respond. Specifically, we will first ask and invite discussion around the questions of design's responsibility and implication, and what/whom we care for.
- 3. Response [discussion and sketching].** If we agree that design (research) has some responsibility/desire to engage with these challenges, we will next ask: *What practices do we need to develop to answer these calls effectively?* Along with general discussion, we will encourage participants to sketch on the paper provided, particularly in relation to the objects representing the specific calls on design. This will enable a visual narrative that can continue in parallel to the discussion and also enable collaborative documentation of the session by both participants and catalysts.
- 4. Abilities [discussion and sketching].** Once we have speculated about the kinds of practices that might be effective, we will consider what these require, practically and concretely. These aspects will be added to the collaborative documentation by both participants and catalysts through sketching directly and/or annotating with post-it notes.
- 5. Concluding invitation.** The catalysts will conclude the session by inviting participants to take one of the artifacts representing one of the challenges as they leave. This signifies that they take that challenge with them and commit to developing response-abilities to it both in their own design (research) practice and within the broader community.

5. Type of space and equipment required

We would need a room with a projector and screen, wall space for hanging posters, and chairs placed around a large table or clusters of smaller tables. Contributions to the conversation can be made through arranging objects, sketching on the paper, using the social media hashtag (#DesignResponseabilities) and speaking, and active engagement (even moving around the room to work with the different materials) will be encouraged.

6. Dissemination strategy

The session will be documented by the participants and catalysts on the paper provided during the session. This will also be digitized through photos and possibly also through updating and making public our Prezi working document. We will also use the hashtag #DesignResponseabilities for social media conversations before, during, and after the event itself. We will also collect the material generated and post it at <https://designresponseabilities.wordpress.com>.

7. References

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About the Catalysts:

Heather Wiltse is assistant professor at the Umeå Institute of Design, Umeå University, Sweden. Her research centres around trying to understand and critique the role of (digital) things in experience and society in ways that can inform design.

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Kristina Lindström is a postdoc in design at Umeå University. Her research focus is on designerly public engagement with hybrid matters.

Aditya Pawar is a PhD candidate at Umeå Institute of Design. His research is focused on participatory design with publics around socio-political issues.

Åsa Ståhl is a postdoc at Umeå Institute of Design. Her collaborative research explores situated *hybrid matters* that emerge in a postindustrial era. Through invitations to public engagement events co-articulations are made around issues of living with mundane technologies.