



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

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A conversation held at DRS2016

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This document is conversation proposal and documentation in one.

Catalysts

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Introduction

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-

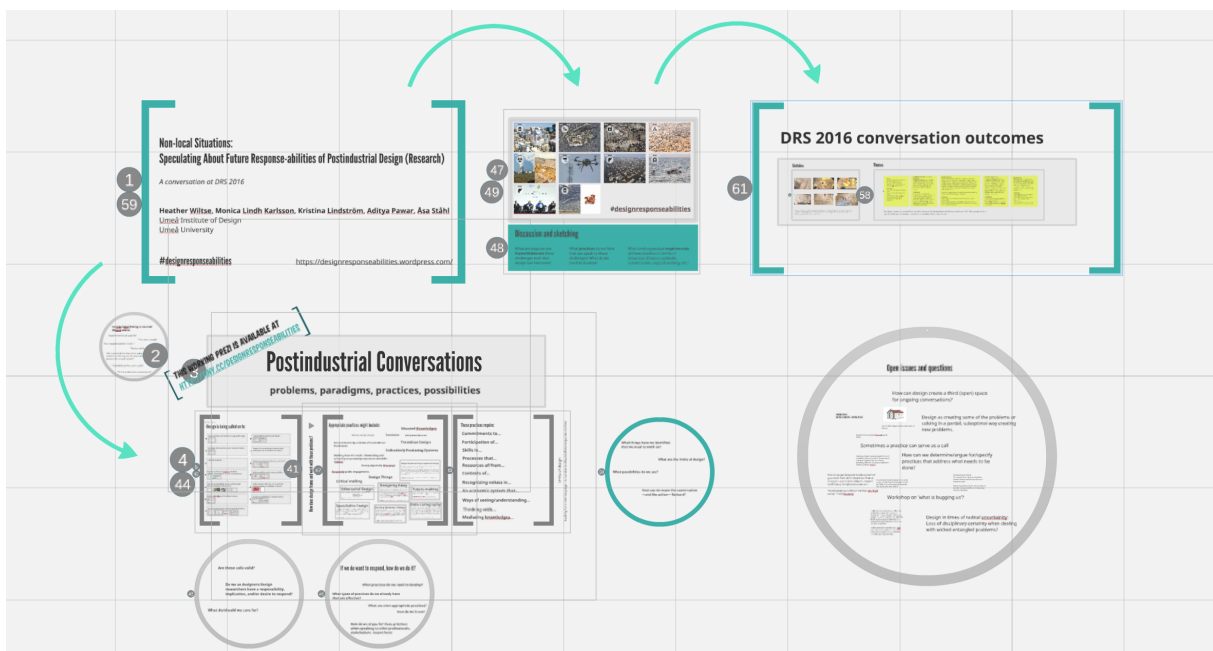


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like and rather connected, dynamic, ‘smart’ components of product and service ecosystems. We need, then, to find ways to grapple with (eco)systems, contextual specificities, new forms of technologies, and societal needs in a changing world where we have yet to even begin to adequately come to grips with the implications of our dwindling resources and 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.



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

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(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 addressed in the session were: *What are the response-abilities of design (research) in relation to large-scale, non-local challenges?* More specific sub-questions used to structure the conversation were 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?

The DRS2016 session

Physical set-up

The conversation was set up inside a conference room with the participant teams occupying parts of the room. During the session the participants had access to craft materials to visualise their ideas and discussions. Posters for selected global challenges lined the walls at the back of the room as a reminder of the scale and variety of problems we were dealing with.



Structure

The session was structured as follows.

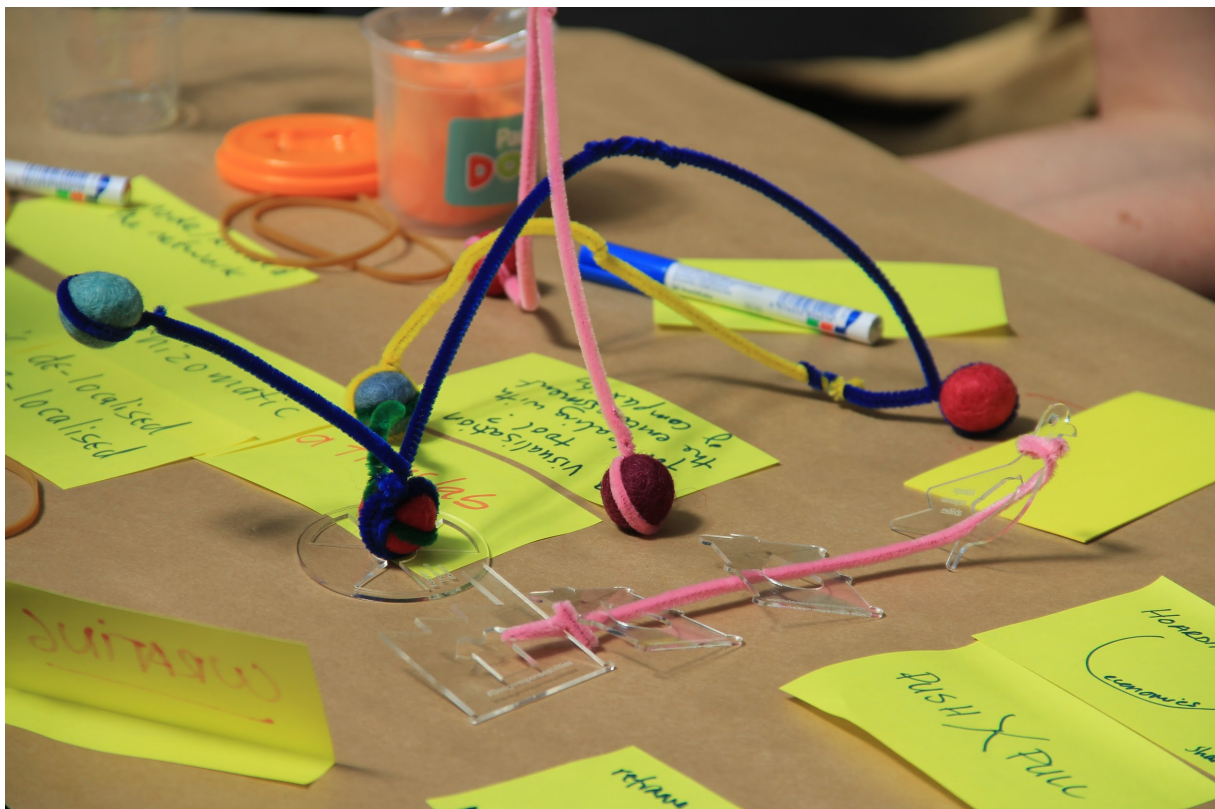
1. **Context and framing [presentation].** We began the session with an initial framing based on the context outlined above and also including a few concrete ‘calls’ on design (research) to deal with large-scale, non-local concerns. These included quotes and the key questions posed by the DRS 2016 organisers 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 referenced included 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 were represented through images on posters hung on the back wall of the room, and tokens corresponding to each were distributed to each participant. These specific calls and props were intended to ground the following discussion.



2. **Implication and care [discussion].** After presenting these calls, the catalysts then opened it up to the participants to respond. Specifically, we first asked and invited

discussion around the questions of design's responsibility and implication, and what/whom we care for.

- 3. Response [discussion and sketching].** We next asked: *What practices do we need to develop to answer these calls effectively?* Along with general discussion, we encouraged participants to sketch on the paper provided, particularly in relation to the objects representing the specific calls on design. The purpose of this was to enable a visual narrative that could continue in parallel to the discussion and also enable collaborative documentation of the session by both participants and catalysts.
- 4. Abilities [discussion and sketching].** In addition to speculating about the kinds of practices that might be effective, we also asked participants to consider what these require, practically and concretely.
- 5. Presentations.** The catalysts invited the participants to present what they did in their groups during the last few minutes of the session. One catalyst also took photos of the sketches toward the end, which we added to the Prezi on the spot in order to facilitate the presentations.



- 6. Concluding invitation.** The catalysts concluded the session by inviting participants to take one of the tokens representing one of the challenges as they leave. This act

would signify them taking the challenge with them and committing to developing response-abilities to it both in their own design (research) practice and within the broader community.

Post-conversation reflections

The conversation described here has actually happened on several scales and temporalities, and has multiple continuing trajectories. Before the conversation at DRS 2016, the catalysts and others at their home institution (and occasional external visitors) worked through a series of seminars to begin to stake out a territory related to the issues described above, and a kind of framework for catalyzing and supporting conversation around this now at least partially shared ground. We began the conversation at DRS 2016 by describing this history, and showing the working document (Prezi) that we used—a moving landscape that we invited our conversation partners to help us continue to chart.

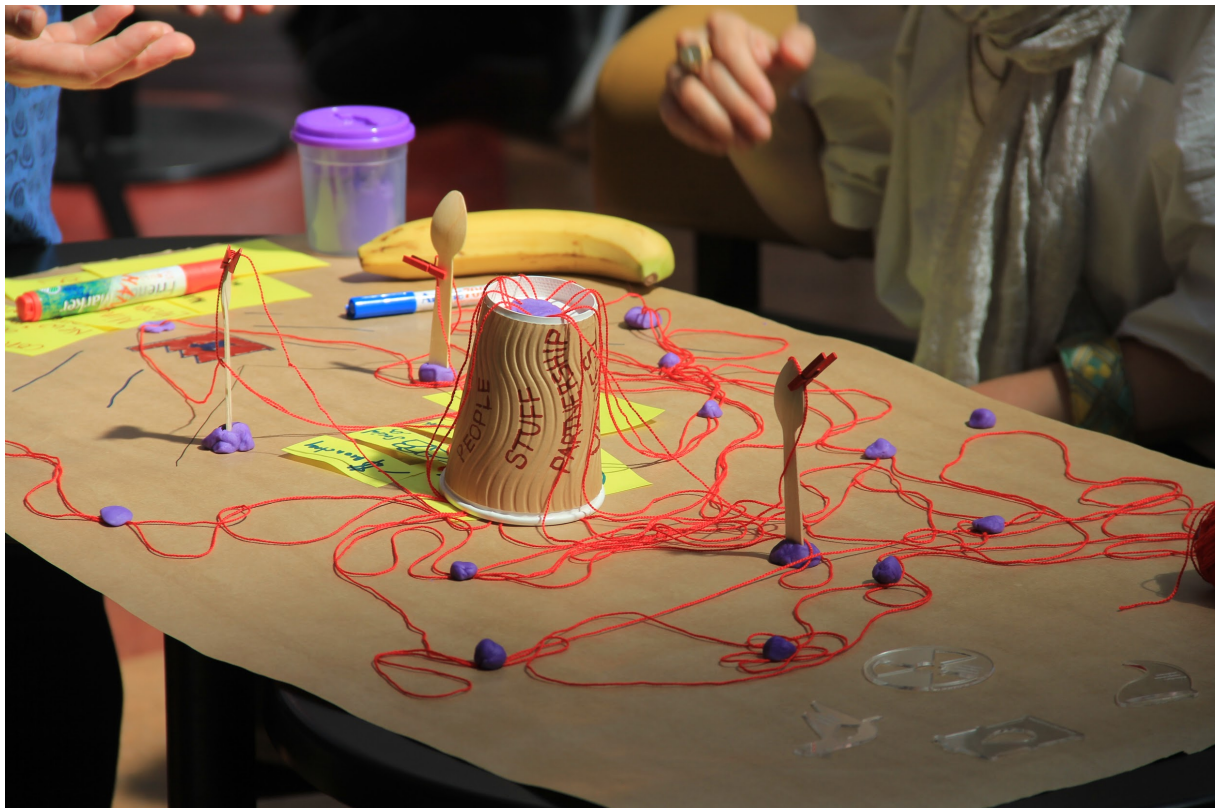
This Prezi (available at <http://tiny.cc/designresponseabilities>) frames a number of post-industrial challenges or calls for design to intervene, emerging practices, and the possible resources, skills and alliances we would have to develop. An important consideration was to look at large global challenges as acted upon by designers in situated contexts, hence, the attention on the non-local or the way design affects these problems at multiple scales.



The conversation partners were divided into groups and given a token representing one of five selected global, but locally manifested, challenges. These challenges pointed to matters around life-cycle/waste, refugee crises, mobilities, nuclear temporalities, climate change, infrastructures of surveillance and diminishing natural resources. These issues were chosen because they are current calls for design to act. Additionally, they required concrete and immediate action and embodied the tension between the global and local that we wanted to bring into focus. The conversation partners were asked to start the conversation provoked by this object through dialogue, visualisations and material representations.

This setup provided a number of entrance points into these issues. Some people started with the tokens, some began talking, others began sketching or making with the workshop materials provided. The temporary groups in their own conversations started to fill in details of particular points of interest, landmarks, dynamics, and flows; and things that design researchers, design educators and designers need to pay attention to in that territory. The sketches evolved with and through the material that was provided.

The Prezi now includes the sketches that the groups made through the conversations, which we added on the spot to display for the larger group during the presentations; as well as what we identified afterward as a few key themes that emerged in the comments that the groups made.



Themes

The themes are not exhaustive nor point to perfect solutions but rather generate tactics that we design-researchers can use to prototype our own practices. To this effect, the themes also generate new questions about our own professional working habits, potential needs and support structures.

1. Value

Industrial design creates value-added products for mass production. However, in light of the global challenges, how can we argue for socio-political values ?

Challenges:

How to find new ways of representing value?

How to find new ways of negotiating value?

Students want to work with socio-political issues, but how should they convince the industry of their relevance and highlight their value?

2. Working with smaller cases and examples

The global challenges are immensely complex and difficult for designers to understand and solve. As designer-researchers we have little awareness of the consequences and trade-offs beyond the design of our products and services.

Challenges:

How to make complex global issues tangible, so we (and other stakeholders) are forced to make decisions and to start understanding the trade-offs?

How can locally situated but networked teams (or trans-labs/departments) tackle specific problems with an eye on the holistic global picture?

3. Representation

The tools which we use to represent long term and large scale events such as environmental collapse, hidden networks, and global mobility are either limited in scope or often use a militaristic mode of representation. A militaristic representation would focus on a top-down strategy of identifying and deploying resources to target a problem. However we are interested in going from this linear model to more interconnected ways of working - across sectors, scales and time scales.

Can we make representations that afford a situated understanding of how to work with these global challenges?

Challenges:

How to make concealed networks and flows of resources and power visible?

How to be attentive to the situated local context for design work?

How to involve motivated and experienced people rather than only disciplinary representatives?

4. Making connections

It is necessary that we work with multiple stakeholders (government, citizens, experts) in order to address these global problems. The task of bridging policy making and public/citizen concerns is of particular importance for designers. Citizens need to feel responsible towards these global problems and the policy makers need to understand the micro-politics of implementing solutions.

Challenges:

How to do the bridging work between policy makers and citizens?

How to interconnect various actors at different levels (professional, sectoral, cultural etc)?

5. Multi-scale

Scaling up is often understood as a linear way of solving a problem. When tackling global challenges we need to work at multiple scales and find new ways to move and think in scale. Essentially, dissolving the boundaries between macro and micro level design engagements.

Challenges:

How to bridge large-scale problems from small-scale cases?

How to dissolve boundaries between macro- and micro level design engagements?

How to find other ways to scale (e.g. scale out) instead of just up or down?

Future directions

In order to continue and scale-out a shared conversation, we catalyze design researchers, practitioners and students to become not only conversation partners but rather catalysts as well. Hence, we urge catalysts to set up similar conversations at their institutions and workplaces so as to expand the node-building-network. As we see this as a present-future oriented shared action-conversation (materialized in the Prezi), we invite others to use and build on our initial efforts to begin mapping this territory and conversation space. Our website (<https://designresponseabilities.wordpress.com/>) is intended to work as a platform for gathering distributed and scaled-out conversations. It also gathers tweets with the hashtag #designresponseabilities. Through the hashtag, the Prezi, the website, future organized conversations, or simply any insights or tools that we might now share—we invite others to join us in a continuing conversation about the response-abilities of postindustrial design (research).

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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.

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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.