
Politics of Things



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Politics of Things

A Critical Approach through Design

Birkhäuser
Basel

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FOREWORD BIRD

One day Alexa was asked if she or he or it was a subject or an object. She or he or it was totally confused and remained silent forever.

Meanwhile this question also concerns all human beings and especially designers. Because designers have always considered themselves able to develop objects, signs, media and services which would serve as guides to users: chairs to be sat on and cars to be driven and communication to be used in the way the design defines, and signs and logistics to be followed. Thereby designers developed the idea of being something like meta-subjects and tended to see other human beings as something like objects.

But those other human beings never quite accepted the role of being just objects of design and instead destroyed or ruined that guidance and very often misused design in a very creative way one could call 'Non-Intentional Design'. Last chance to act as a subject. Probably, those days are now gone and especially the digital objects today are trying to dominate their human users, or, in other words: they have exchanged the roles of object and subject. If this is really happening, then we can forget all our philosophy and the statements deriving from the Enlightenment as well as the concept of identity. Furthermore, as the Enlightenment was based on the idea of a subject (the human being) and objects: Enlightenment stated that each subject needs the objects to become a subject – or has to be aware of the objects to be aware of being a subject herself or himself. And all the concepts of sociology, psychology (of psychoanalysis in particular) have been built on this. Karl Marx's remark that the tables might already be dancing by themselves while indeed they were just moved by people has now become somehow obsolete. If this were true we would all be heading towards a very complicated new structure and system and would have great problems in understanding this.

This publication by Michelle Christensen and Florian Conradi represents both the discussion and the result of a deep analysis and of experiments related to exactly this topic. They discuss and explain how the objects are interacting with the subjects and vice versa – and how this interaction has changed. This is applied to both everyday life and design – after all, this is a book deriving from the analysis of design.

As this analysis has moved into a real existential dilemma, this publication could have gone up into a very abstract theoretical sky. But it does not. Instead, it develops from very common experiences and even plays with this. On the one hand, this book is very serious, but at the same time it is also a very entertaining read. Exactly the way theory should work. At least when the tables have started to dance.

Michael Erlhoff

Board of International Research in Design (BIRD), June 2019

PREFACE – POLITICS OF THINGS

Michelle Christensen and Florian Conradi

‘People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what what they do does.’¹

Ontological Crisis

In times of crisis, where we stroke our phone more than we stroke our partner, and the timer on the navigation system makes us walk, run and drive faster, where our credit card makes us spend phantom money and the smartwatch on our wrist tells us when to breathe, we might start to consider who is in fact the ‘object’ and who is the ‘subject’ in these relationships. When space-specific advertising seems to fabricate social class, while individual-targeted content contrives digital lifeworlds, and fashion imposes possibilities of how we can perform our genders, then perhaps we can acknowledge – as we produce things, they are producing us back. In a society where a specific shade of blue makes us assume neutrality and nations become brands, where the rise and fall of politics can rest on a single hashtag and 140 characters can compromise world peace, we must accede to the fact that we are abiding by the artifice that we have created, and in a sense, we are currently in a battle with, and through, these artefacts.

As this state of ontological crisis advances to fall more and more outside our grasp, we seem to find ourselves digressing deeper and deeper into a state of incomprehensible production and reproduction. As the artificial becomes organic and the organic artificial, people increasingly turn into products and products take on human abilities, terminology such as ‘smart’ and ‘intelligent’ are washed away in removed metaphors that we can no longer reach, and suddenly things might know more about us than we know about them. And as we persist to reach beyond our reach, perpetually playing with fire, we seem to find ourselves merely chasing the shadows of what we invented.

1 Michel Foucault in personal communication (Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, 187).

As ‘makers’ and ‘users’, we have been fairly compromised. We have been constructed in every aspect – as subjects, we are produced in the way that we think and understand, speak and argue, in the words that we use, and the ones that we do not use (Butler 1999). As (and through) objects, we are produced in the way that we move, the way in which we sit, act, push, swipe, make and do. Therefore, through our interaction with things, we are socialised, culturalised, civilised, capitalised on – and through latent powers in the mundane material politics of everyday life, we are constantly being conducted and reassembled. Once we embark on the endeavour of engaging with this simmering predicament as ‘aware’ or ‘critical’, we realise the confrontation of how fabricated we really are. Due to the entrenchment of culture in the material world, we do not even have a mildly bland vocabulary – our materials, colours, forms and functions have all been taken hostage by whirling cultural manifestations. We move within a maze of scripts, not able to utter without saying.

So how do we possibly find an access to all of this, how do we begin to release ourselves from the conditioning that we are producing and produced by, as we find ourselves quite literally on the muddy middle-ground of simultaneously making and being made, using and being used. Where do we begin to have a different conversation with, and through, these things that we make and use. This research project is an exploration into locating a scheme to release oneself, albeit for a moment, from this obscure position. In a sense, one might say, it is an attempt to find possible escape routes – locating possible possibilities to distract oneself from oneself, as oneself has certainly been compromised.

This fluid co-constructive force of power and production can perhaps best be understood from a Foucauldian perspective on power, namely that we simultaneously articulate, and are the vehicle of power (Foucault 1980, 98). Thus, a playful interaction with this dual power must consequently entail a dual strategy – or perhaps, as this project is embedded at the bewildering crossroads of practice and theory, rather a tactic (in the poaching sense of a tactic explicated by Michel de Certeau, 1984). We must perceive and formulate a tactic of intervention – not just against the visible outcomes of this inauspicious power (its graspable empirical consequences), but against its power source (ourselves, that is, or one might say in these circumstances, the battery of the gadget). This ploy of self-intervention is vital, as it not only provokes the project of reproduction, but also acts as an epistemological approach towards understanding it (and understanding one’s own tacit participation in the process). It seems to provide an inlet into undesigning some of culture’s ingrained habits, and of redesigning our options of how to co-produce the material world.

Ceasefire

Thus, within a society where the roles of who is in fact the ‘subject’ and the ‘object’ in human-artefact relationships have become highly intertwined, this research project takes its point of departure in proposing a ceasefire between the idea of ‘us’ and ‘them’. We propose entering into a different relationship between us and the things around us, where we retreat in our anthropocentric approach of ‘granting’ things will, and things retreat their mundane covert powers. Where we stop subjugating things to blind or short-sighted intentionality, things stop overpowering us with their scripted agendas, and where we co-design with the things already as we construct them. In times of crisis, we propose that all parties form a truce – at least for a moment, in order to enter into an urgent negotiation.

As a mode of investigation, this research project explores how artefacts can come into being with a distinct attribute to protest, by having an open script, thereby attempting to create things that are co-constructors of meaning and message. It investigates the potential of engaging in a relationship between producer and produced, where confidence meets insecurity, stasis meets fluidity, where dogma hesitates, and pragmatism doubts, with the aim of understanding how artefacts can come to hold a legitimated ability of confusion, indecisiveness, ambiguity and paradox. In this way, the project depicted in this book explores the designing of frameworks for a potential dialogue that does not favour people nor the things around them, but rather attempts to enable a constant shift in positions.

In/Discipline

The project merges methods from the fields of design and sociology, drawing out a fusion of theoretical and methodological perspectives in order to specify a *design research tactic* of intervening in the social-material world. As sociology turns towards matter, and design makes a turn towards the social (Lury and Wakeford 2012), a transdisciplinary space flourishes which seems to foster an investigation into the un/designing of social-material power.

Within this amalgamation, the endeavour contrives social happenings with and through things, and explores the idea of artefacts intervening in, or even inverting the social. It has an immense focus on personal social relationships between the human and nonhuman, as it seeks to evoke and explore intimate social tension and personal power-plays between us and the things that are brought into being. Therefore, we approached these interplays from the perspective that the artefacts are as much co-agents of this research as we are. In this way, the project explores the process of ‘becoming-with’ the artefacts as fellows in a framework where human and nonhuman are explicitly co-constructed in the happening of social life.

In order to provide a framework for this engagement, the project contrived the approach of ‘Grinded Theory’, appropriating the method of Grounded Theory (Glaser 1998, 2002) for practice-based design research. The basis of the method was applied as it pursues the formulation of theory arising from the bottom up – from the ground of the process. At the nexus of praxis and theory, design experiments were employed to elicit three social-material ‘situations’ in which we hindered and compromised our own personal things, conversations and bodies, in order to enter into odd dialogical encounters. We constructed and shadowed the material regimes of power that we ourselves lived and operated within, prototyping possible disputes and unravelling alliances. In this way, we chose to create and stand in the middle of the problem, as we explored our own deluded dependencies, ruthless routines and hackable habits. As an experiment, one might say, we crumbled any safe ground that we might have been able to stand on hitherto, turning upside down and inside out most of what we thought that we knew until then, in other words – researching reasonable doubt. Each applied experiment was in turn followed by theoretical reflections, before once again plunging back into practice. In this way, both the design practice and theoretical reflections were pulled through an epistemological grinding mill, always interrupting one another in a rather crude condition, evolving what will be shown as ‘practice-based design theory’.

And so, this is as much a theoretical experiment as it is a practical one, as it is, in its core, an attempt to construct theory on the basis of applied design experiments. Within three phases of alternating between praxis and theory, concepts emerged, and terms were coined, contextualised and written into essays. This, in the hope that practice-based design theory might be a productive epistemological approach to access the crisis that design was largely responsible for creating in the first place. The essays resulting from this project provide a reflection on what kind of knowledge might have in fact emerged from these applied engagements, and on what terms it may be considered constructive and transferable. In this way, the overall project is a spirited experiment with theory construction and operates with a certain degree of methodological anarchy. We took a *carte blanche*, one might say, as it seemed that the undisciplined field of design research was offering one (Erlhoff 2016, 211; Joost et al. 2016, 9), in order to venture into the dark alleys of exploring the praxis of theory and the theory of praxis.

Juxtapositions

This book is the result of an experiment into performing a collaborative PhD project. Aspiring to converge and consolidate our two academic backgrounds in critical

approaches to design and sociology, it was carried out as a collective pursuit by the two authors. Therefore, the construction of the overall research framework, the experiments, and the constant documentation of the unfolding process was conducted as a collaboration. Throughout this venture, however, two parallel independent yet highly interdependent perspectives on the common process were synthesised and formulated. In this way, each of the authors assumed one distinct point of view, resulting in two interrelated cross-dependent subject matters – namely an exploration of the ‘dis/order of things’ and the ‘dis/position of the human’ within the current ontological crisis.

Within the dis/order of things, Florian Conradi outlines the urgency of *things* in a society where the human proceeds to innovate so rapidly that they are slowly coming to realise the shifts in power taking place as they emerge into a state of ontological anxiety. His work delineates the politics of ‘objects’ that is transpiring meanwhile, discusses the scripted and latent powers that things hold to act out in the social order, and locates within this a struggle to find tactics to tackle the trouble that we have designed ourselves into (Flusser 1999). Striving to defeat the instrumental perspective on the world that is so entrenched in the ways that we have learnt to become human, and human makers of things, he argues for the addition of the nonhuman perspective within critical approaches to making. The aspiration of this component part of the project is thereby to distribute the power of authorship and share autonomy with things – aiming to *make* thought experiments and *think up* spaces of materiality to elicit inverted ways of reasoning, and divergent reasons for designing. In the essays that follow, he argues for a decentralisation of the ‘maker’ as we emerge as human-nonhuman collaborative makers-in-the-making – drawing on deflative practice, re-situationist activism and ambiguous computing as a form of design practice. Based on the curious in-between spaces that emerged from the experiments, he discusses the potential of the field of design research to produce counter-logics and rear-reason in an omni-reasoned world.

Within the dis/position of the human, in turn, Michelle Christensen outlines the collapse of the ‘subject’, as we become so entangled with our rapidly evolving tools and contraptions that we no longer know when things extend us, and when we become the human extensions of things. As the basic principles and concepts on which we have based the understanding of ourselves hitherto, at least since the Enlightenment and the ideals of humanism, seem to have fractured and cracked along the rims of reason, her work provides a *practical attempt* to tackle the *theoretical call* for new concepts of the ‘subject’ that are more ‘applicable to the present’ (Braidotti 2013). Thereby, she investigates whether the tactic of over-entangling oneself with artefacts and systems in everyday life might provide a point of view ‘from the inside’, proposing perspectives on the ‘subject’ – of who we might *also* be. In the essays that follow, she argues for the demise of the ‘user’ as we find ourselves entering an entangled shared agency and politics with things – drawing on posthuman performativity, becoming the third wheel in our own apparatus of knowledge production,

and ‘hiding in the light’ – in the overproduction of data, putting the idea of human sovereignty in question. Delineating an approach to posthuman-centred design, she discusses how we might consider the potential of a shift from algorithmic-aristocracy and ubiquitous-capitalism towards techno-socialism and a corporeal-democracy with things.

This book, therefore, can be read in several ways. By reading it chronologically, one can become entangled in the unravelling dialogue of perspectives between the two authors, as they each reflect idiosyncratically on their common attempts to contrive a camaraderie with things. By reading every second essay – one can also choose to follow either solely the perspective of the *dis/order of things* (chapters *Maker/Made*, *Grinded Theory*, *Material Mischief*, *Borderline Objects*, *AI/IA*, *Paratypes*, *Rogue Couture*, *United Notions*, *New Dis/Orders* and *Tactics of Criticality*), or the perspective of the *dis/position of the human* (chapters *User/Used*, *Grinded Theory*, *Material Mischief*, *Rapid Protopeople*, *AI/IA*, *Humanodes*, *Rogue Couture*, *Open So(u)rcerers*, *New Dis/Positions* and *Tactics of Criticality*).

Taking into account the magnitude of deciphering the politics of ‘object’ and ‘subject’ positions within an entangled co-production of species in shifting power relations, this book is discernibly a nanoscopic perspective on a geophytic challenge. It is a perspective based on our own tangle with the mundane politics that played out in our everyday lives, as we are submerged into becoming our own research problem.

Ontological Crisis

Maker/ Made

Florian Conradi

A CRISIS OF MAKING

Widely experienced I suppose – things do not always work as we want them to. We try to catch Wi-Fi, car engine hesitates, copy-machine grumbles, printer quibbles, paper gets stuck. Handle breaks, pen runs out of ink, computer does not turn on, battery is empty. Socks too thin, boots too heavy, that too bright, this too dark, that too big, those too small. The moment that things do not work, we stand startled, asking ourselves what to do now – most often, casting blame on them for their incapacities (Erlhoff 2013, 156). This, however, might be the moment at which we come to see them, to understand them – exactly at the point where they might misunderstand us, and for short while, a research space of uncertainty opens up. It seems to be that things really do try hard though, and so do we. They try to connect and to provide, but sometimes we cannot do with them what they try to offer. We break off plastic pieces, squeeze things into the ‘wrong’ place, and even if we do not know what this or that button is for – we press it anyway. We hit, push, press, bend and squeeze things – mostly to make them fit, mainly to make them fit to make do. In this anthropocentric era of ‘many everything’, things hardly have a say. We make machines to make machines, machines to carry machines, machines to ship machines, and machines to destroy machines. We now make machines that ‘talk’ to other machines, conveniently sparing us the time to even have a conversation. We create networks that include some and exclude many. And as machines and networks become increasingly capable of acting ‘autonomously’, we seem to be deliberately giving away even the ‘last’ confrontations and responsibilities, as we consider letting calculative computing and unmanned drones foster and ‘objectively’ administrate our wars (Braidotti 2013, 44).

We have exploited every possible resource on the planet, and from maintaining slavery to manage cotton plantations to upholding wars to mine cobalt for the lithium-ion batteries in our smartphones (Frankel 2016), we have exploited people and the planet in order to create more stuff. Make, make, make. From fires to fire-arms, from notions to nations, from DIN norms to uniforms. Sometimes we simply innovate for the sake of innovating – making it possible to fly to the Moon for the sake of touching down (first) and planting a flag. In fact, the launch of the first artificial satellite in 1957 did not fill the hearts of people with pride or awe, Hannah Arendt writes, but rather with relief, as the human was no longer bound to live on Earth forever. Our many great scientific endeavours had not only managed to fabricate human life as artificial, cutting ties to nature, but had now also managed to break out of prison Earth – Earth being the very quintessence of the human condition according to Arendt. And we now find ourselves rebelling against our own human existence, she writes, bringing earthbound creatures act as though they were dwellers of the Universe, as we outspeed our own inventions (Arendt 1958, 1–2). In these times of anthropocentric innovation, not only is the planet for sale, but also

the Universe has been colonised by commerce. We can hardly see a star that is not already sold, we can buy weather names online, and now the wealthy can proceed to plan their next orbital, suborbital and lunar recreational travel (Cuthbertson 2017). They can only hope that they do not bump into the masses of discarded litter that we have left in 'junkyard space', where the more than 17,000 artificial things in orbit have occasionally collided to create over 170 million useless 'space debris objects' (NASA 2016; ESA 2013).

As soon as a new tool is introduced, Vilém Flusser argues, one can speak about a new form of human existence – because a human that is surrounded by tools, by culture, is no longer at home in a primitive environment, but is both protected by and imprisoned in that culture (Flusser 1999, 45). In a split second, one artefact replaces another, and before we know what we can do with it, it seems, the next product has been released. And so, as matter-makers, we might have slightly underestimated and overlooked the produced patterns of powers, the development of deceptive and destructive desires, and the jittery jargons that deeply underlie mostly every-thing. Within this process, we witness a blatant disregard for the thingness in things, and through our subjective projection on material – the granting application of meaning to matter, also a dismissal of the perhaps unheard potentials that they hold (Sennett 2008, 7). What could be more obvious, Heidegger argues, than that man transposes his propositional way of understanding things into the structure of the thing itself. Violence has long been done to the thingly element of things, he writes, and thereby our concept of things does not catch or gain possession of the thing as it is in its own being, but rather makes an assault upon it. In this way we have not yet championed the ability to allow things to remain in their self-containment, accepted in their own constancy (Heidegger 1971, 23–26). Through science's knowledge of 'objects', he claims, things were already annihilated as things, long before the atomic bomb exploded. The bomb's explosion itself thereby was nothing more than the grossest of all gross confirmations, namely that the thing as a thing remains nil – thingness remains concealed and forgotten, its nature never comes to light and it never gets a hearing. This continues to happen so essentially that not only are things no longer acknowledged as things in the first place, but they have yet to appear to be thinking as things at all (*ibid.*, 168). But perhaps there is a thing in things, an autonomy that was not programmed, a misbehaviour that was not conceived, a protest that was not planned?

As we continue to coerce the standards of normality – from DIN standards to algorithmic hierarchies of 'relevance', constantly categorising and creating quality control, we not only apply ferocity to things, but embody in them the attitudes that are designating and classifying us. Because in the anthropocentric era of innovation, the nonhuman hardly has a say. Things are made in masses to follow human ideas and scripted to follow specific storylines through a form of material enthrallment. Within a strenuous reproductive turmoil, we are working hard to upkeep culture – projecting our own needs on materiality, tweaking the things until they work

as we wish them to, and tossing away the things that do not. And as the human strives in its drive to not be limited, even by materiality, what prevails is the idea of going further, bigger, beyond – megastars, megastores, mega-cities – kilo, mega, giga, tera and nano in a geop-scale. Overshadowed by the overproduction and overconsumption of our own inventions – from spiritual commodities to corporeal ones, and from capital commodities to capitol hill – we seem to be turning into a society where experience is for the rich and expectations are for the poor. Where governments are led by plausible probability while its citizens stumble adventurously into apparent advantages. Where discovery is replaced by recovery, and few will, and already do, hold the power – sourced by all the others (Boskin 2018). Where singularity will be knocking at the door while we are busy cleaning satellite dishes – we will have entangled ourselves in so much complex-matter-debris, that we will be busy barbecuing on the rim of a social abyss. Every critique will turn into another commodity, and there will be no place to hide, other than another darn yoga retreat – relax, rethink, resolve, stretch – for the purpose of: reboot and redo.

As Guy Debord, founding member of the situationist movement has argued, when the process of commodification will have been consummated to its fullest extent, society will be propagated by the commodity and all of life constituted by notions and objects deriving from their value as tradable. In this moment, commodification will have completed its colonisation of social life, and society will be reduced to a ‘society of the spectacle’. All that was once directly lived will become a mere representation, as being will be reduced to having, and having into merely appearing (Debord 1967). This will be a society, or perhaps it is one, where we are so busy reproducing our reproductions, that we did not even notice that things are starting to know more about us than we know about them. And as Humboldt measured the world, we now measure ourselves – from blood pressure to footsteps, from followers to friends, from page views to polls of political power. As we develop a growing fascination for observation, explanation and validation, we are constructing an increasingly quantified world, and countless objects to help us do so. From tactile trackers to twinkly tracers, and from international databases to extraterrestrial space-bases, everything seems to be equipped with plenty of shiny buttons – but perhaps it is time to stop just pushing them.

Best case, it seems that we currently find ourselves on a treadmill powered by our own innovations, and worst case we are incarcerated in a dungeon of rationality that we ourselves dug. Worst, worst case it is a treadmill in a dungeon, and getting out of it seems not to be such an easy task. ‘Prometheus was here’ is scratched on the wall, next to a tally list from the old Greeks about morals and ethics, and $E=mc^2$ stands faded under the windowsill. If the dungeon had a window, one would see the Moon, and even that has been flagged. How to slow down the treadmill while being in a daze from running?

This work tries to decelerate the revolving belt, for a moment, in order to seek out a dialogue with our commodified companions. To open up a space of the in/for-

mal, for un/making, wrong/doing and mis/placing, as a common human-nonhuman act. As a research space, it strives to create a liminal space of mutual crises, in order to create a truce between the maker and the made, where we leave behind our anthropocentric perspective and instrumental approach to the world, encouraging the emergence of things that open up a space for an adventure into the lands of disadvantage. Because even within this ontological anxiety, running on a treadmill standing in a dungeon of rationality, one cannot help but be a producer, a maker of more things – pushing, swiping, nailing, writing, doing. As human beings, we are conditioned and condemned to create – we are making and being made.

POLITICS OF 'OBJECTS'

Our entire environment consists of things – houses, furniture, machines, pens, cigarettes, tins – of course, it also consists of people, but science has largely turned them into things too: measurable, quantifiable and easily manipulated (Flusser 1999, 85). We have attempted to put all of these things into (a social) order – divided into classes, grouped according to names that designate their similarities and their differences – and this order is both the code that governs how we interact with the world and the ways in which we are able to perceive the possibilities of it (Foucault 1970, xxii). The difference between humans and the artificial is no easy task to distinguish though, and therefore, Flusser questions whether we might need other criteria to understand the ontological world – such as perhaps movable and immovable things. However, as he writes, a country would seem to be immovable, yet Poland has moved further West, and a bed would seem to be movable, yet rarely gets moved. And so, whatever catalogues of criteria we make up for things, they seem to be countered by the mere reflection upon those categories themselves – it is no easy matter knowing one's way around things (Flusser 1999, 85). Over time, he continues, we have either attempted to resolve problems by transforming intractable things into manageable ones – what one might call 'production'; or tried to overcome them – what could be called 'progress'; and what we did not manage to either transform or overcome became 'last things', and people died from them. Then, however, came the non-things, the heavy flow of information that was integrated seamlessly into every other thing, and now all we have left are the tips of our fingers, he argues, with which we can tap on keys, or, nowadays one might say – push, scroll and swipe. This new human therefore is not a wo/man of action but of play, he writes, no longer lives a life of drama but of performance, no longer has things, but has programs – and will not die of 'last things' but of 'non-things', not of unresolved problems but of program errors. Thereby the future will be programmed by the programmers, who have been programmed (*ibid.*, 86–93).

Since the Industrial Revolution, the man-machine relationship has been increasingly reversed, as the human did not just use machines any more but became used by them – becoming a relatively intelligent slave of relatively stupid things (*ibid.*, 52). This has slightly changed in our century, as the machines have become more efficient, smaller and more 'intelligent'. However, the ongoing attempts to build the intelligent non-organic machine provide new dangers, as a lever is no longer a stupid arm when it is built into a central nervous system (*ibid.*). And this is challenging insofar as we might find ourselves in the situation that the world will be crawling with post-organic-machinic super-slaves at the same time as we are trying to eat and digest the industrial by-products poured out by them, Flusser writes. We have been moving our arms as though they were levers ever since we have had levers – simulated that which we have simulated, but what might happen when not just the stupid lever, but the intelligent ones begin to strike back (*ibid.*, 53).

By contrasting active humans to assumedly passive nonhumans *a priori*, we are in danger of losing our understanding not only of humans, but also of things – because the human is not a constitutional pole to be opposed to that of the nonhuman (Latour 1993, 137). Humanity and nonhumanity are inextricably enmeshed, and this is the ontological condition of the *Anthropos*, where we are entangled in a web of relations with what we made. In fact, it is quite safe to assume, as Jane Bennett argues, that humans need nonhumans to function more than nonhumans need humans – as many nonhumans, from a can rusting at the bottom of a landfill to a colony of spores in the Arctic, fester or live beyond the proximity of us (Bennett 2010, 151–152). In other words, while humans initiate or mediate some of the actions of their non-human companions, practically all human actions are mediated by nonhumans – our actions, sense making and even our bodies. Therefore, Karen Barad summons us to take issue with the idea of human self-centred exceptionalism, becoming more widely accountable for the roles that we play in the differential constitution and positioning of the human among other creatures (Barad 2007, 136). People and things have always existed as outcomes of reasoning, as well as products of meticulous cultural and material practices, rather than being a point of departure of pure, stable and clear-cut categories. There is no escape from the radical connectedness that we have with these extrinsic relations, and as living matter, including the flesh, is intelligent and self-organising, we must begin to emphasise the nonhuman vital force of life (Braidotti 2013, 60). Matter in itself is intelligent, Guattari argues, exactly because it is driven by informational codes that both deploy their own forms of information and interact in multiple ways with the social environments (Guattari 2000). Or as Donna Haraway puts it – machines are so alive, whereas the humans are so inert (Haraway 1985). Therefore, one of the most pointed urgencies of our time is finding new and alternative modes of political and ethical agency for our technologically mediated others (Braidotti 2013, 58) – to consider the politics of objects, both the politics that we programmed and the politics that appeared.

Foucault writes, in a reflection on the necessity of an expansion of our comprehensions of power, that it seemed to him that economic history and theory provided a good instrument for relations of production, and linguistics and semiotics offered instruments for studying relations of signification, but for understanding actual power relations we had no real tools. We had available only ways of thinking about power based on legal models, raising questions of what legitimates power; or we had the tools to contemplate power based on institutional models, raising questions about the power of a state. But it was necessary to expand the dimensions of a definition of power, at least if one wanted to use this definition to study an intrinsic latent informal dimension of it (Foucault 1983, 208). Foucault's insights regarding the 'microphysics of power', Barad argues, have profoundly altered the ways in which power and knowledge are currently theorised. However, there are crucial features that he does not articulate, including the nature of the relationship between discursive practices and material phenomena – an agential conception of material-

ity and power that takes account of the materialisation of all bodies, nonhuman as well as human (Barad 2007, 201). Therefore, one might argue, we need yet another expansion, not just to include Karen Barad's agential intra-acting material-discursive extension, but furthermore to comprehend (and even play with) the mundane latent powers of ordinary things. Jasper Morrison observed, in regard to latent power, how objects affect the space around them, changing the atmosphere of a room – something that might be hard to measure, but that in some way represents an invisible quality of things (Morrison 2002, 14). In this way, objects are important, anthropologist Daniel Miller notes, not because they are evident or because they physically constrain or enable, but precisely because we do not see them. And the less we are aware of them, the more powerful and significant they are – by setting the scene and ensuring an appropriate behaviour, they determine what takes place, even if they are unconscious of their capacity to do so (Miller 2010, 50).

When taking into consideration a 'politics of objects', and the ability of things to act out latent powers, the idea of ontological politics emerges as a helpful lens, as it speaks of the conditions of possibility that we live with and suggests that the conditions of possibility are negotiable, as they are not given. The term 'politics' in itself works to underline how the process of power unfolds as both open and contested, and so it argues for the idea that realities do not precede the mundane practices in which we live, but rather that they are concurrently shaped within these practices themselves (Mol 1999, 74–75). It brings into play the power plays and negotiations of nodes and networks, performances and assemblages, as well as human-nonhuman and organic-inorganic hybrids (Escobar 2010). Understanding the current crisis of making at the interface of human-nonhuman social friction as being a case of ontological politics therefore might allow for an asymmetric perspective – because if we are both maker and made, then we are actively being co-constructed as, through and with the material and artifice that we make. If ontology relates to being, to what is, to what exists, to the constituent units of 'reality', then political ontology by extension relates to political being, to what is politically, to what exists politically, and to the units that comprise that political actuality (Hay 2006, 80). While the world with which political theory has traditionally concerned itself is a world of social human relations, a world of Aristotle's 'political animal' – ontological politics furthermore takes in the materiality of the world (Pellizzoni 2015, 76). And this turn towards ontology does not mean moving away from the culturalism of language and moving back to a naive realism, Pellizzoni argues, it means rather adopting a non-dualist understanding of material reality and the human intermingling with it. Its basic tenets are thereby the blurring of the epistemic and the ontological – the importance of techno-scientific advancements as a challenge towards both traditional realist and constructionist accounts; as well as the close connection of ontology and politics – the 'actuality' and the 'political' being deemed to be directly implicated by and in one another (*ibid.*, 7).

From the perspective of a maker-being-made therefore, the expansion of a dual and informal 'microphysics of power', being assigned to and resulting from a world of artificial-organic human-nonhuman trans-species politics, encourages novel questions to be posed. Questions concerning the material-power that we interact with and operate in every day, about the reigning 'social order of things' that is ceaselessly being manifested, the state of things, one might say. What and who is being governed in this apparatus of material in/abilities, do we form republics, do we act civic with one another, who has what rights? What ideologies are being injected and re-implanted, by whom, into whom or what? Is there corruption, extortion, nepotism, patronage, bribery or embezzlement emerging – and can we then rather form a coalition with our fellow dwellers, perhaps already in the process of (meaning) making? Because it seems that there is a conflict arising, and we do not have the means to describe it, let alone mediate it. We must begin to understand the non/human 'us' in all of this in order to be able to act on new terms, to practise material empathies and post-anthropocentric ethics, to eventually be able to induce a new common politics with things. If we attempt to overcome the human-centric dogmatic and instrumental way of acting as 'makers of things' – then can we perhaps enter (together) into the critical unknown – materialise something beyond our limited human capacities and imagination, encourage something novel to emerge between people, systems and things? Because power tends to corrupt, Lord Acton famously noted, and absolute power corrupts absolutely (Dalberg-Acton 1887). Therefore, the attempt of the designer distributing power becomes paramount – opening a space for overt rather than covert power plays.

In a rumble against the rational, as an intervention against intent and as a revolt for another reason – this work acts in favour of the emergence of unreasonable unities and pledges un/reasonable doubt. As we have been apprehended by the apparatuses that we designed and find ourselves waking up in a dungeon of rationality and reason, we must submerge willingly in shady relationships with things, knowing that we have power over them, and they have power over us. We can no longer ignore the situation of ontological crisis that we are currently living in, allowing the unsettling blur to stay at a near distance as both sides seem to be arming up.

DIS/ORDERS

So how does one possibly find an access to all of this – how do we begin to loosen the ties from the structures that we ourselves are producing and produced by, not least as designers who find ourselves quite literally on the muddy middle-ground of simultaneously making and being made. Because in this over-mediated and over-made world, categories and classifications, hierarchies and orders, are constantly being re-established in things as a literal manifestation of culture. And even when we attempt to make things otherwise, it seems that we cannot control the culturally automated interpretations and responses to the forms, functions, colours and references that we use. In the designer's dilemma of duplicity, where everything is an intertextual reference to a reference to something outside of itself (Kristeva 1980, 69), we seem to be busy rearranging copies of copies, even within our drive to strive, to constantly reinvent fire. And this in turn is underpinned and bolstered up by the impossibility of intent, because as soon as we intend to create something, for instance something safer, like a seat belt or an emergency button in an elevator, we simultaneously design something else, in this case fear, danger and paranoia. Everything that we will ever, or have ever designed, will inherently be not only re/used and re/understood, it will not just be determined by the structures of the world in which it emerges and is implemented, consequently reproducing those structures, but it will moreover do so in a dynamic, remixed and constantly shifting process of re- and co-construction. So – does this mean that we should stop designing, perhaps making was never ours to make? No, we are a species of fire and play. Designing is a 'natural' phenomenon, and every-body is a designer – be it the designing that transpires through people, animals, planets, systems or things. And so, while Don Quixote created his invincible belief in chivalry and bravely fought windmills within an aware delusion (Cervantes 1615/2003), in these times – it is really quite difficult to even locate the windmills to fight.

Because we cannot help but make, as people, let alone designers, we are busy creating worlds. In the past, this was primarily a question of giving formal order to the apparent world of material, as scientists and thinkers attempted to categorise and order what was already there. However, nowadays, it is increasingly a question of making a world appear – a world of forms that are multiplying uncontrollably (Flusser 1999, 28). Looking into the etymology of the word 'design' in Greek, Latin, English, German and French, Flusser delineates the idea that the crux of 'designing' is trickstering. The word itself, as a noun, includes the meanings of 'plan', 'scheme' and 'plot', and as a verb it contains meaning such as 'to concoct' and 'to simulate'. It seems to always occur in contexts associated with cunningness and deceit, he argues – the machines that we design (traps, like the Trojan Horse) use mechanics (fooling forces such as gravity) and technology (what Plato might have called cunningly seducing people into perceiving distorted ideas). And so, design is the basis

of all culture – deceiving nature by means of technology, he writes, replacing what is natural with what is artificial, and building machines out of which there comes a god who is ourselves. Thus, whoever has chosen to be a designer has chosen against pure goodness, as we must concede to the fact that between ‘moral’ good and applied ‘functional’ good there can be no compromise – in the end, much of what is good in ‘applied good’ is bad in the case of ‘moral good’ (ibid., 17–20). It is human nature to believe that anything that seems possible to make should be tried, Sennett argues, and materially, humans have proven themselves to be skilled makers of a place for themselves in the world – however, Pandora has always hovered over our history of making things (Sennett 2008, 2,13). From a functional perspective, for instance, there is no difference between the elegant and user-friendly design of an ergonomic chair or an electric one, a racket or a rocket (Erlhoff 2013, 185; Sennett 2008, 2–4). With design, the devil is always lying in wait, and therefore one cannot be ‘good in oneself’ and ‘good for something’, one must choose between being a saint and a designer (Flusser 1999, 32–33). Perhaps we can only either, he argues, design bad and convenient, or inconvenient and saintly. Or alternatively, we could perhaps enter into a compromise, designing things intentionally less well than we might be able to do – arrowheads that constantly miss, knives that quickly get blunt and rockets that tend to explode in the air (ibid., 32). This is the producer’s predicament of principles (as if the designer’s dilemma of duplicity were not enough), and this is why so many movements have struggled to rethink the critical capacities of the field. Because as much as we have played our part in creating the order of things, we can also be part of dis/ordering them, creating clutter in the categories, and putting our understanding of them, as well as of ourselves, into an interim state of uncertainty.

With the emergence of approaches from the Italian Radical Design of the 1960s to movements such as critical and speculative design (Dunne 1999; Dunne and Raby 2001, 2013), design fiction (Sterling 2005; Bleeker 2006), adversarial design (DiSalvo 2012) or critical making (Ratto 2011), the idea that design could be a material mode of critical inquiry gained significance and visibility. Dunne and Raby, with their term of critical design, have argued that most designers understand design as somehow neutral, clean and pure, not taking into consideration that it is informed by values based on a specific worldview, or way of seeing and understanding a reality. Therefore, design can be described as falling into two very broad categories, they argue, namely affirmative design and critical design – while the former reinforces how things are now, conforming to cultural, social, technical and economic expectations, the latter rejects the current state of things as being the only possibility and provides a critique of the prevailing situation through designs that embody alternative values (Dunne and Raby 2001, 271). Critical design, they write, is related to haute couture, concept cars, design propaganda, and visions of the future, but rather than presenting the dreams of the industry, its purpose is to stimulate discussion and debate among designers, industry and the public (ibid.).

Bill Gaver adds the argument that mainstream technologies tend to be designed for an undifferentiated mass of ‘normal’ people, resulting in a set of bland devices that appeal equally to everybody, and deeply to nobody (Gaver 2006, 1). In order to imagine alternative ‘normalities’ therefore, many of the critical movements emerging in the design field use design fiction and speculative design proposals to challenge assumptions and conceptions about the role that objects play in everyday life, and thus their objects play a role of product design while emphasising neither commercial purpose nor physical utility. They exist mainly for sharing a critical perspective and posing questions to the public. One of the movements that is closely aligned to the agenda of this research project, through building prototypes over mock-up fictional scenarios, thus at once turning back to confronting the issue of materialising, is the small but steadily growing movement of ‘critical making’. This approach has in common with this project its focus on making a socio-technical critique of material making, reconnecting materiality and morality, and encouraging design approaches for non-traditional design ends (Ratto 2011). Critical making attempts to highlight the reconnection of two modes of engagement which the world has often held separate, namely critical thinking – traditionally understood as conceptually and linguistically based, they argue; and physical ‘making’ – material work. The movement does this in order to overcome what Ratto frames as the brittle and overly structural sense of technologies that often exists in critical social science literature, as a way of creating shared experiences with technologies in order to transform socio-technical imagination, and as a site for overcoming problematic disciplinary divides within technoscience (ibid.). The ultimate goal of critical making is thereby to develop novel understandings by the makers themselves, making objects that are intended to be a shared making-experiences, in order to engender insight and perspective on socio-technical phenomena for groups of making-participants. This brings us one step closer to a critical approach in design, which combines critique with making operative and experienceable objects that are acting rather than illustrating a political difference in the world – with an emphasis not just on the politics of the design work, but also of the designer.

From the literary scientists we know that one cannot fully author, and concepts such as Roland Barthes’ renowned ‘death of the author’ (Barthes 1977) raise equally important questions about the design work as they do about text. As Jacques Derrida formulates it ‘Meaning must await being said or written in order to inhabit itself, and in order to become, by differing from itself, what it is, meaning’ (Derrida 1978, 11). This argument disputes the idea of ‘pure’ authorship and leads to an argument for the case of the object as subject. If meaning must await being made, and as he further argues, must come into being, not before or after the act of coming into being, then perhaps we should consider authoring contexts in which meaning can occur, rather than attempting to author specific meaning in itself. In this way, the designer would choose to retreat from the position of ‘Author-God’ (Barthes 1977), building on the idea that the artefact that is formulated can have a say in

terms of what meaning occurs. This would imply that the ‘designer’ creates frameworks of meaning, giving up the power of full authorship. And it would mean that the meaning and message that the artefact raises would not come into being before the moment in which a receiver engages in a dialogue, thereby creating meaning that is able to inhabit itself. Because as the old German word for ‘thing’ (Ding) expresses in its meaning of ‘a gathering’, and specifically a gathering to deliberate on a matter under discussion – a contested matter (Heidegger 1971, 172), perhaps the matter itself should be part of the thing? Therefore, we need to explore the possibility of an extended vocabulary of prepositions that can address the disparate shifting relationalities between heterogeneous entities that are at once material and semiotic, objective and subjective, human and nonhuman (Michael 2004, 12). It is right at the juncture of where the movements of critical approaches to design and the social practices of objects meet, that this exploration attempts to add the dimension of the nonhuman other to the politics of design and designing. Because although these critical design approaches are manifold, and valuable indeed, they do not share power with *the thing*, or focus their attention on the aspect of reducing the instrumental human-centred approach to the material world, and thereby, their priority is not to include our nonhuman allies in the considerations of critique. And so, it seems that we need to attempt to engage in a less human-centred approach to *making meaning*, thereby formulating alternative conceptions of the *designer* and the *thing*. Rather than making critically designed things, it will attempt to make things that are an active part of raising a potential critique. It will actively compromise the ‘maker’, co-designing with things, in order to make collective trouble in the human-nonhuman social order.

Therefore, this research project entered into an experiment in retreating from authorship, and thus into a radical democracy of sharing power with one’s own creations. In a constant negotiation with things, it confronted the ‘maker’ with the tangle of not-making, not-yet-making, re-making, mis-making and un-making – to in the end finally dissolve into the work itself. Designing with things meant working with misbehaving matter, designing voids of meaning, exploring the unintentionality in things, and questioning whether they might become by themselves through coincidence or positive error. It explored whether it might be possible to encourage some of that thingness in things to emerge, asking whether things might then exist as a different division of political objects, and whether they might enable something different than what we could have intended. In this way, and in order for another mode of critique to emerge, this project meant putting oneself on fragile ground, and living with one’s monsters, one’s own ghosts – listening to the things speaking back. In three practical experiments, it toyed with the idea of things going beyond one’s control, intention and perception, attempting to reposition relationships of the maker and the made. Rather than creating dystopian critiques, warnings or speculations, this project engaged directly in the material-political power-loaded spaces of everyday life. Because if the designer can never be a

saint and is nothing more than a trickster – then one might assume that perhaps a trickster would be able to trick him/herself out of his/her own trickery. Therefore, this research project endeavoured to invert the world, turning it inside out and upside down, in order to access a different point of view of the world and how it operates. It engaged head-on in the paradox of how one even begins to not design in a design process, and if not ‘just designing’ – then when to start and when to stop oneself, and on what terms; or perhaps, on whose? In this way, it attempted to locate and practise tactics to release oneself, albeit for a moment, from the obscure position of ‘maker-making-and-being-made-by-material-world’, inducing possible escape routes and possibilities to distract oneself from oneself. And so, in a slight delirium, and through a cross-eyed perspective, we managed to stand slightly beside ourselves.

As a process of disorderly design therefore, of dis/ordering the positions and powers at play, this project attempts to open up the design concept to emerge as a joint human-nonhuman activism, and thereby, it aims to add something to the ‘thingness-debate’, not just from ours, but also from the things’ perspective.

