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Doing and Undoing Post-Anthropocentric Design

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Citation

Editorial:
Doing and undoing post-anthropocentric design

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This track is an invitation to travel and explore new paths for design framed by an ethics of more-than-human coexistence that breaks with the unsustainability installed in the designs that outfit, furnish and make possible our lives. Central to this discussion is the questioning of human-centered design approaches and the concomitant prioritization of human needs and requirements, discussed in many different ways throughout the papers of this track. In face of increasingly uncertain and bleak futures dominated by probabilistic logics of prediction, extraction and human exceptionalism, it is crucial for design to develop undisciplined and pluriversal approaches that allow 'us' to project common life alternatives and more livable futures.

In his keynote lecture for the 2008 Design History Society conference, entitled 'Networks of Design', Bruno Latour (2008) introduces the titan Prometheus, who defaced the gods and gave fire to humanity, as a symbol of modernism for the design community. If the Greek titan inflamed progress by disruptive innovation, radically breaking the more-than-human order of the Gods – the opposite, namely, to design from within, mediating and negotiating in a careful and modest way, is to contest progress and its powers. To set the scene of this track, all the authors have in one way, or another tried to follow Prometheus' brother Epimetheus agenda. Often depicted as the foolish brother, he was in fact the one giving each mortal creature the equipment it would need to live well, favoring reproduction over production, careful transformations over disruptive ones. To give a more vivid example of how this agenda is explored in the track, we want to point to a contribution where a sensitivity and care for what at first seems rather foolish and fatuous, attending to shit, can literally open up for ways of living better. In "Shitty stories: Experimenting with probiotic participation through design" the design researchers aim to explore probiotic participation in order

to destabilize medical and human focused perspectives, allowing participants to create new relationships with their gut and gut microbiome. Here, we want to especially mention the way the authors also manage to analyze the apparent failure of the research in moving "towards more harmonious coexistence with the uncountable microscopic entities that inhabit our gut." And when doing so, they surf the unexpected, celebrating what exceeded their research script.

Etymologically, Prometheus emphasizes the 'pro', as in thinking and doing before, whereas Epimetheus emphasizes the 'epi', namely the thinking and doing after. In the discipline of design, techniques and practices such as prototyping, planning and experimenting in advance are commonplace. However, in light of current demands to critically rethink the 'modern', colonialist, and anthropocentric inheritance that resonates in design cultures; less known formats, where for example notions of 'after' and 'undoing' might be at play also need to be more considered. Such concerns are visible in a range of the papers in this track. In the contribution "Designing & Worlding -Prototyping Equivocal Encounters"' this is made apparent as the prototypes literally get undone as they are carefully taken apart by the two chimpanzees Judy and Gombe. As argued by the authors, the "value of prototyping does not lay in the agreements reached or in the technical qualities of the artifact, but in the mistakes, problems, and destabilizing aspects that the prototyping process generated". Judy and Gombes 'de(con)struction' of the artifacts can perhaps be seen as a sort of 'dark ANT', much in line with some of the ideas in the contribution "Design beyond the human world of management and organizations: Towards a cosmology for the Anthropocene". Here the authors identify the differences between 'constructability', 'unconstructability' and 'deconstructabality' as proposal to de-project the world as we currently manage it. As the authors call for some sort of reverse engineering, or design adapted to the Anthropocene, this might be what we see described as a mode of affective relations in the next contribution to the track, "Narrating Ecological Grief and Hope Through Reproduction and Translations". Influenced by plaster molding techniques used at a closed-down pottery, citizens are invited by the design researchers to reproduce and translate old animal and plant motifs into present circumstances, literally mapping some of the ruins of capitalism, such as loss of biodiversity onto plates. Thus, what we are confronted with is both the obligation for design practitioners to care for livable worlds fabricated out of the ruins and remains of the post-industrial and lost practices, as well as the demands to actively reflect on and explore the cosmologies implicated in constructing futures – perhaps here we can start to imagine pluralist design cosmologies.

Clearly, what we are dramatizing are not only theoretical and methodological concerns, but also an ethical duty to critically rethink the modern, colonialist, and anthropocentric inheritance that resonates in and through design cultures. As the various contributions demonstrate, the track is situated in the contemporary discussion regarding how to rethink design from a post-anthropocentric and decolonial way of making, thinking, and feeling. As argued in "Making-with the Environment through More-than-Human Design" where traditional, indigenous, and local knowledges are at play, post-human theories function as an intruder to

the current more mainstream design theories typically driven by human-centered perspectives. This is also figured in the contribution "Why would I ever fry and eat my SCOBY? It would be like murder! – Attuning to nonhumans through kombucha fermentation practices", where the practice of kombucha fermentation support us in shedding light on our human-exceptionalist mindsets by symbiotic attuning to microbes, insisting on recognising nonhuman as actors in design processes, beyond relations of mastery and possession. Similar to all authors in this track, they share the need to interrupt what design has been doing from a modern-colonial epistemological matrix.

Reference

Latour, B. (2008). A cautious Prometheus? A few steps toward a philosophy of design (with special attention to Peter Sloterdijk). In Proceedings of the 2008 annual international conference of the Design History Society (pp. 2-10).

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