



Re-Framing the Politics of Design

Liesbeth Huybrechts, Oswald Devisch (UHasselt)
Virginia Tassinari (LUCA School of Arts)

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Re-Framing the Politics of Design

Situated knowledges on the Politics of *Care*, Politics of *Translation* and '*Ontologizing*'

LIESBETH HUYBRECHTS, OSWALD DEVISCH
AND VIRGINIA TASSINARI

INTRODUCTION

Re-Framing the Politics of Design is a research, exhibition and book project exploring the role of designers in collaboratively giving shape to future changes in relation to some of the most complex challenges we face today, including climate change, mobility, and migration. What we are increasingly experiencing on a global level is that these challenges tend to polarize rather than connect societal groups. In the summer of 2021, for instance, large parts of Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany were flooded due to exceptionally heavy rain. The result was an unprecedented human and ecological drama. In the days after the disaster, experts argued that we all need to change the way we live to leave more room for water. But almost immediately, people started voicing their opposition, even negating the environmental disaster, framing it as an attempt by the state to limit 'their freedom', an attack on the privileges they had earned through hard labour. In the meantime, on the ground, thousands of people were removing mud and debris from their houses and working together to rebuild their community. They were already shaping the social changes needed to address the environmental challenges we all face. A similar polarization took place around the Covid pandemic (consider the anti-vax movement) and the European refugee crisis. Each of these crises is driving us towards a society that feels increasingly fragmented, characterized in turn by entanglements of social and environmental injustices. We believe that the acknowledgement of these entanglements can help us to avoid the mystifications that underlie this polarization. What we need is a growing awareness of the deep relationality connecting us all, humans (and not only those who already have a voice in society and are represented) but also more-than-human actors (such as water, in the above case).

A conversation is currently ongoing in social sciences about the need to acknowledge this relationality. Many designers and design theorists are currently contributing to this conversation. There is also a growing awareness in design of the need for what is called an ontological turn (Fry 2003; Willis 2006; Escobar 2018): in other words, the need to acknowledge in the design process the relationality with others as well as the ontologically different ones such as more-than-human actors. French philosopher Bruno Latour (2018 and 2019), to name but one, is challenging designers to no longer think of humans as if they could stand alone, separated from others. His main argument is that each

of us exists because there are others (human and more-than-human agents) who interdepend with us. With his book *Designs for the Pluriverse* (2018), Arturo Escobar has been powerfully bringing this issue of relationality to the fore in the design discourse, inviting the design community to seriously rethink their own design practice and acknowledge the ‘*radical interdependence*’ (Escobar 2019) connecting all the actors – human and more-than-human ones – together giving shape to the earth we both inhabit and help to form. When we recognize that we all interdepend, we finally acknowledge that we cannot but care for one another. As the philosopher Maria Puig de la Bellacasa says:

‘Care is everything that is done to maintain, continue, and re-pair “the world” so that all can live in it as well as possible. That world includes ... all that we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.’

(Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 161)

We are part of this web of life: to maintain, continue and repair it is in our own interest, and therefore should necessarily be our own concern. This means that if we *care* for ourselves, we then also necessarily need to *care* (Ibidem) for others (other people, but also other actors which are more-than-human, such as water). But if humans and more-than-humans interdepend, communities, institutions and the environment also interdepend. When this radical interdependence is not acknowledged, there is a risk that polarizations emerge. If this acknowledgement was already an issue in the past, today’s exponential complexity makes this possibly even more urgent.

Within this process of raising awareness, there is a specific role for us designers, namely unpacking the complexity, representing it, translating the voices of the silent and silenced actors (human and more-than-human ones who are reluctant to participate), and prototyping/enabling ways to reweave the web of life. The aim of this book is to explore this role. We want to challenge our design practices from the perspective of this ontological turn. We argue that this can be done by *carefully* (Ibidem, 2017) paying attention to the politics of these processes. Climate change, for instance, will increase instances of heavy rain, causing more flooding. To limit the impact of these floods, we

will all have to make more room for water, wherever we live and whatever privileges we have. We will have to learn to live with the water system instead of channelling and disrupting it. Once we recognize that we are all connected, we cannot but *care* for one another. In giving form to this *care*, designers inevitably play a political role. Regardless of the scale levels on which we designers operate (on the level of products, spaces, materials, systems, etc.), there will always be aspects and actors that we overlook and there will always be contestation around the complex matters we address (Moi 1999, 75). While this is challenging for designers to engage with, we argue that they still can and need to take a stand within these processes. Engaging with the politics of design is thus not being in denial about the choices we make and the contestation we create, but rather an ambition to engage with them *carefully* and continuously, also listening to those who are silent and silenced within the process.

Discussing this political agency of design is certainly nothing new. Many designers and design theorists – particularly from the tradition of participatory design and urban planning – have been working on the issue of politics (see e.g. special issue on the Politics of Design, Huybrechts and Teli 2020). And yet the increasing level of polarization results in a growing number and rising degree of exclusions and a growth in social and environmental injustices, as a direct/indirect consequence of these exclusions. This urges designers to constantly re-frame what this politics of design might mean concretely and to constantly requestion the capabilities that we need to strengthen to take up this political role. The lessons to be drawn from these exercises of re-framing will certainly need other rounds and are thus necessarily processual and open-ended. But any re-framing needs to start in the here and now, even if with the awareness of it being just a temporary exercise. If all design practices should be considered as situated forms of knowledge (Haraway 1988), this is particularly the case for design practices working with and for radical interdependencies.

The understanding of a politics of design that is explored here requires an embodied, performative form of knowledge: a discourse developed through design and not simply on design – in other words, a discourse developed

Case 3. ACTING THINGS VII:

School of Fluid Measures

JUDITH SENG

Keywords

Relational practices, performativity, embodied knowledge, norm critique, applied choreography, situated knowledge

University / Design-Architectural Studio
Studio Judith Seng

Project lead
Judith Seng

Partners

Team Studio Judith Seng: Elena Steffan, Phoebe Morris, Clementine Boucher, Merel Dassen;
IKSV – 4th Istanbul Design Biennial and its curatorial team: Jan Boelen, Nadine Botha, Vera Sacchetti, LUMA Arles, Z33 and curator Iis Huygens

Country / region

Germany / Berlin; Turkey / Istanbul; France / Arles; Belgium / Hasselt; Estland / Tallinn

Contact information / website
judithseng.de

Abstract Standards such as kilograms, metres and hours suggest objectivity and independence from a given context. Reduced to a shareable consensus, they enable us to navigate the variety of individual contexts and perspectives. Nevertheless, their meaning only unfolds in relation to a specific situation, object, space, or time. In that sense, learning and understanding are less about knowing stable facts and more about being able to listen to how everything continuously changes in relation to everything else. The performative installation *School of Fluid Measures* explores the concept of marketplace as a third space for performative translations. It invites participants to reflect on human values, not theoretically but through silent yet embodied experiences as interactive negotiations with sand in space and time. Fixed standards and positions are thereby dissolved through scored interactions that leave traces in coloured sand. The colours represent exemplary social values as resources to debate, distribute and fuse into new colours and values. The sand serves as a fluid medium for negotiations, expressed as patterns that emerge through an exploratory measure of the fluidity of meanings.

Through an embodied process that surfaces situated intentions and relations, different workshop sessions within the installation invite participants to negotiate the relation between two colours and values and a chosen situation of daily life. As a series of performative negotiations, this installation can be perceived as a collective learning process. In *School of Fluid Measures*, knowledge unfolds over time, over the course of a conversation, and over the course of an exhibition.

Situating the Project

ACTING THINGS: *School of Fluid Measures* was first presented at the 4th Istanbul Design Biennial at the Pera Museum. It was further activated at LUMA Arles in France before becoming part of the opening exhibition of the new building of Z33 in Hasselt/Belgium.

The installation was developed in Seng's studio in Berlin but in relation to research undertaken in the context of Istanbul. Although its development was heavily influenced by the Turkish context, the work as such can be situated within and relate to a lot of different contexts. It is understood as a performative, spatial and material framework for collaborative experimental research. Each iteration of the installation is thus slightly iterated on the basis of previous learnings and in relation to the new context and its participants.

'Markets are not real but mathematical models, created from phantasy of an enclosed world, in which all share the same motivation, knowledge and self-interested exchange.'

(David Graeber 2013)

This case study explores the concept of marketplace as a third space for performative 'translations' between different bodies, contexts and perspectives. For example, at the bazaar, values are negotiated less through a mathematical model than through singular performative acts. The final price of an object is crafted through an interplay of multiple ingredients such as people and how they relate to each other, an artefact, and the desire to buy or sell, or the time of day when the bargaining skills are performed. Being defined anew within each unique situation, the agreed value is unpredictable, whereas the procedure of bargaining has become an established cultural practice that can be known, trained and repeated. To support social and economic exchange among different contexts and their respective cultures, it was necessary to create trust in a way that was reliably independent from different cultures and individual situations. For example, one early form of money protocols was the act of lending grains by engraving it into a clay plate as a story of debt between two parties. By translating this unique transaction into a materialized object, trust was notated as a contract of debt that, having emancipated itself from its original situation, could be traded as value as such. Many centuries later, in 1875 the intergovernmental institution *Bureau International des Poids et Mesures* (BIPM) was founded by seventeen states who from then on applied the metric system instead of the variety of local measuring standards. To this day, the BIPM preserves prototypes that safeguard international standards for seven measuring units. For example, a kilogram was originally defined as the mass of one litre of water at its freezing point. Until very recently, the International Prototype of the

Kilogram (IPK) was made out of a cylinder of platinum-iridium kept under vacuum to avoid natural material corrosion and thus change in weight and standard (Sample 2018).

People thus want to establish reliable standards to enable trust and exchange across a variety of unique and subjective life situations. However, the example of the kilogram reveals the fictional character of such fixed standards. It is an agreement that ignores the inherent relationality of situations that would otherwise constantly change in their definition. The complexity is abstracted for the gain of a common denominator, which makes it possible to act (or translate) between diverse and unique forms of embodied, relational, and dynamic life.

These thoughts led to the installation *ACTING THINGS: School of Fluid Measures*, which initiates a series of embodied, silent conversations to explore how meaning and understanding is created through continuous negotiations between the social and the material. It was first presented at the 4th Istanbul Design Biennial in the Pera Museum and is the 7th project in an ongoing series of experimental set-ups that examine design as choreographies of everyday life or the interplay of people, objects, spaces, and processes as a dynamic, socio-material matter.

Over a six-week period, the installation invited the public to negotiate the dynamics between two social values and their influence in relevant situations in everyday life. Each value was represented by one person and a pile of coloured sand. A negotiation was mainly governed by two rules:

1. Not to talk, but to debate by interacting with sand and body movements in space and time.
2. To create a dialogue by reacting to and building on the other's movements.

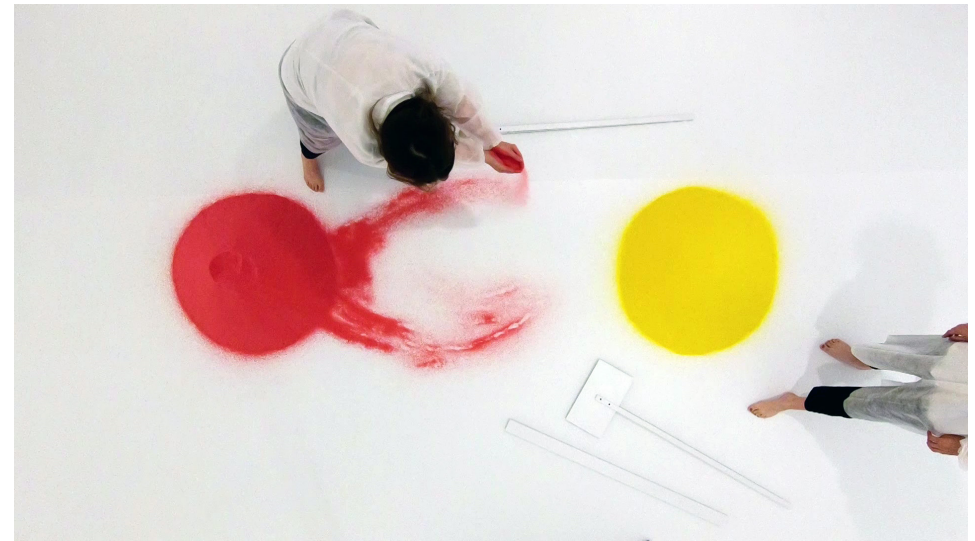


Image 24 and 25.

Documentation of two negotiation processes. Pera Museum Istanbul, 4th Istanbul Design Biennial. Images by Studio Judith Seng



Image 26.

Installation view before any negotiations,
Pera Museum Istanbul, 4th Istanbul Design
Biennial.
Image by Studio Judith Seng

Case 4. Dwelling with seasonal neighbours

Abstract During the summer of 2018, a temporal pavilion or *House for Seasonal Neighbours* was installed in a typical Flemish landscape of fields, scattered houses, retail, and infrastructure. An explanation board explained to visitors and occasional passers-by in five languages that it was ‘a monument for the homeless presence of seasonal labourers in the region’ and invited them to enter. Being a simple gesture, the intervention sits on the intersection of more complex evolutions in Belgian horticulture and European migration. Its creation was part of a larger artistic research project into the lived spaces of migrant labourers by three architect friends with Ciel Grommen as the main initiator.

CIEL GROMMEN

University / Design-Architectural Studio
An occasional collective composed of Ciel Grommen, Maximiliaan Royakkers and Dieter Leyssen

Project lead
Ciel Grommen

Partners
Flemish Government (project subsidies art and heritage), Z33 Flacc (workplace for visual artists), the municipality of Borgloon, the Farmer’s Union (Boerenbond)

Country / region
Haspengouw

Contact information / website
seasonalneighbours.com

Situating the Project

Haspengouw is a fertile agricultural region of Limburg. For a long time, fruit growing determined its landscape development. Over the past decade, the sector has transformed worryingly because of the scaling of the economy. Many small farms disappeared and were replaced by a few monoculture-based fruit companies. Tons of cultivated fruit made the surviving cultivators increasingly dependent on the world market. This metamorphosis is also linked to urban development and societal changes in relation to migration and community. Since relatives, students and local unemployed inhabitants were no longer sufficient in numbers to enable the fruit to be harvested in time, migrant labourers from low-wage countries in Southern and Eastern Europe started to be involved in the process. As the European Union gradually enlarged and a national legislative framework for seasonal labour was developed, farms equipped with residential facilities were developed to house hundreds of seasonal workers. Today more than 20,000 workers travel each year to Belgium to work in the agricultural fields. They are allowed to work 65 long days for a fixed hourly wage under exceptional status.

While the economic role of these European migrant workers is clear, their sociocultural role deserves more scrutiny. In 2017 the artistic research project *Seasonal Neighbours* was launched to investigate this role. During two subsequent seasons the context of Borgloon was explored. This little town in the centre of Haspengouw experiences a demographic growth of one fifth of its total population caused by an influx of mainly Polish, Bulgarian, and Romanian workers.

Two years ago, out of curiosity the designers requested these numbers from the administration of several municipalities in the south of Limburg. It appeared that Borgloon, a small town in the Flemish countryside, houses 2700 seasonal workers for 12,000 inhabitants and has the highest concentration of seasonal migrant workers in the area. To the designers, this discovery was a shock. The main initiator of this project, Ciel Grommen, was a local resident and yet she had never met one of these neighbours. This led her to wonder: Where do they all live? And how do they inhabit this landscape, how do they make themselves at home here?

Mainstream media elaborated at length on the political context. In 2004 the EU enlarged, and free movement of labour was simultaneously regulated across all member states, causing a flux of migrant workers, mainly from Eastern to Western Europe. When interviewing farmers, the designer learned that the scaling of the economy forced them to enlarge production and focus on the world market. Hundreds of people were needed to help with the harvest, so they equipped their farms with housing facilities to host Spanish, then Polish and today mainly Romanian and Bulgarian fruit pickers. A legislative framework was gradually set up that prescribes labour conditions and minimum residential standards. However, when asked questions about notions of hospitality and domesticity, they often responded in a rejecting and doubtful way.

To address the workers empathically and understand their living space, Grommen started to participate in the seasonal work herself. By picking strawberries and pears side by side with seventy seasonal workers of mainly Polish and Bulgarian origin and by accompanying a group of eight women travelling to their hometown in Bulgaria at the end of the season, she encountered a disconcerting environment of hard labour and poor living conditions.

'REPRESENTATION OF SPACE' AND 'REPRESENTATIONAL SPACE'

The farms she focused on proved to have turned into complex sites of cohabitation. Workers from different backgrounds live together in small collective housing facilities, near the farmer's family house. Housing inside the yard has the advantage that it eliminates transport costs. But it also increases control by the employer over his or her employees. Grommen was surprised not to find any sign of appropriation or domestication and understood that migrant workers approached the housing facilities in a purely pragmatic manner, as a place to sleep and eat. For both employer and employee, work determined every moment of the day. Other aspects of life like privacy, free time and religion were suppressed and postponed until after the harvest season. Given that modern agricultural techniques can artificially extend the harvesting season, one wonders how long this postponement can last?

Life outside is limited. Evenings are mostly spent on the farm: the workers gather in small groups under the shelter of a former pigsty, on a bench along the street or seek privacy in the orchard to call their family. In the investigated farms, it was actually prohibited to invite guests to the facilities. One employee explained that she once received a visit from her sister, a permanent resident in Belgium. When using the common kitchen, the farmer noticed her presence on the security camera and threw her out. They continued the meeting in the car.



Image 29.

Daily presence in the *House for Seasonal Neighbours*.
Image by Olmo Peeters



Image 30.

House for Seasonal Neighbours. Design by Maximiliaan Royakkers and Ciel Grommen. Image by Olmo Peeters