

Introduction: Objects, Practices, Experiences and Networks

Tom Fisher^a and Lorraine Gamman^b

^aNottingham Trent University

^bUniversity of the Arts, London

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The purpose of the OPEN Special Interest Group of DRS is to facilitate productive engagement between Design research and fields in the humanities and social sciences that have a relationship to it. This relationship may go in either direction. Design often looks to other fields as a source of theoretical ‘frames’ for thinking through processes and their relationship to abstractions like ‘society’ or ‘the environment’. Design and its processes and products are themselves of interest to some fields – from Design History to Human Computer Interaction. The words that make up the title are intended to indicate some of the most potent of these relationships.

‘**Objects**’ immediately implies ‘subjects’ and points towards debates about the mutual constitution of both. For example, this mutuality connects design to debates that have appeared in archaeology as part of a broader ‘material turn’ across a whole range of disciplines in the last quarter century (See Olsen 2010). This has played out in a focus on materiality and ‘object ontologies’, which can be a little bemusing from the perspective of design, where our practices and research conventions are nothing if not materially engaged, focussed obsessively on objects and, in the case of craft practices, thoroughly embodied. The Cartesian material/ ideal split does not sit easily over Design, and we can gain greater insights into what it is we do from these debates that question it. From the perspective of research, and particularly ‘practice based’ research, this is especially the case where these writers engage with matters of cognition – how we know what we know (Malafouris, 2004, 2013).

The senses the SiG has of ‘**Practices**’ go both towards Design, and away from it. While the practice of designing is relevant to the SiG, the use of the ‘practice’ in sociology may have more potential to bring about that productive engagement with design research. Theories of ‘social practice’ (Reckwitz, 2002) offer Design non-reductive ways of engaging with the consequences of designing. The insights that a social practice approach provides offers



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useful ways to see how material engagements play out in the social world (Shove 2003) and designing itself has been a significant element in sociological accounts of these engagements (Shove et al 2007).

The relationship of material things to human beings has led a number of writers, from different perspectives, to focus on the '**Experiences**' that are in play in those relationships. The broadest categories of material things have been treated in this way: 'cloth' (Weiner and Schneider, 1991), 'technology' (McCarthy and Wright 2004). Again, as well as pointing towards frames for thinking about design's products, outwith Design, 'experience' has been a focus for work within it. Although open to critique for relatively narrow and instrumental focus of 'experience design', it does at least emphasise the human dimension of our material relationships. Also, the processes of design and of design research are themselves thoroughly experiential.

As a keyword in the human sciences and humanities, '**Network**' has both a generalised relationship to the themes of relationality mentioned above and a specific reference to the work of Bruno Latour. His 'actor-network' acknowledges the agency in both humans and 'non-humans' and offers a way to understand objects beyond their representational and symbolic properties. This makes room for a way of thinking about designing as a materially engaged practice that is consequential beyond its role as a meaning-maker, emphasising its potential to be a 'social intermediary' (Latour, 2005). Thinking of designing from the perspective of the actor-network, makes it possible to understand the degree to which it is *both* a 'subaltern' practice (as Clive Dilnot notes), a medium or 'mediator' for the social, and has agency in itself, especially when engaged at an ethical register.

Latour's work originated in studies of science, arguing that science presents as facts what are in fact constructions (1979). Latterly, he has moved from the apparent relativism of this position to a focus on 'matters of concern' (2004), asking "Can we devise another powerful descriptive tool that deals this time with matters of concern and whose import then will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care?"(2004: 232). The work of the OPENSIG in recent years has coalesced round precisely such matters of concern and a desire to protect and care, which echoes the intention of DRS2016 to use the conference to pose the question "How can design research shape our lives in more responsible, meaningful, and open ways?"

This orientation for the SiG has resulted in a book, *Tricky Design: the ethics of Things* due out in 2016¹, which brings together contributions from design and other fields around the compromised and compromising situation that design occupies in respect of the ethics of its consequences. Seeing Design this way, as a shape-shifting, indeterminate discipline with a 'tricky' identity, makes it a complex matter to discern an appropriate scope for its 'matters of concern'. The use of the word 'thing' in the book's title connects it to ideas that feature very prominently in the philosophy of technology since Heidegger (1971) and in the work that follows him, such as the Science Studies initiated by Latour and others.

¹ Fisher, Tom, and Lorraine Gamman, eds (2016) *Tricky Design: the ethics of Things*, London: Bloomsbury

Objects, Practices, Experiences and Networks are all concepts that point towards the way human and non-human entities come together into *things* that are bound up with matters of concern. Design is deeply implicated in this gathering of forces of agency, and given the orientation of DRS2016 to 'responsible, meaningful and open' design research, its distinctive contribution is, arguably, to help to reconcile them. To begin to see how this reconciliation might take place, it is worth dwelling for a moment on the concept of the *thing* to which this discussion refers.

In an article of 2001, Bill Brown proposes a *Thing Theory*, from the point of view of the critical study of culture, or Cultural Studies. For Brown, as for Heidegger, *things* are different from *objects*, though the distinction is subtle and complex, and to sum it up is inevitably to miss some of that subtlety and complexity. Brown tries to capture the sense of *things* being 'out of language' that Latour gives (2004: 233) by referring to way the Surrealist poet, Francis Ponge, engages obsessively with specific mundane objects, doorknobs, 'figs, crates, black-berries, stoves, water', but always overshadowed by lurking *things*... As Brown puts it, 'the word designates the concrete yet ambiguous within the everyday' (2001:4).

Objects implicitly define subjects, they are known, closed, concrete, determinate, discrete, full of meaning, 'industrial', 'technical'. The etymology of *thing* gives it a quite different sense – related to the Norse word for 'gathering'. The Icelandic parliament is still called the Althing and this sense of *thing* is anything but discrete and determinate, rather it is a site, a place for formulating and re-formulating views of right action, which sounds a little like Design. As Latour puts it: 'A thing is, in one sense, an object out there and, in another sense, an issue very much in there, at any rate, a gathering' (2003: 233) that can encompass both 'matters of fact' and 'matters of concern'.

The circulation past the familiar object into the unfamiliar *thing* that is implied by this discussion resonates with some qualities of design, particularly research processes that are not directed to concrete, instrumental ends, but are open, focused on re-casting relations between people, and between people and what Latour calls 'non-humans'. For design the neat distinction between subject and object breaks down because the subject, the designer, is in the object and the subject changes the object. The relationality of objects is consequently more obvious from the point of view of designing, than it is in everyday life, when objects are means, or signs or values which may be compelling, but are relatively static.

Brown sums up the move required to get from (not) seeing an object to perceiving a thing in a passage that is reminiscent of Heidegger's principles of 'ready to hand' and 'present at hand', differentiated by Graham Harman as 'categorical' or 'existential' (2002: 38):

"We begin to confront the thingness of objects when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation." (Brown, 2001:4)

Things then, are objects that seem to be one thing but are actually another, and this quite accurately characterises all the five papers in this OPEN session for DRS2016. They engage in varying degrees with the ‘mysterious and intuitive’ at the heart of design (McDonnell: 109). They also throw up questions about Herbert Simon’s famous definition of Design, which stresses transformation based on preference (1996: 111). Huppertz recently noted that this formulation of design represses ‘judgement, intuition, experience and social interaction’ (2015: 29) as well as accepting that the preference in question will always be determined by others’ – institutional or corporate – interests. This may be the case for the ‘subaltern’ designer, but Design Research should be a reserve territory, where designers can capitalise on their privileged ability to move their attention from objects to things.

To take advantage of this reserve territory, the OPENSIG call for papers for DRS2016 invited responses to relationships as follows:

between designing and norms, expectations of right conduct

between designing and political formations, local and global

designing as the gathering of relationships in ‘things’ - material, immaterial, actual and fictional

The modest number of papers that came forward in response to the call perhaps confirms that design tends to take a subaltern position, but the inventiveness and perspicacity of the authors in interpreting the call is not in doubt. In all five cases, the papers show that Design’s inheritance from the modernist avant garde, though perhaps rather tenuous in many instances is nonetheless intact. Design can ‘de-familiarize’, it can ‘make strange’ the everyday, turning objects into *things* that seem to be one thing but are another. In the selection of papers we hear not only about a research process, but about inter-species bee work; not just a better app but an implicit critique of the new ‘sharing economy’; not simply clothing design for a target market but an co-design engagement with stereotypes about older women; not design for the old but a new ontology for technology. These are clear matters of concern that require going against the grain of contemporary consumption, challenging anthropocentrism and at least opening up, if not considering the ethics of new designs of service.

So Deborah Maxwell, Liz Edwards, Toby Pillatt and Niamh Downing offer us ‘Stories in a Bee-Spoon’, which although it is an account of an innovative research process, is also much more – this is inter-species work that challenges the human/ non-human dichotomy by focusing squarely on the labour and agency of non-human animals, bees, and one of their products, honey. Michael Mages applies Language-Action theory to a case study of the development of software for UBER drivers, noting that the concerns of the drivers puts them in an unconventional relationship to the development of the software. As Cameron Tonkinwise has put it “Saying Uber & Airbnb are ‘design-driven companies’” = “design is the power to trick people to work against their long term shared interest” (2015). Two papers engage with aging, in very different ways. Katherine Townsend, Ania Sadkowska and Juliana Sissons combine Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, with the craft of pattern cutting in a co-

design process that is working to re-define the basis on which older women 'fashion' themselves through clothes. This emancipatory mission contradicts both the youth-centric character of fashion and its conventional supply chain, which divides designers from consumers. This shifting of the ontology of fashion is paralleled by the work that [Elisa Giaccardi](#), Lenneke Kuijer and Louis Neven describe about technology for older people, in effect changing the provision from a focus on objects that are 'fool-proof', to one on *things* that constitute a resource with which older people can engage on their own terms. Finally, Jeffrey Chan takes a broad view of the ethics of design in relation to technology, sustainability and responsibility, this last being a motif covered at length by Peter-Paul Verbeek (2005), which begs a whole set of questions about the degree of agency that design has to take a responsible position and the way in whose interests 'being responsible' is characterised.

Things are OPEN.

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