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Article (Published Version)

Light, Ann (2015) Troubling futures: can participatory design research provide a generative anthropology for the 21st century? *Interaction Design and Architecture(s)*, 26. pp. 81-94. ISSN 1826-9745

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Troubling Futures: can participatory design research provide a constitutive anthropology for the 21st century?

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Abstract. This paper argues there is value in considering participatory design as a form of anthropology at a time when we recognise that we need not only to understand cultures but to change them towards sustainable living. Holding up the democratically-oriented practices of some participatory design research to definitions of anthropology allows the essay to explore the role of intervention in social process. And, challenging definitional boundaries, it examines design as a participatory tool for cultural change, creating and interrogating futures (and the idea of futures). In analysing how designing moves towards change in the world, the paper brings together design research and anthropological concepts to help us better understand and operationalise our interventions and pursue them in a fair and sustainable manner.

Keywords: participatory design, anthropology, ethnography, alternative futures, democratic, future-making, constitutive, everyday design.

1 Introduction

This essay is about design and the politics of making futures. In it, I present a form of designing (here grouped as *democratic participatory design practices*) that creates, supports and interrogates cultural change by engaging with people's futures explicitly and collaboratively. I discuss this engaged interest in change-making as a *constitutive anthropology* in order to explore reflexive and performative dimensions and so address design practices generally at a time when some reconceptualisation is needed to manage the destructive tendencies of unreflective innovation and production.

In placing change in lives, beliefs and societies at the heart of this discussion, I argue that I bring this essay into the realm of the anthropological. If design takes people's futures as its material, establishing new ways of being, it speaks to debates in anthropology about temporality, intervention and making. I use the disciplinary differences in what it means to make an intervention to reflect on the politics of designing. So, the discussion about the responsibilities of making change is framed by another, on the relationship between anthropology and design. To tease out the contrasts and similarities, I draw particularly on Ingold's talk "Anthropology is *Not* Ethnography" [1]. This allows me to examine places where the two disciplines meet, not in a purely epistemological sense, but in terms of mission. Thus, this essay is theoretical in style, but practical in its aims – it argues that we need intervention in

how we think about futures as well as our cultural practices and that certain fields of design research can provide hard-won practical understanding of what this means.

Obviously, this is not to deny what design anthropology has already achieved in exploring the relationship between, and in the space left by, the two disciplines (e.g. [2]). Indeed, Halse [3] gives a view of how anthropology might embrace the future, and how design differs from and complements the other discipline. Nothing written here is intended to ignore these insights, but, as the practice of design anthropology refines itself, this essay chooses to focus on the contribution to be made by a particular form of participatory design work.

A visible tension in anthropology is between academic purists, who spend long periods on their inquiry, and the 'quick and dirty' [4] role of ethnography in business and innovation, there to deliver insights that make the future safer for investment. The separation between those trained in anthropology who make a living from uncritical use of their disciplinary tools and their more scholarly colleagues maps to the separation in the design arena between those who only use their skills in service of their sector and design researchers, who reflect more on the processes involved. However, I will argue that, in certain design practices, research and practice are so tightly coupled that to conduct the practice is to be a researcher-in-action.

Last, in the tradition of good anthropological practice, I introduce myself, the author (whose own practice winds in and out of the essay's discussions), as an edgewalker between disciplines, with greater interest in the politics of creating futures than affiliation to a body of work or historical trajectory. I have spent more than 10 years learning, through observation, co-research and reflection with those involved, how grass-roots 'social organisms' use design practices to make politically-motivated change. For longer, I have been a hands-on designer, devising tools for social change, methods of promoting sociality and means of engaging people in considering how (and how far) we can together make our own futures. Given that I now do this in a research context, attempting, more or less collaboratively, to find out what can be learnt from doing so, I put myself in the bracket of *design researcher*.

2 The Project of Design

My ambition in this essay is to understand the work of what I term *democratic participatory design practices* in contributing to cultural change. To follow my argument, that these practices are a form of anthropology, we need to know what they entail and to situate them by looking at designing more generally and its relation to society and the planet. In this section, I give an overview of designing, making the distinction between *the design discipline*, *designing* as an activity, involving practices and process, and *a design* as output (i.e. what is made by a specific process).

To explain designing is not as simple as it might appear. Despite popular definitions (e.g. [5],[6]), Dorst shows that the act of problem solving is not the totality of designing, suggesting: 'the co-evolution of problem and solution leads to the uneasy conclusion that in describing design, we cannot presuppose that there is something like a set 'design problem' at any point in the design process.' [7]. Tatar [8] takes the idea of a defined 'design space' to task in similar fashion, preferring the

idea of ‘tensions’ as a means of drawing explicit attention to the ‘many incommensurate dimensions’ involved: ‘Design tensions conceptualize design not as problem solving but as goal balancing’ [8]. Fischer suggests that, among other factors, ‘[c]omplexity in design arises from the need to synthesize stakeholders’ different perspectives of a problem’ [9], emphasizing the importance of problem owners (for whom a design is made) as stakeholders in the process because they have the authority and knowledge to reframe the problem as the space is understood [9]. What emerges is a fluid account of designing, one that stresses its world-making (i.e. both its interpretive and generative) aspects. The world does not offer ready-made problems for solution, but the act of noticing is part of the designing activity and may be highly personal. Design involves part-making the landscape one is travelling through [10].

Dorst further suggests we understand the practices of designing as an idiosyncratic balance of interpretive behaviours – from identifying and working within existing relations to employing taste, judgment and choice [7]. While undeniably true at the level of observing what designers do, Dorst’s acknowledgment of such differences in practice points to the trouble with over-arching definition. Designing is both a range of processes and a grouping of them; performed by professional designers with particular methods, by the facilitators of participatory process, and by people making change without formal design training. There is no single activity we can point to.

2.1 Making Change to the System

Nonetheless, the pursuit of purposeful change by selecting and shaping materials that afford (or resist) one’s purpose is highly visible and of increasing concern. For, even if Dorst can critique Simon’s view of design as solving problems, it is hard to dismiss Simon’s ‘sciences of the artificial’ [6], being the way that the world is shaped (and must be studied) as a product of human activity. Referred to now, in some circles, as the Anthropocene, our age is one in which the legacy of invention has touched everything, and human activity may now be the most powerful determinant of the fate of the planet [11]. From philosophy of technology to post-modern cultural theory (e.g. Derrida and Stiegler on the primordially of cultural production), scholars are increasingly viewing design activity as a defining human feature.

Considering the power of designers, Papanek famously opens ‘Design for the Real World’ [12] with the statement that: ‘There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them.’ Papanek designed what we might call ‘appropriate technology’, in a user-centric way, but he spoke against manufactured products that were ‘unsafe, showy, maladapted, or essentially useless’ (as Wikipedia has it) and, in doing so, early exemplified the role of design researcher. Papanek’s concern for designs to be in tune with actual needs and resources looks as fresh today as it was controversial then.

His view has been superseded for its shock value: ‘What we really ought to fear is not “Oblivion” but irretrievable decline. This would be a grim situation in which we all knew that humanity’s best days were behind us, and that none of our efforts, however brilliant or sincere, could redress the mistakes humankind had already committed. ... we need to understand that we really don’t want to find ourselves in a

world that fits that description.’ [13:141-2]. Sterling writes in direct contrast to the conservationists who argue for a zero-growth economy. He suggests the way out of a technosociety is *through* it: ‘Design thinking and design action should be the proper antidotes to fatalistic handwringing’ (p13).

If we look to how each of us tries to make our way through life, we can see this tension in planet-shaping at another scale. Aspirations are not told only in formal, sanctioned activities. In humble, everyday ways, we all work to stack the odds in our favour by tuning, nobbling, planning and making do. Light and Miskelly [14] suggest that tactical designing reveals itself in activism, contrasting it, after de Certeau [15], with the sanctioned, more strategic, designing of designers. Big masterplans co-exist with small tweaks in a giant dynamic intersection of changes being deliberately conceived and perpetrated. Whatever our access to and mastery of the tools, designing is always future-oriented; an exploitation of present features with future goals in mind, but without the wisdom of hindsight. As Reeves observes, even our best attempts to present the future in scenarios and stories merely reveal present preoccupations [16]. Designing is dangerous because it always projects forwards, but we are not able to judge where it will lead. Further, ‘mainstream design is typically drawn into what we could call a close-present: the present of a recent yesterday, limited now and almost tomorrow’ [17]. Much designing takes place in a market where an immediate competitive edge is more important than long-term impacts, blinkered to meet the needs at hand in a segmented production line. Designs may help configure the future, but practices on the ground are frequently indifferent to this responsibility.

3 The Politics of Participatory Design

Design is about *what could be* and the act of shaping becomes the story behind the material culture that envelops us, contingent upon what has gone before and reined in by the limits of the current imaginary. But, given that shaping can only happen in the present, what can it tell us of futures? In asking about *the possible*, we can answer by pointing to both the process of designing and the outcome of it, as texts embodying potentiality for other realities and narrating the elimination of potential through the choices made. And we can go further, since some design research works reflexively to engage with these aspects. At the cusp of participatory design, STS and anthropology sits work where the impact of intervention is the focus. I return to why this might be considered anthropological later; first, here, I look at democratic participatory design practices and explore what is being designed.

3.1 A Brief Political History of Participatory Design

Participatory design (PD) was early defined by its techniques and methods, ‘namely strategies that allow for the direct participation of workers in project definition and design specification’ [18], intended to improve working culture at personal, organisational and national level [18] This appears as a political motivation in the PD

movement of the 1970s, emerging from work with trade unions [19]. Indeed, Kyng, in 2010, is wondering where this feature has gone [20]. The field has always argued there is a democratic imperative for drawing on the ingenuity and expertise of the widest possible pool of people to achieve the best sociotechnical outcomes; an argument more prominent at its outset, but still discussed (e.g. [21], [22], [23], etc).

At present, there is also still considerable work on methods in PD, but much of it takes a more expedient view. As workplace contexts give way to less bounded design spaces, the link between design outcome and emancipation has weakened and work is conducted purely to improve 'fit for use' with no analysis of cultural contexts or desire to change them. In other words, engaging in participatory practices does not mean that methods are deliberately political, even though they all carry their own politics as social relations do. It is the act of self-consciously seeking to change relations that links design to political intent.

Part of this work has been to understand people's potential in context and to strive to create the circumstances that best support it. In working this way, not only do we get a design that is 'fit for purpose', but we may also support group learning and leave a legacy of greater purpose and sense of agency amongst those we have worked with. It is a form of capacity building, of infrastructuring, and can be designed as much as any other social process, as we see also in community development, socially engaged art and transformative design (e.g. [24]). In an age when resource use is controversial, the opportunities provided by this form of designing may include a way both of expressing our rights as people sharing a world and of finding the necessary agency to be able to contribute to a rethinking of priorities and of production. It is fundamentally about changing cultures as well as making things.

So, I derive the term 'democratic participatory design practices' from practices that knowingly address relations by collaboratively exploring, critiquing and designing tools, structures and systems, hoping collectively to change how lives are lived and enhance them. (Here I acknowledge, but look beyond, the 'democratic design experiments' of [25]).

3.2 Designing Futures

Consequently, within the remit of participatory design are some design practices that do not construct anything except possible futures. We see this most clearly in the introductory sections to Ehn et al's book on *Making Futures* [26], Light and colleague's explorations into how older people might want to shape future life using arts practices, *Democratising Technology* [22, 27], and a memorable workshop collaboration between Ehn, Watts (self-styled 'archaeologist of the future') and participants at the Participatory Design Conference 2012, which produced the e-zine *Travel Guide to the Futures* (<http://tinyurl.com/pmy9a8e>). Wilde and Anderson [28] suggest it is 'hard to imagine a future fundamentally different from what we know', offering a participatory 'embodied-thinking-through-making' in which the 'format enables us to sneak up on ourselves, to be caught unaware and unselfconscious for a moment so that we dare to begin'. Researchers at RMIT have run events under the umbrella of Design + Ethnography + Futures, interrogating what uncertainty means in practice (see [29]). Across all these investigatory projects is recognition that there are

politics to futures in the present, and ethics to one's methodology for impacting them, neither of which are often articulated in mainstream design discourse. They make this liminal space their focus.

It is a space in which researchers not only consider the future and seek to impact it, but also consider the nature of impacting and how future-making is embedded in all designing. As Light [27] comments, in this kind of work, a prop used to support people imagining futures is not merely a prompt, but may be a 'design(ed) artefact, helping to reveal the "designed" therefore "designable" nature of tools and systems'. An interest in the ideology of 'the future' as a single discernible state comes through¹; for instance, it is challenged with the term 'The Not Quite Yet' in *DemTech* [30, 31] and using *future-making* as a verb [32].

Ehn, Watts, Akama, Wilde, Light, etc, can be seen as taking others on the co-constructed journey of Dorst's analysis, in playful settings but with critical intent. In raising awareness that futures are mutable, undecided and co-constructed, we create fertile ground for playful, pluralist and critical imagining.

3.3 Imagining Futures

Research into taking collaborative action suggests two circumstances act to trigger campaigning [33]: the sudden escalation of threat, forcing the issue in a way that resembles problem-solving, and recognition or acquisition of suitable tools and/or materials, which closely resembles a more opportunistic, exploratory designing. Accounts of this more playful exploration, where an idea lingers until a mechanism for enactment is found, make visible the imaginative process of *moving towards*.

Heidegger [34] shows how we anticipate action through projection as we move to act. This projection underpins designing, being a *movement* to intervene and one with a purposeful direction *towards* a new state of affairs. The inherent movement and directionality in designing is not straightforward intentionality (a cognitivist position challenged by generations of situated thinking, e.g. [35]), but rather is related to the phenomenological insight that we cannot think without thinking *of* something. It is what occurs to us to do *at the time, in that situation*. This movement precedes any exchange with one's materials, such as is seen in material utterances [36].

In imagining difference, something changes in our potential for action and the directions it might take. In conceiving new ways of being, we are already performing a part of the work of designing, even if we never pursue imagined difference into the discernible world of materials and tools. We may push at norms and broaden symbolic repertoires. We start the confrontation between the fluidity of the mind, where anything imaginable is possible, and the cultural and material choices that already shape possible futures, where (infra)structural commitment is profound [37].

If the designer's role is to support others to imagine difference, this movement and directionality can be fostered. Engaged in democratic participatory design, we are not

¹ One secondary finding from the *DemTech* project was that many participants had conceived of 'the future' in their youth and were offering predictions circa 1960, most of which had come to pass by the time of the workshops in 2007.

always designing directly towards an outcome; we are often designing opportunity for others' participation. Or, perhaps, others' participation may be seen as the intended outcome. This may mean designing vehicles for others' voices in the design process. In collaborative and participatory contexts, *moving towards* includes orientation to other stakeholders. It may involve eliciting people's values, ambitions and beliefs and reflecting with them. When cultural elements such as these are used as instruments for meeting collective ends (e.g. [23], [26], [27]), designers act as researchers, looking pragmatically for means to inspire other people's envisaging, then turning them into opportunities for vision and growth.

4 Between Design and Anthropology

If design researchers are deliberately understanding enough about designing (and how its processes relate to wider society) to replay this back to others as part of interrogating futures, are they acting as anthropologists? What if they are researching people's values, beliefs and goals as part of working with them? What if the act of making futures together also makes new knowledge about people and their ways of being? Marcus [38] reviews what anthropology has become: in his eyes, defined by 'engagement with events in the world as they unfold with ever more perceived rapidity (and to which the still-emblematic patient fieldwork method requires visceral, immersive access) and by an alignment and critical analytic engagement with found thinking, however it is organized and articulated in practices, conflicts, and daily living.' This section looks at critical analytics, engagement and 'found thinking' through temporality and intervention, exploring where design and anthropological investigations come closest.

4.1 The Brief Guide to the Future in Anthropology

Anthropology is traditionally a domain identified with the present (or past) that eschews future speculation; temporality is a source of contention in how fieldwork is interpreted. Classic anthropology explores how others engage with the future, to be seen in work on trends, futurists and 'anticipatory anthropology' [39], in discussion of media futures (e.g. <http://tinyurl.com/pgb2dac>) and in Boelstorff's critique of the furore round Miller's comments on the future of Facebook [40]². One imagines that the furore involving Miller was particularly intense because an industry has grown up predicting future uses of products and systems (and, thus, markets) from present trends and the anthropologists employed in this business do not always police the difference between offering data for interpretation and speculating themselves on likely implications. In the formal discipline, studying the 'found thinking' of futurists

² Miller, in suggesting that young people have left Facebook, drew on his research experience that belonging was already losing appeal in parts of the population, but attracted media attention for speculating on the social network's future.

is categorically different from becoming a futurist oneself, despite a role for participant observation.

A related sensitivity concerns intervening in the field of study. Talk of intervention raises ambivalence. In much social science, the challenge of observing without interfering produces a form of positivist 'objectivity'. In anthropology, it sparked reflexivity. So anthropologists spend considerable time, unlike designers, critically examining how they intervene in existing social structures and relations and what they have brought to the mix in the way of cultural assumptions and social impact. This concern has spawned a sub-discipline of *engaged* anthropology, with a campaigning flavour (e.g. [41]). Elsewhere, making change is often seen as an undesirable necessity in gathering data and analysed as part of interpreting them.

As noted, in designing, the starting point is making change and judging if it is fit for purpose, often without thought to broader intervention effects. In these attitudes to intervening we see how differently the two fields regard the future, not only in terms of reporting it, but in terms of making it. While the anthropologist seeks to understand people and societies through creation of meaning, potentially hamstrung by a concern with altering the status quo, the typical designer's mission is to make an exploitable difference in materials, often leaving other considerations aside.

But one trend in anthropology is co-opting design as a method and resituating reflexive criticality.

4.2 Ingold and Intervention

In 2013, Ingold and Gatt offered a vision of 'anthropology-by-means-of-design' (as opposed to ethnography), describing a role for the anthropologist as co-creator and suggesting that 'deliberate and reflexive participation in the production of artifacts (such as personal relations, documents, or even texts) during fieldwork...is the next step to be taken in the discipline of anthropology, following from the reflexive turn' [42]. Ingold has become a popular and persuasive figure in anthropology so his interest in design (and view of ethnography) is significant here. To understand its precedents, I turn to his 2007 lecture [1] on why anthropology is not ethnography.

His vision of engagement is familiar to participatory designers. Ingold asserts that what distinguishes anthropology from other disciplines that study people is that 'it is not a study *of* at all, but a study *with*. Anthropologists work and study with other people. Immersed with them in an environment of joint activity, they learn to see things (or hear things, or touch things) in a way that their teachers and companions do.' [1:82]. Therefore, he continues, 'an education in anthropology, does more than furnish us with knowledge about the world. It rather educates our perception of the world, and opens our eyes and minds to other possibilities of being.' (p82). The practice of anthropology is 'essentially comparative, but what it compares are not bounded objects or entities but ways of being. It is the constant awareness of alternative ways of being, and of ever-present possibility of 'flipping' from one to another, that defines the anthropological attitude. It lies in what I would call the 'sideways glance'. Wherever we are, and whatever we may be doing, we are always aware that things might be done differently.' (p84).

This practice uses an ‘anthropological mode of descriptive integration’ like that of drawing; observation and description go hand in hand. In fact, ‘Something happens when we turn from the being *with* of anthropology to the ethnographic description *of*. ... Conventionally we associate ethnography with fieldwork and participant observation, and anthropology with the comparative analysis that follows after we have left the field behind. I want to suggest, to the contrary, that anthropology ... is itself a practice of observation grounded in participatory dialogue. ... ‘The field’ is rather a term by which the ethnographer retrospectively imagines a world from which he has *turned away* in order, quite specifically, that he might *describe it in writing*.’ [1:84]. Engaging and recording both have value, but they are not synonymous.

In challenging our way of knowing, Ingold does away with the intervention debate: anthropology is a practice of observation grounded in participatory dialogue in a place we already are. He does not allow for a separation between experience in ‘the field’ and the job of observing. He resituates criticality in the moment of ‘sideways glance’ as to how things might be done differently, away from remote ethnographic analysis of social systems. This is to be *critical* in the way of critical design. We may recall Lewis’ possible worlds theory, which allows that reality is comprised of all that we can imagine: the “actual world” and all “possible worlds”, used by Wakkary et al [43] in discussing counterfactual material and how it is designed to provoke thought about other potential realities. Ingold sites his participatory dialogues over design activities so that he and others can take a ‘sideways glance’ and consider things differently. If this is anthropological, then we might allow that the democratic participatory design practices described in this essay are too. We need only concern ourselves that, in resituating criticality, Ingold has also done away with much of the structural politics that underpins participatory design’s emancipatory commitments.

5 Staging Encounters

Ingold uses design to stage his anthropology. Much participatory design futures work involves staged encounters (e.g. [44], [45]) to create insights and opportunities for collaborative change in practices. To return to Marcus’ framing, we find our ‘found thinking’ by staging ‘events in the world’ to create it. I will draw on my own practice here to add some practical examples of what I mean.

My first example involves eliciting greater understanding of informal designing with, from and for groups of change-makers engaged in transforming their environment (see [23]), i.e. making futures for others. Our research team brought four groups together from different parts of England to workshop events to compare practices. A simple process of moving the different groups across country to see each others’ sites of engagement gave the impetus for 1) comparisons of local conditions and locally evolved techniques, and 2) the development of new ways of thinking. This latter was achieved by devolving responsibility for workshop design to a local group in each of the four places. The shape of encounters progressed, changing each time in the care of people with different priorities and influenced by the learning from the previous event. In doing this, the line between seeing other practices and changing them disappeared. Cross-pollination was expected - and hoped for as a learning

outcome. Meanwhile, the idea of intervention was not limited to the part of the formal designers. Instead, it was understood that all participants were interrupting existing relations in some way and that intervention, through variously staged encounters and the discussions to be had, was an integral part of the method and a way of learning together, especially where followed by reflection. This co-staging democratised participation (i.e. not only were existing relations acknowledged, but everyone was credited with the power to disrupt them). In fact, in a new project, this reconstituting was named *gentle disruption* [32].

In exploring activist futures, evolving throughout a devolved process, we begin to accept that the nature of society is not fixed and there are no essentials to identity as such (e.g. [46], [47]). Following this logic, we design something new on multiple levels when we set up such contexts for co-research and engagement. We do not just share practice and reveal the nature of an interaction, but make new ones possible. These might never occur in ordinary circumstances, so there may be no possible other way to perceive the potential revealed. In other words, the learning in staging these encounters might concern possibilities that are not to be observed however long we might watch and engage during extended fieldwork. If this is the case, then we are designing ways of being through our encounters, as well as staging encounters to learn about ways of being. I will give another example to make this point, drawing on a study where this idea of performativity underpins the design.

Pairs of grandmothers and granddaughters were invited to co-investigate social media use (see [48]). They were brought together in these relations, not as random testers or particular users, but as people that have existing commitments to each other and who will act in ways that are affected by the presence of other family members (as well as other members of a tight community in similar pairings). The day-long event, carefully managed to be constructive and 'safe' for participants, but with little structure, was thus highly staged yet free of many of the interventions of a normal design investigation: 'there was little direction given from the facilitation team. ...with some focusing, the topics spoken about and the way that discussion developed emerged from the activities of sharing and showing' [48]. In working relationally in these six pairings, (i.e. in everyday relations, allowing local and familial concerns to surface), the group created a space for reflection in which the whole community could learn. What happened was grounded in existing place, time and relations. Halse talks of people acting 'as themselves under slightly altered conditions invoked by the magic what if' [3:193]. 'Natural' is a difficult term to make meaningful in discussing performativity: yet we are at an intersection between disrupting and preserving. I will merely note that findings included design recommendations and insight into privacy practices, but also the changed beliefs and expectations of the participants, showing that the project created new cultural knowledge and, perhaps, new cultures.

It is clear from both examples that, in balancing disruption and preservation, the course of these encounters cannot be predicted. While we might argue that all designers are living on their wits, the facilitation required in these contexts is even quite different from running a conventional PD charette with diverse stakeholders. It is more important to be attuned to relations and ready for anything in these flexible and evolving circumstances than it is to have an action plan. Thus, one skill is to make an appropriate judgment call on what might and could happen next and decide whether to intervene [49]: to disrupt or to preserve.

In looking at these stagings, and the facilitation skills needed, we might accept that co-designing a performative engagement with our futures at personal, community and societal levels elicits a different kind of knowledge about ourselves and our potentials to other methods. And we might see the enacted journeying of entangled problem definitions and solutions as anthropological enquiry, where the possibilities and constraints of our materials, tools, norms, imaginaries and desires meet. In proposing this, I go further than Halse, who talks of the chance for designers to create ‘open-ended materials for further experimentation’ and anthropologists to explore ‘particular imaginative horizons in concrete ways’ [3:194]. In merging these proximate activities, I suggest that we can identify a basis for a ‘constitutive anthropology’.

6 Bringing it Together

Anthropologists have been making a significant contribution to designing in industrial settings for years by informing on culture, context and use. But the idea of designing has lately drawn attention beyond what is conceived and made, to be researched as a series of practices with attendant concerns about the future of the planet. If design is seen as a key manifestation of humanity and an unreflective one, this, as much as supporting innovation, brings anthropologists into engagement with design research.

But we have also seen, in Ingold’s arguments, that there are readings of anthropology that offer specific commonalities with participatory design practice. Ingold talks of studying *with*, rather than engaging in the study *of*. That is a tenet of participatory design. He talks of a ‘flipping’ between alternatives in interpreting what is taking place. We have seen that same flip in the steering actions of designers in choosing alternative paths and it appears in the increased awareness of participants co-designing their learning by comparing practice. We have learnt that anthropology may be like drawing, where correspondence between events and the actions of the person perceiving them manifests in a seamless engagement, while ethnography takes the perceiver out of the fray to pull meaning from the world at leisure. So we might reflect that the design actions of the participatory facilitator are seamless like the artists’, responding, in a fully engaged fashion, with choices in the moment. And we might then read the path of one of our staged encounters, where we co-design a landscape by moving towards and away from possibilities, as an anthropology. If we then note our own and others’ choice points and explore the decision-making to get a reflective understanding of practice, perhaps this later analysis is a process of ethnography. And we might reflect that taking stock of one’s practice may be a long and slow process, documented well after the event, like this piece.

This essay is called ‘Troubling Futures’ for two reasons. If we regard ‘troubling’ as a description, we nod to the global uncertainties and societal challenges with which we live. If we view ‘troubling’ as an action, we acknowledge the problematising of the ethics of intervention that has accompanied some participatory design practice.

Anusas and Harkness invite us to see design anthropology as ‘Hopeful, Critical [and] Ecological’ [17] with a concern for ‘the other that is possible’. This ‘other’ is not the ‘flip’ of considering comparative states as a means of critique, nor is it one other single path, but, instead, a recognition of potential for change. This essay has

sought to show how a branch of participatory design can lay claim to a long relationship with these future-seeking alternatives. Sometimes, this is done blandly, but, as cited, often with critical intent and a political mission, nonetheless expressed through facilitating action in the moment. Participatory design is no more based in the future than any other practice, but, on its more democratically-oriented wing, it has made space for multiple futures to be aired, shared and critiqued, thus problematising the nature of design from within, even as it makes new relations between people and the systems and things around them. In doing so, it may blur the boundaries between research and design, but, this essay, in looking at the inevitability of intervention and the importance of understanding and responding to it, has shown this distinction to be a distraction. If we want to understand the work involved in moving towards new territories of concern more clearly (i.e. to understand better the possible transitions in culture available to our societies), we might include these practices in our studies, both to learn more about them and to employ them as our tools of research.

To make this point more forcibly, I have asked, in the title, if these practices form the basis of a new *constitutive* anthropology. So I will end by making a case that they do. The first claim is that these practices are a creative form of engagement, enacting cultural research through making situations for sharing, learning and changing. The stronger claim is that the encounters we stage do more than provide a forum for learning, they create new ways of being that would be impossible to learn of were we not enacting them through our interventions. The encounters are ‘constitutive’ in the full sense of bringing into being. Democratic participatory design has long knowingly fostered the growth of new social arrangements, providing the means of designing these collaboratively while making space for new ways of being together to be born, reflected upon, interpreted, understood and supported.

In its emphasis on being in the moment together and yet projecting to altered states it speaks to Halse’s ‘engaged’ concern that we do not leave ‘contemporary future making to those privileged enough to claim directions for attractive futures on behalf of everyone’ [3:194]. It does so from a disciplinary position that is well-established as a self-contained practice and currently active. It is generative, like all design, but, in working with human consciousness as much as any other material, it can seek to offer a corrective to unreflective exploitation of social and physical resources. Is it important we recognise it as anthropology? No, not at all; the term ‘anthropology’ is only a name. Equally, it is not important if we maintain that it is ‘design’. What is important is that these processes, evolved and tested over time, are recognised and effort is made to understand how and why they work. It will have growing value to anthropologists, designers and others to consider how an interventionary practice can creatively tackle the making of futures and existing cultures of mindless intervention.

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