Editorial: Affirmation? How to Learn to Live with 'The Others' Through Design

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Abstract

We approach design practices as practices of re-composition that 'design' encounters between entities with lives, interests, risks, materialities, politics, scales, and temporalities that are highly heterogeneous. This proposal draws attention to the responsibility of design in a world marked by an increasing ecosocial crisis, which demands not so much an improvement in our ability to design for others, but rather to live with others 'through' design. We will meet with disobedient ants, cultural management, invasive plants, ancestral knowledges, unstable amphibians, women's communities, changing climates, Indigenous peoples, environments, and publics that—all together—design a 'we' that is always in formation, affecting the places where we work, the studios where we design, the classrooms where we learn, or the epistemologies from which we articulate our relationship with otherness.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous thinkers deeply committed to our shared present—from fields of knowledge as diverse as biology, philosophy of science, cultural anthropology, and sociology—agree on highlighting the importance of creative practices in times dominated by events that escape human logics, scales, and temporalities. Moreover, for these thinkers and many others, any commitment to our future requires alternative narratives capable of articulating affirmative perspectives

ENRIQUE NIETO FERNÁNDEZ
ESTER GISBERT ALEMANY

that make us feel together again and take on responsibilities that match the scale of our times.

This call to attention regarding the responsibility of our practices challenges us in many ways. On one hand, it questions some of the tropes of modernity upon which design practices are based; on the other, it problematizes the methods and reaches of all the institutions that support these practices, from their formative processes to the studios and places where design is made. In addition, it alters the dispositions of the aesthetics and politics that design mobilizes, now intersected by numerous interests, pacts, and knowledges that, until recently, would have been of little relevance to its purposes. We argue that it is not so much about improving our ability to design for others, but rather about learning how to live with others 'through' design.

This shift problematizes both the knowledges and the modes of learning developed within the university—the institution perhaps most paradigmatic of the modern project alongside the museum. While we ask what new forms of knowledge matter to us now and how to integrate them into design research, it might be more productive to step aside and observe how these knowledges are invoked and articulated in practices already happening 'out there'. Perhaps it is not so much about exploring knowledges as entities detached from their own involvement with us, but about more fully acknowledging their radical presence.

Therefore, the use we will make of the term 'design' in this introduction does not aim to insist on the delimitation of a disciplinary domain, but rather to highlight the foundational capacity of creative practices when articulated within specific communities resisting the devastating effects of the policies that dominate our everyday lives.

Looking back, we observe that modernity progressively burdened design practices with the task of materially 'informing' the desires of a society that imagined itself as unified. The need to effectively shape the ideals of emerging nation-states was articulated both in defining goal-oriented practices and in the university education of experts responsible for representing and 'designing the important'. However, at the same time, a whole set of 'other' entities began to emerge—excluded from these pursuits—demanding a presence that was not only instrumental but also crucial in the material shaping of the world. These 'others' often carried their own knowledges, articulated through practices that allowed them to 'become' embodied and situated in specific bodies and histories. In this context, we claim that we are no longer as excited to approach our practices as 'the design of the important', but rather as 'the design of the importance of the things that matter to us'.

This is the argument that runs through the selected articles for issues 26 and 27 of *Diseña*. They propose approaching creative practices not for

ENRIQUE NIETO FERNÁNDEZ
ESTER GISBERT ALEMANY

their goal-oriented dimension, but as practices of re-composition emerging from the design of encounters between entities with lives, interests, risks, materialities, politics, aesthetics, scales, and temporalities that are highly heterogeneous. Endangered animals, cultural management policies, invasive plants, ancestral knowledges, regulations, unknown viruses, resistance movements, rural women, changing climates, environments, and publics—all together—aspire to design a 'we' always in formation within these proposals. With this initial ambition, we have paid particular attention to methodologies that aim to promote a certain 'indiscipline', aspiring to a fairer re-composition of what we in the West call 'research' within the field of creative practices. We are also concerned with imagining a better future for research universities and their participation in present-day issues.

THREE HYPOTHESES FOR AN EDITORIAL RESEARCH

An initial hypothesis underlying this argument is to accept that, beyond their own ends, design practices possess a particular interiority often overlooked. This interiority calls upon a large number of issues and involves entities engaged in a permanent process of becoming something else—something akin to a laboratory particularly sensitive to affirmative speculation: a place and time that is not predetermined, requiring attention and concentration.

Therefore, we approach creative practices not only through their ways of knowing or their ways of truth, but also through their ways of making themselves present in contexts where they open divergent futures. We are convinced that within these interiors, some seemingly opposing pairs—such as theory and practice, reality and fiction, natural and artificial, or present and future—dissolve into a choreography where human beings, technologies, politics, aesthetics, and diversities are transformed through the bonds that operate between them. From this perspective, design practices are particularly suited to imagining ways of overcoming the epistemic fracture between matters of fact and matters of concern, while also problematizing how pedagogy and research are conducted in institutions as 'modern' as universities.

Through the selected articles, we aim to explore some effects of design practices when they aspire to 'mediate' between issues that are already unfolding, and to which design surprises introducing alternative futures. These practices of re-composition, with great emergent capacity, unfold their potential through the interactions they enable, opening divergent routes for all those addressed by their actions.

In Marina Fernández's proposal, we will observe what happens when a highly feminized practice, traditionally confined to the domestic sphere—like crochet—bursts into the public space of a rural town, testing the

ENRIQUE NIETO FERNÁNDEZ
ESTER GISBERT ALEMANY

fragile balances that manage it. Her project 'Tejiendo la calle' (Weaving the Street) not only aims to build community, sow diversity, and mend the landscape, but also succeeds in creating the very circumstances that make it viable. Her analysis brings more legitimized creatives alongside the 'ladies' in the world of design, without interruption.

In Julio Suárez's proposal, we discover how a workshop aimed at building a communal classroom in a rural Colombian town becomes a form of resistance, an alternative to the spatial policies of subjugation, dispossession, plunder, or colonization associated with a megaplan for urban renewal. His focus centers on barricades and shells as defensive strategies and domains that also belong to design practices, now transformed into political and aesthetic acts aimed at repairing the socio-spatial fabrics fractured by extractivist modernization processes.

A second hypothesis posits the centrality of creative practices in the formation, delimitation, and sustenance of the concrete communities in which they are embodied, implying the acceptance of the fact that communities do not precede their practices, but are instead produced by them. We can then affirm that their practices are always 'design practices'. This shift in perspective allows us to better think about the responsibility that falls upon our particular ways of being together, while also helping us imagine better forms of participation in design debates concerning the present.

The proposal by Roberto Fernández and Pablo Hermansen highlights the importance of designing a memorial in times of revolt in Chile, serving as a cohesive element and a recognition of citizens in resistance, immersed in a process eager to reconnect with a better world. Their notion of *maraña* (tangle) allows us to identify the components, aesthetics, practices, and relationships with the environment that make it possible to collectively materialize anger, pain, and trauma. We thus begin to sense how the reverberation of pain through the embodiment of loss happens via material design itself.

At the same time, Alicia Morales and Carlos Jiménez's proposal reveals how many creative practices, when embodied in concrete communities, shift their focus toward the political capacities that unfold in the process of 'becoming'. Their work delves into designing encounters, listening spaces, and networks of affection, mobilizing ancestral knowledge from a group of rural women from the island of La Palma, who were affected to unimaginable extremes by volcanic eruptions that turned their worlds 'upside down'.

We will thus focus on observing the reach of these displacements as political forms of resistance, in broken times where creative practices are also called upon as world-makers. In some way, these proposals invite us to think of creative practices not as 'the design of the important', but rather as ' the

ENRIQUE NIETO FERNÁNDEZ
ESTER GISBERT ALEMANY

design of the importance of the things that matter to us'. That is, creative practices are precisely what allow us to overcome the aforementioned epistemic fracture between matters of fact and matters of concern, while also problematizing the ways pedagogy and research are conducted in universities.

Our third hypothesis begins with the consideration that we live in a wounded world that demands a critical update of the practices inherited from modernity—a world marked by an unprecedented ecosocial crisis, but also by the emergence of a vast number of diverse voices claiming participation in the design of a more just and supportive 'us'. To this end, shifts proposed by terms like Anthropocene or Gaia invite us to imagine a better hybrid and relational condition for design practices, as well as the scope of the transformations to come. At the same time, they question the status of the human and any exclusive interpretation of our world from the rationalities deployed by a single protagonist of history: human and Eurocentric.

However, we have all kinds of studies that decentralize the privileges of the Cartesian subject and invent ways of incorporating all those others who have been naturalized, sexualized, pathologized, racialized, impoverished, or simply excluded by the imperatives of the promise of a singular modernization. In these next two issues of *Diseña*, we will observe how the question of that otherness is redirecting interest in the ways we relate 'through' design and through speculation about better-shared imaginaries. We will thus see practices that invite us to speculate about alternative bonds with plants and animals, to shift our attention from the healthy body to the sick, from the pacified body to the rebellious, or from abstract productions to concrete embodiments. These issues question not only human institutions but the very nature of what it means to 'be' human in a world where 'nature' no longer resigns itself to being merely a backdrop.

We will see how Santiago Morilla's proposal invites us to move away from the ideal of an *Anthropos* as the sole protagonist of history, and from there, engage with the question of the meaning and responsibility that artistic practices have nowadays when undisciplined ants take over, occupying the center of the stage. To this end, the author-narrator places himself in the unraveling of an anecdotal moment that provides us with a rigorous example of self-reflexivity and ethical responsibility. A fine exercise in irony, it asks us whether we are as intelligent as our surroundings.

Meanwhile, the proposal led by Iván Capdevila and José Manuel López informs us of how disobedient nature has acquired a preferred status and a desirability in the heart of Europe—until recently unforeseen—and how it has forced institutions to consider it as a subject of rights, adapting their protocols to its unstable temporalities. Their approach to the transformations that the Europan architecture competition has undergone, as nature has rebelled against its role as

ENRIQUE NIETO FERNÁNDEZ
ESTER GISBERT ALEMANY

'a backdrop', allows us to be optimistic about the range of institutional transformations to come.

For the recognition of these three hypotheses, we have been accompanied—as many of the authors of these two issues—by numerous thinkers who have made great efforts to conceptualize this approach: From Karen Barad's 'intractions' (2007) to Marisol de la Cadena's 'being in Ayllu' or 'earth-beings' (2015); through Isabelle Stengers' 'ecologies of practices' (2005), Arturo Escobar's 'autonomous design' or 'ontological design' (2018), Donna Haraway's 'sympoietic practices' or 'situated knowledge' (2016), and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's 'patchwork societies' (2018); to Tim Ingold's 'experiencing' (2014), Erin Manning's 'minor gestures' (2016), Rosi Braidotti's 'affirmative practices' (2011), María Galindo's 'poor tricks' (2021), Walter Mignolo's 'decoloniality of knowledge' (2015), Linda Tuhiwai Smith's imperative to 'decolonize methodologies' (2021), or Tim Morton's 'hyperobjects' (2013).

Thinkers such as Vincianne Despret (2022) and Graham Harman (2018) have developed novel perspectives and operational tools through this hypothesis. Additionally, authors like Joanna Zylinska (2018) or María José Guerra (2001) allow us to situate the ethical dimension of academic research, while problematizing its seemingly neutral character when confronted with other, more inclusive forms of relationality. Meanwhile, authors such as Anna Tsing (2017) or Bruno Latour (2017) allow us to glimpse the consequences of a paradigm shift that challenges our ways of knowing and relating, in search of practices more oriented toward sustaining forms of life than defending our privileges.

Therefore, we will traverse different fields of knowledge, such as cultural anthropology, philosophy of science, critical design studies, architecture, art, biology, materialist feminisms, political ecology, direct action, and queer theory. Our gaze will necessarily be transversal, a working field that has been very fruitful for us and is beginning to be recognized by agencies responsible for ensuring the quality of research.

José Solís' proposal opens this first issue with a theoretical approach in which Sadie Plant, Ada Lovelace, Remedios Zafra, and Karen Barad warn us of the dangers carried by techno-libertarian perspectives now seeking to conquer political and media power in order to launch a cultural battle, where digitalization is defended with a blatant disregard for materiality, corporeality, and the experience of workers, traditions, economies, local communities, or the planet itself.

Meanwhile, Nidhi Singh's proposal helps us understand the scope of the epistemic and political transformations emerging from such arguments. Her approach to design from a desirable decolonization challenges its tools, methodologies, and research practices, all of which serve various Western interests. Starting from a well-established reality marked by migration between Mexico

ENRIQUE NIETO FERNÁNDEZ
ESTER GISBERT ALEMANY

and the United States, the team she is part of analyzes the use of unfinished skirts by local communities as both a narrative canvas and cultural artifact capable of challenging the ultimate meaning of design practices.

FROM THE DESIGN OF IMPORTANT THINGS TO THE DESIGN OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THE THINGS THAT MATTER TO US

The question of the status of the human and its dependence on the modes of knowledge of the Enlightenment took shape in 1966, when Michel Foucault warned us that 'man' is only a recent invention, a figure that is less than two centuries old and will disappear once humanity finds a new form (2003). This intuition marks a crucial point in the trajectory of a decentralization with unimaginable consequences, affecting the ways of doing and thinking that we (only some of us) have inherited and imposed as forms of being on many others. This decentralization has prompted the emergence of the planet as a matter that concerns us all, while the increasing role of technological mediations in what we call the Technosphere has shaped an entire field of interests that strongly influence the question of subjectivity and the possibility of forming a 'collective self' adjusted to these turbulent times, through an update of those practices that articulate different ways of being together.

On this journey through the interior of practices, we observe that design produces a shift in the political status of those who become part of its dynamics. In some cases, this shift progresses *from the human to the non-human*, following an approach akin to ecosocialism. This perspective begins by questioning what the Enlightenment project defined as human, due to the impossibility of extending its ideal attributes beyond our Western borders or even making them applicable within them. On the other hand, it is grounded in the certainty that environmental problems stem from the structural injustices imposed by unchecked extractivism and patriarchy as the only way of being in the world.

Meanwhile, the ideal of design practices capable of participating in the recomposition of 'the human' emerges from practices that primarily aim to be more just, together with solidarity-based forms of coexistence. To achieve this goal, it is first necessary to weaken our status, risking the loss of countless acquired privileges, which, in return, open us to unforeseen developments.

In other cases, we observe a reverse shift, moving *from the non-human to the human*. Under this approach, the emergence of the non-human in the scene as a subject of rights is presented as a confrontational scenario that alters the ontologies structuring academic knowledge within the Humanities. The possibility of peaceful coexistence is not imposed as an ideal or normative horizon, while design practices are imagined as laboratories where alternative recomposi-

ENRIQUE NIETO FERNÁNDEZ
ESTER GISBERT ALEMANY

tions of a collective self are tested—one that design practices can help shape with desirable imaginaries. Ants, plants, and amphibians thus gain the status of the human through careful consideration and attentive observation. From this perspective, the interest of design practices is more connected to their capacity to unfold in alternative cosmopolitics and take on the risks of a technological world that decentralizes any naturalist essentialism.

These shifts in the status of the human move the study of design practices—and more specifically, the interiors it promotes—away from any triumphalist, universal, and enduring view. In fact, it slows everything down, and perhaps this is good news. Design is a field of knowledge deeply constructed from modern perspectives, shaped through at least two institutions created to guarantee its expansion and continuity: the museum and the university. Both are severely compromised when the ideal of progress no longer appears as a hopeful horizon.

We hope that these two issues of *Diseña* will contribute to understanding the implications for us of the imperative to become aware that design practices exist even before designers arrive. The knowledge they have historically mobilized and the ambitions they have pursued have always been closely tied to situated communities. On many occasions, designers have been able to name themselves as such precisely through practices that situate 'doing' as a meaningful experience in harmony with all the 'doings' that converge on our planet.

The dissonances opened by addressing these interiors challenge our daily endeavors while presenting us with a set of exciting challenges that resonate with many of today's agendas. These challenges concern urgent problems of vast scales, such as the ecosocial crisis triggered by resource depletion or climate change, from scales of proximity where all of us can become part of and responsibly engage. In this sense, we continue to think of design practices as mediating practices capable of promoting affirmative transformations and viable futures from our respective places of action, in line with the scale of our times. ⊡

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ENRIQUE NIETO FERNÁNDEZ
ESTER GISBERT ALEMANY

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