

# DESIGN CULTURE(S)

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Volume #2

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# Culture and Relationality. Moving towards 'post-rational' modes of design.

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**Abstract** | This paper argues that practices of design, both in education and in professional practice, are becoming increasingly conservative and risk averse. They are perpetuating 'normative' and 'affirmative' practices that prioritise functionality and economic viability over higher values of 'responsibility', 'ethical practice', and the broader concepts of 'prosperity'. The paper proposes 'post-rational modes of design' as a purposeful realignment of design research practices towards more complex and contestational expressions of possibility as a counterpoint to normative practices of a given design situation. Design is never neutral (Papanek, 1974). Instead, it is a social, cultural, and material force (Adams, Keshavarz, & Traganou 2019) that embodies entangled assemblages of ideas, customs and social behaviour. Design is fundamental to culture(s), politics and the socio-material practices of everyday life. A two-minute film accompanies this paper as a co-expression of the described concept. The film was a way of developing, illustrating and articulating this argument through design.

**KEYWORDS | RELATIONALITY, SOCIO-MATERIAL, PRACTICE, POST-RATIONAL, SYSTEMIC**

# 1. Introduction

This paper argues that a shift towards 'post-rational' modes of design will help push new insights and new practices that benefit economic, ecological, political and social systems. Post-Rational modes of design embrace plurality, multiple relationalities, and multi-sensoriality as fundamental components of future-focused design practice.

The text is a purposeful shift away from the often-banal predictability of reductive, problem limited, concepts of design. Instead, we seek to prioritise agonism as a purposeful process of productive negotiation and expression. The film was produced in parallel to writing this text and is an expression of collaboration, negotiation, and actions of thinking.

The structure of this paper presents three examples of contemporary design research practice that provide insight into what we consider to be examples of 'post-rational' modes of design. The projects are Mathilda Tham, Åsa Ståhl and Sara Hyltén-Cavallius's *BOOST Metadesign*; Unknown Fields *The Breastmilk of the Volcano*; and Lise Amy Hansen's *The InnArbeid Project*. In each case, the use of design differs from traditional [rational] approaches to the discipline, that present new forms of practice that offer new opportunities for the future of design.

By producing the film and analysing each of the case study examples, we present three fundamental characteristics that offer insights into post-rational modes of design. These are 'complexity & plurality'; design 'beyond outcome'; and design 'beyond-solutionism'. The paper discusses design practice as part of 'socio-material assemblages', before critiquing what we consider to be problematic within dominant and populist approaches to design.

The paper is written for an academic audience and discusses design in the theoretical and cultural contexts of the discipline. The text is a proposition and invitation for others to consider and critique the prospect of post-rational modes of design.

## 1.1 The film

Accompanying this paper is a short film (see [vimeo.com/495553583](https://vimeo.com/495553583) and figures 1,2,3,4). The footage presents an abstract visual landscape of flickering colour fields accompanied by a transient, familiar but unknown soundscape. The piece is representative of the complex and unpredictable elements that constitute the contexts that we are designing within. The true value of this process, to the development of our ideas, cannot be authentically summarised in paragraphs of text. Our thinking about post-rationalities in design developed, in part, through the act of making and collaborating. The exercise was context-specific, interpersonal, and performative.

The film was co-composed through the physical act of moving light sources and reflective materials. The process was an unchoreographed dialogue performed through sound and light. Postproduction editing was limited to selecting 'scenes' that we considered to be suitable for our purposes. Terminology relevant to both the film and our thoughts about post rationalities in design includes transitions, complexity, texture, relationality, exploration

and uncertainty. The film is a record of our conversations (audible and non-audible), thinking, editing, describing, and presenting.

This process of incorporating practice-based enquiry to explore non-tangible ideas enabled us to embrace purposeful and open playfulness. It was an act of 'letting go' (Tham, 2020) that helped us to foreground intuition by stepping into a situation of complexity and uncertainty. As researchers, this process was, at times, unsettling. Nevertheless, for us, this 'letting go' led to more explicit understandings of our interests and questions when considering modes of design that take place beyond purely rational frameworks.



*Figures 1, 2, 3, 4. Still images taken from the post-rational modes of design film that accompanies this paper.*

## 2. Examples

### 2.1 Example 1 - BOOST metadesign

Our first example is BOOST metadesign, a design-research project within a larger three-year body of research titled BOOST (Tham, 2019, p.19). The project seeks to mediate the complexities of building and homemaking through metadesign and co-creation. Metadesign, defined by John Wood as “an emerging framework that will enable designers to change or to create behavioural paradigms”(Wood, 2017, p.503), was used in this study to address concepts of building and homemaking by positioning sustainability as a central theme of the work. Tham defines sustainability as “the health of all species on Earth today and in the

future" (2019, p.23). The project works with the needs of migrants, students and the ageing population, to support a diversity of perspectives and narratives that examine ideas of home. The project utilises multiplicity to intersect specific contextual understandings and create new insights of homemaking. Complexity and relational thinking are embedded throughout this project and are used to examine intersubjectivities at multiple scales - from products to systems, to paradigms (Tham, 2019, 30-31).

One result of the project is the consideration of 'design cruxes' - questions, itches and dilemmas considered necessary to negotiate through design but, importantly, not framed as problems to solve (Tham, 2019, p.47). The concept of 'design cruxes' presents a useful theory for design researchers as a reminder of what Haraway describes as 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016). Haraway introduces 'staying with the trouble' as a way of learning to be present as mortal earthly creatures, entwined in "unfinished configurations of places, times, matters and meanings" (Haraway, 2016, p.1). Tham uses 'staying with the trouble' to honour complexities such as, in this case, diversity, accessibility, and staying within the planetary limits (Tham, 2019, p.47).

Design(ing) is practiced within BOOST, in various ways, through creative methods of engagement, collaborative workshopping and making. The work is disseminated as "a slideshow-performance-talk show-exhibition-film-book." (Tham, et al., 2019, p.175). Part of this dissemination is a book containing recipes and practical design scores, provocations and examples. The book is a resource for people (personal or professional) who are engaged in making homes (Tham, 2019a, p.9). As a portfolio of disseminated works, this project reaches outwards beyond the traditional realms of design scholarship and dissemination. It challenges the legacy ideas that design activities should lead to objects and solutions (Tham et al., 2019, p.177).

In the context of post-rational modes of design, BOOST metadesign, is characterised by its acceptance of unknowability and its commitment to maintaining complexity. The project prioritises ideas of responsibility and ethics while working with frustrations, doubts and differences of opinion. While tensions and frictions present themselves throughout the project, the centring of sustainability and focused ethical responsibility towards those who had co-created with the research team (Tham et al., 2019, p.174) remain the prevailing themes of the project.

The diversity of dissemination activities, which actively seek to engage multiple networks through counter conventional media and communications, further expresses how this research engages design beyond the traditional transactional model of problems and solutions. Arguably, this approach enables this work to present more honest, sensitive, and responsible outcomes than they may otherwise have been had the project sought to superficially reduce this reality's intrinsic complexities into efficiently 'knowable' problems to solve.



## 2.2 Example 2 - The Breast Milk of the Volcano

'The Breastmilk of the Volcano' is the second example of work that we consider to offer insight into post-rational uses of design. The project, developed in 2016, by the nomadic design studio Unknown Fields. Kate Davies and Liam Young, the Architectural Association School of Architecture's joint programme heads are directors of the studio. The project tells stories of the global and local implications of new technologies in the context of the Salar de Uyuni, the largest salt flat in the world, which until recently remained an untouched landscape of salt lakes and volcanoes.

Unknown Fields investigate uncertain worlds by embedding relationalities, intersubjectivities and pluralities through design research. Their exploratory approaches engage with the subject matter through undefinable scales including landscapes, systems and people. An incredibly diverse range of elements features in this work. Including stories of materials; everyday objects - lithium batteries, telephones and electric cars; places and landscapes; Bolivian politics, an indigenous activist group and ancient mythology.

The project integrates Indigenous cosmologies into the work, providing the project with its title 'The Breast Milk of the Volcano.' This title comes from the Incan mythology of Turana the Incan giant and how the Salar de Uyuni came to be. Turana's story features volcanos, betrayal, loss, and motherhood, which lead to the creation of the salt flats through a combination of her breast milk and tears (Unknown Fields, 2016). Language, photography, film, drawings, embodied objects, and performance are brought together to tell these tales of 'breastmilk' and 'lithium.'

Together these narratives transverse times and spaces, histories, and futures, and promises of technological utopias. The work does not seek to separate or conclude relational understandings but instead explores these relationships as complex 'entanglements' i.e., interwoven, and interdependent relationalities.

“...we can start to imagine redesigning our gadgets not based on how they slide into our pockets, or feel in our hand, but perhaps for the networks that they set in motion, or the economic resources they might distribute. What could the alternative design criteria be for supply chain design if it weren't engineered around cheap labour cost and material availability.” (Young, 2018)

For post-rational design, one of the most significant aspects of this work is the questions generated about the role of design and the act of designing. The work makes explicit the relevance of uncertainty, complexity, and shifting positionalities through its formulation of assemblages.

This mode of practice creates the means to engage more complex challenges than those comprehensible by any individual or single point of view. The possibility of multiple, potentially contradictory, readings of the same situation allow for plurality in meaning and relational, context-specific, ways of understanding.

### 2.3 Example 3 - The InnArbeid Project

The design research within 'InnArbeid' forms the third example in this paper.

The InnArbeid project is an ongoing three-year Norwegian innovation study which aims to promote improved work participation for individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities (ID) (Hansen, 2019, p.170).

This research is situated in a networked context and with participants who are vulnerable and labelled 'hard to reach.' The project examines the complex systemic challenges faced by people with reduced cognitive abilities. As such, the study embraces a holistic approach to the enquiry to engage with complexity and fundamentally incomplete situation (Hansen, 2019). The study design adopts an unusually long timeframe for a design research project - working with participants from school age to finding work and remaining in work. The study also engages with multiple key informants and stakeholder participants.

Significantly, the project also utilises a 'forstyrregruppe' - disruptive expert group (Hansen, 2019, p.179). The forstyrregruppe, made up of designers and researchers, is tasked with critiquing the work as a way of protecting the study from its own good intentions – a form of constructive agonism.

The InnArbeid project uses explorative and adaptive design processes. The research team prioritise language that asserts the moral position of 'working with' its research participants, rather than 'doing to' (Hansen, 2019, p.174. Ingold, 2011. Sanders & Stappers, 2008). Within the study, design methods were used to visually present the voices of the people with intellectual disabilities, while also seeking to avoid stigmatising clichés (Hansen, 2019, p.174). The team utilised video, visual materials and physical prototypes to support alternative ways of communicating. Hansen highlights tensions in this work that relate to how we recognise design.

"...the propositional nature of design [vs] that of a deductive, rational, progression towards innovations [vs] the diverse insights from such hard-to-reach people." (Hansen, 2019, p.181)

This project highlights the value of design research as a cultural and performative endeavour (Hansen, 2019, p.181). It is an example of design research that seeks to benefit people who are often marginalised in society by including the lived experience and personal motivations of those that the work seeks to benefit. The study embraces the complex social and cultural realities and applies principles and practices of design to support systemic change.

Importantly, the project presents a distinctly different mode of practice than the typical short term design challenge narrative of 'problematise' then 'solve'. Instead, the study seeks to engage in a sustained process of not knowing by utilising a diversity of critical feedback to maintain a balance between action and understanding.

### 3. Discussion

The summary review of the case study examples outlined has enabled us to identify three characteristics that offer ways of considering design that are not constrained by normative and operational practices of design. These are 'complexity & plurality'; design 'beyond outcome'; and 'beyond-solutionism'. The following section expands on these ideas further before providing a brief overview of what we mean by 'Design' in the context of post-rationalities.

#### 3.1 Design complexity and plurality

In this paper, we argue that designers and design scholars are increasingly concerned with ever more complex ecological, political and societal, challenges. The evolution towards practices that are socially engaged, research-driven, and aligned with 'wicked problems', is now widely accepted as being within the remit of design (Sweeting et al., 2020). Unfortunately, populist discourses in design, tend to over-simplify the discipline and focus purely on design outcomes. This emphasis on interventionistic solutionism serves to perpetuate the narrative of design heroism – placing the value of design primarily on the individual rather than the broader benefits of its application, or the progress of the discipline.

At their worst, designers are guilty of designing ever more elaborate solutions to the wrong part of the problem - the symptom rather than the cause. To put this another way, answers are irrelevant if the questions are wrong. While there is undoubtedly both value and need for practical solution-focused design, there is also a need to evolve the discipline so that it can continue to engage with the increasingly complex and uncertain challenges that are faced globally.

“Design theory, practice-based design research and critical design practices increasingly contribute to critical accounts of design as an instrument of power, discipline and oppression.” (Mazé, 2019, p.34)

Furthermore, it is increasingly recognised that knowledge and insights are generated because of the doing (process) rather than the done (outcome) (Lambert & Speed, 2017, p.105). This possibility rather than problem-driven approach to design will now be discussed further.

#### 3.2 Design beyond outcome

Since the 1800s, Design has been dominated by technological and commercial forces and modernist ideals popularised by organisations such as Bauhaus. However, the discipline has always operated beyond these rational and reductive modes of practice. And, increasingly, as the limitations of reductive solutionism become more apparent, there is a renewed need to adopt modes of design that are more flexible and inclusive of social, cultural and political aspects of society.

“In creative exploration, ideas tend to emerge and develop on the move—sometimes impulsively, sometimes reflectively—rather than arising from the investigation of a hypothesis in controlled conditions.” (Lambert & Speed, 2017, p.104)

Design theorist Anne Light argues that within this recent social turn in design, the materials are no longer material (Light, 2019). Furthermore, John Wood argues for a move from products to relations.

“In seeking an alternative to consumption-based systems of production and disposal I advocate a profound conceptual shift from products to relations” (Wood, 2017, p.512).

While we consider this a positive evolution of the discipline, we must not disregard the fact that relations and practices are mediated in the material world, as such design has material implications and offers access to multi-sensory situations. Practices of design now have access to the politics and cultures of the everyday. Design can be used as a socio-material tool for research to illuminate, interrogate and influence the invisible rules within socialities and across cultures.

The evolution of Design towards something more responsive and transcendental raises new possibilities for how we conceive of the outcomes of design practices. We will now discuss ideas about design beyond solutions.

### 3.3 Design beyond solutions

The paper adopts the position that for the discipline of Design to maintain relevance and purpose, it needs to continually seek novel modes of practice that are purposely diverse and responsive to emergent normative practices. It is the agonistic tension, adaptability and breadth of approaches that characterise the discipline of Design. They enable it to be agile, adaptive, and capable of engaging with the complex and rapidly changing challenges facing societies, cultures, and species globally. Mazé argues the qualities of designed visions of the future in ‘opening up’ and ‘thinking otherwise’.

“As designers, we may not only put forward shallow claims of ‘solving problems’ or making a difference’, or even important critical reflections on the question of “What difference does it make?”, we may use designed visions of the future to open up for thinking and doing otherwise, including handing over the question to others (as a political act).” (Mazé, 2019, p.34)

Post-rational design modes seek to promote further discourses that celebrate intersubjectivities, pluralities and relationalities in design theory and practice. It is a celebration of playfulness and uncertainty as central features of the discipline. This position is, in many ways, a counterpoint to norms within the design discipline that uphold the dominance of reductive, problem-focussed, approaches that characterise much of design

education and research under the guise of 'progress' and 'efficiency'. Tony Fry argues for the need for relational thinking in design (2009, p.32).

“Transposed into a theory of knowledge, relationality contrasts directly with the linear notion of cause and effect which has been such a dominant feature of Western rationality. In that the ability to sustain depends absolutely on relational interactions its development and deployment as a theory of knowledge able to direct design will become increasingly critical.” (Fry, 2009, p.31)

Building on the ideas of relationality, complexity and plurality, we will now elaborate on the idea of design as a form of 'socio-material assemblage' and discuss the relationship of this framing to post-rational modes of design.

### 3.4 Socio-Material Assemblages

Post-rational design modes positions design practices within 'socio-material assemblages'. This positioning provides design research with a framework for discussion situating design as part of the complexities, and how design research engages beyond outcomes and solutions. The three examples in this paper highlight very different ways that design research transcends traditional disciplinary classifications. The explorations in these works converge across materialities and socialities.

Design of all kinds intervenes in material and non-material configurations that make up everyday life. As such, Design mediates our interactions; and is 'entangled' with the socio-material assemblages (Muller, 2015) -these include politics, norms and cultural identities of time and place (Delanda, 2016, p.9).

Drawing on the theory of Karan Barad, we argue that the social and material elements (which form all design research contexts) are inter-relating and inseparable (Barad ,2007); that matter and meaning are entangled and cannot be disassociated (Barad, 2007, p.3). These assemblages are relational (Muller, 2015, p.28), constantly in flux, forming, mutating and transforming (Muller, 2015, p.29). Acknowledging that Design is within socio-material assemblages and that these are uncertain states, allows us to discuss design as both part-of and working-within the living systems that surround us. Humans (together with non-human species) shape our environments, and these environments, in turn, shape us (Tham, 2019a, p.8).

Some may argue that working with complexity, including relationalities and pluralities in this way is not possible; that it is impossible to understand the networks that are designed within fully. We argue that separating and not attending to these socio-material complexities can lead to ineffective design, or lead to harm (Tham, 2019, p.25). The examples used in this paper illustrate the way that Design can be paying attention within these networks, which we argue is particularly relevant when Design is engaging with contexts of sustainability including wicked challenges of social and environmental justice.

### 3.5 Rational Design

The ideas of post-rational' presented here do not seek to undermine or undervalue the need for rationality - or using reason and logic in design. However, we seek to highlight the limitations of narrow concepts of design, arbitrarily formulaic design processes, and an overenthusiastic acceptance of measurability.

Increasingly, it is that which is measured that is valued. This axiom gives priority to that which is easily measurable, to the expense of that which is not. However, measurability is not neutral. The tools used to provide measurement and politics used to guide decision-making profoundly affect what is valued and prioritised.

As design becomes increasingly engaged in environmental, societal, and cultural situations that are ever more complex and wicked, measurability's limitations become increasingly problematic. Within many western commercial practices of design, it is the functional approach that has come to characterise the discipline's value. This de-contextualised rationality has come to dominate design culture; consequently, there is little space for modes of practice that push beyond these superficially robust frameworks. We seek to emphasise the importance of promoting a diversity of design cultures to support new, more capable, ways of knowing.

One common oversimplification is the alluring definition of design as a discrete practice. For example, when communicated as a specific method or approach - "I have designed 'x'". While helpful in some circumstances, these definitions only capture design as an action in response to a challenge, i.e. 'designing' - applied to accomplish assigned targets. While incremental improvements are favourable when compared to non-action or selective ignorance – they only really engage with the symptoms of the problem. More significant reforms are required if we are to achieve meaningful, lasting change.

Here, we argue that the value of design is situated within its ability to mediate multi-sensory experiences, materiality and the everyday. It is presented as a way of knowing and understanding personal experience that is distinct and which prioritises sociality and shared togetherness. While this definition may be familiar to many design practitioners, the full scope of design practices remain restrained and restricted - side-lined by unhelpful outdated models of problem-solving and reductive research protocols.

## 4. Conclusion

We presented a short film and three example design projects that, through critique, illustrate ways of working that we consider to be examples of post-rational modes of design. We argue that each of these works engages design in novel ways and lead to unique insights that reach beyond the 'problem-solving' stereotype that is often given to design. Instead, in each case, significant complexities, including context and circumstance, are embraced and celebrated. The works foreground relationality, the practice of designing (rather than design

as outcome), and, although not described explicitly, attend to the more significant challenges of responsibility, morality and ethics.

Interest in post-rational modes of design has come from observations that the academic discipline of Design is often misrepresented and oversimplified. Catch-all framings such as 'design thinking' and 'human-centred design', while appropriate in some circumstances, create monoculture understandings that stifle the evolution of the discipline. Post-rational is an attempt to acknowledge the value of practices that stimulate action beyond the predictability of the (purely rational) design and to seek alternatives to the, primarily western/colonial, design cultures that currently dominate the discipline. In doing so, we are arguing for more diverse and alternative conceptions of rationalities within design.

By analysing each of the case study examples, we present three fundamental characteristics that offer what could become foundations for discourses that examine ideas of 'post-rational' modes of design. These are 'complexity & plurality'; design 'beyond outcome'; and design 'beyond-solutionism'. Further work is needed to elaborate and develop the ideas presented here fully. We believe this is a useful starting point and an invitation for others to critique, respond to, and develop further.

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