

Human Object – Where do I end, and you begin?

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Project description

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1 Introduction: Artistic idea and theme of the project

Human Object – Where do I end, and you begin? is an artistic research project exploring the close and entangled relationships between humans and designed objects. The project is grounded in the premise of the enormous importance and impact design has on human life, and that not only do we design our surroundings; design is also designing us, turning us into *human objects*.¹ The project is a celebration of diversity and imperfection through the unfolding of complex, ambiguous, uncomfortable, frictionfilled and non-standardizable aspects of human life that are typically left out from and by design. Because design can be used to tame and shape nature, human thoughts, bodies and behaviors – think of the way in which waterfalls are put into tubes to generate electricity, how comfortable chairs makes us sit for too long and how the bra shapes the appearance of a female body – I find it important to be part of a critical discussion around the ways in which design is affecting humanity and our environment, and what roles designers can play.

The ambition of the *Human Object* project is to contribute to knowledge about the ways humans and designed objects are entangled in power structures hidden or made visible and tangible by design, and to explore and experiment with methodologies and methods which will contribute to increased emphasis on critical reflection regarding this effect, both within design research and in education of future designers and, I suspect, in the field of design as a whole.

¹ *Human object* is a metaphor I use to describe the human that has been designed by its own design. I am aware of that this needs to be explained in depth, and that I also must explain what I mean by *object* in contrast to *subject*. This is still in process and not ready in this version of the project description.

2 Motivation and background

Despite my practice background in traditional furniture design, and prior education in interior, furniture and product design, I have a disobedient attitude towards the optimistic and widespread understanding of design as primarily being oriented towards *problem solving*. That designers offer solutions to specific problems through designing systems and things is a perception that I meet both among designers and from people outside the field. And of course, design is in many cases about problem-solving – when you break your leg it is nice that there is such an object as crutches, and I do love my bike for my daily commute – but I do not agree that this is all design is and can be. In many cases we need to go behind what seems like a solution and ask new questions. Designing *Bloom*, a pop-up social center tent for refugee camps like Unstudio in collaboration with Scape propose, is an example of design trying to solve real world challenges. The designers explain:

BLOOM is a modular structure that can grow according to need by multiplication of the unit. While each unit is a self-sustained structure, combining several units together allows for a larger capacity of people, programmatic functions and energy production (Unstudio, n.d.).

Ideas and design solutions such as this are good and much needed. At the same time, the question of why we do not go to the root of the problem which is the horrific fact that we live in a world where people are forced to flee their homes and end up in refugee camps, seems urgent. I find it problematic and ironic that designers are expected to find solutions to such complicated and wicked problems given that, in many cases, design has been complicit in creating them. I want a more inquisitive and critical approach to design itself and in relation to the way in which it acts in the world to be a bigger part of design education, design research and design practices. I agree with Bruce and Stephanie M. Tharp stating that ‘while product design has held somewhat of a claim to “design thinking,” it is disappointing that “design for thinking” is not yet a staple of the discipline’ (Tharp and Tharp, 2018: 35).

While product design has an incredible influence on what people do and how they do it, the discipline contributes less effectively to what and how people think. The profession has been shaped to be more practical than intellectual. (...) we imagine an expansion upon, not a replacement for, design’s traditional work (Tharp and Tharp, 2018: 7).

I used to be one of many designers trying to design furniture and products with my unique flair but still trying to fit into each current trend. I struggled to meet the manufacturer’s demand to make a product look exclusive, yet possible to mass-produce on the other side of the planet at the lowest cost possible. It gradually dawned on me that this was not my passion nor my purpose as a designer. I became more and more appalled by the uncritical way this system of production affects design, and – as a result – humans and the environment, and I no longer want to be a part of it. This awakening came, first of all, from simply being a human concerned about the state of the world and wanting to understand more about the

human impact in this process. On top of that, I am a designer trying to figure out what is my contribution that can be given this situation.

3 Context

3.1 Design perspective

My perspective on design has shifted from being product centered towards being process centered: From solving problems with finished design products, towards a much more inquisitive and imaginative process, which asks new questions through open-ended processes. The most influential inspirations for my research interest and transition from being a traditional designer to a much more reflective one, have been the book *Are we human? – notes on an archaeology of design* (2016) by Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley, and the Swiss Design Network's 2018 research summit *Beyond change: Questioning the Role of design in times of global transformations*.

In the book *Are we human? – notes on an archaeology of design*, the authors explore the intimate relationship between design and human, declaring that 'Design is the most human thing about us. Design is what makes the human' (Colomina and Wigley, 2016: 12). They continue with declaring that 'There is hardly any dimension of the natural world that has not been affected by human activity' (ibid.) This has been tremendously influential to my choice of research theme, as well as have the topics that were discussed at the *Beyond change: Questioning the Role of design in times of global transformations* research summit. As written on their web page, the summit was framed as 'a critical response to the tendency of seeing global crisis first and foremost as a worldwide design competition' (Beyond change, 2018). At the core of this where the questions:

How can we reimagine design as an unbounded, queer, and unfinished practice that approaches the world from within instead of claiming an elevated position? How, for once, can we see design as a situated practice instead of turning it into the Global North's escape and problem-solving strategy? How can we think about one world without falling into planetary-scale thinking and the idea that resilience is our only hope? (ibid.)

My research interest and approach to design is also largely inspired and informed by anthropologist Tim Ingold's ideas around entanglement that I will write about later in this text, as well as Dóra Ísleifsdóttir and Julia Lohmann; both professors in design (Ísleifsdóttir at the department of design, University of Bergen, and Lohmann at the department of design, Aalto University), and luckily my supervisors for my PhD. Both have backgrounds from visual communication; Ísleifsdóttir is a professor in visual communication with a background spanning from performance art to advertising, Lohmann holds a BA in Graphic design and a

MA in Design products and earned her PhD from Royal College of Art with her practice-led project (2017) *The Department of Seaweed: Co-Speculative Design in a Museum Residency*. I chose them as supervisors because they are highly skilled designers and researchers with an open-minded approach to design. Their interdisciplinary design approach resonates with my own choice of working in an in-between space and gives me leeway and space to explore more freely than what might have been the case had I chosen supervisors with more traditional design approaches, more concerned with boundaries of the field. I would also like to mention my colleagues Ingrid Rundberg, Siren Elise Wilhelmsen and Sunniva Storlykken Helland, all PhD research fellows at the department of design at the University of Bergen, and the research collaboration of Dóra Ísleifsdóttir together with our colleague Åse Huus; I am honored to be part of a research environment where critical reflection, sharing ideas and discussing design, both in the context of research, education and practices, is at the very center. They are all examples of how design research unfolds through and with design.

The theme for my research has emerged gradually and over time as I have become more and more aware of the powerful impact design can have both in shaping humans and our surroundings, and in effect the importance of not only focusing on *what* we design, but also questioning *why* we design. In a time where there is always a convenient product, app or device that may solve the problem you are facing or optimize your productivity or simply entertain or make you more comfortable, I ask myself; is it really my task as a designer to contribute to this? (The answer is *no*). This way of thinking is influenced by the research of my colleague at the department of design at the University of Bergen, Albert Chen-Syun Tang. In his research he explores design's possibility to be a practice that emphasises critical reflection, and in his PhD thesis from 2018 *Reflective Roaming – Design, ubiquitous fantasy, everyday reality*¹, he focused especially on how technology is permeating every aspect of our everyday lives. At the University of Bergen's website, Tang describes his research this way:

If design is the power to shape the so-called “future”, then who's future and what kind of future are going to be shaped? By whom and what? How can design raise peoples' awareness of being beyond the roles of “consumers” in the ever-evolving, computerized capitalist mode of living? My work seeks ways of converting design into alternative means to ask critical questions and to reflect upon the complicated yet uncertain relationships between human, technology and everyday life (Tang, n.d).

In what follows, I contextualize and position my project further through my key terms, entanglement and disobedience (3.2), and adopt the premise that designed things are, often if not always, discursive (3.3.). From there I discuss the theories and ideas I have appropriated to my project from others (3.4), and finish by framing and delimitating the project (3.5).

3.2 Entanglement and disobedience as key concepts

The effects of design are not always as intended and sometimes even end up being harmful. Plastic, for example – a material that facilitated mass-production of cheap and durable products – seemed like a wonderful innovation when the material was first engineered more

than a hundred years ago. The negative effects it has had on the environment are, of course, tremendous. And I am sure Alexander Graham Bell, the man often credited for inventing the telephone, did not foresee the later expansions on his invention; the development of the smart phone and the way in which it has profoundly changed the way we communicate, get information and are entertained. The low bridges of the parkways on Long Island in New York, is an example of design used intentionally to maintain social inequality; They were deliberately designed to make it difficult for buses to pass and, by effect keeping poor people and blacks away since they were the people who normally used public transit. This last example is borrowed from Langdon Winner's essay *Do Artifacts have Politics*, and I will come back to how and why his work relates to my project in section 3.4.

What I want to convey here is the connection between designing something and how we then relate to what happens after, when our design starts having effects in the world and in people's lives. Because humans and designed objects are entangled in power structures hidden or made visible and tangible by design, I explore and experiment with methodologies and methods related to this entanglement with a disobedient attitude against obviously accepting the ways design is designing us.

3.3 Design in a discursive context

I am interested in the effects of design. I see design as an open-ended and collective process, and want to ask questions, spark reflection, and start conversations through and by design. This ambition situates my design research project within Discursive design methodology; a type of design that Stephanie M. Tharp and Bruce M. Tharp defines on the website discursivedesign.com as

(...) a means through which ideas of psychological, sociological, and ideological import are embodied in, or deliberately engendered through, artifacts. The ideas (discourses) are capable of sustaining a complex of competing perspectives and values with the immediate goal of having audiences to reflect upon them. Rather than discourse about design, or discourse for design, it is understood as a form of discourse through design (Discursive design, n.d.).

In their book *Discursive design: Critical, Speculative and Alternative Things*, they write that 'Discursive design asks its audience to take an anthropological gaze and seek understanding of its artifacts beyond basic form and utility' (Tharp and Tharp, 2018: 5). As I see it in relation to my context, Discursive design practice is a way to unveil and make visible the entanglement and complexity of life without trying to tame, simplify or solve it.

3.4 What informs my project

In addition to Discursive design as a methodology and my learned opinion that more discourse is needed within design – particularly in the fields I come from – my research is informed and inspired by many other ideas from other peoples' research as disseminated in books, projects, and within their own academic fields. These are in particular: Yoko Akama, Jenny Odell and Keri Smith from within the design field, and from outside the field of design; Tim Ingold, Langdon Winner, Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, Bruno Munari, *Unruly heritage: An Archaeology of the Anthropocene*, and art movements such as Surrealism, Dada, Arte povera and Fluxus. I will briefly explain why and how the mentioned people, projects and movements inspire and inform my project:

Yoko Akama

Yoko Akama is a design researcher and associate professor in communication design at the RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. In her essay *A finger pointing at the moon: Absence, emptiness and Ma in design* that appears in the book *Undesign: Critical Practices at the Intersection of Art and Design*, she has a beautiful way of positioning herself in her work, acknowledging that she is a person shaped by her surroundings and that her identity forms her work as a designer. She writes: 'I invite the reader into my world-view as a Japanese designer and researcher to begin a conversation' (Akama, 2019: 113). In the same open-minded manner, yet up-front about her worldview and situatedness, she continues: 'I am side-stepping the very idea of binaries. Instead, I come from the position of plurality and contradiction, informed by an ecological world-view where things that seem oppositional are in fact inter-dependent' (ibid.). She writes that her 'ambition is to weave various discourses in feminism, phenomenology, post-colonial theory and cultural philosophy with "Ma" in the hope that the reader finds some resonance with related ideas of their own' (ibid.). I am fascinated with the way she is so present and clear about who she is and where she positions herself, yet very open towards other ways of seeing things. Akama writes that 'an approximate translation of "Ma" is "between-ness" or "in-between"' (ibid.: 114).

In Japanese, the word 'human beings' is composed of two characters, 'person' and 'between' – a 'between person'. '(...) I am merely using "Ma" as a reminder to heighten and attune us to intangible and intuited countenance of designing (...) often overlooked when design emphasises methods, techniques, process, objects and outcomes alone. (...) Categories that aim to distinguish subject-object, designer-user and human and non-human can inadvertently compartmentalize such associations into objects for design. Instead, "Ma" collapses distinctive worlds and deconstructs all boundaries' (ibid.: 115)

I believe Akama will continue to be an important point of reference in relation to some of my experiments where I play with who and what is in possession of an agency, as well as how to be aware of how I situate myself as a person within my research.

Jenny Odell

With her book *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (2019), artist and writer Jenny Odell has written what she calls 'a field guide to doing nothing as an act of political

resistance to the attention economy' (Odell, 2019: xi). She continues writing that she wants this 'not only for artists and writers, but for any person who perceives life to be *more than an instrument* and therefore something that cannot be optimized' (ibid.). Reading the book was an immersive experience for me and resonated with many of my own ideas of the importance of disobeying capitalist ideas of efficiency and optimization.

Keri Smith

Keri Smith is an author, illustrator and conceptual artist and has written several books about creativity. The focus of her work and research is on creating "Open works", pieces that are completed by the reader or user. Her playful way of exploring and being attentive on what is literally right at your feet, has been a big source for inspiration for my interest in working with found and waste materials. Her book *The Wander Society* (2016) is a guide to the act of wandering, or unplanned exploring, as a way of life. Her way of exploring how wandering feeds the creative mind resonates with my own experience of how good it is for me to be outdoor and in motion as it opens my mind to new ideas – the most important insights and epiphanies in relation to my research has occurred as I ride my bike or run in the mountains – which is why I have implemented this in my personal creative method and research process.

Tim Ingold

The ideas and writings of anthropologist Tim Ingold has been some of the most influential in my research so far, at least from outside of the design field. In his book *Making* (2013), Ingold claims that anthropology is a speculative discipline that has the power of imagining what life could or might be, and calls Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture 'the four A's' (Ingold, 2013: 10), and that the boundaries between the disciplines disappear. I can relate this speculative approach from my designer's perspective, and I think design and anthropology have much in common. I am not concerned about the borders between disciplines, and I see my work much influenced by both anthropology and archaeology. Ingold also writes about how he thinks 'it is wrong to think of learning as the *transmission* of a ready-made body of information, prior to its *application* in particular contexts of practice. On the contrary, we *learn by doing*' (ibid.: 13). I experience Artistic Research, which is what my project is, to be exactly this; about standing in the middle of the project and reflect as I make. It is not about observing from a distance, but rather about being immersed and fully present in the process.

I know Ingold will continue to be an important source of inspiration and context as I continue working on my project.

Langdon Winner

Langdon Winner's paper *Do Artifacts have Politics?* relates to my project because it offers examples of the ways design never is neutral. With his paper he has made a substantial effort to unveil, with examples, how design, both intentionally and unintentionally, is imbued with certain power structures and therefore is political. I have used his paper in one of my experiments where I explore how my own ideas are informed and influenced by the ideas of others, which is really the essence of any research, in an artistic and visual manner by cutting out words and phrases from his text and playing around with them as a way of exploring new ideas building on his ideas. This experiment is also about my process as an artistic researcher, exploring how theory informs practice and vice versa. The experiment is

still in process and not yet finished, but the process so far is presented on my Research Catalogue page.

Marschall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore

In the book *The Medium is the Massage*, authors Marschall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore write about the ways in which we are shaped by our technologies in a very playful, amusing and visual manner:

the environment that man creates becomes his medium for defining his role in it. The invention of type created linear, or sequential, thought, separating thought from action. Now, with TV and folk singing, thought and action are closer and social involvement is greater. We again live in a village (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967: Much of the book has no page number. The quote is from the last page of the book).

Even though it was written in 1967 it appears surprisingly modern and relates to my research interest.

Bruno Munari

Munari worked across movements, materials and fields, breaking the boundaries between art and design. Munari's *Useless Machines* from the 1930s have no obvious utilitarian function and therefore question the concept of functionality. They have been influential in my work, and especially my own *Useless Machine*, which is a direct reference to his works and is presented at my Research Catalogue page.

Unruly heritage: An Archaeology of the Anthropocene

I had a long conversation with Thóra Petursdóttir, who is Associate Professor in Critical Heritage Archaeology at the Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History at the University of Oslo. She is part of the research group *Unruly heritage: An Archaeology of the Anthropocene*, which focuses on archaeology of the contemporary past and especially things floating in the ocean, which is mostly plastics. Breaking with traditional archaeology that deals with categorizing and trying to explain the past through debris, Petursdóttir is interested in things that are unrecognizable and uncategorizable. With a critical approach towards how we understand context and write history, *Unruly heritage* is about the unwillingness of things to cooperate and be categorized, which is very much related to the way I work with disobedience and the exploding of categories in my experiments.

Surrealism, Dada, Arte povera and Fluxus

I am influenced by art movements such as Surrealism, Dada, Arte povera and Fluxus, both because of the playful and disobedient attitude they in my eyes, represent, and because the use of found and waste materials is dominant. I am interested in the different stories that discarded materials can tell, and the polyphony that can emerge when materials usually not combined, are. Materials out of their usual context can cause friction and wake us up. We are confronted and shaken out of our habitual ways of seeing things. The use of waste materials is also closely linked to my anti-consumerist attitude.

3.5 Framing and delimitation

I have a special interest in what unfolds after the designer (usually) has finished her job. The *Human Object – Where do I end, and you begin?* project therefore focuses on the stories, design iterations and development steps embedded in existing man-made objects and the interactions we have with them, as well as being interested in and hopeful of being able to imagine things differently through design and the making of artifacts I create mainly from debris and waste materials. Collections and archives are also central in my project; both collections of things I or others make, and collections of existing things, such as the hammer.

The hammer is a vehicle for exploring and reflecting on the human/object entanglement and is therefore both a central subject and a representation of the human/object relationship in my project. The hammer is also used as a metaphor that frames my explorations and can guide my development of a collection of methods, which in effect could become my own methodology, which I will explain more in the methodology section (4.2). The hammer is an archetypical man-made and oft-designed object (or even a *human object*, as it literally is used as a prolongation of the arm). A hammer is widely used and understood across different cultures, contexts and through time. As such, it offers different perspectives on design, both in an historical sense (connecting contemporary man to his prehistorical ancestors), and in questioning form, function and the relationship between a design object and the human object.

4 Methodology and methods

4.1 Pre-existing methodology

I have already placed my project within the realm of Discursive design methodology and will now discuss another related methodology that I apply in my project's context, in addition to describing methods I have developed myself and that, as the project is moving along, are forming a methodology.

In his book *Adversarial Design* (2012), Carl DiSalvo describes a practice that 'uses the means and forms of design to challenge beliefs, values, and what is taken to be fact' (DiSalvo, 2012). Tharp and Tharp later put Adversarial design as one of the methodologies that belongs under the umbrella they call 'Discursive design' (Tharp and Tharp, 2018: 84). Methods used in adversarial design is the act of troubling categories and to 'reconfigure the remainder' (DiSalvo, 2012: 57).

Political theorist Bonnie Honig uses the term *remainder* to describe what is expelled in politics. This term refers to the people, practices, and Agonism tries to identify discourses that are overlooked or written out of institutions, policies, legislation, and

theories in the attempt produce a consensus that lacks conflict what has been excluded or disruptive differences. But under every condition and from every political position, something is excluded. As Honig (1993, 5) states, "All sets of arrangements are invariably troubled by remainders." One agonistic endeavor is to identify what has been excluded and ask, Why?, and, How would its inclusion reconstitute a given condition or thing? (DiSalvo, 2012: 63-64).

To create friction and debate around a certain topic by including what was excluded, relates to the way I explode the category *hammer* and explore what happens when hammers that behave in unexpected ways or does not fit our preconceived ideas of what a hammer is, are included in the hammer category.

4.2 Developing my own methodology

I explode the category we call hammer by stretching the limits of what we could call *hammerness*, searching for the moment something starts and stops being a hammer. I collect hammers and people's personal hammer stories. I try to connect on a personal level with the hammers through drawing and immersive observation, and by posing questions that address certain aspects of *hammerness*. I imagine and make hammers that do not yet exist and that might break with or disobey our expectations of function. I open up my project by showing process and unfinished work, and I invite people to reflect and reimagine with me what a hammer can be, through conversations and creation. In this process I realize that the hammer is very standardized yet boundless; it can be very many different things both in forms and functions; it can be conceptual, metaphorical, allegorical and practical.

In my process of exploring and exploding the category *hammer* and the different ways humans are entangled with this man-made object, I realize that *disobedience* and *entanglement* are the two words that best describe the *Human Object* project and my perspective; Disobedience and entanglement represent the overarching theme of the project, as well as my attitude and methodology. I have written about my disobedient attitude towards the expectation of designers solving problems under motivation and background (2) and in the context section (3.2). I will now expand on this, focusing on how this affects my methodology.

I use disobedience as methodology in that I try to do opposite, turn things up-side-down, mess up categories and ask rude questions. I do this through using transformation as method; I change size, material or context to make something more visible. I let go of some of my control in the process and bring in elements of coincidence. Examples of this is drawing with my (non-dominant) left hand and blindfolded. I use found and waste materials because I am disobedient towards making things look finished, smooth and glossy, and prefer things looking a bit rough and unfinished.

There are no clear boundaries between me and my project, hence the subtitle of my project *Where do I end, and you begin?* My personal and professional lives are entangled; issues important in my personal life become important in my project and the other way around, my own ideas, methodologies and reflections are inspired by other people's ideas, methodologies

and reflections, which in turn influence the things I write in my thesis. And the things I write in my thesis are informed by my creative experiments, and my creative experiments are informed by the things I write in my thesis. The creative and theoretical processes are entangled with each other, which is, in my opinion, the very nature and characteristic of Artistic Research. The structure and visual presentation of my project is also based on *entanglement*.

5 Process and works

In my Midway evaluation presentation, I will show the works and experiments I have done so far in my process and that I refer to in this project description and explain how they relate to the theories and methodologies I now have presented. Most of them (even if they are still in process) are available on my research catalogue page.

6 Reflecting on my discoveries and findings so far

The *Human Object* project operates on two main levels:

1. Contributing to knowledge about the ways humans and designed objects are entangled
2. Exploring and experimenting with methodologies and methods for design research based on the methodologies that offer entry points into the theme of discovering how design can be(come) more than solutions to simple or specific problems through an artistic research process

In the process I have had up to this point, I have experienced how much the project is about exploring methodology, and that I am seeing the contours of my own methodology emerging. I have also experienced that focusing on process instead of product has become natural and integrated in my way of working in that I show open-ended and unfinished works. This also underpins the importance of the social and collective dimensions of project; that it is much about discussing and interacting with others, as well as it is about being alone and personally engaged with my project. I am curious about where the *Human Object* is taking me next, and I look forward to being entangled with it.

7 References

BOOKS AND ARTICLES

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Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge

LINKS TO WEBSITES

Siv Lier:
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1266714/1273407>

Unstudio architecture design network:
<https://www.unstudio.com/en/page/5893/refugee-challenge-collaboration-with-scape>

Beyond change research summit:
<https://swissdesignnetwork.ch/en/symposia/beyond-change/>

Discursive design:

<https://www.discursivedesign.com/>

A brief history of plastics:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27442625>

Bruno Munari and the Useless Machines:

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Keri Smith:

<http://www.kerismith.com/>

Dóra Ísleifsdóttir:

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