Abstract

How do we converse with materials and other beings to co-design equitably? In this conversation, we aim to host an event that acts as a catalyst to reanimate our mutual relationships with materials. It will seek to identify fresh tactics for designing and ‘con-structing’ objects. We will offer for consideration three ‘materials-as-co-performers’ of design practice, that operate as team members together with humans. Through activities such as sonic fictional design and performative design, this conversation will explore a more-than-human approach to making. During this event, emphasis will be placed on listening to materials and considering their intimate performative relationship to us. Questions for discussion will be: In what ways can we listen to materials? How do materials inform the hand and mind? How can we co-perform with materials? With this conversation, we will seek to map out a nascent material vocabulary relevant to co-making in the Anthropocene. The format of a conversation (rather than an address or lecture) is particularly appropriate for co-producing new understanding and for formulating equitable relationships amongst human and non-human beings.

Proposed Conversation Title ‘Conversing WITH Materials’ How do we converse with materials and other beings to co-design equitably?

Keywords: More-than-human; Anthropocene; New Materiality; Co-making; outside-of-enlightenment; Decolonizing.

1. Convenors Information

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Convenor Name</th>
<th>Email</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dr Jane Norris (Lead and Contact)</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Jane.norris@richmond.ac.uk">Jane.norris@richmond.ac.uk</a></td>
<td>Associate Professor Richmond University, the American University in London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Elvin Karana</td>
<td><a href="mailto:E.Karana@tudelft.nl">E.Karana@tudelft.nl</a></td>
<td>Associate Professor Design Engineering Delft University of Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Nithikul Nimkulrat</td>
<td><a href="mailto:nithikul.nimkulrat@artun.ee">nithikul.nimkulrat@artun.ee</a></td>
<td>Professor of Textile Design Estonian Academy of Arts</td>
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2. Context of Conversation Topic

The significance of our impact on the Earth's geology and ecosystems through industrial approaches to design and making are currently being called into account. The Anthropocene, a concept popularised by Paul Crutzen (2007) in his Nobel Prize winning work on the ozone layer, identified as a distinct geological age, forms our ‘current epoch in which human activity has become a global geophysical force’ (Steffen, Crutzen and McNeill 2007: 614).

Crutzen marks beginning of the Anthropocene as the year 1800. A date that indicates the rise of
industrialisation in the western world using the increase of CO2 in the atmosphere as the key indicator of our influence on the planet. However, to link the Anthropocene to industrialisation, to the use of coal for power and oil to produce plastics etc., suggests an overly neat solution – that of simply reversing our use of fossil fuels to solve the global ecological problems. What this does not consider is our relationships to and with these materials. As Jason Moore observes in *Capitalism and the Web of Life* the industrial narrative ‘does not challenge the naturalised inequalities, alienation and violence inscribed in modernity’s strategic relations of power and production. It is an easy story to tell because it does not ask us to think about these relations at all’ (Moore 2015: 170). Moore suggests instead the term ‘Capitalocene’ for an epoch starting in 1945 (172).

Focusing more particularly on our material/technical relationships, Donna Haraway asks ‘when do changes in degree become changes in kind, and what are the effects of bioculturally, biotechnically, biopolitically historically situated people (not Man) relative to, and combined with, the effects of other species assemblages and other bio/abiotic forces? (Haraway 2015: 159). Haraway herself coined a new term the ‘Chthulucene’ for entangled temporalities and spatialities and intra-active entities-in-assemblages including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-human’ (Haraway 2015: 160).

It is this more-than-human position that the ‘Conversing WITH Materials’ conversation seeks to explore. The format of a conversation (rather than an address or lecture) is particularly appropriate for co-producing new understanding and formulating alternative relationships with human and non-human beings (Kuijer, L., Giaccardi, E. 2015). By focusing on reanimating our mutual relationship with materials to identify different strategies for designing and ‘con-structing’ objects we can consider ‘materials as ‘co-performers’ of practice together with people’ (Karana, E., Giaccardi, E., Stamhuis, N., Goossensens, J., (2016). This DRS 18 conversation offers a space to reconsider material relationships through outside-of-enlightenment-thinking activities (Norris 2017).

Approaches such as Sonic Fictional design are suggested strategies for the session. Pedro J. S. Vieira de Oliveira identifies sound as an ideal medium to address the decolonializing of our relationships, in this case to materials through sound, as Audio can be analysed through its sociological value, anthropological nature, musical character, psycho-acoustic properties, how it is embedded into design decisions (Vieira de Oliveira 2016: 45; Karana, E. et al 2016 and Nimkulrat, N. 2012). Sonic fiction is what could be described as a poetic methodology for sound and cultural studies originally conceived by art theorist Kodwo Eshun and developed by Steve Goodman. It is an approach that generates critical multi-layered signifiers and as Steve Goodman comments in *Sonic Warfare*: it can ‘place theory under the dominion of sonic affect, encouraging a conceptual mutation’ (Goodman 2010: 82). The aim of these conceptual mutations is to build new networks, new connections, new understanding.

Isabel Stengers in *Reclaiming Animism* suggests that ‘In order to honour the making of connections, to protect it against models and norms, a name may be required. Animism could be the name for this rhizomatic art’ (Stengers 2012: 9). But whether it is this term, or Michele Foucault’s four pre-enlightenment categories for organising knowledge: Adjacency, Emulation, Analogy and Sympathy that can be re-deployed (Foucault 1970: 19); or Marcel Mauss’s ‘Law of contiguity’ that blurs
relations between objects and humans in his *General Theory of Magic* (Mauss 1972: 79) there is important work to do in exploring this wider territory for possible design habitats in the future.

The decolonizing of Enlightenment thought, a structure that produced the Nature/Culture categorisation which so dangerously led to the Anthropocene and which is so effectively critiqued by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro via his term ‘perspectivism’ (Viveiros 1992: 73 -4), is work that is crucial to the rebalancing of the global contemporary design practice. How do we converse with materials and other beings to co-design equitably?

3. Conversation research question

How do we converse with materials and other beings to co-design equitably?

- In what ways can we listen to materials?
- How do materials inform the hand and mind?
- How can we co-perform with materials?

4. Set-up of your session

Each of the three convenors will bring a material as a ‘co-presenter’, with samples to place on delegate chairs prior to the session starting. The session will start with an interactive audio exercise by delegates using the materials on their chairs make sounds, which will be recorded. This would enable our ‘co-presenter materials’ to ‘speak’ first, setting this as a president.

The convenors will introduce their ‘co-presenters’ (material) for 7 minutes and offer questions to be discussed in the clusters. We will capture comments by asking delegates to place their piece of material / object on the A4 sheet of paper with the question on and draw / write / make responses. These will be photographed for the conference forum. We will assemble a networked map of material vocabulary during the session.

5. Type of space and equipment required

A room that has a hard floor and good acoustics. Lead convenor will bring a laptop with microphone and WiFi speaker. Blue tac to attach A4 paper sheets to wall. The chairs to be arranged into small clusters around tables to encourage group discussion.

6. Dissemination strategy

A series of warm up social media activities are proposed: A campaign of Twitter posts of materials with the teaser: ‘this is my co-maker – who are they?’ and tweets exploring a draft vocabulary for the session. During the conference discussion will be initiated on the online forum. A reflective article will also be written up by the conveners.

7. References

Foucault, Michel. 1970 The Order of Things London Routledge


Goodman, Steve. 2010 Sonic Warfare Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Haraway, Donna. 2015 ‘Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chuhulucene: Making Kin.’ Environmental Humanities 6: 159 – 65


Stengers, Isabelle. ‘Reclaiming Animism’ - e-flux Journal #36 July 2012


About the Convenors:

Convenor 1 Dr Jane Norris writes material fiction and research papers, on how outside-of-enlightenment understandings reposition our relationship and engagement with materials.

Convenor 2 Dr Elvin Karana is exploring ways of understanding and designing (with) materials to radically enhance material relationships with artefacts. She is the founder of Materials Experience Lab

Convenor 3 Dr Nithikul Nimkulrat is interested in how new knowledge and understanding of materials can be generated through the practitioner’s hands-on experience.