

Design in the Future

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Cher Potter: How do you see design and the future in relation to your own practice?

Paola Antonelli: Design *and* the future, or design *in* the future?

CP: That's interesting. Design *and* the future, I had said.

PA: Designers actually plan for the present and the immediate future. Sometimes they also plan for the remote future when they collaborate with scientists and do more speculative work. Built into the idea of design is an idea of a future, of a dynamic that moves forward. This is particularly the case with modern design, which concerns itself with 'progress'. As a curator of contemporary design, everything I do is built on the past, but for the purposes of the present and pushing towards the future.

CP: Are there avenues of future-oriented design that you're particularly interested in?

PA: Besides my curatorial practice, as a private individual I love science fiction. As you know, there are different types of science fictional futures — there's the gleaming, clean, translucent future; there's the dystopian future; there's the future that is a metaphor for present reality and history. I'm interested in all kinds of contemporary design about life and about the world. For the most part, I'm non-denominational! I don't have much patience for design that is just self-reflective, that is about form or is about exclusivity. I am interested in design that pushes the world forward.

CP: What do you think about the state of design education and futures?

PA: Ever since the Design Interactions course directed by Tony Dunne at the Royal College of Art, with Fiona Raby and others as teachers, there have been many programmes that have tried, in the way that they did, to frame and critique present and future social realities. I think that the most successful programmes are really based on plausibility rather than pie-in-the-sky ideas; the ones that deal with near futures, maybe ten years

from now. For me, the real difference between speculative design and a lot of science fiction is plausibility. *Design and the Elastic Mind*, a show I curated at MoMA eleven years ago, focused on designers' ability to grasp momentous changes in technology, science and society, and convert these into the objects and systems we use — and will use in the future. I argued that almost everything I was showing, with a few exceptions that were very clearly marked, was plausible.

CP: Do you think it's important that there be an aspect of problem solving to design?

PA: It's funny you bring that up. About three years ago, together with Kevin Slavin and Neri Oxman, I ran a programme at the MIT Media Lab in the summer time that was called 'Knotty Objects'. It began with a talk by Raby and Dunne and ended with an Oxford-style debate between Jamer Hunt, who ran Transdisciplinary Design at The New School, and Ahmed Ansari, a member of the Decolonising Design Collective, and a founder of the Architecture Design Research Lab in Karachi. The issue of real-world problem-solving and speculative design was the subject of a heated discussion! While I agree that unfounded far-futures speculation may not solve immediate problems, an important role for designers when working with scientists, for example, can be to provide far-reaching possibilities, inspiration for new directions in their practice and thinking.

CP: Looking forwards ourselves, could you talk a bit about the themes of your XXII Triennale di Milano exhibition¹ *Broken Nature: Design Takes on Human Survival*?

PA: It invites designers to embrace the idea of 'restorative design'. This is a concept in landscape design that is usually associated with ecological restoration, replenishing soils and so forth. My colleagues and I use the term 'restorative' to refer to a process by which design can restore itself — after exploiting resources, depleting the Earth, creating terrible imbalances — it has to take stock and build a new baseline, before it goes on to provide for pleasure and sensuality (Figures 1–4).



Figures 1–4. (Clockwise starting from top left): *Designs for an Overpopulated Planet: Foragers* by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, 2009 © La Triennale di Milano | *Capsula Mundi*, designed by Anna Citelli and Raoul Bretzel, 2009 © Francesco D’Angelo | *The Great Animal Orchestra* by Bernie Krause, United Visual Artists, 2016 © Luc Boegly | *La Llaretta #0308-2B31* (3,000+ years old; Atacama Desert, Chile) by Rachel Sussman, 2008 © Rachel Sussman

I think we have severed some of the threads that connected us to nature — by ‘nature’, I don’t mean only oceans and plants but also other human beings, social constructs, microbiomes and so forth — and we have to try and repair them. Humans need to pay reparations (a purposefully contentious word with its links to righting the wrongs of slavery in America) to nature. We have enslaved nature, and even though it’s not the same as enslaving a whole group of human beings, we should use the terrible experience of the past to develop new viewpoints.

We would like people to leave the exhibition with, first, a sense of what they can do in their lives to move towards this idea of restorative design — simple and practical things, changing habits, choosing more sustainable alternatives; second, I would like to give the Triennale’s audiences a sense of the fact that we live in complex systems, and that we have to learn the pressure points we can use to have a positive impact on this amazing organism that is the Earth; and third, I would like to give them a sense of long time, beyond two or three generations, centuries, millennia. The exhibition starts by highlighting the changes humanity and Earth have gone through, ponders the

remote past and the remote future, moves into a section examining ways to restore natural and social systems, and then into a room devoted to restorative attitudes in everyday life; from there, we take flight again to study complexity, and we end with empathy — for other humans, species, things.

CP: As a final point, do you see any stumbling blocks regarding design in — and of — the future?

PA: A problem with design education today is not the existing models or ideas, but the cost. If students have to pay enormous amounts of money for their education, they will be forced to go directly into commercial practice in order to pay their debts. This stops the designer from exploring his or her imagination, from finding his or her own creative approaches to the problems of the world.

Moreover, educating the people that hire designers is as important as educating designers themselves. Perhaps one of Fiona Raby and Tony Dunne's most powerful impacts on the design industry was that they taught industry people how to *use* speculative designers' ideas. Dominic Wilcox for instance has designed very playful breakfast accessories for Kellogg's to encourage children to eat in the mornings in his *Re-imagining Breakfast* series, which includes a tummy-rumble amplifier and a breakfast-serving drone.

It is really important for young designers to know that there are so many different ways to be a designer.

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Notes

1. 1 March – 1 September 2019.

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