

Introduction

Echoes
of Encounters

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I'm writing this introduction under the impression of a particular event: on International Women's Day, in the middle of Copenhagen, eight of us—all women—from eight European countries and working in different design-related fields, discussed the importance of curiosity, what it is we care about and what we should care about more, while at the same time looking forward. The title of the event was *Curious Encounters*, that is, the type of encounters that French philosopher Alan Badiou has identified as "contingent, chance element[s] of existence." When we experience such an encounter, Badiou continues, "something happens to you that nothing among your existing world's points of reference made likely or necessary. You encounter someone who you do not know and yet who strikes you, attracts you, enters into your life." It is, however, important to bear in mind, as Badiou points out, that there is no encounter without risk. Yet "if you try to reduce this insecurity then you destroy the encounter itself," you destroy the chance of a beginning, the chance of the potentiality, the chance to "give rise to shared consequences, shared innovations" (Petitjean 2014). The power is therefore in the potential of an encounter that can result—as the event itself has aptly demonstrated—not only in the sharing of knowledge but also in the creation of opportunities for the generation of new knowledge and experience.

If I were to sum up the essence of what was said at the event using an anecdote, I would certainly pick the one shared during the discussion by Simona Maschi, the co-founder of the Copenhagen Institute of Interaction Design. Responding to a question on how caring about something manifests in a focus on the future, she pointed to the construction of Florence Cathedral. At the end of the 13th century, when it was realised that the existing cathedral was no longer sufficient for the growing population of the city, the decision was made to build a new, bigger one. This in itself is not unusual; what is remarkable is that when they selected and approved the design of the new cathedral, they would have already been conscious of the fact that they lacked the knowledge to build such an edifice and that it would not be finished within their lifetimes. The most significant part of the story, Maschi stressed, is that the fact, known in advance, that no one involved would witness the results of their decision (the construction would take just over 140 years) posed no obstacle to the approval of the project. On the contrary, the decision was taken in the hope that future generations would benefit.

In other words, the power of such a decision resides in the fact that the foundation of your care is in working to secure benefits in the future despite knowing in advance that you will not live to see these results,

much less their downstream impacts. You are therefore building for the generations to come, able to transcend your own particular interests and find satisfaction in knowing that the fruits of your labours will be enjoyed by generations that, for the most part, will not even remember your name. In practice, this means transcending that *eternal desire* to have your name echo in immortality. As history teaches again and again, much of the heroic chest-thumping quickly fades away; what remains, ever present, are the reverberations of our actions. Moreover, effects that are often dismissed (especially when negative) at a time when bold ideas dominate end up being significant in the future. Here it is important to point out that it is not only the great endeavours, such as the construction of the cathedral in Florence, that reverberate in the future, but also our seemingly insignificant, spontaneous actions, as well as our passivity in the form of inaction. As we stand on the shoulders of the past, it is still up to all of us, time and time again, to make choices about which reverberations we wish to amplify like a tsunami and which ones to ignore, or even to help dissipate.

Thanks to our ability to make deliberate decisions, we are never—despite the daily deluge of dire projections in the context of climate change—facing just a single future. If we feel like we are, we are most likely caught in a loop of projections—as Hannah Arendt puts it, “present automatic processes and procedures, that is, of occurrences that are likely to come to pass if men do not act and if nothing unexpected happens; every action, for better or worse, and every accident necessarily destroys the whole pattern in whose frame the prediction moves and where it finds its evidence” (2013, 10–11). The feeling of powerlessness due to being trapped in a loop of projections is actually due to a sense of loss of *agency*. The underlying cause of this frequently lies in the way we act, as despite Audre Lorde’s caution that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (2007), we all too often persist in this act of powerlessness.

Adding to that, Linda Tuhiwai Smith suggests that one of our tasks eventually is to question what is uncritically perceived as the (only) true knowledge, way of doing things and, ultimately, way of telling stories (2021). Everything reverberates, even the booming silence of indifference and wilful ignorance (Criado-Perez 2019). What also reverberates is the simple fact that for all our awareness of the situation we find ourselves in as a result of escalating climate (and other) change, we simply don’t particularly care about it. As the authors of the *Lancaster Care Charter* point out:

- ↪ It is unlikely anyone would dispute the general intention of care as something that expresses our relationship to each other and the world. However, the same general agreement would have to be applied to the overwhelming evidence that we don't seem to care for much at all, or that the caring intentions and efforts of individuals are not reflected in collective outcomes—undermined, perhaps, by a more dominant, systemic lack of care. (Rodgers et al. 2019, 77)

The role that design ends up playing in this does not just represent an insignificant gesture. Design and art, in their position of translating messages (McLuhan 2001) can actively contribute both to exposing and dismantling of the systemic domination that deliberately promotes a lack of care. They can also open spaces and help co-design tools that will constitute an alternative to the existing tools, or, as Lorde would call them, the master's tools. After all, as the authors of the aforementioned document conclude, design can take on the role of “analyzing and synthesizing future visions” and is thus “best placed to serve as a means for developing ways of caring better for our world, our cities, our livelihoods, our relationships, and for each other” (Rodgers et al. 2019, 77). But in order to achieve this, as designer Sophie Falkeis exclaimed at the event mentioned at the beginning of the introduction, we must finally wake up and act. This interlude, albeit vital, does not apply to everyone, however. Many perpetually ignored individuals have been awake for a while, trying to attract our attention, wake us up from our slumber. Their methods range from the production of scientific knowledge to cutting-edge artistic and design achievements in a variety of media (from films, through immersive virtual reality exhibitions, such as those by Sophie Falkeis, to transformations of our environment through regenerative principles, and last but not least, data visualisation and designing nudges). We are also seeing more and more examples of the pent-up frustration that Jennifer Lawrence expressed so well, on behalf of all of us, in *Don't Look Up*.

This monograph, edited by Tamara Lašič Jurković, is an example of drawing on the former, presenting conceptual yet tangible alternatives to the status quo. In response to the open call “We Will Design – BASE Milano” by Milan's hybrid cultural centre BASE during the Design Week, which encourages designers to reflect on the possibility of creating a universal and reciprocal friendliness—or conviviality—, Lašič Jurković has carefully assembled a selection of master's projects—mostly by women artists who think, research, care and critically respond to the problems

of the community. She shows us that desirable future of which Ivan Illich writes in his book *Deschooling Society*:

↪ I believe that desirable future depends on our deliberately choosing a life of action over a life of consumption, on our engendering a lifestyle which will enable us to be spontaneous, independent, yet related to each other, rather than maintaining a lifestyle which only allows to make and unmake, produce and consume – a style of life which is merely a way station on the road to the depletion and pollution of the environment. The future depends more upon our choice of institutions which support a life of action than on our developing new ideologies and technologies. (Illich 2023, 52–53)

If nothing else, the Academy of Fine Arts and Design of the University of Ljubljana, with this selection of master's theses, clearly shows that it is a space that supports and encourages critical thought. This work, moreover, is in a sense a continuation of the exhibition that we curated at the Academy for the Milan Triennial in 2019, the difference being that with this monograph, we are expanding the field to include art. In this sense we are celebrating two anniversaries together: this year's 40th anniversary of higher education in the field of design at the University of Ljubljana, while at the same time turning our gaze towards the 80th anniversary of the Academy, which we will be celebrating next year, in 2025. On behalf of the generations yet to come, it is my wish that the Academy persists in its resistance to the brutal drive for growth that we are too often forced into by the social circumstances, and to stay on the path of degrowth and the evolution of pedagogical and research encounters.

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