

What might be the speculative social?

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There is a simple premise to this chapter: the practices and products of design work to construct social relations. Sometimes that is an accident or mere by-product of design. But increasingly it is the purpose of design – to make the social. The challenge for us, as scholars, critics, and practitioners of design, is to understand and appreciate this endeavor of making the social.

At the same time, we have to recognize that to simply say that design «makes» the social or «constructs» social relations is not a novel claim. We can find many such assertions throughout design as well as in adjacent fields that study design. My interest is not to be first to point this out (I'm too late for that), or to detail how this happens (this is an essay, not a handbook). Rather, my interest is to explore the qualities and purposes of making the social from the perspective of design. What are the characteristics of this made social? For what ends are the social made?

In this chapter, I take an initial step in the direction of those questions, and outline a notion of the speculative social from existing fields and discourses of design. I use the phrase «speculative social» to label the use of design to imagine and instantiate new associations between humans, and between humans and nonhumans, that asks the question: «How might we live together, differently?» The qualifier of «differently» is important because it marks a distinctive quality and purpose of the speculative social – it is otherwise from our familiar forms of sociality, and it is decidedly conjectural, often aspirational.

At the outset, it is fair to ask, what is «the social,» or what do I mean when I use this phrase? For other disciplines this is a foundational question, the answers to which shape fields and practices. Perhaps most obviously, this is a question that greatly concerns the social sciences. Inspired by recent work in the social sciences, by «the social» I am referring to the associations we have with others, which give structure and character to our individual and collective experience (see Latour 2007). The social is a process of initiating, shaping, and maintaining relations. The social is not a distinctive material or phenomenon. Labeling something as «social» does not put it in a category separate from, say, something that is «commercial.» It is not that education or health are social issues, as distinct from issues of some other category. Nor is it sensible to make distinctions with technology or the environment, as if those categories were not also social. As I use the term, the social refers to relations that are co-constructed, through which both an «I» and a «We» emerge. These might be relations between people, between people and rocks, or between algorithms. One of the challenges of coming to understand and appreciate this endeavor of making the social *from the perspective of design* is to draw inspiration from the social sciences while still retaining care as

to what is important to endeavors of making and doing, to recognizing and valuing the histories, theories, and practices of design, even if our aim is to transform them.

As genres of practice, both social design and speculative design produce considerations of how we might differently conceive and configure the world. Participatory design brings a decidedly political perspective to these endeavors. At the overlap of these fields and discourses, there are possibilities for an experimental practice of exploring what other worlds might be possible. This chapter will draw together a set of topics from social design, speculative design, and participatory design that inspire this idea of the speculative social. This includes critiques of these fields and discourses, their limitations and oversights. By no means is this an exhaustive survey. It is merely an attempt to outline themes in the overlap of these fields and discourses that might characterize more diverse modes of critical practice.

From serving society to participating in making the social

When designers, design scholars, and design critics speak of social design today there are a few common points of reference. One of these is Victor Papanek's *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* (1971). In *Design for the Real World* Papanek outlines what he sees as problems with then-modern design, ranging from a critique of useless products to unsafe manufacturing conditions, and he proposes alternatives for reconsidering the purpose of design and pursuing new applications of the practices of design towards more socially responsible ends. Papanek's polemical text is widely acknowledged in contemporary design literature and over time he has become a lauded, if complicated, figure. But his book was not initially received so warmly. After all, as is often noted, he begins the book with the opening salvo «There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a few» (Papanek 1971: ix).

The subtitle of *Design for the Real World – Human Ecology and Social Change* – is worth briefly considering because it reveals both a purpose of design and a few assumptions. First, it grounds the work of design in the world and experience of people and it characterizes that world as a particular kind, that of an ecology. This is not a world of individuals, but rather one that is defined by mutually dependent interconnectedness. Furthermore, there is a distinction made in that it is a world of *human* ecology. This is curious. Perhaps it is simply a reflection of the thinking of the time, but it is notable that a human ecology, rather than just «an ecology,» is specified as the domain of concern and action. And what is that action? Social change.

Another common reference point for social design is the essay «A Social Model of Design: Issues in Research and Practice» by Victor Margolin and Sylvia Margolin (2002). The essay outlines a model of design practiced based on social work. It also employs a broad notion of ecology, as Margolin and Margolin use environmental psychology as a frame for ordering the multiple factors that comprise a social context. Both social work and environmental psychology are appropriate fields to draw upon. Social work, like design, is an applied field concerned with addressing conditions and developing interventions. Environmental psychology is a field of social science that takes seriously the role of the built environment in our well-being, and has also elsewhere been drawn upon for significant inspiration for design.

Margolin and Margolin raise an issue with regard to the work of Papanek – the tension between social design and more familiar modes of market-driven commercial design. Papanek sets these practices against one another. Margolin and Margolin resist such a clean and clear distinction on two points. First, they state, «[b]y harshly criticizing the market economy, he [Papanek] limits the options for the social design» (Margolin/Margolin 2002: 27). This would seem to imply that for Margolin and Margolin it is not outside the realm of possibility that social design might work within a market economy. Second, they argue against Papanek's claim that social designers must self-organize their efforts. Rather, Margolin and Margolin suggest that change might happen by partnering with other socially committed concerns and practices, such as «health, education, social work, aging, and crime prevention» (Margolin/Margolin 2002: 27).

Of late, social innovation has become a more popular term in design. Sometimes it is used in concert with social design, sometimes as an alternative to social design. For Ezio Manzini, design provides a way to foster, achieve, and sustain social innovation. As with Margolin and Margolin, what produces social innovation is not design alone, but design in concert with other activities and practices. Throughout a series of ongoing research projects and publications, Manzini describes the ways in which so-called creative communities form: «people who cooperatively invent, enhance, and manage innovative solutions for new ways of living» (Jégou/Manzini 2008: 30). These communities may include professional designers, and they certainly include people who engage in design but do not identify as professional designers; this is the distinction that Manzini makes between what he calls expert and diffuse design (Manzini 2015). The role of the designer is a role of both contributing to invention and supporting the conditions of the social; the work of design is to both foster creative communities and assist in disseminating solutions for new ways of living (Jégou/Manzini 2008; Manzini 2015).

Manzini does make a distinction between social design and social innovation: «the two expressions refer to different activities and have very different implications» (Manzini 2015: 64). I agree with this, but rather than keeping these expressions and endeavors separate, we could collapse them together. For Manzini, design for social innovation is distinct because it is first concerned with «the ways in which people generate social forms» (Manzini 2015: 64) and second because what it produces are «solutions based on new social forms and economic models» (Manzini 2015: 64). That is to say, at least one aspect of this work is the construction of new modes of sociality, so that design for social innovation contributes to new constitutions of the social. In contrast, social design, at least according to Manzini, is not so much concerned with this new constitution of the social as with addressing social situations such as poverty, lack of access to education, hunger, etc. Manzini is correct in this distinction, and this distinction is crucial for understanding the limits of social design at this time.

But this distinction cannot hold (and Manzini seems to agree). In order to address social situations, one must address the constitution of the social; it seems odd to expect change in social conditions without changing the conditions of the social. Social innovation, then, is a promising site for design because it can be interpreted not simply as innovation *in* the social realm, but also as an innovation, or transformation, *of* the social itself. This is more than design serving society. This is design as a means of contributing to the discovery, invention, and production of new or modified structures, desires, actions, and values that comprise the social itself.

Speculation as a genre of practice

The phrase speculative design is used to label a broad swath of work that explores possible futures and, to a lesser extent, alternative presents or histories. Contemporarily, speculative design is often bound up with critical design, at times used interchangeably, at other times used together, as in «speculative and critical design.» Design that takes on the label of «speculative design» tends to, at one and the same time, intentionally tweak the time horizons of design and the expectations of design producing useful products.

Similar to some notions of social design, speculative design is often positioned orthogonally to mainstream commercial design, but with different motivations and ends. For instance, James Auger states:

The key benefit of this approach [speculative design] is the removal of the commercial constraints that normally direct the creative process. This decoupling allows for the goals to be based on questions and discourse rather than market-led agen-

das; hypothetical possibilities not real products; utopian concepts and dystopian counter-products. (Auger 2013: 22)

One way to appreciate speculative design is an alternative to how design serves to domesticate technology. Much of the work of design is to make technology useful, usable, and desirable; or, in other words, design makes technology consumable. In Auger's conception of speculative design, however, something else occurs. Rather than waiting for a given technology to be ready for domestication, speculative design takes a technology that is still nascent, acts as if it were ready for domestication, and then imagines and projects it into a future (or present) as it might be as a product. Such projects shift the time registers of designing technologies while also shifting the expectations of design as producing, or even leading to, products and services that we want or need.

Speculation thus moves from being an activity of design to describing a genre of design practice. In the genre of speculative design, it is not just that the designer engages in forethought as part of a process of arriving at an actualized product. It is rather that the work of design is, *and is complete as*, an endeavor of imaginative projection. What makes speculative design distinctive is *not* an emphasis on futures. What makes speculative design distinctive is that it remains conceptual. Speculative design is not intended to be actualized, to be made as a product or service, as least not to be actualized or made in the instrumental ways that we commonly consider to be the productive progression of design. Put another way, speculative design remains conjectural, it dwells in possibility and potential, it inhabits and enacts the virtual.

This is an awkward place for design, which has been and continues to be characterized by usefulness. What is the usefulness of work that remains conjectural? It may be that this is one reason that other terms are at times used as labels for this kind of work, such as design fiction (Sterling 2005) or discursive design (Tharp/Tharp 2019). What designers and critics are trying to provide by using these labels are descriptions that give some traction for describing the work of such design. For instance, we can conceptualize design fiction as design that is meant to construct and be read as narratives of what might be; we can conceptualize discursive design as design that is meant to participate in contemporary social, cultural, and political dialogue. Perhaps one of the fundamental contributions of speculative design as a genre – and what it brings to this inquiry into the speculative social – is to trouble the function of the design object or representation.

This is not to say that the design object or representation itself is radically different in most works of speculative design – it is not. In fact, the objects and representations are oddly familiar, even as the content may be simply odd. What gets made in most works of speculative design are models, images, videos, and other common representational forms used in design. What makes this sort of design compelling is precisely the ability of the designer to craft representations that are believable as products – that appear like products so that we might entertain them as such.

To develop an appreciation for speculation as a genre, and for the speculative social, it is useful to look beyond this cohort, beyond this current movement. This body of 21st-century work is but one moment in a historical (and ongoing) genre of speculation. For instance, Dunne and Raby begin *Speculative Everything* (2013) with a chapter titled «Beyond Radical Design?» They situate their work, and more broadly the work of speculative design, as sharing a relation with a history of design: «We have long been inspired by radical architecture and fine art that use speculation for critical and provocative purposes, particularly projects from the 1960s and 1970s by studios such as Archigram, Archizoom, Superstudio, Ant Farm, Haus-Rucker-Co, and Walter Pichler» (Dunne/Raby 2013: 6). Situating contemporary speculative design alongside the work of these prior studios, collectives, and designers provides a way of historicizing it, provides the beginning of a genealogy of speculation as a genre of practice.

Speculation, then, is not just a label for a specific contemporary movement in design. We can use the term to situate work within histories of practice. Much of contemporary speculative design is a decidedly expert practice and more attentive to issues of emerging technologies than to social conditions. But to get to the contemporary speculative social requires an expansion of not just the work design objects and representations do; it also requires a broadening of participation in design, and rethinking the roles of the designer.

Enabling participation in design things

From its start, participatory design was engaged in a deliberate and proactive shaping of social relations, with the belief that design has a role to play in how those relations manifest. This shaping of social relations was by no means neutral or objective – it explicitly took positions. As Finn Kensing and Joan Greenbaum note, underlying early participatory design was a theoretical mix of Marxism, pragmatism, and feminism (Kensing/Greenbaum 2013).

As part of its political project, one aspect of participatory design has been to question and reconfigure the role of the designer. Much

of design history has been told as the history of individual designers, or in some cases design studios, and their achievements. Within social design we find this in Manzini's (2015) use of the term expert design and within speculative design in the use of the notion of design authorship (Dunne 2008). In contrast, within participatory design, the presumed authority of the designer is challenged and the opportunity to engage in designing is by no means limited to «professional» designers.

As another facet of the project of troubling the common subjectivities of designing (the designer and the user), participatory design also troubles the temporalities of design. Scholars such as Pelle Ehn have explored the temporalities of design, suggesting that there are moments such as «design before design,» «design time,» and «design after design» (Ehn 2008). In each such moment, design occurs differently, done by different cohorts. Such thinking implies that designing is not a fixed or linear progression but rather a multifaceted unfolding of potential over time, which likely will happen in fits and spurts of activity far removed from spaces of professional design.

In contemporary practice, participatory design shifts from enabling participation in the workplace to enabling participation in design things (Binder et al. 2011). What we (designers and others) are participating in is not delimited to defined categories of «work» (or «play» or «learning» or «health») but much more generally, and much more problematically, to the very constitution of the places, conditions, affects, and outcomes of contemporary politics as experienced and enacted. In practice what this means is that the sites and activities of participatory design are expanding. So we find examples of participatory design in community maker spaces and libraries, with civil servants, activists, residents, and refugees, in neighborhoods as well as the halls of government, with those involved in informal economies, the so-called creative class, and affective labor.

As articulated by the collective of Binder, de Michelis, Ehn, Jacucci, Linde, and Wagner, the concept of «design things» takes inspiration from the work of Bruno Latour and his engagement with the notion of the Nordic *ting* as a place of gathering to address matters of concern together (Binder et al. 2011). Succinctly put, design things are socio-material constructions that give form to issues and matters of concern. Along the way, as the sites and themes shift, concepts of democracy shift too. The democracy of design things is not the rational debate of Habermas (1991) but rather the agonism of Mouffe (2013) and increasingly of Arendt (2013; Honig 1992). That is to say, democracy is not a structural given, a set of relatively agreed-upon procedures and institutions, but rather democracy is comprised of ongoing acts of contestation.

The concept of the «design thing» does another bit of important work – it shifts the focus of design from away from the invention of products, blurs the scope of projects, and instead orients design towards the endeavor of assembling, of bringing and holding together. Within the endeavor of participation in design things the efforts of designers are performed in the affairs of gathering. The term «infrastructuring» is, at times, used to characterize this affair (Ehn 2008; Binder et al. 2011; Le Dantec/DiSalvo 2013). Simply put, infrastructuring is the work of providing resources that enable modes of action.

If for Manzini (2015) the issue is how to conceive of design in a time when everyone designs, for scholars and practitioners of participatory design one pressing issue is how to conceive of participation in a time when everything is participatory. Social media provides an example of this situation. Everything about social media is cast as participatory, and social media exemplifies the confounding of design time and subjectivities as well. Penny Hagen and Toni Robertson make the claim that «Social technologies are, in effect, designed through use. They are containers or scaffolds that rely on participation and user-driven contributions to take their form» (Hagen/Robertson 2012: 78–79). The situation of «everything as participatory» is exacerbated because the notion of «participation» that is put forward and enacted is not necessarily aligned with the values and politics that motivated participatory design in early decades, but instead is more often a cynical strategy for commerce and consumption, a gloss on media, work, and government.

Contemporary participatory design, then, has expanded far beyond the shop floor. Within this expanded field of participatory design are grounds for a speculative social, for explorations of how we might live together differently. One way to understand and appreciate contemporary participatory design is as a practice that conflates design and the social: multiple scholars have suggested that within this new notion of participatory design, the social is a subject of design (Halse et al. 2010; Binder et al. 2011; Ehn/Nilsson/Topgaard 2014). Thus, there is a resonance between contemporary participatory design and some aspects of social design, particularly those aspects of social innovation and design for social innovation in which «the social» is taken as the site or subject of inquiry and reinvention. What participatory design brings to this inquiry is attention to a collaborative and collective approach to designing and an opening of design to an expanded field of practice that puts the articulation of issues and controversies at the forefront of design action and purpose, and, along the way, contests and opens the subjectivities and temporalities of design and designing to a pluralistic array of actors and moments.

And yet...

As exciting as they are, these various formulations of design need to be viewed critically. We cannot fall into the trap of simply equating the social with some notion of goodness and then naively assume that all configurations of the social are just. For instance, researchers of social innovation such as a Frank Moulaert (2015) have called into question whether in some cases social innovation and social design is just a neoliberal form of caring. That is, in the absence of a state that provides comprehensive services, does social innovation and design just become a way to offset or outsource the responsibility of providing for the general welfare? Or, as others have asked, in times of austerity does a focus on social innovation provide a way to avoid discussions of structural inequality? (Grisolia/Ferragina 2015). In such cases, what really is the role of design? Is design just a means of seducing and then appeasing us, not in the more familiar direction towards the banal consumption of products but towards the banal participation in some bereft notion of community?

In 2010 design journalist Bruce Nussbaum provoked a firestorm with the essay «Is Humanitarian Design the New Imperialism?» (2010). Nussbaum's provocative question and critique probed the underlying values, motivations, and implications of social design. His line of questioning was fair and followed, in many ways, lines of questioning initially directed towards international aid and development. Scholars such as Paulo Freire (2000), Ivan Illich (1968), and Gayatri Spivak (1999) have questioned the impulse and actions of development and forms of state-sponsored care work. All too often, this work is hegemonic – it expresses and advances paternalistic and colonialist perspectives on «others,» even when pursued with the best of intentions. Why is it that designers are descending upon communities (usually as outsiders) to do «the good work» of design? What are the latent assumptions in this work?

As one might imagine, the questioning of social design as imperialist sparked a heated response from many in the practicing world of design. But still, the question was never sufficiently answered. It was fought against, in a familiar pattern of denial and counter-accusations of cynicism on the part of those who were asking critical questions.

In the more recent developments of social innovation and design, the work of feminist scholars is coming to the fore as crucial voices calling on designers and design scholars alike to question who is and is not included in these endeavors. If social innovation and design is a collective affair, a practice of commoning, then, Ramia Mazé (2014) asks, who is the «we» in this endeavor? It would seem that such questions are not going to be adequately taken up by practicing

designers or design journalism. Perhaps, then, these are precisely some of the key questions for design studies to be engaging with in understanding this practice of making the social.

Continuing a much-needed inflection of feminist and post-colonialist perspectives, speculative design is also open to significant critique. As Luiza Prado de O. Martins and Pedro Vieira de Oliveira have noted and addressed, too much of what we attend to in speculative design is conditions of privilege: speculative design is too Western, too male, too upper-middle-class, too hetero-normative (Prado de O. Martins/Vieira de Oliveira 2014a, 2014b). This line of critique is not an argument against speculative design in principle, but rather an argument for doing speculative design differently. It is an argument for engaging in practices of conjecture with and through design that are intentionally and explicitly feminist, queer, or non-colonialist (Prado de O. Martins 2014).

Articulating the speculative social

These critiques of design are not reasons to abandon the speculative social. It is from within these critiques that I want to articulate the speculative social – to develop the speculative social as a mode of making that acknowledges the problems and limits of design, and works with those problems and limits to draw together and draw forth ways of designing differently. Certainly, social design has been imperialistic and figures into neoliberal regimes. Without a doubt, speculative design has primarily come from positions of privilege, reproducing Western and heteronormative perspectives. Certainly, participatory design has been used as a gloss, to feign engagement, to «give voice» without letting others actually «have a say.» However, just as certainly, other modes of designing are possible.

This is not without precedent and nor am I alone in making this claim – other scholars are exploring similar framings and reframings across these fields and practices. Stephanie and Bruce Tharp have referred to a reflexive turn in design (Tharp/Tharp 2019). They call attention to how designers working with and through speculation (or more broadly what they call discursive design) are turning towards new subjects and new engagements with contexts and publics that have been overlooked – frankly ignored – by design. In their discussion of this reflexive turn, they state: «If discursive design is fundamentally about communicating ideas and stimulating intellectual awareness, then active strategies of dissemination should be considered as part of the proposition» (Tharp/Tharp 2017). Though they do not make the connection to contemporary participatory design, there is an overlap in terms of both content and method, particularly with regard to

methods of «active strategies of dissemination.» In other contexts, design historian Alison Clarke has drawn out connections between the work of Victor Papanek, Italian Radical Design, and contemporary design (Clarke 2011, 2016). As Clarke notes, many of the concerns and practices of contemporary participatory design can find an antecedent in the work of 1970s collectives such as Global Tools, which sought to question and contest the role of the designer and reinvent what design might be through the provocative objects and events. Furthermore, both Papanek's and Global Tools' engagements with non-Western cultures (as problematic as those engagements were) also find an echo in the reflexive turn in contemporary speculative design (Clarke 2011, 2016).

The fields and discourse of social design, speculative design, and participatory design do not mirror one another or fit together without friction, but they can be read as in some cases overlapping, in other cases leaving a gap that can be creatively occupied. So, although none of these alone suffice for characterizing the speculative social, there is a possibility in their blending – a possibility for developing new ways to appreciate and do design, ways that take seriously the work of asking the question: «How might we live together, differently?» From social design, and more specifically from social design for social innovation, we can take the idea of design as a means of contributing to the structures, desires, actions, and values that comprise the social; not simply as innovation *in* the social realm, but also as an innovation, or transformation, *of* the social itself. From speculative design we can embrace a practice of design that is not bound to technological solutionism, that remains conjectural and pushes back on the common teleological assumptions of design (see Rosner 2018), troubling the function of the design object or representation. From participatory design we can reframe design as an affair of broadening participation in design things, of design as a way to gather together to express and address matters of concern and care, along the way contesting and opening the subjectivities and temporalities of design beyond the trappings of expertise and professionalism, resisting the temptation to make designers authorities of our collective futures, whatever those futures might be.

In the overlap of these fields are themes that characterize more diverse modes of critical practice. One of these themes concerns appreciating design as embedded within a lattice of associations. Ecologies, things, assemblies, these terms taken from other disciplines and brought to design – notably taken from the disciplines of the social sciences – share a perspective that whatever the social is, it is a relational condition, and that design is enmeshed within those conditions. The social is not made out of whole cloth, even in its most speculative

moments. Making the social is a matter of weaving within those associations, of crafting textures in the social. If we want to engage in a practice of the speculative social then we need to better understand the place of design – its activities and outcomes – within the always already existing social that provides the lived context of design.

Another of these themes concerns enabling and participating in collective imagination and possibility. Yes, there is an already existing social. But new patterns can emerge that allow us to glimpse and feel the social differently. The work of design is to contribute to and participate in those practices with others. The ability to make worlds seem real enough such that we might tentatively know them, to consider and engage them as believable potentials, is fundamental to the speculative social. But building from an appreciation of design as an enmeshed practice, it is a capacity that should be practiced as a cooperative inquiry, one in which possibilities are imagined together.

A third theme emerges from the critiques of these fields as they have been practiced. In envisioning a practice of design that imagines and instantiates new associations between humans and between humans and nonhumans – that asks the question «How might we live together, differently?» – we have to envision design differently. Participation, speculation, and the constitution of the social as they are performed by design must also be the subjects and sites of critical inquiry and re-fashioning. If we want to explore what other worlds are possible, then as scholars, critics, and practitioners of design we must also explore what other subjectivities of designing might be desirable. Simply enabling others to participate in design as we know it, as we are familiar with it and as it is comfortable will be insufficient for imagining and instantiating other associations. To ask the question «How might we live together, differently?» we also have to ask «How might we design together, differently?»

Just very briefly, by way of conclusion, let us consider an example that hints at the speculative social and touches on these themes: the «Plastic Imaginaries» project by Åsa Ståhl and Kristina Lindström (see <https://hybridmatters.net>). The «Plastic Imaginaries» project is comprised of numerous parts – public engagement events, documentation, an exhibition, a speculative fiction, along with presentations and publications of various sorts. One series of public engagements events involved walks to search for plastiglomerate. Plastiglomerate is created when plastic waste fuses with mineral, wood, and other natural stuff to form a «something else» that did not exist before. This hybrid matter is often taken as a marker of our contemporary condition, an expression of the muddle of nature and culture. While most plastiglomerate is the leftovers of shoreline campfires, it could, ostensibly, emerge from other conditions when plastic waste is affected by extreme heat, such

as forest fires or lava flows (Corcoran/Moore/Jazvac 2014). For these Plastiglomerate Walks, Ståhl and Lindström invited others to accompany them as they scoured shorelines for plastiglomerate. On at least one occasion, when plastiglomerate could not be found participants decided to create it themselves, intentionally making plastiglomerate by fusing collected rock and found plastic in a campfire.

These walks should be considered as design things, and through them we can see bits of what I am calling the speculative social. This work emerges from traditions of participatory design, but it also extends and refigures those practices. Through the walks, Ståhl and Lindström enable an experience of collective imagination, as they and participants together look to find this novel, and problematic, material. Plastiglomerate itself instantiates an answer to the question of how we might live together differently: with such hybrid materials. The walks are staged encounters that bring participants in relation to this novel material. The walks provide a happening in which to consider the prospect of life with plastic differently than we have known it and, in the absence of finding the matter, to collaboratively make it in a moment of ad hoc co-design. The social that is made is decidedly more-than-human. We are brought to an entanglement of the artificial with the natural, we are brought to the experience of nature-culture in the Anthropocene, and through that we are asked to consider what life in these new conditions might comprise.

To be clear, Ståhl and Lindström do not use «speculative social» to describe their work – I simply offer this concise interpretation of Plastic Imaginaries as suggestive of the speculative social. And in such work, not only is the social refigured, so is design. Through the Plastiglomerate Walks people come together and collaboratively make, but make with the refuse of earlier designed things which are no longer objects of desire, but detritus and pollution. The position of design in relation to these conditions is thus complicated, certainly not innocent. In addition, the speculative social may also call into question our expectations of design representation and performance. There are images and narratives from the Plastiglomerate Walks, but these alone do not encapsulate the work. The walk itself, as well as how the experiences and meanings of the walks are conveyed through presentations and publications in various formats also comprise the design work, are ways in which the speculative social is expressed.

As we consider what else might be critical practices of design, the notion of the speculative social offers a way to think across existing fields and practices of design. It is not that these practices are staid at all, but rather that these practices develop over time, through their mingling and in dialogue with context and culture. The ideas and authors discussed in this chapter are not the extent of the discourse

surrounding social design, speculative design, or participatory design, they simply provide an admittedly incomplete cut across fields and discourse, from which to begin to articulate some themes of the speculative social. In closing, we might take further inspiration from Ståhl and Lindström to consider the speculative social as not so much a field of design, but as a patchwork (Lindström/Ståhl 2012, 2015), creatively assembled by the overlap and stitching of practices, traditions, breaks from traditions, and hopes for what else design and designing might be.

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