Making With Love

a reflection on research and design

Tomi Hilsee

I would like to begin by firstly challenging the separation
and parcelling of research and design. The interrelation of
these two aspects has been, and remains, a central approach to
my thesis work, and serves as a jumping off point to enter
the logics and values of the project itself.

By this breaking of a separation I mean to challenge that
these two aspects are in fact separate entities, and that it
is possible to isolate them. To think to isolate them I would
go so far as to say is an ideological and ahistorical act
which is at war with complex reality. And I am completely
enthralled with complex reality— not only because it is
urgent, but because it is the only option we have to deal with
the world in which we are a part of. A world Tim Ingold

would call a "meshwork of lines". To illustrate this point I
would like to make an analogy to the inseparability of
thinking and responding. Meaning that I can only say something
or write something or articulate a thought if I'm provoked. I
can only ever have a thought if I am provoked, by something
which exists. I cannot simply imagine or create a reality
internal to my own world without deriving some observations
or affections from the world in which I am a part and
encounter. All I can ever do is respond. And everything we
have to say is in response to something. We have nothing to
say if we don't have anything to respond to— we need material
in order to think about anything. The thing needs to exist and
affect you in the first place. So we respond to the world, to
people, to objects, to environments, to other ideas, and so
on. Without those things there is nothing to say. You wouldn't
even exist yourself. So all thoughts are responses, and no
thing can be created from nothing. And a conclusion I would
draw from that is to say that thinking is to create
something, it is to design. And thinking derives from our
responses to the environment we observe, encounter and
experience. And we give back to that world by engaging it, by
being attentive and responding, in kind. We return the favor
of being affected by the world by affecting the world. (Which
could be called design.) So there is no separation between our
encounter with the world and our affecting it. You could say
that is what constitutes the encounter— that it is a response
in kind.

I continually go back to a short essay from Sanford Kwinter
responding to the off-hand claims made by Anslem Haverkamp
that memory is creation and invention— "creating links from
one place and thing to another— rather than mere
reproduction". It's a sentiment that moves me because it cuts
to the core of an understanding that thinking, memory,
remembering, even mourning, is an act of creation, of design.
And if we extend this understanding to one in which we
understand thinking as being tied to a response to the world,
as Ingold, Harraway, Deleuze and others would allude, then

it's all the much more startling to link thinking to memory, and memory to creation. Kwinter would go so far as to make an argument that agency, "the capacity of overcome inertness and torpor to act" or in other words "the capacity of organized matter to demonstrate rudimentary features of life", is associated with intelligence, which he proposes was originally made possible by memory.

"All perceiving is also thinking, all reasoning is also intuition, all observation is also invention." - Rudolf Arnheim

If this premise, that thinking, responding, encountering, affecting, creating, designing, remembering, knowing, and acting are interwoven and co-producing each other, is to be established, then the conclusion must be to embrace this meshwork of 'thinking and acting all at once' throughout all that we do. I draw this line from Paul Hajian, who in a guide book for architectural drawing described the practice of architecture as "thinking of everything at once". He makes this claim from the simple observation that "architectural drawing is part of a process that involves large quantities of information. The process of designing is not simple, linear, not (for the most part) hierarchical." In this way as architects we think through drawing and recording complexity— in a manner of form which attempts not merely to reproduce real life in its entirety, but to search and explore connections within the complexity, which can be articulated and communicated, without losing the complexity, or proposing a finite understanding. In other words, an invitation to be able to enter into the complexity, without reduction or overwhelming. Hajian I believe is alluding to a core urgency of the practice of architecture, beyond drawing built form, in which, as Kwinter would say, "the architect in the twentieth century not only builds worlds but must confront the world that is already built, as well as the subjects and the mores

that are forcibly built within and by it." Which I take as a
call to remain in the anxiety-giving struggle to build
immanently and to think of everything all at once.

Furthermore, to make this literal, I approach 'design' in the
same way I have approached 'research'. In the same
emancipatory act even. Which is to extend this complexity and
thinking and working through the meshwork of complicated
processes which have created 'our' world— the interrelated
landscapes of geography, technology, culture, building,
geology, politics, etc. — Not only across scale but
simultaneously extending this meshwork across time and the
(ongoing) history of their (ongoing) formation. Which is a
way of thinking I would relate to topological thinking (or
forming, performative thinking— what a thing does as compared
to what a thing is.). A term used by Corrado Curti in which
he differentiates from "thinking in terms of entities
(typology)" towards "thinking in terms of relations that
define a space of possible entities." By this he means that
thinking can shift away from examining shapes to "thinking of
buildings as the actualization of virtual forms based on
relations ... and of architecture as the discipline that
investigates these relations instead of their actualizations."

So if we can accept 'research' to be done is such a way, I
would say that we can also approach 'design' in such the same
way. Which would then also be an open ended exploration. Just
as with topological research, an open ended design would not
propose a finality or truth about what is happening or did
happen, or claim to know or direct what will happen. With
research we know the complexity is too large to simplify down
to simple truths— beyond even the understanding that no
history is ever objective, and all perspectives are only ever
partial, biased and incomplete. Yet we still struggle to
grapple some, I wouldn't say understandings, but the ability
to feel and move with the complexity— to engage the
complexity, as a participant in it (not merely an observer). I
would say that is all we can ever do. But to actually engage

would mean to never give up on this complexity, but instead
to expand it and try to continually place ourselves within it—
always starting over again from where we left off. (An
intentional oxymoron.) As soon as you are a researching as a
participant rather than as an observer, you are already
designing! A point that Susan Sontag and John Berger would
insist upon! If you photograph reality, you have constructed an
image of that reality which will now time travel and produce
and effect other realities. And there is power in that, which
should be engaged with responsibility. As an observer-
participant you are constantly looking for lines to move with
or against, or diagonally, or above, or below, or so on.

As said before, to find something in history is a process of
creation. When we think about connections, and what to look
for, or how to look, or pay attention— to see things at all—
to map and draw those connections is to create them. And we
can give agency and creative power to that, as James Corner
describes when contrasting mapping from tracing, "to what is
and to what is not yet." "In other words, the unfolding agency
of mapping is most effective when its capacity for
description also sets the conditions for new eidetic and
physical worlds to emerge. Unlike tracings, which propagate
redundancies, mappings discover new worlds within past and
present ones; they inaugurate new grounds upon the hidden
traces of a living context." When you draw lines (because that
is exactly what we are doing), we create those lines, in the
unique way in which you or I have drawn that line, or
connection, which is unique to our sight, and is a new micro
reality. So I think it would be dumb and unfortunate to
abandon that thinking when doing design work. I think to
occupy such a realm is stressful and not easy, and you won't
'figure it out' the first time, or really ever (and I think
thats the point). But I will say again, it remains urgent, as
Corner again describes the "unfolding agency of mapping may
allow designers and planners not only to see certain
possibilities in the complexity and contradiction of what
already exists but also to actualize that potential. This

instrumental function is particularly important in a world
where it is becoming increasingly difficult to both imagine
and actually to create anything outside of the normative."

It's a tough thing to stay with, the complexity (the trouble),
but I think thats the design challenge. Which maybe shouldn't
even be called design, but rather engaging, moving, feeling,
acting, participating, building, making, mapping, dancing, or
even politics (as a verb). All we can do is engage the world,
and by engaging we are designing. Therefore designing can be
better described as an act of ongoing engagement, rather than
an act of producing proposals for how to intervene in the
world. Which doesn't mean to say that we cannot think ahead
about what we do, but we should placate that thinking ahead
as already a part of the engagement. Often in design studios
students are given a task of performing research (in a
theatrical sense) and then concluding the research by
extrapolating a few key points, or summarizations, which are
then converted into design needs, which are then addressed
with a building design proposal. And the student passes on how
well they can translate broad research into narrow points
which can then be clearly and directly responded in with
tangible design product. The success of this project is based
primarily on how well the linear stream of rational thinking
can be presented— as if it was a sales pitch. 'Community A
has a shortage of B, so we created a design which addresses
the need for more B, and we did that by implementing design
strategies X and Y.' I cannot express to you how abundantly
opposed I am to all of that. I just think this depiction of
reality is ridiculous and never true. For one it's completely
insulting and reductive to the research and curiosity that
those students usually began with, or are still doing. Because
research doesn't complete, it just doesn't. To pick a point at
which it has to pretend to terminate and have summaries drawn
out of, is arbitrary. (Which I would argue is different than
finding lines to move in relation to.) So if research is
design, then a design or a building cannot complete either.
Design also doesn't complete. Because the extrapolations, the

summaries, the tangibly design needs, as a fixed entity which can be drawn conclusively, are fiction. And we should at the least not pretend that they are another other than that— or at least acknowledge the incompleteness and impossibility to establish them definitively. If we accept that, we approach design differently. We wouldn't pretend that we have resolved anything, or understood everything. We would know that it's not possible to come to a complete understanding and we would act with humility. We would know that the design doesn't understand, contain, resolve or respond to the entirety of the complexity of the world in which it is in and the things that are constantly forming and changing that and being affected by what we design. In one part that should be obvious, but yet we approach talking about design as if we don't know those realities. To think it's possible to identify the limits of a community and make definable in a list what the needs of that community are, is problematic. To reduce complexity to a definable list is immediately disregarding the things which are not possible to be included in a list. It is akin to thinking that a canon of architecture is even possible to produce. Because it requires making the undefinable defined— which immediately requires a valuation system about what can and cannot be seen as something which can be included into a list or an archive. It values practitioners over informal settlements. It values written history over oral history. It values ideas presented in a treatise over ideas jotted down in a notebook. It values things we can see over things we don't yet know. All of which would perhaps be not problematic if we acknowledged the impossibility of our valuation systems to go beyond their limitations— that they cannot depict reality, but instead create their own realities based on their own constructed values. There would need be a recognition of our designs involvement with a world beyond that which we can summarize, and attempt some engagement with the unknown, and incomplete.

As soon as we think we have understood and resolved
complexity, or boiled it down, made it tangible, and
hierarchical, is the moment in which we have left reality.
Which is less to say that a design should attempt to engage
all aspects of complexity, but more to acknowledge the
limitations of the possibility of that. All of which should be
understood as the opposite of saying 'don't design anything'.
Instead it means to design not as a means to an end, but as a
process of engagement and thinking, which should have no
conclusion— even if it leads to building something. The
building of something is never more than a part of a process
of exploration and engagement with complex realities. The
power of which, as Corner says, "resides in their facticity".
"Although drawn from measured observations in the world,
mappings are neither depictions nor representations but mental
constructs, ideas that enable and effect change. ... Mapping
is always already a project in the making."

With my project I have made a dedicated effort to be both
'designing' and 'researching' all the while. The 'facts' that
I have encountered, and continue to encounter, perpetually
shift my thinking, my understandings and my engagements with
my building, writing, drawing, talking and so on. (With my
tutors, other students, housemates, workshop collaborations,
squattors, pirate librarians— who are all also my friends.) I
present my research and design in the same breath, as my
project has been about exploring that process. My drawings and
maps give equal presence to conversations, technical aspects
of construction, emotions, desires, weather, methods of
working, changing decisions, movements of bodies,
environments of mud and darkness, and tracings of tools,
materials, friends and how those things (and many more) came
together to build. My friendships are not complete, my
readings are not complete, the building is not complete, and
the presentation is not complete. And I never intended them to
be. And I don't think they can be. Anyone who has been in a
long term relationship, or any relationship— friend, family,
romantic or otherwise— knows the fallacy of staticity. To

impose an idea of remaining the same upon a partner, a child, a collective, an environment, a building, a thought, is a war with reality, and could be considered abuse even. And I'm not interested in that, I'm opposed to that. So i've made an effort to be moving in the flux of those things and trying to find ways to build from within and out of those shifting field of things— which has not always been easy. But I just think thats what life is. Constantly working on our relations, which are never stable, and demand our commitment to being attentive and present. An act which is design, which we are constantly doing, to some degree or another. So I feel with Ingold when he speaks of "joining with" undead artifacts, and Harraway when she speaks of "staying with the trouble", and certainly with Harney and Moten when I say that I don't intend to graduate, but to remain committed to study, in mutual debt, "to each other ... in a nurses' room, ... in a barber shop, ... in a squat, a dump, a woods, a bed, an embrace."

References:

Ingold, Tim. The Life of Lines. 2007. Ingold, Tim. The Perception of the Environment. 2000.

Brickle, Penny. Life and Death of the Longhouse. 2013.

DeLanda, Manuel. Curti, Corrado. Material(ism) for Architects: a Conversation with Manuel DeLanda. 2010.

Kwinter, Sanford. Mourning the Future, Radical Anamnesis. 2007. Haverkamp, Anselem. Scene of Memory. 1995. Haverkamp, Anslem. Ghost Machines or Embedded Intelligence? 1995. Derrida, Jacques. The Work of Mourning. 2001.

Haraway, Donna. Situated Knowledges. 1988. Haraway, Donna. Staying With the Trouble. 2016.

Deleuze , Gilles. Spinoza: Practical Philosophy. 1970.
Arnheim, Rudolf. Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of
the Creative Eye, 2004.

Hajian, Paul. Drawing Built Form. 1984.

Altes, Alberto. The Power of Experiment. 2016. Altes, Alberto.
Delaying the Image: Towards an Aesthetics of Encounter. 2015.

Kousoulas, Stavros. Commoning as Differientiated Publicness.
2015. Kousoulas, Stavros. Drift, Naturally: A Transaffective
Unfolding. 2019.

Corner, James. Agency of Mapping. 1999.

Moten, Fred and Stefano Harney. The Undercommons: Fugitive
Planning and Black Study. 2013.

Stengers, Isabelle. Cosmopolitics. 1997.