

**The values of being in design: Towards a feminist design ontology**

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# The Values of Being in Design: Towards a Feminist Design Ontology.

## Summary

This article critiques the way in which contemporary western design ontology is constructed, why this affects conceptions of female creative practice and how this impacts on women's lives. Starting with a personal account of educating female designers, the paper aims to unpack the different ways in which ontologically invisible patriarchal and capitalist value systems act on us as designers, aided by processes of embodiment essential to design practice. It calls for the 'de-designing' of our ontology as designers, through feminist epistemologies and practices that keep questions over transformations, futued by design, in a state of critical plasticity, by attending to socio-political, socio-economical and ecological ethics whilst keeping issues of gender exclusion at its core.

Keywords: embodied values in design, critiques of patriarchal capitalism, feminist design ontology

## On asking for 'more'

Asking for a feminist design ontology may be considered by some as being a bit preposterous. Why not just feminist design methodology or approach? But if we consider ontology as a theory of being and of reality: the nature of existence, - the need to re-shape this existence through radical epistemologies becomes more apparent, considering the central tenet of my critique: That design's situatedness in contemporary western design ontology, governed by patriarchy and capitalism, presents an entrapment which curtails our very ways of knowing in design. I thus construct my arguments on the basis of Stanley's and Wise's (1993) feminist position that: 'the relationship between feminist epistemology and feminist ontology is one which positions ontology as the foundation: being or ontology is the seat of experience and of theory and knowledge' and envelope my discussion in the call to move towards a feminist design ontology that puts into service the plasticity of feminist epistemological contestations.

## 1 Is it war? I felt like I kept sending them 'over the top'

I am starting this paper with my own, personal, account of how it feels to prepare female students for the creative industry as a female design educator. As a feminist design researcher I place importance on situated, lived experience, which includes positioning myself in my writing. It is a partial reality and it is not neutral:

I entered academia after spending a number of years in the creative industry as an art-director, having studied visual communication design at university. As I started to teach I wanted to make sure that my female students were well equipped to deal with the gender biases they might face once entering the industry and that my male students would have an understanding of these biases and would hopefully not become part of re-producing them. Over the years I ended up with a broad network of alumni in the industry and with each new cohort we could go and find the ones that had 'made it' in various locations. I never exposed them to the ones that 'didn't make it', even though some of those were friends. I am ashamed of that. The ones we visited would talk to the students about their journey into industry, the hardships and the joys of being young creatives, and tips on how to 'become' a designer. This is a common practice within design education and is seen as a vital component in order to initiate students into the discipline. I was particularly proud of the female students who had 'made it'. I would often meet my ex-students later for lunch or dinner, to catch up and get a more intimate update on how they were doing.

And I started to get particular stories from particular ex-students. Female ex-students.

- How a female, who was part of a male/female creative team, was in a design pitch and was the only woman in the room. The client handed her his coat and told her what beverage he wanted, assuming she was a PA. This took place in the last decade, not in the 1950s.

- How an award-winning female/female creative team were earning so little as a junior team, that with the high rents in the capital, barely had enough money left to eat each month. Remembering my lectures on the importance of 'being brave' as women to ask for more money for your work, they went to their creative director to ask to be paid the same amount the male junior teams were getting. They were told that it wasn't a case of gender discrimination, but that they just didn't seem as 'hungry' as the other junior teams and no, - they were not getting a rise, and in any case - they shouldn't have been discussing their wages with other people.

- How after having presented a professional, enthusiastic front with the visiting students, afterwards in the pub, a female designer broke down and sobbed, saying: 'I can't live like this

anymore!’ She went on to say how the few senior women at the agency were either complete bitches or lonely alcoholics, sometimes both, and she could not see herself being in the industry in the future.

Is it war? I felt like I kept sending them ‘over the top’. Some of these women stayed within the industry and changed jobs, some of them left altogether. These are the more extreme examples, so I remember them better, but over the years they were supported and supplemented by less dramatic accounts on what it is like to be a woman in the creative industry. What I find strange about it in hindsight is that it took me ages to fully acknowledge that these were not isolated instances of people being horrible or agencies being a bit male dominated, but that it is systemic and structural. I think I was in denial of the truth, because after all, I had been taught by, and worked with, lots of lovely, creative, sensitive and supportive men and it also went against my deep held believe that a woman could do whatever a man could if she tried hard enough. And then there were always also examples of women who did very well, which made the whole thing more opaque and difficult to untangle.

But these young women’s experiences also meant that I had to confront my own darker experiences of being in the industry as a young female creative.

- That time, me and my male copywriter won an important pitch and the agency team gathered around him afterwards with much backslapping and congratulated him on his brilliant work. He never let on that I had come up with the concept and I felt it would be rude to point it out, and knowing myself that I had done well should be enough.

- That time my creative director told me, while I was pregnant, that he thought women with babies shouldn’t work. I thought, he’s entitled to his opinion and hoped it implied a critique of the then very short maternity leave.

- That time when, having had to return to work when my son was only 5 months old, an account handler wrote an email to my line-manager complaining that I hadn’t shown enough enthusiasm for an A5 fold over flyer he was briefing me in on.

- That time, when I was included in a round of redundancies, just after I had applied to go part-time under new legislation for parents that had just come out.

I have always felt that these things happened to me because I hadn’t proven myself enough, that I hadn’t been my best. Deep down I still feel like that.

Failure individualized and accepted.

What forces me to view it differently, at least intellectually, is witnessing what so many of my female students had to go through.

I knew them to be brilliant, smart, talented and hard working. They had excelled academically, won international student competitions and got desirable placements based on their creative portfolios. Who they were as people were did not change when they entered industry, but they entered an environment in which many of them could not thrive. And I had helped put them there. I thought it couldn't possibly happen to them, just as I had once thought it couldn't possibly happen to me. What is *it*?

It also forced me to think about those many students, female and male, who had never made it into industry, - how we don't talk about them to current students, we don't invite them in to talk about their experience of being a creative. There's a big, fat silence around them. What about the ones who did well at uni, but at some point had to just had take this other non-creative job in order to survive. The ones that couldn't afford to do endless rounds of unpaid internships in the hope of getting a 'proper' design job. The thing is, - I still believe that having had a design education has been a good thing for them, no matter what they ended up being. I have seen them applying many of the 'transferable skills' we so often talk about in all kinds of ways and also get the impression that while they were studying they did feel like they were given equal status. But I think the way we transmit what being a designer is all about is very limited to whether they can 'make it'. They embody this and their personal sense of failure is theirs to deal with if they don't 'make it'.

On a study trip, whilst still a student myself, I remember having a drunken argument with one of my tutors about how I felt that 'they' constantly transmitted that the only way 'they' would consider us to be a success would be if we ended up as practicing designers. How I felt that our creative and human worth was purely measured against our potential to 'make it'. I vaguely recall the tutor arguing that this was not the case at all, but that ultimately that's what they were educating us for, to be designers

"What is a designer?" "Someone who works in the design industry."

"What is design education?" "Teaching someone to work in the design industry."

I had no adequate come backs to that, became part of the transmission of it and over the years when we discussed it as members of staff, we went around in circles. "It's just the way it is."

It's like we collectively lack the language to talk about other ways of being in design.

Therein lies the ontological entrapment.

## 2 Women in design

Many feminist scholars have put their life-force into highlighting and critiquing how the lack of famous female artist and designers over the centuries can be traced back to a history made and written by patriarchal systems, rather than to a lacking existence or quality of female creative labour (Parker & Pollock 1981, Pollock 1996, Buckley 1986, Ettinger 2004, de Beauvoir 1979).

Yet after decades of feminist critique and attempts of addressing issues of equal opportunities, and despite female graduates having made up 70% of art & design cohorts for the last three decades in most western countries, these numbers continue to be reversed when looking for those female design graduates a decade later and the track record for high profile positions in the creative and cultural industries, being dominated by male practitioners, is even more out of balance. (Mindiola 2010, Maness 2015, HESA 2012, Siddal 2014, Burgoyne 2010).

It should therefore not come as a surprise that in relation to the status of women within the field of design the international Gender Design Network (iGDN) states that: 'Female designers do not yet enjoy equal participation in all areas of design: 'female' and 'male' responsibilities are distributed unequally (following societal clichés) and this means that the potential of the different genders is neither taken into account nor honored appropriately.' ("Why iGDN?- iGDN", 2017)

This gender imbalance is by no means restricted to the discipline of design. Micus-Loos et Al. (2014) highlight that even in highly developed countries such as Germany, and although barriers to educational attainment have been removed, the labour market is divided by gender, both vertically and horizontally. Vertically, by the male dominance in upper management positions, and horizontally by jobs perceived as being female jobs, which offer less economic reward and career progression potential (Micus-Loos et Al., 2014).

The 2017 European Academy of Design conference's keynote speaker line-up was felt by some to be that unbalanced in its representation of citizenship, class, race, sexual orientation, sex, ability and gender identity (An Open Letter to EAD", 2017), that it inspired an open letter to the chairs and scientific committee, which politely asked that: 'The additional barriers and challenges ordinarily faced by practitioners who are not male, white and able should not be perpetuated here, however unintentionally, through lack of foresight when appointing keynote speakers.' (An Open Letter to EAD", 2017)

The conference theme for this year was ‘Design for Next’ (“EAD12/2017 Design for Next ...”) and aimed to highlight the importance to ‘investigate through design research and practice in order to tackle the societal, technological and industrial shifts of the future’ (“EAD12/2017 Design for Next ...”). Who’s ‘Next’ we will be using design research for? The conference track themes *do* highlight the need to ask questions about power, diversity and ethics in design. Three out of nine of the tracks were chaired by women and on the speakers list, females appear to outnumber the male ones, which of course says nothing about anyone’s possible gender identity or the diversity of backgrounds. It is also important to stress here that although visible diverse representation is an important social signal, - it does not mean that female speakers should be assumed to be more likely to be raising issues of exclusion in design based on the virtue of her gender. Quite the opposite may be well be true, as women might be wary of being perceived as ‘feminist killjoys’ (Ahmed 2016), which can make their own professional position more precarious (Foster 2016).

And although there is now a growing number of organisations and practices within design, that problematise design’s role in propagating exclusion and oppression (Prado 2014); systemic exclusions are difficult to grasp, as they are complex and messy. There is a growing awareness of the lack of visibility of female designers, but this is not just about the invisibility of broad swathes of designers within the practice. As Julier (2017) points out, - we hear even less of those who leave the practice of design altogether to do something else. We hear even less because those who are not included in the discipline of design are ontologically ‘dead’ to the discipline as practitioners.

### 3 Women ‘outside’ design

If women who have left the discipline are ‘ontologically dead’ to it, women who have never officially been part of it are even more so. Any material practice that they might have is largely irrelevant in the disciplinary context, even if it culminates in artifact, more so if it is process focused. If they are lucky they might be identified as belonging to craft, but there is a subtle, but value-laden difference between *that kind of craft* and the kind of craft designers hold dear. If you are in design you know this, because of the tone of voice we use when we talk about *that kind of craft*.

In broader societal terms, Papanek’s (1971) critique that the over-specialised, expert driven and consumption oriented nature of western society, excludes the majority of people from even the most basic forms of creative activity, to the detriment of their wellbeing and sensory

and intellectual faculties, still holds to a large extent. This is reflected in the increasingly sidelined and under-valued nature of creative subjects in many contemporary school systems (Robinson 2011). Whilst Sennet (2008) points out that craft, in the sense of form-giving, can be pursued in very wide variety of pursuits; many others see our predominant situatedness as consumers or users, as curtailing our most basic desire for being producers in our own lives (Milev 2013, Ingold 2012, Kjearsgard and Otto 2012)

Re-iterating Papanek's (1971) critique, Milev (2013) proposes that the very way in which contemporary western design ontology is constructed means that many are excluded from engaging in the process of basic form-giving and meaning making activities. Importantly, she further highlights that many forms of engagement with production are considered meaningless in disciplinary terms, because the resulting artifacts are considered materially or aesthetically worthless (Milev 2013). These exclusions and de-valuations are not, as such, confined by sex or gender, but are particularly pertinent to it, because female cultural production and lived experience has been traditionally under-documented because women's often *process* rather than *artifact* focused making-practices are difficult to materialise into established cultural artifacts and are traditionally less valued (Parker and Pollock 1981).

Sennett (2008) and Crawford (2009) offer a theoretical framework for the refusal to leave fundamental human creative making practices to the professionalised initiated, by stressing that a desire to participate in meaning making and form-giving activities is a central aspect of our humanity. This centrality means that people *do* participate in making practices in all kinds of ways (Hackney 2013, Grace and Gandolfo 2014) with or without knowledge of, or acknowledgement from, the design discipline. But this does not answer questions over the lack of visibility of this cultural production and how it is valued. And if it is not visible, nor valued, it will lack power and with that true agency within the wider socio-economic sphere. So if women leave the design discipline or do not enter it in the first place, they lose their place at the table so to speak. Because contemporary western design ontology was raised and resides in, as well as re-produces, patriarchal neoliberal capitalist values and practices (Buckley 1999, Souleles 2013, Escobar 2013) we need to move towards a feminist design ontology which questions *who designs*, *who produces* and *who consumes* (Manzini 2015), as well as the *how* and *why*, with an explicit aim of addressing issues of gender, privilege and oppression.

#### 4 On 'becoming' a designer



Design is a practice of 'becoming', where individuals are cultured into ways of being, seeing and creating, that are congruent with contemporary design's values and practices (Sims & Shreeve 2012, Danvers 2003, Orr, Yorke, & Blair 2014). Knowledge in design is traditionally acquired through practice; procedural knowledge is a central and extremely effective component of learning in design (Niedderer 2013). Its' effectiveness in this context is not impaired by remaining largely tacit and experiential, and many scholars have highlighted that procedural knowledge has to become 'embodied' in order to be mastered at all (Dewey 1934, Merleau-Ponty 1960, Polanyi 1958). Once this knowledge is embodied through the acquisition of procedural knowledge and experiential learning (Polanyi, 1958, Niedderer 2013, Dewey 1934), its values and practices are re-produced based on complex systems of aesthetic rules, both visual and functional. It is through this production and reproduction, that a designer gains their agency within the disciplinary context and with that within the wider world. This agency is situated within an aesthetic-economic value system, re-produced by western design education (Fry 2015). Most students of design will be exposed to art and design history in which aesthetic value systems are discussed and reflected upon as being changeable, socially constructed and fluid in time. Yet it is in the present, that such knowledge of (design) history seems to hide itself, as it is here that our own historicity becomes difficult to recover or reflect upon.

'Being', according to Heidegger, withdraws. It withdraws itself from the sight and perception of those 'being'. But this forgetfulness of 'being' has its costs, in that it declines any historical narrative or construction of truths. It denies its own 'constructedness', appears as a law bound by the natural order of things. Fry (2015) points to general lack of structural awareness of design in the wider context, which he describes as a gap 'between the agency of the object of experience and knowledge of experience, not at least by designers' (Fry 2015). Reminiscent of McLuhan's idea of 'We become what we behold. We shape our tools and then our tools shape us' (Culkin 2017), Fry (2015) proposes that 'the animal that we were was ontologically designed by the use of basic (stone) tools to become the human-animal that now are' (Fry (2015:14). In that sense, I would argue that our embodied design knowledge and values become the tool/technology, which ontologically designs us as designers and determines design 'being'. For both male and female designers this means that the very way in which we are ontologically constructed becomes invisible to us, and with that circumscribes any potential for transformation.

Irigaray (2002) says that: 'Up until now the form-giving subject has always been male. And this structure has, unbeknownst to itself, clearly given form to culture, and to the history of ideas. They are not neuter.' (Irigaray 2002:3). In order to be able to fully explore issues of gender in design, a difficult archaeology of how we are ontologically designed is necessary to think 'of futures yet unthought' (Grosz 1999) and to try to 'dis-embodiment' embodied value systems of patriarchal and neoliberal capitalisms. A feminist design ontology would by its nature require us to work towards dismantling boundaries of 'realities' that are perceived to be 'neutral', because feminist epistemology concerns itself with the dis-mantling of existing ontological warrants (Ahmed et Al. 2000, Hawkesworth 2006, Malabou 2016). The issues we are faced with range from gendered design, to gender imbalance in design, to an exclusion based on gender from design, to a gendered understanding of the 'being' of design. Ontological warrants need deconstructing because they limit the scope of how our disciplinary discourses around these issues are constructed and re-produced.

## 5 Asking for inclusion?

So how do we as design practitioners, educators and researchers account for gender exclusion and what, if anything, would we like to change? Pre-dominant responses entail thinking of ways in which to can make numbers more equal through pedagogies, graduate schemes, female design awards, and in some very progressive countries even through legislation, are comforting in their obvious alignment with our oft assumed liberal values. These responses also sit well with ever increasing neoliberal ideological foci on 'employability', which Universities are having to respond to. So maybe, the time might finally come when male and female designers are equally represented in industry? But what if our longing and working towards such a future misses a small but important question that begs to be asked: *Why* should female design graduates be equally presented in the design industry? And what if the vast majority our answers are based on a belief that merely materialises our own ontological entrapment within contemporary western design? The belief that: Participation in the design industry is the only way in which our creative labour as designers has meaning and value. And what if the withholding or withdrawal of our creative labour from this value system is a more radical and empowering act than achieving equal statues within it? Feminist scholars such as Sheila Rowbotham (1973) have long thought that women more naturally maintained traces of pre-capitalist attitudes, because their responsibility for production was focused in the family and the fruit of their labour would often be for immediate consumption within the fam-

ily or community, rather than culminating in a commodifiable artifact. Contemporary western design practice is by its nature closely entwined with capitalist modes of commodity and value production (Fry 2015, Hunt 2013, Papanek 1971) and design's self-understanding is axiologically that determined by the industrial; now neoliberal; capitalist system that we urgently need to find ways to envisage design practice existing outside of it, because on its current trajectory this system is leading us to social, economical and ecological ruin.

Parker and Pollock (1981) call to attention that 'women artists have not acted outside cultural history, as many commentators seem to believe, but rather have been compelled to act within it from a place other than that occupied by men' (Parker and Pollock 1981:14). I would argue that female designers are still compelled to act from a place other than occupied by men, but that we should make these places empowered spaces for ontological re-invention through feminist practices.

A feminist design ontology would need to take account of a feminist economic perspective. Bauhardt (2013) highlights that even critical discourses around alternatives to the growth economy, such as post-growth society and solidarity economy, often fail to acknowledge how central questions of gender equality are to societal and environmental justice. Feminist economics were among the first to start raising doubt about the adequacy of neoclassical economic analysis, in particular because of its lack of attention to women's experience of the labour market and within the family, but also because of the levels of destruction it thrives upon (Nelson 2008). This ontological blindness is also rampant in certain parts of most critically active research in the design discipline. Prado (2014) points out the value of critical and speculative design in discussing designs' cultural and cultural role, but vigorously critiques both practices' lack of theory or praxis aiming at questioning gender oppression. This is significant because Escobar (2013) points to the field of critical design studies (CDS) as a potential candidate for an approach from which the transcendence from contemporary design ontology may emerge. He does however also suggest that CDS as a panoply of different critical practices is still nascent, as it is limited by the capacity of Western social theory to generate these critical fields whilst residing in the contemporary conjuncture (ibid.). When these emergent critical fields start to talk about re-designing design ontology, we need to ensure that feminist perspectives and epistemologies are central to these discussion. If we don't, like feminist abolitionists sidelined after the cause was achieved (Donovan 1998), gender in-equality and its detrimental impact on women's life

across the board will, will remain to be considered a largely irrelevant sideshow by those constructing the discourse even if we have given our life-force to the various causes.

What we choose to give or withhold our life-force to or from is deeply political. Rowbotham (1973) spoke of women historically being perceived by industry as weak and un-reliable, and I would argue that it is this, still active perception, which still leads to the exclusion of women from design labour markets. But what if part of this exclusion is a deliberate, if maybe unreflexive, withholding by women themselves? When looking closer at the cause of these perceptions, linked to women withholding and withdrawing themselves from labour markets, Rowbotham (1973) came to the conclusion that - 'Absenteeism in both cases is an individual act of rebellion against capitalism's extraction of labour at the expense of personal life' (p.92). Withdrawing and withholding brings with it, its own potential for agency. Whilst being excluded is an experience steeped in pain, it also has the potential to be transformative and to create spaces which are privileged *because* of they reside outside of dominant structures. And rather than forcing young female designers acceptance into value systems which do not value them, maybe we should strengthen and empower their space and urge young designers, no matter what sex or gender identity, to join them in questioning and exploring other ways of 'being' in design'.

A feminist design ontology would also have to seriously question the way in which people predominantly enter the discipline. The vast majority of designers arrive in the discipline through higher education. This essentially makes design a middle-class pursuit as access to higher education for the working class is still full of barriers. That, in itself, is structurally problematic, when reports show that higher education has significant impact on raising pay and quality of life for women (Foster 2016). Design culture primarily operates to support dominant systems and interests, and does not generally concern itself with creative making practice that does not fall into, or serve existing professional design practice (Julier 2014).

A feminist design ontology *would* need to concern itself with peoples creative making practices that do not fall into, or serve, existing professional design practice and with how those people's design agency can be fortified by acknowledging the immanence of design in material practice that does not materialise into commodifiable artifacts or systems.

## 6 Inclusion in what?

We need to confront our own entrapment within contemporary design ontology and be beware of 'corporate' feminism in particular, exemplified by Sandberg's (2013) 'Lean In', which sprang from her 2011 TED talk titled 'Why we have to few female leaders'. Sandberg proposes that women don't rise to the top because of a lack of assertiveness, an un-willingness to put themselves forward, negotiate salaries, - an 'ambition gap'. Foster's 2016 'Lean out', critiques Sandberg's diagnostics and remedies, pointing out that: 'Lean In points all the blame inward, and ignores structural in-equality', this makes it a palatable kind of 'feminism' in the context of neoliberal capitalism, because it individualises the problem as much as any solution by telling us that 'aspiration and success is within everyone's reach if they endeavour to try hard enough' (Foster 2016:11). It is non-threatening to the prevailing system, because it doesn't seek to antagonise over sexism, - it is non- confrontational of the status quo (Foster 2016). This in many ways sounds familiar to the ways in which we talk about 'making it' in the design industry to our female and male students, - it's the old lie of meritocracy, that true talent and ambition will rise, - believed; embodied; reproduced. Foster (2017) points out that the tempering of ambition is not just an internal process, but made up of codes and messages relating to gender, class, race, sexuality, levels of disability, which leaves the individual with a fairly realistic idea of what is achievable for them in their individual societal context. But the story that women are being told is that 'it is individual failure, not a structure designed to keep business homogenous, that keeps the gender pay-gap in place and forces an earnings cut to women who have the audacity to have children' (Foster 2016:20). I would argue that contemporary western design ontology tells similar such corporate feminist stories to their young, - stories that are convenient to capitalism (Foster 2016). We need to seriously consider that many of the 'missing' female design graduates, reading design's patriarchal codes and messages, may have decided that inclusion in the system is not worth the price it demands paying for it. At the very least we owe them not to let them internalise their withdrawal as individual failure.

Foster (2016) warns against putting any faith in 'trickle down' feminism, where a quasi 1% feminism argues that getting some women into higher positions will become the norm and eventually trickle down. The reason why any faith we might have in this is and other guises feminism is misplaced is, because as previously discussed, - it does not take into account the neoliberal capitalist structure in which design resides, where the wealth hoarding of the few is

to the detriment of everyone further down the chain, especially women (ibid.). Falling into traps of corporate or trickle down feminism will only divert our attentions and sap our energy. Foster (ibid.) points out that moving the critical lens from women's collective position in society to an individualistic level, by focusing on individual women's choices within consumer and corporate culture, repackages feminism as a lifestyle. And she puts design right into the middle of this repackaging, by critiquing the way in which companies decide for their brands to appear liberal in liberal markets, citing Dove's 'real women' campaign as one such example. Rather than having suddenly developed a conscience, companies spot new avenues for selling and exploit them (Foster 2016). In design we call this technique 'the differentiation of your product in the marketplace', but often frame these examples as feminist or ethical design.

And what of inclusion in relation to neo-liberal capitalist structures? Papanek (1971) highlights how design facilitates the public's acceptance of anything new or different, so that the capitalist economy can benefit from artificially accelerated consumption, aided by styling and in-built obsolescence. Hunt (2013) calls this an 'ontology of prefigurement that destroys while it creates' (p.35). He (2011) describes design as operating primarily in the name of general commercial opportunism, mostly driven forward by either marketing opportunities or innovation for innovations sake and that even if a percentage of design is sustainable and socially beneficial, the overall thrust of its nature means that it produces 'vast amounts of dreck' (Hunt 2013:39). If we are striving for equal status within this, - we need to think carefully about the kind of futures we are asking to be included in through a critical feminist practice. 'Design is always future making' (Yelavich 2014:12), but in this process of 'futuring', design also 'defutures' (Fry 2015). His examples of how design 'defutures', through having brought into being anything from herbicides to cluster bombs (Fry 2015), are as such easily identifiable as defuturing things. We need a feminist design ontology that retains a critical plasticity in theory and practice in order to respond to designs ever changing structural and material futuring and defuturing.

## 7 Towards a feminist design ontology

Catherine Malabou (2016) writes that: 'Still today the professional or personal achievements of a woman cannot be seen as anything other than an act of emancipation. Whether or not this

achievement is accompanied by activist demands, it is always political'. Whilst this paper may be akin to an activist demand, I acknowledge that women absolutely need to continue striving to achieve within existing power structures, because otherwise they remain in spaces in which they are lacking in power and agency. But the extent to which fundamentally hostile environments can be changed, merely by the always partial and compromised participation of the few, needs to be viewed critically in relation to corporate feminist stories we tell in design.

Malabou (2016) highlights that the specific type of violence 'woman' is overexposed to is a 'dual constraint or schizoid pressure: the pressure of work in society and at home' (ibid. P.93), exposing the dual exploitation of the system. This dual exploitation is not only a threat to women but needs to be unpacked much further in terms of how men suffer from their own ontology constructing them through patriarchy, within narrow confines. A feminist design ontology would need to be an ontology, epistemology and ethic in design that 'underpins all knowledge-production and no matter by whom produced' (Stanley & Wise 1993:232) and would need to attend to the complexities of privilege and oppression. Prado (2014) proposes feminist speculative design 'as a strategic approach to addressing issues of systemic gender violence and discrimination within speculative and critical design practices' (ibid.:81). She foregrounds intersectionality, a feminist theoretical stance or approach to feminist activism. An intersectional perspective makes explicit that different forms of oppression cannot be understood separately from one another. Intersectionality would make an excellent heuristic within a feminist design ontology, but I believe that rather than any specific approach, it is the very nature of feminist ontology and epistemology which can offer us new ways of being in design. Ahmed et. Al (2000) remind us that feminist practice is animated by a desire for transformation, a politic seeking radical redress, driven by an imperative for change (Ahmed et. Al 2000). Yet what transformations are called for, as well as how the 'it' we are seeking to transform is understood, is a source of conflict and differences not just within feminism, but also between feminisms (Ahmed et. Al 2000). I believe it is this very conflict and difference, a perpetual contestation, - central and immanent in feminist practice, which can offer design a way of constantly 'hacking' its own propensity to create certain possibilities of being in the world by destroying or backgrounding other experiences of it (Tonkinwise 2015).

A feminist design ontology would insist on design anthropological approaches which 'challenge the status quo by facilitating other types of encounters, conversations, and imaginaries, and giving voice to people, things, and animals otherwise marginalized...' (Kjearsgaard et al. 2016) and strive to broaden the discourse about human making and its socio-political, socio-

economical and ecological contexts, and women's position within those. We need to, as Escobar (2013) puts it, move at the very frontiers of the western social theory episteme, so that design's semantics, materialities, immaterialities and relationships can become 'futures yet unthought' (Grosz 1999).

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