Intersectional Perspectives on Design, Politics and Power
School of Arts and Communication, Malmö University
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Design and Intersectionality

Material Production of Gender, Race, Class–and Beyond

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First of all, we would like to say that we are very glad and honoured to host this event with its exciting schedule and presenters, and we hope that we will have great discussions and exchange of ideas during these two days. Before starting the first panel session, we would like to introduce an overview about the symposium, starting with the driving forces that prompted us to organise this event, and then–since especially the name of the symposium is *Intersectional Perspectives on Design, Politics and Power*–explaining a bit the concept of intersectionality, and its relation to design practice and politics.

As you must have been following, in the recent years, the world has been facing incredible and devastating incidents; some that we have been watching online, some that we have witnessed directly, some that we have been reacting through social media, protesting on the streets or so on. To remember some featured examples: public revolts and social movements that spread from Middle East to Latin America, nuclear disaster in Fukushima, war in Syria and refugee "crisis" blasted in Europe, rise of extreme right wing parties and dictator-like governments in various states, public massacres by radical groups in several countries, massacre of the latinx LGBTQI+ community in Orlando, lately Brexit, and the victory of Donald Trump, just a few days ago… Many people have been reacting to these incidents, every time with rage and despair, yet calling each moment as a "state of exception" or "emergency", crying out for a miraculous change and collective action. However, such events represent just a very small visible portion of the overall picture of the ongoing effects of power, coloniality, modernity and capitalism; and misery, exclusion, subjugation, poverty and death, which are the everyday reality of many people in the world, rather than states of exception.

For decades, activists and scholars have discussed such forms of injustice and oppression from various viewpoints. Feminist movements in particular have been prominent in terms of bringing systematic inequality, violence and oppression towards women into view. By the early 1980s, not only gender activism received significant recognition, but also the struggles of people of colour had become fairly visible and compelling, both on the streets and in academia. However, while gender studies were still focusing on the experiences of white women, race studies were revolving largely around the experiences of black men (McCall, 2005). There was no space for women of colour, suffering not only from gender discrimination and sexism, but also from racism; and consequently classism. While the early feminist scholars of colour called this gender-race-class driven suffering as "triple oppression" (Yuval-Davis & Anthias,1983), other feminists (Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Angela Davis, Chandra Mohanty, Nira Yuval-Davis, amongst others) argued that these three should not be regarded as mutually exclusive or separate identity categories, but intertwined axes of social power. In other words, oppressions based on one's gender, race and class, cannot be tackled without understanding the greater matrix of power relations working on the bodies concertedly. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) later coined the term "intersectionality" to explain this phenomenon, in which

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different facets of oppression intersect and interact, defining one's social position. These axes vary from gender, race and class to sexuality, skin-colour, ethnicity, nation, state, culture, ability, age, origin, wealth, religion, stage of social development etc. (Lutz, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 2006: 202). The objective of taking these distinct forms of oppression into account is not to compare them, which would be a useless endeavour. Rather, acknowledging the complexity of oppression and the multiple shapes it might assume is a helpful strategy in understanding its mechanisms. Intersectionality is not a discipline by itself; rather, it is considered a meta-theory (Davis, 2008), a metaphor (Crenshaw, 1991), a theoretical stance or an approach that has already had a profound influence in a wide range of fields. Accordingly, in this symposium, we would like to permeate the potentiality of intersectionality into design, as we think that it could be a useful method for understanding design's contribution to reproduction of such identity categories, hegemonic power and forms of oppression. And through this, we would like to expand the question and discuss the politics and political agency of design.

Our claim as design researchers is that design, as a practice and discipline, is not exempt from these incidents and effects, but directly involved with or at the back of them. Most of the people/designers assume that such worldly issues such as social differentiation and unequal distribution of resources are of interests to legislative, institutional and financial practices, and mainly state politics. However, if we do a "detective work" in the words of political scientist Langdon Winner (1980), we can see how the system of inclusion/exclusion, privilege/oppression and social segregation is reproduced through and manifested in designed artefacts, spaces, sites and technologies. Design is a discipline deeply entangled in the dynamics of inequality. It enacts and enforces them; it is both a producer of these mechanisms, and is informed by them. Assuming that issues of inequality and oppression are a matter of institutional politics, and downplaying Design's role in the maintenance of these systems is a dangerous path to follow, yet one that the design discipline seems too eager to walk. It is a path that tends to silence dissenting narratives, because it assumes that design (and, by extension, the designer) cannot be anything but fundamentally well intentioned. As such, any criticism is perceived with suspicion, if not downright hostility. Why question something that is inherently good? Why so much skepticism, even towards fields within design that are supposed to concern themselves with social issues?

In such an environment, critical engagements with the insidious mechanisms that inform the process of designing are frequently stifled, if they manage to be discussed at all. This unwillingness to examine design's role in the maintenance of oppression only reinforces the need for a profound critical engagement with intersectionality. As a discipline, Design is terribly late to a discussion that has been happening within other fields in the Humanities for decades now, and we have a great amount of work to do in order to overcome this. To paraphrase Ivan Illich: to hell with good intentions! It is urgent that we inquire Design's

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role in sustaining heteronormativity, sexism, racism, xenophobia, and classism. It is essential, particularly given recent events, that we examine the ways in which Design contributes to the continuation of the project of coloniality and white supremacy. Borrowing the words of Argentine semiotician Walter Mignolo (2011), a radical epistemological shift is needed, one that will change not only the content, but the very terms of the conversation. This is no easy task, of course; it is a collective undertaking, one that requires that we challenge each other, that we reflect upon our own modes of operating in the field, and that we look beyond the surface of the obvious.

Let us look into the gentrified and privatised public spaces that push the lower-class to the outskirts of the cities; to the high security checkpoints at the borders and airports that legalise/illegalise bodies with "wrong"/"right" papers; the everyday gendered goods that underpin the representation of heteronormativity and performativity of feminine/masculine and female/male dichotomies; the gender-segregated public bathrooms that enforce binary perceptions of gender and silence queer and trans identities...Such examples, as we call "material co-enactments of design and politics", regulate and manipulate people's bodies' abilities, movements, inhabitations and life conditions in various ways, while segregating society through race, ethnicity, social and legal status, gender, sexuality, nationality and so on.

Apart from such evident examples of artefacts, spaces and technologies, talking about intersectionality in the context of design also requires to see the greater ecology of material power. For instance, we believe that it is not possible to talk about design and its relation to politics and power without thinking of its direct involvement in neoliberal capitalist economy, and being the backbone of the mechanisms of production and consumption. In parallel, the sustainment of neoliberal capitalist economy is one of the most central foci of intersectional critique, as the global labour market is the first hand regulator of the gendered, racialized and impoverished bodies (Mohanty, 2003, Salem, 2016). We can open this argument by stressing that today most of the technological gadgets we depend (say, our smart phones and laptops), garments we dress, cosmetics we use, toys, electronic appliances, plastic goods, textiles etc. are substantially manufactured in the Third World/Global South from Far East to Latin America by mostly under age women of color, the poorest and the most precarious bodies in all over the world. Chandra T. Mohanty (2003: 514) states that "women do two-thirds of the world's work and earn less than one-tenth of its income" under dehumanising working conditions; without insurance, security, sufficient sleeping and nutrition and future. In their article about global assembly lines, Barbara Ehrenreich and Annette Fuentes (1981: 94-95) stress that "eighty to 90 percent of the low-skilled assembly jobs that go to the Third World are performed by women" in the service of "foreign–dominated industrialization." They call these young poor women of color as "the world's new industrial proletariat" (*ibid*.) Considering that all these products and services that these bodies produce as

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the world's new slaveries are "design", one can say that the unremitting machine of design and production work at the center of gender-race-class persecution.

Taking these examples and concerns into account, as *Decolonising Design Group*, we initiated this symposium to stir discussions about intersectionality to scrutinise various categories and axes of power that design is implicated in. We are aware that in the recent decades, many designers and design researchers have been directing their paths towards disadvantaged and marginalised groups or engaging themselves with community projects to "empower people". These designers have been increasingly discussing the notion of "politics" and its relation to design. Yet, they either consider problems too complicated and ignore them because they think that design is not in charge of those problems; or they try to "solve" things that are beyond the capability/limits of design practice. Moreover, as to how these very disadvantages are historically, practically and epistemologically deployed and how design/material configurations are the first hand actors in this deployment is yet to be articulated; sometimes due to various complexities and difficulties involved in such possible discourses, sometimes due to lack of understanding and self-reflection. With this symposium, we attempt to initiate a space of thinking for discussing the concept of intersectionality from the agency of design; designing in particular and materiality in general: How do design and designing participate and reinforce power structures in an intersectional way through and across race, gender and class–and other identity categories in the matrix of power? How can design and designing offer novel ways to understand the ways in which power operates in intersectional ways? And possibly how can design and designing propose ways of intervening in such complex and intersectional power relations?

To try to answer these questions – by probably ending up with more questions – during these two days, we will approach intersectionality through a wide spectrum of topics which, we hope, will stimulate interesting debates. Finally, we would like to take the opportunity to thank to everyone involved in this event, to all our participating presenters and invited speakers; to Malmö University School of Arts and Communication to host this event; to other members of *Decolonising Design Group*.

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