

Exhibition
MIU

VERY
IMPORTANT
PRODUCTS

Design for
Debate

Group 8



Final
Report

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Introduction

Humans are everyday designers. We are able to shape the world around us, either how we see it now or how we would want it to see it in the long term. The objects we design have the purpose to support a higher quality of life, inevitably aiming for human progress. However, it is essential to note that not only humans, but objects as well have a sphere of influence and can become a part of our immediate environment. Although humans are the ones leading the way in the world of design, the things we create unavoidably have a reverse influence on the humans who use it. The question we want to provoke in the human observer is related to the fact that all things in life have a piece of power or influence that should not be overlooked. Therefore, the following question was explored during this project: "What are humans without things?".

In this report, the preparatory research is discussed by highlighting the concepts that are central to the project. The focus lies here on the book by Ron Wakkary, 'Things We could Design'. Then, the design process, which consists of four phases, is explained. This part shows how we formulated our final debate question and what led to the shape of our final presentation. Thirdly, we elaborate on the feedback from stakeholders that influenced the project, after which the final design is described. The report ends with a short description of the semi-public presentation together with possible points of improvement.

Preparatory research

Because this course is based on the book "Things We Could Design" by Ron Wakkary, our first grasp of rethinking design came from reading the required chapters [7]. However, due to the hunger for a different perspective, outside knowledge from various sources was collected in order to better perceive certain topics that had been introduced. Consequently, during the exhibition at MU Eindhoven, a well-formulated explanation could be offered to the audience in relation to 'relationality', 'speaking subject' and 'agency of things', the main topics of our final design.

Relationality

One of the main key messages the book was attempting to instill in the reader, came in our opinion together in the section where the term relationality is introduced. Therefore, as a group, we saw potential in introducing this term in the debate. The book explains human beings do not exist before relations: "They are not independent entities but defined by the relations they form within the world" [7].

In that regard, a conviction had been expressed that, instead of only thinking from the perspective of beings, thinking with things, technologies, other humans, and animals might be a path to answers. University professor and philosopher Rosi Braidotti refers to this as critical posthumanism: "A way of thinking that is not about technology as a neutral or controlled extension of humans; rather, it is about becoming or being human, entangled thoroughly with the world in ways that can only be relational and expansive" [3]. When diving deeper into this topic during our weekly discussion sessions, a remark was made by one of our group members who read the following sentence in the book: "Different things embody different meanings as a consequence of their different embodied relations to the world" [7]. From the standpoint of objects, a notion evolved to acknowledge the everyday link between humans and things. We aimed to engage the audience in an original way by letting them hear the 'language of things'. We hoped that due to the diversity in recognizable sounds, different forms of relationships with things are acknowledged, and a new door could be opened in regards to this perspective.

Speaking subject

Before settling on our final concept, we imagined that no matter what concept we chose, we as a group would be responsible for describing the correct narrative. This brings us to the second term that stood central in our exhibition; speaking subject. As designers in the exhibition, we can be viewed as the human narrator when performing the semi-structured presentation. We as a group can be seen as a speaking subject, a unique human position responsible for, in this scenario, accurately rendering non-humans. In the book, for instance, author Ron Wakkary, who describes his privilege of being human among the mute things discussed in his book, can be seen as a speaking subject. Additionally, Wakkary acknowledges the possibility of biased perspectives regarding his upbringing and who he is [7].

Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian-French philosopher and literary critic, considers the speaking subject not really a person, but rather a 'transcendental ego' which exists outside the realm of experience, context, and influence. Kristeva argues that the speaking subject is made up of a conscious mind containing social constraints such as family structures, and an unconscious mind consisting of bio-physiological processes [6]. In respect to the view of this literary critic, we see that there is a possibility that, in a specific situation where a human being can be considered as speaking subject, both the conscious mind and unconscious mind of that person play a factor in the spoken language.

This would mean that speaking subjects can not be seen as a constant due to the constituent of having a consciousness that, day in and day out, generates experiences - producing perceptions, thoughts, and feelings [1]. Therefore, this knowledge must be taken into account when we as a group are considered a speaking subject in our exhibition.

Agency of things

As human beings, we have the privilege to act independently and make our own free choices as a result of having a conscience [4]. Questions about how agency might be allocated among non-living things were raised in the discussion group. In the book, it is noted that Ingold, a British anthropologist, argues that theorists tend to focus on the "agency of objects" at the expense of considering the "vitality of materials" [5]. Striving to take agency a step further, Jane Bennett, political theorist and philosopher, aims to make distributed agency in vibrant matter, a "swarm of affiliates," more intelligible by creating a range of characteristics of agency that includes efficacy, trajectory, and causality [2]. This idea of allowing objects to proactively influence their functioning was a goal we wanted to create in the perspective of the audience. A possibility of trying to realize this idea is by attempting to limit the individual agency of the spectator, imposing a restriction of acting independently. Hopefully, as a result of this, the agency of things implemented in the exhibition will fare better and will leave a marked impression.

Design process

After four weeks of theory, we started preparing for our final presentation for which we had to organize a debate as a performance or presentation. We went through four phases during our design process, which will be discussed in this part.

First, we had to orientate ourselves within all the concepts and terms we had learned in the weeks before. To do this, we listed the concepts and quotes from the book that stood out the most to us and that we found the most interesting. These were; relationality, intentionality, technical mediation, speaking subject, 'sometimes you design what it is like to be human', and 'design designs'. Because we were required to write a reflection every week, it was easy for everyone to quickly name a few points he/she found interesting for a debate.

With this list as a starting point, we started the second phase of the design process. The group had a brainstorm to formulate questions for each part of the book: Design, Things, and Designer. We came up with a few questions per part. The entire list can be found in Appendix A. From these questions, we picked out one from each part that we liked the most. These were:

- **Design** – Is it possible to design something that can't be understood?
- **Things** – Can an advanced form of technological mediation replace the entirety of intentionality?
- **Designer** – Are we as human narrators able to decide/judge on the ethics of non-humans?

During the lecture in week five, we pitched these debatable questions. The feedback was to keep brainstorming to come up with a final idea for which we had to make a video. The link to this video can be found in Appendix B. The next step in our design process was to conduct a secondary brainstorm in order to move closer towards a tangible idea. The three questions described above served as a starting point for this ideation.

Whereas the last brainstorming session resulted in numerous interesting questions, this time we focused more on what concepts from the book we found interesting and suitable to play a central role in our exhibition. We had a lengthy discussion about the different concepts presented in the book; which concepts did we fully understand, which concepts sparked our interest and how would we implement them in an exhibition? From this discussion, we concluded that "speaking subject" and "relationality" were the most interesting and suitable concepts to play a central role in our exhibition. These concepts were clear to us, and we saw the potential to create a powerful and immersive experience based on them. We also decided that we wanted to use sound in our final performance. This would add a sensory element that would elevate the experience. The first 'teaser' video we submitted was centered around the idea of using sound to express the relationality of objects that do not have a speaking subject status. This way, we combined our central concepts with the medium of sound.

Feedback and further brainstorming on our ideas led to the sketches shown in picture 1. The goal of our exhibition remained similar to the subject of the video: How can we use sound to express the relationality of objects that do not have a speaking subject status? The results of our ideation showed a lot of variety. A lot of different approaches were explored, some more feasible than others. Through selecting and combining ideas, we eventually managed to narrow it down to one conceptual design.

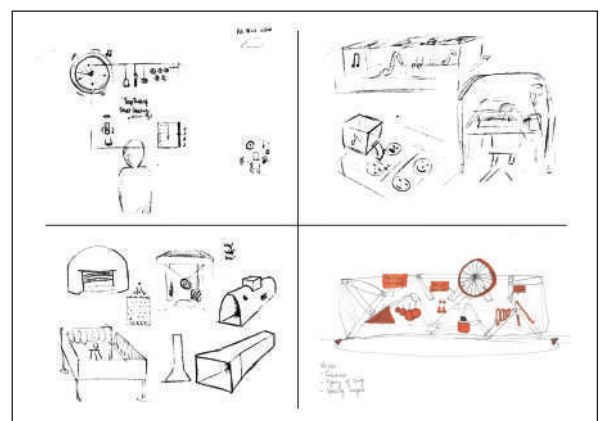


Figure 1. Result brainstorm sketches

Feedback stakeholders

When it came to the ideation of our final exhibition concept, we contacted multiple stakeholders with the intention to create possible successful relationships. Every person in our group tried to gather people interested in our concept, within our own circle and beyond, hoping to broaden the pool of people who

care about the idea. The stakeholders we ended up with were able to give practical support and feedback. Here are some of the insights we gained from each of them that helped us improve our final design.

Stakeholder 1 – Timon Adriaanssen, TA of Design for Debate

Timon is the TA and a previous student of this course. It was felt that due to the fact he has previously completed Design for Debate he would be able to provide essential insights into what was required in this assessment. Based on this knowledge, we asked him to have a look at our preliminary concept and give some feedback. The concept was still fairly vague, and it needed to be steered in a specific direction for it to convey a powerful message in an experiential way. Therefore, we envisioned Timon should definitely be one of our stakeholders, as he would have the capability to provide us with some valuable insights.

Timon has helped us improve our concept by shifting the perspective from which the story of the exhibition is told. We wanted to focus our exhibition on expressing the agentic capacity and relationality of things, but we were still stuck focusing on the human perspective. Practically, this means that we wanted to describe the story of the things on the shelf from the owner's perspective. For instance: "I bought this thing a while ago, had a lot of fun with it but I broke one of the knobs so I threw it in the back of the closet". However, Timon argued that it would be much stronger if we would let the things themselves do the talking. For instance: "I hate this place, it's dusty, dark and the only friend I have is an old sock". This conveys the idea of agentic capacity and relationality from the thing's side much stronger. The story is now told entirely from the perspective of the thing, which means that the text on the shelf is also written from the perspective of the thing. This is also more suitable because these quotes can serve both as a translation of the sounds, and as a description of what is happening in the projection. In combination with the "no speak zone", this adjustment has greatly improved our concept.

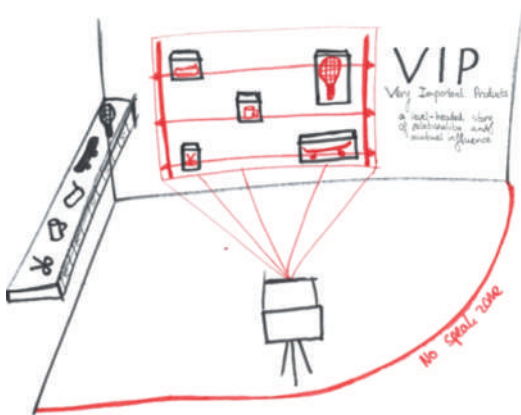


Figure 2. Illustration exposition set-up

Stakeholder 2 – *Minha lee and Ron Wakkary, course co-ordinators and lecturers*

After speaking with Timon, we pitched our drawn-out concept to Minha and Ron during the weekly Tuesday meeting. While we planned for each product to have its own anecdote written underneath, they agreed with Timon Adriaanssen, and argued that if we wrote anecdotes, we would 'spoon feed our audience'.

Therefore, we remained with the idea of the products only telling a few quotes from the 'Things perspective'. Additionally, mostly practical remarks and solutions about the set-up of our exhibition were made during the remaining time of our meeting.

Short approach evaluation

We continued contacting more stakeholders to get more feedback on our concept, namely the expression of agentic capacity and relationality of things. Other stakeholders that have been contacted were from two work areas: a lawyer working in the field of integral safety and a control-and instrumentation technologist. First, they were shown the illustration of the exhibition set-up with the projector and objects in the room (image 2). Then they were asked to visualize being there, knowing that it is a no speaking zone and the central question "What are humans without things?" is provoked. The reason to ask this question is to make sure that it relates to the practical concept we have created.

Stakeholder 3 – *Noëlle Verburgh, lawyer in the field of integral safety*

The lawyer in this case is Noëlle (20 years old). She was asked her opinion about the concept idea of understanding what things are and what we as humans would be without things. Her response was that she never thinks about the fact that things play an important role in our lives. "Where can I live if there is no house, or how can I go to my work if there is no public transport?"

This scares me a little bit." So, we asked if this concept could give the experience to people that things are that important in daily life. She explained that the objects now have the ability to do more than a person. Also, she mentioned that this concept contains a different perspective that the object will tell their story in their own way, that is giving the things a louder voice.

Stakeholder 4 – *Monique de Jonge, control-and instrumentation technologist*

The other stakeholder is a technologist, Monique (57 years old). She was tasked with answering the same questions as Noëlle. Her opinion about the concept was that it does not represent the question that is given. The things are in this situation given as a contrast. Things are in this area much more present than usual.

The effect you want to create is that the objects have a voice. However, in my opinion, the way the items are displayed in the concept illustrated does not convey the true value of the items or the fact that we cannot live without them. For instance, you can bounce a ball that makes the familiar sound of bouncing a ball, but this is more an extension of daily life.

Conceptual design

This section of the report is dedicated to a brief description of the finalized design. In the previous chapter, we discussed the steps we took and the choices we made within our design process. This design process eventually led us to select a definitive design to present at the final exhibition in MU. Now, we will go over the details of our final design; what elements does it include, what story is it meant to convey and how was it ultimately presented at the final exhibition?

The exhibition "V.I.P." takes the form of an immersive audio-visual experience in which 5 "very important products" are put in the spotlight to tell their stories. Through visual and auditory cues, the audience is drawn into a story of relationality and agentic capacity that is completely told from the things' perspective. The exhibition is an effort to immerse the audience in a powerful experience that makes them reflect on their role and behavior in relation to the things they own. It aims to induce a level of critical thinking, and let the audience question themselves; how do I treat my possessions? Would they be content with their situation? What would they say to me if they had a voice?

The experience is thus meant to provoke reflection. It does so by taking a non-human approach, in which the story is completely told from the things' perspective. That is why these objects are called "V.I.P.'s", because for once, they are put in the spotlight instead of the human that owns them. In order to further support this idea, we want the human that takes part in this experience to lose their speaking subject status altogether. Only then can we really listen to what our things have to say. This is enforced by a "no-speaking-zone" within the exhibition area, in which the audience is forced to keep quiet and listen.



Figure 3. Side view exposition Figure 4. Complete set-up exposition

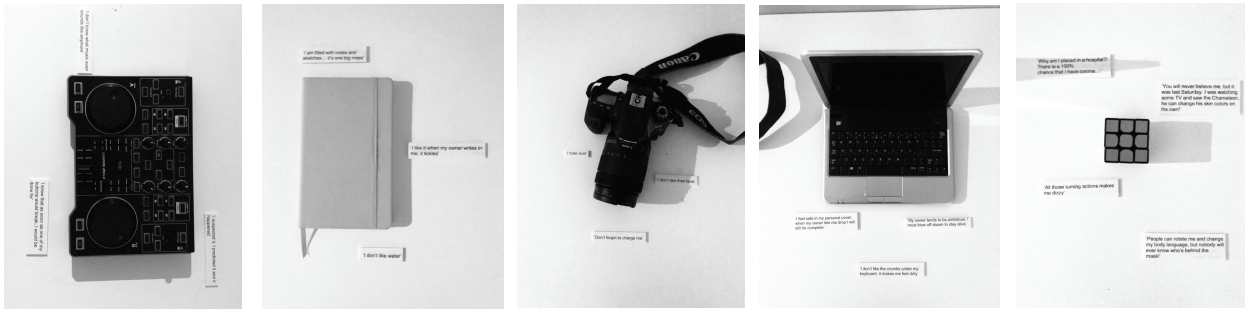


Figure 5. Things with phrases

The exhibition is built up as follows. A projector is placed within the exhibition area in order to project a 3-minute video on one of the walls. In this video, the 5 “V.I.P.’s” are displayed in a big shelving unit. One by one, the objects are taken away and placed back, such that the content of the shelving unit is constantly changing. For instance, object A is first taken away, then object B, then object A is put back again, then object C is taken away, etcetera. The order of taking away and placing back objects is completely random. At the end of the video, all objects are put in a box and taken off-screen. The wall on which this video is projected contains a special element. Boxes are placed at the exact locations of the projected objects, and these boxes have both aesthetic and practical purpose.

When an object within the projection is placed in the shelving unit, the box behind it makes it pop out. In order to add an auditory element, wireless speakers are placed within the boxes. When an object is projected on a box, the corresponding speaker starts playing the sound effect for that object. When the object is taken away again, this sound effect stops. The sound effects are a way to mimic the “voice” of the objects, and they can only speak to us when they are placed in the shelving unit. However, their language is incomprehensible to us. Therefore, a table is placed against the other wall that contains the real-life objects along with the translations of what is being said in the projection.



Figure 6. Impression no-speak zone



Figure 7. Table with things



Figure 8. things' perspective

In terms of the book, this exhibition shows that relationality goes both ways. We as humans are not only on the receiving end of this relationality, we also massively influence the things around us. We just generally do not realize it, or do not bother to acknowledge it. What we also wanted to stress in our exhibition

is that things actually do have the agentic capacity to experience this mutual influence, they just lack the speaking subject status. Through the “no-speaking-zone”, we want to eliminate this barrier and level ourselves with the things around us, such that we can truly listen to what is being said.

Semi-public presentation

The previous section explains our designing process that led up to our final presentation at the MU Expo at Strijp in Eindhoven. This was not only viewed as an assessment but also an opportunity to show our perspective/design to a wider audience.

Assembling our exhibition was relatively straightforward and only required a minimal amount of equipment. The main focus of the exhibition revolved around the video, being projected on the back wall of our space, that demonstrated the relationality and agentic capacity of things. The remaining parts of our exhibition consisted of a projector projecting

the video, boxes that were secured to the wall, a table displaying the objects, with personifying quotes, that were shown in the video, and tape cordoning off our space to emphasize a no speaking zone.

Although there was a presentation moment, most of the explanation was provided by the video and posters along with a short introduction from a team member. During this introduction, the video was played with the different sounds of the objects we are using, to give the public a feeling of what we want to bring the audience.

Points of improvement

Our future vision of this project should convey the message of the question "What are humans without things?". For future improvements of our exposition, it is crucial that the message the experience conveys will remain the same, which results in the same setup. Improvements to our exhibition can be made on the boxes that are highlighting the objects from the video through sound. The boxes can be designed to become more clean and neat, as well as the perfect size for the projected objects. The second improvement could be made to the sound that the objects produce during the video.

This can be done by one audio file for all the five elements instead of five different devices where every person needs to press the play button at the same time. The last improvement refers to the projector stand. The projector stand could be improved in regards to its design, but also the position could be optimized in a way the audience could not walk through the projection.

Reference

Preparatory research

- [1] Anon. 2018. Nature Editorial; What Is Consciousness? <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-018-05097-x>
- [2] Jane Bennett. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
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- [4] Dav M. Gabbay and John Woods. 2005. Individual Agency - an overview | ScienceDirect Topics. The Reach of Abduction Insight and Trial. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/computer-science/individual-agency>
- [5] Tim Ingold. 2011. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge, and Description*. London: Routledge.
- [6] Newton K.M. (1997) Julia Kristeva: 'The System and the Speaking Subject'. In: Newton K.M. (eds) *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*. Palgrave, London. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25934-2_26
- [7] Ron Wakkary. 2021. *Things We Could Design For More Than Human-Centered Worlds*. MIT Press, 2021. Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Appendix A

Design process - list with questions

<i>Design</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Nomadic practices (designing from the 'outside' to the 'inside')◦ Should education implement more nomadic practices and teach us how to design from the outside in?◦ Is studying Industrial Design valuable if you do not get taught about nomadic practices?◦ Is studying Industrial Design valuable if contact with different cultures gives the experience of nomadic practices?◦ Has studying Industrial Design prohibited us to involve nomadic practices in our designing process?◦ How can we still achieve implementing it in our process? Is it possible to design something that can't be understood?◦ Is it possible to design something that is not relational?
<i>Things</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Can an advanced form of technological mediation replace the entirety of intentionality?<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Has this already happened?• Can wheelchairs, airplanes and segways maybe take this role in the future?• Has the development of the internet changed our intentionality as it allows us to communicate with others remotely?• Can an alien artifact become normal over time?
<i>Designer</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ 'Sometimes you design what it is to be human'◦ Biological, us having a developed/conscious brain -> we are capable of designing. We are the only ones as humans who have the ability to speak.◦ Are the products you design equal to you or below you?◦ Ethics for things◦ Nature vs nurture in understanding design◦ Are we as a human narrator able to decide/judge on the ethics of things?

Appendix B

Video final concept & pre-concept

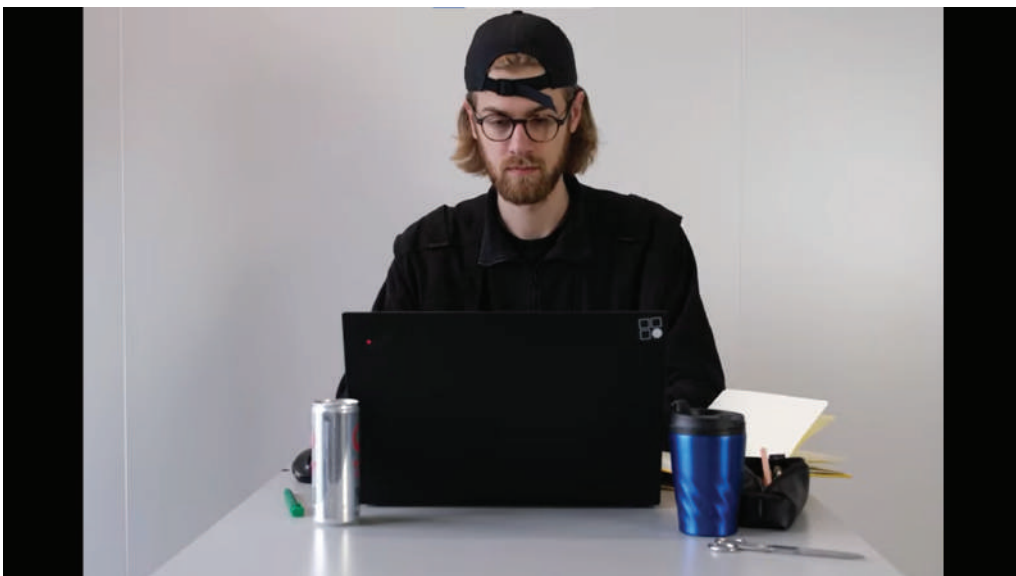
Final concept video

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mszIApUTrZE>



Pre-concept video

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQxondbm3eU>



Appendix C

Posters exhibition

Poster 1



Appendix C

Posters exhibition

Poster 2

