DESIGNING OR NOT DESIGNING FOR A PLANETARY SCALE:
rewriting the script for our final assignment

The title of a paragraph trying to make sense of the state of the world so that I can come up with a design intervention to address systemic issues on a planetary scale

In "Global catastrophic risks"[1] we are presented with an overview of various risks facing humanity at the moment – from climate change to asteroids, nuclear terrorism, pandemic disease, social collapse and biological weapons. We learn that "the most likely global catastrophic risks all seem to arise from human activities" and the text stresses the importance of recognizing "that the biggest global catastrophic risks we face today are not purely external; they are indeed, tightly wound up with the direct and indirect, the foreseen and unforeseen, consequences of our own actions".[2] We can add to this state of emergency a political, economical and social situation that seems more and more unpredictable and complex, fueled by a technological acceleration pushing and empowering various conflicting agendas – whether it be social movements for justice and equality, commercial surveillance logic employed by Google or Facebook[3], the totalitarian top-down technocratic efficiency ideals of a government or state authority[4], or growing right-wing nationalist sentiments across the globe.

Is this true?

When attempting to describe the state of the world in a cohesive way or according to a single narrative, my inner alarm bells go off however, knowing there are large groups of people who have lived under the threat of annihilation and catastrophe for a long time, whether by racial/gender/sexual orientation/physical or mental disposition oppression, colonial imperialism, or civil war. Perhaps the state of risk in our present moment in time

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[1]Nick Bostrom and Milan M. Cirkovic, Global Catastrophic Risks (Oxford University Press, 2008).

[2]Nick Bostrom and Milan M. Cirkovic, Global Catastrophic Risks (Oxford University Press, 2008), 27.

[3] Shoshana Zuboff, Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization, accessed December 2016, doi:10.1057/jit.2015.5.

[4] Shannon Mattern, "History of mediated cities, networks, archives, placemaking" (Lecture, D4TC, Oct 6 2016).

is more equally distributed. The conflicting agendas, that were always there, merely more visible on a surface level.

Is this true? How can we possibly claim something like this as true on a planetary scale?

If I were to choose any one narrative – for the sake of creating a starting point for constructive change work and exploration – it would be the one of a world struggling to deal with complexity, plurality, conflicting perspectives, co-creation across mental, social and disciplinary barriers, and finding a common ground in the midst of seemingly irreconcilable world views.

The title of another paragraph trying to make sense of the state of the world so that I can come up with a design intervention to address systemic issues on a planetary scale

Framing the problem this way I believe directly relates to the overarching "shared" state of risk and catastrophe that we now live in as a human species. To respond to these challenges, whether environmental, social, political or economical, to understand how they came to be and how they connect to each other, indeed requires a collective effort across the divides and "social/cultural/disciplinary bubbles" that normally separate us from each other. It also requires radically new strategies in the face of that which we do not agree with, or that which we feel overpowers us or leaves us with little agency. It requires a careful scrutinization of all the things we hold true, in search of new systems both inside and outside of ourselves, an equally reflective and active approach to social change.

The title of a paragraph trying to navigate away from the grandiose task of designing for a planetary scale devoid of any sensibility to context and process

To address issues of the magnitude I have touched upon is certainly not an easy task, and not one that is going to be solved through another masterplan or a singular genius delivering a one-size-fits-all solution to transformative change. It is a task that is going to require a multitude of, sometimes conflicting, actions, ways of seeing, coalitions, strategies, and thought models, working in a type of synergy that can only be upheld

through a careful alignment of each actor to the specific part that they are capable or suited to fill. It is a situation that I believe requires a collective opening up to an inner sense of purpose and timing, guiding each actor or collective to the roles and circumstances where they can best serve, at the point when they are most ready to do so.

Am I ready for the grandiose task of designing for a planetary scale? Will I ever be and why should I ever be? Should anyone be? We go on to another paragraph trying to navigate away from the grandiose task of designing for a planetary scale devoid of any sensibility to context and process

It is also a task that cannot be governed by the modernist search for a utopia, but rather, as game artist and activist Mattie Brice pointed out in her D4TC lecture: "be seen as a gesture towards a preferred state", as "any utopia turns into dystopia when you arrive". [5]

The title of a paragraph trying to reconnect to myself and my own sense of purpose within the framework of an assignment pushing me to commit to the grandiose task of designing for a planetary scale devoid of any sensibility to context and process

I do believe however, that as an agent in this web of wicked problems, seemingly overwhelming challenges and uncertain circumstances, it is important to carefully think through and start formulating starting points in terms of preferred state/s and theories of change. As mentioned briefly in the previous paragraph, I believe in the importance of searching for a theoretical foundation that strives to understand the relationship between the inside and the outside – or our internal "systems" (in the form of beliefs/assumptions/ world views/mindsets) to the external manifestations of human consciousness in the form of political, social, economical and technological systems. Without acknowledging these links, I believe a lot of change work stays on the surface of things, shuffling around resources or band-aiding symptoms, instead of getting to the root of the problems. As Mattie Brice put it in relation to identity politics as a solution to systemic issues of social injustice: "Simply throwing more bodies of "new colors" into a preset non-changing ideology is just going to make new people turning the same wheel." [6] Or, in the words of Robert Prison: "If a factory is torn down but the rationality which produced it is left standing, then that rationality will simply produce another factory. If a revolution destroys

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[5] Mattie Brice, "Designing power dynamics & identity for ourselves & others online", (D4TC Lecture Sep 22, 2016).
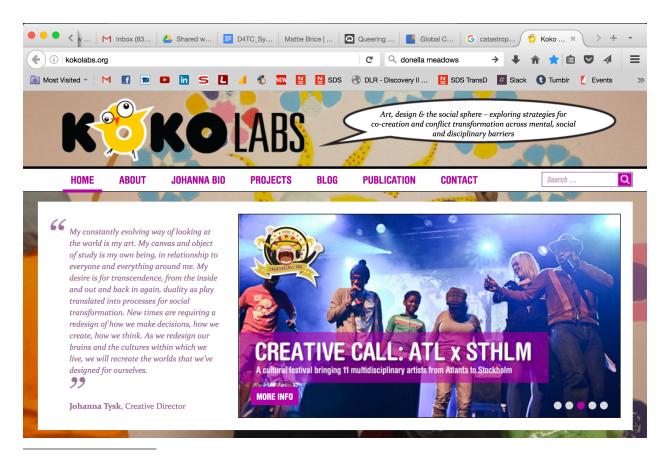
[6] Same as above

a government but the systemic patterns of thought that produced that government are left intact, then those patterns will repeat themselves…"[7]

Hmm…

How to build systems anew is a situation opening up for more questions than answers at this point, and most certainly a situation that requires new types of spaces, platforms and conditions for reflective practice to happen and unexpected perspectives to meet.
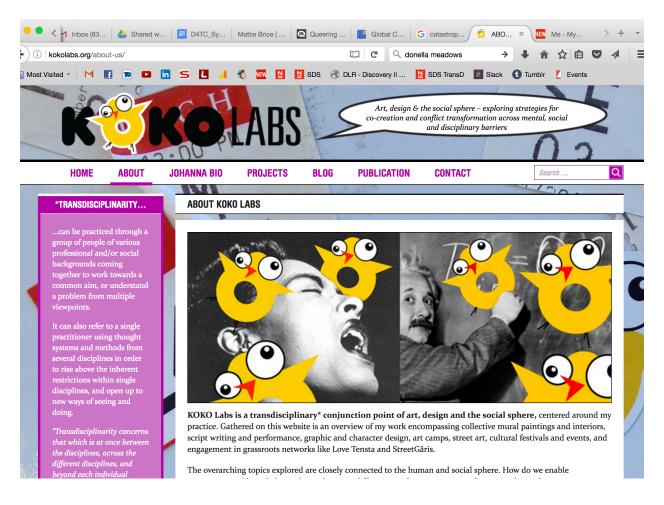
The title of a paragraph that came to be after many struggles and revisions trying to scale my design intervention – which is a very real and true intervention planned to be launched early 2017 – in a way that does not feel like I´m giving in to the grandiose task of designing for a planetary scale devoid of any sensibility to context and process

The design intervention I would like to propose at this moment in time, is therefore the digital platform "KOKO Labs" which I am in the process of setting up. This platform is an

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[7] Donella Meadows, Thinking in Systems, (Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2008).

archive of my practice in art, design and social work, but also a blog opening up for trans national knowledge sharing and exchange, connecting to my US-Swedish network of social and environmental activists, designers, educators, priests, curators, social workers, artists, and change-makers in all shapes and sizes… Apart from posting thoughts, projects and academic writings addressing topics of my interest, I would also feature interviews with members of the larger New School community, possibly staging video conversations featuring guests from Stockholm and Atlanta.

The title of a paragraph prematurely scaling up my design intervention for the sake of the assignment but not achieving any particular depth or relevance because of the lack of sensibility to context, timing, process and inner alignment with the grandiose task of designing for a planetary scale

"KOKO Labs" is a platform that I with time hope to grow into a locally grounded (in Sweden and the US) and globally networked research lab and an educational platform,

engaging academic institutions, governments or municipalities, civic organizations, practitioners from various fields, as well as community members of all ages, in addressing local-global issues connected to our social, political and environmental systems. As a strong believer in the power of art and design to "hold" the tension of multiple perspectives, whether inside or outside, as well as the transformative spaces they can open up through empathy, imagination and connection to bodily knowing and awareness, I see this lab having a special focus on the inclusion of process and knowledge from the creative and artistic fields, in larger societal and political contexts. Research sharing and experiments would be conducted in a public manner to a cross-disciplinary audience, though exhibits, art installations, conferences and seminars, performance art pieces, publications and digital platforms.

The title of another paragraph trying to navigate away from the grandiose task of designing for a planetary scale devoid of any sensibility to context and process

As tempting as it is to start drafting a mission statement, a tool box, a business model and a theoretical foundation for this future trans-national research lab and educational platform, my inner compass is telling me to zoom back to this present moment. Stay here. As Sreshta Rit Premnath stated in his D4TC lecture: "Something is born out of closing down the spectacle", [8] referring specifically to the event-focus in the art world and his desire for more communal being, a speculative space outside of need and necessity. In my interpretation – a silent alignment with the moment, with yourself, with the world, as it is, today.

The title of a paragraph where I am finally starting to land in my commitment to my own process and creative logic

I would like to use the remainder of this essay not to make grand statements about the potentials of design, transdisciplinarity or artistic process. Nor do I want to emphasize the urgency of addressing particular structural topics or challenges. Many of my blog posts hint in this direction, but as a student in the beginning of a very transformative period of graduate studies, I would like for these thought to linger for a bit longer, not be forced into synthesis before the fruit is ripe so to speak.

The title of a paragraph I now have no idea how it is going to turn out

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[8] Sreshta Rit Premnath (D4TC Lecture Sep 27).

That´s interesting, huh? Suddenly this space is interesting? Alive, transformative. Truly transformative, in ways that grandiose tasks of designing for a planetary scale devoid of any context and process could ever be.

The title of another paragraph I have no idea how it is going to turn out

Perhaps, now that we´ve entered a transformative space it is time to reveal the real design intervention.

The title of a paragraph attempting to reveal the smartness and depth of this whole maneuvering of the assignment

The real design intervention – the one that emerged out of the intellectual mess, alienation and discomfort with the framework of the assignment – is *THE QUEERING OF THIS ASSIGNMENT*. This statement requires some careful explanation. In "Queering Human-Game relations"[9], we learn that queer stands for that which is outside of the norm, "still unintelligible, not part of an orderly system". It is a concept "inextricably bound up with the idea of resisting dominant, naturalized narratives and categories". We further learn about queerness in relation to game culture, where queer is used as a verb. "To queer a game" does not imply, like one might assume, to focus for instance on switching out the main (usually hetero normative) characters to gender non-conforming ones. This would be a solution that is still operating within the rules of the original game, with everything that implies in terms of signing up for a logic of competitive play, winner and losers and other norms ingrained in the hetero normative sphere. Rather, the "queer strategy of change" if I may call it this, is about exploring ways of rewriting the script of the game, the actual rule sets. One example of this is when "queerness resides not in failure within the confines of the game´s rule system, but in playing with, testing, and perhaps even rejecting those rules themselves."

So within the context of this essay, we could consider the actual essay the game and the specifics of the assignment the rule sets. I saw the rule sets of this game as at odds with the change that I intend to affect through whatever design interventions I engage in. Staying within the "rules of the game" would thus mean failing to stay true to myself and

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[9] Merritt Kopas and Naomi Clark, "Queering Human-Game relations" (Feb 18, 2015), http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/queering-human-game-relations/

the reasons I came to The New School for. I would most likely fail in producing an interesting and compelling essay also, according to what I think is interesting and compelling. By queering the rule sets however through introducing a separate layer of voice, as well as using the materials of the course itself to disrupt the rule sets inherent in the assignment, I end up in a situation where I actually did not have to oppose the assignment, or fail according to my own standards of failing within its confines.

Before I put an end to this essay I would like to add a few words about how this design intervention of disrupting the rules of this assignment, ironically in my mind addresses systemic issues on a planetary scale. One of the persistent implications of today´s technology driven world, which we have discussed extensively in class as well as during the lectures – is a loss of human agency and ability to resist the goals that have been defined to us. If Facebook wants you to get addicted, you get addicted. If the fast fashion industry wants you to change your consumption patterns, you do. With technology and the agenda/s that drive it becoming more and more seamless and ingrained within our social fabrics, we´re in a situation where we cannot necessarily step out of the game. Rather, our way out may be to attempt to rewrite the script of our participation, using the tools provided by the very agents designed to discipline us into particular ways of thinking. Once you rewrite that script for yourself, you may even find that what you perceived as one-way oppressive was actually something you participated in creating. This, if anything, I believe is a strategy with much potential of affecting transformative change – if sensibly put into practice, by paying careful attention to context, process and timing.

A very nice ending paragraph where my Trans D classmate Julianna helps me land in something that feels very meaningful

Julianna: Could you expand upon the notion of you participating in that which oppresses you? Not sure what that means.

Johanna: Sure. Let´s stick with social media as an example. What if we see Facebook as a game, with a certain set of rules, or a script to determine the behavior of your participation. This script is obviously never neutral, but infused with agency on behalf of Facebook, who want you to behave in certain ways to fulfill their purposes of tracking data, selling ads etc. When you sign up to participate in this game, you are only made aware of a tiny fraction of the script of this particular game.

Julianna: Right, like "connecting to my friends and family".

Johanna: Yes, that´s maybe the only thing in the script that you consciously consent to. As the game starts however, these other dynamics start coming into play. Take the likes as an example. Facebook designed the likes system to get you addicted. It´s backed up by cognitive brain research connected to the release of certain stimulants in your system. It obviously serves their purposes to have your brain chemicals aligned with what they want from you. What happens though, when you step out of the system and look at the system of you acting in relation to Facebook, playing along with the script you never signed up for, you can watch your own brain chemicals, watch the whole things play out. When I did, I noticed for instance, that when I habitually post pictures of things I do, my attention craving brain chemicals are triggered, and I easily slip into starting to see my life as an "image" for others to judge. Not a nice situation. What I did based on this exercise, was define new rules for my own participation. I decided I only post pictures of art work or beautiful or interesting things I see, which is an exchange with friends and family that I greatly enjoy. Also an exchange that does not trigger the attention craving chemicals in my head.

Julianna: So what about all of the other rules of this game, the things you can´t change, like their tracking of data?

Johanna: In any game, there are going to be parts of the script you cannot escape. The challenge is identifying the things you can change, like your unconscious participation in behavior someone designed for you to develop. Sometimes just looking back at the system looking at you, acknowledging its presence, can increase your sense of autonomy and aliveness in systems designed to keep you passive and disciplined.

Julianna: Kind of like with the cigarette boxes, where they´re forced to add an image showing the results of cancer, or a warning text.

Johanna: Yes, seeing that result or warning is like a trigger to be conscious of the rules of this game, what you´re signing up for. I get the same sense walking around in Bushwick where I live, where there seems to be a culture of adding your own comments or adaptations to commercial statement in the subway or on the street. Sometimes it´s something funny (like adding an "f" to School of Visual (f)Arts), sometimes reflective/ provocative (asking on a commercial for feeding (non-white) kids in impoverished neighborhoods, "why no white kids? are there poor white kids?"), sometimes out-right

political (adding "time for feminist revolution!" to an ad for a dance company of happy conforming girls). For me, these tiny actions of exercising your right as a subject on this earth in the face of large systems designed to have you feel or behave a certain way, bring a sense of aliveness. It opens up a transformative space where the intervention is not to oppose, not to move to some remote island, but gently, within the confines of the game, exercise your right to not participate in the numbing of your own being. If there´s any design intervention that can have a lasting impact on the systems we are currently in the midst of, I would say it´s this: redesigning the script of your participation in relation to these systems. I believe it´s already happening. Perhaps the role of design is to acknowledge this, formulate it, strengthen it.

Julianna: Something else I was wondering about in your text, was in relation to your idea about "KOKO Labs". You make a very valid point about the lack of context when thinking about a planetary scale, but your intervention in the form of this lab would have context, right?

*Johanna:*Yes, definitely. I´m not trying to dismiss my own proposal, which I still think has relevance for a lot of the struggles of "the world" today. What I was opposing was the placing of these thoughts or ideas or impulses within the framework of this assignment. When attempting to change things on a large scale, I greatly believe in the importance of respect of process. It´s like giving birth, or watching a plant grow, it requires time and nourishment, a careful alignment with a variety of elements co-operating in the creation of a certain outcome which is ever-changing, never set. It also requires a thoughtful alignment with the local or the particular, in search of ways to understand this in relation to larger structures. Zooming in and zooming out is a sensitive process, not to be rushed. Growth is not to be rushed. Forcing something into "planetary scale" when it has not been properly planted in local soil, then allowed to grow organically in scale, for me does not make sense. The "grand visions" can still be there, to guide you somehow. But to spell them out and formulate them too much in detail prematurely I believe does not serve any noble purposes beyond your own possible ego satisfaction or sense of control of the situation. I tend to think of the value of "grand visions of the future" more in images, inner or outer. Images are not so set, open for interpretation, and more importantly -– they tend to open up a more transformative space for others to step into. Maybe this is how I will finally end this lengthy essay, by sharing an image pointing towards a future that is deeply felt through form, informed by its own logic. The image I have in mind was created this week in the form of a "marker mural" fulfilling the role of

final documentation for my class in Design-led Research. It depicts design process as the holder of the tension between art and science, with me in the middle pondering what human knowledge is. Cannot think of a better foundation for a research lab than this. I will not expand on this however, but allow for the process itself to have its course, reminding myself to follow the bread crumbs, stay true to my path, that´s all that is within my power. Thank you Julianna for helping me make sense of myself. And thank you to this assignment for helping me formulate these thoughts.

Julianna: Thank you Jo!