

# THE OBJECT MATTER OF MUSEUMS: DESIGNING OTHERWISE

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**Abstract:** *The contemporary theoretical and ethical debate on museums is deeply entangled in the world and built from an intra-active engagement with it. As a consequence, the museum tends to address the emergent and the urgent through situated practices that collectively analyse and respond to circumstances in the world. In doing so, the contemporary museum seeks to create conditions for visitor engagement by empowering their unmediated voices to be heard. This text aims to explore the critical space between the apparent decolonial vitality of the museum and how diffractive practices may be designed in a postcritical and postrepresentational context, arguing that approaches based on artistic and design processes of speculative fabulation (as Design Culture) are helpful for thinking and acting in these spaces of experience. Pragmatically, it highlights three modes of speculative (moderated) design engagement with the present and the future to help museums to break out of their ontological blindness and fulfil their critical and transformative potential.*

**Keywords:** *museum; speculative design and museums; speculative middles; postrepresentational.*

**Resumo:** *O debate teórico e ético contemporâneo em torno dos museus está profundamente enredado no mundo e é construído a partir de um envolvimento intra-ativo com ele. Como consequência, o museu tende a abordar o emergente e o urgente através de práticas situadas que analisam e respondem coletivamente às circunstâncias do mundo. Ao fazê-lo, o museu contemporâneo procura criar condições para o envolvimento dos visitantes, permitindo que as suas vozes não mediadas sejam ouvidas. Este texto pretende explorar o espaço crítico entre a aparente vitalidade decolonial do museu e a forma como as práticas difrativas podem ser concebidas num contexto pós-crítico e pós-representacional, argumentando que as abordagens baseadas em processos artísticos e de design de fabulação especulativa (como a Cultura do Design) são úteis para pensar e agir nestes espaços de experiência. De forma pragmática, destaca três modos de envolvimento especulativo (moderado) do design com o presente e o futuro para ajudar os museus a libertarem-se da sua cegueira ontológica e a concretizarem o seu potencial crítico e transformador.*

**Palavras-chave:** *museu; design especulativo e museus; lugares do meio especulativos; pós-representacional.*

*What is necessary is a radical transformation, following the bases of feminism, anti-racism and anti-fascism. An in-depth transformation around the types of subject that we are. And that can only happen collectively, by redefining the type of world that ours is becoming. That is the plan<sup>1</sup>.*

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<sup>1</sup> BRAIDOTTI, 2019.

## INTRODUCTION

In these years of new media, globalisation, migrations, and struggles over identity and memory, issues of representation and contestation have intensified in the cultural field and, in particular, in the context of museums. At the same time, the theoretical and ethical debate fostered by the reflexive turn of the last decades is increasingly driven by the concern to recover a sphere of political action for the museum: activist and decolonial in nature, deeply entangled in the world and built from an intra-active engagement with it. As a consequence, the museum tends to address the emergent and the urgent through situated practices that collectively analyse and respond to circumstances in the world. In doing so, the contemporary museum seeks to create conditions for visitor engagement by empowering their unmediated voices to be heard.

This text seeks to explore the critical space between the apparent decolonial vitality of the museum and how these practices are designed in a postcritical and postrepresentational context, arguing that approaches based on artistic and design processes of speculative fabulation are helpful for thinking and acting in these spaces of experience. That is, they are useful to help museums to break out of their ontological blindness to fulfil their critical and transformative potential.

## SETTING THE SCENE. FROM CRITICAL DISTANCE TO CRITICAL PROXIMITY

In 2006 Sharon Macdonald<sup>2</sup> coined the term «representational critique» to describe a critical approach to reflecting on the exclusion of marginalised groups in society from postcolonial and feminist perspectives. This movement of institutional critique paved the way for a representational critique that has taken shape through disruptive curatorial practices. Although issues of representation were not new — since at least the mid-1960s and early 1970s, museums have been confronted with claims associated with the right to self-representation or participation in the construction of the museum — it was mainly since the late 1980s onwards that by the hand of new museology, new institutionalism, cultural studies and poststructuralist and postcolonial theories, we have witnessed a critical reflexive turn that has dissected, in-depth, the conditions of production, structural organisation, knowledge and power in museums, laying bare the associated discourses and their effects.

The overturning of the myth of innocence (or lack thereof) and the realisation that the museum is of the world and not simply in it has revealed opportunities for museum engagement in more profound and more authentic practices of museum

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<sup>2</sup> MACDONALD, *ed.*, 2006.

decolonisation<sup>3</sup>. The second wave of research within museum studies will enhance this connection with the world of practice by directing its gaze towards analysing the poetics and politics of museum practices. In this reorientation of the gaze, the museum has sought to understand and reassess its purposes, ways of knowing and doing. To do so, it employs both theories of change (of itself and of the world) that recognise the museum as a learning organisation and postcritical approaches that adopt participatory and collaborative strategies to engage different subjects and communities in producing knowledge and action in the world. The way this political desire is articulated reflects a projection of the desired social transformations that these museum activist movements aim for in the present.

### Embracing the South

The critique of representation has acted as a critical factor in both this shift in discourse — from a concern with the «object» to a concern with the «subject» and the «process» and its entanglement in the world — and in the radical approaches and political claims on the museum that we are witnessing today. A considerable proportion of this critical look at museum practices focuses on reinventing the relationship between communities and the subjects of the narratives that the museum represents rather than merely continuing to identify how they reproduce hegemonic discourses and representations. The context in which museums serve their communities has changed profoundly. The new museum narrative now seeks to encompass issues ranging from reducing wealth inequality, protecting the rights of indigenous peoples, halting population growth, eliminating fossil fuel use, reversing biodiversity loss to eliminating wasteful consumption. Museums are urged to create visions to address the «big» problems and «big» questions<sup>4</sup> and to integrate principles that advocate social justice into their missions. The urgency to address controversial and difficult topics — *Hot Topics* as Fiona Cameron and Linda Kelly<sup>5</sup> called them —, social injustices and epistemic violence worldwide, the refugee crisis, social inequality, human rights violations, and wars are constantly proclaimed. A plural, contextual and practical knowledge is suggested, one which combines/articulates different types of knowledges with different relevance. This characterisation of knowledge is akin to the conceptualisation advocated by the epistemologies of the South, which, in addition to attention to intercultural translation and the crafting of practices, argue for a heightened awareness of both

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<sup>3</sup> The list of contributions addressing this issue grows every year. Just by way of example, see the book organised by Ariese and Wróblewska, chapter «How to design your own decolonial practice», which explicitly presents design as a strategy of decolonial practice (ARIESE, WRÓBLEWSKA, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> JANES, SANDELL, eds., 2019: 7; VLACHOU, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> CAMERON, KELLY, eds., 2020.

absences and emergencies and an ecology of knowledges<sup>6</sup>. An understanding that admits subjugated and disqualified knowledges, excluded voices, one that is contrary to epistemological exclusions that seek to hide (or even destroy) other forms of knowledge. A knowledge thought as plural, contextual and practical, and redirects the relationship between the museum and society in a spirit of solidarity. Collectively, many of the texts published on the subject illustrate the sense of shared responsibility felt within the global museum community to act with urgency and seek ways to respond meaningfully to the turbulence of the world. Meaningfulness that means moving from «matters of fact» to «matters of concern», that is, addressing controversial conditions deeply entangled in everyday life<sup>7</sup>.

Interest in the worlds of museum practice and performance is growing. These attempts to move beyond questions of representation, reorienting cultural concerns towards performativity and museum-body practices, relate to what Nigel Thrift describes as non-representational theory or practice theory. According to Thrift, the non-representational project refers to the «practices, mundane everyday practices that shape the conduct of human beings towards others and themselves in particular sites»<sup>8</sup>. Rather than an obsession with representation and meaning, Thrift argues that non-representational approaches value the performative «presentations», «displays», and «manifestations» of everyday life. Non-representational theory has an affinity with new materialisms, speculative realism and postphenomenology in that it embraces the concept of the agency of things and a decentralised or distributed (museum) subject. Thrift describes non-representational theory as a geography of what happens.

## The museum that happens

These non-representational approaches respond to the critique of the static orientation of representation, now seeking to understand life as emergent and unfolding in a multiplicity of movements and encounters. Instead of sidelining the messy world «out there», the museum includes it, offering it the foreground. Rather than stopping movement — as representation tends to do — non-representational practices seek to move together and in relation to the world. What the museum can become (the

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<sup>6</sup> SANTOS, 2014; AIDAR, CHIOVATTO, AMARO, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> In the exhibition opened in 2005, *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Bruno Latour and artist-curator Peter Weibel explored the ways in which artists and designers construct systems that express and enact current social conditions and imagine futures. The reflection unfolds in four interrelated theses-themes: contemporary democracy is object-oriented, i.e., it occurs through what we do; it refers to conflicting matters and their consequences; «things» are the association of objects and matters of concern: when what we do is experienced in the light of conflicting matters and the consequences surrounding them, we are living in what Latour calls a kind of «dingpolitik»; and finally, it is about making these «things» (exploring interaction of objects and issues) and organising audiences: groups engaged in addressing a problem (LATOURE, WEIBEL, eds., 2005).

<sup>8</sup> THRIFT, 1997: 142.

process of becoming) is the matter of its entanglements. Entanglements are much larger than the museum itself. The way it touches the world and is affected by it, is, after all, the core of its responsibility. In the museum's diffractive relationship with the world, each museum is also part of the ongoing intra-active articulation. As Barad explains well:

*The phenomenon of diffraction does not merely signify the disruption of representationalism and its metaphors of reflection in the endless play of images and its anxieties about copy and original and displacements of the Same elsewhere. Diffraction is an ethico-onto-epistemological matter. We are not merely differently situated in the world; «each of us» is part of the intra-active ongoing articulation of the world in its differential mattering. Diffraction is a material-discursive phenomenon that challenges the presumed inherent separability of subject and object, nature and culture, fact and value, human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, epistemology and ontology, and material and discursive<sup>9</sup>.*

Thus, the critical enquiry that this movement of articulation/combination presupposes focuses both on dismantling obsolete structures and — mainly — on creating new concepts or tools to navigate the complexity of the present. This approach to the present produces, on the one hand, the awareness of what the museum seeks to cease to be and, on the other, the perception of what it wants to become (and is becoming). Either of these phenomena occurs simultaneously, in a continuous and non-linear time. This happens because, as Rosi Braidotti argues, the strength of the present — and the core of its intelligibility — lies precisely in not wholly coinciding with the here and now. Any of these phenomena occur simultaneously in a non-linear, time-continuum. Synchronisation is never complete because «all human and non-human entities are nomadic subjects-in-process, in perpetual motion, immanent to the vitality of self-ordering matter»<sup>10</sup>. Following Braidotti, we may associate this renewed focus on the process of «becoming a museum» with affirmative ethics<sup>11</sup>. In this process, the creative imagination does not cease to constantly reconnect with past experiences and emotions. However, it does so to reconstitute itself as action in the present and future, thus realising the museum's unrealised potential. In other words, and in terms of approaching the present, I am referring here also to epistemology as a method. A method that takes place in a flow or process of mutation, differentiation or transformation, which is the vital material core of thought. Therefore, epistemology as

<sup>9</sup> BARAD, 2008: 332-333.

<sup>10</sup> BRAIDOTTI, 2019: 36.

<sup>11</sup> BRAIDOTTI, 2019: 3.

a method also represents a collective effort to define what the museum can become, an effort that stems not only from critical analysis but also from speculation as a way of going beyond critical analysis per se. Critical analysis is not something we do outside the world or the museum, nor is it exhausted in itself. Mieke Bal explains that the intention of critical analysis concerns the affirmative and authoritarian discourses exercised by and through the museum rather than the museum as an «object». From this point of view, the «museum-object» is a subject, a «subject participating in the construction of theoretical views»<sup>12</sup>. As such, discourse is conceptualised broadly from its multimedialisation, that is, museum discourse (a) includes a set of semiotic and epistemological habits that enable and prescribe ways of communicating and thinking that can also be used by others participating in the discourse; (b) provides a basis for intersubjectivity and understanding; (c) implies epistemological attitudes; (d) includes unexamined assumptions about meaning and the world<sup>13</sup>. Rather than an archaeology of meaning, then, the critical analysis and the speculative exercise proposed here are concerned with museum's cultural practice and the interaction with and through meaning that constitutes it<sup>14</sup> in a web of relations with others, implicating in this practice actions of self-knowledge, historical awareness, connectivity, collective action and the design of radical futures.

### **From reflection to diffraction and the power of the present**

Seeing and thinking diffractively is also action; it is making a difference in the world. Haraway explains how in her view, diffraction works differently from reflection, a metaphor and practice that starts from an imagined original that can be copied. Unlike reflection:

*Diffraction patterns are about a heterogeneous history, not originals. Unlike mirror reflections, diffractions do not displace the same elsewhere. Diffraction is a metaphor for another kind of critical consciousness at the end of this rather painful Christian millennium, one committed to making a difference and not to repeating the Sacred Image of the Same. I'm interested in the way diffraction patterns record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference. In this sense, «diffraction» is a narrative, graphic, psychological, spiritual, and political technology for making consequential meanings<sup>15</sup>.*

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<sup>12</sup> BAL, 2012: 11

<sup>13</sup> BAL, 2012: 3.

<sup>14</sup> BAL, 2012: 12.

<sup>15</sup> HARAWAY, 2000: 101-102.

The relevance of this diffractive joint action for the museum is that it ceases to understand itself as the sole causal agent and to see the impacts underlying its action as being the effect of its agency alone. That is, by understanding itself as a subject that acts in relation to other subjects and other spaces when it moves, the museum moves «together with», «in relation to», and «through» the joint actions of other subjects and materialities. Also, «becoming world»<sup>16</sup> and thinking in the presence of others creates a space of hesitation and resistance that produces other modes of relationship. In this new understanding, the museum hopes to go beyond the representation of objective values to engage in movements and positions of «curatorial action», «education», and «unpredictability/perhaps»<sup>17</sup>. Rather than seeking consensus and explanations, these movements may well counter the authorised discourses of heritage and open up (vulnerably) to the unpredictability and reimagination of encounters with others in the world.

In these motion places in the middle — «of being among» — it is, therefore, their capacity to affect — to affect and be affected — that is highlighted as a fundamental capacity of the museum. Affect is an active force that invokes the relational links between bodies and things in the world and the ethical responsibility it entails. It is a fluid and dynamic process that is continuously made and remade; it is an energetic outcome of encounters between bodies in particular places<sup>18</sup>. Affect cannot be other than care<sup>19</sup>. Care that attends to these encounters is made up of divergent interests and desires and opens itself vulnerably to concrete needs in the world and to other understandings and ways of knowing and doing, which include feelings and emotions. The capacity to affect is, therefore, a specific capacity of the spaces of practice that render the museum a «lived» context since, as Guattari warns us, affect is life, or, at least, it is what it means to be alive<sup>20</sup>.

The curatorial agency that Nora Sternfeld<sup>21</sup> speaks of enables these lived spaces in which the possibility of changing the visible, the describable and the thinkable — and of intra-action — takes place. These places of encounter and possibility do not cease to engage in criticality, but the focus on action and on what happens in us, in the museum and in the world outside (and on the relationship between these different worlds) gives rise to other questions: of continuities, of flows, of unfoldings. Moreover, attention to the social space that emerges between subjects and the material contexts raises other questions concerning the enabling conditions; that is, the museum does not stop considering representations but equates them

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<sup>16</sup> BRAIDOTTI, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> STERNFELD, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> DE RIBA MAYORAL, REVELLES BENAVENTE, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> PAPERMAN, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> GUATTARI, 1995.

<sup>21</sup> STERNFELD, 2013.

now in relation to questions of presence and absence and how these create and transform places; how these entanglements can be enablers of other futures. The question that arises is what methods serve us for these productive enquiries into the middle.

### ***IN MEDIA RES. WHEN ATTITUDES BECOME FORMS***

In terms of research and action, these *in media res* ecological spaces I have been referring to call for methods of «co-production», «middling», and «following»<sup>22</sup>, «performance», and «presence» that — in tune with the vitality and complexity of the world — can bear witness to its unfoldings. Although the set of methodological tools available for museum research and work has been widely discussed, it has been difficult to go beyond the linguistic forms of expression to fully realise other ways of witnessing these places of experience and adopt configurations that contradict the traditional model of knowledge.

Often, adapted versions of ethnographic work are adopted as the best way to witness the most intangible aspects of museum practices of affect and how they inhabit the different spaces and times that characterise the multiplicity of the non-representational world. At other times, the call to criticality and action leads the museum curator-bricoleur — neither naively humanist nor romantically impulsive<sup>23</sup> — to experiment with hybrid methodological approaches, which include, for example, visual or sensorial methods — in order to accommodate the tensions of language and meaning and circumvent their limiting structures. In this context, arts and design practices are often presented as fertile fields for epistemic disobedience and the decolonisation of the museum. It is not difficult to find scenarios that associate arts-based methods with the use of design approaches and culture — in particular from a design thinking perspective, defined by its human-centred mindset (e.g., empathy; experimentation; holistic approach; problem framing), integrative process and participatory or collaborative methodology — to creatively address and solve complex problems in the museum context<sup>24</sup>. Approaches that aspire to reconfigure workplaces and change internal and external practices by promoting collaborative, reflective and often diffractive practices and a creative, exploratory culture where knowledge is created and re-presented in new ways.

This methodological pluralism is not entirely new. Feminist, queer, decolonising or anti-racist approaches that include affect and the politics of care have long favoured relational modes of knowing and emphasised the need to use creative and inclusive methods in their ways of knowing and doing. Similarly, currents

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<sup>22</sup> TAINEN, KONTTURI, HONGISTO, 2015; ROGOFF, 2016 cited in STERNFELD, 2017: 166.

<sup>23</sup> YARDLEY, 2008: 6.

<sup>24</sup> HELGUERA, HOFF, *org.*, 2011; DIAS *et al.*, 2022.

developing «more-than-human» approaches argue that we should complement the repertoire of humanistic methods (which generate text and talk) with experiential practices that amplify other sensory, bodily and affective registers and broaden the notion of what constitutes a research subject. These methods are often framed as «participatory», «inclusive», and of «care» and «communion», conceived as generating «access», «agency», «ownership», «solidarity», «responsibility», and «responsiveness in the presence of others». These approaches situate the museum in the context of commitments to epistemological decolonisation and emancipatory and agonistic decolonial practices<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, decolonising involves more than just extending interests and concerns that have been marginalised in dominant museum discourses. I do not doubt that these actions are important, but decolonising the museum also involves challenging the dominant forms, conventions, grammars, and languages through which knowledge about heritage is expressed and produced in museum research and practice.

This is, perhaps, a more radical than a reformist project that is organised less around the struggle — still with colonial contours — for the inclusion and representation of difference and marginalities, but more focused on the agitation and destabilisation of forms — diffuse, naturalised and habitual — that instil prevailing colonial power relations in the museum. One key imperative of decolonial practice is to recognise and respect how ideas, projects, and processes reach «into» and relate «to» particular contexts. This approach recognises that knowledge production is a situated and relational activity; that any approach is a materialisation of an effort to assign meaning to experiential situations; and that the transfer of ideas «to» and «between» different contexts underlies how they affect thought and action. In other words, this project of decolonisation of the museum seeks to emphasise ontologically designed relations rather than an understanding of decolonisation whose project is to pacify, control, erase or occupy (colonise) the situation of which the «other» speaks. To this end, it resists «common denominators» and single frames of reference. Instead, it opts, for example, for the spaces of dissensus that Rancière<sup>26</sup> speaks of or for performative mapping or performative narrative, aspiring to enact relations that respect the ontological differences between bodies, geographies and histories.

Some of the main forces that have transformed and characterised these approaches as a whole — as epistemological and speculative methods of the museum and, in particular, of its relationship with the complexity of the world — are cross-disciplinary and represent a direction for the development of new tools for both internal and external practices: (a) the need to develop and strengthen capacities for

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<sup>25</sup> MOUFFE, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> RANCIÈRE, 2010.

critical-reflexive and creative thinking and multidisciplinary teamwork to engage with complexity; (b) the need to develop ethical, sustainable and future-oriented approaches to imagine otherwise. It is beyond the scope of this text to discuss the nature of these emerging practices in depth. Instead, I want to draw attention to how the thought and principles of speculative fabulation and speculative design — with which I associate speculative places-events in the middle — can support the museum in these oscillatory and productive movements to fulfil its critical and transformative potential.

### **CURATING *MIDDLING*. USING SPECULATIVE METHODS TO EXTERNALISE ETHICS AND POSITIONALITY IN MUSEUM PRACTICE**

Speculative fabulation, as outlined throughout this text, is a tool and material force that interrogates, critiques, and summons (past) futures to imagine them radically different from the world we now inhabit, providing alternative models for how the world — i.e., the museum and its relations to the world — might be reassembled. This is how Haraway describes it in *Staying with the Trouble* when she conceives of it as a «mode of attention, a theory of history, and a practice of worlding», an approach that pays attention to the conceivable, the possible, the inexorable, the plausible and the logical<sup>27</sup>. These features of speculative fabulation disrupt the usual ways of knowing and provoke new ways of thinking that facilitate the emergence of questions around positionality and ethics and the imagination of different futures. Speculative fabulation has nothing neutral about it. It is, instead, situated, relational, and material (feminist) practice. As Barad emphasises, «“We” are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at particular places *in* the world; rather, we are part *of* the world in its ongoing intra-activity»<sup>28</sup> and, as such, speculative fabulation anticipates «a different difference from within»<sup>29</sup>. It is from these places-events situated in the middle that speculative fabulation becomes a response-ability for the creation of the world and a possible method for producing other ecologies in the museum. A capacity that requires, as Haraway states:

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<sup>27</sup> HARAWAY, 2016: 213.

<sup>28</sup> BARAD, 2003: 828, italics in the original.

<sup>29</sup> ÅSBERG, THIELE, VAN DER TUIN, 2015: 160.

*the cultivation of viral response-abilities, carrying meanings and materials across kinds in order to infect processes and practices that might yet ignite epidemics of multispecies recuperation and maybe even flourishing on terra in ordinary times and places. Call that utopia; call that inhabiting the despised places; call that touch; call that the rapidly mutating virus of hope, or the less rapidly changing commitment to staying with the trouble*<sup>30</sup>.

Still in this line, the concept of «speculative middles» used by the researchers Springgay and Truman to talk about the approaches they use in their research-creation projects is useful here to understand not only how these events happen but also the kind of events raised by the queries of speculative fabulation. For the authors, it is not about creating places as such, but events, events in which tensions, restlessness and ruptures seem to emerge continuously and during which «As the agitations take shape, it is the (in)tensions that incite further action, which elicits additional propositions, and new speculative middles to emerge»<sup>31</sup>. It is precisely these (in)tensions/actions that give body to the ethical-political orientation of what happens in these events-places in the middle, generating, after all, a practice that places the museum «in the presence of those who will bear their consequences»<sup>32</sup>. The recognition that there are others who will «bear the consequences» of the material practices of thinking, writing, and doing the museum is an important «node» that we can borrow from Haraway's feminist speculative fabulation. In these speculative place-events, rather than seeking solutions, problems are experienced, and it is this problematisation that becomes a mode of unlearning. Unlearning is necessary to interrupt habits, tropes and assumptions about what the museum is and what it can be and cultivate «response-ability»<sup>33</sup>. Speculation necessarily starts from questions to cultivate that ability to respond. Questions that compel the museum to create conditions for conversation and to engage with the world. Haraway asks us to develop response-abilities through the creation and sticky knots that connect «intra-acting critters, including people, together in the kinds of response and regard that change the subject — and the object»<sup>34</sup>. These encounters generate a change in the museum because when the museum «knows», it can no longer «stop knowing», and only by knowing can it develop its capacity to respond<sup>35</sup>. This is a responsibility of the practices of the world, a responsibility that includes the materiality of thought, the relations and politics of how the museum

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<sup>30</sup> HARAWAY, 2016: 114

<sup>31</sup> SPRINGGAY, TRUMAN, 2018: 207.

<sup>32</sup> HARAWAY, 2016: 12.

<sup>33</sup> HARAWAY, 2016: 35.

<sup>34</sup> HARAWAY, 2008: 287.

<sup>35</sup> HARAWAY, 2008: 287.

distributes its speculative attention in terms of what it chooses to write, quote, circulate and produce, the words it uses, stories it tells, and histories it hears, to «whom» and «what» it pays attention and what/who it inevitably excludes within these affirmative practices. Haraway warns that «It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories»<sup>36</sup>.

## RE-TOOLING AND RE-TELLING AND RE-PRESENTING MUSEUM MAGIC: CULTURES OF DESIGN

The concerns enunciated — namely in terms of practices in the world and their responsiveness (response-abilities) — and the potential for events of speculative fabulation to think outwardly are shared with the world of art and design culture. Victor Margolin states that:

*Designers, like everyone else on the planet, have good reason to be concerned about the future. The world is volatile, and the ability of the human race to make a healthy home for itself is at stake. Threats from global warming, poor nutrition, disease, terrorism, and nuclear weapons challenge the potential of everyone to exercise productive energies for the common good*<sup>37</sup>.

Therefore, it will be no accident that design practices are also on the front line when it comes to finding alternative metaphors to current circumstances. The crises of the beginning of the millennium have produced a renewed impetus for social and activist design and how to approach the challenges of contemporary society and the world<sup>38</sup>. In an essay published in 2008, Andrew Blauvelt defined the third major phase of modern design history as an era of relationally-based, contextually-specific design. These new relational design practices include performative, pragmatic, programmatic, process-oriented, open, experimental and participatory elements, and the very nature of design «has broadened from giving form to discrete objects to the creation of systems and more open-ended frameworks for engagement: designs for making designs»<sup>39</sup>. Moreover, he adds, this new phase is concerned with the effects of design that extend beyond the design object and even its cultural connotations and symbolism. This recently adopted perspective also presents it as a prospective activity that combines deductive and

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<sup>36</sup> HARAWAY, 2016: 35.

<sup>37</sup> MARGOLIN, 2007: 4.

<sup>38</sup> BIELING, ed., 2019.

<sup>39</sup> BLAUVELT, 2008.

abductive reasoning. It deals with complex problems by accessing yet-to-be or not fully-formed areas<sup>40</sup>. That is to say, it is based on potentialities rather than certainties; it is partial and in the process of becoming. It starts from «knowledge for» actions and, in this sense, at its core, it is directional and transformative and is concerned more with how things «should be»<sup>41</sup> rather than how things actually are. In this vein, the more artistically oriented critical design approaches<sup>42</sup> and associated variants — design fiction and speculative design — seem to have found a critical visible space, especially regarding research and participation in curatorial experiments. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby popularised the field of Speculative and Critical Design, making it a central focus of the now discontinued *Design Interactions* programme (2005-2015) at the Royal College of Arts. Their approach still resonates in current art and design practices today. Dunne and Raby explain that their speculative practice:

*thrives on imagination and aims to open up new perspectives on what are sometimes called wicked problems, to create spaces for discussion and debate about alternative ways of being, and to inspire and encourage people's imaginations to flow freely*<sup>43</sup>.

Speculative approaches in design aim to open up various pluralities and distortions by focusing on some unlikely, but not difficult to predict, dimensions of the future. What separates speculative practices from conventional design practices is the idea of presenting fictions that extends established conventions, be they physical, social or political. In the same way that Karen Barad's agential realism implies rethinking the responsibilities of «being in» and «being part of» the world, the narratives of future perspectives proposed by Speculative Design prompt it to adopt a critical stance. Although Luiza Prado de O. Martins and Pedro Vieira de Oliveira do not argue against speculative design — as a principle —, they underline that despite criticism, it is still too Western, too masculine, too upper-middle class, too hetero-normative<sup>44</sup>. From this point of view, speculative design seems to be disconnected from the present, existing in its own speculative bubble, outside the present and somewhere in the future. This positioning makes any meaningful form of direct engagement difficult and subordinates it to a reflexive point of view which is not of interest here.

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<sup>40</sup> CRAMER-PETERSEN, CHRISTENSEN, AHMED-KRISTENSEN, 2019; GALDON, HALL, 2022.

<sup>41</sup> SIMON, 1996: 111-167 cited in GALDON, HALL, 2022: 924.

<sup>42</sup> Speculative design often appears associated with critical design, sometimes used interchangeably, sometimes used together, as in «speculative and critical design».

<sup>43</sup> DUNNE, RABY, 2013: 2.

<sup>44</sup> MARTINS, OLIVEIRA, 2014.

Indeed, these critiques have encouraged other forms of speculative design-making, leading to greater engagement in practices of conjecture «with» and «through» design, intentionally, explicitly feminist, queer or non-colonialist<sup>45</sup>. It is suggested, for example, that thinking in terms of «Design Culture» rather than speculative design may better frame speculative places-events in the middle that — perhaps in conjunction with arts-based approaches — are more diffractive. Moreover, as Julier argues<sup>46</sup>, the notion of Design Culture allows us to overcome the criticism directed at speculative design of moving away from the everyday and sequestering in the more exclusive world of galleries or artistic publications, to act, instead, in the middle — a kind of everyday experimentalism — maintaining a closer relationship of reality checking<sup>47</sup>. Another aspect to consider in this reflection concerns the possibility of interrelating this practice of speculative design with social design and participatory design approaches<sup>48</sup>. In other words, and following Julier's proposal, when I refer here to a design culture in the context of these events of speculative fabulation, I am not necessarily referring to the production of new objects. Instead, I highlight three modes of pragmatic speculative (moderated) design engagement with the present and the future that support the transformation of the museum and the imagination of other possibilities:

- First, in terms of understanding the museum (from object of fact to subject and matter of dissensus; from «matter of fact» to «matter of concern» in Latour's call<sup>49</sup>), drawing attention to and opening critical perspectives on its materialities, disturbing its entanglements, potentiating other readings and, by doing so, making them more refractive. It is still a speculative effort since the results of these events are unknown.
- Second, more downstream and as a starting point, the use of proposals developed by communities in these spaces-events and their socio-material implications for the museum: which museum would result from these proposals? What new relationships and forms of exchange, objects, places, and experiences would they give rise to? What new relationships and forms of exchange, objects, places, and experiences would they give rise to? These kinds of speculative events in the middle would engage participants in these design culture processes in acts of modelling or prototyping to materialise and test ideas. Julier says that it is precisely in this kind of action that design culture would adhere to prefigurative politics and, in doing so, act as a knowledgeable and reflexive (or even potentially

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<sup>45</sup> MARTINS, OLIVEIRA, 2014.

<sup>46</sup> JULIER, 2022.

<sup>47</sup> JULIER, 2022: 221.

<sup>48</sup> DISALVO, 2022: 241.

<sup>49</sup> LATOUR, 2005.

diffractive) space to test knowledge and demonstrate and explore the viability of alternative futures<sup>50</sup>.

- Finally, a third way of designing events of speculative fabulation with/for/in/for... museum/others in the world refers to the participation of design culture in predicting what the museum can be, working alongside it in observing and analysing realities to then build other possible ones<sup>51</sup>.

This proposal implies that speculation is used as a way to activate a trajectory capable of provoking discourses on the desirability of the museum we want in the future. That is, to create a multiplicity of visions of the museum's relationship with the world, suspending disbelief, playing with the uncertainty of the future and the urgency to produce collective imaginaries capable of directly stirring the museum's present instead of offering mere future projections. This entanglement represents a direct intervention in the present, or, as Barad would say, a performative point of view:

*Unlike representationalism, which positions us above or outside the world we allegedly merely reflect on, a performative account insists on understanding thinking, observing, and theorizing as practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being<sup>52</sup>.*

This entanglement adopts a diffractive methodology that is also a critical practice of engagement and critical consciousness of the museum with the world<sup>53</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

These days, the museum's main site of intervention is the gap opened between the museum and audiences — a space that instigates a new civic imagination and collective political will. It is not enough to give the museum the task of merely revealing its stories of injustice and exclusion. It is essential that the museum be instrumental in transcending these stories to develop a more functional set of actions that can reconnect the museum to the urgency of everyday life. It is through and in the movements of practice — acts of thinking, doing, performing, and creating — that the museum opens itself up to the «accidental sagacity» of serendipity and relationality<sup>54</sup>. It is, therefore, not just a matter of cultivating reflexivity (which aims only at representation) but

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<sup>50</sup> JULIER, 2022: 221.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, HOPKINS BROCO, HOFSTEE, JESUS, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> BARAD, 2003: 802-831.

<sup>53</sup> HARAWAY, 2000: 101-102.

<sup>54</sup> LEDERACH, 2005.

of activating reflexivity and criticality in terms of agency, engagement and presence in the world. In this shift to a «post-representational» landscape, it is, therefore, the impacts — understood as the movement of something that affects and is affected — and positionality of curatorial practice-positionality not in terms of fixed identity but of its location within shifting networks of relations<sup>55</sup> — that are at stake.

I have been drawn to the world of design to think about the possibility of creating speculative place-events in the middle as thought experiments for exploring the dilemmas of the world and its possibilities: «Thought experiments can make abstract issues tangible and demonstrate a point, entertain, illustrate a puzzle, lay bare a contradiction in thought, and move us to provide further clarification»<sup>56</sup>. Thought experiments are designed as windows into the fundamental nature of things and reveal something philosophically illuminating or fundamental about the issue at hand. It is argued that fabulation and speculative design approaches in the middle (as Design Culture) can be used as catalysts to initiate, facilitate and support new kinds of conversations — conversations conducted at different scales, driven by different and divergent agendas. In this case, the production of places-events uses design and artistic approaches as a tool of philosophical enquiry, which promotes responsiveness to know and do differently. It is not, therefore, mere speculation per se that is advocated here. It is a narrative of things, experiences, and interactions — tangible engagements that collectively cast the possibility or impossibility of what might happen (not-yetness). Meaning is constructed in, between and through these material and experiential manifestations. It is in these movements of reciprocity between things and actions that lies the ability to see, to recognise the potential, the value, and what the museum has for those involved. The approaches developed within speculative fabulation have the ability to drive and extract these qualities using the language of art and design to build other kinds of engagements, exchanges and understandings of the future. This is where the value of speculative design lies: in the middle, in the ability to unlearn and propose other possibilities, relationships and worlds.

*Let's dance, let's dance, let's dance, let's dance, let's dance*

*Why, why, why!?*

*Love, love, love, love, love*

*Under Pressure, David Bowie & Queen*<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> MAHER, TETREAUULT, 2001: 164.

<sup>56</sup> CACCAVALE, SHAKESPEARE, 2014: 27.

<sup>57</sup> Listen to this song at <<https://open.spotify.com/track/2fuCquhmrzHpu5xcA1ci9x>>.

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