
DESIGN
RESEARCH

DESIGN
FORSCHUNG

RECHERCHE
CREATION

RICERCA DESIGN

SWISS DESIGN
NETWORK

SYMPOSIUM

ECAL 2024

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ECAL 2024

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Design disciplines have entered the academic world in Switzerland relatively recently. Swiss design schools have only been required to perform research since the end of the 20th century to be qualified as universities of applied arts.

Yet what shape does the output of this research take? In many national and international contexts, design has become an academic discipline producing original knowledge in usual formats. Even so, design has designerly ways of knowing that are yet to be fully recognised and understood.

On the other hand, the paradigm of design research, or research through design, has emerged. It supplements new knowledge and regular publications with the production of new designs taking the form of prototypes, visualisations, performances and exhibitions, be they speculative or real.

These new, non-strictly bibliographic formats are particularly relevant for their impact on design schools as well as on a wider audience. Moreover, the advent of AI technologies and their consequences on the production of texts, images, objects and sound, put into a crisis the scientific paper format as the ultimate form of knowledge transmission.

This symposium questions the status of design within the academic system and examines how knowledge is produced by design disciplines. The conference aims to provide examples of virtuous practices and to create an arena for a discussion on the relevance of design research as a framework in the medium and long terms. Which experiences and practices are exemplary?

Which possibilities does research through design unfold? What can we learn from them, and how can we further implement design research into research projects and activities?

For this conference, we invited practice- and theory-based contributions anchored in design disciplines (Industrial and Product Design, Interior Design, Fashion Design, Interaction and Service Design, Graphic and Type Design, Photography) as well as cross- or trans-disciplinary approach (Social Design, Technology and Design) that present examples of research through design, discuss methodological and epistemological issues, and offer novel ways of approaching practice-based research.

PRESENTATIONS

In his talk, Bas van de Poel explores how human minds and institutions can thrive amidst exponential change. By combining insights from academic research and innovative design projects, Bas presents a framework for understanding how new and emerging technologies are shaping the human experience and why 2030 is a significant date for his design and innovation office, Modem (modemworks.com).

From the design context, the research looks at the possible future of design practices in circular processes. The focus is on the extended design methodology of repair: on life-extending design measures on objects before they end up in costly recycling systems. In the fashion industry, we talk about altering, adapting, patching, adjusting, mending, darning. And these activities are rarely carried out by designers; and if they are, then without recognition. Repair_Fashion is to be understood in the context of a systemic and structural change in fashion.

Repairing fashion leads to an expanded aesthetic perception and provokes a political positioning. If the decay and continued life of an object is part of the circular design process, if the visible repair as a creative act of things (re)finds social recognition, this will be an expanded field of work for designers in the future.

Such as the emergence of AI requires us to reposition ourselves in the dimensionality of planetary scale, the research for extra-terrestrial and interspecies communication were, in 1960s, associated with the conquest of two other foreign territories: the cosmos and the ocean. The American neuroscientist John Lilly considered the dolphin as the first alien intelligence to communicate with. In 1959, he founded the Dolphin House, in the US Virgin Islands. This villa on the seashore has been turned into a laboratory allowing inter-species cohabitation. Margaret Howe lived with Peter the Dolphin in this semi-immersed space, to teach him English.

Recalling past voices of the Dolphin House, this performative lecture will explore how animality and femininity have both been used as technologies, shaping the paradigms of synthetic intelligence and cybernetics. Performance and maps both act as interpretative devices for understanding this experiment, exploring the relations between artifacts, bodies, environments, fiction and f(r)ictions.

This talk presents practice-based research on new and unusual ways of experiencing and acting through digital interfaces via the oral cavity. While heavily technological, the work also introduces a theoretical framework for understanding the nature of experiences resulting from designing for diverse sensory modalities.

Currently, all our digital interactions are mediated through audio, visual and touch interfaces: this emerges from the culturally enforced saliency of these modalities, neglecting our diversity of abilities and missing alternative possibilities of experience. But what creative potential exists when we consider the mouth, with all the possibilities for licking, eating, tasting, savouring, breathing and laughing? Emerging frameworks from the cognitive sciences, rooted in enactivism, provide new insights into the nature of phenomenological experiences and the complex interplay of senses, expectations and beliefs. This research employs these frameworks in designing intra-oral computer interfaces, but this approach also has broader ramifications for multisensory design.

CONVERSATIONS

Practice-based PhD Programs in Design

Samuel Bianchini, Serena Cangiano, Sara De Bondt, Lucie Kolb, Aylin Tschoepe
in conversation, moderated by Jonas Berthod

As design disciplines increasingly engage in academic research, practice-based PhD programmes are embracing frameworks to support research through design by incorporating prototypes, exhibitions, and performances as core elements of doctoral work. This panel gathers academics and designers from Swiss and international institutions to discuss the evolving opportunities for practice-based PhDs. It explores how their institutions facilitate these practice-based doctorates and the integration of non-traditional outputs within established PhD formats, but also the challenges and possibilities of practice-based PhDs.

Institutional Support to Design Research

Joel Hügli, Anna Niederhäuser, Dimitri Reist, Cécile Vulliemin in conversation,
moderated by Vera Sacchetti

Switzerland has two public instances for design promotion which also specifically support design research: The Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia and the Swiss Design Awards. The first funds research trips and research at the interface of various artistic, social or scientific sectors, while the Awards recognise completed, practice-based projects in all design categories, with a specific accent on research through design. In this panel, representatives from these two instances are in conversation with beneficiaries of the prizes and grants, who present their project and the role played by institutional support to their research.

The Discursive Image. Analysing, Organising and Producing Images as Means of Knowledge

Paul Bailey, Floriane Fo Misslin, Tânia Raposo in conversation,
moderated by Jonas Berthod

What kind of knowledge and know-how are encompassed in the creation, the organisation and the archival of images? This panel examines their discursive potential in graphic design, art direction and fashion photography through three presentations which propose practice-based methodologies grounded in visual material. Linking practice and theory, the talks are accompanied by visual displays which support and extend the ideas discussed in the panel.

Designing with AI. Critical Approaches and Methodologies through Design-Driven Research

Antonella Autuori, Gabriele Colombo, Matteo Subet, Vera van der Burg in conversation, moderated by Anthony Masure

As the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in design practices and research becomes increasingly common, it raises a series of ethical issues. AI algorithms emerge as objective biased describers of the latent assumptions, stereotypes, and world-views embedded within the training datasets and models. In this context, critically examining AI systems through practice-based research methodologies and multidisciplinary approaches becomes crucial.

This panel brings together a group of researchers focusing on the conscious integration of AI into design practices (Designing With AI Interactive Framework, Antonella Autuori, Matteo Subet); on proposing ambiguous and reverse prompting as critical design research strategies with and through generative visual AI (Prompting for Biodiversity, Gabriele Colombo); and shifting critical focus to employing AI bias as a starting point for exploring the nuanced relationship between creator, algorithm and subject (Objective Portraits, Vera Van der Burg).

Although hailing from different experiences, Dimitri Reist and Rasha Dakkak converge in their critique of the dominant Western-centric idea of graphic design, with its so-called “neutral” mode of image and content-knowledge production. Dimitri’s research, “The Music is the Making of the Music” elaborates on questions of responsibility and value-making, by creating space for voices that are “storying otherwise”, while Rasha’s research “Bayn: Imaging Configurations,” considers methods stimulating the idea of individuals owning their curriculum by centring on their contexts, transforming passive learning into active engagement and narrative construction.

Together in this conversation, they delve into what an inclusive approach to graphic design might entail, sharing examples from their experiences to explore how visual knowledge can be redirected toward social and political contexts. In their dialogue Rasha and Dimitri will consider how a graphic design practice can be established, that is rooted in the community and attentive to social issues.

Designing for Health: Research-Driven Strategies for Wellbeing

Gianpaolo Fusari, Emily Groves, Nicolas Henchoz, Anna Lisa Martin-Niedecken, Delphine Ribes, Fabien Roy in conversation, moderated by Aylin Tschoepe

The future of healthcare isn't just about technical and scientific breakthroughs. Design research that broadens our understanding of human adoption and perception is also essential to the development of new therapies, services and tools. To realise its potential, design research in health and wellbeing demands novel forms of interdisciplinary collaboration. Engaging designers, engineers, patients, and healthcare professionals will stimulate the reimagining of products, services, and relationships. Moreover, it presents an opportunity to introduce new perspectives and methodologies into ongoing medical research projects.

This panel discussion, chaired by Nicolas Henchoz, director of the EPFL+ECAL Lab, brings together different units addressing health and design from Switzerland and the UK. Using case studies of projects from the different centres involved, we will explore topics ranging from the impact of AI in medicine and care, to novel approaches to self-tracking.

To further explore the potentiality of physicalisation modalities in participatory environments for research purposes, this panel confronts the scopes, data, and materials of three interdisciplinary workshops organized among different projects and countries. What these projects have in common is the adoption of the practice of physicalisation to conduct research rather than producing an artefact intended as the final step of a process. The first research tool that will be presented is the “Shape-Shifter” (Beatrice Gobbo) adopted during a workshop that took place in March 2023 in London as part of the international project “Shaping AI”. The second intervention, “Shape your Symptoms” (Ginevra Terenghi), introduces an ongoing doctoral research project in design aimed at engaging women affected by intimate infections in defining symptoms and sharing practices of treatment and prevention. Lastly, “Visualising the Resistance” (Antonella Autuori) considers materials as autographic visualization to explain the phenomenon of antibiotic resistance through participants’ personal experiences and attitudes of consumption.

Desire, Politics, Our Lives

Sabrina Calvo, Camille Farrah Buhler, Aude Fellay, Émilie Meldem, Peter Wiesmann
in conversation, moderated by Jonas Berthod

“Omg, iconic.” This (fashion) colloquialism alone might draw your mockery—to your peril. Luxury fashion is one the world’s most powerful industries. Why is fashion still scoffed at when it wields so much cultural, economic and political power? Why let the Arnaults of this world decide its fate? Can we not start dreaming of something else? In what ways can fashion (design) help us reimagine our collective lives? What kind of politics can desire produce? These are some of the questions we will address as we share the knowledge we gathered and the challenges we faced working on @fashion_colloquialism, a practice-based research project that takes a critical look at the Western luxury fashion industry’s golden age through two of its “iconic” objects. This conversation brings together the members of the fashion collective that was formed in its context and their diverse set of practices.

(Machine) Learning through Design. Collectives Modes of Engaging New Technologies
Aysun Aytac, Adrian Demleitner, Max Frischknecht, Thomas Knüsel, Yann Martins,
Janna Joceli Omena in conversation, moderated by Paola Pierri

The panel examines the role of design in recent machine-learning advancements, addressing issues like algorithmic bias, high resource consumption, and social and economic precarity. Emphasising participatory learning and design, the panel seeks collective solutions to these challenges by exploring the question of how learning through design can contribute to a collective understanding and inclusive development of machine-learning technologies.

The panel features international and multidisciplinary designers, artists, researchers, and technologists. Topics include using mapping to critically explore Generative AI, artistic examination of data-driven social media interactions, speculative design in voice technology research, and forensic tools to analyse data manufacturing, especially regarding user attention commodification.

By presenting diverse perspectives, the panel aims to showcase the different ways in which design can aid a better understanding of machine learning and encourages reflection on the ethical and societal impacts of these supposedly intelligent systems.

Shaping the Future of Type Design

Giulio Galli, Valentina Nitti, Ludovica Polo, Alice Savoie in conversation,
moderated by Davide Fornari

The panel intends to open a debate to speculate on the role that artificial intelligence (AI) will play in the future of typography. The session will start with a theoretical framework, highlighting historical patterns from case studies of disruptive technologies in the type design industry, such as phototype-setting and desktop publishing. This will be followed by a participatory discussion exploring future scenarios. The purpose is to provide a broad perspective and encourage critical thinking about the opportunities and challenges AI may bring to typography.

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Emoticons Don't Have Wrinkles

Luna Maurer

Designing Friction: digital technology has long aimed to eliminate friction, striving for seamlessness while attempting to predict our behaviour. Instead of our whole bodies, we use our fingertips to swipe screens, promising a frictionless world. Designing Friction is a techno-optimistic counterargument, a call for connection in our increasingly technologized society.

Concept development in collaboration with Roel Wouters

Sound by Philipp Johann Thimm

Winner of the Golden Calf (the Dutch Oscar) for Best Digital Culture Production

This exhibition showcases a selection of research projects conducted at ANRT between 2013 and 2023, exploring the links among type design and world writing systems, digital humanities, history, pedagogy and language. Established in 1985 at the Imprimerie nationale to “reboot French type design”, ANRT settled in 2000 at the École nationale supérieure d’art et design in Nancy (anrt-nancy.fr).

The exhibition is organised in partnership with École nationale supérieure d’art et de design de Nancy.

This display provides three examples that explore the discursive value of image in design research. The work of Paul Bailey investigates the visual essay as an instrument to recognise non-normative sensibilities, mentalities and disciplinary imaginaries for, and from, contemporary practices of graphic design. Floriane Fo Misslin uses diagrammatic and mood-board analyses grounded in visual sociology to replace the fabrication of these images in an entanglement of negotiations between photographers, stylists, fashion editors, casting directors and press officers. Finally, Tânia Raposo offers an epistemology of the archive by examining how the professional archives of individual practitioners can be reactivated and used as contemporary tools for the practice of designers and researchers. Using the archives of Hans-Jürg Hunziker and Emigré as case studies, Raposo proposes methodologies that turn archives into active tools through their organisation, cataloguing and dissemination.

How can one as a graphic designer, shift and relearn understandings of visual knowledge towards the social political context each of us is living in? And can this eventually lead to a more inclusive, co-existing and community-based praxis? This installation elaborates on questions of responsibility and value-making, by creating space for voices that are “storying otherwise”. Dimitri Reist started exchanging with peers about the conditions in which we create work, how these circumstances shape our daily practice, our methodologies, our ideas, and how in the end these are materialised in our visual language.

In conversation with: 40Mustaqel, Alliage, Engy Aly, Paul Bailey, Noah Bonsma, Atelier Brenda, Dayna Casey, Benedetta Crippa, Isabel Duarte, D-E-A-L, Rasha Dakkak, Garine Gökceyan, Sofia Gonçalves, Martin Groch, Eike König, Siwar Kraytem, Andriana Lagoudes, Francisco Laranjo, Drew Litowitz, Afonso Matos, Engy Mohsen, Richard Niessen, Nina Paim, Peet Pienaar, Olga Prader, Adriana Rojas, Sarah Saleh, Traduttore-traditore among others.

EPFL+ECAL Lab opens its doors and invites visitors to get an insider's view of its latest design research work. Discover immersive experiences, interactive installations and practical applications that use emerging technologies like AI and neuro-feedback to tackle current challenges in cultural heritage, food, health, and environment. Fostering a close collaboration between science, technology, creativity and culture, the lab's transdisciplinary team aims to create sustainable impact for society and the planet.

We are at a time where we perceive a lack of clarity about design, its methods, goals, definition and disciplinary quality. Many misperceptions float in our explanations about what designers do, and how we do it.

Research through Design can help capture the thoughts and difficulties designers and researchers are struggling with. I propose two “Lab Discussions” which offer an open platform to the symposium design research community to share, discuss, and reflect on our work. Each session will last 45 minutes. The main activities will involve capturing thoughts and making sense of the current design situations, with the final part dedicated to synthesis and summary.

This workshop offers no answer, but a place for discussion and reflection to let appear a multiplicity of practices to collectively bring forth what is taking place when we design. Engage if your goal is to reflect and see anew.

(Machine) Learning through Materialization

Aysun Aytaç, Thomas Knüsel

How do machines learn to see and listen? This exhibition hosts prototypes to accompany the (Machine) Learning through Design panel. Throwback Environment by Thomas Knüsel is a post-photographic setup, creating a feedback loop between images and machine-generated text descriptions. The “provotypes” of the VA-PEPR research project utilize speculative design to demystify voice assistants, enabling people to interact with them through tangible representations. Both works foster a deeper comprehension of AI, challenging existing perceptions.

Points of Failure is an ongoing series of performance-installations in which miscellaneous objects and derelict electronics are used to create a dynamically changing media environment. By using DIY electronics, found objects, light and sound making circuits, the artistic potential of everyday materials is explored. By making and undoing objects, building hybrid mechanisms to make noise, deploying a disordered multi-sensory experience, a hypotonic environment is created in which sound, light and movement are intertwined.

Contributors

Antonella Autuori

Antonella Autuori is a researcher at SUPSI / University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland. Her research focuses on the definition of new methodologies at the intersection of artificial intelligence and design.

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Camille Farrah Buhler is a fashion designer, artist and co-founder of the podcast Front Row, invested in rethinking fashion through a feminist and decolonial lens.

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Sabrina Calvo is an author, poet, visual worlds creator, and experimental fashion couturière, exploring and crafting fantasy worlds.

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Serena Cangiano is senior researcher at the Design Institute and head of Digital fabrication laboratory of SUPSI / University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland.

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Meret Ernst

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Davide Fornari

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Luke Franzke is a research associate and PhD candidate at the ZHdK / Zurich University of the Arts, where he heads the Physical Computing Lab. His current research deals with the design of Intraoral Computer Interfaces.

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Max Frischknecht is a PhD candidate at HKB in Bern, and a researcher exploring generative design for critical data visualizations in the humanities and lectures on data cultures and technology.

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Gianpaolo Fusari is an industrial designer with over ten years of experience in design innovation in healthcare and a senior design associate at the Helix Centre, Royal College of Art, London.

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Giulio Galli is a researcher and PhD candidate at Hasselt University, as well as a typeface designer, member of CAST Foundry.

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Alexis Georgacopoulos is a product designer and the Director of ECAL/ University of Art and Design Lausanne.

Beatrice Gobbo

Beatrice Gobbo is a post-doc fellow at Politecnico di Milano. Her work and academic interests are positioned at the intersection between information design and computer science.

Emily Groves

Emily Groves is a senior designer and postgraduate programme coordinator at EPFL+ECAL Lab.

Nicolas Henchoz

Nicolas Henchoz is founding director of EPFL+ECAL Lab which explores the perspectives of emergent technologies through design research.

Joel Hügli

Joel Hügli works as a sustainable product designer and researcher at HSLU / Lucerne School of Design, Film and Art, and is the founder of the mattress start-up Ecomade. He received the Swiss Design Prize, the Swiss Design Award and various grants for his master's thesis ECOMADE – Ecological Mattress Design.

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Thomas Huot-Marchand is a type designer and the director of Atelier National de Recherche Typographique (ANRT) in Nancy.

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Yann Martins

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Floriane Fo Misslin

Floriane Fo Misslin is a researcher and design educator. They are a PhD candidate in Visual Sociology at Goldsmiths in London.

Anna Niederhäuser

Anna Niederhäuser has been the head of design promotion at the Federal Office of Culture since 2018. From 2012 to 2020, she served as the president of the specialist committee of the Bern Design Foundation, and since 2014, she has been a freelance curator and author.

Valentina Nitti

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Guillermina Noël is a design researcher and educator. She is the head of the Bachelor Design Management, International at HSLU / Lucerne School of Design, Film and Art.

Janna Joceli Omena

Janna Joceli Omena is an assistant professor in Digital Media and Methods at Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal. Her research focuses on the practice and theory of digital methods, intersecting with web technologies, software studies, data visualization and philosophy of technology.

Sarah Owens

Sarah Owens is an award-winning design educator and researcher whose work centres on social and anthropological aspects of visible language and visual cultures. She leads the BA in Visual Communication at ZHdK / Zurich University of the Arts.

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Paola Pierri, with a doctorate in Design Anthropology, researches the impact of design on society and political engagement, specializing in Anthropology of Technologies.

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Delphine Ribes

Delphine Ribes is head of Design for Healthcare and Creative Coding at EPFL+ECAL Lab and specializes in medical image processing and AI research.

Evelyne Roth

Evelyne Roth is a trained seamstress, active designer and lecturer at the Institute of Contemporary Design Practice (ICDP), in the fashion design program at the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW. She is a doctoral student in the Make Sense program, a cooperation between FHNW and the University of Linz in Austria.

Fabien Roy

Fabien Roy is a Swiss product designer and architect who designed Robust Nest, a newborn incubator adapted to the context of district hospitals in sub-Saharan countries, developed in collaboration with EPFL's Essential Tech Centre.

Vera Sacchetti

Vera Sacchetti is a Basel-based design critic and curator. Recently, she co-founded design magazine Fazer, and co-initiated the Design and Democracy platform. She teaches at Design Academy Eindhoven, and is part of the Federal Design Commission of Switzerland.

Alice Savoie

Alice Savoie is a researcher and type designer currently teaching type design at ECAL/University of Art and Design Lausanne and supervising research projects at ANRT in Nancy.

Tim Shaw

Tim Shaw is an artist and researcher who works with sound, light, and communication media. He creates performances, installations, and site-specific interventions. His practice spans environmental sound art, digital media, media archaeology, walking, and installation making.

Matteo Subet

Matteo Subet is a researcher at SUPSI / University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland. His research focuses on human-computer interaction, design education and AI-driven systems in the design field.

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Bas van de Poel

Bas van de Poel is the innovation director and co-founder of Modem, an Amsterdam based office for design and innovation dedicated to envisioning how forward-thinking companies and institutions can thrive amidst exponential change.

Vera van der Burg

Vera van der Burg is a designer, a researcher, and a PhD candidate at Technical University Delft. She explores integrating AI into creative processes as a reflexive tool for makers.

Eloïse Vo

Eloïse Vo is an artist-designer and PhD candidate in the program between HEAD – Genève and EPFL. Her work has branched into performance, media installations, publishing and writing, alongside design commissions.

Cécile Vulliemin

Cécile Vulliemin has been the head of Design at Pro Helvetia since 2023. Previously she was head of Strategic partnerships at ECAL (2018–2022) and project leader for Art/Science programs at Swissnex Boston (2015–2018).

Peter Wiesmann

Peter Wiesmann is an independent jewellery and accessory designer, who has worked for brands such as Louis Vuitton, Hermès, Mansur Gavriel and Supriya Lele.

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