

# Editorial: Object Subject

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The conference that formed the basis of this issue of *fusion* came to my attention in 2016 when the organisers asked me to support a funding application. By early 2017 their application had been successful and after a bit of negotiation we agreed that *fusion* would publish select papers from the conference proceedings and, in exchange, I would join the organising committee.

The conference was concerned with what DESIGN Canberra called “design writing” and it started life with the title *Tomorrowland: The future of design writing is already here* aiming to “bridge scholarly and popular writing in a digital age”. It then became *Object | Subject – Speaking about and through Design* to “explore the way design speaks to us, and the way we speak about design.” In the end it was staged as *Object Subject*. The sequence of titles tells us a lot about design writing as an idea. In addition, the call for papers “[began] with a premise that writing is essential to the future of design” and the host, Craft ACT: Craft and Design Centre, expanded its idea to include “hope” to also foretell the future of craft.

Design was born from the promise of a better tomorrow. From *what-was* design promised to project the possible future scenarios of *what-might-become*. This optimism was best expressed in the 1956 exhibition “This is Tomorrow” staged by the Independent Group in London. While that project never seemed to make much impression on design history the promise of a better tomorrow has remained part of design’s rhetoric. As I write in June 2018 the V&A Museum in London has just opened an exhibition titled “The Future Starts Here: 100 projects shaping the world of tomorrow”.

It’s clear the future has been starting for a long time, quite possibly beginning with Plato’s *Republic*, but without doubt design’s dependency on the future-possible for its rationale was borrowed from the concept of “Utopia” (first published 500 years ago). While utopia has subsequently been corralled into the literary genre of satire it is manifest literally in design’s desire to project *what-might-become*. What is remarkable about design’s now long-term future promise has been its realisation not in any tangible form (it is impossible) but in text. So the history of design seems to indicate that design is better equipped to narrate futures than give them shape. This is even more evident in a recent offshoot from the discipline called “design fiction”, which seems satisfied to chronicle the future scenarios made possible by design. Here both history and fiction collide to imply “that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth” (Foucault 1980, 193).

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In a similar vein the writer Gerald Murnane characterises the author of what he describes as fiction as “wanting to grasp the paradox that has exercised him (the author) during much of his lifetime: by his wanting to understand how the so-called actual and the so-called possible – what he did and what he only dreamt of doing – come finally to be indistinguishable in the sort of text that we call true fiction” (Murnane 2014, 140).

Having taken the decision to consider writing and designing as complementary actions, or as the conference describes, how we “explore the way design speaks to us, and the way we speak about design”, writers of design will run into the residual theoretical problems that Foucault and Murnane outline. This might be another of the great challenges for design – how to establish legitimacy plus be understood! The challenge is complicated by the digital proliferation of design now crafted for illustration and promotion via online media that is generating the production of more *things-for-online-media* and the generation of more *media-for-design*. As such, design writing now produces more design writing and has become a thing (object) in itself.

As I have been saying, design’s sentimental attachment to *what-might-become* that has been dependent on different forms of writing (now apparently fictitious) make the conference promise “that writing is essential to the future of design” extremely prophetic. In fact, it would seem that the future of design might be entirely dependent on the future of design writing. If so, the essays in this issue of fusion carry a responsibility not often associated with design.

The paper by Gyungju Chyon – *Embodying Betweenness: Designing Ecological Artefacts through Imperfection, Impermanence and Incompleteness* – deals with designing ecological objects; objects she describes as designed and made via uncommon mediums – wind/light – to establish an ecology of relations. At the same time her paper presents a very good case for a professional practice reflecting on its own practice and learning about itself. Her paper describes two original experiments in an interesting story that is told well. She describes finding a way of “doing” something from the process of making two ephemeral objects, and this makes a very original contribution to Object/Subject dialogue. Citing the dizzying complexity of Timothy Morton’s arguments as evidence for the existence of “an ecology of relations” is not easy, especially when in this case the weather has become the “hyperobject” and one project relies on “hypo-objects” (microscopic vapour). The two evocative objects Gyungju Chyon has designed “explore the way design speaks to us, and the way we speak about design”.

The authors of the paper – *Design Practice, Things and Language: An Iterative Collaboration* – Thomas Lee and Berto Pandolfo – are both well versed in their fields: literary theory and industrial design respectively. The topic of their paper makes the transition from “objects” into the expanding field of “things”; a field whose critical commentary is increasing in depth and breadth. Therefore, it is an important topic and the authors make sense in their skim across the surface (and skimming the surface is a very wise tactic). Their contribution to the discussion on “thing theory” is original and therefore helpful for design writing where making objects is an increasingly shrinking percentage of the things designers do. In fact, the way in which the matter and manner

of the paper – the object (as subject) and the text (as object) – have been designed has been crafted with skill and ingenuity. They employ an original method that is a nice balance of literary theory at work with a very clever design “object” that I would classify in what is a difficult genre for literature and a rare genre for design: namely, irony.

The paper *Pride of Place: Co-design, Community Engagement and the Victorian Pride Centre*, authored by Gene Bawden and Alli Edwards, describes an important encounter between academics from Monash University’s Design School just formed into a new research entity – the XYX Lab – and Victorian (Australia) LGBTIQA organisations. As far as community engagement goes it revealed two things: that design has an increasingly relevant role to play and that design has a lot of existing “objects” that can be adapted to engagement – and by objects I mean both thoughts and methods that are “designerly”. The paper contributes a fresh approach to its subject – gender identification and equity – and it does this through an important encounter. At the time of the engagement the Pride Centre was yet to be designed and the XYX Lab had not designed anything making their experience potentially challenging. The paper describes their success and at the time of writing the Centre has a design and the XYX Lab continues to operate. In the increasingly rich field of “engagement”, design could learn a lot from the vast number of other disciplines that have been engaging with people for a long time. The XYX Lab have positioned themselves carefully to break through the problem of the inevitability of all design thinking that is still mistakenly pointing to the preferred situation. It must be remembered that all design thought and action does nothing but change behaviour and one person’s preferred behaviour is another’s inequality.

Last for comment but the first paper of the conference is the keynote by Alice Rawsthorn – *Design Rewritten* – in which she explores the role of design writing in her own introduction to design (an almost accidental encounter), and how its influence on her perceptions of design, and its cultural potency, has evolved over the years. Amongst Alice’s many insights is her use of her own trajectory as a writer to explore the way design first spoke to and continues to speak to her, and how she uses this conversation to speak to us about design.

## References

- Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*. Colin Gordon, editor. Pantheon Books, 1980.
- Murnane, Gerald. *A Million Windows*. Giramondo, 2014.