# Design interventions and "alien ethnographies": Experimenting with speculative prototypes as prompts for relations beyond the human.

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## Introduction

The main focus of this paper concerns the role of speculative design prototypes as a means of intervention into everyday lift contexts in order to explore, and possibly enable, new kinds of relations between humans and non-human beings. By addressing a human de-centering through design, I want to quarry what kind of new possibilities might arise when design speculation meets a practice of doing what I will call an 'alien ethnography'.

In this regard the aim of this paper is twofold: First I discuss a turn towards interspecies relations in collaborative design explored through a recent design project entitled Urban Animals and Us; second I consider an ontological trajectory in anthropology that seeks to explore an anthropological move "beyond the human" (Kohn).

These aims are bundled together by an overarching agenda concerning how to augment and enrich speculative design interventions with an ethnographic framework that envisions the world as seen from the perspective of multiple entities, in order to enable a different vantage point from which to understand and premise further design actions. I will tentatively term such an ethnographic approach as "alien", in the sense that it experimentally places humans on equal ontological footing with other non-human beings and thus seek out a perspective "beyond the human" from where to inquire and engage the world through design.

Prototyping relations between fragile seniors and urban animals

I begin here by giving a brief account of a recent design research project, Urban Animals and Us (Jönsson & Lenskjold 2013). The project was developed in cooperation with a Danish retirement home in the city of Elsinore over an eight months period. Through different forms of design interventions and collaboratory events (workshops, unstructured interviews and observations) with residents and staff the project sat out to explore the potential of forging new interspecies relations between wild animals, like magpies and gulls, living in the park and neighbourhoods surrounding the retirement home and fragile seniors residents - many of whom suffering from dementia.

The main portion of the design interventions where centred on the deployment of three experimental prototypes - *Birds-view perspective, Talk-in-to* and *InterFed* - that each in its own way devised forms of interaction, and speculatively explored the possibility of new interspecies relations. In the following, I will concentrate on the third and final experiment, the InterFed (figure 1).
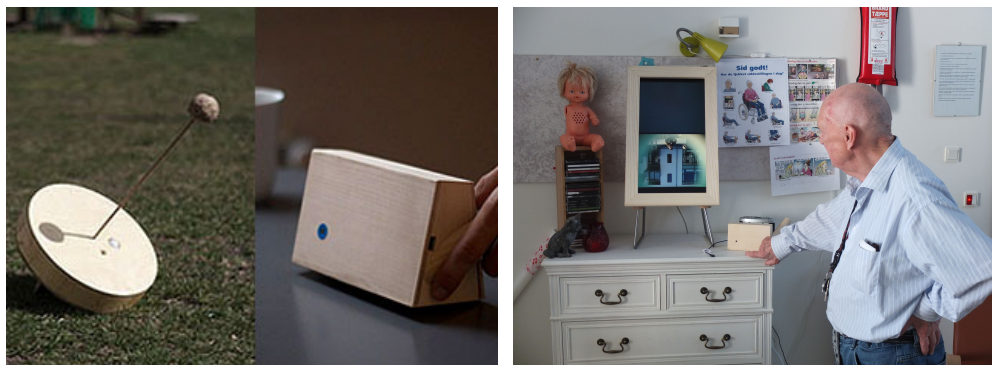


**Figure 1: InterFed is comprised by two camera: (far left) the outdoor camera probe luring bird in to feed of the attached bird-fodder ball, and the portable indoor camera (left). The birds' activities trigger a motion sensor that simultaneously set off the two cameras and display the combined images (right) on a customised monitor situated in one of the ward's communal living room area.**

With the InterFed prototype - comprised of indoor and outdoor cameras, sensors, bird-fodder and a living room display screen - we intended to develop a system whereby human-animal interactions would be initiated by the animals' agency and made to render a representational juxtaposition of their respective life-worlds – outside and inside, animal and human – as a steadily growing stream of simultaneous

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instants, captured as images and interjected back into the everyday rhythms of life in the ward's living room. From a design perspective this was neither an attempt to design *for* the animals nor the seniors in the sense of solving a predetermined problem or "changing an existing situation into a preferred one", to quote Herbert Simon's (1969) now classic definition of design. Rather, the aim was to speculatively instantiate the possibility of interspecies crossings and revert it back to the sociocultural domain – life in the retirement home – in order to follow any affective, experiential or dialogical effects that might occur from the intervention. Or to put it differently, the prototype was employed as a means to juxtapose seniors and birds in an act of prototyping reciprocal relations.

Of interest her is not so much that a prototype performs, but that the Interfed by more general definitions of prototypes in design is lacking in terms of a specific purpose and a precise criterion of evaluation. Dib (2010) argues that prototypes, besides their intended purpose, should be understood as having "the opportunity to become what they grasp. Thus the promise of the prototype is not so much that it does what it was built to do, but rather that it breaks free of its intended function while fostering a conjectural quality and embracing multiple futures."


In this regard, the prototyping of interspecies relations through the InterFed prototype may be seen as an embracement of future eventuation, i.e. as something that might ensue in the transition from a synthetically "coming together" by means of the prototype to a future "becoming together" (Michaels 2011a, 2001b) in the conjectural form of an interspecies relationship not yet defined.

For Michael the development from being together to becoming together can furthermore be illustrated through the conceptual figure of the "idiot" – adapted from Deleuze and subsequently from Isabel Stengers (2005) - as that which resists the conventional way action or thought is mobilized (Michael 2011a, 535). We may, then, ascribe the idiotic to the future "graspability" of the prototype, as a quality that counters existing or conventional interspecies relations "on the ground", e.g. feeding or watching birds as a traditional pastime activity among the seniors. The task of the design intervention thus becomes one of attending to what might follow from the idiotic eventuation caused by the different encounters afforded and produced by the

prototype and the entities it assembles. In this, such an approach does not begin with an a priori problem propositioned by e.g. the municipality, the elderly or the staff. Nor is a problem - or series of preferable changes – collaboratively developed among these stakeholders through an elaborate process of cooperation. Instead the initial (an for some undoubtedly whimsical idea) of interspecies relations is an experimental point of departure from where more manifest opportunities, concerns and problems might eventually develop. "The problem" or pursue of a preferred situation is not the starting point but rather the result that might lead to new experiments in applying methods and tools for interspecies crossings to specific ends and solutions. As such, this approach might be more adequately described by what Mike Michael (2011b) – in the context of public engagement with science – has called "inventive problem-making" insofar as it tries to speculatively engage the existing conditions for multispecies cohabitation in and around the retirement home by experimentally probing the potential for new kinds of interspecies relations.

## Anthro-de-centrifying by means of Carpentry

What ensues from the intervention briefly outlined in the foregoing, and more specifically from the deployment of the Interfed prototypes, then, could be considered as inventive steps towards new problems and subsequently new ways of proceeding with design experiments that might qualify or even at some point functionalise interspecies relations. But the move into a new problem-field is hinged on the outcome resulting from the effects cause by deploying the prototype. In the following sections of the paper I will proceed to discuss some of the events and results and tie these to the tentative proposition of an alien ethnography, but before doing so, a little more needs to be said about the ontological attention that undergirds the interest taken in interspecies relation from a position in collaborative design research.

A motivation for this kind of designerly approach has been to explore design from a position that begins by placing human stakeholder on equal ontological footing with other biological entitles encountered in the context of the project. But to grant humans and non-humans equal existence is by no means the same as engaging them on equal

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terms by means of design interventions. Thus, the notion of "anthro-de-centifying" (Jönsson & Lenskjold, 2013, Lenskjold forthcoming) denotes the process of actively trying to speculate and experiment with multispecies perspectives while simultaneously questioning to what extend such a muli-perspectivism is possible and makes sense as design.

This strategy of engagements is inspired both by recent developments in continental philosophy that goes by the umbrella term "object-oriented ontology" (OOO) (e.g., Harman 205, Bryant 2011) as well as accounts of animal perspectives – or "umwelten" – in the work of Jacob von Uexküll (2010), the founder of modern ethology. From the OOO camp, the book "Alien phenomenology – what its like to be a thing" (Bogost 2012) provides a conceptual framing that lend itself well to explain the function of the Interfed prototype. Bogost proposes the notion of "Carpentry" as a name of "things that do philosophy", or, "things that explains how things make their world" (p. 93).

Extrapolated to the domain of design, we might alter the quote and propose the Interfed as: *a thing that points towards how living entities could connect between their separate life worlds*.

Such modification of the quote – from explanation to indication; from world-exploration to relation-building; from present to future – poses a new set of challenges. Whereas Carpentry so construed provides a great philosophical concept for framing the ontological capacity of speculative prototypes, it says little about how to comprehend and process the experiences "on the ground", e.g. what yields from a design intervention with and around the Interfed prototype in the specific context of the retirement home. This brings me back to the intersection between design and anthropology to seek out an ethnographic approach that operate along some of the same trajectories, one that I might, again tentatively, call an alien ethnography.


## Towards an alien ethnography

Like the proposition of an alien phenomenology, an alien ethnography also relates to the general idea of exploring "what it's like to be a thing", albeit a thing in a given socialmaterial mesh of relations. At this level, the notion is tied to a broader interest in

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speculative (as well as real) performativity of the designed prototype. But in the context of a design anthropology, alien ethnographies also, and more specifically, relates to questions of how designed objects can produce new perspectives on socio-material interactions - the mutual infoldings (Haraway 2008) - that takes place between things and people.

Amidst the recent hype of an ontological turn in anthropology (see Holbard 2011, Viveiros de Castro, et al. 2014), one voice in particular seems to provide inspiration for the application of an alien ethnography to design. Eduardo Kohn's recent book, "How Forests Think- towards an anthropology beyond the human" (Kohn 2013), gives a thought provoking and rich insight into how we may begin to enquire into entities "beyond the human" from an ethnographic perspective. Others have conducted ethnographic research into worlds that are considered alien in themselves, like the microscopic realms of the oceanic deep seas (see Stefan Helmreich 2009), but what makes Eduardo Kohn's work particular interesting to me is that is draws on (what I presume to be) a fairly classical fieldwork, among the Amazonian Runa, in their village Ávila and the surrounding forests in Ecuador.
What in almost every respect is a far cry away from a design intervention in a Danish retirement home, becomes interesting because Kohn redirects his experience to focus "beyond the humans" to the plethora of other beings that make up the living world in it self.

It is a critique of human exceptualism by ontologically addressing the which lies beyond the human, but importantly doing so by paying close attention to how the life of humans, in particular the Runa of Ávila, harbours gateways to these entitles and the wider ecological "form" that defies anthropocentric representations and are largely invisible "because we are insider it" and because form according to Kohn "largely lacks the palpable otherness (…) of a traditional ethnographic object" (p. 185). Drawing on the American 19th century philosopher of semiotics Charles Saunders Peirce, the main argument of the book is that sign-relations extend beyond the symbols confined by the cultural sphere to encompass other beings as selves. An important difference from Bogost's alien phenomenology is that where it concerns

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objects that withdraw from relations and thus can only be grasped through speculation and metaphoric approximations, a sign for Peirce and Kohn always stands for something in some respect or capacity, which is to say that it always indicates a relation with or without a human at its center.

While the book as such provides a provocative and intricate disciplinary dialog with the foundation of anthropology, what interest me here is merely what leanings a move beyond the human by means of ethnography might provide for a productive understanding of the a few select experiences following from the deployment of the Interfed prototype.

## Ove and the Interfed

During our visits and prototype trials in one of the retirement home's three wards, a small group of residents in particular took an interest in the project. Among these was a lively and forthcoming man named Ove. On most of our visits Ove would make his way to the common living room area a soon as he got news that we had arrived. Contrary to the majority of the ward's residents Ove was able-bodied and could move about with his walker, but like most of his fellow residents he too was suffering from dementia. This restricted the scope and directedness of our conversations about the project and the prototype considerably and we where mostly tagging along in the direction that Ove's thoughts would take him, while at the same time encouraging him to consider the birds and the interactions – the exchange of pictures – of which he was part. In the following I recount two experiences that each in its own way revolves around Ove and the Interfed prototype, to consider how these situations might help to render new perspective on the design of interspecies relations.

**The sailor and the gulls**
On one of my own visits long after establishing rapport with Ove, he suddenly and lucidly began to tell me about an experience he once had as a young man: Sailing as a galley chef in the merchant fleet, he had one day stepped out on deck in the middle of

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the Atlantic ocean only to encounter a school of gulls resting on the stern. He explained that this sight had startled him and made him contemplate how bird, as if out of nowhere, suddenly could turn up thousands of miles from land.

It is by no means unusual that people with dementia has moments of lucid recollections of events in the past. But what makes the story interesting vis-à-vis an orientation that goes beyond the human is to consider Ove's past encounter with birds not as a temporal displacement of Ove's experiences, but as a doubling of perspectives inferred on a possible future instantiation of interspecies relations to follow from the interactions afforded by the prototype. It is not Ove as a subject in the world that is represented here, but rather the "double description" (Bateson in Kohn, p. 98) of two differentiated perspectives that merge to contribute to a new way of considering interspecies relations. Following Kohn and Peirce the two perspectives – Ove's story and his present engagement – we might say that their combined contribution to the inquiry into interspecies relations is that it is thought itself that is alive. Thinking and selfhood in the conceptualisation of relations is reciprocally related to the living but not restricted to humans. We might, then, consider equally the relations by which we (as "something") stand to the birds (as "someone") in some respect or capacity. These selves – whether animal or human – are, in this line of semiotic reasoning, a "locus for the production of a novel signs" (Ibid., p. 206), and thus directed towards the future – i.e., what Peirce calls *being in futuro.* In the project described here, this could for instance be by virtue of future cross-species interpretations that will come to manifest new forms of relations between seniors and birds.

**Snapshots and extra-human form**

A different experience resulting directly from the Interfed prototype was the continuous steam of paired photos depicting life inside and outside in the same instant. The photo-pairs where instantaneous displayed in the ward's living room (see figure 1: Ove looking at the monitor in expectation of the next change of photos). But besides being displayed in the living room the photos-pairs where also compiled in a database and exhibited on a webpage. If we consider the sequence of photo-pairs (see Figure 2) on their own, the photos from the inside contain the traces of everyday

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life events and documents the interactions with the camera over time. The outdoor photos, on the contrary, exhibit more of an alien perspective insofar at the photos are much more difficult to interpret, due to the lack of micro-social markers of every-day life occurrences.

If we are to consider the photo-pairs on their own in concurrence with idea on an alien ethnography that seeks to move beyond the human, we might again follow Kohn and interpret these photo-constellations as containing indices of patterns and rhymes that extend beyond the human and exerts constraints and possibilities with regard to establishing successful interspecies relations. In Kohn's analysis of the Amazon emergent forms exists beyond life and arise out of the complex morphodynamic circulation of living matter and non-living matter. These generals consist, among other things, of the distribution of rivers in the Amazon delta and the complex spatiotemporal distribution of ripening fruit varietals and corresponding variations in animal's foraging strategies, that again dictates the Runa's success with hunting as a matter of navigation within these higher-order forms of partly non-living semiosis in order to be at the right place at the right time (Kohn, p. 159).

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**Figure 2: (left) the sequence of instantaneous photo-pairs. Some photos from inside the living room are upside down, because the portable camera for a while had been turned on its head. Other photos depicted close-ups of inanimate objects. We later learned that one of the staff deliberately had pointed the camera towards the wall because, she felt uncomfortable with the ideas that she inadvertently could have her picture taking without warning. The outside pictures are conspicuously more difficult to decode in terms of the events surrounding the release of the shutter, albeit the foraging birds responsible are visible in some of the frames, as are a few hands restocking the probe with new bird fodder balls. (right) the two enlarged photos show Ove keeping a watchful eye on the display in anticipation of the next change of photos initiated by bird activity.**

Extrapolated to the conditions in and around Grønnehave retirement home, we might find that the sequence of photos suggest forms that ultimately would be indicative of conditions that could improve or diminish the chances of bringing humans and birds into relation. From a detailed analysis we might be able to distinguish how, for instance, birds harness forms by adhering to certain rhythms over days, weeks or months that enable efficiency in foraging or increase security. Similarly, an analysis of the indoor pictures-sequences might reveal certain spaciotemporal patterns of activity that could be utilized to guide future experiments. In this respect we come to see the Interfed prototype more accurately described as a probing device that co-constitute speculation into future possibilities by producing indices of non-living forms in which human and animal activities are nested.

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## Alien ethnographies and design anthropology – some concluding remarks

I this paper, I have attempted to draw up some initial ideas of what I've have called an alien ethnography in order to explore new ways of accounting for some of the experiences yielding from a speculative experiment with forging interspecies relation between fragile seniors feral bird in and around the retirement home Grønnehave. A central concern it this regard has been to contemplate how the events and imagery produced as a result of deploying an interactive prototype – the Interfed – might lead to new insights and inform future attempts at enabling interspecies relations from a position that goes beyond the human. The semio-ontological framework proposed by Eduardo Kohn inspires this approach.

A pending question in the context of this seminar on design anthropology is, in what sense, and perhaps even if, this approach adheres to the demarcation of a hybrid space between design and anthropology. I suggest that an alien ethnography that attempts to recast what is considered mundane as enchanted and alien, in order to probe and speculate about new types of relations to non-human beings should have its place in a design-anthropological discourse. Especially, because ethnographic sensitivity and adequate descriptions seem necessary to move this line of inquiry past mere philosophical speculation, to examine the real effects of an experimental design intervention beyond the human.

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