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The Lancaster Care Charter

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Preamble

In the fall of 1991 the Munich Design Charter was published in *Design Issues*. This charter was written as a design-led “call to arms” on the future nations and boundaries of Europe. The signatories of the Munich Design Charter saw the problem of Europe, at that time, as fundamentally a problem of form that should draw on the creativity and expertise of design. Likewise, the Does Design Care...? workshop held at Imagination, Lancaster University in the autumn of 2017 brought together a multidisciplinary group of people from 16 nations across 5 continents, who, at a critical moment in design discourse saw a problem with the future of Care. The Lancaster Care Charter has been written in response to the vital question “Does Design Care...?” and via a series of conversations, stimulated by a range of presentations that explored a range of provocations, insights, and more questions, provides answers for the contemporary context of Care. With nation and boundary now erased by the flow of Capital the Charter aims to address the complex and urgent challenges for Care as both the future possible and the responsibility of design. The Lancaster Care Charter presents a collective vision and sets out new pragmatic encounters for the design of Care and the care of Design.

I. Design

Design is and can be many things. We see a need for a practice of design that is oriented to care as a commitment to human and nonhuman co-existence—that brings to the surface its entanglement with caring ecologies. Design-with-care shifts away from a model of the “designer-as-hero,” and instead offers a more humble, but no less valuable, expertise. Designing-with-care meets people, things, and situations as they are; caring for the dynamism of difference and celebrates diversity and fluidity, operating inclusively and leaving the processes and products of design open and transparent. We envision a mode of design practice that moves beyond incremental and isolated making-preferable, instead acting to give form to the practices of caring ecologies that encompasses multiple, entangled actors across scales.

Design has neglected its responsibility (and response-ability) to care. Design needs to be attentive to context, difference, and time; to be relational, ecological, modest and reflexive, and therefore caring. Yet it also understands that care is work; that, in the most basic sense, requires effort and has effects. Tending to the sources and flows of energy implicated in caring labors is also fundamental to the care-of-design. Designing-with-care works within a relational ontology that sees entities and agencies entangled within and across multiple scales and contexts. It recognizes that encounters affect all entities involved: passivity is not an option, and detachment is impossible. Bringing together design-of-care and care-of-design forces into sharp focus the danger of the subject of

care being perceived as passive. Design, however, does not set out to “help”; rather, it operates on the understanding that care is mutually produced and thus should avoid the inherent power imbalance of the helper/helped binary. Good design-of-care should be mutually liberating, and this requires the time and labor needed to build relationships and maintain contact. A relational view of caring strives to listen deeply, look as well as see, and be responsive to the context and expressed needs.

A caring orientation recognizes the entanglement of design action with history, place, culture and identity, and respects the necessarily careful and entangled relations that already exist. Design can bring care to presence. To design-with-care may mean that, in addition to privileging the newest and most novel, we expand our values to truly acknowledge what exists already and steward these resources. This may be a radical altering of what is, a small nudge, or designing away what exists. It can also mean reconfiguring relations, facilitating both new forms of liberation and new entanglements. It reads and is not afraid of other disciplines and theories. Indeed, it recognizes that a variety of perspectives are needed in order to make sense of the complex and heterogeneous relations and dynamics that are inherent in every real-world—and now also virtual-world—situation. One of the functions of the care-of-design is to integrate these different forms of knowledge and manifest them in meaningful wholes.

We understand that power is implicated in both care and design. Carers and designers intervene in situations characterized by entrenched and emergent power relationships. In this sense, caring and designing need to pay particular attention to power dynamics within caring ecologies, and work to empower all participants in caring gestures, actions, and objects including human and non-human in a constant evolving relationship of care. Ethical imagination, political consideration, and economic invention are central. Design can practice an ethics of care by being mindful, reflexive of its ideas, interventions and configurations.

We call for a world in which to be, is to care; an existence where caring is a given in relation to all others. To design is to make a difference in the world and in relations. Design is thus implicated in absolutely everything, both in very small and humble ways and in ways that have vast (and dire) consequences (often simultaneously). The question, then, is perhaps not “Does Design Care...?” but *how* design cares, or, how design brings to presence, directs or facilitates the care that already exists. Design therefore needs to become much more aware of the complexity of care-filled ecologies, in order to become equal to the task of caring for the actions of care and their consequences.

II. The Challenges and the Limits

The challenges of care exist at different scales of complexity and experience, including the individual, family, social unit, city, nation, continent, the whole earth, and beyond. In addition, we recognize the almost unimaginable challenge of care extended beyond the human-centric, to include ecosystems of species, the synthetic, the post-human, the inanimate, and agentic data.

Currently, design's limitations include a form of colonialism, and we recognize that diverse cultures, societies, languages, understandings, and experiences define what it means to be human—individually and socially. We recognize that a cultural sense of cohesion can support design as a cultural, careful project, and that designers can in fact honor and engage humanity by being human ourselves. This is an apposite moment in design where we can once again see the walls that have been built up since the publication of the Munich Design Charter in 1991. There is now a global crisis of care, as we have blocked our awareness of each other systematically, epistemologically, and organizationally. Many of the problems we see in care now are design problems.

Design is very capable of working together with other professions, disciplines, and situations to generate future possibilities as it draws upon knowledge and skills from both technical and artistic, scientific and humanistic realms. Designers working collaboratively with those from other disciplines need to make explicit the invaluable potential of careful, attentive, creative interventions. As a result, one of the challenges we see is the need for reflexivity as an integral part of design practice, education, and history, which sits in opposition to an objective scientific account of design. Another challenge relates to the traditional “client-focused” relationship; instead we see a need for designers as individuals and commercial entities to act up, to take responsibility for the framing of the design “problem.” We need a shift to a more collaborative relationship where designers reconfigure together with stakeholders the questions being asked and the tasks being set for design. This view of design demands a pro-active role that challenges the quest for short-term solutions, and in turn provokes stakeholders to reconfigure and redesign the efforts they are engaged in. As such, design becomes an integrative discipline that can facilitate co-owned agendas and co-authored responses. Attending to the matters that design should be concerned with is a related challenge; there are so many to choose from, and the act of prioritization is political. Again, design needs to be reflexive and work to understand its own worldviews and assumptions.

Design needs an increased involvement with ethics, but an ethics that is substantive and not only abstracted from practice. We see a need for ethical values drawn from the practices for which they are proposed. Design does not need to rewrite ethics itself, but must engage with the ethics that emerge in and from the disciplines with which it becomes entangled, whether that is predictive medicine, genetic-engineering, biological data, or food production. However, design simultaneously needs to learn and contribute to debates, as artificial intelligence and big data have the potential to close down meaning through teleological definitions of gender, race, and human potential for personal growth.

Care for practice is key: designers as people, and skills and practices also need attention and care, as do those practices of the people and sectors that design engages with. We see models where people are encouraged to try and learn from failure, and we see models of caring practice in societies that need nurturing and care in themselves in order to sustain.

The challenges in care systems have become apparently intractable. There have been divide and conquer approaches to responsibility and accountability in care that act to cripple our ability to engage with the speculative and systemic approaches that design offers. Imagination has been cauterized by a risk-averse, Neo-liberal culture.

Therefore, we propose the following three conditions for the design of possible futures:

- (1) We call the first condition “Care of Complexity”—to design-with-care being sensitive and responsive to the boundaries between human and non-human (i.e., artifacts, animals, nature), local, global, and temporal contexts, and the value in both the commonality and diversity in post-global, post-national, and post-individual contexts.
- (2) The second condition is “Care of the Project”—to design-with-care acknowledging the complex network of relationships between the material and immaterial, and challenging the dichotomy between human and non-human worlds. To achieve this, design must shift its existing paradigm and lead fundamental shifts in other disciplines.
- (3) The third condition is “Care of Relations”—to design-with-care asserting that people today must repair, instead of cutting off, the relationship between people, things, environments, and ecology, not only to maintain a good balance, but also to emphasize the interdependence between these entities.

III. New Scenarios and New Horizons

Progressing research into an ecology of care offered through design must be situated within ongoing debates. What is called for is a notion of care able to attend to things like today’s crises, cultures, politics, values, technologies, and futures. An ecology of care is neither reactive nor solely scientific, but rather reflexive and proactive, founded on three conditions building on an open, developing and fluid set of approaches that celebrate relational agency, including person-centered, and posthuman models.

We propose to call the first condition “Care of Complexity”—to design-with-care being sensitive and responsive to the boundaries between human, post-human and non-human (i.e., artifacts, animals, nature), of momentary, local, global, virtual, temporal contexts, and the importance of valuing both the commonality and diversity in post-global, post-national, and post-individual contexts. In the environment of our digital society, productive and technological logics co-exist and balance, becoming second-nature. Through these reflections we perceive care as a new horizon to design.

This difference makes value if we begin to acknowledge that our complexity is not only personal, but also ecological, with conditions to be imagined and uncovered, not managed or manipulated. We therefore have to work to find the developing and experimental balance of our being and the being of non-human entities between these different logics of technology, production, and service—a balance that avoids the creation of simulacra of care, and accords with an empathic, compassionate and inclusive view of our world.

The second condition is “Care of the Project.” To design-with-care acknowledging that in the usage of the natural or artificial, a person enters a highly complex network of relationships with the material and immaterial; vice versa, through being used by a human, a non-human entity enters and embodies the complex network of relationships. This complex network of relationship has a positive value, it is a benefit to be developed and not to be reduced or neglected. Society today has to face the challenge of breaking the dichotomy between human and non-human worlds, and build the multiple interfaces in between. To achieve this result, design must shift its existing paradigm and lead such a kind of fundamental shift in other disciplines. Design will have to renew itself into a meta-discipline by designing-with-care and caring-for-design.

The third condition is “Care of Relations,” which to design-with-care asserts that today we must repair, instead of cutting off, the relationship between people, things, environments, and ecology, not only to maintain a good balance, but also to emphasize the interdependence between these entities. The processes involved in industrial robotics development and the proliferation of the digital revolution are redefining extant labor and work/home location patterns. Huge swathes of the global population are changing from jobs with a fixed location towards a fluidity of home/work, identity, and nationality that challenge our pre-conceptions of nationhood. Robotization, digitalization, and data-ization might relieve the need to care at intra-personal, interpersonal, and inter-dependent relational levels; but, if we care-for-design what idiosyncratic qualities might grow out of the space created by these scenarios?

IV. Summary

It is unlikely anyone would dispute the general intention of care as something that expresses our relationship to each other and the world. However, the same general agreement would have to be applied to the overwhelming evidence that we don't seem to care for much at all, or that the caring intentions and efforts of individuals are not reflected in collective outcomes—undermined, perhaps, by a more dominant, systemic lack of care. A lot of design continues to invest energy in what design can do based on the sentimental belief in what-might-become. Moreover, design might need to confront the uncomfortable reality that design might not be able to do what it believes it can do. Taking a positive stance, however, we propose that design as a gesture, tool, and means of analyzing and synthesizing future visions is best placed to serve as a means for developing ways of caring better for our world, our cities, our livelihoods, our relationships, and for each other.

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