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**Relating Systems Thinking and Design
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Curating Spatio-Temporal Connection

Geological multi-proxies and becoming-with deep time

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In a transdisciplinary combination of geology and curatorship, long timespans are strung together. We describe a multi-proxy methodology based on actual geological fieldwork conducted in the Barents Sea, and we link this with emerging tidalectic streams in curatorial practice and research. The paper uses geological activity to design what we tentatively, existentially, and metaphorically call curatorial proxies for spatiotemporal connection. Human life is embedded in cosmological and geological systems and forces. Climate change presses for systems understanding and new curatorial practices that are conscious of the culture-making potential of exhibitions and other cultural and spatial designs.

KEYWORDS: geology, curating, multi-proxies, Donna Haraway, systemic design, tidalectic, climate change, the long now, deep time, sympoiesis

RSD TOPIC(S): Architecture & Planning, Learning & Education, Methods & Methodology

Presentation description

How do we connect with the world and its constant becoming, and our becoming with it? In this conference paper, we link geological multi-proxy methodology with curatorial design research in order to enact spatiotemporal connections. The paper is our first joint attempt at using geological practice to design what we tentatively, existentially, and metaphorically might call curatorial proxies of spatiotemporal connection. We aim to create research-based designs for the human experience of being-together with the world.

Geology is a way to think of the temporality of design beyond the consideration of a short time span of just decades but potentially in terms of millennia or longer. Geology makes it possible to think of *the long now*¹ as well as *deep time*.²

We describe a multi-proxy methodology based on actual geological fieldwork that one of us has conducted in the Barents Sea and link this with emerging tidalectic streams in curatorial practice and research. *Tidalectics* as a curatorial approach forms part of a broader rethinking of the performative potential of exhibition making. Climate change presses for new curatorial practices that are conscious of the culture-making potential of exhibitions and other cultural and spatial designs. To facilitate and mediate connection with human culture and the cosmological and geological systems and forces in which all human life is embedded is a key contemporary curatorial activity.

“A tidalectic curatorial approach goes beyond binaries of issues at stake and their representation. It does not assume that there is an outside position from which to observe a thing, a person or another being to be described. Such framings form part of the damaging gestures of the Anthropocene. Artistic and curatorial attempts to depict the natural world often fail to grasp and transmit its complex and lively ‘vibrancy’, as the political theorist Jane Bennett (2010) describes the

¹ In the terms used by the Long Now Foundation, the “long now” spans 10,000 years before and after the present moment. <https://longnow.org/>

² Philosophical concept of geological time and changes over the age of the earth. The concept was introduced by John McPhee (1981).

agency and affectivity of matter, which goes beyond visibility. A tidalectic curatorial methodology, on the other hand, simultaneously shows and brings forth its subject in a performative way, transcending visual representation alone to foster the generative potential of vibrancy and affect.”

Hessler, Stefanie (2020)

Methodology

A key technique in geological fieldwork and sensemaking about time beyond centuries is called the multi-proxy approach. Geologists use multi-proxy approaches to disentangle the past. Etymologically, a proxy is the “agency of one who acts instead of another”; here, meaning something that takes the place of something else. It is related to law, administration and management, and to a caring for—*procuratio*—not unlike the *cura* in curatorship, a caring for what is that is being collected, stored and exposed.

In the terminology within the field of geology, a proxy acts as a stand-in for an actual measurement. We cannot make direct oceanographic or atmospheric measurements in the past, but we can use proxies as agents that, when combined, can reconstruct past climate development.

A geologist line used multi-proxy approaches to collect lake and ocean cores. Cores act as physical archives, and the layers of sediment deposited there over thousands of years tell their own paleoclimatic story. One proxy can tell one singular one-dimensional story, but when combined, the story of the past climate variations begins to crystallise. Only when several cores are spatially combined and correlated can we detangle the climatic story of the past. The multi-proxy method looks for connections and disconnections, isolations and relations, hierarchies and correlations to think through systems.

Discussion

So, how can multi-proxy thinking help our design thinking? In a literal sense, we can trace evidence of human design in the geological record through multi-proxies. In arctic cores, we can see the invention of the coal-fired steam engine in the late 18th century. It thus helps us think through systems and design in the deep now, extending 10.000 years back and forward, as understanding the past helps us predict our designs' influence on the future.

We argue that the method goes beyond this simple realisation. Multi-proxies provide a needed temporal and spatial aspect of systems design thinking. This aspect is most pressing when linking our present-day design to sustainability and the lives of future generations.

In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway lends us thinking tools to explore how we can curate through deep time design in the post-human world. She describes sympoiesis as *making-with* and describes it as "a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive situated, historical systems" (Haraway, 2016, pp. 58). We find it helpful to link making-with to the curatorial practice as sympoiesis, in the curatorial design process, but also in the audiences' experiences of the curated.

In Haraway's (2016) description of *symbiogenesis*, she rests on Margulis's phrase, "the intimacy of strangers. The intrinsic, engulfing entanglement of species, cells, atoms" (Haraway, pp. 60). It is exactly this entanglement that multi-proxies explore and unravel.

Our time is one of alienation, of estrangement. We are not aware of how our food and tools are made, what they consist of, and where they come from. We are estranged from the basic and moral life-making process of symbiogenesis.

We argue that the sympoiesis of curated spaces can benefit from thinking through the temporal and spatial sympoiesis of multi-proxies. Each experience is one point, one core, with multiple agents that are linked to other agents both temporally and spatially.

This is relevant when we design experiences that mediate the connection between human culture and cosmological and geological systems.

Our multi-system estrangement means that we need to move beyond facts and numbers into an understanding of our own sympoiesis with the world around us. Everything is not linked to everything, but everything is linked to something (Haraway, 2016).

Conclusion

We have presented our first musings on how we can think about the long now by linking geological multi-proxy methodology with curatorial design research in order to enact spatiotemporal connections. We tentatively argue that this approach can help bring design system thinking forward, adding spatiotemporal aspects into the systems of design, in which we thereby can operationalise Haraway's sympoiesis into curatorial practice.

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