dictions of the happening, and also to gatherings of likeminded artists, designers, and researchers at events such as the Macy conferences on cybernetics. To what extent is RTD an attempt not simply to rethink conferences, but also to rethink the practices of design research beyond the common perceptions of science? If this is the case, then maybe there is value in looking even further afield to explore what these future “conference” events might be. In terms of the limits of language, is the notion of the exhibition, how imaginative and inventive might one be in the next conference itself a limitation? Similarly, with the notion of the exhibition, how imaginative and inventive might one be in the next RTD? How close to a conference does it need to seem in order to “count” as one?

1 I am a doctoral student, one of the early career researchers that the Research Through Design (RTD) conference aims to support (§§16, 20). Earlier this year I experienced my first RTD conference, RTD2015, 21st Century Makers and Materialities, as an author-exhibitor and participant. The commentary will reflect upon my experience of the conference with reference to challenges and choices presented by Abigail Durrant et al. It will also draw attention to the influence of epistemological commitments in shaping expectations of RTD conferences and will consider the tensions at play in planning a conference that speaks to a diverse community of researcher-practitioners.

2 I recognise my experience of RTD2015 in the account discussed in Durrant et al., exemplified in §§45f and feel that the conference was very successful in achieving a dialogical and supportive platform that embodied the commitments described on the RTD website, http://www.researchthroughdesign.org/about. The way this was enacted included subtleties not described in the target article, but memorable because they are atypical of my other conference experiences. These include quite detailed communication about the event, including the way the Rooms of Interest sessions would be managed and an invitation to take part in the “Making Space” session with clear guidance about the purpose of the session. Direct interactions with the submissions team and exhibition coordinators revealed care and concern for the work and its presentation. I was welcomed personally, introduced to others and checked-in with in a way that signalled a desire to draw me into a community. These details set the supporting tone and the ethos that emphasised authentic concern for the artefact and a genuine desire for a different kind of conference experience that valued research derived from practice. The physical and temporal structure of the conference supported different kinds of dialogue and opportunities for knowledge transfer including group conversations and individual discussions and there were multiple invitations to delegates to comment on and discuss the effectiveness of the format.

3 I learned my way into the conference and agree that the dialogue in the Rooms of Interest improved as new attendees were initiated (§46). Meaningful induction prior to conference would aid induction but, as explained in the article, it is a tacit process that occurs through situated interactions. This may put some prospective participants at a disadvantage due to lack of familiarity with art school cr2ts and experimental ways of communicating research. One of the strong sensations I experienced at RTD was of community, albeit with varied backgrounds and research interests.

4 The conference series itself is an example of research through design, and Durrant et al.’s article is a reflection on an iterative design that produces conference artefacts. An illustration is the discussion of how scribing might raise the prominence of process, reflection and interpretation (§§36f) within an epistemology of design, and the difficulties of getting the right balance in terms of content, medium, experience of scribe and mode of communication (§§66f). The article reveals an on-going conflict between the desire and intent for the conference to be itself, strengthening an identity that is congruent with the ethos and motivations associated with research through design (§71), while at the same time being outward facing and accessible to a wider academic research audience. Not only is there a surface tension where research through design meets traditional research in the wider research community but also there are multiple internal tensions. The conference design participants and reviewers are drawn from disparate research traditions (§2, 21), and interdisciplinary research teams may include non-designers unfamiliar with practice-based research. Consequently, familiar and general means of communication and dissemination that transcend
domain-specific barriers are needed to share research at submission and post-conference, but as reported, these can be at odds with the dialogical dissemination activities that more closely address an epistemology of practice. Additionally, designer-researchers often work within the academy, which retains vestiges of its positivist roots (Schön 1991: 31) through a structure that privileges particular forms of knowledge and favours traditional and recognisable research outputs, so researchers may be torn in their commitments.

5 As I reflect on the tensions articulated in the target article, I am pulled back to arguments from the past that remain present, despite the evolution of research through design. These include inconsistency expressed in understandings and uses of research through design as well as disagreement about practice-based knowledge generation and rigour, and discrepancy in how such research should be communicated. For example John Zimmerman, Erik Stolterman and Jodi Forlizzi (2010) believe that an artifact can be a manifestation of design knowledge is misguided (2008:158) and he proposes grounded theory as a way design knowledge is misguided (2008:158) and he proposes grounded theory as a way to draw out theory from practice (2008:154). Zimmerman asserts the need for a “theoretical scaffolding” (2010: 311) for research through design to clarify the distinction between theory and practice but others (Frayling 1993; Gaver 2012; Gaver & Bowers 2012; Friedman 2008) stress the need for research findings to be made explicit for Research with a capital “R” (Frayling 1993) to occur. In relation to theory generation, Friedman has argued that linking reflective practice of design to design knowledge is misguided (2008:158) and he proposes grounded theory as a way to draw out theory from practice (2008:154). Zimmerman asserts the need for a “theoretical scaffolding” (2010: 311) for research through design to clarify the distinction between theory and practice but others (Frayling 1993; Gaver 2012: 937) warn against “impulses towards convergence and standardization” that could diminish the nature of design research. He contrasts generalizable theories emerging from scientific research with the kind of knowledge that may be derived from annotating the “ultimate particular” of design, described by Stolterman (2008). To return to frequently aired differences may be uncomfortable, because it draws attention away from coalescence and common ground, but I think it is relevant because it points to reasons why the RTD conference requires such care and attention. It also reinforces matters of concern raised in the article about developing future conferences.

6 Design has a multiplicity of contexts so that even the same practices may have different meanings. This was one of the themes of a recent talk by Paul Dourish at Lancaster University. As a result, research that is conducted through design is expansive, encompassing disciplines that use research through design in different ways with different intent. One example of the distinction is between design with heredity in science, such as engineering, and design with heredity in arts, such as information visualisation. Practitioner-researchers from both fields may identify as designers but they may not be grounded in a shared ontology, so their understandings of how an epistemology of design might be advanced may be at odds. This has a potential impact on expectations of the submission and dissemination process at a conference for the furtherance of a design epistemology. I am reminded of James Pierce et al's work on the divergence in the different understandings of CD based on readings of “referent,” “intellectual heritage” (ibid: 2085) and the “forms of knowledge that are considered helpful for doing design” (ibid: 2086). Pierce points to the distinct concerns that design brings to products and production because of its grounding in arts and humanities. The paper uses separate terms to underline the different understandings of CD based on readings of “referent,” “intellectual heritage” (ibid: 2085) and the “forms of knowledge that are considered helpful for doing design” (ibid: 2086). Pierce points to the distinct concerns that design brings to products and production because of its grounding in arts and humanities. The paper, which addresses an HCI audience, suggests ways to broaden and deepen connections between HCI and design, including increasing design literacy within an HCI context. The paper concludes:

Embracing design practice and discourse may require us to rethink, for example, how we conduct peer review, select and prioritize publication formats, and set conference registration fees. (Pierce et al 2015: 2991)

I think the difference in the way CD is used and understood in different academic communities has parallels in research through design.

7 This brings me back to Durrant et al. and the RTD conferences. Although we come from different places, Gaver (2012: 942) writes that most in research through design “share a common set of values” that include appreciation of “the value of craft,” “that the practice of making is a route to discovery” and that design’s “synthetic nature” can allow “richer and more situated understandings.” The commonalities he describes are things I recognize from RTD2015, and the reference to its ethos, motivation and atmosphere in Durrant et al. (§§64, 71, 74) reinforces my sense of building a community to share research and explore a design epistemology. So there are shared values, but there will also be differences in understandings and intent.

8 My concern is how the conference will be nurtured, because it requires a delicate balance to enable it to flourish. The tensions are evident in the target article and a change to programme team, numbers of delegates, conference location, conference space and submission process all have the potential to change the dynamics of the dialogue. Feedback from RTD2015 highlighted issues of inclusivity in the submissions process and perceptions of incongruity because of differing beliefs about practice-based research and differing expectations about the dissemination of design research. One submission mode is unlikely to satisfy all for the reasons set out above, but a mode that privileges process, artefact and dialogue can reinforce the conference ethos. Opening up the questions raised by the article in the context of the conference could provide opportunity for dialogue about the way the structure supports, challenges and develops research through design. This is more than a functional activity because the conversation has power to reveal and clarify epistemological differences and areas of convergence.

9 Frayling's paper (1993) was written at a time when academic Research was a relatively new proposition in some art schools. Frayling showed that this was not something to fear. He shared illustrations of how Research was already ongoing in art and design as a way of engendering confidence. Research through design is in a new phase, though it still faces the challenges brought by multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary traditions. The conference provides a
space to explore, experiment, share, critique and disseminate practice-based research through dialogue, in an atmosphere where a particular ethos has been established. In this way, it can continue to provide a more appropriate forum for the presentation of practice-based methodologies.

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Matching Methodology to Conference Content: The Assemblage Network Potential for Research Through Design Conferences

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> Upshot - This OPC considers the tension inherent in the twin aims of the Research Through Design (RTD) conferences: providing a high quality academic dialogue conference experience, whilst promoting and recording knowledge generated via a range of actants. It proposes the use of a more transparent, underpinning methodology that aligns the disparate elements of the event with the RTD conference aims and content.

RTD paper and conference ethos  

"1" As someone who presented a paper and attended sessions at RTD 2015, Abigail Durrant et al’s target article closely reflects my experience of a conference that actively engages in a collective constructivist approach to research through design. As the article identifies, the RTD conference is “envisioned as an experimental, inclusive platform for disseminating practice-based design research” (§2) aimed at stimulating discourse further and sharing knowledge in design research. In addition, it seeks to “help scaffold a pertinent debate on epistemology in design” (§2). As such, both the conference and this article offer a significant contribution to the field of design research.

"2" The target article offers two clear areas of focus: the way the novel RTD conference format resulted in “(a) providing a dialogue conference experience and (b) capturing the knowledge that is generated during conference proceedings” (§4). This twin focus with embedded but slightly different trajectories sets up a tension that is explored throughout the article: how to maintain traditionally recognised and accepted academic standards whilst also employing new formats of presentation and debate-recording that allow a wider range of less controlled actants to become involved in the network of the event. This OPC will focus primarily on this interesting tension.

"3" As stated in support of a new epistemology of design, “there is much need – and opportunity – for new dissemination platforms to support research through design” (§15). Particularly, as the article accurately identifies, as, “typically, design conferences either adhere to the traditional conference format […] or showcase product propositions whereby the intended outcome is not research understanding […]” (§1). In a rapidly evolving global, digital, networked culture, research and particularly design research needs to be at the forefront if not leading creative research dissemination and modes of communication.

"4" To realise this through the twin ambitions of academic discourse and event recording in a novel conference format, needs, as identified, “further recontextualizations of how inquiry through making may take place and how understanding may be ‘entangled’ between people and things” (Ingold 2013: §13). Theoretical models such as assemblage theory (DeLanda 2006; Deleuze & Guattari 2004) or actor-network theory (Callon 1991; Latour 1993) or the nascent open design (http://opendesign.foundation/articles/designers-can-open-source-session-video) movement offer useful models for such a recontextualization as they supply an underpinning framework that would support the continual reforming and reconnection of knowledge at such conferences.

Engagement in the conference  

"5" The inclusion in the conference of those researching outside recognised forms of academia also contributed to the tension between an authoritative academic voice (quality) versus a more horizontal assemblage (democratic). Christopher Frayling’s closing videoed provocation ‘refers to “pockets of interest” that are not driven by Arts and Humanities Research Council funding themes. As a researcher who is delivering Higher Education in an Further Education environment, outside the Research Excellence Framework and self-funding my research, the ability to access transparent rules of engagement is important, as academic practice is often tacit and somewhat opaque. As a first-time presenter, the peer review was an excellent example of such transparency. It was an exceptionally well-organised and helpful experience. It was rigorous yet suggested ways to draw out, develop and better communicate the key themes of my research in the proposed paper. As acknowledged, “the final formatting of the visual papers for proceedings presented more significant choice points that […] we knew we would have to grapple with” (§32). The open design format was confusing at this granular level. The reformatting of the accepted visual papers, redesign by someone other than the author, risked reducing the clarity of the communication. Here, an assemblage approach would allow for discrete and crafted elements that then connect and interact within the event but do not need to be disassembled themselves. This would resolve some of the tension between retaining a coherent and quality voice and a more fluid and egalitarian format. However, issues around archiving material still need to be resolved, as it should surely not be a choice between high quality or engagement but an assemblage of all. It is concerning that

because the RTD proceedings were not archived in keeping with established criteria for academic impact, some reflected that the submissions did not ‘warrant’ high quality ‘production’ in keeping with that established criteria." (§43)

http://www.univie.ac.at/constructivism/journal/11/1/008.durrant