



Design Ontologies IN Practice

**Pedagogy, Performance, Technology,
and Situated Worlds**

Copyright © 2026 ARTISTIC XPLORATORIUM

Image credit: Ivan Stanczewski



“Walking with Speculative Artefacts” by Kamila Wolszczak, presented during the symposium
“Walking is Still Honest: On Being and Walking Together,”
Vilnius, 2023

Copyright © 2026 ARTISTIC XPLORATORIUM

Image credit: Ivan Stanczewski

**Design Ontologies in Practice:
Pedagogy, Performance, Technology, and Situated Worlds**

Foreword: Dr. Vidmina Stasiulyte

Introduction: Faseeh Saleem, Ph.D., Artistic Design Research

Book Layout & Design: AX (Artistic Xploratorium)

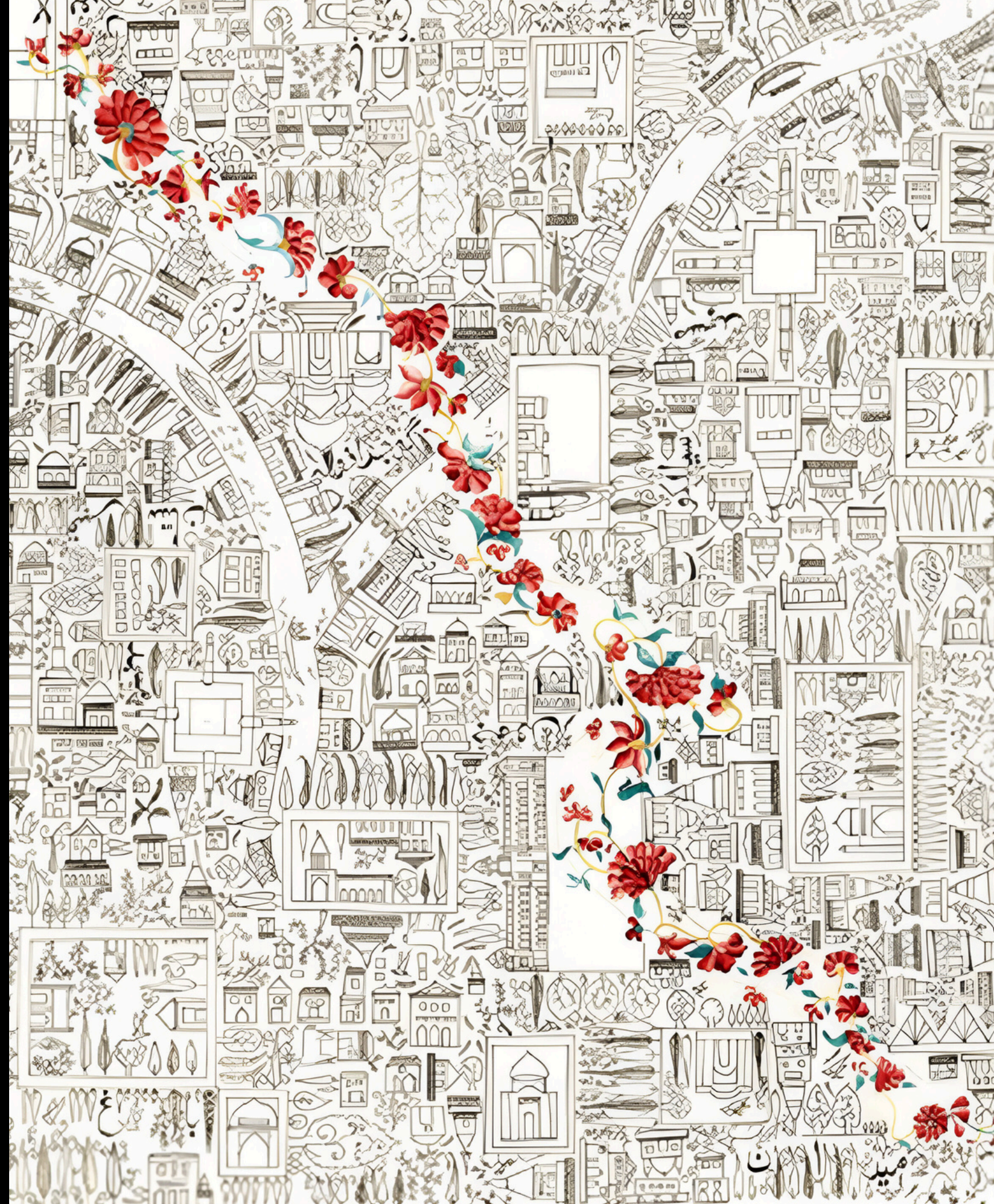
Editor: Team AX

Publisher: AX (Artistic Xploratorium)

ISBN: 978-1-0695957-5-1

Copyright © 2026 AX (Artistic Xploratorium)

Image credit: Bahawal Butt



میدان الامان



Foreword

Design Ontology – Towards Transdisciplinary Research Practices

Design ontology is not a search for a fixed definition of design, but an inquiry into how design continuously produces the conditions through which we understand and act in the world. Design does not simply respond to reality; it participates in its formation. It shapes the questions we ask, the methods we use, and the futures we imagine.

From this perspective, transdisciplinary research is not an addition to design practice but a necessity. When design enters into dialogue with other fields of knowledge, it exposes its own assumptions and expands its capacity to operate as a reflective and critical practice. Such encounters allow design to function not only as a means of production, but as a way of thinking — one that unfolds through material engagement, pedagogical experimentation, and speculative inquiry.

To approach design ontologically is therefore to recognize it as a cultural and epistemic practice that negotiates between knowledge and action. Transdisciplinary research, in this sense, becomes the space where design can question its own foundations while simultaneously contributing to new forms of understanding and responsibility in the world.

Dr. Vidmina Stasiulyte

Introduction

The contributions gathered in this publication collectively position design not merely as a bounded discipline but as an ontological force - one that shapes how knowledge is formed, how subjects emerge, and how worlds are organized. Across pedagogical experimentation, performative counter-design, technological critique, and embodied spatial inquiry, these works illustrate that design functions simultaneously as a method of investigation and as a mechanism of world-making.

Several contributions foreground pedagogy as a critical site where design ontology is actively produced. Studio-based research emerging from teaching contexts examines how design education can move beyond market-driven aesthetics toward forms of inquiry rooted in reflection, relational awareness, and critical engagement. One project, for instance, positions unlearning as an ontological practice in fashion education, challenging dominant curricular structures shaped by standardized craft norms, commodification, and prescriptive trend systems. Through methods such as reverse design analysis, memory mapping, and object-based ideation, this work legitimizes lived experience, sensory knowledge, and emotional memory as valid epistemologies of design. In doing so, it reconceives the designer not as a producer of finalized objects but as a facilitator of meaning, empathy, and situated understanding, proposing pedagogical strategies that cultivate plural design ontologies transferable across disciplines.

Complementing this approach, research in textile studio pedagogy explores how critical inquiry can transform both teaching and practice. Drawing on expanded frameworks of design as a meta-discipline, these experiments treat the studio as a co-evolving ecosystem of objects, processes, and knowledge systems. Assignments structured around research, ideation, and translation invite students to approach textiles not merely as material outcomes but as carriers of narrative, experience, and situated knowledge. Here, design ontology emerges through the pedagogical process itself: students are shaped by the systems they learn to interrogate, adapt, and transform.

Beyond pedagogy, ontology is also examined through performance and ritual. In *Unholy Muss*, Marc Nair frames liturgy as a designed system capable of producing belief, and its satirical inversion as a performative act of counter-design. Echoing Anne-Marie Willis' assertion—“We design our world, while our world acts back on us and designs us”—the performance redistributes agency to the audience, demonstrating how temporality, materiality, and participation recursively shape subjectivity.

Design ontology further unfolds through embodied encounters with place. A walking-based workshop in Vilnius frames the urban environment as a co-creative field populated by human and other-than-human agencies. Through drifting, material discovery, and clay-based translation, participants engage fragments of the city as active interlocutors rather than passive context. This approach exemplifies design as a relational practice of noticing, interpreting, and responding—showing that ontology emerges through interaction with environments, not abstraction alone.

Finally, research on generative AI in visual communication design extends the ontological inquiry into algorithmic systems. As machines simulate emotion, language, and visual worlds, they destabilize assumptions about authenticity, agency, and empathy. AI functions both as collaborator and mirror—reflecting human data while reshaping perception and affective response. By situating generative systems within the political economy of surveillance and data extraction, this work reframes empathy itself as a designed, mediated, and potentially programmable construct.

Together, these contributions illuminate design ontology as neither singular nor stable. It is enacted in classrooms, rituals, technologies, urban encounters, and material artifacts—through processes of teaching, unlearning, performing, walking, crafting, and coding. As Willis reminds us, design is recursive: we shape the worlds we inhabit, and those worlds, in turn, shape us.

Faseeh Saleem, Ph.D., Artistic Design Research

AUTHORS

ALIZAY NADEEM
KAINAT SIDDIQUE
KAMILA WOLSZCZAK
MARC NAIIR
MEHREEN ANWAR
NABIHA KHAN
SARAH JAVAID
ZEB BILAL

ABSTRACTS

P1...Pg. 7

P2...Pg. 9

P3...Pg. 11

P4...Pg. 13

P5...Pg. 15

EXPLORATORY PAPER

P1...Pg. 17-48

P2...Pg. 49-68

P3...Pg. 69-84

P4...Pg. 85-100

P5...Pg. 101-124

Make/Think or Think/Make: Critical Pedagogy In The Textile Design Studio

Authors: Mehreen Anwar, Zeb Bilal, Nabiha Khan

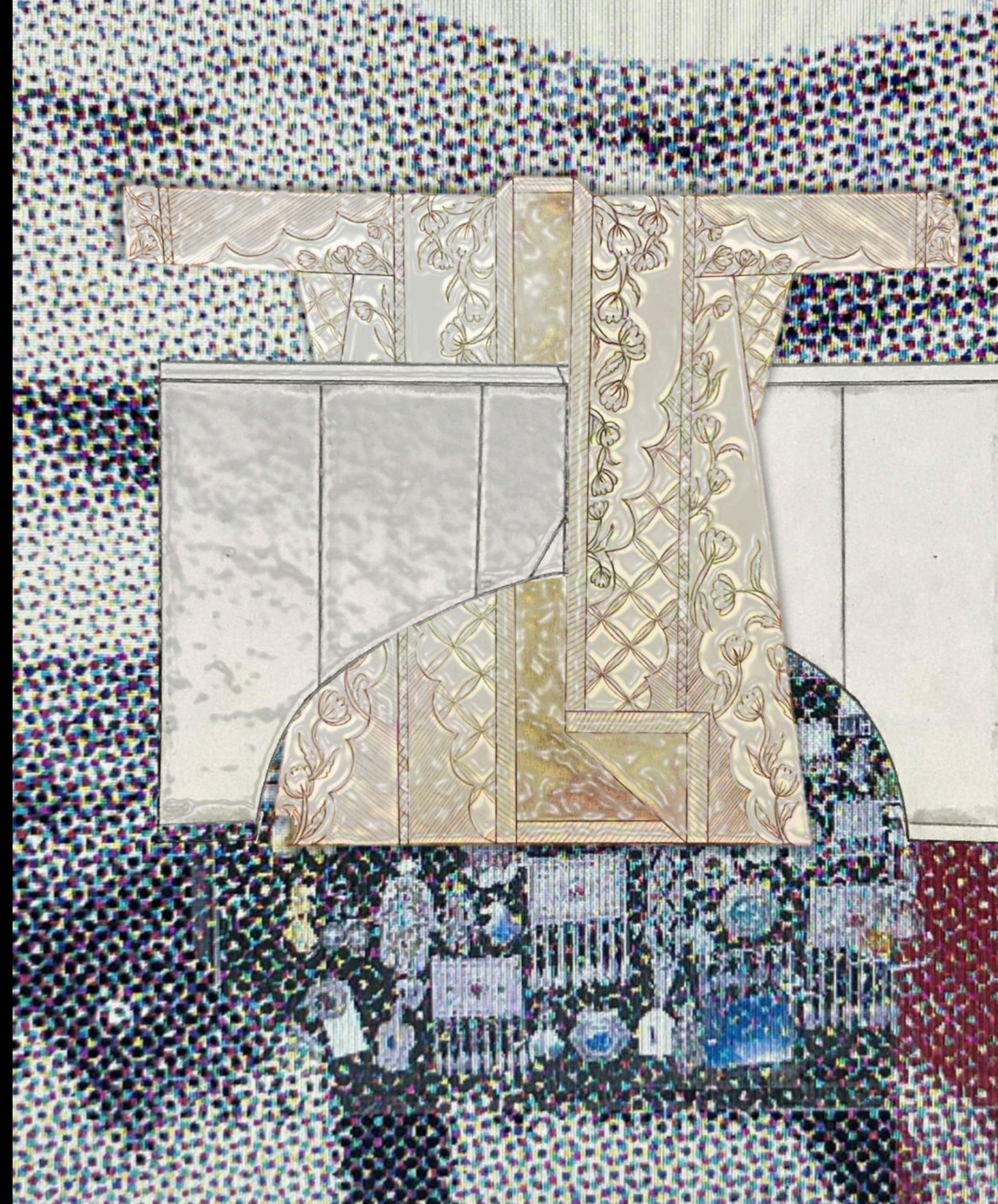
This paper documents the critical pedagogical approaches that were implemented while teaching final-year undergraduate textile design students over a three-year period at one of Pakistan's leading design institutes. Spread over two semesters of 16 weeks each, students engaged with a subject of their choosing and developed a collection of product-centric designed outcomes that would demonstrate their aesthetic and technical abilities in textiles. As design educators, it was our goal to push the boundaries of the existing curriculum and experiment with a design process rooted in critical inquiry. The authors/textile faculty reflected on how design could be taught to align with the challenges of the 21st century and nurture a critical-thinker designer. Drawing on Escobar's (2018) perspective of design, which views it as a meta-discipline that transcends mere functionality and includes a complex, evolving system of objects, processes, and practices, a series of assignments was developed. This paper highlights the teaching strategies of research, ideation, and translation that enabled creative forms of tangibility, knowledge production, and experiences to emerge and asks the question, *How does a critical pedagogical approach facilitate design inquiry, process, and learning in the textile design studio?* By focusing on selected student projects, this paper illustrates how exploratory pedagogical approaches served as a stimulus at various phases of the design process, deepened their understanding, and allowed them to explore textiles as a creative medium.



How Unlearning Changed the Way We Design

Authors: Sarah Javaid and Kainat Siddique

This paper proposes unlearning as an ontological design practice within fashion education. It reframes design not as the production of aesthetically legible commodities but as a mode of meaning-making and empathetic attunement. Drawing on studio teachings in Pakistan, we argue that dominant curricula reproduce narrow ontologies of design that are structured on market-driven aesthetics, standardization of practices and prescriptive trend logics (Whitty et al., 2025). These hegemonic frameworks reduce the purpose of design to a transactional activity limiting critical inquiry into inherited biases and exploration of an empathetic value system. Therefore, we propose an alternate pedagogy that reconfigures the role of a designer through reverse design analysis, memory mapping, and object-based ideation. These exercises mobilize sensory knowledge and lived memory as a legitimate design epistemology, enabling students to rearticulate design's purpose and outcome. This approach foregrounds unlearning as a structured methodology for decentralizing universalist aesthetics and cultivating plural design ontologies. Methodologically, we analyzed student artefacts and reflective journals through a discussion-led, studio-based approach. The findings provide evidence of how these interventions shift students' conceptualization of design from formal resolution to a relational and context-responsive approach. The project contributes a transferable strategy for ontological design in education, offering reflective instruments that can be adapted across disciplines. In doing so, it answers the call to rethink the ontological foundations of design education. What design is, what it does, and how we can unlearn our preconceived prejudices to better shape the world we inhabit.



Eccentric Wanderer with-Matter

Author: Kamila Wolszczak

Eccentric Wanderer with-Matter explores public space as a layered, symbolic medium for social reimagination. Through a workshop experience as part of the 12th New Materialisms Conference at Maynooth University 2024, participants are invited to look at urban landscapes through an eccentric lens, observing hidden traces, textures, and forms that suggest narratives beyond human perception. Drawing from the Greek concept of *kairos* (the opportune moment), this work encourages speculative engagement with time, presence, and space outside the traditional center. Using tactile interactions with clay and other materials, participants practice ex-centric gestures that foster dialogue and inspire collaborative discovery. Eccentricity here is not a deviation but a method. It is an invitation to step aside, to notice, to imagine differently. By cultivating *wit(h)nessing* —a practice of compassionate observation and interaction— we co-create an inclusive symbolic space, where eccentricity becomes a bridge between understanding and innovation. This approach nurtures awareness of overlooked environments and offers new “instructions on how to use reality,” connecting us with unseen layers of our shared public spaces (Huber, 2015; Coumans, 2023).



This paper argues how design is fundamental to the construction and development of Unholy Muss, a performance autoethnography of an “unfaithing” experience. By incorporating temporal, material and agentic elements into the performance lecture-as-liturgy, design engages with established notions of what a Christian liturgical service entails, creating subversive structures that rupture ontological expressions of belief production and question personal belief. These design elements extend to the participatory aspect of the liturgy, which involve the audience as active participants in the performance, creating a communal atmosphere of undoing belief. The use of satire is also a fundamental design feature of Unholy Muss, softening the sharper edges of criticism and offering levity to the subject of religious belief, which is often seen as deeply personal and, therefore, unimpeachable.

The Dismissal

Containing the Order of Service for the

Unholy Muss

And

Other

Diverse

Writings

For your perusal

And entertainment

Empathy through the Lens of Generative AI

Author: Alizay Nadeem

This paper navigates the evolving landscape of generative AI, examining its profound impact on human empathy, perception, and connection. As AI systems increasingly generate human-like responses, they blur the boundaries between human and machine, amplifying the uncanny valley effect and raising ethical concerns about psychological manipulation. At its core, this essay questions: *What makes us human?* By integrating design, psychology, and technology, it investigates whether empathy can be programmed and examines the consequences of engaging with artificial designed entities that mirror human emotions. Highlighting the shifting nature of emotional authenticity in an era where AI convincingly simulates human sentiment.

As generative AI become increasingly integrated into daily life, this work critically examines the risk of desensitization to real emotions and the erosion of trust in human experience. By positioning AI as both a collaborator and an existential mirror, it challenges conventional understandings of emotion, cognition, and agency. In a world where machines can imitate human sentiment, this research urges a reevaluation of empathy not as an inherently human trait, but as a programmable phenomenon that compels us to reconsider what it truly means to feel.





Make/Think or Think/Make: Critical Pedagogy In The Textile Design Studio

Authors: Mehreen Anwar, Zeb Bilal, Nabiha Khan

This paper documents the critical pedagogical approaches that were implemented while teaching final-year undergraduate textile design students over a three-year period at one of Pakistan's leading design institutes. Spread over two semesters of 16 weeks each, students engaged with a subject of their choosing and developed a collection of product-centric designed outcomes that would demonstrate their aesthetic and technical abilities in textiles. As design educators, it was our goal to push the boundaries of the existing curriculum and experiment with a design process rooted in critical inquiry. The authors/textile faculty reflected on how design could be taught to align with the challenges of the 21st century and nurture a critical-thinker designer. Drawing on Escobar's (2018) perspective of design, which views it as a meta-discipline that transcends mere functionality and includes a complex, evolving system of objects, processes, and practices, a series of assignments was developed. This paper highlights the teaching strategies of research, ideation, and translation that enabled creative forms of tangibility, knowledge production, and experiences to emerge and asks the question, *How does a critical pedagogical approach facilitate design inquiry, process, and learning in the textile design studio?* By focusing on selected student projects, this paper illustrates how exploratory pedagogical approaches served as a stimulus at various phases of the design process, deepened their understanding, and allowed them to explore textiles as a creative medium.

Introduction

In South Asia, textiles are imbued with a rich history that weaves a story of the land, its cultural traditions, the creative excellence of its artisans, and the pivotal role they played in a historical transnational global trade. This layered past, and its intersection with colonial rule, collectively shaped the future contours of art and design education in post-colonial nation-states. A major shift occurred in academia when, to support a nascent industry, 'craft-centric' instruction was replaced with teaching '*design*' as conceptualized in the West (Raja, 2017).

Years later, in the mid-1990s, similar motivations led to a government initiative to establish Pakistan's first fashion school. The stakeholders who founded the school had envisioned the potential benefits of creating synergy between design education and industry for economic gain. Resultantly, in 2008, the school expanded to become a leading design institute of Pakistan (PIFD 2021).

The formative ideological underpinnings not only shaped the institute's core mission and philosophy but also influenced how 'design' was perceived as a discipline, impacting the development of curricula for the various design programs being offered. Currently, the institute has five specialist design departments/schools offering undergraduate design degrees in Fashion, Textile, Jewellery, Furniture and Interior, Leather Accessories and Footwear, Ceramic and Glass.

This paper focuses on the textile design program, documenting the critical pedagogical approaches and design exercises developed and implemented while teaching final-year undergraduate textile design students over three years, from Fall 2019 to Spring 2022.

Teaching Framework: Critical Pedagogy x Design Pluriverse

As design pedagogues, we were tasked with teaching and mentoring up to 60 students over two 16-week semesters to develop their individual thesis studio projects. The

guidelines for these projects required students to explore a subject/inspirational theme of their choice and design a collection of product-centric outcomes that showcased their aesthetic and technical abilities in two domains: home textiles or apparel.

This was a challenging undertaking and required a critical pedagogical approach that would facilitate students' agency and autonomy in their projects (Gray, 2022). Our goal was to push the boundaries of the existing curriculum and experiment with a design process rooted in critical inquiry. We aimed to nurture a critical-thinker designer who could understand and effectively address the design challenges of the 21st century. This called for us to rethink the ontological aspect of design (Which essentially meant asking: What is design? And what does it do?). We reflected on the future role of a textile designer, the discipline itself, and *how* to prepare students to navigate an increasingly multi-disciplinary design landscape. We questioned whether textile design should be viewed solely as a utilitarian product/object. What more could textile design be and do?

To respond to these questions, we drew on Escobar's perspective of the '*Design Pluriverse*', which calls for 'a world where many worlds fit' (2018, p. 5). Design is viewed as a meta-discipline that embraces diversity, multiplicity of views, and is understood as a 'complex, evolving system of objects, processes, and practices' (Hartnett, 2021). This design pluralism aligned with the critical pedagogy we applied in the design studio, and helped us to build on the knowledge and technical skills that students had already learnt (these included proficiency in weaving, knitting, printing, and dyeing) during their preceding six semesters of textile studio and theory courses. In this exploratory paper, we share how a critical, all-inclusive pedagogical approach facilitated design inquiry, process, and learning in the textile design studio.

Research: a mode of intellectual investigation

Research has generally been understood to mean *searching again*, but its French etymology suggests that it means to seek with an intense and thorough approach. Glanville (2023) values design as an intentional, creative process equal to systematic

knowledge generation. He suggests a profound interconnection where design relies on inquiry, and research itself is an act of design (Glanville, 2023). This view elevates design from a mere application of research to a primary mode of intellectual investigation. Although the research phase was an integral part of the students' thesis project, we observed a recurring limitation in their primary research. The students predominantly relied on secondary sources, and this one-dimensional approach constrained their creative process.

The initial design conundrum for students was identifying a research idea with sufficient depth for a year-long project. To help tackle this, we established two core research criteria: first, the chosen theme had to be accessible *for rich, in-depth primary research*; second, each student had to find a research gap and develop their own unique perspective. This was initiated through intensive mind-mapping exercises that encouraged students to analyse their themes in great depth, thereby uncovering lacunae and formulating original points of departure. Figure 1 shows the multi-layered mind-map for the project, *Larry Adda (Bus Stop)/Transit Culture*, where the student explored the site as a vibrant cultural microcosm, focusing on social interactions, the material culture, and exploring the traveller's perspective (Fig. 2). This project and others that engaged with a multisensory inquiry reinforce Glanville's fundamental point of view.

Students were also encouraged to take alternate research routes that moved beyond the purely visual. They were guided to analyze their topics both objectively and subjectively. This was essentially a reflexive design approach (Rodgers & Yee, 2023). A prime example of this was when a student documented her family's history through reenactment and poetic interaction with her family's heirlooms (Fig.3). She engaged in a tactile and empathetic inquiry by handling the objects, studying their construction, and using their visual and material language as points of departure to create textile pieces that highlighted the lived experiences embedded within the heirlooms. This immersive fieldwork was always scaffolded by systematic secondary research to position their work within a wider conceptual framework.

Based on Escobar's concept of pluriversal perspectives, the instructors encouraged students' subjectivity and experiential knowledge. They recognized that developing

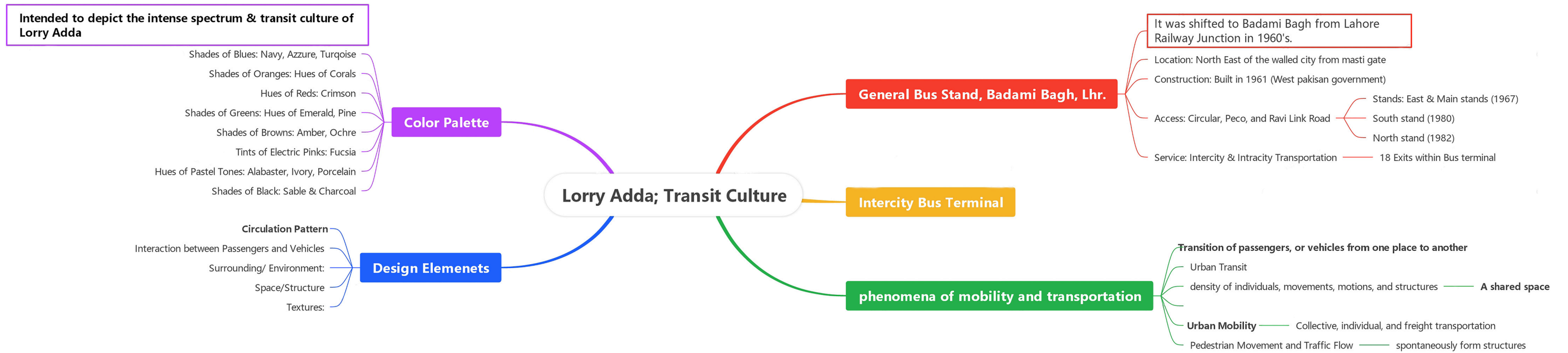


Figure 1. Mind-Mapping for the Project 'Larri Adda' (Bus Stop)/Transit Culture' by Fatima Amanat, c.2021



The Southern Stand was built in 1980 .



Figure 2. Primary Research. Photo Mapping the Site of the 'Larri Adda' (Bus Stop) by Fatima Amanat, c.2021



Figure 3. Primary research. Stills from the Re-enactment Video. Project 'Heirlooms' by Areej Qadir, c.2020

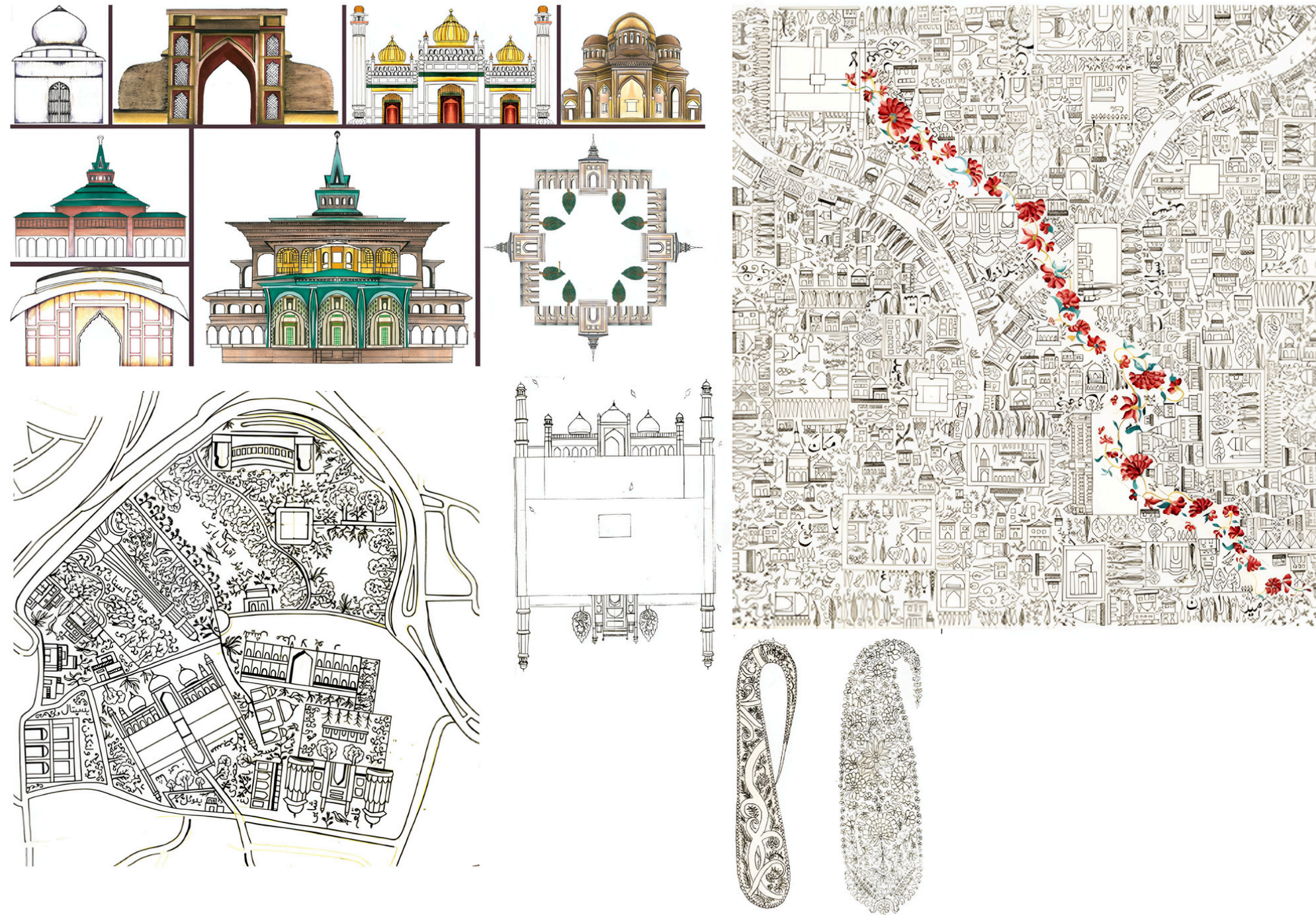


Figure 4. Research Sketches. Project 'Map Shawl: Mapping Migration from Srinagar to Lahore' by Bahawal Butt, c.2020

expertise was not simply a straight path from beginner to professional (Gray, 2022). The students were directed to refer to their own portfolios, to unearth previously demonstrated strengths, unpack a subject of personal interest, or share a narrative. Mapping migration stories through the Kashmiri shawl was another notable project where the student was not a passive recipient but an active archivist and knowledge maker. In this case, the mapping of a personal migrational journey covered the artistic, socio-historical, cultural, and geographical landscape of Kashmir and Punjab. The student thus contributed to the larger tapestry of regional and global history. We also noted that shifting our role from that of conventional instructors to that of facilitators gave the students space to nurture their creativity and conceptual ideas (Fig. 4).

Strategies of Ideation & Exploration: facilitating 'eureka' moments.

The ideation phase of the thesis project flowed from the exhaustive research that students had already done and was pivotal to helping them imagine and create an array of creative possibilities that we called 'idea designs'. Perhaps one of the key goals and challenges in this phase was to instill in the students the significance of developing an *original* visual design language for their projects. To facilitate this, we used *storytelling* and *meaning-making* as a pedagogical tool and as a *viewfinder* for ideation. Students were shown a short film, *'Reel/Unreel'* by Francis Alys (2011), followed by a discussion on its key themes, storyline, and characters. The students were asked to reflect on the visual strategies of the director and develop a photo essay that captured the gist of the film's narrative. This trained them to observe, analyse, select, and understand how visuals had the potential to communicate meaning. Following this, they were asked to apply the same critical lens to their own research and create a seamless visual narrative/story using only black and white, freeing them from the complexity of balancing color. Limiting students to this bold, graphic approach was intentional and made them think in terms of positive/negative space and form. It trained students to think about how visual elements could be arranged, scaled, juxtaposed, and fragmented to tell a story. Students opted for both linear and non-linear arrangements to share their narrative compositions (Fig. 5).

Identifying students' difficulty in extracting a unifying colour palette from their chosen

theme, a bilingual 'text to color' design exercise was developed to help them. Students were provided with two selected paragraphs of text: one in English and the other in Urdu. They were allowed to choose the language they felt most comfortable with, as their task was to read their chosen text critically, interpret its mood, and translate their subjective responses into a visual color story using painted color tabs in a 12 x 12-inch square grid (Fig. 6). The next critique was transformative; students learnt firsthand how subjective interpretation could be successfully translated into an actual palette, which allowed them to apply this method to their research and conceptual work for generating their own colour story.

The exploratory lab phase took place in tandem with ideation and was integral in pushing students beyond their technical comfort zones. Instead of limiting themselves, they were encouraged to investigate their concepts across all well-equipped labs, including weaving, dyeing, printing, knitting, and embroidery. This process unlocked new possibilities, allowing them to translate abstract themes, such as personal memories or the feel of nature, into tangible forms through techniques like cyanotype printing or eco-printing onto fabric. This stage involved intelligently layering these discovered techniques to create more complex and sophisticated textile pieces with richer expression (Fig. 7).

Design Translation: an integrated process.

A framework for design translation was developed that helped students recontextualize and interpret their design ideation as a form of new knowledge with applicability in multiple design contexts. The three core aspects that shaped translation were i) Conceptual, ii) Materiality & Making, and iii) Form in the context of Site/Place. Figure 8 illustrates how design translation emerged from these fundamental nodes and was catalyzed through aspects of transformation, functionality, and the maker/user experience. It was our goal as pedagogues to inculcate this multi-pronged understanding in our students.

The process of transforming ideas into tangible forms began with students expanding their research on the prototypes developed during their exploratory lab phase. This was followed by careful selection of media and processes of making that aligned with



Figure 5. Ideation: Narrative Drawings. Project 'Larri Adda' (Bus Stop)/Transit Culture' by Fatima Amanat, c.2021

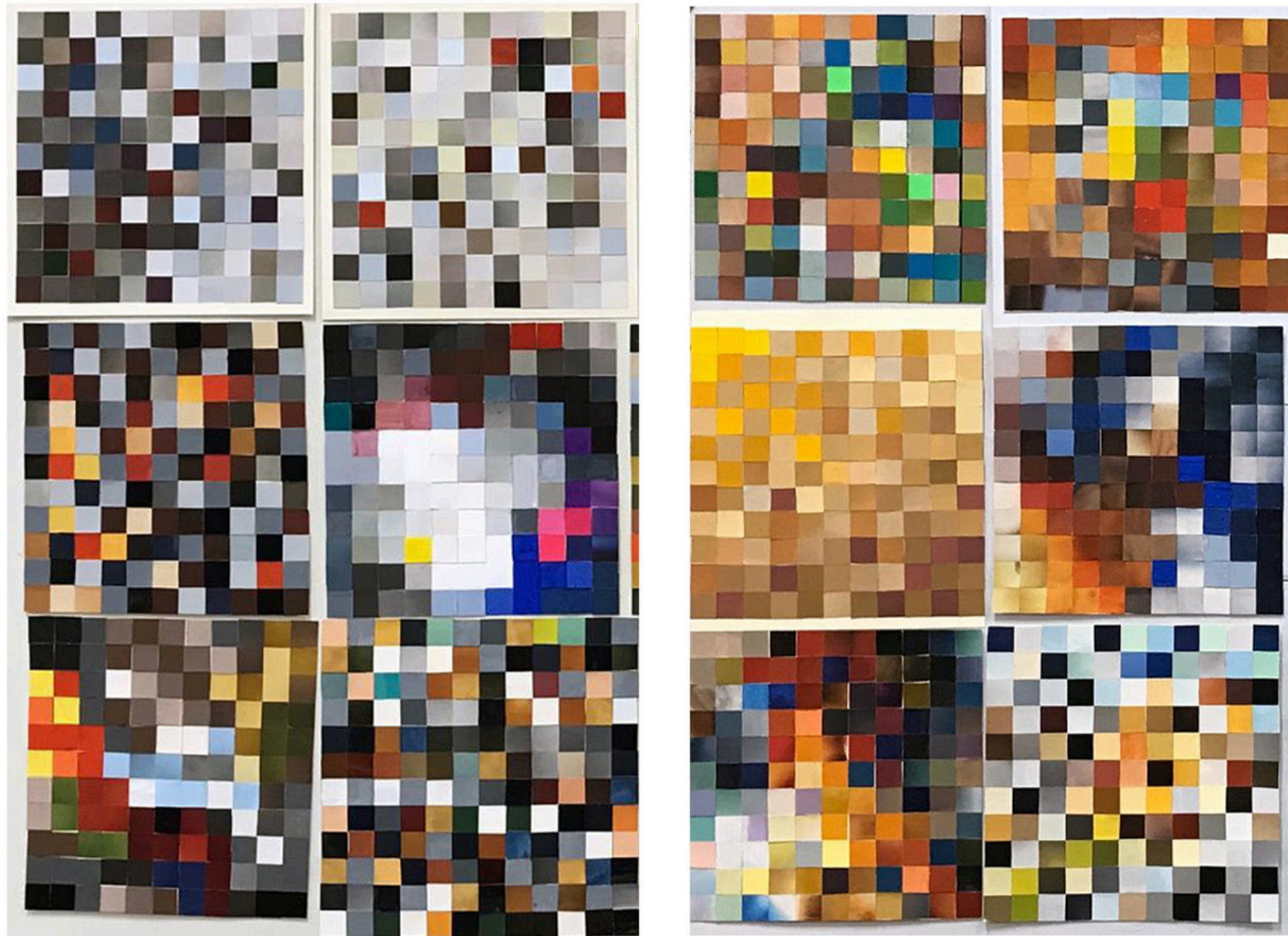


Figure 6. Color Stories Exercise. Pic Credit: the authors

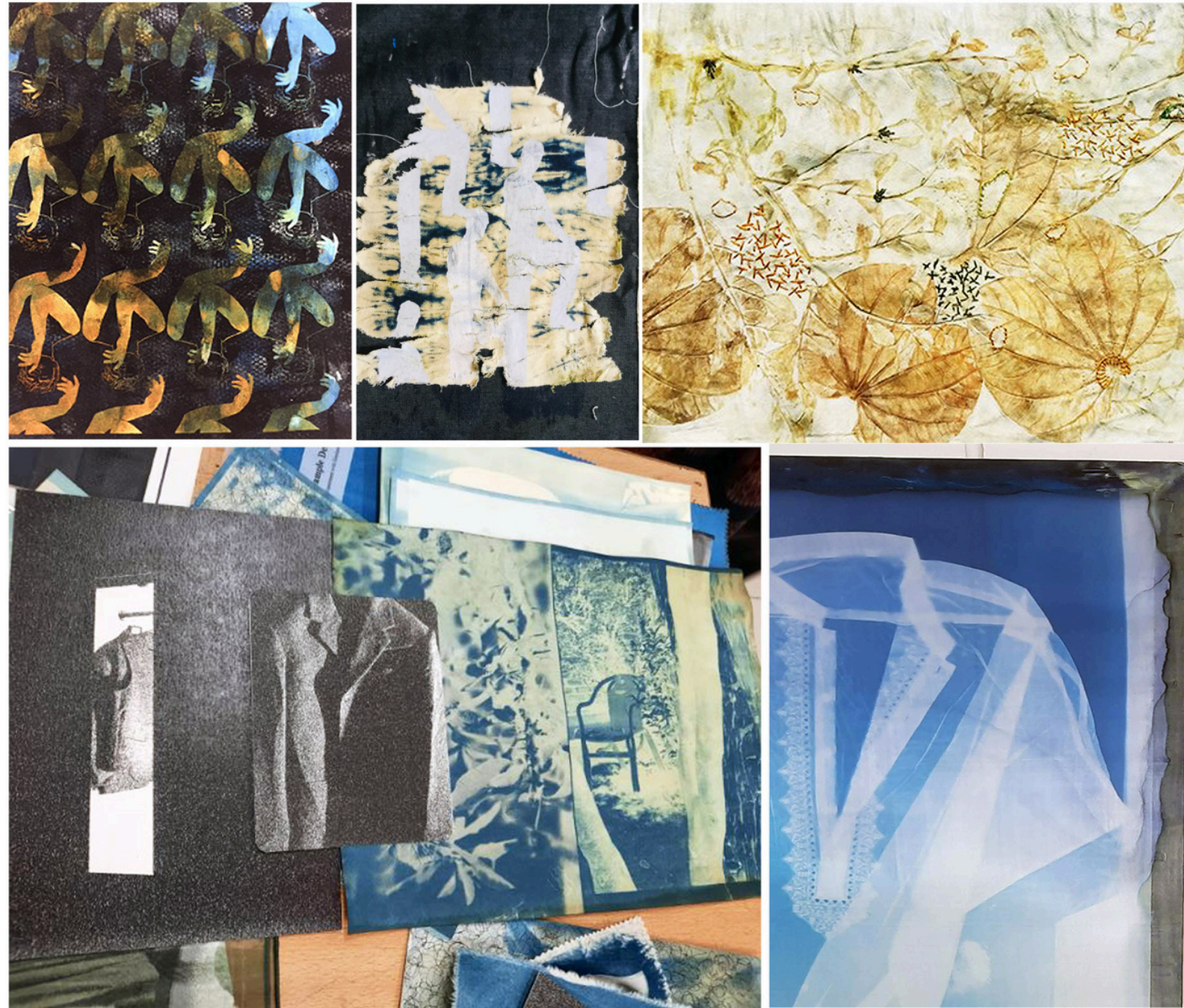


Figure 7. Exploratory Lab Phase.

Top Row (Left & Centre) | Denim printing. Project 'End Bullying' by Mohsin Arif, c.2020 (Right) | Eco-Printing. Project Insect Art/ Nature by Fatima Noor, c.2020 Bottom Row | Cyanotype Printing. Project 'A Tribute to my Father: Presence in Absence' by Fatima Sultan, c.2022

their core research concept and purpose. It represented a fundamental shift in how they approached their work, transitioning from linear, predetermined outcomes to an iterative and responsive approach that is essential for learning, innovation, and ultimately creating meaningful design. The reflective conversation with the medium itself created a dialogue, sometimes changing the entire preconceived idea. It was a practice rooted in make, reflect, refine, and remake. This back-and-forth approach was where the students' true learning occurred. They learned what the material and technology were capable of and, in doing so, refined their original idea or discovered an entirely new one (Fig. 9).

In our teaching practice, design translations were not only functional but also imagined and proposed as lived experiences. Students were guided to consider several key factors in their translation process: who they were designing for (the target audience), the scale and site specificity for their design applications, and the type of experience they aimed to create. They were encouraged to envision the sensory and interactive experiences that end users would have with their creatively translated outcomes (Fig. 10). This approach encouraged them to transcend the traditional boundaries of textile design, to create niche and novel designed solutions and experiences. For example, a student working with the concept of gender bias in Pakistani culture designed an outerwear collection that was gender neutral (Fig 11). The visual language was inspired by a collection of hybrid toys that were created based on his childhood experiences. The student had thus responded to a deep-rooted socio-cultural issue through design. Similarly, another student responded to fabric discards by creating twisted recycled yarn and developing handwoven surfaces for indigenous stools.

Strategies of Evaluation/Critique/Grading

A core aspect of our teaching strategy was to establish a method of evaluation, critique, and grading assessment that would aid students in developing self-criticality and respond positively to the feedback they received. Maintaining transparency and impartiality thus had to be embedded into this process.

Three mandatory external juries were an institutional requirement that took place at key junctures of the design process. To ensure diverse feedback, jury panels would comprise

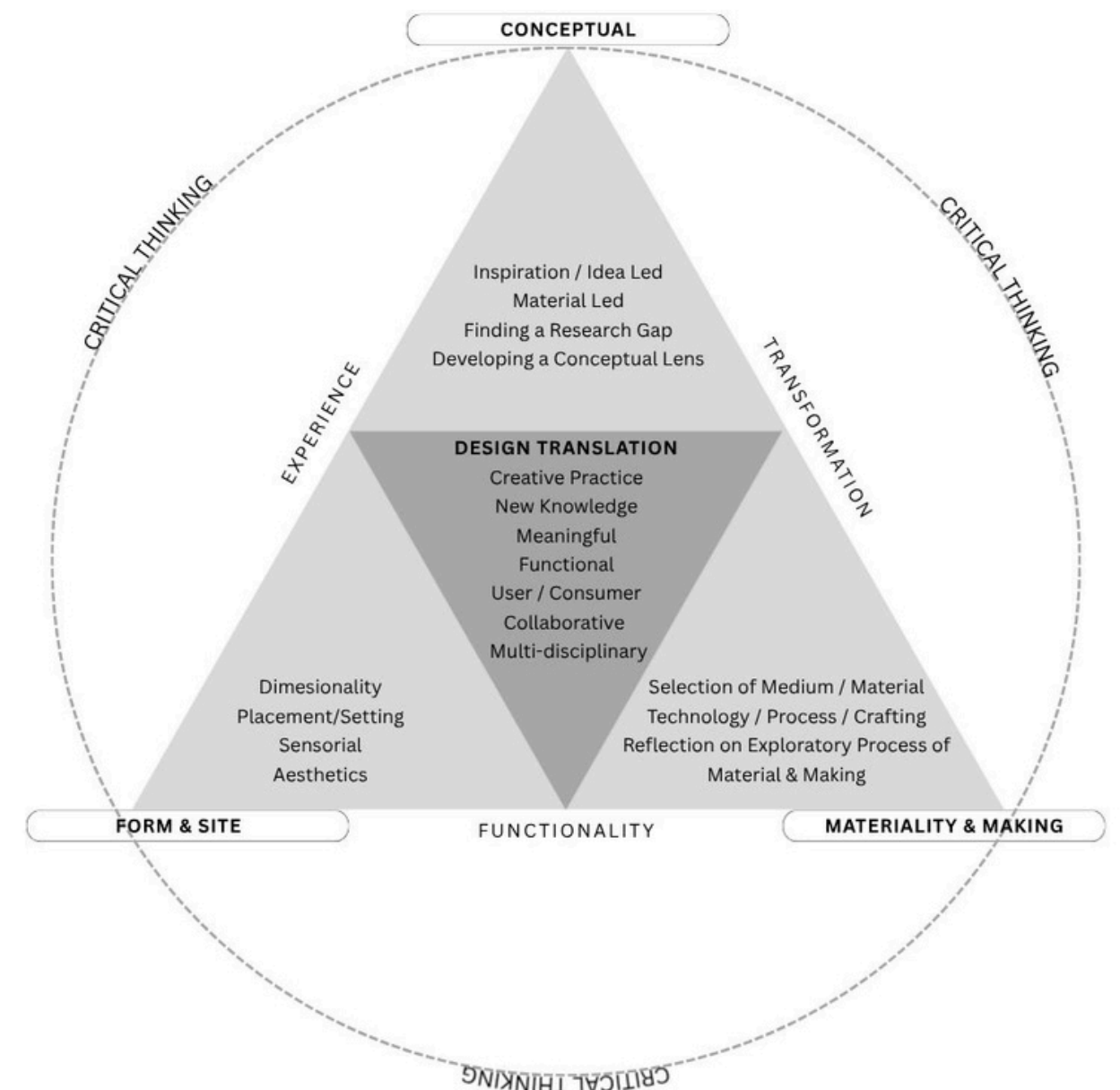


Figure 8. Framework for Design Translation. Developed by the Authors. c.2025



Figure 9. Design Translation.

Left | Narrative Quilt. Project 'Domestic Spaces of Kucha Kawabian' by Sitara Tanzeem, c.2020 Right | Rethinking Materials for Sustainability. Project 'Corn Husk' by Aruj Butt, c.2022

design experts from industry, academia, and textile/fashion entrepreneurs. We initiated closed juries, with just the student and jury panel sitting across a table with no element of spectacle. This created a supporting environment for the exchange of ideas between students and jurors, facilitating informed assessment by the latter. As instructors, we also shared clear grading criteria and rubrics that acknowledged the diverse creative learning paths that students adopted. We realized that many students visualized their initial ideas through and with material forms in 3D (Fig. 12), which put them at a disadvantage when they were graded. To mitigate this, the term *material-drawing* was introduced as an assessment criterion in parallel to the conventional two-dimensional drawing.

We consciously worked to encourage greater peer interaction by asking students to sit in small groups and review and grade each other's work. This helped them look at their own work from a fresh perspective, trained their 'critical eye', and aided in assessing their design process to a certain standard. In instances when collective group critiques had to be steered by us, we were mindful to frame these conversations not through the lens of competency but through accepting pluriversal student creative approaches. Owing to the large number of students, keeping track of individual student progress posed a challenge. Weekly tutorials were held with each student, and to document their progress, we introduced a pedagogical tool in the form of a 'weekly project planning sheet'. Students were required to note down discussion/feedback from the tutorial and also critically reflect and *plan* the next steps of their design process. Our periodic formative assessments would also be based on this documentation. This process empowered them to manage the pace and deliverables of their own project. This was an essential component of nurturing the *thinker-designer* who could adapt to the *real* design field.



Figure 10. Design Translation. Textile Installation. Project 'Introverted Expression' by Nayyab Sammar Jehan, c.2022



Figure 11. Design Translation as Body/Fashion Experience. Project 'Gender Roles' by Haseeb Aamir, c.2022



Figure 12. Material drawings. Project 'Gender Roles' by Haseeb Aamir, c.2022

Conclusion

In this exploratory paper, we have attempted to describe how 'pedagogical flexibility' (Gray, 2022, p.5), rooted in inclusivity and equitable strategies, proved to be transformative in facilitating student learning in the textile studio. This was evident from the diversity of textile design projects showcased at the end of the academic year. These ranged from students engaging with sustainability, rethinking indigenous/vernacular objects and processes, tapping into issues that required social change, and proposing designs for body and spatial contexts. Students exhibited running yardages (with flexible end-usage), as well as tech-driven, interactive installations in space and experiential objects that held meaning. They also presented in-depth material research ideas developed in collaboration with the industry, which had potential for further industry incubation. By providing students with a 'pluralistic ontological design space' (Gray, 2022, p.2), they were able to creatively think through design, express themselves with freedom, develop a self-critical design voice, and understand the role of textile design in shaping the world around them.

References

- Escobar, A., 2018. *Designs for the pluriverse: Radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds*. Duke University Press.
- Glanville, R., 2023. The sometimes uncomfortable marriages of design and research. In *The Routledge companion to design research* (pp. 10-23). Routledge.
- Gray, C.M., 2022. Critical pedagogy and the pluriversal design studio.
- Hartnett, J.P., 2021. Ontological Design Has Become Influential In Design Academia– But What Is It?. *AIGA Eye on Design*.
- Pakistan Institute of Fashion and Design (2021) *About*, PIFD, accessed 12th January 2026, <https://pifd.edu.pk/about.html>
- Raja, I.Z. (2017). *From Craft to Art and Design: Changing Patterns of Art Education*. Unpublished Phd Thesis. University College of Art & Design, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.
- Francis. A. (2011) *Reel/Unreel*. Available at: Francis Alys. <https://francisalys.com/reel-unreel/> (Accessed: 2nd March 2020).
- Rodgers, P.A. and Yee, J. eds., 2023. *The Routledge Companion to Design Research*. Taylor & Francis.

How Unlearning Changed the Way We Design

Authors: Sarah Javaid and Kainat Siddique

This paper proposes unlearning as an ontological design practice within fashion education. It reframes design not as the production of aesthetically legible commodities but as a mode of meaning-making and empathetic attunement. Drawing on studio teachings in Pakistan, we argue that dominant curricula reproduce narrow ontologies of design that are structured on market-driven aesthetics, standardization of practices and prescriptive trend logics (Whitty et al., 2025). These hegemonic frameworks reduce the purpose of design to a transactional activity limiting critical inquiry into inherited biases and exploration of an empathetic value system. Therefore, we propose an alternate pedagogy that reconfigures the role of a designer through reverse design analysis, memory mapping, and object-based ideation. These exercises mobilize sensory knowledge and lived memory as a legitimate design epistemology, enabling students to rearticulate design's purpose and outcome. This approach foregrounds unlearning as a structured methodology for decentralizing universalist aesthetics and cultivating plural design ontologies. Methodologically, we analyzed student artefacts and reflective journals through a discussion-led, studio-based approach. The findings provide evidence of how these interventions shift students' conceptualization of design from formal resolution to a relational and context-responsive approach. The project contributes a transferable strategy for ontological design in education, offering reflective instruments that can be adapted across disciplines. In doing so, it answers the call to rethink the ontological foundations of design education. What design is, what it does, and how we can unlearn our preconceived prejudices to better shape the world we inhabit.

Introduction

Contemporary thinkers have noted that Western design emerged from rationalism and a strict separation between subject and object. Philosophers and theorists from Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger to Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour, have critically examined these assumptions of Western modernity (Escobar, 2018). Against this backdrop, the concept of ontological design emerges as a compelling proposition. Ontological design understands design not only as the creation of objects, but as a system through which we shape our existence, assumptions and interactions.

This study, therefore, proposes unlearning as a pedagogical method that operationalizes ontological design through embodied, relational and culturally situated practices. We argue that ontological design becomes truly meaningful when it is guided by empathetic attunement which is drawn from Iris Murdoch's concept of unselfing. Unselfing, as revisited by Bruggeman (2018), expands on the idea of offering undevoted attention to someone or something that did not receive enough attention with an aim of well-being and interconnectedness (Olsson, 2018). When applied to design, it shifts focus from skilled makers towards critically aware and socially responsive designers who recognize the ethical dimensions of their practice (Gray, 2022).

Yet, within many design ecologies, students are positioned mainly as market producers and not as reflective cultural agents, rarely questioning the biases and assumptions in their education nor considering the wider socio-political implications of their design choices. Instead of exploring how design carries memory or meaning, students are guided to replicate aesthetics validated within global fashion systems (De Rosa et al., 2025). This approach limits creativity and marginalizes knowledge outside the dominant paradigm.

Therefore, this study explores whether and how unlearning can function as a methodology to destabilize dominant ontologies and cultivate empathetic, plural modes of designing. Unlearning here is not an act of erasure but a disciplined pedagogical process that involves critically interrogating inherited assumptions, foregrounding

situated knowledge and validating sensory and memory-based epistemologies. Operationalized through three studio interventions unlearning seeks to reconfigure the role of the designer from a producer of aesthetically legible commodities to a mediator of meaning, care and cultural continuity.

Theoretical Overview

Unlearning is situated at the confluence of several theoretical currents that critique dominant paradigms. According to Ansari et al. (2018), decolonial pedagogy delinks education from colonial epistemologies that privilege Western knowledge while marginalizing other ways of knowing. To intervene meaningfully therefore requires reorienting what is visible and what is silenced. Decolonial scholars argue that research must not be an extraction, but a process of relational accountability (Smith et al., 2024). In the context of fashion, it means questioning the primacy of Eurocentric sartorial canons and re-valuing indigenous or vernacular dress practices as a source of designerly insights (Bellet, 2024). It does not reject technical skills, rather insists that skill development be accompanied by critical reflection on history, power and representation (Smith et al., 2024).

Escobar (2018) extends this critique by calling for practices that recognize multiple coexisting ontologies, often interwoven and in tension. Luo and Leitão (2024) build on this, situating pluriversality as praxis that anchors local-global negotiations and visibility of the power dynamics. Both emphasize indigenous philosophy, grassroots-policy balance and intercultural translation as essential dimensions of pluriverse design. Similarly, in the design studio (Noel et al., 2023) it encourages students to look inwards and source ideas from everyday clothing improvisations, local craft techniques and household objects. Embracing the pluriverse involves validating these different design ecologies and not subordinating them to a single global narrative.

Relational practices further enrich the framework by foregrounding design as a co-constitutive and dialogic process that is cultivated through embodied reflection, interdependence and recognition of multiple temporalities (De Rosa et al., 2025). Dorn and Dickman (2022) argue that unlearning is fundamentally relational, which

requires practices of listening, reciprocity and shared responsibility. Similarly, Isidori et al. (2024) highlight that unlearning involves attunement to corporeal and affective experiences by repositioning the sense of self and belonging through relational exchange.

Whereas epistemic justice draws attention to the political implications of knowledge valuation. Omodan (2023) notes that temporal and capitalistic frameworks disadvantage certain knowledge systems in design education. Acknowledging these limitations, therefore, introduces a productive tension through which standardized competencies can be confronted, while expanding the boundaries of design knowledge and the ethical dimensions of those who participate in its making.

Methodology

The study took shape across two cohorts of an undergraduate fashion design course in Pakistan from 2023 to 2024 with a total of 8 participants. The studio spanned 16 weeks with six hours of engagement every week. It was revisited as an exploratory space where teaching and experimentation occurred simultaneously. To enact the unlearning framework, three interconnected strategies were developed and implemented concurrently. These included reverse design analysis, memory mapping and object-based ideation.

Reverse design analysis was engineered to surface tacit knowledge embedded in everyday clothing. Memory mapping invited participants to trace the sartorial history of a personal or culturally significant garment, investigating how a garment travels across generations and geographies, carrying stories of identity and belonging. While object-based ideation facilitated the use of an everyday object to reorient creative process towards material immediacy. Collectively, these strategies reinforce how meaningful design can be reimagined. Data included reflective journals and material artefacts, analyzed through thematic interpretation and iterative studio discussions. The outcomes were validated and triangulated across sources to strengthen the nuance of interpretation.



Figure 1. Unpicking Garments. Participant 06, Participant 06, Source: Sarah Javaid (2023)



Figure 2. Dissecting Processes. Participant 04, Photographed by: Sarah Javaid (2023)

Findings

The studio interventions marked a shift from formalist approaches to relational and context-responsive methodologies. Memory mapping enabled participants to perceive garments as repositories of layered knowledge while also giving them the agency to narrate their own stories on their own terms. Realized through unpicking and close material engagement, the garments revealed invisible histories embedded within everyday wear. In a significant instance, unpicking the kurta exposed Participant 06 to uneven edges bearing markings of repeated adjustments, faint stitch lines and patches that speak to moments of rupture and renewal (Figure 1), which the participant evocatively described as “evidence of being loved.”

Interpreting the act of repair and affection as a meaningful function of design intelligence, Participant 04 carefully unpicked the lining of a jacket (Figure 2) and paused to note how an inside seam had been reinforced by hand, holding a story of endurance.

In several cases, domestic experience facilitated encounters with living traditions and provided a significant creative framework. Participant 02 mobilized embodied knowledge rooted in communal practice using cultural food rituals to inform design identity (Figure 3). By displacing conventional hierarchies of material value, a perishable object was foregrounded as a symbol, one that collapsed the distinctions between craft and ritual, nourishment and adornment, labor and aesthetics.

Similarly, by mapping the accumulation and display of metal utensils and hand-embroidered summer quilts inherited through the maternal household Participant 07 encoded histories of care and gendered domestic work, transforming utilitarian objects into mnemonic devices, illustrated in Figure 4. Recording traces of artisanal labor and regional aesthetics revealed how design knowledge erases boundaries of utility and ornamentation. These situated materials and domestic gestures displace the anonymity of trend-driven design references, grounding design decisions in lived experience.

Participants who initially focused on market-oriented goals began to interrogate normative assumptions around body and identity. Participant 03 expanded on it by reimagining tailoring for plus-sizes by rejecting corrective logics to explore the idea of one-size-fits-all. According to the participant, “I stopped thinking about flattering the body and started thinking about honoring it” (Participant 03). The move from standards that often marginalize non-conforming bodies to an ethic of inclusivity and dignity, prioritized emotional well-being and wearer agency. By superimposing patterns of a shalwar on a Chogha (Figure 5), the methodological experimentation functioned as a site for negotiating personal and cultural expression. Creating hybrid forms that embody liminality, Participant 03 invited the wearer to inhabit multiple identities. Empathy surfaced not merely as a sentiment but a methodological orientation shaping design and material choices.

The interventions also encouraged participants to question aesthetic hierarchies embedded in their training. Why is local craft only celebrated when framed through Western validation? Why are household sewing methods dismissed as unskilled? These questions surfaced repeatedly, often leading to rich, sometimes uncomfortable debates, exposing power dynamics that shape what is taught and what is recognized as design knowledge.

By the end of the intervention, participants began to actively question their assumptions about design, expanding their creative range by engaging with overlooked forms of making and remaking. We noticed that their processes became slower, attentive and dialogic and were shaped as much by reflection as by material experimentation. The practice of unlearning thus opened space for humility and co-creation, allowing the participants to understand that every act of making is also an act of meaning.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that unlearning, when practiced through an ontological lens, can reposition the fashion studio from a site of production to a site of reflection. As time progressed, we witnessed an incremental shift in participants’ approach to design. Garments became stories, not just outcomes. Exercises like reverse design



Figure 3. When Roti Becomes Cloth. Participant 02, Source: Kainat Siddique (2024)

(Figures 1 and 2), foregrounded the invisible labor and care that garments carry (Whitty et al., 2025). Such encounters helped participants recognize value beyond the polished surface, exposing what Escobar (2018) calls “the invisible infrastructures of making” (p. 226). The studio thus became a site where domestic memory was restated as central to design thinking.

Similarly, memory mapping exercises deepened this shift by tracing the journey of inherited or community-made objects embedded in daily life, positioning material culture as an archive of collective experience. Such examples legitimize local knowledge systems as repositories of design insights without limiting their use to peripheral references.

We also saw empathy transform from a moral concept into a practical method. During critiques, participants discussed their projects not only in terms of form or finish but in relation to the people who would wear or recognize them. Design decisions began to emerge from conversations about inclusivity and care. Participant 03, addressing the challenges faced by plus-sized women said, “I realized fit is not about size, it is about dignity.” Such moments reflected what Dorn and Dickman (2022) describe as the relational turn in design, where making becomes a dialogic act rather than a solitary pursuit.

Importantly, the interventions encouraged participants to question who defines good design. Why are indigenous techniques validated only after Western recognition? Why are domestic forms of craft seen as informal? These critical conversations echo Jansen’s (2020) call for epistemic justice and align with Omodan’s (2023) critique of exclusionary education, revealing how every stitch and pattern carries a politics of value.

In many ways, these outcomes extended Murdoch’s idea of unselfing (Olsson, 2018), where participants momentarily stepped outside of themselves to see design through others’ lives. As Whitty et al. (2025) argue, “to fashion is to relate, to care, to remember” (p. 163). As a sustained intergenerational bond and a situated practice, design emerges from the land, craft and people, requiring attunement to climate and kin. Transmitting memory through tactile and visual means, the findings abstracted ways of knowing that were partial, embodied and relational.



Figure 4. Home. Source: Participant 07, Hassan Murtaza (2024)

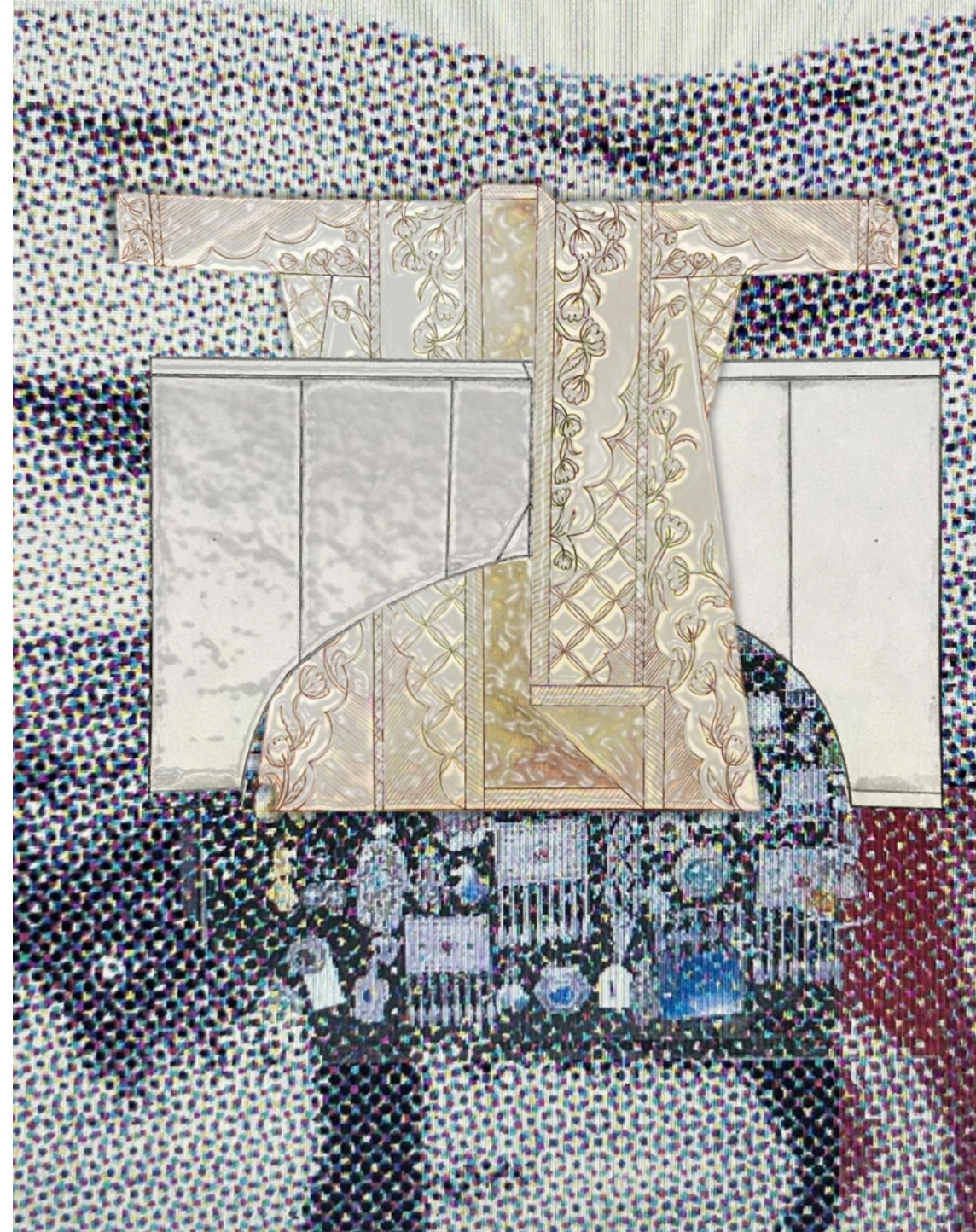


Figure 5. Inclusivity. Source: Participant 01, Muhammad Ateeb (2024)

What started as critique sessions evolved into shared discussions. By the end of the intervention, participants did not merely acquire skills – they reframed what those skills meant. Surface design became a language of remembrance and ethical reflection that was not detached from communities and the ecologies in which it was developed. For us as educators, the experience reaffirmed that unlearning can be a generative disruption, a way to align design education with empathy, plurality and social consciousness.

Limitations and Reflexivity

The exploratory study was conducted in a distinctive cultural setting, where participants had autonomy in the design process. However, it was also influenced by the positionality of the researchers-as-instructors. Furthermore, the study captured immediate effects. Whether the shift endures remains uncertain. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into how unlearning can enrich ontological design.

Conclusion

This study explored whether unlearning could help transform the way fashion design is taught and practiced, and the findings suggest that it can, at least within the microcosm of our design studio. The analysis demonstrates that unlearning, enabled by studio-based interventions such as reverse design analysis, memory mapping, and object-based brainstorming, can challenge conventional curriculum structures and promote creative methodologies in fashion education. The interventions created opportunities for students to reconceptualize design as a carrier of memory, amplifying the importance of overlooked domestic practices, and analyzing the hierarchies present in craftsmanship and pedagogy. These modifications suggest that systematic approaches can enable significant epistemic and ontological development within the design process.

The study defines unlearning as a dynamic process that thrives on context, reflexivity and continuous negotiation. The exploratory nature of this study leaves many important issues unanswered. How might these interventions be scaled? How might these methods be

used in professional practice? What kind of opposition might arise when unlearning challenges established market principles? The study underscores the capacity of design institutions to transcend vocational training, to foster designers who serve as cultural intermediaries and critical agents. From this point of view, unlearning is not the end but the beginning. It is but an invitation to reimagine fashion and its ontological role in shaping equitable futures.

References

Ansari, A., Kiem, M., Martins, L.P.O. and Vieira de Oliveira, P.J.S. (2018) 'Three perspectives on decolonising design education', *PARSE Journal*, Issue 8 (Autumn).

Bellet, A. (ed.) (2024) *New approaches to decolonizing fashion history and period styles: Re-fashioning pedagogies*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Bruggeman, D. (2018) *Dissolving the ego of fashion: Engaging with human matters*. Arnhem: ArtEZ Press.

Dorn, E. and Dickman, T. (2022) 'Towards relational design practices: De-centering design through lessons from community organising', in *Proceedings of the Relating Systems Thinking and Design 2022 Symposium (RSD11)*, University of Brighton, Brighton, UK, 13–16 October.

De Rosa, A., Hurtig, M. and Finardi, M.A. (2025) 'An exploration on relationality and decoloniality in participatory design based on care', in Morrison, A., Culén, A. and Habib, L. (eds.) *Nordes 2025: Relational Design*. Oslo, Norway, 6–8 August.

Escobar, A. (2018) *Designs for the pluriverse: Radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Gray, C.M. (2022) 'Critical pedagogy and the pluriversal design studio', in Lockton, D., Lenzi, S., Heckert, P., Oak, A., Sádaba, J. and Lloyd, P. (eds.) *DRS2022: Bilbao, 25 June–3 July, Bilbao, Spain*.

Isidori, E., Leonova, I., Alonzi, R., Trombetta, M., Bruni, E.M. and Magnanini, A. (2024) 'Epistemological foundations of fashion pedagogy: Investigating knowledge and emerging issues', *Educatia 21 Journal*, 28.

Jansen, M.A. (2020) 'Fashion and the phantasmagoria of modernity: an introduction to decolonial fashion discourse', *Fashion Theory*, 24(6), pp. 815–836.

Luo, I.Y. and Leitão, R.M. (2024) 'Pluriversal design in one situated place: an approach rooted in the interface between the local and the global', in Gray, C., Ciliotta Chehade, E., Hekkert, P. and Forlano, L. (eds.), *DRS2024: Boston, 23–28 June, Boston, USA*.

Noel, L.-A., Ruiz, A., van Amstel, F.M.C., Udeuwa, V., Verma, N., Botchwey, N.K., Lodaya, A. and Agrawal, S. (2023) 'Pluriversal futures for design education', *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation*, 9(2), pp. 179–196.

Olsson, A.-L. (2018) 'A moment of letting go: Iris Murdoch and the morally transformative process of unselfing', *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 52(1), pp. 163–177.

Omodan, B.I. (2023) 'Unveiling epistemic injustice in education: A critical analysis of alternative approaches', *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 8(1), 100699.

Smith, R.C., Winschiers-Theophilus, H., Abreu de Paula, R., Zaman, T. and Loi, D. (2024) 'Towards pluriversality: decolonising design research and practices', *CoDesign*, 20(1), pp. 1–13.

Whitty, J., Yuan, Y. and Dong, O. (2025) 'Cultivating a relational fashion system for prosperity: Embracing decolonial embodiment and more-than-human care through the practice of deep-wearing', *Fashion Highlight*, Special Issue No. SI1 (Prosperity Fashion), pp. 156–169.

Eccentric Wanderer with-Matter

Author: Kamila Wolszczak

Eccentric Wanderer with-Matter explores public space as a layered, symbolic medium for social reimagination. Through a workshop experience as part of the 12th New Materialisms Conference at Maynooth University 2024, participants are invited to look at urban landscapes through an eccentric lens, observing hidden traces, textures, and forms that suggest narratives beyond human perception. Drawing from the Greek concept of *kairos* (the opportune moment), this work encourages speculative engagement with time, presence, and space outside the traditional center. Using tactile interactions with clay and other materials, participants practice ex-centric gestures that foster dialogue and inspire collaborative discovery. Eccentricity here is not a deviation but a method. It is an invitation to step aside, to notice, to imagine differently. By cultivating *wit(h)nessing*—a practice of compassionate observation and interaction—we co-create an inclusive symbolic space, where eccentricity becomes a bridge between understanding and innovation. This approach nurtures awareness of overlooked environments and offers new “instructions on how to use reality,” connecting us with unseen layers of our shared public spaces (Huber, 2015; Coumans, 2023).

Eccentric Wanderer with-Matter

I speak from the perspective of a visual artist, shaped by lived experience of spaces that are layered, transitional, and sometimes fragile. This decentralized perspective helps me understand public space as overlapping layers of many dimensions, with a particular focus on the imaginary (symbolic space) that acts as a social tool for new possibilities of a common future. I read urban surroundings as the scenography of human traces and non-human signs waiting to be decoded, translated, communicated (Van der Tuin and Verhoeff, 2022).

When I reflect on this perspective, I often think about artists who worked with material and gesture to open public space in new ways. Teresa Murak, for example, used germination rituals in the 1970s and 80s, sowing seeds onto cloths and letting them sprout in public. These living sculptures brought fragility and slowness into urban environments, inviting others to pause and witness transformation (Poprzęcka, 2001). In her practice, materials such as soil, water, and seed were never passive. They had their own rhythm, their own agency, shaping the event as much as the human performer did (Huber, 2015).

In other contexts, public space is often designed with clarity of function e.g. squares, bike routes, playgrounds, infrastructures that reflect pragmatic care for shared environments. Yet artistic interventions can create small ruptures in this functionality, inserting play, intimacy, or sensory encounters. Where Murak allowed cress to take over cloth and body, other artists might invite passersby to inhabit temporary pavilions, sculptural playgrounds, or participatory events that foreground collective presence. The dialogue between fragility and functionality reveals how matter in public space shifts roles: sometimes symbolic, sometimes practical, sometimes both.

The workshop in Maynooth opened yet another dimension. Participants came from many corners of the world. We walked the same paths together, yet each of us brought different habits of attention. Some touched trees, others collected fragments, some pressed clay silently against stone walls, while others spoke their reflections aloud while shaping clay in their hands. This plurality of gestures revealed eccentricity as a shared method: each person stepped aside from ordinary perception in their own way. In this multiplicity, space

became something more than a fixed backdrop. It turned into a meeting ground for different material imaginations. Clay, leaves, feathers, stones, and air currents acted not as neutral resources, but as partners in our wandering.

In this sense, the walkshop was not about importing one cultural approach into another but about allowing imagination to migrate across contexts (Tokarczuk, 2019), shaped by material encounters. This migration of imagination is eccentric at its core, it resists centralization and embraces detours, side-steps, and peripheral visions.

The question arises: what if we looked at shared spaces through fragility, through pragmatism, and through many other cultural lenses at once?

What if the matter itself such as clay, dust, bark became the interpreter between us? Imagination in this sense does not belong to one culture or one center but travels with participants, carried and transformed by the materials we handle. The eccentric wanderer then is not only a metaphor for the artist, but for the group itself: diverse, decentred, and attuned to the voices of matter.

Kairos as time at the periphery

The ancient Greeks had two words for the concept of time—*chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* refers to measured, linear time, ticking quantitatively. *Kairos*, by contrast, is a god who appears on the periphery of mythology. He is the patron of the proper time for action, of opportunity, of quick decisions and exceptional moments that can reverse fate.

In the context of public space, *kairos* is not just an abstract idea but a felt experience. It is the moment when attention shifts, when something ordinary suddenly becomes charged with new significance. During the walkshop, *kairos* appeared in small encounters: when a participant pressed clay against a rough stone and discovered an unexpected pattern; when the group stopped collectively at a puddle reflecting the sky; when silence fell and the sound of distant footsteps became suddenly present. These were not planned events, but moments of attunement, fleeting opportunities that reshaped how we experienced space and each other.

Traditions of working with time reveal how eccentricity itself can be temporal. Some practices are attuned to slowness, fragility, and unfolding transformation, where the artist's role is to accompany growth rather than control it. The slow rhythm of seed, soil, or water creates space for *kairos* to appear. Other approaches emphasize rhythm, structure, or efficiency, where infrastructures are designed to maximize flow and predictability. Yet even here, *kairos* can break through: a sudden intervention, an unexpected play of light, or a temporary performance can create an exceptional moment that interrupts routine (Tokarczuk, 2021).

When we carried these perspectives into Ireland, something else happened. Participants in the walkshop brought with them varied temporal imaginations—some attuned to slowness, others to rhythm, others to improvisation. The environment, with its shifting weather and layered histories, responded in kind. Clouds moved quickly across the sky, light shifted from brightness to shadow in minutes, and traces of older paths intersected with modern buildings. Time in this landscape was not linear but folded, layered, and alive.

Experiencing *kairos* in this context meant recognising that time itself can migrate, just as imagination does. The same clay pressed in different moments told different stories: cool and heavy in the morning, warm and dry in the afternoon sun. The participants' diverse backgrounds shaped how they perceived these changes and what counted as an interruption, what counted as a rhythm. Together, we discovered that *kairos* is not a singular experience but a collective possibility. It is a time that emerges at the edges, when multiple perspectives overlap, and when material itself demands attention.

In this way, *kairos* becomes a tool for the eccentric wanderer. It invites us to step aside from predictable paths and to cultivate sensitivity to what unfolds at the periphery. Whether in the germination of seeds, the rhythms of infrastructure, or the shifting skies of Maynooth, *kairos* reminds us that time is never only measured, it is also felt, shared, and transformed through matter and encounter.

Imagination as departure

It all starts in imagination. The Old French *imaginacion* means concept, mental picture, or

hallucination. At this point begins the journey: a slight shift into new pictures and concepts led by *kairos*. Imagination is often understood as a private act, something that happens inside the mind. Yet in artistic practice it is deeply material and social. It emerges when matter resists or surprises us, when a gesture leads to an unforeseen trace, when an encounter with others brings forward stories we could not invent alone.

During the workshop, imagination did not remain confined to thought. It took form through clay pressed onto walls, through the choreography of feet walking side by side, through shared pauses that allowed unnoticed details to come forward. Eccentric imagination is a sideways step, neither a grand leap nor an escape, but a shift into another angle of seeing.

Some traditions of artistic practice have used imagination as a tool of resilience. Artists like Teresa Murak carved out symbolic spaces with organic materials, allowing them to re-enchant public life. Imagination here functioned not as prevention but as departure: the capacity to step aside into an eccentric vision of what could be. A cloth of sprouting seeds was not just a performance, it was a rehearsal of another way of living together, slower, more attentive, more fragile.

Other practices shape imagination through design and planning, reconfiguring urban spaces with participatory projects or architectural experiments. Here imagination departs from existing structures but always looks toward function: how can a square be used differently, how can a street serve both cyclists and performers, how can infrastructure be flexible and open? The strength of this vision lies in its collective orientation, its ability to reimagine shared environments in practical yet creative ways.

Bringing these two approaches together reveals that imagination itself can migrate. Participants in Maynooth brought different imaginative habits, shaped by their own contexts. Some noticed gentle waves in puddles, others invented speculative stories about lost feathers or fragments of stone, others let their hands move clay into small, improvised sculptures and let their hands get dirty. Each gesture was a departure, a sideways step from the ordinary, opening a new imaginative path.

What was striking was how the material itself supported these departures. Clay, with its responsiveness, became a medium of collective imagination. It recorded fingerprints, textures, and chance imprints, creating objects that did not belong to any one person but to the group as a whole. Dust, bark, and air currents also played their part, reminding us that imagination is not detached from matter, it grows with it, reshaped by its resistance and possibilities.

In this sense, imagination is not only a departure from norms but also a migration across contexts. It travels with participants, transformed each time by the encounter with new spaces, new materials, and new companions. The eccentric wanderer is guided not only by inner visions but by the invitations of the environment, by the unexpected *kairos* moments that allow departure. Imagination becomes less about escape and more about connection: a way to inhabit the peripheries of experience and let them speak.

Participatory encounters

Each walk began with a circle, where I introduced the practice of *wit(h)nessing* (Coumans, 2023). To wit(h)ness is to stand between participation and observation, an outsider-insider, someone who accompanies rather than directs. The circle was not a lecture but a slow gathering of attention, an agreement to walk tenderly, to listen more than to speak. This practice shifted the focus from result to relation, from knowing to sensing.

When the group began to move through Maynooth, walking itself turned into a form of collective performance. Without needing a stage, the ordinary act of moving together generated its own choreography such as pauses, overlaps, detours, quiet gestures of care. Eccentricity emerged not as spectacle but as sensitivity: a willingness to deviate, to look sideways, to dwell on what might otherwise be ignored. The ground beneath our feet, walls, and fragments of architecture became active companions. Public space, in this sense, hosted the wandering. It was not a neutral setting but a responsive presence, shaping how we moved, how we touched, how we perceived.



Figure 1. Walk, c.2023, photo: Ivan Stanczewski



Figure 2. Clay and Hand, photo: Ani Kehayova



Figure 3. Circle, photo: Tasha Arlova

Clay served as a key mediator in this encounter. Passed from hand to hand, it accumulated traces: fingerprints, dust, pressure, warmth to slowly become a collective artefact. When pressed against walls, stones, or trees, it recorded their textures, acting as a bridge between human gesture and the environment's surface. Each imprint was a small dialogue: the touch of a participant meeting the resistance of matter. As clay circulated, it carried within it the layered gestures of many hands, holding a record of time and attention.

These tactile exchanges slowed us down. Clay required gentleness; it cracked when rushed, demanded care when held. Passing it between people became a conversation without words, a rhythm of offering and receiving. Through such material dialogue, we learned to *wit(h)ness* not only each other but the environment itself. The act of walking turned into a distributed sensing, a moving assemblage of human and non-human participants.

This participatory attention transformed the walk into a cartography of perception. Every participant created an individual map, some traced sounds, others followed light, others noted the texture of walls or the rhythm of steps. These partial maps overlapped, forming a temporary network of awareness. The path no longer led from one point to another; it spiraled through shared noticing. The eccentric wanderer, multiplied through many bodies, enacted a performance of attention. Public space was revealed as both host and collaborator, a living matrix in which movement, matter, and imagination co-compose experience.

Each walk began and end with a circle, a symbolic gesture of equality. Sitting together, we spoke of expectations and silences. The circle made visible that knowledge arises from relation rather than hierarchy. We accompanied each other's thinking, listening more than instructing.

Through this form, eccentricity became relational. Walking together meant allowing difference without separation. *Kairos* and *wit(h)nessing* intertwined—the opportune

moment arrived when someone noticed, paused, and others followed. The workshop thus unfolded as a field of shared discovery, where matter and imagination co-authored temporary worlds.

These participatory encounters showed that public space is not static infrastructure but living matter. Each step, each gesture, each fragment gathered contributed to a growing web of relations. The eccentric wanderer, in this sense, is not an individual but a collective body moving through material dialogue.

Toward future storytelling

While we often think of stories as belonging to the past, eccentric wandering shows that storytelling begins in the present, in the ephemeral connections between people, materials, and environments. Each walk, touch, or pause creates a micro-narrative that resists closure. These stories do not aim to define but to invite reflection and renewal.

As we walked through Maynooth's layered campus, the landscape itself seemed to carry multiple timelines beardedly visible ancient paths crossing modern buildings, moss growing on digital signage, wind moving between concrete and grass. Such coexistence reveals how matter stores memory and how imagination can retrieve it without domination. The eccentric wanderer listens for these resonances, cultivating curiosity instead of control.

What emerges from this process is neither a fixed artwork nor a closed theory but an ongoing conversation between human and non-human intelligence. Clay learns from touch as much as we learn from its resistance. Air reshapes sound; water alters the texture of soil. In this exchange, both human and material become active participants in reimagining public life.

The future of artistic practice may thus depend not on creating new centers but on sustaining eccentric dialogues, spaces of shared learning across boundaries of culture, matter, and imagination. As Tokarczuk (2021) reminds us, the eccentric perspective opens tenderness toward what lies beyond our control. It allows us to dwell in uncertainty and to

trust that understanding grows through coexistence. In this way, *Eccentric Wanderer with-Matter* proposes a simple yet radical question:

What if material and human could learn from each other? What if imagination itself were not a solitary invention but a mutual discovery, an act of becoming-with? Perhaps the most meaningful transformations happen not at the center, but at the periphery, where attention softens and curiosity takes root.

References

- Coumans, A. (2023) *The Artistic Attitude: Allowing Space for Imagination and the Ability to Shape*. Jap Sam Books.
- Huber, L. (2015) 'Topographies of the Possible.' *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, 24(2), pp. 7–24.
- Poprzęcka, M. (2001) *Teresa Murak: Works and Actions*. Warsaw: Zachęta National Gallery of Art.
- Tokarczuk, O. (2019) *The Nobel Lecture: The Tender Narrator*. The Nobel Prize in Literature 2018. Available at: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/lecture> (Accessed: 2 February 2023).
- Tokarczuk, O. (2021) 'Eccentricity as Feminism.' *The Paris Review*, January 2021.
- Van der Tuin, I. and Verhoeff, N. (2022) *Traces: Critical Concepts for the Creative Humanities*. Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 196–198.

This paper argues how design is fundamental to the construction and development of Unholy Muss, a performance autoethnography of an “unfaithing” experience. By incorporating temporal, material and agentic elements into the performance lecture-as-liturgy, design engages with established notions of what a Christian liturgical service entails, creating subversive structures that rupture ontological expressions of belief production and question personal belief. These design elements extend to the participatory aspect of the liturgy, which involve the audience as active participants in the performance, creating a communal atmosphere of undoing belief. The use of satire is also a fundamental design feature of Unholy Muss, softening the sharper edges of criticism and offering levity to the subject of religious belief, which is often seen as deeply personal and, therefore, unimpeachable.

The Dismissal

Containing the Order of Service for the

Unholy Muss

And

Other

Diverse

Writings

For your perusal

And entertainment

About Unholy Muss

Unholy Muss is an autoethnographic performance lecture written, composed and performed by Marc Nair. The origins of this performance are from Nair's PhD dissertation (Nair, 2022), which presented an autoethnographic text-based liturgy of an "unfaithing" from Evangelical Christianity by detailing the narratives of six different selves of Marc: (see Fig. 1) poetic, academic, memoir, Christian, satirical and performance.

This multiplicity of voices was a deliberate attempt at representing how an individual can hold various points-of-view that exist in an uneasy coalition. The use of the liturgy, which carries over to *Unholy Muss*, offers a design structure that is recognizable and contains participatory elements of various Christian rituals which are particularly useful in transiting the text to the stage. And, unlike the dissertation, in which the person of Marc was visibly spliced into different "versions" of Marc, *Unholy Muss* is led by The Irreverend, played, in this iteration, by Nair. This development of a character distances from the personal, auto-ethnographic self and allows for a more structured, formal aspect to emerge.

Performance Autoethnography in Unholy Muss

Unholy Muss utilizes performance autoethnography as a method. Norman Denzin (2018) writes that, in performance autoethnography, "the emphasis on self, biography, history and experience must always work back and forth between three concerns: the concerns of performance, of process, and/or of analysis" (p. 36). In this way, the interwoven "narrative" becomes a practice that moves from The Irreverend to larger spheres of culture, history and ideology. This allows The Irreverend, as the performative "leader" of the Muss, to anchor the emphasis on performance as undoing an embodied, personal experience of religion in order to offer a creative imagining of un-belief against the longer history of Christian faith practice.

Ethnographer Dwight Conquergood (1998) theorises performance as intervention, as a dynamic "breaking and remaking" (p. 32). Denzin (2003) extends this idea: "Performance is a form of agency, a way of bringing culture and the person into play" (p. 9). *Unholy Muss* is

an act of resistance that is also a "return to the lived body" (Denzin, 2003 p. 54). Foregrounding the body is key because it is the body that is the site of "battle" for the Christian. The soul, which is eternal, is housed in the body, which is subject to temptation and sin. In *Unholy Muss*, this undoing of a body's belief parodies the Christian notion to "present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God" (Romans 12:1, KJV).

The use of performance autoethnography positions The Irreverend as an agent who has reclaimed narrative authority over his spirituality. It allows him to realise the limits of his previous worldview and to offer a site for creative practice as a means of de-hegemonising dominant cultural and spiritual values for himself and for the audience/congregation.

Beyond The Irreverend as a central figure, satirising Christian liturgical rituals is another key design element of *Unholy Muss*. Rituals in religion are not just representations of beliefs; they are the mechanisms through which beliefs become materially durable. Rituals utilize repetition to create life worlds of familiar sites and utterances. Adherents to these rituals attempt to transcend their material selves by accessing another plane of existence, one that is spiritual and often predicated on fundamental aspects of holier living, such as devotional singing, prayer, meditation and teachings by leaders who are deemed spiritually "superior". These rituals are often enacted communally and have a secular counterpoint in large-scale activities such as sporting events and music concerts, where there is a kind of collective trajectory towards the ecstatic, which is derived from the Greek adjective *ekstatikoi*. In the Aristotelian notion of melancholy, *ekstatikoi* is translated as "out of themselves", a dissociative state that Ann Taves, writing about Christian religious experiences, describes as a state in which "the normal state of consciousness was temporally or permanently disturbed" (Taves, 1993, p. 202). This leave of reason to apprehend what lies beyond is, arguably, a fundamental aspect of belief, particularly in the Christian tradition, where "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1, KJV). Rituals ground the ecstatic within boundaries. One's faith becomes negotiated through familiar ontologies that reinforce, especially in monotheistic religions, the primacy of a Creator God and the place of the believer as a created being, held in thrall by the Manichean presence of sin, something that works on multiple levels: the physical body, the spirit and towards a general ethic of living "righteously." All of this builds a closed system of thought and tension that is only truly broken by death.

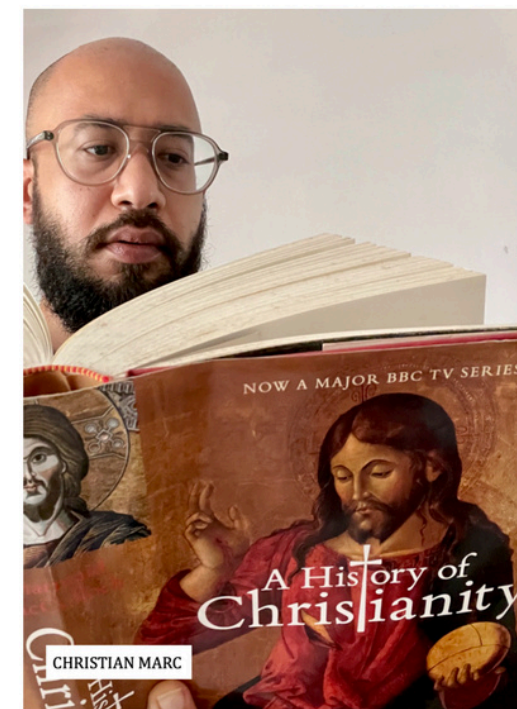


Figure 1. The Selves of Marc (Nair, 2020: 10)

But that too, is an uncertain outcome, because no one can know for sure what lies beyond death.

So, what happens when the Mass, the site of building and teaching the practice of faith and belief, becomes a site of undoing one's faith? By subverting the rigorous system of Christian beliefs and ritual practices, the audience actualizes Lace Marie Brogden's notion that "accepting an invitation into instability, and dwelling there, can create altered spaces for coming to be" (2010, p. 375). This instability is generated through the sustained use of satire in Unholy Muss. Satire allows for constructive social criticism of blind adherence to ritual while utilizing humour as a vehicle for pleasurable purposes. Ultimately, *Unholy Muss*, as satire, reveals, in the words of Dieter Declerq, "a fundamental tension in our lives between the care for others and care of self" (Declerq, online, last updated 2025). This tension can be found in the procedural development of the Muss, which begins with an invitation to experience and concludes with no definitive answer, offering only a renewed sense of the primacy of self over any external belief systems.

Unholy Muss is an altered space that is both individual, communal and transformational in its content and intent, based as it is on an "idealized" Christian liturgical Mass. It is idealized because it is a portmanteau of various elements culled from different denominational approaches to the service. Evangelical, Roman Catholic and Anglican elements are intermeshed into the Muss. Additionally, the use of ontological design principles to "counter-design" and produce a liturgy of unbelief assists in the process of "unfaithing" the self. This approach puts into practice Declerq's definition of the "central dynamic in satire between its moral function as critique and aesthetic function as entertainment" (2018, p. 1) as a way to navigate between making meaning and staving off any potential offence to the audience.

If liturgical design corrals subjects into a divine order, this performance interpellates them (Althusser's idea of 'hailing') into anti-order: a curated void where the self enacts a speculative reconfiguring. This subverts the very mechanisms that render the sacred tangible. By systematically replacing, distorting or voiding these elements, the

performance creates an atheistic doppelgänger of the Mass: one that utilizes its host's structures to produce "dis-belief".

This "dis-belief" is reified through the subversion of various elements in the Muss, the most fundamental of which is the Bible. Extrapolating from Graham Harman's explanation of object-oriented ontology[1], the Bible, for Christians, exists as a real object while *The Dismissal*, the anti-hymnal offered to the congregation as they enter the Unholy Muss and that contains parody songs and the Book of Marc, is a sensual object, existing only in relation to the Bible and the use of hymnals to navigate a liturgical service. The use of satire through the form of a communal liturgy mediates the sensual object into being. It gains tactility through performance and the involvement of the audience, but can it transcend into the real? Unholy Muss then becomes an event for the sensual object, one that is predicated upon the audience's understanding of what a church service and the point of attending such a service is, which is a wider implication on the individual of the place and purpose of religion in their lives. Some people do it out of habit, some would like to establish a relationship with God, others are convinced there is a void in them that can only be filled by faith in a higher being and still others crave the community that comes with fellow believers bound up in having their sins forgiven, their trespasses heard and their abominations forgotten. All of these feed into Unholy Muss, which does not try to establish a basal level of faith or to only define working parameters for Evangelical Christians, for example, but ontologically puts forth the notion of "un-faithing" as a general means of undoing faith. The precise and personal nature of that undoing is up to the individual, as is also the case with faith, generally.

[1] Harman (2017, p.10) offers seven basic principles of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO):

- (1) All objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, non-human, natural, cultural, real or fictional.
- (2) Objects are not identical with their properties, but have a tense relationship with those properties, and this very tension is responsible for all of the change that occurs in the world.
- (3) Objects come in just two kinds: real objects exist whether or not they currently affect anything else, while sensual objects exist only in relation to some real object.
- (4) Real objects cannot relate to one another directly, but only indirectly, by means of a sensual object.
- (5) The properties of objects also come in just two kinds: again, real and sensual.
- (6) These two kinds of objects and two kinds of qualities lead to four basic permutations, which OOO treats as the root of time and space, as well as two closely related terms known as essence and eidos.
- (7) Finally, OOO holds that philosophy generally has a closer relationship with aesthetics than with mathematics or natural science.

Satire, then, is a making-unmaking tool: it dismantles the Christian self while simultaneously prototyping new possibilities for meaning. It does demand a prior understanding, or at least a familiarity with, Christian practices, which could result in discomfort as socially-constructed ideas of what is appropriate (the worship of and belief in an unseen higher being) and inappropriate (mocking the existence of that same being through transgressive rituals) become problematic. As Andrew Whitehead notes, “Transgression is both ridiculed and celebrated. It is not funny as a radical resistance to the force of social conventions, but instead the very idea of transgressing, in its newly problematized situation, is itself funny” (2015, p. 34). This reinforces the intent in *Unholy Muss* of doctrine becoming a design framework for thought rather than absolute truth, a way for the audience to rewrite and transgress their own existential frameworks into something that destabilizes the givenness of faith.

Unholy Muss exists in what scientist Stuart Kauffman has coined “the adjacent possible”. It is a place that captures the potential to undo one’s faith within the limits prescribed by the *Muss*, which, in turn, are the limits defined by centuries of liturgical constancy. As Stephen Johnson writes, “The adjacent possible is a kind of shadow future, hovering on the edges of the present state of things, a map of all the ways in which the present can reinvent itself” (2010, p. 31). But this is not a chaotic, unformed space. The way in which one can be “un-faithed” is ordered by the doctrinal approach found in the Book of Marc. And this begs the question: Is this a new religion, a new way of control? I would argue that defamiliarization as a precursor to unfaithing is only possible by an adjacent (and somewhat ironic) recourse to what is known in order to tread a path towards a different kind of salvation; a liturgy of leaving belief.

Design Elements in Unholy Muss

The traditional Christian service or Mass is a belief-generating system whose formal structures (ritual sequencing, sacred objects, gestural vocabularies) recursively constructs faithful, obedient subjects. *Unholy Muss* subverts this apparatus through deliberate acts of counter-design. This design ontology is structured around temporality, materiality and agency.

Temporality

Time in *Unholy Muss* is not eschatological. In Christianity, the notion of eternity is something that escapes the grasp of reason and therefore exists purely in the realm of faith as a sensual object that is based upon another set of sensual objects: the binary, intertwined futures of Heaven and Hell. Eschewing this, *Unholy Muss* roots itself in the finite, offering no answer to the perennial question of what lies after death. This creates a different kind of life goal, one that is not predicated on an invisible future but one where time is not passing towards eternity but is present, necessary and, ironically, far more sacred. This is realized through various parts of the *Muss*, such as the Atheist Creed: “I believe there is no life after death and no meaning to life apart from life.” (2025, p. 8) and, in the following excerpt from The Book of Marc, the complete book of which is found in The Dismissal, (Nair, 2025, 19):

For each passing season deepens the kindness of this earth, the loamy soil where your freedom now bears fruit, stretches upwards to meet bountiful sky, be thankful you are no longer bound by the blood compact with a saviour. 17 For wherever you go, in both city and country, desert and boardroom, you are now free to see the beauty in the heart of the human, uncreated, and for this, we give thanks. (Marc 3: 16-17)

The design of *Unholy Muss* also copies the temporal progression of a regular mass, although, for the sake of performativity, it takes the form of an “upsized” version, including as many elements as possible for satirical effect:

Order of the Unholy Muss

Overture → The Atheist Creed → 1st Reading → Communal Singing → Testimony → 2nd Reading → Dissermon → Common Union → Offering → Doxxedology → Special Item → Closing Song

The familiarity with these elements (for audience members with an awareness of the Christian faith) creates a sense of temporal dissonance, where the expected progression

Satire, of ritual elements gives way to a radical otherness of doing by undoing. It is the ideological equivalent of backmasking, a supposedly satanic practice where sounds or spoken words are intentionally recorded backwards onto a track. When played in reverse, the hidden message becomes audible. However, for audiences who are unfamiliar with Christian liturgy, the service is no longer satirical, as they have no reference point for the satire. Rather, the complete ontology of the *Muss*, from The Book of Marc to the parody songs, becomes a self-sufficient container of expression, allowing for participation without necessarily requiring a religious background. Is the point of “unfaithing” the self then moot? Perhaps in a religious sense, but one could also see it as a participative performance in a rigorous approach towards undoing belief, albeit from a particular system of faith. It could reinforce existing non-religious beliefs or it could sway someone from immanent beliefs from their childhood that were never questioned or criticized. The temporality the audience finds themselves in is therefore a temporality of both performance and presence, where they reckon with the ideological implications of the ideas offered within the finite duration of the *Muss* in relation to their own belief systems.

Materiality

The audience, as the congregation, is asked to refer to “The Dismissal” as a kind of anti-hymnal throughout the *Muss*. They are able to offer responses, follow along with readings from The Book of Marc and sing, if they wish, sing the songs that are peppered throughout the *Muss*. Some of the songs are parodies of popular Christian hymns, and choruses and their melodies will be familiar to anyone across a variety of denominations who has attended church. This builds, within the purview of *Unholy Muss*, what Gordon Lynch terms as “the sociology of the sacred” (2012), a space he divides into the mundane, the sacred and the profane. *Unholy Muss* is a way of destabilizing the sacred through the vehicle of satire to offer a profane “interruption” and ontologically reconstitute a mundane worldview. The material presence of the audience in the *Muss* offers a new space that, for Kim Knott (2011), becomes a moment in the intersection of configured social relations. This is a dynamic space and there is no intended outcome for the audience, only a series of experiential moments that culminate, for the *Muss*, in the Common Union, a parody of Communion. Whilst the purpose of Communion is to reinforce that relationship with

God and remember the sacrifice of Jesus, the purpose of the Common Union is to “come together in a shared expression of undoing and remaking the self into a blank slate, freed of the chains of religion” (Nair, 2025, p. 9). The Common Union features a call-and-response segment with the audience, further pulling them into the “doctrine” of the *Muss* and building a tangible materiality to the experience.

Agency

The audience transforms into a ready-made congregation in the performance, entering into a celebrant-suppliant relationship. While the performance is figured as a lecture, the dynamic of an authority figure and a group of willing listeners implies a transference of power and a shared agency as the audience becomes willing to be part of the *Muss*. This is aided by participatory elements such as readings from the Book of Marc, where readers from the audience are selected beforehand, communal singing and call-and-response segments. All of this offers a framework for agentic expression, thinking through “unfaithing” as something beyond an emotion or a sense of disappointment with a religious experience. The use of autoethnography through the Irreverend is foregrounded through more personal elements of the *Muss* such as the Testimony and the DisSermon, which offer grounded narratives as a “situated story” (Ellis, 2000). This narrative performance of identity is “particularized, embodied and material” (Langellier, 2001, p. 151) and offers audiences a way to understand how a personal shift in worldview can be undertaken.

The design language and performative considerations of *Unholy Muss* do not represent a choate opposing ‘force’ to Christian liturgy. There are paradoxes inherent in the performance and many assumptions made on behalf of the audience/congregation. The word “un-faithing”, for example, borrows from the existing vocabulary of religious power. Is form, therefore, inescapable? Does satirical ritual simply replace one ontology with another (e.g. doubt as orthodoxy)? Can ontological design help to unmake belief or does it merely remap itself to a different quadrant of desire?

Expanding the Parameters of Autoethnographic Performance

Unholy Muss uses Nair's personal experience as autoethnographic inspiration for the audience, "allowing the self to speak in liberated tongues" (Marc 1:29) through a satirical enactment of an ontology of "un-faithing." It is a confrontational performance that challenges immanent ways of thinking and being as a religious person through an atheistic liturgy. Ontological design elements help to bring the audience together while satire softens the biting narrative presented, which could be triggering for practicing Christians. Ultimately, while religion is a personal choice, *Unholy Muss* challenges the communal experience of faith while breaking new ground in autoethnographic performance possibilities.

References

- Brogden, L. M. (2010) 'Identities (academic + private) = subjectivities (desire): Re:collecting art · i/f/acts,' *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16 (5), pp. 368–377.
- Conquergood, D. (1998) 'Beyond the text: Toward a performative cultural politics', in S. J. Dailey (ed.), *The future of performance studies: Visions and revisions*, National Communication Association, pp. 25–36.
- Declercq, D. 'What Satire Can Do For Us.' *The Philosophers' Magazine*, <https://philosophersmag.com/what-satire-can-do-for-us/>. (Accessed: 10 Sept 2025).
- Declercq, D. (2018) 'A Definition of Satire (And Why a Definition Matters),' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 76 (3), pp. 319-330.
- Denzin, N. (2003) *Performance Ethnography: Critical pedagogy and the politics of culture*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Denzin, N. K. (2018) *Performance Autoethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Ellis, C. and Bochner, A. P. (2000) 'Autoethnography, personal narrative, and personal reflexivity', in N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. Sage, pp. 733–768.
- Harman, G. (2017) *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*. Pelican.
- Johnson, S. (2010) *Where Good Ideas Come From*. Riverhead Books.
- Knott, K. (2005) *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis*. Equinox.

Langellier, K. M. (2001) "'You're marked": Breast cancer, tattoo, and the narrative performance of identity', in J. Brockmeier & D. A. Carbaugh (eds.), *Narrative and Identity*. John Benjamins Publishing C, pp. 145–184.

Lynch, G. (2012) *The Sacred in the Modern World: A Cultural Sociological Approach*. Oxford University Press.

Nair, M. (2025) *The Dismissal*. Self-published.

Nair, M. (2022) *Self-portrait: a performance autoethnography of un-faithing*.

Ph.D. Dissertation. RMIT University. Available at:

https://research-repository.rmit.edu.au/articles/thesis/Self-portrait_a_performance_autoethnography_of_un-faithing/27598644

Taves, A. (1993) 'Knowing Through the Body: Dissociative Religious Experience in the African- and British-American Methodist Traditions', *The Journal of Religion* 73:2, pp. 200-222

The Bible. Authorized King James Version, Oxford UP, 1998.

Whitehead, A. (2015) 'She Who Laughs Loudest: A Meditation on Zen Humor', *Journal of*

Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective, 9 (1), pp. 27-36. Available at:

<https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jgi/vol9/iss1/4> (Accessed: 20 August 2025).

Willis, A-M. (2015) 'Ontological Designing', *Design Philosophy Papers*, 4 (2), pp. 69-92.

Empathy through the Lens of Generative AI

Author: Alizay Nadeem

This paper navigates the evolving landscape of generative AI, examining its profound impact on human empathy, perception, and connection. As AI systems increasingly generate human-like responses, they blur the boundaries between human and machine, amplifying the uncanny valley effect and raising ethical concerns about psychological manipulation. At its core, this essay questions: *What makes us human?* By integrating design, psychology, and technology, it investigates whether empathy can be programmed and examines the consequences of engaging with artificial designed entities that mirror human emotions. Highlighting the shifting nature of emotional authenticity in an era where AI convincingly simulates human sentiment.

As generative AI become increasingly integrated into daily life, this work critically examines the risk of desensitization to real emotions and the erosion of trust in human experience. By positioning AI as both a collaborator and an existential mirror, it challenges conventional understandings of emotion, cognition, and agency. In a world where machines can imitate human sentiment, this research urges a reevaluation of empathy not as an inherently human trait, but as a programmable phenomenon that compels us to reconsider what it truly means to feel.



“The information age has ended and we have entered the age of noise (Salvaggio, 2024).”

This statement by Eryk Salvaggio reflects a change in focus from knowledge pursuit to an increasingly data-driven world. The information age refers to access and dissemination. In contrast, the age of noise refers to excess content, clouding meaningful insights with irrelevant or distracting information. Especially in the age of constant information overload, exacerbated by algorithms, it becomes increasingly difficult to discern valuable information from background noise. As we live in a world where information, once scarce, is now abundant, this "age of noise" feels inevitable. The lack of information is sometimes the result of too much data, a domino fallacy. In the absence of meaningful discernment, information is still noise. Generated Artificial Intelligence is nothing more than surveillance capitalism, repackaging our data and selling it back to us. These algorithms now produce images that reflect worlds they have never been exposed to. It is unnerving to see these images because they reveal what automated surveillance has always done: reduce people to data.

As Hurricane Helene swept across Texas in October 2024, a seemingly heartwarming photo of a girl and her puppy was shared widely on social media, capturing the attention of thousands in Houston. It was a striking image until it was discovered that it was generated by artificial intelligence. A Houston resident who initially believed the photo was real, was shocked upon learning the truth about the viral image. As stated by Margaret Hernandez, "I feel manipulated," she shared. "This AI technology is terrifying. People use it to deceive us, and it's deeply unsettling (Aswad, 2024)."

This incident highlights the growing challenges presented by artificial intelligence in distinguishing reality from fabrication, leaving many to question the ethics of such creations. The transformation of joys, tragedies, and humanity into abstractions raises several questions. Once treated with care, trauma risks becoming desecrated fodder for AI collages. Fragments of children's faces are scattered across datasets, adrift from the stories they tell. Stripped of their meaning, images lose their power to evoke empathy. Generative AI replaces messy, authentic narratives with commodified versions. According to a recent article on policymaking regarding generative AI, it entails substantial risks, such as eroding trust, manipulating human decision-making, and exploiting psychological weaknesses (Williamson & Prybutok, 2024).

This raises a very important question

In the realm of visual communication design how does the integration of generative AI challenge our concept of empathy?

Generative AI accelerates destruction, replacing authentic human presence with speculative forms. To train generative models, photographs of real people and moments are converted to noise and reassembled into a hypothetical image. In this way, decay is both aestheticized and commodified, mirroring Silicon Valley's perpetual growth ideology. What remains is an abstraction, a view of what may have been, divorced from reality. As a result, empathy is eroded. AI generates images into raw data so they can be predicted and regenerated. However, this reduces human stories. People's identities are dissolved into aesthetic experiments, and people become symbols. We are alienated from the emotional burden of visual memory because of this alienation, leaving us with a hollowed-out digital culture that prioritizes novelty over authenticity. Rather than being cherished, the ruins of our images are reminders of a deeper loss: the loss of the ability to connect with humanity. This endless cycle of erasure and regeneration puts not just the pictures at risk, but also the empathy they are meant to perpetuate.

AI is not merely a technology but an ideology a way of imagining and explaining the world that guides the design of "AI" systems. As Ali Alkhatib states,

“AI shifts authority from individuals to centralized structures of power, prioritizing statistical prediction and optimization as unquestionable improvements. This ideology extends beyond technological definitions, shaping how AI is applied and justified in various contexts, particularly socio-cultural systems (Alkhatib, 2024).”

AI ideology promotes automation as inherently beneficial, often concealing biases as fact. Behavior analysis has been used in predictive policing to generate biased predictions, which reinforces inequity. Although unsuitable for socio-cultural systems, this ideology is dominant in decision-making, rooted in cyber libertarianism and technocratic neoliberalism. As a



Figure 1. This photo went viral on social media after Hurricane Helene. Many people thought it was real (Aswad, 2024)



Figure 2. A young girl sitting next to a snow leopard, sparking curiosity and wonder. However, it is created by artificial intelligence (AI) (Talal, 2024)



Figure 3. A young boy finds a moment of stillness inside his home, as the chaos of war rages outside. (AI-generated, 2024)



Figure 4. Boris Eldagsen 'The Electrician' [detail] 2022 from the series 'Pseudomnesia' (Foster, 2023)

result, AI becomes a tool of conformity that demands significant resources and offers limited value, leading to increased efficiency and control over human autonomy.

An AI's imagination and storytelling are based entirely on data it has processed in a world it has never seen. Even though it allows for astonishing creativity, it lacks the empathy that comes from first-hand experience. Machines cannot imagine, feel, or interpret the world like humans; their "imagination" is a synthesis of patterns and probabilities. While machines can generate stories and visuals that resemble human emotions, they often fall short of grasping their deeper meanings. Consequently, the content appears empathetic but lacks authenticity.

Artificial intelligence has become a pillar of innovation across a wide range of fields for its ability to produce lifelike and creative results. Recently, generative artificial intelligence (AI) has experienced impressive growth, particularly since late 2022. Several platforms have expanded access to large language models, allowing users to create content that closely resembles human expression. Despite its prominence, the term "generative artificial intelligence" lacks a universally agreed definition, which can cause confusion (Mariani & Dwivedi, 2024). Although any model that produces outputs could technically be considered generative, AI researchers typically use the term to refer to advanced systems that can generate high-quality, human-like content (García-Peñalvo & Vázquez-Ingelmo, 2023). Contemporary image generation tools include Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) and Diffusion models.

A company called Pangram Labs was asked by WIRED to analyze Medium earlier this year. An analysis of 274,466 posts over the past six weeks shows that over 47 percent posts were most likely generated by AI. According to Pangram CEO Max Spero,

"this is several orders of magnitude more than I see on the rest of the internet (Knibbs, 2024)".

Artificial intelligence slop refers to low-quality content that's created to flood the internet for profit. Like spam, its content that generates ad revenue, is designed to affect search engine rankings, is irrelevant and unhelpful, a time-waster, and is shoddy. The term AI slop refers to

artificially generated hallucinations on the web, in search, and through social media that have not been reviewed by humans. Consequently, AI Slop reduces genuine inquiry to superficial text and images that confirm imagined realities, a practice known as AI Slop. By prioritizing immediate emotional responses over deeper engagement with the world.

An article in The Guardian says:

"Slop' is what you get when you shove artificial intelligence-generated material up on the web for anyone to view (Canton, 2024)"

AI Slop is an aestheticization of data - or, perhaps, an aestheticization of the consensus of what images should be like, reflected in the data. According to Blattberg, aestheticization demands a disinterest in what we see:

"There is disinterested imagining, as when we fantasize, letting our imaginations 'run free,' unrestricted by fact; disinterested presenting, as when we put on an entertaining show or spectacle; and disinterested playing, as when we participate in games that are fun (Blattberg, 2024)."

AI Slop critiques the passivity induced by disinterest, in which the overabundance of AI-generated content leads to a lack of engagement in the creative process as well as a lack of critical reflection. Consumers often become disengaged from such content when AI can instantly create images and mimic human emotions with remarkable precision, unaware that these creations are mechanical.

As a result of this flood of content, which is designed to simulate lifelike human expressions and behaviors, cultural creation is diminished as it gets lost in the "age of noise," where countless perspectives drown out meaningful analysis. Artificial simulations can feel eerily human, further extending the sense of disconnection caused by AI's blurring of the boundaries of the "uncanny valley." Aestheticization of Data blurs the uncanny valley graph by introducing another layer of perception-artistic and emotional resonance that can mask or soften the discomfort associated with near-human or hyper-realistic representations. Data



Figure 5. Loab might seem like standard creepypasta, but her origins are a whole lot more mysterious (Klee, 2022)

aestheticization involves turning raw information into an emotionally compelling form, often giving priority to style and narrative over accuracy and realism.

Artificial intelligence generates images that captivate and unsettle us because they blur the line between real and fake photos. This is because it manipulates a system that is designed to create realistic images to make images that are not real. Feedback loops reverse the uncanny valley effect and break down the features that define realistic photos. This intermingling of the generator and the discriminator leads to an enhanced realism of the system and results in the creation of new and surreal art. These results are affected by model snapshots, training approaches, as well as hyperparameters, which prove how neural networks can be remodeled as creative tools. This offers new perspectives on generative arts by visualizing the machine's process and uncanny gaze, offering outcomes that deviate from works created by humans.

There is a convergence in the uncanny valley graph between human and artificial constructs. Therefore, it has the potential to distort genuine emotional reactions by subtly manipulating human perceptions and reactions. The manipulation of our emotions over time diminishes our capacity to empathize. The constant interaction with AI and the experience of AI-generated content that replicates emotions without really experiencing them, unconsciously alter humans' emotional thresholds, making them less sensitive to the depth and authenticity of real human relationships.

"Maybe the human part of human connection is overstated."
– Anish Acharya, Partner, Andreessen Horowitz (Tiku, 2024)

In the era of generative AI and its tools, such as deep-fake technology, voice synthesis, and hyper-realistic avatars, identifying artificial expressions from real ones is becoming difficult. The ability to emulate human-like features makes these AI generative tools highly capable of replicating subtle emotional expressions, tone inflection, and contextual responses. In this way, the uncanny valley no longer unnerves us, but instead engages us emotionally with innovative, hyper-realistic artificial intelligence creations.

This erosion of the uncanny valley, however, raises serious concerns. AI-generated content is indistinguishable from human-generated content, so how do we define authenticity? With AI blurring the line between human emotions and computer-generated simulations, what is the best way to navigate ethical concerns? There is a strong correlation between these issues and fields such as art and design where artificial intelligence mimicry resembles human expression increasingly. A world in which the uncanny valley no longer serves to delineate humans from artificial must redefine the uncanny valley. In the evolution of generative AI, it challenges the fundamental constructs of creativity and emotional resonance.

Using this example, we can see how AI generation processes infiltrate tangible aspects of media circulation. The aestheticization and mass production of suffering images change how we perceive and empathize with trauma because of the blurring of reality and simulation. Consequently, we find ourselves in a disconcerting space where simulated humanity is almost real but lacking in authenticity. A profound effect of this is the loss of empathy. The result of engaging with AI-generated images is that human emotions are dulled. People may become desensitized because of the abundance of manufactured visuals, resulting in a lack of immediate and meaningful experiences. We may lose the ability to deeply connect with human suffering realities as a result of shifting from lived experiences to algorithmic reproductions. Virtual reality may further erode the fragile line between reality and fiction.

Generative AI models are trained on datasets containing more than a billion images, each containing about 24 bits of information per pixel. Binary decisions are incorporated into these models into complex structures. It uses data previously held in archives, museums, and libraries. The training of AI models requires blending thousands of these images with noise to create countless variations. The generative model then transforms these images into new outputs by stripping them down to chaotic noise. In data-driven visual culture, this cycle from noise to noise creates an overwhelming flood of images. As Eryk Salvaggio points out, with the end of the information age comes the age of noise.


With AI-generated content on the rise, its impact on human behavior is more profound than we realize. AI-generated content subtly changes our perceptions, emotions, and thinking

AI-generated 'Heidi' trailer goes viral and is the stuff of nightmares



Copyright YouTube screengrab - @karpi

Figure 6. Figure 6 AI-generated 'Heidi' trailer (Mouriquand, 2023)



Adobe Stock | #668063846

FILE #: 668063846 Preview Crop Find Similar

DIMENSIONS	FILE TYPE	CATEGORY	LICENSE TYPE
3500 x 2333px	JPEG	Social Issues	Standard or Extended

Palestinian refugees. A Palestinian girl on the street of a destroyed city
By Volodymyr

Generated with AI

Save to Library Download Preview

Standard license
 Extended license (US\$79.99)

Buy License

Figure 7. An AI generated photo of a “Palestinian Refugee” being sold by Adobe as stock photography (AI-generated, 2023)

patterns. The impact extends beyond surface-level engagement; it impacts how we interpret reality, construct relationships, and the authenticity of human emotions. The convincing mimicry of human creativity and emotional depth by AI-generated content makes discerning between artificial and genuine experiences challenging. Exposure to continuous AI-generated content leads to a rewiring of the emotional system. Data generated by AI affects how we relate to others, empathize with them, and understand ourselves.

Our view of the world has been altered as now we view the world through the lens of generative artificial intelligence. Taking human perceptions and individuality and simplifying them into mechanical terms risks reducing their complexity. Although generative models are capable of mimicking human emotions and reconstructing images from noise, they do not "see" as humans do. Applying human metaphors to machines dehumanizes us by equating human thought with mechanical processes. However, we can't deny that generative AI's interpretation of empathy significantly impacts human emotional empathy. By convincingly mimicking emotions, generative AI challenges human perceptions of what constitutes an authentic emotion compared with artificially generated emotions.


Artificial intelligence's ability to mimic human emotions creates conundrum. It fosters connection by presenting relatable emotional expressions. In contrast it also triggers discomfort as these emotions are artificial. This conundrum blurs the uncanny valley. Due to the perceived equal validity or predictability of AI interactions, humans become desensitized to emotions. The overexposure of humans to AI simulations dilutes their sensitivity to genuine emotions. Humans have become accustomed to interacting with AI entities whose responses are empathic and uncanny, which makes it difficult for them to empathize with humans. Generative AI blurs the line between artificial and human-like interactions to become more similar, which makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish between real and simulated empathy. Therefore, empathy can be viewed as a programmable capability, rather than as a deeply human trait. This impacts people's perception of emotional connection.

Today's generative AI appears almost surreal, yet it is eerie and convincing at the same time. The uncanny valley is becoming narrower and narrower, making it increasingly difficult to

distinguish between humans and machines. It is undeniable that generative AI has the potential to manipulate the human eye to evoke awe. However, it also highlights the vulnerability of our cognitive and emotional perceptions. Consequently, we lose trust in emotional authenticity as the psychological ripple effect makes us question our own emotions. The reimagining of empathy by artificial intelligence demands us to reexamine empathy's nature in light of its expanded interpretation.

References

- Alkhatib, A. (2024) *Defining AI*. Available at: <https://ali-alkhatib.com/blog/defining-ai> (Accessed: 20 December 2024)
- Aswad, D. (2024) *The cons of a viral AI-generated photo after Hurricane Helene*. Available at: <https://www.click2houston.com/news/local/2024/10/09/the-cons-of-a-viral-ai-generated-photo-after-hurricane-helene/> (Accessed: 22 October 2024)
- Blattberg, C. (2024) *On Hannah Arendt's Aestheticism*. *Res Philosophica*, 101(3), pp. 479–504. Available at: <https://philarchive.org/rec/BLAOHA> (Accessed: 3 October 2024)
- Canton, D. (2023) *How to avoid AI slop that is polluting the web*. *Harrison Pensa*, 20 June. Available at: <https://www.harrisonpensa.com/how-to-avoid-ai-slop-polluting-the-web/> (Accessed: 17 July 2024)
- Euronews (2023) *AI-generated Heidi trailer goes viral and is the stuff of nightmares*. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/culture/2023/07/14/ai-generated-heidi-trailer-goes-viral-and-is-the-stuff-of-nightmares> (Accessed: 9 July 2024)
- Foster, A. (2023) *Boris Eldagsen: The woman who never was*. Talking Pictures, 1 April. Available at: <https://talking-pictures.online/2023/04/01/boris-eldagsen-the-woman-who-never-was/> (Accessed: 4 May 2024).
- García-Peñalvo, F.J. and Vázquez-Ingelmo, A. (2023) *What Do We Mean by GenAI? A Systematic Mapping of The Evolution, Trends, and Techniques Involved in Generative AI*. Available at: <https://reunir.unir.net/handle/123456789/15134>(Accessed: 28 April 2024)
- Klee, M. (2022) *A creepy AI-generated woman named Loab is haunting the internet*. *Rolling Stone*, 8 September. Available at: <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/loab-ai-creepypasta-artist-supercomposite-1234588335/>(Accessed: 4 August 2024)
- Knibbs, K. (2024) *AI slop is flooding Medium*. *WIRED*, 28 October. Available at: <https://www.wired.com/story/ai-generated-medium-posts-content-moderation/> (Accessed: 30 November 2024)
- Mariani, M. and Dwivedi, Y.K. (2024) *Generative artificial intelligence in innovation management: A preview of future research developments*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378647345_Generative_artificial_intelligence_in_innovation_management_A_preview_of_future_research_developments(Accessed: 11 September 2024)
- Salvaggio, E. (2024) *The age of noise*. Available at: <https://mail.cyberneticforests.com/the-age-of-noise/> (Accessed: 19 May 2024)
- SAMAA TV (2024) *Fact check: Reality behind image of young girl and snow leopard*. Available at: <https://www.samaa.tv/2087312541-fact-check-reality-behind-image-of-young-girl-and-snow-leopard> (Accessed: 25 May 2024)
- Talking Pictures (2023) *Boris Eldagsen: The woman who never was*. Available at: <https://talking-pictures.online/2023/04/01/boris-eldagsen-the-woman-who-never-was/> (Accessed: 7 April 2024)
- Tiku, N. (2024) *AI companions and the future of human connection*. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2024/12/06/ai-companion-chai-research-character-ai/> (Accessed: 20 December 2024)
- Williamson, S.M. and Prybutok, V.R. (2024) *The Era of Artificial Intelligence Deception: Unraveling the Complexities of False Realities and Emerging Threats of Misinformation*. *Information*, 15(6), 299. Available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2078-2489/15/6/299> (Accessed: 5 August 2024)



We received 17 submissions in response to the open call under the category of exploratory papers. Following a rigorous double-blind review process, a selection of these submissions has been chosen for inclusion in the publication.

The open call invited researchers, artists, designers, and scientists to contribute to an exploration of design ontologies—the philosophical and practical frameworks that shape how design is understood, defined, and enacted.

This publication aims to foster transdisciplinary dialogue by bringing together diverse perspectives on how design operates and evolves across different contexts. It seeks to establish theoretical linkages across disciplines, encouraging deeper reflection on the ontological dimensions of design—what design is, what it does, and how it both shapes and is shaped by the world.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to all reviewers and contributors to this digital publication. We especially acknowledge Dr. Vidmina for her valuable input through the foreword, and Faseeh for authoring the introduction.