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## Counter-Design: Praxis in Eco-social Movements

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**Counter-  
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*Praxis in  
Eco-social  
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# Design Frames and Counter-Framing

## Provocation.

Our point of departure for the Counter-Framing Design project has been to home in on the concept of 'frames' to contribute to the development of politically informed design research methods and practices. Our motivation has been to hook a critical framework onto the pervasive concept of *framing* in the design field through the elaboration of *counter-framing*, as a response to the widely deployed design practice of "framing the problem". This design practice of problem-framing sees meaning and sense-making as a design skill, whereby complex social situations are made understandable through design actions. In this project, we leveraged the concept of counter-framing to demonstrate how such design framing practices have been articulated in a way that obscures the politics at play in any design framing position being promoted or implicitly adopted in a context.<sup>1</sup>

Frames are slippery things and our initial foray into fostering a more critical and expansive notion of framing in design was confronting. This was particularly apparent to us by how widely taken up understandings of frames in design theory and practice appeared to leverage frames in ways that often flattened and depoliticised sociocultural and sociopolitical context and conditions. Whilst we observed design theories of frames to be lacking, more unexpectedly, we also observed a viewpoint in practice that all it takes is to 'get the frame right' and 'we'll get the outcome we want'. This wasn't just a designerly dilemma. We observed practitioners lean on framing in this instrumental way, across a breadth of organising cultures and within the contexts that we participated in, which can be described under the broad canopy of new economy organising.

For example, from alarmist, to doomist, to hopeful, or optimistic frames, climate discourses span the gamut of such affective response seeking to elicit climate action, conveying how frames are understood to operate in relation to other knowledge bases, such as the science of climate change. In our work we observed how grassroots communities perceive a monocausal relationship between frames and their presumed direct effects on realising social change. As the project commenced in February 2020 at the onset of the pandemic, these frames were also differentially invoked against other constructs, such as time: doomists claim we are out of time, those engaging hopeful frames suggest we are in the nick of time, or the pandemic provided the perfect time for systems change — a "reset moment" as one conversant put it.

*The same desire to 'reset' is embedded in the ever-mutable notion of change within activist and grassroots organisations who continue to struggle with how to co-create a 'new' society and its institutions. The 'time' to act is always now, and therefore also always shifting. If the time to act, to innovate, has already passed, there is nowhere to go-and if it is yet to be, we needn't worry. We must also make space, 'clearing-out' the old to make room for the new, much as Le Corbusier's attempts to redraw cities into standardized and rational sites of production and egalitarianism ignored a very basic tenant; people, and their practices, were already there.<sup>2</sup> Any attempt to level the socio-cultural land and start anew with the aesthetics and administrative power of high modernism would necessarily 'fail', at least in its utopian goals.*

*A reset moment—  
normal was the problem in the first place.*

We've sought to understand how the process of deploying frames shapes the communities with whom we collaborated (Citizens UK, ECHO, and Outlandish) and what this implies for their future possibilities. We observed how frames become epistemic, ultimately co-constructed with and by communities of practice that construct what is possible for those communities.<sup>3</sup> For instance, the field of design for sustainability has been dominated by ecomodernist techno-determinist frames and this has largely operated to foreclose alternative forms of eco-social design knowledge, which may also have bearing on stagnation in the field of sustainable design.<sup>4</sup> Such institutionalised frames structure how knowledge can produce and reproduce certain worldviews with and for practitioners, and we've written about this in more detail elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> In this vein, a paper by Benjamin Tyl and Armelle Gomez, published while doing the project, traces the conception of 'value' in ecodesign research to the neoclassical economic framework, which they argue has been detrimental to the success of ecodesign research writ large.<sup>6</sup>

1. Sharon Prendeville, Pandora Syperrek, and Laura Santamaria, "On the Politics of Design Framing Practices", *Design Issues*, 38, no.3 (2020): 71-84, [https://doi.org/10.1162/desi\\_a\\_00692](https://doi.org/10.1162/desi_a_00692).

2. Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage Books, (1961) 1992.

3. Anaïs Carlton-Parada and Sharon Prendeville (2023) "Radical Design Praxis and the Problematics of Intent," *CoDesign*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2023.2269913>.

4. Garrath T Wilson and Tracy Bhamra, "Design for sustainability: the need for a new agenda", *Sustainability*, 12, no.9 (April 2020): 3615, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12093615>.

5. Prendeville, Syperrek and Santamaria, "On the Politics of Design Framing Practices".

6. Benjamin Tyl and Armelle Gomez, "The hidden face of the value in eco-design tools: Theoretical basis of an essential concept", *Sustainable Production and Consumption*, 31, (2022): 794-804, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.spc.2022.03.025>.

## New Eco-nomics

This mirrors our research with grassroots groups working on alternative economics. We worked primarily with four organisations throughout the duration of the project, Public Works, Citizens UK, Outlandish, and Echo: Economy of Hours.

Echo and Outlandish worked most explicitly within the field of new economics, but sustainability and negotiations of value underpinned all of the organisations even as they focused on community driven development related to art and architecture (PW) or policy change campaigns (CUK). Nevertheless, the relationship between dominant, institutionalised frames and (economic) power creates a slew of tensions for any organisation operating toward social alternatives. Most starkly, one of our Echo collaborators despondently relayed a (familiar) story of how their designs for a 'new economic' community currency based on peer-to-peer exchange transmuted, over time, into a pro-growth capitalist entrepreneurial incubator. The radical practices initially envisioned ultimately dissolved into an unchanged system. As we reflect on the project, we can't

help but wonder about the broader resonance between this original vision for a community fostered on and by economic autonomy and the needs sought through, for instance, a migrant employability campaign run by Citizens UK, which our research informed. Though certainly not new or restricted to the UK, in the context and timeframe of our project (from 2020 through 2023) political discourse on the value of migrants has been and continues to be directly related to contestation about whether they support the existing formal economy (e.g. filling 100,000 vacancies in social care only to be subjected to debt bondage)<sup>7</sup> or diminish it (an ever impending migrant crisis of too many people taking up too many resources), but rarely on challenging this measure of value outright.<sup>8</sup>

How might practices in support of economic autonomy work across communities, who are themselves articulated through differential frames?

7. Shanti Das, "Migrant Care Workers Came to Help the UK. Now They're Trapped in Debt Bondage," *The Guardian*, June 18, 2022. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/18/migrant-care-workers-uk-debt>.

8. In 'Border Walls Gone Green', John Hultgren argues that it is our ongoing basic commitments to certain problematic conceptions of Nature that give rise to exclusionary anti-immigrant agendas. See John Hultgren, *Border Walls Gone Green: Nature and Anti-Immigrant Politics in America*. (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2015).

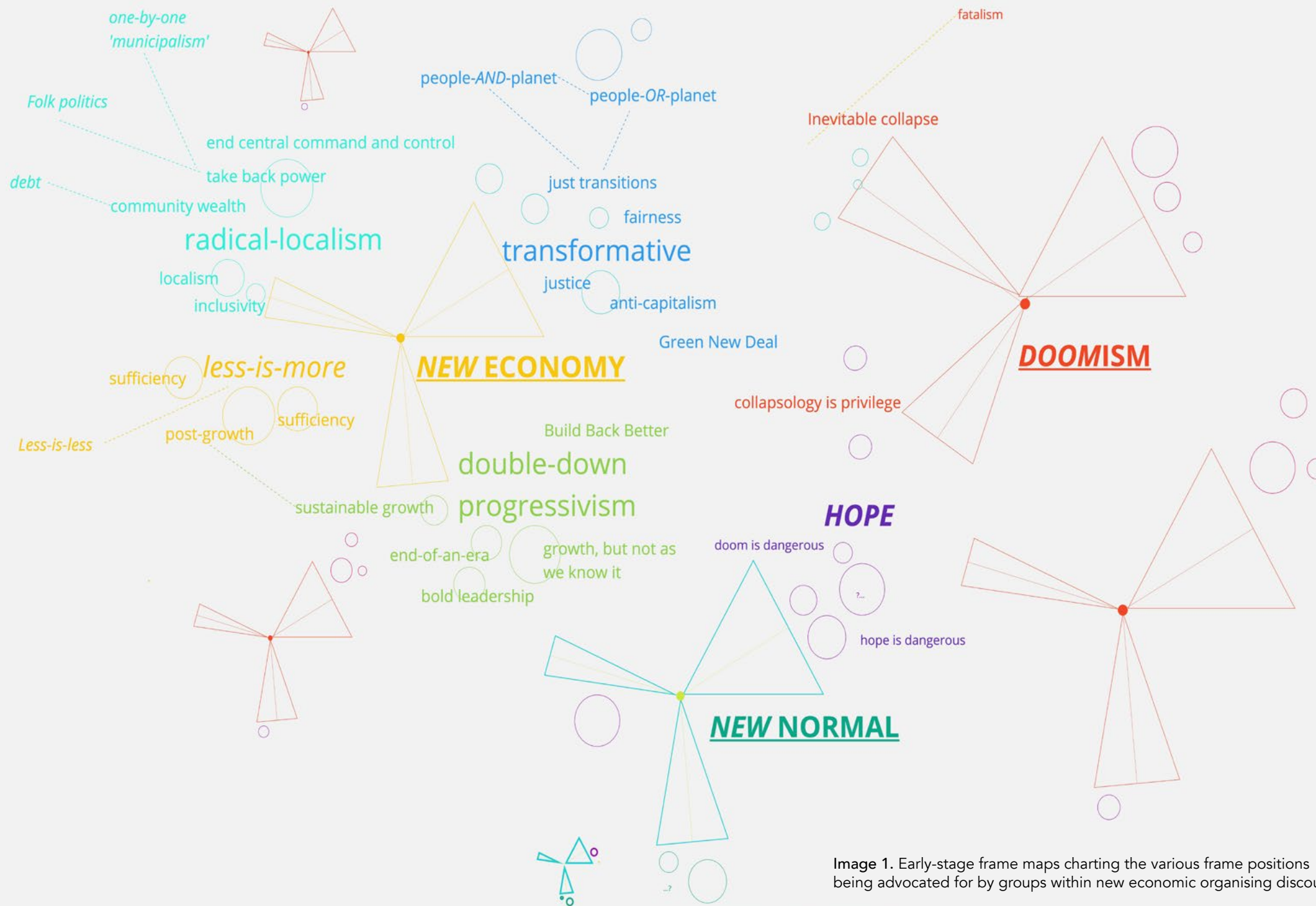


Image 1. Early-stage frame maps charting the various frame positions being advocated for by groups within new economic organising discourse

Frames are 'takes', counter-frames are 're-takes', is a simple explanatory phrase we've used throughout the project. A frame conveys a social or political problem or issue, that also implies something of the frame's constitution, its sociopolitical and historical context; frames are citational. What we have found is that applying counter-framing as a design practice can usefully reveal something of that citationality, that is, the power structures and resources that sustain a frame in a given context. More conceptually, frames are Things<sup>9</sup> that are "made" (and unmade) in practice through social interactions and are 'Thingified' through visual cues, catchphrases, metaphors, and visual images. Counter-framing is thus the process of deploying new frames and disrupting existing institutional frames (the counter-frame would be the 'thing' itself, the frame that challenges).

Our initial work emphasised deconstructing frames on the basis that framing can obscure toward solutionism i.e., the 'right' frame equals the 'right' enactment. Motivated to understand the potential manifold or oblique meanings available in a context, we homed in on the frames our collaborators engaged through their sustainability work to understand their relation to design practice embedded in a sociopolitical context.

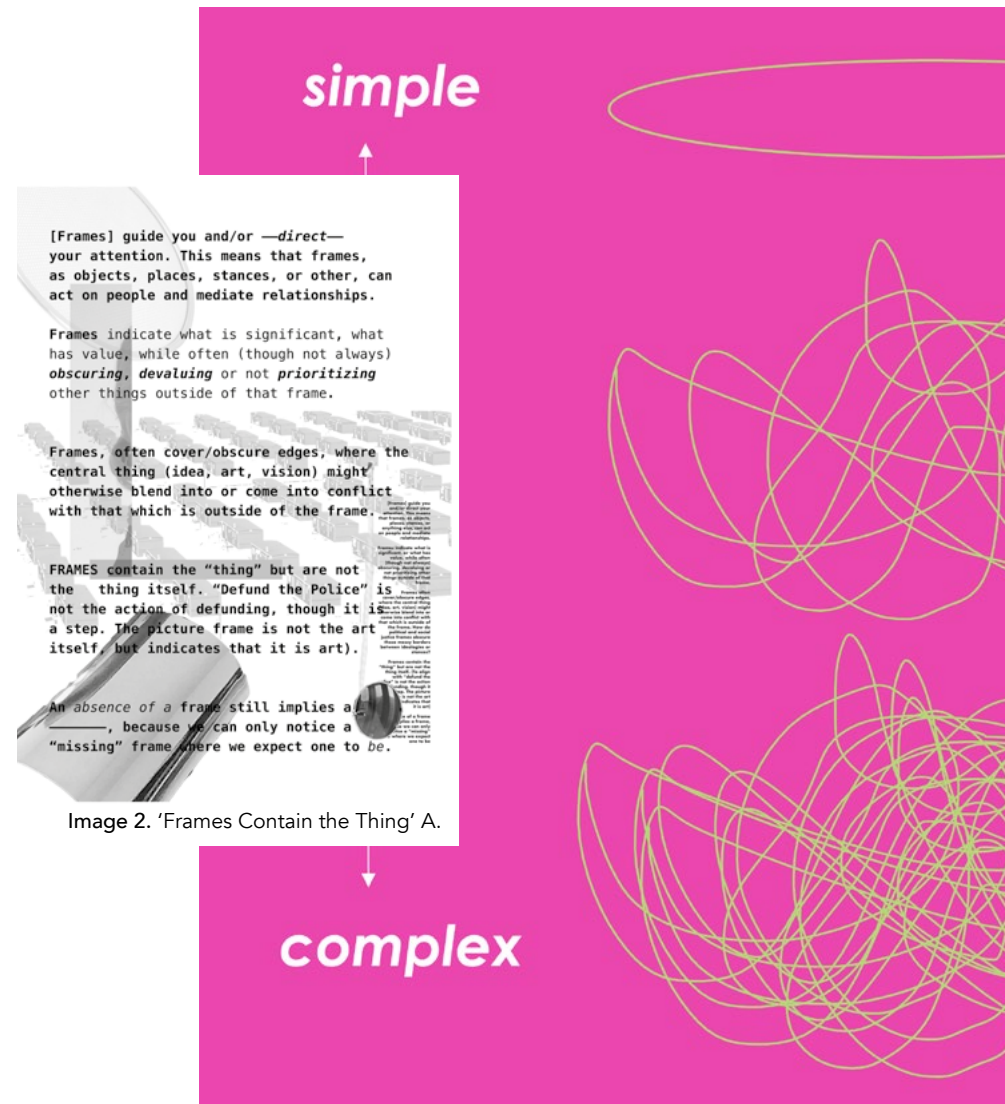


Image 2. 'Frames Contain the Thing' A.

"Migrants can be a part of regrowing...  
...the economy,  
..."

Nevertheless, assumptions in grassroots groups that getting the frame right is the measure of success clouded out more fundamental questions about power and control over resources in the contexts within which we were researching. We were acutely aware of how pre-determined agendas—enacted in and through frames—established power asymmetries in meetings and the subsequent direction of discussions and activities often performed a favoured, more palatable, or low risk outcome as a *fait accompli*.

We thus sought to recentre the 'content' of frames and unpack how frames operate as 'surface effects' and how counter-framing may be articulated as a toolbox in pursuit of better understanding this content, a more informed design positioning from which to move forward. Nevertheless, the task, as we approached it, through linguistic mapping, was stultifying; it implied too much that static frame debates made the world. Ultimately, this has the effect of dialogue where frames seemingly respond to one another, mediated by people.

9. Bruno Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik," in *Making Things Public: Atmosphere of Democracy*, B. Latour and P. Weibel, Eds. Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015, pp. 4–31.

Image 3. Project motivation, 'simple-complex'—from frame statements to frames as relational and enacted through socio-material practices.



*Sustainable growth is...*

Not sustainable if it's still playing to a capitalist growth mindset.

What about *de-growth*?

Which validates growth.

*Post-growth?*

So not necessarily counter-to but building on, or beyond.

This is a bit...

Don't say it.

Academic.

Or maybe just growth, but not as we know it.

Meaning?

Meaning less-is-more

I see, so less-is-more local, radically local

Like take-back power local, end central command and control local...

Well, maybe not quite so hands-off.

You mean, maybe not quite so radical.

A bit more pragmatic, perhaps?

But pragmatic is business as usual.

Unless it's money in hands, jobs for migrants...

Like community wealth building to counter wealth inequality.

Well, sure, maybe- but then you must mean wealth beyond money.

Like mental *wealth*.

Like community care intervening in a systemic lack of care,

Or mutual aid,

Or tool sharing circles,

Or my two-year-old running out the door with a whole block of 6- to 60-year-olds ready to catch him if he falls.

Idealistic.

*The new normal.*

I thought that was for work-from-home life?

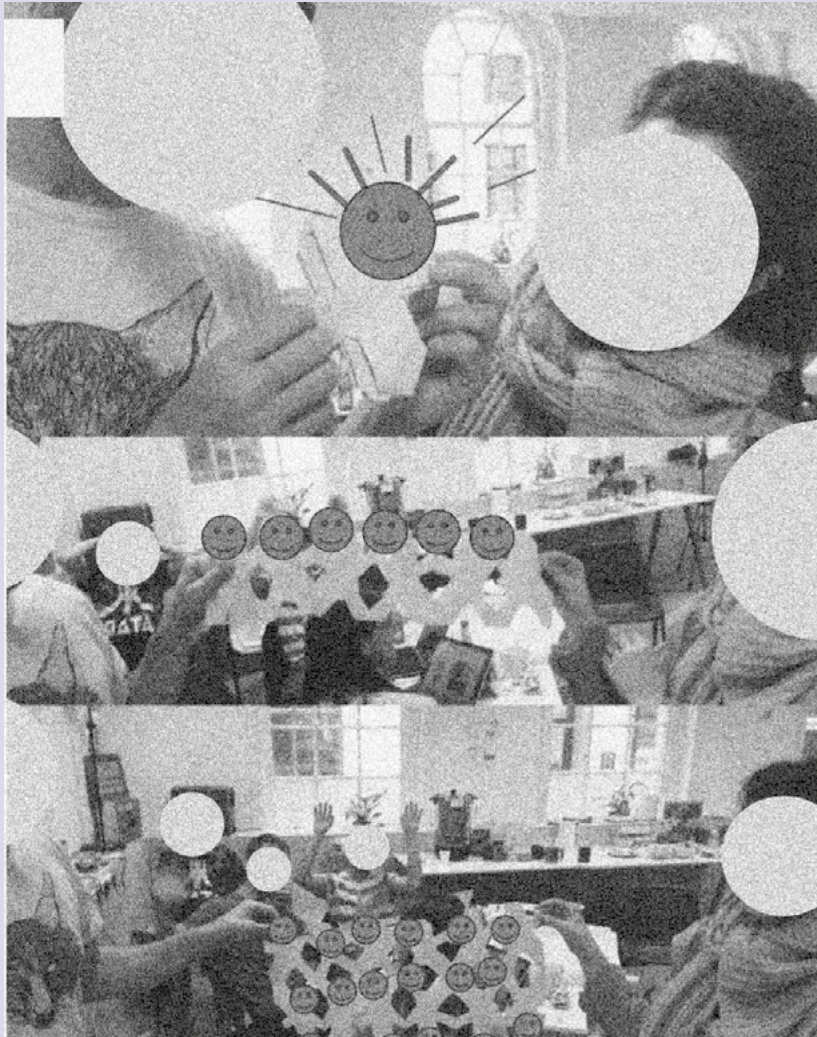
It's for anything that isn't 'build back better'.

Better for who? Normal for who?

For whom, you mean.

Not at all. Shall we talk about language ideologies?

(and so on)



Taking stock of this partiality, we sought a different approach that would recentre the socio-materiality of *practices*. Counter-framing as we have developed it aims to reveal this very messiness of power over resources. Mapping frames and practices in situ and through objects, fostered deep understandings of practitioner contexts and the invisible knowledges that already existed in their communities. Weaving between the mundane words and utterances caught during day-to-day work, our structured design fieldwork activities, and the synthetic frames overtly agreed upon by groups for community mobilising, rendered the relationship between practices and frames visible. What is of merit here is not the content of the mapping per se; ultimately frames are infinite. Similarly, we assert counter-framing cognisant of the corollary simplisticness it risks implying if these are understood as endless retakes. Rather, what is significant, is how this design activity revealed the co-constitution of frames and practices and how this shed light on the implications of this relationship on community actions. This also served to create space for new possibilities for alternative ensembles of practices to take shape.

## GENERAL WORKSHOP

During our first project workshop practitioners working in open technology, alternative economics, post-growth campaigning, as well as several academic experts were invited to bring an object with them that represented some part of their practice, and then map frames onto their objects. Upon reflection, these objects revealed how frames are related to practices in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.<sup>10</sup>

Practitioners in new economics relied on changes in framing as a means of achieving their outcomes be that through relying on frames as tapping into people's deepfelt values or feelings, or a sense that the wrong frame can backfire—at times simultaneously undervaluing the interplay of many frames and the relationships that sustain them (e.g., wealth inequality as it relies on community wealth building and mental wealth as co-constitutive, even when in opposition). Indeed, frames are a part of design practice, whether it is the discipline of design or community co-design. Still, both fields can obscure the palimpsest quality of frames in that they rely on (are written over) other frames, which may be then 'unreadable' but nevertheless must be present for the 'new' frame to take hold. Quite simply, the world is not a blank slate on which we impose order.

Paying careful attention to quotidian practices and juxtaposing this with an apparent formalism of frames in communities of practice, led us to observe a gap and see how these—often uninterrogated—assertions and assumptions also at times came into direct tension with the praxis of those communities. We take this forward as an insight from which to productively move forward together.

10. Sharon Prendeville, Anaïs Carlton-Parada, Victoria Gerrard, and Pandora Syperek, 2022, "From Publics to Counterpublics: Designing for Autonomy," In *Proceedings of the Participatory Design Conference - Volume 1, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne*, (August, 2022): 218-229, ACM, New York, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3536169.3537795>.

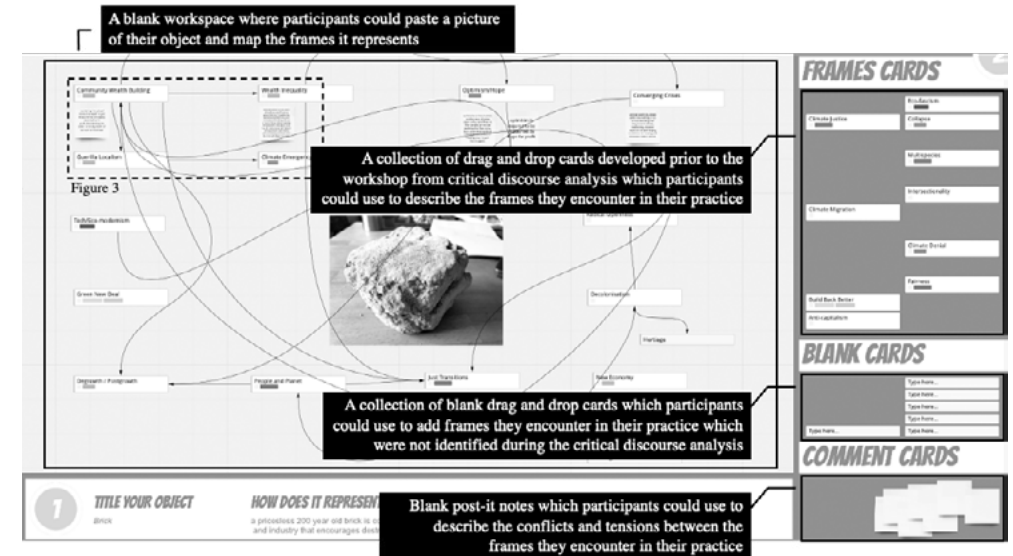


Image 4. A "place setting" format completed by a participant during the workshop. The format itself posed challenges to participants who were new to MIRO as well as the need for a clearer set of instructions from the design research team (us).



Image 5. Collage of objects that participants self-selected as representing their practice. Participants used the objects as a starting point to identify the frames they encounter in their work.



# En-countering Design Research Contexts and Conditions

Alongside this evolution from mapping frames to interpreting frames in relation to practices, our own community experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the effects felt by many of our collaborators, rendered our original project intent impractical and unachievable. This may seem obvious; the notion that any researcher can be a distanced, objective and unaffected observer has long been passé but the extent to which researchers' (our) own socio-political positionings and everyday lives affect and are affected by the same conditions as our collaborators is still an understated entanglement. Obscuring this entanglement allows us, as researchers, to hide behind project ownership, but what would happen if we made ourselves more visible? Where might this take us?

The anthropologist Anna Tsing speaks of project-making as a type of patterning where the project(s) is(are) always in formation under a set of political-economic conditions.<sup>11</sup> How we encounter our co-participants is a form of patterning and so, perhaps, if we carefully trace the dynamics of a project and the practices at hand, we can learn something of its politics, and thus, in our case, design politics, especially of the conditions under which design (research) is produced.

*Conditions which, depending on who is designing, are all but ignored in favour of the knowledge produced, as if context only matters for (co-)participants, evidencing exactly what is lacking in this seeming reciprocity.*

In these instances, designers are squarely knowledge producers in their ability to translate from 'raw data' (provided by participants) to concept and output, but the everyday patterns and processes that underpin designers' (i.e., our) ways of understanding are not subject to the same mapping, the same fine-toothed comb. So, in this spirit of patterning and tracing here we take stock of the context and conditions of our project through the ethical lenses of positionality, projectification, and performativity.

11. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, "A look inside The Mushroom at the End of the World," Princeton University Press, June, 2021. Available at: <https://press.princeton.edu/ideas/a-look-inside-the-mushroom-at-the-end-of-the-world>.

# Positionality

We might interlace various and sometimes seemingly disjointed project narratives together, speaking to project themes, or concepts, or insights. These were listed, after all, over and over in bits and pieces of documents as we struggled with adapting and transferring the project teamwork to wholly new digital work practices, in lieu of the usual design research project practices, involving pinning images and notes to office walls...

*...which when linked together they read like a simplified poem that could be overanalysed, enjoyed, and sometimes even both: counter-design, community, radicalism, positionality, structures, relationality, labour, power, autonomy, practices, counter-publics, dissensus.*

The point is that it would be absurd to deny the realities of how working conditions affect what we do. Our close collaborator Dr Pandora Syperek has consistently called our attention to the question of material conditions and relationality in the context of Covid. Distance from the day-to-day work of our partners, along with each of our own upheavals during this timeframe, including physical and mental illness, loss, as well as the euphoria and demands of new parenthood, has taken us to a space where our work is, arguably, over-theorised. Design research is more typically cast as a-theoretical, universalising and diffusing 'the' normative design canon across situations and contexts in problematic ways.

Yet the prevalence for positionality statements as offerings of life experiences to illuminate epistemological leanings creates challenges too.<sup>12</sup> While potentially worthy statements of presence, when provisioned alongside an absence of deeper political economic contextualisation, stating positionality is certainly a practice that risks becoming the victim of 'elite capture'.<sup>13</sup> Still, positionality can enlighten us to our framing conditions and context. We need the self-interrogation of positionality to understand the limits of our knowledge—difficult to put down in the 250-word allocation of a journal article and too easily slipping into performative virtue-signalling.

## Dissolving Positionality

*How many times had we come back to positionality, to questions of intersectionality, to the body as a sign, as a commodity, as a medium? Of course, it was always a mess. I would layer coloured circles on top of one another, lay hexagons neatly against one another in a pixelated flower, toy with rubber bands, pulling to and fro to feel some semblance of the way it felt to be perceived but not understood. We were trying to design that feeling, after all, or design for it maybe, but everything came back too trite. Lines were too finished, too exclusionary, words not simple at all, but with the same unfortunate problem of the self. Perceptions vary and so complexity is lost or recognized in so many ways that our classifications of self are at once meaningless and too meaningful.*

*How did I re-design myself, even as I trialled all the iterations of a positionality map, wondering if I should include this-or-that self. 'Mother': easy enough, and fairly undeniable considering the seven-month-old at home—except of course, when it isn't, when 'mothering' is expansive and not assumed. 'Immigrant': true, twice over, but how could I footnote a recognition of my privileged status, and at the same time not deny how similar placelessness can be? I'll come back to that one. 'Latina': complicated and loaded with meaning, but not necessarily here, not the same meaning anyway (and even then, overwrought and passé) Latinidad's essentialism and erasure rear their head, alongside the horrors of colonization. I footnote that too. What else? Some words are too loaded. Even now the fixation on mapping the self feels like its own colonialist project and I struggle with the discomfort of knowing that, done badly enough, my statements on positionality can become another form of 'elite capture'.*

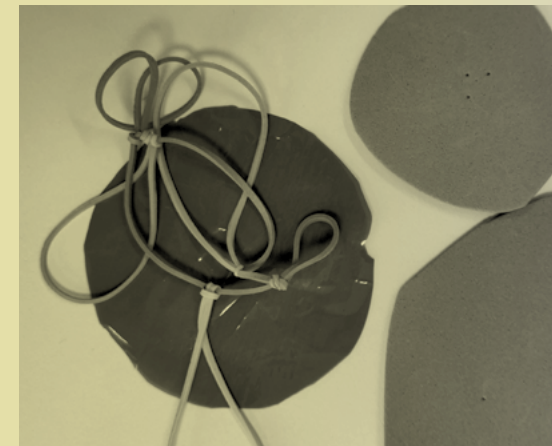


Image 6. Disbanded Attempts at Positionality Mapping

12. For a nuanced and thoughtful reflection on the practice of positionality statements and how we introduce ourselves see footnote two in Max Liboiron (though the whole text is a learning point on this topic too) *Pollution is Colonialism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), vii-3.

13. Olúfemi O Táíwò, *Elite capture: How the powerful took over identity politics (and everything else)* (London: Pluto Books, 2022).

These personal life circumstances that became more visible in our work contexts during the pandemic, were sliced up into disparate issues (of mental health, as distinct from care, distinct from race, from gender) and this only seemed to mirror the challenges of framing we were trying to navigate in the project context. How do we reconcile the tensions between the necessity of frontline responses to social needs, that were never so broadly visible as during the pandemic, with organising communities whose campaigns centre on single issues rather than broader reform? For example, how are calls to *end casualisation* in universities—an issue which some of our team members experienced directly—necessarily complicated by the ways in which instability can variously affect individuals depending on the (primarily financial) support they receive in other facets of their lives?

Like all other domains of life, the pandemic rendered the remit of research work anew. During this time, the sustaining work of the (reproductive) commons became visible too, as boundaries between work and home gave way amidst the necessity to accommodate teaching delivery and our research activities, despite the circumstances we faced.



Image 7. Disembodied Design Research Activities

We assembled remotely and intermittently through the performative conditions of online Zoom sessions and contrived and episodic design research workshops that inevitably belied certain realities and could only ever offer partial insights on what we sought to understand and achieve.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, this new ability to ‘participate’ online was a welcome privilege too; a flexible, if ultimately gruelling, medium between lifeworlds that minimised infection risk whilst also sustaining a veneer of normalcy during a state of exception. Curiously, whilst several of our research collaborators spoke of the proliferation of digital assets for the knowledge commons during this time, we accessed far less discussion or direct experiences (through our work practices) of the mutual aid networks that proliferated during the pandemic. We do not have enough evidence to comment on why this may be, but this absence certainly resonates with the ambiguousness of our own contradictory biopolitical pandemic experiences, of the physical demands of online work facilitated by new, or newly available, digital technologies, whilst other forms of commoning might have otherwise been transformative to our experiences.<sup>15</sup>

14. Sharon Prendeville and Cindy Kohtala, From Rhetoric to Realpolitik: The Design Optimism of Commons Discourse, in *Commons in Design*, ed. Christine Schranz (Amsterdam: Valiz. 2023) 181-200. Available at: <https://valiz.nl/en/publications/commons-in-design>.

15. Prendeville and Kohtala, "The Design Optimism of Commons Discourse".

# Projectification

Even if our funders provided ample leeway to rearticulate the project outcomes based on the “new normal”, the more consequential answer to the question of how we might do (fund, evaluate, value, conceive of) research differently in such circumstances seems yet to crystallise. To continue our excavation of the project context and conditions we encountered, we reflect here on questions of praxis as it manifests as an epistemology of co-learning.

In participatory design, issues such as institutional funding frameworks and practices of ‘projectification’ are acknowledged challenges, especially by the way such conditions induce myopic perspectives and consequently limit project activities and perhaps, possibilities for a more fruitful practice of patterning.

“In the ‘projectification’ of the social life of vulnerable groups, participatory design researchers and stronger cultural workers surmount and blend voluntary work, unpaid and paid work, and stable and unstable ways of making a living, with the hope that this may lead to a new project, another project, yet another projectification.”<sup>16</sup>

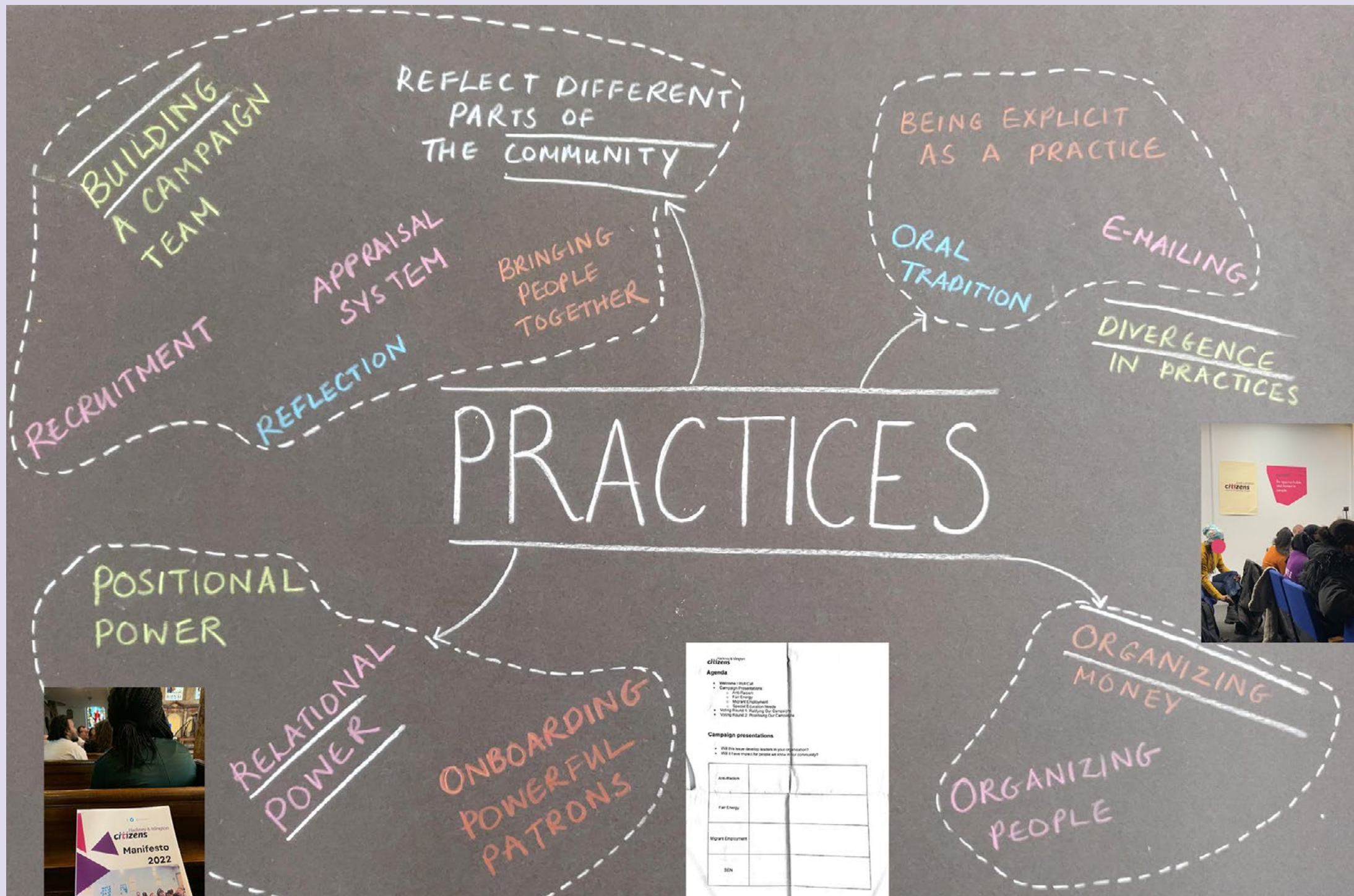
As we’ve set it out here, to us this implies the need to focus on the conditions and context of the project, which might inform creating new ways for us to rethink this mode of practice and stem, undo, or make the compulsion irrelevant. On the other hand, without deep interrogation, political-economic contextualisation, and candidness our work risks irrelevance, at best, or being harmful



at worst, as unambiguously conveyed in this expression of the phenomena of projectification. More to the point, how, in the context of the inevitable next disruption, might the methodological dimensions of the project we’ve developed better equip us at a time when our life-sustaining ecologies continue to break down? How can we build projects that meaningfully respond to expressed community needs? How to reflect and write on research partnership outcomes critically but also fairly? And in ways that do not risk reappropriation to nefarious ends? We do not have complete answers to these questions; our approach has been to seek to engage with our co-participants in as frank and meaningful ways as possible. At the same time, we are also acutely aware that, despite the evidence of many examples of successful technical developments of ecological products and services, material demand and overconsumption continue unabated—pointing to where the barriers to change truly lie. Yet, funding continues to emphasise and reward this product impact focus at the behest of a wider systemic and sociopolitical lens.

16. Erling Björgvinsson and Mahmoud Keshavarz, “Partitioning Vulnerabilities: On the Paradoxes of Participatory Design in the City of Malmö.” in *Vulnerability in Scandinavian Art and Culture*, eds. Adriana Dancus, Mats Hyvönen, and Maria Karlsson, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 247-266. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37382-5\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37382-5_12). In our article ‘From Publics to Counterpublics: Designing for Autonomy’, we consider how design projects construct marginalised groups oriented towards some “matter of concern” (a la Dewey), regardless of

how much recognition of autonomy there may be. In this regard, this construction of a public may also be a precursor to the norming of that public, and thereby complicates and at times exemplifies the very problem designers are engaging with. See Sharon Prendeville, Anaïs Carlton-Parada, Victoria Gerrard, and Pandora Syperek, 2022, “From Publics to Counterpublics: Designing for Autonomy,” In *Proceedings of the Participatory Design Conference - Volume 1, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne*, (August, 2022): 218-229, ACM, New York, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3536169.3537795>.





Consider a participatory workshop we carried out with Citizens UK a partner organization on how to achieve settled status for undocumented migrants, not currently permissible under existing policies. Policy demands developed in order of priority by a broader community of organisers working in the interest of migrants (and often as migrants), are not necessarily deemed actionable. The reasons are varied and include the opportunity to 'win' a lower ranking policy outcome with the current administration. There is no reset. The campaign framework would need to suggest a hierarchy of possibility that mirrors the hierarchy of need.



A hierarchical list of the socio-material policy demands of UK-based migrant groups generated during a counter-framing design workshop drawing on object cartographies:

1. Give children the right to join a family member (parent or grandparent), reduce child citizenship fees and give UK-born children the right to citizenship;
2. Provide access to services, such as health and housing, free school meals and healthy start vouchers. Policies to protect those potentially availing of services by implementing firewalls between services and the Home Office;
3. Reduce citizenship fees in general and for visa renewal processes;
4. Provision of access to services (e.g., health, housing) whilst waiting to settle status, instead of current discriminatory 'right to work' or 'right to rent' policies;
5. Reduce lengthy routes to citizenship for people who have been here for a long time (from 20 years to 10 or 5)

## Bring Your Object Along.

In another workshop participants were invited to bring an object representing migration to them and included passports and permits, photos, a sieve, a hand, coffee, a ring, textiles, leading to discussions of roads not taken, family, roots, identity, and memory in the face of generational and intersectional issues; cultural adaptation and assimilation; state control and maltreatment; inhospitality and feelings of separation; isolation, and powerlessness.

*MIGRATION 'AS'... waste / loss of control / incapacitating / a set of assumptions / arbitrary / empathy / being outside / a journey / power struggle / cultural adaptation / a clash of social norms / a religious issue / identity / a past place / a history / bringing your objects along.*

As soon as we frame 'Migration as...'we reduce it, delimit it.  
'We are objects of migration discourses.'



The objects of a community are also co-designers (not to mean the co-designers of a community are also objects). The basics of ontological design tell us this. Above us we see the objects of migration mediating the experiences of migration, a process of sign-sharing that has the potential to complicate discrete frames ("migration as...") and support the creation of 'new' frames that would generate open conversations around such a hierarchy of policy demands.

Image 9. Researcher and co-participants presenting the the Migrant Employability Campaign during a Citizens UK Assembly

But objects can also flatten, close, delimit frames, narrowing the possible conversations in the room.

The object below tightens the conversation, creates a structure for it, and thus a different set of policy agendas arises.

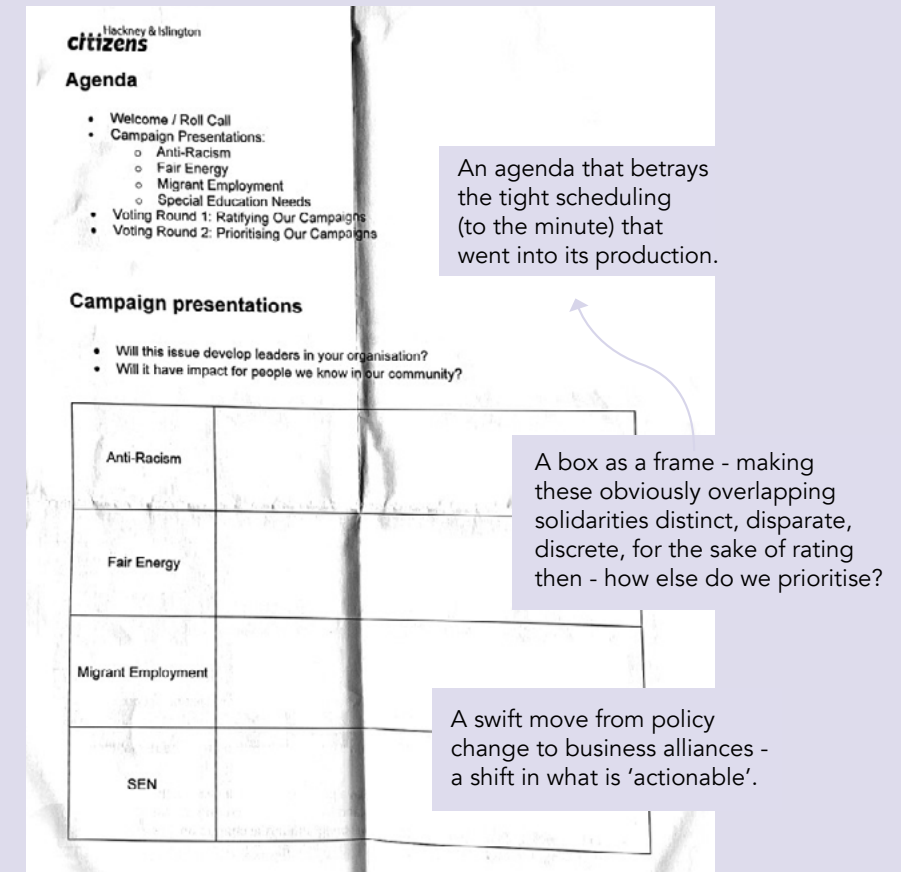
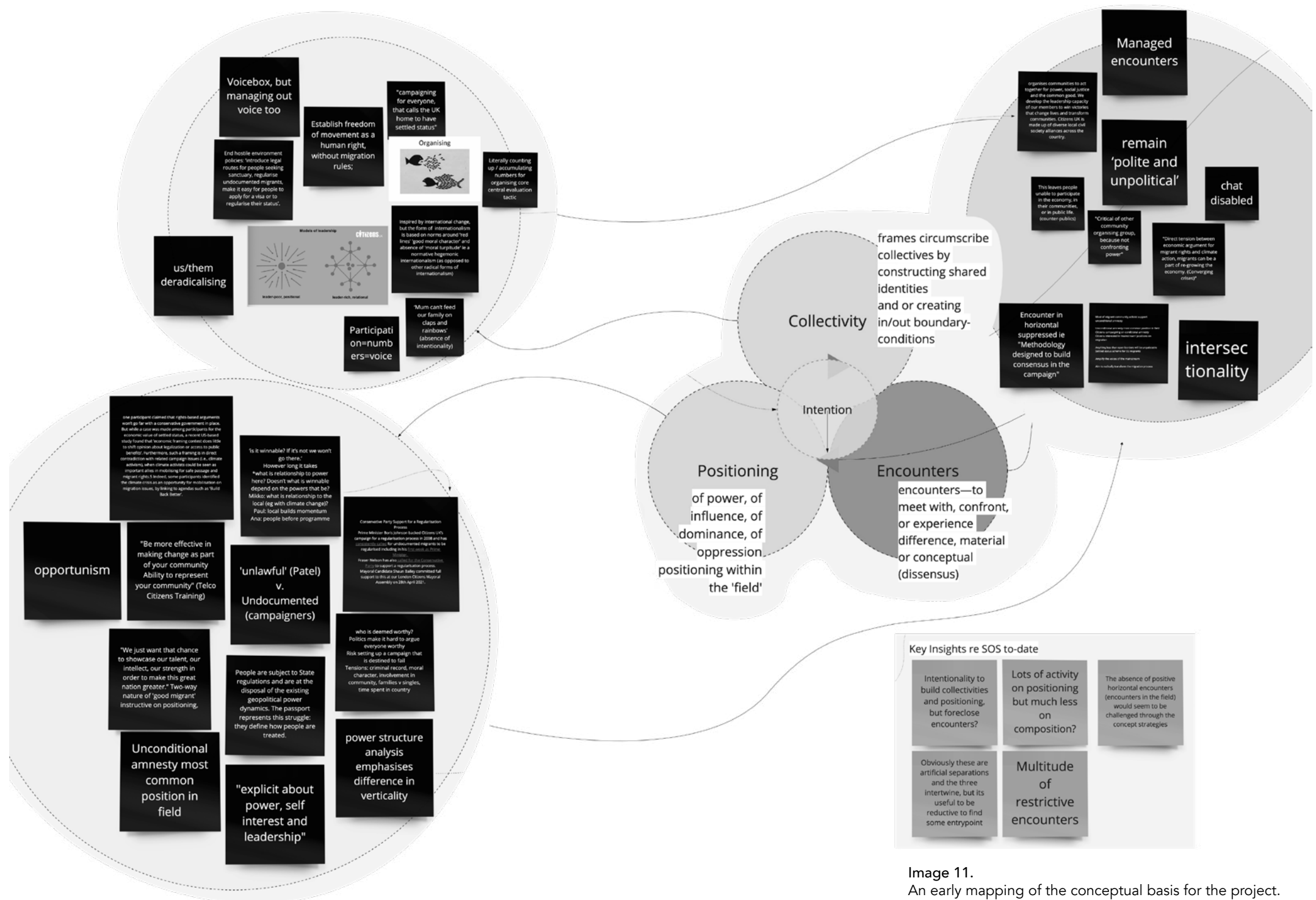


Image 10. Frames Contain the Thing B





## Performativity

This confluence of a critical orientation, resistance to solutionism, and pandemic-induced distance from our partners, at times precipitated tension and perplexity as partners or participants struggled to grasp what the design output or 'bit' of our work was or is—a nod to the everydayness of diffuse design practices but also to the tensions in enacting epistemology as a praxis, the co-construction of knowledge through *inter-relations*.

This tension also speaks to the challenges of developing a design practice that shuns the Modernist productivist design impulse. In practice, ideas about what design is and what it can operatively 'do' was a constant negotiation.

Design theory and practice is often (self-)critiqued for its deterministic and instrumentalist assertions. Yet our experiences and intentions to create other ways of doing design underscore that this is what is asked of design by communities of practice and by the conditions and the contexts within which design operates. To our knowledge, this point is not adequately considered within this wider critique within the field.

*We should start from the point  
that everyone is allowed in.*

We equally rowed back from certain design methods and practices that seemed misplaced in context—the gamification of asylum, the pursuit of single-issue agendas—as our work deepened, and our knowledge of our terrain evolved. Our own cautiousness appeared in contrast to several organisations with whom we interacted that were interested in leveraging design practices for movement mobilising. Instead, they invoked design methods within their strategizing activities that mimicked the design turn in business contexts, despite these methods being highly distinct from those interested in design studies for social movements.<sup>17</sup> We observed directly how this was the mode of design most often invoked as a strategic device, a performative tool, for setting out movement building and organising strategies. This reflects a perception and utility of designer inputs as providing a capacity to manipulate our understandings or act out often pre-determined outcomes.

At other times we felt compelled, for clarity, into using established language and terms that we were not always comfortable with. Indeed, even the core purpose(s) of our work was stretched and moulded to simplify, clarify, and perform in ways to make us accountable for our communication. We went back in time and found a sentence to copy and paste into emails or guide us when we spoke with (potential) partners:



*“We’re developing new ways of forming  
communities by experimenting with  
creative organising principles through  
our partnerships. We aim to achieve  
this by coming to grips with necessary  
conflict that exists across communities  
through frames, or understandings  
of issues that relate to values.”*

Direct, maybe, and useful, certainly, but not without its problems. Resisting ‘solutionism’ meant tricky conversations with partners and collaborators conveying our reluctance to design a service or a policy process before getting to grips with the full remit of the activity. Furthermore, the use of our design outputs warranted careful consideration and reflection. As windows of access to deepen community insights opened and quickly closed back up again, we grasped glimpses of the frames that filtered the work most obviously.

17. See the following:

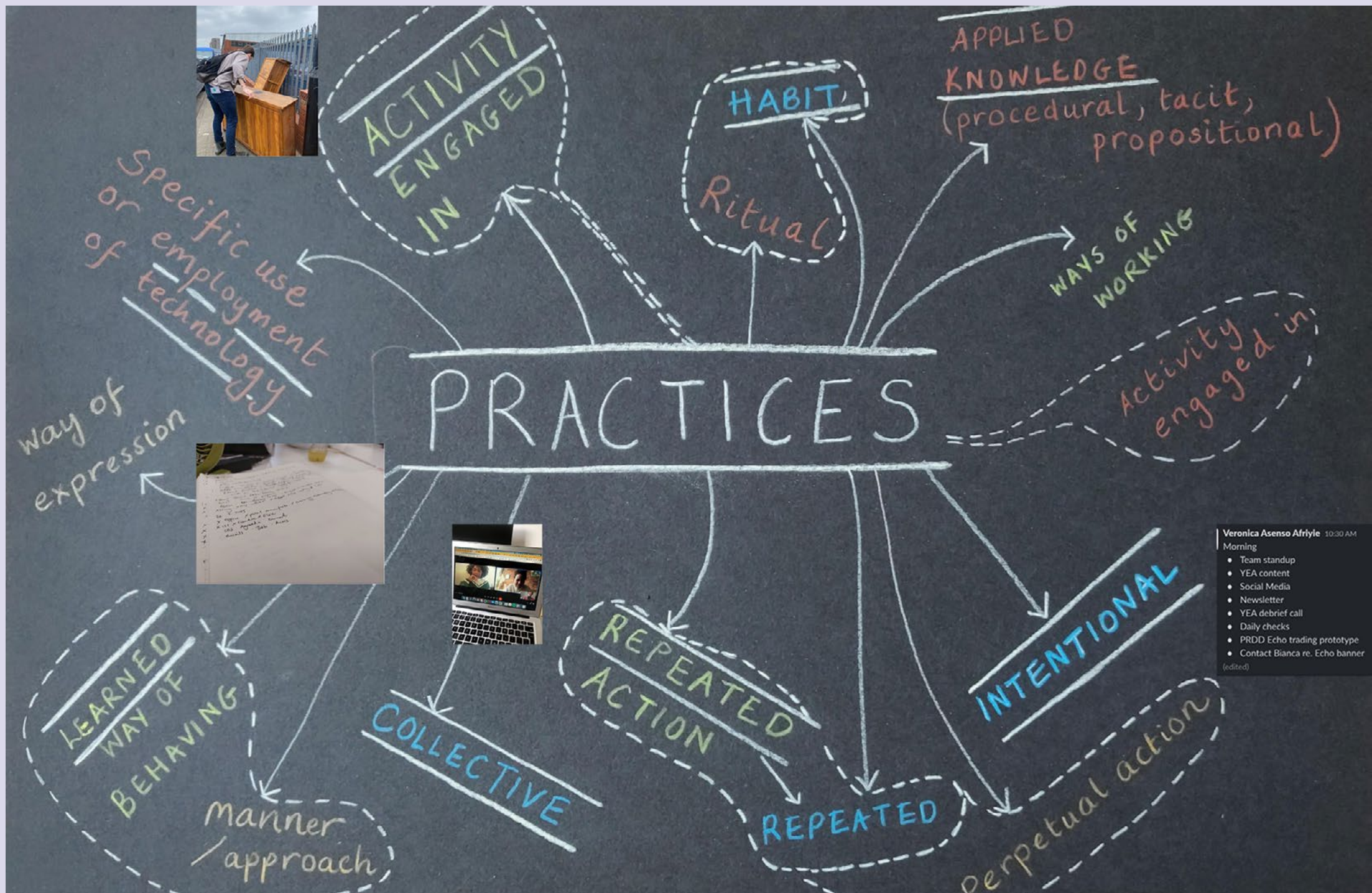
Tom Bieling, *Design (&) Activism: Perspectives on design as activism and activism as design* (Mimesis International, 2019)

Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon. *Disobedient objects*. (London: V&A Publishing, 2014).

Goda Klumbyté, Ren Loren Britton, Outi Kaarina Laiti, Luiza Prado de O. Martins, Femke Snelting, and Caroline Ward. “Speculative materialities, Indigenous worldings and decolonial futures in computing & design,” *Matter* (2022).

Reem Talhouk, and Sarah Armouch. “Dialogues on Decolonial Participatory Design Praxis During a Revolution.” In *Proceedings of the Participatory Design Conference 2022-Volume 2*, pp. 52-57. 2022.

Elizabeth “Dori” Tunstall, *Decolonising Design: A Cultural Justice Guidebook* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2023).



Veronica Asenso Afriyle 10:30 AM  
 Morning  
 • Team standup  
 • YEA content  
 • Social Media  
 • Newsletter  
 • YEA debrief call  
 • Daily checks  
 • PRDD Echo trading prototype  
 • Contact Bianca re. Echo banner  
 (edited)

# Echo

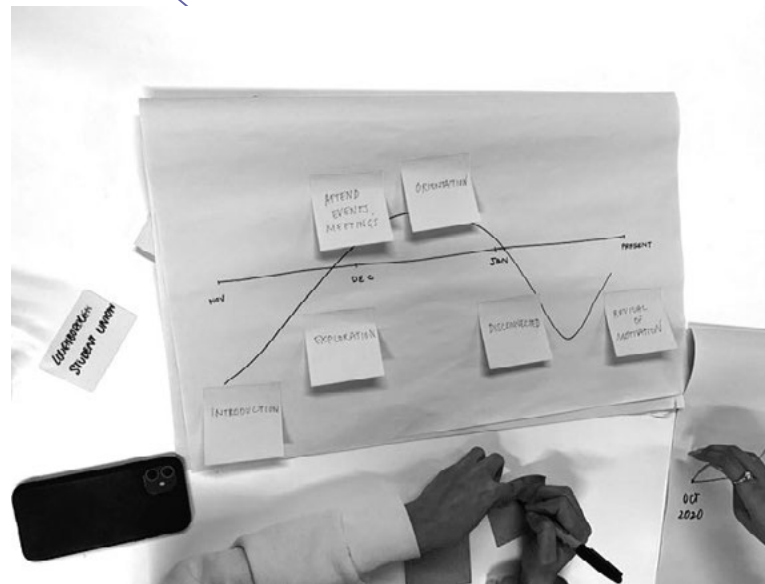
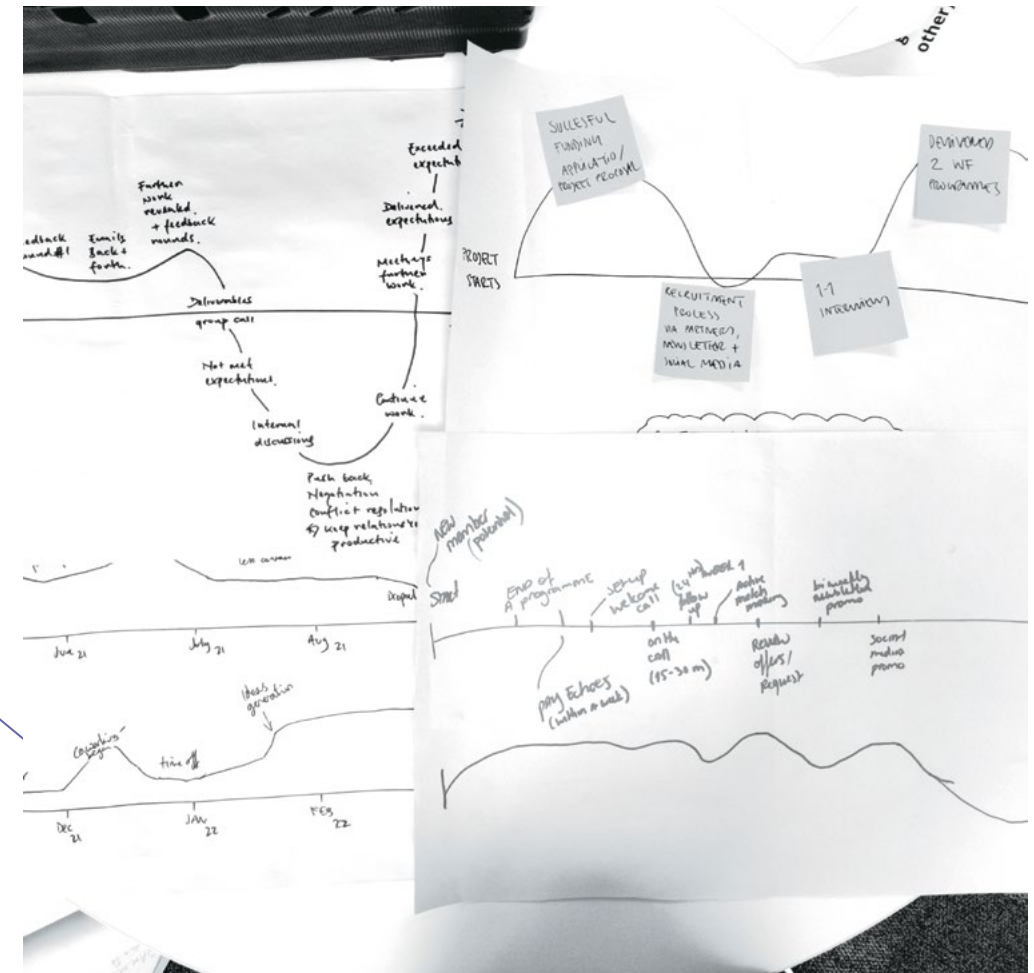


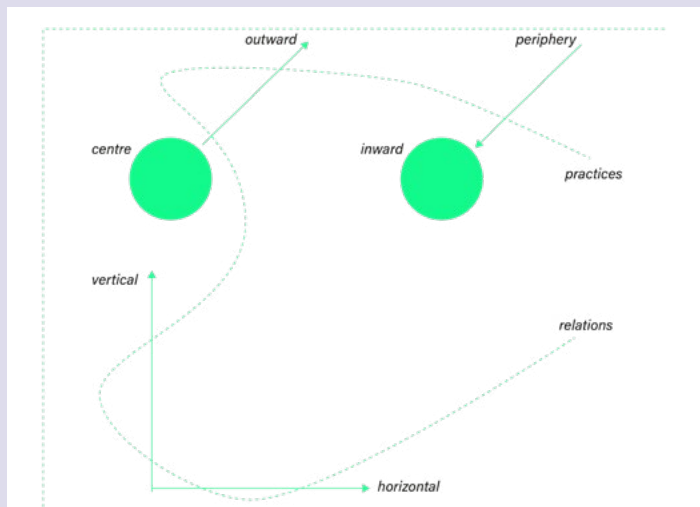
Image 13. Participants were asked to plot the practices they employed within their organisations on a timeline, along with a rising and falling line that indicated their feelings at the time of the practice. This line indicated a range of positive, neutral, and negative feelings, which they were then asked to clarify.



timeline activities

## On Letting things Die

It is perhaps this view of design as something that can determine outcomes that makes waning projects and unintended consequences feel like failure—and in turn keeps design ever oriented toward problem ‘solving’. *“This is the way the world ends. Not with a bang but a whimper.”*<sup>18</sup> What might design look like if we instead see these ‘failures’ and frictions as an exploration of the link between design thinking and design practice—where they hit and miss, and repeat themselves, and change? How might we create more space for empathy in design if we learn to care for projects and outputs at the end of their lives, much in the way the Stewarding Loss project supports organisational ‘death’ with compassion.<sup>19</sup> It might allow us to enact Counter-Design without fear, to seek out all the complexity in the gap between design thinking (as an iterative process tied to theorizations of innovation) and design practice (as every mundane and extraordinary component of what we actually do).



**Image 14.** Formalistic community structures based on general models and rigid decision-flow hierarchies can become proxies for relations and obscure power plays and resource negotiations in practice. In this context, this was entangled with and perhaps was effectual in the actual community trajectory away from its original democratic aims.

18. Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Poems 1909–1925* (London: Faber & Faber, 1925/1927), 128.

19. “When Organisations Need to Die,” Stewarding Loss, accessed September 26, 2023, <https://www.stewardingloss.com/initiatives/when-organisations-need-to-die>.

20. “How ECHO Works,” ECHO, accessed September 26, 2023, <https://www.economyofhours.com/how-echo-works>.

Here, then, is the mundane. I signed up for Echo’s platform—a self-proclaimed ‘Economy of Hours’ and one of our partners on the project. The platform allows “...people to exchange time and skills in place of pounds and pence....”<sup>20</sup>

I set up an offer- a skill I could teach in exchange for a few ‘echos’- i.e., tradable hours I could give to someone else to learn a skill. I thought it might give me a good idea of how these interactions play out, a way of doing participant observation that was true to the organisation itself.

The process was easy and, to me, seemed quite accessible.

Skills here become boxed up knowledge and bubbles of categories- a frame that tells us what is significant about what we know. In this case, how we can deliver the content (online, in person), how long it takes, and what category it falls into- chosen by me but from a set of pre-existing phrases. Ease, convenience, is itself a framing and one that design loves.

Still, this very accessibility makes me wonder at the platform’s usefulness for those on the economic margins in the UK’s pro-growth discourse, particularly when it comes to migrants whose value (in a very tangible, statist way) is dependent on how they support this economic growth. Might they find a space here that welcomes them for a different kind of contribution, and could this, in any way, temper the both the demands of everyday needs and of fitting into a ‘good migrant’ narrative?

**Image 15.** Sign-up pages for Echo Platform, no longer accessible, Echo, Home ([economyofhours.com](https://economyofhours.com))

But I never did get any requests for my offering and given Echo's more recent shift to foregrounding their role as a community entrepreneurial incubator, I thought about how their own re-framing might be dependent on diminished platform use (or maybe my offering just wasn't that exciting). This move was something I learned after signing up, during a facilitator workshop that stressed a train-the-trainer model and action learning as a methodology. Design thinking, the facilitator explained, leads to active facilitation, an attempt to understand the user and the challenge, redefine problems, and create alternative strategies and *solutions* while also creating empathy with the target user.

This move, however, made it clear to me that skill exchange may be a thing but it isn't *the thing*. That would be empathy towards (commodified) userexperience, that would be boosting the visibility and ultimately profit of small businesses, that would be in-person workshops and events that had been so restricted under pandemic regulations. It also made me feel slightly better about the lack of interest in my offering, which I doubt I'll ever put forward again (and this is how things fade). This is not, however, a failure.

Or rather, might it be a Queer framing of failure.<sup>21</sup> Platforms are not solutions, designing is a process, and counter-designing is a design praxis. What I found here was a gap in what I understood an organisation to be, through the frames they had constructed in one space (a platform) and what I came to understand about who they were through the *process* of framing in another space (in person workshops). This gap, between interpretation, between modalities, and between spaces is not a fault. Things may fade away in this 'gap', but it shows us how all framings are steeped in and dependent upon context and relationality. Perhaps this is enough to understand counter-design as a way of thinking about, or rather concepts to think with.

21. Judith Halberstam, *The queer art of failure*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

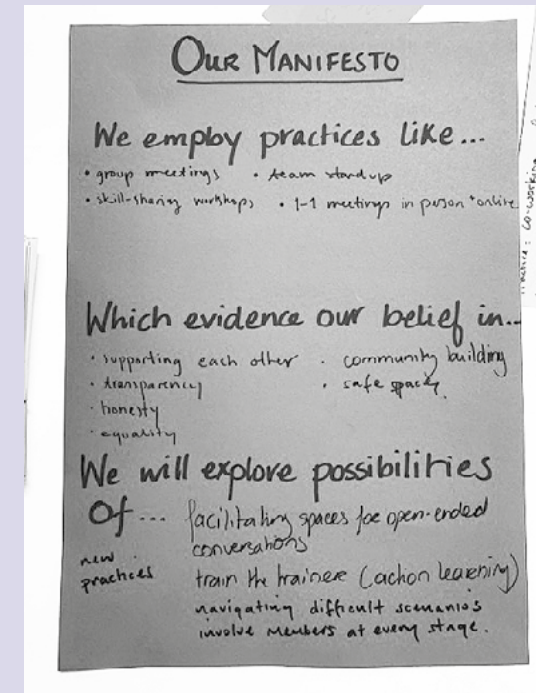
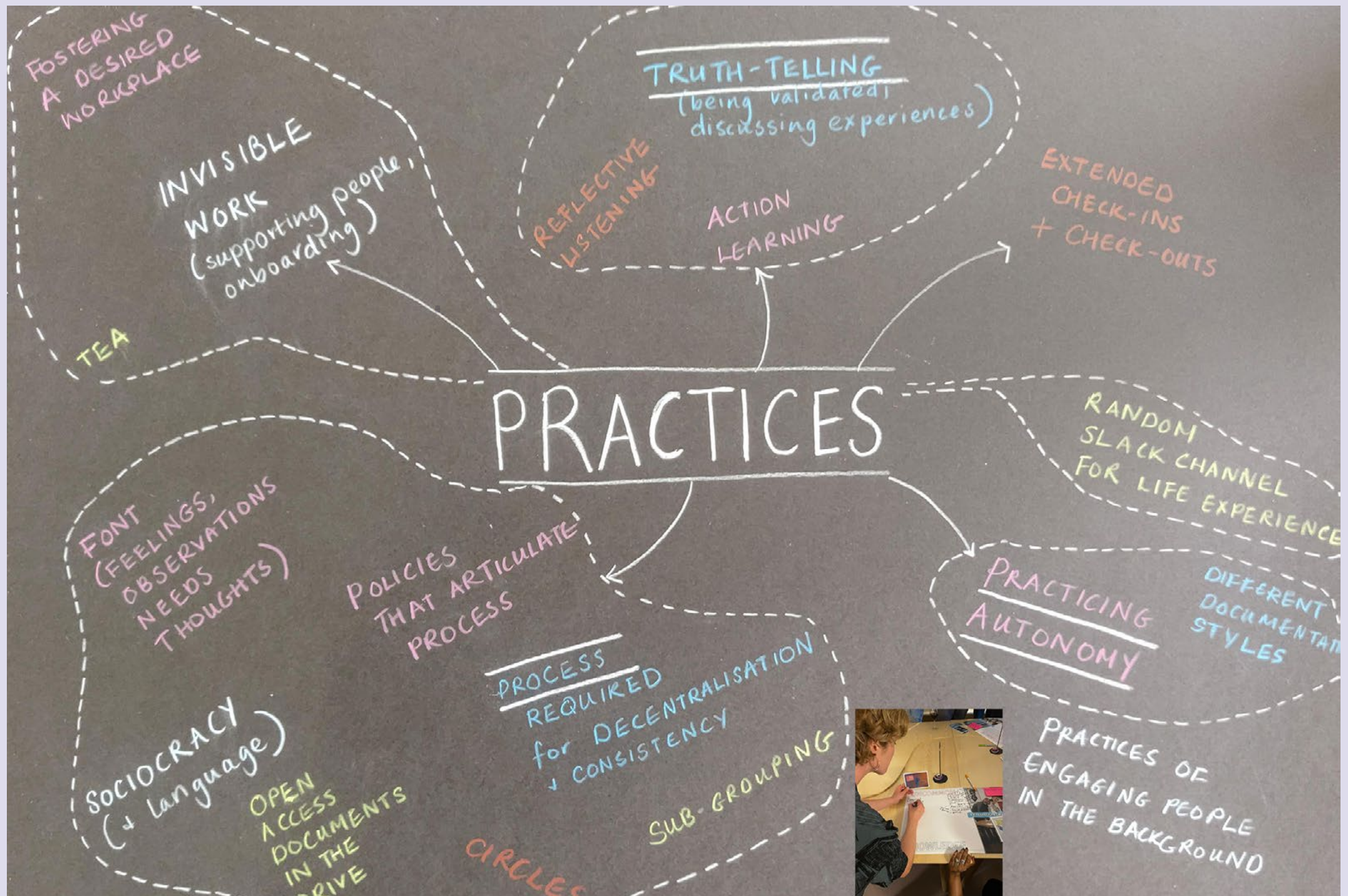
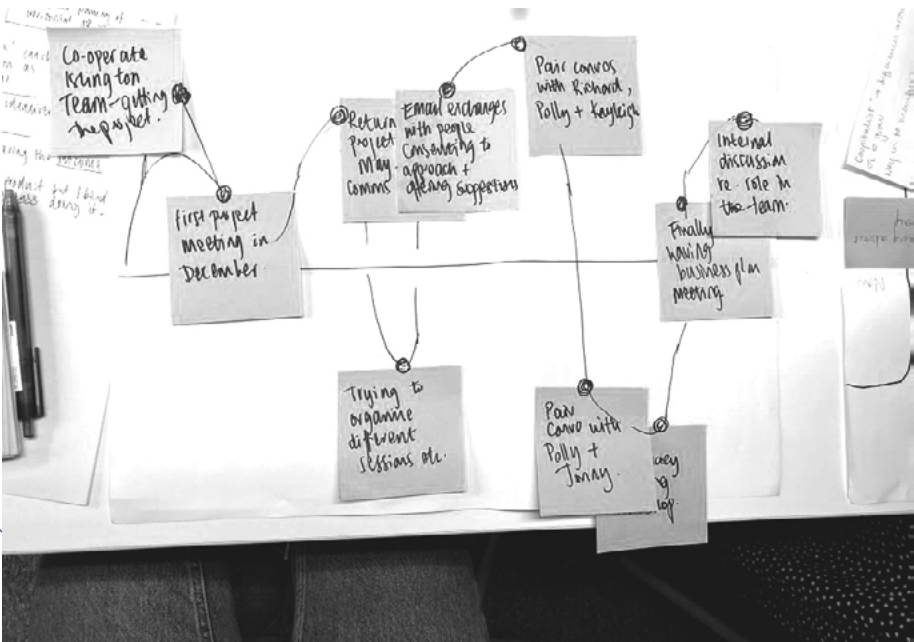
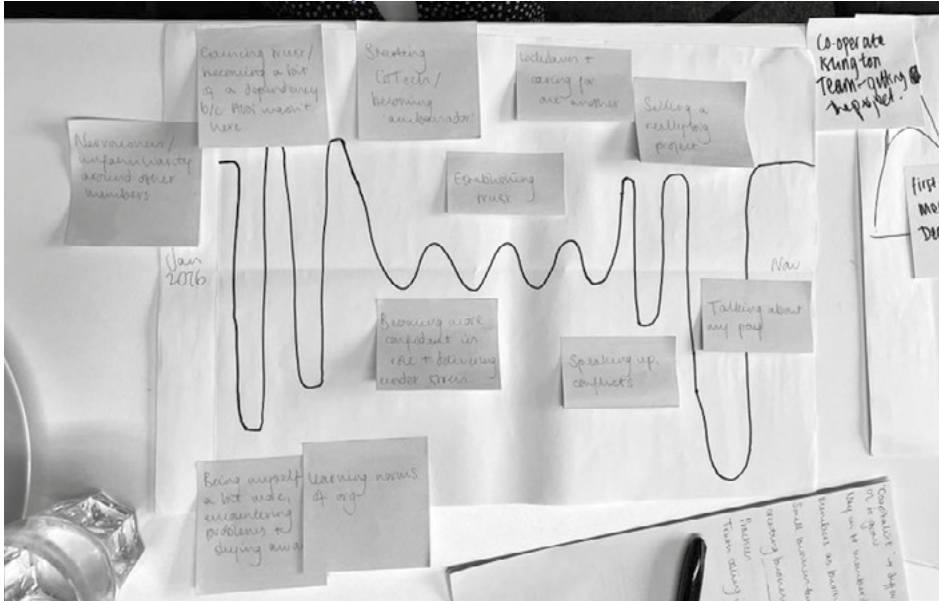


Image 16. Participants were asked to free write on coloured cards all the organisations and individuals they interacted with and/or shared practices with, constrained by a given amount of time to write. They were then asked to arrange the cards around a central card that represented their organisation, in whatever way they thought relevant. From this process, participants made existing practices within relationships explicit and found new ways to talk about their broader network of relationships.



# Outlandish

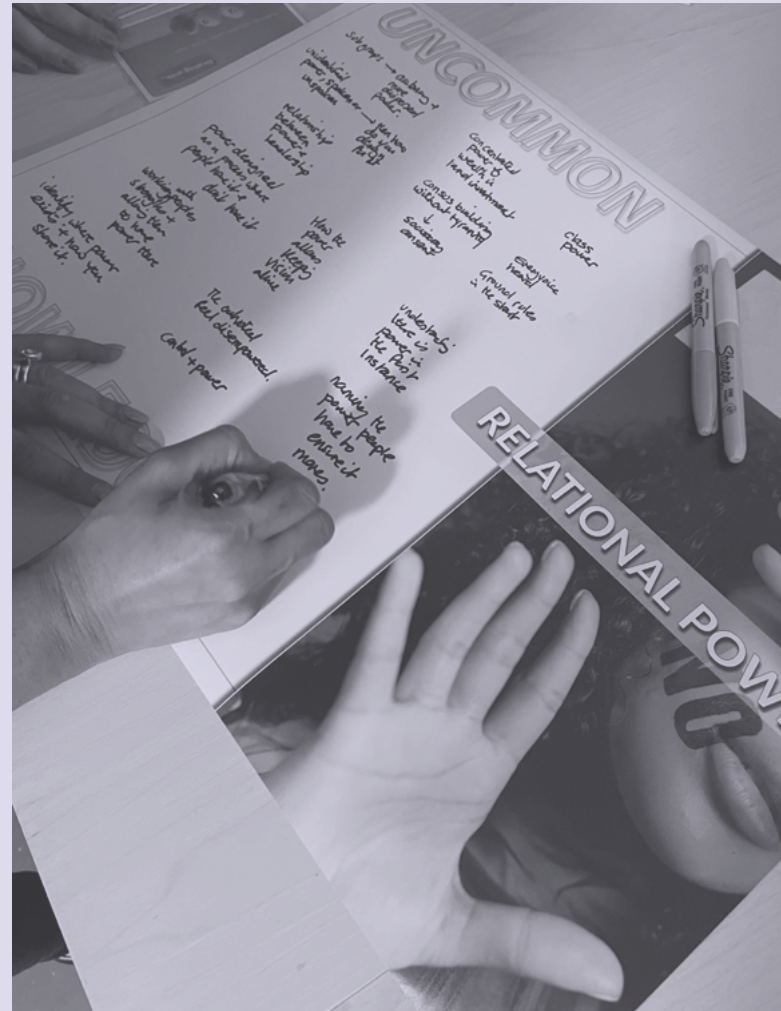


timeline activities

## On Helping us Grow

This focus on death insists that we think about growth as well, particularly the relationships that we advocate for throughout but have not yet focused on entirely. To say that relationships are integral to anything, including design, is not in itself revolutionary—but finding honesty about relationships in design research, about their growth and change, is still quite exciting because it feels rare. We often find ourselves reproducing this academic secrecy. We write about our relationship with Outlandish, a digital agency and worker owned cooperative which focuses on projects that, as they say, make the world a better place. What we mean is, of course, twofold. We have a relationship with the broader organisation (as an entity) which begs the question of corporate personhood a bit, but we primarily have a relationship with two people from the broader community of Outlandish. Our first meeting together was a CFD workshop and their honesty about interpersonal tensions, complications with trust, negotiating personal conversations in a 'professional' space, vulnerability, and caring for one another endeared us to them. It also felt refreshing, if not revolutionary. It was the conversation that the CFD project, that we, were missing.

Counter-design asks us to embrace the complexity of changing relationships, how dissent and difference can be foundational to building trust. It is this ability to negotiate change that allow us to enact praxis. Robin Wall Kimmer<sup>22</sup> advocates for mutuality, reciprocity, and care as the foundations of relationships, including more-than-human relationships. She suggests that by recognizing the abundance we have within our networks we undermine our current unsustainable economy, chipping away at unmet desires and a scarcity mindset.



22. Robin Kimmerer, *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants*. (Minneapolis: Milkweed editions, 2013).

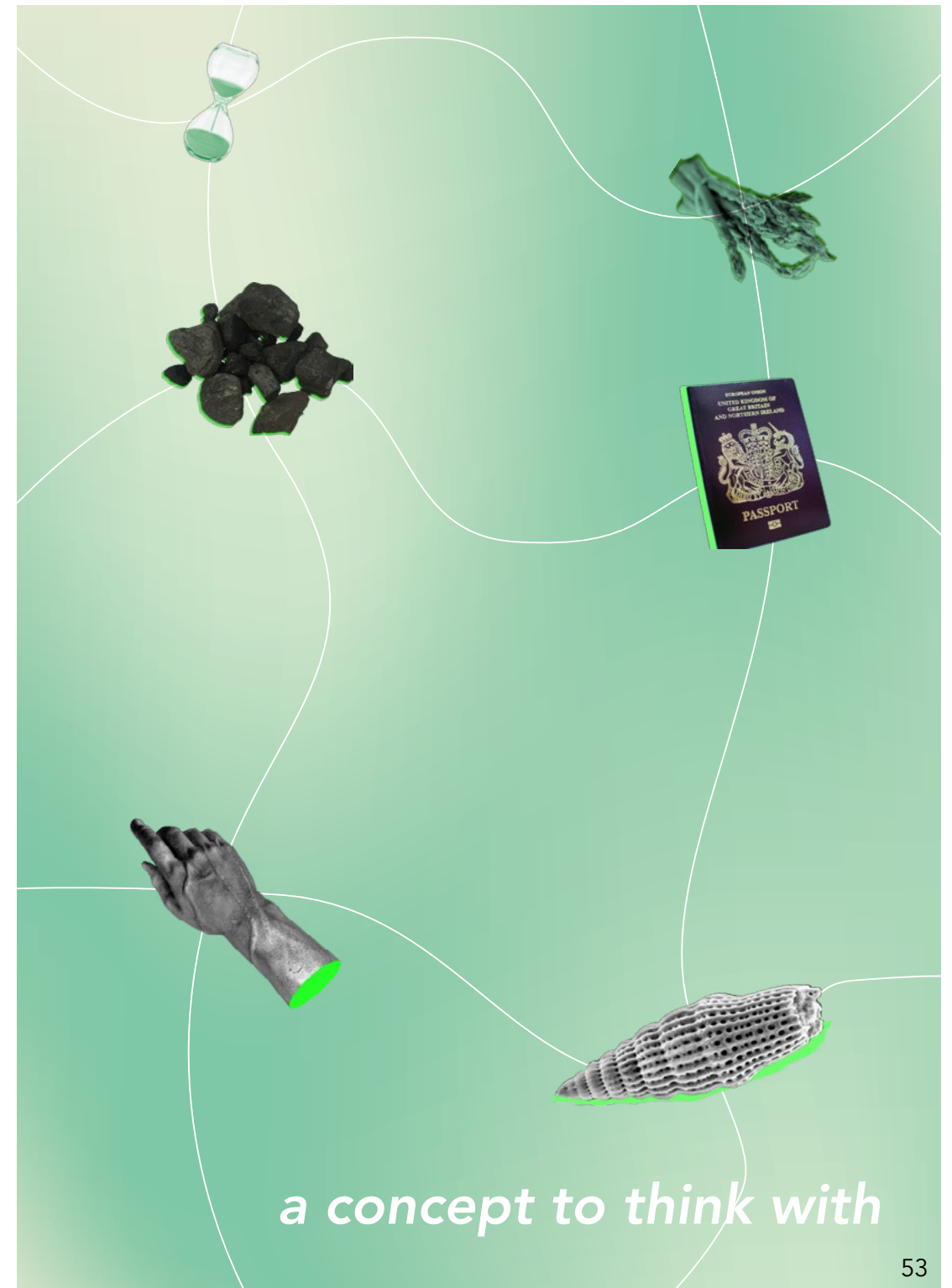
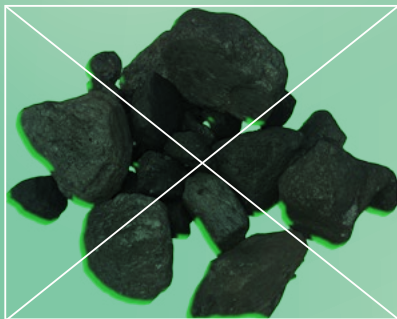
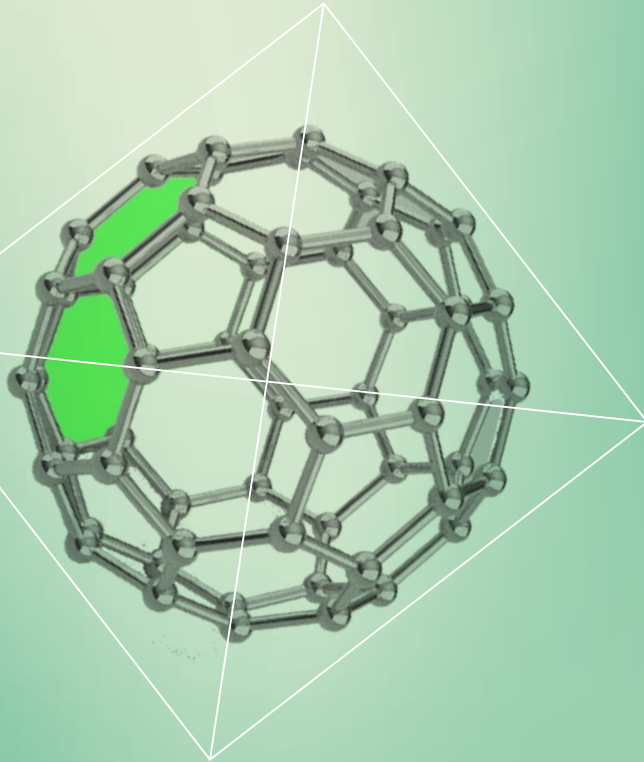
23. Dean Spade, *Mutual aid: Building solidarity during this crisis (and the next)* (114), (London and New York: Verso Books, 2020).

Image 18:  
Snapshot from  
our workshop  
with Outlandish.

Dean Spade<sup>23</sup> advocates for building a culture of connection as a core tenet of functional mutual aid, particularly small, everyday things like eating together and checking-in with people. Spade mentions it may feel silly at first, but it builds deep relationships that can survive difficult dynamics. Strong networks are, like practices and frames, continually reproduced and, therefore, constantly open to countering. The benefits of embracing these moments of change in a relationship came with our participants at Outlandish. We discussed partnering with them on a new project called Un:Edge. We pitched it as an open-access educational resource on employing commoning and other alternative organisational practices. They agreed to support us and act as partners, a formal establishment of an existing relationship that would change its character. We took on some of their organisational practices, primarily extended check-ins, a simple, everyday, and perhaps even obvious way of building trust. It gave us context, for how we were showing up with and for one another and allowed things to grow in that context.

We acknowledge that this may seem idealistic, particularly as our relationship has grown slowly over the last two years. Surely, as relationships grow, they also need more tending to, more care; they need more time. It is this precise problem of time and investment which is not accounted for in 'projectification' and therefore, always secondary to the short termism of academic design projects. Counter-design, then, forces us to reckon with the way that relationships are cultivated (or not) on an institutionalized schedule, and the way relationships live, die, and shift in much the same way (counter-)frames do.

# Countering



*a concept to think with*

# Countering as Praxis in Design Movements

24. See Tony Fry, "Redirective practice: an elaboration," *Design Philosophy Papers* 5, no. 1 (April, 2015): 5-20. Tony Fry, *Design Futuring* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2009), 71-77.

25. Carlton-Parada and Prendeville, "Radical Design Praxis and the Problematics of Intent".

26. Tony Fry, "Design, a Philosophy of Liberation and ten considerations," *Strategic Design Research Journal* 11, no. 2 (2018): 174-176, <https://revistas.unisinos.br/index.php/sdrj/article/view/sdrj.2018.112.16/60746376>.

27. We follow in the footsteps of many design scholars seeking similar goals from whom we learn and are grateful to. Here we refer to the important works of: Claudia Mareis and Nina Paim, eds., *Design Struggles: Intersection Histories, Pedagogies, and Perspectives* (Amsterdam,: VALIZ, 2021). Elizabeth "Dori" Tunstall, *Decolonising Design: A Cultural Justice Guidebook* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2023). Arturo Escobar, *Design for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, Duke University Press; 2017). Sasha Costanza-Schock, *Design Justice: Community-led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2020). Oliver Vodeb, ed., *Radical Intimacies: Designing Non-Extractive Relationalities* (Bristol, Intellect, 2023).



So, we tentatively speak of *countering* as a radical design practice, cautious of introducing another "prefix"-*design* construct but nevertheless speaking to how, we did, at times, find countering a productive framework for challenging simplistic linear stories and depoliticised narratives. Depoliticisation is achieved through abstraction, reduction, and simplification, whereas countering politicises by making visible the ensemble of practices, assumptions and value claims that reproduce normalised frames, and consequently avenues for their redirection.<sup>24</sup>

*"Countering is the various design actions that work to disrupt institutionalised or normalized ways of doing/being, including adhering to and reproducing normalised frames, which can be part of an ongoing process of radicalism, i.e., complicating to reveal and acknowledge socio-political contexts."*<sup>25</sup>

There is certainly something useful to be said for design concepts to think with in support of design movements that seek the undoing of the received and embedded knowledges through which 'we' have been taught what normative design studies is and is 'of'.<sup>26</sup> Many design theorists already speak to this imperative.<sup>27</sup>



Image 19. Our Final Design Workshop (in Three Acts)

28. Carlton-Parada and Prendeville, "Radical Design Praxis and the Problematics of Intent".

29. See Fry, "Design Futuring," and Fry, "Redirective Practice."

30. Shannon Mattern, "Maintenance and care," *Places Journal*, November, 2018. Available at: <https://placesjournal.org/article/maintenance-and-care/?msclid=7ef26afed03911eca225af3c1d3b52f0&cn-reloaded=1>.

*"Counter-design is a design praxis (in research and application) that seeks to foreground processes of countering and challenges to existing systems in the pursuit of alternatives and possibilities, in broader socio-political spheres but also in design as a practice, as it is embedded in socio-political contexts."*<sup>28</sup>

Countering is thus meaningful for any design practice concerned with ontological redirection because semiotic communities rely on shared signs to make shared cultural meaning. Dissensus emerges where these signs are not shared or are contested.<sup>29</sup> As Shannon Mattern relays community maintenance and repair are the ways in which a community codesigns and reproduces itself,<sup>30</sup> for instance through shared signs it continues to implement. The question at the heart of countering then is, what is reproduced, redirected, or rearticulated? Our design research activities were conceived to better understand how we might leverage countering as a practice within this co-making of shared signs. Simply put, this involved mapping frames and intervening in practices in situ through culturally responsive methods. Yet this simple starting point allowed use to complicate the straightforwardness of things by harvesting meaning through the socio-political context.

Counter-design provides a loose framework for fostering this knowledge through community codesign, to create space for new possibilities for alternative ensembles of practices to take shape. Frames can only be disrupted by first understanding how they are reproduced. Countering thus makes meaning through rearticulation.

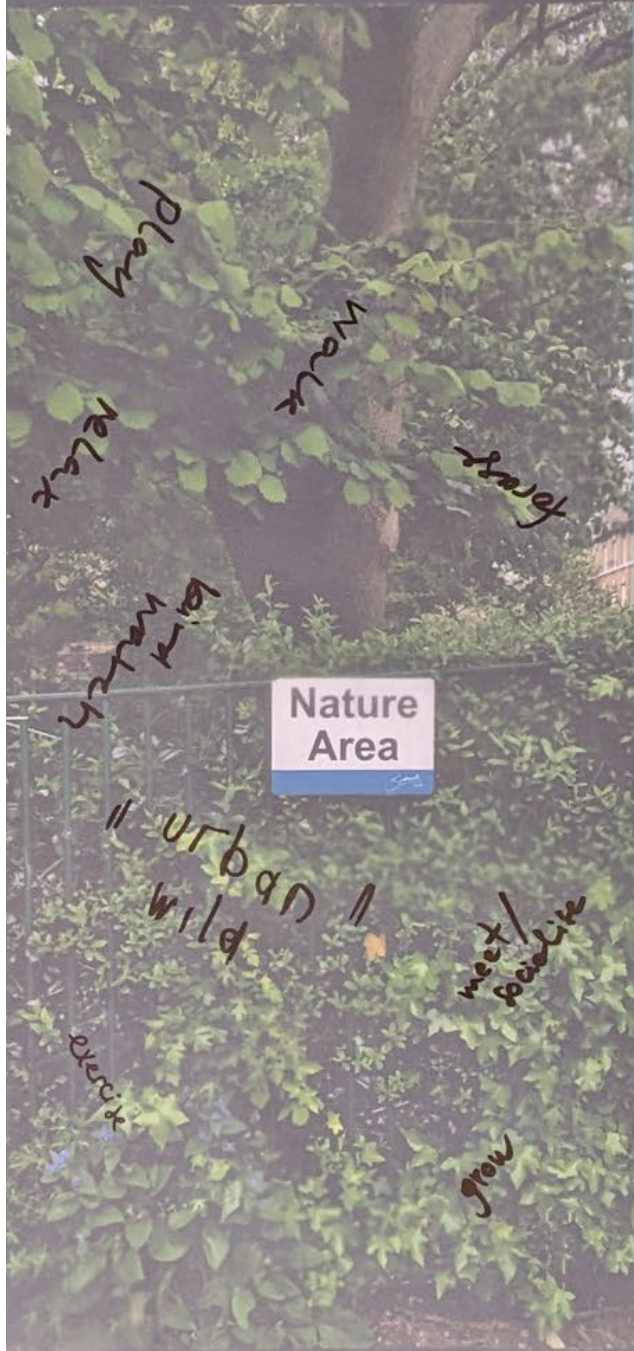


Image 20. An exercise from our Final Design Workshop (in Three Acts) asking participants to think through frame/counter-frame using two different conceptualizations of 'nature'.

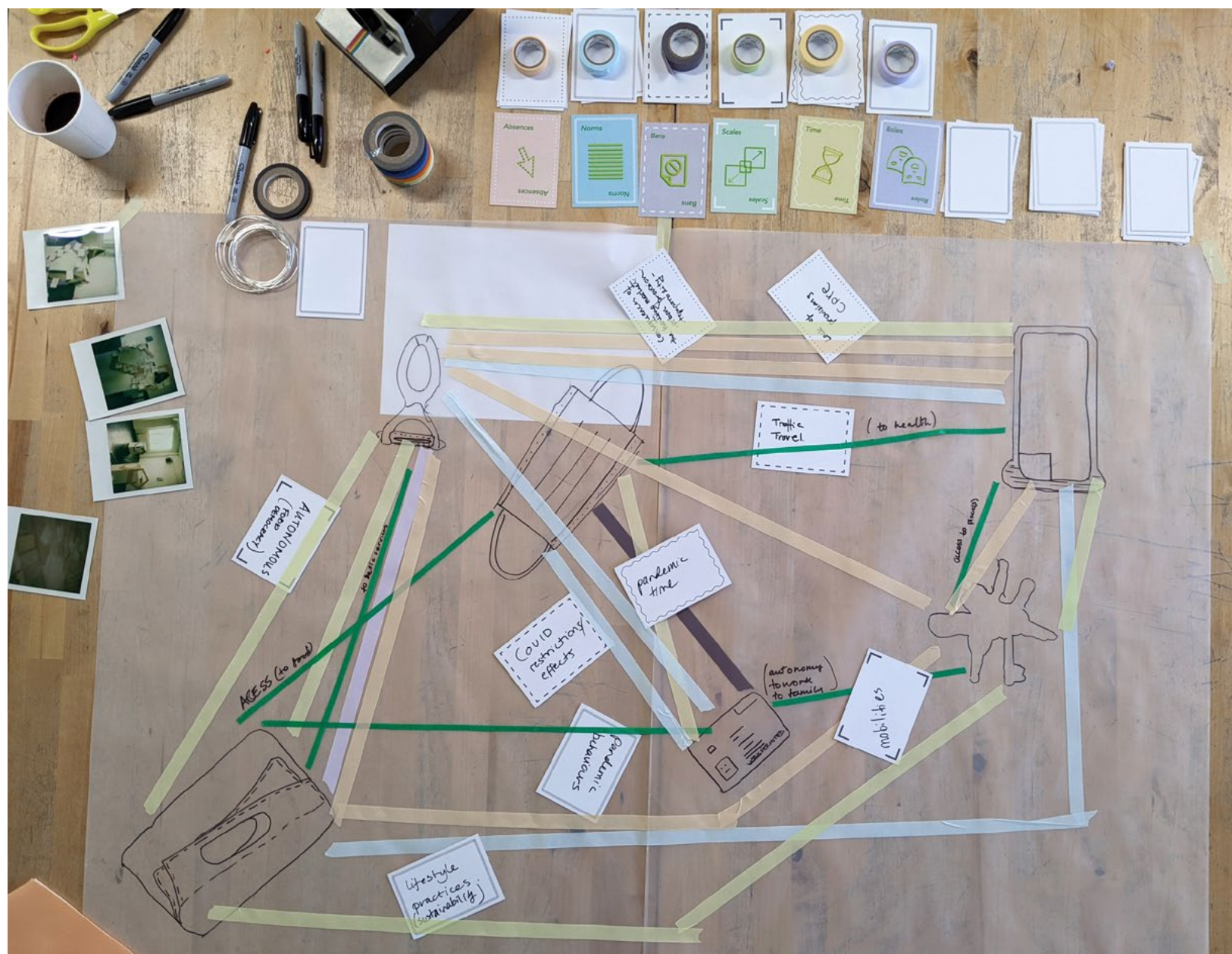


Image 21. An exercise from our Final Design Workshop (in Three Acts) where participants mapped out the relationships between objects they were asked to bring in related to their everyday practices.

Countering (as a praxis in design movements) then complicates and untangles the more or less visible norms and privileges by which we live, take on roles, and make choices. During our final design event we sought to synthesise this through a staged process of co-constructing a collective new economic frame across a pool of collaborator movements: precarity, housing, work, and migrant rights. Our goal was to work with our collaborators on how we can challenge simplified, homogenising, and universalising framings of sustainability issues and foster understanding of the various ways in which such assertions may be reasserted unintentionally through design practices. One collaborator reflected that

*"the point of the activities was to understand how stories and frames shape how we live all the time and if we're more conscious of them then we can change them".*

Whilst achieving a collective frame as an output may not have fully come to pass, the value of taking a context expanding and analytical design process approach was evident, even if some remnant of that deterministic intent was still lingering on.



## Open Endings

*"We should remember that this idea of framing everything in terms of the economy is a new thing in human history. [..]"*

*If I could change one thing, it would be to get out of the system of production and instead build a political ecology."<sup>33</sup>*

Our approach has been an actively transdisciplinary and wide-ranging pursuit characterised by a commitment to a critical scholarship of design. This is significant, since we have continued our work and collaborations through new projects that, at the very least, will continue to pursue these questions and provide knowledge resources for the same communities discussed herein.

If we originally tasked ourselves with producing a "design approach", an output with a clarity of intent that makes up a "winnable" grant, our process and practice of (un-)learning has led us, at times, to more questions than answers. We do not have a fixed method or guidebook to provide here. Rather, we would reaffirm our overarching assertion to resist monocausal conclusions or design solutions, seeking instead to grapple with the necessary intractability of community change.

33. Jonathan Watts, "Interview with Bruno Latour," *The Guardian*, June, 2020. available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/06/bruno-latour-coronavirus-gaia-hypothesis-climate-crisis>.

*A reset moment.*

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**Counter-  
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