APPENDIX
INVENTIVE TENSIONS: A CONVERSATION

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THE SCENE: THE FOURTH FLOOR OF 1 GRANARY SQUARE IN KINGS CROSS, London, and the home, since 2012, of Central Saint Martins, one of the constituent art and design colleges of the University of the Arts London. Lucy Kimbell, the host, takes the visitors – Michael Guggenheim, Noortje Marres and Alex Wilkie – on a tour of the building and then invites them into a small room where a conversation ensues, the transcript of which has been edited by all four contributors.

LK: Welcome to this art and design school. Our building is full of people designing, making, creating, generating, exploring, performing, building, knowing and doing. There are students, staff and visitors whose work practices are intimately connected with investigating, proposing and enacting social arrangements, although they might not talk about it that way. Thinking of them as one audience for your book, I want to start by asking, why this book and why does it matter now?

NM: What has been interesting in making this book is that each of the editors has a different take on this. Some of us, I think, are quite okay with the rather sensational claim that ‘the social is back’ after it seemed to have disappeared for some time. You had a period in social theory, and arguably in public discourse – roughly speaking, during the 1990s – where ‘society seemed to have
disappeared.’ Today, by contrast, the social seems once again to be playing a central role in culture, the economy, science, politics – think of social innovation, social enterprise, social media, social design, social data. One of the questions then is how we approach this return of the social. What I think we’re doing in this book is showing how these returning socials are different from how ‘the social’ has traditionally been defined and understood. These new socials are often about introducing technology and creative methods into other kinds of professional sectors. However, in the book we say ‘Let’s not be immediately dismissive of these new, creative uses of the “social” as a label, let’s see what they are about, and what can be of interest in going along, at least initially’. That also means we don’t simply want to criticise or reject the fact that sociality is today more closely inter-articulated with the technical and the creative. So that’s one opening.

AW: Another way to think through the return to the social is to ask who or what decides what the social is? Here, and crucially, what counts as the social is being done in a myriad of ways outside, and irrespective of, the social sciences and other centres of expertise charged with determining the social. In other words, the disciplines that are conventionally sanctioned and obliged to proclaim ‘this is the social!’ This gives rise to both theoretical and practical concerns around how the social is conceived, composed, made and accomplished once the presumption of an extant social as pre-given and singular has been abandoned. Our attention, then, as social scientists, and in my case as a designer too, turns to sociality as process and multiplicity including the inventiveness and becomings of socials – where the s is underscored, meaning there is not one definition of the social, but a plurality of societies. It follows, then, that this implicates questions of methods and techniques and modes of doing research, as the ‘practical’ above indicates. So, in a sense there exists a multiplicity of concrete and possible socials that we and others are starting to recognise and locate, and this includes an appreciation of the situated role we play – as analysts and makers – in the emergence and patterning of socialities. Arguably, this requires an interdisciplinary engagement or an engagement that speaks outside the social sciences as well as inside them. The field of design is interesting in this regard, since its practitioners
are accustomed to shaping and redefining the composition and compossibility of socialities.

MG: The word ‘social’, *sozial* in German, has always had this confusion; in everyday parlance, *sozial* means something like ‘just’, or ‘equally distributed’. There’s also the notion of something being ‘unsocial’, meaning it’s unjust. And basically, as a sociologist speaking German, you continually have to fight for this distinction that for sociologists there is no such thing as a non-social policy or whatever. Using social in this way isn’t a discourse coming from the right, similar to the Thatcherite claim ‘there is no such thing as society’. It’s actually mostly a leftist use of the term social. As a sociologist, I’m tired of dealing with these confusions – they’re not very productive. For me, the volume is really about what it means to invent the social. This is where there seem to be a lot of changes, which are mostly changes in the practice of social scientists, and in the way that social scientists now cooperate with people from other disciplines and away from academia.

LK: Colleagues and students here are involved in researching, designing and participating in some of these new ‘socials’, through their work inside the studio, and outside in bars, offices, clubs, prisons, galleries and online. I suspect they’d be comfortable with your ideas of multiplicity and becomings and would feel they have something to say, or show, about being inventive. But they don’t necessarily want to be the objects of study for social scientists, which is what you are hinting at. As well as engaging artists and designers, who else are you addressing with this book?

NM: To recognise that the ghost of ‘the social’ is out of the bottle, that it doesn’t necessarily comply with understandings of the ‘social’ that sociology has taught us, gets us into all sorts of trouble. For one, it is a highly sobering experience. For many, data science is the new social science and they are willing to accept that computing, physics and other sciences will provide the ontology for the social (think of contagion models for digital communication, where messages are assumed to spread like viruses). Design and art are today favoured by many as methods for representing society to society. There seem to be important shifts in the air, in terms of what are recognised to be the most valuable and effective instruments for knowing society, representing it, intervening in and
engaging with it. To be sure, these various disciplines are critical participants in the doing of what we may want to call sociality, but I also think there are a lot of misunderstandings about their capacity to grasp the specificity of the social. If we say, to give only two examples, that an organisation is just like a neural network, or that making a painting can be the same as doing a survey (but better), then we’re likely to be misunderstanding something about sociality. This is why it is important both to broaden who can participate in the doing and articulating of the social, but also to remain very critical about how it’s done. In that sense, I have a possibly quite megalomaniac idea about who or what we are addressing, because I think we are addressing interested parties from these various backgrounds, whether it’s computing, design, art, data science, sociology, architecture; they each have a stake, many of us have stakes in the reinvention of sociality.

LK: Today, it’s as if nearly anyone can do social research and everything can be viewed as social. Design agencies offer ethnographic insight to spark innovation projects; managers and civil servants map the journeys of users and citizens engaging with their services to learn how to change them; artists create ways for people to visualise and play with data. There’s a whole emergent field that, unfortunately, calls itself ‘social design’ which some funders and commissioners hope will enable design researchers to have academic impact, make designers feel useful to society (and not just capitalism), and lead to new solutions to policy challenges (Armstrong et al. 2014). For me, your book is valuable because it poses questions about what makes up the social, who defines and articulates it, the contexts for doing research into and inventing the social, the practices through which the social is made, and it sets this against the literatures of sociology and their histories. But I am left wondering how many data scientists or designers will engage with it? I want the book to open up to the people who are not yet critically aware of the socials they are co-constituting in their work.

AW: Part of the context is how sociology itself responds to the idea of its coming crisis, a predicament raised by Mike Savage and Roger Burrows (2007) about the efficacy, relevance and utility of sociology in the face of large-scale empirical research conducted on behalf of public and private institutions and made possible by new computational technologies of data production and
analysis. Their response, however, is a lurch back into seemingly conventional ways of doing sociological description by way of combinations of existing empirical research techniques – a somewhat disappointing riposte, echoed by John Law’s (2004) ‘method assemblage’, which entails a re-mixing of the discipline’s existing methodological repertoire, and which, perhaps, the mutability of ethnography, for instance, has been well disposed to in any case. This book, alongside others, is trying to provide an alternative by saying, ‘Well, actually there are other ways to respond’, and these responses involve both theoretical novelty and methodological adventure, as well as a change in what might count as description – knowing that our descriptions, techniques and constructions add to the composition of the world. For my part, then, and having been committed to teaching novel empirical research skills to designers in order to resource and diversify their practices, this book can be used as an additional aid in the pursuit of equipping designers to develop their own explanations of situated design settings without relying on pre-fabricated explanations or methodologies.

NM: A lot of the excitement around social media has to do with the fact that they render recordable and traceable all these colloquial, semi-natural forms of interaction. As such, contemporary practices of recording have something to do with the methods of social research: sociologists and ethnomethodologists have long emphasised the value of analysing interactions and conversations ‘in-the-wild’ for understanding social life. However, today’s interest in the social entails loads of other definitions, for example the social (engagement) as a placeholder for marketing, or the social as a placeholder for ‘let’s not use any government resources but free labour’. Having said this, they are also about the kind of socials that makes sociology exciting.

MG: But this excitement is somehow forty years too late, no? There’s a great article by Mike Lynch and David Bogen (1994) about the excitement of conversation analysts in the 1960s now that they had these new tape recorders with which they could precisely record what was talked about and achieve what they thought was a natural science of the social. I think this was the decisive step in terms of being able to record so-called ‘natural’ interaction, and ironically, it seems to me, the new forms of treating these new data are in many ways less
sophisticated than the practices of conversation analysis, and sociologically less interesting.

NM: I think social research is becoming more participatory today, and that is one of the big changes. One of the examples I like a lot is hetexted.com which is mostly young women posting screenshots of their SMS exchanges with mostly boys, and doing collective interpretations of these texts, like ‘Is he dumping me here or not?’ It’s a wonderful spectacle of attempted communication across the gender divide, and my sense is that such experiments in interpretation open up possibilities that those sociologists of the 60s and 70s who invented conversation analysis weren’t necessarily attuned to. But also, this is about the invention of a particular device, or dispositif, that enables a participatory form of social analysis. Here, recordability is not separate from interpretability, which is a mistake that some versions of data science make. It’s the invention of a practice where recordability, interpretability and interaction all come together, and it’s a very particular social, technical, material and aesthetic practice. There are many such moments of invention occurring today, and I do think there are different opportunities for understanding opened up by hetexted.com in terms of the politics of knowledge and politics of invention, as compared to the mostly gentlemen social scientists in the period of Sacks, whose aim was still to provide the authoritative account of interactional order, of what’s happening in a pause.

LK: Given these developments, and the methods crisis within the social sciences, what are you adding to recent work on inventiveness?

AW: If we formulate the view that it’s not just social scientists but also others, such as designers, architects, computer scientists, and so on, doing inventive social research, one approach, such as Lury and Wakeford’s (2012) Inventive Methods, as well as the work Mike Michael and myself (2015) have been involved in, is looking back and asking what’s interesting or who has done interesting work around expanding or adding novelty to the repertoire of empirical techniques that may be adopted (or not, as is more likely the case) and developed. For this book, however, I think how we’ve asked contributors to work is to think through the view that inventiveness is distributed and not the privilege or responsibility of a single actor. So it’s not just a question of how methods
in themselves are inventive (if at all) but also how the methods themselves are being deployed in order to understand inventiveness, and that’s something that’s distributed. I think this book acts as a kind of lure to researchers to think about how they themselves might take up some of these commitments in relation to their problems, their questions, their areas of interest, how the social pushes back at them and their work. In other words, rather than being inventive simply by taking up novel methods or describing the inventiveness of others, we are arguing for some kind of double capture where invention requires and begets inventive techniques and description.

MG: For me, part of the interest of the book is what follows from this for our practice as social scientists. Just to stick to the conversation analysis example, we would say ‘okay, what is left for conversation analysis’? What is left for social statistics in Savage and Burrows’ case, mentioned by Alex earlier? What is left for ethnography when there’s all these examples of proto-ethnography? Shall we simply insist that we do these things somehow better, or more thoroughly? And I think that’s mostly the answer that we are giving, but it’s probably neither a really interesting answer, nor one that will make a lot of sense in the long run. Here, what the book is trying to explore is better, more interesting answers to that problem of reinventing social scientific methods in the face of all these changes.

NM: Besides the question of what is distinctive about social enquiry, there is also the question of how we participate in it. In the traditions we’re referring back to, like the ethnomethodology and conversation analysis of the 70s and 80s, you could say there was a kind of a death drive present in them. Broadly speaking, their argument was that if social methods are being deployed across social life by social actors, and if methodologically accounting for social life is already part of how society operates, then we don’t need sociologists anymore. I think that kind of approach was very much animated by this legislative and sovereign conception of what it is to do social enquiry, so it had to be completely distinctive and completely different from what was already going on, otherwise it didn’t have a right to exist. We’re now in quite a different context where the question is not ‘Are we going to kill that big beast or let it live?’, or if it can survive, ‘How to secure a legislative space where sociology is in charge?’ To shift away from this is a risky move but one worth attempting. The question to ask
here is, ‘How do we participate in these wider processes?’ I think there’s actually plenty of work for us to do when I look at other practitioners getting a taste for the social, for example the ways in which artists and designers working with found materials or found footage show a way into documenting social (dis-)order and social change. I also think there is a lot that social researchers and sociologists can bring to those practices: how does this work, how do we elicit sociality, how do we render social problems detectable in everyday settings? So, the question is how can we participate and how can we make this kind of contribution without any of us getting tricked into reducing our engagement to an issue of authority of who can legislate the social. You can’t just say ‘we’re not playing that game’, because the social is at stake and these are political issues. But still, asking how we can participate effectively, for me, is a more productive question than asking what’s the little piece on the allotment where we still have absolute sovereignty as sociologists.

AW: It’s slightly ironic and revealing that we’re sitting here in an art school where there is a pronounced preoccupation with the role of aesthetics grounded on adding things to the world and the concreteness of what gets made here – and, of course, how the school publicly stages this style of invention and innovation to visitors and members alike. This is very much foregrounded here, and yet amidst all this we’re fixed on an altogether different register – the problems of relevance and effectiveness facing the social sciences, but very much formulated as part of internal debates and problems rather than the new demands being placed on social science, which all this new stuff surrounding us incites.

LK: On reading the book, I was left grasping for the answer to the question ‘What does this mean for me?’, in my domain of design. What does it mean for the civil servants I know grappling with how to do experiments to provide answers to policy questions, who may not be able to engage deeply with sociological accounts that problematise their work, such as Ben Williamson’s (2015) writing on policy innovation labs? What does it mean for funders and commissioners of arts venues or projects? We are sitting here in a recently-built art school, where the former head of college who commissioned this building, the architecture firm, the university administrators, the staff and students, the local government planners, and various others involved, were constituting an
imaginary of a higher education institution, which is now continuously being re-articulated in the everyday practices of all these people and things. I doubt they consulted a sociologist along the way to discuss the sociality of a future art school. It’s already in the practices of art and design to generate new social worlds through the devices, methods and objects they create. That’s ordinary. But it’s increasingly evident that designers and artists need to be aware of and held to account for the implications of the particular versions of the social that are imagined, enacted and unfolded in what they do, perform and make. I think artists and designers, managers and civil servants are concerned to understand which socials their work co-constitutes. But often people just get on with making it, and leave the studying of it to others. Your book shows how designers and architects are able to do research that is inventive, rather than being objects of study for sociologists.

MG: I think there’s an interesting parallel to, say, psychoanalysis, where something similar has happened. Psychoanalysis has been in a decline for a long time now, but (pseudo) psychoanalytic theory has been taken up by everyday discourse and is used for everything. And if you look at psychoanalytical discourse, there’s a huge amount of frustration about the decline of the discipline and its expertise in the face of its actually quite incredible success. I think one of the main problems from the viewpoint of its inventors is that they now have zero control over what they invented. Ideas or theories do not come with warning labels that have to be adhered to by users.

NM: I think it’s fair to say that the wider condition is mostly one of mutual irrelevance. We carve up the world according to disciplines, and the prize or the cherry on that cake is the fiction of relative autonomy. You don’t have to do all this diplomacy. But this can also be taken to mean that to produce situations of mutual relevance is a challenge, a task, and a job. And I think it’s very important for us to keep remembering that it’s a task, and not a given. That’s one of the annoying things about today’s revival of the social; when you hear social innovation, social enterprise, social media, it sounds as if the social is already accomplished in those environments, but of course it isn’t. My colleague, Emma Uprichard, came up with this slogan, ‘Just because it’s called social, that doesn’t make it social.’ Sociology and supposedly non-creative disciplines are more of
the underdog in some ways. They don’t have the resources or the legitimacy to make a stronger claim and say that the experts tasked with inventing computational social science, or social media, are in many ways pretty bad at sociality, grasping it and doing it.

AW: And, of course, there are other organisations where the social is precisely the thing that is being harnessed. Much of the fieldwork I conducted on designers working for a multinational semiconductor manufacturer (2010) invariably featured interdisciplinary working practices that included various mixtures of designers, cognitive and social psychologists, ergonomists, mechanical engineers, computer scientists, and even anthropologists-as-corporate-ethnographers, all of whom could claim a certain expertise on and about the social, although some more than others. Here, I didn’t experience mutual irrelevance between them, which suggests that they remained absorbed within their own disciplinary concerns and discrete domains of experience, as defined by an organisation. On the contrary, they were working with one another on a daily basis – often unproblematically. Their concerns were not with the practicalities of interdisciplinary collaborations, nor were they epistemological in terms of the kind of knowledge they were producing. Instead, their interests lay in new situations and possibilities brought about by faster, smaller, more energy efficient microprocessors, and the implications of this for creating new products, new applications, new markets, and, as a corollary, how to go about or inform how such new ways of living are colonised. Disciplinary concerns were less of a problem, because the problems were elsewhere and more ontological, for example, ‘Where is the new market?’, not ‘Oh, you’re worried about this social or that social’. And that goes back to Lucy’s question of why it should matter. It does matter because what we see is organisations that are increasingly interested in people who can go in and tell them what the social is, how it operates, how it functions, precisely as a way to harness whatever knowledge practice can support an organisation’s interests. Another way of putting this is to ask how epistemological resources are brought to bear on questions of practical ontology – about what and how to bring into the world, and the kinds of changes such new phenomena and entities – such as microprocessor-based technology will bring about, not least to the imagination
of such organisations, a point made by Andrew Barry, Georgina Born and Gisa Weszkalnys (2008: 35).

MG: A lot of designers are operating and actually need to operate with an almost naïve belief that what they’re producing will have the intended effect. I think this is holding a lot of sociologists back: the fact there has been so much research about social science itself, showing that this belief is mistaken, and that it can have unintended effects. We are all taught how the era of 1950s and 60s planning euphoria crashed because of, among other things, a related euphoria about the powers of social science (see for example Scott 1998). You have to follow projects to really understand what is happening, and you cannot just think ‘Let’s put social science here and then the world will be better’. Because we know about this history, we have also lost our own belief that we can really contribute in these ways, because we already know that it won’t turn out the way we intended it. And I think this is a really tricky thing. I think in a way we need this naivety, or at least a little bit of it, to do interventionist projects at all. But we should also know, being STS scholars, or more broadly, social scientists, that it is going to turn out differently, and that it could actually go completely against our intentions. It appears that designers, and architects in particular, are just much better at forgetting how things went wrong previously, and continue to believe that their own grand projects will succeed. For me the solution is to design actual experiments rather than have specific ideas of what I want to achieve, in terms of outcomes. I want to set up experiments that open up options, that allow us to see options, to make them accountable. When I say experiments, I do not mean ‘being experimental’ in a fuzzy sense, but setting up devices that force us and participants to do things we would not do without the experiment, and which create situations that would not exist without these experimental setups.

NM: An experiment on society is often seen, in sociology, as a quite scandalous way of acting on society, something that’s not ethical, but when Michael makes these remarks now, he’s talking about the experiment as a particular trick for generating accounts and accountability of social life. When John Law says engineering is sociology by other means because it’s all about making associations, that ontological claim is actually not enough. Now that we have
a world full of engineering scholars who say ‘Yes, we’re sociologists’, we know that there’s actually more ingredients, more concepts that come into play, in the doing of sociology, namely the accounting for, and/or articulating of, practices that involve technology. We need these deliberate, expressive articulations of practices if we are to properly appreciate how social connections and heterogeneous associations come about in those practices.

LK: I think sociology could make more claims for being necessary to creating new devices, practices and institutions, by studying a situation and the collective work of creating the accounts of what is or could be happening in that situation. Andrew Barry, many years ago, introduced me to a version of the quote from Marx along the lines that social scientists study the world, whereas the point is to change it. Similarly, in design research there’s a long-standing but uncomfortable distinction between studying a situation and changing it, by devising courses of action to change ‘existing situations into preferred ones’, as Herbert Simon put it (1996: 111). Your book challenges this dualism in a stronger way than I’ve seen elsewhere. It recognises not only the need for accounting-for practices, but also the participation of those accounts in the creation of new practices in experimental setups. But I’m struck how, as a reader, while I am invited into the experiments discussed in the book, I cannot easily participate in them. We’re speaking of opening up possibilities, and yet it’s a text. Some of us need other ways or multiple ways of engaging with concepts. As well as the book I want the pop-out installation or the do-it-yourself inventive toolkit. How can I access materialised or digital instances of its discussions, and make the insights usable for the experimental contexts I work in, and for others who may not come across or read this book? How can I perform it?

NM: We shouldn’t blame a book for being a book. It is clear that the works accounted for, or narrated, in Inventing the Social, have several different incarnations: they exist in some cases as an exhibition, or as an experimental device, or an intervention, or an art installation. And we have to introduce different criteria of evaluation, or wear different glasses, for these different instantiations. One of the things that stands out about the book, for me, is that it brings together an interdisciplinary set of contributors; another characteristic is its
intentional confusion of roles. We attempt to move away from the kinds of abusive relations that intellectuals in previous times initiated in terms of how they connected with design, for instance: ‘Now you’re going to make my text look nice’, or where artists say to the intellectuals ‘Now you’re going to write nice captions for my performance’. Where those experiments go wrong is where they end up as failed role reversals, the pretence to be something you’re not. But role confusion is a kind of success. Is Andrés Jaque doing architecture or sociology when he is producing his Mies van der Rohe project as a chapter? Is this person still just writing as a theorist, or is there actually a methodology being proposed?

LK: It’s disciplinary androgyny. It’s a book and more than a book. How do different kinds of aesthetics play out in the different contributions?

AW: I think that’s maybe one of the unanswered topics of this book, or one that it opens up to and invites readers to take up. To take an example from today, from where we are standing now, earlier we were looking into the window of one of the Central Saint Martin’s fashion studios, and in there was a young student, dressed in a very particular way, all black, but the length and the cut of the cloth was not that of a typical garment. This is the garment of somebody who knows intimately about what they are wearing, and he was making something that wouldn’t convert into a book, that would be hard to translate into written accounts and books. Instantiated in that costume and the way it is worn is years of training to acquire a certain sensibility about a certain mode and fashioning of aesthetics. And I think that’s something that we as authors might admit, that this is stuff we find very hard to include, or to get at, namely experiences that escape linguistic or textual modes or that themselves demand experiencing rather than explanation. Having said that, books also circulate in this setting, and contribute to the aesthetic practices of the art students – a point I will return us to later.

MG: I’ve never understood the blaming of books or academic texts for being closed objects. For me, it is not about blaming particular forms; I think that’s actually nonsensical. There is a reason why we still have, and should have, 500-page social theory books. We need them, with two thousand footnotes. And to assume, just because something appears as a 500-page theory book,
that it is closed, is wrong, because obviously it pre-exists in talks, and there are reviews, and people talk about it and so on and so forth. At the same time, it only works in the way it does because it’s this closed thing. For me, specifically with regard to sociology, we have to open up any default assumption that stuff should appear as a text. And I guess the other way around, with, say, design, I think we should give up the idea that the default product needs to be a three-dimensional thing. It’s a matter of thinking about for which instance, for which situation, for which intervention we want to produce which kinds of materials and forms, and there are indeed many avenues to be explored here, once we leave our default assumptions behind.

NM: Our intention was precisely to invite non-professional sociologists into the format of the sociological text. In this book, we have multiply-trained contributors, some who have PhDs in sociology, some who only started reading sociology a few years ago and come from very different trajectories. We invited these people because we know, or we are confident that their practice speaks to this question about how the social is being invented today. And that partly has to do with a certain idea of how we do knowledge politics, but also with knowing what your competence is. When Alex speaks of this aesthetic competence, I know that this book can only work if it has the trust and the commitment of people who have that competence. But I also know that there are many who have only passive knowledge of that competence. So yes, it’s about the specific purpose, and also knowing which strengths are called for when, and who possesses them.

LK: Given that data science is big business, and computing an academic field and a growing policy agenda, I’m struck by how the book’s examples don’t engage strongly with this. Where are the missing big data masses? There’s obviously some computational work, but it’s closer to people’s experiences with devices, although the analysis reveals their interconnections with other worlds. Does the emphasis on particular scales and contexts discussed in the book matter?

NM: There’s nothing about including a business chapter in this book that I would find intrinsically problematic, but it would probably be about the conditions under which those kinds of connections can be made to work, and what are the conditions under which they wouldn’t work. One thing we’re doing
is talking to academia and saying ‘Architects and designers are authors in our space that we should address as authors – not just as research subjects that we can interview and then anonymise’. So one of the interventions is in academic debates, and how they reproduce distinctions between the accredited and the unaccredited sociologist or social scientist. But the other intervention is about being ambitious across disciplines and fields about what it is that we can problematise. Because often when we talk about impact that kind of scaling down happens in another way, where it is assumed that ‘we’re not really going to intervene in problem framing, because that’s just going to be confusing, and unsettling, and it’s going to make it harder for us to demonstrate that we’re relevant’. I think what we’re saying is that in the labs of big digital industries, and in policy spaces, the social is being deployed in highly selective ways. This is how within Western governments social policy is recomposed as something else. This is how in digital industries what counts as a social community is being recomposed. And it is those kinds of framings that we also need to act upon in responding to the call to ‘invent the social’.

MG: When we did our sandbox project, we set out to explore new methods of creating disaster scenarios (Guggenheim, Kraeftner, and Kroell 2013; Guggenheim, Kräftner, and Kröll 2016). We set up a sandbox in which participants created worlds with abstract figures and let disasters happen. The whole point was to create new and radically different, participative methods to counter existing forms of creating risk registers. We enrolled disaster researchers to play in our sandbox, and we also tried to interest government experts. But it quickly became very obvious that there simply isn’t a straightforward way in which what we want to do can be in any way aligned with what these people are doing. We interviewed them, we played with some of them. But because the whole method fundamentally undermines the idea of what risk is, what a disaster is, and who should take decisions about these questions, it is difficult to convert government departments to adopt it. In the whole apparatus that is the government, the assumption is ‘We do it and you don’t’. Ideally, we would have been happy if they had said ‘Oh yes, this is much better than what we are doing’. But it’s not the scale of the project that prevented it. It’s the fundamental incongruence between our interests and theirs.
NM: Being experimental also means that there has to be a space where confusion is possible. You need to allow for that possibility.

AW: There is also something about the fragility of these things which I quite like, the vulnerability, the temporality; but another way to understand this is through scale. How, for example, do devices or things necessarily scale up, if indeed they do they scale up? This is directly related to the question of policy and instrumentalisation. One example of this is discussed in the chapter I’ve written with Mike Michael, as well as our piece on speculative method (Wilkie et al. 2015), which is precisely about the failure of the rollout of sixty million smart monitors in the United Kingdom as a way to address climate change. Here, in fact, we find an ostensible solution that is being scaled up across an entire population, and yet reports are emerging indicating that people either can’t use them, don’t appreciate or comprehend the relation between consumption and calculation, or actually leave the lights on for longer – knowing they can do this with LED or low-energy bulbs. Arguably, it can’t get bigger than that. And that precisely is addressing the question of what happens when policy finds itself in a mode of operating where there are reports that it’s failing, and yet it continues on a particular logic and path. Another way to think about this, and another way to address qualms about the relevance of the practices included in this book to questions, arguably, of governmentality, is to situate the work being done in relation to what Latour (2007) describes as ‘political-1’ where new associations are coming into being and changing the composition of collective life. As a heuristic, I find this a useful way to appreciate the importance of and need for the work exemplified in this book, although, and as the UK smart monitor rollout illustrates, there are movements back and forth across the different political registers where smart monitors themselves are not fixed (to encode normative energy behaviour) but operate also to bring about new practical relations.

LK: Christian Nold’s piece is in a similar vein, discussing the specifics of those material, digital, place-based community interactions that exceed the possibilities of the policy or programmatic question.

NM: I think there may also be some really basic confusion between intervention, and what, in a sort of vulgar language, is a provocation, as opposed to research, right? This book is mostly concerned with research pre any specific
applications. That doesn’t mean that research doesn’t have any further output, and obviously I’m not a fan of that language at all, but I think it would be wrong to short-circuit it. The spaces of research are continuously expanding. There are the arts as a form of research, the museum as an urban laboratory, neighbourhoods as experimental settings. Bringing a research sensibility to social life is potentially relevant to these different environments where there is this moment of realisation ‘Oh, what we’re doing is really researching’, or ‘We’re really doing a social experiment’. It’s social research happening in spaces that don’t have that accreditation. But the test has to be our capacity to problematise. I mean for me, in relation to this book, it’s not so much about acting on problems, but how to pose the problems well. That’s the business of this book.

AW: Earlier, as we were taking the lift to get to this room, someone got into the lift and then stepped out at the library floor. On the top of the pile of books the person was carrying sat a copy of Foucault’s (1978) *The History of Sexuality*. Later, and whilst sitting in the room, I noticed someone walking by carrying Pelle Ehn’s and his colleagues’ *Making Futures* (2014). These books, these artefacts and their accompanying versions of the social, circulate. We’re in this environment, having creativity reflected back to us, and yet, at the same time, the social sciences – for want of a better term – circulate and get mobilised in all manner of ways, by students in the first case, and by staff members as well as the design research practitioners who wrote the book, in the case of *Making Futures*. Clearly these books have an effect outside particular disciplinary settings and preoccupations. One key difference, perhaps, is that we are inviting others to contrive their own socials rather than use this book as a ready-made.

**NOTES**

1 The British sociologist Nikolas Rose published a paper ‘The End of the Social’ (1996), while Bruno Latour (1993) adopted Margaret Thatcher’s slogan that there is ‘no such thing as society’.

2 The actual quote refers to philosophers: ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it’ (it is thesis 11 of Karl Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845)).
REFERENCES


