

# Investigating design research landscapes through exhibitions

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*Abstract: What characterizes a design research exhibition compared to a traditional design and art exhibition? How do you show the very materialities of the design experiments as a means for communicating knowledge of research and of practice? How do you present, review and utilize such an exhibition?*

*With those questions in mind, the intention and challenge for the Nordes 2013 Design Research Exhibition was to expand on current notions of staging research enquires in design research conference contexts. Artefacts, installations, performances, and other materialities that relate to the theme of the conference - Experiments in Design Research – were displayed as tools to express and communicate different design research enquires. Through this paper we will describe the Nordes exhibition as a specific case that renders questions visible in relation to how to utilize a design research exhibition. Furthermore, we suggest ways of inviting participants to explore what role exhibitions and all their materialities can play in design research through a 'design-research kit'.*

Keywords: exhibition, experiments, probes, design conference, artefact

## Introduction

The fifth Nordic design research conference, Nordes, took place in Copenhagen June 2013. Since its establishment in 2005, this venue has gained its position as perhaps the most important scholarly event in design field in the Nordic countries (Brandt et al. 2013, p.4). Gathering a diversity of actors presenting conference papers and exhibiting related works, the topic of the 2013 conference was *Experiments in Design Research*. This paper will present the conference exhibition and our shared attempt to utilize artefacts, installations, performances, and other materialities as tools to express and communicate design research enquires side by side with conference papers. The 2013 exhibition was the most challenging and ambitious in the history of Nordes. As authors of this paper and as co-chairs, we will describe our experimental way of designing the curatorial process, the exhibition space, and a 'design research kit'. The aim is to discuss what might be the role of exhibitions in design research contexts.

In the context of the first Nordes conference, entitled *In the Making*, design was conceived as “a restless field positioning as a productive practice in between conceiving and making” (Binder et al. 2005, p.3). With this definition the conference was already exploring how material artefacts and processes of making can contribute to research. The aim of the first conference was to bring together a diversity of people who share an interest in understanding and developing design as a transdisciplinary practice by paying attention to ways of exploring, explaining and challenging what we know in and through design. The conference directed its interest towards diversity, challenges and emerging design practices. In this paper we are taking this challenge further by focusing on diverse material exploration through design research exhibitions.

In respect of the overall conference theme of experimentation the Nordes 2013 Exhibition was conceived as designerly exploration into materials, technologies, and expressions. It also entailed design experiments as means for promoting social change or as critiques of political and ethical values. The ultimate aim of the design research exhibition was two fold: to present the very materialities of such design experiments; and, to explore how the outcome can work as a tool to express and communicate research enquiries.

In this paper we first take a closer look at what kind of role exhibitions have gained in the field of design research, which we then relate to some contemporary curatorial challenges within traditional design exhibitions. We proceed by introducing the case, Nordes 2013 Design Research Exhibition. We then describe in detail the processes related to the evolving exhibition – including the curatorial process, spatial design as well as the designing of ‘The Nordes Design Research Kit’. Finally, we sum up by pointing out problems and future opportunities for the role of exhibitions in design research contexts.

## **The role of exhibitions in design research**

The book “Design Research Through Practice” (Koskinen et al. 2011, p.89-107) discusses how design related practices are utilised in the field of design research, and furthermore how these practices are related to the idea of exhibitions. Here, the way in which people see and experience the material world and elicit change through debate is questioned. The roots of this discussion can be found in the sphere of critical and artistic discourses:

Critical design, or design that asks carefully crafted questions and makes us think, is just as difficult and just as important as design that solves problems or finds answers. Being provocative and challenging might seem like obvious role for art, but art is far too removed from the word... There is a place for a form of design that pushes the cultural and aesthetic potential and role of... products and services to its limits. Questions must be asked about what we actually need, about the way poetic moments can be intertwined with everyday and not separated from it. Critical design is related to... design propaganda, and visions of the future... Its purpose is to stimulate discussion and debate amongst designers, industry, and the public. (Dunne & Raby 2001, p.58)

As encouraged above by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, the initiators of the term ‘critical design’, contemporary designers can adopt a critical attitude if they wish to make the public aware of their true interests. With these kinds of practices, designers are able to shake up the routines of everyday life (Koskinen & al. 2011, p.95). According, the primary purpose of critical design is to make people think:

(...) the interesting thing is to explore an issue, to figure out how to turn it into a project, how to turn the project into some design ideas, how to materialize those design ideas as prototypes, and finally, how to disseminate them through exhibitions or publications. (Dunne & Raby, cited from Koskinen et al. 2011, p.95).

Thus, according to Dunne & Raby, exhibitions are important mediums for materialised design ideas to distribute carefully crafted questions. When considering this possibility in relation to design research, it is obvious that for many design researchers, exhibition items, such as prototypes, photographs and videos are important mediums to express and communicate research enquiries, on an equal part with written text. It should be emphasized that artefacts in research exhibitions are exhibited in theoretical frameworks rather than as stand-alone artworks. This means that the exhibition item, in whatever medium it might be, has to be experienced and recognized in relation to the design researcher’s theoretical perspective and reflections (e.g. written text), and also in the light of the overall framework of the event in question.

We will come back to this point, but before we move on we introduce our first motivation for the Nordes 2013 Exhibition and emphasize how it ties into some contemporary concerns of design curatorial practices.

## **The motivation behind the Nordes 2013 Exhibition**

According to Christina Zetterlund (2013, p.50), exhibitions within design have an influence on how design and craft is understood outside the practicing design communities. Zetterlund describes how the exhibition format has helped to move design and craft beyond the private everyday use of products. Hence, exhibitions are potential important mediums to communicate design to a wider audience. Moreover, the problem with many museum exhibitions is that their display of collections has emphasized a certain definition of the craft and design object, in particular that of the history of design as ‘visual objects that decorate capitalism’ (ibid.). Consequently, Zetterlund is calling for alternative exhibition formats that take us beyond the dominant contribution that accordingly has institutionalized the field of craft and design.

For us, design research exhibitions have the potential to contribute to such an alternative. Nonetheless, our challenge was slightly different since design research is rarely caught up in 'only' aesthetic or capitalistic issues. Rather, one challenge within design research contexts are how to get beyond verbal ways of staging design research enquires. Academic texts can also be considered as 'material', but they already constitute main parts of that which makes up design research conferences. Hence, our intention has been to introduce, include and invite three-dimensional and non-verbal materialities that might not feature so vividly in design conference situations. The kind of materialities that are often close at hand in a range of different design practices include wood, ceramics, bits of code, film and paper.



*Figures 1 & 2: The photo on top shows some of the attendees at the Nordes 2013 exhibition opening. The photo below this shows the short description stating the project's overall aim and research questions.*

To make a review of how exhibitions were featured in previous Nordes conferences, we retrieved information from the Nordes conference website ([www.nordes.org](http://www.nordes.org)) that gathers all information about common Nordes activities. Based on this review it became obvious that the conference has historically offered some possibilities to show and present 'case studies'. Although there was little or no information on how case studies were actually exhibited and executed during the conference.

We are highlighting this because it shows aspects and challenges of a design research exhibition. Artefacts, materials and experiments can be much harder to present and document if they are to contribute to some kind of knowledge. This also points to the power of text in contributing to research - it can be easily saved, documented, and shared. We can imagine that academic systems such as referencing have evolved and changed over time through a history of trial and error. Those are features that many material things such as artefacts and exhibitions in design research lack. The fact that there is so little information of the previous Nordes exhibitions - compared to accepted conference papers illustrate this point. This ultimately leads to questions of how we document, share, and build upon each other's knowledge in a materially pluralistic manner?

In the next section we describe through both images and text how we tried to meet some of those challenges during the exhibition.

## The design research curation process

The Nordes 2013 Exhibition had 50 designers and design researchers applying to participate, and after a double blind review, the exhibition included 27 exhibitors in total. The submissions for the exhibition could either be submitted as an exhibition piece accompanied with a two-page paper explaining the main idea of the work and how it is related to the conference theme, or as an exhibition piece accompanied with a full or exploratory paper. All exhibition proposals had to be documented as visual material, such as through photographs or video to allow the blind peer reviewers to evaluate the work.

Each submission went through two peer reviewers, using the same process as how papers proceed into the Nordes conference. The two reviewers were assigned due to the specific expertise within the field of the submission. For the exhibition items, the reviewers were asked to describe the aesthetic, communicative, and experimental qualities of the piece. Furthermore, they had to give an overall rating of the piece, as well as a rating of their own expertise within the area. Based on the ratings an average score was calculated, that automatically accepted or rejected the submission.



Figures 3a & 3b: The illustration shows one of many attempts to cluster the different exhibition items into more comprehensive fields of design research (a). The photograph shows a layout of the physical boards and tables in the exhibition (b).

The accepted submissions were subsequently invited to make iterations to their submissions according to the suggestions from the reviewers. During this time, we as chairs made up a rough sketch of how the different submissions and experiments could fit into the exhibition (Figure 3a). The experiments that were to be exhibited ranged from voice-activated interaction designs and performances to craft-based objects in ceramics.

## The spatial design of the exhibition

To deal with the challenging fact that some exhibitors would have to pack their exhibition-items to go through customs and may only arrive hours before the opening, we decided to allow room for the exhibitors to stage their own experiments. As a 'blank canvas' the exhibitors were given the options of using a standing board, a table, or a combined choice in size 2m x 2m made of plywood, to communicate their design research experiment (Figure 4).

The exhibition architecture was designed according to the clusters of the entries. To create this layout we organized and combined the submissions according to themes. We uncovered five overarching themes. With the help of post-it notes the themes were then applied to the boards and tables (Figure 3b). This arrangement was then positioned into the physical space of the Exhibition Hall.

Through email dialogues and Skype-sessions between the exhibitors and chairs, the Nordes 2013 Exhibition slowly came into being. But the opening event of the exhibition only fulfilled the task of

showing stand-alone artworks. The task of considering how the exhibition items contributed to a more theoretical framework was to be realised in the special slot designed purposefully for uncovering the roots of this research-related exhibition. For this purpose, we decided to develop The Nordes Design Research Kit.



*Figure 4: The picture to the left shows the plain board the exhibitors were given to utilize according to their needs for exhibiting their items. The second picture shows an example of the actual set-up of the exhibition piece 'Time experiments – Design for reflection' by Liv Maria Henning and Fanni Baudo.*

## **The Nordes Design Research Kit**

To engage the conference participants we created 'The Nordes Design Research Kit' by applying the idea of 'probes'. Since discussions and dialogue do not necessarily arise in a straightforward way, the intention was to allow for more vivid exchanges between exhibitors and conference participants - to utilize the full potential of the conference participants' expertise as a part of the exhibition.

For achieving the goal, we applied the base idea of 'cultural probes' as outlined by Bill Gaver (Koskinen et al. 2011, p. 40-41). In the field of design research probes are used as vehicles that are sent out to gather information. Often the purpose is to support self-documentation, with the benefit that they operate and gather information without the presence of the researcher (Koskinen et al. 2011, p.41). However, the key idea behind the probes can be applied in various ways. Furthermore, probe tools can be a playful way of gathering information and engaging users into the design processes (Mattelmäki 2006). They can also be used for sensitizing users or research participants for a discourse of a certain topic (Ahde-Deal 2013, p.47-50).

While Ahde-Deal treated design probes as starting points for conversations about emotional attachments with jewellery, we used probes to establish dialogues between exhibitors and conference participants. In this way, the topic was left to be explored in relation to the each exhibition piece. 'The Nordes Design Research Kit' used the metaphor of an explorer's kit. It consisted of a set of coffee mugs, a 'design research map', some 'enquiry notes', pens and coffee. This was all packaged in two coffee cups and given to the conference participants during a special exhibition slot (Figure 5). Each participant, or 'explorer', teamed up with a partner - with whom they shared the kit - while exploring the Nordes design research landscape and enjoying coffee and cake. We describe two less self-explanatory components of the kit in more detail below.





Figure 5: The 'Nordes Design Research Kit', at the entrance to the Nordes exhibition Hall.

**Probe 1:** *The Design Research Landscape* (Figure 6) is a map that first indicates the overarching research themes that made up the Nordes 2013 exhibition. In addition, it also illustrates the physical layout of the exhibition space. Referencing a cartographic process to symbolize the exhibition, each island on the map was given a specific design research theme corresponding to the Nordes conference session themes (see also figure 4 and related explanation). The island, 'Experiments as Making Explorations' featured the more crafty material explorations. 'Politics of Design' featured more provocative exhibition items such as the home abortion kit 'Abort N' Go'. While, 'Messy Method' showed pieces that would deal with more explorative methods of using design to conduct field research.

Furthermore, different sights, such as the actual exhibition items where presented as specific landmarks. Heights, depths and slopes - the characteristics that tie together a landscape - where featured as extracted sentences from the papers that accompany and contextualise the exhibition item.

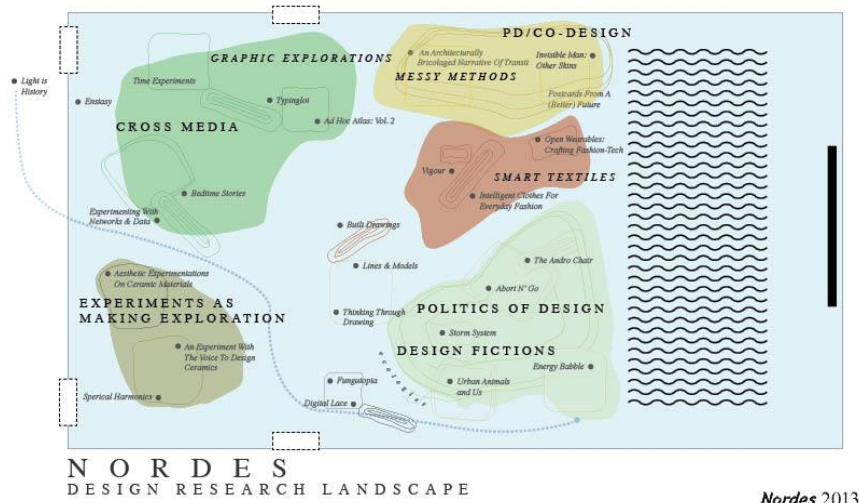
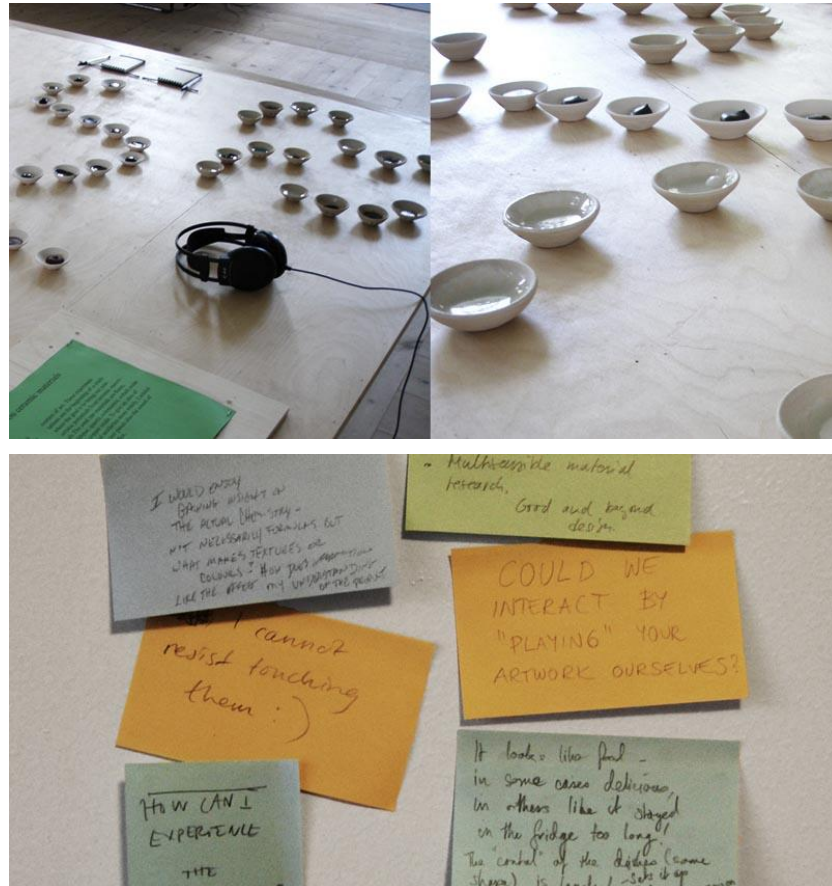


Figure 6 : The 'design research landscape' map.

**Probe 2:** *The Enquiry Notes* are made up of re-packaged 'Post-It' notes that encourage the explorer to leave a trail of enquiries, or questions to be utilized by other explorers after them. As one walked around the exhibition the enquiry notes could be attached to the boards and tables. For example, Priska Falin's exhibition item 'Aesthetic Experimentations on Ceramic Materials' (Figure 7) showed a selection of test pieces accompanied by the sound of crackling flux (Falín 2013, p.486).



Figures 7 & 8: Exhibition piece 'Aesthetic Experimentations On Ceramic Materials (above)', and the enquiries that the exhibitor received during the Nordes exhibition slot (below).

Falin, who explores new artistic potentials from ceramic materials and sound, received enquiries that ranged from positive comments, to questions and suggestions (Figure 8). On one of the enquiry notes an explorer writes 'I cannot resist touching them', while another reports 'I would enjoy gaining insight on the actual chemistry - not necessarily formulas but what makes textures or colours? How does information like that affect my understanding of the product?' Another explorer asks Falin 'could we interact by playing your artwork ourselves?'

In this way the enquiry notes started to generate their own discussions between different participants and exhibitors. One could add to someone else's enquiry, which each exhibitor or participant could then utilise by seizing the moment to discuss a certain topic when the enquiries were scribbled down. Alternatively, the exhibitors could venture out as explorers themselves to enquire into someone else's relevant work. At the end of the conference the exhibitor had the possibility of bringing the enquiry notes as a trail of insights and reflections enquiring into her particular exhibition research topic.

Overall, this large Exhibition Hall was a very lively central point for the whole conference. It hosted conference paper sessions, keynote presentations as well as the opening ceremony. Hence, the conference participants used the space for other reasons as well – not only to explore the exhibition. Thus, the pieces were not only seen nor discussed via 'enquiry notes' during the special exhibition slot, but during the three days of the conference.

## Discussion

In trying to position the role of exhibitions compared to traditional design and art exhibitions we argue that the very characteristics of a design research exhibition lies in the synthesis between the text and the design experiment. In concurrence with this, the current curatorial design research challenge is firstly to consider how this synthesising characteristic can be utilized. Then secondly, to consider ways

that allows exhibitions, with all their materialities, to become serious and important components of the more text-based academic procedures of design conferences.

Through our case study, the Nordes 2013 exhibition, we have presented and discussed how design research exhibitions help utilize such characteristics. In regards to the first challenge we have accounted for how the 'Nordes Design Research Kit' produced exchanges between the written paper and the exhibition item. Furthermore, we encouraged exhibitors to show process and experimentation as central to the exhibition, in conjunction with a written paper that positions and contextualises the experiments. Those are both important features that help add to a more pluralistic perspective on how materialities can contribute to knowledges in the making.

In respect of the second challenge; to allow materialities to become more important components in design conferences we argue to 'review the reviewing'. Reviewing 'some-thing' for design research follows a research tradition that is geared towards assessing papers. This became very visible in some of the review feedback that the Nordes exhibitors received. Exhibition items such as prototypes, photographs and videos may not fit well into traditional modes of making design conferences. Typically, the reviews of the exhibition pieces were assessed *both* through the paper and the visual material. Here the reviewers would, for example, assess how the visual material was experimental, and how the two-page paper could benefit from being written in a more straightforward manner to position the experiment. The reviews for the full or exploratory paper were more problematic in terms of the exhibition items. Here the reviewers tended to focus on the review of the paper, and in some cases did not even consider the review of the exhibition item.

To point to futures; further ways to overlap, intermingle and stage both text and other designerly materials can be done through micro-exploration, such as our example the 'Nordes Design Research Kit'. A further possibility is to expand the exhibition area as a more dynamic and flexible environment for paper presentations in relation to the exhibited artefacts - in contrast to the classical auditory setup (for further examples of this see 'The Art of Research', organised since 2005). As well as to consider ways of making design research exhibitions more public to utilize the medium of the exhibition to communicate design research to a wider audience, such as the design practitioners.

With regards to reviewing, there is definitely room for improvement, to consider better ways to review exhibition items. At the same time, using the more traditional format for accepting conference contributions for a design research exhibition also shows an opportunity. The fact that we do not have one curator, instead the decisions of who exhibits have been spread out of over many different people, or reviewers, means that the curation has been de-centralized.

Finally, when considering our task as co-chairs and authors, our closing contribution has been to document the Nordes 2013 exhibition. This paper is one way to document and share our experience, so others can build on the knowledge we have gained. We want to argue that research in its most basic sense - contributing to knowledge that allows others to build upon - contributes to new means of curating design exhibitions. This very paper contributes to a way of synthesizing between text and experiment, theory and practice. It is in itself an experiment in how to further elaborate on the characteristics of design research exhibitions.

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