

Utopian epistles: computing [codesign]crises

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COVER LETTER (May 20, 2025)

The Aarhus decennial conference on computing is turning fifty.
Congratulations.

Between November 2024 and February 2025 (and finally in May 2025) the author, a conference "veteran", wrote ten letters addressing younger generations of participants and the theme of the sixth conference on computing [x] crisis. With a special focus on codesign, participation and democracy, the letters are predominantly musings on critical matters related to the first fifty years of the conference, but there are also perspectives reaching half a century back before the 1975 conference as well as fifty years ahead of the 2025 conference. Most letters have a specific emphasis on a broad tension like memory and nostalgia, labor and capital, collaboration and conflict, democracy and autocracy, war and peace, history and future, narrative and truth, thinking and acting.

Being letters they stand as they were originally written at a specific time from the existential and political here and now of the author. The only corrections are minor and regard misspellings, a few factual errors and for the sakes of brevity and discretion a few omissions.

As letters they also reach out for (critical) replies, discussions, other stories and perspectives. Some of that may happen already at the conference, but the vision is an ongoing epistolary public exchange on computing [codesign] crisis. Some old "penfriends" have already signed up. New are welcome. This cover letter is an introduction to each of the letters, categorised by a short description and a few excerpts to indicate content and style. Teasers if you like. Each letter can be read separately, but in between there are references back to earlier ones.

1. Singing in dark times (November 6, 2024)

This troubled letter was written on the day after the last presidential election in the USA. The purpose is to open a discussion across generations

relating the conditions for computing and codesign around the first Aarhus conferences to the much darker circumstances today. What may we learn from one another? Are there glimmers of light where we may envision an attainable Utopia?

"You have to learn to speak better English if the revolution is going to succeed!"

"I wish I could offer more of hope, but what happened today in the USA is so much darker than the democratic revolution we hoped for and anticipated. I very much feel I have lived in two different worlds, a time full of hope and utopian dreams, say around the two first Aarhus conferences, and a time of despair, grief and utopias lost since the last conference ten years ago. So, I apologize for ending this letter in the minor key. In these dark times we need better songs. I would love to hear you singing them."

2. Time shelter (November 13, 2024)

The letter is built around a visit to a kind of "full-scale laboratory" in the Old Town museum in Aarhus. One street ends in 1974 just before the first Aarhus conference and another in 2014 just before the last conference. What were the different social, material and political backgrounds for issues at these conferences and what is the role of nostalgia and memory when we retrospectively return to those "time shelters"?

"Walking down memory lanes in the block ending in 1974 evoke bittersweet recollections of a time before the computer, a time of which I guess you have no memories of your own. A more just and equal society, with really improved living conditions for the working class and a narrowed gap between the poor and the rich. A democratic welfare state that had grown out of the triumphs of well-organized reformist labor. But you also encounter a wish for more among young people, an engagement emanating from the "revolutionary" 1968."

"It seemed easier to become a collective designer in the seventies when I was in my twenties than as of now in the twenties when I am in my seventies and out of the game. I guess your twenties may have been less optimistic."

3. My utopian places (November 20, 2024)

What happened to Utopia where workers craft new technology from the nineteen eighties and a Digital Bauhaus for the twenty first century? The author revisits these favourite "time shelters" from a critical distance, but not without nostalgia.

"Utopia, where workers craft new technology, was despite its offerings not really a safe time shelter from the neoliberal storm. But if I could time travel, would I like to come back? Absolutely! These were times of great hope"

"Digital Bauhaus started as an at that time unlikely utopian time shelter at the turn of the century. Today it still exists, and many of the students from the early days now run the place as researchers, teachers and designers. So, you have to ask them if it still is a place and time shelter worth seeking refuge in."

"So, what do you think about my time-places Utopia and Digital Bauhaus? Are they worth visiting again? In that case and despite all their qualities and merits, I hope I have also communicated that they are not really solid shelters for safe retreat."

4. Intermezzo (December 7, 2024)

This letter is about the language-games we play with one another under contemporary capitalism. It is inspired by a reading of Sally Rooney's romance noir novel "Intermezzo". In the novel she experiments with how Wittgenstein's notion of language-games can be used to shed light on human interaction. This resonates in thought-provoking ways with codesign theory and practice understood as intertwined language-games.

"Mankell vs. Rooney. Here is an idea for a new language-game formed to bridge the gap between generations, a language-game that has family resemblance both with the language-games of Mankell's Nordic crime noir fiction and the language-games of Rooney's romance noir. The troubled man, inspector Wallander, meets with the also in their own way troubled young Irish crowd from "Intermezzo" to address the global crime against nature as well as the withering away of our democracies under the current state of capitalism. Is this a worthwhile design challenge? Actually, I think the performative

actions by Extinction Rebellion might be a prototype to start from. What do you think?"

"From January 20, the American people and the rest of us will have to live with the maybe most powerful man in the world playing language-games in his brutal win, win, win cannot lose way. In this revolutionary situation the codesign suggestion of the construction of shared design-language games to increase mutual understanding and joint exploration seem just a bit too naïve. What are the options? To go for the man or to go for the ball? For the sake of democracy, I think we should go for the ball, but that may also require that we in-between break the rules, e.g. through actions of civil obedience, and create new parallel games e.g. around alternative independent internets and collaborative media. Seeking support from revolutionary thinkers from even darker times may make us see the situation clearer."

5. Peace on earth (December 24, 2024)

This letter contemplates the relation between codesign activism and war, exploring a reorientation of codesign towards design as peace-making under the current condition of computing [x] crisis. What may we learn from earlier attempts? Can Hannah Arendt's and Simone Weil's reading of the "Iliad", the first "western" epos on war, throw light on the matter?

"To Arendt, the "Iliad" is the first literary work that clearly recognizes the human value of the defeated. Power comes from people acting together. Violence kills but is rather a sign of powerlessness. To her annihilating war can only end by political action through which the enemies are "reconciled" to a common world."

"[According to Weil] the true hero of the war is neither the Greek hero Achilles nor his deadliest enemy the Trojan prince Hector or any other human participating in the war. It is instead what she calls the "force", that power that turn anybody subjected to it into a thing, and in its extreme literally to a corpse. (...) To stay away from the force requires a miracle. The miracle of grace."

"P.S. A melancholy note. If it takes a miracle to make "peace on earth", how many miracles do we then need for the ultimate

challenge of making "peace with earth"? But we believe in miracles, don't we?"

6. Morbid symptoms (January 20, 2025)

This letter is a snapshot from the presidential inauguration. But what did we really see? "Morbid symptoms"!

"If these "morbid symptoms" from the coronation, where autocratic leadership and libertarian capitalist freedom is replacing hopes of public engagement, democratic participation and genuine co-production, is the dark reality of Computing [x] Crises for the coming years, how can the new then be born?"

7. Fires of freedom (February 13, 2025)

Activists and philosophers Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil, Simone de Beauvoir and Ayn Rand lived and acted in the dark times of the nineteen thirties. We meet them as young women in Wolfram Eilenberger's remarkable book "The Visionaries". In this letter they are, as a thought experiment, invited to the Aarhus conference. First as their young selves to the first 1975 conference and later given their life wisdom as keynote speakers to the 2025 conference on computing [x] crisis. What may we as contemporary codesigners learn from these extraordinary women?

"So, what happened with the request in the first letter for better language if the democratic socialist revolution in the era of the computer was going to succeed. Well, I guess the quest is unresolved. But with inspiration from Arendt and Weil, I suggest that English, that now has taken the violent form of "making America great again", could be replaced by languages, or should I with Wittgenstein say language-games, of "grace" and "reconciliation". Maybe not the most obvious conclusion for an old Marxist".

"I can hear that this sounds more melancholic than hopeful, as if the dark thirties show up again. "We live in a world where people can expect miracles only from themselves", Weil wrote. That may be so, but while waiting for the miracles to come there is some comfort in Arendt's thesis that power emerges wherever people act together. So, there is hope, "fires of freedom", revolutionary or not."

"Codesign emerged out of visions of democratic freedom for the industrial worker in the era of the computer, but where does it make

most sense today? Should we, inspired by Weil's plan to parachute nurses to the frontline to give comfort and moral support to the wounded and dying, find similar missions for codesign? I opt for less heroic undertakings, maybe as democratic fire brigades or guerillas fighting for peace in dark times of war and autocracy? "There is a crack in everything" Leonard Cohen sang on the dark album "The Future".

8. News from Utopia (February 19, 2025)

In 1890 William Morris wrote "News from Nowhere", about a Utopian socialist society with common ownership and democratic control of the means of production. The protagonist falls asleep after a boring socialist meeting and wake up in 2090 in this dream civilization. This letter dwell upon how we may write about, or in other ways envision, futures of computing, design, participation and democracy without having the reader falling asleep? Traditional letters might be out? What about "speculative fiction"? Utopian or dystopian is that the question?

"Dear participants (or should I say selected delegates). Dear humans and non-humans. Welcome to the eleventh congress of CPSR and to our centenary celebration. For fifty years we were only the decennial Aarhus conference. Then we decided to continue as a movement based on the participative idea of a workers' council."

9. Playlist (February 20, 2025)

This letter is not as maybe expected a list of references, but a playlist accompanying the earlier ones, musical associations I made rereading them. Maybe this list can be a way into them and the matters contemplated. As a reader you may come up with completely different playlists. Let's listen, compare and discuss. We might even learn something from one another on the matters of concern in the letters.

"I have since I was a young man been an admirer of Leonard Cohen's songs, not least the lyrics. Hence, a fitting choice for this letter on singing in dark times could well have been "Leaving the Table" from "You want it Darker", the album he made as he was dying. Instead, I have opted for "The Who" and their rebellious "My Generation" from the sixties. Maybe it fits your generation as well?"

"The easy way-out could have been to choose something from the bands "Utopia" or "Bauhaus". But I don't really have a relation to

them. So instead, my choice is "Community of Hope" by PJ Harvey.
The dark side of Utopia and Bauhaus, if you like."

10. Call to action (May 20, 2025)

This is a call to action in addition to the letters on computing [codesign] crisis written two months earlier. Since then, the world has not become a brighter place when it comes to fundamental crises such as war, democracy, inequality or climate emergency. Each of these crises urgently demand action. Minor as it may appear in relation to those crises there is now also a new crisis with special relevance to the ethos of the Aarhus conference: the existential threat to the critical researcher. Hence, this tenth letter and call to action. It is a letter to all conference participants and not least the organizers.

"Academia where critical researchers are silenced. Today USA,
tomorrow maybe the rest of the world."

"We must resist the attack on academic freedom, especially on the critical researcher, and everything that codesign research stands for from critical thinking and activism to diversity, equity, inclusion and close collaboration with NGO's."

"SINGING IN DARK TIMES" (November 6, 2024)

Dear X,

This epistle is the first in a series of letters I intend to send to you in hope that they can reach you in Århus at the sixth decennial conference on computing. This time with a focus on crisis.

"In the dark times,
will there also be singing?
Yes, there will be singing
about the dark times."

Thus, wrote German revolutionary socialist poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht from his exile in Denmark in the dark times of the late nineteen thirties just before the outbreak of war. Today there is too much recognition, but maybe also consolation, in those lines.

"You have to learn to speak better English if the revolution is going to succeed!" For obvious reasons I am not addressing you X at this sixth decennial Aarhus Conference, but the phrase might have been uttered at the first decennial Århus Conference in 1975. In fact, it was not, but a year earlier at a business administration conference on technology and alternative organizations. Those taken aside and lectured for their poor performance as academic speakers were some young men with long hair, uniformly dressed in big sweaters and corduroy trousers (at a conference with ties and suites). Children of the 68 revolution if you like. Yes, I was one of them. The utterance was made by our mentor Kristen Nygaard, the initiator of the first Aarhus conference and inventor of object-oriented programming. He was also the key person in a new Scandinavian movement for democratic control of computers at the workplace, what later came to be known as collective or participatory design. He even developed a description language for this named DELTA (which in Scandinavian languages means PARTICIPATE). Forgive me if you have heard the anecdote before, but it just felt right as an opening of this letter deliberating on computing [x] crisis in times much darker than half a century ago. Times

when two malign narcissists, one a bullying real estate robber baron capitalist and the other the richest man in the world, a techno-oligarch determined to scrap unions and the welfare state, just have been promoted to govern the only superpower in the world. What might be reasonable, accurate or hopeful collective or participatory design responses to this and to the existential crises for climate, war, democracy and half the population? What language do we as collective designers need today, and what about the revolution? The language of revolution is civic action, and revolutions feed out of crises. Remember Marx: "All philosophy has so far only tried to explain the world, our task is to change it". The questions and the challenges are not new, though certainly more acute than ever. But now maybe with the additional reflection: What change, and on which mandate? What songs do we sing as codesigners?

My songs on codesign and computers, across generational gaps, grounded in the days around the first Aarhus conference, might sound very different from yours. My songs as a codesigner are melancholic in key, but still enthusiastic for every new beginning, contemplating the losses and achievements in ongoing struggles for participatory democratic design. Then, half a century ago and long before the first Participatory Design Conference in 1990, we called our engagements with computers and democracy at work a "collective resource approach". Over the years the prefix has with somewhat shifting meanings and contexts come out as "cooperative design", "collaborative design" and "collective design" or just "codesign". Important as distinctions might be, in these letters I will just refer to this democratic participatory approach as codesign, and myself as a collective designer wannabe. But who are you, my anticipated receivers of this letter from an old privileged white man?

You X is not the X clamped between computers and crises, but a generation X, Y and Z conference participant and potential collective designer. On second thought the predicament for you X might be exactly that. To be precariously squished between computers and crises. Anyway, I imagine that you, give or take a decade, are in your late thirties now and consequently

ten years younger at the last Aarhus conference, that is about the same age as I was for the two first conferences half a century ago.

The idea of these letters emanates from a meeting with American colleagues. In terms of generations, they are possibly more X than you, as you are probably more Y and Z than X. I got to know them just before the last Aarhus Conference. In the following years we had an exiting exchange of ideas on computers, democracy and codesign in meetings and in letters that we also intended to share with others. This might still happen, but for now you will have to stick with my new letters. However, to clarify these thoughts for you X, I will include in this letter excerpts from troubled letters I wrote them eight and four years ago:

"November 8, 2016. Dear friends, "Make America great again!" Tonight, this trademarked slogan took on a frighteningly xenophobic, racist, misogynic shape far from the hopeful democratic utopian future making design practices we discussed around the fire in my Swedish cottage a year ago. We discussed the strength of combining feminist utopianism with Nordic participatory design. I was arguing for democratic design experiments (in the small and in the many) and you for the glimmering of hopes in the mundane every day. You spoke from design research in the US and in Taiwan and I from participatory design in the Nordic welfare states. We envisioned that design could have a constructive or compositional role in more participatory and less colonial public engagements than democracy reduced to representative democracy and election of members of parliaments. Given my experiences of participatory design in the Nordic welfare states since the early 1970's my stance was maybe not less hopeful than yours, but no doubt with a stroke of melancholia. We actually found common critical ground in the Nordic noir crime fiction, in the anti-heroes standing up for democracy and human decency in a welfare state threatened to fall apart in a world of neo-liberal global capitalism. However, the horror of Nordic noir fiction and the threats to the welfare state seem by far trumped by tonight's reality show and the trademarked ideology of how to make America great again. In the light of this turn of the events does it still make sense to proceed with our fragile critical utopian design approach? Is our endeavor worth pursuing in this suddenly so much

darker brave new world? Not that our reflections and potential insights might be the most important ones in the current situation, but hopefully they could contribute to the necessary collective rethinking and reclaiming of the utopian vision of democracy in a truly cosmopolitical world. Just as threatening as design is as a driving force in unhampered capitalist consumption, just as hopeful does the small and marginal attempts and experiences of design as glocal collaborative future making appear. But in the light of what has happened our rethinking of democratic design must also be a self-critical endeavor reconsidering maybe too well meaning and naïve assumptions about the relations between design, class, gender and ethnicity.

I am particularly struck and perplexed by the outcome of the votes from the rust belt and the support from the predominantly white former industrial unionized workers to the xenophobic vision of how to make America great again. When participatory design emerged in the early 1970's in the Nordic countries the industrial worker and his local union were the key actors in strives to democratize working life. Metal workers at Kongsbergs Weapon factory in Norway were the first to organize locally to democratize the workplace and challenge managerial prerogatives on design, innovation and new technology. In Sweden, I had as a young actions researcher and designer the privilege to work close together with and learn from workers, organized in local metal worker unions, repairing locomotive engines while at the same time struggling for genuine participation in design and use of new technology and the organization of their workplace. They were all white men, many of them twice my age. At Volvo, the by then major Swedish car manufacturer, small steps were taken away from the monotonous work at the assembly belt towards new factories supporting more autonomous and collaborative work practices. And there were inspiring exchanges of experiences between trade unionists and workers engaged in democratizing the workplace in Sweden and activists from the automobile workers union and other industries in the rust belt similarly engaged in challenging management prerogatives and fighting for decent living conditions. This is all four decades ago and much have changed both in Sweden and in the USA. Still, it struck me as a tragic paradox that the same white men, or rather their sons (and daughters), now have turned

their hopes away from a more democratic (working) life and towards its opposite, whole countries run as capitalist enterprises under a sovereign leader. In the light of this I really believe we must critically rethink the practices of codesign as democratic design experiments. I trust feminist utopianism can be one lever to reinstall a more optimistic hope and make democracy great again."

... and four years later:

"November 3, 2020. Dear friends, Today I keep my fingers crossed for you and that there will be light at the end of the tunnel. Exactly four years ago, in kind of a chock, I wrote a letter to you to explore if our conversations on design, democracy and feminism needed a new orientation in the light of the catastrophe of that day. Later we had a really vital retreat at your place, and then our conversation evaporated into thin air. Maybe we were too similar? But things have changed, and maybe we could have another go? Not everything is Trump! On the one hand on your side of the pond there is a growing interest in democratic socialism (a baseline for participatory design), but also #MeToo (feminism) and BLM (post-colonial), and across the pond we have climate activism like #FridaysForFutures and Extinction Rebellion. I am sure we all see moral and political potential with relevance to democratic design in all these movements, but we may also have disagreements. I for my sake (old white western male democratic socialist) have not surprisingly some difficulties and struggle to fully embrace identity politics as well as intersectionalism. But this is where I think we could meet in real dialogue and constructive disagreements. (...)"

These letters pretty much cover how my thinking on computers and crises has drifted since the last Aarhus conference in 2015. Only with the dark addition from the last years that the threats to democracy now not only come from authoritarian sovereigns as such, but also from their brutal war crimes against Ukrainian and Palestinian civilians. This adds to the challenges of becoming a collective designer.

I wish I could offer more of hope, but what happened today in the USA is so much darker than the democratic revolution we hoped for and anticipated. I very much feel I have lived in two different worlds, a time full of hope and utopian dreams, say around the two first Aarhus conferences, and a time of despair, grief and utopias lost since the last conference ten years ago. So, I apologise for ending this letter in the minor key. In these dark times we need better songs. I would love to hear you singing them.

Your friend P

P.S. Democratic socialism, the revolution we dreamed of is still to come. I am not sure it has to do with lack of mastering the English language, but as you must have noticed I still have a long way to go to a syntactically and grammatically proper English. I beg your pardon and hope my scribbles still can make some sense to you.

"TIME SHELTER" (December 1, 2024)

Dear X,

Yesterday I was visiting the ABF building in Stockholm. ABF stands for Workers' Educational Association, the more than one-hundred-year-old educational section of the Swedish labour movement. I have been there many times. Among other things they organize the yearly conference SocForum, on issues related to democratic socialism. Since retirement I have made it a habit to attend these conferences.

This year the theme was "Crisis and Hope", an appropriate theme also in relation to the upcoming Aarhus conference. Climate emergency, genocide in Gaza and Ukraine, and the crisis of the welfare state dominated. There was not much of hope offered besides the alternatives that might grow out of pockets of resistance. The only real hope demonstrated was related to solar energy and ongoing full-scale experiments with communities living sustainably in wooden houses off the grid. Maybe a "Walden Three" vision of how to live in times of climate emergency (It might be worth to check out the versions by Thoreau and Skinner)?

The picture of dark times from this conference stand in bright contrast to my first visit in the building. I think it was back in 1972. Speaker was the liberation theologian and Marxist Paulo Freire who addressed an enthusiastic audience of young socialists with his hopeful liberation "pedagogy of the oppressed". His experiences were from working with poor peasants in Brazil with living conditions utterly different from the unionized industrial worker in Sweden. Nevertheless, his approach of learning to read and write as a critical practice really made sense. The "teachers" worked together with the peasants and collaboratively assembled the "teaching material". This material always took its point of departure in challenges in concrete local well known practices, but at the same time it was composed to open and connect to broader societal controversies and ways to approach them. This was revolutionary! Substitute "teacher" with "designer" and you have the core principles of how we a few years later came to locally collaborate with typographers and metal

workers and other organized labor as the computer was entering the workplace.

That time the world seemed open and full of untried possibilities. After the conference yesterday I found few glimmers of hope. It is certainly tempting to retreat to nostalgia. Especially for someone my age. It seemed easier to become a collective designer in the seventies when I was in my twenties than as of now in the twenties when I am in my seventies and out of the game. I guess your twenties may have been less optimistic.

Have you been to the Gamle By (Old Town) in Århus? If not, and if you are in Århus when this letter reaches you, I suggest a visit to two historical blocks, a full-scale laboratory and mock-up participatory experience if you like, (1950-1974 and 2000-2014). Hence, the streets end just before the first (1975) and the last (2015) Aarhus conferences. This full-scale laboratory figure in "Time Shelter" by Bulgarian author Georgi Gospodinov. It is a book about democracy, memory loss and the pros and cons of nostalgia. It begins with clinics for people with dementia (with good results), expands to full-scale laboratories all over Europe for people who want to re-experience their best years (typically when they were in their twenties) and on to national referendums in the European Union voting on what decennium people want their country to be. Many of the countries in eastern Europe choose the time after the fall of the Berlin wall, whereas Denmark as the rest of the Scandinavian countries voted for the seventies. When America was great is another story. I guess the nationalistic nostalgia is about the fifties and the sixties. It is a dystopic sign of our times that many people in Europe again have begun to vote for the thirties.

Walking down memory lanes in the block ending in 1974 evoke bittersweet recollections of a time before the computer, a time of which I guess you have no memories of your own. A more just and equal society, with really improved living conditions for the working class and a narrowed gap between the poor and the rich. A democratic welfare state that had grown out of the triumphs of well-organized reformist labor. But you also encounter a wish for more among young people, an engagement emanating from the "revolutionary" 1968. There are for example the homes of people

living in communes as an alternative to the traditional family. Traditional values are challenged not only when it comes to family. There was certainly sex, drugs and rock'n'roll, but more important a strong international engagement against "US imperialism", especially the war in Vietnam. More generally, among young people, there was a growing critique of capitalism not only abroad but also in the welfare state at home. A "revolutionary" wish for more freedom here and now? But most people, then as now, lived in traditional nuclear households. Shops displayed "analog" stuff like vinyl records and "high tech" was washing machines, clumsy television sets, radios and cameras. Workshops, for example to repair bikes and mopeds, were mechanical. More difficult to notice during a visit to this 1974 full-scale laboratory are the effects of the economic crisis most of the Western world suffered with high inflation and unemployment among traditional blue-collar workers. There was even a "climate crisis" though of a different kind than today. Due to war in the Middle East, there was for some time not enough oil and gas for cars, industry and the heating of homes. This was the scene just before the first Aarhus conference and the entrance of the computer and struggles for a more democratic working life. Internationally the US imperialism defeat in Vietnam 1975 was still in the future.

The next street is maybe more your home turf than mine, even if I was there as well. Now it is 2014 and the scene has changed dramatically. You do not see many computers, but they are ubiquitous hiding behind the facades of a bank, a shopping center, a video shop, a solarium, a convenience shop, etc. All with well-known names and most of them with international brands. These facilities are operated by a rapidly growing class of service workers. The nuclear family still dominates, but more and more people live as singles and the "rainbow family" has replaced the commune as a new way of living. The dire straits for many people caused by the financial crisis of 2008 does not really show up in the street, nor does the "revolutionary" civic engagement by young people in the Occupy movement opposing the power of financial capital. The climate crisis had since 1990 been made clear by the UN panel on climate change, but "revolutionary" civic engagement like Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion was still to come. The "refugee

crisis" in Europe was also still to come. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine had started with the annexation of the Crimea in 2014, but we clearly did not engage a lot in it at that time.

In the Old Town full-scale laboratory 1974 and 2014 is where the two streets end, but that is exactly where our walks down memory lanes of computing, codesign, and crisis embark. The first imaginary path through the nostalgically remembered past is between the times around the two first Aarhus conference and the other around the last two conferences. It is time to leave the Old Town and visit my utopian time shelters - Utopia and Digital Bauhaus.

See you soon on these walks down memory lane.

Yours, P

"MY UTOPIAN PLACES" (November 20, 2025)

Dear X,

"Learning in Participatory Design as I found it (1970-2015)" (2017) is a report from my codesign travels, a travelogue with a special focus on favorite places in time and space. You can look it up if you are interested. Here I will only share lessons on crises learned from two of these "utopian" settlements: Utopia and Digital Bauhaus.

Leaving the 1974 street in Århus Old Town my first time shelter (1975-1986) down memory lane of computing, codesign and crisis was Utopia, even known as the Swedish Center for Working Life in Stockholm. It was an interdisciplinary research center set up to foster democratization of the workplace. At the center, we had the first Apple Macintoshes (128 k), later also connected via a local area network to a desktop laser printer. In the lab we had advanced early graphic workstations including mock-ups of interaction devices. Prominently placed on our research bookshelf, besides the obligatory Capital by Marx, you would find its update to the age of automation "Labour and Monopoly Capital- The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century" by Harry Braverman (1974), our handbook for designer/researcher-worker collaboration "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" by Paulo Freire (1972) and a well-thumbed manuscript of the forthcoming "Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation For Design" by Fernando Flores and Terry Winograd (1986). As an odd part of the collection there was also a copy of "Philosophical Investigations" by the unconventional philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.

"Utopia where workers craft new technology. Today Scandinavia tomorrow maybe the rest of the world". Thus ended a most affirmative article in MIT Technical Review in 1985. It was a review of the Utopia project about skill-based design in printing industry. That project was in a way the culmination of the collaboration between trade unions and researchers/computer scientists/designers on democratization of the workplace that had started more than a decade earlier in Norway. Hence,

this time shelter took place not only in one place, but all over Scandinavia across academic institutions and industrial workplaces. Not least in Århus.

The outcome of these utopian "democracy at work" interventions and experiments we reported at the second Aarhus conference (1985) and can be read in the proceedings "Computers and Democracy", dedicated to our mentor Kristen Nygaard as a "festschrift" for his 60's birthday.

When the Utopia project was regarded a success in the academic world it was as a fruitful approach to democratizing technology, including playful collaborative participatory design methods and skill-based human-computer interaction patterns.

However, the prototypes from the Utopia project didn't really make it to the marketplace. There may be many reasons for this including technological deficiencies and insufficient capital investments, but it could have been otherwise if it wasn't for the "iron lady", British prime minister Margaret Thatcher.

In 1981 the Labor party and young socialists took over the governance of Greater London Council, the local government administrative body for Greater London. They introduced a new type of left-wing politics including emphasis on minority rights. As part of this new politics the Greater London Enterprise Board was established. It was a social innovation incubator, as we would say today. The technical director of this incubator was engineer, computer scientist and trade union activist Mike Cooley, well known for his union leadership in the seventies at Lucas Aerospace, the British weapon factory. The trade union response to the economic crises and the threat to be laid off was a plan for "alternative production". The detailed plan including some 150 socially useful products, counting prototypes of small-scale wind turbines and electric bikes. Though rejected by management and government the plan inspired an international transition movement for "Alternative production". As a spokesperson for this movement Cooley was well received in Scandinavia, both by trade unions and by research environments like The Swedish Center for Working Life. This led to constructive meetings between Participatory Design out of

Scandinavia and Alternative Production from Britain. When Cooley later became technical director at the Greater London Enterprise board he connected the Utopia project with Whitechapel Computer Works, one of the startups supported by the incubator. Whitechapel was developing a graphic workstation on which the Utopia specifications for skill-based design could be implemented. A trade union Utopian democratic socialism technology dream come through. Workers and their trade unions in a network across nations actively participating in technological development from design to financing, incubation, production and implementation. Utopia - where workers craft new technology! Too good to be true? Yes, in 1985 Thatcher abolished the Greater London Council, a democratic socialist experiment totally at odds with her political and economic agenda. Gone was the enterprise board with its capital and industrial relations for socially useful production. Only too late did we realize that the third way between capitalism and communism with a focus on the welfare state, a more equal and democratic society, was being replaced by austerity politics, banishing trade unions, privatization of key national industries, deregulations of markets, and centralizing power from local authorities to central government. It started as Reaganomics and Thatcherism, but by the end of 1989 and the fall of the Berlin wall this was, with a borrowed and contested phrase, "the end of history". Capitalism had won, also in Scandinavia. There was only one "free world", the West, and it was neoliberal. The high hopes of a democratic and socialist third way between capitalism and communism was being blocked by the breakthrough of neoliberalism. The movements that Mike Cooley and Kristen Nygaard had pioneered had dreams of other futures, revolutionary or not, utopias of democracy at work in which worker participation and trade unions played a significant role in design and implementation of new technology. In short, Utopia, where workers craft new technology, was despite its offerings not really a safe time shelter from the neoliberal storm. But if I could time travel, would I like to come back? Absolutely! These were times of great hope, and with the knowledge we have today the democratic revolution might have been more successful.

Fast forward down memory lane. This time to a new millennium, along the Århus Old Town street ending in 2014, and on to the time of the last Århus conference. This is also the time and place for my last utopian time shelter a Digital Bauhaus (1998-). It had its own manifesto and was formally known as the School of Arts and Communication at Malmö University. It was a very well-equipped place with research and design studios for critically exploring space, place and storytelling in the early days of social media and physical computing. There were also studios for music and film making, a performance "black box" as well as a mechatronics lab. All studios and labs were on the same floor connected by an exhibition space and a "third culture" café. There was a constant flow of students, teachers, researchers and designers across spaces and programs. Compared to Utopia from the seventies and the eighties the library had many more books. There were the old Bauhaus manifestos from Weimar and Dessau, but I think it is fair to suggest that books by Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway (and their colloques and followers) were the most red ones. In for example "Reassembling the Social" Latour inspired us to rethink how in design to collaboratively draw things together, and in "Making things public" the rich "catalogue" from an international exhibition he and colleagues gave their bid on democracy and its social and technological challenges in a new millennium. His feminist adversary Haraway accompanied this view with the "cyborg" and the importance of "situated knowledge". They both introduced complementary perspectives on the challenges of humans and non-humans living together in a world of climate emergency. I guess I should also mention "Design, when everybody designs" by Ezio Manzini. Not because it was the most read book in the library, but because it signaled an important bend on the way towards democratic codesign. Scandinavian Participatory design had constructively merged with Italian Design for sustainability and social innovation, (a merger more "successful" than that between Participatory design and Alternative production in the early eighties).

The "Digital Bauhaus" manifesto for the school suggested a critical amalgamation of Scandinavian participatory design from the times of

Utopia with early modern design from the nineteenth twentieth and the social and aesthetic revolutionary goals of the Bauhaus. A Utopia where workers craft new technology might have seemed like a possible way forward at the peak of the third way and in an era of democratization of the workplace, but how was a publicly funded "revolutionary" Digital Bauhaus possible at the peak of neoliberalism? I can only speculate. Around the turn of the century there was a huge demand from telecom and computer game industry for creative digital workers to take part in design of everything from "smart phones" to "interactive games". The same was the case with the emerging social media platforms. In general, there was a strong believe in the economic potential of the new "creative class". Never mind then the social and political rhetorics of a "Digital Bauhaus", as long as it helped foster an employable workforce. Furthermore, the great divide between libertarians and democratic socialists concerning digital freedom was not yet an open conflict.

Research at this Digital Bauhaus followed two straits. One had to do with democratizing social media through platforms that could make those former known as audience to also be designers of their own media as well as content providers. Certainly, demonstrated utopian scenarios of collaborative media had great potential, from citizen protests using live broadcast from political conflicts or local hardware networks for monitoring climate and other environmental hazards in a city, to workers production of their own local learning media. In reality, what at the beginning of the period seemed like a great Utopian potential for collaborative media later turned out, as we now know, in new media as sheer surveillance capitalism. From Wikipedia as a promising collaborative and open platform for building and sharing knowledge to X, where the X in computing [x] crisis equals a personal megaphone for a tech right libertarian, if not fascist, superstar.

The other major orientation of our Digital Bauhaus we called Malmö Living Labs. The labs focused on bottom-up collaboration with citizens in Malmö as well as with the municipality. One such collaboration was with Herrgård's Women Association, a group of officially unemployed immigrant women we

with genuine respect called the "Mothers of Invention". In interaction with the lab they created catering services, worked with refugee children, and explored new ways of collaboration with the municipality as well as with private companies.

In 2009 our Digital Bauhaus got a sizeable 10-year grant from the Knowledge Foundation to become an excellence center on co-production with the living labs as a major approach. The first review a year later led to a complete termination of the whole funding. The expert committee could see no signs of a control system that could grant research on co-production of good scientific quality, and no signs of co-production that could be transformed to robust collaboration with industry. And our "success case", the collaboration with Herrgårds Woman Association was totally scorned. As one of the highly esteemed professors in the expert committee in affect exclaimed, not as a question, but in a condescending tone: "I cannot see what these housewives have to do with innovation".

In 2010 the hegemony of neoliberalism and new public management control had come full circle and now also clearly included the academic system, at least if we can judge from the Knowledge Foundation and its academic experts. The borders for a "creative class" and innovation had been distinctly drawn. Social innovation and democratic participation did not fit the new academic neoliberal agenda.

There is some Utopian irony in this. I think it is more than a curiosum that at the time of Utopia and democratization of the workplace trade unions had also developed an economic mechanism called "wage-earner funds". It was a profit-sharing system which gave the workers through their trade unions shares and board seats in companies. The shares were accumulated in collective funds. These funds, that grew relatively fast, were by conservative and liberal political parties seen as a socialist revolution of the economy that had to be reversed. And so they did, when they came into power again. In 1992 the wage-earner funds were abolished. The substantial capital that already had been accumulated was transformed into a few well-resourced research funds. The Knowledge Foundation with a focus on knowledge, competence development, and "creative industries" was

one of them. By the way, they also closed down my first time shelter the Swedish Center for Working Life.

Well, Malmö Living Labs never really died. Activities continued in smaller scale for years. In "Making Futures: marginal notes on innovation, design and democracy", a creative commons license book from 2014 published by MIT Press, we made our case. Squashed by neoliberalism and new public management there are still democratic pockets of codesign, civic resistance and utopian visions.

Digital Bauhaus started as an at that time unlikely utopian time shelter at the turn of the century. Today it still exists, and many of the students from the early days now run the place as researchers, teachers and designers. So, you have to ask them if it still is a place and time shelter worth seeking refuge in. (Since 2015 I am only an emeritus, a distant observer from my cottage by the sea. My melancholic shelter from the times it seems.)

So, what do you think about my time-places Utopia and Digital Bauhaus? Are they worth visiting again? In that case and despite all their qualities and merits, I hope I have also communicated that they are not really solid shelters for safe retreat.

Looking forward, what I can observe, from the work by my younger colleagues at our Digital Bauhaus do today, is that they are still concerned with codesign, but now more clearly related to climate emergency and/or non-western knowledge regimes exploring ways to live well with one another as well as with other critters including artificial ones. And when I flip through the new "International Handbook of Contemporary Participatory Design" I see similar concerns including a re-politicising of design, more-than-human entanglements and decolonising of hegemonic western knowledge regimes; a codesign "that supports local and global trajectories towards sustainable and transitional futures". I guess you have similar concerns. My worries are that this might have to take place in darker times than the times of Utopia and Digital Bauhaus, a new era of capitalism characterized liberal democracies transformed into populist, far-right,

libertarian, illiberal or even fascist, autocracies. This threat to democratic design is not only an American dilemma, but a real threat also in many countries in Europe. And still there must be hope. One is reminded of the words that the revolutionary Anatoli Gramsci in the late twenties wrote from the cell where he was imprisoned by the fascists. "Pessimism of the intellect. Optimism of the will". This optimism also echoes the final words of a Bauhaus manifesto from the same dark times: "But we exist! We have the will! We are producing!" I think we will have to revisit these times, not for time shelters, but strategies of resistance.

Yours from my melancholic post-utopian time shelter by the sea,

P

P.S. In defense of melancholy. In an interview in 2017 the author of "Time Shelter" Georgi Gospodinov was asked what the advantage of being a melancholic could be. He answered: "Melancholic people are also more hesitant humans. Neither Putin nor Trump is a hesitating man, and I am afraid of that kind of people, who react violently and are of the conviction that they can solve everything. In this very frail world it is better with slow and cautious melancholics than passionate extremists."

"INTERMEZZO" (December 07, 2024)

Dear X,

Yesterday evening I met with my golf and book club. We are six men of the 68 generation. Now all retired since many years. We meet at the golf club every week, where we for a couple of hours suspend the darkness in the world and the infirmities of old age. It is our kindergarten where we passionately play our games as if we were young again. You might find us morally dubious and maybe even pathetic. But this is what we love to do together, despite our "revolutionary" background. Besides playing golf, we also read and discuss some four books a year. The books we choose to read are often about aging men and what life has learned the protagonist about love and work and other existential issues. The last book we read was "The Parisian" by Isabella Hammad, a colonial background to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the difficulty of growing up across oriental and occidental culture. Before we read "Lessons" by Ian McEvan, about growing up in post-war England and the conflict between professional life and family. Another great book that we have read about similar issues, especially the difficulty of coping with age related loss of creativity is "Tritonus" (not translated to English) by Kjell Westö, one of the finest contemporary authors who write novels in Nordic prose. Another book along the same lines, that we have been reading, is "Baumgartner" that Paul Auster wrote as he was dying, a lamenting book about an old professor's loss of love and memory. But not all books we read and discuss are about old men. "The Visionaries" by Wolfram Eilenberger tells for example the story of philosophers Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil, Simone Beauvoir and Ayn Rand as young women in the dark times before and during WWII. (I will come back to them in later letters.)

This time we have been reading "Intermezzo" by Irish "romance" author Sally Rooney. Foremost about young people, maybe your age. Not our typical reading, but favorable reviews made us curious about this Taylor Swift of contemporary literature. The epigraph to the book reads: "Aren't you feeling grief now, but aren't you now playing chess?" I recall the quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein's "Philosophical Investigations". My favourite philosopher

(besides Marx) from the time when I was a young codesign researcher and wrote a PhD thesis on design, computers and work. Reading on in "Intermezzo" it turns out that the epigraph is not a minor nod to the philosopher but directs us towards a thorough investigation of human and non-human relations in the language-games we play with one another.

So, my reading of "Intermezzo" together with my golf mates is the background for this letter. An "intermezzo" if you like or more pretentious a deliberately designed language-game across time, genre and generations.

By the way, "intermezzo" has at least two different meanings.

In music it can be a way to halt for contemplation between related parts, like after the dancing and before the bitter end in Cavalleria Rusticana, the opera by Mascagni. This letter is such an intermezzo in the sense that it is not per se about computing [x] crises, but about design language-games that may make mutual understanding possible, or at least to make it possible for the sheep and the lions of a crisis (from global to local and private) to participate in a way that makes sense to all involved even if there is no shared understanding. The Marx in me protests, but some way we also must invent games of reconciliation. Wittgenstein meets Weil and Arendt.

"Intermezzo" is also a move in a game of chess. It is an unexpected move. With Wittgenstein we could say that the player follows the rules but does so creatively and in a totally unforeseen way. A real design move if you like, especially if everyone afterwards agrees that this is the way to play.

In Rooney's "Intermezzo" the language-games the characters play with one another are about grief and love, and maybe we can say about truth. Ivan, the young talented chess player (probably on the autism spectrum, just as Wittgenstein was by the way) and his ten-year older brother Peter who is the opposite, a socially most talented human-rights barrister (with some drug problems). They mourn the death of their father each in his own way and become almost deadly enemies. The other main characters are their fiancées Sylvia, Margaret and Naomi, with whom they are also involved in

complicated and interwoven language-games. I will not say more about the book now, but there is a kind of spoiler towards the end of this letter.

Back to my thesis from the eighties where an unorthodox reading of Wittgenstein's language-games play an important role. You could maybe say that where Rooney makes literature out of his language-game philosophy I tried to make design theory.

In short (probably too short): Wittgenstein suggests that we live in relational language-games where the meaning of a word is its use in that practice. Language-games, as the games we play as children, are social activities. That is our "form of life". We learn a new language-game through its "family resemblance" with language-games we already know in practice.

Wittgenstein says: "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him" because we do not share "form of life". But who shares form of life? Do designers and those people once reductively and domesticating called "users". No and yes. The suggested resolution in the thesis, an interpretation that may have made the philosopher turn in his grave, is the explicit design of a third artificial language-game that has family resemblance both with that of designers and that of "users", design as a play of intertwined language-games.

Here is an example from the Utopia project, our skill-based and work-oriented approach to newspaper technology. Two language-games met, that of the skilled typographers and that of us "designers" (computer scientists, industrial designers, systems developer etc). The first game had words like knife, page ground, body text, galley, logo, halftone, frame and spread. It is for example about mastering practices of page-making, including how to handle the knife when making up the page in paste-up technology. For a skilled typographer the meaning of these words is their use in that practice. But even if we as designers learned all these words, we did not understand that practice. And vice versa, our language-games as designers, aiming at designing "tools for skilled work", included words for systems design like flowcharts, object-oriented programming and prototyping as well as for then new digital devices like mouse, graphic display and laser printer. Words that were most meaningful in our language-games, but literally nonsensical

to the typographers. We did not share form of life! As good willing designers we learned this the hard way. The resolution of the crisis came in the form of cardboard mock-ups, partly functional prototypes, scenarios and different design games (not excluding joint visits to exemplary sites). In parenthesis, I have been told that the cardboard box on which we printed: "Desktop Laser Printer" has a fame of its own in the design theory literature. But our new designed language-games, which we labelled "design-by-doing" and "design-by-playing", were not about those design artefact per se, but about collaboratively creating and playing a design language-game that had a family resemblance with both those of designers and those of typographers, that could help bridge our different forms of life. The participation in these design language-games, more than forty years ago, has been the most rewarding experience in my whole professional career. This includes the great friendship I otherwise would not have made with "revolutionary" typographers like Gunnar, Malte, Bjarne and Bernt. I know, not many women there, but those were the days when most skilled typographer and union activist were men. Fortunately, the times they are a-changin'. And here is a confession, at that time, when I was the age of the characters in "Intermezzo", I also had my share of passionate and complicated language-games of love that were part of being a young design researcher. However, this is not a love letter and as the then young Wittgenstein wrote in "Tractatus", his doctoral dissertation, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." Rooney might with her writing have proven him wrong. Or maybe not. The young Wittgenstein did in "Tractatus" not refer to the language-games of love, but to the limits of logic and description.

So, to the spoiler. In the last chapter of "Intermezzo" Ivan competes in an Irish chess championship and ends up winning the whole tournament. But that is not the point here. Outside the hall Peter and Margaret incidentally meet for the first time. Peter, to say the least, is very sceptical of Ivan's fiancé, but that changes as he meets her. We can say that a new (design) language-game centred around Margaret has been established. She becomes the "boundary object", as we later learned to say, binding the

different language-games of the brothers together, almost as far as to mutual understanding, or at least to activities that made sense to both. With their loved ones the earlier hostile brothers even plan a joint Christmas dinner. A maybe not realistic ending you may say, but unlike in chess you cannot win alone. True for both the language-games of love and of design, and may I add of golf?

But here is maybe also another lesson for codesign from the idealising ending of the book. The happy ending is a construction by Rooney, just as the conflicts and crises earlier in the book are. The ending might not be the most likely one, but if this was codesign, and not literature, it could be seen as a scenario worth working towards. A scenario we need in dark times.

In the letter to my American friends after the 2016 election in USA I referred to our common interest in exploring Nordic noir crime fiction and how the genre could be used as a societal and political critique. A major example was the many police stories by Henning Mankell, another male author from the 68 generation, who wrote about inspector Wallander. We follow this anti-hero in crime case after crime case investigating the dark sides of contemporary capitalism and colonialism as well as he can, given all kinds of messy relations in his private life. In the later books he becomes more melancholic as his body and private life is in a state of dissolution which in a way parallels how the welfare state is threatened to fall apart in a neoliberal world full of xenophobia, racism and misogyny. Melancholic or not, his last words, uttered almost twenty years ago, are not without hope and come with a strong appeal to stand up for democracy as we play along in our language-games.

For a white man my age it is not difficult to identify with the Nordic melancholy of Mankell's anti-hero Kurt Wallander the way the world has changed, but also with what it is still worth struggling for, maintain and develop.

The existential language-games Rooney's young characters play with one another in contemporary late capitalist Ireland is not without glimmers of hope, but maybe more in a temperament of loss and grief than of

melancholy. I imagine it might be possible for you to identify with them and their challenges in life as they play along.

Mankell vs. Rooney. Here is an idea for a new language-game formed to bridge the gap between generations, a language-game that has family resemblance both with the language-games of Mankell's Nordic crime noir fiction and the language-games of Rooney's romance noir. The troubled man, inspector Wallander, meets with the also in their own way troubled young Irish crowd from "Intermezzo" to address the global crime against nature as well as the withering away of our democracies under the current state of capitalism. Is this a worthwhile design challenge? Actually, I think the performative actions by Extinction Rebellion might be a prototype to start from. What do you think?

I end this intermezzo with an anecdote. It may be a bit out of context, but it is about language-games across generations. It takes place in my home in Stockholm the year after the first Århus conference. My oldest daughter is three years old, and the ambitious father tries to teach her how to play chess. The pieces that she favours are not surprisingly the Queen and the King, whom she renames Princess and Prince. However, the moves seem tedious and limited to her, and the chessboard constraining. Not many moves into the game she changes the rules. This is not war. It is a love story where the Princess and the Prince together escape from the boredom of the chessboard and moves away and make a new home on the mantelpiece in the room. I do not remember my next move, but obviously we were playing different language-games. However, as Wittgenstein points out, we can change the rules as we play along. Actually, this is fundamental to the games we play in codesign. Furthermore, it is not necessary that we mutually understand each other's game as long as it is meaningful for each of us to keep on playing.

Looking forward to your next move. I guess I move the white men.

/p

P.S. All said above is of course also relevant for the games I play together with my golf mates on course and off course. It is to some extent about

winning or rather playing a game of golf as good as you can, winning or not, and success is more about sharing stories and having a good time together as we play along. But then again there are other ways to play the game. The USA president-elect is a most dedicated and not bad golf player who given his age could fit in our group. However, as other malign narcissists he is always the winner. No matter violating the rules of the game when found necessary or with all means disavowing a second-rate performance. He wins and the others are losers. He is the greatest. Early on in his professional career he learned the lesson that to win "you have to go for the man, not for the ball". To lie, deny, intimidate and threat become important moves in the game. That is a very different language-game of golf from the ones we play. As mentioned, Wittgenstein suggests that if a lion could speak, we could not understand him, because we do not share form of life. A minor problem in golf. Who cares? But from January 20, the American people and the rest of us will have to live with the maybe most powerful man in the world playing language-games in his brutal win, win, win cannot lose way. In this revolutionary situation the codesign suggestion of the construction of shared design-language games to increase mutual understanding and joint exploration seem just a bit too naïve. What are the options? To go for the man or to go for the ball? For the sake of democracy, I think we should go for the ball, but that may also require that we in-between break the rules, e.g. through actions of civil obedience, and create new parallel games e.g. around alternative independent internets and collaborative media. Seeking support from revolutionary thinkers from even darker times may make us see the situation clearer.

"PEACE ON EARTH" (December 24, 2024)

Dear X,

I am in our cottage, where my American friends once were my guests. Now with children and grandchildren having a felicitous family feast escaping the pandemonium of the world.

According to the Christmas gospel a child was born in Bethlehem, and he would bring peace on earth. It happened two millennia ago. Today maybe not the most prophetic prediction about the state of the earth and the place of that birth given the systematic mass killing of Palestinians (and in Europe people from Ukraine).

The Scandinavian codesign movement took form during the first years of the nineteen seventies, as collaboration with trade unions in attempts towards democratization of the workplace in the new technological era of the computer. Most of us that participated had never experienced war and did not expect it to be a condition for codesign. Our focus was on democratization, not on peace. War was another agenda, like engaging in solidarity work against US imperialism in Vietnam or the military junta in Chile. Could it have been different?

The first trade union driven codesign experiment in Scandinavia took place at Kongsberg Våpenfabrikk in Norway. Today I find it somewhat paradoxical that this pioneering project on democracy and computers, that we have learned so much from, took place at a weapon factory.

Democratization of computers at the workplace was pioneered, but weapons were produced. Other trade unions took a different approach.

For example, a few years later at another weapon factory, Lucas Aerospace in England, the trade union response to the economic crises and the threat to be laid off was, as I mentioned in an earlier letter, a plan for "alternative production". Under the banner "No to arms production - We want socially useful work" a concrete plan for this transition was detailed. The plan inspired an international transition movement for "Alternative

production" and in 1979 the initiative was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

The early work on computers and democracy in Scandinavia had a parallel in Chile. A peaceful revolution through the ballot box had made socialist Salvador Allende the country's democratically elected president. His minister of finance Fernando Flores brought the excentric cybernetics genius Stafford Beer to Chile to help build the "Cybersyn Project", a computer-based system that in real time could coordinate industrial production from more than 80 companies. Though different from early experiments with computers and democratic socialism and restructuring of the industrial system in Scandinavia this was an interesting early example of computers in reconfiguring the industrial system in a democratic socialist economy. A bloody military coup in 1973 ended the democratic socialist experiment and threw the country into seventeen years of fascist terror. After the coup computer supported coordination of industrial production was soon replaced by neoliberal market mechanisms. Flores was imprisoned and tortured. In prison he studied philosophy. Forced into exile in 1976 he ended up in Silicon Valley where he met with Terry Winograd. Together they wrote "Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation For Design". As mentioned in an earlier letter, a manuscript to that book was very influential for the codesign understanding we were developing in Scandinavia, especially for the Utopia project. Maybe it is also worth mentioning that during the early years of codesign I and my colleagues shared spaces with Chilean trade unionists in exile in Sweden.

So already early on in codesign there were many opportunities to reflect upon war, democracy, computers and design, but maybe we were too focused on our own Utopia, blinded for anything beyond democracy in Scandinavia or Europe?

Early on we could actually have learned more from Silicon Valley. Computer scientist Terry Winograd was the main collaborator when connections between Scandinavian codesigners and human-computer interaction researchers and designers in Silicon Valley were established. Together with anthropologist Lucy Suchman he was one of the founding members of

Computer Scientists for Social Responsibility. For many years an indispensable public voice, as an organization of concerned professionals, promoting responsible use of computer technology. I remember being invited to a meeting during my first visit to Silicon Valley. There was a genuine interest in design, democracy and participation, but the main focus was on critique of computers in warfare.

I guess you know Lucy, or at least her unparalleled contributions to human-computer interaction and codesign. Not only has she, with ethical and political integrity, brought anthropology and science and technology studies to codesign, and hereby contributed to profound rethinking of the field in theory and practice. In parallel she has all the time also been deeply engaged in principal and specific critique of computers in warfare and how precarious human bodies are destroyed, killed, with weapons to which control has been delegated. Her shocking critique of the use of AI, robotics and drones for mass murder in Gaza and Ukraine make me think of "the banality of evil". With "the banality of evil" political philosopher Hannah Arendt meant the mass murderer Adolf Eichmann's incapability to think beyond bureaucratic rules, his lack of empathy with and failure to see the world from the perspective of those whose death he organized. With artificial intelligence the "banality of evil" is reallocated to those humans who thoughtlessly delegate the power to kill to smart machines that cannot think.

Hannah Arendt and her contemporary Simone Weil were both born during the first decade of the last century in Germany and in France. With their Jewish background they both as young women in the dark nineteen thirties had to flee from the Nazis not to be murdered, but that did not prevent them from active resistance. I will return to them and their activism and political thinking in later letters. In this letter I will just zoom in on their deliberations on peace on earth as political action and miracle. I might have misunderstood a lot, but this is in short what I found. Can it help rethink the codesign agenda?

They were both well read in ancient Greek and found great inspiration in the "Iliad", the Western epic poem par excellence. That poem, created several

hundred years before the birth of Christ, attributed to Homer, contemplating the last weeks of the ten-year Greek siege of the city of Troy. Both Arendt and Weil found it a most profound meditation on war.

Weil finishes her meditation "The Iliad, or The Poem of Force" (which I recommend that you read) with these appreciative lines: "But nothing the peoples of Europe have produced is worth the first known poem that appeared among them. Perhaps they will yet rediscover the epic genius, when they learn that there is no refuge from fate, learn not to admire force, not to hate the enemy, nor to scorn the unfortunate. How soon this will happen is another question." The true hero of the war is neither the Greek hero Achilles nor his deadliest enemy the Trojan prince Hector or any other human participating in the war. It is instead what she calls the "force", that power that turns anybody subjected to it into a thing, and in its extreme literally to a corpse. It destroys anybody touched by it, not only the oppressor, but the subjugated as well. "The vanquished is as disgraceful to the victor as the victor to the vanquished". To stay away from the force requires a miracle. The miracle of grace. A transformation of the soul. But that is the only hope in war. There are almost no such situations in the Iliad, but it may happen. Achilles has in rage and vengeance killed Hector and disgraced the corpse, because Hector had earlier killed his best friend. Hector's father, the king of Troy, walks unarmed to Achilles' camp and on his bare knees, willing to give anything, begs Achilles to get the corpse back so he can bury his son. Achilles is in no such mood of empathy, but something happens. He is moved by the old man's grief and comes to see the shared meaninglessness in all the killings. Hence, he lets the father bury his son. That act of grace comes as a miracle. Is it possible for co-design to open for the miracle of grace?

To Arendt, the "Iliad" is the first literary work that clearly recognizes the human value of the defeated. Power comes from people acting together. Violence kills but is rather a sign of powerlessness. To her annihilating war can only end by political action through which the enemies are "reconciled" to a common world. "Reconciliation" is a fundamental political act affirming solidarity with the world as it is despite wrongdoings and

evil. It is not an act of forgiving enemies, but an acceptance of the world as it is also with them in it. In a polis of plurality political actions become the constant and tireless search for the most reasonable and fairest settlements, "of never annihilating but always expanding and extending new treaties". That is, according to Arendt, the only miracle that can save us from destruction. But there are war crimes and crimes against humanity that cannot be "reconciled". In those rare instances the act of reconciliation must turn into a political refusal to reconcile. The case of Adolf Eichmann was to Arendt one such instance. What may the role of codesign be in acts of "reconciliation" (or non-reconciliation)?

So where do these meditations on war leave codesign? Without peace, there is no democracy, and without civic public engagement, there is no peace. So, it seems only natural for us collective designers to join forces with the peace movement. Certainly, this must be a humble act. Most of us know much too little about peace-making activities before, during, and after actual violent war. At least I do. But local civic engagements across interests and borders, even in agonistic contexts, are an area where codesign theories and practices may contribute. Maybe we could, inspired by Arendt and Weil, form a new utopian vision for codesign where "the banality of evil" is met by the "grace" of participation and design, and annihilating violence is met by collaborative acts of "reconciliation". But as in the early days of codesign, this has to be concrete and specific. In Sweden, where I live, it could mean aligning with the work of the 135-year-old peace organization "Svenska Freds". Just as in the early days of codesign when we aligned with the work of trade unions. This could for example mean engaging with initiatives towards transforming the Swedish weapon industry into socially useful production (like the efforts of the Lucas Aerospace workers in England in the seventies), supporting civic democracy projects in Russia, or reinforcing local cross-border peace initiatives between people from Israel and Palestine.

I finish this letter on peace on earth with Arendt's concept of "natality". It is a miracle just as the birth of Jesus from Nazareth, though for her a secular one that belong to every human being. In "The Human Condition"

she wrote: "The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new [people] and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope." As I understand it, natality is the miracle that makes us able to design and create new things as well as to come up with innovative resolutions to political conflicts. Hence, natality is also the ultimate protection against war and repressive regimes that try to make political action impossible. Natality is at the core of codesign for democracy as well as for peace.

It seems inappropriate to end the letter to you with a wish for a "Merry Christmas", but I let a Cristian have the last word. According to Weil "we live in a world where people can expect miracles only from themselves".

Yours,

P

P.S. A melancholy note. If it takes a miracle to make "peace on earth", how many miracles do we then need for the ultimate challenge of making "peace with earth"? But we believe in miracles, don't we?

"MORBID SYMPTOMS" (January 20, 2025)

Dear X,

Drill Baby drill, goodbye green deal and Paris accord. Watch out immigrants. The military is coming to take you away. Have fear political enemies and queer people. Your time is out. Watch out Panama and Greenland. America needs your territory. Thus spoke the great avenger saved by God to make America great again. His entourage of tech right elite and MAGA populists happily singing and dancing, having a great day at the coronation. One of them is the only European head of state attending the celebration, the Italian prime minister, leader of a populist far-right party and once openly declared neo-fascist. One would expect that she easily recognized the right arm gesture, for historical reasons forbidden in her country, from the biggest sponsor of the party, the oligarch, techno-feudalist and the president's "first buddy", as he saluted the crowd.

With him, in first row, in front of the coming ministers, he was positioned together with other major platform capitalist entrepreneurs (Amazon, Meta, Open AI, TikTok and others). These new oligarchs had in advance shown their loyalty by donating multimillion dollars contributions to get this spot at the coronation.

I guess you as I followed the spectacle. All over the world we could follow it in detail, second by second, in real time through old and new media. But what did we really see? It is as if the Italian "collective intellectual" Anatoli Gramsci, imprisoned by the fascists, from the darkness of his cell, in 1930 saw the same "morbid symptoms" as we were watching:

"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

If these "morbid symptoms" from the coronation, where autocratic leadership and libertarian capitalist freedom is replacing hopes of public engagement, democratic participation and genuine co-production, the dark

reality of computing [x] crises for the coming years, how can the new then be born?

/P

P.S. And did you notice how the "queen" and the "first princess" were dressed for the coronation, especially their hats? I might be wrong, but I see a wink to the style and glamour of Jackie Kennedy and Audrey Hepburn. A tribute to the fifties and early sixties when the times were great (and women were real women)?

"FIRES OF FREEDOM" (February 13, 2025)

Dear X,

Today is December 13, in the old calendar the darkest day of the year. To us up here in the North the tradition bids that Santa Lucia (Saint Lucy), dressed in white and with light in her hair, accompanied by singing children literally brings hope of a brighter tomorrow. And this year there is also singing, far more east and south, in the streets of Damascus and Seoul. In Syria the ruthless dictator family for more than half a century has been overthrown and in South Korea members of parliament and the people have with great courage stopped a coups d'état and banned the ultraconservative president. These are certainly glimmers of democratic hope in dark times when the authoritarian leadership of Russia and Israel only intensify their war crimes against Palestinians and the people in Ukraine.

The Cristian martyr Lucia from Syracuse literally lived in dark times. Before she was beheaded, the legend has it that she was tortured by eye-gouging. But here I want to return to other dark times, 1933-1943, and to four other women, Hannah, Simone, Simone and Ayn. We meet them as young women, maybe your age X, in Wolfram Eilenberger's "The Visionaries: Arendt, Beauvoir, Rand, Weil, and the Power of Philosophy in Dark Times". This letter is not the place for a review of that outstanding book, which German title literally translates as "The Fires of Freedom", a better depiction of how they each in their own way burned for freedom in the maybe darkest time in European history. If you haven't read it, I really recommend that you do.

Here I will allow myself the literary freedom to "invite" these remarkable four women and you to participate in two thought experiments. First, what if they, as their young selves, had been invited to participate in the first Aarhus conference in 1975. How would they have contributed? Second, imagine that they were invited to give a keynote at the 2025 conference. What would they say to us given their philosophies of freedom developed over the years? Needless to say, my thought experiments linking codesign

and the Aarhus conferences to the “fires of freedom” make no justice to the richness of Eilenberger’s book, nor to the extraordinary lives and philosophies of these women. But wouldn’t it be great if they were here?

Experiment 1 (Århus conference 1975).

Let me start with Ayn Rand. Having fled from the Soviet Union and having seen her father’s business being collectivised she hated communism and all forms of socialism. As a refugee in USA, not able to get her family out of the Soviet Union, she was an individualist, loner and survivor painfully struggling to make it as a writer in Hollywood. Codesign would to her seem grotesque. She would absolutely not come to the 1975 conference.

The same would be the case with the young de Beauvoir. During the darkest times in France she was still living an “existentialist” life exploring the limits, not least sexually, to her own pleasurable freedom without much consideration of the comfort of other women and men, or for that sake of politics.

Simone Weil was the opposite to both. Critical Marxist, from a well-educated Jewish family, she helped communists flee from the Nazis. As trade union activist she proletarianized herself to factory work (not successfully), with the purpose to live and understand the social, economic and political conditions of the working class. She participated in the Spanish civil war on the side of the anarchists against the fascists (and injured herself). She even housed Trotsky when he was undercover in Paris, while at the same time openly confronting his politics. She would come to the 1975 conference, finding codesign and democracy worth fighting for in the new era of computing, but she would also accuse the rest of us for not being radical and revolutionary enough in our commitment and lifestyle. I imagine it would be like sending Greta Thunberg back in time.

Finally, I think Hannah Arendt would also accept the invitation. Born in a Jewish family, student and lover to philosopher and later Nazi sympathiser Martin Heidegger (later married first to a Zionist and later a Marxist), already philosopher in her own right, with a doctoral thesis on St Augustine’s concepts of love. Imprisoned by Gestapo for surveying

antisemite activities, managed to escape and flee to France, again imprisoned and managed to flee, finally stateless ending up in USA with her Marxist husband. During the darkest years an organizer within the Zionist movement to help people escape the Nazi tyranny, but always an independent thinker and activist. Exactly what the young Arendt would have said at the 1975 conference I do not know (what she critically did say the last years before she died in 1975 e.g. about the Vietnamese war or the state of Israel is another matter). However, from her work as organizer and activist to service refugees and other persecuted people, and from her heritage from Heideggerian thinking, we might conjure that she would be supportive of active resistance to attempts to control and subordinate workers by the use computers. But she would probably have a more critical view on modern technology as such than the rest of us at that time.

Experiment 2 (Århus conference 2025).

But let's move on to the second thought experiment, an invitation to the four women as keynote speakers at the 2025 conference on computing [x] crisis. Now with the difference that they could draw upon their lifelong experience as critical philosophers and outstanding writers.

Computing [objectivism] crisis.

Ayn Rand would not be the most popular keynote speaker at the conference. She would arrive in triumph as the great avenger. The crisis is over. The West, especially with the recent victory in the USA, has turned away from collectivism, altruism, and the embracement of mediocracy. Now is the time for unbound neoliberalism and her own version of capitalism, objectivism as she illogically names this far-right libertarian ideology based on ethical egoism, rational self-interest, and the deeds of entrepreneurial supermen. With special reference to the conference theme, she dismisses codesign, founded in ideas of democratic socialism and a strong welfare state, as a stupid utopian vision that now must be replaced by real greatness.

She is pleased that the president of USA has acknowledged how inspired he has been by her ideas, and she supports him, but he is not really her kind

of superman. He does not have the greatness. Her hero is his sidekick Elon Musk. He is the incarnation of Howard Roark from her 1949 success novel "The Fountainhead". Roark is a visionary architect, a genius, that will create something extraordinary for humankind. The problem is all kind of mediocracy and collectivism, rules and regulations that constrains his efforts. When she found out that Musk was not at all the ordinary right libertarian hippie that she despises, but an extraordinary talented and visionary entrepreneur that wanted to create something really great, she decided to re-write the "Fountainhead" with him as the hero. The vision of her hero is to create a new home for humankind on the planet Mars (or at least an escape for the chosen few). Like a Henry Ford he first finds ways to mass-produce the electric car. On the way he has to scarp the trade unions at all his factories. In the name of freedom of expression he takes over a world leading media platform and with AI and special algorithms transform it to his own megaphone that can be heard all over the globe. Rand is a bit in doubt whether this is really great or just necessary. But she adores the satellites and the rockets his entrepreneurial genius creates. Mars is within reach, but to get there he must also first exterminate the counterproductive collectivist altruism in the state administration which threatens entrepreneurial greatness. This means among other things firing the public servants engaged in all kinds of aid organisations or working with diversity, equity, and inclusion. Will he succeed?

In the earlier version of the "Fountainhead" the hero was betrayed by the collectivist mediocracy and decided to literally blow his masterpiece to pieces not to have it contaminated by dilettantes. Will Musk do the same if forced to? And who will his mediocre enemies be? The MAGA people, the liberal "elite" or a revitalised collectivist left? As for the new ending I leave you in suspense, and your guess is as good as mine.

Computing [otherness] crisis.

The invitation to Simone de Beauvoir may have been problematic for the organizers. Given rumours of grooming and sexual assaults of younger women in her early life should she be "cancelled" despite her outstanding theoretical contributions to feminism. The resolution was to instead invite

a young scholar to talk about her groundbreaking work "The Second Sex" from 1949. They would talk about the importance of "The Second Sex" not as a Utopia, but as a method for critically analysing the conditions and power hierarchies and structures constructing "otherness" such as gender and race in society. As for strategies and tactics derived from this analysis, I guess their talk would span from broad issues such as "decolonisation" to specific tactics such as "cancelling" and "deplatforming". And it would be really interesting to listen to their analysis of the Trump administration's misogyny and xenophobia with "The second sex" in their hands, even if de Beauvoir cannot be used as a manual for action.

Moving on more specifically to codesign I believe it would be considered not revolutionary enough. It still is founded on the white western man. And yes, let's also face my blindness. Not blinded by torture as Lucia from Syracuse, but by privileges as western, white, well-educated, cisgender, old man. I understand that my universalistic "we" comes from a privileged position, a specific form of life and particular language-games, to invoke Wittgenstein again, and hence that listening might be more important than speaking. But then again might it not be worth designing a third language-game that make sense across all our diverse "otherness". Or is it just my blind faith?

It just struck me. Maybe my "penfriend" from ten years ago can be of help here. When we first met, we had both read "The principle of hope" by Ernst Bloch and shared an interest in his utopian thinking with its hopeful "not yet". She was deeply engaged in Utopian feminism, and we talked about how a fusion with Scandinavian codesign might vitalize both. She referred to contemporary feminist philosophers. To Erin McKenna and her understanding of Utopia as "multiple possible futures-in-process". To Seyla Benhabib arguing for an "actual dialogue situation in which moral agents communicate with one another" including both traditional justice ethics and feminist care ethics, and based on "principles, institutions, and procedures to enable articulation of the voice of 'others'". I do not know where she has taken this today, but is it not here an embryo for codesign

as a language-game where multiple "others" can meet, if not to understand each other, so at least in meaningful participation? Wrong again?

Computing [grace] crisis.

I am not sure Simone Weil would accept the invitation. Either she would be physically too weak, or if not, she would have gone somewhere where people were really suffering and where her presence might give some comfort to them. And the expenditure for travel and accommodation could be better spent for other causes. However, Utopian as it may be, her "spiritual" or "ethical" philosophy based in her experience from earlier dark times seem ever more relevant to our times and the theme of the conference. Hence, it was decided to invite a generation X designer, researcher and activist to give the talk. Deeply influenced by her work, not least in his doctoral thesis "Design and Grace", he was chosen as the messenger.

The main message I imagine would be a design for openings of grace, design as actively not doing what you are able to do, where design action is decoupled from intentional change and passivity from resignation. Below I introduce some of the concepts for this kind of design, but it is very brief and should rather be read as headwords that will be explained during the talk.

Design cannot create grace, but maybe openings for grace. This act of design requires "attention" and "decreation" regarding both designer and what is being designed. Attention does not mean seeking something, but waiting to be ready to receive that which come to you, a kind of active passivity. The practice of attention is suspended between doing and receiving. On this practice Weil writes that "the capacity to pay attention to an afflicted person is something very rare, very difficult; it is nearly a miracle". "Decreation" is not destruction of something, but a creative withdrawal, a supplication. It is made possible by a radical dislocation where the 'I' itself is said to be unmade. In terms of codesign for grace we could maybe say that it becomes an activity of attention to the afflicted from a decreated designer. Is this possible?

Our generation X "Weil"-designer might give examples of strategies from his own practice. One such strategy is the "Odysseus pact", self-binding to avoid doing what you desire but want to refrain from. Another example could be "placebos", where a violent or wounding interaction is replaced by more playful collaboration. He will explain "design for grace", his own experiments as well as the influence from Simone Weil much better in his talk. There he will also expand the design for grace approach to include all kind of critters, not only humans. It might surprise you, but I know, that in his talk he will even have a Simone Weil take on AI! You must wait until then for that revelation. But to make her ideas more concrete I guess he will exemplify with the story of her own "parachuting front-line nurses" design proposal.

Weil put forward the proposal when in exile in England in her last year 1943. She had arrived in London to join the resistance and general de Gaulle's Free French. Her health was not the best, since among other things she was starving, refusing to eat more than the tiny food rations the French soldiers and occupied civilians got. Her assignment was to help plan the transition to a free France after the war. Instead, she came up with the proposal to parashot a few committed women to the front-line of the battlefield. She would be one of them. They would act as nurses, to help wounded soldiers, but their main obligation would be moral, "with a maternal solicitude" combined with a "courage not inflated by the impulse to kill" they would comfort the wounded and the dying. They would show that you can be active in the battlefield without surrender to killing. This would have the strongest effect for the French soldiers, but even German soldiers might see that in warfare courageous humanistic moral principles can succeed over murderous ones.

The design proposal was to Weil's big disappointment totally rejected. De Gaulle thought it was insane and in no way operational. They would all be killed. But the proposal also compellingly suggests how to design for grace through decreation and attention. A true Utopian design!

Computing [acting/thinking] crisis.

"Philosophy is a solitary business, and it seems only natural that the need for it arises in times of transition when men no longer rely on the stability of the world and their role in it, and when the question concerning the general conditions of human life, which as such are properly coeval with the appearance of man on earth, gain an uncommon poignancy. Hegel may have been right: 'The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk.'"

Hannah Arendt was in Denmark in 1975, the same year as the first Århus conference. The reflection at that time about thinking in dark times is taken from her acceptance speech for the Sonning Prize. I guess it would be maybe even more appropriate for a keynote at the 2025 Århus conference. Maybe she could, as a matter of convenience, repeat her 1975 speech in extenso. But then again it is half a century ago, and most of her work has been on *vita activa* not *vita contemplativa*. So, I guess the organizers should ask her to talk about both action and thinking in dark times and how that relate to the theme of the conference. I am sure she would come up with something much more interesting and surprising than what is asked, but here are some suggestions for questions and clarifications.

Codesign. In your writings you distinguish between three types of human activity: labour, work and action. With your vocabulary design is work, an activity in which we make art, artifacts, infrastructures and institutions that are durable over time and bind us together. Design is worldmaking. But it is not the private toil of labour nor public political action. If so, what is the mistake we do in codesign when we try to join the three forms of human activity together, grounding our codesign experiments in everyday social activities and at the same time trying to give the design process a form that opens for political action?

Democracy. You are equally critical to socialism and liberalism when it comes to democracy, politics and freedom. The one for grounding political action in materialism and the social, and the other for subordinating it under the market and private property rights. Neither put political

freedom first. Instead, your idea of democracy is inspired by the ancient Greek polis, in which free citizens participate to act for the common good (without private interests). At the same time, you insist that the condition for democracy is plurality. Humans are all different and have different visions. In acting politically, they make promises, but might be proven wrong, hence the possibility of being forgiven is essential. You are critical of the party system and in favour of the socialist idea of a "council system" with direct participation. You are even in favour of civil disobedience. The Scandinavian codesign tradition has for the last fifty years had a strong focus on direct worker/citizen participation and over the years also related to citizen assemblies and other forms of public direct participation, and at times also to civil disobedience. In many ways this seems to be in line with your political Utopia, with your thoughts on democratic action, but here within a vision of "democratic socialism". Where, if so, do you think we go wrong politically with our Utopia?

Revolution. Whereas most people would think of the French revolution as the archetype for freedom, you favour the American revolution, politically favouring rights over bread. Only the American revolution resulted in a constitution which created a public realm with many publics and political freedom guaranteed for all. As you also have expressed this was only in principle and that that freedom has ever so often been transgressed. So, what are your thoughts on the new 2025 Trump-Musk leadership in the USA. Is it a counterrevolution? How do you judge the new space for public speak and action? Mr Trump talks about a revolution of common sense. In a way it sounds like something you could have said, so what is your reaction to his language of revolution?

To continue the issue of language and speech. You have vividly argued for the importance of a free press and warned for the totalitarian disaster of mass propaganda. In this perspective how do you judge the transformation of Elon Musk's ubiquitous platform X? You might have been in favour of it as a platform for public freedom of expression, but has it become a new form of megaphone for his and his masters voice and in that case what does that mean for freedom and democracy?

Then there is Trump the liar. To you lies are not alien to politics. As mentioned before, when we act politically, we make promises in good faith. But we might be proven wrong. After all we tell stories, hence the importance of the possibility of forgiveness. However, in your analysis of totalitarian political systems you find an element being "the consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth" and that the effect of this constant public lying is not that the lies are being believed, but "rather that nobody believes anything any longer". Consequently, a people "is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and judge". How far is this Dystopia from a true account of the situation in USA today?

Artificial Intelligence vs. thinking. You have in your writings been warning about the risks with modern technology including computers, not least how scientific language, despite all its merits, tends to shrink the space for free public political action. Is it right that the risk you see is not primarily becoming slaves to the machines, but to a specific form of technical or algorithmic thinking?

I see the risk that Hannah Arendt would find the above questions unoriginal and tell a totally different story, but that is the advantage of engaging with a philosopher who "thinks without a banister".

This became a longer letter than intended. Different as they are, it is easy to get caught up with these four Minervas, extraordinary goddesses of wisdom, and their fires of freedom. As for their wise old owl let's hope it can lead us out of the darkness and towards a brighter Utopia.

As you can see from the beginning of this letter I started to write it two months ago, on the darkest day of the year, when Santa Lucia here up in the North comes with light in her hair to literally bring hope of a brighter tomorrow. On that day we also could notice glimmers of democratic hope in Damascus and in Seoul, but no signs of the war crimes against Palestinians and the people from Ukraine to cease. When I finish this letter today there is two hours more of daylight, but is the world a brighter place? After two months there is still hope in Syria and in South Korea, but otherwise it is

still dark times despite a short ceasefire in Gaza and measures for peace negotiations concerning the future of Ukraine. But where one would hope for "grace" and real "reconciliation" in the spirit of Weil and Arendt, there are no signs of such miracles. The new leader of the world negotiates directly with the oppressors on how to divide the territory of those subjugated, including measures of ethnical cleansing. If Trump the liar makes anything go, true or not, there seem to be more to the tragedy. Maybe some of the explanation can be found Hannah Arendt's contemporary, the Nazi professor Carl Schmitt and his political philosophy. They shared concerns about the fragility of democracy and its laws and regulations, but where Arendt wanted to give more power to the public, Schmitt sided with the Sovereign. Not that I think Trump ever read Schmitt, as Arendt carefully did, but he acts politically as if he had understood Schmitt's message that in politics the Sovereign does not deal with true or false, or with good or bad, but with enemies and friends. That is the sinister "art of the deal" when the new Sovereign attempts to make America great again, at home and abroad.

So, what happened with the request in the first letter for better language if the democratic socialist revolution in the era of the computer was going to succeed. Well, I guess the quest is unresolved. But with inspiration from Arendt and Weil, I suggest that English, that now has taken the violent form of "making America great again", could be replaced by languages, or should I with Wittgenstein say language-games, of "grace" and "reconciliation". Maybe not the most obvious conclusion for an old Marxist, but I feel in good company with Arendt and Weil who knew their Marx well, and it rests on their conviction that power comes from acting together and that violence is a sign of weakness, and that in the end "the force" is damaging not only the oppressed but also the oppressor.

I can hear that this sounds more melancholic than hopeful, as if the dark thirties show up again. "We live in a world where people can expect miracles only from themselves", Weil wrote. That may be so, but while waiting for the miracles to come there is some comfort in Arendt's thesis that power

emerges wherever people act together. So, there is hope, "fires of freedom", revolutionary or not.

Codesign emerged out of visions of democratic freedom for the industrial worker in the era of the computer, but where does it make most sense today? Should we, inspired by Weil's plan to parachoot nurses to the frontline to give comfort and moral support to the wounded and dying, find similar missions for codesign? I opt for less heroic undertakings, maybe as democratic fire brigades or guerillas fighting for peace in dark times of war and autocracy? "There is a crack in everything" Leonard Cohen sang on the dark album "The Future" from the early nineties.

"Ah, the wars they will be fought again
The holy dove, she will be caught again
Bought and sold, and bought again
The dove is never free
Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in"

With its glimmer of hope the song echoes Brecht's appeal to sing in dark times. Yes, we must be singing, but now in less utopian languages at least without "perfect offerings".

/P

"NEWS FROM UTOPIA" (February 19, 2025)

Dear X,

This is my eight, and for now, last letter to you. It is neither a letter of resignation nor of parting. Deadline for the conference is approaching. It is as simple as that, and I know, there are many, too many, loose threads to join in this last letter. So instead of trying to do that I will invite you to think about how we may write about codesign, computing and crisis in more or less utopian ways. Here I have tried the epistolary form (despite neither mastering the format nor the language). So, no doubt there is room for improvements!

In 1890 William Morris wrote "News from Nowhere", about a Utopian socialist society with common ownership and democratic control of the means of production. The protagonist falls asleep after a boring socialist meeting and wake up in 2090 in this dream civilization.

Morris was also a pioneer in the Arts and Craft movement, a forerunner to modern design. Our Utopia from the nineteen eighties with its focus on "quality of work and product" and "tools for skilled work" certainly echoes Morris' socialist visions of work in "News from nowhere" reported back from two hundred years into the future. Could we write similar reports back-casting from the eleventh Aarhus conference celebrating one hundred years and from the next Aarhus conference in ten years.

Given our dark times it would be tempting to project an even darker future. In this we could learn from master writers like Maragaret Atwood and Philip Roth. In "The Handmades Tale", set around 2005, USA has become the misogynous totalitarian Republic of Gilead. Atwood points out that everything that take place in Gilead already had happened in the world when she wrote the book back in 1985. In "The Plot Against America" from 2004 Roth tells a counterfactual story. His own growing up as a Jewish kid in America, but a USA where President Franklin D Roosevelt in 1940 was defeated by the national hero, "America first", fascist sympathizer Charles Lindbergh. It did not happen, but how do we read that story today?

Then again, we may need more hopeful and less dystopian visions. But how to avoid that they become boring? Simone Weil wrote: "Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvellous, intoxicating."

So, what kind of "News from Nowhere" would you write from the 2035 Århus conference? Darker or brighter? Dystopian or Utopian? Are we in the new thirties already beyond the climate tipping point or is there still hope for a future for humankind within "planetary boundaries"? Are the new thirties more like the last dark thirties in the West or has there been a democratic turn back towards less autocratic societies? Maybe the dominance of West and the white man has already been replaced by a new utopian or dystopian world order. What has happened with AI? "Tools for skilled work" or weapon of mass destruction of whole civilisations? Are there still collective designers and what kind of democratic design experiments do they participate in? Revolutions?

Who besides yourself do you picture as participants in that Århus conference ten years from now? I will be 87 so my participation is less likely. I better be quiet. I remember a panel of young researchers at the end of the third Århus conference in 1995. Already then, they were complaining about us "old" participants. If our influence did not diminish the next conference would be about "Computers in wheelchairs". Well, they may have been right. Only four decades and conferences later. Since this is probably already at least your second conference you as well better watch out for the young ones. Every generation have their story.

Moving on to the eleventh Aarhus conference and fifty years from now. In 2075 your old you might be there, just as I hope to be at the sixth conference celebrating the first fifty years with you. Well, I will for obvious reasons not be attending the eleventh conference. Hence, I look forward to you already now envisioning a "News from Nowhere" report from the 2075 conference contemplating one hundred years of codesign in the era of the computer. What stories will you tell? I guess you will not repeat Morris completed socialist Utopia, but rather something more unfinished that is continually "codesigned" in an open process with special attention to the

voice of the "other". In the "Intermezzo" letter I suggested that something socially and politically interesting could come out of a merger of Nordic crime noir (Henning Mankell) with romance noir (Sally Rooney). But can you do that? Maybe it would be better with something inspired by Donna Haraway's science fiction Camille stories from "Staying with the Trouble" (2016). There we follow five generations of Camilles (human and non-human) from 2025 until 2425 living in Communities of Compost. Unfortunately, you only have one hundred years starting 1975 for your speculative fabulations. Maybe your ideas are completely different, but if you want to play with me, below I offer the beginning of a story that you may continue as you please. Maybe you rather want to begin in medias res, in the dark now. Fine with me, as long as you play along.

"Dear participants (or should I say selected delegates). Dear humans and non-humans. Welcome to the eleventh congress of CPSR and to our centenary celebration. For fifty years we were only the decennial Århus conference. Then we decided to continue as a movement based on the participative idea of a workers' council. We came from many communities: In the beginning Human-Computer Interaction and Participatory Design, and later Design for Social Innovation, Science and Technology Studies, Media Studies, etc. Only lately have non-human actors been invited to participate. CPSR (Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility), the name of our council and congress we adopted, as gesture of recognition, from our American colleagues who back in the early nineteen eighties organised all kind of "computer professionals" to, with "social responsibility", critically stand up for democracy and peace as the new technology became ubiquitous.

The fact that we at all can meet here in Aarhus this week and have our eleventh congress is nothing less than a miracle given the many deep crises there have been, especially since the political and military dark turn fifty years ago and with few signs of bringing global heating under control. But here we are as a sign of the power of acting together.

It is only fifteen years until 2090, the year from which William Morris' in "News from Nowhere" reported back to 1890 on a socialist

Utopia that had come through. How far from that vision are we today, and do we even want to go there? During the coming week we have many critical issues to deal with but let me first remind you about how it all began.

The first participants, one hundred years ago, actually lived in a kind of welfare state, almost a Utopia of democratic socialism. Though some of them thought that a revolution of sort was required. The language of this revolution was not violence, but one of participation on all levels of society. But how did the new thing called the computer fit into this Utopia? That was the challenge socially, technically and politically. Led by the computer science professor K, offspring of a man with a traveling puppet theatre and himself a science fiction enthusiast, a group of young activists, his disciples as it were, set out to deal with that challenge. Armed with Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" they began with the workplace ... (and here over to you)

Enough from me. Looking forward to listening to you and your thoughts. Hopefully in Århus.

Yours from Utopia,

P

"PLAYLIST" (February 20 and May 20, 2025)

Dear X,

This is not as maybe expected a list of references or yet another letter to you, but a playlist accompanying the eight earlier letters. Since I "submitted" them to the conference less than two days ago things have become even darker for us here in Europe with now self-proclaimed "king" Trump as "peacemaker". I will not make any further comments on that sad subject, but instead revisit the earlier letters with a playlist. Maybe this list can be a way into them and the matters contemplated. The list is not at all my favourite playlist, but musical associations I made rereading the letters.

"Singing in dark times" (November 6, 2024)

I have since I was a young man been an admirer of Leonard Cohen's songs, not least the lyrics. Hence, a fitting choice for this letter on singing in dark times could well have been "Leaving the Table" from "You want it Darker", the album he made as he was dying. Instead, I have opted for "The Who" and their rebellious "My Generation" from the sixties. Maybe it fits your generation as well?

"Time shelter" (November 13, 2024):

Here I am indecisive. It could be "Melancholy Man" by the "Moody Blues". There are also two Dylan options: "The Times they Are A-Changin'" or "Shelter from the Storm". I cannot decide.

"My utopian places" (November 20, 2024)

The easy way-out could have been to choose something from the bands "Utopia" or "Bauhaus". But I don't really have a relation to them. So instead, my choice is "Community of Hope" by PJ Harvey. The dark side of Utopia and Bauhaus, if you like.

"Intermezzo" (December 7, 2024)

Since it appears in the letter, I guess it must be the "Intermezzo" from the opera "Cavalleria Rusticana" by Pietro Mascagni. I am not an experienced

listener to classical music, but I remember that this was a rare piece I found really beautiful when I was young.

"Peace on earth" (December 24, 2024)

There must be a Christmas carol. I have chosen "Peace on Earth" from a 1977 album with Bing Crosby and a young David Bowie! Miracles are often indicated in the letter, so I supplement Crosby and Bowie with the "Jackson Sisters" and their 1976 hit "I believe in miracles", even if it wasn't "peace on earth" that was their message.

"Morbid symptoms" (January 20, 2025)

I could, as the king himself did, have chosen "America is Beautiful" as sung by country singer Carrie Underwood at his coronation. But no. I rather go for his strong critic Bruce Springsteen and "Born in the U.S.A.". Then let's face it: it must be a soundtrack of dictatorship. Wagner comes to my mind. He was loved by a dictator from an earlier dark time. Whether it would be appreciated by the new king or not I opt for the opera "Rienzi", a proto-fascist story.

"Fires of freedom" (February 13, 2025)

The letter opens with children singing "Santa Lucia" bringing a lighter tomorrow. It is a must, and it should be carolled in Swedish. I think "Chariots of Fire" by Vangelis also may be a good match with references to spiritual issues, Blake's poem and the film. Leonard Cohen's anthem from the dark album "The Future", suggests that "There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in". It encapsulates the hope there is across the entire letter.

"News from Utopia" (February 19, 2025)

"More News from Nowhere" by Nick Cave & Bad Seeds is my last pick. It clearly references the 1890 "News from Nowhere" by William Morris, along with the Iliad and the Odessey by Homer, but this is Nick Cave, personal and mythological, not that easy to grasp. A great storyteller.

"Call to action" (May 20, 2025)

"Joe Hill" as sung by Joan Baez is my pick for calling to action in dark times. We need to organize to resist the attacks on all we treasure as researchers, workers, citizens and human beings. For this Joe Hill represents a great American tradition with Scandinavian links worth following.

You may come up with completely different playlists. Let's listen, compare and discuss. We might even learn something from one another on the matters of concern in the letters.

Hope to "hear" from you,

P

"CALL TO ACTION" (May 20, 2025)

Dear conference organizers, dear participants. This is a letter calling you to action. Maybe it is also a wakeup call for all of us at the conference.

Since the last letter was written two months ago the world has not become a brighter place for codesign and computing when it comes to fundamental crises such as war, democracy, inequality or climate emergency, and each of these issues demand calls to action. In this perspective it may seem sheer navel-gazing to focus a call to action on the existential threat to the (critical) codesign researcher. No doubt this has been a privileged academic position, not least in relation to computing, and in little need of support compared to other codesign practices, participants and issues. In earlier letters I have been grumbling about financial cuts related to a neoliberal agenda and new public management, but this is after all on a totally different scale than what is now happening under the Trump administration. We must resist the attack on academic freedom, especially on the critical researcher, and everything that codesign research stands for from critical thinking and activism to diversity, equity, inclusion and close collaboration with NGO's. We might disagree on research paradigms and methods, and on what counts as scientific "truth", but I believe we share the conviction that "truth seeking" requires a careful reflective critical approach free from external coercion. Integrity and possibly also a moral standpoint.

"Utopia where workers craft new technology. Today Scandinavia, tomorrow maybe the rest of the world." An appreciative American academic view from the nineteen eighties on the future, but that is not really what happened as we know. A present-day paraphrase may read "Academia where critical researchers are silenced. Today USA, tomorrow maybe the rest of the world". We must not let this happen.

I suggest that the Aarhus conference on computing [x] crisis with our institutions initiate and mobilize the strongest possible support for critical research in the field and for our colleagues under siege. I do not have a draft for this call to action, the call has to be worked out at the

conference, but the idea is not to plunder US universities and progressive environments around the world of their excellent researchers (as seems to be the de facto European approach), but for example to offer extended collaboration, exchange programs, moral and financial support, and when found necessary a "safe space". Such manifestations would be in line with the very ethos of the Aarhus conferences and honour the memory of its first chair, Turing Price winner Kristen Nygaard, who paved the way for fifty years of Scandinavia-USA critical research collaboration on computing and democracy.

Conference organizers and participants make your voice and support heard! Call to action!

/P