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Utopian Epistles on Dissent, Disagreement, and Disillusionment

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Abstract

This Situated Action proposes the building of a correspondence archive, initiated by Pelle Ehn, and now expanded towards the PDC community. In this proposal, we turn from the archive's current focus on peace, dialogue, and coexistence towards a generational turn that considers the need for expressing and making space for dissent, disagreement, and disillusionment. In a world in disarray, we turn to unpacking our own participation in systems of oppression and rethinking the role of participatory design in those same mechanisms. This action encompasses the making and starting of an archive in honour of the conversations that need to happen between us to build the dialogue and coexistence we dream of in our utopias.

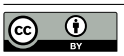
CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Participatory design**.

Keywords

correspondence, co-design, letters

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1 Introduction

Milan will be the location for a second iteration of a reading of letters: a slow exchange between researchers and others interested in discussing the past, present, and future of participatory design. In this situated action, we continue a tradition started in 2025 by Pelle Ehn, with an emphasis this time on co-designing an archive for these epistolary exchanges. In this short article, we first introduce the first iteration of this event, followed by a description of where we collectively seek to take this initiative.

1.1 The First Letter Exchange in Aarhus 2025: "Utopian Epistles: Computing [Codesign] Crises"

At the Sixth Aarhus Decennial Conference (AAR '25, August 2025), Pelle Ehn presented his essay *"Utopian Epistles: Computing [Codesign] Crises."* The piece took the form of ten letters [5], each addressed to younger generations of design researchers and practitioners. Written in an epistolary style, the letters reflected on fifty years of participatory design and co-design, while projecting forward to future crises and possibilities.

The epistles explored enduring tensions in design, such as memory versus nostalgia, labour versus capital, collaboration versus conflict, and democracy versus autocracy. Ehn adopted a reflective and personal voice, situating design within broader political and social struggles. A recurring phrase that resonated publicly was his reference to "dark times," coupled with a call for new (less utopian)

"songs" and stronger collectives to sustain democratic and critical alternatives in design.

Ehn invited five researchers from different generations and career stages to respond publicly to the letters. The invitation came in the form of a proposal to participate in a joint performance at the Aarhus conference, in which each response letter was read out loud to the conference attendees and paired with a song. In this way, the letters came to function as a passing of the baton between well-established researchers and new voices in the field, and the epistolary style opened for responses beyond the academic framings usually applied to the topics at hand. The invited group comprised Shaowen Bardzell, Sanna Marttila, Erik Sandelin, Ida Larsen-Ledet, and Mafalda Gamboa. Their response letters ranged from deeply personal and touching to amusing and provocative. During the performance, a conference workshop [15] provided a material response in the form of a small embroidery kit for attendants to work on.

The situated action at PDC in Milan 2026 is the next iteration of the Utopian Epistles. This present action continues the thread of dark times, new songs, and stronger collectives, thus picking up on challenging aspects of dealing with such dark times.

1.2 Second Letter Exchange and Situated Action in Milan 2026: "Dissent, Disagreement, and Disillusionment"

Our focus and drive this time is "Dissent, Disagreement, and Disillusionment." We aim to host a space for slow protest and engagement with conflicts of the PD community, as well as asking how participatory design as dissent and protest may have a role in peace-making in the world beyond academia. In this iteration, we seek not to shy away from contentious issues within participatory design, for example, but stay with the trouble by discussing the refusal to engage in a shallow manner with local spaces or communities that may already be in dire need of less labour being pushed upon them. This dilemma of engagement is central to ethical, inclusive, and non-extractivist forms of participation.

Our situated action is grounded in political, decolonial, and pluriversal approaches within PD. We align with Björgvinsson et al.[2], who, drawing on Chantal Mouffe's political theory, challenge consensus-oriented ideals in PD. By foregrounding Mouffe's notion of agonistic pluralism, which rejects consensus as the objective of democratic practice, she positions conflict as a necessary condition of democracy. Building on this perspective, Björgvinsson et al.[2] argue that design spaces should be co-constructed through the articulation of difference and should not be expected to be fully reconciled. Instead, PD efforts should be directed toward creating "publics," where different values, interests, and worldviews can confront and challenge one another, rather than be aligned or harmonised. This agonistic participatory design approach is concerned with amplifying marginal voices, challenging hegemonic positions, and designing collective gatherings that bring together diverse and opposing perspectives around specific issues [2, 4, 10].

Similarly, learning from decolonial and pluriversal perspectives in PD, it seems that attempts to resolve differences or conflicts through consensus risk reintroducing dominant epistemic and ontological logics, thereby marginalising alternative ways of being, knowing, and designing in the world [6, 9, 14, 17]. Working against universalising tendencies and dominant design [1, 3], these approaches call for participatory frames that allow multiple worlds to meet without collapsing into a singular outcome, embracing tension and making collective struggles visible.

Our situated action builds on these perspectives by aiming to co-create and hold a space for difference in thinking, knowing, and designing within PD. Through the use of postcards, we seek both to cultivate a polyphony of voices, which are sometimes conflicting, sometimes attuned, and to create moments of pause for listening to dissent, disagreement, and disillusionment. In doing so, the situated action enacts and performs agonistic world-making, where friction is treated as a condition for critical engagement, collective reflection, and mutual learning.

This situated action thus directly addresses the conference's theme of *Peace, Dialogue, and Coexistence*; both in the content of the letters and in the format of the situated action itself. To move towards peace, dialogue, and coexistence, a space for disagreement and dissent must exist. To work with the tensions and power structures explored in the first set of epistles, we must acknowledge and address the disillusionment that can arise from compromise and from attempts to approach conflict with reconciliation.

We aim to involve the PDC community directly, and we purposefully engage local connections through letter sending rather than momentary in situ exchanges only. This time, we will not only pass the baton among different generations but also more deliberately move across borders, both national and disciplinary boundaries.

With our use of letters, this situated action will draw its strength from the combination of the personal and the public. Although public, the letters leave room for less formal and more personal expression. With this, the utopian epistles will be anchored in participants' own experiences of dissent, disagreement, and disillusionment rather than in scholarly foundations, which we hope will help us transcend disciplinary borders. This anchoring, we hope, will help expose and critique dominant narratives through the counter-narrative of the personal [8]. Letter writing can make the personal "productively usable in ways in which it was not prior to being written down" [8, p. 54] by serving as an act of reflection that transforms how the sender's experience – as a researcher, a citizen, or whatever role(s) they find themselves in as they write their letter – is interpreted and framed. Crucially, letters as a genre are familiar to a much broader public than academic texts would be, and so it makes it possible to extend an invitation to people outside academia, hopefully starting with citizens in Milan.

2 Before Milan: Letter Sending

This situated action has two phases; before and after Milan. To continue the dialogue in written form, we have chosen this time to spread the invitation more broadly, but in a shorter invitation format. We will use postcards as the medium for invitations to contribute to the situated action; sent through regular postal service delivery[1].

[1]Curiously, during the development of this situated action, Denmark discontinued its state-run postal service. Anecdotally, one of the authors of this submission has now turned to a parcel delivery service to send documents. More on this can be found here: https://group.postnord.com/news-media/2025/postnord-to-discontinue-handling-mail-in-denmark-in-2026–focusing-exclusively-on-parcels/

Physical mail has a slowness that is conducive to reflection and to paying attention to others' contributions (letters), and using the postal system to maintain networks and communicate dissent is an established aesthetic genre, e.g. [7, 11, 16]. The physical medium is also an act of dissent against digital surveillance capitalism. Physical letters — postcards, in this case — enable us to communicate outside of for-profit digital platforms that can easily be subject to political control, and where use can be conceived as a form of indirect consent to the agendas of the institutions that own and operate those platforms. Taking the letters off the digital network is also an act of dissent against people's words being harvested for artificial intelligence.

Using postcards is also a way for us to more easily include a broader group of people without putting out a completely open call. To this end, 100 postcards will be sent from the existing set of corresponding people (each of us will send a set of 10 or 20 postcards). We use the materiality of the postcard to invite others into the conversation. Out of the answers we get, we will contact 4–5 of the responding authors and invite them to write full letters and be part of the situated action in Milan. Along with the postcards sent to 100 recipients, a short instruction on the format for the engagement will be provided.

To allow for a more local connection, a number of these postcards will be sent to local actors in Milan, including the venue where the action itself will happen.

3 Situated Action in Milan: Reading and Archive Building

The performance will be similar to the one that took place in Aarhus 2025, pairing music with letter readings. Milan will be the first attempt at continuing this tradition: Our suggestion is to broaden the situated actions, including a new set of participants who will read and enact their own letters.

As a backdrop to this performance, we will create an exhibition of the postcards that we have received. These postcards and letters will be exhibited at the conference venue in a manner that allows the audience to read them independently. To this end, we will create a physical letter archive that can travel with us from Scandinavia (where it is currently located) to Italy.

3.1 The Archive

The letters and postcards produced during the situated action will be added to a growing body of work. The situated action is therefore the building and opening of the Archive; it involves both the writing, the performing, and the curation and decision of how the archive is accessed, transported, and contributed to. This action is the first attempt at evolving a somewhat ephemeral performance in Aarhus towards a more permanent and expandable artefact.

In the process of this travel to Milan, the archive will be co-designed amongst the organisers, in a manner that will open to further redesign at the site of the conference. The emerging conditions and contingencies of this travel will become part of the history of the archive's design. This situated action is a negotiation on what characteristics of the archive we (those who contribute) want to invest in; treating it as a work in progress and as a collectively owned cultural object. For example, issues of accessibility, openness, and levels of digital dimensions need to be negotiated. Importantly, questions of what meta-data could be applied to this archive is part of what we want to discuss with others in Milan.

For this co-creation process, we turn to the political act of the archive and anarchive as a form of participation (see e.g. [12, 13]). Therefore, the archive is not yet fully defined, as it needs to be co-created with those contributing to it and the forms of correspondence they wish to include. In designing the physical letter archive, we expect to draw on forms from historical and contemporary epistolary storage (trunks, heaps, cabinets) and exchange (stamps, seals).

4 Short Bios

Mafalda Gamboa is a design researcher and PhD student, arguably a specialist on dissent.

Ida Larsen-Ledet is a postdoctoral fellow at University College Cork, where she is exploring a methodology for engaging members of the public in ethnographic co-research.

Sanna Marttila is an associate professor with a research interest in how designers can engage with relationality, commoning, and infrastructures of participation.

Erik Sandelin makes prototypes to instigate and investigate gracious modes of life. He is a postdoctoral fellow in the Data+Feminism Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Shaowen Bardzell is a professor who works at the intersection of feminism, humanistic computing, sustainability, and HCI.

Lone Koefoed Hansen is an associate professor. Her work spans participatory design, speculative design, feminist and posthumanist design, and design fiction. She explores how design practices can engage with political, ecological, and non-human concerns.

Anna Seravalli is an associate professor in (participatory) design engaging with collective action and precarious presents.

Pelle Ehn has for more than half a century been engaged in design research as democratic design experiments.

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