

Becoming Solar: Towards More-Than-Human Understandings of Solar Energy

In this article we examine the experiences of the first and second author who have changed themselves to become newly attuned to the sun, or who have “become solar”. Motivated by calls to approach solar design in novel, less technocratic ways, we reflect on their one-year journey to gain a new relationship with solar energy as an explicitly more-than-human design (MTHD) approach. We argue that their perception of solar energy progressively worked to decentre them as human actors in this new solar-energy arrangement, revealing other nonhuman actors at play, instigating situations of care and attention to those nonhumans and ultimately guiding them towards what it means to be solar. For solar design, we see this approach as creating a new lens for solar designers to draw from. For MTHD, we see this acting as a practical example for designers seeking to begin transforming themselves in their own practice by taking initial steps towards a MTHD approach.

1 INTRODUCTION

Designing from a more-than-human perspective requires designers to radically change themselves. They must open their minds and senses, pay attention differently and discover how to learn in completely new ways. This process takes time and requires mechanisms to propel designers out of their typical experience of the world (e.g. Bell et al. 2005). Taking the time to do this cannot be forced or hastened through solution-oriented design activities. It requires attuning oneself to new spaces, relations and entanglements so as to see and understand from more-than-human viewpoints (Liu et al. 2018).

In this article we examine the experiences of the first and second author who changed themselves to become newly attuned to the sun, or to “become solar”. Motivated by the urgent need to transition to renewable energy sources and calls to approach solar design in novel, less technocratic ways (Nathanson 2021; Smelik et al. 2016; Törnroth 2023; van Aubel 2022), we reflect on their one-year journey to gain a new relationship with solar energy as an explicit more-than-human design (MTHD) approach. MTHD still exists largely in theoretical discourse, so we aim here to offer a practical account of the ways they have attempted to newly understand solar energy for themselves by seeking more embodied and situated ways of experiencing the sun’s light as energy.

They began this exploration by choosing to power their smartphones with portable solar panels in daily life, altering their existing relation to the sun. This led to a new focus on the built everyday environment, which had a transformative effect on them in ways relevant to both MTHD and solar design. We describe, in this new arrangement,

how their perception of solar energy changed and worked to *decentre* them as human actors, an important principle of MTHD discourse. This is demonstrated in the ways that nonhuman actors were newly revealed to them throughout this study, instigating situations of care and synchronicity with nonhumans as well as changing the researchers’ understandings of the technologies around them. This article therefore aims to demonstrate how, by attending to the nonhuman dimensions, researchers can be moved towards an understanding of “becoming solar”, or what it means to become co-constituted with solar energy systems.

Our contribution is twofold. Primarily, this research contributes a practical example for designers seeking to transform practices, demonstrating early stages of two design researchers re-orienting themselves to support an MTHD approach. Secondly, we highlight this more-than-human lens for solar designers to consider in relation to their own practice.

2 KNOWING DIFFERENTLY

We began our design inquiry into solar energy in search of a more-than-human mindset to guide our research. We wondered, *What does it mean to work with nonhumans?* or *What might this look like in practice?* In this way, the outcome of this research is an examination of our early process attempting to explore solar energy from a solar energy viewpoint; a process we later describe as “becoming solar” because of the way it affected the first and second authors as thinking-and-feeling design researchers.

Considering the growing literature on MTHD and posthuman design (e.g. Forlano 2017; Frauenberger 2019;

KEYWORDS

More-Than-Human, Posthuman Design, Noticing, Solar Design, First-Person Research.

LICENSE

CC BY-NC-ND

HOW TO CITE

Mackey, Angella, Monserrat Vallejo de la Guarda, Oscar Tomico, Ron Wakkary, Troy Nachtigall, Martijn de Waal. 2023. “Becoming Solar: Towards More-Than-Human Understandings of Solar Energy.” *Temes de Disseny* 39: 248-269. <https://doi.org/10.46467/TdD39.2023.248-269>

ANGELLA MACKEY
Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS)

MONSERRAT VALLEJO DE LA GUARDA
Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS)

OSCAR TOMICO
Elisava, Barcelona School of Design and Engineering (UVic-UCC)
Eindhoven University of Technology

RON WAKKARY
Simon Fraser University
Eindhoven University of Technology

TROY NACHTIGALL
Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS)
Eindhoven University of Technology

MARTIJN DE WAAL
Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS)

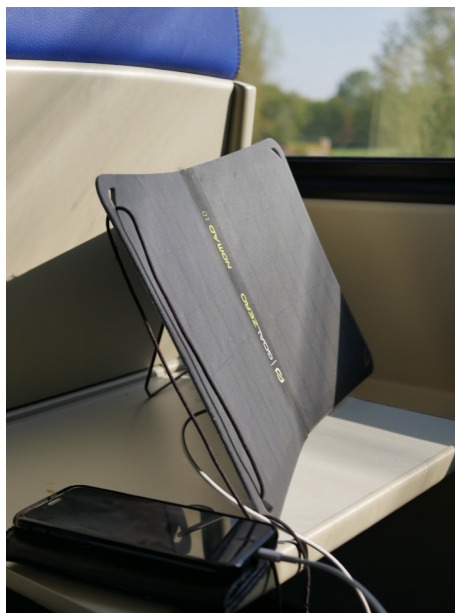


↑ Fig. 1. Becoming solar.

← Fig. 2. Solar panel on a train. Solar panel on a kitchen shelf.

↙ Fig. 3. Our first rudimentary “solar sounder” made with instructions from Ralf Schreiber’s Solar Sound Module (www.ralfschreiber.com/solarsound.html). Behind, three “solar ears” made from recycled solar devices.

↓ Fig. 4. Listening to solar energy with a solar ear. (Image by Cécile Bok, courtesy of The Solar Biennale).



Tarcan et al. 2022; Ulmer 2017; Wakkary 2021), this research draws from certain core concepts. This includes seeing in what ways human-centred design has been problematic for all life on earth, focusing on decentring humans in these processes and widening the scope of design practice to include nonhumans in more participatory roles. In parallel, it helps to see and understand the ways humans are already intimately interconnected with our environments and shaped by the nonhumans around them. It helps to see that a more-than-human mindset involves shedding notions of separateness and superiority over natural and technological worlds. In this way, the first steps for designers and design researchers may be to reveal what we do not see in our environments from a human-centric lens, yet is indeed *there*, and learning to work with what we find in new kinds of design assemblages.

Still, even if these concepts can be understood and accepted, it is quite different to know them on embodied, situated or tacit levels. That is, it is different to begin taking actions as more-than-human designers, so to speak. We must find ways, ourselves, to *think with* (Ulmer 2017) and *design with* (Wakkary 2021) nonhumans. We must re-orient towards more expansive and relational ways of being, which might start with being open to nonhuman ways of knowing (e.g. Liu et al. 2018; Oogjes and Wakkary 2022; Tomico et al. 2023).

Here, it can be important to take on an attitude of curiosity and an assumption of *not-knowing* (Wakkary 2021), to pay attention differently and allow more-than-human experiences to guide us. This requires a particular kind of *trust* in the process, the courage to be comfortable with uncertainty and an openness to naivness. We relate this attitude to Ana Tsing’s (2015) *art of noticing*, which demonstrates how attuning oneself differently reveals unseen complexities of a situation, a perspective being increasingly used in HCI research in MTHD discourse (e.g. Liu et al. 2019; Oogjes and Wakkary 2022; Poikolainen Rosén et al. 2022). We also relate this attitude to Laura Watts’ (2019) *landscape ethnography*, which demonstrates a way of investigating by carefully being and walking in landscapes without presumption.

In *Things We Could Design for More Than Human-Centered Worlds*, Ron Wakkary (2021) unpacks the idea of not knowing, or partial knowing, as starting positions for a posthumanist design approach. Referenced here is Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2017) approach to radically situate oneself with and within a particular more-than-human world in order to re-orient oneself towards “what we take for granted or think is inaccessible” (Wakkary 2021). Wakkary continues, “to not-know things almost require[s] a transmogrification—that is, a surprisingly if not seemingly magical change of who we are, in relation to things and nonhumans”.

While we do not claim to have undergone such a magical change in relation to nonhumans through our one year of research, we do wish to claim a radical shift in our own personal relation to the sun, to solar energy and to other nonhumans. Moreover, these experiences have felt like a series of veils being lifted from our eyes, changing even the things we thought we knew to knowing them differently.

Designing with the Sun is a research project aimed at taking a MTHD approach to support the energy transition towards new energy practices. Initiated in November 2021, we recount here the first year of this project in which the first and second author attempted to re-orient themselves towards nonhuman dimensions of solar energy.

As previously described, we base this research in understandings that a more-than-human approach might include a kind of unlearning and openness to newly relate to nonhumans. We therefore began with an attitude of *not-knowing* solar energy and attempting to understand it through bodily perception and explorative actions in daily life. We engaged in two explorations to experience solar energy in new ways, that of (1) charging our smartphones each day with portable solar panels, and (2) listening to solar energy through “solar ears”. These actions could be considered the beginnings of what Wakkary calls *repertoires* for solar design, or “actions the human designer can take to increase participation of nonhumans in design research practice” (Oogjes and Wakkary 2022).

Accordingly, we used techniques from first-person research in HCI (Desjardins et al. 2021; Lucero et al. 2019), combining autoethnography and autobiographical design (Neustaedter and Sengers 2012) to document and analyse our experiences (see Desjardins and Wakkary 2016; Lucero 2018; Mackey 2021; Tomico et al. 2023). Although the research started as autoethnographic for the first author, a second period of research includes the second author, where the two engage in the approach collaboratively, making a case for *duoethnography*. According to Howell et al. (2021) and Sawyer et al. (2012), with duoethnography the “emphasis is on the dialogical relationship between the lived experiences of the researchers... juxtaposing multiple voices, [they] can reflect on the similarities and differences between their experiences, opening doors for learning”.

Below we describe the two explorations engaged in by the researchers to newly relate to solar energy.

3.1. Charging our smartphones with portable solar panels

For one year the first author charged her smartphone with a portable solar panel while living in the Netherlands. For the second author it was five months. This activity was chosen for its potential to thrust each researcher into an immediate relationship with the sun with regard to their energy use. In short, it forced them to pay attention differently.

The solar panels used were small and light, made for hikers (Figure 2), were durable and waterproof and made to charge smartphones with 2-3 hours of direct sunlight.

3.2. Listening to solar energy

Seven months into using the portable panels, the researchers also began listening to solar energy in their everyday life using devices that made the energy’s strength audible. They did this by building “solar ears” based on the *Solar Sound Module* by Ralf Schreiber (Figures 3 and 4). This

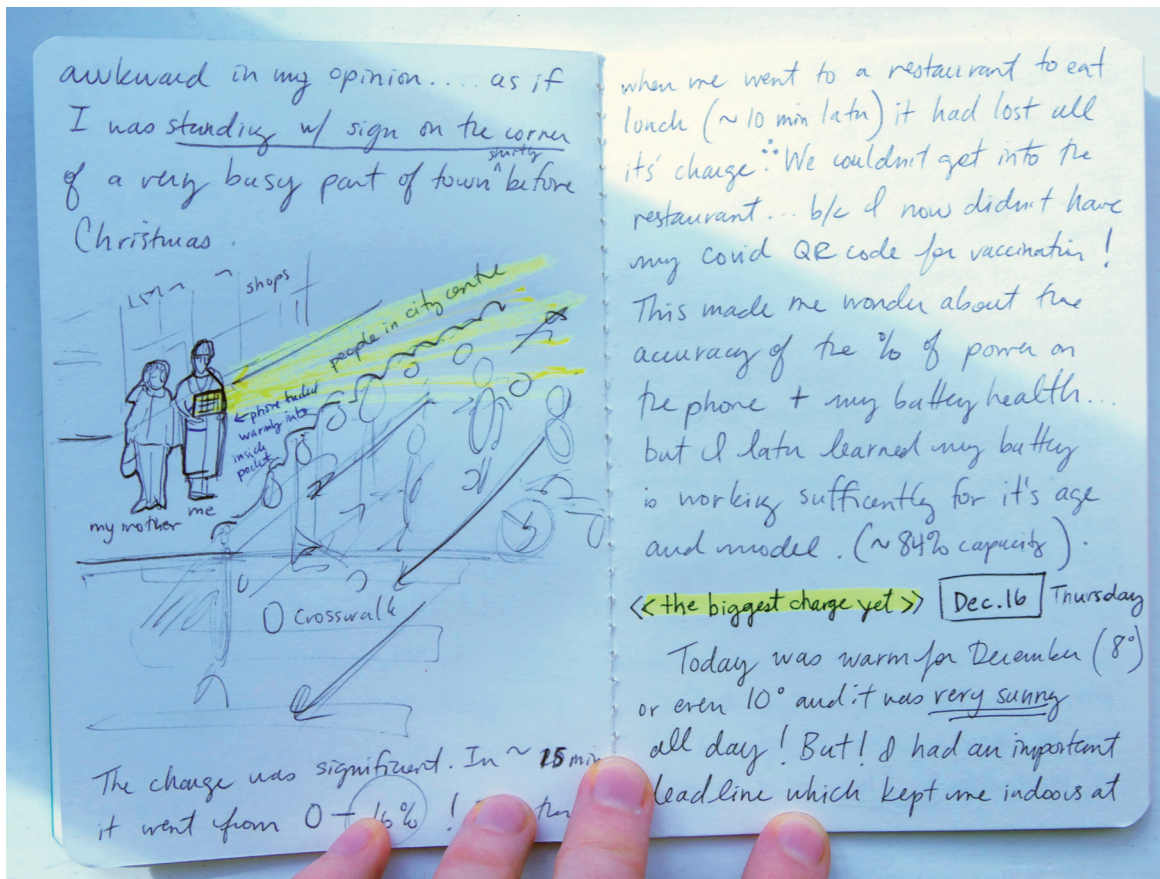


Fig. 5. Excerpt from first author's journal.

activity was chosen as a way to perceive subtler variances in solar energy beyond the typical binary of *enough power* or *not enough power*.

the train, the streets. Still, this one spot—the fantastic rooftop—became the best location to charge on days I worked from home. I would place it there between 11 am to 3 pm, periodically tilting it to face the sun as it moved.

4
 AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNTS
 OF THE FIRST AUTHOR

We now offer the first author's autoethnographic accounts. These accounts have been selected and summarised from her journals (Figure 5). We selected moments that most significantly capture how her thinking and actions became re-oriented towards the solar dimensions of her environment. The accounts are written in the voice of the first author.

4.1. *Bicycling, walking, clouds, windows, angles, rooftops*

My first attempt in November to charge my phone was a failure. I bicycled with the solar panel strung across my torso. I moved it around to face the sun, but collected no energy. The next day I tried hanging it outside my home office window. I got a slight charge. The phone's battery level showed 3% more.

I searched for spots around my home and found a fantastic spot on my rooftop: a flat roof accessible from the second floor. I could place the panel facing south. I let it sit there for several hours and was so happy to have gained a 30% charge. I explored many places to charge my phone: my kitchen shelf (Figure 2), my sons' playroom, my backyard, parks, cafés, classrooms, offices, courtyards, airport gates,

4.2. *Park benches, sitting, cold, body warmth, wind, rocks*

I diligently kept a record of all the places I visited, dates, times, weather and charge percentages I could track in an Excel spreadsheet (Figure 6). Park benches were great places for me to take the panel if I was away from home. In 30 minutes I could get a 20% charge. During the cold months, I needed to keep the phone warm or the battery wouldn't charge. I would put it in my pocket or inside my coat, still tethered to the panel; this sometimes made for awkward sitting positions. I would also weigh the panel down with a found rock to stop the wind from blowing it over.

4.3. *Lunch, buildings, street corners, WhatsApp, Google Maps*

Several times I needed to do something in a timely manner, but my phone had no power. One day, planning lunch with my mother, I needed a "Covid pass" to enter a restaurant, but my phone had died. We were in a shopping area and it was difficult to find sunlight not blocked by buildings. We found a ray of light, and for 20 minutes we stood awkwardly on this busy street corner (Figure 5) with me holding the panel towards the sun.

In February, I became frustrated with how easily my phone would die despite great efforts to collect energy. After fiddling with the phone's settings, I concluded that apps were using the most power, whether I used them or

Mar. 17	15:00	15 %	starting power		HOUSE - rooftop, w/ phone tethered inside
	16:05	29 %	UP (peak)		
	18:09	27 %	ending power	1 %/hr	
Mar. 18			losing power		
Mar. 19	10:45	12 %	starting power		HOUSE - mudroom on chest
	12:00	35 %	ending power	20 %/hr	
	12:41	39 %	starting power		HOUSE - rooftop, w/ phone tethered inside
	13:58	89 %	UP		
	15:05	100 %	ending power	30 %/hr	
Mar. 20	14:57	54 %	starting power		HOUSE - rooftop, w/ phone tethered inside
	15:30	64 %	UP		
	17:50	84 %	ending power		
Mar. 21	≈8:30	62 %	starting power		ON TRAIN - sun shining through window
	≈9:00	52 %	ending power		
	12:21	41 %	starting power		AT WORK - TTH courtyard
	12:30	41 %	nothing	0 %/hr	
	12:34	44 %			
	12:40	48 %	ending power		
	14:45	45 %	starting power		AT WORK - TTH courtyard (blue table)
	14:51	48 %	UP		
	15:04	56 %	UP		
	15:18	63 %	UP		
	15:39	71 %	ending power	30 %/hr	
Mar. 22	10:30	6 %	starting power		AT WORK - through window at MDD studio 1
	11:53	25 %	ending power	15 %/hr	
	12:15	24 %	starting power		AT WORK - KSH courtyard
	13:00	29 %	ending power	4 %/hr	
	15:47	20 %	starting power		STANDING STILL - Holding at Amstel train station
	16:03	29 %	ending power	40 %/hr	

Fig. 6. Excerpt from first author's log of collecting solar energy.

not. WhatsApp was bad. Google Maps, in use, was a ferocious energy thief. So I began rationing energy. I turned off Wi-Fi and data for long periods during the day. I only used the phone for texting, making calls, checking train schedules and occasionally banking. All other activities I had previously used my phone for (reading the news, shopping) were stopped. I also began wearing a watch to tell the time instead of checking it on my phone. In times of extreme energy drought (more than three days) I allowed myself to charge with "wall electricity", although I tried to avoid this.

4.4. *South, flowers, moss, shadows, time, chimneys, sleep, birds, artificial lights*

In my search for solar energy, I began honing the skill of looking at shadows for direction. I learned my house

faced east. I understood why there were more flowers on one side of a bush in my yard and why moss on the trees generally faced south. I learned the south-facing windows and courtyard spots at the university I worked. I began noting where south was in new places whether I needed to charge the phone or not.

In early March, I noticed that at noon my neighbours' chimneys cast shadows perfectly parallel to the roof tiles (Figure 7). I then noticed how they looked in the morning when I woke. I enjoyed this activity of checking the "chimney clocks". But later, when the clocks changed to "summer time", it felt viscerally wrong that the noon shadow was now at a skewed angle.

I stopped closing the blinds at night. I felt a longing to stay connected to the sun and let it shine in on me



Fig. 7. "Chimney clocks".

at morning. I realised that the birds would wake me early rather than the sunrise itself. I started paying more attention to their habits and chirps and how they related to the sun. I noticed magpies regularly resting at the tops of trees around 3 pm.

I became more sensitive to artificial lights at night not only because they kept me awake, but because I now started "seeing" energy in everything around me. They seemed wasteful. I tried not to work on my computer (which I now saw as an energy eater) until the sun was properly up at about 10 am, and wondered if I could possibly extend this to 11 am? In short, I wished to work when the sun works and sleep when the sun sleeps.

5

DUOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNTS OF THE FIRST AND SECOND AUTHOR

We now continue with duoethnographic accounts written in the voice of the first author, with reference to the second author (Monse from now on). Both authors agreed to select these shared and differing experiences with regard to their explorations with solar panels and solar ears.

5.1. House plants, water, cotton, plastic cups, roots, insects, patience

Undeniably, Monse and I both began experiencing our own house plants differently soon after beginning to use the solar panels. This happened for each of us independently, which we discovered through conversation several weeks into our collaboration. We both had recognised our plants as trying to capture solar energy alongside us; their leaves like little solar panels.

For me, this led to a renewed interest in plants. I liked plants before this, but I couldn't keep them alive for long. Once I found myself searching for energy alongside the only plant in my home office, I knew it had wisdom I did not. I began caring for it more attentively and brought several more plants into the space. Their presence was now such that when I felt thirsty, I checked to see if they were thirsty too. I became a caregiver of plants. What struck me most about this new relationship was that the plants were using solar energy to grow themselves, which in turn added oxygen to my environment. On the other hand, I was using the energy to charge a smartphone, which essentially gave nothing to them.

For Monse, noticing her house plants triggered a deeper investigation into their role as teachers of solar energy. She saw them as shaped by the light and wanted to find other ways to observe this, other ways to open a dialogue between herself, plants and solar energy. Her instinct was to begin germinating lentil seeds in cotton, something she did as a child. She placed eight plastic cups with seeds and cotton along her window ledges in her apartment and observed their growth (Figure 8).

She loved watching their roots grow, twist and shape around each other as if each plant was helping the other. Insects were attracted to them. At first, she would



Fig. 8. Germinating lentil seeds in cotton.

crush the insects, but later she tried to observe if they were helping the plants or not. This became a constant personal dilemma for her throughout the months—evaluating the "purpose" of different insects. It led to a new understanding of death and sacrifice for plants in general. She started seeing the plant world in her apartment as a rich, full ecosystem in which she was participating. She began developing a new degree of patience throughout this process, but felt it still wasn't enough. As Monse recounts, "I've noticed the plants are simply working on a different time scale than I am, one that I do not yet fully understand".

5.2. Sounds, sunrise, clouds, Excel sheets, shadows, personal energy, work spaces

In June we built our first rudimentary solar sounders together that made the sun's energy audible. They were delicately attached to breadboards and protected in plastic containers (Figure 3). We placed them in windows in our home workspaces and listened to them over the days and months. This opened up a new dimension for us. Each sounder made a variety of noises, mostly squeals, when the sun's energy was strongest. We learned that on an average sunny day, the rising sun sounded like a low grumble or hiss, progressing to a higher-pitched sound, then a faster, steady squeal. At the end of the day, the sounds became more varied, with tick-ticks and noises that resembled TV static.

To our surprise, the sounds we heard sometimes perfectly correlated with our own personal energy levels. For example, precisely when I was taking steps to wind down from working, my sounder moved from a high to low pitch; or a time when Monse was in an argument with her partner, the sounds rose higher with her growing frustrations. Compared to the spreadsheet log (Figure 6) that documented collected energy, listening to solar energy in this way was immediately more immersive.

Two months later we made eight "solar ears" as more robust, portable versions of the first ones. We could now bring them outside. We made each one differently by varying their components. Some were less sensitive to light; some sounded like cicadas or birds chirping. We discovered that the energy sounded "speckled" when walking under a tree; that the sound of passing clouds resulted in an audible diminish and rise. An overcast day sounded quiet and "static". Most surprising was when we found tiny whispers of solar energy present in shadows, both indoors and outdoors, where we assumed there was none.

6

BECOMING SOLAR

Below we reflect on the ways we, the first and second authors, were changed by the experiences described above. Related to Section 1, where we describe the MTHD concepts motivating us to break with human-centric thinking and re-orient towards nonhuman dimensions, here we aim to examine the small, early steps towards such a shift. We aim to unpack our process of "becoming solar", a process of becoming interconnected with solar nonhumans.

6.1. The world of solar energy opens up

When we began the exercise of charging our smartphones with solar power, our arrangement was human + solar panel + sun + smartphone. Quickly, this arrangement expanded to become human + solar panel + sun + smartphone + clouds, wind, cold, heat, shadows or park benches at different moments. We also became aware of actors not *directly* affecting our ability to collect energy, yet they were participating in solar worlds alongside us. They too, affected us. We began to notice house plants, birds, shadows, insects and moss as they all held new meanings in their relation to the sun and to us. Moreover, we now "saw" energy in the technologies around us, such as artificial lights and computers.

Placing ourselves into these new arrangements had the effect of illuminating an abundance of things around us that also relate to solar energy. In terms of decentring ourselves as humans, this demonstrates the ways that paying attention differently worked to *expand* our previously small assembly of human + nonhumans. We were also able to recognise how we lacked control in many situations, for example, in not always having access to energy or being limited in how we could direct the phone's use of power.

6.2. Caring for nonhumans

In order for the human + solar panel + sun + smartphone assembly to work, we had to be active participants, caring for the solar panel and caring for the phone. For example, in cold weather, the phone needed to be kept warm in a coat pocket, and the panel weighted to protect it from wind, tilted slightly to follow the sun. When moving or sitting with the panel, our bodies were sometimes contorted to achieve the best angle, sometimes for uncomfortable periods of time (Figure 5). Indeed, the level of care involved in holding a panel began to blur the lines between ourselves and it—we sometimes felt like a panel, standing still, facing the sun.

Similarly, as we perceived our solar world expanding, particularly to include plants, we became more attentive towards them. Our relation to plants changed. They were not decorations, but embodiments of ancient solar knowledge. This led us to observe how insects were attracted to them or see death as part of their system of renewal. We both came to understand their ability to cohabitate with non-plants. This completely shifted our understanding of our own human + solar panel assembly, prompting us to question whether what we were doing was suitable for cohabitation with nonhumans or not.

To summarise, by being active participants in this particular arrangement, it meant we actively cared for these particular nonhumans. This led us to uncover what the solar panel and smartphone "needed", which were things we had not previously considered. Furthermore, our expanded understanding of this solar world, which prominently featured house plants, led us to new kinds of care and attention towards them. In terms of decentring ourselves as humans, we see that we felt a new kind of *accountability* for our solar panels, smartphones and house plants, as well as a certain degree of *dependence* on them. We had become entangled, each of our movements tugging on the other.

6.3. Our bodies re-oriented

Entangled together in this new solar world, with this new awareness, we became newly attuned to our environments, newly “solar”. That is, some of the actions we took or things we felt did not occur in any intentional manner insofar as they felt like *instinctive* responses to our environment. These include the ways we wanted to “work when the sun works and sleep when the sun sleeps”, being sensitive to artificial light, no longer using blinds, noting which direction was south and paying attention differently to the activities of birds or growth patterns of flowers.

The solar ears, as an added layer to this re-orientation, deepened our understanding of the spaces we lived in, worked in and visited by allowing us to hear the dynamic nature of solar energy in each space. As energy rose and fell, so too did the sounds we heard. We could hear the sun come up, clouds drift by and uncover energy in shadows. With the solar ears on our window ledge, always there and always humming, we were kept continuously connected when at home. Moreover, they enabled us to newly see ourselves as organisms dependent on the sun, as revealed through the ways their sounds sometimes correlated to our own energy levels.

What we recognise here is that in many ways we became *synchronised* with nonhumans in our new solar world. To the extent that it is possible, in this one year, in this one study, we became solar.

6.4. Technologies understood differently

As “solar people”, or at least as design researchers more synchronised with the sun and the solar-nonhumans here with us, we changed our use of several technologies. In this world, artificial lights are used sparingly, curtains are opened and computers are used between 10 am and 3 pm as a matter of embodied knowing. Time, as numbers on a clock, or a representation of earthly rotation, “felt wrong” after the clocks were changed for daylight saving time, and noon was no longer represented by perfectly horizontal chimney shadows (Figure 7).

Moreover, we could no longer use our smartphones as we once did. They required more energy than was available. In this new solar world, we could use them by selectively enabling data and Wi-Fi, avoiding most apps and withstanding days without any phone use. Certainly, there were sunny periods that made using the phone effortless. But over the entire year, the energy we collected was being rationed *most* of the time, where the phone was used more like a pre-smart phone.

This revelation became a logical understanding at some point, where we *viscerally understood* that the smartphone did not fit the equation of energy availability and energy demand. Our frustrations, then, or the difficulties we encountered, were not with the lack of solar energy, but with the amount of energy required for the phone, and with our inability to fully decide how the device would spend the energy. Moreover, we felt challenged by our inability to opt out of the always-on smartphone system that so defines contemporary life considering our new solar attunement. As it seemed to us, in an embodied way, our smartphones no longer made sense in this arrangement. Our smartphones had not become solar.

7 DISCUSSION

What we have tried to describe, through these first-person and duoethnographic explorations of solar energy, is that these experiences not only changed us in terms of the ways we perceived and understood solar energy, but also in how we understood ourselves as “becoming solar”. Next, we discuss what this might mean for solar design and elaborate further on the idea of becoming *more than*, in MTHD terms.

7.1. Becoming solar for solar design

Becoming solar, for us, has meant *always being interconnected with solar energy*, whether it is there or not, whether we are collecting it or not. We see it as *a way of being* that we hope to take into our practice as we continue to do research for solar design. What this means is we will try to stay attuned to the solar dimensions of our surroundings, learn new ways to “listen” and try to bring novel voices to the discourse of new solar energy practices. But we have also found our interconnectedness to be a delicate situation, easily broken by the solar-blind world around us. When we could not collect energy for weeks, it was surprising how easily we began breaking ties with our new way of being. When contemporary life required us to use smartphones and there was no sun for days, we could plug into the wall and get power with no effort. This ease would nudge us back into practices where energy felt limitless and the sun was irrelevant.

Indeed, at the time of writing this paper, I (the first author) have been experiencing three weeks of a solar energy drought and can feel myself disconnecting from solar life by working on my computer in darker hours or mindlessly using my phone. My solar ears have been barely whispering on my window ledge. Yet this makes sense in early January, several weeks out from the winter solstice, Latin for “sun standing still”. I cannot help but wish the demands of my everyday life would allow me to stand still in these weeks so I can continue to be solar like a hibernating animal. I wish it was seen as reasonable to not use my electronics until solar energy begins moving again. This is all to say that it is an uphill battle to change energy practices on one’s own. What is needed are broader societal strokes to become solar.

In terms of what is possible now, our main take away for solar designers is *to consider the lenses we use to express solar energy as lenses that will affect understandings and uses of it*. As we experienced tracking our energy through an Excel spreadsheet, we felt separated from solar energy with this view. Our records translated what we were experiencing into numbers, places, dates and percentages. If we think of typical energy apps that accompany home solar panels, the same kind of data can be observed. Graphs show users how much energy was extracted and used, at what times and indicate how this can be optimised for economical savings. If the solar field wishes to work with more than economical motivations, as we know it does (van Aubel 2022; van Dongen et al. 2022), then we suggest it would be beneficial to explore lenses that do not constrict understandings of solar to quantitative measures. Based on this early research, we

also suggest further investigation into how plants can act as lenses for understandings of solar energy.

Finally, we suggest that a dependence on batteries for solar-energy storage works against the more embodied understandings of energy that we see as helpful for energy transitions. While we can recognise, from a human-centred perspective, that batteries are necessary for solar energy to be experienced as continuous, we *know* that solar energy is not continuous. Therefore, we question the expectation of uninterrupted energy use, as do others (e.g. De Decker 2018), and would argue for more research into how perceiving our energy sources affects our energy practices. We see batteries as a lens that hides the true nature of solar energy, enabling us to continue feeling separate and unknowing of an energy source.

7.2. Taking the time to become “more than”

As we hope to have shown through this research, this way of placing ourselves in situations to alter our relation to solar energy has progressively had a decentring effect on us as human actors. At the beginning of our explorations, we were concerned with collecting solar energy with great frustration and talk of percentages, locations and techniques for obtaining it. By the end, our concerns had shifted beyond these purely human concerns. We found ourselves conversing with plants and allowing solar energy to guide us into new routines. Everything around us held new meaning, and we became entangled in systems bigger than where we started. This process was not rushed. This process took time. It took time to begin breaking with what we thought we knew about the sun, to unlearn and to re-learn what it means to be solar. Where we landed after one year is still only a glimpse of what we expect becoming solar could truly mean.

We relate this to the metaphor of *horizontality* used by Wakkary (2021), describing the humility required for posthuman design, or “all the resistance to the loss of human privilege, a fall to the ground” before one can begin to design. While we could not claim to have achieved horizontality in this research, we believe we better understand the kinds of mechanisms required for igniting such a path within ourselves. Too often, sustainability concerns in design are framed from the perspective of “awareness” and “behaviour change”. But we see now that more fundamental changes are required that come from within us, where we as designers let ourselves be guided by new understandings of the world around us and let it take the time that it requires. When we can take the time to become something more, something willingly intertwined with nonhumans, we instinctively begin to act with and for them. We then become more than ourselves.

Therefore, for designers or researchers who wish to begin engaging with the more-than-human in their practice, we ask *what can you unlearn?* and *what can you become?*

BIOGRAPHIES

Angella Mackey, PhD
Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS)

Angella Mackey is a researcher at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences in the Civic Interaction Design and Fashion Research & Technology groups, where she also teaches in the Digital Design master’s programme. Mackey holds a doctorate degree from the Eindhoven University of Technology as a Marie Skłodowska-Curie doctoral fellow with ArclnTex ETN. Mackey’s design and research practice has interrogated technologies in relation to bodies in fashion, art, research and commercial contexts, working with first-person research methods to understand our complex relationships to them.

Montserrat Vallejo de la Guarda
Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS)

Monse Vallejo is a designer and researcher at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS), with a background in sustainable textiles and digital design. Her work currently focuses on ways technology and materials can be used to reveal unseen dimensions between people and things, prototyping and experimenting with a variety of approaches.

Oscar Tomico, PhD
Elisava, Barcelona School of Design and Engineering (UVic-UCC);
Eindhoven University of Technology

Oscar Tomico heads the Industrial Design Engineering Bachelor’s Degree at Elisava, co-directs the Design for Emergent Futures Master’s Programme in collaboration with IAAC, and is also an assistant professor at the Department of Industrial Design at Eindhoven University of Technology. His research revolves around 1st Person Perspectives to Research through Design at different scales (bodies, communities and socio-technical systems), ranging from developing embodied ideation techniques for close or on the body applications (e.g. soft wearables), contextualized design interventions to situate design practice in everyday life, exploring the impact of future local, distributed, open and circular socio-technical systems of production or experimenting with cohabitation as a posthuman approach to multi-species design.

Ron Wakkary, PhD
Simon Fraser University;
Eindhoven University of Technology

Ron Wakkary is a Professor in the School of Interactive Arts and Technology at Simon Fraser University, where he is the founder of the Everyday Design Studio (eds.siat.sfu.ca). In addition, he is a professor in Industrial Design at Eindhoven University of Technology in the Netherlands. His research investigates the changing nature of design and human-computer interaction in response to new understandings of human-technology relations and posthumanism. Wakkary is the author of the book *Things We Could Design: For More Than Human-centered Worlds* (MIT Press, 2021).

Troy Nachtigall, PhD
Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS);
Eindhoven University of Technology

Troy Nachtigall is a professor at Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences where he chairs the Fashion Research & Technology group. In their living lab and wearable data studios they look at emerging designerly ways of making and wearing with data on the body. This research is performed with the staff and students of the Amsterdam Fashion Institute and Digital Design Masters. Troy is also a researcher at Eindhoven University of Technology in the Wearable Senses lab of Industrial Design.

Martijn de Waal, PhD
Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS)

Martijn de Waal is a professor in Civic Interaction Design at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. Key publications include *The Platform Society* (Oxford University Press 2019) with José van Dijck and Thomas Poell, *The Hackable City* (Springer 2019), co-edited with Michiel de Lange and *The City as Interface* (NAi010 Publishers 2014).

REFERENCES

- Bell, G., M. Blythe, and P. Sengers. 2005. Making by making strange: Defamiliarization and the design of domestic technologies. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI)*, 12(2): 149-173. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1067860.1067862>
- De Decker, K. 2018, December 13. “Keeping Some of the Lights On: Redefining Energy Security | Demand.” Demand: Dynamics of Energy, Mobility and Demand. <http://www.demand.ac.uk/13/12/2018/keeping-some-of-the-lights-on-redefining-energy-security/>
- de la Bellacasa, M. P. 2017. *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*. University of Minnesota Press

verdadera naturaleza de la energía solar y que nos permite seguir estando alejados del origen de la energía, no conocerlo tanto como podríamos.

7.2. Convertirse en “más que” necesita tiempo

Tal como esperamos haber demostrado a través de nuestra investigación, este modo de colocarnos en situaciones que alteren nuestra relación con la energía solar nos ha descentrado de forma progresiva como agentes humanos. Al inicio de nuestras exploraciones, nos preocupaba y nos frustraba a más no poder el hecho de recolectar la energía solar, al solo hablar de porcentajes, lugares y técnicas para hacerlo. Aun así, al final, nuestras preocupaciones habían ido más allá de estos problemas humanos, y acabamos conversando con las plantas y permitiendo que la energía solar nos condujera hacia nuevas rutinas. El entorno que nos rodeaba adquirió un nuevo significado, y nos entrelazamos con sistemas más grandes que los iniciales. Fue un proceso largo, un proceso que necesitó tiempo. Necesitamos tiempo para empezar a separarnos de lo que creíamos saber sobre el sol, para desaprender y reaprender lo que significa ser solar. El lugar en el que acabamos tras un año de investigación es tan solo un atisbo de lo que esperamos que hacerse solar puede llegar a ser de verdad.

Relacionamos este concepto con la metáfora de la horizontalidad de Wakkary (2021), la cual describe la humildad necesaria para el diseño posthumano, o, en otras palabras, “toda la resistencia a la pérdida del privilegio humano, una caída desde lo alto”, antes de que se pueda empezar a diseñar. Pese a que no podemos afirmar haber alcanzado la horizontalidad durante nuestra investigación, sí que creemos que entendemos mejor los mecanismos necesarios para emprender dicho camino en nuestro interior. Muy a menudo, los problemas de sostenibilidad se enmarcan en la perspectiva de “concienciar” y de “cambiar los hábitos”. Aun así, ahora vemos que los cambios necesarios más fundamentales deben provenir de nuestro interior, donde, como diseñadores, permitimos que se nos guíe hacia una nueva comprensión del mundo que nos rodea y dejamos que tome el tiempo que necesite. Cuando podamos tomarnos ese tiempo para convertirnos en algo más, en algo entrelazado por voluntad propia con los agentes no humanos, actuamos con ellos y para ellos por instinto, nos convertimos en algo más que nosotros mismos.

Por todo ello, a los diseñadores o investigadores que queráis empezar a aplicar un enfoque más que humano a vuestras prácticas, os preguntamos: ¿Qué es lo que podéis desaprender? ¿En qué os podéis convertir?

BIOGRAFÍAS

Angella Mackey, PhD

Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS)

Angella Mackey es una investigadora de la Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, en los grupos de Diseño de Interacción Cívica y de Tecnología e Investigación de la Moda, donde también imparte clases en el máster de Diseño Digital. Mackey se doctoró en la Eindhoven University of Technology con la beca Marie Skłodowska-Curie de la ArclnTex ETN. La práctica de investigación y desarrollo ha interrogado a distintas tecnologías en relación con los cuerpos en los contextos de la moda, el arte, la investigación y el comercio y ha trabajado con métodos de investigación en primera persona para entender las complejas relaciones que establecemos con ellos.

Montserrat Vallejo de la Guarda

Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS)

Monse Vallejo es una diseñadora e investigadora de la Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS), con experiencia previa en tejidos sostenibles y diseño digital. Su trabajo actual se centra en los modos en que se pueden utilizar la tecnología y los materiales para revelar las dimensiones invisibles que existen entre las personas y los objetos, para lo que ha creado prototipos y ha experimentado con una gran variedad de enfoques.

Oscar Tomico, PhD

Elisava, Facultad de Diseño e Ingeniería de Barcelona (UVic-UCC)
Eindhoven University of Technology

Oscar Tomico es jefe de estudios del grado en Ingeniería de Diseño Industrial en Elisava y codirige el máster en Diseño para Futuros Emergentes en colaboración con la IAAC, además de ser profesor adjunto del Departamento de Diseño Industrial de la Eindhoven University of Technology. Su investigación gira en torno a las Perspectivas de Primera Persona en la Investigación a través del Diseño a diferentes escalas (cuerpos, comunidades y sistemas sociotécnicos), como desarrollar técnicas de ideas personificadas para aplicaciones en el cuerpo o cerca de él (por ejemplo, tecnología ponible); llevar a cabo intervenciones de diseño contextualizadas para situar la práctica del diseño en la vida cotidiana; explorar el impacto de los futuros sistemas sociotécnicos de producción

locales, distribuidos, abiertos y circulares; o experimentar con la convivencia como un enfoque posthumano para el diseño multiespecie.

Ron Wakkary, PhD

Simon Fraser University;
Eindhoven University of Technology

Ron Wakkary es profesor de la Facultad de Arte y Tecnología Interactiva de la Simon Fraser University, donde fundó el Everyday Design Studio (eds.siat.sfu.ca). Además, es profesor de Diseño Industrial en la Eindhoven University of Technology, en los Países Bajos. Su investigación trata sobre la naturaleza cambiante del diseño y la interacción persona-ordenador en respuesta a la nueva concepción de las relaciones entre los seres humanos y la tecnología y el posthumanismo. Wakkary es el autor del libro *Things We Could Design: For More Than Human-centered Worlds* (MIT Press, 2021).

Troy Nachtigall, PhD

Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS);
Eindhoven University of Technology

Troy Nachtigall es profesor de la Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, donde encabeza el grupo de Tecnología e Investigación de la Moda. En su *living lab* y estudio de datos de tecnología ponible, investigan métodos de diseño emergentes para fabricar y ponerse tecnología de datos. Dicha investigación se lleva a cabo en conjunto con el profesorado y los alumnos del Amsterdam Fashion Institute y del máster de Diseño Digital. Nachtigall también es investigador en la Eindhoven University of Technology, en el laboratorio de Diseño Industrial de Sentidos Ponibles.

Martijn de Waal, PhD

Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS)

Martijn de Waal es profesor de Diseño de Interacción Cívica en la Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. Algunas de sus publicaciones son *The Platform Society* (Oxford University Press 2019), junto a José van Dijck y Thomas Poell; *The Hackable City* (Springer 2019), coeditada con Michiel de Lange; y *The City as Interface* (NAi010 Publishers 2014).

FIGURAS

Fig. 1. Hacerse solar.

Fig. 2. Panel solar en un tren. Panel solar en una encimera.

Fig. 3. Nuestro primer “aparato sónico solar” rudimentario, hecho a partir de las instrucciones del Módulo Solar Sónico de Ralf Schreiber (www.ralfschreiber.com/solaround.html). Detrás, tres “orejas solares” hechas de dispositivos solares reciclados.

Fig. 4. Escuchando la energía solar con una oreja solar. Imagen de Cécile Bok, cortesía de The Solar Biennale.

Fig. 5. Extracto del diario de la primera autora.

Fig. 6. Extracto del registro de recolección de energía solar de la primera autora.

Fig. 7. “Relojes de chimenea”.

Fig. 8. Semillas de lentejas que germinan en algodón.

REFERENCIAS

Ver listado completo de referencias en la página 257.