

**Material Weight:**  
The Performativity  
of Designed Things  
in the Space of  
Corporate Responsibility

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## **Certificate of Original Authorship**

I, Katrin Ilka Staudinger-Morgan, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy: Design, in the School of Design at the University of Technology Sydney and the School of Art and Design at the University of Wuppertal.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This thesis is the result of a research candidature conducted with the University of Technology Sydney and the University of Wuppertal as part of a collaborative doctoral degree.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is about designed things acting in the context of corporate responsibility (CR). It explores how designed things are mobilised by corporations to address CR issues. This research project was conducted by a designer through an interdisciplinary research project bringing together design, business and the social sciences.

Previous research has explored design in the space of CR. This work predominantly focused on the potential of design to make CR more effective. My project has a different focus. It does not advocate for design in the space of CR but, rather, is interested in how designed things participate in CR activities; it examines the different roles performed by designed things on behalf of the corporation.

The theoretical lens through which questions were framed and data interpreted in this project is Actor-Network Theory (ANT). This interpretive lens allows designed things to be recognised as actors with agency and effects. ANT concepts help to unpack how designed things shape CR activities, and how they are used to address issues of public concern. Equally, designed things operating in this space are shaped by corporate ends. They might be mobilised to smooth relations between the corporation and other actors or to mitigate risk for the corporation. This is complex territory and needs to be considered when looking at designed things acting in this space.

CR reports from Deutsche Post DHL (DPDHL), an internationally operating mail and logistics company, were used as data material. Qualitative data analysis was performed on this material using a combination of discourse analysis and visual methods. Out of this process understandings of how designed things are mobilised in the context of CR emerged. The data also revealed the corporate ends that drive CR.

## Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Arbeit beinhaltet die Untersuchung gestalteter Dinge die im Kontext von Corporate Responsibility (CR) agieren. Es wird erforscht, wie Unternehmen gestaltete Dinge mobilisieren, um CR-Aufgaben anzugehen. Dieses Forschungsprojekt wurde von einer Designerin in einem interdisziplinären Forschungsprojekt durchgeführt, das Design, Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaften zusammenführt.

Forschung, die sich mit Design im Bereich CR befasst, konzentriert sich häufig darauf, CR-Aktivitäten durch Design effektiver zu machen. Das vorliegende Projekt hat einen anderen Schwerpunkt. Es befasst sich nicht mit vorbenannter Problematik, sondern beleuchtet, wie Design CR mitgestaltet; es untersucht die verschiedenen Rollen von gestalteten Dingen, welche vom Unternehmen initiiert wurden.

Der theoretische Ansatz dieses Projektes ist Akteur-Netzwerk Theorie (ANT). Dieser Ansatz hat sowohl die Forschungsfragen, als auch die Dateninterpretation beeinflusst. In ANT werden gestaltete Dinge als Akteure mit Handlungsfähigkeit und Effekten verstanden. Dieser interpretative Ansatz ist hilfreich, um aufzuzeigen wie gestaltete Dinge innerhalb von CR-Aktivitäten agieren, und um besser zu verstehen wie sie mobilisiert werden, um Probleme von öffentlichem Interesse anzugehen. Gleichermäßen werden entworfene Dinge in CR-Aktivitäten im Interesse des Unternehmens genutzt, zum Beispiel, um die Beziehung zwischen Unternehmen und Öffentlichkeit zu verbessern. Darüberhinaus werden sie eingesetzt, um potentielle Risiken für das Unternehmen zu reduzieren. Dieses Spektrum an Einsatzmöglichkeiten macht CR zu einem komplexen Konstrukt, welches berücksichtigt werden muss, wenn man entworfenen Dinge, die in diesem Zusammenhang agieren, analysiert.

Das Datenmaterial für dieses qualitative Forschungsprojekt waren CR-Berichte von Deutsche Post DHL (DPDHL), einem international tätigen Post- und Logistikunternehmen. Dieses Datenmaterial wurde mit einer Kombination aus Diskursanalyse und visuellen Methoden analysiert. Das Resultat dieser Analyse sind Erkenntnisse darüber, wie gestaltete Dinge im Kontext von CR mobilisiert werden. Ein weiteres Ergebnis dieser Analyse ist, dass die Unternehmensziele den Umgang mit CR mitformen.