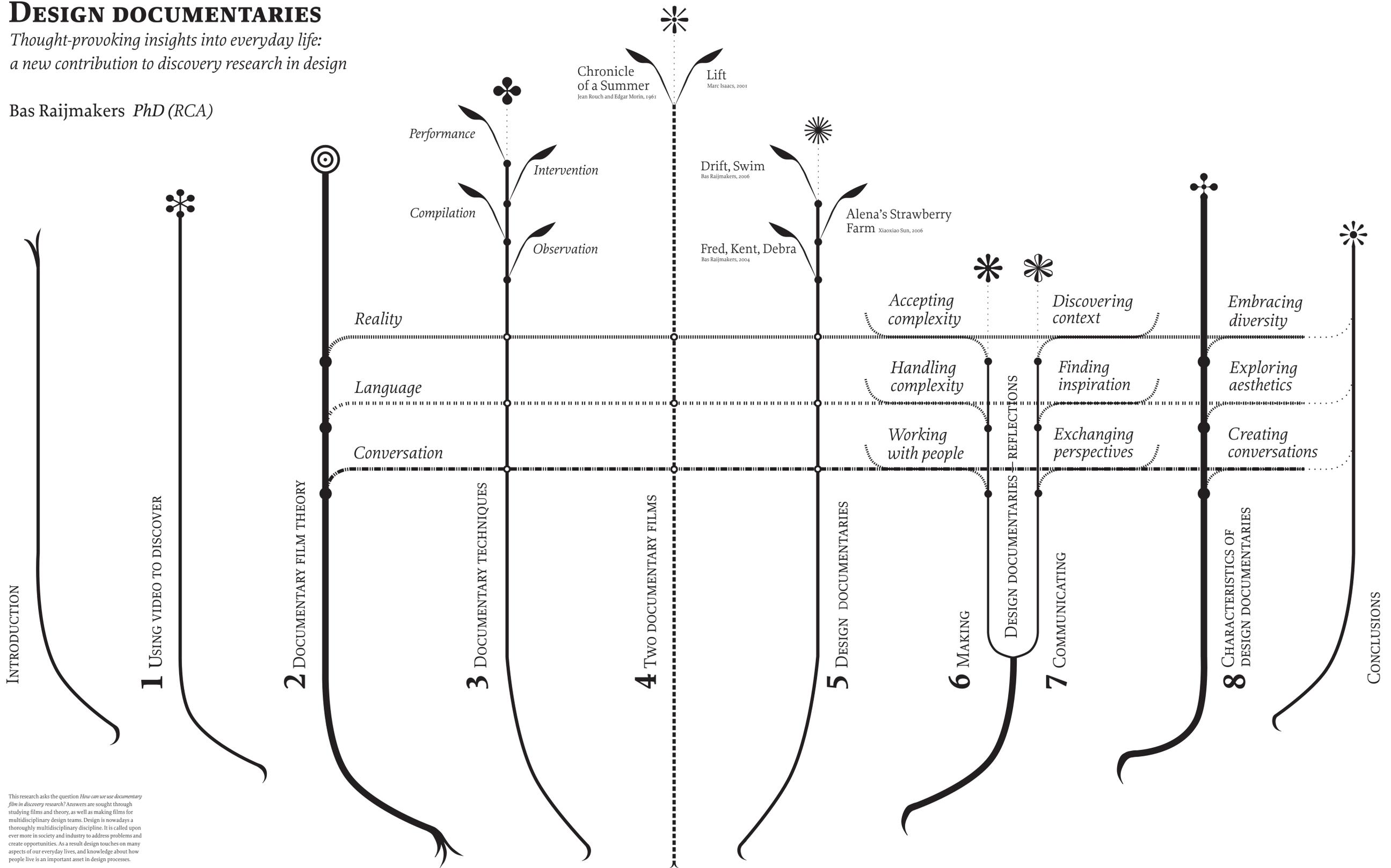


# DESIGN DOCUMENTARIES

Thought-provoking insights into everyday life:  
a new contribution to discovery research in design

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This research asks the question *How can we use documentary film in discovery research?* Answers are sought through studying films and theory, as well as making films for multidisciplinary design teams. Design is nowadays a thoroughly multidisciplinary discipline. It is called upon ever more in society and industry to address problems and create opportunities. As a result design touches on many aspects of our everyday lives, and knowledge about how people live is an important asset in design processes.

In design processes discovery research is used from the start, to get access to knowledge about how people live and what matters to them. But that is not its only role. Ideally, it also inspires design processes. Video has been used to support both roles since the 1980s, but has not moved much beyond registering discovery research activities. For the first time, this research adds documentary film to the multidisciplinary mix in design in a fundamental way. With more than a hundred years of experience in portraying everyday life, documentary film brings many inspiring ideas and techniques to discovery research for design.

Documentary film has a strong connection to reality, and developed a rich film language. The films that inspire this research in particular present the perspectives of people behind and in front of the camera in conversation with each other, and invite viewers to join and continue these conversations. The three notions reality, language and conversation have become the foundation of *design documentaries*, the new method for discovery research in design that this research introduces. The name design documentaries was chosen to stress their origin, their hybrid form and their particular purpose: to inform and inspire design.

Filmmakers have explored and developed countless techniques since 1895. This research groups them as observation, compilation, intervention and performance techniques. Observation techniques are driven by a desire to not disturb the situations that are being filmed. Intervention techniques on the other hand interfere in situations by asking questions, adding narration, and so on. Compilation techniques use archival and found footage such as tv broadcasts or home movies. Performance techniques recreate situations from the past through re-enactment, or create completely new situations with the protagonists, and possibly the filmmaker, performing roles. These techniques provide an inspiring toolbox for discovery research.

Documentary films such as *Chronicle of a Summer* (Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 1961) and *Lift* (Marc Isaacs, 2001) mix the three ideas (reality, language and conversation) and four techniques (observation, intervention, compilation and performance) to tell a story about everyday life that leaves many idiosyncrasies and complex details intact. These films can be seen as discovery research. Not research that is filmed – the film itself is the research. This is also the starting point for my own filmmaking practice. My films explore how documentary filmmaking can be (come) discovery research.

During the research, I made several films for and with design teams. *Fred, Kent and Debra* (2004) are films about heart patients commissioned by Philips Medical Systems. *Drift and Swim* (2006) explore the application of smart textiles, for several small companies. I assisted filmmaker Xiaoxiao Sun in making *Alena's Strawberry Farm* (2006), for Goldsmiths College and France Telecom Orange. In practice, making design documentaries for design teams turned out to be an iterative process where documentary film influences discovery research and vice versa. Thinking inspired making, and making inspired thinking. The two activities came together into an iterative process from which design documentaries emerged.

The design documentaries I made raised practical, theoretical and ethical issues which can be grouped around the three ideas that characterise documentary film: reality, language and conversation. Design documentaries connect to reality by accepting the complexity of everyday life. They use film language as a tool to tell stories which appreciate and handle the complexity of everyday life. Working with participants, researchers and designers during the filming happens in a conversational way and creates relationships between people. Good working practice seems to be close to the existing, diverse practice in documentary filmmaking where possible ways of dealing with similar issues have been explored extensively.

Design teams appreciated the direct access to the people in the design documentaries, allowing them to discover the context of the situations they were designing for. The creative use of film language, instead of registration, was inspirational for the teams. The perspectives researchers added to the films stimulated designers to bring their own perspectives to discussions on the research. This facilitated the continuation of conversations that started between researchers and participants during the filmmaking into the design process.

Design documentaries appropriate the three ideas from documentary film for discovery research. The idea that film is like reality is focused on embracing diversity and ambiguity in everyday life in the research. The use of film language becomes an exploration of film aesthetics aimed at expressing these ambiguities and the perspectives developed during the research. The idea that films are conversations is further developed when design documentaries are used to create conversations in design processes. Together, these appropriated ideas empower discovery research to communicate stories in new ways, and also to tell new stories. Design documentaries interfere deeply with how discovery research is conducted, communicated and used in design.

Design documentaries offer new ways of doing discovery research based on their characteristics: embracing diversity, exploring aesthetics and creating conversations. In practice, they have shown that research can be part of design, and design can be part of research: design documentaries create new shared spaces for research and design to co-exist. They make mixing and moving between research and design easier, which encourages connections between design and everyday life. Design documentaries introduce documentary film to the multidisciplinary mix in design, and invite researchers and designers to engage with video and everyday life creatively, to inform and inspire design processes.

See the films at [www.designdocumentaries.com](http://www.designdocumentaries.com)