

POSTCARDS FROM A (BETTER) FUTURE: PROCESS AS MAKING

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“How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?”
Meno, from Plato's dialogue (in Solnit 2005)

ABSTRACT

It is hard to imagine a future fundamentally different from what we know, yet increasingly people dream of and agitate for social, cultural and political change. *Postcards From a (Better) Future* is part of an evolving interrogation into how embodied-thinking-through-making might assist in the imagining of (better) futures that might otherwise elude us. It is a bid to empower people to imagine, through making, so that they may effectuate change. This paper describes the theoretical background and structure of the *Postcards From a (Better) Future* process. It provides background on the fundamental conceptual shifts; and discusses how and why the process, in and of itself, might constitute making.

INTRODUCTION

One of the primary difficulties of creating social, cultural and political change lies in our inability to imagine practical, executable steps that can be taken towards complex and overwhelming problems. “What do you really want, if you could have anything?” is an awful question that mostly results in simple, modest answers.

In her book, *On Longing*, Susan Stewart (1993) proposes that objects of desire assist in the formation of continuous personal narratives that connect the present with the past. *Postcards from a (better) future* attempts to turn this connection towards the future. It is a

participatory workshop experience, in the form of a making circle, designed to facilitate the articulation of objects to address changes in imagined futures. Taking participants' personal desires and fears as the point of departure, the process uses embodied making to enable the conception of objects of desire that might affect future change in specific and executable ways. The resulting objects give form to speculative and utopian design fantasies, and form ongoing personal narratives that strengthen connections between the present and imagined futures. They thereby empower participants to imagine how they might effectuate change.

METHODOLOGY

Postcards from a (better) future makes use of three distinct research processes, *embodied thinking-through-making*, *research through design* and *design placebos*, to investigate the role that embodied exploration might play in ensuring the social and personal relevance of design innovation. Drawing on these processes, we have developed structures to support thinking with the body in ways that capture the imagination, stimulate curiosity, and afford multi-sensory experiences.

Embodied thinking-through-making is adapted from Gaver et al's work in *Cultural Probes* (1999). Cultural Probes were originally intended to give designers access to the thinking and desires of a specific set of users in order to inspire design processes. They typically consist of activity prompts sent out to participants, who interpret the activities as they wish and send their responses back to the designers. Our modified version uses a probe-like process as the basis for enabling real-time situated exchange between designer and participant. Through the use of tightly structured instruction sets, designer-facilitators prompt participants to engage in an embodied thinking process that results in exploratory objects. These objects serve as props in physically engaged interviews and activities. With the associated frameworks for action, they assist participants to move from abstract (personal knowledge-based) embodied exploration into a specific articulated

design space in which they are able to explore their idiosyncratic desires in relation to clearly defined futures (Wilde 2011).

Research through Design (RtD) is a hybrid approach that employs methods and processes from art and design as legitimate modes of inquiry (Frayling 1993). RtD is commonly used in technology design research to understand the influence of a new technology on how people think, value, feel, and relate (Zimmerman et al 2010). It makes use of designerly activities (Gaver 2012) as a way of approaching messy situations with unclear or even conflicting agendas. By engaging users in creative play with research ideas and techniques, RtD shifts the research focus toward the future, instead of the present or the past. It provides opportunities for community engagement in a discourse, and allows consideration of the broader ethics of what is proposed, developed or designed. Importantly, by leveraging embodied thinking-through-making and the notion of *Design Placebos*, our approach to RtD generates personal knowledge, as well as knowledge that can contribute to societally relevant design future outcomes.

Design Placebos are physical objects or interfaces that afford the experience of an idea that may not (yet) be feasible (Dunne and Raby 2002). Rather than alter reality in any tangible way, a Design Placebo prompts the development of narratives to explain how the world is different as a direct result of what the placebo is imagined to be doing. Placebos encourage the willing suspension of disbelief and engage people in the active re-imagination of the world, allowing them to transcend the everyday and reach for new possible meanings for situations they encounter. Framing our participants' exploratory objects as Design Placebos affords engaged discussion around imagined futures, including deep consideration of the social, ethical and personal implications of what life would be like if they were real.

The careful interweaving of these three research processes affords the bringing into being of previously unarticulated thoughts and desires for the future, as well as consideration and discussion of concrete and tangible actions an individual might take to affect societal change.

TOWARDS AN IMAGINED FUTURE

Over the last decade design research has proven itself a valuable and powerful approach to ascertaining understandings and concerns regarding the design of the world around us. With the *Postcards from a (better) future* project we are investigating ways of expanding design methods through the use of embodied making processes. Our frameworks for embodied thinking-through-making enable the bringing into being of previously unarticulated thoughts and desires around that which does not yet exist, or has not previously been imagined. Our approach asks: If design research can assist us to imagine specific and detailed design futures, might they not also enable us to open up conversations

about highly idiosyncratic political and cultural concerns? By making manifest that which did not previously exist, our approach constitutes a kind of making, in and of itself.

Postcards from a (better) future is a speculative proposal for reframing methods to scaffold "practising the future". It forms part of a larger body of work aimed at testing the link between investigative objects and the meaning that may reside as potential in and around such objects. Related work by the authors includes participatory methods focusing on: imagining body worn devices (Andersen and Wilde, 2012), future scenarios for specific technologies (Samson and Andersen 2013), creating non-functional models of technological fantasies (Andersen 2013), and embodying imaginative poetic enquiries (Wilde 2011).

THE FORMAT

The *Postcards from a (better) future* project is an instruction set for a making circle designed to empower people to imagine, through making, that they may effectuate social change. Making circles (Andersen, Wilde 2012) are typically conducted with twelve participants and two facilitators in a neutral, utilitarian space that contains a large shared worktable with various tools and lights, and another table, off to the side that holds various recycled materials. The format of the circles has been reduced to the following sequence of conceptual estrangement switches, and short declaratory 'interview' process (Being 'Done'). These activities work to shift the mindset of the group away from the predictable, towards a temporary moment of otherness. According to Judith Butler (2005) we must: "risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human." Our circles are purpose built to facilitate this kind of risk taking, to provide a temporary space in which participants can 'become'.

ESTRANGEMENT SWITCHES

The circle begins with a short introduction that functions as the drawing of the circle, and in a theatrical sense, declares the beginning of the game (Caillois 2001). We introduce the above quote from Meno (Solnit 2005), and briefly explain the broader structure of our enquiry into how embodied thinking-through-making might assist in the imagining of (better) futures. We then take participants through four estrangement switches:

1. Participants are asked to choose from of a limited set of desires, borrowed from the motivational psychology research of Steven Reiss (2000). Reiss' desires are usefully provocative. They reduce a complex emotional field down to someone else's shorthand definition of the world. They also introduce language before the participants know what they might be describing,

and thereby provide an uncommon point of departure for an embodied discovery process.

2. Participants are then invited to pull from a hat one of forty-one methods of nonviolent intervention (a subset of 198 Methods of Nonviolent Action proposed by Gene Sharp (1973)). This action compounds the first estrangement switch. Pulling options from a hat alludes to magic and chance.

In *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennet (2009) asserts that “magic raises the stakes of unforeseen events, gives changes in form a compelling power to command wonder and fear.” We lean heavily on this idea, approaching a difficult subject in an equally difficult or convoluted manner. The underlying assumption is that to ‘free up’ the creative and expressive body to respond to the unanswerable, we must first ‘busy’ the reasoning part of the brain so that it will not interfere (May 1994).

Sparse instructions engage the reasoning part of the brain, freeing participants to be spontaneous, and follow their intuitions and creative whims (Bogart 2001). Leaving elements of choice to chance additionally destabilises, defamiliarises or ‘makes strange’ that which is already beginning to be so (Shklovsky [1917] 1965). The combination and contrast of the chosen desire and the randomly selected method of protest creates a pregnant confusion within each participant. Together they provide a double point of departure that may contain inherent conflicts. The duality prompts focus shifts between the intimate body personal, and a socially engaged, outward-looking perspective. From this point of confusion each participant may begin to engage through an embodied making process, which we ground equally in the body and material.

3. The third estrangement switch facilitates a transfer from, and connection between, desire, fear, power and the body. We ask participants: “Where in your body does your chosen desire reside?” and “How is your body engaged or endangered by your method of protest?” These nonsensical questions draw heavily on surrealist art strategies, liberating in their absurdity (Brotchie 2004).

“If you were a colour, what colour would you be?”

Children know this game and have answers for these types of inquiries. The switch between an abstract desire and intention, defined very strictly by someone else, and the feeling that these words and ideas may indeed reside within the body, or reach out in social protest, allows participants to begin to work. The questions move from the abstract to become concrete and physical. A clear concept emerges to guide the subsequent work.

4. “Find the material that works for you.” This prompt allows the physical making and crafting to begin. Participants now find physical form and texture for the body-feeling they have identified, selecting materials from our neatly organised, neutrally coloured, texturally and structurally rich palette of materials. The decisions they make at

this point will not be reasonable, rather they will continue the line of absurdist questioning by asking: “If this feeling had a texture and a shape what would it be?”

The process is designed to expose unexpected and poetic possibilities that may be explored through the sensory potential of material to body, as brought into being through the behaviours, desires, feelings, and anxieties that arise. Dr. Montessori famously used blindfolds in reviewing materials, stating that the eye can interfere with what the hand knows (Lillard 2008). We could add that language can interfere with what the hand knows. For this reason, as the participants choose materials they will make, rather than speak, to support their burgeoning concept.

These four switches occur in less than twenty minutes, allowing no time to reconsider or back out into careful reasoning. In a sense, participants will not be completely committed yet, because they do not know what it is that they are making. Nonetheless, the process engenders tranquility: a focused, efficient, relaxed and also gently energetic state. The work that follows is typically instinctual and effective, the conversation around the table limited to the practical, until at some point each object is “done”.

BEING 'DONE'

Knowing when a device is ‘done’ is an instinctual knowing. By removing verbal reasoning from the imagining and creating process, our process frees participants to trust their ability to recognise what it is they are doing as it emerges, including when it is ‘done’. This knowing ‘when’ is something we all have experienced. Henri Cartier Bresson called it ‘the decisive moment’ the moment when the trigger on the camera is pushed. This moment relies on the photographer’s ability to see and record an event literally taking form in the immediate future (Zichittella 1998). Once ‘done’, participants pose for a self-staged photographic portrait with their artefact, ensuring that the correct pose is captured and retained for posterity.

The making process is completed with these portrait poses. Participants then re-gather for a group discussion, where they formally declare: their name, desire, method of protest, the name of their self-made object and what it does. They then demonstrate their object and portrait-pose to the group. The strictness of this final presentation format allows the hazy decision making process that has come before to crystallise. Excluding language from the central part of our structure allows an intuitive and productive process to emerge. The formalisation of this final declaration process allows verbal reasoning back in.

From previous work (Andersen 2013, Andersen and Wilde, 2012, Samson and Andersen 2013, Wilde 2011), we know that such public and vocal presentations allow the switch between the intuitive and wordless process and a reasoned presentation to happen in the moment,

with many participants only realising what they have built as they name it and present it to their peers. Once all the presentations are complete, the circle is broken and the game is over.

CONCLUSION

Postcards from a (better) future takes participants through a rapid series of formalised conceptual shifts, that each draw on large areas of work in theatre and performance theory, game play and design research. Placing embodied exploration at the centre of our methodology enables us to leverage individual creativity, and draw out unarticulated thoughts and desires. This approach allows us to drive socially relevant, desire-driven innovation by creating openings for new ideas, while explicitly allowing for idiosyncratic concerns, comprehension, and preferences. We can thus ask participants and ourselves: What might the world look like if we fast-track through the technologically feasible adjacent possible (Johnson 2010) to innovations firmly rooted in human desire, imagination and bodily experience?

Significantly, the making circles blot out the most immediate response to such questions, so that we might access more instinctual, and perhaps less plausible responses that challenge and stretch what we consider to be possible. Their format enables us to sneak up on ourselves, to be caught unaware and unselfconscious for a moment so that we dare to begin. By facilitating the turning of matters of concern into physical material, we are able to support a basic process of embodied making and making sense. We imagine results that represent a kind of souvenir from the future. Rather than reminding us “what happened then”, these objects might carry stories about “what happens next...”

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