

THE IN-BETWEEN: AN EXPERIMENTAL VENTURE INTO THE POSITION OF THE DESIGNER.

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ABSTRACT

Increasing interdisciplinary collaborations between art, design and science, draw attention to the need of elucidating the position of the designer. Here this stance is identified as an in-between position, characterised by its exploratory nature, which contributes to the experimental practice of design as a whole. This interstitial position for design, is furthermore identified as an empowering one, which can open up doors to novel opportunities and outcomes, by enabling designers to engage within the processes that construct meaning.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we will try to address the in-between position of the designer as an empowering one, which can open new avenues for research and lead to novel outcomes. Such opportunities might remain closed or distant for those remaining within practices firmly grounded in one discipline or field. Addressing the practice of design as a generative one, we will extract insights from design writers such as Lucy Kimbell and futurist Stuart Candy, but also expand on these views by including filmmaker and writer Trinh T. Minh-Ha's views on liminality.

The reflections contained within this paper derive from personal experiences encountered in recent multidisciplinary projects, such as G-Motiv, which investigates game elements as motivational triggers for behavioural change, within the Creative Industry Scientific Programme (CRISP) in the Netherlands. By

presenting examples from such interdisciplinary collaborations, we will explore how working from the in-between, means designers take on different roles within multidisciplinary projects. Such roles vary from intermediaries between the different partners to interventionists in changing situations, as well as knowledge facilitators. We hope to illustrate the possibilities and implications such an in-between position of the designer might pose, contributing to the ongoing discussion on the experimental practice of design.

EMBRACING UNCERTAINTY

Interdisciplinary ventures between designers, artists and scientists inevitably lead to a crossover of work methodologies and ideas. This exchange often begins with set roles and goals for collaborators. Design, more often than not, will redefine its initial question (Kimbell 2012), changing the nature of the debate. This reframing of the initial brief, brought forth by a generative practice, will extend beyond the pre-defined boundaries of any collaboration.

Designers play with boundaries, an exploratory practice which is experimental as it entails a questioning of meaning and set definitions. An example can be found in EVASIA, a design fictions proposal currently under development within the G-Motiv project, as part of a Research Associateship at Design Academy Eindhoven. EVASIA addresses the use of smell as a storytelling tool to explore experience in the context of drug addiction, by integrating the scent expertise from the Olfactive Design Studio (ODS) of International Flavours and Fragrances (IFF). In this manner, EVASIA expands upon G-Motiv's list of collaborators and knowledge, enhancing the project's focus area by highlighting the relevance of sensory and subjective insights.

Similar approaches situate designers as instigators or generators of situations. They imply a wider scope for

design, through an expansion which takes place in more than one direction at a time. These deviations to the official storyline, contribute to a level of ambiguity and uncertainty, which designers must often cope with throughout a project's development. Nevertheless, it is through such side exercises or accidents that meaning is created, essentially informing the design process (see Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1: Design process-flow diagram.



Figure 2: Deviations or accidents inform the design process.

THE POSITION OF THE DESIGNER

This inquisitive approach is understood through a shift from focus on the process of design, to focus on the position of the designer. Trinh T. Minh-Ha is a filmmaker and theorist whose philosophical writings explore liminal stances, serving as inspiration to validate the in-between position of the designer. Design's explorative nature, requires an understanding of the interdependencies between the different categories at play, which means working within the spaces where these merge and coexist.

This is the space in-between, described by Trinh T. Minh-Ha as "the interval to which established rules of boundaries never quite apply" (T. Minh-Ha 1992). Within the G-Motiv project, it results from the crossovers between the scientific partners (Delft University of Technology, University of Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit, Erasmus University and the Technical University Eindhoven), the creative partners (Design Academy Eindhoven, Monobanda, IJsfontein, RANJ and Novay) and the service or healthcare providers (Berenschot, Careyn and Brijder).

Exchanges within these liminal spaces constantly challenge set structures, shifting focus from seeking a solution to a pre-defined problem, to that of

interventions on behalf of the designer. From an in-between position, designers can actively influence knowledge generation processes and validate these by facilitating an exchange of information between the different collaborators. This exchange comes from embracing those "elements that escape the structure", which often lead to "accidents that are created by letting go of things while you are in full control of them" (T. Minh-Ha 1992). Designers engage in the co-evolution of a multidisciplinary project from different angles, by understanding the different aims and needs of its collaborators. The designer becomes an interventionist, as these exchanges lead to "blueprints and artefacts along the way [which are] designs towards the final design" (Kimbell 2012).

The expansive character of design creates and explores new options, rather than limiting itself to pre-existing avenues. An example can be found within EVASIA's Play the Future! workshop, which brought together G-Motiv's creative partners to speculate upon the future of games. The workshop looked beyond the frames of G-Motiv, applying game theorist Leigh Alexander's (Alexander 2012) three postulates on the future of games (games will never end, games won't be perfect, games will be played everywhere) to the three focus areas of G-Motiv: physical stimulation (Alzheimer patients), mental stimulation (addiction patients) and stimulation of pro-social behaviour (workplace environment). Extending beyond the project's immediate goals, the workshop led to outcomes which explored alternative possibilities of collaboration between the creative partners, resulting in three game concepts: tools to catalyse social group behaviour, crowdsourcing emotions through smell, and ringtones for mindsets (see Figure 3).

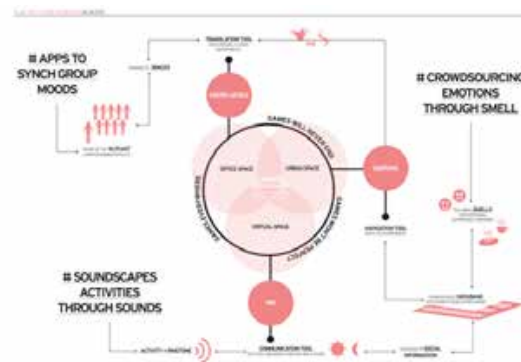


Figure 3: Play the Future! workshop results extended beyond G-Motiv's immediate goals, exploring the future possibilities of games.

MEANING, NOT TRUTH

Working within such liminality means design does not own anything. Designers become intermediaries, which explore and question relationships between science and society. The parallel stories they conjure from such activities bring forth real desires and anxieties, "creating meaning, not truth" (T. Minh-Ha 1992), as they extend beyond sums of facts. This knowledge does not aim to

be scientific, as it is not based on objective facts. In the case of EVASIA, it stems from a discussion which becomes more precise over time, as the projects, designs and exchanges with G-Motiv's collaborators evolve.

This often requires the need to speak various 'languages' in order to facilitate the necessary exchanges between healthcare providers, patients, scientific, creative and industrial partners. Design artefacts can serve to materialise "the possibility space" (Candy 2010) from such interactions. Operating as interstices between "the world that is and the world that could be" (Candy 2010), they point towards alternative processes for the construction of meaning.

Within G-Motiv's framework, EVASIA considers this merge between fictions and reality, exploring the possibilities of alternative stories. (see Figure 4).

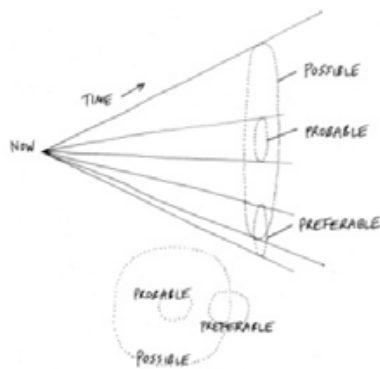


Figure 4: Stuart Candy's diagram of "possible, probable, and preferable futures as subsets of possibility space" (Candy 2010).

Fantasy is a motivating game element, which often addresses the emotional needs of learners, allowing players to experiment with new constructs in low-risk environments (Malone, Lepper 1987). For this reason, an optimum learning environment might be one in which individuals can create their own fantasies. Design fictions can provide conversational platforms (Candy 2010), through which parallel stories can be told, addressing human needs and desires. Acting as testimonies of contemporary culture, these stories can provide contexts to investigate further play's frames, between reality and the game world, and its paradoxes for therapy (Bateson 1955/1972).

To explore personal stories and experience, a series of sensory interviews were conducted at healthcare provider Brijder's drug rehabilitation clinic Mistral, in Den Haag. The patients, aged between 14-22 years old, were asked to draw a free map of the clinic, including those places they wished to talk about during the interview. They were asked to consider what spaces they liked the most or least, as sounds and smells were recorded or sampled, whilst visiting these locations. The outcomes revealed a different perception and categorisation of the clinic, based on experience. The communal living and eating room for example, a place

where the patients spend most of their time throughout the day, proved to be one of the most anxiously perceived spaces, identified as excessively noisy and chaotic.



Figure 5: The sensory interviews revealed how the clinic is perceived by the patients, based on experience of each space.

TO SPEAK NEARBY

Design can create platforms, working from a human-scale, to explore alternative ways of expression. This approach involves a constant play between different narratives, engaging with fact and fiction. In this manner "the narratives shift back and forth between being informational, reflective or analytical, and being emotional, trivial, absurd or anecdotal" (T. Minh-Ha 1992). In the context of EVASIA, this suggests a direct engagement with the reality of the patients, where design provides the necessary tools and voice for the construction of their own definitions and meanings.

This is intrinsic to design's concern with the "human or micro-scale" (Kimbell 2012). Such co-creation devices and processes differ from data gathering exercises. Instead, they generate awareness, by drawing attention to the politics of health and its social manipulations, actively contributing to the construction of personal identity.

Taking an in-between position is therefore also an act of resistance, as from such a position one does not intend to "speak about", but to "speak nearby" (T. Minh-Ha 1992). The in-between position of the designer, empowers an experimental and critical practice for design, as it refuses to reduce its role "to that of a mere device to authenticate the message advanced [by others]" (T. Minh-Ha 1992). Speaking nearby, design will provoke new ideas, awareness and reflections, by pointing to the processes that construct new meanings. Furthermore, by adopting such an in-between position, design is no longer subject to the regulations of those well-defined boundaries, therefore gaining the necessary freedom to explore the possibility space (See Figure 6).



Figure 6: To "speak nearby" means designers operate within the possibility space (coloured areas), from an in-between position.

FUTURE WORK

EVASIA will explore the in-between position by designing the relationship between now and the future, working between the patients and the other G-Motiv partners. This will be done by developing two complementary lines of work, comprising speculative and more immediate designs. The speculative work will consist of a series of 'companion species', working as provocations or rovers of emotional experience. These will be built into the context and routines of Mistral, to avoid decontextualisation.

The more immediate line of work will consist of experience prototypes, of elements of the companion species. These will build upon the insights previously obtained in Mistral. They will be a first step towards the speculative designs, and a tool for understanding their meaning. The overall outcomes will aim to reveal new narratives and behaviours, valuable to the different collaborators within the G-Motiv project.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this paper we looked to integrate insights from outside experts to design research, such as filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha and futurist Stuart Candy. Combining their 'liminal' views with those offered by known voices within the design profession such as Lucy Kimbell, we hoped to further expand on the notion of the in-between, likewise alluding to ways in which the design practice can be informed from such external perspectives. This is in no means intended as another definition for design. Instead, it stands as an ode to its experimental nature, as such resistance to categorisation is what perhaps allows it to continuously expand its frontiers.

CONCLUSIONS

Design's experimental nature is intrinsic to its exploratory character. This often leads to deviations or side exercises that account for the ambiguity and openness of its practice. Such an approach, requires a

shift from focus on the process of design to focus on the position of the designer as an in-between position, which operates within an interstitial, or possibility space. Interventions originating from that space enable designers to explore processes at the micro, or human scale whilst embarking on speculations beyond the limits of the individual entities it navigates between. In this manner, design does not speak about, but nearby, as it provokes the construction of new meanings.

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