

TIME EXPERIMENTS - DESIGNING FOR REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT

By researching through designing the *Supertid* project investigates – in visual and tactile form – the acceleration of Western societies as well as the ephemerality and experience of time. The *Supertid* exhibition installation is a ‘cabinet of curiosity’; displaying various design experiments and a publication - created to render time experientially available, and thus enable reflection and dialogue among the involved designers, researchers, and participants, in order to challenge the contemporary notion of time.

INTRODUCTION

Concurrently with the industrial revolution society in the western world foresaw that technological developments would lead to less work and more time. Instead, time has become one of the scarcest resources (Schjødt 2002). The Western civilization is working overtime - martyred by a nagging feeling of always being behind, and have now reached a point where ASAP isn't fast enough in the digital and mobile world (Grønberg 2012:28). There's status in the fully booked calendar - but flirting with the high pace comes at a price: According to the OECD and WHO, 70% of all diseases in the Western world in 2020 will be related to stress (OECD 2012). This complex set of experiential, philosophical, and societal paradoxes is what we loosely define as ‘the problem of time’.

THE 'SUPERTID' PROJECT

Supertid addresses this problem of time. It is the master thesis project made by the interdisciplinary design duo Baudo & Henning at The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts - School of Design (2012). *Supertid* is a Danish expression associated with professional sports,

which means *super time* and refers to the competition of being the fastest. Through interviews with five people (aged from 43 to 83) revolving around their different perceptions of time and decisions of living with time in unusual ways, the project has resulted in a number of visual and tactile studies, all collected in a publication entitled *Supertid*. Parts of the visual and tactile studies of the project as well as the project publication have been exhibited at the Academy's Graduation Show summer 2012.

MAKING TIME BE REDISCOVERED

Time is indeed a very complex and faceted phenomenon, and researching time demanded an equally complex design approach. Treating time as a ‘wicked problem’ (Buchanan 1995), we have worked with an iterative and explorative process, following the approach of ‘design research through practice’ (Koskinen et al 2011; Zimmerman et al 2010), where researching and designing are not separate but works in parallel. Throughout the project we have conducted several experiments in various materials, seeking to make time more experientially accessible and raise discussion by exploring what time would look, feel and smell like if it was more concretely manifested. We will now shortly describe three.

THREE EXPERIMENTS

The nature of time is abstract and difficult to grasp, but the instruments used to measure it, like a clock, are even more so distancing time from an intuitive and personal comprehension. We often attribute ‘time’ features of living organisms, such as ‘time flies’, ‘killing time’ etc. To try and capture this ‘living’ quality of time, we conducted an experiment with ice.

Eight blocks of ice in different colours were arranged to melt on a white piece of paper. The process of the melting ice was put on display, and the development of the colours blending together, made visual patterns and structures on the paper. As a spectator exclaimed: “You get enticed to watch the melting ice cubes, and forget time while they leave traces on the paper” In this way

the ice turns out to be an alternative clock, estranging the way we normally keep track of time, pointing at how relative and subjective the experience of time actually is. Being absorbed in the process of the slowly melting ice, could annul, if only for a short while, what Max Weber calls the Zweckrational, and make the onlooker wonder if drifts and detours are in fact beneficial?

The 'fruit keeping experiment' is a careful documentation of the development of natural decay in fruits and vegetables: photographing the colours, the structures and patterns. The natural decay was also manipulated and attempted delayed by encapsulating the fruit in fluid latex and lacquer, which surprisingly ended up reinforcing the moulding process, making it even more expressive. The reactions from the spectators of the fruit keeping experiment were quite strong – and that of both fascination and repulsion: "When you leave the fruits be, you conjure something beautiful within the disgusting". The aged and wrinkled fruits delight in the sense of displaying attractive colours and complex surfaces – and disgust by showing decomposition and rot. Displaying the decaying fruit shows the sensuous and poetic features in aging, and it becomes a sort of vanitas. It illustrates and concretize the passing of time, pointing out that deterioration and mortality are inevitable basic conditions.

Based on the idea of Western calendars, a third strand of experiments tried to visualize time, an indeterminate and abstract dimension of existence, in a schematic form; e.g. an alternative week calendar. A spectator commented: "I would love for my calendar to look like that. I never use my 'normal' calendar, it's too conservative". The recognisability of the diagram suggests a logical usage, but it's actual lack of logic and level of abstraction creates another function:

To make us reflect upon our normal way of managing our time. The nonsensical diagram proposes if it is possible to manage time, in a less limiting manner? It thereby functions as a critique of the controlling role time plays in our lives, and allows the absurdity of our current time management to stand out.

THE 'SUPERTID' EXHIBITION

Both the publication and the exhibitions format is inspired by the 'cabinets of curiosity' that were popular during the European Renaissance, with their collection of strange objects that leaves the viewers to wonder or to be provoked (McDougal 2008). These responses are also what we wish to trigger in the spectator. Athony Dunne and Fiona Raby advocates a complicated pleasure: "[...] in order for conceptual design to be effective, it must provide pleasure" (2001:63), and we've strived to make the 'time experiences' both provocative and enjoyable through humor, insight and surprise. Hence a mixture of a naïve, tactile and colorful expression with a more crude intention behind it, has been inherent in most of our experiments.

TOOLS FOR REFLECTION

Our method of exploration is also highly influenced by a sensitive approach to design, where intuition, design experience, and emotions play an equally important role as analytical reasoning (Koskinen et al 2011:43), and the sensitive approach serves as a way of communicating the very fine nuances in the topic of time and invite to reflection, as well as to set the project apart from the rational way we normally talk, think, deal with time.

"It's a very challenging project - you need time to reflect on the subject and the thoughts behind it" says a spectator. The visual and tactile experiments present a way of trying to grasp time, not rationally, but aesthetically and poetically through sensibility and sensuousness. It is constructive design research, that shows us something about the integration of design and research, because the creation of a product, system, space or media are the key means in constructing new knowledge (Koskinen et al 2011:2). Designing becomes a tool for knowledge production and reflection, by estranging, fascinating and giving access to rediscover the familiar. It is research that creates an interstice, a room for new possibilities and asks 'what if'.

CONCLUSION

Leaving fruit to decay may seem strange. To represent hours in a day with yellow ink dots may seem naïve, and waiting for ice to melt may seem a waste of time. But it is this lack of conventional reason that can create an interstice allowing us to rediscover how we live with time. In contrast to conventional design products, these artefacts do not have any immediate functional use. The project is a continual explorative and reflective design process, where the experiments serves as a catalyst for delving deeper into the matter and posing new questions, rather than a mission of solving the problem of time.

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