Design at the Present Tense

Donato Ricci

Fig. 1

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We designers, through our activities and our practices, have tirelessly produced the future. We have seen, foreseen and made others see the future by realising it, by making it real. Other disciplines and practices have imagined or planned the future, but they have still relied on design to produce its iterations at a human, vivid and tangible scale. We have been called to materially weave together the horizon of the "vision" and the plane of "action" by using "projects" as vectors.

All modern reflections on design and its methods have mobilised this ability as their very disciplinary justification[1]. They have articulated an idea—or an ideal—of design as a problem-solving activity (Dorst, 2006). A transformative process obtained by jumping into the future and then returning to fix a specific reality. This idea—rooted in the second half of the 20th century, nourished by the development of systems theories and firmly attached to the "wicked problem" discourse (Rittel & Webber, 1973)—has enrolled the discipline in that global enterprise which Jenny Anderson (2018) called the "future factory"[2]:

> "the inroads of futurism into market-based and business-oriented activities of consultancy, paid advice, and a kind of 'think outside of the box' in which the radical notions of human imagination of the 1960s somehow merged with an emerging management speak."

[1] In this respect, it is worth quoting Herbert Simon (1969): "From a pragmatic standpoint we are concerned with the future because securing a satisfactory future may require actions in the present. Any interest in the future that goes beyond this call for present action has to be charged to pure curiosity. It belongs to our recreational rather than our working day". Similarly, John Chris Jones (1992) wrote: "Designers (…) are forever bound to treat as real that which exists only in an imagined future and have to specify ways in which the foreseen thing can be made to exist".

[2] An evidence of the commodification of the future – some sort of side effect of the global "future factory" - is represented by a gadget produced for the Kayser-Aluminium employees by RAND corporation, in 1964. The box game, called *Future: a game of strategy, influence and stance* was the simplification of a simulation game (see the patent in *fig. 1*) that paved the way for the first computer-based approach for the DELPHI method. Literally, in this case the future was simplified, gamified to be ready to hand: a speculative leisure for the humans.

The field of Design has unbound its scope ever since, to the point that, as Colomina and Wigley (2016) noted "[t]here is no longer an outside to the world of design. Design has become the world." This completely designed world, the one that has been brought back from the future, is today showing its fragilities, its precarity. As Tony Fry (1999) showed, design—the global, modern and solutionist enterprise—triggered some significant "defuturing effects". It contributed to hindering the world itself from having a future. The contemporary reality, along with its political, social, technological and ecological issues (Latour, 2018), transformed the future—once thought of as an infinitely expandable horizon, spatially and temporally—into an incoming pressure acting on the present (Latour, 2010). Faced with a contraction of possibilities in terms of the availability of time and space, we should question the way in which we are allowing our present reality to be investigated, represented, designed and, ultimately, endowed with a future.

Competition in a saturated space

Expected to escape the modern logic of solutionism[3], the requests of the markets, and to gain political relevance, critical design and design fiction—practices meant to "act as a catalyst for collectively redefining [the] relationship to reality" (Dunne & Raby, 2013)—heavily relied on the constructions of alternative futures, projections that were often shocking and provocative, to show the consequences of present issues (DiSalvo, 2009). This was alluded to in an interview by Rick Poynor (2016), when Anthony Dunne stated:

> "As designers we can explore different manifestations of a technology before it is fixed. There is very little we can do once it enters into everyday life and new behaviours and conventions begin to emerge and solidify."

Judging by this sentence, a dislocative project seems to be a necessary pre-requisite for producing alternatives to how things are. It seems that the present, in order to be changed, must be deferred, abstracted and transplanted elsewhere. However, the already shrunken space of the future—a space we have continuously used as a fertile and evocative sandbox in which we have mixed, both aesthetically and technically, fears and hopes by assembling virtual, material, and symbolic elements—is now, more than ever, a saturated space. Space over which fictional, critical and solutionist approaches fiercely compete[4]. From this space, design projects are continuously bringing images, pictures and presences back to the present that, while opposed in terms of their scope, appear to be composed of the same matter. Their end results and imaginaries are blurring together. As an example, take the issue of redefining our relationships with other biological entities, used both to express the critical stance for a more-than-anthropocentric understanding of our realm, and, at the same time, injected into bio-technological enhanced human life. Or take the issue of the role of algorithms in our societies. Both the designers endorsing and those criticising the calculated future reality are exploiting the same technological determinism. They both leverage, either to praise or to denounce, a future where algorithmic and artificial agents have completely fulfilled their promise of effectiveness.

How much agency do we still have over these fictions, visions and critiques? How can we explore whether these futures are relevant

[3] In his exploration of the etymology of the word "design", Vilém Flusser (1995) showed how the idea of "solutions by design" is mainly a way of concealing the "traps" and "trickeries" that every object contains.

[4] It should also be noted that the methods and techniques of design fiction have already been absorbed - and normalized – within the practices of companies and corporations (Salmon, 2018).

to us? Are they opening or closing the possibility of acting upon our present condition? Are they not engaging in the risky endeavour of competing in the production of future imaginaries that will be increasingly sublime, spectacular, insistent, purified, sharp and incisive in order to continue to work? Some bases for answers may be produced, somewhat counterintuitively, by acknowledging alongside Bruce Sterling (2016) that "most design fiction will of course be pretty bad." As for any speculative or critical reification—textual, visual or material—we could hope for a progressive improvement of *quality*, rather than exuberance. We might rely on improving our capability for discerning between the bad and the good, training ourselves to dive into the procedures that fabricate specific futures: their simplifications, their assumptions, the conditions of their validity. We should equip ourselves by addressing the intentions of whoever produced these futures and, at the same time, what these futures want us to do.

Resisting in the present

Nevertheless, we should not give up exploring how differently our practices relate to what contemporary issues are prospecting us with. We must invent forms able to go beyond the obsession with the future and its exoticism. Forms that resist in the present. We could try to design through and with the *thingness* and the *thickness* of the world. They demand *new techniques*[5] of attention and sensitivity, which should be design techniques that are eminently political. They will concern the way in which *we*—the public[6], those concerned—might choose, collectively, to *reset* (Ricci, 2016) our present world so it can be equipped to focus on what comes next.

The design techniques I'm advocating should be able to project and compose a rooted understan-

[5] The notion of "technique" diverts from the "magical properties" (Gad & Jensen, 2014) of reproducibility and self-explanation that the notion of "method" risks to carry. Take as example the ever growing amount of boiled-down, *easyfied* instructional material meant to diffuse and reproduce design methods. The notion of "technique" also relates to the process of *making*, as described by Tim Ingold (2013).

[6] The notion of "public" here refers to the one formulated in the famous Lippmann-Dewey debate. In the resulting pragmatist definition, the public is not an *a priori* constituted set of people, but a local and specific arrangement of individuals. They are tied by their commitment in addressing a situation and by their concerns for its future consequences. The public is dependent on the context that calls it into being: the *issue* (Marres, 2005). But issues are not able to assemble the public on their own. Herein lies the problem: before acting the public must be first assembled, "constructed" in order to achieve a desired result (Dewey, 1927).

ding of what is behind, beneath and underneath a specific issue, before moving quickly to its critique or solution. They should slow down the present, making it tense and dense, allowing us to realise the objects that populate a specific present reality. These *tensing techniques* are meant to make perceptible the way in which we inhabit an issue and by which links and dependencies we are sustained (Ricci, 2019). Design techniques have the scope to question these links, letting some of them be composed or decomposed, weighted and ordered, supplemented or deformed. Tensing techniques should strive to rearticulate the politics of an already designed world. They should try to understand and destabilise any passivity we may have towards issues that are political—specific and local—but have been taken for granted or abstracted. They should be techniques that are able to, let's repurpose John Law's (2004) programmatic sentence, "make some realities realer", by developing new representations of the present and new imaginations[7].

[7] Chiara Bottici (2014) defines *imagination* as the capacity to envisage things differently and to construct alternative political projects, and *imaginary* as the social context that shapes our perception of the world. In this way, she puts an individual capability in tension with a socially constructed one.

There are examples of such an approach. The "Smog Tasting" project by The Center For Genomic Gastronomy—which deals with issues of pollution and air quality—creates culinary recipes "that make the invisible ingredient of smog visible and tasteable" (Denfeld, 2015). Articulating the mundane already-at-hand objects that comprise the issue does not dislocate or postpone the problem, but designs a way of posing new questions and articulates collective answers. The "Friction Atlas" project by La Jetée—concerned with the normative effects of laws in urban public spaces—performs "the omnipresent scripts […] regulat[ing] public assembly and behaviours" (Patelli & Vendrame, 2018). Through simple graphical materialisation on physical surfaces, it makes realer the rules under which it is normalised. The "Italian Limes" (2016) projects by Studio Folder may well represent another example where climatic change and anthropogenic impact become tangible, not by using an abstracted future setting, but by existing at the same time as they are happening.

Projects like these do not aim to provoke solutions, to critique or to speculate on abstractions and generalisations. By producing a situation, they resist the specificities and the situatedness of the issue they tackle. They operate at the same time and in the same space as their issue. They resist, as much as possible, to arrogate to

themselves the right to disqualify—by reductions, simplifications, categorisations—any object, entity, being or actor when representing an issue. They try to produce constraints for a grounded collective answer to the question "what *world*[8] do we want to realise together?" Although any answer to the question is located absolutely—embedded in the situation from which it emerges and which gives it meaning—it opens up the possibility of experimenting with new realities without dislocations.

Glitching for representing

When attempting to further unfold the specificities of the tensing techniques, it might be useful to refer in more detail to a particular application conducted at the médialab in Sciences Po: the Algo-Glitch project. Dealing with the issue of the role of algorithms and digital platforms in our society, it addresses the question: "how do we want to be calculated?"

4YO daughter asks my @Google Mini: "Hey Google, what's Mrs. Claus doing?"

Google proceeds to find an article about Mrs. Claus & explain that Mrs. Claus & Santa are made up stories.

Thanks Google.

#MerryChristmas #Christmas #AI #AiFail

Fig. 2

The project started by collecting experiential fragments of uncomfortable and misaligned encounters between "*we* the calculated" and "*them* the calculating", i.e. the *glitches*. While in the most common understanding, glitches are considered technological

weaknesses to be overcome, if not evidence of the limits of humans when designing technological systems; in the project, they have been treated as partial stories accounting for a vast and dispersed computational network.

The glitches have been welcomed as one of the few possibilities for recomposing an assumed division between algorithms and society. They offer a way to collect the elements comprising their relationships. Relationships that are meant to be transparent, seamless and intuitive by design. If, on the one hand, through the glitches it is possible to render more clearly the expectation of smoothness we assume from socio-technological environments; on the other, it is possible to make these environments accessible by becoming aware of them (Boyle, 2015). Glitches are situations in which a change of *intensity*[9] has been produced between the elements, the beings, the objects and the actors comprising a calculated environment. Thanks to this change in intensity, it is possible to direct our attention towards how they redefine, or could possibly redefine, each other. In this way, the issue could be thought of as just one of the many possible configurations of these elements and their correlations. A temporary arrangement of an ongoing relational process.

Take, for example, the account of the glitch in *fig. 2*. Once we disregard the residual sadness it produces, if we pay attention and read it closely, despite its extreme briefness, we discover an extremely rich world. It is composed of all sorts of entities, objects and actors ("Santa Claus", "Google Mini"); manifest and latent relationships and delegations ("education"); and social configurations ("the family"). The glitch provides an opportunity to imagine a stable pre-glitch configuration, one that has been altered by the "4YO daughter" to produce a new configuration

[9] The word "glitch" was first used by astronauts in 1962, specifically by John Glenn, to describe a sudden change or spike in voltage (Zimmer, 2013). It seems that the notion of *intensity* is already embedded in the concept. Various definitions have been proposed after its emergence in the field of the digital arts. Jon Satrom (2013) defines it as "a moment in time that breaks one from a predetermined flow", highlighting the dimension of "slowing down" they ask for. Hugh S. Manon and Daniel Temkin (2011) conceive it as a representation depending "upon the inability of software to treat a wrong bit of data in anything other than the right way": a definition useful to cast light upon the delicate correlations of socio-technical systems. Rosa Menkman (2010) expresses the uncertain outcome of a situation when a glitch is produced: "What actually happens when a glitch occurs is unknown, I stare at the glitch as a void of knowledge; a strange dimension where the laws of technology are suddenly very different from what I expected and know. Here is the purgatory; an intermediate state between the death of the old technology and a judgement for a possible continuation into a new form, a new understanding".

upon which we are called to act while respecting the agency of the other objects and actors involved. The glitch signals a change of intensity that needs to be listened to and asks for a reaction: preserve Santa's existence or reinforce the intelligence of an algorithmic object? Welcome an algorithmic corporate agent into our children's education or become extreme and refuse any technology that impacts the way we would like to raise them?

The corpus of collected glitches has been open to a collective curatorial process (*fig.*3). This exercise has invited the public to express their relationships and commitments towards the elements contained in the proposed algorithmic manifestations. The exercise asked for a progressive *denaturalisation* of one's own understanding of the issue, to discuss what should be added, what should be excluded, which correlations should be changed in intensity to be *otherwise* calculated.

Fig. 3

Central to these exercises is a specific tradition of pragmatism (Debaise, 2017) that can be repurposed into design activities concerned with something that does not, but could, exist. Not new solutions, but new potential configurations that are not manifested into a future but tensed in the present. Instead of producing new futures through critical, fictional or solutionist images, the scope is to produce new representational settings. This is realised through trial, testing, and encounters. In these settings, the public can answer difficult questions like: "What is going on behind this issue?", "What about this issue affects me?", "What touches me?", and "What matters to me?"

[11] *Databending* is the process of manipulating a media file of a certain format, using software designed to edit files in a different format.

The personal answers to these questions, once collated, could be collectively negotiated in an effort to gain political momentum and relevance. This has been the case of the Cozy/Flat[10] project, which is investigating the effects of digital platforms like Airbnb on the urban space. By repurposing the *databending* glitch technique[11], the platform's digital content has been transposed into a physical manifestation. To compose the corpus of the issue, the platform has been scraped to retrieve all the information related to listings available in the city of Milan, and the pictures of the listings have been processed to identify the objects contained within them. The corpus has been published in two different formats. In the first, the listings have been printed on slotted cards similar to Enzo Mari's *Fable Game* and Eames' *House of Cards*. In the second, the corpus has been bent to fit the Haussmannian *Catalogues d'Ornements* format (*fig.4*).
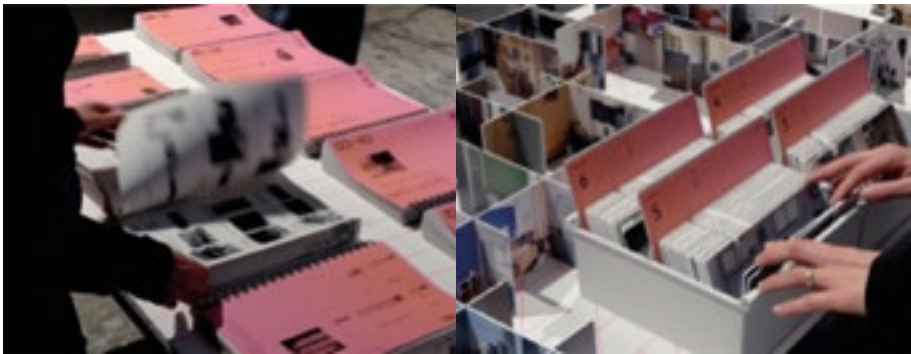

Fig. 4

In an indexical sedimentation manner, the participants constructed themselves as a public collective by constantly doing and redoing, acting upon and reflecting on somebody else's configuration of the Airbnb city. By checking whether their own apartment was present in the corpus; by flicking through the catalogues to check if their furniture was similar to what was presented at the event; by identifying and thus discussing the seemingly emerging homogeneity of our private environments, a collective coordination was put in motion. The exercise produced a process of material inscription constructed by the encounter with the similar, but also, with the different and the anomalous (*fig.5*).
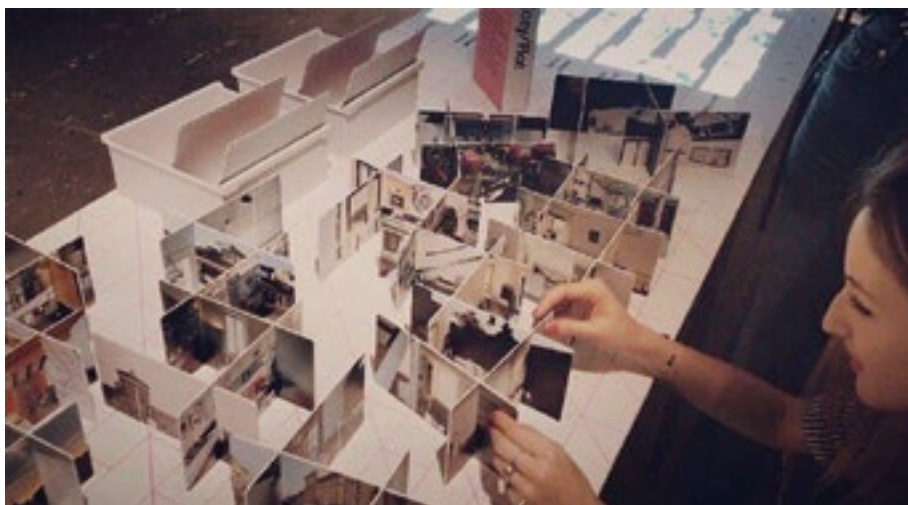
Fig. 5

The designed materiality of these representations is particularly relevant here. The representations can be located in space and time, as well as pinpointed to explore how they have been made. They can be used as a starting point or a quasi-firm ground on which to iterate the processes of becoming a collective and public body: articulating the passage from an I to a we, to grant a position to the concerns of the individual within a larger political *ensemble*. These experiences show a design meant to sustain a political process of representation. In this way, discussions and negotiations find a presence in a new materiality that is able to endure over time and remain open for possible future evolutions.

Settings
A design less obsessed with the future would no longer be attached to a solutionist commitment, isomorphically shaped on the same rationale as the present, reinforcing an inevitable technocentric idea of innovation. It would no longer be engaged in materialising unresponsive critiques or fictions, postponing elsewhere or to other times issues that are already latent in the present. On the contrary, it would inventively produce spaces for open-ended enquiries into present conditions, states and realities. By grounding a collective and public understanding of how an issue is composed, it would eventually engage in a transformational commitment to finding a way into new realities and imaginations: "to look where [we] are going, not to fix an end point" (Ingold, 2013).

Concerned with the active and laborious process of descriptive adjustments—performed through the identification, grouping and reconnection of heterogeneous objects and entities—a design dedicated to producing tensions in the present, is a design participating in the constitution of the issues. It acknowledges that issues are *just* consolidations of correlations, interdependency and attachment: relational consistencies. They can still be acted on and modified if we ask ourselves how, from a multiplicity of possible correlations, they emerged and consolidated themselves. If we do not separate the issue from its historical trajectory and its *milieu*. If we design a situation where relational intensities are materialised, where the public is gathered around and pulled closer to the issue. If we use design to empirically represent political questions and experiences, setting up a space and a time for a tensed present.

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