

Data as Artifacts in Design Interventions

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Introduction

In “Design Interventions as a Form of Inquiry,” Joachim Halse and Laura Boffi provide an onto-epistemological investigation into the multiple, productive contradictions that design interventions make explicit. Having descended from the coupling of design and anthropology, design interventions are at once speculative and interpretive, representational and methodological, “favor[ing] and explor[ing] unsettled and imagined possibility” on the one hand while “...employ[ing] empiricist virtues of embodiment, empathy and documentary forms” on the other (Halse and Boffi 2014:1). Through these contradictions, design interventions produce structured spaces of uncertainty in which to explore and express the “barely possible” (Halse and Boffi 2014:1).

In design interventions, exploration and expression are motivated and made tangible in what Halse and Boffi call “placeholder artifacts.” Like design prototypes, placeholder artifacts are physical objects (or representations of physical objects) that are constantly being re-fashioned and re-shaped to reflect a range of possible uses and meanings, adapting and adjusting to new ideas as they arise in the context of the design intervention. They can be everything from a pencil sketch to a folded piece of cardboard to a 3D printed widget. Indeed, the artifacts are themselves uncertain: emergent, unstable, never finished.

But these artifacts need not be physical objects. In this paper, I will make the case that data can be a powerful artifact for design interventions, stimulating the same type of imaginative possibilities, ambiguities, and new ideas.

Knowing without Knowing

Objects are useful in design interventions because they make ideas tangible. They facilitate sensory encounters with possible futures, allowing us to role-play as if we existed within those

futures and imagine what they would be like. Objects embody beliefs and values about the world: in considering what those objects do, where they come from, who they're for, how much they cost, who made them, and how they were made, we come to understand that they are part of a much larger system of economics, politics, and culture. "Placeholder artifacts," by being in constant flux, allow us to examine a wider range of possible futures and, more importantly, a wider range of beliefs and values as well as their potential implications.

Data, on the other hand, is information in its purest sense. Lacking physical form, data gains meaning only when it is placed into context through human or computer interpretation, which often serves to visualize or represent it in some way. And even though we can't put a literal finger on data, it shares common ground with objects in that it is just as —if not more— entangled in economic, political, and social systems. Where did the data come from? Who collected it? Why was it collected? Who will interpret it? For whom is it being interpreted? The questions are the same, but the answers are much harder to trace.

Data works for design interventions because it is open-ended. It will always beg questions. Intuitively, this may not seem to be the case. We perceive data to be objective and factual, the result of computer-led operations that erase the possibility of error from human intervention. Objectivity and certainty usually go hand in hand. But it is this very fact — that data, on its own, lacks context and subjectivity — that lends it an uncertain, unstable, and open-ended quality. Take, for example, the case of ThingTank, put forward in the article "Things Making Things: An Ethnography of the Impossible" by Elisa Giaccardi, Chris Speed, and Neil Rubens. ThingTank, as described by the authors, is:

“...an Internet of Things (IoT) research project that uses a combination of field studies, object instrumentation and machine learning to listen to what 'things' have to tell about their use, reuse and deviant repurpose, and it harvests this data to inspire idea generation, fabrication, rapid prototyping and business development generation” (Giaccardi et al 2014:1).

Internet-connected objects, by collecting data about how we use them, know things about us without actually *knowing* us at all. They record real behaviors and interactions, but those behaviors and interactions don't tell us much until we place them into context. Until we interpret

them. Separated from the complex range of subjectivities that make up who we are, these behaviors and interactions—this data—reveals a new set of patterns from which to envision new possibilities. Data creates uncertainty by revealing something without knowing everything; it is our job as messy-minded, baggage-laden humans to add context, ask questions, interpret, and imagine.

Ethnographies of the Imagination, Volume 1: The Beach

I explored these issues firsthand in a data-driven design intervention that I initiated as a postgraduate student in Design Interactions at the Royal College of Art in London. The intervention sought to examine the origins and continued relevance of Western imaginings of paradise, questioning the degree to which historical visions of the “good life” reflect contemporary values and aspirations.¹ The project’s title, *Ethnographies of the Imagination*,² explicitly reframes design interventions as ethnographic endeavors that seek to facilitate and interpret imagination.

The beach has long occupied the Western imagination as a vision of the good life; indeed, when you Google “paradise,” you get images of white sandy beaches, turquoise water, and palm trees. I wondered: are these images accurate reflections of our values and aspirations? What would paradise look like if the images were separated from the individual beliefs and values they embody? Would we like what we see?

To address these questions, I began by conducting a survey of the history of the beach as a paradise, beginning in the archaeological record and ending with a Google Image search. I constructed a timeline, drawing mainly from American and European sources including historical documents, paintings, films, songs, cultural events, and websites, that together reflected a patchwork of references that have structured the notion of the beach as a paradise over time.

Using the timeline as a data set, I extracted the key words that describe what makes the beach a paradise in each of the references. From a list of 120 key words in total, I calculated which occurred most frequently, and ended up with a final set of 26. Then, using just the key

¹ In *The Future as Cultural Fact*, Arjun Appadurai, suggests the need for an anthropology of the future that takes root in the examination of imagination, anticipation, and aspiration. Appadurai suggests that an inquiry into these capacities might begin with our ideas about the “good life.”

words as a design brief, I invited artists from around the world to create three-dimensional renderings of new landscapes based on the key words. The process of transcription from machine-calculated data to human-drawn renderings was the crucial stage of the intervention. In that moment, the key words acted as “placeholder artifacts” to be shaped by the imagination of each artist.

Out of context, the key words took on a new set of meanings and formed a new set of patterns from which to imagine new outcomes. The artists were forced to confront the uncertainty of the key words’ provenance and consider them in terms of their own personal experience, or simply what the key words brought to mind. As a result, the landscapes [see appendix] are uncanny amalgamations of places that seem familiar, but look strange. They hint at a fundamental dissonance between what the good life should be and what it has become.²

Conclusion

In their essay, Halse and Boffi conclude:

“To what extent design interventions, with their stagings of empirical dialogues around evocative probes, props, and prompts, can be seen as a materially enhanced version of ethnographic inquiry into people’s concerns, aspirations and imaginative horizons, is, however, a question we prefer to keep open for discussion” (Halse and Boffi 2014:13).

In this essay, I have suggested that data, by creating structured spaces of uncertainty, can enhance the particular form of inquiry facilitated by design interventions to provoke novel imaginings. “Ethnographies of the Imagination” share a great deal of conceptual and methodological ground with design interventions, and furthermore, fall neatly into the categories of “Interventionist Speculation” and “Ethnographies of the Possible.” This overlap seems to offer a convergence of approaches to — and a new level of comfort with — the uncertain yet promising territory of design anthropological futures.

² To view “Ethnographies of the Imagination, Volume 1: The Beach” and its companion publication, see www.lanazporter.com

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Appendix



Richard Fraser, UK, Key Words (10/26)



Richard Fraser, UK, Key Words (17/26)



Thomas M. Grimes, USA, Key Words (26/26)



Olivia Vander Tuig and Mark Lewis, USA, Key Words (19/26)



Patrick Turner, Canada, Key Words (13/26)