AGENT MAKERS - The un-masking of environmental agency through design for speculative social innovation.

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AGENT MAKERS – The un-masking of environmental agency through design for speculative social innovation.

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Living in the Anthropocene, with its accelerating human agency impacting on the planet, we have to open our eyes to the ever increasing signs that the relationship between design(ers) and nature is more often than not disastrous.
Speculative & Critical Design

Speculative (often future focused) design allow us to suspend disbelief about change while at the same time open up space for discussion (Dunne and Raby, 2013) through the use of critical design objects which may not have a functional or commercial use.

Agency

Having the power to shape your life experiences. You can contribute to them and are not just shaped by them (Bandura, 2001).

And although designers hold a great deal of power to influence our relationship with our environment, it is questionable whether young designers feel like they themselves have any of this power or are aware that their training equips them with agency beyond the artifactual context.
This research explores whether and how speculative, future oriented design briefs can make design students aware of their agency in social and environmental contexts beyond the micro–environment of their immediate design discipline or disciplinary industrial context.
The project focused on ‘Design Futuring the City’, an international cohort of MA Students from a cross-disciplinary design programme were asked to imagine futures for their home cities, developed from a wide range of futurologist predictions.
BRIEF
Design for (speculative) Social Innovation:
Design Futuring the City

Module Task – Create a designed outcome that surfaces a particular issue in relation to design for (speculative) social innovation.

For this brief you will need to identify one issue/prediction, which may potentially affect your home city in time to come (at least 50 years into the future) and come up with a designed outcome which attends to this prediction in some way.

Background: There are many predictions and forecasts out there about issues that will impact on how we will be living in the future. Nobody knows exactly which ones will turn out to be true, but as designers we have the ability to imagine the future and put our skills and material knowledge towards/or against creating particular futures.
The Anthropocene

Human population to reach 85 billion by 2030 (UN, 2015)

Haraway (2016) suggests we eschew individualism and that ‘making with’ is the approach to take.

Design can and should promote social innovation and change.

Student perspective
’...we are in such a position of dire need, in terms of climate change, over population, that it feels urgent to focus now... this topic is relevant and feels vitally important to consider the ethics of what is being designed and how it impacts the earth and others.


Part of the students exploration was to give consideration whether their visions of this future were utopian or dystopian and to develop an understanding of how design ‘futures’ and ‘defutures’ (Fry 2015) at the same time.
What matters?
How can speculative design briefs make design students aware of their agency within a broader social and environmental context?

Do visual methods to create and document these concepts support this agency?

How can design pedagogy and research make this agency active?
4 tutors

1 exhibition

48 project reports

10 projects chosen for a close reading (from HM or D level)

16 digital questionnaire responses

5 student interviews (1 tutor)

1 visual analysis day for 3 tutors (all 3D/makers)

Further analysis by 1 tutor
Student exhibition
The link between Yemen's traditional kitchen values in 2050
We have been reviewing student work to examine their agentic practices – can this been seen through the visuals? Connections to articulate methodology. How are these the Interface to understand agency

Thematic coding framework:
Users
City/place
Aesthetics/form
Prediction
Dystopian
Utopian
The future city as . . .
an imagined future
a diagram
national identity/ tradition
Your Government closer to you now than ever before

Mock-up of the app including the main app icon, home screen layout, notification bar and app permission warning that illustrates how the app uses the phone's microphone to monitor the subject.

A advertisement mock-up poster that illustrates the ministry of information advertising the censorship app under the guise that the app is in a way reducing the gap between government and people.
Agentic design
creational agency

Your Remedial Treatment

Instructio:

- To wear it 24 hours a day.
- Take it off every night and before showering.
- Do not wear while swimming.
- Check your arm and wear the band in front of the mirror every two months until your treatment is complete.
- Bring your object to every check-up appointment.
- Do not allow anyone to wear this band or let it contact with your treatment area.

(Figure 66. H. Russell, consultation, 2016a)

(Figure 67. H. Russell, sketchbook scan, 2016b)

(Figure 68. H. Russell, treatment leaflet, 2016b)
human robot relationship
sanctuaries

perspective

sensory aspects:
- low redacted
- lavender scent
- calming music
- soft surfaces like moss, carpet
day light

drinking water

indigenous plants
social innovation through critical design
Illustrations set up in a triangular layout with the tip of it being the symbol of the authoritarian dystopian government.

Items and illustrations are silhouetted vectors in order to look more generic to fit with the uniformity of a dystopia and the info-graphic style poster.

The language of the poster is direct simple and authoritative laying under the layout triangle and on top of the agency issuing it.

Label underneath with the seal and logo of my fictional ministry of technology it matches the official government issue poster and also the colours and ministry give a near medical agency look which is also linked to welfare.
Mental health
Majority of students experience mental health issues, says NUS survey

The survey, released as MPs meet to discuss student mental health, also shows 54% don't seek help
The city as
an interface to student cultural background
an interface to student wellbeing
Performative agency
Creational Agency
Although many of the projects had environmental futures as their starting points, many of the final outcomes focused on the imagined impact on individual and societal experience of everyday life.

This may hold further potential to encourage design students to become agents in both the micro and macro contexts of social and environmental sustainability.
We believe Design pedagogy, whether within or outside the art school, has a pivotal role to play in the making and un-making of design histories beyond dominant ontologies and a duty to contribute to more resilient social and environmental futures
Speculative design inquiries in relation to social innovation are one way of making visible how we as designers are trapped by our own ontological constructedness.

We need to strive to de-design ourselves to be able to think of ‘futures yet unthought’ (Grosz 1999) and to ‘challenge the status quo by facilitating other types of encounters, conversations, and imaginaries, and giving voice to people, things, and animals otherwise marginalized...’ (Kjearsgaard et al. 2016)
thank you!