

**LA+**  
INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL  
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## IN CONVERSATION WITH Anthony Dunne+Fiona Raby

**Anthony Dunne + Fiona Raby** are, in every possible sense of the word, designers. In the work of their practice, their teaching, and their writing they reframe the way society understands the world around it, offering momentary glimpses into other possible realities. As educators—previously at the Royal College of Art in London and currently at the New School in New York—Dunne + Raby are continuously redefining the role of design in society. Not by imagining better, sleeker, or more efficient “products,” but by creating work that is simultaneously curious, provocative, novel, inspiring, and unexpected. These speculations are not driven by industry or the market, but by an interest in alternate realities that might emerge from engaging in, what they term, “social dreaming.” Christopher Marcinkoski interviewed the designers for *LA+ Journal*.



+ For those unfamiliar with your writing and work, can you briefly describe what you mean by speculative design, and what you see as its primary values? And as a follow-up, how would you differentiate this kind of work from what one might otherwise describe or characterize as art practices?

Speculative design is a living, constantly evolving set of practices rather than a dogma or a theory so we have always resisted trying to define it too precisely. An ex-student of ours, currently working on a PhD exploring speculative design within a Chinese cultural context, told us her supervisor suggested using the term design speculations rather than speculative design – that makes a lot of sense as it shifts the focus back onto the work and specific projects rather than general descriptions or definitions.

With our book *Speculative Everything* (2013), we wanted to open up a space where speculative forms of design practice could thrive alongside more traditional modes of practice. It was intended to offer an alternative design framework for designers who instinctively rejected solution-oriented approaches to design but who struggled to find a context that celebrated criticality, imagination, and materiality. We provided many examples and references for people to begin to assemble their own forms of speculative practice rather than setting out how we

think it should be done. In the years since the book was published, speculative design has been embraced by all sorts of organizations and applied to many different professional, academic, and cultural contexts. As it comes into contact with different issues and challenges it continues to morph and mutate. For us, the most important thing is that imagining alternatives to how things are now gains more acceptance within design, especially in design education. But this does not mean it has to be about futures; in fact, for us, we find futures as the primary way of framing design speculations to be extremely limiting.

This all might sound a bit obvious to architects where there is a history of this kind of work going back hundreds of years, but in design, when it has happened, it has been in the service of marketing. For example, in the automotive industry there is a relatively long tradition of developing concept cars to test new markets and communicate new directions. We have focused on decoupling speculation from this role and making it available for a wider range of more socially oriented uses. We're very conscious of overlaps with architecture, literature, film, and art, but always try to focus on what design speculations can bring to the conversation that complement those of other disciplines.

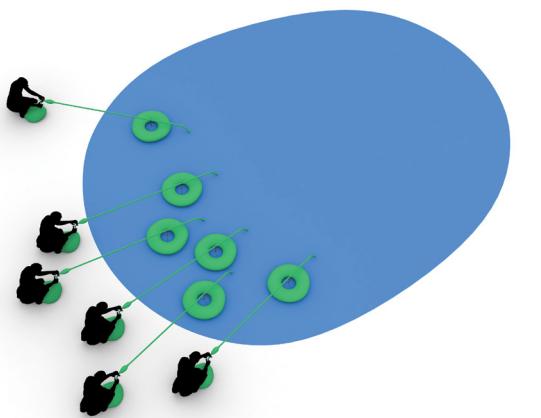
+ In the first chapter of *Speculative Everything*, you write that much of design is too often oriented towards "fiddling with the world out there, rather than the ideas and attitudes inside our heads that shape the world out there." Does a desire to solve problems foreclose on the possibility of a critical design practice?

Not at all. They are not mutually exclusive. Our argument is against prioritizing problem solving above all else – of seeing everything, no matter how complex, as a problem to be solved. We'd like to see a greater plurality of approaches in design.

+ In reflecting on your work, as well as the various projects included in *Speculative Everything*, it seems quite clear that you do not have a predilection for or fixation with any particular strain of technology, but rather are quite pluralistic about sources of inspiration. Do you see the implications of technology as more central to your work than the technology itself?

Yes, we do, especially when we were leading the Design Interactions program at the Royal College of Art in London. Working within the field of interaction design [very broadly defined], one of our goals was to move beyond using design to develop new applications for technology in an industry setting and instead to explore potential implications and consequences for it in more public settings. Recently, we have begun to focus on the other end of the process – the values and belief systems that drive technological development.

One of the attractions of joining The New School was being able to work with colleagues in disciplines such as anthropology, history, sociology, philosophy, and politics to explore other ways of seeing and understanding the world. In this context, design can serve as a catalyst for interdisciplinary imagining, and once these ideas are brought into a more public context, hopefully, they can spark further imagining. None of our



Previous Page and Opposite: "Foragers: Designs for an Overpopulated Planet" (2009).  
Left: "Algae Digester: Designs for an Overpopulated Planet" (2009).



designs are intended to be implemented in any form; their purpose is to enrich and broaden discussions about the kind of world(s) people wish to live in – not in the future, but now. We're very interested in exploring the role design can play in this process.

+ You point out that in much of contemporary design discourse, there is a tension between usefulness and fiction – that fiction is seen as something negative or wasteful. Why is it important that design understands fiction and speculation as means to resist or inflect dominant social mores or intractable economic models?

The process of deciding on what is considered real, and what is not, is where politics and the imagination meet. Politics today is a battle over the imagination, and work that operates on the imagination by

either maintaining pre-existing realities, or by challenging them through alternatives that encourage people to question prevailing worldviews becomes political. As Chiara Bottici and Benoît Challand write in *The Politics of Imagination*, "If politics has become a struggle for people's imagination this is, in the first place, due to the fact that such a struggle takes place within human beings and not just among them." Being aware of this as designers is "doing work politically," to borrow and slightly modify Thomas Hirschhorn's phrase; for practitioners, the politics are in the "how," not the "what." In this way, the unreal becomes political in the sense that it can challenge the limits people place on their own imaginations when it comes to thinking about, and questioning, what is possible.

The binary view, which divides the world of ideas, things, and thoughts into real and not real is extremely damaging to the fostering of imagination and its ability to uncover alternatives to how things are now. Especially when the word "unrealistic" often simply means "undesirable" to those in charge, rendering alternative realities impossible for everyone else. Designers need to move beyond this binary approach to dividing up thoughts, ideas, and things.



"Augmented Digestive System and Tree Processor: Designs for an Overpopulated Planet" [2009].

They all exist after all, just in different ways, otherwise it would not even be possible to think them. Design needs more nuanced ways of understanding and talking about this relationship, one that acknowledges that the real and the not real are just two poles on a subtle and rich spectrum.

A big issue for us in design education, at least in the West, is how the idea of reality—and more specifically, what is real and not real—is dealt with. With a few exceptions, at the heart of most current approaches to design pedagogy is a focus on thinking within existing realities whether social, political, economic, or technological, with the result that the ideas, beliefs, and values that have gotten us into many of the challenges we are currently facing are reproduced through design, endlessly. Yet the underlying logic driving the labelling of certain ideals as real and others as unreal is rarely challenged or even questioned, which leads to an ongoing suppression of the design imagination.

Clearly there are certain features of reality that are fixed, at least for the time being (science concerns itself with these), and there are certain unthinkable imaginary objects that can never exist anywhere, or even be thought. But these are the extremes. In between, there is a rich and fascinating space from which unknown realities might one day emerge. Not just things, but also beliefs, values, hopes, ideals, and dreams – the raw material from which new realities can be constructed.

+ I'd like to turn now to a question of aesthetics, and your choices of modes of representation and materiality. In considering your work, I would characterize it as having a kind of techno-simplicity or neutral modernity. You seem to emphasize a smoothness of form, the brightness of color, the plasticity/artificiality of material, and the absence of detail. There is nothing fuzzy or fussy in the work – it is conspicuously precise. Is this simply a personal predilection, a particular aesthetic ideal of the future, or are there other motivations at play?

A bit of all of these. How do you design for unreality, and what should it look like? How should the unreal, parallel, impossible, unknown, and yet-to-exist be represented? And how, in a design, can you simultaneously capture the real and not real? This is where the aesthetic challenge for speculative design lies, in successfully straddling both. To fall on either side is too easy. As designers working outside a strictly commercial context and aiming to engage people with complex ideas, one could argue that similar to film our designs should be about clear communication. But for us, this assumes a simple model of engagement based on transmitting meaning to a passive viewer. We think it is better to engage people through a skillful use of ambiguity, to surprise, and to take a more poetic and subtle approach to interrelationships between the real and the unreal.

Early on, we located our work within an industrial design and interaction design context. The idea was to turn the language of product design on itself so that the objects looked superficially technological and consumer oriented, but on closer inspection didn't quite make sense due to their functions and reason for existing. We recently did a wonderful residency at Pilchuck Glass School and it reminded us how much materiality can bring to a project, something we want to explore more in future projects.

+ I am curious about the role of the "weird" or the "absurd" in speculative design as an idea, and in your work in particular. It seems to me that there is enormous advantage to using spectacle as a means to provoke thought or reframe possible futures. However, there also seems to be a great deal of risk in relying on these qualities as they can be too easily dismissed as one-liners. Where do these qualities fit into your own work?

That's a problem with a lot of poorly executed speculative design, it focuses on the weird above all else. Hopefully in our work we manage to mix things up in more interesting ways. We like using familiar object typologies like vehicles, furniture, domestic products, and so on – objects people understand and can relate to, but transformed in ways that suggest they embody other values to prevailing ones. They usually have simple forms, but always with something that is not quite right, and that's the quality we spend a lot of time trying to achieve – different kinds of wrongness.

Mark Fisher put it very nicely in his book *The Weird and the Eerie*: "I want to argue that the weird is a particular kind of perturbation. It involves a sensation of wrongness: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet if the entity or object is here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid. The weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate." This beautifully captures what we see as the value of the weird.

+ In the context of increasing awareness of the interrelationship of things and actions – ecology in its broadest form – could you comment on the role of the systemic in speculative design? Should we understand the prop simply as a means of entry? Or does the object have some value in and of itself?

Both. I can't think of a single object that is not part of a system, whether an ecology, a system of ideas or beliefs, a technological network or infrastructure, or a legal or regulatory framework. When we see the object it is easy to forget all this. Or maybe simply not be aware of it. In our work, we always try to think through the systems our design would be entangled with, but as we are object focused we don't really show that side of the work. It's just part of the narrative we use to generate the work.

It's a very interesting time to be working with objects. Besides the different modes of existence an object can have [from the virtual to the actual], the different categories [such as models, props, prototypes, mock-ups], and all the cultural baggage attached to each, in addition, ideas from speculative realism, object oriented ontology, actor network theory, and hyperobjects provide wonderful new lenses for thinking about objects in new ways.

+ One final question, you write a great deal about designing for how things could be. Where do you see speculative design practices as having the greatest efficacy [engendering social good, changing behavioral patterns, deepening our awareness of the implications of technological regimes, something else]? Perhaps what you describe as "allowing for the production of billions of individual utopias"?

In design, when a project steps away from the here and now, it is automatically relocated to the future, often a possible [realistic] one. But futures, as a narrative framework, can be very limiting. They restrict the imagination through the requirement to link back to the present [which of course they are nearly always some version of] or extensions of current worldviews. We are more interested in starting with alternative worldviews and using design to give them form. They can be in the future, in the past, or in a parallel present, but most importantly for us, they are simply *not here, not now*.

By working with anthropologists, political scientists, and social theorists, design can contribute to the proliferation of multiple worlds existing in the collective imagination, enlarging it to provide a richer conceptual space from which to uncover alternatives to the present and consider the kind of world(s) people wish to live in. A form of interdisciplinary imagining that aims to inspire further

imagining, rather than communicating a vision of how things will or should be. In this role, the designer's task is to give form to a multiverse of hidden possibilities that can contribute to a culture of imaginative alterity materialized in ways that engage the mind by challenging it, shifting its focus, arresting it, motivating, and inspiring. Raising awareness that if reality is not given but made, then it can be unmade, and remade. This is not simply about the reimaging of everyday life – there are plenty of examples of this – it is about using unreality to question the authority of a specific reality in order to foreground its assumptions and ideology.

This is something we are currently exploring in a project we've called the "Many Worlds Working Group." The project began as a series of design responses to conversations about research in history, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and politics. A colleague described it as a sort of "other world's fair," which we both like. It's a proposal for a new kind of facility for public imagining, set in an alternative Floyd Bennett Airfield on the edge of New York which aims to provide a counterpoint to future visions as the primary framing device for imagining new realities. A sort of anti-futures facility, it would be a place where new worldviews can be developed and formulated into propositions, questions, hypothesis, ideas, and what-ifs – useful fictions materialized through large scale partial prototypes and models forming temporary landscapes of [social] thought experiments made physical.

It is not a place for testing ideas intended to be implemented, nor a public consultation forum, but rather a place where, in response to the complex fusion of politics and technology shaping today's social realities, speculative forms of material culture can be used to provoke new ideas and collective imagining about the kinds of worlds people wish to live in. One of the aims of the project is to experiment with and deepen understanding of the mechanics of unreality – utopias, dystopias, and heterotopias; what ifs and as ifs; hypotheses, thought experiments, and *reductio ad absurdum*; counterfactuals and uchronia, and so on. Synthesizing ideas from political science, anthropology, sociology, history, economics, and philosophy into new worldviews made tangible through an expanded form of design practice. The proposal itself is a question about the nature of futures and how they take shape within a society.



"Huggable Atomic Mushroom: Designs for Fragile Personalities in Anxious Times Project" (2004).

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