

The Archive of Impossible Objects is a platform for exploring other systems of reality that stretch our imaginations in ways that not only help us imagine how things could be otherwise, but also, how the way we think about reality might change. Impossible in this context means within our own narrow sense of what we deem real, or unreal.

There are other 'reals' that allow very different possibilities to exist—literature, the edges of science, non-western cultures and ontologies, and philosophy. As for objects, here we are thinking more about models than products or prototypes. Models as ideas made concrete, physical proxies for other realities, impossibilia, abstracta and ontological oddities.

This was a space to discuss, share and explore ideas along these lines and to think about how such a space might exist in a society, what it might contain, and how it is made accessible to different publics. During the workshop we developed proposals for new impossible objects that expanded the archive.

AN ARCHIVE OF IMPOSSIBLE OBJECTS

MP ∞ Over the last ten years, Dunne & Raby have consolidated a methodology of design and teaching that involved the formulation of fictional worlds often in relation to technological and scientific contemporary and future-gazing agendas. How does the new context of Parsons New School in New York, surrounded by disciplinary fields such as sociology and anthropology, impact on the role of fiction and the formulation of fictional worlds in your work?

D&R ∫ At The New School we're exploring how by collaborating with colleagues working in anthropology, political science, philosophy and other related disciplines we can develop design responses better suited to the wild "quantum politics" shaping our current realities. Our teaching and research here is less about extrapolating technological futures, even critically, or exploring the implications of science and emerging technology, and is more focussed on new kinds of political imaginaries and other ways of seeing the world, made tangible through the design of everyday things.

MP ∞ Could you expand a little on the notion of "quantum politics" and the political imaginaries that are emerging out of your practice there?

D&R ∫ This is something we have just begun to explore. Looking at what is happening with politics in the US and especially the UK, and even in Russia, it seems that classical frameworks related to a Newtonian way of understanding the world—cause and effect, objective reality, linear time, etc.—can no

longer describe contemporary political realities, and the seemingly contradictory rhetoric they generate.

We began to wonder if we have entered a time when quantum concepts would be more helpful for describing the new forms of political reality currently taking shape around us. Something we also see creeping into the language being used by journalists and political commentators—parallel worlds, multiple realities, etc. For example in Hong Kong: "One Country, Two Nationalisms", or for climate change: "Same Planet, Different Worlds". And of course Brexit, where, two, or maybe even more, competing versions of the United Kingdom are battling it out within the public imagination, giving rise to increasingly paradoxical political rhetoric and tactics the media can barely make sense of. A sort of quantum politics.

Bringing this back to design, we're trying to think about what it means to design for a time when quantum theory has gone mainstream, become a sort of "quantum common sense", something we might see happening as technologies like quantum computing gradually enter everyday life. But this is all in progress and we're mainly reading around the topic and speaking to experts at the moment.

MP ∞ For *Fiction Practice* you set up a workshop programme that took the idea of impossible objects as a starting point. What constitutes an impossible object?

D&R ∫ One way of thinking about possible objects is as objects that reinforce the existing status quo,

whereas impossible objects exist beyond the constantly shifting border between the real and the unreal. Not unreal in the sense they defy the laws of physics, but because they don't fit our current worldview, our "real", which is just one amongst many (im)possibilities.

We're interested in using the idea of the impossible object as a way of exploring how we construct limits to what is possible, within us, in our collective imagination. Where do these boundaries come from, how are they internalised, and most importantly, what processes would enable us to breach their artificially constructed borders allowing the seemingly impossible to become possible.

MP ∖ This implicit political desire in your practice, how does it get shared with others? And does it shift when it is participated? I'm thinking of your collaborators, your students, and our workshop participants, for example.

D&R ∫ As you say, for us, the political dimension of design is implicit rather than explicit. We are not interested in "campaign design", or design as a form of physical propaganda, we're not against it, it's just not where we want to focus our efforts. We're more interested in using design to catalyse new thoughts, imaginings, ideas and (im)possibilities in other people's minds. It is in the mind after all that ideas are born, and die.

We try to do this by creating spaces that resist the pull of prevailing currents, that offer small eddies of calm, where people can pause, think, look

inwards for a moment and take stock of their own position in relation to the ideas we bring to the situation. These could be classes, projects, or events like this one. Ideally, exhibitions would be places like this too, for reflection and contemplation.

While it is super important to focus on changing the world out there, we also need to create opportunities to think about the worlds inside us, that we carry around in our minds, and whether they need to change too.

MP ∖ How did you get the group to think of, search for, or create such impossible objects? And what kind of ideas were circulating among participants during the workshop days?

D&R ∫ We're not sure, it sort of just happens! At the start of every workshop we wonder if the theme will connect with the participants, and if anything will come from it. It takes lots of trust, from both sides, but interesting results always seem to emerge.

In this case, we were also very conscious of the context and didn't want pretend we could be anywhere, but to acknowledge that we were in Porto with its own specific culture and history of impossible objects. We were very grateful to be able to visit several institutions including the Centro Internacional das Artes José de Guimarães, which specialises in ethnology, and Cruzes Canhoto, a gallery for outsider art, as well as inviting Matilde Seabra and Francisco Adão da Fonseca to speak about the early 20th century Portuguese eco-utopian Padre Himalaya and his wonderful inventions.



Everyone had ideas very quickly, but as is often the case, the gravitational pull of the real meant the participants also spent a considerable amount of time doubting and questioning their ideas which served as a sort of testing process against what they were doing in their own practice, the workshop theme, and larger issues. A process we like to think of as “intuition chased by reason”. Reason is used to test the original intuitive idea to breaking point and to aid its development. For many, this is the wrong way round, but we think it works well.



In only a few days, the participants explored many different kinds of impossibility, from paradoxes to social taboos, or alternative realities. For example, starting with Momus’ statement that “every lie creates a parallel world, the world in which it is true”, Nestor Pestana proposed four (impossible) masks for navigating the parallel, orthogonal, elastic and bent realities created by politicians’ lies. Madalena Lopes asked, if we can imagine an impossible object, is it still impossible; while anthropologist Maria Restivo proposed new saints for new realities illustrated by Juhee Hahm; and Beatriz Granado presented annotated notes from an interview with an entity from a place where only paradoxes are real.

MP \ The workshop started with a lecture that expressed your current research focus and preoccupations, could you share some of them?

D&R \ The lecture focussed on the archive of impossible objects we are currently developing which

as of now, contains twelve objects, each one a jumping off point for reflection on various forms of speculative thought: different “reals”; politics and the collective imagination; the aesthetics of unreality; and designerly modes of inquiry. Examples so far include an object with only the property of being blue; quantum round squares; globes of planets from literature and the fringes of science; everyday objects designed for other temporalities; swatches of impossible colours; a Russian noo-scope, various speculative topographies; and other ontological oddities...

The archive grew out of an encounter at the MAK in Vienna with the ideas of Alexius Meinong, an early 20th century Austrian psychologist and philosopher known for his Theory of Objects, sometimes called Meinong’s Jungle. His taxonomy challenges simple binaries such as real/not real, actual/imagined, impossible/possible and so on, making room for different shades of real. One of his objects, an object with only the property of being blue, made us wonder if it could form the basis of a more abstract approach to world-building. What kind of world could such an object exist in, and could it show us anything interesting about our own reality? From there we began to add more.

The big shift for us over the last few years has been to move away from futures as the primary framework for designing for the “not here, not now”, and to seek out other less constrained, and possibly more poetic approaches, that engage people’s imaginations more fully. The archive is a device to help us both make this conceptual shift.

MP \ One of the images that you mentioned when we began talking about *Fiction Practice* was José Saramago’s *The Stone Raft*, a novel in which the Iberian Peninsula detaches from Europe. This literary image—the split—serves as a means to create a political imaginary. The imaginary develops from the specifics of the spatial condition that was set up, at least for the reader, who by following the narrative will understand the many dimensions of such a simple event. The way you describe your methodology beginning with intuition and then followed by reason could be seen as a similar gesture, where you take a proposition to its last consequences, letting the work develop from an image created at the start. This kind of approach is very different from what is traditionally seen as a design method, which tends to identify a “need” or a “why” first, and then work on a solution.

D&R \ As increasing numbers of designers move into research, often in the form of a PhD, there’s a risk that they leave behind their practice and attempt to adopt the methods of other fields which seem more obviously rigorous and rational, and therefore provide a feeling of security. We believe that design shouldn’t mimic other models, but instead, explore its own methods and research culture, and draw from intuition. For us, design is an applied art and starts from a similar place, at least for the kind of design we are involved with.

We wouldn’t suggest using this method to design practical products, but in an educational context, it seems to allow students a way of

accessing more subjective, and often highly original ideas. It's a counterpoint to heavily theoretical approaches to education, and ultimately, it's an act of subversion and even resistance aimed at prioritizing the imagination.

At a time when we hear almost daily that design will soon be automated, we need to focus on what makes us human, on what machines (currently) struggle to reproduce, like subjectivity, intuition and our inner rich worlds... the stuff that makes us complicated, contradictory and deeply human.

MP ` In recent years there has been a growing interest in the science fiction and political fiction genres, for example through the popularization of the work of Margaret Atwood through the making of TV series, but also in the future as a subject, with countless exhibitions, books and cultural programmes being created. In your opinion, what might be causing this phenomena, and does it impact on the so called speculative design field?

D&R ` It's too difficult to say precisely why this is, but clearly, for many people, existing reality is broken, at least in the West. For us, this hunger for new political imaginaries and other ways of seeing the world, helps create a "climate of possibility" from which new realities might begin to emerge.

Amongst the many kinds of speculative culture that exist, the interesting issue for us is what speculative forms of design practice can bring to the conversation that complement work being done in other fields. If you want to have a big impact, then

film and TV seem more effective. But one thing design does well in this area, maybe uniquely so, is to bring fragments from imaginary worlds found into the space of the viewer, often in a form that echoes everyday objects, products and systems.

Design materializes only small parts of fictional worlds unlike architecture or science-fiction cinema where whole cities and worlds can be represented. Maybe this fragmentary approach creates more room for the viewer to imagine the world it belongs to for themselves, so perhaps another quality design brings to the conversation is a more suggestive and open-ended approach. But compared to literature and even architecture, where speculative forms of thought have existed for centuries, it's still early days for design.



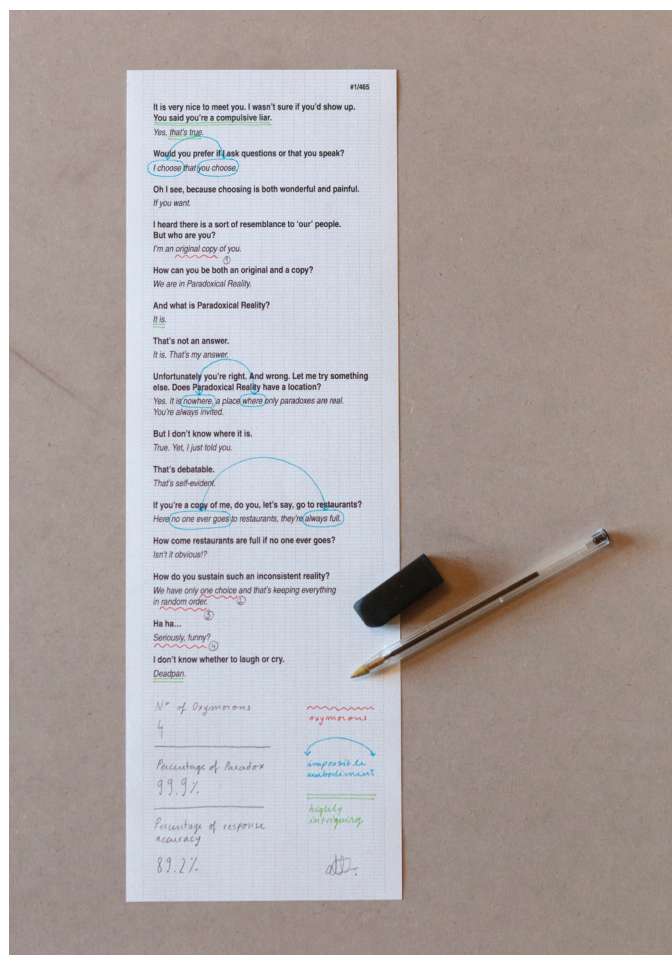


AN ARCHIVE OF IMPOSSIBLE OBJECTS

LED BY FIONA RABY
AND ANTHONY DUNNE
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
BY JUHEE HAHM

PARTICIPANTS:
BEATRIZ DE LIMA GRANADO,
GABRIELE LEO,
MADALENA LOPES,
GRAZIA MAPPA,
JOÃO PEREIRA,
NESTOR PESTANA,
MARIA MANUELA RESTIVO,
KAT THIEL

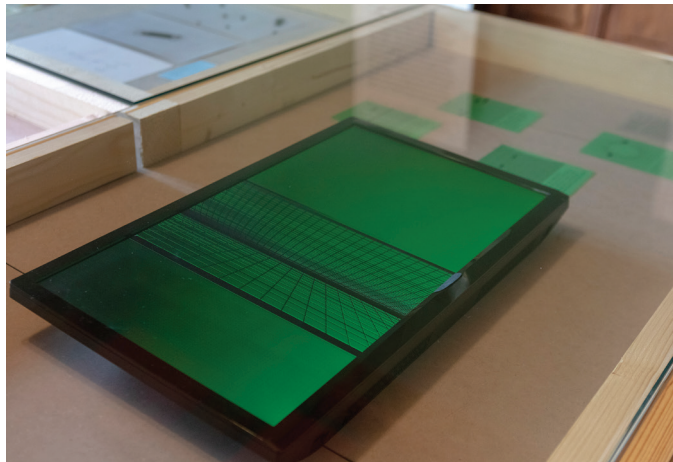
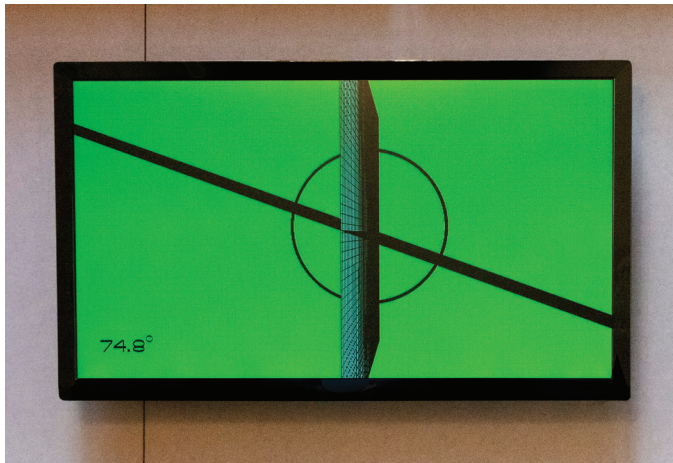
WITH THE CONTRIBUTION OF:
MATILDE SEABRA,
SKREI,
CRUZES CANHOTO



Beatriz Granado ∞ Paradoxical Reality.

– Where only paradoxes are real

This document presents an extract from a brief interview with a paradoxicalist.



Nestor Pestana ∞ Every Lie Creates a Parallel World...Σηε World ηη ωήγicη it's True, (The Book of Scotlands, Momus). Parallel universes. Bent universes. Bouncing universes. Diagonal universes. What if lies created other universes? Drawing from quantum physics to explain the existence of a multiverse of lies, this project proposes a mode of communication where masks act as portals for multidimensional communication. Governmental Multi-universe Meetings (GMM) are organised by the people to make their governments accountable for the complex universes they have created with their lies.



Alhures Studio ∞ (Maria Manuela Restivo and Luciano Moreira) New saints for new needs. Illustrations by Juhee Hahm. Saints have been central figures in the religious imaginary for centuries. Their extraordinary lives can serve as an example to be followed, but they can also intervene in your life when you have specific needs or desires. Are the existing saints responding to the specificities of 21st century anxieties? In this workshop we tried to imagine the saints that meet our neglected needs, fictionalizing their lives and wondering about their magical abilities.