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Week 5. Speculative Design

DESIGN OF 'WHAT IF?'

keywords: present (here and now), alternative present, future, technology, speculation, uncanny

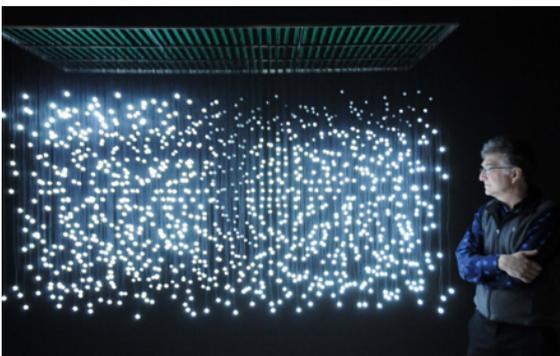
Speculative design is an act of storytelling, seeing the objects in a different way from its original cultural context. It is not only the way of imagining the future, but also a method which is focusing on the present (here and now) while analyzing and re-thinking about the current technology. We can see the possibility of 'alternative presents' by thinking differently in a perspective of uncanny. What questions there can be in this design method in terms of interaction? Also, what steps that interaction designers could take while developing their design with this method? While doing the research under these two main questions, I tried to find examples in a variety of fields that can evoke some more relevant queries and discussions related to the concept of speculative design.

Question 1: The difference between a true interaction and a Mimicry?

While doing the research about the interactive artworks, I could find many artists using a variety of methods with different kinds of objects. However, In the field of marketing and designing of products, this 'interactive technology' seemed more like as a tool for delivering the idea of futuristic atmosphere to the customers. This reminded me the reading 'Delusions of Dialogue: Control and Choice in Interactive Art (Jim Campbell, 1999)', where the author asks a question about the true interaction and its mimicry.



(Digital interactive roads, Audi Urban Future Exhibit at Design Miami 2011: <http://www.trendhunter.com/trends/audi-urban-future>)

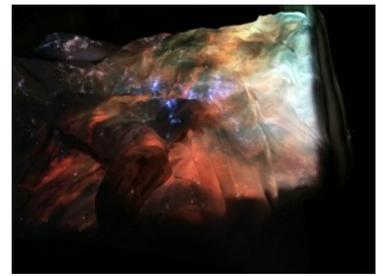


(Jim Campbell standing in front of his artwork 'Exploded View' in 2010. <http://proyectoidis.org/jim-campbell/>)

In his document, Campbell brings out the idea that the real interaction should not only be switch on- and off of a screen while showing some past images or concepts, but a communication of the 'present' between the artists and viewers through the technology. I thought this can be a crucial point for interaction artists and designers to keep in mind while they are approaching their project, before trying to polish it with the latest technologies.

Talking about my personal experience in interacting with an artwork, I remember visiting the 'Kunst Haus in Zürich, 2016. There, I coincidentally saw the exhibition of a Swiss visual artist 'Pipilotti Rist'. Her artworks were mainly based on the video, sound, and images created by herself. Even though they were the recording of the past, I could feel the strong sense of 'being there' with the movements of images which were being presented at 'that time'. Although I wasn't touching on a computer screen, the interaction was

there between me and the time and space that the artist was providing. The method of interaction in the exhibition were the long fabric materials and lines of dangling crystals, reflecting the visions of the video. I could listen, touch and feel that objects in that very moments while being inside of the whole atmosphere. Therefore, although Pipilotti Rist is not specified as an 'interaction artist', I thought this experience could be an example for thinking about the interaction of the 'present', which is also relevant for the speculative design.



(Pipilotti Rist, Exhibition at Kunst Haus Zurich, 12.03. 2016, photographer: Juyoung Yi)

Question 2: The border between speculative design, art and insanity?



(Stelarc, CNN style, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/08/13/arts/stelarc-ear-arm-art/>)

While talking more about the concept of time, there is another interesting idea to think about which is 'uncanny' in the speculative design. Stelarc, an award-winning Australian performance artist, implemented an ear on his arm. Thanks to the modern medical technology, he can actually hear with his arm in 'present' while interacting with outer circumstances. Also, like in speculative design, this man didn't do this for the commercial purpose. He claims that he seeks 'what a body could be' with the technology nowadays. If we can consider a 'radio tooth (Speculative design: The products that technology could become, James Auger, 2012)' as a project speculating the possible future or an alternative present with current

technology, what can we say about Stelarc's performance? Actually, Cutting off the ear is a well-known incident for Vincent Van Gogh and his insanity. I think it is interesting to think that now we are living in the era that implementing the third ear can be considered as an artwork.

Question 3: Interaction with the objects, another form of life?

Now let's take this 'uncanny' or 'thinking differently' in a perspective of objects. Thinking about a product or an object, it is common to come up with their usage rather than their 'secret lives' that is mentioned in 'Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects (Anthony Dunne & Fiona Raby, 2001)'. By changing the meanings of the objects and focusing on the interaction, the reading shows that the designers can actually create another form of 'life'. The project mentioned in the reading 'Expanding on Wabi-Sabi as a Design Resource in HCI (Vasiliki Tsaknaki & Ylva Fernaeus, 2016)' scopes imperfection and mortality, which are the characteristics that every living organisms have.

This reminded me of a Japanese industrial designer, Tokujin Yoshioka, and his foldable paper chair. The material he used is the paper, having a meaning of 'nothing lasts'. The interesting part of this chair is that it is never having a fixed form as it shapes with the person who sits on it (which shows the 'imperfection'). Of course, to make this concept into a real object, Yoshioka had to develop a special method and technology that can make the paper more sustainable after being folded for several times. Regarding that he tried to see the chair as a 'constantly changeable thing throughout the interaction' while using the new material technology, I think his object contains some ideas of speculative design as well.



(Tokujin Yoshioka, moma the collection pop armchair, 2000, <https://www.pinterest.com/officinem/omd-tokujin-yoshioka/>)

Lessons learned: About the methods of speculative design

- A designer should first consider the context that the speculative objects would exist. this ecological approach helps to ground the concept in our familiar reality. In some way, it is like considering the system and environment in design process like mentioned in 'Systems and Art (Jack Burnham, 1969.)'
- Like in an observational comedy, speculative design starts from observing the mundane reality and analyzing it in 'specific' (in particular time, place and person). Then with this foundation, a designer can speculate a technological future or alternative present which is 'unfamiliar' while making a perceptual sense.
- Transforming design research to true products are important in speculative design. Some psychological issues like 'uncanny' could appear in this process with a technological believability. One thing a designer should keep in mind that this is far from the intentions of bringing the product to market.

Personal ideas & More questions: About time, objects, design, art and the interaction

- Maybe, future is not existing 'in front' of the timeline. Perhaps it is on the side of the 'present', as a parallel line we can never reach. Speculating the future could be an act of imagining that 'alternative present' with the idea of 'uncanny'.
- In terms of speculative design, objects are not only just the end products of needs. They are existing in the process of interaction with people which is happening in the 'here and now'. Maybe we could call this process as 'giving a life'.
- As Ernest A. Edmonds said in 'Human Computer Interaction, Art and Experience(2014)', Art was interactive before the use of the modern technologies. If we say 'design' is the word embracing the whole human thinking process, probably art has been one of the most powerful ways of it in delivering and perceiving the ideas. Now with the developing technologies, what can be the new possibilities of interaction in the field of art?

While studying about the speculative design, I could learn that different perspectives of thinking toward time, objects and technology can open new possibilities for designers with their projects and products. I could also find out the various artists and designers who are sharing the ideas of speculative design as well, by researching about the examples. I hope the themes and questions that I presented would help to make further connections of ideas and discussions for us, as the interaction designers.

References

Readings

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Images

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3. Pipilotti Rist, Exhibition at Kunst Haus Zurich, 12.03. 2016, photographer: Juyoung Yi
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5. Tokujin Yoshioka, moma the collection pop armchair, 2000, <https://www.pinterest.com/officinem/omd-tokujin-yoshioka/>