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The Science of Imagining Solutions

Design Becoming Conscious of Itself Through Design

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Abstract

This dissertation addresses a paradox in design: we currently live in a day and age that is fundamentally conditioned by artifice on all scales, and principled by a deep sense of contingency and possibility. In this world, any thing could always be something else. Design is a discipline uniquely capable of configuring artifice, instantiating it into a stream of different design artefacts. In this way, design uniquely captures and shows forth possibility, not only on the scale of individual products, but also on the level of the artificial, in other words speaking directly to our contemporary human existence, to the sense of possibility as such. We can say that—distinct from other disciplines—design contributes knowledge through this very practice of possibilizing. Strangely, design displays a curious lack of consciousness of itself with respect to this unique capability, preferring to instead put its growing array of design methods and design thinking tool kits to use in the latest problem areas, thereby implicitly affirming the lack of any distinct knowledge contribution at its core. With a commitment to reverse this dynamic by exploring this very capability, this dissertation concerns the prototyping of a pataphysically infused design practice, as a way of making design more conscious of itself. Pataphysics, articulated by the poet Alfred Jarry at the turn of the 20th century Paris, and popularly referred to as ‘the science of imaginary solutions’, is a notoriously slippery substance, successfully eluding academic autopsy, let alone categorisation or definition. While critical design practice has extensively adopted methods and tactics from the avant-garde movements following and drawing on pataphysics—such as dadaism, surrealism and situationism—this dissertation seeks to rectify this incomplete lineage, by bringing out the timeless pataphysical impulse in design. This process of bringing out the pataphysical impulse, is what I discuss as an ‘infusion’ of pataphysics into my research practice. The research practice consists of a series of five different projects, carried out in the methodological tradition of research through design, where I explore pataphysics as a possible conceptual foundation for design. In each of the projects, design’s capability to possibilize, is brought out just beyond the edge of design’s disciplinary domain, making a self-conscious foray into contemporary problem areas of printmaking, global mass surveillance, smart cities, future making, and design discourse building. By playing out across the material and immaterial, fluidly and consciously transgressing the actual and the imaginary in this range of different contexts, the dissertation shows what a pataphysically infused design practice is: a design that not only views its artefacts, experiments, and projects, but also itself, along with the world in which it operates, as imaginary solutions. In addition to the practice itself, one of the imaginary solutions produced through the research practice is the science of imagining solutions. This is a theory describing the way in which a design conscious of itself is uniquely able to show forth possibility to the world and to knowledge as large. Finally, this dissertation does not only concern design itself as a discipline, but with its focus on design’s unique capability to show forth possibility as such, more broadly speaks to a world that currently sees the sense of possibility being curtailed in numerous ways.

Keywords

design, pataphysics, possibility, imaginaries, imagination, the artificial, critical practice, critical design, speculative design, design fiction, participatory design, smart cities, lies, metadata, surveillance, failures, research through design, constructive design research, epiphenomenology, quantum poetics

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