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Making, Mending and Growing in Feminist Speculative Fabulations: Design's Unfaithful Daughters

Keywords: speculative; futures; feminism; decolonial; politics;

1. Catalyst Information

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2. Context of Conversation Topic

Drawing inspiration from a recent book by Stengers and Despret (2014), this conversation seeks to consider design research practices around critical and speculative design (Dunne & Raby, 2009, 2013), which have been criticized for their lack of public engagement and awareness of their political and normative positions. In particular, we are interested in the ways in which feminist speculative fabulation (Haraway, 2011) offer alternative approaches through attention to core feminist arguments around corporeality, materiality, embodiment, affectivity and experientiality. Haraway discusses the ways in which “worlding” happens in part due to material artifacts as well as the ways in which the factual, fictional and fabulated come together in research. She draws on Marilyn Strathern’s ethnographic work on gender, stating that “It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.” Mazé argues

that "the future, or futures, that are imagined, materialized and intervened by design, represent different perspectives, preferences and, indeed, different realities...Elaborating and multiplying possible futures is an exercise of power," (in press 2016). Bardzell (2010) describes a feminist HCI methodology as including: a commitment to both scientific and moral objectives, a connection to feminist theory, a deliberate use of methods based on values and goals, an empathic relationship with research participants, transparency around the role of the researcher along with their beliefs, co-construction of research, mixed methodologies and reflexivity.

This conversation will draw inspiration from critical feminist theory such as Haraway's cat's cradle (1994) as well as recent examples from critically engaged design practice on topics such as composting (Lindström & Ståhl, forthcoming), the spider-ant (Jönsson, 2014), the future of work (Forlano & Halpern, 2016), and the history of women cyclists (Jungnickel, 2014). In particular, we will imagine new ways of practicing design by examining relationships between speculative futures and reimaginings of the past; the role of a feminist perspective in problem-making and questioning; speculative design and fabulation as participatory practice; the role of practices around mending, growing (Hallam & Ingold, 2014), maintaining and repairing (Jackson, 2014); and, the posthuman design and the anthropocene. These examples and themes will be enacted through collaborative prototyping and the crafting of new feminist speculative fabulations that will materially embody the discussion and allow for an active, experiential session. In this way, and in keeping with feminist figurations, this conversation will engage in a double move to leave something behind while also suggesting something new (Åsberg, Hultman, & Lee, 2012).

3. Organizing research question

How can a feminist approach to critical and speculative design allow for the formation of alternative possible futures and histories? What kinds of questions can be raised through imagining feminist futures and utopias as well as re-imaginings of history? How might the politics, aesthetics and materiality around speculative prototypes suggest explicit connections with feminism? How can engagement with speculative prototypes suggest a more participatory and co-designed experience? How can we emphasize not only the making of the new but also mending, growing, maintaining and repairing?

4. Set-up of your session

This conversation is envisioned as a two-part experience for participants. For the first hour, the group will discuss the key research questions and sub-questions. For the second hour, the group will work together to prototype an object (or set of objects) that can act as a material embodiment of the discussion. Laura Forlano will play the role of facilitating the participation of the catalysts as well as the broader audience of participants in the conversation. She will also be responsible for photography, audio and video documentation of the session. Åsa Ståhl will contribute key examples from feminist speculative design and speculative fabulation for discussion by the group. Kristina Lindström will document the

session through live note-taking that will be displayed visually (either on a screen or whiteboard) so that participants can follow the flow of the conversation during the session. Li Jönsson will lead the group in prototyping a speculative fabulation that incorporates key aspects of the discussion. Ramia Mazé will act as a discussant to contribute relevant perspectives from critical design theory and feminist philosophy. All five catalysts will participate in the discussion and the prototyping activity.

5. Type of space and equipment required

While the conversation will be open, the group will prepare 5-10 visual images of key examples of speculative prototypes and fabulations in order to focus the discussion. In addition, the group will bring 5-10 specific examples of women's contributions to the field of design from a variety of disciplines and sources. Images will either be displayed on a screen or handed out in hard copy. Following the discussion, the group will prototype a material embodiment of the discussion, drawing on the visual images and descriptions that have been incorporated into the session. This conversation requires an open room for at least 30 participants with movable seating, 6 tables, an LCD projector and 2-3 whiteboards. All materials for prototyping will be provided by the group. The visual display of live notes as well as the physical prototype will allow for participants to follow and engage in the discussion in an active and engaging format.

6. Dissemination strategy

The discussion and prototyping during the conversation will be documented with live notes, photography, audio and video. These materials will be curated into a visual pamphlet or fanzine about feminist speculative fabulations i.e. "Experiments in (and Out) of the Studio" pamphlet (Forlano, Hannah, Jungnickel, McHardy, & Rogers, 2012) and "Making Futures," the fanzine and companion guide (Ehn, Watts, M., & Topgaard, 2012), which was a prequel to *Making Futures* (Ehn, Nilsson, & Topgaard, 2014).

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About the Catalysts:

Laura Forlano is an Assistant Professor of Design at the Institute of Design where she is Director of the **Critical Futures Lab**. Her research is focused on the intersection between emerging technologies, material practices and the future of cities.

Åsa Ståhl, postdoc in design at Umeå University, explores hybrid matters in public engagement events together with Kristina Lindström. This work builds on their transdisciplinary practice-led PhD on *making* in relation to co-articulations of emergent issues of living with mundane technologies.

Kristina Lindström is a postdoc in design at Umeå University. Together with Åsa Ståhl she did a practice-based PhD on how hands-on making can facilitate co-articulations of emergent issues of living with technologies. Her current research deals with public engagement with a focus on hybrid matters.

Li Jönsson's interests lie in the attempt to move beyond the anthropocentric positioning in design by linking discussions between more recent materialist approaches at the same time as being a designer/maker. Her recent projects explore computational technology and the politics of participation as a 'speculative co-design'.

Ramia Mazé specializes in critical and politically-engaged design and design research practices. She is Professor of New Frontiers in Design at Aalto University, Finland. One of her current projects is 'Feminist Futures' with colleagues from KTH Royal Institute of Technology and from Mycket, Sweden.