On Interventionist Speculation

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I can honestly call myself an anthropologist, an archaeologist, a sociologist, or a design researcher—but the truth is that I'm an intellectual mongrel who enjoys intervening in, and between, disciplines and practices. My research is committed to multispecies and more-than-human concerns, and my interventions in design anthropology are speculative both in the sense that they rely on incomplete knowledge, and in the sense that they make things up. My position on speculative interventions is compatible with those of Ingold and DiSalvo in ways described below, and I also hope to offer a few subtle, but interesting, twists and turns based on my own experience.

Anthropological design ethnography

In his paper for the "Interventionist Speculations" seminar in 2014, Tim Ingold argued that ethnography, as an exclusively retrospective activity, should be replaced with a more broadly anthropological participant observation—and I agree. The embodied, situated engagement of anthropologists is to transform, and be transformed, by the world. In this way, anthropology is indeed already as much a practice as design, and we need not strain ourselves to imagine "an anthropology *by means of* design" (Gatt and Ingold, 2013).

But I'm not willing to entirely give up (on) ethnography. I approach it from the perspective of Haraway's modest witness: "suspicious, implicated, knowing, ignorant, worried, and hopeful" (1997, p. 3). To do this, I practise ethnographic participant observation like a designer: iteratively. And this means that I don't have to choose between retrospection and prospection; I continually move *through* both asynchronously, but not "schizochronically" as Ingold describes.

Speculative interventions as inquiry

Carl DiSalvo's paper for the "Interventionist Speculations" seminar addressed speculation as a mode of inquiry, and this also resonates with my experience as a speculative design

ethnographer. Just as I engage in participant observation with curious uncertainty, speculative design allows me to open up rather than close down spaces of possibility. In fact, I specifically choose to work with speculative design because it can avoid the problem-solving imperative that limits other forms of design in much the same way as an exclusively retrospective approach to ethnography does.

DiSalvo describes the kind of speculative interventions he does as being similar to collaborative research *through* but not necessarily *for* design, and I tend to see what I do as a kind of co-production of knowledge both through and for design, depending on the kind of speculation. As DiSalvo describes research for design as something to "better the design of products or services in the here and now," I would argue that it is just as much "for design" to imagine situations that should not move beyond speculative interventions.

DiSalvo and I are also in (perplexed) agreement around the bigger issue of impact—but I would add that impact is inextricable from, although not the same as, intention. A common claim among speculative designers is that our/their designs present new worlds in which people can explore, or even debate, complex issues. But even when speculative interventions are used as a mode of inquiry, little systematic effort is put into assessing (or even asking what it might mean to assess) what participants/audiences get—or take—from design processes or products.

Do People Dream of Electric Sheep?

To contextualise and expand on my comments above, I would like to close by sharing a few thoughts on a project of mine. As a means of exploring how animals might make their way into an "Internet of Things," the *Counting Sheep* project used participant observation and interviews to understand how New Zealand Merino sheep are produced and consumed, and then a team of us created a set of speculative design scenarios in which their production and consumption was mediated by networked identification and context-aware technologies. These scenarios were then put online, and visitors invited to complete surveys in response. (Readers can visit the original project website at: http://countingsheep.info/)

The primary goal with our scenarios was to be transformative, to re/present people's actual hopes and fears in ways that made the familiar strange, and the strange familiar. I followed Ursula Le Guin on fantasy's ability "to restore the sense—to regain the knowledge—that there is somewhere else, anywhere else, where other people may live another kind of life" (Le Guin, 2009, p. 41) and Haraway on research that "strives to build

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attachment sites and tie sticky knots to bind intra-acting critters, including people, together in the kinds of response and regard that change the subject—and the object" (Haraway, 2007, p. 287).

However, the main point I'd like to share in response to, and support of, Ingold and DiSalvo is that my speculative interventions produced what Mike Michael (2012) has called "difficult objects," or those things that:

> warp the scientific and the social (as mediated by the designers)—have implications that are good and bad, individual and collective, internal and external, biological and cultural, emancipatory and authoritarian, modest and arrogant, cruel and funny, academic and commercial, serious and playful, and of course, designerly and scientific.

And when we (anthropologists and designers) produce difficult objects we have to be prepared for participants and audiences who "misunderstand" our intentions or "misbehave" in response—including not being interested in what we're doing.

Sure enough, despite our actual intentions, responses to the *Counting Sheep* scenarios most often assumed that we were advocating for these particular futures and, more often than not, respondents told us that our visions were ludicrous or unpleasant. Some even became hostile, accusing us of industry shilling and unethical research. But mostly, people didn't care one way or the other. It turned out that we (researchers) were far more interested in these possibilities than anyone else. And *that*, I'll suggest, it what made them so valuable as a mode of inquiry. I may not have learnt much about animals in an Internet of Things, but I learnt quite a bit about what people do think is interesting or important. As DiSalvo (2009) has noted, design *constructs* publics and our speculative interventions were no exception. Multiple publics worked iteratively and asynchronously, using both memory and imagination, to share matters of concern in a continuous, emergent present. We (be)came together, but we did not become one.

How do we measure that kind of impact?

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