SF = Superflux

TRUTH IS A MATTER OF IMAGINATION

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Reality is more abstract than abstraction — Jean Helion
In your work, projected future scenarios are materialised in very concrete or 'real' ways. What role does fiction play in your practice and how do you understand the relationship between fiction and reality?

It's a question of how we use fiction. We use it as a means of exploring nonfiction, examining where we are now by extrapolating and speaking through allegories. Our fictions are about analyzing the social fictions that we already live within, the stories we tell ourselves about the way the world is, the way things operate and exploring the potentials in that.

Coming from a narrative and filmmaking background there is always a desire to tell a story. We are also fans of Ursula le Guin's work, amongst many others. Her quote that we keep coming back to is, 'Sometimes the most direct way to tell the truth is to tell a totally implausible story, like a myth.' In that way you avoid pretending the story ever happened or ever will happen. Even though we are not quite at that point, we do confuse whether this really happened or not. We use that as a medium or a material to draw attention to very 'real things,' because what is reality anyway? Reality is made of stories, it is a grand narrative we tend to believe to be real.

We are trying to understand how we get so entrenched in certain narratives. We are questioning our entrenchment within this very manufactured reality that is being increasingly algorithmically manipulated. We are trying to figure out ways to question our own belief in certain ideologies and opinions. 'This is right,' and 'right wing' and 'this is left,' 'left wing.' These models of reality have been constructed. We keep pushing ourselves deeper and deeper into these ideological frameworks.

DUE

It seems law could be one example of a system related to your work that asserts realities. In your view, how do these realities and stories become real and is there a verification process?

SF

We think a lot about the grand narratives that we are often asked to accept or that we inherit, about how relevant they are, and if there are different ways to think about them.

We see law as just one of the grand narratives. Progress is also one of the grand narratives. 'This is the developed world,' 'this is the developing world.' In that sense law is a construct. The United Nations is also a construct. They don't really have any power. They think they have power and we seem to believe they have power.

We think more about the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. What is a trade agreement? What allows corporations to continue to mine resources from their countries and how is that legally legitimated? It was baffling to watch something that was so totally wrong become a contract. We are creating a new deck of tarot cards which actually address these constructs. What might a contemporary version of tarot cards or the tarot archetypes be today? It gets interesting as we try and bring some of these cards into micro-interventions rather than directly into projects.

It's like a fable, a prompt to re-narrate something.

DUE

As an interactive design firm, how do you understand imagination and the relationship of imagination between individuals and collectives as something beyond the fantastical?

SF

One of our recent works in Barcelona, Mitigation Shock, comes to mind as an example. We looked at climate change and food insecurity and found there is a real disconnect between this intellectual understanding of what climate change is and our emotional understanding of it; what does it mean in our lives, particularly in the West?

We built this apartment for London set in approximately 2050. People entered by unexpectedly walking into somebody's house and as they walked around they started realizing that what initially felt comforting and familiar was actually completely different because the entire apartment had been transformed into a food production space. We made these quite low-fi food computers using Fogponics to grow food quickly. The entire space, typically used for relaxation, had been given over to food production. Over six months 100,000 visitors passed through the exhibition, and we started seeing images pop up on Instagram. It made us realize that this was such a direct experience that allowed us to capitalize on or tap into the imagination of the visitors. In a way, our works trigger the imagination of people not to have direct answers about 'bad' or 'good' but to create an appetite for what may be possible.

These are tools for thinking that allow you to place yourself in a scenario and then think from within that situation, rather than think about it in abstract terms where you might have all sorts of biases.

SF （Anab）

For me the word imagination is really important in our work, however not my imagination. It is in some ways a trigger for critical activism. Reclaiming people's imagination or getting them to critically rethink something or see the world differently are, in my opinion, modes of critical activism or social activism. They are triggered because we articulate or probe people's imagination.

SF （Jon）

I think of a Timothy Leary's quote 'to think for yourself you must question authority,' and that's something we'd like people to do when they experience our work.

DUE

Within the idea or context of algorithms, for example one sitting on the board of a corporation instead of a person, is technology becoming not just something we imagine, but something that actually 'imagines' or projects new futures?

SF

It already does. That is a lot of what we want to do.

Often you see a technology presented in terms of what it can do for you in quantifiable terms. Or very singularly, 'We are going to put this technology out into the world,' expecting it to be used in a very specific way. But actually, no it won't – it is going to embed itself in the culture, breed and collide with other technologies. It is going to collide with the imperfections of the world and ourselves, breaking those sterile, corporate narratives.

It is mediated. It is hard to point to 'ohh that AI created such and such.' You can't even say that anymore with technologies like facial recognition which →often make wrong judgments and now we are making decisions based on that technological fiction. We are listing people as high risk based on wrongly identified data.

They're very seductive aren't they, all these stories about technologies. We were reading →this article by Judea Pearl in the Atlantic where he says we have been thinking about AI in the wrong way. We constantly talk about curve fitting – everything is fit on the curve – all based on large amounts of data, to remove uncertainty. What he says though is more about cause and effect, if you break the casual pattern in which we are getting these machines to think then interesting things start to happen. The first evidence of robots having freedom will be when they start communicating with one another counterfactually. It will be when two machines communicate opinions to each about some action and one might tell the other 'you should have done better'.

That's really interesting, we don't know what we feel about that, but we want to witness it.