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Failing at the future

Queer Design Utopia

The future is uncertain. At least that's how the saying goes. But is it really? Of course, the countless images with motivational quotes, encouragingly reminding us of the randomness of our lives and all its chances, could not have foreseen a global pandemic, that put a question mark behind all our visions of a possible future. We have lived through security-shattering times. The uncertain future doesn't seem to be a vast horizon of possibilities anymore but rather a looming threat. It might be that the SARS-CoV-2 Virus has changed our feeling towards the future. But the uncertainty produced by this global pandemic is limited. It remains on an individual level, affecting only our personal perception. We, those who can be infected by the virus, are also susceptible to its uncertainty. The system of global, digital capitalism, however, is not. The realization of an absolutely certain future that has long been designed into every aspect of our lives, inscribed in the workings of this system, has only been accelerated. What the philosopher of technology Yuk Hui so poignantly described as "the bad infinity of mono-technologism" of globalization, that sees the earth resources as a "standing reserve", has determined our reaction to this crisis, border nationalism as an auto-immune response included (Hui 2020). While some fossil fuel burning airlines were deemed too big to fail, securing their future with certainty, Amazon saw its revenue rise by 35% in the first 3 quarters of 2020 as consumers intensified their online shopping. Video Calls from our home offices have annihilated any separation between work and leisure time, demand absolute flexibility, and have given our generation a new name: the zoomers. Our public spaces have been reduced to chat rooms while all physical contact is limited. A global infosphere expands into our everyday lives and turns our homes into isolated positions in a network from which we order our takeaway food, our plants, our gadgets, and our lovers online.

This system and its design are neither new nor did their future change much due to the Sars-Cov-2 Virus. It is the simulated infinity of endless yet stagnant potentiality accelerated by the pandemic that the Philosopher Federico Campagna describes as a central principle of "Technic"'s cosmology (Campagna 2018). "Technic's world is a world in which everything can happen, yet nothing does" (228). In this bad infinity, in technic's endless perfection, this system has "fully internalized becoming" (ibid.), made it frictionless, "allowing for the virtually endless presence of productive units" (225), nodes in a network, in a very safe and absolutely certain future. This safety of a certain future is Technic's luring promise to those who still have to endure uncertainty since they are still alive. It's a promise of security to

those that still have to live through becoming. It is the modern promise of progress and it has been made that much more enticing by a global pandemic.

So, is the future really uncertain? Aside from our individual perception has it ever really been that way? Or haven't we designed ourselves into a system that already contains a very certain future – at least for most. In our risk aversion and search for security, we have designed structures that push an endless horizon of possibilities in a particular direction of world-improvement that demands a particular way of self-improvement. Design plays a central role in both. Although it can seem counterintuitive at first, it makes perfect sense to look to design in our stalled relationship with the future to reimagine it. After all, design, as well as its continuous designing, were responsible for precisely this lock-in, this being stuck on a pathway towards a predetermined future. The design theorist Tony Fry speaks of the “defuturing effects” of design as a modern project of progress and improvement (Fry 2009). And even though it can be said that design is the materialization of the project of enlightenment, rationalization and democratic functionalism put into form, Fry directly links this to design's contribution to the systemic conditions of structured unsustainability that eliminate possible futures (Fry 2011). Even if I don't share Fry's pessimism towards enlightenment and liberal democracy, I do agree with him on one point—besides sharing his sustainability concerns. Design has had »defuturing effects«. Not in the sense that modern design prevents any possible future from happening but in the sense that design since its modern inception and in service of global financial capitalism limits all possible futures to one particular, very certain future. Towards this future it has always been oriented. In fact, towards which we ourselves oriented our designing. And unknowingly, in doing so, oriented our own being designed by what we are designing towards this future (Willis 2006). Our design fulfills our needs, pleases us as consumers and users and thus we are complacent in the construction of easy-to-go desires and easy gratification, avoiding friction in search for pleasurable, enjoyable user experiences and constant improvement. This is what human-computer-interaction (HCI) researcher Erik Stolterman calls the “onedimensionality” of a user- and usability-centered design (Stolterman 2018). In addressing us as said users the interaction design designs us and our needs in exactly that way: as users (Dourish 2018). What we design designs us back and we're trapped in an endless circle of usability, functionality, progress, and ease. It is technic's perfection that Campagna describes as well as the culture of mono-technologism that Hui sees. Design is the engine of social order that creates our onedimensional future. Even though Karl Marx himself expressed an optimistic stance towards a streamlined technological future in remarking that revolutions are the locomotive of world history, I am more inclined to take Walter Benjamin's position who famously said that: “[P]erhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake.” (Benjamin 2003, 402)

It seems that not even a global pandemic could force us to turn the lever. But what might this emergency break-in design look like? How can we change our course of action and conceptualize design as a “redirective practice” (Fry 2011)? How could design function as a vehicle of our becoming otherwise? One possible way out of the modern fixation of design on only one possible, modern version of the future is to take the perspective of those who have always been denied that future. Those whose discrepancy with the normative structure was too great to smoothly be integrated. Those who were denied a frictionless interaction with the system and therefore could never see themselves as regular users with easy desires. To redesign design and in doing so redesign our future and ourselves we could take a queer perspective on design, to break out of straight time and include something very foreign to the discipline: failure.

But before we get into the very non-design concept of failure, I need to approach this queer perspective, that I am suggesting might ‘solve’ our ‘problem’ of a one-dimensional future. What might constitute a queer perspective on design? First and foremost, it is important to note that design has always played a crucial role in the codification and materialization of a binary and oppositional gender system as well as framing a normative understanding of corresponding ‘normal’ sexual behavior. Although gender is only one of the normative inscriptions of design that intersect with our everyday lives, it is definitely one of the most impactful ones. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler draws on Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation (Butler 1993). An ideological call by the law personified by a police officer constitutes the subject of this very law. It is the same mechanism that is also at work in our designed systems that construct us as pleasure-seeking users (Dourish 2018). “Klick Me” is just the same as a police officer shouting: “Hey you!”. We are called upon as a certain subject by a governing law and our next moves depend upon our interpretation of the text, its codes, and our performative embodiment of the law. We as a specific subject are created through the act of this call. This interpellation can be traced back to a stage, at which we are actually not yet capable of responding appropriately at all: “It’s a boy!”. From the moment our biological sex is assigned and an according name is chosen we are called upon in a certain way. A straight future emerges for us with its streamlined design. As a boy you’re supposed to like the color blue, play soccer, be adventurous and dirty, aggressive even. You’re not supposed to like the color pink, girly stuff, not even girls (for now), and of course as a famous song by The Cure reminds us: you’re not allowed to cry. Thus with our first interpellation, which happens while we’re still not yet conscious, normative codes are enacted upon us and we’re supposed to perform our social gender. In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler describes this performative nature as doing gender (Butler 1990). From a design standpoint, I would like to add the material perspective of designing gender: the color blue, anything that’s rough and dirty as well as toys for boys that mimic heavy machinery.

But we don't even have to go to the toy store to discover the material side of doing gender and of gendered design. Rather, a binary gender system has always been inscribed into the very foundation of the modern design discipline. The design historian Judith Attfield highlights that at the heart of the modern design movement lies this binary understanding of gender, that reproduces the inferiority of "FORM/female" that is supposed to follow "FUNCTION/male" (Attfield 1989). Even though women were allowed at the famous Bauhaus Walter Gropius suggested that they should choose workshops according to realistic career opportunities (as wives) like weaving and pottery. Many female design pioneers, like Christine Frederick, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, and Paulette Bernège were designing for the kitchen as the domain of the female while advocating for the taylorization of everyday life—some in an emancipatory manner and others with very conservative and gendered ideals in mind (Midal 2019). This idea that women can only design with the particular interests of women in mind while the male designer can easily occupy a neutral position and design something of universal use and value is still encountered today. But the interpellations of this designed gender binarism are not only limited to female designers. As design researcher Ece Canli points out, the alleged relationship between, for instance, interior design, fashion design, decorative arts, and femininity also applies to the stereotype of the gay male designer (Canli 2018). As everything associated with femininity has been regarded as degenerate, primitive, erotic, and thereby inferior, stupid even, like the color pink, the stereotype of the effeminate, naive and flamboyant gay decorator has prevailed. The straight matrix that deems only one future as possible further discriminates in the design profession.

What then, would a queer turn in design look like? As Canli points out, it certainly "does not mean 'design for queer people' as a new marketplace for production" (95). Queering design is not a business strategy of creating another niche in an oversaturated design market, in which every politically charged difference is turned into a style for mass consumption (Kosok 2021). A queer turn in design, actively queering design, is to recognize design's role in its designing and materializing gender. As once again Canli explains: "A queer turn in design, however, is first to acknowledge design's direct and ruthless impact on bodies through its artifactual, spatial, sartorial, discursive or digital segregation; and how bodies, in turn, reintegrate and reactivate the meaning embedded in these materialities by performing, embodying or inhabiting them every day." (ibid.) What then might breaking up and undoing normative constraints and straight futures mean if we as users find meaning in design and its utility only within the limits set by those boundaries? What does queering design require if our understanding of design rests on functionality? Canli sets high standards for a project of queering design: "It is a project of excavating, unfolding and unraveling the hegemonies of a material practice so deeply entrenched in our cultural, social, and daily contexts" (ibid.). This is only possible as a dynamic act, »a form of undoing, unmaking and destabilizing the representation of normative identities, authorship and behaviour« (96). Of which the

conclusion is indeed: “the design that is being queered is supposed to function as an anti-thesis of itself” (100).

How then do we design something as its own anti-thesis? Enabling us to think about the possibility of different, queer futures, I’d like to turn to a very queer mode of being in the world that Canli also references: failure. Because, as Jack Halberstam puts it in *The Queer Art of Failure*, failure is not only a mode of “being in the world”, a “style” or an “entire way of life”, that can stand in contrast to all those capitalistic and neoliberal “grim scenarios of success” (Halberstam 2011, 3). In its self-shattering potential failure “is also unbeing [...] and unbecoming” (23), a rupture in straight time that opens up other possible futures. In a very strange and indeed queer relation to design, I want to focus on an example that Halberstam gives for the aesthetics of failure. In a series of photos taken on a trip to California the artist duo Cabello/Carceller captured the “empty promises of utopia” (111) that are present in empty, dried-out swimming pools; vacant and yet full of longing and melancholia. The emptiness of the pools is what according to Halberstam makes the viewer reflect on the role of form and function. And in their ruined state they represent “a perversion of desire, the decay of the commodity, the queerness of the disassociation of use from value.” (ibid.) The overall aim in Halberstam’s analysis of queer failure is “to explore alternatives and to look for a way out of the usual traps and impasses of binary formulations” (2) and to use the negative affective effects of failure, like “disappointment, disillusionment, and despair”, to “poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life” (3).

In *The Politics of Things* Michelle Christensen and Florian Conradi give an example of what queer failure in design might look like. In looking for ways “to release ourselves from the conditioning that we are producing and produced by” or in “an attempt to find possible escape routes” (Christensen, Conradi 2020, 12) the two design researchers conduct a series of design experiments that I would like to read through the lens of queer failure. Besides their experiments with “material mischiefs” (75) in which they open up the scripts of mundane everyday objects, that structure our day, to reverse the logic of the performance principle of productivity, what they describe as “doing drag with things” (131), I want to briefly describe their “AI/IA” project. It was a “venture into applying tactics of effective error” (148) into our relationship with artificial intelligent voice assistants. Within three experiments a dialogue with the artificially intelligent system was started that integrated flirting, teasing, and nagging, that for example tried to teach the machine who Judith Butler was to insert un/intended information and active mis/understandings into the system as well as into the human-computer-interaction. They trained a “droid-sitter” for the AI device with their own voices that kept on asking questions related to the concept of gender and thus querying and slowly queering the system. This intervention into technic’s pragmatism from data to dada echoes Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” from 1985, in which she describes our new human condition decentered in networks of information (Haraway 1991). This is very much

in line with Conradi's and Christensen's inquiry into failure in design, which seeks to locate misunderstanding, failure, and uncertainty in both the human and the machine by blurring the positions. In doing so they of course also queer our understanding of what it means to be a human successfully. They break through the mono-technologism and one-dimensionality of human-computer-interaction and through a design intervention open up technic's totality to other possible futures.

Then, maybe, through design interventions, we can see a glimpse of possible other futures? By integrating a perspective of queer failure into design a central promise of modernity and vision for the future can be revisited: the promise of utopia. Admittedly, however, a very different kind of utopian vision for a multiplicity of futures. It's a utopian vision that contains what philosopher Federico Campagna describes as technic's counterpart: a different world-making cosmology of magic (Campagna 2018). Not magic in the sense of magic tricks, that work rather technical, but magic in the sense of an ineffable "dimension of existence" (118) that linguistically can only be grasped in the mode of "as if" (214). It is a magical mode of utopian longing for a different future that again can be found in queer desire. In *Cruising Utopia* Jose Muñoz describes a need for utopian thinking while at the same time highlighting with Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno, that utopia can only ever be "the determined negation of that which merely is, and by concretizing itself as something false, it always points, at the same time to what should be" (Muñoz 2009, 36). Looking for the connection between utopian longing and queer desire Muñoz uses the world of gay male cruising for anonymous sex not only as a powerful metaphor for the desire-driven search for future pleasures but also as an actual ecstatic practice of cruising in the dark for the "the anticipatory illumination of the utopian" (18). This again links a certain kind of queer failure in design with this longing for a different kind of future. As Muñoz points out the modern bathroom is "the site where nonfunctionality and total functionality merge" (7) quite magically, a place of ornamentation and functionality and most importantly of self-care. Especially public bathrooms, which are the preferred gay cruising sites, fuse together an abstract ideal of democratic equality with a modern disciplinary regime of hygiene. But in their being misused by gay men as cruising sites, as places of non-normative pleasure, of porous masculinities (Florêncio 2020) and of radical passivity (Halberstam 2011), as if they were always meant to be used in that way, bathrooms are opened up to a potentiality of other possible and queer futures. At the same time as the bathrooms fail to call upon gay men as straight users of their sanitary functions, gay men design themselves through their desires as misusers and through their designing queer the latent potentiality of the bathroom. They enact a queer politics of failure by doing something that was not meant to be done, that was not supposed to happen, breaking the order of succession in a place that was not designed for them, that yet points at the possibility of a not yet here.

The possibility of other and queer futures is of course only a glimmer in the dark, an illumination that is consumed by desire. Therefore Muñoz' central argument, with whom he opens the entire book, is that "queerness is not yet here" (Muñoz 2009, 1). In a world full of social norms, straight time, and straight functions, that are guided by the one-dimensionality of functionalist design and governed by technic's totality "we are not yet queer" (ibid.). But because we have failed to become queer "we must always be future bound in our desires and designs" (185), we must act as if we were already queer and we must be utopian. Even if queerness is not yet here "it approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality" (ibid.).

Concluding this essay on queer failures in design, that might help us to imagine other possible futures, I want to return to the here and now of our current situation, the personal uncertainty that is created by the virus. It is the same uncertainty and fear of the foreign, unknown and strange, that has led us to the discourses of national identity and security, technic's ultimate promise, that are, once again, becoming increasingly invested in immunizing the body of the state against foreign bodies and other possible futures by closing its borders—through their design (Keshavarz 2018). To overcome this fearful entrapment in a onedimensional and straight future we must not make the mistake of directing queer negativity and failure only towards a self-shattering experience of individual pleasure but must uncover its communal world-making potential. In *Bareback Porn, Porous Masculinities, Queer Futures* João Florêncio highlights this possibility of queer pleasure and solidarity (2020). In describing bareback porn and sex, that is condomless gay sex, that once contained the deadly threat of a virus and now pharmacologically can be managed by antiretroviral therapy and pre-exposure prophylaxis, Florêncio uncovers the radical openness and ethics of "pig-becoming", that experiment with pharmacopornographic technologies (Preciado 2013), "to bring forth a future that veers away [...] from the temporal coordinates of heteropatriarchy and capitalism" (Florêncio 2020, 255). Structures of care and solidarity are the foundation upon which not only queer openness to failure must rest. They must be integrated into our designing, that one day might be queer so that our future finally will become uncertain. By letting failure, queer pleasure, and magic guide our designing our future will once again be open to a plethora of possibilities.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the guests of the podcast "Off_line", some of whom inspired crucial sections in this text. Without the conversations about failure, the ways in which technology is changing us, feminism in design, and the future of care, this would certainly have been a very different essay.

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