A School for Design Fiction
James Langdon — Interview, Magazine — March 3, 2015



James Langdon, 'A School for Design Fiction' (Spector Books, 2014)

Francisco Laranjo: Design Fiction is a term that has been increasingly popular within design discourse, especially in relation to product/ interaction design, and more recently, graphic design. The short course/project *A School for Design Fiction* that you initiated in 2013 formed the content of a subsequent publication with the same name. Why did you choose to use this term in relation to the specific context in which the project was taking place?

James Langdon: My use of the term 'design fiction' began with a presentation at the Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst Leipzig in November 2013. The format was a single day of lectures and instructional performances. A small publication followed in January 2014, and the project has continued as a workshop, hosted in London (UK), Ravenna (Italy), Stockholm (Sweden) and Vancouver (Canada).

My motivation is to present an alternative understanding of design fiction. In my practice I have never been concerned with anticipating or implying particular futures through design. I am interested in how artefacts speak to us, sometimes in ways that can be shaped by design, but also in ways that a designer cannot control.

FL: To propose a 'school' for design fiction suggests that on the one hand that it can (should?) be a field in its own right and on the other that there may be specific methods and processes that are substantially different from the norm. How was this reflected in the workshops done in the context of the project?

JL: I should begin by describing the programme of the workshop briefly. The workshop takes a collection of ordinary objects and puts them through a series of related processes of description, interpretation, representation and transformation. The final exercise takes the premise of reverse-engineering as a form of *portraiture*, asking the participants to deconstruct an object and shape its remains into a representation of another object. The emphasis is on analogy and manipulating the narrative potential of objects.

Perhaps it would also be useful for me to be more precise about how I use the term design fiction. I see design essentially as a storytelling process, in the sense that I understand all human artefacts to be implicated in telling the story of the universe. I like the image of an archaeologist examining an artefact from a lost civilisation. Many centuries after its designer lived, that artefact continues to suggest narratives about the culture that produced it. For me, the *fiction* in design fiction is not primarily about the impossible, or the futuristic, but about the multiplicity of possibilities in any ordinary decision making process. If one accepts artefacts as narrators of the universe, then it would seem that a most urgent task for any designer is to become familiar with manipulating object narratives in this basic and essential way. It is design for the attention of archaeologists.

In the context of this workshop it has not been important for me to assert design fiction as a field in itself. In fact I have found it necessary to resist the preconceptions held by some participants that design fiction implies design without everyday constraints. The methods and perspectives used in the workshop are derived from various disciplines, I consider that essential for any design education.



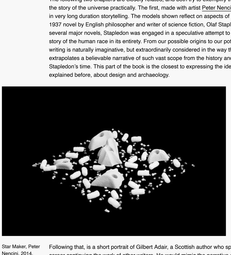
James Langdon, 'A School for Design Fiction' (Spector Books, 2014)

FL: Design historians have perhaps most notably used design archeology as a method. Your concept of design fiction seems to draw more on this legacy than on the future-oriented science fiction literature that feeds most design practice associated to the term. In the book *A School for Design Fiction* it is only possible to see traces of objects and some initial insight into the discourse that framed the methods. What references, work or methods is this project building upon? And, what did it add to them?

JL: The book is structured by a ridiculous yet sincere proposition of a curriculum for designers. The elements of this are as follows:
The first part of the book is a relatively conventional historical design fiction that expands on a small publication of mine titled *Pugin's Contrasts Rotated* and published by Bedford Press in 2011. It takes the example of English architect Augustus Pugin and his polemical manifesto on architectural style, *Contrasts* (1836). Pugin's book has a notoriously binary argument: essentially, that Gothic architecture was the true, form of divine Christian architecture, and that the neo-classicism of Pugin's age was a vile desecration of that ideal. The design fiction in this case is to imagine the original production of Pugin's book as if it were not subject to the technical constraints of its time. What appears in *A School for Design Fiction* is a representation — made by artist Simon Manfield — of the earlier work, in which an original first edition of *Contrasts* is disbound, modified and rebound so that its graphic design and binding better relate the binary form of its argument to the binary form of the open book's two facing pages. In terms of the curriculum I am describing, this is intended to establish the idea of an essential union between format and meaning.

The second chapter of the book is the most speculative in its relation to design. It presents the work of American neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga, a pioneer of the study of split brain surgery in humans. The content in my book is only superficially a design fiction, in the sense that it is a revisualisation of existing material. Gazzaniga has lectured and published very widely and videos of him presenting similar material as illustrated lectures can be seen on YouTube and read in numerous textbooks. My work, with artist K.N.W., was to be faithful to the science as documented in these sources, but to make two shifts of emphasis. The first is the macabre aesthetic. Early split brain surgery involved extensive animal testing, and this is hardly covered in Gazzaniga's recent presentations. So there was a motivation to stress that aspect: the abuse of living beings in the pursuit of knowledge and insight into our own existence. The second emphasis was to assert Gazzaniga's discovery of the 'interpreter' — the part of our brains whose function is to make narrative relations between the disparate phenomena of our sensory experience — as profoundly significant to design. To me, Gazzaniga's discovery confirms the idea that humanity's role in the universe is to tell the story of the universe.

The following two chapters are closely related, and both try to exemplify this idea of telling the story of the universe practically. The first, made with artist Peter Nencini, is an exercise in very long duration storytelling. The models shown reflect on aspects of Star Maker, a 1937 novel by English philosopher and writer of science fiction, Olaf Stapledon. Through several major novels, Stapledon was engaged in a speculative attempt to imagine the story of the human race in its entirety. From our possible origins to our potential fate. His writing is naturally imaginative, but extraordinarily considered in the way that it extrapolates a believable narrative of such vast scope from the history and politics of Stapledon's time. This part of the book is the closest to expressing the ideas that I explained before, about design and archaeology.



Star Maker, Peter Nencini, 2014.

Following that, is a short portrait of Gilbert Adair, a Scottish author who spent his entire career continuing the work of other writers. He would mimic the narrative constructions and prose style of his subjects with amazing fidelity. I have been writing more about Adair recently, and this is the part of *A School for Design Fiction* that I am presently most focused on exploring. What I see in Adair's example is an idea that I think is a great resource for designers: a kind of code for relating to the past. There is so much of design education that is concerned with the historical record, and studying the work of previous generations, but I know of relatively few concrete pedagogical examples of how exactly these influences can be assimilated into a practice. Gilbert Adair is wonderfully instructive in this way. In the project to tell the story of the universe, we need a method for continuing the work of our predecessors. The final part of the book is a proposal by Céline Condorelli for putting these ideas to use in a process to redesign the cafe of the Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst Leipzig, where the project was first presented.

FL: After *A School for Design Fiction*, you published *A School for Design Fiction Workbook* (Motto Books, 2014).[sic:sidenote side="right"] 318w" sizes="(max-width: 472px) 100vw, 472px" /> The publication gathers a series of objects from different historic periods and locations with some formal similarities, framed by a text by the artist Francesco Pedraglio that proposes a way of thinking aligned with that argued in the previous book. Between this text and the objects printed in black and white, it is possible to see colourful objects photographed on colourful backgrounds. These subtly reference the objects, but they also highlight that this project exists in a fine art context. The proximity and the sometimes flirtatious relationship between design and art has been previously debated, for example, in *Design and Art* (MIT Press, 2007) and more recently in *It's Not a Garden Table: Art and Design in the Expanded Field* (JRP Ringier, 2011). Why is design fiction useful to art?

JL: I have to begin by expressing skepticism for the dialogues that I have read around transdisciplinary art and design. I would add another representative title to your list, *The Transdisciplinary Studio* (Sternberg Press, 2012) by Alex Coles. My reservation about these dialogues is that there is probably nothing at stake in them. In my outlook, an interesting context in which to practice always offers constraints and requires responses. I think very few artists work— or, importantly, desire to work — in a way that is free of a context or premise to respond to. In the past three years I have interviewed a number of former students of the English designer and educator Norman Potter. I have heard many similar anecdotes that reflect an attitude that Potter apparently instilled in his students. They all go something like this: If you were working on a project — as a builder, for example — and you had the ability and tools to help your commissioner — with some plumbing, for example — then you would do so, naturally. Such improvisations probably constitute a vast majority of the everyday processes in any human activity. The fact that there is apparently no discourse on transdisciplinary practice in the building and plumbing trades tells me that certain art and design commentators are overlooking the ordinary realities of work in all but the most reductive practices.

A School for Design Fiction Workbook was published to accompany the final presentation of the workshop that I mentioned at the beginning of our conversation. The book is concerned with reading objects as an essential exercise for designers, and draws on reference points in philosophy and archeology. I commissioned the contents of the book in relation to a historical narrative that loosely informs the workshop. It's a classic archeological hoax known as 'Piltdown Man'. In 1912, skeletal remains were found in a gravel pit in the English village of Piltdown. These were heralded as one of the most important discoveries in history, evidence of the 'missing link' between humans and apes. An extensive discourse was written around these fragments, until they were revealed, forty years later, to be a hoax. Apparently nothing more than orangutan bones stained with chromic acid to make them appear ancient. Prompted by this narrative, Francesco Pedraglio's text in the *Workbook* interweaves two situational readings of an object to suggest the decisive moments that determine its canonisation — be that in the history of archeology, of hoaxes, or a single personal history. As you noted, the text functions in the book by implying a connection between the two collections of images — found photographs of archaeological sites and artefacts prepared by Bahia Suter, and new sculptures by Samara Scott.



Spread, 'A School for Design Fiction Workbook' (Motto Books, 2014)

To account for this work directly in response to your point about the usefulness of design fiction to art, I need to rearrange the terms. In the case of the *Workbook*, I am visualising aspects of a number of practitioners' work to communicate this sense of the mutability of objects that I have described. That strategy is an expression of my own approach as a designer. I think of my work as display: *a gesture of showing something to someone*. The Workbook is a proposition: a way of understanding the work of its four contributors — Peter Nencini, Francesco Pedraglio, Samara Scott and Bahia Suter — that emphasises a particular quality of incomplete narrative that they have in common. I am offering this as a suggestive reference point for designers. It is not intended to represent 'transdisciplinary' practice. I don't see the fields of art and design, however we constitute them, in that way. I intend the context to be *narrative* — in the biggest sense that we can imagine it — the narrative of all of the things made by humans, and their potential to be remade by our changing perceptions of them.

Interview originally published in *Modes of Criticism 1* (2015).

11 *A School for Design Fiction Workbook* (Motto Books, 2001).



https://modesofcriticism.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/langdon_school_13-318w428.jpg 318w" sizes="(max-width: 472px) 100vw, 472px" />

Tags: A School for Design Fiction, Design Fiction, James Langdon

Related:

Click to Comment

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. Learn how your comment data is processed.