WORLD AUTOMATIC
((((THE REALLY REAL PROJECT))))

Bachelor Thesis ("Processbeskrivning")
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1. Project Introduction

In a prospective post-work society, a select group of citizens participate in a cross-temporal project. As we follow along their journeys, questions arise. How does time move when it is no longer a commodity? What is design in the age of rampant robotics? How do we define creativity? What is wasted potential, and is it possible to be a failure? Most importantly, can fiction teach us anything about reality?

Through a group of fictional Citizens, this project aims to examine the potentials of a Society in another time, while simultaneously questioning the potentials of the fiction in itself.

My project is based in design fiction, and the idea that sci-fi is no longer about inventing the future, but rather a form of distortion of the present.\(^1\)

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\(^1\) Anastasiia Raina: Design In The Posthuman Age, Lecture at Rhode Island School of Design, 2018
2. Theoretical starting points

“Sometimes doing something poetic can become political, and sometimes something political can become poetic.”

Francis Alys

2a. Automated Futures

In the beginning of 2018 I read the book Fear and Love: Reactions To A Complex World. The book examines the role of design in our time, and suggests that in a rapidly changing world, design is defined by both optimism and anxiety.

In one of the chapters, the term “Fully Automated Luxury Communism” is brought up. Fully Automated Luxury Communism is a proposed new political ideology that aims to embrace automation to its fullest extent, combining full automation with Universal Basic Income in order to remodel our current work system.  

Despite the suspicious simplicity of this proposal, and despite being very put off by my own connotations to the term “luxury”, the idea had me curious. Having taken part in some of the conversations about robotics, I always felt that the term “the robots are taking our jobs” was a bit ambiguous. Within the existing structures of our

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2 Justin McGuirk and Gonzalo Herrero, Fear and Love: Reactions To A Complex World, Phaidon, 2017
society, the displacement of workers by mechanisation is a serious cause for concern. Even though exact estimates vary widely, some current figures estimate a loss of up to 35% of jobs all over the spectrum in Germany and the UK within the next decade\textsuperscript{4}, and in Ethiopia 85% of jobs may be lost to robots\textsuperscript{5} - figures that risk leaving already precarious workers in complete poverty.

But, if capitalism could facilitate such huge leaps in productivity, and if highly cognitive, sensing bodies are doing work that could be done by robots, I was also intrigued by the proposition that through a different ideological framework these technologies could be used to reform or even abolish the current work system.

Feasible or not, the bare thought of a post-work future sparked entirely new realms of thought.

2b. ‘Does the world need another poster?’

In the fall of last year I did an exchange at Rhode Island School of Design, where I took the class \textit{Design in the Posthuman Age} with Anastasiia Raina. In this class, we used research based projects to explore our contemporary condition as designers, and graphic design was simply a medium to ask questions about ethical and speculative concerns emerging from advancements in science and technology.

\textsuperscript{4} Gil Press, AI And Automation By The Numbers: Predictions, Perceptions, And Proposals, Forbes.com, March 30 2017

\textsuperscript{5} Helmo Preuss, Robots may take over 85% of Ethiopian Jobs and 65% of Nigerian Jobs, Report, TheNerve Africa, Apr 13 2016
In the beginning of the semester, the professor asked the class why we design, and what we would do instead if our current jobs could be automated, or if logos would instead be made using ai (as they already can today⁶).

“Does the world need another poster?” she asked.

A lot of students had profound, beautiful, and spiritual reasons for designing, while I sat there thinking that I wouldn’t mind doing something entirely different, or even nothing at all.

But, as David Frayne says in his book *The Refusal of Work*, “To take a critical stance on work may even seem distasteful or elitist in the context of a society where jobs are so highly sought after”. I also had a sense that my position as a Swedish student (whose enrollment at the school was realized through a tax-funded exchange) might have played a part in my view on work and my relationship to the market as a whole ⁷.

So, I kept quiet - but my thoughts about why we actually work kept growing.

A few months later I read a *WalkerArt* article stating that “Graphic design can do more to intensify income inequality, even if it’s in a passive way, than it can to reduce it.”⁸, and felt further ambivalent about graphic design in particular.

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⁶ Abhimanyu Ghoshal, This AI-powered logo design service shows how much we need human designers, Thenextweb, Aug 8 2017
⁷ Gøsta Esping-Andersen has written extensively about decommodification and citizens’ degree of immunization from market dependency, particularly in Scandinavian and Swedish society, for example in his book *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, 1990
⁸ Erik Carter, Do you want typography or do you want the truth?, Walker Art Center/the Gradient, June 7th 2018
2c. Basic Income and Post-Work

“In order to stop suffering, we have to stop working.”

Bob Black

As the year went along, I started doing more research around labor, automation and universal basic income. Universal basic income (UBI), is a model for providing all citizens of a country or other geographic area with a given sum of money, most often regardless of their income, resources or employment status. It’s younger cousin, Universal Basic Services, was coined in 2017 and proposes the state should make shelter, food, travel and IT services available to all, rather than focusing on redistributing money.

In the book Inventing the Future, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams argue that “The demand for UBI combines the needs of the employed, the unemployed, the underemployed, migrant labourers, temporary workers, students and the disabled. It articulates a common interest between these groups and provides a populist orientation for them to mobilise towards. A basic income unbinds the coercive

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9 Bob Black, The Abolition of Work, Loompanics Unlimited, 1985
10 Ben Chapman, Universal basic services could work better than basic income to combat 'rise of the robots' say experts, Independent, Oct 11 2017
aspects of wage labour, partially decommodifies labour, and thus transforms the political relationship between labour and capital.”

These three elements - basic income, full automation and the abolishment of work - slowly started to form the ideological basis for my project, and an alternative post-work imaginary.

“**The goal of the future is full unemployment**”

Arthur C Clarke, Co-author of the screenplay for *2001: A Space Odyssey*

As I carried on with my research, I found decades of theory criticizing our current work-system, some suggesting to abolish work all together. This put ideas like FALC into a bigger context, and I understood that while some of these concepts may seem futuristic, they are also firmly rooted in history and well established ideology.

If you take a look at the history of work, it turns out it hasn’t always looked the way it does today. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* from 1905, Max Weber explains that in a pre-capitalist society work was only tolerated in so far as it was needed. Weber uses an example of a harvester to illustrate this - “The harvester, when offered a higher rate of pay, did not dream of the extra money he could earn, but calculated how much less work he could perform in order to earn the same

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comfortable amount as before. His main priority was to preserve his free-time, rather than to increase his financial reward.”

Weber argued that this attitude towards work was later transformed by the rise of a Puritan morality or a ‘Protestant ethic’, which began to portray work as a virtuous end in itself.

“We are trapped in a society of ‘labourers without labour’ in which, perversely, the most pressing problem for most people is no longer exploitation, but the absence of opportunities to be sufficiently and dependably exploited.”

Hannah Arendt

Marx made the shortening of the work week central to his postcapitalist vision, arguing that it represented a “basic prerequisite” to “reaching the realm of freedom”. In Capital, he wrote that the possibility of human fulfilment through the exercise of productive capacities was being smothered by industrial forms of work, which ‘mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into hated toil’.

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Throughout his writings, Marx argues that work, in its ideal form, is what makes us human. That it fulfills the essence of our species. He distinguishes humans from other animals by their ability to make a world of artificial objects, and thus, to modify the natural world - in perpetuity expanding the possibilities of human life.

However, in a capitalist society, humans are instead alienated from the things they produce, as well as from each other. The limitlessness of our essence is controlled.

Valerie Solanas takes a feminist approach to work and (as she calls it) unwork in her SCUM manifesto. There, she writes “Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex.”

It is important to keep in mind that to be critical of work is not to deny that what we currently do under the label of work has any value. Kathi Weeks, Professor of Gender, Sexuality and Feminist studies at Duke University writes that to critique work is, rather, to insist that there are other ways to organize and distribute that activity, and to remind us that it is also possible to be creative outside the boundaries of work. “It is to suggest that there might be a variety of ways to experience the
pleasure that we may now find in work, as well as other pleasures that we may wish to discover, cultivate, and enjoy."\(^{18}\)

A critique of work reminds us that ‘the willingness to live for and through work renders subjects supremely fit for capitalist purposes’\(^{19}\)

2d. Environmental Impacts of Work

The conversation about ‘job creation’ in mainly American media has long had me wondering how this can be portrayed as an inherently good thing - regardless of the industry and working conditions of that job - and what are the environmental impacts of relentless expansion.

In *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet*, ecologist Tim Jackson suggests that capitalist societies cannot possibly hope to sustain their current rate of production without major ecological consequences. Jackson points to research on the depletion of vital natural resources, the loss of biodiversity, soil pollution, deforestation as well as climate change in order to illustrate his point that endlessly expanding the economy in order to provide work has become an increasingly unpalatable strategy.\(^{20}\)


\(^{19}\) IBID

Srnicek and Williams echo this sentiment in *Inventing The Future*, while arguing that automation could in fact be used as a tool for lessening environmental damage instead of maximizing expansion. They write “Reductions in the working week would lead to significant reductions in energy consumption and our overall carbon footprint. Increased free time would also mean a reduction in all the convenience goods bought to fit into our hectic work schedules. More broadly, using productivity improvements for less work, rather than more output, would mean that energy efficiency improvements would go towards reducing environmental impacts.”

2e. Questions

As I got deeper into my research, I got particularly curious about how a world without work could affect its inhabitants, and what happens when you’re not forced to commodify your talents, body or spirit. I started thinking a lot about creativity, and what shapes creativity could take if it wasn’t tied to a capitalist market. What would the world look like if every person was free to discover their inner creativity, curiosity and inquisitiveness? What does it mean to be “creative”, and who is currently encouraged or even allowed to be?

Coming across the book *Against Creativity* by Oli Mould by chance sometime in February, I was glad to discover that the relationship between creativity and capitalism had already been researched at length.

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Mould argues that over the last few decades, capitalism and creativity have gotten increasingly intertwined. Following the rise of neoliberalism’s ‘marketization of everything’ and its trope of the ‘enterprising self’, he says that capitalism has introduced a vague notion of creativity where our entire productive selves and the relationships we keep are geared toward producing things, ideas, experiences and services that capitalism can exploit. He writes “You have as much chance of coming up with a new idea while you’re praying, playing with your child or dreaming as you do while you’re at work. This individualization, and the accompanying invasion into everyday life, is the fundamental shift in how labour is conceptualized in contemporary capitalism.”

As observed by many other writers today, Mould writes that any movement (be it a countercultural group, protest movement, meme or activist ideology) that is looking to destabilize capitalism is viewed as a potential market to exploit. Thus, “What it means to be creative ‘at work’ is to produce only more growth of contemporary forms of capitalist production. At the same time, ‘other’ forms of creative work and economies that produce radically alternative, or indeed anti-capitalist, means of socially organized labour are being marginalized, destroyed and/or reconfigured for profitable gain.”

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22 Oli Mould, Against Creativity, P. 54, Verso, 2018
23 In a Swedish context for example, capitalism’s co-option of feminism was discussed by Valerie Kyeyune Backström in her article “Hellre Blodinbella än Kakan och Zara Larsson” for Expressen, June 3, 2019
24 Oli Mould, Against Creativity, P. 37, Verso, 2018
“It is a freedom to have a unique hair colour or display a surfboard in your cubicle, but not to have a real influence over the labour process.”

Peter Fleming & Andrew Sturdy

2f. Approach

With this theoretical base I felt a strong sense of security in that fantasizing about life without work was not unreasonable, indulgent or wrong. I had sorted out what drew me to these ideas and knew that it was about something bigger than myself. With that in mind, I decided to approach my degree project with a decidedly anti-capitalist mentality that could exist in the world I’m imagining; trying to be as free as possible in my making and not worrying about a packaged and polished concept that could be summarized in a tagline. My thoughts are unfinished, disjointed, maybe at times even incorrect. But instead of trying to prematurely tie them together for the sake of a ‘concept’, I’m letting them be the way they are, in their honest state. I quickly realized that ten weeks is not enough to really digest all of this, but I also don’t want to compromise the subject - since learning and expanding is my motivation for doing all this, for being here.

When it was time to settle on an exhibition format I had started looking back at some of my own work more critically. I felt like it didn’t truthfully embody my spirit - that the results was always somehow a little too shiny, too catchy. It was like I saw remnants of my short career as a copywriter in advertising ten years ago, and I wanted to do things entirely differently. Attempting to live my life as if I existed in this alternative Society seemed like a good way to start.

25 Peter Fleming and Andrew Sturdy, ‘Being yourself ’ in the electronic sweatshop: New forms of normative control, September 23, 2010
3. Project Contents

“Nature is in great need of being re-designed”²⁶

Bruno Latour

3a. The Really Real Project

Through a fictional ten-week project - The Really Real Project - I will examine a fully automated post-work Society in another time, via the remnants of five of its Citizens. I will tell fictional stories rooted in current realities, blurring the line between fact and fiction in order to put into question what really is Real.

The project will materialize in an installation-style exhibition, where I display the artefacts these Citizens leave us, examining what kind of stories artifacts can carry, and what my particular artefacts can teach us about this Society, specifically circling in on its relationship to creativity and commodification.

In the book *Are We Human?*, Mark Wigley and Beatriz Colomina talk about artefacts by illustrating our interdependency with them. They describe the human as “An unstable category, even an unstable being, defined by its diversity and plasticity

- its ability to modify its own abilities. In redesigning itself, it redesigns the planet. But equally and simultaneously, the redesigned world redesigns the redesigning animal. Thus, What makes the human human is not inside the body or brain, or even inside the collective social body, but in our interdependency with artifacts. The human is suspended in a complex and continuous back and forth between itself and artifacts, a flickering that ultimately dissolves the distinction between them. Designed artifacts have as much agency as the animal that seemingly produced them. They transform the animal just as much as they are transformed by the animal. Or, to say it the other way around, the body and brain become artifacts.”

We increasingly design the world around us every day, and in turn the world around us design us. Thinking about it this way, design does not only define us as humans, but create us as humans. Maybe this is the reason design can make me feel so upset - not because it means nothing but because it means more than i ever realized. You can design a generic logo that says nothing. You can design a better logo that amplifies classism. You can design behaviors. You can design a species. We design humanity.

But then, carrying this thought further, how would designing under different circumstances, or with different motivations change us as human beings?

3a. Fact or Fiction?
“Our lives are already determined by a fiction forced upon us.”

Larissa Sansour

In Larissa Sansour’s film *In the Future They Ate From the Finest Porcelain*, artefacts and archeology are used in the context of Palestine to obfuscate the distinction between facts and fiction.

Here, “A narrative resistance group makes underground deposits of elaborate porcelain – suggested to belong to an entirely fictional civilisation. Their aim is to influence history and support future claims to their vanishing lands. Once unearthed, this tableware will prove the existence of this counterfeit people. By implementing a myth of their own and planting the evidence to substantiate it, the group completes a historical intervention – de facto creating a nation.”27

The film brings up so called “Facts on the ground”, a geopolitical term that attempts to describe a situation in reality as opposed to in the abstract. The term was popularised in the 1970s in discussions of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict to refer to Israeli settlements built in the occupied West Bank, which were intended to establish permanent Israeli footholds in Palestinian territory28. The tactic has been used by the

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27 Larissa Sansour, *In the Future They Ate From the Finest Porcelain*, Video, Directed by Soren Lind, U.A.E: Mec Film., 2015
Zionist movement for over a century in order to obtain control over more and more of Palestine. 29

In opposition to this, Sansour questions how historical and national narrative is shaped, and establishes that what is referred to as facts for some, is fiction to others.

4. Project Components

My exhibition is split into five components, one for each Citizen taking part in The Really Real Project.

4a. Citizen YXa44”

YXa44” has recorded various sounds from the ten weeks, which is presented as a sound diary.

29 Rashid Khalidi, "Bad Faith in the Holy City", Foreign Affairs, April 15 2010
How does time move in this kind of society, and what is presence in a society of de-commodified time?
4b. Citizen A+387”*g

“The end of the world has already occurred”

Timothy Morton

What is the potential of human cognitivity in a society that’s less focused on profit, and what are our wildest creative potentials? Inspired by mycelial intelligence and the claim that mushrooms could have played a massive role in the evolution of human consciousness30, Citizen A+387”*g uses DIY science to try to make their ecofantasies come to life.

30 Paul Stamets, Mushrooms and the mycology of consciousness, CIIS Public Programs Podcast, 2016
DIY Fungi, early material test

Fungi at Tyresta National Park

Fungi made out of spray foam and dried moss
According to some theorists, the end of the world has already occurred. In Timothy Morton’s book Hyperobjects, he says “The world ended in April 1784, when James Watt patented the steam engine, an act that commenced the depositing of carbon in Earth’s crust — namely, the inception of humanity as a geophysical force on a planetary scale.” This quote describes the anthropocene, a proposed epoch dating from the commencement of significant human impact on the Earth's geology and ecosystems, including anthropogenic climate change. In this era, humans can create, edit or eliminate nature as they wish.

CRISPR-cas9 is a gene editing tool developed in the past decade that has made it dramatically easier to make precise edits to the genes of everything from viruses and bacteria to mosquitoes and humans. Gene drives allow humans to change the genetic makeup of a species by changing the DNA of a few individuals that then spread the modification throughout an entire population.

For example, scientists working to eradicate malaria are now able to change the three species of mosquito most responsible for its transmission — Anopheles gambiae, Anopheles coluzzii, and Anopheles arabiensis — so that all their offspring would be male, effectively leading to the species’ extinction.\(^\text{31}\)

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\(^{31}\) Dylan Matthews, A genetically modified organism could end malaria and save millions of lives — if we decide to use it, Vox.com, Sep 26, 2018
Many people faced with topics like advanced DNA manipulation, gene babies and the creation and elimination of species feel a sense of living in a sci-fi movie - even though these are technologies already in use in our society today.

Citizen A+387**g uses DIY DNA editing as a regular hobby, perhaps akin to something like knitting.
4c. Citizen 9999.cd

9999.cd disappears from the Project.

All that’s left after the ten weeks is their 30cm long nails, excavated from the ground.
Fingernails from Citizen 9999.cd
4d. Citizen M?2

M?2 conducts experiments on themselves by growing another being inside their own body, attempting to combat a sense of loss of community that came with the lack of work. The experiment goes wrong, but it is unclear what exactly happens.
“The human hand is human because of what it makes, not because of what it is.”

Mark Wigley & Beatriz Colomina

The tools designers use today were created by large corporations such as Adobe for particular purposes, like efficiency. What could design tools and the process of making them look like in a different kind of society?

Z5b<3: makes tools to make things.

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32 Beatriz Cololina and Mark Wigley, Are We Human?, P. 27, Lars Müller Publishers, 2016
33 Julia Velkova, Engaging with Practice-Driven Free Software for Computer Graphics : Opportunities and Challenges, Lecture at Konstfack, 2019
In *Are We Human?*, Wigley and Colomina write “The human hand is uniquely adapted to make and use tools. The inherited structure of the body is ultimately altered by its technological extensions. For all Darwin’s opposition to the idea of a designer of nature, the human can actually change the shape of its own organism over countless generations. Human designs eventually redesign the human. We are gradually redesigned by our tools.”
5. Process and Challenges

In order to embody my characters and create their processes, notes and thoughts I tried to enter their state of mind.

To begin with, I jotted down all the things I did every day that wasn’t work, and tried to be as present as possible in those moments. I was also hoping that carefully writing down these kind of non-events would award them a little more significance,
and that as a result, I wouldn’t feel guilty about spending so much of my degree project exploring what it meant to “do nothing”.

After a while my process became less forced - in order to record the sounds I wanted for the sound diary I had to slowly shadow a plastic bag that swirled around in the wind, and to accumulate materials and inspiration for the fungi i had to come closer to the earth and observe life on a micro-scale. Thankfully, my process afforded me these moments of contemplation and presentness, and I still can’t quite make out if that was through intention or consequence - but maybe it was a bit of both.
At the same time, I often felt like I had started a large research project that I wouldn’t be able to complete. I constantly had to remind myself of my own aspirations - to remould my relationship to work and results.

I felt quite alone through my reading and writing process and thought a lot about inaccessible knowledge; wishing I had gotten a chance to read these things earlier, wishing I had people to discuss it all with. I think I’ll upload all the PDF-books and texts I’ve read for the other students in the department to read if they like, and try to open up for a little more communication, if other people are interested too.
6. Exhibition

My exhibition didn’t materialize until the final week of the course, and in a lot of ways, that’s when my world came alive. When I look at the exhibition today and exist in the space I’ve created, I feel a sense of serenity and joy.
At the same time, I also feel like I’ve transcended a lot of my own thoughts, and that I just want to keep searching for new insights, get to new places.

It was difficult finishing this text, because in a way I’ve gotten past what I started out with, and I felt that I wanted to rewrite everything. But of course, those were the thoughts that brought me here, and created what lead me further. In some ways I feel like I can’t define the project anymore, or perhaps I feel like it’s not really a project at all. But I suppose that’s what I intended - to let it be open and undefinable.
I’m thinking that this is so much more than these weeks, that I want another year, another education, a lifetime. That I’ll never be able to finish these thoughts and understand anything entirely. I think that’s what I’ve really gotten out of this; a strong need to keep understanding, misunderstanding, connecting and disconnecting, transforming and expanding myself as a human. To design and redesign myself.

7. Conclusion

By living, working, and unworking with this project, I’ve explored the potentials of fiction, and in a way I’ve become the characters I created.

Attempting to reimagine the potentials of creativity within the walls of the society we live in can perhaps only go so far, but sampling my friends laughter to make a drumbeat or making the crinkle noise of a paper sound like the a rocketship has done its bit to set me free.

By imitating the conditions of these Citizens, I’ve gotten as close as I can to living in this alternate time. In a way, I’ve become my own fiction.
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