INTRODUCTION

Some technologies have advanced beyond our ability to conceptualize their implications. In response, a new discipline in design, architecture, and art emerged: Speculative Design. It takes the uncertainties and ambiguity of new technologies as a starting point and imagines possible outcomes. It includes non-human agents and anticipates a world in which humans might play a less central role.

OBSERVATIONS

‒ In the past ten years, a new discipline in design surfaced: Speculative Design (SD). The term was coined in the '90s by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby. In Speculative Everything (2013) they describe SD not only as a tool to create things, but also to speculate about how things could be, in order to imagine possible futures.
‒ Benjamin Bratton, who teaches SD in the U.S., proposes in The Stack (2015) that different genres of computation-smart grids of a planetary scale, such as cloud platforms, smart cities, the IoT, and automation, can form a coherent whole: an accidental megastructure that is both a computational infrastructure and a new governing architecture.
‒ Leading institutes design speculative projects and various universities worldwide have SD programs. The MIT Design Fiction Group and the Moscow based Strelka Institute for Media, Architecture, and Design, for example, teach SD. Liam Young is a known speculative designer and his think tank Tomorrow’s Today’s Thought operates in this area. Another think tank concerning SD is the Near Future Laboratory. The past Istanbul Design Biennale ‘Are we human’ was an exhibition of SD. The Amsterdam-based design studio Metahaven is known for its speculative projects (and for its collaboration with Edward Snowden by designing the platform WikiLeaks).
‒ In previous notes, we talked about how to forecast the future and we introduced movements, such as accelerationism, that try to embrace technological developments that shape our world. Now, SD deals with the uncertainties and ambiguities of technologies in order to anticipate the future.

ANALYSIS

Speculative Design (SD) introduces two new ways of thinking about the world. First, SD deals with the new materialism of our world. Before, industrial material allowed for the inexpensive mass distribution of standardized designs: new matter provided a new materialism. Today, we are confronted with a new kind of materialism that is potentially just as transformative, Klaus Schwab writes in The Fourth Industrial Revolution (2016). Biotechnology, IoT, AI, and robotics form the new materialism that restructures the world. Our minds can grasp the initial applications of these technologies, but the second or third order effects are hard to foresee. SD tries to probe the contours of the possible transformations. This differs from predicting because SD borrows techniques of fiction in order to explore the implications and consequences of emerging technologies. SD places new technologies within imaginary but everyday situations in order to start a debate on the implications of different technological futures. SD poses “what if” questions to open discussions about the kind of future we want and anticipates at the future to make it more shapeable.

Second, in times of IoT, AI, etc., SD seeks to overturn the way of thinking which has been the privilege of the human being. In After Finitude (2008), French philosopher Meillassoux says we now have to allow ways of thinking that are not correlated with the human. SD is thus geared toward users who may or may not be human. Bratton gives us the example of ubiquitous computation that seeds communication to and from objects at, below, or above a normal human scale of encounter: How will computational assemblages define our sight and change our territories? Another example is machine vision: When we will “see” through the eyes of a machine, can we program these to share our aesthetics and interpretations?

SD deals with the ambiguity and uncertainty generated by the new materialism through creating a framework for discussion that includes nonhuman users: it is a design discipline for the post-Anthropocene. The questions of how successful SD can be in getting us ready for the future and whether speculation will not lead us to even more uncertainty, remain. Nevertheless, SD might help us shape our intuition of our future world.

POTENTIAL BENEFICIARIES

‒ Producers that understand the principles of new materialism.
‒ Design that go against the misguiding simplification of nostalgic design and gears users to deal with a new reality.
‒ Tools of fiction as a skill or competitive advantage.