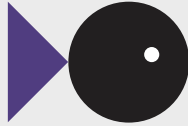


Doing design futures inquiry through metaphorical thinking

BY Betti Marenko

EXTRACTS: Edited from I05 UNIT 05

AVAILABLE: [Link](#)



Introduction

The Philosophical Pills are an experiment in post-qualitative methodology: a way of doing inquiry that capitalises on the unknown as a field of potential, rather than imposing a blueprint (St Pierre 2019), and an instance of “serious play of rigorous experimentation” (MacLure 2020) through which uncertainty finds its way into the frameworks and methods of research to produce creative encounters with the unforeseen (Manning 2015).

This chance-based method is significant for a number of reasons:

- It is based on a radical openness to what the future may (or may not) bring, thus counteracting ingrained risk-averse tendencies to predict, control, and prepare for the future (future proofing).
- It disrupts established academic research by leading the participant through an ‘unchosen’ path where serendipity trumps intention, and where you are called to co-create meaning
- Finally, it wants to make a stand in favour of uncertainty and reclaim it from the rhetoric of contemporary capitalism where it is deployed (together with agility, resilience, mobility, flexibility) as a mode of anxiety inducing neoliberal governance.

Why Pill?

The metaphor of the ‘pill’ should be read in two ways. On a first immediate level, the pill suggests that these philosophical ideas are like active ingredients, they possess curative properties, they are easily digestible, produce tangible effects, and can be prescribed as fast, reliable, effective and targeted cure to assist design students with their inquiry.

The second layer evokes the ‘pharmakon’, which in Greek stands for both medicine and poison, something that according to dosage and mode of intake can be either beneficial or disruptive. The ambivalence inherent in the act of ‘taking the pill’ – where curative properties coexist with side effects or even with the risk of an overdose, and where the remedy may turn to poison – is an appropriate metaphor that reinforces the methodology and the ethos of using a practical philosophical approach that interrogates futures by staying with uncertainty, and indeed turning uncertainty into a material to work with.



The ethos

The Futures Philosophical Pills use chance-based interrogations into the unknown to generate opportunities to make meaning, create inspiration and build knowledge. This ‘divinatory’ ethos is embedded in their method of use.

By the random selection of one (or more) Pill card and of several Prompt cards users are able to build a random transversal collection of insights, ideas and references.

The way these insights resonate with each other, producing further thoughts, is a combination of the ‘chance-based’ together with the individual engagement of the participant – and interpretation – coproduction.

Your own way of interpreting the cards that chance has served you, and the content each card has to offer, become a narrative journey to help you reflect critically on your design practice and its future orientations.

On the unknown

... To sum up, the Futures Philosophical Pills we have produced help to imagine and enact a plurality of futures by design. They are:

- Philosophy-in action: working at the hinge between the speculative and the pragmatic.
- Transdisciplinary: Devised by a hybrid team of theorists and designers with design practitioners in mind
- They pertain to post qualitative inquiry – based on understanding becoming
- They do meta-inquiry: they use the unknown to capture the unknown
- They are diagnostic devices: to decode the present as it morphs into futures.

Crucially, while they concern futures, they are ‘not about predicting, but being attentive to the unknown knocking at the door’ (Deleuze 2006, 346).

▲ Figure 1: Postgraduate students from across UAL engaged in sense-making activity, 7 February 2020. (Image Credit: James Bryant).

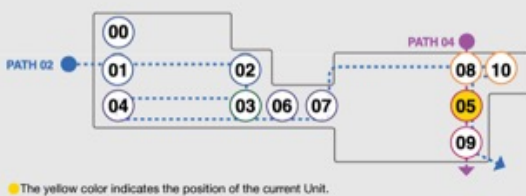
CASES AND EXPERIENCES

Case title: Hybrid Futures Hackathon

Short descriptions: The Hybrid Futures Hackathon took place during the Digital Innovation Season – a series of talks, lectures, events and technical skills workshops bringing together critical thinking and creative expression around the theme of human-machine encounter at Central Saint Martin UAL (October 2020-January 2021). Facilitated and delivered entirely remotely, the Hybrid Futures Hackathon was designed as a platform for community-building, exchange and cross-course learning for UG and PG students engaging with the key themes of the season [How can we re-imagine human-machine encounters?]. A selection of Pills (Anisimism; Counterfactuals; Decolonization; Heterotopia; Post-Anthropocene; Superstition) were prescribed to mobilize students' different expertise, locate a shared theme/research question, and as a gravitation point to form the hackathon teams with the final objective to land on a research question which would inform the production of short video submissions.

The Pills proved highly versatile as they performed a variety of functions: icebreakers, brainstorming devices, critical lens for the production of the research questions. The Hackathon had a total of 40 participants, with 9 competing teams, 6 shortlisted and 4 winners. Produced by international teams working across several subject disciplines, nationalities and time zones, the videos were showcased during the Hybrid Futures symposium which concluded the season, vividly illustrating, anchoring and counterpointing the debate.

ROADMAP AND CONNECTIONS



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The Philosophical Pills use a transdisciplinary and transversal perspective to articulate call philosophy-in-action or practical philosophy (Deleuze 1988). The key characteristic of this approach concerns working at the hinge of the speculative and the pragmatic so to develop intellectual interrogations that can scaffold tangible design-led interventions which in turn are able to feedback on to speculation. It's important to stress this point: the speculative and the pragmatic are not opposed to each other: pragmatic doesn't mean practical as opposed to speculative or theoretical. Rather, we talk about speculative pragmatism (Massumi 2011): how to stay open to invention and future making (speculative) while staying with what is happening, the now, and figure out ways (methods) to enact this (pragmatism). The 'how' is crucial. It means that philosophy in action is in the business of activating ideas through prototyping techniques that engage with what does not exist yet, that turn uncertainty into modes of knowing, that use uncertainty as an opportunity to create meaning.

The Philosophical Pills are critical lenses to furnish design educators and design students alike with theoretical tools to amplify their capacity to think about possible futures, diagnostic devices to cultivate imagination and introduce different non-existent futures into the present in order to shape practice. This again is a crucial point: to connect these anticipatory skills to action – and design's many ways of seeing, interpreting and enacting the future.

Consolidate into two distinct decks of cards, the Philosophical Pills offer 40 concepts. For each of them a short introduction is available together with key reference texts – written thinking about an audience of design students. While all these terms belong to a repository of concepts that we can use to articulate multiple versions of the future, at this stage this is highly situated work which draws largely on European thought (process

philosophy in particular)

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on your design practice and its future orientations.

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Put differently, the Philosophical Pills are a response to the challenge of conducting inquiry when conditions are volatile, times are turbulent, and complexity increases. How do we attend to the multiple instabilities and contingencies of a world in continuous transformation, and how do we capture this unfolding of events within our inquiry? What kind of conceptual frameworks and methodological practices can be used to engage with becoming and all the mess it entails? The Philosophical Pills offers a possible way: by firmly knitting together theory and practice, thinking and making, design and philosophies, the speculative and the pragmatic.

This is not only a methodological but also an epistemological shift: from seeing inquiry based on the analysis of data (and the assumption that data are raw and mute and will acquire meaning only by external coding) to seeing inquiry and knowledge-production

as 'diffractive' (Barad 2007) – rooted in the entanglement of theory and practice, of researcher and research, speculative and pragmatic, and in the awareness that as researchers, educators, practitioners we are never external observers but always implicated with the research we are co-producing within the flow of events. Seen in this way, the Philosophical Pills are an experiment in post-qualitative methodology: a way of doing inquiry that capitalizes on the unknown as a field of potential, rather than imposing a blueprint (St Pierre 2019), and an instance of "serious play of rigorous experimentation" (MacLure 2020) through which uncertainty finds its way into the frameworks and methods of research to produce creative encounters with the unforeseen (Manning 2015).

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1: Interrogating Futures (tutor's content)

01. Introduction: Narratives of the Future In this section students learn about different viewpoints and perspectives that can be used to describe "the Future". This section

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introduces a range of ideas (from western and non-western cultures, and from other fields such as science, physics and ancient philosophy) and definitions of key terms (imagination, anticipation, speculation). The aim is to offer learners a broad understanding of the many ways in which the things called 'future' can be conceptualized and constructed culturally.

02. Why do we need Philosophy?

This section explains the methodological approach underpinning the Philosophical Pills and its philosophy-in-action ethos. It explains the notion of the "pharmakon" (the idea that something can be both remedy and poison). It positions the Philosophical Pills within post-qualitative modes of inquiry concerning the process of becoming (rather than the essence of being) and methodologies fit for a world that is continuous (rather than discrete), uncertain (rather than determinate) and volatile (rather than predictable).

03. Working with Uncertainty

This section deepens students' understanding of uncertainty (e.g. from physics, risk management, philosophy, epistemology) and suggests ways in which it can be used as a material to work with, including the awareness of the limits of one's own knowledge. Two trajectories are offered: negative knowledge (the knowledge of the boundaries around unknown objects of research); and conjectural knowledge (knowledge that allows for elements of chance and unpredictability to enter the outcome).

04. What are the Philosophical Pills?

This section explains in detail what the Philosophical Pills are: a series of curated philosophical insights to interrogate and

challenge established approaches and assumptions around the future and catalyze research. It explains how the Philosophical Pills came to be, and the key purpose of doing philosophy in action by scaffolding the development of design propositions through the means of selected philosophical concepts with the aim to amplify, disrupt and expand existing visions. The broad objective is to push students outside their received notions, prompt them to question and justify their choice, and build increased awareness around the social construction of collective future imaginary, so that they can be exercising a more fine-tuned sense of agency and openness in relation to possible futures.

05. The decks

There are two decks of cards: the Pills deck and the Prompts deck – each containing 40 cards. By combining cards from the two decks participants can create a number of chance-based, situated 'readings', where the philosophical terms (Pills) intersect with directives, questions, provocations and nudges (offered by the Prompts). This process has been designed to open routes for adventurous thinking, conceptual exploration, and playful philosophy-in-action to amplify and disrupt the speculative-pragmatic hinge and inform design practice.

2: Taking the Pills (workshop) - see above section 06 for details

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◀ Figures 2 & 3: The Futures Philosophical Pills and content from UNIT 05, IO5 FUTURES LITERACY METHODS. (Image credit: FUEL4DESIGN).

▲ Figure 4: 'Do you see the glass half empty or half full?' Betti Marenko and student participants. The 'Hacking Futures - Futures Hacking' Philosophical Pills workshop at Central Saint Martins, UAL, 7 February 2020. (Image credit: James Bryant).

