



# SOUVENIRS FROM THE FUTURES

## **Objective**

Paolo Cardini is an Associate Professor of Industrial Design at RISD. His particular emphasis within the broader field of design is “Speculative” or “Discursive” design, which the designers and theorists Stephanie and Bruce Tharp define as a category of product design that treats artifacts principally as transmitters of substantive ideas, rather than as mere instruments of utility. The primary intent of the discursive designer then is to encourage users’ reflections upon, or engagements with, a particular discourse; the goal is to affect the intellect. Moving beyond traditional styling or commercial problem solving, discursive design embraces a more expansive role for the designer: engaged citizen, sociocultural critic, educator, and provocateur.

Prof. Cardini teaches Discursive Design to RISD Industrial Design students. In particular, he does so through his courses “Design for Utopias and Dystopias” and “Design Futures.” In both, Cardini fosters a deep critical analysis about our present society and he pushes students to imagine the future as a direct consequence of our present choices. Being at RISD, a School committed to critical inquiry around the intersections of globalization and art & design and where many students are from countries outside of the so-called “west”, Cardini immediately felt the urge to reset his general idea of future and reset his assumptions about the meaning of social critique. Through student projects, he soon realized that what appeared to be a dystopian reality for some was in reality a mere representation of the present for others.

As such, Cardini understood that the field of Discursive/Speculative Design practice continues to operate within a white-western perspective and context. The Global Futures Lab seeks to disrupt this model and to craft a more pluralistic and inclusive debate about the future by engaging in a global discourse with participants in specific geographic locations across the world to share dreams, fears and doubts across and among cultures.

For the Lab, Cardini will collaborate with institutions (non-profit art spaces, academic institutions, and other spaces) to create on-site workshops to explore this concept about discursive design within each local context. During each workshop participants will be asked to build objects, “souvenirs from the futures”, able to illustrate what the future would be in their own reality as consequence of, or in response to, their socio-political-economical present condition. The workshops will be based on Speculative Design, Speculative Ethnography and Design Fiction theories and the goal will be to produce physical artifacts, developed by the students themselves or in collaboration with local artisans.

The ultimate goal for the project is to create a mobile exhibition bringing together the discourses and objects that map souvenirs for diverse global futures.

## **Overarching Frame: RISD Global Engagement**

RISD's Global Office is a hub for discourse and cross-cultural exchange that supports students, faculty and members of the RISD community on campus and in the world. It is committed to developing and sustaining opportunities, programs and networks that address the challenges, meanings, and significance of art and design in a global context, and inspiring creative agents for a changing world.

Within this context at RISD, the Global Faculty Fellowship program advances RISD Global's goal of addressing the challenges, meanings and importance of art and design in a global context and invites the selected faculty member to respond to this during the fellowship period. Core to this goal is the fellow's collaboration with peers, colleagues, students and organizations across the world that are pertinent to the focus on their work and the future of their disciplines more broadly. As such, RISD is taking seriously its mission to educate artists, designers and future leaders to "make lasting contributions to a global society through critical thinking, scholarships and innovation."

In Academic Year 2016-2017, Professor Paolo Cardini will serve as the Global Faculty Fellow, during this period the fellowship --under Prof. Cardini's leadership-- will take on the questions of futures through a decentered approach that seeks to challenge the more typical western perspectives on this topic and to instead imagine futures collaboratively within very particular socio-geo-artistic contexts including: Isfahan, Iran, Lima, Peru, and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and China. In doing so, Cardini will collaborate locally in each context to also craft a bridge between local traditions of making and designs for global futures.

As such, through this fellowship, RISD is honored to be collaborating with leading art and design schools in these areas to imagine and design together possible futures.

## **Process**

"Design fiction is the deliberate use of diegetic prototypes to suspend disbelief about change" (Bruce Sterling). Starting from this definition we can simplify the idea behind this project as "the creation of everyday objects, set in the future or in alternative realities, able to suggest what it will look like to live in a specific future linked to a particular geo-cultural context. This series of workshops will craft alternatives to the dominant, western stereotypes of futures in relation to Utopian scenarios and Science Fiction. Students will have the opportunity to reflect upon their own environments, their traditions and beliefs and to envision a future respectful of their cultural needs and coherent with their own idea of tomorrow's life. In opposition to a diffuse *technological determinism*, where society seems shaped by new technologies, the Global Future Lab wants to endorse a sort of "cultural determinism" in which any idea of future should be double-chained with localized visions and debates about plural futures.

The process will be based on the creation of future scenarios, utopian or dystopian, in which the students will envision tomorrow's everyday life. They will produce narratives and stories about that future and that will evoke how people will live and interact. They will look at objects and artifacts that future peoples will use; quotidian objects that would go unnoticed in future lives but for us, in the present, will result as concrete representation of new habits and new behaviors. Those objects will play the role of *diegetic prototypes*, suggesting a certain idea of future that society can contribute to achieve (if desirable) or prevent (if unwanted).

## **Outcomes**

The outcome of the entire initiative will be a series of objects able to represent unique and genuine ideas of future true to the different locations and cultures involved in the project. With the proper flexibility and case-by-case considerations, the outcomes should respect the following requirements:

- The artifacts should represent everyday objects used in the future realities envisioned during the workshop.
- Although there is no limit to the number of artifacts that can be produced, given the short time available, it is highly recommended that students concentrate on one to three pieces.
- The objects created must be limited in size and not exceed (all together) the 1x1x1mt dimension (this is to reduce the shipping cost and make the entire operation easy to handle and manage).
- Ideally, but not exclusively, objects should be realized with materials and techniques typical for the place where the workshop is held.

## **Follow up**

Professor Cardini, RISD Global and the RISD community at large are working at the moment to envision different possible follow up to this project. The potential paths analyzed so far includes:

- A Publication in which the different workshops experiences will be enriched by contributions from the participants (but not only) in form of essays and articles.
- An Exhibition, that could take place initially at the RISD Campus but later travel to each location involved in the project.
- A Symposium, to be held at RISD, to address the topic of Global Futures where representative of the partner Organizations will be invited (together with other guest speakers) to express their thoughts and share their perspectives.

## **Workshop development**

The workshop will take place over four full-days. During the workshop the students will work on creating future scenarios and product ideas and prototypes to be later realized by either local technicians (the people) or techniques (the methods). After the workshop, the students, with the supervision of the local faculty involved in the project, will be responsible for managing the relations with the local artisans and the full production of the artifact.

## References

Following a little selection of projects, papers, articles and books that could help in defining the framework of this project. Any of these documents is specifically focusing on what Global Future Lab want to achieve during this challenging investigation but they are all, in one way or another, connected with the topic of a non-western vision of future.

### Projects

Botanica (Formafantasma): future of objects without oil.

<http://www.formafantasma.com/filter/home/botanica>

The Afronauts (Cristina De Middel): space travels from African perspective.

<http://www.lademiddel.com/the-afronauts-1.html>

New Mumbai (Tobias Revell): bio-fiction with big mushrooms providing energy to the slums.

<http://www.tobiasrevell.com/New-Mumbai>

Afterlife (Auger, Loizeau): metaphysical dialogue, examining the cultural shift from belief systems upheld by organised religion to the more factual basis of science and technology.

<http://www.auger-loizeau.com/index.php?id=9>

Supercargo (Peter Moorsgard): collection of “cargo cults”, ritual appropriation + subversive mimicry.

<http://cargoclub.tumblr.com/>

### Papers

Speculative Design: crafting the speculation (Auger)

[http://ellieharmon.com/wp-content/uploads/2016-06-Auger\\_Design-Fictions.pdf](http://ellieharmon.com/wp-content/uploads/2016-06-Auger_Design-Fictions.pdf)

What is critical about critical design? (Bartzell, Bartzell)

<https://openlab.ncl.ac.uk/digitalcivics2014/files/2010/03/p3297-bardzell.pdf>

Listening to non-western perspectives (Hicks, Slaughter)

<http://www.metafuture.org/pdf/nonwestern.pdf>

### Articles

Design Fiction: a short essay design, science, facts and fiction (Julian Bleeker)

<http://blog.nearfuturelaboratory.com/2019/03/17/design-fiction-a-short-essay-on-design-science-fact-and-fiction/>

Design Fiction: Diegetic Prototypes (Bruce Sterling)

<http://www.wired.com/2011/02/design-fiction-diegetic-prototypes/>

Ethnographies from the future: what can ethnographers learn from science fiction and speculative design (Laura Forlano)

<http://ethnographymatters.net/blog/2013/09/26/ethnographies-from-the-future-what-can-ethnographers-learn-from-science-fiction-and-speculative-design/>

### Books

Speculative Everything (Dunne, Raby)

<https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/speculative-everything>

Postcolonialism and Science Fiction (Jessica Langer)

<http://io.gizmodo.com/postcolonialism-and-science-fiction-an-introduction>

Future: all that matters (Ziauddin Sardar)

<https://www.amazon.com/Future-That-Matters-Ziauddin-Sardar/dp/1444790044>

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