

Apexart Curatorial Program

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EMERGENCY SIMULATION ROOM FOR HYPOTHETICAL TOOLS

ALTERNATIVE UNKNOWNNS

ORGANIZED BY

ELLIOTT P. MONTGOMERY

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NOVEMBER 5 - DECEMBER 19, 2015

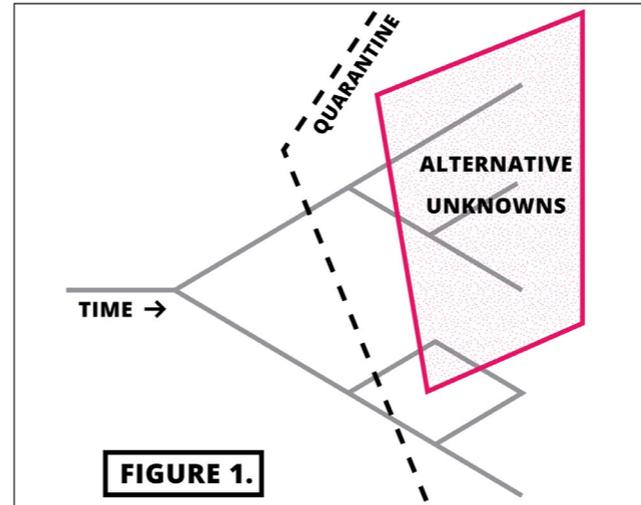


FIGURE 1.

Sam Hart, *Fog of War*, 2015, four-fold booklet, 2.75 x 5.75 in

Alternative Unknownns:

Over the last few decades, speculative design has emerged as a new sub-discipline of design, one which proposes hypotheticals, asks questions, and explores alternatives - shifting focus away from design's conventional goals of solving problems, providing utility, and often, optimizing consumability. Speculative designers borrow strategies from think tanks, foresight strategists, forecasters, and trend analysts, balancing those perspectives with design approaches that allow them to develop provocative social scenarios and make the invisible visible.

Speculative design has resulted in physical objects like Huggable Atomic Mushrooms, fictional therapy devices imagined for people afraid of nuclear annihilation (Dunne and Raby). Other speculative design artifacts include a suitcase of biosensor-activated colored feces to help self-diagnose an illness (Daisy Ginsberg and James King), and a network of robotic buoys for surveying marine life on the Bronx and East River (Environmental Health Clinic & The Living Architecture).

Though early speculative designers set out to divorce themselves from traditional contexts of applied design (namely, the commercial marketplace), contemporary practitioners have found numerous opportunities to position speculative design in the public eye - most commonly through exhibitions at cultural institutions such as MoMA's pioneering "Design and the Elastic Mind" (2008) and "Talk to Me" (2011). In addition to being introduced and showcased in public exhibitions, speculative

design has also been adopted by research organizations as a means of public engagement, and leveraged by commercial innovation teams such as the Philips Design Futures group and Nokia Design Strategic Projects Studio which use speculation to explore new product territories.

More rare are the instances of government agencies using speculative design. There are in fact very few examples in which speculative projects are developed directly with and for government agencies or services, despite the need for foresight in these organizations. The relationship between speculative design and governmental public services has yet to be extensively explored. The curators envision this exhibition as an opportunity for speculative work to be developed in partnership with government employees and to offer new perspectives on the work of a public agencies.

Alternative Unknownns began with a roundtable discussion between five emergency preparedness experts, six designers, an actor, two writers, and the curators. This interdisciplinary group met at the NYC Emergency Management headquarters in downtown Brooklyn on August 26th, and dove into a captivating discussion about "the unlikely but possible" emergencies on New York City's radar. The importance of community involvement was raised many times, with specific reference to the Community Emergency Response Teams located throughout many parts of New York City. Reaction and threat psychology also came up in discussion as opportunities for investigation. Thirdly, the conundrum of digital vs. analog systems was raised, acknowledging that digital tools such as Twitter may actually break news of emergencies before any other media, although reliance on electronically powered systems can be dangerous since the electrical grid is certainly not without flaws.



Lost Cause Inc, *The Red X*, 2011, Paper, Ink, Staples, 8.5 x 11 in

Alternative Unknowns consists of speculative artifacts created by New York-based product designers, writers, digital developers and artists; and a simulation room for emergency scenarios (the apexart exhibition space). The simulation room examines potential behaviors and interactions that could be sparked by the speculative artifacts. After the meeting, the group set out to craft a script for the simulator, incorporating contributions from NYC Emergency Management and the *Alternative Unknowns* team. Among the numerous possible emergency scenarios, the team decided to focus the simulation script on a situation that receives less public attention than more common events such as hurricanes and floods. It was decided that the scripted scenario would revolve around an unnamed pandemic that's hit the city, and is traveling easily via public transit. The scene focuses in on the entrance to the subway, and an associated pop-up health checkpoint for monitoring and controlling the spread of disease.

Among the artifacts created for the show are a low-tech tool for reaching community volunteers, a reconsidered system for social interactions, a communication regarding activism during pandemics, a self-administered disease testing kit, a mobility aid that connects to current infrastructure, a kit for adapting urban animals as biosensors, and an informational document.



Matt Jones, Matt Delridge and Isaac Blankensmith, *CitibikeInfrastructure*, 2015, digital print



Radiological Dispersal Device (RDD) in Coney Island 2013 - NYC EM

In November, in the completed simulation room with script, artifacts, and scenic treatment, a panel of emergency management experts will join a public audience at apexart and observe four alternative enactments within the simulation room. To conclude the exhibition, the curators will invite public viewers and the expert panel to deconstruct the enactment, and to scrutinize the role of speculative design as an approach for agencies such as NYC Emergency Management.

While speculative design is not currently employed by NYC Emergency Management, one of the experts explained that the office regularly trains for emergency situations with what they call "tabletop exercises." These exercises introduce a scripted scenario, such as a summer blackout, to examine the operation procedures and communications to develop what's referred to as "posture."

Simulation exercises are also practiced in the field to role play reactions to situations such as the Radiological Dispersal Device (RDD) scenario that was enacted in Coney Island on November 17, 2013. This exercise simulated a radiological incident, and allowed stakeholders and responders from multiple city agencies to engage with the coordinated response. Participating agencies included NYPD, New York City Fire Department (FDNY), NYC Department of Health & Mental Hygiene, and NYC Water.

There are some historical examples of speculative models being utilized by governments and militaries. A particularly inspiring simulator is the San Francisco Bay Model, constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1956. The model was originally built to test a major engineering plan to build dams throughout the bay. The simulator served as a decision

making tool, rendering the plan as a non-viable proposal, and helping to save the bay. As early as the 1930's, flight simulation instruments were developed for training and evaluation. The Link Trainer, a flight simulator produced in 1929, was developed as a tool for teaching pilots how to fly using the most current instruments. The Link flight simulator responded to the pilot's controls and gave an accurate reading on the included instruments.

This history of simulation use in government contexts provided inspiration for the simulator premise in *Alternative Unknowns*. As a way to bring realism to the experience, the curators references the methods, models and aesthetics found in recent and historical government settings created to simulate and train for specific situations.

Through the exhibition as simulator, *Alternative Unknowns* explores the value of combining speculative design and government simulation setups as an opportunity to pre-enact an array of wider ranging alternative scenarios, but also to examine the role of speculative systems and equipment in the situations. Applied and participatory speculative design, in the context of government and public service, may have potential to introduce bolder, more imaginative strategies for dealing with critical emerging issues. As seen in many political cycles, politicians with audacious dreams for radically better systems draw strong support. Our public servants on the front line could be empowered by opportunities that encourage active dreaming on the job.



Clay Kippen, *Discreet Diagnostic Device*, 2015, Wood, acrylic, glue, museum board, acrylic ink on paper, 18 x 14 x 1" in



Miriam Simun and Nanu Al-Hamad, *Emergency Intake*, 2015, Massage table, floor mat, clipboard, intake sheet, space pen, 136 x 28 x 33 in

Applied speculative design could be introduced as a common practice in these situations to bolster more visionary approaches to service development and provision. When these government employees collaborate with interdisciplinary groups using futures-oriented methods and tools, they produce visions with the potential to guide strategy and dramatically influence their goals.

It goes without saying that change-making in public service agencies requires much more than speculative opportunities alone, and that the challenges inherent to public service development are manifold. Knowing these challenges exist, this exhibition investigates one approach to crafting thoughtful, deliberate and engaging opportunities for applied participatory speculative design to be deployed with public servants to foster constructive visioning.

Elliott P. Montgomery and Chris Woebken © 2015

Curators **Elliott P. Montgomery** and **Chris Woebken**, co-founders of the speculative design research practice "The Extrapolation Factory," experiment with new methods for extending speculative design to a broader, non-expert audience. The Extrapolation Factory introduces specific models of speculation through workshops, usually yielding physical prototypes that help to tell pointed stories of deeper questions.