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Changing the Rules of the Game: Data and Ethnographic Surrealism

Codesign has become a social science standard for community consultation on services provided by development organisations, information technology companies, hospitals and local government. It is the go-to process for public sector entities, such as councils for negotiating complex data surrounding urban development. (See, for example, City of Sydney consultations on *Sustainable Sydney 2030* in 2008 and *Sustainable Sydney 2050* in 2019.) The history of the participatory processes of codesign in the field of design is often traced to the research of Pelle Ehn (1988, p.1) who sought to democratise design as a 'social and creative activity' by including workers in the restructuring of newspaper production that began to incorporate digital technologies in the 1970s. Twenty years later, computer scientist Heike Winschiers-Theophilus and her collaborators (2010, p.9) described how important it is for participatory design facilitators to understand the sensation of 'being participated'. Here I take them to refer to the sensation of feeling forced however gently into an agreement rather than autonomously electing to do so. This echoes the observation by development researchers Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (2001) of participatory practices as a kind of authoritarianism or tyranny that systemically reduces the participants' agency in the exercise of power by facilitators. In their words (2001, p.4), participatory practices of codesign in the development field risk becoming models of power that are 'oppressive, unjust and arbitrary' and (p.8) serve only to 'reinforce the interests of the already powerful'. In development studies the historical genesis of participation as the cooption of participants' labour has been traced by Roderick Stirrat and Heiko Henke (2001) to the popularist methods of the Reformation as practised by Protestant missionaries of the 19th century and the emergence of the ethos of empowerment and an emphasis on process rather than the evaluation of outcomes. Recognition of the potential for codesign to reinforce power imbalances and the pacification and corralling of participant agency to fit social norms are only recently emerging in design discourse (see Pawar and Redstrom, 2015) and it is to this debate that this paper aims to contribute.

Reflecting on how codesign can resist the potential to flip from engagement into coercion in my research on topical and complex data, the workshops were designed to explore how personal experiences can interrupt the historical conventions and social imaginaries of data. My rationale for constructing the workshops with invitations to misuse technology or readymade products in ways that are unusual, or may be interpreted by their designers as incorrect, is a technique with which I invite participants to curb tendencies to self-censor when communicating with strangers—other participants—and to engage with the data playfully. In this context I define playfully as including irrational perspectives or ideas that at first glance seem fugitive or ambiguous in relation to the data. By including the irrational and fugitive I hoped that participants could draw on liminal and in-between experiences comparing them with the experiences of others to attain perspectives that challenge the objectivity of data.

Making the familiar, or objective, strange according to the vision of Surrealist artists, shaped the ethnographic practice of Michel Leiris, a poet, novelist, ethnographer and curator who understood self-doubt and skepticism and recorded the details of his interactions with other people, however unappealing, as a way of understanding himself. According to Leiris human interactions brim over with conflicting emotions that exceed an integrated subjectivity. As James Clifford notes (1981, p.121) the Surrealist project to make the familiar strange met its counterpart in colonialist ethnography which sought to make the strange familiar or at least knowable. Ethnographic surrealism is defined in this context as subjective ethnography and an approach for exploring the possibilities and limits of codesigning alternative imaginaries in an increasingly data-rich world. Ethnographic surrealism was initially described by Leiris in 1934 (1934/2019), and more recently by James Clifford (1981) and Michael Taussig (1993), among others, as a sensitivity to diverse cultures that reflects on the importance of recognising the subjectivity and biases of the researcher.

Urban designers Corelia Baibarac and Doina Petrescu (2019, p.91) recommend that codesign develop methods that are 'situated, mediated, networked and opensource'. Accordingly, the workshops invite participants to make images and artefacts about data through the misuse of mass-manufactured products such as clothing and the misuse of technology such as mobile media cameras, 360 cameras, and data point sensors installed in the National Facility for Human-Robot Interaction Research,

Sydney. The iterative development of the workshops' activities aims to undo any sense by participants that the researcher dictates the outcomes.

The workshop's misuse of technology approximates the definition of beauty (Ducasse, 1869) as 'the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table' adopted by many Surrealists including Man Ray and Rene Magritte. Misusing technology is also an adaptation of the 'Tutorial problems' that were developed by ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel (1964, 1996, 2002) to observe responses to the breaching of socially sanctioned behaviours and problematise or reframe the taken-for-granted in everyday interactions. For Garfinkel (1964, p.226) 'making commonplace scenes visible' and 'for these background expectancies to come into view one must either be a stranger to the "life as usual" character of everyday scenes or become estranged from them'. While Garfinkel requested that students behave as if lodger's in their parent's home or jump queues without explanation my workshops request that participants treat high-tech recording instruments as toys to express an aspect of the issue of concern. These breaches aim to disrupt norms with infractions of the status-quo and to elicit empirical responses, rather than theoretical abstractions, and produce new understandings of the familiar that are usually taken for granted.

Succinctly defined by philosopher Charles Taylor (2007, p.171) the social imaginary is a culmination of 'the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie their experiences.' The workshops that are developed with collaborators in various locations have questioned the social imaginary through disjunctures between published data and participants' experiences to explore urban surveillance (Sydney and Pittsburgh, 2016), climate change (Sydney, 2018) and women's health in relation to menopause in the workplace (Katoomba and Sydney, 2020). At first glance these topics may seem an arbitrary selection but what connects them is their positioning of data concerning challenging issues that are often perceived as overly complex and therefore overlooked. The key questions underpinning my exploration of how to make complex data more engaging are:

1. Does the co-creation of images about data open up emergent narratives of the lived experiences of complex issues for workshop participants?
2. To what extent does the co-creation of images and narratives reframe participants' understanding of their experiences in relation to data?

To understand how codesign might engage participants in complex issues the iterative development of the workshops has involved a range of activities. These include a request that participants prepare for the activities beforehand or at the workshop's commencement by reading contrasting accounts of the issue of concern in selected news stories, literature and scientific reports of data. A discussion about the contrasting accounts on data and their perceived relevance to participants is followed by storying activities where participants narrate events that they have observed that are related to the issue of concern – whether personal or second hand or at the level of urban myths. As stories are shared participants select the activities that are meaningful for their experiences of the issue, such as mixing or photographing colours, scripting a performance for video based on an event that they have observed, preparing placards for CCTV cameras to express an opinion, creating photographic montages, and making a costume that personifies an aspect of the issue.

My ambition in this selection of activities is to keep alive the liminal—and sometimes ambiguous—interpretations that data can provoke and create spaces for collaboration that resist codesign's potential to pay lip-service to democratic ideals while pressuring people to provide the data that the researcher wants. The framework with which I structured the workshops in order to undo structural inequality draw from Paolo Freire's thesis that pedagogy can reinforce social hierarchies (1970/2018) and the Surrealist understanding that everyone is an artist engaged in the co-construction of meaning. As a result of opening up codesign the workshops take shape and develop in ways that I do not always anticipate or plan. Rather than assess the unplanned approaches and outcomes of the workshops that developed according to the participants' determinations as a failure I assess such workshop events as evidencing an engaged level of participation in the codesign approach.

In 2016 I focused on activities that would open up codesign to more fully reflect and record the tacit know-how of participants in relation to surveillance technology such as closed-circuit television (CCTV). By repurposing CCTV cameras I sought to explore the implications of the burgeoning use of CCTV in high density urban environments and to understand the resident's experiences of the representation of diversity recorded in high surveillance city centres and reproduced in news reports on crime (Fig. 1).

The premise of the research was that despite the social benefit of deterring crime, the increasing reliance on CCTV footage in media reporting meant that monitoring technology had become associated with police control and functioned in the popular imagination as an exercise of power and an invasion of privacy. To counter the negative representations of urban environments as crime ridden and dangerous the study sought to collaboratively reimagine security video as a creative device to co-create positive visualisations of urban diversity. Among a number of activities that participants were invited to select I included the opportunity to discuss their observations of an interaction between strangers in public space and re-enact it or display placards with written messages in front of the CCTV cameras I had installed in Miller Gallery, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh.

As the workshop at Carnegie Mellon University was held in the week following the 2016 election in the United States my repurposing of technology was in turn reformulated by the workshop participants. They elected to appropriate the activity to protest the election outcome with handwritten banners projected through the CCTV camera installation in the gallery. The historical context of Pittsburgh that week meant that participants expressed a sense of urgency. As doctoral candidates from Pakistan, India and South America they were deeply concerned about election promises to close the borders to international students. Therefore, the participants were intent on expressing their perspectives at the same time as remaining anonymous with the use of masks. It was a workshop that is best characterised as emotionally heightened and it raised several questions for me about the responsibilities of leading workshops on complex topics in difficult times.
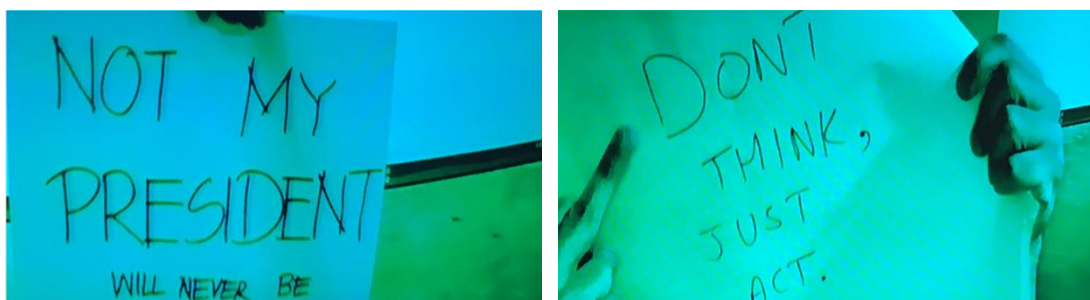

Figure 1. Anonymous participants, 2016, *Myths of the Near Future: CCTV*, 'Climactic: Post Normal Design', Miller Gallery, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh. Photography: The Author.

In later workshops I sought to structure the activities as opportunities for participants to use the time allocated for activities that served their interests and explore several

questions concerning the ethical implications of codesign that arose in Pittsburgh. Reflecting on the potential for deeper insights to be gained from greater emphasis on creativity I structured a workshop on climate change data in 2018 to commence with an artist talk on the public artwork 'Highwater' (2018) by Indigo Hanlee and Michael Hill (Lightwell) at Green Square, Sydney, followed by a series of activities at the School of Art & Design, UNSW, in Paddington. This workshop sought to record the participants' fears and fantasies about climate change in Sydney with a 360-degree camera. Participants, mostly doctoral students at UNSW Sydney, shifted the focus of the workshop by suggesting the inclusion of Paro. This therapeutic robot mimics a baby seal and provides animal therapy for people in aged care facilities. As the workshop took place during a heatwave, the bodily experience of what the data has been forecasting for decades added meaning through the physical discomfort experienced on the day. Images produced by the participants included scenes of melting landscapes and of Paro the robot seal in various settings around campus as a symbol of the arctic animals now at risk with increasing temperature and melting ice (Fig. 2).
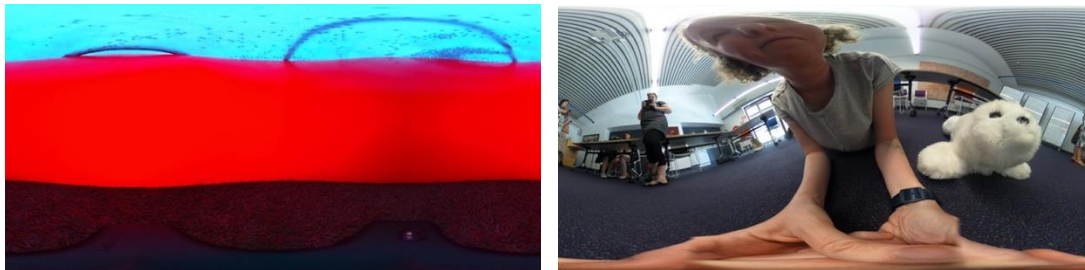

Figure 2. Anonymous participants, 2018, *Expanding Experimental Aesthetics in the Social Imaginary: 360 Cameras*, UNSW Sydney, Paddington, 2018. Photography: Chantelle Baistow.

Analysis of the participants' commentary during the workshop however revealed a sense that the underlying ethos of the workshop, that everyone is an artist, was undermined for some participants by the inclusion of publicly recognised artists speaking about their data-driven artwork. Instead of provoking greater engagement with the activities some participants implied that they felt more distant from the issue of concern—climate change— after seeing the completed artwork. Despite these comments the images that participants produced with 360 cameras were evocative and aesthetically charged. Questions remained, however, about how the workshop activities might be structured to produce fewer contradictions between what participants said and what they made.

In 2020 I led workshops concerning ageing, in this case in relation to women's experiences of perimenopause and menopause in the workplace. Motivated by the difficulties for participants to identify with the role of art making in the 2018 workshops, I structured these recent workshop's activities to emphasise the shared construction of meaning through news stories when interpreting data about the issue of concern. The workshops took place at the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre, Katoomba, and the National Facility for Human-Robot Interaction Research (HRI), Paddington, Sydney in November and December 2020. The Cultural Centre provided a large room with a panoramic view of the Blue Mountains while the Human-Robot Interaction Facility provided a room fitted with discrete sensors that collect data point clouds. Although strikingly different environments, both workshops commenced with discussions about the reports that included statistics about the experiences and perceptions of women working fulltime during their menopausal transitions in the United Kingdom and the United States. In these workshops I expanded the collection of workshop documentation about how participants experienced menopause at work and how their understanding of menopause while working changed after the workshop. My concerns about the coercive potential of the use of codesign in the workshops were allayed when comparing participants' initial discussions of the taboo surrounding women's health during menopause in many workplaces (Reitz, Bolton, and Emslie, 2020), and the participant reports of a greater sense of agency following the workshops (Fig.s 3 and 4).

Figure 3. Anonymous participants, 2020, *Expanding Experimental Aesthetics in the Social Imaginary: (The Change at Work,* Blue Mountains Cultural Centre, Katoomba, 2020. Photography: The Author.
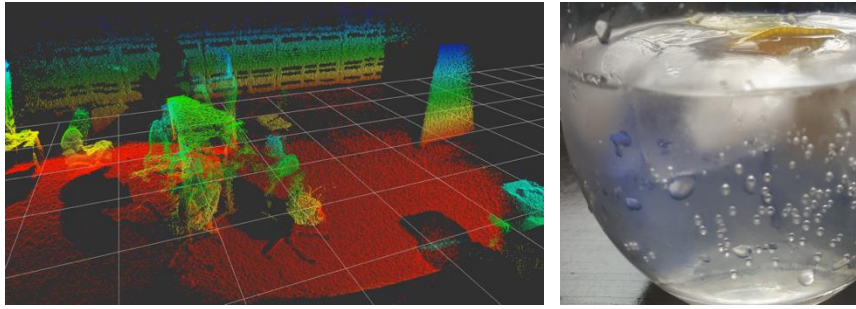
Figure 4. Anonymous participants, 2020, *Expanding Experimental Aesthetics in the Social Imaginary: The Change at Work*, National Facility for Human-Robot Interaction, Sydney, 2020. Photography: The Author and anonymous participant.

As a research study on intervening in the tendencies of codesign to coerce participants into producing what the researcher wants and to instead collaboratively interpret data through discussions of their experiences of complex issues, the workshops contributed significantly to the project. The evaluation of whether collecting qualitative data on women's lived experiences through collaborative image-making diminished participants' sense of menopause as a stigma and reframed menopause as a significant rite of passage to maturity is ongoing. In general terms, participant commentary concurred with the reports of 70% of women surveyed by the BBC in 2018 not disclosing their menopausal status to their manager because of fears of retribution or marginalisation. Despite the increasing number of women over the age of 45 participating in fulltime employment (McPhail, 2018) stereotypes surrounding menopause were apparently rife in the workplaces mentioned by participants. One participant described the exclusionary behaviours of senior managers towards other women regarded as menopausal and described in dismissive language as 'embarrassing' and 'not on top of their game'. The description of menopause as 'the strongest, most impactful, and most discriminatory taboo still existing in the workplace' (Reitz, Bolton and Emslie, 2020, np) was reflected in the garments, images and performances developed by participants.

The documentation of the workshops, that sought to limit the potential of 'being participated', revealed that creatively interpreting the available data and speaking about menopause in the workplace challenged the norms and social imaginary of women. As a result of a participant who elected to engage remotely online and was therefore unable to participate as fully as the people in the room, further research on the curtailing of feelings of coercion in online modes of the workshop is ongoing. Despite this drawback, participant feedback commented on how the colours, garments and images created by workshop participants during discussions about

data on menopause in the workplace assisted them in collaboratively reframing their experiences. A greater understanding of the contextual factors that were common among the workplaces that shaped the participants' experience of menopause as a social taboo was discussed by women in perimenopause, women from diverse backgrounds including first-generation immigrants, women who cannot take HRT due to medical conditions, and as women located in semi-rural as well as urban locations in Australia. Given that the most cited resource for understanding menopause identified by such diverse participants were the UK television series 'Absolutely Fabulous' (1992-1995) and 'Fleabag' (2019) the resources with which women understand their individual experiences are limited to comedies that can reduce the serious and challenging side-effects of the hormonal transition for comic effect.

I am currently adjusting the original aim to make the material available in an online exhibition for women to initiate discussions with GPs, work colleagues, peers, friends and family without stigma according to participant feedback. Participants' suggestions in the early testing of the workshop described above emphasised the necessity for participatory engagements if the artefacts are published in an exhibition as it was the creative activities while sharing stories that they found most rewarding. Comparing notes of their own experience with the diverse experiences of others engaged participants in effectively reframing their menopausal transition rather than see it as taboo.

In future workshops I hope to recruit medical experts including endocrinologists, GPs and psychologists to complement the insights and lay-expertise of women over 45 experiencing the menopausal transition. The research will be useful for public health institutions focused on women's health in the workplace who may be seeking richer and localised understandings of recent qualitative data on perimenopause and menopause; science startups developing high trust relationships for the interpretation of sensitive data concerning menopause; and workplaces seeking to engage with women transitioning through menopause. While the workshop is designed for scalable online engagements more testing is required so that women can participate and access the results from the comfort of their home, an important consideration in the potential lockdown phases of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This paper has reported on workshops that explored how to structure workshops to undo the coercive potential of codesign while collaboratively interpreting complex

data. The first workshop explored data on CCTV in surveillance and the social imaginary or norms surrounding suspicions about the biases reflected in the data collected. The second workshop explored data on climate change and the conventions of governments ignoring data as evidence that something that was not immediately perceptible was occurring with the climate. The third series of workshops explored data from the United Kingdom and the United States concerning women's experience of menopause at work, a topic about which there is little data in Australia to date.

My ongoing development of codesign workshops that creatively engage participants in discussions on complex topics without any sense of coercion to fit social norms or satisfy the researcher's agenda has emphasised activities that encourage participants to discuss subjective interpretations of data in relation to their lived experiences. Doing this provides codesign participants with greater opportunities to express contradictory impressions while interpreting data.

The workshops' foregrounding of impressionistic—partial, fragmented and incomplete—experiences of their embodied knowledge of data produces images that are aesthetically charged. At the same time the workshop documentation records the exploitative tendencies of codesign and could be interpreted as encouraging participants to protest Trump's election as activism for a gallery CCTV setup, to mask ambivalence with a pious attitude to the truth of climate change with little discussion on how they are transforming everyday practices to divert global warming, and to make sharp observations of women in the menopausal transition that reproduce gendered age-related biases.

3390 words

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