Destinations for Polyamorous Futures and Their MAD Lovers

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Abstract

When futures meets design, we can build collaborations, use each other's tools and perspectives and plot a course for a destination beyond our fields. Futures and design are well suited to working together 'en route' to a society where creative processes activate collective imagination with a keen awareness that multiple futures are possible. This article draws on the author's interdisciplinary practice to examine what the collaboration between futures and media, art and design (MAD) has to offer and what makes it possible. It suggests that we recognise the interdisciplinary (polyamorous) nature of futures, that we get close to pool resources, that we use media-rich approaches for their ability to shape images of the futures and for co-creation with people outside of our fields. It lists lessons learned from a sample of three projects and indicates do's and don'ts that futurists can keep in mind for making the most of the collaborations and relationships that form at the intersection between futures and design.

Keywords: Arts and Design, Co-creation, Collaboration, Images of the Futures, Media, Social Foresight.

Travelling Together

At the intersection of futures and design, the two sets of practice and thought are set to have more than fleeting encounters. When futures meets design, we can build collaborations, use each other’s tools and perspectives, and plot a course for a destination beyond our fields: a forward-looking and generative stance with critical awareness of alternative futures in all sections of society. If we undertake that journey together, we need strong partnerships and collaborations informed by mutual understanding and realistic expectations.

If we are to be travel companions, then the relationship metaphor used by Stuart Candy (2010), suggesting that futures and design are getting married, and exploring the basis for that partnership as well as the nature of its potential offspring, is particularly useful. We are not merely passing strangers whose paths cross accidentally, and so we are challenged to make our relationship work.

In this context, mine is a privileged position. I am a futurist with a long-standing collaboration with a visual artist who is also my life partner. Our shared practice began 20 years ago with a three-year field journey for collecting and producing images of the futures in 28 countries across five continents (Agence Future, 2012).
We use ethnographic approaches borrowing from visual anthropology in combination with motives and approaches from audio-visual media and visual arts. Over time our experimental work evolved to include other artists and creative professionals who take on specific roles in joint futures projects.

I will draw on this practice to examine what makes collaboration between futures and media, art and design possible and consider the advantages of travelling together. I will list lessons learned from a sample of three projects and indicate do’s and don’ts that futurists can keep in mind for making the most of the collaborations and relationships that form at the intersection between futures and design.

The projects that will be discussed, fit in with the designerly practices addressed in the critical design and futures literature of the past decade that points out the democratising potential of the relationship between futures and design (Candy & Dunagan, 2017; Dunne & Raby, 2013).

The earliest of the projects described below relied on modes of inquiry more typical for journalism and media production than for design. Later projects have included artists’ work that references futures methods or signposts futures without however presenting images, artefacts or situations concretely as possible futures. Nevertheless, these specific variants fit well in the family of practices at the intersection between futures and design. In respect of my own practice I will refer to them as ‘media, arts and design’ and for brevity (and for fun) use the acronym MAD.

I do not argue for adopting MAD approaches to the exclusion of others, but want to emphasise the considerable potential of collaboration with MAD for concrete and strategic futures work. I contend that partnership with MAD can amplify the diversity of images of the futures and be useful for learning how these images are (or can be) created and activated collectively as well as individually. I want to ensure that we don’t just brush the surface of the potential that is present here by merely using forms of one for thoughts of the other to remain stuck in business as usual. I am interested in the opportunities afforded to futures by media-rich approaches for expanding and fortifying the possibilities for inclusive personal as well as local and global conversations on alternative futures and for bringing these conversations to bare on the present. It is my view that futures and MAD are well suited to working together ‘en route’ to a society where creative processes activate collective imagination with a keen awareness that multiple futures are possible.

Polyamorous Futures and MAD as A Preferred Partner

What counts

In her article ‘New challenges for futures studies’ that appeared almost two decades ago, Eleonora Masini (2001, p.637) puts forward that rapid and interrelated changes in social reality mean that “no discipline on its own can face the different correlated and global challenges”. Futures work inevitably is a multi-, inter-, trans-, or cross-disciplinary activity (the exact nomenclature depending on how precisely you like to mix and mingle). It requires multiple partnerships and collaborations, and that is a very specific determining condition for the marriage between futures and MAD.

Futures operates on the basis that the characteristics of any future environment will relate to factors internal as well as external to that environment. In this respect futurists learn to think about driving forces and pay attention to the trends and emerging issues, the motors and objects of change pertaining to many different environments (Dator, 2018; Sardar & Sweeney, 2016). In addition, applied futures research can direct its attention to any particular setting, question or subject with a variety of ‘futures of X’ work. This kind of work — that several generations of futures students practiced in assignments set by Jim Dator at the University of Hawaii, and that is also at the heart of much of the commissioned work by research agencies and consultants — requires knowledge and experience appropriate to X. There is no limit to the diversity of thematic choices available. In addition, futures projects can address a range of scales, from individual futures, to local, regional,
national, or international outlooks, and different views can be cast: issue-driven, case-driven, location-based, for different time horizons and different sets of values. In all this variety, knowledge and insight from more than one specialisation are relevant, and interdisciplinary work is called for.

In practice, the expertise required for the specificity of each project is most often brought in by clients and stakeholders, or comes from collaborating academics with different backgrounds. In my own practice I have worked with historians, economists, social geographers, linguists, political scientists, media scholars, technologists, engineers and physicists and philosophers. They all contributed their own subject specific proficiency to projects. Artists or designers more often contribute skills, knowledge, experience, perspectives or approaches, based on methods rather than on subjects. Here they come into an already crowded space as futures methods, tools and techniques are a mixed bag with relatively few methods unique or exclusive to futures (Aaltonen, 2009).

It is clear that the kind of interdisciplinary collaborations that futurists need to build for concrete projects are context dependent. These partnerships cannot be fixed according to a pre-existing set of rules but must grow and develop according to the needs of the work at hand and the dispositions of all involved. Overall this is more akin to polyamory than to marriage. Polyamory is a practice based on the principle that (romantic or sexual) relationships do not have to be exclusive. Just as is the case for interdisciplinarity, there are many variations. A British and an American polyamorist may not mean exactly the same by the term. There are open and closed variants, ranging from versions of ‘anarchist love’ that see all kinds of relationships (including outside of the realm of romance) as equal, to versions that label partners as primary or secondary or that demand polyfidelity. If the partnership between futures and MAD is going to work, we will need to make explicit the assumptions on which it is based, and think about the what, how and why. The stereotype ‘it’s complicated’ is certainly applicable. Both at the scale of concrete projects, and more strategically en route towards a collective capacity for imagination and foresight, we have to work out together what works and what doesn’t.

So why and how can MAD count as a preferred companion for futures among many potential and actual partners? The most obvious motivation for including its media-rich approaches in the multitude of futures work is their communicative power (Mitchell, 1996). It makes sense to make the most of that in futures or foresight communication, project interfaces and reporting. (Ramos, 2006) Even so, MAD approaches — like storytelling and visualisation, deeply rooted and ancient practices; also the darlings of contemporary marketing and communication literature — have more to offer than rallying force, attention and retention. A further motive for futurists to work with MAD relates to the functional proximity between the two sets of practices. The next basis for affording MAD tools a special status, among the many kinds of tools that futurists use, is their capacity for visualisation and narrative development, uniquely suited to the creation of images of the futures. The final ground for working with MAD tools and people, which will be discussed below, is their aptitude for co-creation and inclusivity.

From practice

In my longstanding collaboration with photographer and videographer Bram Goots on Agence Future, the two of us are both literal and metaphorical travel companions (Agence Future, 2012). Since the year 2000, we have recorded semi-structured interviews and orientation conversations with over 750 people spread over five continents. We intentionally combine approaches from different fields of practice (Van Leemput, 2005). Specifically, we blend academic futures research with multi-media and visual arts, and with journalism. The hunt for a soundbite, an unashamed engagement with personal stories, and the use of quick fire 10-minute street interviews (next to sometimes day-long in-depth interviews) all brought in by the journalistic lens also deliver in terms of research results. Still photography in the present-day environments to which our conversation partners guide us often no more than suggests that futures can be perceived in the present. All of the
protocols and techniques from these domains, design or other, help us ask questions in more ways than one, as well as process and analyse what our conversation partners talk about with different filters. Creating concrete visual narratives — images of the futures — with research participants, away from the interviews with them, offers a form of interdisciplinary triangulation.

Lessons learned

Considering how futures must partner with multiple other fields, and how overall — based on the specific preferences and predilections of individual futurists — futures seems to be able to love most any subject or method; and considering also that MAD have as many different associations, the relationship, though privileged, looks distinctly like a polyamorous one.

_Do:_ in this situation, accept that there is no orthodoxy and that this may be somewhat uncomfortable, not just for the partners in the collaborations but also for external observers whose expectations are challenged.

_Do:_ with so many options open to us, work out, case by case, what really fits, and ensure detailed customisation and tailoring to the settings and demands of any specific project.

_Do:_ look for multiple matches and expand your horizons.

_Don’t:_ think polyamory comes easily; figuring out a modus operandi that respects the ambitions and assumptions of all involved, and that gives space to what each partner can contribute for making the journey a success, requires careful attention.

_Don’t:_ stick to just one mode of collaboration or set patterns.

_Don’t:_ demand exclusivity or have pre-set expectations of what the other brings into the relationship.

Proximity and A Shared Sense of The Game

What counts

“Designers need futures. Futurists need design. Each speaks to something that the other lacks” argues Stuart Candy (2010, p.165). He sees futures and design as “isomorphic enterprises” with similarities “built into their very structure” (2010, p.171, p.179). This is what provides the proximity needed as a starting point for concrete collaboration. I will use the example of my work for _A Temporary Futures Institute_ (ATFI), a group exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Antwerp (M HKA), with alternative futures as its central theme, to show how this proximity affords a shared sense of the game and brings futures and MAD close enough to pool our resources and collaborate fruitfully.

From practice: A Temporary Futures Institute

The senior curator of the M HKA, Anders Kreuger, and I started preparing _ATFI_ almost two years before the opening of the four-month show (M HKA, 2017). At the outset our bi-weekly meetings compared the theory and practice of our contexts, with particular attention to parallels and resemblances. Besides certain shared characteristics and perspectives — the generative and intentional nature of processes, knowledge as contingent — what stood out to us were the similitudes of the everyday behaviours and expectations of the individuals, groups, organisations and institutions involved.
Figure 1. The seventeen screens of ‘A Conversation Piece’ by Agence Future at A Temporary Futures Institute. Photo: Bram Goots

Figure 2. The co-curators of A Temporary Futures Institute show Jim Dator around the exhibition. Photo: Bram Goots
ATFI was explicitly conceived and implemented as a collaborative undertaking. More than a dozen artists and futurists, including Agence Future, collaborated on the show and a whole ecosystem of museum staff was involved (see Figures 1 and 2). In addition, the research centre Open Time I Applied Futures Research at the Management, Media and Society department of the Erasmus University College Brussel (where I am senior researcher and coordinator) with a handful of international partners, organised a unique futures conference, titled Design Develop Transform (DDT) inside and alongside the exhibition (Design Develop Transform, 2017). While the working conditions of all the individuals that collaborated on ATFI were not alike, the administrative and seasonal rhythms of the college and the museum determined everyone’s tempo and rhythm. A shared practical sense and a common understanding of how to think about what works and what doesn’t, and how to act accordingly (even if what concretely should be done could be the topic of hot debate), made the collective effort possible. Krueger and I as co-curators were struck by a persistent sense of familiarity and recognition. Attitudinal and behavioural characteristics that we both ascribed to our professional backgrounds made the collaboration stick.

In collaborations between futurists and artists (or other creatives), how we operate together is set by our sense of the game, our workplace environments, habits and implicit assumptions. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus or what is ‘second nature’ to people, given by what they learned formally and also through experience in their specific contexts or fields, helps understand this. “Habitus is internalised experience, embodied culture and history”, writes Bourdieu commentator Philip Gorski (2013). Bourdieu’s discussion of habitus in the field of art offers a useful parallel for what futures and MAD have in common that makes them a good polyamorous match.

Like habitus, ‘the rules of art’ is a phrase that signifies practical knowledge, learning-by-doing, tacit understanding [...] Art can never be reduced to following set rules and yet to say it is without coherence, strategy, or intention, or not based on socially organised and shared knowledge, would be to misunderstand it utterly. (Calhoun, 2002)

Futures and MAD are similarly coherent, strategic and intentional enterprises. Pre-existing experience within these fields provides a solid basis for striking original relationships and collaborations in which the partners themselves set the standards and determine the final destination of their journey together.

I will not attempt to discuss the core of Bourdieu’s field theory here, but the idea of a “domain of relative autonomy marked off from others by its distinctive hierarchy, values, struggles, styles of improvising action, and forms of capital” (Gorski, 2013) is helpful for thinking about interdisciplinarity as well as proximity. The fields of futures and MAD are distinguished neighbours in the overall context of cultures and societies. This means that we can share resources, combine processes and agree on common goals. The example of the ATFI exhibition and DDT conference, created by pooling different forms of capital, is telling. We combined financing streams (economic capital); we combined people from our networks (social capital); we also combined our learnings (academic capital) and brought the status of our institutions and individual collaborators (cultural capital) to bear on the project. It is fair to say that together we were better than alone and could travel further.

Lessons learned

Mutual frames of reference make for suitable travel companions. Similarities built into the structure of futures and MAD produce a closeness between the habitus and dispositions in these fields. They invite us to find each other and even inhabit each other’s space.

Do: at the intersection, make use of being close to each other; keep an eye on each other; read each other’s books; and talk; get to know each other.
Do: take part in each other’s activities, even away from the intersection where each does their own thing independently.

Do: make the whole more than the sum of the parts.

Don’t: deny a partner’s autonomy, and don’t give up your own.

Don’t: crowd each other or force other partners upon each other.

Don’t: expect MAD to be just the pretty one in the relationship. Institutions, professionals, collectives and publics from the fields of MAD have more to bring than aesthetics or style.

Mad Tools for Visualising and Narrating Futures

The choice of words in the field of futures suggests that futures are to be visualised. There is foresight and la prospective (Godet, Durance, & Gerber, 2008); we have visioning and even visions (Dator, 2011; van der Helm, 2009; Jungk & Müllert, 1987). Jim Dator presents the main subject of futures studies explicitly as “images of the futures” in his classes (Dator, 2002). Much of the time, however, we think of futures in terms of concepts, ideas or metaphors, and more seldom do we refer literally to pictures; tangible visual images. With the tools of MAD, concepts are challenged by images and stories, if not full experiences of body and mind. This provides one of the starting points for the media-rich practice of Agence Future with Bram Goots. Visual and narrative approaches are useful at all stages of our work, from mapping to developing alternatives, deepening, capturing, documenting, reporting, and relating images of the futures.

From practice: Agence Future’s Reel Molenbeek Futures

For a year-long project in the disadvantaged neighbourhood of Molenbeek in Brussels, Goots and I approached a core group of 5 selected residents with a camera from the start (Reel Molenbeek Futures, 2011). We explained that we were conducting research about personal and local futures in their home community and at the same time shooting a film on this subject. We asked the participants to indicate possible subjects, places and activities to film for illustrating the ideas they related during their interviews, challenging them to fill in the blanks in their ideas on the futures.

This was the basis for a collection of unique stories about Molenbeek in the future.

Concretely visualising futures with the participants in Molenbeek aided their elaboration of alternative images of the futures. It stimulated their imagination and helped them arrive at well-constructed narratives of future possibility. For instance, over the course of three consecutive interviews, 32 year-old Touben came up with a location and props to allow us to film him engaged in the activities and placed in the surroundings he had described for his old age. As he developed ideas for the video, he provided descriptions of future modes of transport and of public spaces in his neighbourhood. Touben also suggested depicting the future multi-lingual character of the neighbourhood and his own personal development by posing with a newspaper in a different language than is commonly used in Molenbeek today. With Dina, a teenage girl who was uncertain whether her ambition was to be a police woman or a fashion stylist, the device of preparing to film her in the situation she was thinking of, prompted her to review where both professions would take her, and what their environments would have to offer. She weighed up her attraction to the materials and tools of the couturier’s studio against the desirability of contributions to neighbourhood life that she might make as a policewoman, also considering if in future, wearing a headscarf would be an option in either profession. Fashion won over policing, but in her follow-up interview after the shoot in the couturier’s studio, Dina expressed new arguments for this possibility as well as against it.

In the initial stages of their interviews, both participants had far less to say about details of the futures they described than they did once asked to consider putting this future into a scene, and actually going through the process of doing so. Their engagement with the challenges of visualisation and storytelling for an audio-visual end product deepened their engagement with future
possibilities. The resulting images of the futures connected the personal and the local, and produced essential alternative narratives beyond predominant images of a neighbourhood lacking future opportunities for its young residents.

Lessons learned

Aiming towards concrete images of the futures, deploying tools from the fields of MAD supports the rigour with which we ourselves and participants in our projects create images and narratives of the futures. As has been argued by Milojevic and Inayatullah (2015) as well as Jarva (2014) in their discussions of narratives in futures studies, this is crucial for orientation in the present and awareness of alternative future possibilities.

**Do:** use MAD tools for asking questions.

**Do:** use MAD tools for arriving at multi-dimensional images of the futures.

**Do:** it for the learning curve of everyone involved.

**Don’t:** use flat or superficial images of the future; they don’t lead anywhere near the kind of destination we have in mind here.

Co-Creation

What counts

Wendell Bell (2002, p. 39) teaches that in futures studies, the process of “image making itself”, is studied to “encourage people to rigorously explore alternative images of the future and construct images of the futures themselves”. He argues that “Futurists encourage people to look beyond the familiar and to search for opportunities for themselves and their organisations…” Participative and co-creation approaches serving this democratic reflex fare particularly well when MAD approaches are fully implicated in project designs. While theorising possibilities for the futures may be a specialist competency, the affective tools and techniques of MAD can open this realm up to others. Merritt Polk (2015, p. 110) points out how transdisciplinary co-production with non-expert actors can stimulate “a high level of stakeholder participation and commitment to the research processes, and promoted knowledge integration and reflexive learning.” This was our experience with *Reel Molenbeek Futures* and also with *MAONO 0201234*.

**From practice: MAONO 0201234**

From 2012 until 2014, Agence Future ran a mixed methods project titled *MAONO*. Over the course of three years, 15 artists and 41 young adults based in Katanga’s provincial capital Lubumbashi in Democratic Republic of the Congo, and 40 young adults from Brussels, worked together to observe, collect and create images of the futures. The primary tool used by the young adult participants was a ‘Roadbook’ containing 21 missions. Each mission explored possible futures and was completed with an image, which could be a photo, a video-still, a clipping, collage, or drawing; and even sound recordings have been made. In collaboration with the young adults, local artists then created 16 pieces, including musical recordings, a poem, a comic strip, sculptures, drawings, and poetic video documentaries (Van Leemput, 2015). (See Image 3.)
The requirement of providing concrete images for each of the Roadbook missions, for most of our participants meant a challenging switch to visual thinking, in addition to the switch from present-day thinking to long-term visioning. Finding and making images was an uncommon method, taking the young participants out of their routine and encouraging them to think differently. A daily loan system of recording equipment, particularly attractive to the young Congolese participants, aided their commitment. Their engagement increased with practical guidelines and tips from our
professional photographer. The night-time conversations around the two portable printers, about photos shot earlier, provided as much reflexive learning and knowledge integration as any of the accompanying workshops.

For the participating artists, translating ideas into concrete images was everyday business. They were already involved in shaping and re-shaping reality, creating different forms, sights and sounds. Both in Reel Molenbeek Futures and in MAONO, participants received critical support from our photographer and other participating artists, getting access to the professional tools and skills of seasoned image-makers. The advances made by all concerned in the live collaboration and negotiations between the artists and the young participants were considerable. The project yielded images of the futures that were shared widely. With projects like MAONO diverse images of the futures are brought into the world to activate the present, provide orientation, and affect mindsets, actions and behaviours. Collaboration with MAD can make this work more effective and open up a much-needed space where individuals and groups can engage with multiple future possibilities, away from futures colonised by only a few predominant images of the future (Sardar, 1993).

Lessons learned

The polyamorous spirit of futures and MAD allows these partners to invite a host of others as travel companions to explore multiple futures together and report on the journey.

Do: use MAD approaches for facilitating participation and co-creation.
Do: provide a goal-oriented context and means.
Do: make a point of sharing generative procedures, creative processes and skill sets.
Don’t: just use MAD approaches for better communication, illustration or window dressing.
Don’t: let differences between points of view or abilities, part and parcel of any relationship, stop you.

Destinations

Projects like ATFI and DDT, Reel Molenbeek Futures, and MAONO are part of a varied journey of exploration with my MAD lover and many other MAD friends and colleagues as travelling companions. The destinations for these collaborations can be described simply as their goals. The first set of goals is making the projects themselves possible, and making them suited to inclusive co-creation of qualitative, multi-dimensional images of the futures. The next goal is to activate and include multiple perspectives and capacities in actual conversations about local and global futures. Ultimately, the aim is to make these conversations matter, in other words, to boost the social capacity for foresight and bring it to bear on the present.

That the partnership between futures and MAD may be able to navigate towards such a far-reaching goal is a point that has been made convincingly by Candy and Dunagan (2017), Brassett and O’Reilly (2015), de la Pena (2017) and others. Futures and MAD meet at an intersection in a diverse environment that is at the same time the object and the subject of the activities we undertake. From here we can set out to produce occasions for different actors to create, work and play with images of the futures. As we travel outward from our common point of departure, we create a strategic space for alternative futures to be present and understood in. The path may really be the destination. Our journey has the potential to extend crucial qualities of our habitus beyond our own fields, and infect our cultures and societies with the freedom, intentionality, imagination and procedural scaffoldings of the theory and practice of our fields.

Lessons to be learned

The do’s and don’ts listed above may be much like relationship advice; they also provide procedural suggestions for collaborations between futures and MAD navigating towards a hard to
reach common destination in a complex reality. They emphasise the need for (1) getting close and (2) pooling resources without pre-set rules, (3) careful adaptation to contexts, (4) asking questions in multiple ways, and (5) including others and sharing our practices with them. They warn against (1) set patterns, (2) losing distinctions, (3) superficial application, and (4) fear of differences.

Do: build collaborations to plot a course for a destination beyond our fields.
Do: take care of your travel companions, share with others and adapt to the surroundings.
Don’t: forget to enjoy the scenery.

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References