

Imagining possible futures - designing possible pasts?

Ton Otto

University of Aarhus and James Cook University

My title is intentionally somewhat provocative. It is so in two different ways. Firstly, designing is generally understood as a process of developing ideas and forms to shape the future not the past. And secondly, one could question whether it make sense at all to talk about designing the past, since the past has already happened and therefore cannot be changed. In this paper I will develop the idea that a possible future needs a possible past to match and that part of planning the future is to conceive of a past that makes this future possible. Whether this process of conceiving and constructing the past should be called design can of course be debated, but I will argue that it is at least to be considered as an integral part of a design effort. In the cases I will discuss below the construction of the past is part of different creative events - a cultural festival, the production of a video installation, and an exhibition - and therefore I find it defensible to call it a design process in its own right.

I take theoretical inspiration from the pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead. In his posthumously published *The Philosophy of the Present* ([1932] 2002) he discusses the consequences of one of his core ideas – that human reality, including consciousness, emerges in action – for our understanding of time. According to Mead the present is the true *locus of reality*; this means that our existence happens in the present, which is in a continuous state of emergence. Of course past and future exist as well, but in Mead's perspective they have to be understood as dimensions of the present. The past, conceived of as past presents, sets the conditions for the emerging present, but the past is only accessible through traces and constructions that are present in the now. Therefore the past is forever under construction since people's interests and cultural constructions change through their actions over time. And people's actions as determined by the conditions existing in the now, give direction to the future as a potential of the emerging present.

In spite of the condensed abstractness of Mead's ideas, no doubt aggravated by my inadequate summary of them, I believe he highlights a key insight relevant for understanding the process of design namely the relative indeterminacy of the future and

the connected indeterminacy of the past. The way I wish to use these ideas in theorizing our topic of the space of the possible is by focusing on the dimension of the past that is necessary for imagining the future. As Mead makes clear, the past conditions the present but we are only partly aware of this conditioning. If we plan and design the future we need to develop a vision that includes a past that can generate this future; that is, we need to construct a past that shows continuities both in the form of the conceived 'objective' conditions (such as necessary resources) that make the designed future possible and in the form of the construction of agentive identities that can act to realize this future. With agentive identities I refer to the cultural ideas about agency that define who can act to realize certain goals, whether these agents are social groups such as families, political units, or economic organizations; or whether they are generalized categories such as consumers and citizens conceived as individuals.

In the following I discuss three cases of cultural performance that involve change in order to explore how constructions of the past are part of these processes. In all three cases the interventions of anthropologists play a role albeit to quite different degrees. I use these cases to reflect on forms of ethnography of the possible that involve performance, video recording and museum exhibition as media of exploration.

The cultural festival

My first case derives from my own fieldwork on Baluan Island in Manus Province, Papua New Guinea. In the days from Christmas to New Year 2006/2007 a large-scale cultural festival was organized on the island, a festival that was intended to give shape to a new future for the region but that was simultaneously rooted in an understanding of the past. The main organizers of the festival were re-migrants from the island who had lived their working lives elsewhere, primarily in some of the few urban centers of Papua New Guinea: Port Moresby, Lae and Goroka. In their professional lives they had become aware of the relevance of cultural performance and its power to attract an audience from outside the region. Among other things they had established a dancing group in the nation's capital, Port Moresby, that with great success performed the fast dances from their home island for tourists in hotels and at public events organized by the government. They were so successful that they were invited on several overseas tours to Australia, Korea and Europe and on these tours they developed their

understanding of staged performances and how to interact with an international audience.

The stated aim of the organizers for the cultural festival was to use culture as a means of development. On the one hand, they were concerned that modern developments in the villages were eroding the feeling of community and the motivation of the youth to stay and contribute to village life. A focus on traditional cultural performances was believed to raise a sense of identity and create ‘unity through culture’, as the motto was for the festival. On the other hand, the organizers saw tourism as one of the few realistic options for economic development on the remote islands, and cultural performance was considered an important ingredient for attracting tourists. I, as an anthropologist with a long-term connection to the island, was invited to make a film about the festival, because the organizers were keenly aware of the power of modern media to address an international audience.

The festival was met with great support and enthusiasm on the island but also with criticism. The criticism focused precisely on the new construction of the past that the cultural festival implied. Whereas the festival organizers claimed that they honored, preserved and even revitalized traditional culture, the critics pointed out that ‘*kalsa*’ (or culture) as performed at the festival was something else than ‘*kastam*’, the Tokpisin term mostly glossed as ‘tradition’. The concept of *kastam* put great weight on the continuity with past practices and concepts. According to the idea of *kastam*, cultural performances were owned by clans or lineages, as part of what constituted their identity as a group. These groups could exchange or give away *kastam* practices, but they could not create new ones. The critics argued that the performances at the cultural festival were combinations, transformations and even inventions, that were different from Baluan tradition.

The organizers did not like the critique and defended themselves by arguing that they did not really change the tradition but only gave it some ‘colour’ in order to make it more interesting for an outside audience to watch. Some limited change was necessary, they said, for tradition to survive and blossom. But from an analytic point of view there are some substantial differences between *kastam* and *kalsa*, which include dimensions of ownership, group identity and orientation in time (see Otto in press). Unlike the situation with *kastam* performances, it is unclear in the case of *kalsa* who has ownership rights over the new performance practices. This is linked to the fact that the agentive identities for creating ‘unity through culture’ are considerably expanded in

comparison to *kastam*. Instead of clans or lineages, the groups that are now seen as ‘owning’ the culture as part of their identity are at the scale of whole islands or even regions. But the ‘ownership’ is less clearly defined and can be seen as a kind of general heritage in contrast to the well-articulated and well-defended rights of lineages and clans. Finally, unlike *kastam*, which focuses on an intentional preservation of the past, *kalsa* is explicitly oriented towards the future. It can be developed and changed to fit future needs better. It also opens up for the agentic identity of creative individuals, who can claim certain innovations in the performances as their own inventions, something that is not possible in a *kastam* context.

The case of the cultural festival shows how the vision of a different future made it necessary to revise the dominant understanding of the past as the authoritative source of cultural concepts and practices. The discussion about the interpretation of the past and the ensuing ownership rights and appropriate cultural practices continues on the island. The intervention of the anthropologist was in this case limited to making a film at the invitation of the organizers. We (Suhr and Otto 2011) decided to make a film that presented the different voices we heard on the island, and thus included both supporters and opponents of the festival. In this way we thought we could contribute to the informed discussion about how to rethink the past in order to create a dynamic role for tradition in the present. The organizers were originally not completely happy with our choice, but they changed their mind when they discovered that the film was popular both with the local public and also internationally.

Christmas Birrimbir/Christmas Spirit

My second case is located in Northern Australia (northeastern Arnhem land) among an indigenous people known as the Yolngu. It concerns a collaborative project between an extended Yolngu family, in particular the family elder Paul Gurrumuruwuy and his wife Fiona Wanambi, the Australian anthropologist and filmmaker Jennifer Deger, and the Australian video artist David Mackenzie. It started with Deger, who has a long-term collaboration with the Yolngu, wanting to make a film about the intellectual, emotional and aesthetic complexity of Yolngu rituals, especially those connected with the ways the dead are remembered at Christmas. The Yolngu make a connection between Christmas and the yearly start of the rainy season, announced by the arrival of Wolma, big dark thunder clouds, which signify the transitional nature and renewal of life. In

Yolngu understanding the coming of Wolma also indicates the arrival of Christmas, when the birth of Christ is celebrated. However for the Yolngu Christmas is not only a time to celebrate new life, but also to remember the dead. Especially the recently dead are often central in family Christmas rites, in which people adorn the graves and their houses with Christmas lights and decoration, while giving a special place to photographic images of their deceased loved ones.

The project became much bigger than Deger had anticipated, because the Aboriginal family brought in their own cultural agenda, which in Deger's words included a clear ethnographic ambition. Paul and Fiona joined the project as co-directors and creative partners with the explicit intention to communicate to a non-Aboriginal (Belanda) audience something they considered of great value: the way the Yolngu remember and live with their ancestral spirits. As Yolngu people are convinced that one must feel in order to know, Paul and Fiona conceived of the project as a way to invite Belanda to share in the sorrow and joy that are part of a Yolngu Christmas. What they did was however much more than presenting family rites of relating to the dead to a non-Aboriginal audience. In fact they created a community-wide Christmas ritual in which Yolngu traditions concerning the ancestral spirits were connected with these more informal domestic Christmas rites.

To understand what these means, we have to know what role the ancestral spirits play in Yolngu life. Let me quote from Deger (n.d.): "Whenever Paul Gurrumuruwuy speaks publically about the video project *Christmas Birrimbirr (Christmas Spirit)*, he makes an impassioned case for the enduring power of the 'old people'. Gurrumuruwuy is not talking about senior citizens. Even though he himself is often addressed by his family as *wolman* ('old man'), he uses the term 'old people' to refer to his ancestors: to his father and his father's father, back through the countless generations that came before and whose spirits live in the Dhalwangu clan waters in remote north regions of tropical Australia." In spite of dramatic changes in Yolngu's material and social life during the past eighty years due to the impact of the white culture, there is no doubt that these spirits remain a potent source of meaning and identity for the Yolngu; they are seen as the source of life and the renewal of life. "Yet what non-Aboriginal people often do not appreciate when they hear him talk about the power of the 'old people' is the degree to which the living—those who call themselves the 'new generations'—bear responsibility for renewing ancestral power through their own creative, intellectual and emotional efforts." (Deger *ibid.*).

The community ritual that was created and organized by Paul and Fiona was transformed into a three-screen video-installation and later a film for a non-Aboriginal public. The video-installation has been exhibited in Darwin, Australia, and will be part of the opening exhibition at Moesgaard museum in Aarhus, Denmark, in 2014. Thus a further collaboration, including the co-curating of the exhibition, is taking place between designers and curators at Moesgaard Museum, Paul Gurrumuruwuy and Jennifer Deger (Fiona has sadly passed away after completing the installation and the first exhibition). If we take the last planned product, the museum exhibition at Moesgaard, as object of our analysis, we can identify a complex process of cultural design.

Let me try to unpack the various layers of this design process.

1. At a very fundamental level Paul and Fiona have ‘renewed’ Yolngu ritual by creating the Christmas Birrimbir ritual in which not only the recently dead but with and through them the whole realm of the ancestral spirits are invoked to join the family at this special time. Based on Yolngu *rom* (‘law’ and ancestral precedence) Paul ascribes their innovations to the intervention of the ancestral spirits who communicated to him through his dreams. Thus founding his agentive identity in the ancestral realm makes the innovations both possible and valid from a Yolngu perspective. It is a form of renewal of ancient wisdom and lore, where Paul and Fiona are taking the responsibility of the ‘new generation’ to recreate and activate their culture so that it can live on.

2. An important part of the ceremony is the intention to share it with westerners, who have brought the concept of Christmas (including Christmas lights, Christmas trees, carols, etc.) to the Yolngu but who do not know the special depth of feeling that the Yolngu have contributed to the Christmas idea. By embracing the new technology of video filming, the Yolngu are not only able to add a medium of visual expression to their own rites and ceremonies (see Deger 2006) but also to develop a medium of intercultural communication through which they can offer their cultural (and intellectual and emotional) knowledge to others. The long-term involvement of Deger with this Yolngu group is an important factor in this innovation as it has facilitated the appropriation of this technology in a process of co-creation and co-production. Thus certain elements of ritual signification are expressed and amplified through the possibilities of video (for example the representation of the ancestral as movements of water touched by wind projected over people engaged in traditional dance moves).

3. A further complexity of the design of the past in this ritual, involving ancestral agency, and its transformation into a video installation and film, occurs when it is transposed to Moesgaard Museum where it will be re-contextualized and materialized through various design interventions, suggested by museum workers concerned with the reception by a Danish public. All design interventions are to be discussed and approved by the Aboriginal collaborators and Deger, as the expert ethnographer, who has a mediating and clarifying role in this process as well as being an active co-designer. So we end up with different constructions of the past, that have to be integrated into one whole to create a cultural, intellectual, emotional and sensory experience for the public. First there is the specific concept of the ancestral and its effect in the present, that has inspired Paul and Fiona to create the ritual in the first place. Then there is their understanding of the lack of ancestral concern in white (Australian) culture and the video project to make an intercultural experience of this form of past-present possible. And thirdly, in the context of the Moesgaard exhibition project, which is dedicated to communicating relations to the dead and the ancestors in different cultural worlds, specific Danish sensitivities in this field are brought into play to design a exhibition in which people can be inspired by the Yolngu ceremony to reflect on their own life and relation to the dead.

Digital natives in Denmark

My last case is from Denmark, although the label 'Digital Natives' refers to a global development. The concept of digital natives derives from Prensky (2001) who postulated that the generation born after 1980 had physically adapted to the pervasive impact of digital technologies through a social and mental rewiring of their brain functions. While taking distance from this crude and largely undocumented assumption, the anthropologist Rachel Charlotte Smith has recently used the concept of digital natives to zoom in on aspects of the digital cultures that are emerging worldwide and that are particularly embraced by the young generation. Her research on digital culture was part of a larger comparative research project at Aarhus University focusing on innovations in cultural heritage communication. Smith addressed the challenges faced by cultural heritage institutions in an era in which the digital has become an integral part of cultural production and communication. In her view these challenges

rest not primarily in applying digital technologies within the well-known project of documenting, preserving and communicating cultural heritage in museums and other heritage institutions. Rather, she argued, the challenge is to grasp the impact that the digital as a cultural and social phenomenon has on the production of culture and heritage, both within these heritage institutions and outside.

In order to investigate this question she designed a research project that focused on the collaborative production of an interactive, digitally based exhibition displaying the emerging cultural heritage of contemporary ‘digital natives’ in Aarhus, Denmark. Her project began with a more traditional ethnographic fieldwork in which she contacted young people from about 16 to 19 years old, who extensively used digital media as an integral part of their daily life. In this initial phase she endeavored to obtain an insight in the various ways these youngsters incorporated the digital in their social and cultural life. Seven teenagers were recruited to take part in the exhibition project, that apart from Rachel Smith also included another anthropologist (part of the time), and a number of interaction designers and IT programmers. In her PhD thesis ‘Designing Digital Cultural Futures. Design Anthropological Sites of Transformation’ Smith (2013) describes and analyses in depth the process of making the exhibition, including the divergent interests and interactions of the involved parties and the interventionist role of the anthropologists. She also deals with the reactions of the public.

What is of particular interest for my present paper is how implicitly a construction of the past – however limited - was involved in this project that took cultural emergence and change as its point of departure. To start with, none of the youngsters knew the term ‘digital natives’; thus it was in no way a concept that was used as an element of the self-identification of the teenagers. However, at the time of the opening of the exhibition a shift had occurred and the teenagers were happy to take the role as representatives of the digital natives that the project had facilitated. Thus their active participation in conceiving, negotiating and realizing the exhibition had created a reflexive space in which they had become aware of something like a shared culture due to their particular lifestyles which were imbued with the use of digital media. This self-identification was effectively a product of the exhibition, initiated by the anthropologist, and the public recognition that the identity of digital native thus had received. Therefore I would argue that a sense of the cultural heritage of digital nativeness was created in the very process of exhibition making. This (possible)

heritage was a reflexive objectification of an emerging digital culture and thus facilitated and agentive identity that was absent or at least unarticulated before the exhibition project. With its creation, the digital native heritage constituted a past to the forms of digital culture that had been given expression and shape in the exhibition. The previous digital experiences, habits and products of the teenagers, as exhibited in the various installations, became realized as the past that facilitated the emergence of a specific digital culture and a concomitant form of participatory agency.

Comparing the cases

The three cases I have discussed above have, I hope, substantiated my argument that a design of the past is a necessary dimension of efforts to imagine a future that different from the present. Although all three cases in my view clearly demonstrate this aspect, they differ in important ways. I will conclude this paper by identifying three dimensions of contrast.

First, the envisioned time span of the past-future horizons is widely different between the three case studies. In the case of the digital natives, the constructed heritage is very recent as it refers to the formative years of the young people involved in the exhibition. In accordance with this, I would argue, the future horizon is also experienced as rather near: still within the life span of the same individuals. In the case of the PNG cultural festival, *kastam* refers to remembered events and practices in the lifetime of the parental generation of the organizers of the festival, while they explain their efforts to develop culture (*kalsa*) with reference to the possible lives of their children. Finally, the past that informs the presence of the Yolngu ritual innovators goes back to the ancestral realm, which is at least some generations deep and which can be seen as a kind of origin time. Thus while Paul and Fiona renew their culture and lore through the Christmas ritual, they do this on the basis of an understanding of an underlying continuity that reaches far into the future.

The second dimension of contrast lies in the type of agentive identity that is constructed in the different scenarios of past-ness. Whereas the innovation of the Yolngu ritual leaders is legitimated by their accordance with ancestral agencies, that have a kind of lasting present-ness, the conflict at the cultural festival circled around the refusal of the organizers to be bound by the performances of their recent ancestors. Instead they created a more flexible form of cultural heritage that incorporated the

creative innovation of the present generation. The agency of the ‘digital natives’ is at a more individual level, creating personal lifestyles while participating in and exploiting the possibilities of a global technological development. Their heritage is thus less formative of a sense of groupness than of an inter-generational identity linked to the way they engage the digital.

The third contrast between the three cases lies in the interventionist role of the anthropologist in the co-creation of expressive forms of past-presentness. In the Papua New Guinea case, the anthropologists only contributed by making a film, on invitation, of a large-scale festival that was happening independently of the anthropologists’ presence. The film provided a space for reflection and objectification that may contribute to some extent to future plans and projects on the island (cf Otto 2013). Among the Yolngu of northern Australia, the intervention by the anthropologist prompted the innovative organization of a community Christmas ritual and an intentional project to communicate Yolngu lore and cultural wisdom to a broad, non-Aboriginal audience. The intervention in the case of the digital natives in Aarhus, is no doubt, the most extreme, as the identity concept embraced by the collaborators was only realized in the exhibition process. But at the same time, one can argue that this project, by provoking a heritage making process, has created valuable insights in ongoing processes of culture making facilitated by the digital, thus representing an ethnography of the possible.

In their various ways the anthropologists in the three cases contributed to exploring the possible in collaboration with the people involved. They all opted to be guided by the agendas and interests of their collaborators, whether it concerns the exploitation of culture as a social and economic resource; the intercultural communication of the importance of the ancestral; or the reflexive shaping of a personalized and participatory digital culture. I believe this accordance with the collaborators’ interests is a fundamental but not unproblematic premise of this kind of interventionist research (cf. Gatt and Ingold 2013, Otto 2013). What I hope has become clear as well is the enormous potential of visual media of research, communication and engagement, such as photo, video and exhibition, to create inspiring ethnographies of the possible. The specific contribution I have focused on in this paper is the co-design of the past as a necessary part of planning the future. One has to ‘open up’ the past, in order to open up for a new future. The cases I have discussed show how visual media-based interventions can assist in this process.

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