

SPECULA

[HOME](#) [INTERMISSION](#) [ARNDSCAPES](#) [SPEACULATIVE](#) [PIRATES](#) [POST](#) [CONTACT](#)

Salvatore
Iaconesi &
Oriana
Persico:
We've
transformed
ourselves into
a Speculative

Design of P E C U L A

[HOME](#) [INTERVIEWS](#) [DISCOURSE](#) [ABOUT](#) [SPECU](#) [LATIVE](#) [EDU](#) [CATION](#) [IN](#) [ITALY](#) [CONTACT](#)

November 22, 2020

Discourse, Interviews

Sara Božanić talks
with SpeculativeEdu
team members
Salvatore Iaconesi &
Oriana Persico about
the state of Speculative
Design in Italy.





HOM

CONTACT

LA

Photo by Emanuele Pensavalle

He is an interaction designer, robotics engineer, artist, hacker; and she is an artist and writer. Together, **Salvatore** and **Oriana** look at all changes in society deriving from the coming of ubiquitous networks and technologies.

Between poetics and politics, bodies and architecture, and revolutionary business models, the couple promotes a vision of the world in which art is what unifies science, politics, and economy. Their performances, publications, and artwork have appeared all over the world. They teach **Near Future and Design** in several universities, among them ISIA in Florence and Università La Sapienza in Rome. They are also the founders of HER – Human Ecosystems Relazioni – now HER: She Loves Data – a research center studying the psychological and social implications of data and computations in contemporary societies.

You are the founders of HER – Human Ecosystems Relazioni, a research center that uses art and design to create cultural acceleration processes through data. Can

you tell us more about the center, its aims, vision and practice?

HER was born in 2011 as a result of a large EU project from which we had obtained the possibility to use a software to capture data from social networks to understand what people were talking about in various territories and communities. Other partners of this project have used this software for market and trend research, or for “smart cities” types of projects. We, instead, chose a different path. The negative effects of all this data being extracted from people’s online conversations and behaviours were already clear to anyone who was looking: algorithms (and then AIs) were already on our backs, endangering our fundamental rights and liberties. For this we have tried to do the opposite: data to the people!

This research center that we built, in a sense, “liberated” data from all these companies that were harvesting enormous quantities of it, anywhere from social networks to bank accounts. All this liberated data was not kept in the laboratory or in a closed data center, but brought to the people to ask fundamental questions. Do you realize that this data is being collected, and that it could affect your rights, liberties and psychology in this way? Are you alright with it, or would you like it in some other way? And, then, there is the thing that first brought us close to speculative and near future design practices. Because all of this data was constantly used by large corporations to construct scenarios about people: from selling sneakers to them, to designing election scenarios. Data was extracted from people’s expressions, and it was used against them.

Instead we said: all right, what if we give this data back to people and we use it together with them to design our own futures? The ones we desire, prefer, and that seem just, fun, or that will make us feel better as individuals, communities, cities. That was a major change for us. We started using the ways of design and of art to do this, to be more inclusive and to transform the languages associated to these forms of participatory politics, and the impact that they had. We started teaching a version of near future design with our own methodology which included data and large participatory projects (the approach is described in Digital Urban Acupuncture). And we started to create projects around the world (in Italy, UK, Brazil, USA, Germany, Greece) in which a Museum of the City was used to start these collaborative data collection processes that were used to

design future narratives of cities, communities and individuals.

It was peculiar because they were not hackathons, or corporate oriented initiatives. They turned out into stories, narratives, exhibits, works of art, poetic design concepts, visualizations, and each engaged maybe hundreds of people. And we were starting to train the people who were going to act as the interfaces between these participatory Speculative Design processes and institutions, companies, foundations and other organizations: transform art and design into policies. That's where it all began. When this started systematically to work it was 2014. There were around 6-10 of us (and many, many collaborators), we had a fake office in London, and we were doing projects all over the world.

Now we're back in Italy, we are

redesigning the research center after COVID-19, to bring this concept even further in this direction. We have currently abandoned our headquarters in Rome and we're looking for a space that will allow us to do all this and also to experiment in co-loving, energy and food generation and new ways for living. We've transformed ourselves into a Speculative Design project!



"DataMeditations: new rituals for new possible worlds" workshop: a near future design datapoietic experience inspired

by lockdown. Realized for the Hackers & Designers Summer Academy in Amsterdam, 2020

Where does your own practice sit within Speculative Design and what is the current state of Speculative Design in Italy in education (formal and informal) and practice?

The situation is peculiar over here. Many people are consciously doing some form of Speculative Design, whether they call it that or not, in universities, companies or associations of some kind. There are some drivers for this, including institutions, foundations and companies, that give out grants to constantly reinvent, regenerate, rethink, etc. This is good: for designers, departments, even for artists, who all get to participate in some form of competition so that they can get some money and assistance for their

projects.

What really changes the cards on the table is the purpose. There are many, starting from the more startup-like initiatives – which are a world of their own, aiming anywhere from taking people off the unemployment lists, to searching for unicorns – to cultural foundations with their strategies and desired impact, corporations looking for business cases or for greenwashing, all the way to ministries and other institutions trying for innovative ways to enact policies. About these last ones: we must remember that Italy is currently led by populists/sovraniists, for whom “participation” is a very peculiar term: to give the sense of participating, but there’s no doubt who/what makes the decisions.

About us: in Florence, at ISIA, we had started in 2012 the first

Near Future Design course in a public university, by providing a NFD curriculum within a course whose official title was Multi Platform Digital Design. With our students we created Nefula: the first design studio in Italy dedicated to NFD. As long as it lived we did many things: with the EU Commission, la Triennale in Milan, national level statistics institutes, and more. Then Oriana and I felt the need to concentrate more on the research center and we stopped teaching and running Nefula. The near future design is and will be fully part of the practices that we lead strategically with our research center. We are also trying to place it in the approaches of some very important projects: for example IR – Impacting Rome, a national call for innovation issued by the Department of Public Function that we won with a consortium of partners in the city of Rome, to bring up a

large scale experimentation in
impact investing for the
cultural ecosystem of the city.

J T E C U L A

HOM



ONTACT

STARTS Pavilion, Net Future 2016,
Brussels: the exhibit "The Future of
work", curated by Salvatore Iaconesi and
Oriana Persico and produced by Nefula
and ISIA Firenze

**As part of the
SpeculativeEdu project you
have delivered a Speculative
Design summer school
entitled NeoRural Futures.
Can you tell us more about
the idea, the process and the
key benefits behind it?**

We were very satisfied with
it. As in the previous cases, the

occasion of the periodic consortium meeting was also the chance for an event in which we tried, with the full help and support of the SpeculativeEdu project, to bring together an international crowd of parties that were interested in Speculative Design: students, PhDs, practitioners, academics, researchers, professionals. On this occasion, we also had the need to test our current findings from the project: our final outputs will be dedicated to education and practice, so we had the need to test communicative and pedagogical styles, as well as the soundness of some assumptions we had made along the way, and some recurring critiques of Speculative Design and related practices. So we set forth and produced a summer school in our current university at RUFA (Rome University of Fine Arts) in Rome in which we received 45 participants

that we selected from more than 100 that applied.

For the school we selected a peculiar topic: neo-rurality, which is the phenomenon according to which in these years new ways on inhabiting rural areas are happening: because cities cost too much; to experiment on new forms of circular economies; to experiment around new problems connected with climate change; for different forms of geopolitics. It is a phenomenon of great interest. For us it was also a chance for two reasons.

The first was to test some of the recurrent critiques made of Speculative Design. Moving away from urban, western environments, we could test in practice the critiques of “colonialism” (“can you speculatively design for Africa”), of “science fiction” (neo-rurality on the Moon), of uselessness (neo-rurality in

Chernobyl's exclusion zone: is it still design? is it art? where's the boundary?), of being able to connect with communities and bring transformation (for example we had members from a neo-rural community from the mountains near Salerno), of being able to predict (for example in Arjeplog, a village in northern Sweden, which will probably very affected by climate change), and many more. This part was very, very successful.

And the second reason was the fact that we wanted to transform the whole summer school into a Speculative Design project: how can you be neo-rural in the middle of Rome? And that's what we did: from designing the school's ecological impact, to composing the practices according to which the food for the school was sourced and cooked, and the dynamics of the communities that were engaged for the cultural

program. Up to the final evening where we designed a “Titanic Participatory Cooking” event, a neo-rural neo-ritual, in which a traditional feast of cooking and celebration was repurposed for a beautiful roman terrace.

We have just finished a publication about this output that describes the whole process, with pictures and documentation from the exhibit, that will be out soon.



**Are there any key trends,
methods and/or tools that
are recognized and
frequently used by
Speculative Design students
and/or practitioners?**

In our experience there are two. The first is a sort of collaborative scenario design, in which some form of research is made to drive the creation of some artifact that has the capacity to tell a story from the future scenario. Through its presence – or materiality, or transmediality – it becomes a “thing” which is immediately transformed into a series of questions, curiosities, desires, further speculations and discussions.

The second is constituted by the set of methods and approaches which use some sort of mediator for the

speculation: “technology cards”, or “board games” in which you can mix practices to obtain new ones. Some tools to remix tech and behaviours, to facilitate (and randomize) the creation of new ones. And, of course, it depends on who you’re speaking with. For example with artists we have often found it best to work narratively from the beginning. Just as with corporations we often need to define an objective from the beginning. The context is always very powerful.

Can you name some projects that in your opinion showcase best what Speculative Design is and should be?

I will name just one: Antitesi. Antitesi is a future scenario in which a plant merges with AI, acquiring new sensibilities. The plant/AI is able to

observe itself (when it flowers, its temperature, humidity, chemicals in the ground, its position in the world) and to compare this data with other data (for example with historical series). In this way, the plant/AI can try to understand if/when climate change is actually happening, and it can express emotions about it, through which we humans can also establish new forms of relationships. For example, the plant/AI has a digital identity through which it can receive donations in digital currencies. When it realizes that climate change is happening, the plant/AI gets angry, and starts to invest in stock markets, in favor of those companies that have been particularly careful about their ecological approach, and in disfavor of the other ones.

On top of that, Antitesi is open source: that means that you can grab the software and hardware and transform the

little plant on your windowsill
into an Antitesi. Or, if you're a
farmer, you can turn all your
fields into Antitesi. It's an
artwork and a design object
which immediately
materializes a possible future
scenario and transforms
everyone into a potential
performer of that future.



Antitesi, presented at HER: She Loves
San Lorenzo - a neighbourhood festival
for arts, data, artificial intelligence
and culture, 2018

**What does life with the
pandemic look like in Italy**

and what in your opinion is and should be the future of Speculative Design?

Lots of things happened for us
and to us during the
pandemic: my cancer has
returned, we have started a
complete restructuring of the
research center, we have
moved to another city, and
much more. Speculative
Design, in these types of
conditions, could be a
precious tool to reinvent our
reality. To avoid all of this
suffering and limitation to go
wasted for nothing. To use it
as an occasion to rethink
things.

Emotions often take over: we
were all so happy in Italy when
the lockdown was over.
Everyone was out in the
streets, in restaurants and in
celebrations. But now things
are coming back again, and
we're starting all over. If we
could channel those same

emotional powers into a redesign of our present/future, and use this same stamina to make it happen, it would be the thing to do. Through Speculative Design we should constantly try to turn all these things that happen into occasions for our social reinvention.

**Previous
post**

Paolo

Cardini:

Cultural

determinism



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



Erasmus+



SVEUČILIŠTE U SPLITU
University of Split



Interactive
Technologies Institute

Edinburgh Napier
UNIVERSITY



itd

Institute for
Transmedia
Design

This project has been funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme of the European
Union.
This publication [communication] reflects
the views only of the author, and the
Commission cannot be held responsible
for any use which may be made of the
information contained therein.