

## **Example of dissected and analysed article**

**WHAT** - Paper: Cultural Probes  
**WHO** - Author: Bill Gaver, Tony Dunne and Elena Pacenti  
**WHERE** - Published: Interactions (journal)  
**WHEN** – Published: Jan + Feb 1999

### **THEMES:**

1. The Gift
2. Design as research
3. Distance (between the designer and the investigated)
4. Aesthetics
5. From probe to design

### **SHORT – The text:**

- EU project about the elderly interaction with technology
- Small societies with different social situations close to Oslo, Pisa, Amsterdam
- Cultural probes should be understood as a gift, which should teach the project team something about the elderly and the elderly something about the project team.
- The EU project had a very open design description.
- There existed large amounts of demographic material on the elderly, which led to the use of a more free and open research of the needs and opinions of the elderly.
- Could have used traditional design methods – ethnographic studies, interviews, questionnaires
- That they used another method is closely connected to their understanding of RESEARCH THROUGH DESIGN

### **INTENTION – of Cultural probes:**

- to address a common problem for a designer in a new context
- to create understanding for a new context
- to make sure that the new designs were not totally irrelevant for the users (the elderly)
- not to be arrogant
- to make sure that the elderly did not focus on well known problems, wishes and needs
- to direct the discussion towards unexpected ideas
- to make sure that the designers did not dominate the elderly (and their ideas?)
- turned worries into curiosity and enthusiasm

## 1. The Gift/Probe:

- The Probe should be seen as a gift, which is meant to provoke the user/the elderly
- The probe is left with the user and is sent back
- The probe is a strategy for experimental design
- The probe contains:
  - \* Postcard – picture/question about their view on technology, their life and surroundings
    - + What do you like about your city?
    - + Tell about your favourite device (et cetera)
    - + Idealistic because they are informal, personal and pre-paid
  - \* Map – about the elderly relation to the surroundings
    - + Where have you been in the world?
    - + If Peciolli was New York
  - \* Camera – with questions
    - + new packaging not to advertise
    - + encourage to take pictures: your home, something boring, et cetera
    - + 50% of the pictures handed over to the elderly
  - \* Photo album
    - + Asked the elderly to describe their life with 6-10 photos
    - + The past, grandchildren, family, something meaningful
  - \* Media Diary
    - + encourage to write down the use of media
    - + TV, radio, news paper, telephone (time, subjects, and so son)

## 2. Design as Research

Research through design – a way to see research within technology, with origin in “artist-designers”

- Science **can** be an inspiration – just as popular literature, et cetera

## Contradictions / Pairs of Conceptions / Dichotomies of the text

+	%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Artist-designers</li> <li>- Aesthetic control</li> <li>- Cultural aspects of design</li> <li>- New design spaces</li> <li>- Focus on the understanding of technologies</li> <li>- New possibilities to discover enjoyment, sociality and cultural forms</li> <li>- Inspirational data</li> <li>- Partly 'objective' problem descriptions</li> <li>- Stimulate fantasy – provoke</li> <li>- Impressionistic stories about the lust and belief of the elderly, aesthetic preferences and cultural worries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Software designers or system designers?</li> <li>- Precision data</li> <li>- Systematic analysis of the existing</li> <li>- Precise methods</li> <li>- Focus on commercial products</li> <li>- Design solutions for the needs of the users</li> <li>- Information</li> <li>- Objectivity</li> <li>- The 'servants' of the elderly</li> <li>- Official questionnaires and formal meetings, turning the designer into a doctor making a diagnosis, prescribing a technological solution to their problems</li> </ul>

### Characteristics (Manifesto):

- Speculative designs
- Expand the borders for technological needs and requirements
- Explore functions, experiences and cultural events outside the norm
- Provocateurs - shake the conceptions about the functionality of the technology

### 3. Distance

Problem in most forms of research, observations and registrations:

- Distance between observer and the person being observed
  - The physical distance (London vs Oslo, Amsterdam, Pisa)
  - The financial distance (wealthy EU project being flied in)
  - 'Official' (the researcher) to the 'common' person
  - The address of the university versus the name of the authors
  - The material can be sent separately and in different stages
  - Visual material to overcome eventual language barriers
- They tried to minimise the distance through the aesthetics of the probe

#### 4. AESTHETICS

The aesthetic form of the probe is not just a question about making the task more inviting or motivates the participants

BUT is to be considered as a part of the functionality

The aesthetic value is therefore as high a criterion in design as usability and efficiency.

Probes =

- pleasurable	<b>but not</b>	childish or condescending
- abstract/unknown	<b>to</b>	support the unexpected
- beautiful	<b>but not</b>	too professional
- personal(informal	<b>to</b>	create a distance to marketing
- 'reveal' the designers	<b>to</b>	give the elderly a 'clue' what to expect

The aesthetics was with other words also contributing to reduce the distance between the elderly and the designers.

#### INFLUENCE FROM CONCEPTUAL ART

Conceptual techniques from different directions within art

- Mapping = Situationist (psychographic maps – captures emotional moods)
- Collage = Dada (mix of pictures in new settings – borrows language of graphics from commercials)
  - Techniques and tactics that is ambiguous, absurd, and mystical to provoke new perspectives on everyday life

#### 5. FROM PROBE TO DESIGN

The probe is not created to be analysed on its own or the results as a natural part of the design process.

The material from the three places mirrored three very different situations. Some of the collected material worked as a lighthouse for the projects. (A photo of some friends in a café in Italy, a photo of drug addicts and thieves in Amsterdam, and a joke about a dead man in Oslo)

The material came popping in and not everything came back. (Not a failure - but perhaps an indication of that the elderly had other things to do)

## **DESIGN PROPOSALS:**

Amsterdam:

The idea comes out of a strong local community in a dangerous neighbourhood - computer displays communicating values and opinions to other citizens

Oslo:

Well educated elderly – used libraries to send out questions about social matters that can be answered through electronic systems in cafés, trams and other public places

Pisa:

Rich nature and relaxed social life – an enhancer of nature experiences and captures radio landscapes, which makes it possible for the locals to listen to places in the landscape.

The probes did not lead directly to a design, but to the understanding of the possibilities of the places. They created an invaluable knowledge to the places and to the cultural differences. Only half of the project was about informing the project. The other part was to make the elderly to think of their own roles and meaning to the local culture.

The real strength of the method is in that all material was produced specifically for these projects, for these people and for their surroundings.

## **QUESTIONS:**

Research through design – is research just for people in white coats with stringent methods? Or can creative people with more ‘jumping’ synopsis contribute to the rigidity and formality of science? Or is it just informal art?

How do you avoid scaring people away – if they are ‘seriously’ interested in the observed situation or subject, without making them feeling bad?