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THE SCHOOL OF CONSTRUCTED REALITIES

Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby

Today we visited a new school of design developed specifically to meet the challenges and conditions of the 21st century. It offers only one degree, an MA in Constructed Realities. Having sat through the presentations for the open day, we were still a little unclear about its distinctions between real realities, unreal realities, real unrealities and unreal unrealities, but we were intrigued enough to want to know more.

The school provides a mix of theory, practice and reflection. There are no disciplines in the conventional sense; instead, students study bundles of subjects. Some that caught our attention were Rhetoric, Ethics, and Critical Theory combined with Impossible Architecture; Scenario Making and Worldbuilding mixed with Ideology and Found Realities; and CGI and Simulation Techniques taught alongside The History of Propaganda, Conspiracy Theories, Hoaxes and Advertising. Projects are expressed through various forms of reality: mixed, immersive, simulated, unmediated and so on. Students can also attend the classes Multiverses and Branding, The Suspension, Destruction and Production of Disbelief, Reality Fabrication: Bottom Up or Top Down?, The Politics of the Unreal, Reality: Local Variations, and our favourite, The Aesthetics of Unreality.

After the presentations we asked the Director about the thinking behind the school. He was a little reticent at first, which is understandable knowing the risks associated with relocating design from its cosy home in the old reality-based community to a new one among reality makers, fabricators and constructors, but he was keen to share. He began by explaining that in his view, for most people today reality isn't working, that it broke sometime near the end of the 20th century:

"It's clear that reality only works for a privileged minority, but designers advocate a realist approach, which means they work within the constraints of reality as it is for the minority. The school aims to challenge this by making reality a little bit bigger to provide more room for different kinds of dreams and hopes. An important part of this process is generating multiple versions of reality, and this is where design comes in."

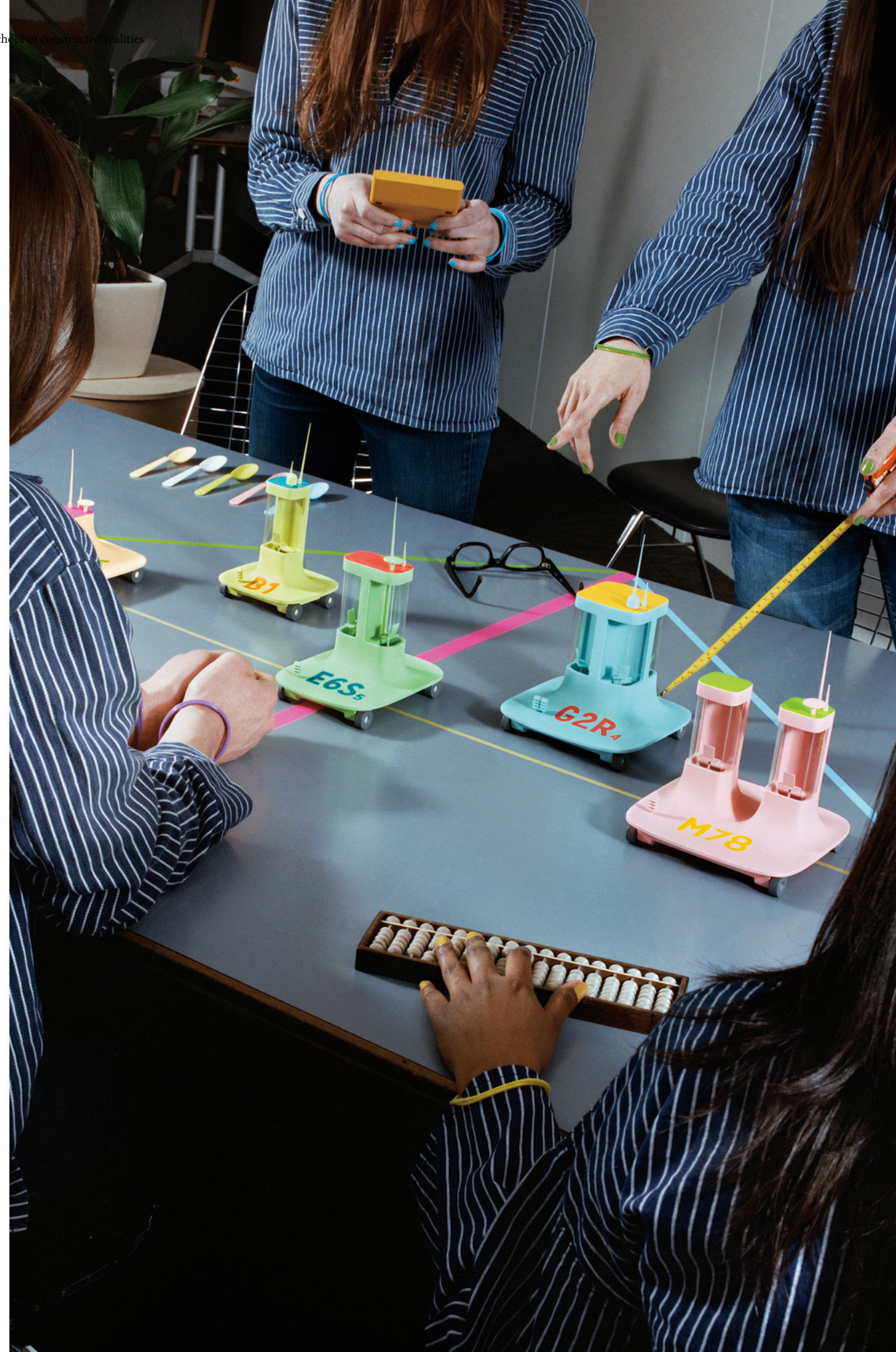
"We concluded," he said, "that the only way to challenge this unsatisfactory situation was to be unrealistic – to breach realism's heavily policed borders and to fully embrace unreality."

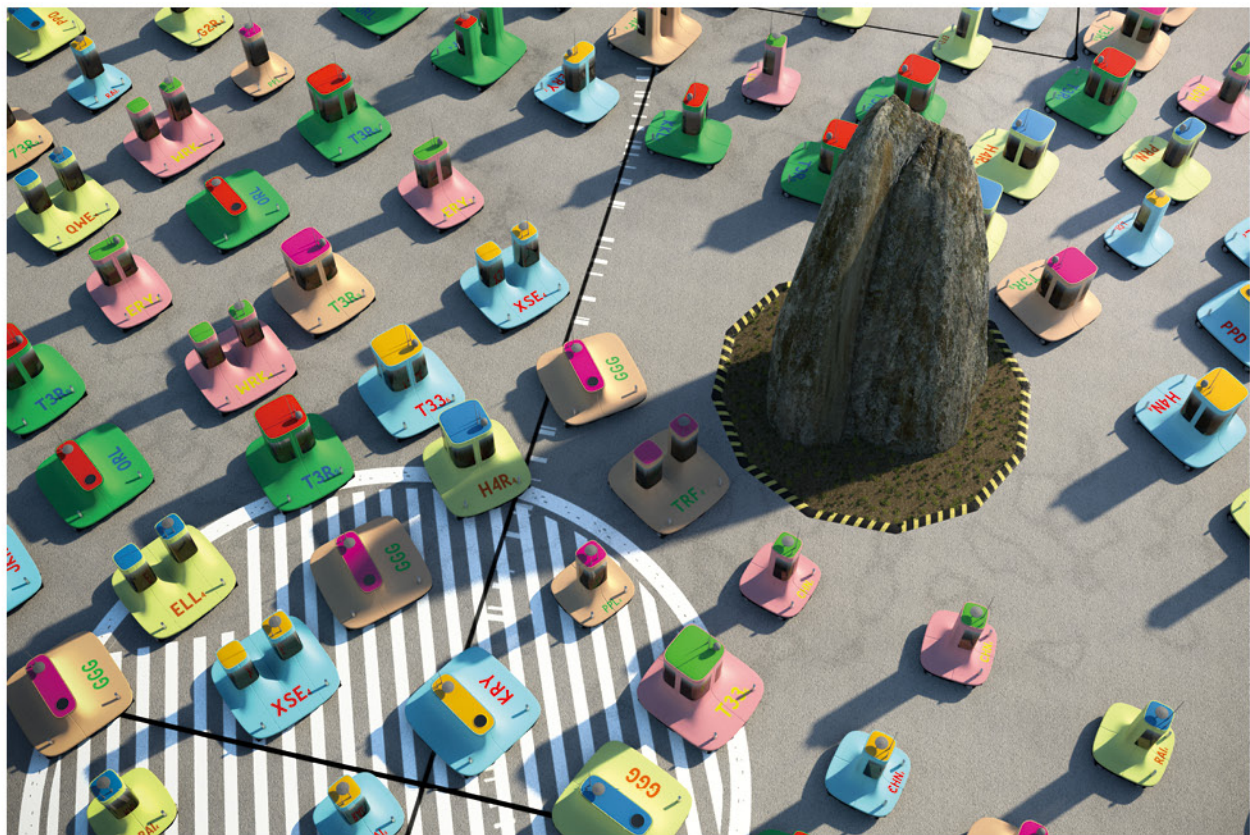
Listening to him, we began to think so too.

Article originally written for Maharam Stories, with permission to reprint

Opposite: Digitarians

PICTURE CREDIT: JASON EVANS





Top: Biocar, CGI. Above: Digicars



Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby

Would you mind telling us the inspiration behind your project *The School of Constructed Realities*?

Being educators as well as designers, we're always thinking up new projects for our students. When we were invited to write a short design fiction for maharam.com, we thought it'd be interesting to imagine a new kind of design school. We're very interested in how you prepare designers to operate in a world where boundaries between reality and fiction are not only blurring but multiplying and folding in upon themselves. What kind of curriculum, theory and projects would be needed to prepare designers for constructing new, alternative realities? We're currently developing this project for a small exhibition at the MAK's Geymüllerschloß in Vienna, which opens in summer 2015.

Realities are important elements in your recent exhibitions and work, how would you like to challenge people on the ways in which realities are presented and perceived?

We'd like people to begin to see reality as not fixed, but something that can be re-imagined and even reconfigured. Of course, designers cannot do this by themselves, but we can act as catalysts to get the process going by presenting tangible bits of alternative worlds that invite viewers to imagine their own. We think dreams are important too, even if we're not always sure how they can be realised.

How would you describe your experience of constructing or presenting an alternative reality?

We start with values, priorities, hopes, fears, dreams – often in opposition to, or critical of, those we live with on a daily basis. Then we explore how these might translate into new cultures, behaviours, ethics and so on, which we use as the basis for designing new devices, systems and services. Once we've

made them tangible through models, prototypes or video and photographic scenarios, we present them to different groups through exhibitions. Sometimes these are expert audiences, like scientists and researchers, while at other times they are the wider public. When people see our work we hope that they will "reverse engineer" our designs to explore the politics and alternative values behind them, contrasting them with ones that prevail in today's society.

What role does fiction play in the presentation of your design concepts and in your exhibitions?

For Fiona and I it's very important that people recognise our work as fiction and enjoy it as such. Some of our colleagues develop highly realistic design fiction that sometimes function as hoaxes, or fool people into believing they are real. We prefer to use playful design languages, ambiguity and even absurdity to invite people to engage imaginatively with our work. It's not for everyone, and can be hard work, but for people who enjoy the world of things it's another way to enjoy alternative worlds besides literature and cinema.

How do you envision the future of creative education?

That's a very difficult question, but we must fight for broader models of education that recognise exceptional talent and provide environments where it can be nurtured to the highest level, and contribute to society in ways that might not always be obvious, practical or even knowable at the time. We need to ensure, in a world that is becoming increasingly functional and concerned with the bottom line, that there are still places that can provide a form of design education to support genuine experimentation and creative risk-taking so that truly original minds are allowed to flourish.

