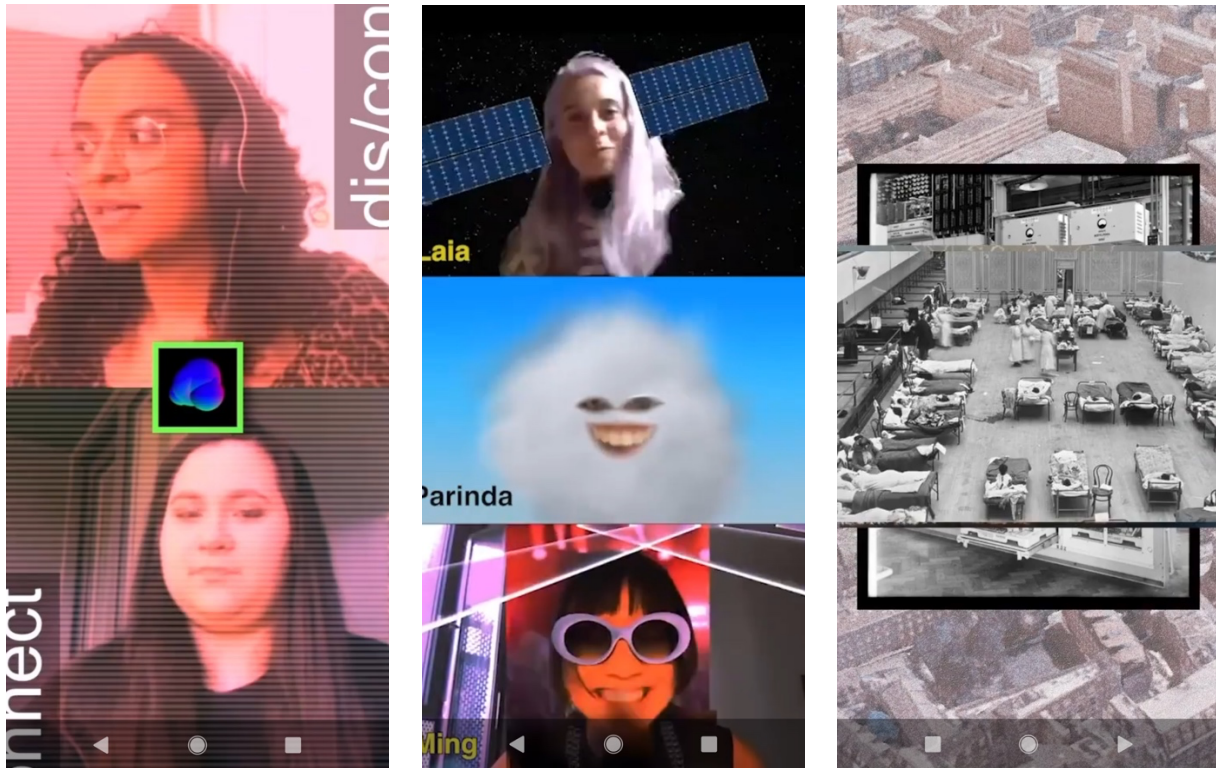


Reflections On and In Virtual Space: Book Test Unit 2020 at the Royal College of Art

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Screenshots of videos produced for the Instagram Live launch of *Dis-connect: Communication in the Age of Isolation* (MRes Communication Design 2020) by Clara Searle and June Huebner (left); Laia Miret, Ming Ling, and Parinda Sakdanaraseth (middle); and Xiaojuan Pang and Il Sun Moon (right).

The shift to online learning has brought a dramatic alteration, for many, in how students and tutors communicate and collaborate. Communication media and technologies play an enormous role in shaping the new interactions involved in online learning and teaching. Communication design research students are therefore well-positioned to work reflexively with current challenges of communication, social interaction, and the tools and media through which they happen, while learning during the pandemic.

This presentation reports on 'Book Test Unit 2020: The Future of Telecommunication', a project on the Communication Design Pathway of the Royal College of Art's MRes programme, in partnership with the BT Archives. It discusses insights about creating and studying objects in the virtual space – when one of the objects of study is the virtual space itself. It focuses on using archival research during the pandemic to produce a designed object: a virtual publication.

The project began in February 2020 with a visit to the BT Archives and a brief to produce a collaborative publication exploring the future of telecommunication. As lockdown ensued in

London, our engagement with archival artefacts turned virtual, and the focus pivoted from 'the future' considered broadly, to telecommunication during the pandemic. Artefacts took on new virtual lives in the students' work, providing both grounding and inspiration for speculative design in the online space, and a prompt for reflexivity. As Teal Triggs and I wrote in the introduction for the students' publication *Dis-connect: Communication in the Age of Isolation*, archival artefacts 'became prompts for critically engaging not only with a history and a future, but with the content of an evolving 'live' pandemic'¹. Reflections on this experience shape learning and teaching on the pathway in 2021 as I continue involving design students in re-thinking how we communicate as collaborators, researchers, teachers, and students during the pandemic, as we navigate it together.

¹ Emily Candela and Teal Triggs, 'A Dialogue: Documentation for Distant Futures', in *Dis-connect: Communication in the Age of Isolation* (MRes Communication Design Pathway, 2020), <https://dis-connectfuture.com/>.