

Reflecting on the Genesis and Realization of Design for a Dissemunization Station

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Résumé de l'article

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Kaisu Koski, *Injection Simulator* (2015)

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REFLECTING ON THE GENESIS AND REALIZATION OF DESIGN FOR A DISSEMUNIZATION STATION

PATRICK MAHON, ANNEMARIE HOU

Design for a Dissemination Station (D4DS) is a collaboration between Annemarie Hou, Executive Director a.i. of the United Nations Office for Partnerships and was then a UNAIDS building-based executive and advocacy expert interested in ideas and problems surrounding accessibility and vaccines, and Patrick Mahon, a university-based artist and curator. An installation consisting of two tent structures, D4DS included listening stations and provided ambient sounds suggestive of a vaccine moving through the body. The hybrid term "dissemination" was used to reveal ideas concerning distribution of vaccines and related information. Hou and Mahon reflect on the project and assess its success with respect to aspects of collaboration.

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Figure 1: Annemarie Hou and Patrick Mahon, with Tegan Moore, *Design for a Dissemunization Station*, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Portable tent structures with sound installation. Photo by Patrick Mahon.

THE INTENTIONS OF *DESIGN FOR A DISSEMUNIZATION STATION (D4DS)*

This discussion begins with a review of the ideas and intentions for the project *Design for a Dissemunization Station (D4DS)*. The artwork that was ultimately realized consisted of a pair of custom-printed tent structures with two interior listening stations presented in context of an ambient soundtrack invoking an “inner bodyscape”—suggestive of a vaccine “liquid” ostensibly moving through it. The installation offered participants an experiential engagement with the subject of vaccines and its complexities in a 21st-century global context. Participants encountered historical radio reports of epidemics and vaccines-related news, recordings of public health students, and artists discussing the challenges of communicating vaccine information through visual art strategies. The artwork provided an opportunity to enter into a physical site that simultaneously suggested a space for vaccine promotion and access; it was a multimodal situation

where participants could learn about, ponder, and imagine the problems and possibilities that are inherent to vaccines in the contemporary world.



Figure 2: Installation view with artists, Annemarie Hou and Patrick Mahon, *Design for A Dissemination Station*, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Portable tent structures with sound installation. Photo by Natalie Loveless.

OUR WORKING PRINCIPLES

The intentions of the project were based on the mutual commitments of the principal collaborators, Annemarie Hou and Patrick Mahon, to engage in shared research and the production of a creative work integrating design and expressive art. Hou and Mahon began with the assumption that each would focus on their respective expertise and knowledge sets regarding vaccines, and also work to inform themselves about the other's perspectives, as well as attempt to grow their capacities regarding less familiar areas of expertise—in their respective lives as a UNAIDS executive and advocacy expert (Hou) and a university-based artist and curator (Mahon).

Hou and Mahon’s working methods initially involved online exchanges of text (conversations, readings, data), images (drawings, rough designs, found images), and other materials that they thought might help inspire collaboration. Among the various materials exchanged, some of the most compelling included historical radio broadcasts reporting on important vaccine discoveries, news bulletins about outbreaks and epidemics, images of adjuvants and viruses, and visualizations of how vaccines work in the body. As collaborators, they were conscious of the question of how to capture vaccines and vaccination in an artistic manner. The visual materials they exchanged therefore included the microscopic and digitally produced, as well as the pictorial, such as photography of vaccine administration and representations of the “cold chain.”¹

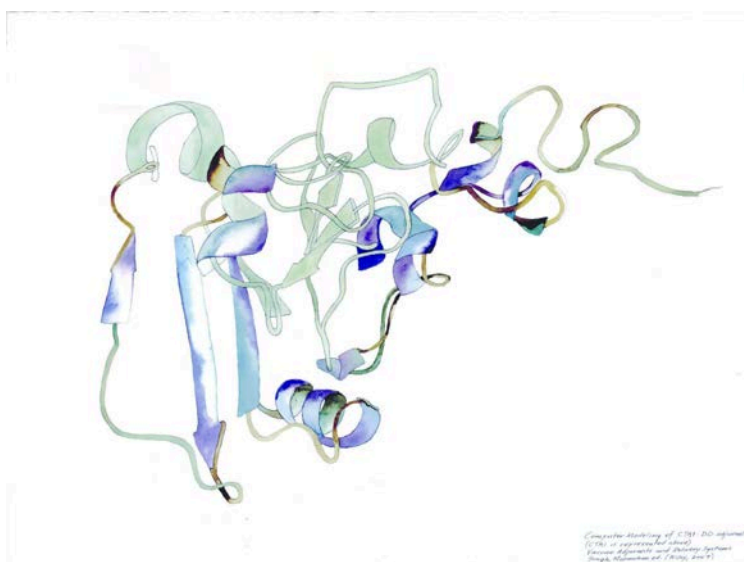


Figure 3: Patrick Mahon, watercolour detail of Vaccine Adjuvant for Design for a Dissemunization Station, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist.

Early on in their collaboration, with the intention to reduce the vast set of problems identified to a set of interests they felt they could usefully address, Hou and Mahon found themselves focussing on questions of

access (to good information, and, for many in the world, to vaccines themselves), and debating ideas regarding representation. In the latter regard, the pair asked broadly, “What do vaccines ‘look like’? How do we understand vaccines through various forms of visual representation, through the image culture that we are exposed to?” This led to research into biomimicry—the design of materials and structures modelled on biological entities and processes. At this point, they also began to discuss the degree to which, given the global context they hoped to deal with, their work should be committed to ideas of mobility—not only the mobility required to distribute information and vaccines themselves, but the realization that if art is going to offer meaningful impact in the context of vaccine discussions and realities, then the artwork itself would need to invoke forms of mobility through its propositional character and its structure.



Figure 4: Display photographs of proposed D4DS usages, *Design for a Dissemination Station*, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Portable tent structures with sound installation. Photo by Patrick Mahon.

Background research for the project showed that many artists and designers have already proposed and/or built structures that are intended to address problems regarding human social needs and desires—structures meant for shelter, privacy, mobility, and so on (e.g., Andrea Zit-

tel, Lucy and Jorge Orta, Krzysztof Wodiczko). In context of such precedents, Hou and Mahon determined that their project should be dedicated to the idea of designing and producing at least one prototype: a portable sculptural structure that suggests multiple uses regarding vaccines. The prototype would act as a foldable, decorated information booth that could be sited in public contexts such as airports, or as a portable node for creating community awareness, or even to provide possible access to vaccines.² *D4DS* would invoke real-world issues—reminding viewers about issues of access to vaccination, and about vaccine hesitancy, for example—but as an artwork, it would have a propositional or even fantastical character that enlists imaginative responses.

When it was ultimately completed, *D4DS* comprised the following: a pair of custom-printed tent structures with two interior listening stations, all shown in the context of an ambient soundtrack invoking an “inner bodyscape”—as a vaccine ostensibly moves through the body. The listening stations featured voices of public health professionals and students in discussions concerning how attitudes to vaccines are formed in various settings around the globe; visual arts students discussing the potential of art as a tool of engagement regarding vaccines and the debates that surround them; and a montage of several decades of radio broadcasts about vaccine discoveries, epidemics, and related reports.

Ultimately, to encapsulate the aforementioned concerns and intentions, Hou and Mahon arrived at the playful, hybrid term “dissemunization.” Fusing the word “dissemination” with “immunization,” the neologism attempts to point to ideas concerning the distribution of information, access to immunization, and the complexity of representations that are required to encapsulate the idea and the phenomenon of vaccines as a global and shared challenge.



Figure 5: Display photographs of proposed D4DS usages (detail), Design for a Dissemination Station, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Portable tent structures with sound installation. Photo by Patrick Mahon.

REFLECTIONS ON THE *D4DS* PROJECT

What follows is a dialogue and reflection on the project’s genesis, methods, and outcomes.

Annemarie Hou: I think it would be useful for us to begin this discussion reflecting on the character of the multi-year, international collaborative undertaking, *<Immune Nations>*. Do you recall being skeptical and/or excited about anything about our overall undertaking, in particular? Let’s also talk about what may have changed (or stayed the same) regarding what we anticipated doing.

Patrick Mahon: I have done several expansive collaborations that had similarities with this one, so I don’t recall being particularly anxious about the challenges of the project at the outset. Nonetheless, when the group came together—the scientists, policy folks, artists, and communications people—I realized that I was on unfamiliar ground.

I don’t have a strong science or health-science related background, and, indeed, much of what I have done as an artist has turned on social and/or environmental concerns, so I was aware of feeling “out of my depth” at an early point in the project. And it seemed as though, at the beginning of our undertakings, we were sometimes speaking at cross-

purposes. Or perhaps it was that it took time to find ways to effectively link together our respective concerns as artists, scientists, policy wonks, and so on. During that first meeting, it even sometimes felt as if we were in a “competition” to determine whose goals (e.g., the scientific, policy-focused, artistic, etc.) would predominate—whose goals would be primary and whose would be secondary. Interestingly, though, once we stepped back after our initial meeting, and thought about the ideas, aspirations, and respective value systems we were each most committed to, a lot of the uncertainty seemed to subside. It was as if once the shared work really took hold, the desire to find points of intersection became a useful “synthesizer,” such that there was a real spirit of cooperation and an attitude of shared creativity amongst the teams. And, in my experience, this ethos was then transmitted to the overall, large-group dynamic.

I think what changed is that we moved from encountering interdisciplinary collaboration as hard work and even as a form of mild “competition” to experiencing it as useful and generative. Following that shift in perspective, we moved to engage in our shared work more vigorously—and playfully! I witnessed a transition that led to eventually sharing in creativity, no matter what our respective disciplinary heritages might have been. Do you recall this sort of transition, or was there a different trajectory to your experience?

Hou: I immediately approached the project the way that I curate the art at UNAIDS. “Who is my audience? What do I want to provoke them with and what are they interested in?” With *<Immune Nations>*, at least at that first meeting, these questions were a bit premature. So that is why this pairing—you and me—was so great in the end. We brought together the artist perspective and the policy advocacy perspective.

Mahon: At this point, I think it would be useful to think back on the work it took to develop *Dissemunization Station* in order to determine what was the most challenging thing about the project, what was most rewarding, and perhaps where the successes and ongoing struggles occurred.

Hou: When we first met and I saw your art, I was struck by the connection I felt to you and your pieces, so I was convinced early in the introductory session that we would work well together. This collaboration has been a path of shared discovery and also independent thinking. At first, I was worried the biggest challenge was going to be time—would we find enough of it on top of two busy day-jobs for meaningful engagement? I remembered that time we both were travelling and happened to be in the same time zone, you in Ecuador and me in Panama, and it was really a joy to connect while both of us were out of our usual elements. It has been rewarding to glimpse your world and to share my world with you. I've been able to show you how art can shape dialogue and move global health policy. I also got to introduce you to the First Lady of Namibia and the Canadian minister of health. I have seen the iterative process and spontaneous nature of art creation and the lasting bond that forms over a three-year project period. And on a very sweet side, I loved that any time children came to the exhibition they immediately ran for our “tents”; there is something universally interesting and safe about coming to a shelter, which in the context of vaccines is something we could explore further.

Mahon: I think you've captured the spirit of what our working relationship around the project offered. New challenges meant needing to stretch our professional boundaries, and the opportunities to connect with others reminded us how shared, creative work can be personally rewarding and transformative, but also, at times, mystifying or even frustrating! For example, there were moments on the project that I was concerned that my work was interpreted as performing an illustrative or decorative role alone, or that my take, as an artist, on the problem-solving aspect of a project was assumed to be “soft,” or highly indirect. In the end, though (and I think I can speak for the other artists involved in *<Immune Nations>*, as well as myself), our work as visual practitioners felt very much welcomed and embraced and respected. And I think you, for one, were instrumental in creating a welcoming space in which we could work collaboratively and include art meaningfully. In fact, you mentioned the iterative aspect of our working process, and I was thinking that you yourself really helped foster an

iterative process for public engagement with *<Immune Nations>* as a whole that was tremendously beneficial.

In many ways, our first exhibition in Trondheim at Galleri KiT in March of 2017 (the public gallery of the Trondheim Academy of Fine Art) was an appropriate launch for the project. Nonetheless, the audience there was a somewhat typical one for several of us to encounter, in our roles as artists; largely, it was made up of students, other artists and academics, and members of the culturally-minded general public. They were a responsive group, certainly, but I think the context of UNAIDS that next May in Geneva, and the opportunity to intersect with a sector of the international health community, made a profound difference to the life of the project and to its potential impact outside of the art world proper. In that iteration, the project's aspirations, to test the capacity of art to foster engagement within a highly knowledgeable community regarding the subject of vaccines, were *very* apparent. Rather than the audience coming to the exhibition on the pretext of expecting a novel encounter with art, they appeared to be open to or perhaps to be looking for new ways to expand upon an international dialogue that is already underway but requires new modes of expression and perhaps new ways to recognize and communicate the urgency of the challenges. So I think your work in hosting us at UNAIDS was really a significant creative and intellectual contribution to this project that really allowed it to focus substantially on its goals.

Hou: Maybe, by way of concluding our discussion, we can talk about what we learned methodologically that might inform others working on multi-year, international, and interdisciplinary collaborations. What would we want to retain, adapt, or change in moving such work forward, and what would we recommend others do in this type of undertaking?



Figure 6: Installation of sound components by Tegan Moore, Design for a Dissemination Station, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Portable tent structures with sound installation. Photo by Patrick Mahon.

Mahon: One thing that I think is key in doing this sort of work is to recognize the respective skill sets and the expertise of the collaborators, and to be open to becoming educated regarding each person’s respective capacities without trying to become that kind of expert. It is important for scientists to insist on scientific excellence, artists to insist on artistic excellence, and so on. This can be difficult because it demands time and patience, and people are busy, so there’s often not a huge amount of time to engage in the patient sharing of information that is not immediately transparent from a different disciplinary perspective. A further and perhaps more significant issue is that, as researchers and creators, we can sometimes feel insecure when we confront a knowledge set that is unfamiliar. Certainly, the impulse to try to “measure up” to someone who knows a lot about a potentially unfamiliar subject area—such as vaccines—is understandable. But in a healthy collaboration, I think it’s unproductive to be overly preoccupied by this kind of thinking. As an artist, for example, I found that I was better at asking lots of questions about how vaccines work, and about how the politics surrounding them functions, and to use the responses as a means to build the foundation for my own research-creation approach. But I also came to understand that it was important to trust in my own abilities as an artist [...] in order, for example, to be able to recognize and elucidate some of the beautiful and curious aspects of what I was learning. Ultimately, this was important in order to realize a project that had artistic richness as well as a solid knowledge-based foundation.

Hou: Agreed. But, honestly, you made it easy for me, being flexible on the timing and being so skilled at interpreting my ideas into a shared vision for the project. I like that we were able to come from our areas of strength and also be open to each other’s worlds. I felt my contribution to <*Immune Nations*>—what are we calling it? “collaboration?” “experience?”—came with the exhibition site itself: UNAIDS. It was when we finally decided to install it there, during the 2017 World Health Assembly, that I felt, “Okay, this is my world, I know how to guide people through it.” So, I guess, when it comes to this kind of interdisciplinary and emergent collaboration project, it means you need to pace yourself and recognize that you were chosen

for a reason and that your role will become clearer, even if it is not clear from the start.

The show in Norway, while it was held as a joint opening reception event with the 2017 Global Health and Vaccination Research Conference (GLOBVAC), was, I think, ultimately more traditional. It was in a gallery and it felt very much like an exhibition, while the event in Geneva at UNAIDS was more of an experience. It wasn't traditional at all. Starting with the space: we do have an amazing lobby, [the] size of a soccer pitch and surrounded by three-storey-tall windows, but it is nothing like an art space. So we built a series of events around <*Immune Nations*> during the World Health Assembly with many different audiences and with top health officials in the world. It was also a chance to expose all the artists to the advocacy side; I put together a town hall with the executive director of UNAIDS and the First Lady of Namibia that all the artists attended, so they could see the kinds of issues that get talked about. We also did walk-throughs with public health and policy students. And it was amazing to have the Canadian minister of health give an incredibly moving speech about the importance of vaccines from her perspective as a minister, physician, and mother. These were not typical gallery experiences. Similarly, UNAIDS staff had the opportunity to interact with artists and health leaders [on] new issues and broaden their understanding of the power of art to bring debate surrounding complex social and political issues to life. I don't think we realized how big of an impact we could make.

Mahon: One last aspect of the impact of the overall project and our specific work that we haven't discussed is around the notion of disseminating "knowledge" regarding vaccines. As alluded to earlier, art is sometimes thought to have a somewhat indirect or tangential capacity to communicate significant ideas and is therefore seen to have limited potential to engage in clear communication, especially regarding complex subjects. But thinking through our work, we observed that when viewers have numerous possible ways to approach complicated ideas and subjects through artwork, and when their individual experiences and impressions are allowed to vary quite widely, this can actually produce a kind of strength regarding impact.

In the case of the *Dissemunization Station*, the fact that people were “lured” into a beautiful tent structure while surrounded by ambient sound—even before they actually went about putting on the headphones—might have increased the possibility for them to be open to what they then encountered by way of knowledge and information. The work as a whole is meant to offer a multilayered experience such that the content we hear via the headphones is only one aspect. Now, one could argue that it’s that aspect which could be most effective in influencing attitudes (the hearing of news reports and other “information”), but I don’t think we want to discount the importance of the creative framework in which the information is encountered as itself producing a form of knowledge. Simply put, the “affect” produced by the work is a significant component of the experience. Arguably, it just might be the very thing that helps change minds (in productive ways), so to speak.

That being said, there was some pretty wonderful “affect” experienced by us as the artist-makers, too. When we came into the project, I don’t recall thinking it would be as pleasurable, or, really, as refreshing and transformative to me, personally, as it was. But I think as the group gradually came together and “gelled,” and we saw the amazing generosity of the participant-collaborators, it became increasingly heartening and pleasurable to be involved in *<Immune Nations>*. I don’t think you can fully orchestrate this kind of result, though involving people of similar good will certainly helps! In the end, I think if the collaborators can come together with a combination of confidence in their own work and a willingness to learn and be vulnerable, then it makes for a dynamite combination. I do think our whole project on all levels was the result of such a synthesis.



Figure 7: Installation view (from exterior courtyard), *Design for a Dissemination Station*, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Portable tent structures with sound installation.

Photo by Patrick Mahon.

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IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: Annemarie Hou and Patrick Mahon, with Tegan Moore, *Design for a Dissemination Station*, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Portable tent structures with sound installation. Photo by Patrick Mahon.

Figure 2: Installation view with artists, Annemarie Hou and Patrick Mahon, *Design for A Dissemunization Station*, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Portable tent structures with sound installation. Photo by Patrick Mahon.

Figure 3: Patrick Mahon, watercolour detail of *Vaccine Adjuvant for Design for a Dissemunization Station*, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4: Display photographs of proposed *D4DS* usages, *Design for a Dissemunization Station*, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Portable tent structures with sound installation. Photo by Patrick Mahon.

Figure 5: Display photographs of proposed *D4DS* usages (detail), *Design for a Dissemunization Station*, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Portable tent structures with sound installation. Photo by Patrick Mahon.

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Figure 7: Installation view (from exterior courtyard), *Design for a Dissemunization Station*, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Portable tent structures with sound installation. Photo by Patrick Mahon.

NOTES

1. The “cold chain” refers to the system of storing and transporting vaccines at the recommended temperature needed to maintain vaccine’s potency from its location of manufacture to its location of use.↵
2. To produce a work of high quality, as well as one that would be convincing as a realizable proposition, Hou and Mahon decided to work in consultation with an architectural designer. In doing so, they anticipated that both their prototype and an accompanying set of three photographic montages describing its potential uses in multiple contexts would allow the project to be presented within an art exhibition, while suggesting sites of real social possibility.↵



Annemarie Hou and Patrick Mahon, with Tegan Moore, *Design for A Dissemination Station*, Galleri KiT, Trondheim, 2017. Portable tent structures with sound installation. Photo by Yanir Shani.



Annemarie Hou and Patrick Mahon, with Tegan Moore, *Proposed D4DS usages (detail)*, *Design for a Dissemination Station*, 2017. Portable tent structures with sound installation. Image courtesy of the artists.



Annemarie Hou and Patrick Mahon, with Tegan Moore, Display photographs of proposed D4DS usages, *Design for a Dissemination Station*, Galleri KiT, Trondheim, 2017. Portable tent structures with sound installation. Photo by Yanir Shani.



Annemarie Hou and Patrick Mahon, with Tegan Moore, *Design for A Dissemination Station*, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Portable tent structures with sound installation. Photo by Annik Wetter.
