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Case Ƨtudy: Communicative Machines Ƨpeculating on Death

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Classroom projects speculating on the theme of "death" from the School of Design at Politecnico di Milano.

Contemporary academic culture organizes fields of study according to its own specific words, frameworks, and methods. Design, by its very nature, escapes this model by positioning itself among scientific knowledge, technical expertise and art. It is an anti-disciplinary field, as in the words of Ito (2016), in which it is possible to witness a switch from the centrality of function to the centrality of meaning becoming a tool to create ideas, not only things (Antonelli, 2011).

A similar premise is the basis of what, over the last six years, inspired the teaching method of one of the Visual Communication Design Studios at the third year of the **Bachelor in Communication Design**, School of Design, **Politecnico di Milano**. The students are prompted to work on visual and experience design related to thought-provoking

themes: "death" was the one for the 2019–2020 course. The task was to design interactive and experiential devices (defined as "Communicative Machines") in a critical and speculative framework, not by conceiving possible futures but rather by reflecting on alternative presents. To do so, they were encouraged to use code and digital prototyping, although the use of a specific technology was not mandatory.

The main outputs are objects, installations or interactive devices intended as "object personas": an extension of the design research and educational process arguing for design fiction as an important methodological tool that can reveal new questions and unconventional opportunities (Cila et al., 2015).

Using a variety of technologies and media, students find in Speculative Design a fertile field of "cross-disciplinary and integrative" experimentation.

The following four projects were developed (from concept to final prototype) over five months and represent a selection out of thirteen works produced in last year's class.

Micromort is a fictional currency connecting nationality and the value of death. The project intends to emphasize how death has a different social value depending on where it occurred or who has been involved. The speculation is shaped on a "stock exchange monolith" composed of 16 screens, and four LED strips that show real data and videos related to wars, natural disasters or terrorist attacks. The price of every single death worldwide is calculated thanks to an algorithm which collects and processes more than 21,000 accurate data from public databases. The consistency of the machine design (the column), the data and the interfaces reveals the critical position against the supposed Western superiority based on economic values and the role and the ethics of media (www.micromort.org; [@micromort_org](https://micromort.org)).
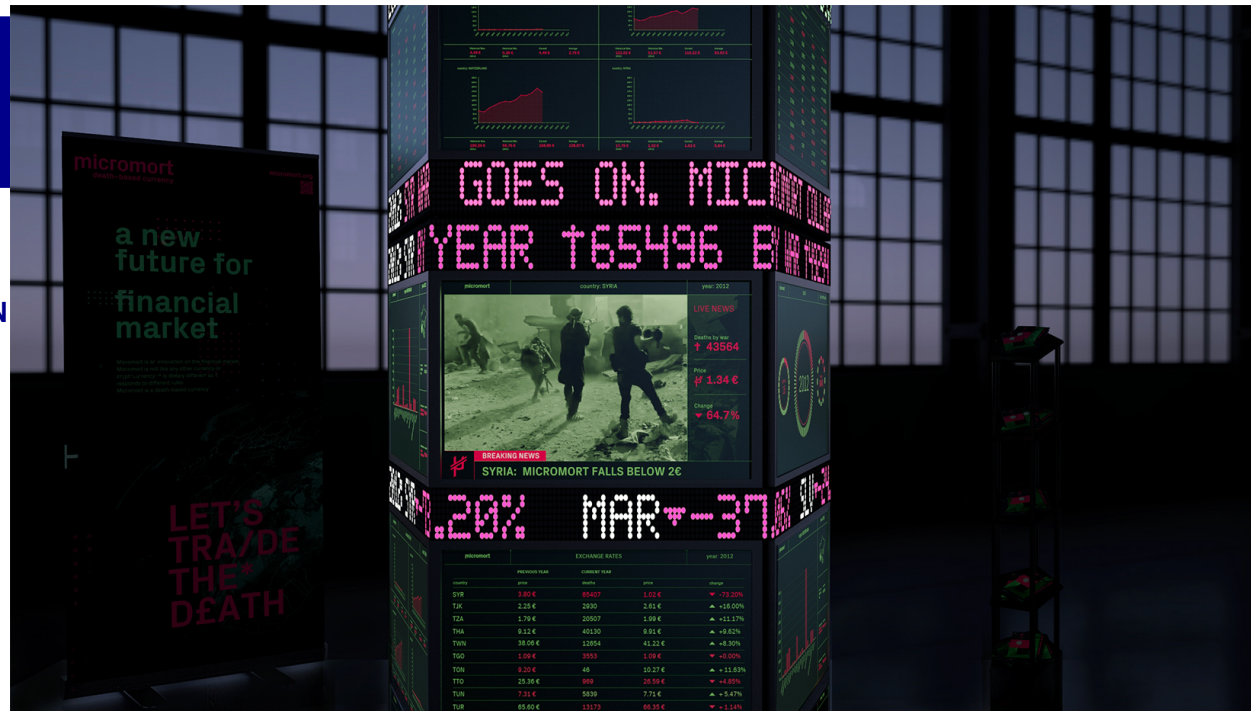
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Micromort stock exchange monolith, design by Alvise Gregorio Aspesi, Carlotta Bacchini, Elisa Carbone, Pietro Forino, Davide Perucchini, Enzo Taboada Fung (2019).

Geist (Gedankliches Experimentelles Institut für Spezielle Therapien, Experimental Institute of Thought for Special Therapies) is a fictional centre for scientific research, focused on unknown aspects of the human mind as the Schadenfreude, the pleasure caused by others' bad luck or death. Users are involved in a fictional test

(**Schadenfreudemetertest**) which forces them to watch simultaneously six videos of real-life events, including deaths and killings. The machine is equipped with an Eye Tracker that follows and processes the movements of the user's gaze. At the end of the experiment, the machine prints a report with a graph representing the trend of the user's Schadenfreude level. The experience reflects on human morbid curiosity about death, emphasized by media and social channels (www.geistlab.de; @geistlab).
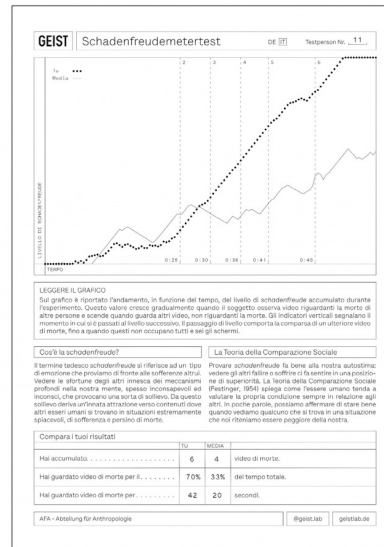
The Schadenfreude test machine and the final output printed, design by Alessia Arosio, Lorenzo Bernini, Emanuele Coppo, Enrico Monasteri, Filippo Testa (2019).

In the case of **Kaluma** (The Forms of Mourning), the speculation addresses the modern Western habit of hiding pain following a significant loss, such as the death of a loved one, under a social mask of apparent serenity. Kaluma (from the Greek "Kalumma", referring to the veil used to hide one's pain and declare one's mourning) intends to give a public display to mourning through three objects: *Cela* shapes the mouth into a forced smile accentuating the pain; *Langue* partly restricts finger movement in order to make physical and visible the emotional impediment; *Segna* dyes tears black thus making a visible mark on the face (@leformedellutto).

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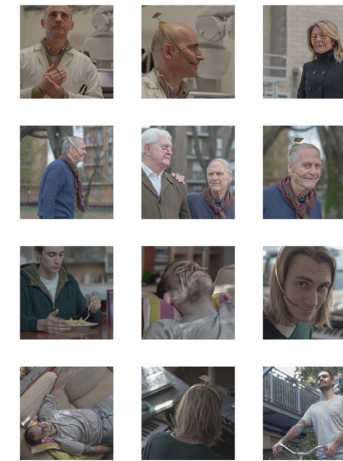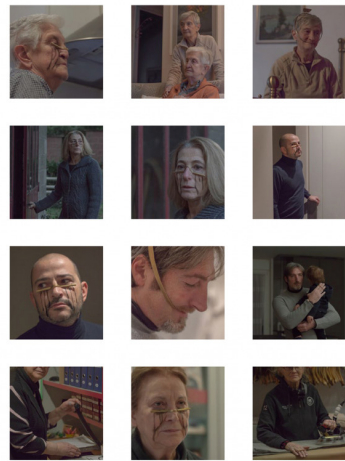
The Kaluma jewels, design by Benedetta Boga, Marta Cambiaghi, Tommaso Genisi, Marco Perico, Agnese Viola (2019).

The last one, **Deposito Cinerario Italiano** (Italian Cinerary Depot), means to underline some of the limitations of Italian laws regarding the disposal of the body after its death, according to the dominant religious tradition. Religions other than Catholicism are excluded. This scenario inspired the critical position for Deposito Cinerario Italiano, where the user is pushed to act as an agent for collective burial, where all deceased are equals and indistinct. During the process, the system shows the user the portrait

of the deceased to be buried. Those portraits are generated by an AI (www.depositocinerario.it; @depositocinerario).

Deposito Cinerario Italiano, design by Federico Lucifora, Elisa Manzoni, Desirèe Milazzo, Micol Montenesi, Matilde Teani (2019).

These four projects interpret the main theme of death from different points of view and develop multiple scenarios. Using a variety of technologies and media, students find in Speculative Design a fertile field of "cross-disciplinary and integrative" experimentation (Lukens & DiSalvo, 2012, p. 32).

These are experiments in the areas of visual design, user experience and tangible interactions between spatial dimensions, also involving the dimension of time. Overall speculation and critical position are actively translated through communication design by exploring alternative values, forms and representations (Johannessen, 2017; Bardzell & Bardzell, 2013).

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