

Create a Vision of Homo Sapiens 2.01¹

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THE CHALLENGE

What could be more exiting and at the same time frightening than the idea of designing yourself? Being in charge of your capacities, abilities, and perhaps even basic outlook – the entire physical, mental and spiritual set-up of your existence. And thereby approach your whole being as a human being as a design task rather than something 'given'. What would you go for? What would you do? Would you add or remove capacities and abilities? And what reflections would such designing call for?

When we were asked to edit this themed section of *Artifact* we immediately imagined a vast array of possible themes. Among them we luxuriously chose what we think is the most intriguing and exciting of them all: to conduct an experiment with man's very self-understanding and ethical boundaries staged as a design task with our self as object. We wanted to call upon contemporary designers and thinkers to create a vision of Homo Sapiens 2.0.

THE SETUP

No matter what ethical, religious or legal constraints we should apply trying to prevent ourselves from messing with man's nature in the future, nothing has ever historically been able to stop us. And the toolbox for reconfiguration is getting bigger and richer day by day. So in a pragmatic vein, perhaps it is our ethical obligation to proactively influence the direction of this perpetual urge to 'improve' human beings through instructive reflections on design.

Designing the human body and mind is an everrefined vision and practice. From non-invasive therapy, training and education to medication, surgery, and implants according to changing norms, theories and available technologies, we struggle to both figure out and master our existence. The only change to this urge is the shifting balance from the metaphorical and conceptual to the physicality of reconfigurations. We no longer merely shape our self-understanding and behavior to make sense of our existence. We will increasingly interweave narratives, cultural norms, and technology directly into the body.

But who should be responsible for designing Homo sapiens? Should designers, philosophers, physicians, social scientists, theologians, evolutionists, women or men, or each individual decide? What is the primary goal of Homo sapiens 2.0? Is it spirituality, global sustainability, greater happiness, equality, harmony or creativity? Improved capacities for most people or survival of the fittest?

We sent the challenge to visionaries actively shaping contemporary thinking and design, and ended up with four very different visions deeply rooted in the contributors' respective professional and personal standpoints. We are quite thrilled that the authors belong to the world's leading thinkers and practitioners of their respective fields. We have a philosopher, a theologian, a transhumanist and a designer each providing their perspective on the challenge and each engaging with the task in fascinatingly different ways.

MOTIVATION

Since we have asked colleagues to share their very private beliefs for the future, it would only be fair to be frank about our own motivation for staging this experiment. To us, there is no doubt that technological findings and inventions change the way we perceive ourselves, not least indirectly. Scientific progress means technological progress and technological progress means changes in the way we organize our society. During this continuing process of change we get involved in social relations that continuously shape our self-understanding and values regarding technologies and their implementation.

We do not believe in the deterministic view that this self-understanding is just an expression of the technological development. Or that technological evolution itself is a mere realization of a predetermined order immune to contextual influences. Even the innovative transhumanists of today, a vibrant community of futurists actively exploring the possibilities of remedying man's physical shortcomings through technology, believe in a more self-realizing imaginative use of technologies and their implementation than a truly deterministic perspective would allow.

The scientific and technological development is influenced by how we choose to organize our society, but we also act in social relations that embody attitudes towards technology and therefore shape our self-understanding and values regarding technologies and their implementation.

Technology is our strength and our weakness. On the one hand technology has provided us with a very high standard of living. On the other hand it has deprived us of some of our freedom. We merge with technology, in metaphoric as well as in more direct ways. Our technological versatility as well as our autonomy is simultaneously molded through private, public, academic, fictional, realistic and fantastic stories on the merging of man and technology.

We rely on technology and we have to face it. Technology will become a still greater part of us and vice versa. It is not a box of tools that we can use whenever we feel like it. Technology is already a part of us. But, no matter the compatibility potential, we cannot be reduced to technology. We stage ourselves and our surroundings as systems to be able to act. But these systems are not 'the truth' or absolute. They are perspectives on the world that help us obtain coherence and meaning in an utterly chaotic world.

That is exactly what our four contributors do: offer perspectives and future scenarios. And we deliberately gave our contributors a relatively short time-horizon to force them to put themselves at stake by agreeing to embody the design themselves.

PROFILES

In the spirit of this experiment we actively sought for contributions that would enrich the topic with different perspectives. There are endless interesting takes on the matter of Homo sapiens 2.0 and we wanted to cover some of that vast ground to maximally inspire future debate and exploration. We

surely got what we wanted. Among the numerous different ways the notion of Homo sapiens 2.0 can be approached, we received very different perspectives. Moreover the authors not only offered their professional insight but added personal dreams and aspirations to make the debate even more crucial and relevant.

The contributions represent not only four different perspectives but, to a certain extent, also different positions on the idea of reconfiguring man. From rejection of the very idea that man could or should be improved by (human) design to ethical imperatives to do so.

The 'hands off' position is represented by the MIT theologian and computer scientist Anne Foerst. Currently a professor in computer science, but before that a research scientist at the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. At the Al-Lab, Anne served as the theological advisor for the Cog and Kismet Projects, two attempts to develop embodied, autonomous and social robots in analogy to human infants. Robots, which might learn and develop more mature intelligences. She also initiated and directs "God and Computers", a dialogue project initially between Harvard Divinity School, the Boston Theological Institute and MIT. Anne's work and thinking have been known for years outside academic circles. Her book God in the Machine: What robots teach us about humanity and God was published in 2004 and she has been a part of public debate in media like The New York Times, MSNBC, The Boston Globe, Der Spiegel, etc. as well as numerous radio and television shows.

From her work with some of the world's most advanced robots at MIT artificial intelligence labs, Anne Foerst sees androids as a welcome means to teach ourselves tolerance and appreciation of otherness.

A more affirmative position is represented by the transhumanist Natasha Vita More. Even though Natasha's research investigates cultural futures, human/machine interfaces, and philosophical views concerning human rights and human enhancement at the University of Plymouth, she has a long track record within the American transhumanist movement where she also was president of the Extropy Institute. Her conceptual design "Primo Posthuman" was featured in Wired, Harper's Bazaar, The New York Times, U.S. News & World Report, Net Business, Teleopolis, and Village Voice and she has appeared in over twenty-four documentaries on the

future contributing her challenging wits and artwork as well as her great personality and charisma. By contrast to the theologian Anne, Natasha focuses on applying technology to herself as a radical liberation from arbitrary constraints created by evolution.

In between the theology/transhumanism – or 'Stop!' and 'Go!' – extremes we have two different takes on the how and why we should apply design on our existence: the philosophers' and the designers' perspective. As a philosopher, Daniel Dennett is occupied with life-until-death and the existential potentials of designing death. Through reflections on the disadvantages of a slow and painful dying from old age Dennett reaches the conclusion that design is most appropriately applied to a suddendeath contraption. If death becomes something that strikes vital persons while they least expect it, life remains rich and meaningful until the end. What we lose in life-quantity we gain in lifequality. This somewhat provocative idea is typical of Dennett's thinking. Being one of the leading and most influential philosophical thinkers of his generation, Dennett seldom fails to deliver strikingly clear analyses and hypotheses. In his seminal books Consciousness Explained (1991) and Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life (1995), Dennett takes on the theme of man's place in nature with such effect that nobody is left without a reaction.

Saul Griffith, who is the only trained designer among the authors, has in addition multiple degrees in materials science and mechanical engineering and completed his Ph.D. in Programmable Assembly and Self Replicating machines at MIT. He is the cofounder of numerous companies including: Low Cost Eyeglasses, Squid Labs, Potenco, Instructables. com, HowToons and Makani Power. Saul's creativity has been awarded numerous times for inventions including the National Inventors Hall of Fame and Collegiate Inventor's award. Saul's research focuses on minimum and constrained energy surfaces for novel manufacturing techniques and other applications. For this issue, after overcoming an initial reluctance "to play God", Griffith's designer spirit was awakened and he carefully ventured into designs for a better life in a carbon constrained future. Rather than taking away – quantitively - parts of life as does Dennett, Griffith envisions how to "redesign humans to be the first species to ever consciously accept their role in a larger, finite ecosystem, and to design themselves and their collective lifestyle to sustain their species at a quality of life of their choosing". Griffith's vision takes us through a tour de force of imaginative

ways to reduce our energy use, from body hair over vegetarianism to ways for managing violent dispositions.

FEEDBACK

Ways of configuring man are growing by the number every day with most of the possibilities still in the future. It seems beyond reasonable doubt that we will continue to 'mess with' our own nature. The question is whether we just let it happen slowly and unconsciously or actively engage in shaping the development. Technological possibilities are present every day in political decisions that influence our society. Not only as technologies in themselves, but also as economic and social circumstances surrounding technology. This is the reason why it is important to discuss the technological possibilities in the broadest possible forums.

This is not easy in a world where technology calls upon science-fiction scenarios or just very fantastic versions of everyday lab-life converted into news stories. Still, as the design profession encompasses ever greater areas of human activity it seems only natural to let design reflections mix in with the choir of ethics, anthropology, religion and all the other perspectives needed to tackle this increasingly relevant issue.

In our little experiment we have set up a framework based on scientific and technological scenarios, but filled with existential, moral, political and aesthetic perspectives. We hope that you feel inspired after reading the articles and want to continue the debate. So, if you want to help shaping the future and challenge experts, science journalists and the like on setting the agenda for Homo sapiens 2.0, we have created a platform for discussions related to the four articles. Share your visions and let's shape the society of tomorrow: http://homosapiens20.ning.com/

NOTES

1. Notion borrowed from Gert Balling (ed.) *Homo sapiens 2.0.* GAD, Copenhagen. 2002.

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