moving between futures

*How can exhibition design, in the context of activism, through empathetic storytelling explore futures in relation to the planetary emergency, that inspires sustainable agency?*
Hope makes the present seem only one of many possibilities and in doing that, in provincializing the present, it opens the field of the future to a wider set of possibilities, a wider set of actors ("Ecological Reparation: Ecological Hope - YouTube" n.d., 3:30).
# table of content

4 abstract

6 acknowledgements

8 introduction
    prologue
    context

12 methodology

13 what is

14 journey
    awakening
    my scope
    i am the canvas
    prototyping
    workshop
    conversations with society
    designing an installation

24 holistic sustainability
    the four sustainability spheres

26 what if

27 final words
    evaluation
    next steps

29 references
In the project "moving between futures" I explored through an interactive design exhibition and a performative event on the streets how design can be used to encourage and to reflect on one's own wishes and fears regarding the future in relation to the climate crisis which we are living and facing. Part of the exploration process were a story gathering workshop and engagement with activists.

This is a project about you, me, us. About the total sum of being alive, feeling alive and breathing in reality. It is about a deep unconscious knowledge that we never learned to process and act upon.

It is about listening first and taking action later, together. About understanding that we are alive at the same time, at the edge of no return. It is about the stories we tell each other when we dream and the ones we tell each other when we wake up screaming from a nightmare - the inbetween and the million, trillion directions we can decide to take from here.

This project is about the climate disaster we are facing and how we need to find agency within ourselves together. We can still move between these futures.

It is heartbreaking sobbing tears a loss of future and the longing for hope.
Figure 1. Snippets of the stories I collected regarding the hopes and dreams for the future.

keywords: climate emotions, futures, speculative design, holistic sustainability, pedagogy, co-creation, reflection, enabling agency
acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the net of people surrounding me, that helped me find my direction and path along the way. Thank you,

Merete¹ and Mirja, for being my extended thoughts and consciousness. For always believing in me and telling me who I am when I forget.

Anthony for their invaluable support and encouragement throughout the process.

Merete, Mirja, Lea, Sweny, Mathijs and Shoeb, for sharing something as personal as their dreams, hopes and fears for their future.

Klimatstudenterna for their excitement towards my project, the valuable feedback and the spatial support that made the exhibition possible.

¹ I use first names only throughout my report, to ensure the privacy of the people involved.
Figure 2. Mirja Timm, Merete Christensen and I answered what the terms future and futures mean to us. They both are design students and worked on similar topics throughout the thesis.
I know that my future, the future that I always dreamed of as a child, will probably not exist. I know that a lot of the things I thought would happen, will most likely not. I still dream about futures and it’s what keeps me going, but I also know deep within that there is a high risk that this will never happen and it makes me unbelievably sad, all the way through my body.

Figure 3. Snippets of the stories I collected regarding the hopes and dreams for the future.
prologue

what is and what will be, what could have been, what should have been and what never will be\footnote{I used the subjective-poetic voice to make use of my own experience, weave it into a bigger context and connect to you as a reader; acknowledging that we all communicate differently and showcasting my feelings not just with words. These passages are indicated through italic writing.}\footnote{\textit{in contrast}}

what happens when the world I know ends?
when what I thought my future to be, is not?
when my nightmares become reality and everything I ever hoped for is out of reach?

I heard children laughing, felt the warmth of a hug, the breath of summer and the voice of past days.

\textit{Do you feel it too?}

\textit{I feel the tears on my cheeks}
\textit{the cold around my neck}
\textit{the loss of my future.}
I was about 15 years old, it was the 24th of December and my brother & I were standing on the hill we used for sledding. Neither of us had a jacket on. It was 17 degrees and we looked at each other. He asked me: "Will Christmas always be like this?"

Figure 4. Snippets of the stories I collected regarding the hopes and dreams for the future.
To explain my project it is important to understand the complexity and reality of the climate disaster. It is important to tune into the depths of it, without getting lost. Without losing hope or with finding it again.

Therefore, I chose to enter this topic from a very personal perspective, to break it down and make it more accessible. For facts appeal to the mind and stories reach the heart.

It is easy to zone out when the news anchor talks about yet another catastrophe and the high death number it caused. It is easy to look away when people go out on the streets to fight against the status quo. It is easy to feel numb when you realise that you are a very small part of this. It is easy to ignore the reality, for the comfort is not easily left.

Throughout my project I explored the notion of personal stories and how they can help us enter into our empathetic selves, that are willing to take agency and fight for change.

Can we, through tapping into each others stories and emotions, leave the sleepiness and change the direction we are heading towards?
methodology

Within the project I made use of several designerly methods. In the following I will explain what methods I used and how I used them.

The Love Letter and The Breakup Letter (Martin and Hanington 2018, 54) helped me to gain insights into the relationship we have with our future, what causes connection and contrary abandonment.

Directed Storytelling (Martin and Hanington 2018, 31) helped me to reinforce the gathering of rich stories.

The Fly-on-the-Wall Observation (Martin and Hanington 2018, 42) made it possible to not taint the experience and therefore the insights I want to gain.

I used Prototyping (Martin and Hanington 2018, 66) for the testing of concepts and making quick decisions.

The concept of Languaging (Tham, Ståhl, and Hyltén-Cavallius 2019) was an important tool to acknowledge and be aware of the relationship between the language we use and how it shapes the way we perceive things, thoughts and life around us.

Lastly, the concept of Staying with the Trouble (Haraway 2016) helped me to understand what I can and what I can not achieve with my project. What I would like to change and challenge and what I can actually achieve.
The now is more important than the future and still we live everywhere, but never now. Humans are better, wiser, bigger, more important than everything else and still it seems there is a better human than you and me. A more savable one, a more privileged one. The economy must grow no matter what, even if it costs our precious, superior species lives. It is okay, it is not the more savable, more privileged one.

We exploit the planet, for we can not leave our comfort, can not leave the bliss, business as usual. Bodily system of avoidance, ignorance and shutting down. Our ethics and responsibilities are shifted. It is not me, it is you, it is them. There is a word for future, but not one for futures, because we only believe in one possibility and it takes away our action.

Most of us practice superficial climate engagement and create the illusion of a green lifestyle, while we ignore the real problem. Engaging in consumerism to feel a rush of dopamine and escape into dependency is an accepted symptom of our Western society.

---

3 We live in a society full of hierarchies in which we prioritize specific humans, so it is not only humans over all species and the planetary wellbeing, but also humans over other humans.

4 I am hereby referring to climate justice and the global south and global north.

5 I intentionally switch between future and futures throughout the text, to show the contrast and power that comes with the knowledge of having agency to become active actors in our future outcome.
Figure 6. Snippets of the stories I collected regarding the hopes and dreams for the future.
awakening

At the beginning of this project I was faced with an awakening, not with a spiritual one, but with a planetary one. I always knew about the climate disaster, at the same time as I did not know anything at all.

I still remember the first time I had the wish to become a change agent. I was nine years old and I drew a world that was on fire. Crayons scratching paper. I told my parents that I would change the world, that I would save it.

17 years later I wake up and realize I was sleepwalking throughout my life. It felt like I found the missing piece of a puzzle and was only now able to see the whole picture.

I woke up because I listened to a talk of the Last Generation ("Vorträge" n.d.) and was faced with the darkness of our reality. During the presentation a young man about my age read the story of Andy Neumann, who witnessed the flood disaster in the Ahr Valley in Germany on July 14, 2021 ("Erklärung" n.d.). I read about the catastrophe in the news before, but after they finished his detailed description on what he experienced and what he felt, I was crying. It was the first time in a long time that I was able to tap into the emotional side of a catastrophe; Neumann’s story gave me an entrypoint. It was not just a story anymore, I could feel it, breath it, hear it. It was reality.

I knew that stories were the key element I wanted to work with.
Apart from stories I wanted to work with activism, climate emotions and the question on how to engage people and enable agency, so I did some research into a variety of directions.

My interest was sparked by the way people would risk going to jail (Zeitung 2022), or even worse, in the name of fighting for our future. How they would use their bodies (Tate n.d.), or made use of bodies (Tate n.d.), to point the viewer without doubt towards problems that were overseen for so long.

My area of exploration and the people I was hugely inspired by were the people demonstrating as part of Die letzte Generation, Marina Abramović and the performance art she is doing, the Guerrilla Girls and the way they protest anonymously, the Red Rebel Brigade, and the controversial art by Santiago Sierra.

Since most my inspiration came from the field of art, it was really important for me to identify how I could make use of it and transport it into my design work.

My first ideation process led to the idea of me being the canvas in combination with videos that were being projected onto my body visualizing my possible futures.

I created a video that represented the way I always wished my future to be and the way that I fear our future will look like, with visuals and sound.

For the video I used free footage and it consists of landscape scenes underlined with the sounds of birds, rain and water. After a few seconds there is an emergency sound slowly getting louder and louder, replacing the nature. The visuals turn into scenes I know from the news, like icebergs melting and forest fires. Suddenly there is a baby laughing, first mixed with the alarm, but then it fades and the visuals go back to a thriving forest.

It symbolizes the possible outcomes for me and how alarming our reality is. There is this future that I want and then there is this danger of what is already happening and what will potentially get worse. We have a choice and we can still change the outcome, we can still decide how our future will look.
The first performance took place during the 50% presentation. It was easy to control the conditions like light, time and who was able to see me. I was wearing a white outfit, so the projections were more easily visible for the viewer. I stood in the middle of the classroom and the spectators could move around me, while the video was projected onto me. I asked them to walk around me, to later point out that this video might be specifically tailored to my future wishes, but the projections that fell on them as they walked past me and around me became a symbol of the shared future we eventually will have.

We all have our own dreams and wishes, but which of those will actually be possible with what we are facing?

I continued to test the performance outside, to see how it would work, what audience I would be able to reach and how it would make me feel. I worked with different canvases, meaning different fabrics and colors that I was wearing, as well as with different locations.

Since the projections are best visible during darkness I went to Växjö town during night and was confronted with technical issues, since I needed an outlet for the projector to work, that led to location issues, because I only found one in a small alley.

I had to rethink my design, who I was trying to reach and where that would be best possible.

prototyping

Figure 7, 8 and 9. Foto credits Merete Christensen. Prototyping the projections, canvases as well as location.
To collaborate on narratives and sustainable change agency my Fellow design student Merete Christensen and I planned and executed a workshop together. The goal for me was to open up a space where I, through Directed Storytelling, The Love and The Breakup Letter and Bodystorming, could conduct research about different futures.

I designed an invitation that we spread around campus. After realizing that the posters were not catching any attention, I made the color coding more vibrant.

My target group were people that have already been thinking about the climate crisis and were experiencing anxiety, or any other sort of emotion towards it, be it hopeful or hopeless.

While we did not necessarily gain a lot of new information, it was still important for me to read the letters and ask questions.

I felt in touch with the stories and it once again made me realize the power they can hold over us when it comes to transporting emotions and making a topic more accessible.

We create change not by confronting something head on, but by telling stories. By meeting with people, listening to them, and then trying to find a way to reach the heart (“We Create Change Not by Confronting Something Head on, but by Telling Stories. LinkedIn” n.d.).
conversations with society

I know my story and how I ended up right where I am, where I want to go from here and what my next steps are. But I did not know the stories of most of the people around me. I knew nothing about the dreams and fears they have, when it comes to the future.

I decided to interview people from different backgrounds, cultures and beliefs regarding the way they always dreamed their future to be and what they thought it will look like with the climate disaster.

I recorded their answers and felt very moved. I could find myself in so many ways in the stories of another. It felt very intimate, but safe and enabled an ongoing process of learning, growth, and collaboration that I can see helping us to build stronger, more inclusive communities and societies.

The stories did not only make me emotional but the feedback from the participants mirrored the experience as well.

Figure 11. Snippets of the stories I collected regarding the hopes and dreams for the future.
designing an installation

A design that focused on processes rather than the creation of individual objects; it was collective making rather than individual creation (Fallan, Zetterlund, and Munch 2023, 62).

I believe that there are too many resources used for designerly needs already and I do not want to add to the problem but instead find new solutions to design and create change, be it on a product-, system- or paradigm-level (Tham, Ståhl, and Hyltén-Cavallius 2019, 27).

I see it as my designerly responsibility to reflect on the current status quo and through that showcase possible futures and realities.
That is why I chose to make an installation for my final project.

To collaborate with society I contacted Klimatstudenterna, Växjö and proposed the idea of having a design exhibition in their sharing container that is positioned on campus Växjö.

The idea was that I am in full control of the circumstances like light, time, accessibility, the technical aspects and the target group.
I planned on having the exhibition for one hour during the lunchbreak. I knew the sun would shine on the side of the container, so the inside would be dark and that the area would be filled with students and teachers.

As a change agent I am not an educated product designer, communication designer, etc. but I touch upon most of them.
I designed all aspects of the experience: the invitation, the interactive parts, the space, the layout, the sound and the visuals. I made use of my skills through exhibition design, speculative design, pedagogy, as well as project management.

I used the stories that were shared with me and created a video. First I thought that I would underline the talking with visuals that would match what was being said, but quickly realised that the stories were already powerful enough and pictures could not add more

---

6 Klimatstudenterna is a student initiative who facilitates climate actions on the university campus.
to the experience. I rather chose an amplification of the stories in the form of written text and projected it along with the sound, to create an immersive experience. In this way the visitors can discover the story thoroughly in the small, intimate gallery container.

Just like the title of my project "moving between futures" says, I wanted the viewer to be able to walk among the stories, the futures and become part of the installation. I wanted them to interact with the creative potential in the not yetness of the future ("Ecological Reparation: Ecological Hope - YouTube" n.d., 3:20) and feel the opening effect on how we think about and practice and enact futures ("Ecological Reparation: Ecological Hope - YouTube" n.d., 4:14).

For the invitation I chose a picture of myself that was taken during the prototyping of myself as the canvas. I put the title in between Anna 1 and Anna 2 to play with the different realities that we can move among. The vibrant colors were a learning from the poster for the workshop and I continued to chose it for the title on the entrance curtain.

The exhibition was designed as a pedagogical staged experience that lets the viewer enact their own future through the stories of others and encourages reflection. I designed a reality where it is possible to learn from one another, to sit and move within the beauty and the fear of the future, but not get overwhelmed by it. There is hope that we all hold within ourselves, we just need to act upon it. The project aims to foster dialogue and empowers each and everyone to take agency of our shared future.

To create this experience I decided to make use of white curtains as canvas for the projections that I hung up in a way, so that the visitors walked between them, while the visuals were still perfectly visible.
Figure 12. Invitation to the exhibition.

Design Exhibition
by Anna Paape & Klimatstudenterna
Figure 13 and 14. The exhibition in the sharing container on campus Växjö.
Figure 15. The four sustainability spheres.
Sustainability means the health of all species on earth today and in the future (Tham, Ståhl, and Hyltén-Cavallius 2019, 23).

The model of the four spheres of sustainability consist of the areas: social, cultural, economical and ecological. Those, as well as the Metadesign Nest Map, helped me to not miss out on good synergy effects and make insensitive interventions that would make matters worse (Tham, Ståhl, and Hyltén-Cavallius 2019, 25).

The exhibition "moving between futures" acting as a tool to design with, rather than to design for, relates to social sustainability by aiming at and supporting healthy and connected communities.

The creation of a room where we can dive into the endless possibilities of our shared future is a deeply personal and meaningful experience and it can be a way for individuals to connect with a larger community of people, who share similar hopes and aspirations.

Economical sustainability in this project is intertwined with sustainable coping mechanisms that consists of the mental well being of the individual, intrinsic motivation to change and taking back agency; instead of extrinsic pressure to adapt to concepts like the carbon footprint, which was promoted by oil companies, to put the blame for the climate change on the individual (Solnit 2021).

A strong sustainability culture exists if people share a belief in sustainability's importance and behave in ways that support it ("5 Ways to Create a Strong Sustainability Culture | Greenbiz" n.d.).

Cultural sustainability in this project is moving away from the separation of the individuals towards communal responsibility and the normalization of sharing and exchanging each others dreams, fears and wishes. To make usage of the privilege we hold and questioning the status quo.

In the exhibition ecological sustainability is the positive interplay between the different stakeholders and practices that can be found in a society, e.g. a strong community is highly interconnected with the learning outcome.

Within the exhibition I tried to deal with sustainability through various perspectives and practices (Fallan, Zetterlund, and Munch 2023, 64) and have a holistic approach to it.
The future would be equally, if not more important, than the now, because it is where or rather when our ancestors, along with all the other species, will live. It is where our children will run, laugh, cry, fall, stand up, create and flourish. The planetary well being is our number one priority and we build on a team consciousness to reach a lifestyle that protects our home first. The individual would always be above monetary profit. We share our individual narratives to become one.

We create systems of resilience, empathy and trust. Our economy is heterodox and interconnected with the wellbeing of our communities, as well as the planetary survival and wellbeing.

Through sharing stories and being a part of those of others, we can tap into each others emotions and find agency through empathy and being awake. Reflection and self awareness of the individual are tools to find communal responsibility.
evaluation

Looking back at the final design project, there are a few things I learned and would change now. Having the installation for only one hour was not enough time for people to understand what was happening and that they could enter the container. Even though I planned that one hour during lunch time and there were more students and teachers than during other times, it would have been beneficial to set up a sign and not close the entrance halfway.

The technical aspects need to be reconsidered as well, since the internet was slow and the audio too low. The stories were almost inaudible from the outside and could have added to the user experience and making people interested to enter.

Even though I thought that the container was a closed and dark enough space, it was still too bright to see the projections properly.

For the next time it would be more beneficial to talk to people and ask them to enter the space and let me know what they experienced, rather than letting them write it down by themselves.

next steps

I have met with Anton who is engaged with Fridays for Future Växjö and we plan on using the stories as background audio for a strike. We think it could engage people, spark their interest and open up for conversations. We also plan on having workshops to talk about our climate responsibility, the engagement and how to dive further into change making agency.

After reconsidering my target group I believe it makes sense to create an online space, in addition to a physical exhibition, where the stories could be displayed and made accessible for a wider audience.

It could again take the form of an container that is displayed online. The long shape is perfect for the curtains, that the viewer can walk between and they can become part of the installation through movement.
Hope (...) emerging often most powerfully under conditions that challenge existence, that challenge endurance in the world, that challenge our ability to hold ourselves and our communities in place and to move them forward in the ways we want to ("Ecological Reparation: Ecological Hope - YouTube" n.d., 10:20).
references


