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## After Work:

### *questions concerning transition imaginaries towards a post-work society and the use of second-order design fictions as frames that resist consensus*

Dulmini Perera

The consensus among various stakeholders of society that automation will influence the future of work has risen considerably in the post-Corona context. Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, who are critical of how a minority uses consensus about facts to maintain an existing common sense (a fiction) around the concepts of work and labour. This requires a new common sense collectively established via the workers whose very work lives are at stake within these post-work futures. In their call for a 'new common sense,' they undermine the problems related to 'difference' in sense-making processes when working with systemic(wicked) issues, particularly the struggles of the stakeholders with conflicting value systems and problematic mental models trying to make sense of the transformation process in which they are entangled. The project "After work" addresses the need to look at sense-making and difference not by appealing to common sense but rather by addressing the elements that do not make sense and cause tensions within the system. Second-order Design Fictions (SoDFs), with their ability to frame 'fact' and 'fiction' in a complex manner, are introduced as a methodological tool where the stakeholders can frame and reframe the differences as it appears as tensions within the transformation.

Keywords: wicked problems, difference, change, innovation, Second-order Design Fictions

## Introduction

*The Church of Work* is a Tarot card set that provokes stakeholders to question tensions within their long-time relationship to the institution of work and visualize possibilities of reframing the notions of 'progress' and 'work.' *The Creatives*, an interactive story, invites the readers to explore the semantic confusions regarding terms labour and work. The interactive format allows contradicting futures to exist within the same story. Readers are invited to follow the decisions of the creatives who decide to use the automated future and the Universal Basic Income to develop a new model of creative life. *The Take Times*, a newspaper from the future, describes conflicts of the post-work future and invites one to reflect on how one would interact with news if a workweek consisted only of three days of work. *It's About Time* is a board game where time is exchanged at a time tribunal. The players experience other narratives of time existing simultaneously, which are at present overridden by capitalist time. *Vacation Images of the Everyday* uses postcards to invite people to think of how automation systems have helped them rethink free time and vacation time within everyday care practices. *Domestic Ecologies* is a "post-it play kit" that helps one reframe their relationship to household objects and the common-sense fictions built around them. Each of these projects presents frameworks that generate playful interactions, identified as second-order design fictions. How can second-order design fictions enable multiple stakeholders to make sense of the processes of transformation (second-order change) they are intrinsically part of while contributing to the invention of a future that comes after work?

In this paper, I will discuss why a nuanced approach towards notions of 'difference' and 'change' is needed when making sense of transformational processes that requires paying attention to elements that create tension in the form of contradictions and paradoxes. Using the concept of second-order design fiction (SoDF) in the context of 'automation' and 'after-work' discussions, I will discuss what this might mean in practice. While the complex

relationship between 'fact' and 'fiction' is often misused within the current neo-liberal design logic, SoDF provides an alternative way of working beyond neo-liberal common-sense fictions around technology, work, and progress.

## After work imaginaries: problematic mental models and challenges

There is a need to problematize the fears of a post-work future, to make apparent and bring into public discourse what these technological changes (particularly the notion of automation) mean in the context of everyday work life. Srnicek and Williams (2015) have argued that the current hegemony of neo-liberal work models is supported by an ideological infrastructure set in place by a few elites who benefit from the neo-liberal models of work and labour (Srnicek and Williams, 2015). Common sense, or predominately the neo-liberal common sense, is identified as a "fiction" developed carefully via the ideology of a neo-liberal market system. They insisted that a new common sense should be found by those omitted from the current discussions (workers), and that the new common sense should act in a counter-hegemonic manner making way for a necessary transformation (Srnicek and Williams, 2015). Highlighted here is also the fact that a counter-hegemonic project requires an active speculative mode of operations and not only a critique. They depart from the more traditional modes of negational criticism that see 'machines' and 'automation' as problematic categories that lead to alienation. Instead, a post-neoliberal work model is only possible by embracing these systems and working within the systemic complexity brought forth through such automation processes. Srnicek and Williams seek to advocate for a new understanding of work via addressing human relations (labour relations) with technology (Srnicek and Williams, 2015). They also suggest that existing technological infrastructure must be repurposed to free them from the way they objectify unequal power relations. Part of the task of a counterhegemonic project is to reframe these systemic complexities and place them within a participatory framework so that "workers involved in the technology sector who are, through their design choices, building the terrain of future politics" (Srnicek and Williams, 2015, p. 153) may be able to take part in this repurposing project.

Srnicek and Williams (2015), in their demand for a model of change, ignore that such a process would require a left (or in general workers) that understands technology, values design, and identifies design as something not limited to mere objects (Baker, 542). Their argument pays significant emphasis on counter fictional (utopian)imaginaries that can provide visions for a radical change while undermining the contradictions and tensions that emerge within the process of change itself (second-order change). These limitations arise due to how they address the concepts of 'universalism' and 'difference' within their strategy. They are critical of the universalism of the modern narratives of progress and work. However, they argue that universalism can come to occupy differences (specific demands, ideals of the minority). Within this response, they do not move beyond the dialectics of the hegemonic vs. the counter-hegemonic project. Donna Haraway (1991) hints at the danger of a "counter" which is part of a dialectical strategy that either produces a negation or another level of resolution, which though useful in some instances may not necessarily suit the task of reframing complex systemic relations without ending up with a universalism that reduces difference or essentializes certain normative categories within the system. The necessity to move away from dualisms and the need to maintain the permanent partiality of limited views is emphasized as a mode of working through the complex relation between complex technical and human systems (Haraway, 1991). The participatory project of developing a new commons sense(fiction) as suggested by Srnicek and Williams (2015) remains problematic particularly in the ways they ignore the conflicting mental models both at the personal level (fictions one would tell oneself and related value frame works) and collective state / institutional levels (fictions constructed by institutions and related value frameworks).

The COVID-crisis has disrupted the conventional common sense (fictions)around three problematic and entangled conceptual areas related to work. Namely, the distinction between work and labour, mental models related to automation and machines, and the notion of free time as opposed to work time. First, there needs to be a considerable discussion beyond an academic one that addresses the semantics of work and labour and how they intersect with questions of value and meaning. What does one mean when one uses the terms work and labour? How do these terms relate to notions of automation? Questions such as care work and creative work that belong to immaterial work must be addressed with more attention and placed at the centre (Hester, 2016; Graber, 2016). Second, there needs to be a better understanding of automation and machines and what these words mean within

worker's imagination. For most stakeholders, automation conjures the idea of an industrial machine or a solid object such as a coffee machine, a ticketing machine. What is often omitted in this discussion or imaginary is the understanding of "automation as a process" (Hui, 2017; Bratton, 2019). Yuk Hui (2017) highlights the significance of exploring Karl Marx's notion of "fixed capital" in the context of contemporary automation processes, which is radically different from the industrial machines that were implicated within the original theory. The investment in fixed capital can reduce necessary labour time and increase both surplus labour and value. Free time in the original theory is understood as both idle time and time for higher activity (Marx, 1967, as cited in Hui, 2017). Yet Hui (2017) reminds us that fixed capital is always *double*. It is capital for capitalists (who then extracts the surplus value) but also tools for workers (tools which in turn creates psychosomatic relation with the workers and extends beyond a factory). The way capital is framed within the counter- hegemonic project envisioned by Srnicek and Williams (2015) is reductionist as it reduces automation to something that only relates to work environments. Nevertheless, automation is everywhere and has become radically environmental via smart technologies. In other words, one cannot reduce the capitalist work narrative only to the worksite (factory/office). Automation understood in this way then forms an ecology (Bratton, 2019). Benjamin Bratton (2019) further elaborates how this radical environmentality functions where action (work process) and sense-making itself is coded into complex adaptive relays running through living bodies and non-living systems. As such automation encodes abstractions that then persist through generations and result in narrow purpose instruments that become norms within the operation of these systems (a language, a work schedule, a formula, a bias). Eubanks (2019) has highlighted how previous faulty abstractions get embedded within the service systems as a given part of a niche that are implicitly applied within decision made about stakeholder futures.

Bratton (2019) suggests how within such a context discursive consensus driven politics loses relevance as a reference model as it is impossible to locate these contexts across place and time. While there are many attempts at inviting the stakeholders to co-deign the systems to get rid of these faulty norms, studies such as that of Bath (2014) indicate that as long as the participants of the co-design process maintain certain faulty mental models these faulty values can reappear within the system regardless of the multiagent design process. More design work is required to help workers shift the consensus around faulty mental models surrounding the ideas of how automation functions as a complex ecology. Third, (Hui, 2017) highlights how equating free time from work with playtime, becomes problematic within such a model of automation. He highlights how contemporary machine systems allow playtime to be converted to broader projects of self-optimization and other forms of profit generation. Hester (2016) extends this argument to questions concerning domestic technologies and reproductive labour and how this has resulted in some instance not in simplifying domestic labour but instead added to higher value standards of domestic work accomplishment and in turn requires more work to be performed within the extra time. As such looking at the tensions relating to the various modes of experiencing time, particularly capitalist vs. other systems, rethinking linear time narratives associated with progress is particularly necessary to explore absurdities in the system.

## Beyond common-sense: Sense making and the limits of methodological tools

Perera (2020; 2021) has explored the relevance Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber's (1973) work on second-generation methods for exploring difference within the sense-making processes in the context of wicked problems. She suggested that exploring such difference also meant the incorporation of tensions in the form of "the many components that do not seem to fit together, elements of a system that does not have a recognizable pattern, differences in different voices, differences within and across one's senses"(Perera, pg. 190). While Rittel and Webber's (1973) work has been particularly helpful in exploring differences broadly via co-design and participatory frameworks, Perera (2019) highlight that the 'conversational' element in itself does not guarantee towards the formation of new value frameworks that escape previously established normative systems. In other words, it is suggested that such conversations via too much focus on consensus run the risk of developing a new consensus that tends to repeat faulty values (Perera, 2020; Sweeting,2019). Berg (1995) and Bath (2014) have exposed this replication of faulty values within participatory projects by using case studies related to domestic technologies and automation. Drawing from Gregory Bateson's notion of 'play,' Perera (1999, 2020) suggested how a communication frame could act as a playframe that can aid towards a transition in value frameworks when the communication frame allows for reframing the tensions, paradoxes that emerge within the second-order processes of change so that these elements can be reintroduced to policymakers and the general public. Within this model 'this is play' does not refer to the act but the setting up of the 'frame'.

The problem of 'good sense'(common sense) is that it equates sense with categorical identification and posits sense as a superior condition of a possibility of truth (Perera, 2020). In play, concepts exist at more than one level

of abstraction. The play frame invites different levels of communication to coexist. When one is free or open to these 'othered' components, one can slide between concepts transversally. The playful functions as something that works against agreement formation within the information model or anything that blocks a system from adapting to change. The playful works by continually unpicking consensus while simultaneously allowing it to be remade as required. It allows the system to open for second order change to prevent previous consensuses (common sensical fictions) from becoming part of the present problem. Play, or the 'play frame' that sets up a meta- communicational framework can take many forms. Second-order Design Fiction as identified within this project is an example for one such form that the 'play frame' can take.

## Second-order design fictions: communication frames that reframe tensions

Dunne and Raby (2014) and Julian Bleeker (2009) have in their respective discussions outlined how design fiction (DF) and related "diegetic prototyping" methods can provide a helpful communication frame that allows exploring the complex relationship between fact and fiction. Design fiction acts as a communication device between the innovation industry and the public, creating feedback between the two systems. Taking from the facts in the industry and converting it to fiction, DF's propose possible future directions of technological developments to the public. Based on how the audience receives the fiction, the DFs propose to the innovation industry what set of facts matters. Nevertheless, in think-tank settings, design fiction is often used to diegetically speak about and advance a particular idea of futures (change) at the expense of others. Fictions are used to create a new consensus around technological products that appear as potential solutions. In addition, these diegetic prototyping practices often pay insufficient consideration to the "de-futuring causality," the idea that selecting a future, in turn, de-futures other possibilities (Fry, 2019; Fry and Perera, 2021). The SoDF as a play frame attempts to work beyond the deficiencies of the DF and address the complexities inherent to understanding questions of technology (automation as ecology) and the transformation process in the following manner.

1. SoDF's attempt to de-link design fiction with market-driven narratives of innovation exposes the insufficiency in how concepts such as work, progress, futures, and technology are defined within familiar institutional and organizational contexts. SoDF is a critique against what Vinsel and Russel (2020) have identified as the problems of "innovation-speak." Innovation-speak posits difference as the generation of the new, and that the new is inherently good, and the task of progress is to move fast and keep producing things constantly. Innovation functions as the proxy for values perceived to be lacking in society. In automation, one sees this as a suggestion of technological solutions to profound social problems leading to a devaluation of maintenance and care as an essential aspect of work. (*Vacation Images of the Everyday* and *Domestic Ecologies* are good examples where the SoDF allows to reframe these common-sense fictions and therefore reframe the stakeholders' relation to the notion of automation in the contexts of domestic environments).
2. SoDF is not only focused on change but instead pays considerable attention to second-order change. Second-order change considers how technological changes become embedded within contexts. When design fictions are focused on change, they prioritize 'disruptive innovation' as an essential condition of progress and promotes disruption for the sake of progress. The effects of the destruction caused by the speed of market- innovation to the ways of being and the problematic ways these changes affect the stakeholders are ignored. These disruptions cause most tensions within the sensemaking process of the stakeholders. SoDF as a play frame addresses these things that are other to the established logical categories and help reframe these tensions that later appear as contradictions, paradoxes within the transformation process. SoDF then assists the stakeholders to reframe their relation to the change itself.
3. SoDF can be used to dismantle the faulty notions of a 'technological universal' that are often implicit in automation and change discussions. Allowing stakeholders to work with SoDFs, in turn, will enable them to deal with the enablers and constraints of the contexts in which these technologies are used and situated and allows a respectful engagement with these multiple ontologies.
4. SoDF is not the name given for a product. It is a method of making the problem present. SoDF assists in reframing the relation of the stakeholders to the process of design and question their relationship to established fictions. As shown in the examples, the setting up of the SoDF frame can be done in the most suitable medium for the community where the facilitators are located. The facilitator works within the

community to identify the most appropriate medium for working with these common sense fictions. Finding that medium, is a part of the challenge of developing SoDF's. Some communities can work with playful dialogue reflection (ex: the interactive story form of *The Creatives*, the newspaper in *The Take Times*). Some communities may not have time for verbal exchange but would be willing to interact via short written comments playfully (post-it kits in *Domestic Ecologies* used in student housing, in the project *Vacation Images of the Everyday* postcards were placed in all forms of public spaces). The Tarot-card kit is a possible example of working with stakeholders who hold radically different ontological presuppositions of time and space (ex: non-linear time).

5. The SoDFs assist in reframing significance of the second order task of constantly reframing design's relationship to change and questioning the role of technology within the process particularly when dealing with systemic issues. SoDF invokes a recursive mode of continually exploring difference, helping the stakeholders create a design conversation (internal or with others) about automation and value, and designing a meta-framework for a continuing conversation on the changing nature of those values (Dubberly & Pangaro, 2019). Second order design fictions matter not because they provide blueprints for a future after work, but rather help work through the unresolved tensions of the present while working towards post-work futures.



Figure 1. Rethinking archetypes related to work. The church of work, © Victoria Grossardt.



Figure 2. Past, present and futures of work. The church of work, © Victoria Grossardt.



Figure 3. Dismantling the church of work, rethinking institutions. The church of work, © Victoria Grossardt.



Figure 4. A newspaper from a post-work future. The Take Times, © Lara Schuster.



Figure 5. If you had more 'free time' would you read newspapers differently? The Take Times, © Lara Schuster.



Figure 7. What kind of news is produced in an after-work future? The Take Times, © Lara Schuster.

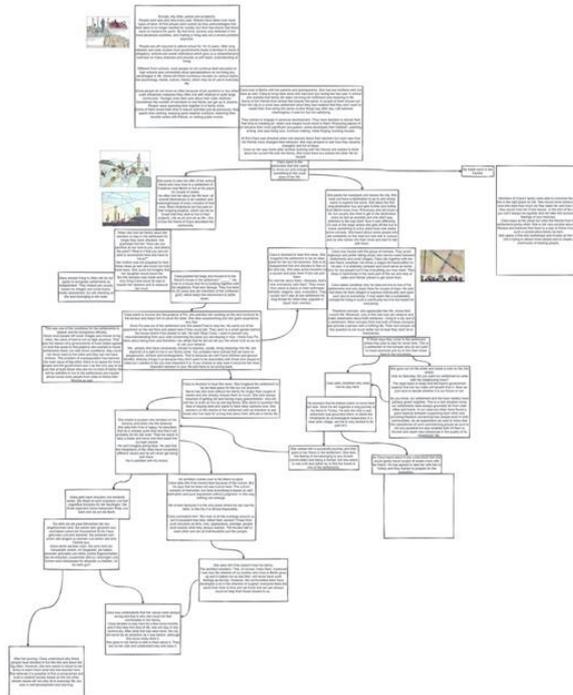


Figure 7. tensions as multiple storylines. The Creatives, © Egor Gavrilov.

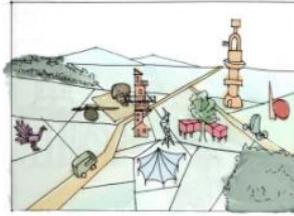
Clara lives in Berlin with her parents and grandparents. She has two brothers who live here as well. Clara is living here since she was born but during her last year in school, she realized that family life does not bring her fulfillment and meaning in life.

Some of her friends from school feel the same. A couple of them moved out from the city to a small new settlement since they had realized that they don't want to waste their time doing the same routine day after day. Life seemed meaningless; it was fun but not satisfying.

They started to engage in personal development. They have decided to devote their free time to creating art. Producing pieces of art became their most significant occupation: some developed their hobbies – painting, writing, and also fixing cars, furniture making, metal forging, building houses.

At first, Clara was shocked when she learned about their decision but soon saw how her friends have changed their behavior. She was amazed that they became energetic and full of ideas almost overnight. Once on her way home after another evening with her friends she started to think about her current life with the family. She loves them but wishes the other life for herself.

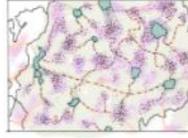
Clara came to the conclusion that she wants to move out and change something in the usual pace of her life.



CHOOSE FROM ONE OF THE OPTIONS BELOW



She wants to take the offer of her school friend who now lives in a settlement of Creatives near Berlin to live at his place for a couple of weeks. He often told her about the life here: all commit themselves to art creation and meaningfulness of every moment of their lives. Most inhabitants are focused on their ongoing projects: Life as art and art as life – this is how the friend of Clara described the community.



She packs her backpack and leaves the city. She does not have a place to go to and simply wants to explore the world. She takes the first long destination bus and gets further and further from Berlin every hour. Previously she did travel a bit, but she didn't pay attention to the route itself. Now it was different; Clara plans every step of her trip. On one of the stops where she gets off the bus in a tiny silent town where she meets some nomads. She has heard about some people who are constantly on the road but now she gets really curious about them and comes into their circle and starts to talk with them.

However, Clara decides to stay with her family.

Figure 8. A programmed version of the interactive story .The Creatives, © Egor Gavrilov.

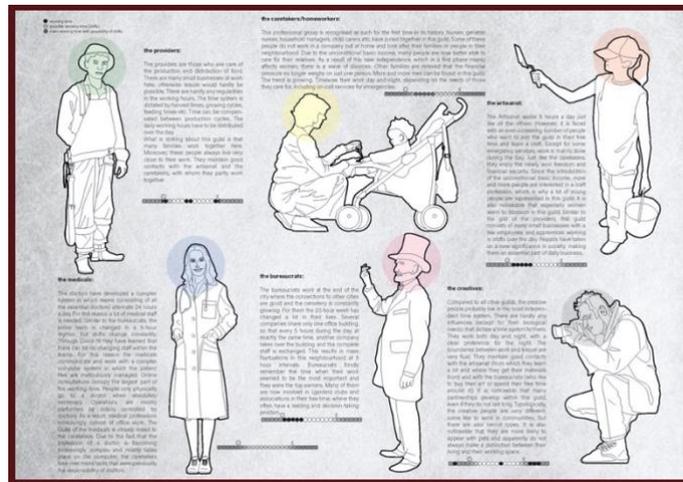


Figure 9. ontologies of time within different social guilds in tension with neo-liberal time. It's about time, © Zoe Pianaro

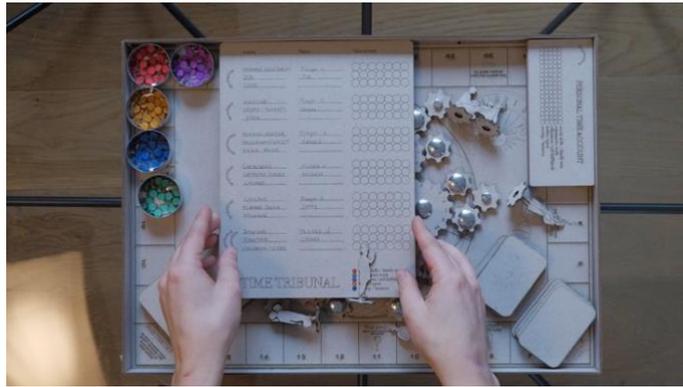


Figure 10. Time tribunal. It's about time, © Zoe Pianaro



Figure 11. Establishing a functional system via trading time. It's about time, © Zoe Pianaro



Figure 12. Post-it kit and non-linear progress chart. Domestic Ecologies, © Leonie Link



Figure 13. Playing the 15 days post it challenge. Domestic Ecologies, © Leonie Link

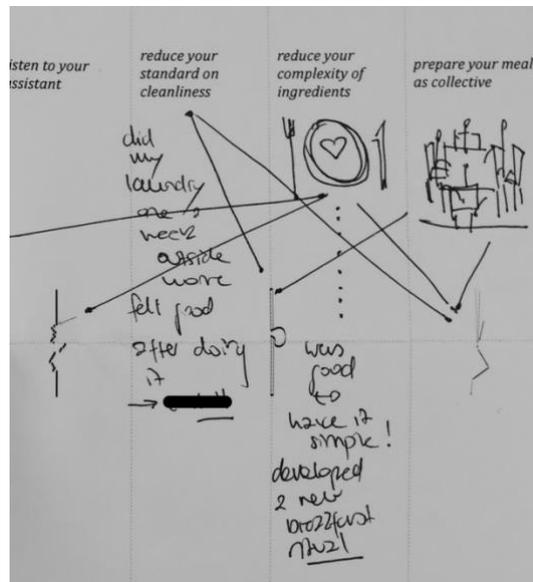


Figure 14. Recording daily progress within the non-linear progress chart. Domestic Ecologies, © Leonie Link



Dentist, Weimar  
Patient's Waiting Room

TIME\_ 10.34 Morgen  
LOCATION\_ Vor der Universitätsbibliothek  
QUESTIONS\_ Ich liebe solche Projekte!  
Wie hast du die Bilder bearbeitet?

TIME\_ 11.20 Morgen  
LOCATION\_ Vorm Bauhaus Atelier  
QUESTIONS\_ Eine Minute Zeit haben Sie. Was wollen Sie uns sagen? Ja das ist wichtig darüber nachzudenken.  
Sie wollen also, dass wir Ihnen was zurückschicken, ah hier steht schon die Adresse.

TIME\_ 17.27 Kurz vorm Feierabend  
LOCATION\_ Drogerie  
QUESTIONS\_ Wollen Sie die verkaufen? Achso, also zum Verschenken? Da vorne können Sie keine auslegen, alles was für Kunden freigegeben wird, muss angemeldet sein.  
Kann ich denn welche mitnehmen? Die kann ich dann mit meinen Kollegen teilen.

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Figure 15 Postcards in the patients waiting room. Vacations images of the Everyday, © Jasmin Chu

BioMarkt, Herderplatz, Weimar



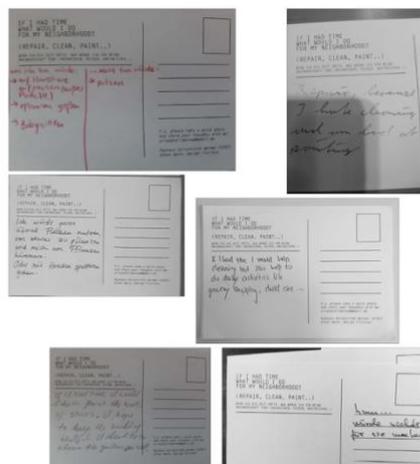
TIME\_ 14.45 Nachmittag  
LOCATION\_ Lebensmittelgeschäft  
QUESTIONS\_ Wollen Sie einfach dort hinten welche hinlegen?

TIME\_ 15.30 Nachmittag  
LOCATION\_ Kontor  
QUESTIONS\_ Oh spannend. Was studierst du nochmal?  
Ein ähnliches Projekt kenne ich aus dem letzten Sommersemester. Das heißt, die Postkarte verschicke ich an Freunden und sende dir nur ein Foto zur Cool! Wie heißt du eigentlich? Sind uns noch gar nicht über den Weg gelaufen.

TIME\_ 17.40 Kurz vorm Feierabend  
LOCATION\_ Basteistudio  
QUESTIONS\_ Wollen Sie die hier verkaufen? Und wieso machen Sie das? Wie funktioniert das? Müssen wir Ihnen diese zurückschicken? Und wie?

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Figure 16. Postcards in the bio-market. Vacations images of the Everyday, © Jasmin Chu



IF I HAD TIME  
FOR MY NEIGHBORHOOD?  
(REPAIR, CLEAN, PAINT...)

We are in a crisis of social reproduction, where the population is aging and the demand for care work is increasing. Acknowledging care work is necessary under the current capitalist conditions for the collective well-being.

Are we still willing to take time to do work outside of employment and fulfill the well-being of others? Does wage change how we value action?

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Figure 17. Recordings of responses and discussions. Vacations images of the Everyday, © Jasmin Chu

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