UC San Diego News Center

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New UC San Diego Visual Arts Major Emphasizes Designing for the Future

Like the campus to which it belongs, the UC San Diego Department of Visual Arts blends art, science and emerging technologies. Accordingly, with an eye on the future and an emphasis on students' marketable skills, the department offers a unique approach to design with a new undergraduate major called, "speculative design." The first courses, already with wait-lists, are underway during Winter Quarter 2016.

Spearheaded by visual arts Professor Benjamin Bratton, speculative design capitalizes on the rich interdisciplinary nature of the arts on campus and its world-class scientific and technological resources—ultimately merging studio and laboratory settings at UC San Diego.

Surface detail of untitled architectural installation (2014). Image by Elena Manferdini

"Speculative design confronts an uncertain and ambiguous future and seeks to give it shape. Instead of optimizing what we know, it explores what we don't know. Today's designers need to be able to do more than solve known problems; they need to be comfortable with uncertain opportunities and with how to invent new solutions," explained Bratton.

According to Bratton, the field of speculative design has emerged as a globally recognized form of interdisciplinary design that uses several different design technologies and methods, combining them in innovative ways: interface design, communication design, architectural and urban design, software design, information visualization, systems design, product and service design, industrial design, design theory, scenario planning, qualitative and quantitative research, and more.

"The speculative design major emphasizes open-ended creative thinking that provides a strong and flexible foundation for the 21st-century economy," affirmed Bratton. "It will prepare students for careers in the art and design worlds, graduate level studies and an entrepreneurial path."

The new major features four areas of emphasis: public culture and urban ecology, design computing, design systems and media design. All students in the major will take foundation- and intermediate-level courses, electives and upper division coursework based on their areas of emphasis. The curriculum culminates with a senior design studio that combines theory and application in an immersive capstone course.
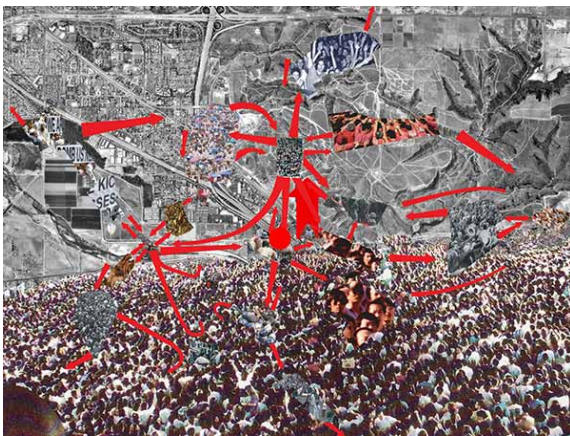
Graphical detail from "Debordered" (2011). Image by Estudio Teddy Cruz

This winter, two undergraduate speculative design courses are offered: Introduction to Speculative Design (VIS 30), taught by Professor Benjamin Bratton and Introduction to Public Culture (VIS 100), taught by Professor Teddy Cruz. VIS 30 focuses on the social, ethical and aesthetic issues in the design of emerging technologies, whereas VIS 100 requires students to rethink the ideas and practices of public space.

Speculative design coursework offered during Spring Quarter 2016 will include Design Communication (VIS 41), a practical visual computing techniques course and Cross Border Urban Imagination (VIS 102), a comprehensive introductory lecture course on the Tijuana and San Diego border region.

Division of Arts and Humanities Dean Cristina Della Coletta said, "This new major is very exciting, not only for the Department of Visual Arts and our division because of its interdisciplinary nature, but for our students because they will be prepared to effectively transfer their arts and humanities education to the professional world."

A symposium celebrating the launch of the new major and hosted by the UC San Diego Division of Arts and Humanities, the Department of Visual Arts and the Arthur C. Clarke Center for Human Imagination will take place Feb. 10 in the Visual Arts Presentation Lab at the Structural and Materials Engineering building on campus. The event will feature a keynote presentation by Fiona Raby, professor of industrial design at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, Austria. Raby is co-founder of Dunne & Raby, an award-winning studio that uses design

to stimulate discussion and debate about the social, cultural and ethical implications of existing and emerging technologies. Participants can expect panel discussions highlighting speculative design and featuring university visual arts faculty. An event schedule is pending.

"The speculative design launch event will inaugurate the public discussion among speculative design faculty and students," states Bratton. "The major is fundamentally interdisciplinary—linking arts and humanities with emerging technologies—but extends the research-driven experimentation for which the Department of Visual Arts is globally renown."

For details about the speculative design major, please email: vis-ug@ucsd.edu or visit the UC San Diego Department of Visual Arts website.

MEDIA CONTACT

Sheena Ghanbari, 858-822-7755, sghanbari@ucsd.edu

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