What Got Us Here, Won't Get Us There

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Transitioning Fitness Habits into Sustainable Practice through the Study of the Green Gym Community

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Abstract: Transition Design proposes a new approach to design which pushes for lifestyle changes at various socioeconomic levels to create a more sustainable future. We embrace the ethos of this new role of design and explore a new methodology to study an active group of people involved with sustainability. We spent some time with the Conservation Volunteers' Green Gym, a community of volunteers taking care of the environment while putting an emphasis on health and fitness through activity. We conducted interviews with fitness participants to understand their motivations, which inspired some valuable connections between the individual practice and the need for collective change. Through design, we propose a series of prototypes to invite fitness users to spend more time outdoors and participate in the care of a park as a new social practice. In doing so, we seek to establish new lifestyles as provocations.

Keywords: transitional design, design for interaction, sustainability, community, social practice

1. Introduction

Transition Design is an emerging area of the design field in which designers are seen as catalysts for social improvement, committed to long-term systemic change. This reconception of lifestyles involves reimagining infrastructures and social practices. Therefore, Transition Design offers a new area of design practice, study, and research which advocates design-led societal transition toward more sustainable futures. As a design methodology, it pushes us to reconsider "entire lifestyles, with the aim of making them more place-based, convivial and participatory and harmonizing them with the natural environment" (Irwin et al., 2015), and does so by embracing theories of change and design intervention. In our case, we look at "a lifestyle that is place-based and regional" (Irwin et al., 2015) and chose the Conservation Volunteers' Green Gym, a community of volunteers taking care of the urban environment in London, putting an emphasis on health and fitness through activity. Transition Design has made its mark through the use of the theories of change which make design a serious approach.

Our decision was to search for an existing community to explore their perspective on the world, learn something from their resolution and design using a new theorical framing. In the first phase, we went into the field to research their practice, not just to study the group but to be with them, do the work, and reflect on their practice as observant-participants. In the second phase, we went back to the studio to research their ideas and solutions. Lucy Suchman describes a similar process as an "affiliation" (2005), to look at something existing in order to redesign it rather than design from an issue. We brought back new ideas about sustainability, a conversation rather than an existing product. In the end, it's not about which vision works better but an exercise to get out in the field, understand a committed community and explore new ideas from a different perspective. Our first design was a small iteration, creating a green space where people could develop their ecological considerations while taking care of their bodies. Further examination of the Green Gym led us to diverge from the space into a series of tools which could be adapted to fitness users. In doing so, new possibilities were created, where gym afficionados would take their professional training tools outside and participate in something beyond their own care. We are aware that this is quite a paradigm change, but the purpose was to create an option for people who want to do both, take care of themselves, and extend their care for nature as a possible route to narrowing the gap between nature and culture[1], the individual and the collective.

2. Staying with the trouble!

Sustainability is one of the most pressing issues designers could help resolve, but it is not the same as other issues, as the scientific research and political discourse are not always in phase. We suggest starting with Donna Haraway's moto "staying with the trouble". There may be many things we can do, but the trouble is with the earth and, in order to resolve it, gardening might just come close. Many questions arise about the necessary changes we must all face if we want a sustainable future, we suggest looking at the issue in terms of attachment or detachment, in terms of certainty or uncertainty (see Figure 1). According to Dominique Boullier, tradition is important because it brings back some attachment to nature, such as the care of the soil, so it is no longer "out there" as a simple backdrop for human activities (2015). It is an opinion followed by designers such as Enzio Manzini who argues that, in order to develop new design process, designers need to cooperate with communities to consider existing tradition, counting on their own resources rather than waiting for a general change in society (2014). The return to nature is certainly a good starting point to revaluate

[1] This is a reference to Philippe Descola, who describes nature from a modernist perspective, as something far away that can be extracted at will (2013).

our practice but it is also one that is difficult to implement globally. The temptation is to take a modernist approach to an issue already amplified by modernity. This is an argument made by Bruno Latour, who sees modernity as a relentless pursuit of progress and an unshakeable faith in the power of science and technology to create a better future (2017). It is indeed an issue for designers that we do not fall into techno-solutionism, thinking every issue has a technological answer, but manage the amount of technology we use through circularity or avoidance. For example, too many designers still see the ABC[2] model as a good model, as if the issue would be immediately resolved the moment people behaved better (see Lockton & Caine, 2014 for example). The purpose of such a model is to put the responsibility on the individual, as if social change is thought to depend upon values and attitudes (A), which we believe drive the kinds of behaviour (B) that individuals choose (C) to adopt (Shove, 2010). We don't deny that some nudging might be necessary, but the idea that such an instrumentisation of the human is enough is a reductionist perspective (see Figure 1: Design-Science). Moreover, research often shows that the responsibility lies more in the policies issued by government and industrial practice (see Funk et al., 2018). Felix Guattari, a precursor of eco-philosophy showed us this long ago, saying "it is quite wrong to make a distinction between action on the psyche, the socius and the environment" (2000, p.41).

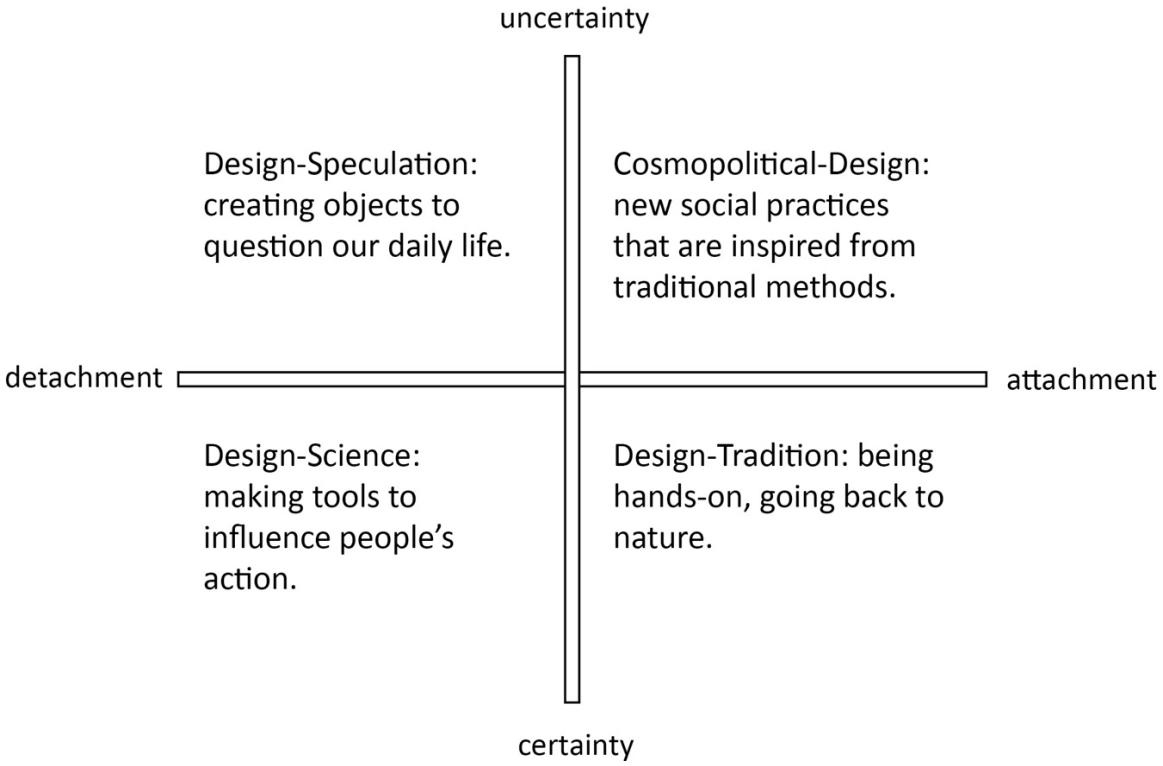

Figure 1. From Design-Tradition to Design-Science, from Design-Speculation to Cosmopolitical-Design (inspired by Dominique Boullier, 2015).

In order to create change for the environment, influencing the user is not enough, we need to act on the social. One thing that is important to us, is denouncing the role of individuals in regard to sustainability practice being a smaller issue than we are led to believe (Maniates, 2001), but also to link individual action with collective action from a bottom-up perspective. In order to do so, we look to the theory of Latour and others, to propose a perspective where objects, with or without technology, are at the root of collective work towards a more sustainable world. We look to work with a small community in the development of our design. An object can have a function (the modernist approach) but also can act as a provocation, an object that triggers debate (Dunne &

[2] The ABC model is (A) attitude, (B) behaviour, (C) change.

Raby, 2013). Speculative design is an area that makes use of this technique in order to seek a reaction from the audience (Figure 1: Design-Speculation). It is a perspective in which we are sensitive to our design, but it remains a studio practice that lacks natural social engagement. As practice, it has a similar detachment from nature but helps us consider the uncertainty linked to the issue of sustainability. The final perspective (Figure 1: Cosmopolitical-Design) brings back the attachment to nature (tradition) while acknowledging the uncertainty of climate change. Latour calls the use of this kind of space "cosmopolitics", a space "done, created, instigated, composed or ecologized" (Latour, 2010) as an alternative to modernity.

3. Design with Neotribes

Communities are often celebrated in design (see Manzini, 2014) but we think it is important to define the meaning of a community and how we might be able to collaborate better with them. Communities are often presented through their external meaning, in relation to geography or identity, such as a neighbourhood, age, race or gender, while there is also an internal meaning, a shared practice and the development of a sense of belongingness through activity. These groups are not only representative but can be important in terms of innovation, because they have a chance to imagine, develop and manage something new that fits their specific needs. In terms of innovation, external communities are often recognised entities (see Gaver et al., 2010), so they can be a good place to start a design in terms of funding, but they may also reach a bureaucratic level which makes them difficult to work with. Manzini (2014) suggests they may open a window to a better understanding of tradition, because they bring nature back to the centre of our concern. Seeking to understand tradition is important, as it is a path out of modernist thinking, as discussed in the previous section.

Our own practice with communities has led us to a group of people doing divergent activities such as diving in dumpsters (see Marechal et al., 2019) or planning a journey to Mars (see Zhang & Marechal, 2018). The internal meaning of community is, for us, more important, so such groups might be more open in terms of collaboration or conversation in order to create a cosmopolitical space. Since it can be difficult to see the difference between the two types of communities, we choose the term "neotribes", which are created, as Michel Mafessoli (1992) puts it, by the "astonishing impulse that drives one to seek oneself, to assemble oneself, to surrender to the other". These groups of people get together with a common purpose, either for themselves or society, but are ephemeral at the same time. To design with neotribes is a way to accept this form while giving them recognition for their action. Neotribes are not necessarily ideal for long projects, but their intentions are strong and their taste for action helps with the design. In terms of communities interested in dealing with climate change, we found that the community was not necessarily well informed about the issues. The group meant well, but this was not always enough. What inspired us most about the green gym was their need to make a difference through what they were doing rather than what they were discussing. This imperfection meant that the making of the tribe was still in progress, with many possible paths ahead, and we were one of those possibilities.

We have found that such groups could be centred around an object (such as a collective fridge, see Marechal et al., 2019) or require the creation of an object in order to exist (such as a musical instrument to remind them of the earth, see Zhang & Marechal, 2018). This is an important concept for designers as objects can help form or maintain social things which might "authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on" (Latour, 2005, p.72). To us, the collective goes beyond the relation between an individual and a product (such as usability or affordance) to include the influence of a tool on a larger group of people where the tool might encourage, suggest, or render possible tasks not yet imagined.

4. The Green Gym

The volunteers of the Green Gym were concerned with their activity first. They contributed to this endeavour by increasing their health through the improvement of the local environment. This represents not only citizens' action for a sustainable future environment, but also better wellbeing for themselves. In terms of fighting climate change, the urban space is often seen as an important site by urban designers and design activists (see Evans et al, 2016 for example). While the addition of green space is an obvious step, resolving issues such as the circulation of water, the appropriation of space for urban gardening, and the reduction of individual transportation in favour of public transport are important factors in terms of transitioning. The Green Gym focused on the maintenance of existing resources. They led the way in inviting others to care for the urban space better, as maintenance is a stronger alternative to new construction (Girardet, 2015).

Our first visit to the Green Gym introduced us to a middle size group of around 15 people. Most of them were suffering from various level of body issues, originating from a sedentary lifestyle. We approached the group as observant-participants. We wanted to know what was going on in the group, but also to get involved with the labour. Trudi and Amy, members of the group, explained that people felt more pleasant after their gardening activity, and kept coming back. However, the members also felt various levels of pain after the activities, because every time they had a task to accomplish, such as repairing an uncovered road or trimming public trees, they overused one group of muscles and sometimes hurt their backs. Gardening can be a type of exercise (Bird, 2004) but it cannot be compared to fitness training using multiple machines. When we pointed out that the name Green Gym might be misleading, they all said that the concept of the gym was indeed weak, despite planning a warm-up and cool-down ritual as part of the session.

5. From Green Gym to Green Fitness

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6. Gardening Tool

When we came back to the Green Gym, we found that the members showed a great deal of passion for the gardening tools, such as rakes, forks and spades, training each other on the correct use of each (Figure 2). They cleaned them and created stories around them. An American girl in the group had a different feeling about the tools, becoming irritated with the normative use of gestures, so she developed funny ways of controlling them.

Figure 2. Tool workshop (photo: Min Yan).

These comments got us thinking about tools not only as facilitators but as performance, that helped the various members of the group identify themselves with their tools while creating an identity that separated them from a professional group such as gardening contractors. Two week's experience in the Green Gym helped us focus on a series of stimulating points which could be used to develop a concept of green fitness. Below is a first sketch (Figure 3) in which we start to observe a possible combination of gym facilities and gardening tools. For example, the shape of kettlebells reminds us of the watering can and the routine of dumbbell exercise resembles using a hand rake. However, between the two practices, Green Gym and fitness, there is a gap that could be filled through the development of new practice.

Figure 3. First sketch (3D rendering: Min Yan).

7. Social Practice

Science and engineering face one of the biggest challenges of human existence when confronted to the climate change. However, we believe that it is not a challenge that can be resolved by science or technology alone. It is an issue that necessitates many transitions at many levels, from the political to the individual. Like many designers and policy makers, we find that communities are good places from which to understand these changes and engage with the future. Neotribes can help us relate to existing traditions (such as gardening) and foresee a possible cosmopolitical outcomes but what about the social practice? To Andreas Reckwitz, social practice is all "forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of under-standing, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (2002, p. 249). From this perspective, Green Gym is not just a community but also social practice. It is interesting because it demonstrates a key question in the understanding of ecological issues, the relationship between the individual and the collective, which is more explicit when it goes through a specific object or "thing" and its use. It is a point we have been looking at through the work of Latour, but which we deepen through the work of Reckwitz. Elizabeth Shove goes further, stating that practice exists as performance, saying "it is through performance, through the immediacy of doing, that the 'pattern' provided by the practice-as-an-entity is filled out and reproduced" (2012, p.7). The term performance is not a specific form of art here but an attempt at a new action. The "American girl" from the Green Gym felt uncomfortable at times with the tool, because the tool felt out of context for her, so she invented a new performance to make it right. This shows the fragility of neotribes as ephemeral groups, but also that objects are reconfigured through multiple performances.

8. Prototype

From what we had gathered so far, though our observation and the study of theory (Latour, Reckwitz and Shove), we set to work designing a new vision of green fitness, in which users would come from either the gym or the garden and have collective exercise routines (Figure 4). We used Cinema4D to design tools and their uses (Figures 5 and 6) and made some interfaces (Figure 9) to demonstrate the working of the new tools with information about their body and use of energy. In one prototype, we consider the human expenditure of energy as a transfer of energy to nature, strengthening the link with nature. The vision contains a set of professional tools assembled in future green fitness, but keeping their function of gardening, including five machines and one piece of clothing to help the user increase body strength in the chest, biceps, back, triceps, quads, and glutes. We tested the usability of one machine by making paper models, which helped improve the size of the handle and the angle of the body gesture.

Figure 4. Re-imagining gardening in the city (drawing and rendering: Min Yan).

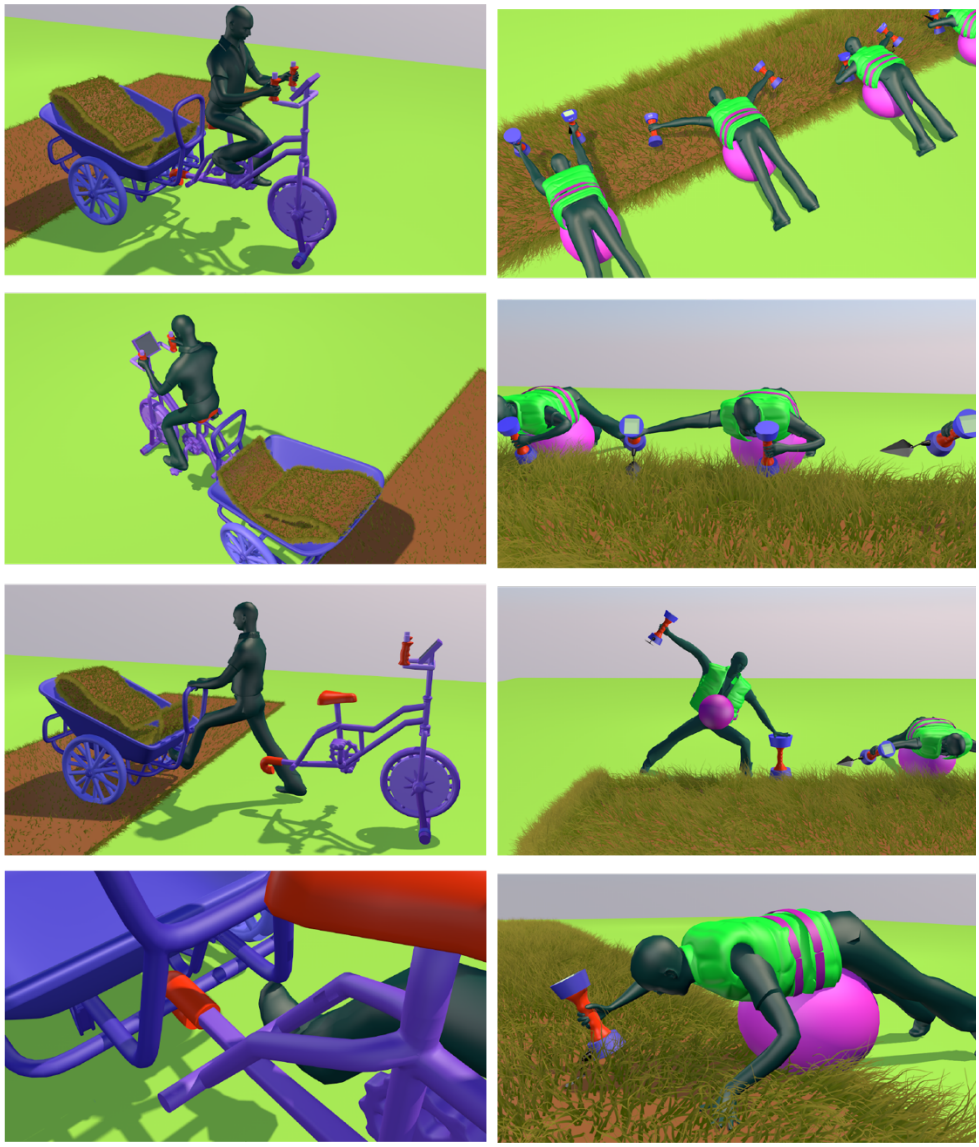

Figure 5 (left). Bicyclebarrow and Figure 6 (right). Hand trowel yoga (drawings and rendering: Min Yan).

We created two categories of tool, those that would work in a fitness centre adapted to work in nature, and those which work in nature adapted to also work as fitness tools. The Bicyclebarrow (Figure 5) and hand trowel yoga (Figure 6) belong to the first category, as cycling already exists in fitness. The green-gardener would attach a wheelbarrow to a bicycle as a change of exercise, between green exercises that require carrying soil. Hand trowel yoga is a break from planting, where the yoga ball helps the user change to a more favourable position for the back. To illustrate the second category, we made a rake chest press (Figure 7) to be used as a classic gardening tool and, at other times, similar to a traditional chest press found in fitness centres. We were trying to find a new way of using each tool, a hybrid of the two places. The last object is an elastic garden scissors (Figure 8) which works exactly like any garden scissors but has elastic attached to it that applies a different strength to your shoulders depending of the height of the scissors.

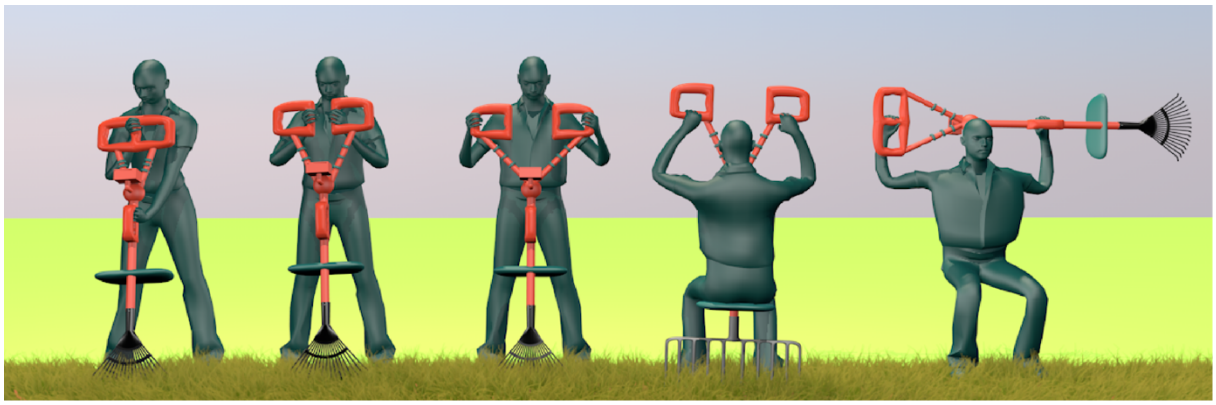

Figure 7. Rake chest press (drawing and rendering: Min Yan).

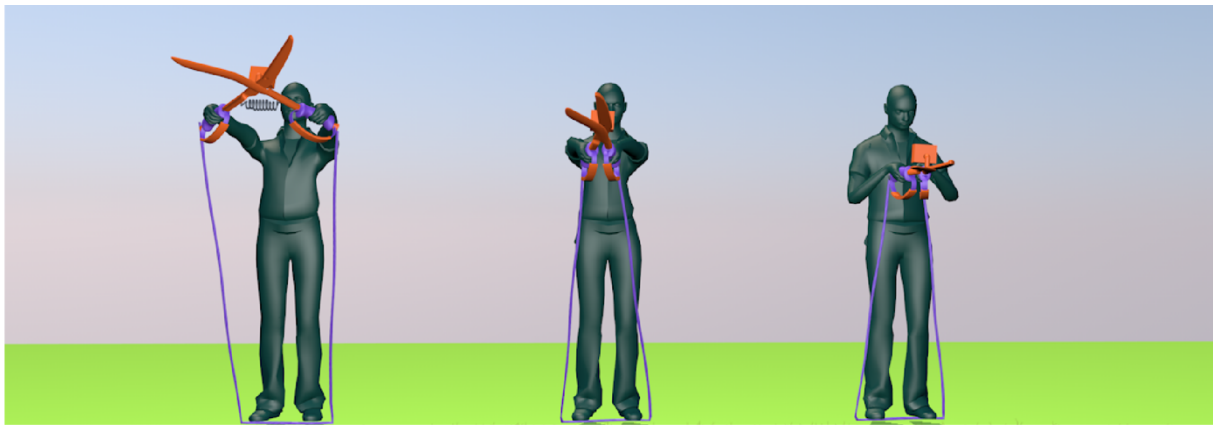

Figure 8. Elastic garden scissors (drawing and rendering: Min Yan).

The interface was inspired by the fitness models in order to show the body workout status. In our research, we found that gym users liked to measure their effort as a way to keep track of their progress. The interface, while being a nudge to do more or work faster, is what the gym users talked about most, and it felt important to keep a system that fit with the behavioural model of a fitness centre. The interface could also do other things such as remind the user about the use of the machine, the balance between individual fitness and environmental contribution, or the use of a specific muscle in order to find alternative movements.

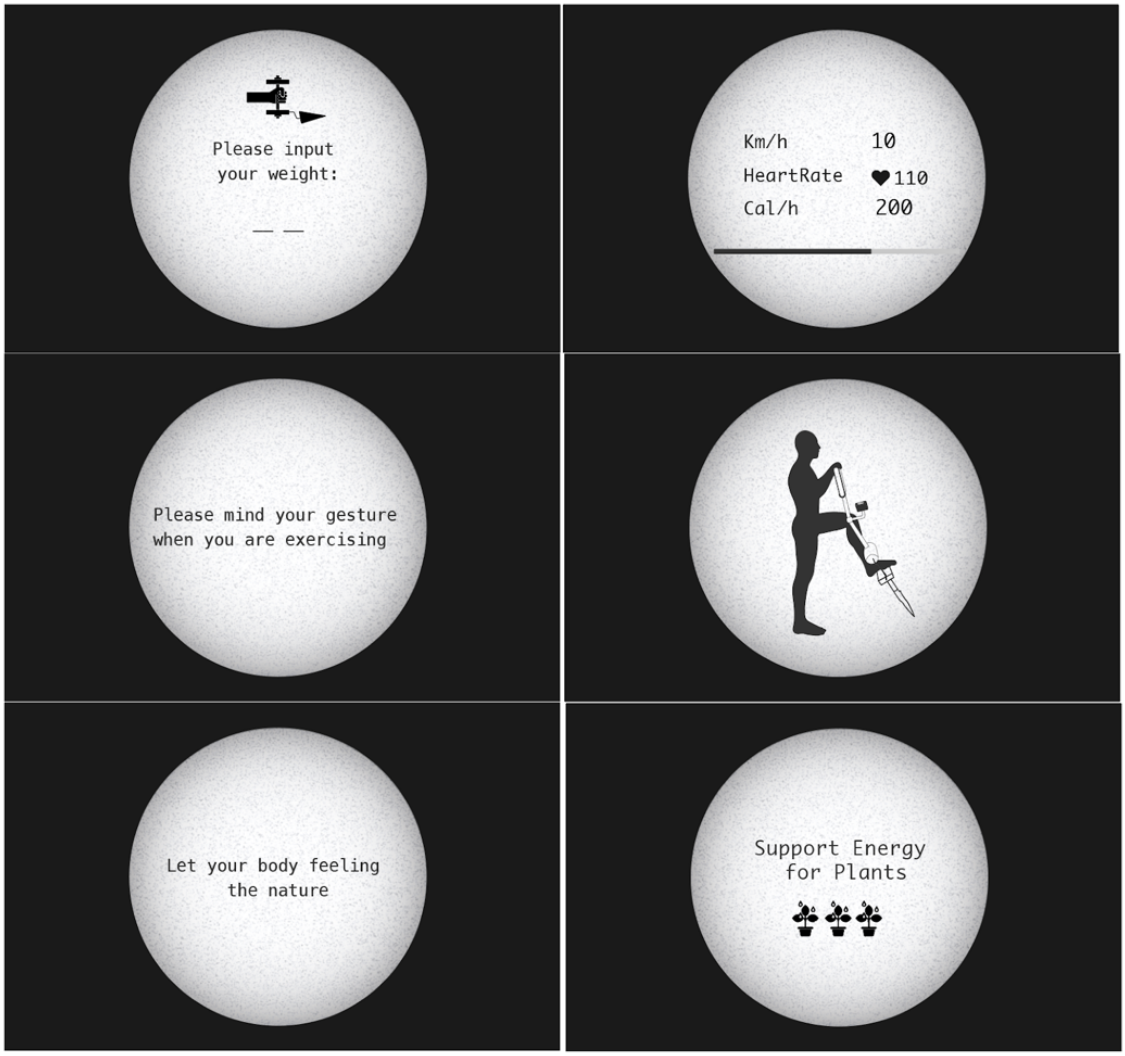

Figure 9. Interface (image: Min Yan).

It is worth mentioning that these visions are not conceived as a blueprint of green fitness, but rather as an open-ended form of design. Taking Figure 1, we have reached the speculative level, where the object is for provocation or debate, in order to suggest a possible new practice. They are strangely familiar objects at this point, a term coined to describe objects that are not yet usable but in the form of a paradox to inspire the user (Blauvelt, 2003). The vision would continually change, since it is based on knowledge learned from the project and real user initiative. The design process is iterative and requires tangible prototypes and user testing at this point. To test the idea further, we made images and video to test in front an audience at the London Design Festival, in 2019 (Figure 10).

Figure 10. The project exhibited at the London Design Festival (photography: Min Yan).

9. Conclusion

The affiliation of the community's vision helped us in the creation of something new, in an attempt to unite two very different groups, the green gym and the fitness users, in a common vision. One seeks tradition while the other seeks modernity, but together they can be oriented towards a more cosmopolitical view. The issue we face in terms of sustainability is that government policies tend to put the blame on individuals and techniques of instrumentisation, such as ABC. Working with a community has been done before, with good results, but we put forward a new way of looking at the issue which leads away from the individual to the collective via the making of an object. Following Latour (2007), then Shove (2010), we used these objects as a starting point for a new social practice. At this stage, the objects got positive feedback from the exhibition visitors, but they would require far more work to see a new, stabilised social practice. In particular, we think that these objects need to be more transparent to either use for gardening or fitness training. At the moment, the fitness objects are still too much of a break from the gardening. Finally, the design process needs to consider its influence on the natural world. This project is a step towards this endeavour.

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