

Xiaohan Mei

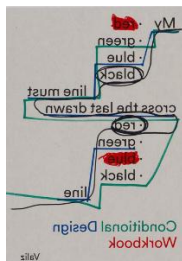
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## Project One: Ghost in the Machine

The most important insight I gained from Project One, *Ghost in the Machine*, was that design does not need to fully control outcomes to generate meaning. Before engaging in this project, I largely understood design as an outcome-oriented activity. I believed that successful design required a clear vision of the result and a strong sense of authorship. Uncertainty was something to be minimized through planning and control. Through exploring Conditional Design and rule-based collaborative practice, this assumption was fundamentally challenged, prompting me to rethink what constitutes intention and authorship in design



Conditional Design reframes design as the construction of systems rather than the production of objects. Instead of designing a finished artefact, the designer establishes a set of rules that shape behavior and interaction over time. In this project, we did not decide what the final image should look like. Instead, we designed simple and precise constraints that governed how participants interacted with one another and with the drawing surface. This shift forced me to reconsider the role of control in design and to accept uncertainty as a core condition rather than a flaw, opening up new possibilities for collective creativity



The *Shape Relay* exercise made this conceptual shift tangible. Each participant represented themselves with a single shape and responded only to the trace left by the previous person. No one had an overview of the final composition, and no one could revise or correct the collective result. At first, this lack of control felt uncomfortable, as it removed my ability to plan strategically. However, as the exercise progressed, I began to understand that this constraint created space for emergence rather than chaos, encouraging attentiveness to the present moment.

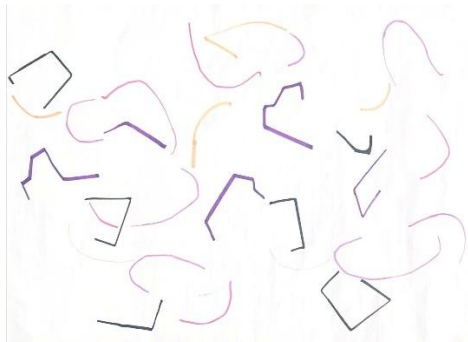
Through this process, I observed how small, local decisions accumulated into a complex and unpredictable visual trajectory. The drawing was not random; it was shaped by continuous responses, adjustments, and interpretations made by different participants. This helped me understand the Conditional Design principle that “process is content.” The value of the work did not lie in the final image itself, but in the visible trace of interaction, time, and decision-making embedded within the system.

One of the most significant aspects of this project was the way human imperfection surfaced within the system. Moments of hesitation, misalignment, or deviation were not errors to be corrected, but indicators of human presence. These moments revealed the “Ghost in the Machine”: the intuition, habit, and bodily behavior that emerge when rational systems encounter lived experience. I realized that meaning in Conditional Design arises not from flawless execution, but from the interaction between rules and people.

This project also reshaped my understanding of authorship. Rather than belonging to a single individual, authorship was distributed across participants and the system itself. Control did not disappear; it shifted from individual decision-making to the design of constraints. This reframing changed my attitude toward uncertainty. Instead of viewing unpredictability as a risk, I began to see it as a productive design condition that encourages attentiveness, humility, and collaboration among participants.

Overall, Project One marked a significant turning point in my design thinking. It challenged my desire for control and reinforced the value of systems, participation, and emergence. These lessons formed the foundation for the

subsequent projects and continue to influence how I approach collaborative and process-led design in both academic and professional contexts.



## Project Two: Making the Invisible Visible

Project Two, *Making the Invisible Visible*, shifted my focus from collaborative systems to everyday urban environments. While cities often appear neutral and functional, this project revealed how behavior in public space is continuously shaped by visual systems that operate quietly in the background. Through observing and documenting urban signage, I began to understand that rules are not absent in the city but embedded in familiar visual language that is rarely questioned.

At the beginning of the project, I photographed recurring signs found in streets, parking lots, and building entrances, including warnings, restrictions, directional indicators, and access control signs. These photographs deliberately excluded people, emphasizing the absence of visible authority. Despite this absence, the rules remained effective, demonstrating how behavior is regulated through design rather than enforcement, and how compliance is achieved without direct supervision



Rather than analyzing the signs based on aesthetic qualities, I categorized them according to function. This revealed signage as a system of invisible rules that guide movement, restrict access, and distribute responsibility. Through this process, I realized that control often operates through neutrality. Warning signs do not eliminate danger but transfer responsibility to individuals, while measurement and restriction signs exclude certain bodies or vehicles before entry, making exclusion appear objective and unquestionable.

This insight fundamentally challenged my previous understanding of neutrality in design. The signage system appeared neutral precisely because it was effective. Because it presents itself as informational rather than directive, it rarely invites questioning or resistance. I began to understand design as an active participant in shaping behavior and power relations rather than a passive carrier of information.

To reinforce this idea visually, I processed the photographs into high-contrast black and white, retaining only the color of the signs themselves. This strategy reduced environmental distraction and reasserted the authority of the rules. Using maps as a background further strengthened the concept, highlighting how both signage and maps, though perceived as objective, actively structure space, access, and movement



This project expanded my understanding of critical design. Rather than proposing solutions, the work exposed existing systems and encouraged reflection. By relying on repetition, categorization, and editorial structure, the project allowed viewers to recognize patterns rather than consume explanations. This approach taught me that design can create conditions for questioning rather than delivering answers.

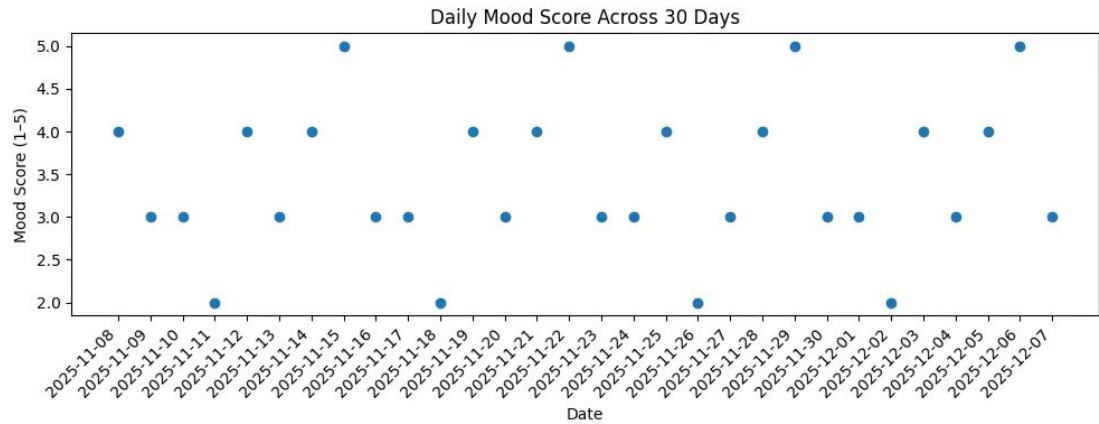
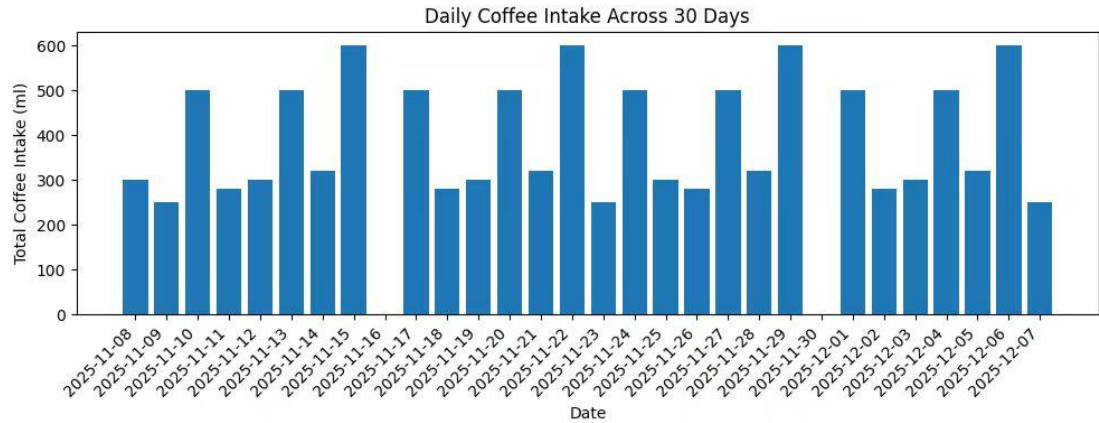


## Project Three: The Quantified Self – Coffee & Mood

Project Three marked a shift from analyzing external systems to reflecting on personal experience through self-tracking and data visualization. Over thirty days, I recorded my daily coffee intake alongside my emotional state. Initially, I expected to identify a causal relationship between coffee consumption and mood. However, as the data accumulated, this assumption was challenged, leading me to reflect more critically on how habits and emotions interact.

The recording process itself became a form of reflection. I documented coffee type, quantity, and contextual notes alongside self-assessed emotional scores. As patterns emerged, I realized that emotions often preceded behavior rather than resulting from it. Calm days were associated with milk-based coffees, busier or emotionally flat days with Americanos, and no-coffee days with fatigue or emotional overload, revealing subtle but meaningful daily rhythms.

| Date  | Day | Coffee Type | Cups | Total Intake (ml) | Mood Score (1-5) | Notes           |
|-------|-----|-------------|------|-------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| 11/08 | Sat | Latte       | 1    | 300               | 4                | Relaxed weekend |
| 11/09 | Sun | Americano   | 1    | 250               | 3                | Stayed at home  |
| 11/10 | Mon | Americano   | 2    | 500               | 3                | Workday         |
| 11/11 | Tue | Cappuccino  | 1    | 280               | 2                | Fair mood       |
| 11/12 | Wed | Latte       | 1    | 300               | 4                | Feeling good    |
| 11/13 | Thu | Americano   | 2    | 500               | 3                | Normal          |
| 11/14 | Fri | Mocha       | 1    | 320               | 4                | In a good mood  |
| 11/15 | Sat | Latte       | 2    | 600               | 5                | Weekend         |
| 11/16 | Sun | None        | 0    | 0                 | 3                | No coffee       |
| 11/17 | Mon | Americano   | 2    | 500               | 3                | Busy            |
| 11/18 | Tue | Cappuccino  | 1    | 280               | 2                | Sleepy          |
| 11/19 | Wed | Latte       | 1    | 300               | 4                | Stable          |
| 11/20 | Thu | Americano   | 2    | 500               | 3                | Work            |
| 11/21 | Fri | Mocha       | 1    | 320               | 4                | Relaxed         |
| 11/22 | Sat | Latte       | 2    | 600               | 5                | Very good mood  |
| 11/23 | Sun | Americano   | 1    | 250               | 3                | Engaging        |
| 11/24 | Mon | Americano   | 2    | 500               | 3                | Work            |
| 11/25 | Tue | Latte       | 1    | 300               | 4                | Snowy day       |
| 11/26 | Wed | Cappuccino  | 1    | 280               | 2                | Feeling low     |
| 11/27 | Thu | Americano   | 2    | 500               | 3                | Normal          |
| 11/28 | Fri | Mocha       | 1    | 320               | 4                | Happy           |
| 11/29 | Sat | Latte       | 2    | 600               | 5                | Weekend         |
| 11/30 | Sun | None        | 0    | 0                 | 3                | Hot day         |
| 12/01 | Mon | Americano   | 2    | 500               | 3                | Work            |
| 12/02 | Tue | Cappuccino  | 1    | 280               | 2                | Irrled          |
| 12/03 | Wed | Latte       | 1    | 300               | 4                | Mood improving  |
| 12/04 | Thu | Americano   | 2    | 500               | 3                | Normal          |
| 12/05 | Fri | Mocha       | 1    | 320               | 4                | Good mood       |
| 12/06 | Sat | Latte       | 2    | 600               | 5                | Weekend         |
| 12/07 | Sun | Americano   | 1    | 250               | 3                | Calm            |

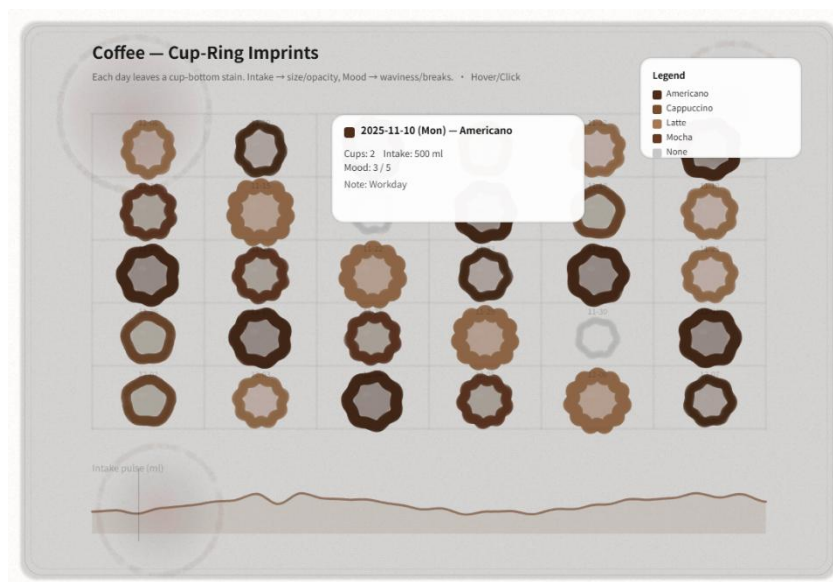
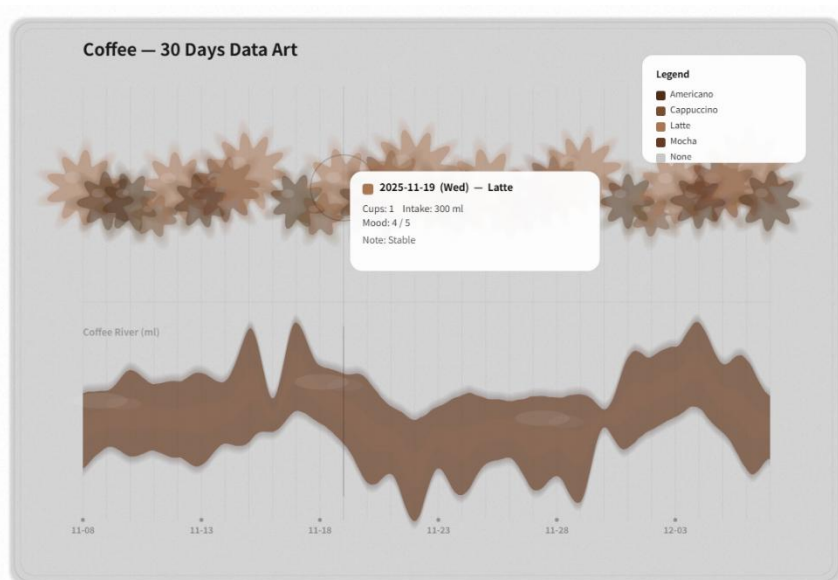


Rather than proving causation, the data functioned as a trace of lived experience. This shifted my understanding of data from objective evidence to reflective material. When translating the data into visual form, I found that conventional charts captured quantity but failed to express emotional nuance. Mood is fluid, contextual, and difficult to quantify through numerical values alone.

To address this, I adopted a metaphor-driven visual language inspired by coffee cup stains and liquid movement. Each visual trace represented a day, with scale and opacity indicating intake and irregularity expressing emotional fluctuation. Through interaction design, viewers could shift between daily

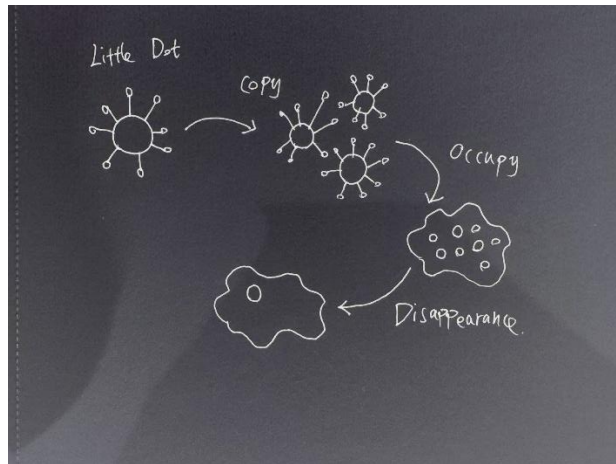
records and long-term patterns, emphasizing temporality, accumulation, and emotional change over time.

This project reshaped my understanding of objectivity in data visualization. I learned that personal data is inherently subjective and that design plays an interpretive role. By embracing subjectivity rather than attempting to eliminate it, the project gained emotional depth and conceptual clarity, strengthening my reflective design practice



## Project Four: Interactions with Non-Humans – Little Dot

Project Four represented the most significant conceptual shift in my design thinking. It challenged the assumption that interaction design must center on human intention, emotion, or usability. Instead of designing for users, I focused on constructing a system that operates independently of human perception, requiring me to rethink the role of interaction beyond user experience.

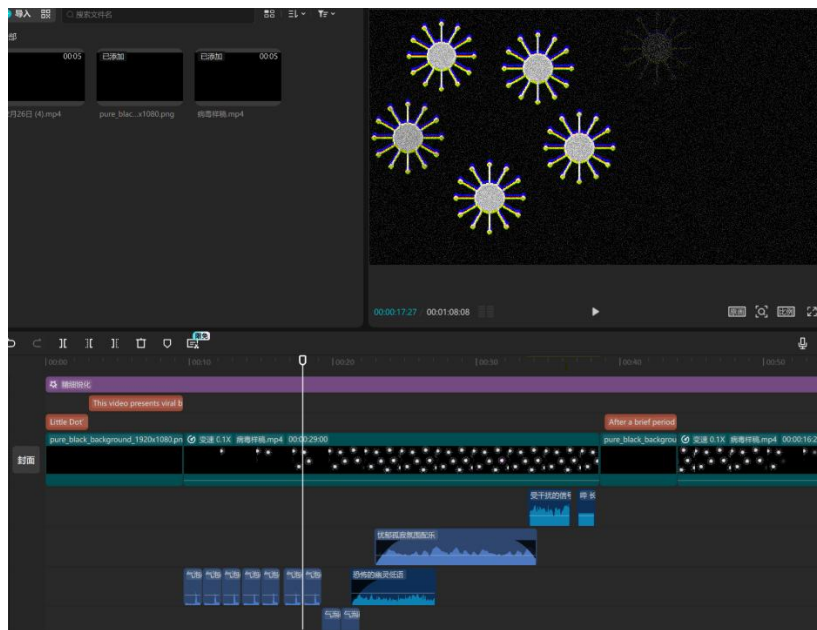


Inspired by viral behavior, I abstracted characteristics such as latency, replication, retreat, and density response into a minimal visual unit called *Little Dot*. The system responded only to conditions such as time and density, with behavior emerging from state changes rather than intentional action. This abstraction allowed the focus to remain on system logic rather than representation.

Through PACT analysis, I defined *Little Dot* as a non-human participant. Actions such as appearing, pausing, and disappearing were direct responses to environmental change rather than narrative events. Importantly, latency and pause were treated as active strategies rather than failures, challenging my assumptions about efficiency and productivity in interaction systems.

By reducing form and emphasizing time, the animation functioned as a research medium, allowing observation of non-human behavior. This project shifted my thinking from outcome-oriented design to state-based systems and expanded my understanding of interaction design as a speculative and

research-driven practice.



## Overall Reflection

Across all four projects, my understanding of design evolved from controlling outcomes to constructing and observing systems. I learned to value uncertainty, question neutrality, treat data as reflective rather than objective, and move beyond human-centered assumptions. Design became less about delivering fixed solutions and more about revealing hidden structures, behaviors, and relationships embedded within systems.

This system oriented, reflective approach will continue to guide my future studies and professional design practice, influencing how I engage with collaboration, research, and critical inquiry in design.