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ANAESTHETICS

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Introduction

_structuring my unfolding interests into cultural connotations of sustainability and an anecdote

I remember that on a late foggy autumn day when I was walking home from my university in Budapest, somehow I became extremely aware of trash bags piled up next to trees, in the small parks I was passing by. They were filled with fallen leaves, bagged up. The heat of already ongoing metabolic processes started to condensate on the insides of the bags. I found it extremely sad and ironic. On the same open and welcoming soil where they fell, they lied, all packed up and suffocating in blurry translucent plastic bags, censoring their frayed edges and decaying earthy colours.

At that time I was reading J.J. Gibson's *The Ecological Approach to Perception*, which until to this day is an extremely influential framework for me. Nothing has changed, the way I look at the world more than this book. It's main starting point is that vision is a part of our cognition and our eyes are the main organs of processing when it comes to the visual world. Gibson says, that our attention and how our body reacts to visual cues are, at a very primal level, independent from any cultural encoding. But I was more influenced by his topological separation of medium, substance and surface. In his system of the visually perceptible world these three categories define themselves based on our interaction with them, thus the ecological approach.



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A medium is through which one can pass either with ease or with struggle, like air, fog, water, but even more importantly it allows light to pass through it. The less light can pass through a medium and starting to reflect from it, it creates the category of substances. The main attribute of substance is that alongside the areas where it reflects light it forms a surface. Thus surfaces, according to Gibson and his ecological approach, are only a visual category. They might leave cues about the quality of their substance as a medium, for example the visual surface level topology of a pile of pebbles will allow you to think that your body will be able to move through it to a certain degree, but the surface hint of a singular pebble will suggest otherwise. These are tacit experiences that precede any culturally decoded "reading". These are evolutionary decoded embodied reactions alongside which he also created his famous term: affordance. The bundle of embodied reactions and physical manipulations that one could execute with an object is what Gibson call an object's affordance. But what is an object, he says that anything with a fully or nearly closed surface is an object. The only way we can make sure that such a surface is closed is to be able to fully move around it, in its three dimensional habitat. (Gibson, 1979)

However Gibson restricts this definition to concrete objects, philosophical school of thoughts like Graham Harman's Object Oriented Ontology¹

¹Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) is a philosophical approach that argues all objects—human and nonhuman—exist equally and independently of human perception. It rejects the idea that reality is centered on human experience, emphasizing that objects have their own realities beyond how they are used or understood. OOO also stresses that objects always withdraw from complete access, meaning no relation ever fully exhausts what an object is.

and Timothy Morton's hyperobjects² it is not too hard to apply the same logic to conceptual objects, like ideas and concepts. In a Heideggerian sense, any concept's or idea's true "substance" will only unfold through interaction (if not through its failure) and until then, we will only be able to assess it solely based on how it is presented to us.

The topic of sustainability and circular economies became important to me from a conceptual point of view during the same time when I started noticing those said bags of strangled leaves. I started to wonder how certain cultural encodings and socio-political fixtures might influence our sustainable transitions. I felt that the sustainable methods that I was encountering were missing some sections of the full circle. Let it be material, political or conceptual. In this thesis I will focus more on conceptual and socio-political obstacles. As by now, thanks to contemporary material research and the tireless work of climate and engineering researches, there is little that we do not know on a practical level about sustainable materials and production methods. Their implementations therefore must face a more deep, cultural obstacle. To make it more clear, before we dive in, I will give you a personal example:

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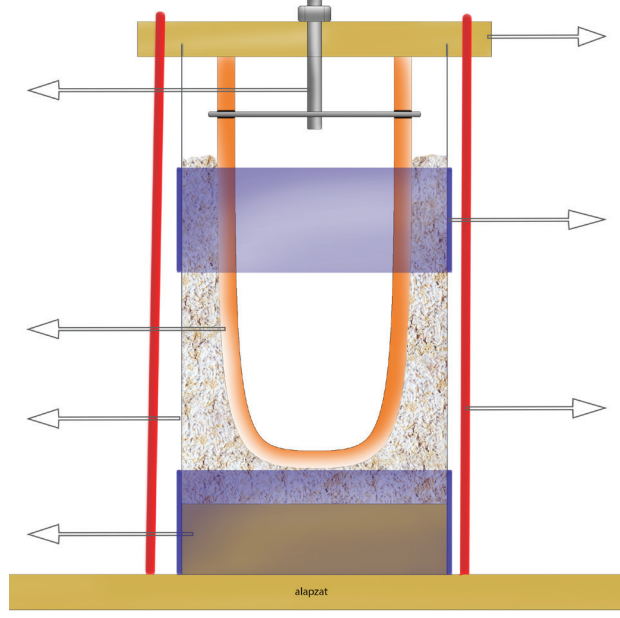
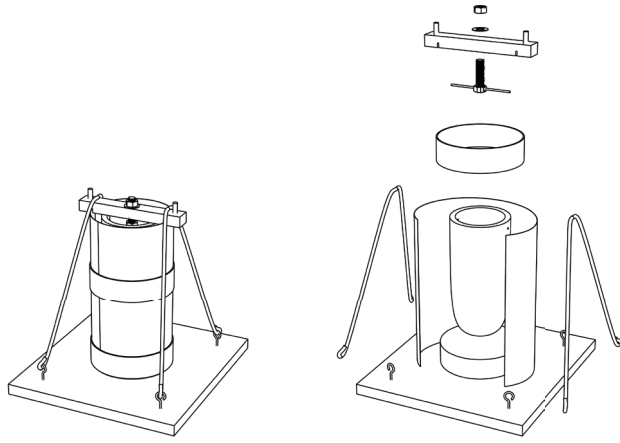
2_Timothy Morton's concept of "hyperobjects" describes entities so vast in temporal and spatial scale that they exceed direct human perception, such as climate change or radioactive waste. These entities can only be experienced through partial, local effects, challenging traditional distinctions between nature and culture. Hyperobjects thus force a rethinking of human agency and responsibility in the Anthropocene.

In 2018 I have been commissioned by a duo of a marketing strategist and an engineer turned mushroom enthusiast.

They told me that they've been working with mycelium substrates³ that could become, after growth and treatment, fully biodegradable objects. By now this is a very widely researched and used material, however, given how early they started experimenting with such materials, they did not have the needed references and data. Their plan was to start a business around these objects, but they were still in the research phase of the material, however they already wanted to have a fixed object/product, that can be sold in small batches in parallel with their ongoing experiments, that would still allow some levels of flexibility for testing the substrate and how it behaves corresponding to the geometry of the object, like thickness, size, undercuts, details.

An object which functions are less sensitive to such changes. I liked the idea of selling unperfected objects as a way to fund the ongoing research. I thought this is a very organic approach. Previously they were using 3D printed moulds for their tryouts as they had access to a 3D printer, which at that time was still not something obvious, especially in Hungary. This method I immediately discarded as I thought why would you produce plastic trash while developing a fully degradable product.

3_Producing objects from mycelium substrate involves cultivating fungal mycelium within an agricultural waste matrix, such as sawdust or straw, which acts as a nutrient base. As the mycelium grows, it binds the substrate into a dense, cohesive composite that can be molded into specific forms. Once fully colonized, the material is heat-treated to halt growth, resulting in a lightweight, biodegradable object. This process offers a low-energy, sustainable alternative to synthetic foams and plastics.



picture02_2020_mould system for production and experimentation for mycelium substrates

My proposed object was a very simple bowl like object. An object that can be a lamp shade, a bowl, packaging, housing, whatever... As one would call it a multi-stable⁴ object with a wide set of affordances. Both the inner shape and outer diameter was fully adjustable, as the inside was supposed to be made from baked freeform clay and the outside, a fully adjustable aluminium shape, similar to some cake forms. It was a quite complex and hard to use object but I thought that this is a small price to pay to stay flexible and circular.

I believed that a product can only be sustainable if there are no corners being cut. Every aspect of its becoming need to follow my beliefs of sustainability, almost to a dogmatic degree. What I have not taken into consideration is the complex biases and systematic obstacles that were present in front of them. Such as the lack of proper funding they could acquire for such a project, missing data and documented research and customers who have been socialised and conditioned to single-function objects with dedicated specialised forms and smooth surfaces. Their struggles with the cultural and economic context of that age, combined with my blind designer dogmatism resulted in a quick ceasing of our collaboration.

⁴__The term multi-stable describes a product quality in which an object can exist in multiple stable states or configurations without loss of function or integrity. These states may be physical, functional, or perceptual, allowing the product to adapt to different uses or contexts. Multi-stability emphasizes flexibility and longevity by enabling reconfiguration rather than replacement.

This is a story that I carry with me since, because in such a simple example it put on display the most important limiting factors of truly sustainable and circular methods of planning and production. In the next chapters I will lay down some facts about the cultural role and dependency of contemporary design practices and how these dynamics are bound to politics and what role aesthetics play in it. As to follow we will dig even deeper and unfold - with the help of my experiences as a designer and scientific theories I researched - the underlying patterns the modern man has developed when it comes to recognising and applying aesthetics.

Design and Politics

_two frameworks on how the practice of design is tangled up with the practices of politics as an aesthetic approach

The fact that we live in the Anthropocene, doesn't only mean that we have reached a point of no return when it comes to the extent to which we have tapped into earth's non-human systems, but also that we have created a second environment (nature)⁵, a term coined by John Dixon Hunt (Williamson, 2020), and however it is only a theoretical concept it helps us navigate and reflect on our ways of being in the physical world.

In 2023 I spent a week on the Suldenferner Glacier⁶, thanks to the This is Not a Glacier residency, organised by two of our university assistants Valerie Deifel, Brishty Alam and by a former glaciologist colleague of ours, Lindsey Nicholson.

When we arrived and started hiking up to the hut where we were going to stay for a week I found it interesting how direct human infrastructure is slowly fading away, yet never disappearing.

No matter how far or high we went we were always reminded that even this remote area

5_*First nature* is the untouched natural world, *second nature* is the human-made physical environment that comes to feel natural, and *third nature* is our global information and technological infrastructure. Together, they trace how the natural, built, and digital worlds are intertwined. (Williamson, 2020)

6_The Suldenferner Glacier is located in the Ötztal Alps of South Tyrol, northern Italy, near the Austrian border above the Schnalstal (Val Senales) valley. It is notable for being largely covered by a thick layer of rocky debris, which distinguishes it from clean-ice glaciers and significantly influences its melting behavior and visual appearance.



picture03_2023_bridge and dam structures
at the feet of the Suldenferner glacier

is catered to us through spray painted signs and neon plastic poles to indicate safe passages.

An even more persistent human factor besides the ever persistent was also present, the preconceived notion that we were visiting a tragic site, a glacier that lost ...% of its original size in the past ... years.⁷ A loss that sounds appalling especially given its pace in the lights of the glacier's naturally occurring changes during its whole lifetime.

The more details I learned about the consequences of such changes a very divisive pictures started to appear in front of me. On the one side you have the decreasing access to fresh and clean glacier water release and an increased amount of landslides and flash floods risking the surrounding villages, which are dependent on these resources and safety provided by the calm and reliable creeping of this ice behemoth. These villages are also greatly dependent on tourists, skiers and hikers who come to visit and awe at the Suldenferner Glacier and its surrounding snow covered peaks.

These conditions are slowly becoming obsolete thanks to climate crisis, as the snowcaps lifespan are becoming shorter and the icy behemoth is also backtracking into the cold heaven of the heights, leaving behind a muddy and seemingly barren landscape.

The wet and muddy landscape, veined by tiny creeks shows us the other half of the coin, which is the presence of erupting life in the forms of tiny flowers and brushes. The glacier and the surrounding raw milieu does not care about our

7_The numbers are missing on purpose. Knowing the exact pace of retreating of the glacier did not and will not change our epistemological conceptualisation of it. It will always exist in parallel to its actual physical and biological contingencies.

human drama of “loosing” a glacier. Biological processes do not work with absolutes and it certainly does not care about our safety and lucrative profit oriented tourist services that we have founded on an inherently contingent actor.

To circle back to second nature, we can draw two main conclusions from this concept and my short detour to the glacier:

First, is that 99% (if not 100%) of our environment that surrounds us and we interact with, is human made or curated. If one would take the time and effort, could trace back every little detail of our environment to a series of individual personal decisions. From the average annual temperature of Karlsplatz, through the dominant patterns found on raw pine furniture being sold at Ikea, to even the level of microplastics in super clean glacial melt-water. The concept of “pure” and untouched nature is not interpretable anymore, if nothing else erratic weather as a result of the climate crisis will affect such milieus.

The second is that our ways of interacting with this second nature stayed unchanged from the way we interact(ed) with our first nature which is meant to be the “pure and untapped”. Im aware that this is a very restricted view on our interconnectedness with non-human systems, but it still raises awareness to our perceived lack of agency and reflectivity when it comes to consumer behaviour. We take a lot of set systems of our everyday routine as granted. Most people don't question the inner workings and material logic of said second environment. We obviously try to look for the best options out there, but we rarely question its right to exist and what behaviours and values it might accommodate, let alone what motives and values were the initiators behind the design of such systems.

This is a very vulnerable position for the non-reflecting consumer who's window to reality, which they take for granted, is staged and curated by other actors. Jaques Rancier describes this dynamic, however in a broader socio-political context, as the distribution of the sensible. His two main questions, around which his whole notion centers, are "how perception is organized and how sensual experiences are combined in specific modes of interpretation". Without going into the fine details of his framework I will give a brief breakdown of it.

The sphere of activities that are framing and designing our sensible reality are not politics or design, but as a reference to Foucault, Rancier calls it the police.

"The police set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible; they crystalize established modes of perception and prevent discordant ways of sensorially experiencing" (Gineprini, 2023)

Politics, thus are conceived in opposition to Police.

"The political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise." (Gineprini, 2023)

From Ranciere's definition of politics it is clear that he thinks of it as an inherently aesthetic practice. Such as design, which gives these two fields of practice a tendency to move parallel to each other, as they are both concerned with shaping human experience and influencing behaviour based on personal beliefs and values. From one side politics define systems of power and gover-

nance in the forms of regulations, funding priorities, and cultural values which all influence design practices. Political climates can also foster innovation, such as state-sponsored design programs, material research fundings. However from the other side design can serve as a medium through which political ideas or certain values can be communicated and enacted. Public procurement and design standards also reflect political priorities, emphasizing national identity, inclusivity, or technological advancement. It is not a chicken or egg questions, but rather two entangled snakes trying to decide where one ends and the other begins.

Designers operate within political contexts, whether consciously or not. Looking at a designer and their work through this lens: "design is not a manifestation of pure creativity crystallised in extraordinary products that eventually make it to the marketplace of a liberal economy, but it is a historically contingent practice that unfolds according to contemporary political systems." (Arellano & Osorio, 2019)

Contemporary political systems that are dominating the global north are blooming into fully populist regimes. However populism is not an inherently bad thing on every level. If one can see it as a tool, it can become a valuable asset in shining light into societies underrepresented issues. A method that is crucial for maintaining meaningful democratic systems.

Based on the theoretical interventions of design theorists Carl DiSalvo and Tony Fry, Oliver Arellano and Ever Osorio proposes the use of Radical Democracy, more accurately the logic of populism and agonistic pluralism as tools to a critical examination of contemporary design practices that are bound to politics. Fry's three fold critic of democracy also applies to the realm of design:

1. Democracy is not sufficiently criticized;
 2. To criticise democracy does not imply that democracy "can be reduced to a simple singularity and that there are not other modes of politics that equally demand critical scrutiny."
 3. "Democracy as an operative political system must not be viewed as the most advanced possible form of political practice."
- (Fry, 2011 as cited in Arellano & Osorio, 2019)

Populism here does not refer to an ideology or to autocratic political systems but to a necessary formal dynamic of democratic societies. The populist logic we want to build on here works in the production and reproduction of material and semiotic cultures. Said logic expresses neglected concerns of society and frames them in politics that pits people against an intransigent elite through which it can become a catalyst for political change. (Arellano & Osorio, 2019)

If we apply the same logic onto contemporary design practice that is operating within the perceived validity and functioning of the free market we quickly arrive to today's consumer culture's main driving dynamic which is the commodification of said signifiers⁸. In order to continuously generate profit and purchase of new products one needs to constantly hunt for underrepresented

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⁸_Commodity aesthetics refers to the ways in which objects are designed and presented to appeal to consumers beyond their functional value, emphasizing style, image, or status. It highlights how aesthetic qualities are shaped by market forces and consumer culture, making products desirable as symbols rather than merely tools.

needs and problems in order to ensure that new designs and products let it be material or service in nature, to be continuously consumed. However this method has to face a bottleneck that is two fold.

If an addressing of a certain signifier is satisfying enough, it will become a part of our everyday life, other actors will start reproducing it, generating a lot of profit and widespread acceptance, through which it becomes part of the perceived "elite" or a common place, both evidently slowing down its profit generating capacity. So investment bound contemporary designers working for the "free market", whose main latent purpose is to maximize profit and the re-occurrence of said signifier as an underrepresented issue find themselves in certain stranglehold of innovation.

One is to only partially represent a certain societal need/issue, a prime example for this is greenwashing, where companies try to frame their production and products as something that is indeed sustainable and circular however in reality, it only partially fulfills said expectations, thus maintaining the problem, thus the discussion and ensuring that their product is continuously purchased and applied by consumers.

An other example that will come our main focus for the rest of this thesis is to reduce the lifetime of their product. This method is now commonly known as planned obsolescence, a phenomena that has been discussed and observed for a long time now. It describes the practice of deliberately designing material fatigue into the product itself so that it reduces its lifetime, thus forcing consumers into a repeating purchase of the product. A famous counter example for this is the Centennial Lightbulb, a lightbulb in a fire department found

in Livermore, California that has been on since it was installed in 1901. Besides two brief brakes in its operation, once 22 minutes in 1976 when it was replaced to another location and another one that lasted for 9 hours in 2013 as a result of an electricity shortage it has never ceased to emit light. That is 124 years of continuous functioning of a product, as a result of engineering and material design untainted of profit maximization through planned obsolescence.

Before we get carried away by the romantic promise of ever-lasting and collectively beneficial products and services that we can leave behind for our progeny in the hope of adequate generativity, we have to also accept that our society and its values are changing in an extremely accelerated rhythm. Big societal changes and catastrophes will promote populist behavior as it always presents a clear “underdog” position, but there are other pressuring elements for this endless race. Reasons that lie deeper than, continuous adaptation to ever-changing political narratives and contingent milieus.

Decaying Certainties

_the terror of the inevitable and historic strategies for mitigating it through material goods

Modernity has evolved parallel to the desecralization of social life and the individual during this transitioning period had to deal with the struggles of abandoning religious dogmas in favour of scientific certainties. A transition that is on a pragmatic and material level deemed easy as it provided the individual with an increased level of agency towards their life and also increasing standards of living for most. However it failed to deliver values as guides to social life. Instead these values got privatised through the commodification of the already mentioned signifiers, leaving a vast amount of individuals alone with the task of establishing values to guide their lifestyle and to make sense of everyday life.

Phillip A. Mellor and Chris Schilling writes, after Giddens, that not even contemporary societies can produce a radically new type of social world, in contrast to theories of postmodernism - which rejected the power of a "grand narrative" - they still view social life as fragmented and reject the notion of the ontologically real self. (Mellor & Schilling, 1993)

This antiquity is also present in our material culture and how we relate to our physical surroundings. The transcendent gap that secularism has left is aching and filled with marketing generated needs and endless chasing of material goods, to have it all. Or at least to have what they tell me I lack.

The possibilities, the grand individual agency and freedom that has been provided to us is overwhelming and this state of collective shock and confusion is easily taken advantage of. As the individual has been sucked into the center stage, as the sole responsible agent, at the same time it has been named as the source of all problems. It replaces collective responsibility and contextuality with fragmented personal decisions. (Becker, 1973)

Just think about the infamous term “carbon footprint”⁹ created by BP oil in order to emphasize individual responsibility in climate change. A blatant and outrageous lie, as the real decision making responsibility does not lie with the individual but the purely profit seeking, industrial behemoth, a collective, which can afford to continuously cross environmental guidelines and pay the fines for it, or just simply get away with it, thank to its lobbying. The magnitude of difference in effective change that could be achieved by a self-reflecting and environmentally conscious BP oil, compared to the conscious individual is immense.

However as an emotional product, it perfectly feeds into the contradiction that lies in-between our attempts to create, maintain and preserve valuable self-identities and the fact that

⁹_A carbon footprint measures the total greenhouse gas emissions caused directly or indirectly by an individual, organization, product, or activity, usually expressed in carbon dioxide equivalents. It is used to assess environmental impact and guide efforts to reduce climate change contributions.

individuals were never more replaceable then now. The continuous and successful operation of our institutions rely more on their status quo than on the specific individual. (Kearl) This constant obliteration of the individual from the social is a well established tendency in high modernity, that is not a recent one. As Walter Benjamin writes about the shock of the first World War as the first post industrial crisis:

"A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds, and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body."

(Benjamin, 1933 as cited in Colomina & Wigley, 2016)

This was the first time in history when people felt truly shocked by the technological advances that industrialisation has achieved in magnitude, speed and efficiency. Technologies that were only used in the civil sector before, thus still maintaining the illusion that they benefits are collectively distributed, they were turned against the people on the battlefield. Before that each battle was centered around man against man combat, but now the tangible touchings of individual conflicting wills were reduced to pulling levers, invisible whistling projectiles and dropping bodies left and right. Fear became more abstract and the individual lost immediate agency.

To fear death without any agency is an inherent human condition though.

So inherent that Otto Rank who was a long time and very influential assistant to Freud argued

with him, that the erotic and reproductive patterns that Freud positioned as the seed of all human action might not be the origo. Instead, he states, the fear of death and one's own survival is what actually underlies every aspect of our life. (Becker, 1973) This survival that is clearly interpretable in a pre-historic context had transposed itself into our symbolic domain. As direct and external physical threat to our existence slowly faded away thanks to how us a civilisation managed to establish certain measures that makes us feel safe. However the fear still lingers and no matter of a changing milieu, our bodily and psychological reactions to our possible demise, let it be physical or symbolic (more on this later) still send us down to the same fight or flight response routes.

Terror Management Theory (TMT) which is an ongoing empirical research project, ground itself in Ernest Becker's work *The Denial of Death* (1973). It was later empirically developed by Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski in 1991 as a theoretical framework, which sociologists and psychologists still contribute to, (but also challenge it). It posits that human awareness of our own inevitable demise (mortality salience) produces a great deal of existential anxiety, which is then managed through adherence to cultural world views and pursuit of self-esteem. A pursuit that we already touched up on previously in a different context. (Hayes, 2017)

TMT clarifies that our primal skills that were once necessary and used for our physical survival gradually got transposed into the symbolic realm. Such shifts however are not moving from one absolute to the other. From the earliest times, pure symbolic behaviour developed hand in hand with our physical skills as a vehicle to accelerate and

convey the otherwise lengthy and contextual unfolding of individual physical and material skills. A fine example is the sheer amount of pre-historic hand axes that we keep digging up, in perfect condition. Prestwich noted in a lecture given to the Royal Society in 1860, that the amount and the lack of use observed on these artifacts, let us speculate that these objects might have not primarily been made to be used. Rather they were decorative, putting on display a certain individual's skills in tool making, thus attracting mates to maintain their gene pool. Even Darwin himself at some point wondered, whether these are actually man-made. A clear symbolic use-case where actual organic function is secondary to the attached meaning. (Gamble & Moutsiou 2011 as cited in Colomina & Wigley, 2016) What I am trying to point out here is that we are complex beings who do carry vast capacities of sensibility for both realms of the raw and the symbolic, however the weight and social role we grant to function over aesthetics or the other way around, is highly dependent on temporal political contexts.

In a civilized, and physically safe postindustrial and postmodern global north we can clearly see that the importance we grant to physical survival skills are definitely overpowered by our symbolic feats. Art, identity, moral values and creative legacy are all attributes to which we had shifted our attention and education in order to affirm continuity beyond individual mortality.

Fear of death has always been avoided through distraction, denial or direct constructive strategies like religious narratives or communal rituals. (Norgaard, 2011, Weintrobe 2013 as cited in Király & Köves, 2023) Historically, to create a narrative and reason for one's death was the most com-



picture04_2023_Artemis Fine Arts Louisville, CO, US
Large Paleolithic French Acheulean Chert Hand Axe

mon and successful anxiety buffer, however since we entered late modernity these certainties evaporated with the secularization of everyday life and as science failed to provide a solution nor a reason for one's death, we had to look for new strategies of distractions.

The main helpful strategy that late modernism offers is the already mentioned lonely center stage, convincing the individual that they have all the time, attention and means in the world to achieve all of their goals, thus establishing a meaning to their finite journey. We only need to work hard and long enough to acquire assets and deliver according to our personal dreams. Our life constitutes of a collection of small personal manifestos so to say, a project, an object, an acquired position of status. All of these solo projects, that Becker calls immortality projects, are meant to solidify one's own presence in a world where transcendental belonging to community has been eroded drastically. These projects carry their creators legacy further than their biological time, allowing an access to symbolic immortality. (Mellor & Schilling, 1993)

In these creation stories, people tend to stay as independent as possible, ever increasing the thrill of individual meaning making, becoming heroes, so to say. This abstract separation of the individual and its agency from the interwoven web of personalities and real life context, evermore increases the belief that us humans can and did rise above nature. That even without tapping into our collective capabilities, let alone contributing to it, we are able to supersede the general limits of it. (Yalom, 1980 as cited in Király & Köves, 2023)

Human exceptionalism is a fragile concept however. It is built on and feeds from our symbolic

domain which, in an anthropocentric world clearly bears a higher level of permanence than our biological world, meaning that any societal disruption or biological threat which leaves its mark in the physical world, affecting us, informs the symbolic realm, thus posing a potential threat to this delirious state. (Koller, 2021 as cited in Király & Köves, 2023)

As we already established the fact that we live in times of ontological insecurity it is especially important to see and experience our world as a safe and meaningful place, where both biological and symbolic life can persevere. However continuous societal disruptions and even more importantly the increasing unpredictability of our biological world thanks to the climate crisis, undermines such security. First of all they effect us directly as extreme weather reports and changing natural resources that were taken granted, reminds us that we are per definitionen part of the natural world and we depend on it. Secondly it also presents an indirect threat to the continuity of our symbolic order, raising the possibility of human extinction, but the very least societal and cultural collapse.

As a commission based designer I am, as well, faced with the contemporary expectations to stay visible and to create something that will outlive my biological time, and the same time I am also faced with my client's similar struggles.

I started my designer practice right after my graduation at an architecture studio called Architecture Uncomfortable Studio. Their ascetic approach towards trying to find what is just enough in every project was deeply resonating with me especially after spending 3 years in an extremely market oriented designer program. Our endless debates and talks about aesthetics and style and our deep respect and attention to the "worker" who actually builds our plans were extremely inspiring for me, especially that I was still producing almost all of my designs.

My young motivation and confidence in a new, de-growth¹⁰ inspired approach to design

10_ De-growth is an economic and social movement that challenges the assumption that continual economic growth is inherently desirable or sustainable. It advocates for reducing production and consumption in wealthy nations to achieve ecological balance, social equity, and improved well-being, emphasizing quality of life over material accumulation.

was still met with my clients' artificially aggregated needs. As the main points of their requests were purely aesthetic in nature, leaving me with the struggles of finding sustainable solutions for it, I was met the first time with the tensions between certain aesthetics, the ways they can be produced and the ethical connotation they carry. I was dogmatically educating my clients on how smoothness is a sterile and ignorant quality and how every material should welcome wear and tear. As I was doing this, I realized that I have also become a smooth and ignorant person when it came to letting in personal wishes and needs.

I still believe however that these aesthetics do convey certain historically ethical connotations, but I also neglected the personal history one might carry in their clinging to certain aesthetics. A negligence that turned into curiosity later on, so let's dive into a short post-industrial design history.

The dominant aesthetics of our contemporary material culture are deeply rooted in the struggle of maintaining and contributing to an image of the world that presents it as a safe and meaningful place to live in. Its main aesthetic tool has become the smoothing of surfaces, eliminating all visual and performative cues that might overwhelm or remind people of the complex and contingent nature of our world. This practice did not start with modern digital technology, like how Apple invested in an extensive material research into plastics in order to develop a material that will not turn yellow as a result of UV exposure and greasy human touch. (Kahney, 2013) The smoothing of surfaces started way earlier, around the time from when I also quote Walter Benjamin and his remark on people's overwhelming shock to industrialized destruction.

To cover all the socio-economic consequences of industrialization would extend way over the bandwidth of this thesis, so will only concentrate on aspects regarding how it formed our material culture in the lights of certain socio-economic changes.

First of all, in general we can agree, that its initial and still main beneficiary were the ruling class and people who held the capital and were able to invest into such machinery, increasing their profit efficiency. From this, it directly follows that the artistic agency of the craftsmen and their tacit idiosyncratic production methods got privatised and products were made in the image of said ruling class. The industrial production of royal ornament and infrastructure and the devastating outcomes it brought to us were critiqued early on, for example in Adolf Loos's (in)famous reports of Ornament and Crime.

The abolishment of ornament can be also seen as anaesthetics. Removing the pain that was inflicted upon the everyday people by erasing the pompous and autocratic reminders lurking at them off of every building and object. Such smoothing of surfaces was seen as a form anaesthetics by le Corbusier and the wide-spread introduction of cocaine as a mean of pain relief during the first World War uncannily parallels the development of modern design. (Colomina & Wigley, 2016)

The removal of ornament from the public sphere also made sense as a revolutionary act. Removing of such autocratic elite imagery and letting the "pure" material stand for itself without any pre-curated meaning is deliberating to some extent. However, in retrospect it speaks more about the empty and debilitating shock that people felt towards the representation of industrially maintained status-quo. It was the first occasion when

the individual was provided with the option and also with the responsibility to be included in the collective meaning making of our world, as clean and smooth surfaces lacked the narrative guidance, thus inviting or rather luring the witness into projecting their own meaning onto them.

Architects and designers also changed their focus, instead of contributing to questionable grand narratives they shifted their focus towards a more objective aspect of design. Towards function, efficiency and pragmatism, creating "objectively" safe and calculable objects and metropolises where every function and system of the milieu is pre-calculated and optimized in order to protect and caress the citizen who has been traumatized by the destruction of the industrialized ruling class.

"Cleansing anything superfluous was a moral project." (Colomina & Wigley, 2016)

Le Crobusier also followed and contributed to this project, in *Vers un Architecture* (1923) he writes:

"People should be proud to live in the most modern of houses with walls as smooth as sheet-iron, like the ancient walls of the perfected machine that is the Parthenon" where "the impression is of naked polished steel."

Such smooth surfaces are "naked," "bare," "clear," "honest" "direct" "pure" "clean," "healthy," "moral" - a chain of synonyms used to create an atmosphere of polemical virtue. (Colomina & Wigley, 2016)

The practice of removing royal or high class ornament from our physical surroundings and provide the everyday person with at least a visual carte blanche sounds like a noble approach.

However such an approach proved to be highly problematic at least on two levels.

One is that through this practice, design enters itself into a moral discourse, it enters politics in a self-entitled way that was not seen before. Aesthetization of social values and accepted ways of representation, up until the dawn of modernity was monopolized by the acting church, kings with god given rights and their noble men, who were plenty eager to provide and enforce said formalized values according to which one should live their life.

The second is that it provides the designer with an escape route. To not aestheticize ethics does not mean to not be aware of the moral context and importance of certain motives and aesthetics, and the ways they indirectly affect our lives. A prime example is the happy-go-lucky attitude of post-war post modernism. Nothing matters, but the mood and grand archetypical narrative of material culture that supposedly work independently from our lived political reality. But lets not get too far.

Before industrialization, guilds¹¹ had always been able to grant certain levels of agency to themselves in the political field, using their irreplaceable monopoly in production and economic weight as a leverage, but their aesthetic language mostly originated from either above, from said ruling classes or from below, continuing the visual lore of the local vernacular. Thus the political agency of guilds

11_ Guilds were associations of artisans or merchants in medieval Europe who regulated their trades, maintained quality standards, and protected the economic interests of their members. They often controlled training through apprenticeships and set rules for production, prices, and working conditions. Beyond economics, guilds also served social and religious functions, providing mutual aid and a sense of community among members.

were resided into the niches left, such as trade economics, social welfare and resource allocation, without crafting any grandiose, symbolic narrative.

This has slowly started to change however during industrialization as production got more and more automatized, the separation of crafting and planning has given birth to designers who were only dealing with concepts in order to provide suitable plans for these machineries. These plans however were strongly influenced by the limited capabilities of early production lines and the eagerness of factory owners to produce in large numbers to the everyday people.

This way of producing and designing were extremely limiting, and it has not changed too much to this day. To design something for mass production, means that one needs to cut corners when it comes to certain aesthetic qualities. A sacrifice that was not so welcomed by some craftsmen.

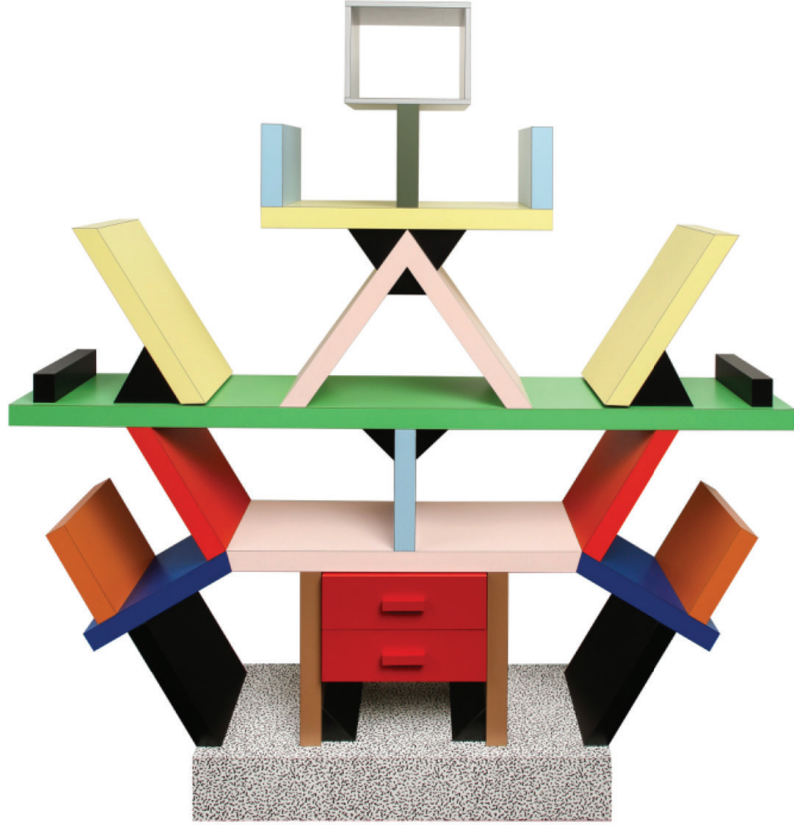
Such a resistance gave birth to Art Nouveau or in other part of Europe to Jugendstil, which tried to provide aesthetically detailed objects even to lower class people, arguably though. It soon fell to the overwhelming monopoly of industrial mass production as it just could not keep up with the pace at such a scale. Eventually it slowly degraded into Art Deco and during the aforementioned despair of the First World War, it fully surrendered itself to Modernism and to pure calming pragmatism. Only to be resuscitated by postmodernism, but more on that later.

Its really important to acknowledge, that these movements did not exchange themselves, but rather it was a series of shifting dominance as every new aesthetic movement were able to provide makers and designers and of course consumers with new ways of relating to newly spreading









picture08_1981_Post Modern Bookcase
Ettore Sottsass, USA, www.1stdibs.com

industrial production. Every movement were an honest and organic reaction to what people might need in those times and what they might expect from their objects, these movements were all trying to reflect on contemporary collective struggles of the everyday people.

"Art belongs to the people. Without the ability to reflect their realities, it remains isolated from its purpose." (Walter Gropius)

Needs and problems has always been the main categories around which design thinking has been revolving, we seek for dysfunctions to eliminate and strive to create objects and services that are meant to be contiguously virtuous. "A well-designed object is one that does ever more good to ever more people." (Colomina & Wigley, 2016) An ambition to social reform is embedded in every seemingly modest object and service. Referring back to the previous quote from Walter Gropious, this social reform is however is always a temporal reflection on the contemporary.

During the first half of the 20th century people felt cheated by the promises of industrial production that initially did bring virtue to their life. The cult of smooth design, dominating modernism tried to bring back truth as an aesthetic quality. Every object were designed following pure function, from bare materials "as if a smooth surface, a rounded corner, or a continuously folded metal tube could only tell the truth and that truth itself was beautiful". At leas such metal tubes did not fire bullets from nowhere at you.

"Design is never shocking, disturbing, alienating, incomprehensible, or discomforting in this global campaign." (Colomina & Wigley, 2016)

Not even the quirkiness and playfulness of some dominant designers of the Bauhaus movement could break through the rational of modernist aestheticization. A movement which tried to apply its wide range of design practices to create a more democratic approach, providing access to technology for every classes of society in order to better their life, until the National Socialist Party in Germany banned it in April 1933. (Forgács & Forgács, 1997)

The category of Good Design had been given birth. If modernist objects were meant to present objective truths, then they must be inherently good. Such blatant aestheticization of ethics were ripped from the hands of aristocrats and were handed to the people. People as in designers who had access through employment to mass production. Such moral high-grounds of design were supported and promoted during the first half of the 20th century, through traveling exhibitions and awards. In 1939 the Museum of Modern Art creates the Department of Industrial Design, by Eliot Noyes a former student and employee of Walter Gropius and in 1941 they add a special section to the popular Useful Objects series, called "Good Design". (Colomina & Wigley, 2016)

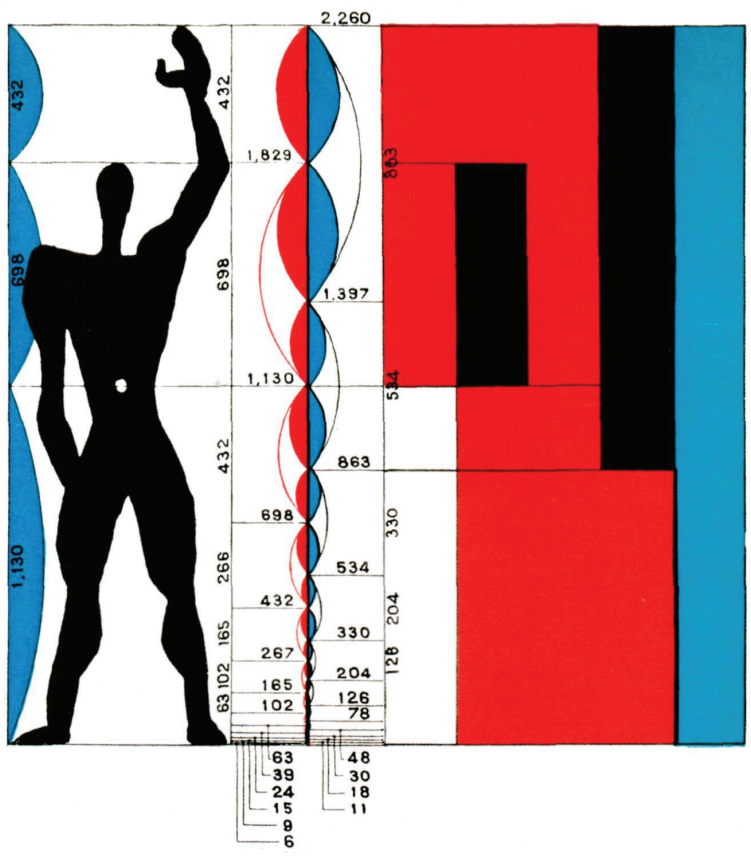
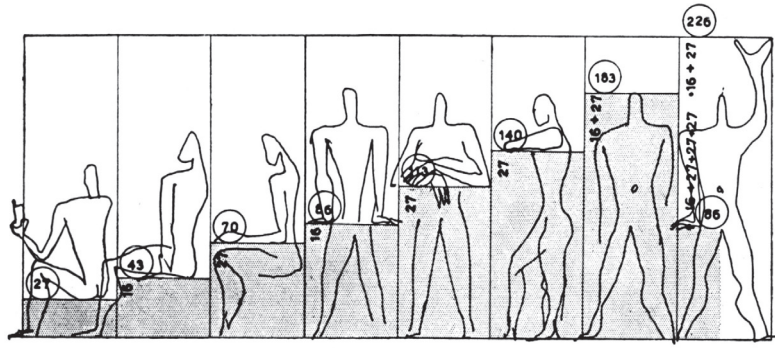
Through such a label, "good design" becomes a category in the archive of aesthetics, meaning it is distinguishable and it is readable. It does stand alone, separated from mediocre or even bad design, purely based on external visual and topological qualities. It removes it from the flow of use and experience, a method that we have already established as a necessary step in getting closer to the essence of a three dimensional object which allows, let alone invites human interaction. The existence of such an essence is still debatable though, yet we can definitely still agree, that there

is a certain continuity or sameness that we look for in an object.

As Hannah Arendt argues Heidegger's idea on how human identity stabilises itself primarily in relation to concrete objects, she says: "in contradiction to the Heraclitean saying that the same man can never enter the same stream – men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table." (Arendt, 1958 as cited in Gineprini, 2023)

Let us ruminate a bit about this tension between the ever-changing nature of human and sameness. Modernism did try to address the ever-changing nature of human through an archetypal approach to design that falls into the same line of Heideggerian thought what Hannah Arendt argues in the above quotation.

Modernism's main unifying and arguably democratizing approach lied in the promise that the attentive designer is able to decipher and formalize the one and best solution for any problem and scenario and at the same time it can encapsulate and convey them through self-explaining aesthetics. Just think of Le Corbusier's famous Modulor system. However there attention was detailed and humane, it failed to reflect on the pluralist quality of our being, as in we are not one mass of the same people. Producing ever-applicable designs and measurements, one indirectly defines and restricts the category of what a person is and how it should be and behave. An approach that was unfortunately popular in the political field, both in the apartheid ridden United States as well as in Europe with its blooming fascism.



picture09_1952-54_ *Modulor system*
Le Corbusier

Adolf Behne has a very interesting take on this dynamic between humans and mechanical logics. In 1926 he argued that designers who only care about the pure mechanical logic and functions and aim to make buildings a “pure tool” actually end up with an anthropomorphic architecture. “In fact dehumanization is the very thing that leads to humanization, to anthropomorphism.” And in reverse, those who claim to care only about the “human will” end up producing an inhumanly standardized architecture. (Colomina & Wigley, 2016) While modernism discovered the numbing function of design through aestheticized ethics and the removal of pompous reminders, it still provided a somewhat democratic distribution of well designed objects.

Their dedication to industrial standardization and their research into what minimum ergonomics such standards shall meet, greatly benefits the practice of design, if one approaches such perceived axioms with a sufficiently critical mind. It also left space for individual existential reflection. Given the fact that nothing shows and reflects wear and tear more than smooth empty surfaces. While the aesthetics and materials it used were pure, the way these artificial surfaces put the unavoidable material change and degradation to display, it kept people grounded.

As the dread of the World Wars started to heal and the industries started to produce objects instead of weapons a new material hit the scene. If we consider the smoothing of surfaces as the abolishing of aristocratic status-quo, applying the same logic one could say that plastic meant to provide a warm, soft and curvy alternative to the cruel and cold smoothness of logic-driven, machine-polished materials. An artificial material that is not bound by preceding production methods and can basically fill any empty space (idea) that



picture10_2018_Industrial buliding with dirt patterns
created by rainwater runing down alongside roof ribs

it is injected into. People desperately needed new ideas, and the economy even more.

New narratives started to occupy designer practices as a result of the general disappointment and terror felt towards modernist rational absolutism. And once again artistic movements started to reflect on the new reality of people. A new reality that was craving for plurality, colourfulness, in general for hope. The positivism that post-modern architecture and design pledged allegiance to, were meant to celebrate the arbitrary and the tacit sensations that we find joy in, in our everyday life. Like the childish delight that lying in a grass can provide, invoked by the Pratone chair designed by di Ceretti/Derossi/Rosso for Gufram in 1971. (Pic) Cold and impersonal rational started to slowly be overpowered by new and seemingly personal in scale narratives. As Venturi put it:

"I speak of a complex and contradictory architecture based on the richness and ambiguity of modern experience, including that experience which is inherent in art. ... I welcome the problems and exploit the uncertainties. ... I like elements which are hybrid rather than "pure", compromising rather than "clean" ... accommodating rather than excluding. ... I am for messy vitality over obvious unity. ... I prefer "both-and" to "either-or", black and white, and sometimes gray, to black or white. ... An architecture of complexity and contradiction must embody the difficult unity of inclusion rather than the easy unity of exclusion."

(Robert Venturi, 1965)



Such plastic freedom and the abolishment of pure logic driven design resulted in a true conceptual boom in the fields of design and its theory. New approaches, forms, standards and formats started to emerge. Speculative design became a thing in this new environment where any individual idea was greatly celebrated and also needed. However its true valour is hard to distinguish from the parallel domination of aggregated consumer capitalism as an economic backdrop. The commodification of truly progressive thoughts regarding our collective global cooperations and shared material reality put a stranglehold on the true promise of post-modern design. Ideas and movements like the Gaia-theory, de-growth movements, personalised and open source material cultures were quickly devoured by the desirable-idea-hungry industry. Turning it into partially or only performatively sustainable and resource aware as well as through endless variations and subcategories, creating the illusion that it is tuned for personal, idiosyncratic needs. Mellor and Shilling calls this period rather as high-modernity, to separate the promising ideas of post-modernism such as the rejection of grand narratives, a collective and embedded view on the human species and viewing social life as fragmented (plural) and "hyper-real". (Mellor & Schilling, 1993)

However modernism backed up ontological security through belonging to the anonymous mass for which it could provide with generic, objective, science driven solutions, it did fail to provide values on how to live social life. A task that high-modernity eagerly handles through the privatisation of said personal (fragmented) needs. Providing the same ontological safety, but through performative attention and making sure that while needs are being met, profit from said services are

also maximized. With its never the same palette and its quirky and witty aesthetics it makes one forget about the dread of latent existential insecurities.

In the hyper-individualized¹² reality of high-modern consumerism, the self-identity is constructed through the continuous re-ordering of self-narratives. (Mellor & Schilling, 1993) To match the high fluctuation of the ever-changing needs, the industry needs to produce on a rather huge scale, especially given the democratic conditioning of modernism, as in, everyone should have access to well designed objects. However this well-designedness means something else in contemporary societies. First of all, such morals are produced with a top-down mentality by the designer and the industry as we already learned from modernism. Secondly, today they also need to be produced in an extremely wide variety and very big quantities as these objects need to be able to show off the promise of individuality. As the main hero or our anti-anxiety center stage. The narratives are dictated by the industry and its main goal has become continuous consumption. These objects need not to last long as the self-narrative engines behind these personal consumer motives are also short-lived. This use-case of material objects has launched us into the age of waste as the ever-changing needs make longevity ironically irrelevant.

¹²*Individuality* refers to the development of a distinct personal identity shaped through social relations, while *individualism* is an ideological orientation that prioritizes individual autonomy and self-interest. They are related but not identical: individuality can flourish within communal contexts, whereas individualism emphasizes independence from collective claims, framing the individual as the primary social unit.

As Anders puts it:

“the essence of them [these objects] consists in the fact that they are here in order to not be here. They are manufactured to be consumed as rapidly as possible through their use.”
(Anders, 1980 as cited in Gineprini, 2023)

These objects produce their own elimination, instead of repeated use, they elude a stable concept of ownership, as long term use would slow down their substitution, thus threatening the continuity of commodity flow. Anders goes even further, concluding, that waste production is far from being a dysfunction or a side effect, it is the central mechanism of consumer society's economic and symbolic reproduction. (Gineprini, 2023)



picture12_2023_trashcan with instructional
pictograms, designed for single-use coffeecups

Such an immense production of waste comes with consequences. Consequences, that by now, we are all familiar with, from the complete destabilisation of ecosystems thanks to pollution to the more and more clearly harmful cellular level effects of microplastics in our bodies. Obviously our level of concern aligns with the symbolic surface area of our life being affected by our reckless production of waste.

The dominant out of sight out of mind approach is crumbling.

Since ancient times, we were only concerned about trash as something that only bothers realms outside of our immediate environment. An approach from the time when the only thing we had to worry about is whether our food scraps will draw predators, and to makes sure that we do not get in touch too much with the bacterial abundance of metabolic processes of organic matter.

As we know from the findings of TMT that all primal physical threat slowly got transposed into our symbolic realm, the same thing happened with discarded material. This time however, having unfolded the historical relations between identity

and aesthetics, its even more clear why we feel so threatened by discarded function-lost products.

According to Benjamin, once discarded, commodities lose their mystifying presentation as desirable objects and reveal themselves as an allegory of broken desires, promises of happiness that remained unfulfilled but still lively. Such reminders can definitely can become, although subtle and indirect, but affective insinuations of one's ontological fragility and uncertainty. At this point we need to make a difference between the containment and disappearance. While containment of waste is needed to avoid aforementioned biological hazards, making it disappear is a symbolic act. Laura Moisi mentions the Frankfurt-kitchen, designed by Austrian architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky in 1926 as an early example of waste being swallowed and taken out of mind by the industry. The design's main promise was a cheap construction, with a topological layout that is informed by industrial ergonomic research into effective movement optimisation of the factory worker.

However said industrial ergonomics also saw waste as a topological obstacle and got stashed away, into a corner, behind a door, built into the smooth unity of the design. (Moisi, 2024)

I grew up in hungary and I was greatly influenced by the material and resource awareness that dominated Hungarian material culture during the communist era. The mentality it has left as its residue in my grandparents deeply educated me, the saying "This can be still useful for something..." is a collective cultural meeting point for Hungarians to anyone who has lived in times of scarcity. Instead of sticking to fixed ideologies and forever trusting the state to provide, as the political narrative suggested, people were pushed to abandon such narratives and go about solving

their own issues, from whatever they could find. A shift that Király & Köves in their paper, *Facing finitude: Death-awareness and sustainable transitions* call a Transcendence Management Theory (TrMT). They say after Cozzolino et al, that in a “high dose” condition of mortality salience, when we are unavoidably faced with the inherent vulnerability of our human existence, the self can reach a deep level of reflection and fundamental changes in our worldviews and value systems. This so-called worldview-capitulation pushes people towards intrinsic values, becoming more interested in seeing and supporting others, focusing more on their relationships and recalibrating their life perspectives. Through these transcendent shifts we grow beyond our previous bounded individual selves and turn towards projects that transcend our individual lives. Not by longevity but by scale.

Interestingly these are the crucial changes that in cultural worldview and behavioral changes that emphasised by ecological economics as a basis for sustainable societies. (Király & Köves, 2023)

However such deep reflection is also applicable and available under “low dose” conditions as we already established, even the slightest, most symbolic salience trigger can be traced back to actual existential threat.

Makes me think of the deep breath one takes before removing the food residue piled up at the bottom of a kitchen sink, before carefully placing it into the waste bin. Our bodily and cognitive reactions can be momentarily overwritten by ejecting oneself from the connotative cloud that such a sight resides in, allowing us to remap the actual physical reality of the situation. Regression in this case is a helpful method. Evaluation based on pure physical affordances and contingencies helps us overcome our symbolic strangleholds.



picture13_2024_piled up foodresidue at
my apartment's kitchen sink

Careful Fearless

_artistic strategies to encourage detachment of the self from aesthetic hegemonies through careful holding of each other (accountable)

I propose an exercise, a type of wake if you will.

The next time you are throwing out something, stop yourself and place the item in a visible if not special spot for a few days. Make sure that any hazardous emissions it might produce are carefully contained, but try to maximize the sensory information the item will produce during the exercise. Let it be visual, olfactory or audible in nature.

As your days go by allow yourself to go down the so called memory lane, this object might trigger. How you acquired it, how you used it, what emotions it gave you. I encourage you to go deeper and reflect on the moment when this object stopped serving you and lost its meaning. How did this moment affect you, what did you feel? Were you content, distracted, annoyed, afraid? Examine the very physical processes that might go down while this item is placed on this momentary pedestal as well as the changes in your attention towards it. Ask yourself:

Can this be still good for something?

If you live with other people I encourage you to share these reflections with them, maybe even invite them to share their own feelings and reflections.



picture14_1970_Grabage Wall by Gordon Matta-Clark
© The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark

Putting waste on display, or even on public display is a strong aesthetic tool of disrupting hard wired cultural connotations. Artists during the birth of the post-modern, in a scene of spreading environmental consciousness tried to raise awareness to detached industrial production and to our blind sightedness towards the unsustainable and alarming production of waste.

In 1970 Gordon Matta-clark presents his work, Garbage Wall. It consists of salvaged material cast, locally, on site into a big concrete wall. Solidifying the position that such discarded materials play in our everyday life and in maintaining our industrial consumerism.

Another artist, Mierle Laderman Ukeles's work was also extremely influential in shedding light on the invisible maintenance work that Neo-liberal consumerist societies rely on in order to keep working. In 1969 she writes the Manifesto For Maintenance Art 1969!, a text that was initially written for an exhibition proposal, soon it became a manifesto for the unseen and mundane work that comes with maintaining one's life. Especially as while writing the text, Ukeles was pregnant and was faced with the discrepancies regarding sacrifices that a woman artist needs to make compared to male artists. Being a woman in 1969, meant that she had to fulfil her contemporary duties in keeping the household up and while also being pregnant, she had very little time left for her art practice. (Sample, 2016)

Ukeles is also an artist in residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation since 1971, being the only person who ever held such a position. Between 1979 and 1980 she met with 8500 sanitation workers individually shaking their hand



picture15_1969_Mierle Laderman Ukele meeting sanitation workers, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, US 59

and thanking them for keeping New York City alive, the documentation of her conversations deeply changed public opinion towards the employees of the Department of Sanitation as not only inanimate objects can fall victim to our abjections.

Such democratic works that instead of the grand narrative, they place the mundane, actual reality of the artist in the center, are really good examples for the growing consciousness towards environmentalism and celebrated individuality, that post-modernism had to offer. However in today's "high modernity" such happenings are lost in the high fluctuation of spectacles and get devoured by the industry in the form of commodified marketing campaigns.

To produce meaningfully critical art works that shine light to certain dysfunctions of high modernity is an extremely challenging task. The fragmented narratives and constant shared existential crisis gathered people into well separated bubbles, so called echo-chambers. While such bubbles could offer a safe haven that could become fertile soil for collective alternative-making, the ever present fight and competition for exposure and validation poisons the scene. And here is the paradox. Most artist, not so differently from any other people, seek and recognize their own validation mostly on the very terms that the (art) industry and Neo-liberal capitalist systems created. The validation and secure-self one might find through community and shared work does not meet the ontological threshold of the desensitized hyper-individual. They would rather be thirst-trapped into a forever promise, than to lower their dreams and accept the dread of class struggle and give up on the false promise of upward mobility.

As I said before, this fight for exposure is not unknown for me and I still do struggle with and within it.

In 2023 I was commissioned to build a shelf system for Tonhalle Wien. Their budget, both financial and timely, was tight. However I was really excited to provide my services for an established community that, in my opinion are taking part in the democratisation of means of production. Providing affordable courses, space and material for people who would like to produce their own ceramic objects. As the shelf need to be produced in a short time, I was proposing very simple console joints for it. During the design process I found myself constantly compromising between practical and aesthetic decisions. But not in a way that one might think. To be honest I did not really care how it looks as their commission was clear, all that they want is a long lasting sturdy shelf system that can serve them for years under heavy load. My design process was more focused on how to design the most sturdy and at the same time the most skill-revealing design as I was starstruck by the amount of exposure this shelf will be subject to, through the many visitors Tonhalle receives on a daily basis. At end of the day we collectively decided on the most simple, pragmatic, stereotypical design as it being the most time and cost efficient way of producing the shelf. The anonymous and humble servitude this object now delivers are only celebrated by Stefi, the owner, who praises the shelf every single time we meet each other.

There is a beauty in silence and the mundane. In today's aesthetic culture where everything, even the tacit needs to be shouted, and the most basic guidelines such as sustainability are being highlighted as the most unique approaches. The silent and self-evident ways of progressive art and design production might be the only way of true transition. Focusing only on the locally communal and personally applicable aspects. While holding each other hands, watching the bounded individual self slowly perish.



Embedding oneself into meaningful local and communal milieus do not come quickly though, the process is draining as the noise of fluctuating narratives is loud and the pressure for constant novelty is persistent. I am constantly wondering how to lay low and keep one's sanity, while not muting myself so much so that I am not able to participate.

Such a fine line must be found however and with my artistic project for my graduation I aimed to look for such a line.

The first step was removing the pressure of novelty and basing my work on previous projects I have done at the department during my five years of studying here.

I wanted to base my master's work around an old work of mine, that I did for a class exhibition, called *From there, through here* in 2022.

The piece is called Aporia, a term from greek philosophy used to describe a lacking passage in an abstract way. A situation where a certain shared essence as a base of common understanding is missing. A concept I felt extremely relevant in relation to how discarded products actually gain agency through being ripped of their imposed meaning.

“vital materiality can never really be thrown ‘away,’ for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity.”

As Jane Bennett states it, in her book *Vibrant Matter*.

These empty shells are deprived from their connective tissue that ties them to our meaningful symbolic realms, following the same order of decaying that deceased bodies go through. The game is built from purely found and scavenged material.

The aluminium sheets I acquired for free from a Viennese painter who's assistant was giving them away. The yellow wooden concrete mould pieces are from the time when our department just moved into the Österreichisches Postsparkasse that quickly went under construction after our moving in. The only thing I've bought are the plastic balls, that I got from a family through Willhaben, where the kids were selling their old toys in order to re-invest into some new ones and the sand which I bought straight from OBI for hygienic reasons.

Aporia is a deconstructed version of the famous Connect Four game created by Howard Wexler in 1974. It is a two-player game with perfect information for both sides, meaning that nothing is hidden from anyone. It is a zero-sum game as a player's advantage is an opponent's disadvantage. It is also a solved game, meaning that whoever starts, by making the right moves, is guaranteed to win.

The main and almost only change from the original one, besides the reduced grid is that I have removed the inner structure that allows the tokens to stay in place. In my version the support mechanism was replaced with sand and the tokens were replaced with balls.

I built the game to observe people and their reactions to it. To see how it changes their thinking and interaction with one another. I was curious what kind of strategies a carcass of of a rigged competition based game will induce.

During the past months I have been conducting test-runs of the game. My instructions were the following:

- Making sure that the original Connect Four game is recognized through the topology of the piece.
- Making sure they are aware of the rules of the game.
- Suggesting a Connect Three approach as the grid was reduced to a 4x4 instead of a 6x7 as a result of the given size of the found aluminium sheets and the size of the balls.

Some physical restrictions of the game are also worth to mention, although I did not reveal these to the players beforehand.

The balls do not fit through the wholes

The gap between the sheets is equal with the balls diameter.

The sand is just enough to fill the whole empty space in between the sheets without any balls placed.

After I communicated the above mentioned baselines, all I asked them is to play. I did not care how, based on what rules. Each session lasted for approximately for one hour and I managed to conduct five full sessions with people with various backgrounds. All games were video documented with sound as the participants were encouraged to share ideas, associations, reflections that might come up during the game besides the obvious discussion regarding the rules.



For me the whole series of experiments were an extremely enriching experience. As a designer, I like to think of myself as a person who is good at assessing the affordance of certain topologies, but the wide range of different approaches and unique methods that the participants put on display, left me humbled. I never thought that only by removing the inner structure of the game it will free itself up to so many new and meaningful ways to play with it.

As the video material is yet to be fully reviewed and edited, and it will be also part of the installation, I do not want to fully disclose all the detailed insights and realizations that I and the players came to through playing the game.

In my abstract reading based on which i tried to decipher moves and strategies, the Sheets are the already set system within which we are forced to operate, some systems are however only a shadow of themselves as the world around us has changed a lot, yet we still find ourselves following the same rules it once set.

The Balls stand for personal visions or ideas, our needs and desires that we are forced to manifest in such frameworks.

And finally, the Sand stands for the "work" and resources that go unseen and not talked about, all the effort and support we provide for in order to see our visions come true.

To help my case I would still like to share the most dominant realization.

To begin with, the competitive nature of the game was the first aspect that was thrown out of the window. As the balls wont stay in place without having built sufficient sand structure underneath, the players soon realized that if they want to en-



gage in a meaningful game, they need to help each other in order to make moves. Quickly demolishing the zero-sum aspect of the game. Every move was made as a collaborative action, building the sand-supports and then placing the ball. With one pair, it escalated to the point where they were only building positions, just to blindly draw a ball of a random color from a bag, rendering it fully luck based, however still putting a lot of work into it.

Another pair interestingly enough did not deter from the original rules, they stuck with the basic connect three rules. As they found the building support for positions annoying and lengthy, also hard to differentiate what constitutes a move, they started to time their turns. In 20 seconds they tried to do as much as they could, sometimes not even reaching a point where they could safely put a ball into position.

The other common axis, alongside which different approaches were formed, were the use of sand and space in between the sheets. Some players did not use any balls for some turns, just kept building, some players tried make sense of the game only using the balls, without any sand.

The plurality of the games that were played truly surprised me, but it was very insightful to see, how we are still ridden with the fever of competing, and even when a set framework of competition is obviously defected, we still resort to somewhat restoring it through competing.



The game is exhibited, embedded into a setting, reminiscent of a medical waiting room.

A space of suspense. Where fear and hope, uncertainty and reliance are strongly present at the same time. A complex feeling which felt resonant as a useful backdrop for a careful invitation for deepening one's mortality salience.

A calm space where small comforting and distracting elements carefully cater our vulnerability to us.

The furnishing of the room is entirely built from scavanged, worn, materials resourced from various, partly symbolic locations. The room contains of a coffee table, a bench, a shelf on the wall and in the corner as "play corner" the game.

The video of the conducted experiments is continuously playing in a VR glass that is placed on the coffee table. In the VR glass one sees an exact copy of the waiting room. However the room is perfectly mapped and all the furniture are exactly where they are in real life, the surfaces and small details of them are fully erased. Everything is white, only dimensions match. Where the game should be, a virtual frame is floating in space playing a compilation of short few second long discussion snippets from the experiments I conducted.

The video condenses the experience, one could acquire through making their hands dirty and muting their egoistic needs to win, into an easily consumable lesson. The video leaves one with the wise conclusion that getting your hands dirty and helping others makes the world a better place, while never letting their hands get dirty, nor their ego challenged.



picture20_2025_snippet from the video
documentation, displaying cooperation

Epilogue

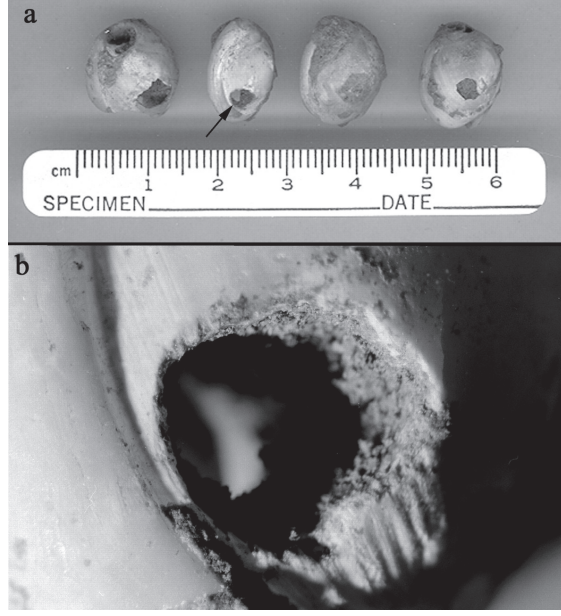
The scene is peaceful, providing space and time for one to stay with their inner turmoil.

The worn and rough materials of the waiting room invite one to meet their ambivalence of being reminded of material decay and the same time ensuring that they still hold and do what they are supposed to do. The tension is within us.

On the road to achieving a safe and ontologically stable self, braking free from the shackles of bounding aesthetics and opening up categories to allow the free flow of personal desires is an important step. Engaging in agonistic pluralist democracies, let that be political or material is a task that requires a stable and unbound ego.

As I said before, regression in the right time and right place is a powerful tool in letting us immerse into play as the origo of all meaningful exploration into self-manifestation.

Because every shell is a toy and whatever they might whisper, those are only echoes of our own pulsating vitality.



picture21_44000BP_earliest record of purely
aesthetic human manipulation, drilled shell pendants
(Kuhn, Stiner, Reese, Güleş, 2001)

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