

SUSTAINABILITY beyond the commodity-machine

“What happens when this commodity-machine —now conveniently located out of the view of most of us— breaks down, as environments give out, markets crash, and/or sweat-shop workers scattered across the globe somehow refuse to go on?”
Hal Foster, 2003.

I. crises of the commodity-machine

an unsustainable configuration vulnerable to multiple financial, social and ecological crises.



INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION

design & manufacture

- OWNERSHIP: monopoly on means of production [corporations, stockholders, intellectual property]
- LABOUR: professionalisation, division of labour, wage labour, top-down organisation
- GEOGRAPHIES: extractivism, North/South gap, “designed in California, assembled in China”



MARKET MEDIATION

marketing & advertisement

- separation of production and consumption
- capital in commodity-form, exchange goods
- distribution/allocation through exchange-value
- reproduction of exchange relations, competition



INDIVIDUAL CONSUMPTION

shopping mall & landfill

- consumerism, commodity fetishism
- planned and perceived obsolescence
- resource depletion, environmental pollution
- credit bubbles to fuel growth

it is not designed objects themselves that are unsustainable, but the economic relations they are embedded into, and design practices can be sustainable only if they are decoupled from this mode of production.

post-growth perspectives require a different framework that puts value production to the centre:

II. three domains of value production in design



DESIGN LABOUR

the activity of designing subjects
designer, builder, maker
research & innovation
creativity, pedagogy



DESIGN INTELLECT

the circulation of design projects
ideas, blueprints
knowledge base, know-how
use rights, licences



DESIGN ARTEFACT

the making of designed objects
tools, machines
infrastructure
means of production

to what extent emergent practices prefigure a new and sustainable basis for product design, and redirect the production and distribution of material artefacts towards viable, desirable and equitable configurations?
what social implications are at stake, in regards to employment, consumption, self-organisation, allocation of resources, self-sufficiency and autonomy of a community?

III. emergent postcapitalist design practices

bypassing market mediation, producing shared value, as opposed to exchange value.



PEER PRODUCTION

- Michel Bauwens: “to create value in common”
- collaboration (co-design)
- participation (user generation)
- amateurism (do-it-yourself)
- commons-based peer production, p2p



OPEN SOURCE

- networked, immaterial blueprints
- open/free/public licenses
- right to access, modify and share the knowledge
- public domain, copyleft, creative commons
- bridging global design & local production



DIGITAL FABRICATION

- self-production & collective ownership of the means of production
- peer property, common goods
- collaborative consumption, right to access
- appropriation of technologies, spaces, networks

André Gorz argues that an ‘exit from capitalism’ is already under way, and that the surpassing of a “society based on commodities, wages and money” depends primarily “on our capacity to discern the trends and practices that herald its possibility.”

this analysis will contribute to the understanding of a broader socio-cultural tendency:

IV. commoning: the production of commons



food, fuels
“bites”



designed objects
“stuff”



digital information
“bytes”

according to P.M.: “the future commons really boils down to two elements: access to land (i.e. food, fuels) = bites; and access to knowledge (the capacity to use and improve all means of production, material or immaterial) = bytes.”
I would argue that between bites and bytes, there is a third current of commoning, the production of design commons.