

TEXT 2

BITTEN STETTER

P. 429–436

A PLEA OF AN AESTHETIC FUTURE FOR DESIGN

This essay is a plea for an appreciation of surface things—for what is experienced physically, with the senses. It resists an approach that regards the social primarily as a “system of norms or as a chain of rational, utilitarian actions” and that reduces seeing, hearing, feeling and smelling to the processing of information, that is, a purely cognitive act. In short, the argument presented here is one in favour of aesthetics and aestheticisation.

This text opposes all retrograde ideas that “for the continuance of modern, Western societies, there is hardly anything as superfluous as the aesthetic.” This critical stance towards aesthetics has actually long been overcome, and so it is grotesque that it is currently no longer to be found in cultural studies nor in the natural sciences, but is now prevalent in the design field. In my opinion, this old-fashioned view does not adequately account for the essence of the aesthetic by unjustly regarding it as mere unnecessary décor. The aesthetic is placed under general suspicion of potentially facilitating the wastage of resources, and for being jointly responsible for unthinking consumption—something that would run counter to modern imperatives for sustainability, including “respect” and “awareness.”

It is all the more irritating to me as a designer who is active in teaching, research and practice when several practitioners in my own field join this chorus and insist that in the context of our shifting understanding of the world, we are *not* just engaged in superficial things any more, that we are *no longer* interested in the aesthetic, and that we do *not* just train designers of objects and surfaces. We live in a time when aesthetics are experiencing a radical erosion of boundaries in our consumer

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society, and when they are becoming ubiquitous in all areas of our social lives under the banner of “aestheticisation.” As a result, the above-mentioned negative approach is neither expedient nor forward-looking. It underestimates the significance of what is perceivable by the senses and forgets that it is only when we learn to decode the semiotics of design that we can grasp the political dimensions of the aesthetic.



Of course, designers too have to take a stand, in line with our current shift towards sustainable thinking. But we should certainly not manoeuvre ourselves back into upholding no-


tions that have long been overcome, and we should not be doing anything that defames our own talent, our own sphere of activity and our ability to act. We cannot deny that in our modern, Western, capitalist, technology-driven, consumer and achievement-oriented society, aesthetic practices have often broken through role systems and changed how we act in the socio-political field, and they have provided leverage for societal change. Nor may we ignore the fact that aestheticisation processes are, or can be, crucial in promoting sociality, criticism, communicating values and shaping the future.

Social scientists and cultural scholars seem to have grasped the relevance of aesthetic practices in our post-modern / hypermodern society better than we have, though we are co-producers of these practices, since their increased interest has in recent decades served to power the discourse about the “empire of things”  and “aesthetics and society”  in a positive way. In the following, I shall therefore endeavour to demonstrate that a deep engagement with surfaces, materials and symbols is not superfluous to design, but in fact essential to it, because aesthetics have an important persuasive function that can assert viable future practices on a broad basis.

“Consumption is omnipresent in highly developed, affluent societies, and it is difficult to contemplate spurning the regular consumption of products and services,” writes Francis Müller at the beginning of his lecture “Gesellschaft/Society: Haben oder Sein” (“Society: Having or Being”), and he points to the fact that we are part of a consumer society “in which central value orientations that determine our behaviour, along with our sense of entitlement, are geared

to acquiring and using products and services.”  These manifestations of consumption have several different levels of functional and symbolic use, as well as different communicative dimensions. They are linked to experiential content, they are at the centre of our attention, they symbolise our lifestyle, and form our identity. We not only negotiate the past and the present with them, but the future too. These products and services have a face, a material, a surface, and an inner and outer design, an aura—in short, an aesthetic visual manifestation. 

Taking a cue from Plessner, Aida Bosch writes that human beings, being made up of body and soul, have a “dual access” to the world. “Humans are directly given matter and distancing spirit—and in their living environment and in their practical experience they always have to refer the one to the other. Just as with their body, humans have a dual relationship to the material world that surrounds them. With the help of ideas, they can create theories about it and form and shape their environment.”  The basis for our spiritual engagement with our environment is our practical and corporeal experience that is itself based on a habitualised knowledge of the body.” 

In the year 2000, the phenomenon of a new, sustainable form of consumption was first described in books such as *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million Are Changing the World*.  Under the acronym LOHAS (Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability), sociologists and futurologists took a closer look at a new group of consumers who organise their lifestyle according to the principles of sustainability. This newly discovered consumer group differs from the environmentalists of the 1970s and '80s less through any new ethos 431

than through a new, aestheticised lifestyle. “We are the new environmentalists that the press often talks about,” says the LOHAS Manifesto of 2007. “Our consumption is consistently environmentally friendly and fair, without foregoing modernity. In contrast to the ‘old environmentalists,’ we are technology-friendly and pleasure-oriented. We [...] enjoy sustainably. We know about the consequences of our consumption and try to keep these as minimal as possible. We are interested in health, spirituality, sustainability and ecology. We go to yoga classes or do tai chi, we drink green tea and ‘bionade,’ We are often vegetarians.” These values are not fundamentally distant from those of the “old environmentalists”; their practitioners have “merely” adapted to new technological possibilities and to today’s pleasure-oriented lifestyle.

When we read this self-description ten years on, we cannot but think of the aesthetic manifestations of LOHAS. We see brown cardboard, green smoothies, feigned home-knitted woollen pullovers and “ideal-world” photos of an idyllic life in harmony with nature. Concepts such as “globalism” and mindfulness have aestheticised themselves in the shape of chalkboards with hand-written quality hallmarks such as “homemade” or “designed by nature.” We think up slogans such as “less is more” that have found their way onto the mobile “advertising pillars” of our time (namely 100% organic jute shopping bags) and “ethical fashion,” the latter also in its equally fair-trade versions “slow fashion” and “green fashion.”

This use of existing and past aesthetic codes makes it possible for us to rethink “old values” in new ways. Abstract concepts of sustainability become desirable again thanks to the

Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *Der neue Geist des Kapitalismus*, trans. Michael Tillmann (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2003)
Teigeler, “Greenmarketing,” 131 (translated from German).



Mareike Teigeler, “Greenmarketing,” in *Moral Phobia: Ein Zeitgeistglossar von Achtsamkeit bis Zigarette*, eds. Judith Mair and Bitten Stetter (Hamburg: Gudberg Neger, 2015), 131 (translated from German).



Bitten Stetter, “Green Fashion,” in *Moral Phobia: Ein Zeitgeistglossar von Achtsamkeit bis Zigarette*, eds. Judith Mair and Bitten Stetter (Hamburg: Gudberg Neger, 2015), 128.



ascetic aura and redesigns of products that seem to be in close touch with nature: they serve to reactivate existing knowledge. The contemporary aestheticisation of this eco-look and the implementation of a “sustainable lifestyle” enables (ecologically) uneducated consumers to identify more and more with bike-riding, with thermos flasks, and thereby also with a new, environmental and consumer-critical stance. “Capitalism itself is making use of this criticism of consumption; it is marketing a better, fairer form of consumption that at the same time becomes an expression of a critical, authentic, moral lifestyle that has integrity.”

This capitalist appropriation is brought about by artistic criticism and aesthetic practices and is something that Boltanski and Chiapello do not see merely as “green-washing” or a marketing strategy. Instead, they actually believe that this new moral form of consumption can renew the capitalist spirit so that it becomes more responsible, so that “it seems suited to leaving the old ‘narrow-mindedness’ behind it, with a view to achieving ‘non-economic values.’” And indeed this seems to be happening, given the increasing number of people voting for green parties and the committed climate demonstrations of children and young people. As Malcom Gladwell has said, “Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread like viruses do.” This awareness has changed by becoming mainstream, while a small group of consumption-happy muesli eaters has managed to use aestheticisation processes to sensitise a broad mass of people to environmental and socio-economic priorities. They have turned our consumer markets permanently upside down not just through

rational approaches, but by means one can perceive with the senses, and these in turn have now entered the economic and political agenda, both of which are ostensibly rationally controlled. ☞ By their material presence, things convey societal visions, and as representatives of symbolic ideas they can also alter human actions. The tangibility that can be experienced bodily “offers learning opportunities for those who are acting, and point beyond their purely object character. [...] their materiality is pure metaphor [...] but as such, materiality should not be neglected because the carrier material does not just express the idea, but co-forms it.” ☞ It is thus appropriate that “our behaviour-determining value orientation and sense of entitlement” ☞ is not just geared to acquiring services and products, but changes our acquisition of them, and also helps to shape our understanding of the world and initiates processes of societal change. Today, we can do without the “eco-look” and practise sustainability in modern, recyclable high-gloss materials.

I now ask straight out: is there anyone in our ranks who believes that it is only through non-aestheticised information—in other words, by means of pure facts and purely cognitive processes—that we are today able to speak with such vehemence about climate change and sustainable living across different generations? Do we really believe that mere abstract definitions have turned us into reflecting consumer-citizens—such as the definition of sustainability as “the process of people maintaining change in a homeostasis balanced environment, in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development and institutional change are all in harmony and

soziologische Relevanz,” in *Design der Gesellschaft: Zur Kulturoziologie des Designs*, eds. Stephan Moebius and Sophia Prinz (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015), 51 (translated from German). ☞ Müller, “Gesellschaft/Society,” 1 (translated from German).

Anja Kirig, Christian Rauch and Eike Wenzel, “Zielgruppe LOHAS: Wie der grüne Lifestyle die Märkte erobert” (Zukunftsinstitut, 2007). ☞ Aida Bosch, “Sinnlichkeit, Materialität, Symbolik: Die Beziehung zwischen Mensch und Objekt und ihre

enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations.” ☞ We are able to experience human communication when it is anchored in bodily, sensory living environments, and communications usually only acquire relevance by being experienced. ☞ “Language is a very significant medium for storing human knowledge and for passing it on to the next generations; but before all linguistic access to societal knowledge, there is our ontogenetic, haptic and visual interaction with our environment.” ☞

Things, along with their aesthetic appearance, are “forms of expression and vehicles of communication. They are complementary to linguistic expression, and can be alternatives to it. Just like language, they determine matters of distance or proximity.” ☞ This proximity or distance does not just have an impact on our sociality, but also makes it possible (or impossible) for us to access bigger societal, political issues. These issues naturally tend to be abstract, which would seem to recommend a purely linguistic means of processing them; and yet, we should not underestimate how sensual, corporeal means of access can foster our engagement with these issues and can offer complementary insights.

This is why we are arguing here in favour of also exploring aesthetic manifestations of non-desirable futures, and of observing the semiotics of things that have hitherto undergone no aestheticisation processes. This is because it is through these that we may be able to determine what goals and moral/ethical world views are being pursued by a performance-oriented, (post)capitalist society. The ugly, that which seems to be non-aesthetic, can be just as rich a source of knowledge as the beautiful. It offers insights into 433




Malcon Gladwell, *Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York: Brown and Company, 2000), 7ff.



collective values, or can be used as something anti-aesthetic and thus as a provocative, effective stylistic device in art and politics that brings to light socio-political structures that have become entrenched, or issues that have been repressed or tabooed.

But what happens when the non-aesthetic or de-aestheticised remains hidden because it seems inappropriate to make the “anti-aesthetic” productive? In my view, the ugly can prevent us from engaging with big, real-life topics such as disease, old age or death because it makes it impossible for us to experience a sense of identification or proximity. This in turn can mean that we fail to process relevant societal questions about the future, or that we are able to answer them only in a very one-sided, taciturn manner.

For this reason, we argue here all the more against any formalistic, rational objectivation of our lives, and against any stance that is oriented towards an image of the human being as acting in a manner determined purely by what is rational: because if we cast a glance at areas of consumption such as disease and death, our reaction is what is sketched out above.  So I ask: what images occur to us when we ponder concepts such as disease, dependency on care, or the end of life? Wizenod hands, covered in plasters, clasped in prayer, latex gloves, wood veneered hospital beds with bed trapezes, patterned hospital pyjamas, transparent rubber tubing, a sea of colours from chrome, steel-grey, disinfectant-blue to the white of the doctors' coats and the green scrubs of the nurses: all this would probably come to mind. Objects and their constituent materials, surfaces, and symbols are linked to a habitualised corporeal knowledge of illness, suffering and the fear of losing autonomy, but they also signify


Wikipedia contributors, “Sustainability,” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, accessed December 28, 2019, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sustainability&oldid=980213635>. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976), 123ff.

Aida Bosch, “Sinnlichkeit, Materialität, Symbolik,” 51ff. Hermann Bausinger, “Die Botschaft der Dinge,” in *Botschaft der Dinge*, eds. Joachim Kallinich and Bastian Bretthauer (Berlin: Wachtler, 2003), 10. See Andreas Reckwitz, “Ästhetik und Gesellschaft,” 17.



See Andreas Weber (Lecture, “Pal-liative Care und Organisationsethik,” Zurich, February 26–28, 2018).

Jasmin Mersmann, “Henkel, oder: Fünf Versuche, die Dinge in den Griff zu bekommen,” in *Dinge im Kontext: Artefakt, Handhabung und Handlungsästhetik zwischen Mittelalter und Gegenwart*, ed. Thomas Pöpper (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 88 (translated from German).



anonymity and the purpose-oriented standardisation process of economised medicine that is increasingly turning us into de-individualised bodies that are fragmented and processed efficiently in healthcare factories. They do not symbolise health or healing, nor do they signify well-being or loving care—and they certainly do not correspond to any understanding of “human-centred design.” Then again, one could also claim that these aesthetics are in a perverse sense appropriate because they “sell” illness and mortality (or a state of being “non-productive”) as something correspondingly ugly. If we pursue this economic, outside perspective of the non-affected, then any beautification of these areas of life must accordingly seem inappropriate. However, those affected would surely benefit from aestheticised image and product worlds, as various medical studies have already proven,  though these have had hardly any impact hitherto on the design of environments for the sick and dying. If we consider the depressing images that symbolise care dependency, it seems that societal taboos and repression are actually co-responsible for them. This speechlessness—both individual and of society as a whole—is what I have been inves-


tigating in my research on the topic of “Palliative care und design,” where I analyse the material culture of dying in the past, present, and a putative future. One question that particularly occupies me is this: What effect does the lack of a material culture (or a de-aestheticised culture) have on our relationship to illness and death?

“Every handle is made for a body, and also has an impact on it, though the manner of handling it and its connotations [...] alter throughout history.”  Today, for example, feeding cups have no handles; “they are made of hard plastic, are dishwasher-safe, de-individualised, and not adapted to the individual needs of the patients.”  Even in the mid-19th century, things were different. Beak-shaped drinking vessels in more varied forms were available for those in care, and they could be made of high-quality materials—if only for a small, well-off portion of society.

If we take a closer look at feeding cups of hard plastic, uniform hospital pyjamas, and adult diapers in the spirit of democratic consumption and a more mindful lifestyle, then they might not appear anti-aesthetic, but certainly represent a non-aesthetic provocation that makes us aware in concrete terms of our relationship to illness, death, and profit-oriented health policies. However, if, by contrast, we look at historical, fligree, porcelain feeding cups, they have the appearance of a kind of societal utopia that acknowledges the reality of weakness and a need for care. The function of both cups is fundamentally identical, but the approach to the world that lies behind them is, from today’s perspective, completely different.

If we were to acknowledge the power of the aesthetic and make use of it, rather like the LOHAS adherents


 Reckwitz, “Ästhetik und Gesellschaft,” 14 (translated from German).

 Bitten Stetter, “Design & Palliative Care (Teil II): Dinge, Identität, Lebensstile,” *NOVAcura: Das Fachmagazin für Pflege und Betreuung* 51, no. 6 (2019), 42 (translated from German).



did a few years ago, then mortality and the state of being ill might become socially acceptable again, just as being environmentally friendly once managed to achieve such acceptance; our narrow-mindedness towards weakness and the weak might be overcome, and “non-economic” values like well-being, solidarity and care could once again rise to the sensually experienceable surface. A small, international group of “death-positive thinkers” is currently driving this process. For my part, I believe that this will all be impossible without “redesigning dying.” This is why I am using design-ethnographic methods to investigate the last phase of life from the perspective of consumer sociology, and as part of my research I am designing sensually experiential care objects under the brand name “Final Studio,” in which a different, more conscious, holistic approach to the end of life is made material.

The ubiquity of the aesthetic and the change of thinking among a few people is already having an impact in “enticing” Swiss health and care institutions into cooperating with designers, in the hope that new aesthetic approaches may succeed in breaking through hardened taboos. Thus in the field of Trends & Identity, research collaborations are beginning with the Centre for Palliative Care at the Waid City Hospital in Zurich, and with the teaching curriculum on the topic of “the end of life” at the Aargau Hospice.

I shall close here with a request to teachers and students alike that they should not regard manifestations of consumption as over-aestheticised banalities, but as harbingers of possible future developments that are oriented towards either the current or past zeitgeist. I should like to warn them against comprehending the aesthetic “as a purely cogni- 435

tive value that acts in the service of emotionally neutral behaviour control.”  Because of such a mindset, we are in danger of forgetting that as designers we do not act outside our socio-economic, political, and cultural system, but within it, and it also ignores the fact that observing what is generally considered “beautiful,” “trendy” and “ugly” can, on the one hand, be a useful instrument for analysing society and, on the other, an apt tool for designing the future, because an “aesthetic turn” can be key to a future that is more desirable.

This is why we should teach our students to take every aesthetic discovery seriously, to place it in a broader societal context and to ask: why do things look the way they do? Why did they used to look different? What should things look like in order to be the harbingers of a better world and to open the door to a society of the future?

Analysing the aesthetic means researching into trends and changes in values. It can tell us about the present in which we are designing, and in what kind of future we might want to live one day. If we do not do this, we risk being led by aesthetics and shaped by them without becoming aware of it. The “dark side of aesthetics” ultimately lies in the fact that it can also be instrumentalised and used as a means of manipulation, as in the case of Neo-Nazi hipsters, the so-called “Nipsters,”  and in trends such as the “Identitarian Movement.” A conscious approach to the sensual, to materiality and symbolism can counter this, however, if we learn to read signs and things that are encoded: because, whether we like it or not, it is aesthetics and material culture that to a large degree serve as the “social glue” that holds our world together. 

Aida Bosch, “Einleitung: Die Inklusionskraft der Dingwelt,” in *Konsum und Exklusion: Eine Kulturosoziologie der Dinge* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2010), 10.

2019, <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/heil-hipster-the-young-neo-nazis-trying-to-put-a-stylish-face-on-hate-64736>.

Thomas Rogers, “Heil Hipster: The Young Neo-Nazis Trying to Put a Stylish Face on Hate,” *RollingStone*, June 23, 2014, accessed November 20,

ANALYSING THE AESTHETIC MEANS RESEARCHING INTO TRENDS AND CHANGES IN VALUES

ANALYSING

P. 63
P. 83
P. 135
P. 241
P. 269
P. 356
P. 370
P. 436

AESTHETIC

P. 55
P. 63
P. 77
P. 83
P. 84
P. 135
P. 142
P. 143
P. 144
P. 154
P. 229
P. 323
P. 324
P. 334
P. 335
P. 336
P. 340
P. 341
P. 365
P. 377
P. 424
P. 430
P. 431
P. 432
P. 433
P. 434
P. 435
P. 436
P. 457
P. 469
P. 469
P. 470

VALUES

P. 93
P. 114
P. 115
P. 211
P. 221
P. 237
P. 238
P. 240
P. 252
P. 272
P. 354
P. 360
P. 424
P. 431
P. 432
P. 434
P. 435
P. 436
P. 469

