Gullible consumers: the Contradictions of [1]Sustainability

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The contradictions of sustainability are the way brands greenwash their practices to signal their good and ethical practices, and how they continue to create products and services branded as sustainable that we just do not need, but never challenging the systems that created the problems to begin with. In this chapter, I use entries from my book *Designerly Ways of Knowing: A Working Inventory of Things a Designer Should Know* (Abdulla, 2022) to explore these contradictions.

To broaden my scope and produce knowledge differently, I lean into amateurism. I quote Edward Said who draws on the literal meaning of the word in French: "the love of something"(Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, 2009). The somethings Said loved; he was very involved in without being a professional. Throughout his life and career, Said fought against the trappings of specialisation and raised questions about issues that spanned multiple disciplines and areas beyond his own specialisation of literature. I believe that a designer cannot be anything but an amateur, because design – no matter how you define it – is about everything.

In thinking about the contradictions of sustainability, I observed poor systems at play, particularly health care and supermarkets – the latter of which many of us spent a lot of time in over the COVID-19 pandemic. I will return to the supermarket towards the end. I asked myself questions such as

- why only the damaging measures of surveillance put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic remained
- did society's individualism help spread the virus more than it could have
- how could big transportation projects cost billions and proper signage is overlooked
- why do professional athletes make so much money
- how can countries so rich have so many food banks

- why are public toilets still disgusting despite enhanced cleaning measures and people still don't wash their hands
- why do people keep windows closed on public transit during a pandemic
- why do we make things such as Sodastream or laundry tablets or coffee tablets or banana slicers or Fitbits?
- And why do we – humans – continue to believe that everything that exists can be made sustainable?

"This society of ours is a society of consumers," states Zygmunt Bauman, "and just as the rest of the world as seen-and-lived by consumers, culture turns into a warehouse of meant-for-consumption products – each vying for the shifting/drifting attention of prospective consumers in the hope to attract it and hold it for a bit longer than a fleeting moment." (Bauman, 2009, 157)

Our consumer society is fuelled by the type of person successive governments in the Global North have worked to promote: the resilient, individualistic and productive person who is at the service of the economy. You can see this in how mental health is discussed: healing is a personal journey, practice self-care.

In thinking about the consumer society, I was reminded of Kathrynn Yusoff's quote: "The solutions and proposals are all about the continuance of the current statis of inequality, powered by other means". (Yusoff, 2018, 28)

In this chapter, I focus on brands since I have been documenting what I deem contradictions since 2019. However, the last year has witnessed an abundance of green, plant based, clean, natural, and the now token diversity language in adverts. To quote Marshall McLuhan, "When a thing is current, it creates currency" and sustainability and social justice are *de rigeur*.

Generation Z may be touted as the social justice and climate change advocate generation, but it is all through brands, which have cannibalised every aspect of our lives. We live in a world of privatisation which has slithered into every aspect of life. All experiences are branded, and all spaces are those of consumption – increasingly sustainable – accompanied by any army of henchmen: the private security guard.

Brands impersonate political struggles, but a performative solidarity with these struggles. I started thinking about how much of a role design plays in this development. While design is not a recognised area of critical study, the lack of seriousness it is given undermines the power it has to form futures. Design has facilitated the blurring of need and desire by manufacturing desire. Designers are the creators and keepers of neoliberal dreams.

When I refer to designers, I am referring to the industry but also calling on those designers who can use their collective power to begin to change the industry. Designers, as Niki Wallace argues, "are also agents who are capable of taking action that contravenes the recursive practices that are visible in industry norms". (Wallace, 2019, 84)

Truly contradictory?

I start the journey at a hotel: “To help us save the environment, please reuse your towel,” the sign urges the guests. In the same bathroom where this sign hangs, you will find a small bottle of body wash, another one for shampoo and conditioner, a bar of soap rolled in paper with a sticker on top, a plastic cup wrapped in plastic (or paper), and Nescafé sachets. The situation represents the contradictions of sustainability.

Contradictions of sustainability are all around us. From the airport regulations that require you to fit all toiletries into 100ml/ 3oz bottles in a plastic bag and having to dump any drink (even if under 100ml)/ 3oz before going through security to force you to buy another one wrapped in plastic, to the plastic cutlery wrapped in plastic or the paper cups and bottles and the packaged food on the airline, to the reusable plastic bag initiatives. They are referred to as contradictions because the very companies who preach about their sustainable practices are the ones driving the problems. But why are we so gullible? While I cannot provide an answer to this question, I will attempt to dive further into the issue and explore the reason behind why we find these initiatives so attractive.

Uniqlo

I will begin with Japanese clothing retailer Uniqlo. Tucked away at the bottom of their web page, visitors will find a link to “Sustainability”. In the store, there is a transparent donation box, visually demonstrating their mission to “Unlocking the Power of Clothing”. Uniqlo's three pillars are people, planet, and community.

Uniqlo is a fast fashion brand not attempting to reduce the amount of clothing they produce (they remain, like the entire fashion industry, married to seasons), but to donate unwanted goods to disaster victims and socially vulnerable groups, working with the charity Goods for Good, amongst other recycling initiatives. The continent of Africa being the world's recycling bin, with a substantially higher number of goods donated there than anywhere else in the world. Good intention sustainability.

Uniqlo’s sustainability mission claims the company wants to turn the power of clothing into a force for good by making and selling good clothing that is made to last, is comfortable and pleasurable, without excessive burden on the environment, and under good (read non sweatshop) environments. I am not opposed to a company making these claims, but they can use their power to reduce the amount of collections and garments produced, challenging the seasonal notion and offering staple, key, comfortable, necessary items. That is working towards a more just and sustainable society. Unfortunately, like many brands, Uniqlo seduces audiences of its good natured business through infographics that simplify complicated processes.

The dangers of short-term decision making

Many sustainability initiatives are no more than buyback initiatives. Buyback programmes signal the danger of short-term decision making and the dangers of seeking out simplicity. At times, buying back requires people to jump through multiple hoops to acquire it, whether by requiring multiple pieces of personal information to ensure one in fact did purchase the product

from them, or by claiming to have a system in place which is suddenly "being reviewed", or by putting a time limit on the store credit or a minimum spend. The final offer is always worth less than the labour involved, as demonstrated in figure 9.1, which reads "Recycle your old electronics here, when purchasing a new item. […] You must provide your proof of purchase and can only exchange one old item when purchasing a new one".

These initiatives only increase consumption: recycle clothes through the company, feel good by doing it, and get money off your next t-shirt. How can we begin to think differently if every company that has the ability to enact change comes up with short term, silly solutions? Sustainable brands may claim "green" credentials, but like others before them, they use the same techniques to keep you consuming: take £10 (or 10 dollars) off your next order, free delivery or 20 percent off your purchase. Just stay with us.

Buyback programmes only divert the problem elsewhere: far away from our eyes, to second hand markets and landfills in countries like Ghana and Chile. Little is known on pre and post production waste. (Simpliciano, 2022)

In the last two decades, the values of both the second-hand clothing market and the second-hand electronic market have exploded. But these so-called revolutions ignore how this benefits those who handle the waste generated.

FIGURE 1. ARGOS RECYCLE YOUR ELECTRICALS CAMPAIGN, LONDON (2022). PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR.

FIGURE 2. OVERFLOWING ELECTRICAL ITEMS RECYCLING BANK, LONDON (2022). PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR.

The system itself does not make recycling goods easier. Recycling old electronics is not a simple process, and although companies state that you can recycle old goods, you have to purchase a new product to recycle an old one. We dispose, turn around, and feel good about ourselves (as

illustrated by figure 9.2 which signals that by putting it beside the bin, it is now someone else's responsibility to take care of this). There are supposed strategies being put in place to manage end of life, but what about the birthing of this process – that which should not happen (see *When not to Design* below).

Stakeholder and investor pressure on carbon emissions are easier than discussing labour conditions. Instead of focusing on the second-hand market for clothes, electronics, cars, products and so on, there should be an emphasis on making less things that actually last, and changing people's mindsets around ownership of tools that are used infrequently and are better shared. Continuing to take planned obsolescence in mind is the reason we have a huge second-hand market and waste to begin with.

Good On You

The greenwashing agenda of fashion brands is propped up by a whole industry of sustainable shopping initiatives and organisations that "measure" the impact of their work. Some of these are genuinely calling out the problems but others are increased forms of greenwashing. I draw on two examples. The first is Good on You, an Australian sustainable and ethical brand ratings website that urges you to wear the change you want to see. They state that it is a group of campaigners, fashion professionals, scientists, writers and developers who have come together to have a real impact using the one powerful weapon we all have in common: the ability to choose.

Good on You seeks to choose and reward responsible fashion brands that do good for a more sustainable and fair industry. They use expert analysis to conduct their work and contribute to the UN Sustainable Development goals (UN SDG). Similarly, to most initiatives, it is apolitical. Framing it in an apolitical way makes us accept everything as a given, and it is easily sold and packaged. In their analysis of Nike, they rate the company as: "It may not be a big change but it's a start." Here lies the problem: we continue to encourage good intentions, and now everything is a small change and yet none are making big changes. Moreover, it skims through the open documentation of Nike's use of sweatshops using forced labour. But hey, it's a start.

Shady Club

The second example is Shady Club, an image-based Chrome browser plugin that identifies which products are sustainable as you shop. It uses visual icons to identify the rating (typically using the green amber red to do so) and directs you to a more sustainable brand. To seek out information on how they have developed and collated this data, you will find a coming soon under their FAQ.

The dangers of seeking out simplicity & the dangers of greenwashing

This is the extent of our imagination – a form of awareness campaign that seemingly thinks it will disrupt a whole industry. The limits of our imagination are found in the products and services pushed through by Instagram and Facebook to entice you to buy. Many of these take

basics, for example cotton buds, cotton swabs, laundry detergent, lunch, bedding, and add some sustainable features and copy about how the old way is not working and should be disrupted.

But the new way is the old way with a slight twist. The differences are almost always superficial, suffering from featuritis. There is no real look into the systems that cause this product to be unsustainable to begin with. Like most design solutions, it is a quick fix (figure 9.3). Thanks to the internet and social media, products still in beta are pushed. It is the same manufacturing processes and problems with the promise of a longer lasting product.

FIGURE 3. SIMPLIFYING SYSTEMS BY RECYCLING AND EQUATING RECYCLING WITH HEROIC ACTIONS. LONDON (2022) PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR.

The consumer capitalist system generates problems of waste, excess, obesity, etc., and they counter this with commodified solutions (Reith, 2019) – low-fat, low calorie options; think of McDonald's offering salads. It is the same when replacing plastic with compostable and biodegradable. This only fuels the problem by giving people the illusion they can consume even more because it is not harmful. Has the inventor of the paper lid and paper straw really considered how ineffective a material it is for the function?

Moreover, recycling systems are not necessarily in place to support these new materials and let us now forget how confusing most – if not all – people find the recycling system. Recycling, for most people, still appears to be the only way the earth will be saved. Recycling is a powerful brand with a strong story because it relies on how little people know about "material sourcing, production volumes, input substitution and property acquisition" (MacBride , 2019), and not to mention understanding the recycling symbols. The more you recycle, the more is produced (Liboiron 2021).

Kickstarter, Instagram, Facebook and the market overall contains an increasing number of commodities and lifestyles on offer, but they often fail to meet our expectations. We then throw them out and others replace them quicker than ever before (Bauman, 2007). Acquire the lifestyles you want, pursue pleasure, instant gratification and self-realisation through easy credit and contactless payments. The acquisition of debt submits us to the economic status quo. Our transactions are surveyed to push more content through platforms to buy more. "Less friction, more consumption" (Kuang, Fabricant , 2020, 235) as the UX/UI mantra goes. And this will only increase: The 2022 Instagram trend report states that 1 in 4 teenagers and young people (27%) shop directly via social media, a statistic they will surely capitalise on. Even Google has worked out a way to make your shopping experience easier: enable scanning of your screenshots to shop for products.

But a saturated market leads to anxiety. Designers work on developing new ways of interacting with the abundance of choice that paralyses "consumers". Think of the video store experience versus the decision-making anxiety of the streaming service interface. It remains unsolved.

Cost of living crisis

Worse yet is the normalisation of the cost of living crisis: the guides produced by companies to help you save money through investing in electricity saving gadgets and advice from governments and businesses on how to stay warm this winter. It seems any form of suffering can be exploited for gain, and the power of the disimagination machine – the cultural apparatuses undermining our ability "to think critically, imagine the unimaginable, and engage in thoughtful and critical dialogue [...] to become critically informed citizens of the world". (Giroux, 2013, 263)

When not to design

Think for a minute about all the products designers have developed – thinking – at the time – this is a need, this will make me money, this is genius. Returning to my introduction, products like Sodastream, Medicine massage mat, Fitbits, Portable fans, a banana slicer – everything in the Danish variety-chain shop Flying Tiger which continues to manufacture nonsensical objects

and charges you for a bag and claims it is sustainable – laundry tablets, coffee pods, the whole universe of accessories around phones, and so on and so forth (figure 9.4).

FIGURE 4. BANANA BOX AND BANANA SLICER AT FLYING TIGER, LONDON (2019). PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR.

The solutions we create choose to ignore the complexity of the world in which we inhabit. We choose to look at the simplest way forward and fixate on technology fixing our problems away. Different materials will solve our planetary extinction, while consumption levels remain the same. Why? I outline the three reasons why in their imagining futures, designers are becoming conservative or arbitrary stated by John Chris Jones (Jones, 1992):

1. Copying outward form of what came before
2. Refuge in personal sense of artistry
3. Economics (cheap materials)

For Jones, designers are abrogating responsibility, hence creating further problems. This is where designers need to think about

Someone can always claim this product is useful, but if you take Sodastream, the banana slicer, or the coffee pods away, what actually happens? As something artificial, it is not the same as making a species extinct. Now taking away all plastics will actually have consequences, because as scholar Max Liboiron cautions, not all plastics are equal:

> For example, the term single-use plastics includes medical plastics, disposable packaging, and other items. Conflating them can cause harm, particularly when there are calls to ban all single-use plastics" [...] Without differentiating between medical plastics (while also making them less toxic … and other single-use plastics, or differentiating between pvc (which is full of toxic chemicals) and silicone (less so), or differentiating between plastic use and plastic production, it is impossible to be responsible to the problems and ethics of plastic pollution. This is just one way to think about the relationships among differentiation, specificity, ethics, and obligation in plastics. There's not even a We for plastics. (Liboiron, 2021, 27-28)

What we take for granted

I am going to briefly discuss another realm of consumption: large events. During the COVID-19 pandemic, large sporting events, conferences and festivals were postponed, taking place a year later with limited audiences. Spectacles like the Olympics and the World Cup see millions spent on opening and closing ceremonies for a few hours of entertainment. We need to look more closely at our obsession with tradition. After all, as Mark Perryman shows in his book on the Olympics, the Olympic torch relay "was an invention of the Nazis – brought to you by Adolf Hitler, with stage production by Joseph Goebbels. Conceived for the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the torch relay was originally intended to showcase the racial superiority of the Aryan nation as the flame travelled around Europe." (Perryman, 2012, 151). Instead, our solution is to think of how we can make these events more sustainable, as shown in figure 9.5, where Time Out London provides a way for individuals to "green up their act" at festivals.

FIGURE 5. GREEN UP YOUR ACT GUIDANCE FROM TIME OUT LONDON, 2019. PHOTOGRAPHY BY AUTHOR.

However, prior to the 1980s, the Olympics celebrated amateurism and were not as corporate. This all changed after the 1984 summer games in Los Angeles, with both the "commercialization of the Games and professionalization of the athletes, [which] have been key to the dramatic transformation of the Olympics into what they are today". (Perryman, 2012, 190) The design of the identity of the 1984 Olympics (by Deborah Sussman and Paul Prezja) reflected this commercialisation by being absolutely everywhere. Finally, we should remember that travelling fans were not as common as they are now, which was made easier by the deregulation of

European air travel in the late 1980s and led to the rise of cheap budget airlines. The Olympics – and any large sporting event – "are designed to serve the interests of the [International Olympic Committee] IOC in maintaining and defending their very particular model of the Olympics, and not the needs of the host city and nation." (Perryman, 2012, 151)

When Naomi Klein wrote *No Logo* over 20 years ago, the world was asking if "your sneakers are "No Sweat"? Your rugs "Rugmark"? Your soccer balls "Child Free"? Your moisturizer "Cruelty-Free"? Your coffee "Fair Trade"?" Now it is all about how clean or plant-based or vegan or carbon-neutral you are (figure 9.6). As Klein cautioned back in 1999, "[s]ome of these initiatives have genuine merit, but the challenges of a global labor market are too vast to be defined – or limited – by our interests as consumers". (Klein, 1999, 428) What has changed other than the marketing copy and brands signalling how *good* they are? The brands pushed in our feeds only talk about the impact of the materials used. Calling something 'natural' or 'plant based' strips away complexity, simplifying the process into the dualist and binary Cartesian way of viewing the world. Moreover, as "consumers", we pressure companies to tackle their materials but we do not focus on the invisible labour behind the objects we consume; how much pressure is on changing business operations and supply chains?

FIGURE 6. ADVERT ON THE LONDON UNDERGROUND FOR GRIND COFFEE PODS THAT DO NOT DESTROY THE PLANET, LONDON (2022). PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR.

In *No Logo,* which itself emphasised the severity of a situation that seems – on reflection – much simpler than what we are facing now, Klein outlined: "For the system to function smoothly, workers must know little of the marketed lives of the products they produce and consumers must remain sheltered from the production lives of the brands they buy." (Klein, 1999, 347). In other words, a capitalist economy is one of the good life and one of waste, and waste must be disposed of without being seen. (Vergès, 2021)

Forced labour remains an even more growing problem in many sectors including services, manufacturing, construction and agriculture. Manufacturing accounts for 1/5th (over 3 million people globally) of forced labour exploitation of adults in the lower tiers of domestic or global supply chains, whereas services accounts for 1/3rd (over 5.5 million people).

The demands of greater social and environmental responsibility are missing a key demand: mark-up of products is close to 400 per cent in some instances due to low labour costs. Workers could be working between 12 to 16 hours, often these are young women who work for contractors or subcontractors who are filling orders for larger companies based in the US, Canada, Germany, Japan or the UK. Low skill, tedious work, for below subsistence wages and for an abusive boss. (Klein, 1999) Denying someone's freedom and their economic and social agency to make the goods we consume.

Change would require pressure on businesses and the governments where they do business to implement new policies to prevent abuse from businesses operating in their jurisdiction, where there is respect for human rights in their operations and supply chains. If companies are presenting social accountability, they have to live up to it. While some do, sophisticated design and copy can highlight certain "wins" but hide the ugly truths. How far down are we presenting data? Trade agreements now include labour provisions, however only about one-third of trade agreements from the last decade "contained provisions relating specifically to freedom from forced labour and other fundamental rights at work" (ILO, 2022, 94). In addition, there remains secrecy around production volumes. Brands disclose their supplier policy, but little disclose how it is implemented (Simpliciano, 2022). One third of major fashion brands score between 0-10 per cent on the fashion transparency index. Secrecy on suppliers, policies and commitments persist because international trading rules do not enforce these measures nor prevent companies from paying low wages, selling off factories and making deals with dictators. (Klein, 1999)

Growth

If there are so many more initiatives around sustainable business, why are we consuming more, and wasting resources at an even quicker pace? Because growth is the goal, and growth is the only supposed way to finance the sustainable practices companies aspire to. The promises for doing better, cutting carbon emissions and so on and so forth, remain empty promises if the main drive is profit and growth.

The same logic of planned obsolescence lies behind the sustainable products we are now being exposed to, convincing you of something new and better. By buying a more sustainable version, you are saving the earth from oblivion. Cheap products continue and will continue to get made.

Newer sustainable products are priced at a premium, attracting a specific segment of society and signalling to those that cannot afford it that this is not for them. How expensive second hand clothing or so-called sustainable products are should have us thinking about why the other stuff is so cheap. We all know people tend to overvalue things – think of the price of homes, or how people sell H&M (the multinational Swedish clothing company) tops they bought for £20 for over £40 on online marketplaces. As the saying goes, only the rich can afford to buy cheap. Everyone should have access to good quality products that last. As I've written elsewhere

> Convenience is the most underestimated and least understood force in the world today. All around the world, convenience—more efficient and easier ways of doing personal tasks—has emerged as perhaps the most powerful driver shaping our individual lives and our economies. Convenience seems to make our decisions for us, trumping what we like to imagine are our true preferences. Easy is better; easiest is best. While convenience has its benefits, it also has a dark side. It makes us lazy—spoiled by immediacy. (Abdulla, 2021)

The glamour of throwaway culture from the post-War period that led to the culture of convenience should be abolished. Instead, we should remove the idea that repairs and the time it takes to repair are not cost effective, but we cannot expect everyone to suddenly be able to repair things themselves. Basic repair skills should be taught at a young age, to help people gain the confidence to mend their garments and fix their electronics more easily. While objects have become easier to use due to the illusion of seamless user experience, we have lost the ability to control "how things work, to take them apart, and to question the assumptions that guide their creation." "The more seamless an experience is," Cliff Kuang writes, "the more opaque it becomes" (Kuang, Fabricant, 268). Our gadgets now make our decisions for us, and we sit back and accept it for the sake of convenience.

Aviation and The Military

I have focused on industrial consumption looking at fashion, products and services, but the aviation industry accounts for over 2.5 percent of global CO2 emissions, roughly speaking because of how emissions are attributed. The industry also produces millions of tonnes of cabin waste due to strict restrictions put on food safety, hygiene, freshness and so on, and rules imposed to avoid disease transfer, therefore catering is often incinerated or buried in landfill, preventing reuse and recycling. Interestingly, over the last twenty years, airlines have developed inventive ways to cut costs, including developing a whole bag industry around low-cost airlines, a travel size toiletries industry, and not to mention the bottled water phenomenon. Surely they can develop innovative solutions to this problem. Here's their solution.

It is difficult not to be amused by the paradox European ultra-low-cost carrier RyanAir offers you: the option to offset your emissions for a small fee (after they've bombarded you with all the other add ons). Airlines will continue to fly, and it will continue to be cheaper to fly from London to any European city due to transportation infrastructure and costs. Why should I be inconvenienced with all the changes required to reach my destination for a higher price? It is far worse in North America, where lobbying efforts by car manufacturers contribute to poor transportation systems and flying is easier. To think that in countries with the largest land mass in the world, there are no bullet trains. Such is the power of lobbying. Even as financial collapse

and environmental disaster loom, there is no pressure on changing things, on re-evaluating the systems that continue to support this, there is only pressure only on greening airlines.

Another industry whose carbon footprint outweighs most countries and is seldom discussed is the military. The US department of defence has a larger carbon footprint and emits more carbon dioxide than nation states on their own. (Crawford, 2022) The military is a space where design, engineering and technology thrive; a space where future technology develops at the expense of people's lives, which then turns them to seemingly harmless commercial technologies. Standardisation and component interchangeability actually came from US government agencies, and the methods developed quickly became the global system of manufacturing.

Designing over time

So far, I have outlined the problems of the sustainable market. However, if we look at these products from the standpoint of the term sustainability, then they are doing exactly that: sustaining. The main delivery of sustainability as it was originally popularised is economic. Therefore, there are no contradictions because we do exactly as the system wants us to do. We blame nature rather than understand this is a condition we have created ourselves. But I used the term sustainability because it is difficult to get rid of it, and the term itself is fuelled by global initiatives such as the UN Sustainable development goals.

There is much reliance and faith on big global governance organisations and foundations such as the Bill Gates foundation, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, the World Economic Forum, the IMF, and the UN SDGs. The proposed "global" strategies have not accomplished much – they are devised by and on behalf of the dominant global system. Those who created the conditions for the climate crisis are the same ones setting and controlling the interests of fighting it by setting the debate and the conditions for the debate to take place.

Reducing one's plastic consumption and attaining a zero-waste life are a much easier sell than questioning injustice, inequity and environmental catastrophe. Moreover, placing the origins of environmental destruction nearer to the 1800 Industrial Revolution denies that the system that led to the modern-day climate crisis in the first place is colonialism, "the centuries-long effort to dominate other peoples and exert political and economic control over their territories". (Sugla, 2021) Colonialism

> facilitated a system of resource extraction that not only includes practices such as fossil fuel manufacturing, but also clear cutting of forests, industrial agriculture, and water-intensive mining. All these practices … fed industrialization and a culture of consumption that neatly tracked the rise of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere. Resource extraction hinges on the displacement of Indigenous peoples — a reality that is intentionally hidden from most of the world, in an attempt to justify business as usual. (Sugla, 2021)

One only needs to look at the media coverage of the Pakistan floods in June 2022 – where millions were displaced and had to walk through water. The effects of ecological catastrophe is something that happens to brown bodies *elsewhere*.

The continuation of these practices makes crisis a permanent condition caused not by nature but by the systems humans have created. The emergence of the coronavirus pandemic is a case

in point. This was “a consequence of our hyper-consumption, our waste systems, the privatisation of our essential services, the exploitation and oppression of people all over the world” (Vergès, 2021). COVID-19 may have changed the world, but it did not change anything about how we think. If we are unable to reflect on the root causes of our unsustainable world, will we be just as unprepared for the next pandemic? We humans must work to unlearn viewing sustainability as just another “what’s in it for me” situation.

To conclude, I would like to look at some possibilities of designing over time, to expand the picture beyond the product/service realms and propose more general ideas.

The first is consumer anticipation. After well over a decade of creating consumer anticipation for new devices, how does this then become an unlearned anticipation? We could consider imposing rules on smartphone giants like Apple and Samsung: what if phones were made to last and constructed in a way where they did not require a secondary market of screen protectors and cases?

The second is modularity, which is slowly becoming a design consideration with an increase of products that combine features in a meaningful way. For example, a bed that also has a side table fitting by the Danish brand ReFramed, or a multifunctional pan from the UK brand Our Place. These solutions are simple, but they take a critical look at our obsession with featuritis – a problem fuelled by a lack of critical design education that fails to educate designers in developing literacy, in dealing with complexity, in understanding the unintended consequences of what we make before and after it is made, and in moving away from an obsession with outcomes.

A designer can go a long way in looking at an object and thinking what was going through the designer’s head when they first designed it. The challenge of designing over time is to get designers and/or anyone facing challenges to go back to the moment something was designed: why was it designed this way? What were the conditions and the context in which this came to be?

Modularity considers replacing pieces of an object rather than the whole. However, replacing objects remains a difficult endeavour. Rather, buying a whole new one is easier and cheaper. How often should we replace objects? Should tags be implemented to remind us how to care for things to extend their life? What about repair? To repeat my earlier statement, a repair culture requires the creation of conditions to enable it, such as training people in repair at an early age. Replacibility and refillability are being considered by smaller brands, but bigger brands and companies who have the larger market share are falling behind.

Third, designing over time is not only looking at the material outcome and placing the designer at the end of the process, but understanding the different positions designers have in the system, by learning to engage the entire ecosystem. What restrictions are considered before making a thing? For example, how serious are conversations about abolishing seasons for the fashion industry, or considering modular wardrobes, or moving away from a focus on materials and landfill and demanding humane labour conditions and pay for the very people who make our things?

Fourth, designing over time means looking at necessities such as water, heating and the internet as communal rather than individual commodities.

In the introduction I said I would return to the supermarket. Supermarkets are one of the first places where we can begin to design over time. Throughout the last two years, the dangers of a food system reliant on just in time delivery have been revealed. Record high inflation and sky-rocketing prices means more and more people are struggling to afford groceries, and despite coming face to face with empty shelves and panic buying during a pandemic, there remains an inability to imagine an alternative to our food systems.

What if large supermarkets were required to be entirely refillable where possible? What if convenience products like chopped onions and garlic, and bulk buying were abolished to make room for shopping based on need instead of desire? The rise of refillable stores and cooperatives are welcome, but as Ann Larson argues, these "are often dismissed as offbeat boutiques frequented by hippies and the upper classes, while the vast majority of us shop in supermarkets". (Larson, 2022)

Conclusion

In this chapter, I worked through more simple propositions because large scale change and meaningful actions demands planning and time. I propose what me and Pedro Oliveira term minor gestures:

> Thinking in terms of minor gestures allows us to work on the very pervasiveness of the infrastructures of capital and colonialism. At the same time, minor gestures do not eschew the necessity of addressing the structural causes of inequality, mental illness, dehumanization, and environmental destruction; minor gestures can be a way of de-structuring and disarming that which seems inevitable to escape from. Minor gestures are localized, subversive acts that can be performed to expand the limits of a given enclosed system. [...] They are radical in the sense of exposing, addressing, and tackling the root, while they escape being caught or apprehended by common, diminishing connotations. (Abdulla, Oliveria, 2023)

Most importantly, they "do not replace the need (and the demand) to dismantle institutional power, nor the collective, organized struggle towards systemic change," (Abdulla, Oliveria, 2023) but should be viewed as a starting point to build up towards something, never a finality. The place to start is by addressing the crisis of imagination. If systems thinking is about questioning basic assumptions, it should teach people to question the very terms of the things we think are just "normal". Let us remove the shackles of the past that determine our future by relying on the same systematic patterns that produced the previous problem and leave them to repeat those patterns; to let go of the familiar and lay with the discomfort, the discomfort that can help imagine the world anew.

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