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Power in Transformation

Creative Practices as
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POWERING THE COMMONS THROUGH DESIGN: EMBRACING THE AESTHETICS OF CONVIVIAL IMPERFECTION

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How can design strategically strengthen non-capitalist and postcapitalist economies and increase the social power of those sustaining them? What role does aesthetics play in shifting power towards postcapitalist modes of life? How can it more effectively contribute to make postcapitalist modes of life both widely desirable and translocally regenerative? These questions and the following reflection are based on the fact that capitalist modes of doing economy are destroying our planet's stable climate and thriving biodiversity,¹ and thus are undoing the web of life on the only inhabitable planet we know.² But they are also inspired by the fact that other modes of doing economy are already in existence today and that we can choose to strategically support them. As a feminist design researcher and infrastructure activist I keep on choosing to sustain economic modes related to the commons and enacted through community economies.³ And my reflection here is triggered by what I observe in my own design field—which can be loosely described as eco-social design—about how aesthetic choices power (or disempower) collective drives for postcapitalist modes of life.

To unpack and think through this observation, I will situate myself and my design practice. I will then explore how aesthetics are tied to value practices, outlining how I see certain aesthetics as closely linked with

- 1 E.S. Brondizio et al., "IPBES (2019): Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services of the Intergovernmental Science–Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services." (Bonn, Germany: IPBES Secretariat, n.d.); IPCC, 2021, "Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change" (Cambridge University Press: IPCC, 2021); António Guterres, "Secretary-General's Special Address on Climate Action 'A Moment of Truth,'" United Nations, June 5, 2024, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/secretary-general/speeches/2024-06-05/discorso-especial-sobre-la-accic%C3%B3n-clim%C3%A1tica-%E2%80%99Clahora-de-la-verdad%E2%80%9D>.
- 2 Jason W. Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (PM PRESS, 2016); Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," n.d., 7; Johan Rockström et al., "Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity," *Ecology and Society* 14, no. 2 (November 18, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-03180-140232>.
- 3 Bianca Elzenbaumer and Fabio Franz, "Commons & Community Economies: Entry Points to Design for Eco-Social Justice?," in *Proceedings of DRS2016: Design + Research + Society - Future-Focused Thinking*, ed. Peter Lloyd and Erik Bohemia, vol. 10, 2016, 4015–28.

imperial modes of life and the detrimental effects these have on people and the environment. I then explore the concept of convivial imperfection as a possible way to power commons and caring modes of life through an aesthetics that is empowering and proliferating post-capitalist options.

Situating Myself

For the readers who have never encountered me or my work, here are a few coordinates that I think will be helpful in understanding where I am thinking from: I am a female 44-year-old white design researcher with Italian citizenship and an 8-year-old, healthy child. Since 2005, I have worked together with my partner Fabio Franz under the umbrella of Brave New Alps.⁴ The question guiding my collaborative research practice asks how designers can mobilise their skills to strategically strengthen postcapitalist economies. After having studied and worked as an eco-social designer across Europe and Palestine, in 2014, my partner and I decided to dedicate our next 40 years studying how design can support the emergence and maintenance of commons and community economies. We decided to root this study in the region in which we grew up: the Italian Alps at the border with Austria. This decision to root our practice here was inspired by our training with Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal of Decolonizing Architecture.⁵ Our study is infused by an acute awareness of the privilege we have—in these times of forced global displacement—to be able to root our practice where we grew up in and to plan for a project with a 40-year time span. This is a position of privilege we aim to mobilise to foster radical eco-social transformation.

We now live in the rural village where my partner grew up. Here, we turned his parents' home into the "basecamp" of our longitudinal experimentation and have in the meantime co-created—amongst other spaces—a community academy that we co-run at the main railway sta-

4 Brave New Alps, "About," Brave New Alps, 2015, <http://www.brave-new-alps.com>.

5 DAAR, "Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency – About," accessed March 12, 2014, <http://www.decolonizing.ps/site/about/>.

tion in our valley.⁶ In this context I coordinate a civic research lab where we mobilise eco-social design in interdisciplinary connections (for example with agro-ecology, social work, political science, legal studies) to experiment with commons and community economies.⁷ In the lab we cultivate symbiotic cultures of practice and theory that centre questions of commoning, care, ecological literacy, and multispecies livelihoods. Through a multitude of collaborations, we co-create and co-maintain interdependent physical and social commoning infrastructures. These include infrastructures such as the community academy La Foresta,⁸ the community garden comun’Orto,⁹ the participatory drinks enterprise Comunità Frizzante,¹⁰ the forest school Sottobosco, and Station for Transformation,¹¹ a public-civic hub for climate and biodiversity positive action. Our aim here is to contribute with interrelated infrastructures and modes of commoning to support caring modes of life.

Values and Value Practices

It is from this situatedness that I embark on the reflection on what role aesthetics play in how designers can (em)power the commons. This reflection is triggered because aesthetics do not float in a vacuum but are tied to values and value practices. Commons theorist Massimo De Angelis describes value practices as “actions and processes, as well as correspondent webs of relation, that are both predicated on a given value system and in turn (re)produce it.”¹² The values giving direction

6 Melissa Harrison et al., “La Foresta,” in *Urban Commons Handbook*, ed. Urban Commons Research Collective (Barcelona: dpr-barcelona, 2022).

7 Bianca Elzenbaumer, “Alpine Community Economies Laboratory,” 2019, www.alpinecommunityeconomies.org.

8 “La Foresta | Accademia Di Comunità,” accessed September 22, 2024, <https://laforesta.net/>.

9 “Comun’Orto,” accessed September 21, 2024, <https://comunorto.org/>.

10 Brave New Alps, “Comunità Frizzante,” 2019, www.comunitafrizzante.it.

11 European Urban Initiative, “Station for Transformation - Modelling a Train Station as a Replicable Hub for Public-Civic Engagement to Tackle Climate Change and Biodiversity Challenges,” Portico, accessed September 28, 2024, <https://portico.urban-initiative.eu/european-urban-initiative/station-transformation-modelling-train-station-replicable-hub-public-civic-engagement-tackle-climate>.

12 Massimo De Angelis, *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global*

to the practices I want to (re)produce are related to care, equity, mutuality, and horizontality. These connect up to a series of values practices, such as:

- a) Care and tenderness—observing what happens when the goal of my design research practice is the creation of care for myself and others;
- b) Equity and justice—exploring how design practices can contribute to strengthen the community-led governance of spaces and processes;
- c) Mutuality and shared vulnerability—probing what regenerative land-body relations we can create when we better understand (and feel into) the ecosystems that sustain us;
- d) Horizontality and joy—experimenting with ways of working that sustain the interdependent thriving of human and more-than-human livelihoods.

This conceptualisation that closely links values to value practices invites us to query if we are actually creating symbiotic relations between the values we cherish and the ways we practice, relate, co-create. Querying how values and value practices align in the multiple spheres of our lives allows many frictions to emerge. This emergence of frictions is alternately exciting and exhausting, but it is where the power of exploration and transformation sits—right at the edge of our comfort zone.

Working with values and value practices complicates our own positionality, bringing to light how voluntarily or involuntarily complicit we are with so many values and value practices we despise (such as exploitation, profit, externalisation, white and male supremacy, supremacy of Western modes of thinking). Given my training as designer, a profession whose development is closely linked with capitalist modes of production and modern notions of progress, I am preoccupied by the values and value practices our aesthetic choices are tied to even when we work with an eco-social agenda. The question that keeps on nagging me—even more so given the democratic back-

Capital (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 24.

sliding we are experiencing—is if the aesthetics (re)produced by eco-social designers are actually effective in contributing to make postcapitalist modes of life desirable, viable, and democratically realisable? Or are they still too closely tied to what we could call the aesthetics of imperial modes of life?

The Aesthetics of Imperial Modes of Life

Political scientists Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen define our current way of life in Europe as imperial as it based on exclusivity: It is a way of life that can be maintained only as long as we have an outside that we can externalise costs to.¹³ An outside that can be people, both close by and in other places in the world, but also other living beings and ecosystems. Cost can be anything from hyper exploitation to dispossession, from pollution to destruction of habitats. This imperial mode of life is closely tied to an aesthetics of the modernity/coloniality nexus, aesthetically defined amongst others by “the new,” “the standardised,” “the tidy,” “polished.” This imperial aesthetics goes hand in hand with high material throughput and high energy consumption, racism, individualisation, classism.

From my own experience I know that as designers we are mostly trained to cater to the aesthetics of imperial modes of life, even when we are trained in social, eco-social, transformation, or transition design. Because, although there is a rough consensus in transformation-oriented design fields that the aesthetics we (re) produce are political, much of the eco-social design we see celebrated in events and various media—in my opinion—reinforces an aesthetics still too tied to imperial modes of life. But I argue that a break with that aesthetic is needed, especially if we want to empower commons and postcapitalist modes of life. This is because these often-unquestioned imperial aesthetics contribute to divisive, exhausting, and destructive dynamics when it comes to sociality, ecosystems, and personal wellbeing.

13 Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, “Imperial Mode of Living,” *Krisis Journal for Contemporary Philosophy*, no. 2 (2018): 75–78.

The Value Practices Generated by Imperial Aesthetics

I shall elaborate on what I observed in terms of the divisive, exhausting, and destructive dynamics that eco-social design often remains tied to. I have consciously chosen not to include images as part of this essay, despite its focus on design and aesthetics, since I do not wish this to be an exercise in finger-pointing, but in opening up a conversation about what kinds of aesthetics can hinder or support the empowerment of commons and postcapitalist modes of life.

In the sphere of sociality, I see the aesthetics of imperial modes of life creating anxiety, exclusion, social division: The spaces created by eco-social designers are often so polished they seem to say “be part of this but don’t mess it up” or “all welcome but please be photogenic.” Also, the visual representations of interactions in those eco-social spaces often create a sense of exclusion and exclusiveness with images depicting a swathe of happy, relaxed, well-dressed people—untouched by precarity, mental health issues, low spending power, through many exhausting -isms. This message is often further conveyed through the use of niche language, as well as through the materiality of the spaces themselves, that makes people outside the eco-social bubble easily feel out of place and not up to standards. In my interpretation, this unwanted dynamic is due to the fact that many eco-social designers still thrive on being recognized by peers, and the fact that organisations still prize the aesthetic canon of imperial modes of life. This thriving is something I can understand and empathise with as it can seem like the only route out of precarity.

In the sphere of ecosystems, imperial aesthetics require swathes of new materials in times when our material throughput should be drastically reduced to keep humanity in a safe operating space on Earth.¹⁴ Clearly working with new materials is easier, faster, and allows for a visually more coordinated, sleek, standardised appearance. But ecologically it often makes very little sense. Moreover, to move in the sphere of imperial aesthetics, even for eco-social designers of-

¹⁴ Digital Talks: Sustainability in Action - Intervento Del Prof. Stefano Mancuso, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMjBo8R5iUE>.

ten requires an embeddedness in energy-devouring lifestyles that imply flying to all sorts of more or less prestigious events and places. And although I see the beauty in travelling and encountering new people, I get enraged by the fast and apparently cheap means to achieve this: the externalities of flying—from land expropriation, to devastation through petrol extraction, to noise pollution and climate change—disproportionally impact those communities already excluded by the sleek imperial aesthetics that even eco-social design tends to (re)produce.

In the sphere of personal wellbeing, I see the enormous impact of imperial aesthetics on ourselves as eco-social designers: There is a diffuse tendency to overwork to fit the expectations of imperial aesthetics. Many of us work on eco-social projects on a limited budget and yet there is an attempt to fit in with the dominant aesthetics driven by people and agendas fuelled by large sums of money (and most often serving values that are not on the eco-social agenda). In practice, this translates into unpaid work during evenings and week-ends, the sidelining of own bodily and social needs, time and money being drained from less visible and thus less prestigious, yet important, activities in support of our livelihoods. Such tendencies easily feed into a spiral of exhaustion, complaints, and victimisation in which the desire to live up to the standards of imperial aesthetics remains an unperceived trigger. I am not arguing here that the aesthetics of imperial modes of life are the only cause for exhaustion, but wanting to live up to them contributes to an even greater mismatch between payment and effort that is put into eco-social projects. What is more, in terms of wellbeing, imperial aesthetics also create an internal divide for those designers who have not grown up embedded in its most cherished form. Design historian and activist scholar Paola De Martin did a wonderful analysis of how designers from working class and migrant backgrounds need to train themselves into the habitus of imperial aesthetics and how this new habitus (often painfully) alienates them from their own social milieu.¹⁵ So how to deal constructively with that trap of imperial aesthet-

15 Paola De Martin, *Give Us a Break! Arbeitermilieu Und Designszene Im Aufbruch* (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2022).

ics? As decolonial pedagogist Vanessa Machado de Oliveira reminds us, there is no being included in modernity and progress without others (as well as ourselves) paying the price for this inclusion.¹⁶ So how to break with the aesthetics of imperial modes of life? What aesthetic experiments to venture into to create for ourselves, other humans, and other living beings, spaces and experiences that are much more enlivening, empowering, healing and regenerating? Machado de Oliveira invites us to engage in what she calls the “hospicing of modernity.” With this term she invites us to help modernity and progress to die well in order to cultivate other modes of being that are based on equity and care. And indeed, if we take seriously the proposition by philosopher Jacques Rancière, who defines aesthetics as crucially being tied to “configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity,”¹⁷ then as eco-social designers we need to engage in creating aesthetic strategies that support the hospicing of imperial modes of life, while inviting postcapitalist worlds to be built and reproduced.

Hospicing of Modernity Through Convivial Imperfection

One such strategy I want to focus on here is what I call embracing the aesthetics of convivial imperfection. This is an imperfection that is not about doing things badly or with little care, but about letting go of ideas of market- and industry-driven ideas of perfection. It is an aesthetics that lets go of the “perfection police in our minds” and embraces modes of commoning with humans and other living beings. This letting go is necessary to co-create caring ways of working, space for convivial modes of togetherness, practices that value situatedness and slowness, situations that accept our imperfect ways of being human. But it is also necessary for co-creating spaces and practices whose materiality, energy demand, and maintenance impact much less upon—or ideally even regenerate and heal—the ecosystems that sustain life.

16 Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2021).

17 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004), 9.

In terms of experimenting with and implementing modes of convivial imperfection, this means dealing with the (often) market-driven perfectionism and sleekness we are trained to go for, even as eco-social designers. This letting go could look like this: We imagine what we would like to create—which for most of us is very much co-shaped by what we think is valued by our peers and design institution—and then take about three steps back in terms of perfection. My knowledge from experience is that what we then co-create is almost certainly much closer to what “ordinary” people find inviting and empowering than what we had in mind originally. And as my colleague and friend Kathrin Böhm puts it, at a personal level, when we do things at 80% we will feel much less exhausted and the majority of people will still appreciate and enjoy the outcome. And if it is participatory work we do, people will appreciate the more relaxed stance with which the work is collaboratively undertaken.

So here an attempt at a reminder to ourselves as eco-social designers on how to power the commons by furthering the aesthetics of convivial imperfection:

- Let’s relax into doing things together—co-producing spaces, objects, visuals, texts together with others—whether professionals or not—and allowing for conviviality to run through all the activities. This will allow everyone to feel empowered, to enhance their sense of self-efficacy, and to get real ownership over the co-creation process and its outcomes.
- Let’s put a time cap on design work—making sure to take time to rest, to care for ourselves, to care for others, to engage in social transformation processes, to care for the ecosystems we are part of. Enjoying the world outside the bubble of work.
- Let’s put a money cap on design work—working with what there is, making do and sparing the money for expenses that truly enhance the quality of life, support equity, and create a more nurturing base for commons-based ways of life.
- Let’s take it slow—taking time to reuse, recycle, reduce, taking time to chat, drink herbal tea, have a laugh, attune with more-

than-human others, taking time to see how what we create evolves and is adapted by the ones using it.

- Let's share the beautiful, the ugly, the messy, the ordinary—creating, and circulating less polished images of ourselves and our community. Imperfection is welcome within the commons: Our lives and our work are beautiful in the messi- and ordinariness that comes with commoning.
- Let's ditch jet set aesthetics—trying to live in a world without planes. To power the commons there is much room for reinventing how we exchange and travel in ways that take us towards caring economies and ways of life.

Conclusion

As you have seen, these reflections on aesthetics and the commons finally boil down to questions of power. Who do our aesthetics side with? Who are they building power with? What modes of life do they uplift and which do they marginalise? To me these are questions to be explored in practice by eco-social designers in order to see (and experience) how we can empower the commons and other postcapitalist worlds. And I'm up for it—better still, I'm already right in the middle of it, with all the imperfections and frictions that come with it. Please do come and join this transformative movement!

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