

# Things Are Cheap, Hurrah! Towards an Alternative Aesthetic of Consumption

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# Things Are Cheap, Hurrah! Towards an Alternative Aesthetic of Consumption

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## the WHY CHEAP ART? manifesto

**PEOPLE** have been **THINKING** too long that  
**ART** is a **PRIVILEGE** of the **MUSEUMS** & the  
**RICH**. **ART IS NOT BUSINESS** !  
It does not belong to banks & fancy investors  
**ART IS FOOD** . You cant **EAT** it **BUT** it **FEEDS**  
you . **ART** has to be **CHEAP** & available to  
**EVERYBODY** . It needs to be **EVERYWHERE**  
because it is the **INSIDE** of the  
**WORLD** .

### **ART SOOTHES PAIN !**

Art wakes up sleepers !  
**ART FIGHTS AGAINST WAR & STUPIDITY !**  
**ART SINGS HALLELUJA !**  
ART IS FOR KITCHENS !

### **ART IS LIKE GOOD BREAD!**

**Art is like green trees!**  
Art is like white clouds in blue sky !

### **ART IS CHEAP !**

# **HURRAH**

**Bread & Puppet Glover, Vermont. 1984**

Figure 1: The Cheap Art Manifesto [Licensed under Creative Commons] via Bread and Puppet Theater (<https://breadandpuppet.org/cheap-art>)

## ABSTRACT

In their 1984 Cheap Art Manifesto, the Bread and Puppet Theater rightly argues for the merits of art that is available to all. In this provocation, we will argue that a similar line of thinking applied

to consumer objects is the source of the completely overblown consumption patterns currently seen among affluent populations. We take an aesthetic perspective, from which we consider the creation, consumption, and disposal of things under capitalism to be part of the same aesthetic pattern. Our aim is to explore the requirements of an alternative aesthetic of consumption, one that challenges designers to critically reflect on the implications of their designs, which is based on notions of care. We recount our initial thoughts and forays into giving shape to this aesthetic.



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## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Interaction design theory, concepts and paradigms**; • **Interaction design process and methods**; • **Systems and tools for interaction design**;

## KEYWORDS

Aesthetics, consumption, rebound effects, care theory, post-growth

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In theory, technology and products exist to do good. They help us do things we otherwise couldn't, reduce the burden of physical tasks, and have the capacity to make life more pleasant and enchanting. Making those technological capabilities available to all has been the great promise of the modern industrial age. That promise of industrially produced things, however, has turned sour under capitalism. Enabled by modern design aesthetics, mass consumption among affluent populations worldwide is ballooning to ever larger proportions. An individualistic approach to meeting (and creating) needs and a desire for newness, ever-improving efficiency, and convenience, drive this forward and is embodied by the things that designers create. It has polluted the unavoidable act of consuming with a longing for immediate satisfaction, disposability, and a focus on the needs of one. Meanwhile, a growing body of work suggests avenues for limiting consumption while maintaining or perhaps even improving quality of life by adopting Post-Growth principles [14]. We consider that a logical avenue to hasten our efforts in mitigating the rapidly worsening climate crises. The desired result is an immediate and far-reaching decrease in global consumption - particularly among affluent consumers.

Furthermore, current consumption aesthetics have created a disparity between consuming and understanding one's actual resource footprint that is practically impossible to oversee for the average person. The useful tool of industrial production is being misappropriated, and designers have become instruments of capitalism. Armed only with the outdated ideologies and aesthetics of modernism, they find themselves trapped amid a wicked machinery in which the *ways we do things* continuously change, merge and emerge [15]. They grapple for certainty in an increasingly unpredictable world while the demand of marketable products robs them of their true impact-making potential. Meanwhile, consumers are left with very limited agency over how they consume because they are both highly steered by the constraints of societal structures and continuously rushing to keep up with the latest trends and innovations, making it difficult to understand and influence consumption streams.

Designers who implement sustainability interventions may turn out disillusioned because those interventions often don't have the impact they intended due to *rebound effects*. Rebound effects occur when 'a technical measure reduces some environmental pressures

while increasing or keeping constant other environmental pressures' [12]. While initially limited to energy efficiency gains, the concept has evolved to include economic, environmental, social, and circular economy disciplines and a plethora of triggers, drivers, and mechanisms [6]. Many of these are relevant to designers, such as the ways people use time and space, the influence of needs, attitudes, and lifestyles on consumption, and many more systemically embedded phenomena. Research on rebound effects tends to focus on sustainability measures, though the underlying principle is that a measure with certain intentions can have unintended, undesirable behavioral implications.

In this provocation, we weave reflections on these effects into a new design perspective on what types of aesthetics to pursue, and how to pursue them. Our aim is to sketch the horizon of a new design aesthetic, spanning both design practice and material applications that anticipates and prevents rebound effects while reducing consumption. First, we describe the relevance of aesthetics and link it to the prevalence of rebound effects. We then introduce the notion of care and outline our arguments for an alternative aesthetic of consumption.

## 2 ON AESTHETICS

While aesthetics are expressive of the dominant truths, ideologies, and ideas of the material world that they exist in, they are more than simply a symptom of those things. Aesthetics profoundly influence consumerist behavior, whether through its focus on pleasure and the production of an "imaginative hedonism" (in [9]), novelty and the "desire for the new" [4], or the formation of personal meaning and identity in everyday life (in [18]). While 'good' aesthetics can lead to a well-crafted, durable and sustainable product, it can also create a 'rebound effect' where 'good' aesthetics trigger the desire in a person to own more and more well-crafted and durable products. Aesthetics shape products, services and interactive systems, but also ideology by critiquing what is beautiful and what isn't - and at present novelty, efficiency, and individualism are the hottest thing [7]. As entities of capitalism, design aesthetics are fundamental in enabling the continued growth of consumption. If one wants to put a halt to this effect, while preventing rebound, changing how designers treat aesthetics is a very sensible choice.

We observe that the trends of novelty, efficiency and personalized individualism are important drivers for rebound effects and thus growing consumption. Generally, any improvement within a certain parameter leads to a desired further improvement. For example, improved fuel efficiency in cars elicits more car journeys, leading to a new desire for further improved efficiency [12]. This vicious cycle can be applied to many parameters in many fields, summarized in the paradoxical '*new is better*'. Our consumptive world is geared towards keeping this cycle in order: through enticing marketing imagery and rapid-fire trends [13], through a monopoly on need fulfillment maintained by modern technologies and the creation of new needs that can only be solved by more new technology [11], and through a design field that is fixated on fulfilling consumers' every wish [16].

Because of this vicious cycle, designers and engineers often miss the mark with their sustainability innovations. For example, car

sharing initiatives that aim for a more effective use of cars also reduce the barrier to using the car as a mode of transport, increasing the number of car rides. Moreover, these cars tend to be driven less carefully, which shortens their lifespan [2]. Similarly, a new type of device fulfilling an existing need with a different technology, such as heat pumps, may bring about unexpected behaviors related to its use practices that undermine their energy-saving promise such as higher standards of comfort [20]. This systemic entanglement implies that a wider scope is needed when aiming for more sustainable consumption. No longer should we look at a thing that will be consumed by an individual in an isolated, zoned-off territory, but at a thing being released into an ecosystem. The field of design, too, should be able to reflect from a distance on itself and see its role in that system. Rather than step into the pitfall of oversimplifying cause and effect, designers should learn to give shape to an uncertain and constantly evolving world.

Embracing ecological uncertainty not only enriches a designer's perspective on consumption. It is also a befitting attitude to have when user control and convenience are no longer the primary end goals. Moreover, it aligns with our encouragement towards designers to let go of the familiar and explore new waters, through a re-evaluation of the role of design and technology as an infinitely taxable reductor of complexity and burden. In this view, the aesthetics of ecological demeanor, how a thing behaves in a system, becomes an object of study in a sustainable design practice and forms the contour of what a designer can expect of the impact of their designs. Following that, how people make sense with and of this demeanor and how they shape their behavior off that perception should be at the core of the alternative aesthetic. But how?

### 3 ON CARE

In our search for answers, we started by exploring the notion of *care*. Upon it, we place the burden of being an imperative for frugality. Most importantly, we think caring could give an answer to the question: what to do when one is confronted with moral choices surrounding consumption? Posing the question raises further questions like: why keep an object when you feel like getting a new one? Why get one that lasts instead of one that is cheap? How can we go from having a seemingly minimal amount of care for the things around us to having a more meaningful relationship with those things? Care is relational [8], encompassing “everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair “our world” so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web” [17]. We don't see caring as a silver bullet solution, however. Even caring – or intentions of it – may have rebound effects, the exploration of which will be part of our future journey. In a small experiment, meant as an exploration of embodied care, we asked participants to bring a small hyacinth in a pot everywhere they went for three days. Instead of being careful with this delicate plant, they quickly learned to determine the plant's minimally acceptable well-being based on how many petals, meant as signs of its delicacy, were falling off. It became an indicator to be able to take as little care of the plant as possible, instead of the other way around. It's a quick example of how

things that are meant to evoke care can be interpreted completely differently in everyday life. This initial exploration further showed that creating empathy through curiosity and eliciting that curiosity by making things that are expressive could be key features for the material side of the aesthetic. If the aesthetic is to be truly relational, that expression should go both ways. Thus, inviting to build relationships with objects by allowing for bi-directional expression might be key in evoking care. *Beautiful, embodied relationships* then become a goal of the new aesthetic. Again, it can be said that all these properties could backfire or be interpreted in a different way. We want to emphasize the importance of their ambiguity in a design (research) process and note our own anticipation of this backfiring. Developing an alternative aesthetic that aims to reduce consumption should move beyond the material, though.

### 4 THINGS AND FOOTPRINTS

Overall, this exercise gives rise to a new perspective on the *footprint* of a thing and the relationship designers maintain to that footprint throughout an object's use and disposal. No longer is it something directly perceivable – either theoretically or practically – that is imprinted only by the thing itself: it becomes the adjunction of the thing to the unstoppable vortex of existing things, flows, and meanings. The ripple effects of that adjunction form the true footprint of the thing.

Thus, we call for designers to ask themselves the question: what does my design *bring about*? Does it nourish communalities or feed into further individualization? Does it reduce consumption or merely change its course? Does it improve quality of life, or is it simply more efficient? And what kind of behavior do the aesthetics of the things that I create assume and evoke? Answering these questions requires an aesthetic sensitivity that transcends individual product-user relationships and the material world while incorporating elements of systems thinking, economics, and an understanding of the ideologies and practices that designed things become a part of. It also demands a continuous and lively critique of what “improving quality of life” means and what we consider to be aimless meandering. Key to that critique should be an acknowledgement of the capriciousness of the world that design exists in and how that relates to life improvement. Of course, we have no answer (yet) to the question of what a design field that accounts for all this should look like. It may evoke new perspectives on sense-making, creative reasoning, testing, and much more. However, we believe designers who account for consumption in their work will have to implement these considerations in their praxes somehow, and we invite you to think along with us on how it should be done.

### 5 TO CLOSE

Let us leave you with our own modest manifesto. As we believe design, too, doesn't belong to fancy banks and investors, has the power to soothe pain, and an ability to sing hallelujah again. It is only through design that we can bring about a good life for all. We invite designers to embark on this initially destructive journey towards new beginnings. To step away from the warm bath of marketability and challenge themselves by leaping into the unknown. To make fluent what has been rigid, embrace the unpredictable, and beautify the strange. To value meaning over

convenience, frugality over value, and curiosity over control. To realize that any path forward also includes the willingness to burn bridges and fail.

With that said, the point of this provocation is not to make its readers aware of how the release of new products leads to more consumption, or that designing new products for the sake of novelty is bad. We know that much by now. Instead, we wish to bring the notion that *intentions* and *consequences* can be very different when things are released into the world to the attention of the people who make them, and that this systemic dynamic plays an extremely important role in our desire to decouple design from consumption. The fact that our society is aesthetically and ideologically geared towards a continuation of the growth of consumption does not make this any easier. That self-sustaining galaxy of creation through disposal forms an aesthetic circle that must be broken, however. If it truly wants to support quality of life, design must be purged from the neoliberal values and thought systems that only direct consumption patterns to further growth. All of that so that we may at one point say: 'Life is good, hurrah!'

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