



Michelangelo Pistoletto, Venus of Rags, 1967

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The function of fashion? The design of new styles... of thought

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Premise

I don't know if we are all aware of the fact that joining the ongoing academic discourse about the "Function of Fashion" means being ready to open a Pandora's box full of questions such as: How do we define the function of Fashion in current society? Is Fashion utilitarian? Does Fashion inform society's attitudes and behaviour or does Fashion just mirror the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times? What is the semiotic function of Fashion within society? Is the function of Fashion the creation of hierarchical and/or competitive signs functional to the market economy? Has Fashion to be just seductive? Is Fashion the fabrication of art, pleasure, or entertainment? Is Fashion Design equal to Design and if so, what is Design? How do we define Design?... and the list of self-revolving questions could go on for pages. As you see, the in-built risk of research is that of creating perpetual machines of never ending theoretical questioning. This process is of course very necessary and very fruitful for the construction of academic knowledge about design and research activities, but does not really respond to one of the main 'functions' of knowledge that - especially in crisis ridden times as ours - I consider to be dramatically urgent and imperative: the design of (aesth) ethical models for sustainable growth and new prosperity.

Research, or better said, design researchers are today asked to roll-up their sleeves, suspend their arguments about “form follows function” (Sullivan, 1896) rather than “form follows fiction” (Deitch, 2001) and go for “**FORM FOLLOWS FACTION**”, the new dictum of the new modernity, where

*“new modernity is understood to be an unsentimental but humanistic acceptance of the state of the world - a clear-eyed engagement with the recent radical changes in human interaction, access to information, awareness of catastrophic problems, that is combined with deep personal commitments to hope, passion, and the belief that it is possible for humanity to live in a new way. Further, if faction is understood to mean a group of people who express a shared belief or opinion, and if its Latin root word, factum, is understood to mean an objective consensus on an aspect of reality, then the expression form follows faction perfectly summarizes all of the various innovative and humanistic creative responses the new modernity of 21st century.”*¹

Furthermore, the Latin word *factum* also means something done, enterprise, and last but not least business. Shortly said: this is a call for sharing our ideas, taking a stance and going for action. And for doing that, we can start from here and now. We can start from Fashion of course.

Our most urgent task: designing alternatives

Let’s get one thing straight: if there is a chance to find a way-out from our global emergency, that depends on cultural players – like all of us – willing to contribute with the design of alternatives to the actual (and deeply damaged) system. We urgently need the design of new economic, political and above all cultural models that can take up, that can deeply change businesses’, politicians’ and people’s attitudes, thinking styles and behaviours. In the absence of alternatives - for which the time is ripe

¹ David Goldsmith, Masterstudent at The Swedish School of Textiles 2009

- an unsustainable situation can drag on and collapse seemingly forever. History offers instances of many socio-economic regimes that were collapsing and disappearing forever (Diamond, 2004).

The shift from a black outfit to a black outlook

Black seems to be the color of our prosperity outlook not only across Europe’s and the USA’s economies but worldwide today. Macroeconomists, governments and the media tell us that the global GDP is endangered as never before. “Growth isn’t growing” and nobody knows if and when it will start growing again. And this threatening news got us while we were still under shock because of the results of the Stern Report (2006), the IPCC UN scientists outcomes (2007), the UN-Nature Conservation Body research (2008), just to mention few of the studies, that respectively told us that, yes, climate change is happening and it is anthropogenic in its nature, meaning that it is essentially caused by human interference; that the costs of climate change would amount to as much as 20 percent of the global GDP if we don’t commence immediate countermeasures; and that we are already losing two to five billion dollars in the form of natural capital every year.

The end of the beginning?

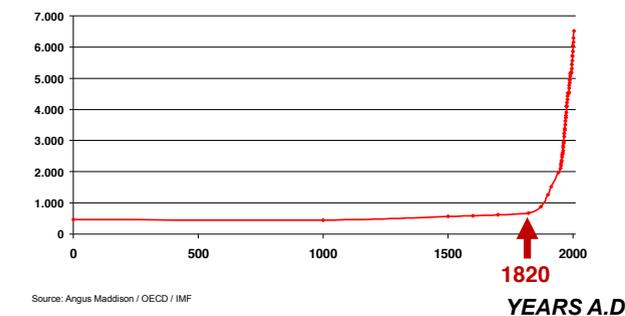
Is this just a temporary stormy condition, or the “end of the beginning” of a worldwide catastrophe? Catastrophes are of course catastrophic only for transient life on this planet – like human beings, because our planet Earth, unlike us, is the product of as many as five billion years of natural catastrophes. In fact, the environmental pressure that we have been imposing on the planet over the last two-three hundred years represents just one of its many disasters. But for most life forms that inhabit our planet, including the human race, it’s a matter of life and death (Lovelock, 2009). For us, human beings, this is an existential problem. Gaia, together with her gods and demons, is looking on and leaving us to get on with our self-made catastrophe. Our

pretty blue planet will continue along its path through the universe with or without us. It will survive with or without *homo sapiens sapiens* and our wonderful inventions such as art, science, technology; with or without that special creature that invented music, philosophy, and discovered X-rays and vaccines; with or without that same humanity that created morality, but also war...that humanity that made history.

From *homo habilis* to ...*homo modernicus*

A history that describes how mankind, slowly and gradually at first and then, with rocket-like acceleration, has managed to exponentially increase its population and its productive power. When we follow the development of economic achievements of mankind then we have to notice that there was not much happening for millions of years. It was only at the beginning of the 19th century that the gross domestic product of certain countries literally took off (Maddison, 2001).

➔ World GDP per CAPITA (in 1990 international \$)



This enormous growth spurt which is actually still going on, indicates that at that time, after the *homo habilis*, the *homo erectus*, the *homo sapiens* and the *homo sapiens sapiens*, a new type of human being was born: the *homo modernicus*.

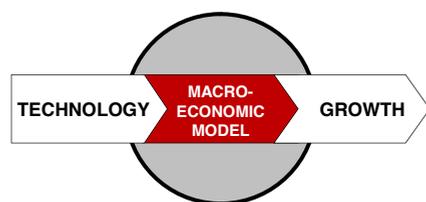
Our *homo modernicus* is a European offspring, a rationally-thinking offspring of the Enlightenment. He is a free and democratic Man, who shows his solidarity with others and is guided by the values of the French Revolution. He is an ingenious being who made the Industrial Revolution. He is a pragmatic Man, who grasps the economic dimensions of consumption economy. And finally, this *homo modernicus* is also an exuberant Man, who not only threw himself -with all the exuberance of an youngster- into the globalization project in order to be able to keep up with the exponential trend of economic growth at compound annual growth rates. But he also went beyond his goal of harvesting the profit of the real economy and launched himself into the hazard of the speculative financial markets (Carbonaro ; Votava, 2008).

The neoclassical model of growth

According to general economic knowledge, the economic growth of the modern age, which has kept up for nearly two centuries now, is a factor touching on selfsupporting processes, which are based on two main tenets: With regard to the supply side, growth made it possible to invest in research and development which produced significant technological innovations until now. This led to new products and more efficient production processes which, in and of themselves, reinforced further growth. That is why productivity today is 20 times that of 1820. In the eyes of economists technology is thus the true driving force of growth. They rely on technological progress to solve the repercussions of any environmental pressure and do not see any incompatibility between economic growth and environmental protection.

On the demand side, growth created an extraordinary improvement in the standard of living in the industrialised countries and led to the development of our present consumer society, which is itself an important mainspring of growth. For traditional economists our concept of well-being, as well as the social, civil and cultural development of societies, is therefore tightly linked to economic growth (Sollow, 2007). But this neoclassical

growth theory provides neither details about the social impact of economic prerequisites on technological progress, nor does it tell us anything about the duration of the transitional state. Like most economic theories, it is based on a very simplified model, which describes the consequences of an input parameter like technological progress for example, on the output parameter, which is defined by the model, as for instance the GDP growth index. For this, *ceteris paribus* conditions are assumed – which means that one thus assumes that all other parameters remain unchanged.



Today, macroeconomics is still unable to describe the effect of several determining factors which are interacting with each other on complex and interlinked systems like our economy, our societies, our cultures and our environment. Nor can it make statements about the reaction time to modifying impulses within such systems. That is why we must be very much aware of the fact that we have entered into the adventure of deregulation, liberalization and globalization with a stirring declaration of faith but without any rudder. We were, we are, navigating only by sight!

GDP and GNP straight jackets

In 1968 Robert Kennedy, in a speech he gave during the primaries of a US election campaign, was already questioning the GNP as a suitable economic indicator of prosperity when he said: "...Our gross national product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and

ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for those who break them. It counts napalm and the cost of a nuclear warhead...It counts television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children... Yet the gross national product... does not include the beauty of our poetry... the intelligence of our public debate... It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile..."

To date, and in spite of that prophetic warning, more than 30 different indicators have been developed in which the subject of prosperity has been assessed in different ways. One of the most interesting one is the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (which later evolved into the Genuine Progressive Index) because, for the first time, this indicator made it possible to make an actual comparison between economic growth and prosperity. This comparison proves that economic growth in all the industrialized countries has indeed generated prosperity, although with a steadily decreasing force. Prosperity growth began to stagnate in the US from the 1960s onward, and in the 1980s growth even became negative in the remaining OECD countries (Daly ; Cobb,1989). Despite some criticisms that could be made with regard to the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare methods, people today would largely agree that a steadily growing portion of the GDP consists of the repair and maintenance of our society.

The discrepancy between wealth and happiness

It will come as no surprise that the equation linking economic growth and public happiness has today being repealed – not by moralists or anti-capitalist activists – but by liberal economists such as Lord Richard Layard. There is scientific proof that – in economically developed countries - the tensions caused by material wealth worsen with the increase of economic growth.

According to the findings of the psychologist and Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman (2003), in our western societies, people's aspirations are presently moving from an economy striving for material wealth to an economy striving for well-being and happiness. In such an economy, those goods that are valued most highly only have a significance within communities and are not exchangeable, cannot be reproduced or cannot be replaced by others, like for example security, peace, friendship, time, culture, knowledge or simply truthfulness and honesty. These socio-cultural factors, which form the bases of what people's aspirations are made of and that could be the platform of our future economy, have not really been taken into consideration in macro-economics to date.

It is only recently that some politicians have also come to understand that today, the gross domestic product cannot be an indicator of prosperity any longer. At the beginning of this year, as an example, the French President Nicolas Sarkozy surprisingly commissioned Josef Stieglitz and Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize Laureates in Economics, to propose new indicators for the quality of life and for sustainable economic development by April 2009.

Technology as the driven force of growth?

We should not only question if and how economic growth is really contributing to our well-being and happiness today, we should also take a much closer look at the concept of technology as the driving force of growth and progress.

On one hand it's true that technology has already proven many catastrophic predictions wrong. In the past, for example, we thought demographic growth was going to throw us back into the dark ages, but increases in agricultural productivity have managed to solve the problem. Too bad that this same technological "solution" is also one of the factors that increases environmental pressure and will eventually create the next generation of problems.

The perpetual machine of natural capitalism

The advocates of "natural capitalism" (Daly, 1991) claim that if technological progress could provide enough free energy by exploiting all forms of renewable resources, then we will have achieved heaven on earth. We would have built up a kind of perpetual production machine, a happy, everlasting world, fueled by all kind of renewable resources. It is a world where the economy is in perfect harmony with all ecosystems, a world in tune with all imaginable consumerist lifestyles and a world in which we no longer need to question either our economic system, nor the quantity of material "things" that we need to need for our pursuit of happiness.

Let us imagine for just a second that this vision can come true right after we will have fixed our actual global economic crisis, before climate change becomes irreversible and before we run out of fossil fuels. Let us envision a world of tomorrow in which the development of a "cradle-to-cradle" design system, based on the precept that there is no real end for any object we manufacture, just "reincarnation" (Braungart, 2003), together with an endless availability of energy, an unlimited access to resources, would make the unlimited production of material things feasible.

I think that even if this were to happen, we would still end up "hitting the wall" simply because the infinite growth of material "things" would be unsustainable and incompatible with our ways of life and the meaning of life.

Time and space are non-renewable resources

The fact is that we cannot just consider our physical environment and our material world. We also need to take into account our *habitat*, and our habits, meaning the totality of our living space and of our life-styles in which the psychological dimension of the quality of our existential space and time occupy a central position. Our space and our time are also limited (Virilio, 2008) and they are also - in some sense - non-renewable resources. They should thus be handled with care and be an

integral component of our deliberations on economic development and environmental pressure. The issue of sustainable growth certainly implies a technological challenge, but also an anthropological one, meaning a cultural concern. And both of these facets of growth are closely correlated to each other and have to be viewed on equal terms.

People on the two sides of our planet

It is of course true that people respond very differently to the economic and environmental pressures they are exposed to, depending on where they live. On the other side of our planet we have new hopes for prosperity and for the achievement of a Western life-style – a hope that might start to collapse due to the repercussions of our western economic crunch (20 million Chinese laid-off factory workers have already migrated back to their native villages).

On this side of our planet we see the end of the dream of constantly growing material prosperity. This was the dream of Mr. And Mrs. Everyman when they were – quite recently – still identifying themselves as members of an increasingly wealthy middle class. For them, the Damocles sword of a next energy crisis and the soaring costs of basic foods, of their children's education, of health and assistance, have become a serious problem.

They do not care about whether prosperity is measured by one index or another. They only notice that the bursting of the speculative bubbles has also left deep holes in their own pockets and that in the meantime, planet Earth has become as small as their own flat and suddenly, everything is somehow interconnected.

They have understood that the two giants, China and India, have awakened and are hoovering up energy, raw materials and jobs by manufacturing cheap products for the whole world. And their employer's "headcount reduction measures" showed them very clearly just how much these foreign cheap articles production sites impact the domestic industry. And by the same token has shown

how much we also depend on the prosperity of those "fast developing countries" for the export of what we still produce in our countries.

The change in Western consumers' behaviour

Thus the life of Mr. And Mrs. Everyman has changed all of a sudden and quite unexpectedly. Concerns about their standard of living, their pensions and their jobs are added to private crises which are accelerated by the decline of the traditional family model and the dissolution of obsolete gender roles.

In view of the economic, social and environmental turbulences of our time, our previous life style, aimed at material, ephemerally hedonistic and irrationally entertaining consumption, can no longer provide the security they desperately need today. What was so self-evident until recently, now seems remarkably unreasonable.

We should thus not be astonished that consumers have become more shopping reluctant. It is as if, after all of the hullabaloo of too much, too many, too tempting "offers, bargains, points-of-sale and advertising messages" aiming always and exclusively at their purse while making use of the most extravagant marketing means, that consumers are now asking for a time-out. They are less and less impressed by the advertising campaigns and turn their attention increasingly to the cost-benefit ratio of what they eventually still buy. That is why they flock to discount shops, into factory outlets of all kinds and their only new form of luxury is to treat themselves with a private item, a little something that is very special and unique, clean, fair, good... something that makes sense and is able to tell the story of its tradition and origin.

The last act of the odyssey of our consumption economies has begun: Ulysses returns to Ithaca. As Ulysses did after his long wandering, people too, after all the deceptions, the disappointments and transient seductions, are searching for tranquillity, the sense of a safe harbour today. They have lost their faith in the myth of possession,

of the "must-have" and are yearning for values which are not only added, but intrinsic and linked to another basic human need, namely the need to grow, the need to invent oneself again and again. However, only *those* things that have meaning to us broaden our horizon and stimulate us to keep on rising above our own personal limits (Weber, 1922).

From a "culture of economy" to an "economy of culture"

I'm not talking here of the so called "Economy of Creativity" announced by Richard Florida (2002). And I'm not talking about Design or Art as strategic tools for differentiating new mass-market products in a global landscape already drowning in commodities. No. Here, I am talking about the need of an economy of balanced material growth on the one hand, and an economy of culture on the other hand, one that implies the advancement of science and art, the expansion of knowledge and experience and last but not least the redesign of educational programmes that break down the barriers between disciplines (Morin, 1999).

It is that kind of cultural development that is necessary for transforming all our products into symbolic and cultural means. Such a paradigm-shift requires a deep cultural and social transformation: from the actual culture of economy driven by the mythology of quantity, mass consumption based on mass-production and the promise of an opulent society focused on the possession of ephemeral things to a new economy of culture based on quality good works, good products, good services. Sustainable of course, but also beautiful, and meaningful.

And a new economy of culture in which culture is not an abstract term, but it is a network of cultural actors that can generate and diffuse not only a new economy producing art, information, communication and education, but also the design of social innovation.

The design of social innovation

People are in fact not waiting for macroeconomist and world politicians to fix the problem of our crises ridden economies. People are already doing their part. They want to make sense, to make a difference. Individuals are already starting to explore new systems to work and live together in a more meaningful and sustainable way. They are starting to organize their own lives differently. They act. They show by doing that there are other ways to live a good life without at the same time threatening nature, other people, or their own inner peace. They are organizing themselves in time banks, home nursery, playgroups, car-sharing networks, producer markets retailing, ethical purchasing groups, community supported agriculture, self-help groups for the elderly, shared gardens, vegetable gardens in parks, eco-sustainable villages, local food catering, co-housing, neighborhood self management, local micro logistics, neighborhood laundrettes & restaurants, 0 Km food services, tool exchange workshops, book exchange libraries, second hand fashion ateliers, and apparel swap groups.



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People creating second hand fashion ateliers - Emude - "Creative communities". PoliDesign, 2007.

and bottom-up-driven models of designing prosperity in times of adversities have been the object of investigation and cooperation of a new generation of scholars, designers and artists – like the group of Ezio Manzini of the Polytechnic University in Milan or the one lead by John Thackara in the UK. The cultural leaders and the creatives engaged in the design of a social innovation give to policy makers an opportunity to learn from their common success factors and to be alerted to common obstacles they encounter. They can help to develop, initiate and test new policies, aimed at enabling and empowering individuals or “creative communities” to do better and to do more. By exploring new structures of civil society they are also setting the conditions for replication of projects of sustainable lifestyles. By understanding the existential anthropological motivations linked to people’s new behaviors they can also alert and advise the operators of the consumer goods industry and service about new sustainable and meaningful life models, and therefore about the design of new processes, new product and service ideas for which latent needs exist (Meroni, 2007).

The long tail of bottom-up prosperity

What we also already see happening is that many creative individuals or communities are already transforming themselves into sustainable entrepreneurs of excellent uniqueness. Seen from an economic point of view, the entire range of this new generation of artisanal niche suppliers will not only become more significant in terms of turnover, they will also become an important motor of employment for our post-industrial societies, especially because their business model is NOT oriented towards the use of economies of scale.

However, we cannot allow ourselves to envision the production facilities of these new niche suppliers only as romantic arts and craft facilities without any kind of technology. On the contrary! These new producers, in spite of the fact that they regard themselves as enlightened craftsmen and their craft also as an art, have

become real experts in the employment and use of small, flexible and high-tech machinery, which has meanwhile become accessible and affordable for every DIY amateur. And, like every good artist, they know how to sell themselves. They make contracts with local retailers and even department stores, which are beginning to open up for such niche products, because they have understood the importance of including excellence in their own range of products. But they use the internet – and its viral power – as their preferred sales and – above all – communications channel. They are masters of the art of mouth-to-mouth propaganda using twitter, blogs and video blogs and make sure that people are able to discuss their products, works and principles in specifically themed forums. As Chris Anderson has highlighted in his book “The Long Tail”(2007), the internet is an integrated component of the niche provider’s business strategy because it turns masses of markets into a virtual mass market for products that are either unique or of excellent quality.

Redesigning our next culture of consumption

What would thus become the focal point of the new economy of culture is thus a culture that does not seek to renounce material wealth, but redesigns a balance between our unsustainable way of consuming and a fair and equitable distribution of wealth in the world. It is a culture that puts our unreasonable lifestyles under scrutiny of course, but without demonizing material goods *tout-court*, is instead questioning the meaning of what we do. It is a culture that can change on the parallel unreasonable habits of our private every-day life as well as in our actual senseless production methods, by transmitting the intangible yet priceless worth of our vital resources. And it is a culture that frees itself from the dictatorship of differentiation and the always changing consumption-driven Western lifestyles *fictionary* (Baudrillard, 2005), by showing us the unknown gain of diversity and suggesting new models of a good life based on the richness of our cultural diversities.

In brief: It is a culture that – by challenging the zeitgeist – spreads the seeds of a new prosperity and a new faith in the future. A culture that reconciles the vision of the world we are living in with the planet we are living on.

The design of a cultural epoch-making transformation

Those who simply claim that such a transformation is impossible should first ask themselves and then tell us if the current dogma of senseless growth still carries within it the seed of well-being and faith in the future. If the answer is negative, one has to imagine some new course of action. History has already witnessed some cultural and social movements that have dramatically changed the stream of time like Christianity, the Renaissance or the Enlightenment (Ruffolo, 2008). All transformation emerges from that which distinguishes our species from all others: our human mind and spirit.

The transformation towards an economy of significance and meaningfulness would thus require that philosophers besides dealing with ontological dilemmas start highlighting the relevant questions about the meaning of a good life and the set of values and principles we can share for re-designing a good and responsible life: economists must reconsider their discipline as part of the social sciences and therefore stop applying simplistic models of growth and start designing an economy based on a model of balanced, fair and sustainable prosperity; sociologists must stop writing up their market research and start understanding the driving forces of humanity. And last but not least, artists and designers and fashion designers must apply their skills to giving shape, colour, taste and smell to new visions of (aesth)ethical and sustainable prosperity in such an inspiring way that it has the power to challenge the mainstream culture.

Banksy graffiti



Artists/designers/fashion designer as “change agents”

As a matter of fact, in the construction of such an “economy of significance and meaningfulness”, designers and artists are asked to use their creativity to provoke public opinion, to spark public imagination through their interpretations of what a good, clean and fair culture of living would look and feel like for the people of this planet.

In this new economy designers and artists have a tremendously political role, since they – and not the technocrats – can really involve people emotionally and provide models to help us all re-imagine the future. They are the ones that can help us to give shape to our visions and hopes. A future of happiness of course, but this time it certainly will be a more sober happiness.

Many people today speak of the meaning of art and also of design in the creation of a more sustainable growth (ECP, 2006). But so far no one understands how to really unlock the potential of these disciplines. In the consumer goods industry, designers and, in recent times, also artists are regarded as fulfilling strictly a pure marketing function and are not employed as “change agents” or as communicators of the new latent needs of people for a sustainable and better life, which is why most of them do not entirely understand the subject of sustainability, let alone how to implement such a thing.

The “sustainability thing”

The result of this is that the confusion on our markets and in our civil society about “the sustainability thing” is tending to increase and that there is virtually no way that any vision for cultural transformation can be envisioned. We are almost drowning in an ocean of do-good fashion design products and fashion design textiles or clothing labelled as sustainable because they are either organic, or fair, or ethical or vegan, or green or ecological.

I am not going to talk about the differences between ecological and eco-friendly, between organic and green,

between ethical and fair trade. I just want to point out that all these terms are generally put in the same bucket of sustainability that has become a fashionable catch phrase of our time. To most people, sustainability is not just associated with something durable and good for the environment, but has also tended to be associated with some kind of denial and not with cultural and esthetical values that would make this objective emotionally attractive and worth striving for.

Three pillars (without culture) can not sustain sustainability

We all know that the challenge of three pillars model of sustainability implies a equally balanced ecological, economic and social commitment. But all that is not enough. It is necessary but not sufficient, because people today call for much more than just products that will save their world, their wallets or their peace of conscience. They are looking for cultural messages that also can deliver a clue for the "ecology of their mind" (Bateson, 1973). Cultural productions and goods that express their stance through a powerful aesthetic impact. That means everything that embodies strong cultural messages that can reconcile them with a future they thought they had lost.

Who else but artists, designers, and fashion designers would be able to merge all three aspects of sustainability with a poetic and daring gesture!? And who else but they could give us a tangible and understandable sign of a social change that is underway right now? Design is not just the discipline of giving shape to either functional or trendy and seductive artefacts. It is a discipline that can consciously transmit these "low-level signals" of our societies and it is a discipline that can advance, challenge and stimulate us at the same time in that it gives shape to "the new". Let me take the example of fashion design to clarify how design can be a highly sensitive seismograph of socio-cultural changes as well as the stimulus for cultural transformation.

When fashion design was a driving force of change

For those who can think back that far - It was at the beginning of the 1970's: Vivienne Westwood entered the scene with her rebel fashion creations, expressing the spirit of a new generation of young people and supporting their anti-establishment cultural revolution. And in the late 70's, Armani was not just inventing prêt-a-porter. He was much more designing the new, emancipated and possibly also post-feministic woman, who strode with head held high into a working world largely occupied by men and masculinity. In the 80's Katharine Hamnett was the first fashion designer who designed wearable politics. She was the first designer who used t-shirts as billboards for spreading awareness about the un-ecological and un-ethical criteria of textile and apparel industrial production. In the 90's the trained sociologist and political scientist Miuccia Prada was then creating the intelligent, educated and thoughtful woman, a woman who displayed her femininity in a minimalistic and understated way, which was in contrast to the cynical, opulent yuppie style of those times. Finally, at the end of the 90's Dolce and Gabbana's fashion message captured the secret need of women to reclaim their sensual, warm and prosperous femininity and released them from the anorexic and androgynous patterns that dominated fashion.

These kinds of designers were certainly not changing the course of consumerism history (today most of them represent exactly the opposite: the old luxury status quo), but they wrote history for the way they managed to capture and mirror in their fashion design the most relevant emergent signals of the socio-cultural transformation of Western societies in the last century's decades.



And Today?

Under the technocratic and short-sighted direction of the marketing departments, today's fashion and apparel industry finds itself the prisoner of the marketing strategy of "mass prestige" also referred as "masstige". This strategy means bringing past dreams of luxury to the masses and, in particular, to the many newly affluent people of the emerging countries. Revitalizing old fashion does not require much sensitivity nor originality. As a consequence fashion designers have lost sight of their artistic creative talent and the apparel industry has lost its reservoir of cultural messages to be transferred into the mainstream product offer.

Today, everyone is just copying everyone else. Zara's designers copy Armani and Chanel, the new hordes of Chinese designers copy H&M and the luxury brands copy old Asian and Chinese heritage and transform it into a trendy exotic fashionism. And by so doing, fashion has just become fashion and repetitively refers to itself instead of nourishing our cultures and contributing to the evolution of our civilizations. Fashion has been losing its strong symbolism, its systems of signs and signifiers, its meaning and its messages. Miles of cloth are getting swallowed up by the rhetoric of fashion emptiness. And Fashion is starting to go out of Fashion at rocket speed.

But this could also be a tremendous chance for a restart!

The design of a practical utopia

Allow me to indulge here in a last personal note. In 1933 Keynes said, "The decadent international but individualistic capitalism, in the hands of which we found ourselves after the war, is not a success. It is not intelligent, it is not beautiful, it is not just, it is not virtuous – and it doesn't deliver the goods. In short we dislike it, and we are beginning to despise it. But when we wonder what to put in its place, we are extremely perplexed." (Keynes, 1933)

I believe the same. Certainly any kind of "decadent" capitalism will end, some day, like all historical formations. But hopefully only once we will have been able to create those economic, political, and above all cultural alternative models that will allow us to keep on progress and prosper. In the absence of those alternatives the color of our future, as I said at the beginning, is black.

What is needed is not just a good show, but constructive work on a project, the practical utopia of the design of a new prosperity. What I have in mind is a sustainable, fair and enlightened new culture of economy, based on a capitalist entrepreneurship that is not coextensive with accumulation for profit, but consists of great, creative enterprises, luminous instances of which we have had so many in our Western countries, as elsewhere.

The ultimate task of the next generations – starting now, with our present generations – is to break the economy out of this petrifying mold of interminable, unlimited material growth and senseless wealth accumulation and turn its vital force to the pursuit of a responsible and sober happiness based on quality: real quality that truly counts toward better life and impels the growth of culture, education, the arts, science, knowledge craftsmanship, experience, and last but not least wisdom. By transcending itself, capitalism could most probably count on centuries and centuries more, because it will enter the last growth phase of the consumer economy, the one of an economy of culture, which is the only economy that allows for unlimited growth.

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