

# DESIGNING ANTI-ACTIVISM: APOCALYPSE FASTER!

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## ABSTRACT

This exploratory paper reviews literature on design activism and looks into the ways, how design can be used to bring matters to a head in our society.

Sustainable design can be perceived as design activism, and as such it can be connected to design exploration, seeking to provoke, criticize and experiment. This text studies explorative and participatory design approach in the context of sustainable consumption.

Focus of this paper is on a new media project called "Apocalypse Faster!", which was launched in January 2011. This participatory campaign takes an anti-activist approach against consumerism with designerly means.

## INTRODUCTION TO APOCALYPSE

The "big fuzz" around climate change and the Millennium Development Goals of United Nations is fading, but one message stays: An enormous global inequality exists as the developed countries consume the majority of resources, with only little left for the rest except the ecological burden. The real problem still is – and has always been – our well-developed consumption society.

Unseen growth in gross domestic production of the developed countries hasn't guaranteed happiness or provided a sustainable society (e.g. Happy Planet Index). Instead, there are emerging signs of decreasing biodiversity and exceeding the limits that our ecosystem can handle (WWF international 2010; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005). At the same time it seems that the best design can offer is to improve eco-efficiency of products and style them "green", leading

only to rebound into increased production, or varieties of eco-friendly alternatives to stand aside the older ones in a twice as big mall.

## DESIGN AS THE CAUSE AND THE KEY

The finger pointing on design is nothing new - already the first sentence on of Victor Papanek's Design for the Real World states that '[t]here are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only very few of them' (1971). Papanek sees only 'advertising design' more harmful, '[i]n persuading people to buy things they don't need, with money they don't have, in order to impress others that don't care' (pp.1). Today Papanek's message stays even more relevant, emphasizing design for genuine needs rather than looks.

Design profession doesn't necessarily have to be "for advertising" but instead it could create changes in consumption patterns. Design has a normative position between domains of society, and could function as a key, if the process is kept open to stakeholders and to the public. To embrace this openness, design approaches such as co-design, participatory design, social design and others that encourage participation should be promoted further.

## DESIGNERS AS ACTIVISTS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Designers play often the activist role, either being themselves activists or then being 'activists for hire' (Thorpe 2008, pp.2). In each case activism is defined by underlying cause for action, such as social or environmental issue, as opposed to a commercial cause (ibid.). Alistair Fuad-Luke defines design activism in his book with the same title (2009) to involve 'design thinking, imagination and practice' that is applied 'to create a counter-narrative aimed at generating and balancing positive social, institutional, environmental and/or economic change' (pp.27).

Why then take consumption in focus? - the reasons for this are clear. While from the point of view of sustainability the first group of people that urgently needs to change their behavior is designers themselves (Fuad-Luke 2009, pp.87), the group that could create the biggest impact is the western consumers. As one fifth of the global population accounts for over four fifths of the consumption it is well justified to call this majority of the world 'under-consumers', and the

remaining 'over-consumers' (Fuad-Luke 2009). Against the background shown in the first section, and with common sense, it is sensible and justified to focus on the over-consumers, the 20% of global population 'whose total mass and flow of consumption is causing most of the problems' (pp.86).

#### DESIGN EXPLORATION AND ARTIFACTS

Design process materializes in 'designerly ways' that 'thinify' ideas 'into dynamic artifacts, whether or not these turn out to be products, services, or spaces' (Fallman 2008, pp.18). According to Donald Schön's famous definition, design focuses not merely knowledge in action, but 'reflection-in-action' (Schön 1983), where existing knowledge is iteratively reflected to new problem contexts. Daniel Fallman has suggested a framework to interaction design that could help to identify different design activities. Fallman's model is a simple triangle, peaking in 'design practice', 'design studies' and 'design exploration' (2008; see Fig. 1). In the triangle design practice can many times be understood as commercial design activity, whereas design studies can be seen as academic activity that is distancing rather than involving (ibid.). Design exploration, on the other hand, seeks to ask *what if?* and it's ultimately guided by visions and ideals (ibid.).

As design activity, design activism seems often to fit into the category of 'design exploration' (Fuad-Luke 2009). Design exploration is ultimately guided by visions and ideals and is creating an interface towards society at large (Fallman 2008). It often seeks to provoke, criticize, and experiment, to reveal alternatives, to transcend accepted paradigms, and to bring matters to a head (ibid.), and the artifacts created by it or in it are often societal in character (ibid.).

Designers should not promote sustainability only by good design, but also indirectly by influencing behaviors with design. Therefore the strategy has to be twofold and intertwined (Fuad-Luke 2009), emphasizing both the process and the artifacts. One fitting approach to critically comment the consumer society to this mass is to take a participatory anti-activist's stance.

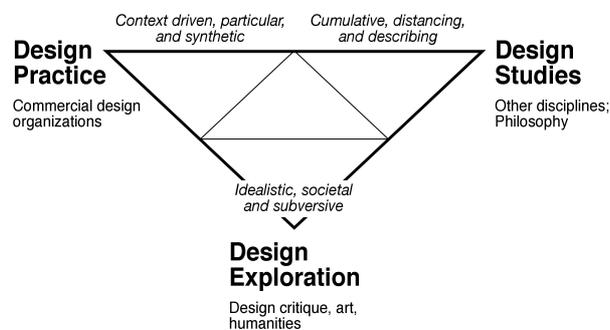


Figure 1. Framework to understand design activities (Fallman 2008)

#### APOCALYPSE LATER – OR SOONER?

Apocalypse Faster! is a collaborative design project that calls designers and public audience to ridicule consumer culture and the exhaustion of resources. It is based on concern about sustainability, is targeting consumers in the industrialized contexts, and has an anti-design approach that supports provoking and critical design explorations. The participatory approach taken in the project relies on the assumption that in the context of sustainability the design explorations should be made more open to public participation, to better enable societal discourse around the topics at hand.



Figure 2. Logo and concept development (authors 2010)

The project is based on the work of five post-graduates from the field of design – Liao Tjhien, Karthikeya Acharya, Anders Emilson, Anna Seravalli and the author – initiated in Nordes Summer School in August 2010, in Pukeberg, Sweden. It is grounded on a shared interest of sustainability, but also on a critical approach that is being more concerned with the existing consumerist mentality. It started as a serious attempt to question over-consumption with a concept called "Apocalypse Later", but evolved quickly into more effective attempt, hopefully better able to stand out from the passive status-quo that exists in consumption and design (see Fig. 2).

The project as well as this paper leaves outside it's scope corporate design activism, and also social innovation, where actual design solutions are scaled up from some niche market. Instead of the bottom the following case example focuses on the peak of the pyramid, and communicates with artifacts that try to provoke the western over-consumer.

#### DESIGN AS ACTIVISM

Design activism has a long history, which is not possible to go through in detail here. However, some clear examples can be found from the design discussions in the 1960's, when new radical thinking emerged and strongly influenced design field, reacting against the ideas of the Modernist movement. Radical design movement was particularly concerned to show up the growing alliance between design and consumption (Sparke 1990), and it took anti-consumerist position (Fuad-Luke 2009) involving also the he so-called 'anti-' or 'counter-design' that grew up

as part of the general crisis of the late sixties (Sparke 1990).

The radical movement as a whole introduced some revolutionary design approaches, including design with ‘holistic vision of the environment’ rather than with isolated item-specific approach (Sparke 1990, pp.200), entailing approach taken in future frameworks for sustainable design, universal design, inclusive design, but also for user-centred design, co-design and system design (Fuad-Luke 2009). During the 70's these topics staid in discussion among designers, and eventually left a lasting mark in design.

#### MORE RECENT APPROACHES

More recently several participatory design movements have been reshaping design's role in societal activities, one among them being ‘slow design’ (Fuad-Luke 2009). Slow design is raising from the grassroots and critically commenting the contemporary lifestyle, and it requires ‘stepping outside the existing mental construct’ to create ‘fresh awareness’ (pp.157). Similarly fresh counter-narrative approach resisting existing paradigms can be seen in modern critical design or anti-design. Critical design, popularized by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby through their firm, Dunne & Raby, takes a critical theory based approach to design and uses designed artifacts as critique or commentary on consumer culture. Anti-design and its famous case examples such as Adbusters have a similar approach.

Social movements such as slow design or modern anti-design are ‘an accumulation’ of several different actors taking different actions, but ‘held together by shared beliefs’ (Thorpe 2008, pp.5) and as bottom-up approaches they are evolving social capital. Radical design activism approach is still here in the form of design criticism, social innovation and participatory design, and designers are skilled to facilitate these processes.

#### TYOLOGY OF ACTION AND THE ARTIFACTS OF DESIGN ACTIVISM

Slow design movement involves “anti-activists” that are a diverse coalition of groups protesting against – generally – consumer society and its phenomenas (Fuad-Luke 2009, pp.6). Such groups are for example many movements and initiatives (e.g. Reclaim the streets, Buy nothing day, Meatfree monday) or NGO's and organizations (e.g. Adbusters), and their message is for example anti-consumerist or anti-globalist (pp.157). The common nominator to these is the focus in industrialized contexts and consumer society. These examples strive to shake existing thought-patterns, disturb or provoke society and behavior within it.

Ann Thorpe refers in her conference paper (2008) to seven typologies for design activism (see Table 1) and founds that many these revolve around artifacts (ibid.). Examples of design activism artifacts are ‘service artifacts’ providing humanitarian aid, ‘demonstration artifacts’ focusing to demonstrate positive alternative

solutions, and ‘protest artifacts’ that may be provoking, confrontational or even offensive, but offer critique against the status quo (ibid.).

Table 1. An initial shape of typology of action for design activism. (based on Thorpe 2008)

Action:	of total:	Explanation:
Demonstration	28 %	Demonstrating positive/superior alternatives
Info/communication	27 %	Making information visual/ tactile, creating symbols, physical links, etc.
Conventional actions	13 %	Proposing legislation, conducting research, etc.
Competitions	10 %	
Service artefacts	10 %	Humanitarian aid
Events	9 %	Conferences, talks, installations or exhibitions
Protest artefacts	3 %	Confrontational, even offensive, reflection on status quo

According to Thorpe’s material it seems that similarly as design in general, design activism is about mostly about artifacts and communication, as 41% of the cases orientate around artifacts and 27% around information/communication” (2008). This, similarly as the approach to design as a normative practice, suggests that most natural area for design activism revolves around communication and artifacts that embody societal meanings.

In consumer culture, products seem to substitute also self-identity and social life. Modern media and consumer culture – but also "consumer design" – encourages people into supine 'interpassivity' (Zizek 2002), and this fetishism towards things has to be questioned by 'radicalizing' the relationship between persons and things (ibid.). By attaching more fantasy to the artifact, designer can introduce another symbolic level to the artifact to induce attached messages.

Anti-activist approach seems to often create protest artifacts that question existing paradigms. Anti-activists act with communication by information. But provoking design can also be extended easily to material and tactile world of design as well. Provoking design in its tactile form can be found for example from Huggable Atomic Mushroom chair by Anthony Dunne, Fiona Raby and Michael Anastassiades, that was exhibited in Freak Show –exhibition (Bördner and Lovell 2010) in Gallery Helmrinderknecht, in Berlin (see Fig. 3). The work emphasizes the ignorance related to existing nuclear armament, and shows a perfect example of a design artifact protesting against a certain paradigm.



PHOTO: MARCUS GAAB STUDIO

Figure 3. Huggable Atomic Mushroom / White mohair chair (Dunne, Raby and Anastassiades 2010)

### CASE: APOCALYPSE FASTER!

The idea for Apocalypse Faster! was originally presented with an intentionally confusing message: The concept presentation started as a traditional campaign for sustainability, but then transformed into anti-statement towards consumerism (see Fig. 2) Feedback regarding the anti-approach was encouraging. It seemed that the project's anti-activist stance managed to induce critical thinking in the audience, but also humor it.

The project was then realized by the author: Three sketched design concepts were elaborated into graphical representations and simple mock up site was designed. In January 2011 "www.apocalypse-faster.net" beta website was launched. Apocalypse Faster! resulted in a new media campaign with a humorous portfolio of design concepts that are "promoting a faster apocalypse", and a forum for discussion. Its website offers a medium to download campaign media, browse and share critical content, and discuss and comment. Participating community can also suggest and upload new concepts.

### DEVELOPING SOCIAL CAPITAL BY TAKING A POSITION AGAINST

Interesting design approaches can be induced by design research carried out by 'practicing designers within an intellectual context' (Dunne 2006, pp.4), and activism many times is motivated by personal needs, desires, goals, or by a 'sense of altruism or morality', aimed for the greater societal good (Fuad-Luke 2009, pp.18). In most cases design activism results from a collective process and therefore represents collective action (Thorpe 2008). It is developing collectivized social capital as it tries to modify existing paradigms of meaning, values and purpose (Fuad-Luke 2009).

Examples of design activism often accept pluralism of values and interests, and are not targeted towards "universal rational", but towards some regulative ideas emphasizing certain practices. Design activism is promoting a form of 'normative rational' that aims to

open and 'deliberative' democracy (Mouffe 2000) without necessarily seeking a consensus. Apocalypse Faster! is an example of such activist project designed for a certain purpose - to criticize the fetishist approach to products and owning.

### CAMPAIGN CREATING COUNTER-NARRATION

The campaign tries to induce critical thinking in the audience by creating counter-narration with anti-design, and it calls for participation in the forms of communication and sharing of media. On the website audience can browse and discuss anti-design concepts. They can also download campaign material such as stickers and posters, and share and propose concepts (see Fig. 4).

Emphasis is put on re-interpreting the 'interpassive' status-quo of standard life (Zizek 2002), and on symbolic reduplication that is playing with design and semiotics. Problems of consumption and inequality are reframed into humorous fake design concepts (see Fig. 5) that try to provoke audience but also to amuse and ridicule, to encourage participation. In the long run the community can expand the concept portfolio further and add other media content.

### DISCUSSION: DESIGN IS ACTIVISM

Design activism in its several forms is not focused to any single domain of design (Thorpe 2008). Instead it should be extended to all designers and areas of design. Design activism requires new ways to communicate with 'imaginative use of design [...] to penetrate beyond the 'white noise'' (Fuad-Luke 2009, pp.88). It requires participatory design exploration with critical approach, in which new ideas can be created through transcendence from the tradition, arising from existing solutions when different groups, practices and knowledge meet (Fallman 2008). But most importantly, it should promote open cultural and social dialogue, and support the emergence of the 'deliberative democracy' raising from the grassroots and open to several views (Mouffe 2000).

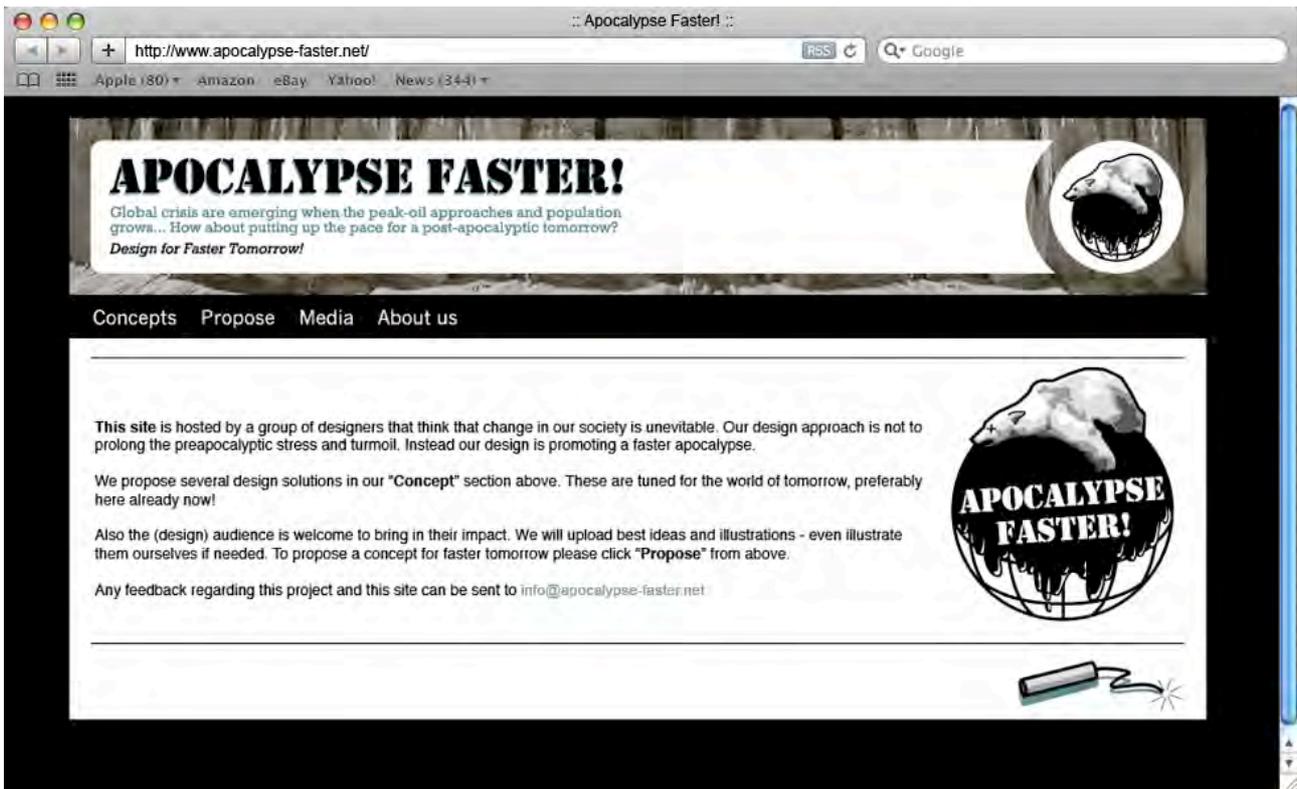


Figure 4. Campaign website – www.apocalypse-faster.net

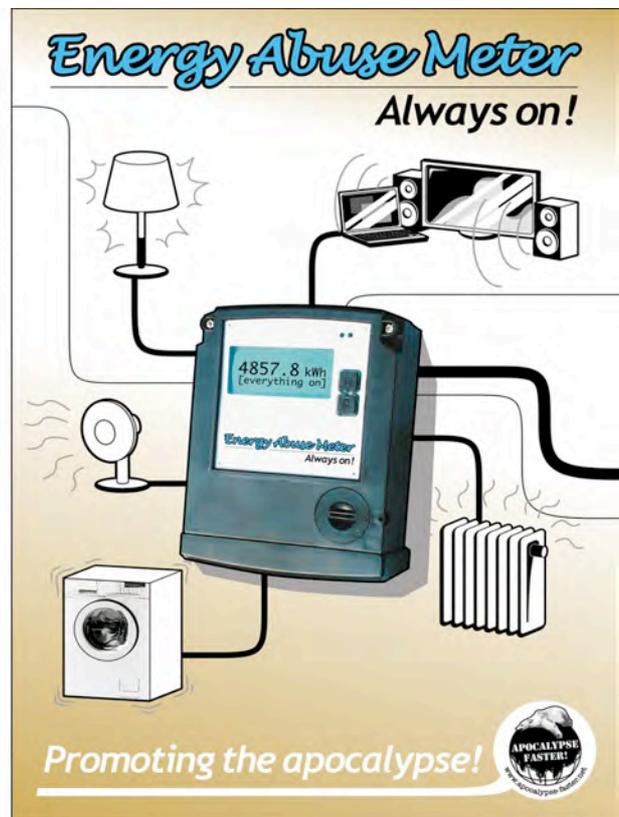
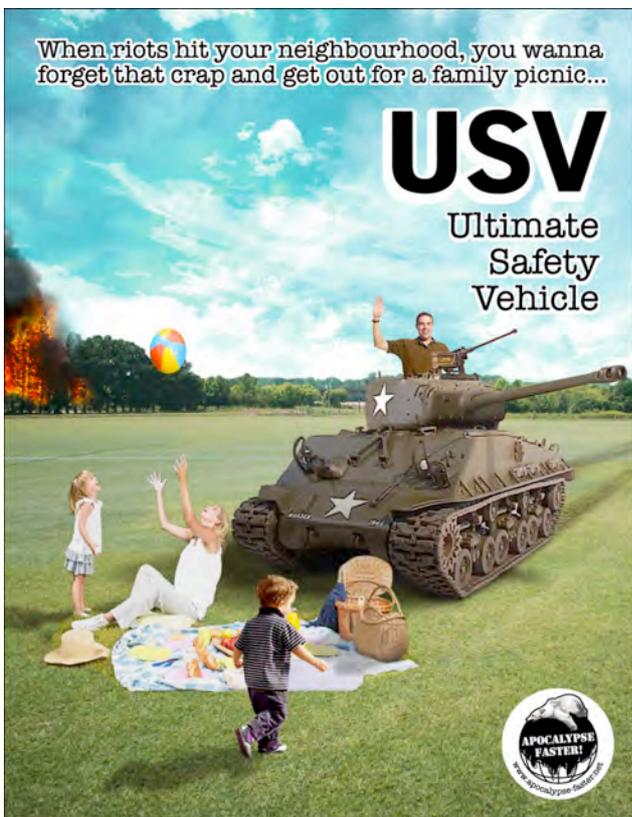


Figure 5. Examples of fake design concepts

As activists, designers are more likely to 'help people imagine not just how to reform broken societal patterns, but to imagine and invent new ones' (Thorpe 2008, pp.12). Promoting design activism could contribute to dialogue about new social goals and values, and this requires open participation and discussion. Designers are partly semioticians, but should not participate in creating mere 'semiotic skins' (Dunne 2006) for new products that promote the end of the world. Instead, while consumerism is running uncontested it should be challenged 'through the visual languages and resources of design' (Adbusters 1999).

Although protest artifacts are the least frequent instances of design activism (Thorpe 2008), they are aimed to create discussion in the design field and in wider audience, and can be powerful tools to create critical awareness. They are of fantasy and can be 'objectively subjective' frameworks to help to extrapolate the experience (Zizek 2002). *Apocalypse Faster!* is such a small attempt to provoke and raise discussion.

## CONCLUSIONS

Very little has changed since the first initiatives against consumerism. Several decades of pursuing for sustainable development haven't been creating more sustainable society. Design can be an agent for change in several ways, but most important issues from the point of view of sustainability have to be the habits of consumption.

Designers are entitled to raise discussion in public and bring important issues up in another shed of light. If *Apocalypse Faster!* succeeds to gather audience, it can help to point out the adverse logic in consumption culture, and to support open participation, and thus be involved in shaping the values for future society.

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