

# Changing the change

Design Visions, Proposals and Tools

An international conference on the role and potential of design research in the transition towards sustainability

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## NOTES ON ECODESIGN, BODY AND THE POST-HUMAN THOUGHT

### Foreword

The paper proposes the establishment of eco-design as a key discipline in the pursuit of new viewpoints and substantially different scenarios for the world of objects. If we are going to usher in a more advanced phase for the disciplines of design, we need to discard the idea of eco-design as merely a “first-aid kit” at the sick bed of production.

Only becoming a *great energy, based on solid scientific assumptions but at the same time visionary in outlook*, design can mark a significant turning point in the methods of production; this is the role that design can play in a more mature phase of ecological culture and this is, probably, the missing enzyme for radical change.

### Eco-design, objects and the body

In the complex reflection on the outlook for the world of objects, which the culture of design is specifically required to carry out – entailing the contribution and combination of many disciplines – we can identify one element which is notable by its absence: *the body*. The acknowledgement of eco-design, as a way of more generally rethinking the world of objects vis-a-vis the environment, also interferes with broad sociological considerations; but in this context what is lacking is reflection on the body starting, for example, from the theoretical input of “post-human” thought.

And yet the theories of the post-human certainly impact on *new models of existence* -as suggested by the subtitle of the recent essay by Roberto Marchesini - which influence the culture of design. The paper underlines some features of post-human thought based on recent contributions and connects them – firstly – to design perspectives that are able to affect the relations between objects, the body and the environment.

The paper starts by identifying three transformations that are crucial for the definition of the passage from modern design to post-modern design and which impact in particular on eco-design issues:

- |                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| 1) mechanical technology -     | electronic technology                          |
| 2) unit of design: the product | unit of design: the product-in-its-environment |
| 3) society based on objects -  | dematerialisation                              |

But what terms should we use to define the transition from modernity to the post-modernity of the relationship between the body and the design project? The only way that the body is considered within sustainable design is in terms of health, starting from the logical equation that a healthy environment also means a healthy body.

Following Michel Serres, man has the faculty to transfer his bodily functions in objects; and to take advantage of this freedom in order to go further. The body, freed once more and even more so by the

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new technologies of communication, is actually in a “condition of inferiority” in respect of the mind, since the latter is offered the tools of ICT and virtual reality so that mental faculties are expanded exponentially. So on the one hand we have a huge expansion of the possibilities of the mind and a striking *extension of consciousness*; on the other, vis-a-vis the *infinitely performative* world of the virtual, the body is essentially debased. However, at the same time and to a greater extent insofar as it is actually inorganic, the world of objects is also debased.

Based on all these premises the paper highlights an extremely critical point: the so-called “death of things” is not contradicted today – but rather confirmed – by the remarkable multiplication of objects, produced at an astonishing rate and destined to have extremely short, and often useless, lives. But what directions should the culture of eco-design be moving in if it intends to influence this sort of change?

It will be hard to respond to this question until the disciplines of design deal with a *microsociology of ethical mediation of daily techniques*. The excessive attention given by philosophical and sociological analysis to sociologically evident aspects – such as assembly lines, nuclear explosions or ICT – commits the additional error of *cancelling the immense network of object-subject micro-relations that constitute our daily world*, ending up by simply creating a gap, a no-man’s land that is the terrain for all sorts of prejudices and fanaticism.

## New perspectives

The paper proposes *two directions* for design research associated with hypotheses for future activity: both starting from a *microsociology of daily objects* - which does away with the old nature/technology dichotomies - and both working for new conceptions of objects:

- 1) assume dematerialisation as a key element, while at the same time designing a system of objects actually able to free us from the *burden* and the *exponential torrent* of things.
- 2) work for a *post-ergonomics*, for new ideas of the role of the body, not linked to an abstract neo-purity as a corollary of environmentalism, or in opposition to the virtual world.

The fact that the body is currently removed from the reflection on design is confirmed by the fundamental *impasse* of a specific historical design discipline, namely ergonomics: if ergonomics has become bogged down with the concept of an *abstract and rigid* individual, eco-design now possesses the means to build immediately and plainly a new concrete brand of ergonomics based around a *flexible and hybrid* individual whose existence is implied just as forcefully in nature as it is in technology.

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