

Case Study

# Expanded Design between Design Activism and Collectible Design

Beatrice Bianco <sup>1,\*</sup>, Alessandro Squatrito <sup>2</sup>, Marinella Ferrara <sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> Istituto Europeo del Design (IED) Torino, Italy<sup>2</sup> Politecnico di Milano, Italy

\*Correspondence: Beatrice Bianco (bianco.beatrice.c@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** The last three decades have witnessed in Europe an increasing interest from institutions, and creative communities in independent research connected to crafting, DIY, maker culture, and design activism. A new generation of designers has focused on the experimentation of processes, materials, and technologies used as a vehicle for socio-political and environmental messages and as the starting point of solid narrative projects. This paper aims to analyse this phenomenon inside the niche of Collectible Design, a field in recent years of great interest by galleries and institutions for its ability to embrace material and technological research as well as craftsmanship and art. We investigate the phenomenon, through a series of interviews with designers such as Shahar Livne, Eugenia Morpurgo, Pleun van Dijk, Tellurico, and Standard 404, selected for their ability to use experimental materials and technologies, as communicative media for reflections on systemic issues.

**Keywords:** Design Activism; Collectible Design; Material Activism; Design Narrative

## How to cite this paper:

Bianco, B., Squatrito, A., & Ferrara, M. (2022). Expanded Design between Design Activism and Collectible Design. *Journal of Art and Design*, 2(1), 33–42. Retrieved from <https://www.scipublications.com/journal/index.php/jad/article/view/367>

Received: July 10, 2022

Accepted: August 29, 2022

Published: September 01, 2022



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, global issues such as environmental concerns, human and non-human exploitation, and wealth polarization, are systemic and defined as *hyperobjects* (Morton, 2013). The sedimentation of Bruno Latour's (1991) earlier theories has come to produce a collective and active response both in the art field and in the design system. In the last decade, the environmental and social issues of energy, production, and waste have led several designers to focus their attention on possible responses, focused on the manufacturing process, ubiquitous technologies, and the selection of materials involved. *Cleaner technologies* (Myers, 2012) are the focus of a new transdisciplinary engagement between design and other disciplines such as art, biology, chemistry, social sciences, and geopolitics, which has triggered what is now a common practice: design activism (Julier, 2013).

A proper niche of such experimentation is the *Collectible Design* (Bianco, 2021), a field also known as *Design Art* (Pasca, 2010), a self-production creative practice that emerged in the late 90s among young European designers (Ferrara, 2002). Features of their practices are handmade, non-industrial, or high-end manufacturing proposals of unique pieces or small collections. These are exhibited in art galleries or trade fairs. Design Art production includes experimental approaches to techniques, materials, shapes, and final uses (Ferrara, 2011; Ferrara, 2014; Macdonald, 2017).

While the phenomenon initially exhibited a pragmatic and apolitical approach to independently conducted design research (Ferrara, 2002), it now displays a greater complexity of attitudes, design visions, and actions. However, the Collectible Design niche "can hide the devious side of the futile trend of such practice in the global scale of

our systemic issues, where the consequences of these creative acts risk to be irrelevant if not insulting concerning the market around and its functioning" (Von Busch, 2022). On the other hand, Von Busch appoints a healing perspective where the means and ends of a project can meet in the process of making (2022), where the *Deleuzian objectile* engages its environment and its stakeholders, from the beginning of the idea to the materially endless transformation of it. Therefore, among young designers and artists, a growing tendency is brought to focus more and more on materials, processes, and technologies, used as a vehicle of a political and social message and as the starting point of a strong narrative around the project. In this context, our paper aims to explore the design activism related to the phenomenon of a collectible design production featured by *making practices* with new technologies and materials in the very last years. After a theoretical overview followed by case studies interviews, we concluded with some reflections.

## 2. Designing in the Anthropocene

Our historical moment is desperately looking for answers and fundamental pivots to assure the survival of our species and the others facing the consequences of climate change and the environmental issues caused by anthropic activity on the global scale. We address this era as the Anthropocene, the geological era characterized by changes caused by human intervention (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). Therefore, what can design do? At this stage, it must "shift from a discipline that aims to attribute form to artifacts, towards conceiving it as a plan or project for the realization of a more complex and systemic transformation" (Maffei, 2021).

Victor Papanek, with *Design for the real world* in 1984 and later in 1995 with *The Green Imperative*, already questioned the role of design towards possible sustainable paths and responses to the threats of anthropic activities, including design itself. Concepts such as the *telesis* have been pillars inspiring the new generations of designers of this century that broaden their field of research, including transdisciplinary and different design approaches, such as Advanced Design (Celaschi & Celi, 2015), Critical Design, Material Design, Speculative Design (Dunne, 2008) and Social Design.

However, even if the ecological problems we face "are not going to be solved by eco-art, representations of fake-nature or collections of plastic hybrids from polluted coastlines" (Anderson, 2015), the changing attitude towards our relationship with the realm of objects can help to investigate new perspectives of what the post-human can be; enlarging the conversation on such topics with public exhibitions like the XXII Milan Triennale in 2019 *Broken Nature: Design Takes on Human Survival* curated by Paola Antonelli (Antonelli & Tannir, 2019). As Max Liboiron reported (2016): "objects are as implicated in social relations as human beings, and thus demand close attention. Objects have agency. They influence the things around them in relation to each other". They develop into the *population of wastes* which on its turn as well, develop into the *population of pollutants and man-made erosion factors* (Maldonado, 1970). Moreover, this is one of our significant issues as species.

## 3. In dialogue with contemporary European designers

For this paper, 5 case studies were selected among young European designers and artists we observe, producing experimentations and collectible design. The selection was made including cross-cutting issues such as environmental problems, and political, social, and moral issues. We used a case study methodology based on an explanatory approach as expressed by Yin (2003). The choice of this approach is dictated by the blurred boundaries of the phenomenon examined and by the desire to be able to propose some theoretical ideas.

We collected data using semi-structured interviews administered directly to designers through the submission of a questionnaire or direct interview. We designed the

interview to gather as much information as possible about the concept and theme to be conveyed, the role of materials and production processes, funding for production, involvement in exhibitions or publications, and distribution of the work.

#### 4. Shahar Livne

Shahar Livne is an Israeli award-winning conceptual material designer located in Eindhoven, Netherlands. Her project *The Meat Factory* started in 2014 during her study at the Design Academy Eindhoven. "The reason of this research is my personal conflicted relationship of attraction/aversion to meat. The project evolved through the years into a collection of materials". The designer managed to develop rubbers, pigments, dyes, and a leather-like material that she could use in a wearable sneaker in collaboration with the German sneaker brand Nat2.

The leather material is made of by-products and waste materials of the meat industry, such as bones, blood, and fat. One of the uniqueness of the material is that it can act as a pourable leather-like material which opens many possibilities for design. Excellent option for unsustainable animal leather. The project is part of many material libraries worldwide; it was listed as DEZEEN 10 Top innovative materials of 2019 and lately was shown at the Dutch pavilion at the world expo in Dubai, to mention a few.

In the case of *The Meat Factory*, design activism is applied to the material to take control of it, understand the raw materials from which to derive it, connect the final design to experimentation, and create new craft and aesthetic possibilities.

The designer states that the problem she has encountered is the possibility of scaling up and industrializing the materials since the leap from craft to industrial scale and performance involves technologies and systems that either don't exist yet or are not economically and logistically viable for larger fabric companies.



**Figure 1.** Shahar Livne, *The Meat Factory*, series of material experiments to work with the "whole beast", investigating and inspired by the days when animals were killed, every single part was used as the entire beast was valuable, Credits: Shahar Livne

#### 5. Pleun van Dijk

Pleun van Dijk is a Danish speculative artist/designer that lives and works in the Netherlands and Denmark.

*Replika, staging a human production line* is a work started as her dissertation and is the evolution with which she questioned the evolution, manipulation, and ability to modify our bodies and how we as a species slowly deconstruct the human body and rebuild it

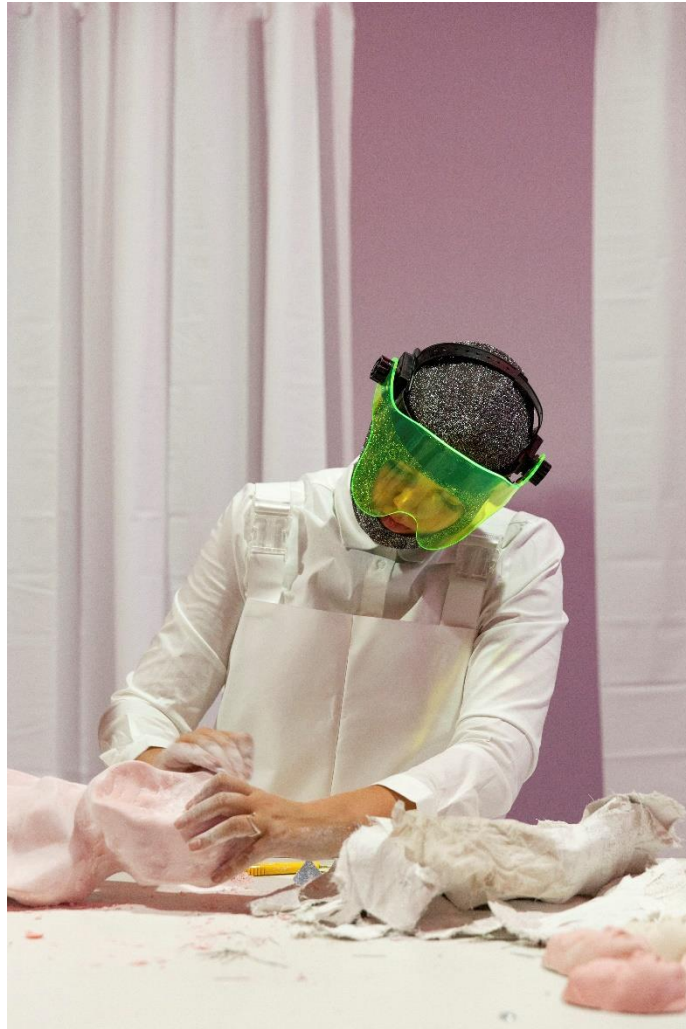
afterward. This became the starting point of her research as a designer, or as she prefers to call herself a "form philosopher".

*Replika* was commissioned by the Roskilde Festival in Denmark in 2018. It was a performance staging a human production line with baby shape sculptures making performance, where process and method were the protagonists

"I started experimenting on a doll I had as a child and used it as a subject to model and reproduce a series, considering the Platonic ideal of the best version of ourselves: perfect mould, perfect version, perfect body."

The designer then asked herself: what happens if you keep copying the human body? And what happens if you do it with different materials? Every time you copy the mould, the version changes with different details. The differences are visible going forward, from the first version to the last. The project, therefore, questions our approach to cloning and genetic manipulation as a species, as we can never fully control the outcome in future generations. To address these ethical issues, the designer has used performance design because, with them, she can trigger some reaction in the audience, perhaps more than written words or institutional speeches. Since the first performance in Roskilde, the project has been shown at the Arnold and Sheila Aronson Gallery, Parsons School of Design in New York, Alcova during the Fuorisalone in Milan, K11 in Guangzhou, and the Design Museum Den Bosch in the Netherlands, to name a few.

"To me, design activism is a practice in between the academic world and the collectible design context. To be honest, I never create works to earn money. However, my research needs a lot of time and a lot of money to be developed and that's why I rely on my academic path, as a teacher and hopefully one day as a PhD student."



**Figure 2.** Pleun van Dijk, *Replika*, a moment of the speculative design performance commissioned by Roskilde festival in 2018, Credits: Nahmlos

## 6. Tellurico

Tellurico is a multidisciplinary design studio specialized in objects and installations, founded by Italian designer Francesco Pace and based in the Netherlands.

The project examined is *A Chair for Ursula*. It is a very intuitive project on the diplomatic incident during the visit of the President of the European Commission with the President of the European Council, to the Turkish President in Ankara, where von der Leyen found herself without a seat in the official meeting.

As the designer recounts, the project was very unstudied. The idea was to convey a message. "As a European man, I felt very bad, because I have always been educated in the manners of hospitality and equality." For this project, the classic cliché of the designer as a seating designer was taken up, and as in other projects, the material became a catalyst for communication.

For Tellurico, working on the production process requires relying on classic techniques or renewing artisanal processes from a contemporary perspective. "We really need to renew different production processes; otherwise, we risk losing them in the long run, and on the other hand, some other production processes are extremely environmentally invasive." In terms of funding, the designer relies on curators, galleries, and others who have funded several projects with which he can continue his research.

In the case of *A Chair for Ursula*, the project was self-produced as an instinctive act. "I wanted to make a statement after the news broke. I used the techniques I know best, carving and plaster. Several people have asked me for a custom project from this one."

The project was exhibited for the first time at the Brussels Collectibles Fair in May 2022.

Concerning the design and material activism, "I think collectible design is one of the very few environments to work on it. Neither industrial design nor the art world is that free to research in this way. Collectible design is where I can and want to perpetrate material activism. I believe it will become the starting point to change production processes in the long run."



**Figure 3.** Tellurico, *A Chair for Ursula*, unique piece realised with the carving technique and plaster, Credits: Tellurico

## 7. Eugenia Morpurgo

Eugenia Morpurgo is an Italian designer who researches through her works the impact of production processes on society and the environment by experimenting and creating prototypes that imagine possible alternative scenarios. *Italian tropics* is a project born in 2018 in collaboration with Olivia de Gouveia and is still under development. It was born as personal research on the impact of human activities within a specific territory, such as the Mincio valleys.

The lotus is a non-native plant that has become a pest in the Mincio valleys (ITA), where it has found favourable environmental conditions to reproduce. Plant rhizomes were grafted around the 20s to experiment with the cultivation as a food and textile production source. The project, never defined, led to uncontrolled production of lotus plants, which, also because of rising temperatures, had continued to reproduce even in winter periods when usually the growth stopped. Moreover, due to fertilizers in agricultural waters that are discharged into the lakes of the valley, today the lotus has now colonized the entire territory. The presence of the lotus has profoundly changed the territory by modifying the shores of the lake and its depth. It has also impacted the fauna that no longer finds places and substrate to nest and attract non-native species such as ibis.

Through production methods and manual techniques, the two designers have produced a silk-like yarn from the lotus and extracted pulp and fiber to produce paper, panels, or fabrics.

The project has been carried out and exhibited during the last triennial of Milano, Broken Nature, and at the biennial of Porto. The project has received local institutions and some consortia' interest in producing fibers but is now interrupted by the pandemic.

"The production of an artifact directly facilitates communication and shows in a direct way the future potential of a material or a technique", says Eugenia.

"In the future, for me, it will be important to work more within the territory, spend much time collaborating with local realities and immerse myself in the territory. In this way, I can communicate my messages and I can make this reach as many people as possible."



**Figure 4.** Eugenia Morpurgo, *Italian Tropics*, samples of the Lotus flower rhizomes, Credits: The Future Continuous

## 8. Standard 404

Standard 404 is the new-born studio between Madrid and Eindhoven from former La Cube, founded by designer Stefano Fusani and historian Clara Hernandez.

*Trigo, Perro, Roca* is the result of independent research based on the relationship between man and urban context exhibited in 2018 at Camp Design Gallery in Milan and never shown again. The idea was to investigate how the nature that surrounds us daily is a humanized nature (intervened, influenced), or a false nature (directly created); both states reveal deep and ancient domestication of the world, an adaptation and shaping of it for human needs or ambitions. Humanity needs to domesticate raw nature, to give it a

function according to the rules of rationality. Positivism demands explanation and function. Everything in the world follows the example of the wheat, the dog, the barley, the goat, and the roses. Bread, milk, companionship, beauty, everything is domesticated. By giving them a function, they are not taken as such "we do not sculpt, but rather make rocks, change their genetics to arrange them to our taste and need; we then go to the extreme, turning minerals into domestic rocks that seek a function, to fulfil the role they assign". There has been a constant dialogue between the concept of domesticating nature and experimenting materially through moulds and layers of artificial material and textures, and the imperative to have light side tables and stools with this material.



**Figure 5.** Standard 404, *Trigo, Perro, Roca*, part of the collection's overview, Credits: Alec Iatan

## 9. Conclusion

The case studies offer a jagged cross-section of the complex analysed phenomenon that highlights a change of perspective from contemporary designers/artists educated primarily in Northern European institutes. In the last decade in these countries, public funds, such as *Stimuleringsfonds* in the Netherlands, have allowed the financing of disruptive research projects by young designers. This policy influences the didactic proposal that academies and universities offer to their students and creates an induced ability to feed possible creative linked industries. The phenomenon has increased all around European design schools.

In this context, a new generation of designers tells their own stories, express their criticism of the status quo, and envision their contributions as an alternative proposal or an artifact as a tool to shock, trigger debates through the process of making, establishing a new relationship between resources and production. They are aware that "The challenges to our planet today are so complex that they cannot be solved by one discipline. Design is the bridge. It translates scientific ideas and discoveries into real-world applications." (McQuaid *et al.*, 2019). Then, they adopt an approach of problem-solving and goal-setting, the stimulation of questions, and the creation of critical reflections.

Their artifacts unfold various layers of interaction with abstract subjects such as context, politics, cultural development, and intersectionality (Biggs, 2002). The artifact becomes a medium of cognitive contexts, conventions, and outcomes in the reality the



designers are immersed in. Designers manipulate the raw matter to shape a new physical narrative, creating a persuasive argument that comes to life whenever a user considers, or uses or contemplates an artifact as a means to some end (Buchanan, 1985). The process of experimenting is fundamental to building new paths in the material research: the tinkering approach is characterized by a playful, experimental, iterative style of engagement, in which makers are continually reassessing their goals, exploring new paths, and imagining new possibilities (Resnik & Rosenbaum 2013).

The collectible design branch can be seen in two different perspectives. On the one side, as a collector of independent conceptual research not linked to an industrial production but to stimulate consciences and raise issues with possibilities of engaging with public and private institutions. On the other side, as a small market with limited commercial options and, therefore, very complex for independent designers to finance their research. On both sides, we face a phenomenon that undoubtedly is not new and is evolving in an era in which “the design is expanded” (Pasca, 2018), and its role is deeply modifying.

In the attached diagram we try to summarize the process that characterizes the new system of production through specific channels (mostly institutions and galleries) facing the creative economy rise. Starting from personal environmental positions and socio-cultural reflections, these designers and researchers define a scope of action based on a concept that will be developed through actions, most often independent and low-budget. This concept is presented to public or private organizations, sometimes commissioning the first production. However, in some cases, the concept and research continue as self-financing and self-producing. Only in the phase of display and distribution public or private organizations come into play. Research in the form of an artifact is therefore distributed or exhibited. At that point, that artifact becomes Collectible design. From the sale, display, and distribution of collectible pieces, it is now possible to finance new research projects or creative businesses in a virtuous circle.

This is the process/system that current European policies seem to favour promoting creative research on major issues and verify its acceptability by a wide audience. It is a process capable of making a design act take on a value of responsibility and civil perspective. As Gregotti (Eco & Gregotti, 2009) argue, design is no more a question of producing objects whose form depends on the modes of production and necessary use but on the modes of diffusion and exchange values that they can assume.

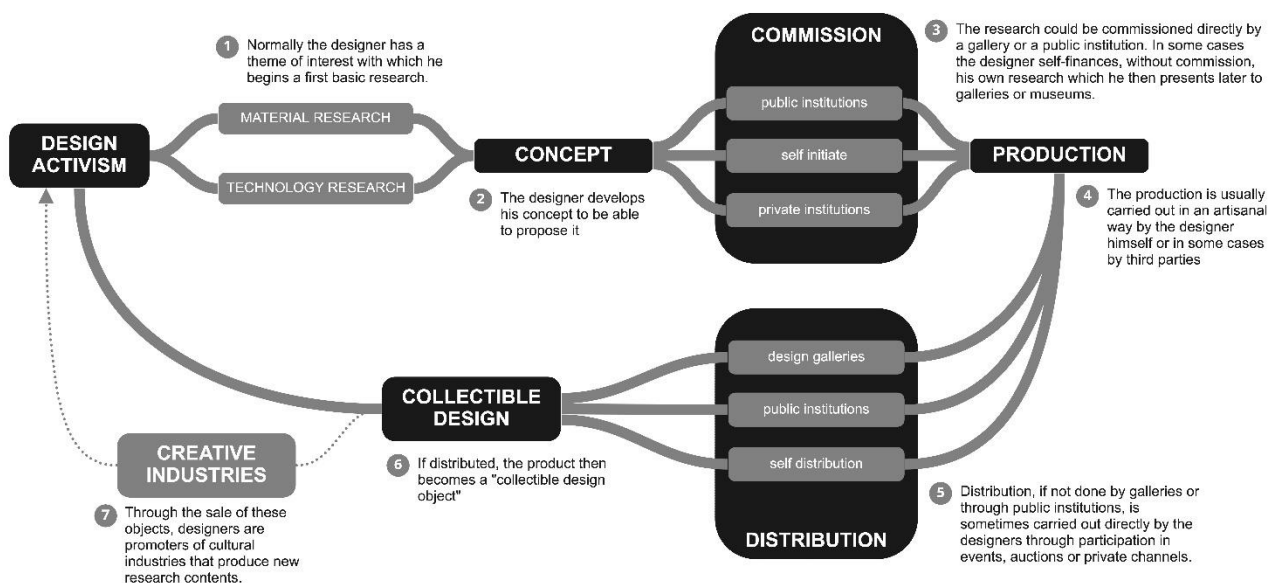


Figure 6. Collectible design process

## References

- [1] Anderson, K. (2015). Ethics, Ecology, and the Future: Art and Design Face the Anthropocene. *Leonardo* 48(4), 338-347. [https://doi.org/10.1162/LEON\\_a\\_01087](https://doi.org/10.1162/LEON_a_01087)
- [2] Antonelli, P., Tannir, A. (2019). Broken Nature: Design Takes on Human Survival. Electa.
- [3] Bianco, B. (2021). Design bites. <https://collectible.design/interview-beatrice-bianco/>
- [4] Biggs, M. (2002). The role of the artefact in art and design research. *International Journal of Design Sciences and Technology* 10 (2), 19-24 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/30383041\\_The\\_role\\_of\\_the\\_artefact\\_in\\_art\\_and\\_design\\_research](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/30383041_The_role_of_the_artefact_in_art_and_design_research)
- [5] Buchanan, R. (1985). Declaration by Design: rhetoric, argument, and demonstration in design practice. *Design Discourse - history, theory, criticism* 2 (1), 4-22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1511524>
- [6] Celaschi, F., Celi, M. (2015). Advanced design as reframing practice: Ethical challenges and anticipation in design issues. *Futures* 71, 159-167. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2014.12.010>
- [7] Crutzen, P.J. Stoermer, E.F. (2000). The "Anthropocene". *Global Change Newsletter*, 41, 17 <http://www.igbp.net/download/18.316f18321323470177580001401/1376383088452/NL41.pdf>
- [8] Dunne, A. (2008). *Hertzian tales: Electronic products, aesthetic experience, and critical design*. MIT press.
- [9] Eco, U., Gregotti, V. (2009). Sulla fine del design. *Lotus International*, 138, 115-124.
- [10] Ferrara, M. (2002). Produzione, autopromozione, autoproduzione. Esperienze dei giovani design in Europa. In Pasca V., Trapani, V. (eds.) *Scenari del giovane design. Idee e progetti dall'Europa e dal mondo*, Lupetti, 253-275.
- [11] Ferrara M. (2011). Design and self-production. The advanced dimension of handcraft. *Strategic Design Research Journal*, 4:1. [https://www.academia.edu/1360329/Design\\_and\\_self\\_production\\_The\\_advanced\\_dimension\\_of\\_handcraft](https://www.academia.edu/1360329/Design_and_self_production_The_advanced_dimension_of_handcraft)
- [12] Ferrara M. (2014). L'impatto delle tecnologie sulla pratica e la cultura del design. *Op.Cit* 149, 81-96
- [13] Julier, G. (2013). Introduction: material preference and design activism. *Design and Culture*, 5(2), 145-150. [https://www.academia.edu/6875405/2013\\_Limpatto\\_delle\\_tecnologie\\_sulla\\_pratica\\_e\\_la\\_cultura\\_del\\_design](https://www.academia.edu/6875405/2013_Limpatto_delle_tecnologie_sulla_pratica_e_la_cultura_del_design)
- [14] Latour, B. (1991). Nous n'avons jamais été modernes. *Essai d'anthropologie symétrique*. La Découverte. [https://www.editions-ladecouverte.fr/nous\\_n\\_avons\\_jamais\\_ete\\_modernes-9782707148490](https://www.editions-ladecouverte.fr/nous_n_avons_jamais_ete_modernes-9782707148490)
- [15] Liboiron, M. (2016). Redefining pollution and action: the matter of plastics. *Journal of Material Culture* 21(1), 90 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183515622966>
- [16] Lovell, S. (2013). Limited editions: prototypes, one-offs and design art furniture. *Walter de Gruyter*. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783034608909/html>
- [17] Macdonald, H. (2017). Can I Sit on It? Thoughts on Collectible Design. <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/can-i-sit-on-it-thoughts-on-collectible-design>
- [18] McQuaid, M., Lipps, A, Condell, C., Bertrand, G. (2019). *Nature: Collaborations in Design*. Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.
- [19] Maffei, S. (2021). Expanding the galaxy. *DIID* 75, 14-21. <https://doi.org/10.30682/diid7521a>
- [20] Maldonado, T. (1970). *La speranza Progettuale*. Ambiente e Società. Einaudi.
- [21] Morton, T. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. U. of Minnesota Pr.
- [22] Myers, W. (2012). *Bio Design - nature, science, creativity*. Thames & Hudson.
- [23] Papanek, V. (1984). *Design for the real world*. Thames & Hudson. [https://monoskop.org/images/f/f8/Papanek\\_Victor\\_Design\\_for\\_the\\_Real\\_World.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/f/f8/Papanek_Victor_Design_for_the_Real_World.pdf)
- [24] Papanek, V. (1995). *The Green imperative*. Thames & Hudson.
- [25] Pasca, V. (2010). Il design nel futuro. Voce dell'enciclopedia Treccani online [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/il-design-nel-futuro\\_%28XXI-Secolo%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/il-design-nel-futuro_%28XXI-Secolo%29/)
- [26] Pasca, V. (2018). Dopo i discorsi sulla fine. In Bassoli, N. Garcia Sanchis, M., Piccarolo, G. (eds) *Eco/Gregotti Sulla fine del design*, Editoriale Lotus, pp. 33-39.
- [27] Resnick, M. Rosenbaum, E. (2013). Designing for Tinkerability. *Design, Make, Play*. Growing the next generation of stem innovators. Routledge. 163-181. <https://web.media.mit.edu/~mres/papers/designing-for-tinkerability.pdf>
- [28] Von Busch, O. (2022). *Making Trouble – Design and Material Activism*. Bloomsbury Visual Art.
- [29] Yin, K.-R. (2003). *Application of Case Study Research*. Sage Publication, 33-35 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/31849692\\_Applications\\_of\\_Case\\_Study\\_Research\\_RK\\_Yin](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/31849692_Applications_of_Case_Study_Research_RK_Yin)