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Minimalism as Potential for Speculative Design to Envision Unlimited Futures

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Abstract

Minimalism is an aesthetic principle that can be found in all cultures. The meaning and purpose of minimalism are culturally diverse and conceptually very heterogeneous. Minimalism in the visual arts in East and West represents different aesthetic positions and mixes and fertilises each other (Zen, Ukyo-e, Impressionism, Functionalism, Modernism, Avant-garde, Postmodernism). There are currently at least two other meanings:

- Minimalism in the visual arts
- Minimalism in design
- Minimalism as a lifestyle.

This paper attempts to consider minimalism in its various meanings and intentions as a theoretical and practical speculation towards an ideal future. Speculative design lends itself both as a model of thought and in design practice to catalyse minimalist aesthetics for a better future.

The complexity of the interconnected world requires strategies of restraint and renunciation as well as innovative concepts for future societies. A critical examination of minimalist tendencies, derived from history and current trends, and design as speculation beyond market logic, provide an outlook, but also visions that forecast design for ideal futures.

Keywords: Minimalism; Speculative Design; Minimal Art; Innovation; Social Design

Introduction

people interact with it, three aspects of minimalism are brought together below with the fundamental intentions of speculative design. When it is no longer about beautifying objects or being blindly focussed on economic growth, designers in the future should also see their task as bringing together sustainable and integrative challenges for new ways of thinking and attitudes. This is done here by attempting to interpret the minimalism of the West and the East in its different motivations and formulations, in order to then propose speculative design practice as a set of tools for innovative paths.

The motivation to analyse basic minimalist attitudes in art, design and the lifestyle that is so dominant today and, above all, to show both the aesthetic and content-related differences and attitudes, is outlined in this rough list of historical terms:

- Art and intellectual history in the West (Greek rhetoric, Classicism) and in Japan (Zen, Minimarizumu, Ukiyo-e)
- Western modernism (1870-1940): Impressionism, Bruno Taut, Marcel Duchamp, Soetsu Yanagi (Mingei)
- Postmodernism (1940-1980): Daisetsu Suzuki, John Cage, Ad Reinhardt, Yves Klein, Fluxus, Gutai
- Mass media (1980-): Dieter Rams (Braun), Jonathan Ives (Apple), Kenya Hara (Muji), John

Meada (Human Centered Design / Simplicity), Jasper Morrison / Naoto Fukasawa (Supernormal)

The extent to which these historical and contemporary aesthetic phenomena can be brought together with current design methods such as speculative design in the sense of an applied design strategy will be examined below.

Minimalism in European intellectual, art and design history

In the history of art and culture, there have always been extreme contrasts in style and form between simplicity and complexity. Simplicity was first thematised in writing by the Greeks and Romans, who referred to rhetoric. In antiquity, the minimalist principle served to maintain an understandable, comprehensible formal measure. Aristotle says that the perfect linguistic form is clear and at the same time not banal. After *inventio* and before *elocution*, *memoria* and *actio*, the clarity of *dispositio* is one of the foundations of rhetoric (1). Architecture and rhetoric are linked where it is assumed that a speech can be better learnt by imagining a space with images that each represent a part of the speech (2) Vitruvius ultimately counted *dispositio* among the basic aesthetic concepts of architecture and expanded rhetoric from the linguistic to the visual (3). At the end of the 18th century, classicism returned to the simple aesthetics of antiquity – especially the minimalist Doric style – as a counterpoint to the opulence of the Baroque.

Around 1900, the Chicago School (Sullivan) stood for a simplification of architecture and inspired the Austrian Adolf Loos, who wanted to abolish all ornamentation and decoration (Loos House in Vienna, 1910). Here, too, a rebellion against the prevailing aesthetics of the time and its connection to the bourgeoisie and the empire is evident. The Werkbund and Peter Behrens became role models for Bauhaus, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe and thus the programme of functionalism, which degraded decoration to a mere historical reference (4). Finally, the demand for simplicity in object design in the circle of the HfG Ulm extends to communication and information design, which locates the problems of design primarily at the interfaces of complex solution approaches in technical, social, organisational and economic contexts. The search for simplicity finally culminated at the end of the 20th century in interface and UX design, for which John Maeda provided a programmatic text very early on, Jonathan Ive orientated the Apple product line on the aesthetics of Dieter Rams and Jasper Morrison and Naoto Fukasawa undercut the ordinary and simple things of everyday life with their reminiscence under the term *Supernormal*.

Minimal Art

The term minimalism in the visual arts was first coined in 1965. Despite the demand for simplicity, it differs from all previous minimalist endeavours primarily in its references to the recipient and the space surrounding the artwork. The works of Minimal Art are holistic. They cannot be broken down into their details in order to analyse them (5). This becomes particularly clear in colour field painting, which works almost exclusively with hard edges.

Frank Stella notes that the minimalists are turning away from European art and distancing themselves from it to an extreme degree. This applies above all to supposedly aesthetically similar movements such as Constructivism and Illusionism. ‘What you see is what you see’, no philosophy, no rationalism, no reductionism (6)! Omitting is not reduction – omitting means adding something new (7)! Some even claim that the term *Minimal* must be replaced by maximal, as minimal goes far beyond the artefact. The term *Minimal* seems to imply that what is Minimal in Minimal Art is the art. This is far from the case. There is nothing minimal from the art in Minimal Art. ‘If anything in the best works being done, it is maximal (8).’ Minimal Art can therefore be understood as extremely complex, although this does not appear to be the case at first glance.

The minimal artists create new dimensions between art as an object and the object in relation to the recipient. In doing so, they incorporate negative space as well as nature into their work (9).

‘It is the spectator who is now ineluctably bound to the work, not the artist. The spectator, perhaps as never before, is crucial for completing the work of art, (...) The spectator is built into the work: space, light and objects only become a work when we add the spectator’s field of vision (10).’

Three-dimensional works dominate Minimal Art because they create a spatial reference and because they cannot be immediately identified as art in themselves, as is the case with painting, for example (11). Before Minimal Art, works of art always had to be Avant-garde, always new and exciting. Minimal Art wants artworks not to look like art (12). If Minimal derives from a modernism, then from Dadaism, which also did not want to be art (13).

The minimalist aspect of historical art and modern (postmodern) art and design cannot be summarized under a certain premise and in some cases cannot be compared. The prerequisites, the social and cultural perspectives as well as the concept of art are too different for this. Nevertheless, it is always an aesthetic phenomenon that imposes formal and situational restrictions and omissions.

Minimalism in Japanese intellectual, art and design history

In the East, minimalism is understood as both a spiritual attitude and a practical way of life. It manifests itself in everyday practices such as sitting or walking meditation or tidying and cleaning as active forms of meditation. Trust in the physical acquisition of knowledge prevails over Western trust in intellectual knowledge. In Japan, the term minimalism is only known as an import from the West: *minimarizumu* ミニマリズム. ‘The perspective of Zen Buddhism thus sharpens the understanding of minimalism as a path and not as an end in itself or a goal (14).’ At this point, Zen Buddhism will be used as an example of a form of expression of oriental minimalism in order to relate it to the statements and aspirations of Kenya Hara as a contemporary position.

In the present, Kenya Hara refers to the Dojinsai study room in the Jishoji temple and defines emptiness as the first requirement. ‘He uses this example to emphasise the difference between Western modern simplicity and Japanese simplicity, which derives its meaning from the deep emptiness it contains (15).’ Furthermore, Hara clarifies the distinction between minimalism in the East by pointing out that it is not an opposition to complex aesthetic devices such as ornamentation: ‘(...) that [Japanese culture several hundred years before the Bauhaus] express a strength of purity and concision pitted against complexity; yet different from the western concept of simple. How? In their emptiness, I would assert. (...) Through its very emptiness, a vessel can apply a centripetal force absorbing one’s awareness (16).’ Furthermore, he foresightedly points out the economic potential of these aesthetics: ‘We should be able to stand on the stage of a new economic culture harnessing aesthetics as a resource (...) (17).’ The picture here is very different from that in the West.

For Hara, the potential of the purposelessness and aimlessness of minimalist aesthetics and that of economic value dominate, in contrast to the Western anti-attitude towards the usual conventions.

Minimalism in design practice

The sectarian movements since the 18th century are generally regarded as the forerunners of the strategic design of products and life programmes. Quakers, Shakers and Amish still had to lead their lives in religious asceticism in secluded communities. Henry Thoreau’s escape from the industrialised world also ended in the seclusion of the woods not far from Boston. The functionalists of the early 20th century were then able to live out their reductionist architecture and products in public and profess them, although at this time popular counter-movements such as Art Nouveau and later Art Deco also ensured plurality in the aesthetics of living environments. Minimal design only became programmatic in the 1950s in the wake of the HfG Ulm and the work of Dieter Rams, who demanded as little design as possible and thus equalled Minimal Art.

The idea of *less design* thus became increasingly dominant and appeared in the rhetorical form of an oxymoron: The less, the more (minimalism). Steve Jobs, experienced in Zen meditation,

brought Dieter Rams' aesthetics into the digital age, setting a global standard for minimalist product design for the first time. Jasper Morrison and Naoto Fukasawa, on the other hand, ennobled the normal and everyday into a minimalist design principle with their *Supernormal* programme. John Maeda recommends another programme entitled *Simplicity* for the world of digital interfaces and user-centric requirements. The principle of the capsule wardrobe was invented in 1999 by fashion designer Jil Sander, who used it to clear out overcrowded wardrobes (18).

Minimalism and restraint in the consumer world

In addition to the artistic trends of minimalist attitudes and forms of expression, the term minimalism currently dominates as a stylistic concept in graphic, UX, interior and fashion design as well as in architecture, but also in lifestyle trends and the design of everyday life. The claim of a minimalist lifestyle is expressed in the reduction of consumption and the use of material goods. This can affect clothing, furniture, living space, media use or the avoidance of events. But isn't this something quite different from the mere reduction of physical objects and environments? In his actor-network theory, Bruno Latour describes the power of things that goes beyond their practical and functional properties. The value of things can lie in their orientation, their memory, their connection with the past and the future and much more, which is why the lifestyle minimalist must dispense with these as well as their utility and material value.

The promise *Be more with less* aims to raise the aspirations of a privileged middle class that can afford the minimalist lifestyle as a counterpoint to mass consumption. This type of identity politics corresponds to the above-mentioned minimalist strategies of rebellion and criticism of existing conditions. The supposed retreat into restraint is also based here on so much dominance and self-indulgence, as only the rich have the freedom to choose their lifestyle. 'The European tradition of minimalism as a design gesture that always legitimises domination must lose credibility today if it can only be defined within the framework of luxury. Because voluntary renunciation of luxury is still luxury (19).'

Minimalism as Potential for Speculative Design

The prerequisite for innovation and thus for future-oriented idealisations is made possible by the fictitious in the sense of the speculative design approach. Speculative design goes beyond the economic concerns of conventional design practice. While the goals of product, media and communication design are essentially defined by the achievement of value enhancement and attention, the goals of speculative design lie in the area of criticising conditions that can be improved and facilitating discourse.

When people think of design, most believe it is about problem solving. Even the more expressive forms of design are about solving aesthetic problems. (...) Rather than giving up altogether, though, there are other possibilities for design: one is to use design as a means of speculating how things could be – speculative design. This form of design thrives on imagination and aims to open up new perspectives on what are sometimes called wicked problems, to create spaces for discussion and debate about alternative ways of being, and to inspire and encourage people's imaginations to flow freely. Design speculations can act as a catalyst for collectively redefining our relationship to reality (20). (Fig. 1)

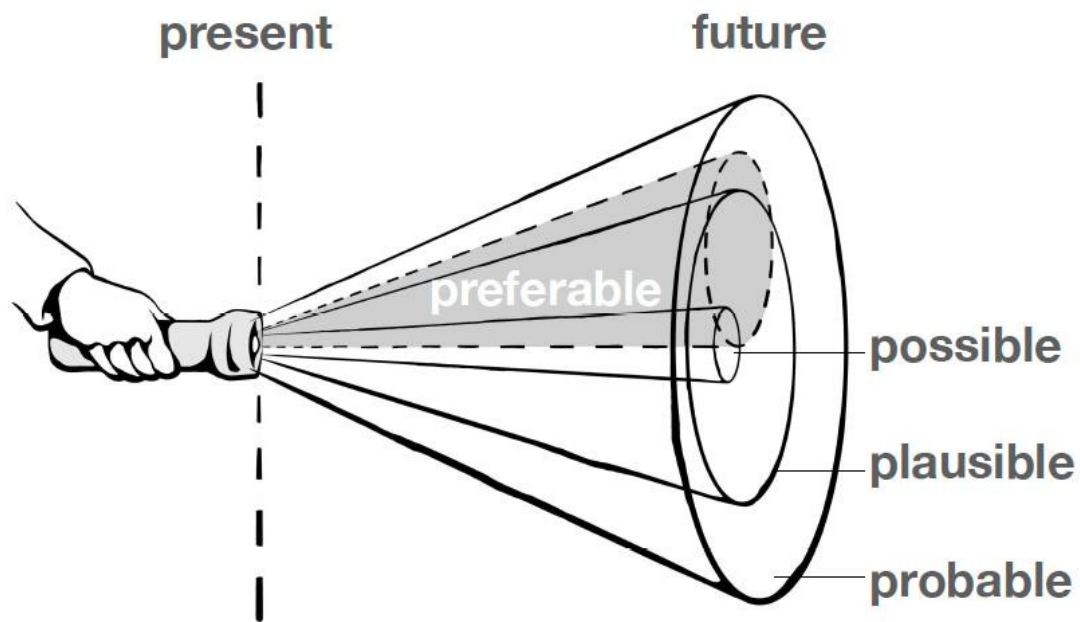


Figure 1: Speculative Design is the idea of possible futures and using them as tools to better understand the present and to discuss the kind of future people want, and, of course, ones people do not want. (Source: own representation according to Dunne & Raby, 2013)

While Minimal Art refers to the need for the recipient to take an active role in relation to the artefact presented, speculative design also assumes the active role of the recipient, but also encourages them to engage intellectually with the artefacts and their social, political and cultural contexts. Thus, minimalist aesthetics can be compared with the aesthetics of speculative design in terms of both qualitative and quantitative reduction in relation to the thematisation and maximisation of the recipient's responsibility. Of course, this does not mean that speculative design must always be minimalist. Rather, the minimalist aesthetic is a variety of speculative design, which is deliberately the focus here.

If aesthetic minimalism in modern and Avant-garde art is about the detachment of a qualitative judgement on the relationship between the external appearance and the meaning of the artefacts, speculative design resolves the relationship between design practice and its economic orientation. If minimalism relieves the artist of his technical ability, it burdens the recipient with the demand to take a stance and attitude towards it. The same happens to the recipient of the design object that is supposedly linked to economic purposes. Both can be interpreted as criticism of undesirable and conservative conditions, and both aim to improve or change these conditions.

If lifestyle minimalism interprets renunciation as the luxury of making decisions about one's own life in the spirit of reduction, the speculative designer reveals himself by withdrawing from the safe economic sphere in order to face the unpredictability of unknown challenges. The Avant-garde (minimalist) artist acts as a pioneer in accepting the highest risks in view of the positive response of his audience. The rejection of ownership in a world characterised by consumerism or a shift in the context of design and value creation testify to the actors' increased self-efficacy and their willingness to take risks against the establishment and the mainstream. A pioneer of speculative design in the context of sustainable product design and consumer criticism is Bazon Brock's *Covenant of the Golden Chopsticks*, founded in 1981 (Fig. 2).

Historically, the most demonstrably successful form of ecological, economic, hygienic and aesthetic care – in short: sustainability – can be achieved through luxury as an expression of

asceticism. The golden chopsticks visualise this principle. If we were to give our golden chopsticks to billions of Asian chopstick users, the sublime treetops of South American primeval forests would not have to fall victim to logging for the production of wooden chopsticks (21).



Figure 2: The golden chopsticks – theoretical object from Bazon Brock, (Source: <https://www.georghornemann.com/en/collaborations/bazon-brock.html> viewed on Nov. 5th 2023)

This not only opens up a minimalist principle in the face of the seemingly contradictory demands of luxury products, but also makes it clear that object values always carry much more than the sum of their utility or function.

Brion Vega’s cube-shaped television impressively demonstrates the black box properties of electronic (and now digital) devices. It is no longer possible to visualise all the functions of electronic and digital devices with clear semantics. ‘Marco Zanuso and Richard Sapper’s television for Brion Vega was a sophisticated expression of a new role for the skin of an object, with very different characteristics in both its states. Switching it on or off transformed it from familiar to mysterious object (22).’ (Fig. 3)

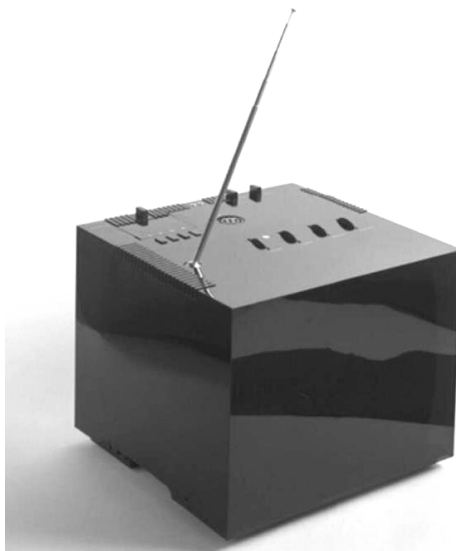


Figure 3: Marco Zanuso and Richard Sapper’s television for Brion Vega. (Source: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O168300/black-1957-201-television-set-television-richard-sapper/?carousel-image=2006AT9575> viewed Sept. 22nd 2023)

Similar is the case with Daniel Weil's *Radio in a Bag*, which is considered one of the most well-known speculative design projects. Consequently, the question arises as to what form a radio should and must have, and what happens when one completely dispenses with conventional values. Weil's radios possess both product design qualities and artistic autonomy. Wolfgang Welsch claims that the miniaturization of microelectronics dissolves the maxim form-follows-function (23). Digital devices have no function per se or can perform different functions (black box): Decoupling of the outer form from the inner product structure (24).



Figure 4: Daniel Weil, Radio in a bag, 1981, aka Hommage à Marcel Duchamp (Source: <https://arzadesign.wordpress.com/2015/03/02/daniel-weil-lintemporel/> viewed Sept. 18th 2023)

Conclusion

With regard to the question posed at the beginning, to what extent historical but also contemporary minimalist phenomena can be brought together with current design methods such as speculative design in the sense of an applied design strategy, some inspiring interfaces can be identified.

Firstly, there is the active invitation, both on the part of Minimal Art and Speculative Design, to involve the audience in the work as a voice capable of criticism. Rationality and the mere fulfilment of needs are deliberately set aside in order to evoke an active attitude. Secondly, both the oppositional attitude towards the historically conventional aesthetics of Western minimalism and the rejection of speculative design as art form form a common core. This also tends to postulate an uncomfortable and unpopular attitude, whether as user-unfriendliness or as a refusal of any affirmation of existing or established conditions.

In addition to these parallel interfaces, however, it should be emphasised that a potential can be identified in relation to the necessity of current issues and challenges in a society geared towards post-growth and sustainability. For in both the East and the West, minimalism – whether in history, art, design or lifestyle – manifests itself primarily through renunciation. In addition to the dominance of protest through renunciation of existing conditions in the West, the potential of mindfulness and

the economisability of a minimalist aesthetic form an expanded field of possibilities. Even if speculative design cannot necessarily be reduced to a minimalist aesthetic, the speculative method, which is based on an artistic approach, opens up new possibilities and opportunities to utilise minimalism in its many facets beyond mass consumption and the growth imperative.

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