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IS THERE A MORALITY OF THINGS?

A TRANSDISCIPLINARY REFLECTION ON MATERIAL
AGENCY AND THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

Over the past sixty years, the impact and the distribution of things designed are so embedded in our daily lives that we understand the role of objects far less than we think we do.¹ “The world we live in today is much more a man-made, or artificial, world than it is a natural world,”² and it demands a deeper understanding of the forces of – and how we relate to – **what** we make. This turn towards things is accompanied by a body of theory from philosophy and social sciences that push for a paradigm shift: human and nonhuman³ entities have a symmetrical position regarding agency in a given course of action; things play a role in the construction of the social. From this perspective, a substantial part of our everyday morality rests upon things designed. However and despite the fact that design being associated with moral categories is not new,⁴ ‘another kind’ of design practice is emerging and also claiming back material agency.

This thesis examines the shift towards material agency by generating a discussion about the moral dimension of things, both from the positions of social science and philosophy theories and design practices. Both realms acknowledge and address the role of objects, however, to different extents, in different languages, and through different media. Through this trans-disciplinary reflection, I intend to draw lines between both perspectives and to expose commonalities, misconceptions, and controversies that will contribute not only to close the gap between both realms but also further the discourse and help re-think the way people and designers relate to and through the material world.

In PART ONE, I will approach human-world relationships from the perspective of theory. I will analyse what things do through concrete cases of human/nonhuman interactions, and I will examine the ways in which objects mediate human morality.

Design processes and production methods are ever more fragmented and distributed among many different people, times and places. Whether unintentional or because designers simply do not care, this detachment, this little to no control over processes of the making is not only physical, but also ethical, and it demands a deeper understanding of the forces of–and **how** we relate to–how we make.

¹ Dilnot, “The Artificial.”

² Herbert Simon, *The sciences of the Artificial*, 2.

³ The expression non-human in the Actor-Network-Theory discourse is used as a practical concept to overcome the object-subject dichotomy tradition of the social sciences. It aims to include and distribute agency not only among humans but also to things.

⁴ This will be developed in the Introduction, under “Is design being associated with moral categories something new?”

In PART TWO, I will examine how design is reflecting on and is making visible its ethical dimension from its own material discourse in two ways. Studio Formafantasma will help investigate material as language—thinking through the object. Through examining the projects **Autarchy** and **Botanica**, I will analyse critical object's agency as propositions and as a renewed version of crafts. Alternatively, Fairphone will help investigate how design addresses the moral dimension of the materials that make an object and its process. I will also examine how a product can emerge from research, as one effective possibility for activism and as a concrete instance of change.