

DISTRIBUTION AS VALUE

Over the last decade changes in production models have tried to keep up with fast social and economic shifts that move production into the digital domain and by expansion into the quaternary information sector. On-demand, built to order, mass customisation, knowledge-based configurations. These models are vastly taking over field after field as hyper-efficient, targeted, super-demographic, high yield paradigms. More and more we need to understand production beyond just reshaping or assembling raw materials into finished value goods, even look beyond the distinction between handcrafted and machine-manufactured, beyond consumer and producer. As production becomes more and more intertwined with information, it might be distribution that drives economic value. It might even drive value beyond a market.

If we look at recent economics, there's a tendency that as production becomes more and more digitalised, production costs approach zero. As this happens, prices drop along with them. When looking at these economics as not limited to finance, value can take on another format or a new currency. One not so easily quantified and ranked by numbers.

Things are only valued as long as they are available. In this internet era, where a single click assures next day delivery, limited seems more and more besides the point. Searchability on the other hand becomes more and more relevant. What can't be found on the first page of google, can see its value drastically diminished. SEO is a serious business. Aluminium, while being the third most abundant element and most abundant metal in the Earth's crust was first considered a rare metal. Because it could not be easily extracted from ore, it was more valuable than gold. Which comes down to: although it was abundant, it was not findable. It needed to be made a commodity. Scarcity implies difficult to find. This can be resolved by pushing things into an information sector as information replicates and distributes easily. It also requires almost no storage space.

It's a shift from exclusivity to inclusivity. Companies no longer offer exclusiveness, they offer inclusiveness. This is the new value: to be part of something. It's reframing the exclusivity of a set by the possibility to share its content. Tapping into a distribution is what reveals value. Real scarcity is what has no value. Maybe the classic correlation between availability and value has been disrupted. It might seem paradoxical but that what is widely distributed, seems to be able to gain higher and higher

values.

Setting most of the consequences of this aside, we might look at art and value. It could be interesting to see how an artwork can approach this. The rise of machines and modernity raised concerns about parameters that define an artwork. It suddenly became clear that uniqueness and craftsmanship were no longer the only determining factors. This was actually instigated by artists themselves. Artists were the ones who went looking for this expansion in definition, shifting the producer from manual labour into a disseminator of information. In dealing with how modern society produces and what it produces, they sought to question what art could be and what an artist could be.

Now some new issues emerge. Bypassing the fact that the majority of artworks still rely on being the pinnacle of uniqueness by a unique producer with unique technique, let's look at that part of the field where artworks search for other means of production while keeping in mind this is not a call for complete reorganisation. It's not a model to force onto all artworks. Instead it can be a set of singularities that point out a subset of concerns. An expansion of the field instead of a takeover.

Although there is always some latency between the art world and what is actually going on, it seems that some art is able to approach this topic from a different angle. One beyond efficiency and maximisation. One where devaluation is not necessarily off limits. Where the improvement question is not necessarily upfront and pivotal while simultaneously retaining waste, divestment, bankruptcy as problematic.

So artworks can be machine-produced and this has several consequences. Positioning the artwork in the information sector maybe dodges that question for a moment and relays another focus. It's not the product which is distributed, but the means to a production, no matter how this production is organised. We go from the master to the master file, from producer to production protocols, from object to program, definition to proposal.

This also leaves the door open to customisation, shareholders, unsound methods. Master files can be corrupted, partially executed with substandard control and deviating intentions.

And as the work shifts from the object to the manual, it necessarily finds value in its distribution as well as the production. An infrastructure, a logistics.

It's a focus on a design stage stepping over the implementation stage to

the dissemination. The actual implementation of the design is but a mere temporary stepping stone to move things forward. Yes, this production is flawed and incomplete. It was actually never meant to last. It's actually but a waste byproduct of design. It was only meant as a placeholder for what is to come. Prototypes that continuously point forward in a non-teleological way. We are always in a transition state, an in-between system, an interbellum. This is actually the permanent question: What does transition look like? It's far from the question what does the future look like or what does utopia look like? It doesn't look to replace dreams with new dreams.

Robert Metcalfe, the inventor of the Ethernet switch, claimed in 1980 that a network's value is 'the number of users squared'. But in this framework of distribution how do we measure value? In terms of money saved, revenue earned or profits accrued? In 2013, the OECD's economists agreed that it could not be captured by traditional market metrics. an information economy may not be compatible with a market economy – or at least not one dominated and regulated by market forces primarily. All the money created, all the velocity and momentum of finance built up during the last twenty-five years have to be set against the possibility that capitalism – a system based on markets, property ownership and exchange – cannot capture the 'value' generated by the new technology. (Mason, 2015)

THE LONG TAIL

A 2006 working paper titled "Goodbye Pareto Principle, Hello Long Tail" found that, by greatly lowering search costs, information technology in general and Internet markets in particular could substantially increase the collective share of hard-to-find products, thereby creating a longer tail in distribution. In general today the long tail seems a negligible afterthought.

With artworks especially, we might see they are often given a very concentrated distribution. An exhibition, sometimes limited to an opening of an exhibition, an article, a quick advertisement. They might be an ultimate consumer product, peaking very fast and disappearing arguably even faster.

The economics of storage and distribution can enable the advantageous use of the long tail. In aggregate, "unpopular" movies are rented more than popular movies. On the supply side centralised warehousing allows for more offerings, thus making it possible to cater to more varied tastes.

On the demand side, tools such as search engines, recommendation software, and sampling tools allow for finding products outside geographic areas. Where the long tail works, minority tastes become available and individuals are presented with a wider array of choices. The long tail presents opportunities to introduce products in niche categories. These encourage the diversification of products. These niche products open opportunities for suppliers while concomitantly satisfying the demands of many individuals – therefore lengthening the tail portion of the long tail. In situations where popularity is currently determined by the lowest common denominator, a long-tail model may lead to improvement in a society's level of culture. The opportunities that arise because of the long tail greatly affect society's cultures because suppliers have unlimited capabilities due to infinite storage and demands that were unable to be met prior to the long tail are realized. At the end of the long tail, the conventional profit-making business model ceases to exist; instead, people tend to come up with products for varied reasons like expression rather than monetary benefit. In this way, the long tail opens up a large space for authentic works of creativity.

How to generate a long tail for an artwork? How to make it searchable? And how to connect this to storage? How to connect this to production?

The storage of artworks is a difficult business as they are often fragile, heavy, big, unstable or a combination of these. So a way to think about the long tail, is bringing down storage necessities. So how can we incorporate this into the work itself. An artwork that hands over (digital) a master file implies the actual production is necessary. However the work is not necessarily limited to this production. There is some idea of elastic manufacturing incorporated into the DNA of the work itself, into its content.

So as storage becomes less of an issue, it can not only be kept in storage for a longer time, but also be kept in open storage Meaning: making it searchable to an audience and by consequence distributable. There is a pitfall here to again constrain distribution to a quantitative parameter. How to look beyond the numbers? The long tail beyond redefining the popular over another, longer timeframe? It might not be about creating unlimited availability. It might be thinking about keeping at least one copy available. There is a difference here. It might indicate a shift from the quantitative towards the qualitative as a value indicator.