

Notes on pre:fab: An wildly discursive and overly theoretical argument in five or more parts for a new way to gather in the post individual, later than late capitalist, cultural production service industry.

Notes on pre:fab: Episode 3 - Life After Style

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TLDR: For thousands of years style functioned as a ‘proof of work’. The clothes we wore and things we had provided a trustless verification mechanism that proved we were who we said we were without the need to really say anything at all. Trustless networks depend on the identity of authenticity and verification. Technological and political developments since 1750 created a world of extreme material abundance and cultural diversity that broke this equivalence. Separated from verification, authenticity is moralised as an aesthetic proposition and becomes a style. Decoupled from context and supply chain, authenticity as style is commodified and becomes meaningless—a reference with no referent. Any distinction between the market and life disappears.

Keywords: crypto; clothing; technology; branding; authenticity; late capitalism

1. RIP Lévi-Strauss

In 1995 Mark Wigley published ‘White Walls and Designer Dresses’, a book in which he tracks the emergence of whiteness in European society from the late mediaeval period until today, from the surface of the body, through clothing and fashion, to the apotheosis of modernist architecture - the blank white wall. It’s a great ride, but one that leaves its central question, “what is style?”, unstated and unanswered.

Thirteen years later, pseudonymous author Satoshi Nakamoto’s 2008 white paper, ‘[Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System](#)’, would launch [Web3](#) and provide the answer: Style is a ‘proof of work’; A real time ‘trustless’ verification tool at the top of our moral judgement processing stack. The purpose of style is to demonstrate that the location and manner of some things’ appearance is consistent with its rightful place in the order of things. That something belongs where it is, and is what it looks like.

Style is a covering which reveals that which cannot otherwise be seen.

In order to perform this function, style must be contingent on context and difficult to fake. It must seek out and juxtaposed inequalities in information and technology [ie. knowledge and agency], and convert these differentials into self-evident indexical signs¹. As such, the usefulness of style is subject to changes in social, psychology, and technological development; aesthetic judgement is reactive. Style produces knowledge and serves as a validating mechanism to prove our moral system is working, thereby guiding ethical decision making. But as techno-social dynamics change, this system breaks. Previous proofs of work [styles] lose their credibility and are replaced by new ones.

[For example:] In the early mediaeval period style was an effective trustless verification tool. Supply chain innovations connecting Europe with Asia and North Africa presented a range of new pigments and textiles to the region that were extraordinarily difficult to obtain. Possessing them was a matter-of-fact demonstration of one’s wealth and power. Trust across social classes depended on one’s dress rather than word. These

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<https://pre-fab.xyz/>

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¹ Make these difference universally and immediately legible.

textiles and pigments were arranged [by the supply chain] into their own natural hierarchy, which was further differentiated by new and difficult tailoring techniques, enabling a highly codified clothing culture to develop derived from various combinations of material type, colour, and technical detailing. Fashion. The [natural] inequalities of the social order were indexed and theorised in terms of aesthetics which both reflected and reinforced them.

Some six or seven thousand years ago Proto-Indo-Europeans decided to reify the difference between what a thing is and how it appears into language by distinguishing the concepts of truth ['deru', from which we get the word tree] and trustworthiness ['were-o', from which we get the word verification]. Style as 'proof of work' is an attempt to re-merge these two concepts by codifying authenticity in aesthetics. But authenticity as a proof of work is doomed to fail. Such a system can continue to adapt only so long as authenticity remains the outcome [ie. authentication] and not the object [ie. style]. But games will be gamed: From roughly 1000 to 1750 AD [the beginning of the Romantic period during which the foundational elements of the modern consumer subject were set out by the self-conscious [ie. stylised] rejection of haut bourgeois society by a small network of countercultural radicals [ie. artists]], mediaeval conditions of scarcity, combined with widespread ideological acceptance of the social order, had thus far kept the concept of authenticity within the layer of verification. However, sometime between the publication of Niomi Kline's millennium ending book, 'No Logo', and the emergence of 'normcore' [coincident with Satoshi's white paper], the intervening 250 years of accelerating technological and material abundance produced a rhizomatic concatenation of continuously evolving styles, each infinitely replicable² at close to **zero marginal cost**, thereby creating the conditions of possibility for the measure to become the goal³...

Countdown to life after style: 5) Mass Market Fragmentation: In a world in which any and all styles are available the question becomes about the self first, 'which style is right for me?', and the world second 'what does it mean?'. 4) Lifestyle Capitalism: Capital leans into subculture culture to develop lifestyle brands through which it can repackage and sell the same suite of products to different types of people, thus ensuring efficiencies of scale. 3) Authenticity Subculture: In response to capitalist exploitation, subculture consumers undertake a sincere ground up attempt to align consumption aesthetics with what people think is morally responsible. 2) Premium Mediocre: Highlighted by authenticity subculture culture, Capital identifies and deploys collective tropes of authenticity as a metamoral framework re-homogenising mainstream consumer culture. The explicit moralising of authenticity as an aesthetic proposition decouples style from its context and supply chain enabling its indiscriminate mass application. 1) MYOB[and]: Shared tropes of authenticity constructed over centuries are exhausted by Capital in less than a decade. Inspired by celebrities, individual creators fall back on the only authentic thing they have left. Authentic by definition, individuals launch themselves as vertically integrated mini brands. 0) The Creative Production Service Industry: Creators and influencers produce and traffic content to build audiences which they sell to Capital which sells them product. Personality precedes brand. Authenticity [the belief that something could be uncompromised by Capital] is over. **Any remaining distinctions between information and infomercials, products and relationships, the market and life disappear...**

Abbreviations

| | |
|------|----------------------|
| TLA | Three letter acronym |
| RIP | Rest 'n pieces |
| MYOB | Mind Your Own Brand |

² Able to be copied or reproduced.

³ For 'style' [sign] to displace its signified [social/political status/agency]

References

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1. **K-Hole, Toby Shorin**

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