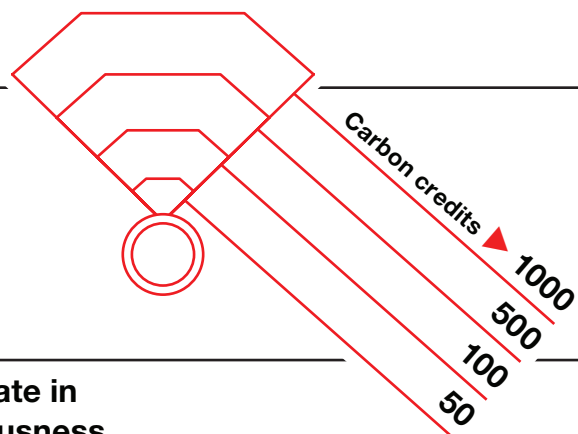


Technology

Alternative Currencies

► Monetary currency is continually proving inadequate in projecting the object of your own reflective consciousness



Whether you like it or not, everything from the clothes you wear, to the computer you use, relies on signifiers and signifieds to derive meaning. You are constantly emblazoned with a self-fashioned image. Our very existences are reified through these chains of signifiers that permeate our communications—thus creating a parallel, simulated world composed solely of signs. This parallel world is the realm in which the accepted ideals of conspicuous, competitive consumption, and unsustainability can be “challenged and overturned.” These signs purportedly communicate our personal values—but these values, however, are frequently eclipsed by those imposed on us by capitalism. In a capitalist society, profits take precedence over the planet, and one only has a right to what they can gain for themselves in the marketplace. This everyone-for-themselves mentality leads many to desire to demonstrate their socio-economic superiority over their peers. **Despite its impact on the planet, we continue to consume conspicuously—we want to look and feel wealthier than our neighbour; and competitively—we must always feel the need to “keep up with the Joneses.”**

This phenomenon has only emerged in the past century—the century of the self—and is illustrated by the shift from advertising products’ use-value, to constantly perpetuating the belief that our consumer choices can define us and make us happier. **This is largely accomplished through creating signs that broadcast these sentiments; through coding brands and products with sign-value.** Luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, and luxury objects like diamonds epitomize this. A Gucci purse or a diamond ring does not have any direct use-value—their prevalence and desirability is only the result of their signified: wealth and superiority. Currency is another instance of this. Although it is widely believed to be an exemplification of exchange-value—what mediates our objectified relationships—it seems that instead it is largely one of symbolic value. Symbolic value is assigned to an object only in its relation to another subject; in this case, our currency’s relationship to the authority of the modern state. This form of currency empowers financiers over everyone else. With their wealth, they consequently obtain vast amounts of power in the political, social, and environmental spheres.

The current carbon credit trading system fails to empower individuals as well. The system is comprised of quotas on the emissions of businesses, with the possibility of selling surplus allowances, or buying allowances in order to emit more than their permitted amount. CO2 trading as it currently exists only directly involves businesses, nation-states, and large corporations. Although its aim is to lower emissions in industrial and commercial processes, it does not take into consideration the purpose for these processes—the consumer.

Despite the lack of any democratic involvement in economy or industry, we are frequently reminded that we are to “vote with our wallets.” Thus, product design’s function is to provide a choice to self-fashion with. However, the differences between products are often minuscule to consumers—just look at mobile phone design before and after the iPhone was introduced. This massive selection of vaguely different products is often paralyzing—especially when you know that whatever you pick, you’ll have to buy another one when it dies after a few years.

The current capitalist paradigms of consumerism, obsolescence and this paradox of choice do not allow for the expression of non-consumerist or sustainable beliefs and practices. With this in mind, a new speculative currency has emerged: the International Non-Consumptive Currency, or INCC. Since we may never see global capitalism’s growth falter until its final demise, the INCC aims to provide methods of enabling autonomy, stigmatize unsustainable habits, and reward non-consumptive practices within the current paradigms of society, industry and politics.

The INCC is a parallel currency, in the form of a jewellery-based carbon-credit micro-trading system. This carbon-based economy—which is currently only used at the molar corporate level—can be utilized as a tool for social welfare. In contrast to the molar form of current CO2 trading, the INCC is molecularized, with every individual carbon-consuming act taken into consideration. **Each participant is given a synthetic diamond ring, embedded with an RFID tag to track the carbon footprint of individual purchases. A mobile app records this information, along with other data—travel time and speed, in order to determine methods of transportation, and GPS information, to track the participants activities (playing sports in a park versus shopping in a mall).**

The resulting carbon credit (or debit) is stored in an electronic account, with the balance fluctuating based on their personal choices—driving versus biking to work; eating at a fast food restaurant versus growing their own food. **The diamond, as a representation of both wealth and carbon, functions as the wealth indicator in the INCC—the bigger the carbon credit balance, the bigger the synthetic diamond. Credits can be sold to carbon-hungry corporations, in order to reward those who, in stark contrast, make little to no impact on the carbon footprint of the human race.** This makes the INCC a potential transformative asset—climbing out of poverty can now be a method of

creating a sustainable world. The INCC’s wealth indicator, synthetic diamonds, share a common quality with traditional, physical currency—symbolic value. Through non-consumption and sustainable actions, the participant’s synthetic diamond grows in size, subverting the diamond’s established signified—those broadcasted by conspicuously consuming. **Acts of competitive consumption are also turned on their head—those with the gaudiest and most ostentatious jewellery are sustainable non-consumers—instead of the converse, which is how our perception of others currently works.**

B.F. Skinner’s behavioural conditioning is a form of learning in which an individual modifies their own behaviour due to its consequences, through positive and negative reinforcement. The INCC aims to make participants’ behaviour less mindlessly consumptive and more sustainable through positive reinforcement—the diamond’s size growing as material reward—and through negative reinforcement—those without a massive diamond will be continually reviled until their behaviour becomes more acceptable.

It is not hard to realize that the effects of this currency will be significant. As consumers’ buying habits change, corporations with unsustainable habits will be consequently forced to change their outdated business models. **The established message of conspicuous consumption—affluence—will be subverted, instead rewarding those who value non-consumption and sustainability over ostentatious displays of wealth.** ⑤

Keeping up with the Jones’s commodity fetishism has never been so sustainable.



You don’t need abstraction of labour for the objectification of value.

I°N°C°C

International
Non Consumptive
Currency

More is less.