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Design for Life: The Struggle for Utopia?

In the first chapter of his book *Means without End*, Giorgio Agamben introduced the phrase *form-of-life*. As he explains it, it is “a life – human life – in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all power.”¹ It is precisely the *possibilities* of life – the ability to imagine or recognise the possibilities and have the power to choose between them – that offers the shortest description of what design can do in society, even though it is constantly being threatened by the demands of the neoliberal market. A large part of the design profession, education, and media promulgates the notion that the bond between design and the market is inextricable. The bond, however, is not as indivisible as it may seem.

Scientist and economist Herbert A. Simon stated: “To design is to devise courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones.”² A similar point was made by design theorist Clive Dilnot. He described design as an act that “is wedded to the possible. It comes into being only in so far as the possible is present as possibility – i.e., as the capacity for change.”³ These conclusions establish the necessity of recognising an existing potential, and acknowledging our capacity to activate this potential. Design is not only capable of perceiving the impossible within the possible, but also of actualising these ideas in practice. It has the potential to shape our daily existence in accordance with Alain Badiou’s demands. Namely, design should, in any given situation, create the situation’s structural impossibility. That is to say, “a real point to hold on to, whatever the cost.”⁴

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¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2000, p. 4.

² Herbert A. Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1996 [1969], p. 111.

³ Clive Dilnot, “Ethics? Design?”, in Stanley Tigerman (ed.), *The Archeworks Papers*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Archeworks, Chicago 2005, p. 17.

⁴ Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, Verso, London 2008, p. 34.

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The objective of this paper is to identify the structural impossibility within the potential for designing our everyday life. In other words, the goal is to make a case – through a discussion of active citizenship during the era of globalised capitalism – for the necessity of the existence of unregulated islands of design activity. I will try to show why focusing on everyday design – design for life – should be of much greater importance than it is now.

What do we mean by ‘designing our everyday life’? Design theorist Tony Fry describes the world we live in as a “world-within-the-world”. A world that is entirely designed by humans, and yet largely invisible.⁵ Siegfried Giedion defines it as a world of anonymous living, as “particles [which] accumulate into an explosive force.”⁶ It is this invisible, anonymous, gradually changing everyday world that is “continually shaping and reshaping the patterns of life.”⁷

It is precisely because of its ordinariness and commonness that it is repeatedly overlooked, that its significance remains unacknowledged. As we design (spontaneously or purposefully) our everyday environment, the latter, as Giedion noted, constantly redesigns us. This brings us to the assumption that the ordinary is, in fact, typically ignored, yet it is precisely in this ignored everyday life that one may find the possibility to resist, to transform the present situation. Historian and activist Howard Zinn refers to this transformation as a true revolutionary change:

It takes place in everyday life, in the tiny crannies where the powerful but clumsy hands of state power cannot easily reach. [...] It takes place in a hundred thousand places at once, in families, on streets, in neighbourhoods, in places of work. It is a revolution of the whole culture. Squelched in one place, it springs up in another, until it is everywhere. Such a revolution is an art. That is, it requires the courage not only of resistance, but of imagination.⁸

⁵ Tony Fry, “Whither Design/Whether History”, in Tony Fry, Clive Dilnot, Susan C. Stewart, *Design and the Question of History*, Bloomsbury, London 2015, p. 4.

⁶ Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command*, Oxford University Press, New York 1948, p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. VI.

⁸ Howard Zinn, “A Fresh Look at Anarchism”, in: Žiga Vodovnik, *A Living Spirit of Revolt. The Infrapolitics of Anarchism*, PG Press, Oakland (CA) 2013.

The ability to challenge convention is hidden in the possibility of (re)designing our everyday environment. However, this possibility must involve the active participation of every member of society. The process of redesigning our everyday environment introduces the aforementioned potential of impossibility and thus alters, step by step, the existing and the ordinary. In order to achieve this goal, we must establish some distance; we must create the potential for an outside-in perspective. Operating within the narrow parameters of the given context – or, better yet, of what *appears* to be the given context – is not enough. We must perceive what is seemingly unalterable, impossible, as well as what is regarded as trivial, mundane, and ordinary. The latter is, as we have already established, usually discarded and intentionally disregarded. Only a sweeping, comprehensive perspective will allow us to perceive the potential of the impossible and, consequently, reshape the existing into the preferred.

To help us achieve this, Tony Fry proposes a paradigm shift. To avoid passing the point of no return, we have to terminate the existing mode of operation wherein we first (re)design the world only to watch (or, caught off guard, subsequently address) the unanticipated implications of our actions. Instead, Fry's advice is to imagine the kind of world we wish to live in and then adjust design to what we have imagined in such a way that it will yield the preferred result.⁹ The essence of this proposal lies in imagining and constructing a world as an alternative to the existing one. Moreover, the proposal envisages agreement on the kind of world we want to live in. As we know, this is where problems usually arise – with the question of whether it is *worthwhile* to imagine an alternative in the first place. The sheer thought of even starting to consider an alternative discourages many from thinking.

According to Stephen Duncombe, the rationale behind this is evident: the majority does not believe an alternative is possible at all. Duncombe writes: “The dominant system dominates not because people agree with it; it rules because we are convinced there is no alternative.”¹⁰ We reject alternatives based on the assumption that they are, at present, simply impossible. More so, alternatives

⁹ Tony Fry, *Becoming Human by Design*, Berg, London 2012.

¹⁰ Stephen Duncombe, “Odprta utopija [Open Utopia]”, in: Thomas More, *Utopija*. Studia humanitatis, Ljubljana 2014, p. 140. English version available at: <http://theopenutopia.org/full-text/introduction-open-utopia/> (accessed 2 May 2017).

are not possible because we doubt our own capacity to even conceptualise anything that deviates from the norm. Or worse yet: we reject alternatives because it is impossible, using standard measures of comparison, to compare them to that which exists. Consequently, we are not capable of comprehending them, and therefore we dismiss and thwart the work and creativity of others. We reject exactly that which is – according to Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben – necessary. Namely, in the act of creativity, there is always also an act of rebellion.¹¹ The action of the deed can only follow the preliminary idea: the idea of an alternative to what exists.

As stated at the beginning, imagining change and possibilities has always been (and still is) an integral part of design. Its purpose has remained the same since the very first redesigned stone: it is about the process of imagining and changing the existing into the preferred. It is about building upon the potentiality of the new, while dismantling the old. It is about the potentiality of the world as it could be – or not. When both options are available, we gain the possibility of transversality, which is crucial for design. By imagining the possible and the impossible, as well as what could and could not be, we create the potential for changes. The effects of these changes open the space for new thinking. What used to be impossible becomes a new possibility. We prepare the ground for new utopias that serve as a constant potentiality of actuality and the non-existent.

The 20th century may provide a way to tackle this given task, despite legitimate observations that the rules and ethical foundations of the 20th century, which have governed the field of redesigning our environment, have crumbled. In their subordination to the market, they became unusable. In relationship to the environment, they became unsustainable. It is therefore hardly surprising that the 21st century has seen a number of experiments in design. These experiments – anarchic and oblivious to the dogmatic notion of acting *correctly* – are likely to provide new forms of agency. One of the earliest examples took place in the second half of the 20th century. This radical rebellion strived to defy the perversity of having the role and position of design in society imposed by the Other.

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Resistance in Art*, European Graduate School, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=one7mE-8y9c (accessed 5 May 2017).

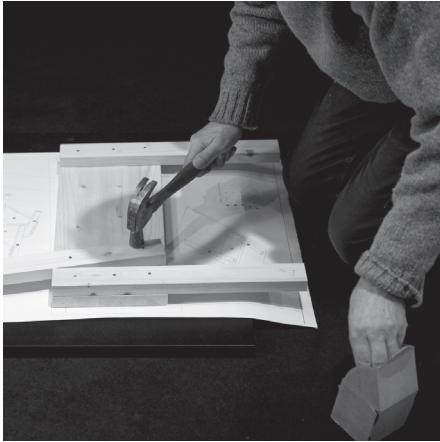


Fig. 1: Enzo Mari, *Proposta per un'autoprogettazione*, 1974.
Photo: © Artek (www.artek.fi)

I refer here to the thought and work of Italian designers such as Enzo Mari and the radical “antidesign” movements united in the Superstudio and Archizoom collectives. Seeing as how most designers accept the widespread notion that design should be subordinate to the market and function as a catalyst for consumerism, Mari and both groups turned their critical gaze inward, towards the design practice. With this self-criticism, they wished to subvert the foundations of uncritical, toothless design, which does not recognise (as well as does not look for) an alternative outside the given (and seemingly immutable) frames of the established market logic. This is precisely what Mari and both collectives offered: an alternative that would shatter social dogmas. Mari stated:

In my job as designer, or rather as an intellectual who contradicts the actual state of things, I try within the network of commissions and projects to ‘smuggle in’ moments of research and ways of creating the stimulus to free oneself from ideological conditioning, standard norms, behaviour and taste.¹²

With their critique, Mari and the collectives place emphasis on the aforementioned outside-in perspective. They encourage us to become aware of the ordi-

¹² Enzo Mari, *Proposta per un'autoprogettazione*, Edizioni Corraini, Milano 2002, p. 33, www.matthewlangley.com/blog/Enzo-Mari-Autoprogettazione2.pdf (accessed 15 June 2017).

nary, everyday environment that we have built and that we inhabit. By becoming aware of it, we would finally acknowledge it as merely another product of humanity's material culture. Thanks to this insight, we would recognise our capacity to influence the existing; we would recognise our ability to alter and redesign the whole. And therein actually lies the key to evolving from a passive observer into an active one. Viewed from the inside, our everyday environment seems to be an unalterable, given context. However, by establishing a view from the outside, it becomes something into which we can intentionally, actively interfere. The latter reminds us of the thesis of Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* and *The Emancipated Spectator*. In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière points out two oppositional categories. In

those who possess a capacity and those who do not [...]. Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions.¹³

Rancière thus asserts that our position as an external observer is (inter)active. The latter is based upon the assumption that with our conscription knowledge we entangle ourselves in what we are seeing and thereby actively co-create the view of it. Similar holds true regarding education. We remain passive while someone else carries out the selection of knowledge for us. As such, we only seemingly move forward. The knowledge that has been received remains fragmented, since we still remain in the grip of someone who is leading us, who is measuring out knowledge that we still have to master. According to the method of emancipation, that which we learn ourselves, we relate to everything else. Or, to return to the position of a spectator:

We do not have to transform spectators into actors, and ignoramuses into scholars. We have to recognize the knowledge at work in the ignoramus and the ac-

¹³ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London 2009, p. 13.

tivity peculiar to the spectator. Every spectator is already an actor in her story; every actor, every man of action, is the spectator of the same story.¹⁴

This position is essential for redesigning the everyday. Since the mid 20th century the design discipline has been, as mentioned, all too often attached only to the position of the passive performer, too often helping in transmuting potential active users into passive consumers. As Andrea Branzi writes: “Sheltered from myths established by the Modern Movement, industrial societies did not realise until the 1960s that the Western World had evolved from an Architectonic Civilisation to a Commercial Civilisation.”¹⁵ Blinded by its own ideals about constructing a better world, the larger part of the design and architecture discipline simply did not recognise its gradual assimilation into the frame of the production system, of capitalism.

In time, through the mentioned transformation, the production system and capital became the authority that makes the selection for design. They assumed the role of the teacher, the role of the one that explains. And still today, the two are measuring out fragments of knowledge to designers, and because of its seeming complexity, the entirety remains split amongst many specialists. Capital is unsurpassable in persuading every specialist that he or she is irreplaceable, a key element of the whole. Thus, each element accepts the given situation without much doubt. All *inconsistencies*, all *discomforts*, are already adapted from the starting point or subsequently integrated – as a new trend – into the world of marketing.

On the other hand, the method of emancipation allows us to think about an alternative in the design discipline; about design as an independent discipline that is capable of existing outside the market-production system. It returns us to the aforementioned recognition of the potentiality the profession holds. The question is not whether we, as a profession, can do it. Rather, we are confronted with two choices, with two criteria for selecting the (future) role of design in society. We must choose between the existing (or, better yet, between *conforming* to the existing) and the emancipatory choice – a choice that regards the existing

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁵ Andrea Branzi, “The Primitive Metropolis”, in: *Andrea Branzi: Objects and Territories*, Constance Rubini (ed.), Editions Gallimard – collection Alternatives, Paris 2014, p. 100.

with scepticism and establishes design as an agency; a choice that implements structural impossibilities and, as a result, punches holes in the thick fabric of the ordinary. In other words: the emancipatory choice sets its task within the existing in order to create – by viewing the existing from the outside – the possibility of the impossible within the existing.

Let us look at two telling examples of practical experiments with decentralised structures of design potential: *Hacking Households* and *Cloning Objects*. Both projects can be perceived as an extension of Mari's 1974 project *Proposta per un'autoprogettazione*. Like Mari's work, *Hacking Households* and *Cloning Objects* question the established means of production and hand the latter – along with a set of instructions and tools – back to the individual. As Mari explained his objective: "In 1974 I thought that if people were encouraged to build a table with their own hands, for example, they would be able to understand the thinking behind it."¹⁶

Scepticism towards present-day design and the production of things prompted the authors of *Hacking Households* and *Cloning Objects* to consider and explore alternative ways of addressing the issues concerning the design process. The authors base their idea on identifying poorly adaptable and largely unsustainably produced household appliances. The main shortcoming of traditional household appliances is that they are created as a closed system: "when something goes wrong, the most cost-effective solution is to throw out the appliance and replace it with something new."¹⁷ For the user, this implies a predefined role in the process, allowing no active involvement or upgrades.

In *Hacking Households*, the proposed method of developing and producing objects draws on the development of open source software. The result is a system of programmed objects that allow for instantaneous adaptation of their function. This gives the consumer freedom to make decisions, and to design and develop products within a community. At first sight, what consumers receive seem to be *merely* pieces, blocks of material. Yet a set of blocks constitutes the desired object – an object we create ourselves according to what we need. As the final

¹⁶ Mari, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁷ *Hekanje gospodinjskih aparatov*, 2014, <http://50.bio.si/sl/teme/hekanje-gospodinjskih-aparatov/> (accessed 1 May 2017).

Fig. 2: Jesse Howard, Leonardo Amico, Tilen Sepič, Thibault Brevet, *Cloning Objects*, 2015.
Photo: Tilen Sepič



object will address our needs, the decision as to its nature and design is ours alone. “Objects can now be designed, developed, and produced democratically, rather than through a top-down approach from corporation to consumer.”¹⁸ In *Cloning Objects* the product contains embedded information needed for its re-production. Although products can still be distributed through the existing network and could even be manufactured within this network, individuals may also freely produce, modify, and redistribute the pieces as they see fit.¹⁹

The fact that designers no longer provide the final, unalterable solution to potential users is not the only reason why these projects are interesting. They also allow (as well as empower) the community of users to address – autonomously, independently, according to a given situation – the issues and needs they are faced with. With these projects, designers manage not only to give consumers access to knowledge, but also to provide them with the tools that empower them for further independent action, thereby succeeding in raising the presently often limited aspiration to participate in the design process. This results in the renunciation of material production as part of the market system. Rather than building its potential on manufacturing products, the solution is validated through the open-source production of ideas.

This brings us to the inevitable question: how do we protect newly generated ideas from the marketing system? How do we prevent ideas from becoming a

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Hacking Households*, 2015; www.hackinghouseholds.com (accessed 1 May 2017).



Fig. 3: Ernesto Oroza, Technological Disobedience: TV aerial made out of standardised metal trays from public diners, Havana, 2005. Photo: Ernesto Oroza

commodity? The authors' cogent response focuses on users empowered by freely shared knowledge. Individuals are tasked with finding their own answers to the given neutral network of knowledge and ideas, to the given set of blocks of material. Their task is to create a new use and to become active participants in the process of creating, and subsequently to reject the role of consumers that was defined by the Other. We are, once again, reminded of the designers from Superstudio, who presented – as far back as 1972 – the following demand: only by rejecting objects of possession, or, better yet, by eliminating objects prescribed in advance by the Other, will design finally evolve into a means of knowledge and thus become a foundation for real human existence. Namely:

When design as an inducement to consume ceases to exist, an empty area is created, in which, slowly, as on the surface of a mirror, such things as the need to act, mould, transform, give, conserve, modify, come to light. [...] The times being over when utensils generated ideas, and when ideas generated utensils, now ideas are utensils.²⁰

²⁰ *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape. Achievements and Problems of Italian Design*, Emilio Ambasz (ed.), The Museum of Modern Art and Centro Di, New York and Florence 1972, pp. 246–251.

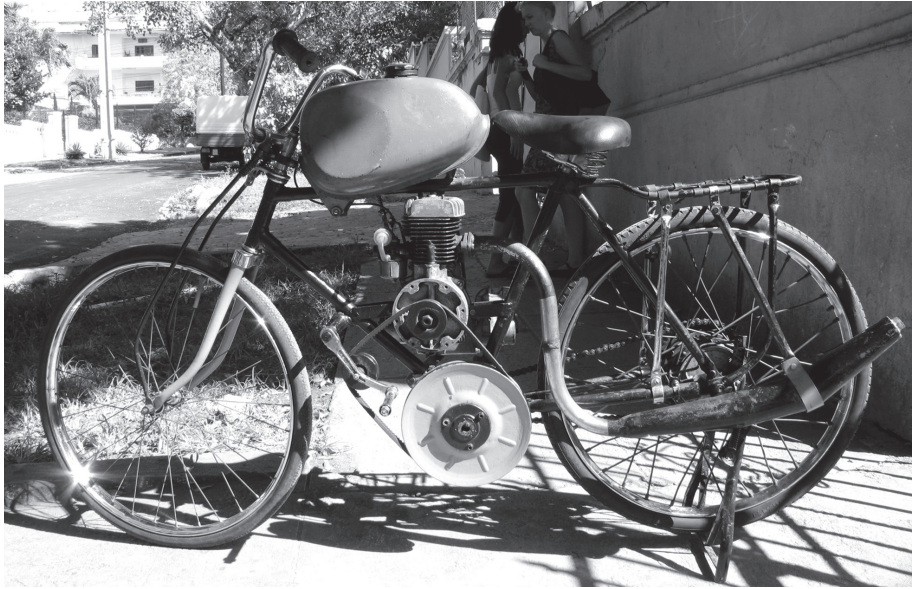


Fig. 4: Ernesto Oroza, Technological Disobedience: 'Rikimbili' bicycle fuelled by a military tank engine, Havana, 2005. Photo: Ernesto Oroza

An excellent example of the vast potential of the need to act and transform (as well as the quotidian participation of individuals) is a collection made by the Cuban designer and artist Ernesto Oroza. Over years of seeking and documenting, Oroza has amassed a collection of everyday objects that people in Cuba have ingeniously, creatively modified to make new everyday objects. These items were created by the Cuban people out of necessity, after the country was hit by a severe economic crisis in the 1990s. According to Oroza, the deeper the crisis, the bigger the potential for creativity among the people and the bigger the pool of inventive solutions to address their daily needs. Moreover, “as they were reinventing their lives, an unconscious mentality began to take shape.”²¹

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²¹ Ernesto Oroza, “Technological Disobedience: From the Revolution to Revolico.com”, *Worker Build Your Own Machinery*, www.technologicaldisobedience.com/category/notes/ (accessed 3 May 2017).

Oroza considers the items collected from this period to be a perfect example of technological disobedience, blatant manifestations of complete disrespect for the final form and function of mass-produced everyday objects. The collected objects are new technological re-interpretations of knowledge in the fields of electronics, engineering, and design. “If an object broke, it was fixed. If the object worked to repair another object, it was used, whether in part or in whole. This contempt in the face of the consolidated image of industrial products could be understood as a process of deconstruction.”²² As a consequence, the products show a high degree of improvisation and artfulness that far exceed the versatility of the original idea. Nothing could escape being modified into a substitute. Clothes dryer drive motors have been turned into fans, shoeshine machines, and key cutting machines. Various motors and engines that had previously powered military tanks, spraying systems, or water pumps, have been used to construct motorcycles known as rikimbilis.²³

The selected projects (the last one mentioned born out of urgency, the first two out of a wish to design an alternative) actually represent two sides of the same coin. Their foundation is a thinking individual, the only intangibility that consumerism cannot subvert into unusable fetishism. When we recognise that, we recognise the goal of design. We recognise the essence of design, which does not lie in the creation of products, but rather in the creation of a new use, in the encouragement of potential new thinking. At the same time, the described situations position us in a network of decision makers, as well as producers. Everything places us in the position of a designer, of one who has knowledge (or is enabled to acquire it), and who, on the basis of the newly established possibilities, independently decides what one needs and what one will do. It places us among Zinn’s agents, operating in tiny, rebellious crannies, among Badiou’s creators of new thinking, among the architects of the new systems of symbolisation that the new world needs. In Badiou’s words: “Building is no doubt necessary; founding is necessary. But the world is vast, and it is on its scale that thinking must perceive and act.”²⁴

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Motherboard: The technological disobedience of Ernesto Oroza*, 2013; www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-XS4aueDUg (accessed 3 May 2017).

²⁴ Alain Badiou, *The True Life*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2017, p. 48.

Despite its good intentions and desire to aid in the creation of a better world for everyone, the modernist design of the 20th century eventually succumbed to the production system of capitalism. This raises the inevitable question: Are the described actions taking place within the matrix of the current prevalent system? Are perhaps the described actions only seemingly undermining the system, when in fact they are merely prompting – with the help of participatory open source design – the gradual assimilation of individuals and users into the frame of the capitalistic production system? The question, therefore, is how to avoid contributing “to the invention of formal ways of showing something that the Empire already regards as existing”?²⁵

In order to interpret the described seemingly active stance as merely another element in a series of formal manifestations of the already existing, the role of the user would have to be limited to the field of selection. However, the selected examples entail more than an ostensible creative act of choosing between pre-determined options. We must view the selected examples through the lens of Andrea Branzi, who no longer sees design “as a positive response to a functional requirement, but as creation of the demand itself, i.e. as active intervention in the modification of behaviour, creating new functions and new freedoms.”²⁶

Branzi introduces the challenging notion that the task of design is to design an original problem as such. The answers of design no longer offer solutions to known problems, but – as the above quote suggests – *create the demand itself*. In other words: we do not design the solution of a problem but a searched for and detected problem. In this context, we can better understand what Branzi means when he writes about the necessity to create a demand. What we are talking about here is the redesign of the recognisable problem, and the result of such redesign is the creation of the conditions for new ways of use and, as a consequence, the aforementioned new ways of thinking. The problem, as recognised in the selected examples, was that the designed products were trapped in a closed system of production and use. So, by redesigning the detected prob-

²⁵ Slavoj Žižek, “Étienne Balibar in problem nasilja”, in: Étienne Balibar, *Strah pred množicami. Politika in filozofija pred Marxom in po njem*, Studia Humanitatis, Ljubljana 2004, p. 490.

²⁶ Andrea Branzi, *The Hot House. Italian New Wave Design*, Thames and Hudson, London 1984, p. 49.

lem we alter the role of users, as well as the position of the product within the changing process of creation.

A similar thought can be found in Giorgio Agamben's short essay *In Praise of Profanation*. In it, Agamben focuses on the special relation between use and profanation. He writes: "The passage from the sacred to the profane can [...] come about by means of an entirely inappropriate use (or, rather, reuse) of the sacred, namely, play."²⁷ For a special relation between use and profanation to occur, Agamben introduces a third element into the formula, play. As an example, he mentions child's play because, through play, a child manages to modify something that is, at first glance, totally useless. In other words, through play, a child manages to create a toy in a new way. Play is therefore essential because it allows us to create a new use. This is also important because, according to Agamben, the ability to create a new use offers a response to consumer capitalism, which constitutes:

the pure form of separation, to the point that there is nothing left to separate. [...] In the commodity, separation inheres in the very form of the object, which splits into use-value and exchange value and is transformed into an ungraspable fetish. The same is true for everything that is done, produced, or experienced – even the human body, even sexuality, even language. They are now divided from themselves and placed in a separate sphere that no longer defines any substantial division and where all use becomes and remains impossible. This sphere is consumption.²⁸

If we want to return the usefulness to such product, we are forced to deactivate the old use and thus create the possibility for a new use.²⁹ In short, erasing the separations that make an object unusable is not enough. We have to create a new use – through play. Branzi and Agamben are actually talking about the same thing: they are talking about *play*, a design that will allow new functions, new freedom, new thinking, and the ability for active intervention in the modification of behaviour.

²⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, Zone Books, New York 2007, p. 75.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 86–87.

In order to achieve this goal, design needs – as mentioned before – thinking individuals. It needs all those whose ordinary acts are overlooked today but are already happening in everyday life and are free from market domination. The task of design lies in recognising and empowering each of us. We are confronted with the systemic powerlessness of the individual and the fact that even the smallest production is immediately thrown into the domain of consumerism. Consequently, the role of design – as one of the key builders of our environment – lies not only in redesigning the environment in order for it to ensure the requisite empowerment of individuals, but also in establishing the conditions for creating and encouraging new functions, new ways of thinking. The latter must be based on the individual's capacity to think and to accept, generate, and share new knowledge and new dimensions of use.

This is the only way to ensure that the desire to exit the market system achieves the required separation and lays the foundation for a new culture, a new level of openness, a new approach in the field of exploring possibilities. Should we fail to achieve this goal, we will be forced to face a state of lost opportunities. Instead of empowerment through the creation of choices within the possibilities of life, there will be, as now, power that stems from the position of the apparatus, from the authority of the currently prevalent production system. The persistence of unregulated, anarchic, and experimental individuals and movements in the field of design is therefore of vital importance. Only by pressing on will we establish the possibility of devising an alternative, of preventing the loss of a potential future. That is to say, a world where we will not only be able to survive, but where we will aspire to live.