NANOPOETICS OF USE

Kinetic prefiguration and dispossessed sociality in the undercommons

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May 2019
We owe each other everything.

Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 2013: 20
Abstract

This thesis reflects on the development of a practice of sociality that takes the realm of use as a rich terrain of political experimentation. The point of departure for this undertaking is a critique of what has been named “possessive individualism”: a seemingly innocent force of social fragmentation, fostered by liberal thought and complexified by neoliberal rationality, whereby each subject is called to see itself and act as the independent proprietor of its life. This is a tendency that affects us not only discursively but also materially, by establishing individualising regimes of perception and motion, essentially reconstructing relational bonds and mutual dependencies as a supplemental dimension to an otherwise private existence. In order to contest and momentarily defy the many interpellations that compel us to feel and act as “one” – as self-possessed individuals – this research thus seeks to both rethink and concretely re-enact use as an affective practice: that is to say, in terms of a primal, generative, corporal entanglement with the world, rather than the effect of sovereign intentionality. To this end, conceptual elaboration, the making of a kinetic machine, and its collective use during a choreographed activity jointly contribute to the exploration of bodily vulnerability and reciprocal interference. This type of practice, it will be argued, could be understood as one expression of what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have called “study”: the cultivation of a mutual indebtedness that circulates beneath and beyond the institutionalised surface of communal life, in the undercommons. By designing material constraints that could magnify instances of simultaneous moving and being moved, sensing and being sensed, this intervention aims to prefigure a mode of collectivity that hinges on the consensual, poetic, mutual dispossession of use.

Keywords: use; affect; nanopoetics; prefiguration; undercommons
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Author’s declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Giovanni Marmont

May 2019
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From what I have gathered, the acknowledgements are often that place in a PhD thesis where certain seemingly scandalous confessions about the nature of the work are disclosed, which are not normally tolerated elsewhere in the text, regarding a general discomfort with ideas of individual authorship and originality. I am not entirely sure what to think of this quarantined honesty: whether it is compliance, fake modesty, or a way of smuggling the unspeakable into a framework that is primarily designed to “let bureaucrats check that our papers are in order”, as Foucault once said. Whatever the case, I want to wholeheartedly share here the same confessions – itself a fully avowed display of unoriginality – but also hope that this same indebtedness to the various efforts of others has managed to spill over into the rest of the thesis too.

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To Nikki, Cristina, Filippo
O. Introduction

What it is to be given (as) something to hold, always in common, has really got a hold on me. It’s not mine but it’s all I have. I who have nothing. I who am no one, I who am not one.

Fred Moten, Stolen Life, 2018: ix

The question is not one to be answered, the problem not one to be solved. Rather, it is one to be looked after. One to remain troubled and unsettled by, ‘enamoured of’ for as long as we can and as intensely as it is in our collective power. And staying troubled, to paraphrase Donna Haraway, here demands the full warmth of our care, so that this tenuous question does not congeal into a deadening unitary certainty: so that the question keeps flowing through us, overflowing us, gliding with enough thrust to carry us away, together, again and again. The question is that of sociality, that of the “with” of Being. Which is to say, it is the question of what we are capable of when our bodies are implicated in a shared event, entangled and interacting with the same material environment. It is the question of what we can feel when moving and being moved together, when sensing and being sensed, differently but in the same act. In those moments when we get undone and yet we are still and even more relentlessly there: singularly plural, different but not separate. Those moments when, as suggested by Fred Moten’s words in the epigraph above, we are not “one”. This work, then, is for – prior to about – the collective, material, and kinetic experimentation with modes of social life that can and already do participate in a mutiny of sorts: namely, the unmaking of the monolithic figure of the “individual” and its unbearable world.

As we shall see more extensively in due course, the problem of individualism as a source of social fragmentation is a complex one. Part of this complexity, it will be argued, is caused by the colloquial association of individualism with simple selfishness – that is to say, with the form of egotistic utilitarianism that can perhaps be formally traced back to the thought of Jeremy Bentham. But seeing oneself and acting as an individual also indicates a more general and deeply-rooted sense of *possession*, “wholeness”, and private responsibility over one’s life and capabilities. A possession that is maintained by setting up clear boundaries between what is “me” and what is “not-me”. When this is the case, being with others must be intended as a sum of separate units pre-existing a social life that merely “happens” to them. Independent individuals thus come together for interest and/or through the recognition of common attributes – and, of course, “coming”, as opposed to “being” together, already begins to reveal the fault line here. Conversely, being unable or unwilling to be independent is presented as a defect, as irresponsible. While this might sound like a common-sense way of being, and perhaps even an appealing one, we could ask: who are these units that somehow come into contact, as if from nowhere, if not themselves constantly shifting products of encounters between both organic and inorganic bodies? Taking relationality as the consequence of, rather than the precondition for, singular lives, thus obscures a dimension of fundamental mutual dependence and reciprocal interference.

Far from being an abstract condition, this individuality is also something that we do with our bodies: that is, each “I” performs this independent “me” through the ways it moves and the ways it feels. The individual thus sits on a chair, puts on some clothes, hops on a bus, has sex, watches a film, writes an essay, drinks a cup of coffee: whether alone or amongst people while doing these things, the individual is that who tends to behave as a separate entity, interacting with a world outside while striving to maintain control over its actions and material confines. When the individual says “we”, then, what is often meant is an aggregate of “I’s”. And yet, there are many moments of intense complicity when we yield complete command over ourselves and – more or less deliberately, more or less explicitly – end up blurring the boundaries between where “I” ends and
“you” begins. These are moments when we participate in a different form of sociality and our engagement with the world radically shifts away from that of a first person singular.

As we will see throughout this text, a number of attempts have been made, particularly within the art world and some of which will feature more or less prominently here, to turn these moments of profound entanglement into collective experimental practices, thus approaching the question of social life as a question of performance – as something that we creatively “do” and which, simultaneously, “does” and “undoes” us. In the effort to celebrate those instances when we stop acting and feeling as individuals, such practices attend to and indeed cultivate ways in which we are experientially indebted to one another. What still appears to be missing, however, is a clear sense of the role that interaction with artefacts – crudely put, the use of “objects” – can play within these practices. If performing as independent individuals more often than not involves and is expressed through the “use” of our material environment (to recall some of the examples suggested above: chair, clothes, bus, computer, cup), then the sphere of use should itself be explicitly claimed as an important site of experimentation with a sociality beyond, before, and against the individual. And it is precisely the realm of use, as a peculiar and inherently relational mode of acting, that this research wishes to take up as its starting point and main focus.

To this end, our journey establishes design practice as its primary field of intervention, given that – whether superficially assumed or more carefully probed – a preoccupation with use is in many (heterogeneous) ways absolutely central to this particular type of activity. Clearly, such a preliminary contextualisation shall not be mistaken for yet another questionable attempt at fencing off design practice by pitting it against the art world – an exercise that, we shall see in Chapter 1, has been proven to be of dubious worth. Still, acknowledging the indeterminacy of these disciplinary demarcations should not impede us to situate – at least tentatively, and if only for the sake of clarity within this thesis – the intervention proposed in the pages that follow within a certain broad tradition of

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3 Such as those by the Nanopolitics Group, discussed in Chapter 1, or by Erin Manning’s SenseLab, addressed in Chapter 5.
making and material explorations that take the realm of use as their ultimate horizon. More specifically, this project is concerned with the design of tangible, “technical” (or “infrastructural”) artefacts as a manner of elaborating and introducing certain material conditions of possibility for acting and interacting (hence not including, for example, graphic and illustration design). If we follow Sara Ahmed in pointing out that ‘[s]omething cannot be used for anything, which means that use is a restriction of possibility that is material’,4 we could say that what this research sets out to do is to explore how crafting certain material restrictions of possibility can be enabling of new processes, of new practices of social life. Enabling, that is to say, of new manners of being together that depart from the problematic fiction of individual existence.

Consequently, it should be clarified that the general mode of investigation employed for this study is akin to what is colloquially and broadly defined as practice-based research or, sometimes, as research-creation. What this means, essentially, is that this research includes elements of “practical” experimentation that are central to the progression and outcome of the inquiry – in this case, a combination of studio-based design/making and collective performance. Throughout the thesis, but particularly in Chapters 2 and 5, we will however have the opportunity to reflect in some depth on how the above (academic) denominations often presuppose the possibility, perhaps even the necessity, of neatly distinguishing practice from theory as well as process from outcome. Such distinctions are instead rejected by this research in favour of what has been termed a “methodological ensemble”: that is to say, a manner of operating that relies on the coexistence, co-dependence, and non-linear connection between various “registers” of exploration – some intangible, some tangible.

Questions: elaboration and activation

This investigation can be said to harbour a twofold ambition: it seeks to couple a conceptual articulation of sociality beyond individualistic conformations, on the one hand, with, on the other hand, a material intervention devised as collective

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experimentation with said sociality. What binds together these two registers of the research, as we have already begun to see, is the central role bestowed upon the notion and act of use. Indeed, use – and the mediation of “technical objects” – is taken up here both as something of a magnifying glass and as a possible field of struggle. That is to say, use is deployed as a vantage point from which phenomena of mutual interference and vulnerability could be not only observed, but also amplified and made integral parts of an aesthetico-somatic approach to political action. Consequently, two main questions run through and animate this research. The first is a question of theoretical elaboration; the second is one of methodological activation.

The first question, the question of elaboration, essentially concerns a reformulation and radicalisation of sociality. Drawing on and bringing together a diverse cast of theorists working across several fields and traditions, this research seeks not only to move past the individualist notion of liberal society, but also to articulate an alternative to communitarian compositions. Indeed, it will be claimed, both these forms of sociality rely on problematic notions of unity and property: immanent unity of the independent self-possessed individual, in the former case, or unity of a group around a collectively owned “common”, in the latter. By contrast, the type of social life that will be put forward here is akin to an insurgent mode of friendship. Which is to say, a practice of complicity emerging in-between singular bodies, underneath the common, and effacing the illusory independence of the individual by operating through what will be defined as a reciprocal “dispossession”. Given that this research, as stated above, proposes acts of use as a conceptual and material prism through which to observe and experiment with social compositions, the first question can be articulated thus:

*How can the notion of “use” help us rethink social life?*

Addressing this question will take us to consider that the paradigm of use, if painstakingly probed, can offer a number of precious coordinates that might inspire new forms of socio-political experimentation. Which leads to our second question – the question of activation – through which methodological
considerations are squarely brought to the fore. Indeed, since social life will be unequivocally approached not as a state to be reached but as an ongoing performative practice, the question of method will here come to coincide with or perhaps even replace any crystallized “content” of this relationality. That is to say, the “what” and the “how”, the means and the end, will become indistinguishable. This second question thus takes up what is here referred to as a nanopolitical framework, in the effort of devising, as Nick Montgomery and Carla Bergman write, ‘not a new critique or new position, but a process’. In other words, we will seek to establish one way in which this radicalised use can be put in play as an instantiation of dispossessed sociality. Consequently, the second question may be formulated as follows:

How can “use” be turned into an intervention capable of momentarily undoing individualism?

It should be stated here that, as will become clearer throughout the chapters that follow, this couplet of questions is joined together by a complex bond: indeed, these two lines of inquiry at times overlap to such an extent that keeping them apart becomes hardly possible. Further, and contrary to appearances, their relation is neither one of causality (“if this, then that”) nor one of sequentiality (“this first, than that”) but, rather, one of synergy: “this and that”, elaboration and activation. As will be explained in the thesis’ Coda, then, these questions represent the two sides of the same coin, so to speak, converging towards the (re)formulation of a collective mode of prefiguration.

**Context: disciplinary vagabondage**

Having discussed the two major issues at stake in this research – the problem of sociality and that of bodily experimentation – and having introduced as many key questions driving the work, we might now be in the position to indicate the scholarly debates and, importantly, domains of practice to which this

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investigation hopes to offer a contribution. However, given that the research moves rather waywardly across several territories of inquiry, situating it within neatly defined disciplinary boundaries would be a troublesome exercise. Still, on the one hand, this is not to merely suggest some sort of multi- or inter-disciplinary nature of the exploration either, amounting to an orderly engagement with a combination of clearly identifiable fields of study, being here simply brought into dialogue. Which is not, on the other hand, to ignore the obvious debt that this research does have with a number of existing, illuminating and, in fact, longstanding debates developed in distinct fields – such as the analysis of processes of subjectivation in political theory; the questions of technical acting and the notion of use in philosophies of technology and design; and issues of bodily and choreographic experimentation in performance studies. These are indeed clearly recognisable (and often explicitly acknowledged) throughout the thesis.

Rather, largely aligning with some of the authors cited, this is to say that the research has for the most part operated by displacing and manipulating the diverse material encountered throughout its development, irrespectively of academic demarcations altogether. It is to say that this work has not so much borrowed from certain scholarships, each time abiding by their specific methodological protocols\(^6\) and canons of use. This research has instead freely and unapologetically “picked the pockets” of various disciplines, sometimes clumsily and other times perhaps more skilfully, without the intention of ever returning what had been stolen to its “legitimate” owners by means of orthodox disciplinary rigour. It has gate-crashed, so to speak, a number of ongoing parties, playing along and mingling only as long as it took to embezzle the free drinks and nibbles necessary to continue its journey. Interestingly enough, throughout the thesis this profane attitude seeps beyond methodological concerns thus becoming content too, as we will see in Chapter 4. An “appropriative” approach of this kind can perhaps be described by the manner in which Stefano Harney and Fred Moten discuss issues of context in relation to the recently published

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Spanish translation of their book *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. In a conversation with the translators, when asked about their take on the increasing circulation and potential shifts in context that translations of their work inevitably enable, the two authors express their hope that their work ‘continually moves and is moved so that it can be undone and redone, digested and reconfigured in and through contexts [they] had no way or right to imagine’.7

A statement that Harney and Moten immediately follow up with an important question:

> What if it turns out that at a really fundamental level coloniality is an imposition of the proper, and of propriety, which critiques of appropriation advance rather than retard, all in the interest of a certain stillness, an inertial resistance?8

Somewhat ironically, it is precisely in this unruly and unceremonious curiosity, in its stepping in and out of fascinating scholarly domains, in a desire for the tension between ideas and their original source to be left largely unresolved (without however simply erasing it), that this research has found an unlikely “home”. Indeed, the very undecidability and deliberate disciplinary vagabondage of this research is shared by a multitude of other theoretical and material explorations, so much so that something of a *non*-field has emerged with the turn of the century that capaciously – to use Gregory Seigworth’s felicitous term9 – accommodates many of these scholarly rascals. This non-field is what has since been dubbed as *affect studies*. Why the “non-”, then?

Although what is arguably one of two major “strands” of affect studies10 is primarily steeped in a philosophical lineage that goes from Baruch Spinoza to

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8 Ibid.


10 The other one (not of interest to this research) being instead inspired by the work of Silvan Tomkins: a quasi-Darwinian “innate-ist” bent toward matters of evolutionary hardwiring’, see Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, ‘An Inventory of Shimmers’, in *The Affect Theory*
Gilles Deleuze and then continues all the way to a plethora of contemporary theorists (some of whom feature heavily throughout this work), the exploration of affect can be much more, even much else, than what discussed by these authors. In their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg indeed point out that

There is no single, generalizable theory of affect: not yet and (thankfully) there never will be. If anything, it is more tempting to imagine that there can only ever be infinitely multiple iterations of affect and theories of affect: theories as diverse and singularly delineated as their own highly particular encounters with bodies, affects, worlds.11

The “non-” here is then meant to signify that, as Seigworth and Gregg continue, ‘it would be impossible’ for the myriad angles taken in the study of affect to be ‘somehow resolved into a tidy picture’12 if not through what Seigworth describes elsewhere as an often ‘unwelcome blurring of certain disciplinary boundaries and procedures’.13 Seigworth and Gregg, while attempting to map a number of ‘regions of investigation’14 within affect theory, also caution against taking their tentative snapshot as an exhaustive taxonomy, as many “affect theorists” are ‘[a]lready moving across and beneath nearly all of these strands’.15 If anything, Seigworth proposes, the strength of affect studies emerges precisely when the tensions and divergences provided by this heterogeneity of perspectives is not dissolved ‘by imagining that affect study will somehow magically turn into some kind of overarching über-discipline (as if!) or, even more basically, into a single multi-discipline-straddling methodology’.16 This scholarly openness can perhaps be interpreted as a response to the kind of ‘sharp division of all knowledge into disciplines and professions’17 lamented by cultural theorist Masao Miyoshi. A fragmentation through which, Miyoshi contends, ‘[e]ach sector is mandated to

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11 Ibid., 3-4.
12 Ibid., 5.
13 Seigworth, ‘Capaciousness’, ii.
14 Seigworth and Gregg, ‘An Inventory of Shimmers’, 8.
15 Ibid., 9.
16 Seigworth, ‘Capaciousness’, i.
develop exclusive terms and methodologies as if it could successfully seal its autonomy'.

What can be said to tie together most approaches to affect under the same banner, regardless of their particular orientations and methods, is thus less to do with allegiance to a single, defined scholarly tradition, than with a general sensitivity towards a number of themes or debates orbiting around the concept of “affect” – as famously defined by Spinoza and then taken up by Deleuze, essentially in terms of a body’s capacity to affect and be affected. What affect scholars tend to share, for instance, is a preoccupation with and attention to the tension between the individual and the social, and how this is often articulated throughout hardly noticeable experiential and relational dynamics between bodies (with the latter term understood in the broadest possible sense, thus spanning both organic and inorganic matter). Indeed, the study of affect is generally concerned with a ‘careful probing into subtle layers of human experience’ that are found in the material, situated relationality of encounters and which incessantly exceed and ‘transgress individual perspectives and frames of reference’. That is to say, the work of those scholars more or less loosely associated (or associable) with affect study is by and large marked by an attunement to the fleeting everyday and often unexceptional processes whereby ‘the boundaries of the self become porous’. Therefore, affect scholars are generally attentive to what can be said to ‘arise in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon’ – with the two intended as inseparable instances of the same process. To put it in other terms: affect (some would say, unlike emotions) is not what unfolds within individual bodies but, rather,

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18 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 2.
22 Seigworth and Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', 1.
'between interacting bodies whose potentialities and tendencies are thereby continuously modulated in reciprocal interplay'.

Further, very much like what was said earlier about this research’s *modus operandi*, Jan Slaby and Birgitt Röttger-Rössler note that most of the scholarship exploring issues related to affect deviates from established methodological canons and also, occasionally from the strictures of theory [...] explore[s] poetic and personal styles, toy[s] with allegiances to the arts, [and] experiment[s] with unusual modes of articulation and presentation.

The un-disciplinary (and undisciplined) approach that this research wishes to pursue will hopefully not be dismissed as a mere whim or petty academic rebelliousness then. Rather, this eagerness to stay unsettled serves the scholarly purpose of taking seriously and remaining receptive to the glimmering and unbound vitality of affect: that is, those flickering instances – that “inventory of shimmers”, as Seigworth and Gregg beautifully describe it – when bodies move, feel, act not as “one”. We will now see that, if the thematic connections between the topic of this exploration and the non-field of affect studies should be sufficiently clear at this point – the tension between individual and collective experience – what represents the specificity of this investigation is the particular angle taken to explore the issues under scrutiny and, more important still, to propose a concrete intervention.

**Contribution: affect, use, design**

This research hopes to contribute to affect studies by bringing into its heterogeneous mix an element that, so far, if perhaps not entirely missing, is at the very least severely underrepresented within this non-field: namely, the question of use. More specifically, this investigation turns to design practice as the means through which to operate its intervention within the study of affect.

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24 Ibid., 2.
25 Seigworth and Gregg, ‘An Inventory of Shimmers’.
and explore its relation to use. Yet, make no mistake, design – or, more accurately, designing – is of interest here only obliquely, only as a proxy activity, so to speak: that is, it is of interest because of its closeness to the sphere of use. In many cases and whether explicitly or not, as already suggested, design practice can indeed be intended as a peculiar mode of engagement with, and access to questions of use. Understood in these terms, design practice is approached not as an end in itself but as a form of “infrastructuring”: which is to say, the creation of conditions of possibility for action, for use – something to which we will return in Chapter 1. As a result, it is use that will take centre stage throughout this exploration, not design. This clarification is not meant to discredit design as a discipline, but simply to signal this study’s general disengagement, for reasons that will be discussed in due course, from design research – intended as a series of reflections, discourses and theorisations mostly, or at least in part, about design itself. That is why, as noted above, the focal “directionality” of this process of (non-disciplinary) incorporation is one whereby design as a mode of intervention is being brought (out) into affect studies, not the other way around. Or, better, design practice is alienated from its own reflexive discourses and released into the unruly wilderness of affect studies – not unlike the “inside-out” attitude in critical design practices described by design researchers Ramia Mazé and Johan Redström. Consequently, except for a contextualisation of the coupling of design and political action in Chapter 1, “design” will not be thematised as such but mostly discussed in terms of practices that display similar traits to what elaborated here. This is primarily due to the fact that – and this cannot be emphasised enough – this research has no interest whatsoever in participating in a reorientation of “design” as a whole, and will therefore not engage in any of the many debates gesturing in that direction.

The caveat above is important when assessing claims of originality for this research’s contribution. Indeed, a certain interest in issues of affect, particularly by way of Deleuze’s work, is not unseen in design research. Some examples might be represented by John McCarthy and Peter Wright’s as well as Christopher Le

Dantec’s incidental engagement with affect from a design perspective, but certainly more prominently, hence worth discussing in some detail here, by the excellent volume *Deleuze and Design*, edited by philosophers of design Betti Marenko and Jamie Brassett. The book – a much needed offering for the discipline that vows to take seriously the complexity and inherent fluidity of design – is driven by the aim to ‘bring to the fore possible connections between [...] Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy, as the practice of creating concepts, and design, as the practice of materialising possibilities’. The centrality of Deleuze’s thought for the study of affect could clearly identify Marenko and Brassett’s enterprise as a relevant precedent for this investigation, albeit an indirect one. However, apart from the exclusive focus on one author – and those thinkers that gravitated in his same orbit (notably Felix Guattari) – there are at least three ways in which Marenko and Brassett’s work differs from what proposed in this thesis. The first one is that, while the essays composing *Deleuze and Design* compellingly engage with the French philosopher’s corpus and its rich conceptual arsenal, what does not explicitly feature in the book is precisely a robust discussion of what is instead the central concern of this thesis: namely, affect, intended as the plane of experience wherein the individual and its alleged independence are unsettled. The second point of divergence calls into question the directionality of intervention addressed above. Although at first sight this research and *Deleuze and Design* seem to share a desire for undisciplined contamination – an intention that Marenko and Brassett reiterate numerous times throughout the book’s introduction – it could be argued that the two authors are still primarily concerned with, and very much anchored to, design as a field of study in its own right. Indeed, despite the seemingly sincere attempt at breaking free from the paradigm of “applied philosophy” – ‘[t]he point is not a philosophy “applied” to design’, the authors write – the temptation to do exactly that is looming large and can be found again and again in the words of the editors. Let us be clear: this

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29 Ibid., 8.
is not to question whether or not Deleuze and Design succeeds in showing how ‘an encounter with design will be as creatively fruitful for Deleuze’s work as vice versa’,\textsuperscript{30} or whether or not it will help ‘to redesign Deleuze in the same way in which through Deleuze [Marenko and Brassett] rethink design’.\textsuperscript{31} Still, when the editors specify that they ‘work designing through Deleuze’,\textsuperscript{32} that the book ‘aims to interrogate the rapidly evolving world of design’,\textsuperscript{33} or, finally, that ‘encounters between Deleuze and designing manifest an impact on the boundaries of design as a discipline’,\textsuperscript{34} it becomes quite clear that a preoccupation with ‘the way design [...] theorises its own presence in the world’\textsuperscript{35} dominates throughout. In other words, whereas Marenko and Brassett repeatedly make a point of situating their work at the crossroad between two defined disciplines – philosophy and design, the latter being unmistakably dominant, their claims notwithstanding – what we are instead attempting here is to leave behind design as a discipline, as a field or discourse, and solely concern ourselves with the infrastructural practice of designing as a manner of materialising possibilities of use. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, unlike this research, Marenko and Brassett’s volume is entirely and unmistakably focused on “theoretical” conceptualisation, hence not including any tangible, material, “pragmatic” experimentation.

With these considerations in mind, we can now formulate this study’s intended contribution to scholarship. In accordance with its twofold ambition, this research wishes to originally intervene in debates around the study of affect by, first, attending to the realm of use as a particular mode of sociality beyond the individual and, second, by devising relevant forms of experimentation assisted by design practice. The eventual, peculiar form taken by this PhD thesis is admittedly but one of many others that an engagement with the very same set of concerns could have brought about. That this PhD has turned out to be this one and not another, then, is partly the fruit of obvious constraints that simply made it impossible to cover all possible ground, but also the “result” – if we can

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 17.
call it that – of that beautiful process of serendipitous, wandering curiosity that animates most research projects. Where certain texts, debates, and routes of inquiry have been left unexplored or only passingly perused, then, this is to some extent because the compositional force given by such curiosity has been prioritised over compliance with mantras of scholarly thoroughness.

**Structure**

This thesis is composed of a total of six chapters, including a *Coda* – which presents the research’s conclusions. *Chapter 1* will lay the foundations of the argument by presenting the two central pillars around which the rest of the work is built: namely, sociality and nanopolitics. Driven by the intention to rethink and re-enact sociality through a new “with” and a new “how”, the chapter begins with an assessment of the figure of the “individual” and its key trait: the capacity to see itself as the sole proprietor of its own life. Further, we shall see that neoliberal entrepreneurialism does not eclipse but, rather, complexifies the self-possessed individual, burdening it with the responsibility of ceaselessly investing in itself. This analysis will lead us to propose that imagining social life as a secondary condition of this self-possessed individual necessarily results in either the abstraction of a *society* of associated atoms or in its rejection as the fusion of members possessing in themselves the right (shared) prerequisites for inclusion into an exclusionary *community*. Starting instead from social life itself, it is suggested, entails a mutual “dispossession” that this research identifies as a radicalised mode of friendship. It will be then proposed that, if we are to escape neoliberalism’s economisation of existence, forms of political action that look beyond the economic sphere must urgently be devised. To this end, the research will draw on the work of the Nanopolitics Group, as one fruitful way of elaborating modes of collective political experimentation that instead operate on a somatic register of bodily motion. The chapter will end by proposing that such a framework would be greatly enriched by a re-articulation of the notion of use.

*Chapter 2* will start with the claim that design, because of its operational proximity with use, might be taken up as an important vector of nanopolitical
intervention. We shall then embark on a contextual review of the complex interplay between design, use, and political action, addressing some of the ways in which this triad has been articulated within historical as well as contemporary modes of design practice. This will introduce a closer consideration of the methodological underpinnings for this study, including a discussion of the difficulties emerging when working across conventional binaries such as “theory-practice” or “process-outcome”. Taking a distance from this terminology, it will be proposed that the research has developed by means of a combination of three registers of inquiry: namely, what we will be calling Intangible Practice (or concept-making), Tangible Theory (or material exploration), and Enactment (or collective exercise) – in the effort to signal the porous edges separating each of these. The chapter will then conclude by clarifying the relationship between the three registers: a relationship that is not articulated through linear sequentiality but, rather, as a tripartite ensemble, whereby each element simultaneously informs and is informed by the other two.

Chapter 3 inaugurates a slow conceptual progression that will run throughout the following two chapters. Representing something of a prelude to the subsequent discussions on use, this chapter will take up the question of “technical acting” and its thorny relation to the contentious notion of technology. The chapter will foreground the concept of originary technicity, as discussed by Bernard Stiegler, in order to assert an expansive understanding of technical action. This will lead us to reject the idea that something of a “pre-technological” or “non-technological” human being has existed or could exist. Avoiding facile condemnations or glorifications of technology, the chapter will then problematise what Martin Heidegger famously described as technology’s inherent danger: namely, Gestell, the calculative tendency to conceive everything as resources to be exploited – a rationality redolent of the economisation processes encountered in Chapter 1. Heidegger’s notion of Gelassenheit (or releasement) is then proposed as a possible first step in relinquishing the supremacy of technical intentionality, essentially requiring the cultivation of an openness to the world’s unfolding by way of a willful suspension of willing. It will be finally suggested that, if considering this endeavour as a practice rather than
an improbable act of disembodied “consciousness”, Michel Foucault’s work on what he called “technologies (or care) of the self” can provide some important coordinates for the task at hand.

Chapter 4 can be considered as the focal point for the whole thesis. Indeed, it is here that the research undertakes a radical re-formulation of the notion of use, proposing an incremental set of conceptual coordinates along the way. Largely drawing on Giorgio Agamben’s work on the same theme – itself heavily indebted to Heidegger’s take on technology and intended as a continuation of Foucault’s “care of the self” – use is here presented as a particular paradigm of technical action that is far more nuanced than what its colloquially utilitarian acceptation might lead to believe. In fact, the radicalised mode of use that this elaboration will bring forth consists in a form of profanely “gestural” practice, disconnected from issues of teleology, and which collapses any clear distinction between subjective “agents” and objective “patients”, between effecting and affected. Use will thus emerge as an instance of entanglement with the world: an event so fundamentally collective that it undermines any claim of property over one’s acting and, ultimately, oneself. This way, use is “reprogrammed”, so to speak, as an experience of dispossession of the self. As the aporetic character of dispossession is then examined through the joint writings of Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, it will become necessary to take Agamben’s dispossessive use beyond itself, in order to progressively ground it in a dimension of corporeal practice. An undertaking that will be aided and inspired by the writings of Harney and Moten, whose work on the sociality of blackness and what they have famously dubbed “the undercommons” will offer some invaluable clues. Not only as to what such a dispossessed practice might feel like but also, importantly, regarding circumstances in which glimpses of it can already be found. Ultimately, the dispossessed use being articulated here will be claimed to be akin to what Harney and Moten describe as “study”: a haptic mode of growing indebted to one another; a practice of recognising, cultivating and circulating a sense of mutual indebtedness through an enacted consent not to be “one” – not to be an individual.
As the research swings ever more vortically between its three registers, Chapter 5 presents the way in which this project has attempted to put in play – to *activate* – the coordinates being mapped throughout Chapter 4 by means of what was introduced in Chapter 2 as the *Enactment*. This chapter will be divided into two parts. The first part will resume the previous conceptual work with the aim of extending and implementing it within the context of an actual instance of nanopolitical experimentation. In doing so, we shall turn to the work of Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, as the two authors will assist this research in its effort of defining the modality of intervention that the Enactment sought to afford. More specifically, a triplet of concepts – *choreographic thinking*, *differential attunement*, and *enabling constraints* – will guide our investigation further, allowing us to better address interrelated questions of multimodal investigation, curation, and consensus. As this first half of the chapter progresses towards a refined understanding of the Enactment’s operational nature, the second part will instead chronicle the planning and unfolding of a nanopolitical session. Itself retrospectively divided into seven “acts”, we will see how this session involved bringing together a number of participants and a purposely-built kinetic machine in order to explore bodily instances of dispossessed use, as haptic and motional mutual indebtedness. Finally, the chapter will advance a number of conclusive remarks and questions that emerged before, during, and as a result of the Enactment, particularly regarding the session’s relation to academic research.

Chapter 6 – the thesis’ *Coda* – will draw this study to a close. Following a review of our journey in its entirety, we will attempt to reconnect this to the two research questions that initially set us in motion, thus raising as many fundamental points. First, we will propose that what has driven this investigation was essentially an ambition to develop a form of design that could approach use not so much speculatively as *prefiguratively*: enabling the immediate experimentation with alternative practices of sociality. Second, it will be argued that the type of use elaborated throughout might contribute to the ongoing formulation of a form of poetics that is collectively practiced through the movement of our bodies in interaction with artefacts.
Now, before this research gets more formally underway, it is perhaps worth spending just a few words on the thesis itself, as a compiled and itemised manuscript prepared in view of official evaluation. It is not simply a matter of pedantry to note that the presentation of this work as a linear argument, which the format of a doctoral thesis largely imposes onto an otherwise non-linear piece of research, is slightly artificial. Indeed, this text is the expression of but also relies on a multi-register and highly relational, associative meandering – the fickle, hesitant bursting forth of a messy intervention – which the structured string of chapters that follows will probably mask. Although this thesis has attempted not to disguise such artificiality and, in fact, explicitly and repeatedly draws the readers’ attention to it, this manuscript is still likely to suggest a somewhat orderly, sequential, and ultimately pre-planned progression. What is important here is not to outright reject but to recognise and trouble the comfortably neat guise that the arrangement of this thesis might provide.

A note on style

Even if only in passing, it might be worth commenting here on one aspect of the general writing style adopted throughout: namely, the consistent use, whenever possible, of the pronoun “we”. Indeed, a rationale for this deliberate choice is arguably required before frustration mounts around the otherwise justified question: “who is this we?”. Now, to begin with, it should be clarified that this expedient has nothing to do with a clumsy, risible assertion of objectivity or detachedness: neither will be found anywhere in these pages. Nor is this a simple case of “nosism”, whereby the perspective of a single author is either aggrandised through something of a “royal we”, implicitly claimed to be expressive of a larger group of people, or even arrogantly presumed to be shared by the reader. This “we” is meant to signal, in a way that will hopefully not reek of false modesty, a certain discomfort both with the idea of authorship as a solitary endeavour – at the very least for what concerns this work – but also, and more important still, with the completeness that this often suggests. In other words, and obviously without any self-defeating pretence of originality here, what this “we” is tasked
with is: first, rendering the inevitably social origin of the ideas presented, which professed as entirely personal would seem like a usurpation, although it is indeed a single “author” to have gathered and combined them; and, second, attempting to keep this text alive by treating it as some sort of ongoing dialogue or correspondence happening live, bringing writer and reader together, rather than a simple exposition.

In truth, though, there is a third reason behind the choice of the “we” that stems from a desire to take the subject matter of this research seriously: that is, a sincere, performative effort – whether failed or not – toward consistency. Indeed, it would seem nothing short of jarring to dedicate a couple hundred pages to propounding a sabotage of individuality, only to then reintroduce that very same “oneness” through the backdoor, littering the entire text with a barrage of “I’s” in the process. As will hopefully transpire throughout, I am present here and everywhere in this research, no doubt about that, and indeed there are passages where the use of the first person singular has been necessary in order to avoid excessive syntactic convolution. But I am present as already plural, as immediately bringing with me countless other voices from which “my own” can hardly be distinguished, not least those of the many authors and friends that have inspired this exploration in a myriad of ways. Other bodies are present, then: bodies by virtue of whom this writing “I” can write at all. Including, of course, those that will be generous enough to carry on reading.
1. With

We recognize our friends at great distances, before we can see the contours of their faces and the colour of their complexions and hair, by the posture and gait. We recognize someone not by the outlines, by running our eyes around the contours of his or her head and trunk, but by the inner lines of posture. To recognize a person is to recognize a typical way of addressing tasks, of envisioning landscapes, of advancing hesitantly and cautiously or ironically, of plunging exuberantly down the paths to us.

Alphonso Lingis, The Imperative, 1998: 52-53

For what concerns the unfolding of its written account, this exploration starts neither from a “beginning” nor, as Deleuze and Guattari might say, from the “middle”: it begins instead from the end – from an end. And yet, this end is one that is most frequently offered as a beginning – as the beginning – as well as the end. In fact, it is an end that must pose as the beginning for the rest of its narrative to hold. This end is represented by a figure that not only pretends to be a beginning as well as an end, but also one that hides this pretence behind an amiable façade of apparent triviality: an originary status, the purported self-evidence of which has been engrained in western imagination through centuries of concerted efforts cutting across the most diverse disciplines, from the sciences to the humanities. We are talking about the figure of the “individual”. This chapter, then, will essentially aim to do two interrelated things: first, assess the tension existing between the individual and various modes of social life; and second, discuss the significance of addressing the question of sociality as a form of collective practice.

Now, the fact that an exploration of modes of sociality begins here with an appraisal of the figure of the individual might appear immediately contradictory. However, this is not to accept the narrative of the individual by granting to the
latter the status of foundation, of beginning: the primal unit, the singular from which a plural must emerge, the “being” coming prior to the “with”. Quite the contrary, this is meant to commence our narrative by trying to do away with the aberrations that result when this lone entity – either tacitly or explicitly, both discursively and performatively – is accepted to be the centre of and precondition to relational life. Indeed, a dissolution or sabotage of the individual is necessary before the question of sociality can be thought and, indeed, enacted anew.

Importantly, we should clarify that the pages that follow will make no attempt to rehearse in any great historical detail a complete genealogy of the concept of the individual, as a political invention and founding moment of liberalism, for at least three reasons. First, because a serious historiography of the concept of the individual would also involve considering the philosophical trajectory of closely related notions such as those of the “subject”, the “Self”, legal personhood or citizenship, and sovereignty. An undertaking of this kind clearly far exceeds the much more contained ambitions of this study. Second, because a critical appraisal of the nature itself of liberal and neoliberal capitalism (as well as the role that the individual has played in their development) would be equally beyond the scope of this research. In this respect, let us instead simply refer to Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval’s lucid explanation of the term neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, they write, is the ‘rationality of contemporary capitalism’: a global rationality that, through ‘a set of discourses, practices and apparatuses’ far exceeding the economic sphere, is ‘productive of certain kinds of social relations, certain ways of living, certain subjectivities’ and essentially ‘enjoins everyone to live in a world of generalised competition’. Third and last, because compelling efforts of this kind already abound, largely drawing on Foucault’s work on

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., 3.
4 Ibid.
governmentality, the rigour of which this study could not hope to match, let alone implement in any meaningful way. Because of these reasons, we will focus here on few crucial traits of this paradoxical figure. Indeed, this chapter’s more modest intention is to show how these traits, when assimilated and effectively acted upon as a governing principle, are productive of particular modes of sociality within the contemporary context, both as a direct consequence and, more problematic still, through some of the reactions that individualism engenders. Ultimately, it could be said that this review will have less of a diagnostic aim than a propositional one: not so much a “how did we get here?” – what Foucault might call a ‘history of the present’ – but, rather, a more exploratory “what now?”.

To this end, the first part of this chapter will get underway by considering what some have argued to be a defining trait presupposed by the notion of the individual: namely, its self-possession. We will see that the ‘logic of possession’, which Butler and Athanasiou contend to be ‘a hallmark of modernity’ inextricably tied to ‘the historical conditions of slavery’, operates in concert with a constellation of interlinked concepts, including, amongst others, responsibility, independence, and freedom. In the second part of this chapter, then, we will address how, whenever individuals are effectively made to conceive themselves as the exclusive proprietors of their own person, the mode of sociality that ensues must be the legalistically regulated coming together of right-bearing owners – as is the case with liberal democratic society. Further, we shall see how the allegedly salvific notion of community often deployed to contrast this extreme (anti-)social fragmentation can easily lend itself to either hyper-capitalist recuperation or, even worse, to the fusion of the many into one that typical supports exclusionary

8 It is important to note that this study does claim that all subjects are always constructed in this or that particular way, thus ignoring people’s capacity for everyday acts of resistance to power – either through overt struggle or through informal deception and fugitivity. We will here be focusing on those frequent instances in which neoliberal interpellation is successfully received by the interpellated subject.
rhetoric. We will thus attempt to sketch a mode of sociality grounded neither in a sum nor in a fusion of elemental units but in what we might instead call, invoking Denise Ferreira da Silva’s superb phrasing, a ‘difference without separability’:⁹ which is to say, an entanglement whereby plurality neither presupposes an originary “singular” nor is resolved in a shared “common”. This latter conformation will ultimately be linked to radicalised forms of friendship.

Taking up the already mentioned ambition for this research to engage in actual experimentation with the mode of sociality thus delineated, the third and last part of this chapter will begin to address the political significance of such an intervention. This assessment will start off by disentangling the “major” register of institutional, “capital P” Politics from the “minor” politicality of everyday life relationality, following which a third term will be discussed: nanopolitics, a mode of mobilisation that is primarily concerned not with scale but with register of intervention, hence operating on a somatic and kinetic plane. The chapter will then draw to a close by suggesting that such an aesthetic, choreographic, and bodily approach to politics could benefit from a closer exploration of the notion of “use”, intended as a paradigm of technical action that carries a latent political charge awaiting activation.

1.1 One

1.1.1 Life as property

A pervasive narrative seeks to present life as an individual not only as ontologically possible and practically commonsensical, but even as appealing. Examples abound, and it is perhaps not unusual, as we attempt to cope with the conditions imposed by the socio-economic context we live in, to recognise ourselves in some of the following stereotyped vignettes. “Creatives”, perhaps sitting elbow-to-elbow in a “co-working” space, haunted by the need to stand out, improve their personal skillset, and expand their portfolio of clients. Singles

troubling themselves over which picture, inspirational quote or personal feature might best suit to fish a potential date out of an ocean of equally lonely souls – only to then bow out of relationships the moment complete control over their life is threatened. Frantic workaholics seeking redemption for their justified deficit of professional ambition in the noxious lies of bestselling self-help books, leadership courses and the self-aggrandising rhetoric of TED talk innovators, advising us on how to “actualise one’s unique potential” while “not giving a fuck”. Disillusioned travellers whose thirst for “exoticism” resembles the strategically planned conquests of a game of Risk. Distressed employees finding it easier to sign in for their employer-promoted mindfulness course than to fight back against their company’s anxiety-inducing obsession with competitiveness. Meanwhile, as a necessary flipside to this bourgeois triumph of collective separateness, vilifying the various forms of dependencies in which are enmeshed those incapable, systemically incapacitated, or even unwilling to individually “stand up for themselves”, seems to have become a national sport of sorts: the scarecrows of the undeserving benefits “scrounger”, the “illegal” migrant, the underachieving student are but some of the most obvious examples, at least on UK soil. As much as these are all, again, rather clichéd caricatures, they are nevertheless frequent enough illustrations of certain hyper-individualised and individualising material and practical conditions of existence in the so-called Global North and beyond. Taking such a climate as our starting point, we shall seek to define how proprietariness can be read as the common denominator of the conditions described above.

If we are to understand the significance of the synergy binding the notion of the individual together with that of possession to such an extent that ‘subjectivity is defined by the subject’s possession of itself’,10 as Moten asserts, there is arguably no better place to start than C.B. Macpherson’s classic 1962 study The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism. Through his highly influential genealogy, Macpherson sought to present a critique of liberal individualism that would not be content with what he saw as superficial

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chastisements of Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism,\textsuperscript{11} by some simply deemed guilty of an excess of selfishness, in order to then recover otherwise ‘desirable values of individualism’.\textsuperscript{12} That is to say, Macpherson’s diagnosis is not concerned with issues of “magnitude”, with the crossing of something like a moral threshold beyond which we witness ‘a perversion of the fundamental liberal insight of an earlier tradition’.\textsuperscript{13} Rather, what he meant to challenge was the idea itself of ‘the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities’\textsuperscript{14} that lies at the very heart of liberal-democratic theory.

Individualism’s ‘possessive quality’,\textsuperscript{15} Macpherson tells us, has its conceptual roots in the thought of seventeenth century Enlightenment political theorist John Locke – who famously postulated that ‘every Man has a Property in his own Person’\textsuperscript{16} – but also, before him, in the English Civil War political movement known as the Levellers, and in Thomas Hobbes’ model of the social contract. It is therefore from the conception of the individual found in the work of these thinkers that Macpherson begins, in order to construct his theory of possessive individualism as the great integral fallacy inherited by contemporary liberal democracies. What Macpherson ultimately shows through his account is that the doctrine of the self-possessed individual not only guided a set of economic and political operations. Rather, he claims, it effectively proposed a proper metaphysics – an “individualist anthropology”, as Italian jurist Pietro Barcellona later defined it.\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, within such a framework, a subject’s humanity ends up depending entirely on the essentialisation and universalisation of this supposedly chief “quality”: namely, the individual’s ‘capacity as proprietor of his own person’.\textsuperscript{18} To put it bluntly: no self-possession, no human being.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Locke cited in Ibid., 200.
\textsuperscript{17} Pietro Barcellona, \textit{L’individualismo proprietario} (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1987) 12.
\textsuperscript{18} Macpherson, \textit{Possessive Individualism}, 271. Our analysis retains the masculinist language with which the notion of possessive individualism is discussed in the literature, not out of carelessness but in agreement with Wendy Brown’s assertion that both liberal and neoliberal
The radicality of this proposition must not be understated. Indeed, if it is true that, in the words of Barcellona, ‘[i]n modernity, the subject presents itself with the quality of proprietariness’,\(^\text{19}\) this claim should not be taken to represent yet another trite critique of consumerism, decrying widespread material greediness and obsession with the acquisition of commodities. Possessive individualism, when at work, operates at a much deeper level by construing life itself as private property. This means that simply stating that the whole existence of the individual is inextricably tied to its possession of “material goods” still does not allow grasping the full reach of this doctrine. Rather, the logic of possession that underpins this form of individualism extends to the point that, according to Butler and Athanasiou, ‘property relations have come to structure and control our moral concepts of personhood, self-belonging, agency, and self-identity’.\(^\text{20}\)

Indeed, if it is far from uncommon for individuals to consider themselves as having experiences,\(^\text{21}\) as having rights, as having relationships, or even as possessing certain traits or attitudes that are somewhat private, this is because it is first and foremost the property of one’s own being that is at stake in this mechanism.

Thus perfectly mirroring the capitalist logic with which possessive individualism is so profoundly entangled, in the words of Paolo Plotegher, ‘private property is also’ – indeed primarily – ‘private property of the self, accumulation is accumulation for the self, enclosure is enclosure of the self’.\(^\text{22}\) This way, as Barcellona writes, ‘property ceases to be a personal feature and becomes a form of subjectivity in and of itself’.\(^\text{23}\) Spanish philosopher Marina Garcés has further elaborated on Barcellona’s analysis of propertied subjectivity and its implications for collectivised modes of action. She contends that this

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\(^{19}\) Barcellona, *L’individualismo proprietario*, 79.


\(^{22}\) Paolo Plotegher, ‘What Can I Do With the Nothing I Have? Forms of Non-Oppositional Struggle against Capitalist Subjectivation’ (Goldsmiths, University of London, 2012) 18.

\(^{23}\) Barcellona, *L’individualismo proprietario*, 37 (emphasis added).
‘extreme privatisation of individual existence’\textsuperscript{24}, which is initially instituted as and through the juridico-political device of legal personhood, eventually results in the \textit{experiential} and bodily abstraction of each individual from ‘any shared dimension of life’.\textsuperscript{25} Importantly, though, for Garcés a complying response to this mode of self-possessive interpellation does not precipitate individuals into absolute solipsism but rather into a thoroughly “social”, and indeed globalised, existential impermeability – a way of being separately together.\textsuperscript{26} We will return to this apparent paradox later on.

Through the doctrine of the propertied individual, each subject is thus relentlessly encouraged – both discursively and performatively, and certainly in heterogeneous and fragmented ways – to see itself and act first and foremost as ‘the king of his castle’,\textsuperscript{27} as Moten puts it, where the “castle” is to be intended as the subject’s very life. Which is to say, each individual is the object of an assorted pattern of interpellations urging it to present itself as a \textit{sovereign} entity: one that, while patently entangled in a web of interdependencies and demands for competition, can nevertheless and at the very least claim to have ‘exclusive control of (rights in) his own person’\textsuperscript{28} – control of “his” \textit{being} “himself”.

\textbf{1.1.2 Life as value}

This liberal ethos of individual proprietoriness has been further complexified by the loose and diversified set of ‘discursive formulations, policy entailments, and material practices’\textsuperscript{29} that commonly fall under the rubric of neoliberalism. These shifts are compellingly traced by political theorist Wendy Brown in her 2015 book \textit{Undoing the Demos}. Here, Brown revisits and in part reworks Foucault’s prescient account of neoliberal subjectivation – the product of which is the rise of what the

\textsuperscript{24} Marina Garcés, \textit{Un mundo común} (Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra, 2013) 28. I am indebted to Garikoitz Gómez Alfaro for assistance with the translation of all passages from this book.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Fred Moten, \textit{Stolen Life} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018) 172.
\textsuperscript{28} Macpherson, \textit{Possessive Individualism}, 263.
\textsuperscript{29} Brown, \textit{Undoing the Demos}, 20.
French philosopher calls ‘homo oeconomicus’\textsuperscript{30} – to show how an ever-expanding process of “economization” of existence has been dramatically exacerbated by neoliberal rationality. An increasingly hegemonic ‘order of normative reason’\textsuperscript{31} that nevertheless appears as ‘inconstant, morphing, differentiated, unsystematic, contradictory, and impure’,\textsuperscript{32} rather than as a clear-cut rupture with classical liberalism through a completely new regime of subjectivation, as some scholars instead suggest.\textsuperscript{33} What Brown’s reading of Foucault offers to this study is a springboard from which we can begin to uncover the novel conformations taken by the individual and its “possessive quality” examined earlier.

At its most basic level, Brown’s analysis contends that under neoliberal regimes of interpellation ‘all conduct is economic conduct’,\textsuperscript{34} which eventually leads to the complete vanquishing of any other subjectivity – particularly that of ‘homo politicus’.\textsuperscript{35} Importantly, she continues, this implies the extension of such an economising ethos well beyond the explicitly monetised dynamics of wage labour. From work to leisure time, from professional to sentimental and sexual interactions, from physical to intellectual endeavours, ‘all domains and activities – even where money is not at issue’\textsuperscript{36} – are being redefined primarily as terrains for the enhancement of one’s very own set of spendable skills, interests, capacities, and resources. In other words, neoliberal interpellation consists of a multifarious attempt to colonise and recast every aspect of life as a potential avenue for investment.\textsuperscript{37} Everything can be expected to contribute to the increase of one’s \textit{human capital}:\textsuperscript{38} education is obviously a glaring example of such logic, and so is the markedly corporate notion of “networking” that seems to be infiltrating more and more moments of conviviality. Not to speak of the

\textsuperscript{30} Foucault, \textit{The Birth of Biopolitics}, 226.
\textsuperscript{31} Brown, \textit{Undoing the Demos}, 30.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 48.
\textsuperscript{34} Brown, \textit{Undoing the Demos}, 10 (emphasis added).
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 33.
managerial concept of “life admin” that now commonly describes all sorts of daily activities as maintenance tasks – somewhat ironically including correspondence with those one has been networking with. Ultimately, what we can see emerging from this type of rationality is an individual reconstructed ‘exclusively along entrepreneurial lines’.

Against this backdrop, then, it would seem exactly right to infer, with French insurrectionist collective Invisible Committee, that ‘[e]conomy as a relationship with the world has long surpassed economy as a sphere’. With this crucial shift there comes, too, a shift in the liberal paradigm of individualist proprietoriness. Indeed, through the ‘financialization of everything’ described by Brown, we can see that it becomes no longer sufficient to simply possess oneself. Rather, the subject of neoliberalism is also encouraged to (re)produce, curate, display, and develop itself so as to increase its value. Being capable of appropriately responding to the shifting demands of a merciless globalised market becomes imperative in order to avert being ‘cast off and left to perish’, as well as being shamed and deemed unworthy. In this respect, it is perhaps fitting to recall how the lives of migrants are frequently being defended by the liberal “Left” on the cynical grounds that these subjects actually contribute to economic growth. Life is thus established as a peculiar form of property: one constantly in need of improvement, a debt that must be individually repaid through self-valorisation. This way, within the same regime of subjectivation, it becomes somehow possible – and, in fact, necessary – for an individual to be hailed through a “dual interpellation”: that is, through an injunction to "be who you really are" and, at the same time, to "be anything you want to be". How does and, indeed, how can this contradictory process of subjectivation function? Which is also to ask: how does it manifest itself in the comportment of the individual?

41 Brown, Undoing the Demos, 28.
42 Ibid., 72.
1.1.3 Life as privatisation

The ‘sophisticated common sense’\textsuperscript{44} integral to the interpellation described above can be said to operate as a tight entanglement of duty and promise. Let us address the former. As we have already begun to see, the ever-in-flux portfolio of skills, traits, behaviours, and resources required to adequately respond to the injunctions of today’s form of capitalism ‘are the result of a combination of innate ability and subsequent development’.\textsuperscript{45} Think, for example, about one’s physical prowess and appearance, or one’s intelligence: partly innate qualities that are nevertheless subject to continuous demands for adaptation and improvement through exercise, cosmetic products, or the acquisition of new knowledge (such as a new language or professional specialisation). Consequently, Brown can contend that \textit{homo oeconomicus} is an individual that ‘is made, not born’.\textsuperscript{46} Made, that is to say, ‘through subtler and reflexive biopolitical techniques of self-formation, self-care, self-fashioning, and self-governance’\textsuperscript{47} (often remaining heavily bounded by gendered essentialism). What is more, though, not only this individual is made, but it is also persuaded to see itself as the sole responsible for this making: the sole agent accountable for the necessary perpetual refashioning and rebranding of itself. As well as, of course, for its failure to do so.

Responsibility, too, is thus privatised and ‘turned into a reductive set of stifling norms or duties’.\textsuperscript{48} What would otherwise be an immediately relational dynamic (already given away by the word “response” that the term contains, the “ability to respond”) is reduced to an individualised yet thoroughly networked appeal for \textit{responsibilisation}. Athanasiou brilliantly captures this shift when she defines the ‘neoliberal corporate privatisation’ of responsibility as ‘a flight from social responsibility’.\textsuperscript{49} Within the paradigm of responsibilisation, she continues,

\textsuperscript{44} Brown, \textit{Undoing the Demos}, 35.
\textsuperscript{45} Cornelissen, ‘The Human Condition in a Neoliberal World’, 15.
\textsuperscript{46} Brown, \textit{Undoing the Demos}, 84.
\textsuperscript{47} Butler and Athanasiou, \textit{Dispossession}, 29.
\textsuperscript{48} Montgomery and bergman, \textit{Joyful Militancy}, 131.
\textsuperscript{49} Butler and Athanasiou, \textit{Dispossession}, 105.
there are no social forces, no common purposes, struggles, and responsibilities, only individual risks, private concerns, and self-interests – all individually calculable and imperviously self-mastered.\textsuperscript{50}

Now, when responsibilisation fuels a process whereby each subject is individually tasked with ‘discerning and undertaking the correct strategies of self-investment and entrepreneurship for thriving and surviving’,\textsuperscript{51} the cardinal virtue of this self-possessed creature would seem to be its responsible independence. Conversely, following this preposterous “meritocratic” logic, the inability or unwillingness to individually cope with this unfathomable, unevenly distributed ‘moral burdening’\textsuperscript{52} denotes “irresponsible” dependency. We should then be able to notice that this very responsibilised independence is at once a virtue and a sentence. Through this more or less palpable, more or less monetised, more or less unpayable, but certainly entirely privatised debt, individual responsibilisation thus produces something that we might describe, adopting Saidiya Hartman’s phrasing, as ‘burdened individuality’.\textsuperscript{53} Namely, an individual that is simultaneously ‘self-possessed and indebted’.\textsuperscript{54} Returning to our earlier ontological schematisation, then: no independence, no self-possession, no individual, no human being. Maurizio Lazzarato, in his analysis of the “debt economy”, thus hits the nail on the head when he writes:

The subjective achievements neoliberalism had promised (“everyone a shareholder, everyone an owner, everyone an entrepreneur”) have plunged us into the existential condition of the indebted man, at once responsible and guilty for his particular fate.\textsuperscript{55}

What, then, is the reward promised to those successfully summoned through this regime of interpellation? What lure might make this condition of existential exile seem at times even remotely appealing – at least enough to mask its actual

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} Brown, \textit{Undoing the Demos}, 132-3.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 132.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
coercive underpinnings – so that ‘these forms of subjection are felt not as impositions but as desires’? The answer to these questions, in one word, is “freedom”. A very specific, chimeric, and utterly privatised type of freedom, understood as the absurd dissolution of all dependencies from the will and actions of others. ‘This’, Brown proposes, ‘is the central paradox, perhaps even the central ruse, of neoliberal governance: the neoliberal revolution takes place in the name of freedom’. Montgomery and bergman perfectly describe this “pretend play” presupposed by individualist discourses of freedom, when they contend that

the “free individual” of modern, Western capitalism [...] is an uprooted being who sees his rootlessness – his very incapacity to make and sustain transformative connections – as a feat of excellence.

Whether or not any freedom is effectively and eventually granted to the individuals who comply with this regime of interpellation, what matters is for them to become capable of acting as if they were or could be free. Which is to say, capable to act as if they were and had to be in complete control of themselves, for dependency on others is regarded with contempt or pity, loathed as an impediment and a cost for society. What matters is for individuals to somehow believe that this type of freedom has to be their ultimate horizon and indicator of fulfilment. What matters, in other words, is ‘the story [...] that we tell ourselves’. Ultimately, as Hartman argues, it is this very mix of duty and reward, these ‘entanglements of bondage and liberty [that] shaped the liberal imagination of freedom, fuelled the emergence and expansion of capitalism, and spawned proprietorial conceptions of the self’. Because ‘proprietorship is the generalized form of such exclusive control’ over oneself, as Macpherson writes, according to

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56 Montgomery and bergman, Joyful Militancy, 55.
57 Brown, Undoing the Demos, 108.
58 Montgomery and bergman, Joyful Militancy, 82.
59 Brown, Undoing the Demos, 92.
60 Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 115.
61 Macpherson, Possessive Individualism, 263.
this thoroughly bourgeois logic, then, this type of individual ‘freedom is a function of possession’.62

Under such circumstances, this research does not oppose the patent deception described above by asserting some kind of real individual independence – one that had been promised but was not conceded in the end. We will opt instead for the formulation of a mode of sociality that would not shun dependency but instead celebrate, cultivate, and deepen it. This undertaking will clearly require a radical rethinking of “freedom”: not as solitary conquest and ‘point of arrival’ but, in the words of Moten, as a collective practice of escape to nowhere, an ‘act of fugitivity’.63

1.2 Sociality

1.2.1 Society

We have so far outlined some of the features central to the figure of the individual: chiefly, its ontologically self-possessive quality, but also its self-valorising entrepreneurialism and responsibilised independence, both predicated upon a repudiation of constraints under the rubric of freedom. The question, now, is: what sort of social life does this creature partake in and indeed presupposes? More urgent still, what would and does it mean to think and act otherwise, to tell ourselves a different story, to experiment with different modes of sociality? Or, in other words, how do we defend ourselves against what Moten aptly describes as ‘a fantasy’ – that of the individual – ‘that shoots real bullets?’64

Let us proceed with order and address the first question, so as to examine what results from ‘thinking the entire question of social life by taking the individual as starting point’.65 We should also note, however, that the various modes of sociality discussed here below should not be mistaken for incompatible, mutually

62 Ibid., 3.
63 Moten, Stolen Life, 227.
65 Barcellona, L’individualismo proprietario, 32.
exclusive alternatives: that is, what follows is not meant to insinuate that we only ever inhabit one type of sociality at a time, which consequently rules out all other ways of being together – just as much as we do not only ever perform one type of subjectivity at a time. Nor does it aim to contend that these modes of social life are entirely distinct from one another, for they often intersect in complex and even contradictory ways.

Earlier on we began to suggest that intending life as an ontologically private affair – existentially siloed within the impermeable somatic boundaries of independent individuals, and experientially separated from all other entities – does not mean to imply a total absence of social dynamics. Quite the contrary, the individuals thus interpellated are hardly solitary creatures: rather, they are at all times immersed in and navigating through a vast web of connections, both actual and virtual, which they establish with other individuals. And yet, without imposing here any facile moral connotation onto the types of connections established, this connectivity is by its very nature a form of sociality to which these creatures always ‘participate as individuals, as closed entities’ – as paradoxically hyper-social hermits. It is from this premise that “society” is born: as a social crystallisation, the formally arranged social life between individuals.

What Barcellona tells us to represent ‘the founding act of the modern State’ thus consists in the perceived necessity and artificial effort to ‘construct an order of coexistence’ for the pre-given distinct entities that are pulled together from an alleged primordial isolation – what according to an infamous passage in Hobbes’ Leviathan is the ‘solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short’ state of nature. Within this model of sociality, intended primarily as the interaction between independent proprietors of their own selves and capacities, it is

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67 Invisible Committee, Now, 139.

68 To be distinguished from the more generic term “sociality” used throughout to instead indicate a practice. For a similar terminological distinction see: Donna Haraway and Nicholas Gane, ‘When We Have Never Been Human, What Is to Be Done?: Interview with Donna Haraway’, Theory, Culture & Society 23, no. 7–8 (2006): 143.

69 Barcellona, L’individualismo proprietario, 12.

70 Ibid.

71 Hobbes cited in Macpherson, Possessive Individualism, 23.
reasonable to claim that ‘the contract adequately epitomises the relations of commitment between individuals’.\textsuperscript{72}

Of course, when social life is envisaged as a supplementary being-together that otherwise separate constituents enter into (or find themselves in), a contractualised and contractualising approach to such a being-together serves first and foremost as a contrivance of defence, of protection. That is to say, contractualised sociality (i.e. “civil society”) requires a system that would allow to maintain the capacity and indeed preserve the right for individuals (i.e. “citizens”) to remain in possession of themselves even within social dynamics – and, in fact, as a prerequisite for them. That system, that regulatory contrivance enabling and mediating the separate togetherness of “free” and “equal” rights-bearing individuals is, according to Barcellona, the apparatus of modern Law. It should go without saying that modern Law can only ever function if combined with and enforced by a number of other apparatuses of power – notably, that of the police, also know in some countries as “law enforcement”. Still, in his study Barcellona compellingly shows how the establishment of legal frameworks as the basis for social life played a central role in the constitution of modern society. Indeed, Barcellona muses, modern Law somehow managed to achieve the impossible: namely, ‘enabling the unification of an atomised society’.\textsuperscript{73} This almost ‘miraculous occurrence’,\textsuperscript{74} as the Italian jurist describes the paradoxical workings of modern Law, realises unification and separation at one single stroke – hence why Harney and Moten speak of an ‘(anti)social contract’.\textsuperscript{75} Modern Law, Barcellona writes,

renders possible the division and atomisation of social life construed as a society of independent individuals and, at the same time, enables its unification, reaching that unity which permits to identify society as rule.\textsuperscript{76}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{72} Anonymous, ‘Call / Appel’, 19.
  \item \textsuperscript{73} Barcellona, \textit{L’individualismo proprietario}, 17.
  \item \textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{75} Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, ‘Improvement and Preservation: Or, Usufruct and Use’, in \textit{Futures of Black Radicalism}, by Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (London: Verso, 2017a), 87–90.
  \item \textsuperscript{76} Barcellona, \textit{L’individualismo proprietario}, 17.
\end{itemize}
This mechanism thus constructs a world that, as philosopher Brian Holmes acutely observes, comes together through its falling apart.\textsuperscript{77} This “antisocial sociality” is brilliantly defined by Jean-Luc Nancy as a predicative together-ness given through the encounter of autarchic subjects: ‘the “together” of juxtaposition \textit{partes extra partes’},\textsuperscript{78} an auxiliary substance achieved through the connection of otherwise ‘isolated and unrelated parts’. \textsuperscript{79} Under such circumstances, as the Invisible Committee rightly argues, the ‘metaphor of the network’\textsuperscript{80} provides an accurate depiction of the connectivity of discrete self-sufficient units characterising today’s globalised society. The version of sociality thus propped up by this contractualistic scaffolding is one in which each individual is essentially engaged as an associated \textit{member}.

\textbf{1.2.2 Community}

Now, if the type of membership just described grants access to, or secures permanence within a sum of associated yet inexorably separate individuals, another type of membership-based sociality has been and still is frequently upheld as an antidote to the misery of the social atomisation illustrated up to this point. We are talking about the notion of \textit{community}. Whenever and wherever the existential alterity and connected separation fostered by liberal democracies and further exacerbated by neoliberal economisation spurs disillusionment by showing its inherent viciousness and failure to deliver what it ostensibly promises (if not to a \textit{very} selected few), communitarian discourses regularly take up the challenge to either recover or construct a social cohesion that is either lost or missing. Community is thus seen, in the words of Roberto Esposito, as ‘an origin

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{80} Invisible Committee, \textit{The Coming Insurrection}, trans. Robert Hurley (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009 [2007]) 40.
\end{itemize}
to be mourned or a destiny foreshadowed’.\textsuperscript{81} Granted, we should be suspicious, as Maurice Blanchot warn us in his classic essay *The Unavowable Community*, of any hasty lumping together of all appeals to community, thus subscribing to an ‘oversimplified opposition of two types of sociality: the series [...] and the fusion’.\textsuperscript{82} Which could be equally summarised as a clear-cut polarisation of society (series) and community (fusion) – a dichotomisation famously postulated in a 1887 study by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies,\textsuperscript{83} just to mention an oft-cited example. The sheer vastness and diversity of literature devoted to the meaning of community\textsuperscript{84} – cutting across the political spectrum, and some of which is addressed throughout this investigation – is clear testament to the complexity that characterises this concept. A complexity, then, that would be foolish to flatten as if the term community were descriptive of a single mode of sociality. We will see below that it is perhaps such an ambivalence that represents this concept’s main problem.

Of course, many communitarian views do indeed traffic in an understanding of sociality as fusion, in the purported effort to oppose individualist paradigms: that is, a sociality whereby many become one, the plural becomes singular, the individual is absorbed within the harmony of a whole. In this case, the togetherness of community results in what Nancy describes as ‘gathering *totum intra totum*, a unified totality’.\textsuperscript{85} This mode of unity can be found at the root of fascisms of all stripes – such as the “imagined community”\textsuperscript{86} driving xenophobic claims – just as much as in the political agnosticism of new-ageist precepts, hence being rather variegated in and of itself. Yet, we should also


\textsuperscript{85} Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 60.

be alert to the fact that, concomitantly, the very same vocabulary of community is also being mobilised to justify the material enclosure of wealth\(^{87}\) (e.g. the EU, formerly known as European Community) or even in tandem with virulently liberal “cosmopolitanism”, both indicating a social articulation predicated upon otherness. In the latter case, social life is approached as a problem of *intersubjectivity*, which, if we take our cue from Massumi, clearly brings us back to square one by ‘start[ing] from a world in which there are already subjects that are preconstituted’.\(^{88}\) Further complicating an already contradictory picture, it is no wonder then that the idea of community has also been completely recuperated even within overtly individualist frameworks. Indeed, as the Invisible Committee denounces, ‘after having ravaged all the existing bonds, capitalism is running on nothing but the promise of “community”’;\(^{89}\) of course, this is a ‘community of proprietors willfully associated’,\(^{90}\) coming together for the co-creation of value. Which is all to say, finally, that the contested notion of community appears to be pulled in rather divergent directions at once.

Even when faced with such heterogeneity, what obviously permeates all pleas for community is the idea of a “common”. From State communism to terrifyingly resurgent fascist rhetoric, moving through depoliticised spirituality and thoroughly corporate neoliberal value co-creation, the sociality of community hinges around *something* that is shared by all members – a common property. Few have articulated this link between community and property with the same lucidity as Esposito. What unites otherwise divergent takes on community, he argues, is

the ignored assumption that community is a "property" belonging to subjects that join them together: an attribute, a definition, a predicate that qualifies them as belonging to the same totality, or as a "substance" that is produced by their union. In each case community is conceived of as a quality that is added to their nature as subjects, making them also subjects of community. [...] In each case, community is what is most properly our "own".\(^{91}\)

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\(^{89}\) Invisible Committee, *Now*, 133.
\(^{90}\) Garcés, *Un mundo común*, 32.
\(^{91}\) Esposito, *Communitas*, 2.
We can see through this passage how the notion of community, whatever ambition it might express, still remains anchored to the very same logic of possession that we are working to undermine. Which is to say that the paradigm of property, although (ostensibly) distributed in this case, is still part and parcel of communitarian modes of sociality. Indeed, Esposito continues, what is “common” in community ‘is defined exactly through its most obvious antonym’.92 that is, the members of any given community, he affirms, ‘are the owners of what is common to them all’.93 What follows is that each member of a community is not undone as such, but simply reconfigured as something of a shareholder. And if this sounds familiar, that is because we have already encountered the same phrasing in Lazzarato’s earlier assessment of the “neoliberal promise”. Which is why there can actually be no substantial (i.e. ontological) contradiction between the possessive individualism of liberal society and many approaches to community. Whether this shared property is produced, gradually incorporated, or recognised in each individual’s ‘national character or, more problematic still, genetic predisposition’,94 the sociality of community is thus trapped in a conundrum. As it is framed in an anonymous pamphlet, allegedly linked to the authors of French journal Tiqqun: ‘the question of what I belong to […] has been reduced to the police fiction of legal property, of what belongs to me, of what is mine’.95 A baffling reversal of terms.

Still, as suggested earlier, some communitarian approaches do exist that attempt to resolve the aporias described above. At least two are worth of a brief mention here. The first one is presented by Esposito’s own work. The Italian philosopher locates in the etymology of the Latin word communitas a generative springboard through which to radicalise the meaning of community. This linguistic journey leads him to suggest that the munus from which community (cum-munus) is derived ‘isn’t a property or a possession […] but on the contrary,

92 Ibid., 3.
93 Ibid (emphasis added).
94 Moten, Stolen Life, 222.
95 Anonymous, ‘Call / Appel’, 64.
is a debt, a pledge, a gift that is to be given’.\textsuperscript{96} Community as indebtedness. The second attempt to salvage the notion of community is instead represented by those who underscore its “verb-like” nature:\textsuperscript{97} that is to say, those privileging acts of commoning over the stillness of the common. Community as process. However, while this move allows avoiding the serious pitfalls of the essentialist claims often charging communitarian rhetoric, this articulation seems to still run up against some of the conceptual hurdles already mentioned. Because commoners come together with the intention to make or reclaim something common, not only a shared “product” of some kind surely must still be on the horizon, but this activity also still relies on previously disjointed subjects that participate in a collective “production” of sorts. We will confront the designerly angle on this participatory productivism in Chapter 2.

As we will see throughout the thesis, Esposito’s \textit{conceptual} shift from a logic of addition and ownership to one of subtraction and indebtedness – a mode of owing rather than owning – is in many ways remarkably close to the type of sociality that this research is seeking to formulate. Likewise, this investigation recognises considerable \textit{pragmatic} affinity with those interventions that preserve an interest in the common by turning it into a practice. And yet, largely because of the general ambivalence attached to the term, twenty years after the publication of Esposito’s study the notion of community appears, at “best”, to have lost most of its transformative potency due to capitalist recuperation and, at worst, to be again increasingly colonised by reactionary sentiments. Which is why, rather than attempting to recover this concept – perhaps by means of linguistic finesse – this study tries instead to deploy a different vocabulary, following a tentatively divergent route ‘beyond claims of similitude and community’.\textsuperscript{98} That is, it reaches out beyond alterity and identity, disconnecting from communitarian forms of belonging and co-habitation, in order to instead participate in what Harney and Moten call a collective ‘being together in

\textsuperscript{96} Esposito, \textit{Communitas}, 6.

\textsuperscript{97} E.g. see: Peter Linebaugh, \textit{The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008); Gustavo Esteva, ‘Commoning in the New Society’, \textit{Community Development Journal} 49, no. suppl_1 (1 January 2014): i.44–59. I should thank Elona Hoover for her generous advice on issues of commons and commoning.

\textsuperscript{98} Butler and Athanasiou, \textit{Dispossession}, i.87.
It is starting from this general “homelessness” – neither idealised nor simply metaphoric, as Jack Halberstam rightly clarifies – that we should commence ‘drawing a map for a new type of relationship based on the strength of dispossession’.

1.2.3 Friendship

Thus far we have attempted to examine how social arrangements based on a sum of independent individuals achieve a paradoxical condition of unified separation. We have then proposed that the increasingly obvious deficiencies of rampant individualism are often being met with calls for community: a community to be either established or retrieved. Yet, these responses seem, on the one hand, fundamentally unable to escape a logic of unity – sometimes only nominally different from the ‘the unity of unities’ of civil society – and, on the other hand, this unity is in every case still bound up with a logic of property – by means of the specific “common” that all members must posses or preserve, albeit through sharing. With these observations in mind, our task is now that of considering what might constitute a sociality reimagined and acted out as a form of mutual indebtedness, thus disconnected from proprietorial paradigms.

For a start, rethinking and re-enacting sociality outside of the sphere of possession arguably requires for “being-together” not to be perceived as ‘a ”social” or ”communitarian dimension” added onto a primitive individual given’. Such is the route taken by Nancy in his seminal essay Being Singular Plural (1996). In this essay the French philosopher sets himself to dispute a rationality that posits

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99 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013) 96.


101 Garcés, Un mundo común, 34.

102 Esposito, Communitas, 2.

103 Nancy, Being Singular Plural, 44.
first the individual, then the group; first the one, then the others; first the rights-bearing subject; then real relationships; [...] and above all, first a "subject," then "intersubjectivity".  

That is to say, in his study Nancy wants to reformulate and, indeed, turn on its head the entire question of sociality, so as to radically prioritise the “with” of Being, to the point of making it the very foundation of and constitutive precondition for life itself, for any meaning as such to be at all possible. This ontological prioritisation of the “with” is expressed in extremely unambiguous terms already in the first few pages of Nancy’s text, where he contends that ‘[e]xistence is with: otherwise nothing exists’. According to Nancy, for it to be made originary, this “with” must cease being intended as a predicate, as a ‘particular and supplementary qualification’ of a somewhat preliminary “I”, but instead as its utmost structural condition. Although at first sight this formulation might seem to relapse into the (comm)unity of fusion that obliterates singularities, this is not at all what Nancy is getting at. Rather, this originary “with”, he claims, is to be understood as the opening out of which singularities must emerge for any meaning to be possible at all. In other words, the foundational “with” of sociality appears not as a unification but precisely as its opposite: in and as the spacing of Being, a primal “between” that ‘no longer appears as a com-position, but only as a dis-position’.

Importantly, this disposition is not an act of separation either but, rather, one of ‘dispersion’ or ‘distancing’: a ‘stretching out’ of Being. Consequently, Nancy can finally claim, this with that is neither secondary to nor derived from individuals, casts existence as ‘singularly plural and pluralily singular’. Returning again to Ferreira da Silva’s formidable locution that this research adopted as its beacon,

104 Ibid.
105 Nancy follows Heidegger in his differentiation between “being” – a singular entity, as it manifests itself (i.e. a being) – and the more general notion of “Being” – which we could define here, with some rather crude approximation, as “Life” itself.
106 Nancy, Being Singular Plural, 4.
107 Ibid., 60.
108 Ibid., 46.
109 Ibid., 12.
110 Ibid., 16.
111 Ibid., 5.
112 Ibid., 28.
we could then say that such a simultaneous singular plurality is a form of “differentiation without separability”. It is a liminal and generative field, so to speak, that does not open between “you” and “I”, but which, in fact, is what makes possible and constitutes the very sense of a singular “you” and a singular “I” – of singularities.

Now, as we walk this thin conceptual line, always in danger of precipitating into either unity or fragmentation, what are we to make, operationally speaking, of such a rich yet admittedly convoluted articulation? Where the narrative of the possessive individual from which we started is ‘a war cry directed against everything that exists between beings, against everything that circulates indistinctly’, the counter-narrative gradually taking shape here is instead a mode of sociality that has no other texture, origin, and destination than this very “between”. A between that is at once spacing, as we have seen, and closeness. It is this peculiar closeness, Montgomery and bergman argue, that menaces the smooth functioning of capitalism and which, for that reason, is everywhere threatened by means of ‘relentless violence, division, competition, management, and incitements to see ourselves as isolated individuals or nuclear family units’. And it is with Montgomery and bergman, along with many others, that this research wishes to align here in calling this ‘dangerous closeness’ with a fairly unassuming (yet philosophically rich) name: that is, “friendship”. Why so?

If, as previously posited, contemporary social fragmentation is ultimately waged in the name of a thoroughly privatised freedom, it is to this skewed concept that we shall now return. While commonplace definitions of “freedom” now tend to revolve around ‘rights, absences, and lack of restrictions […] applied

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114 Montgomery and bergman, *Joyful Militancy*, 82.
115 Ibid.
to an isolated individual’. Montgomery and bergman remind us that, actually, ‘[f]reedom and friendship used to mean the same thing: intimate, interdependent relationships and the commitment to face the world together’. Along the same lines, the Invisible Committee before them observed that

"Friend" and "free" in English, and "Freund" and "frei" in German come from the same Indo-European root [...]. Being free and having ties was one and the same thing. I am free because I have ties, because I am linked to a reality greater than me.

When cast under such a decidedly different light, rather than indicating the phantasmal promise of ‘being unhindered, unaffected, independent’ that props up the independent individual, freedom is returned to the openness of a relational dimension. Freedom as friendship is thus appreciated as a collective capacity for sustaining a certain manner of being-with that is ‘not about controlling things but about learning to participate in their flow, forming intense bonds’. When interpreted as a process of entangled openness, friendship could then be ‘revalued as a radical, transformative form of kinship’.

Anything but an uncontested term, Montgomery and bergman are rightly alert to the tame and bland version of friendship that neoliberal capitalism proffers: namely, one that seeks to reduce moments of dangerous (i.e. powerful) “betweenness” to ‘a banal affair of private preferences’. Further, even when not underpinned by placid depoliticised incitements to just “get along”, friendship can conceal an instrumental, utilitarian matrix. That is to say, as Montgomery and bergman warn us, friendship can quickly become weaponised as a ‘source of coercion, manipulation, and exploitation’. These blatant usurpations, however, shall not be taken to signal anything other than the fact that ‘friendship is a

117 Montgomery and bergman, Joyful Militancy, 83.
118 Ibid.
120 Montgomery and bergman, Joyful Militancy, 84.
121 Ibid., 92.
122 Ibid., 93.
123 Ibid.
125 Montgomery and bergman, Joyful Militancy, 124.
terrain of struggle'. In contrast with insipid or instrumental relationality, friendship is also (and primarily) the name of tentative and humble processes of cultivating ‘durable bonds and new complicities’ not as blithe escapism or toxic manipulation but, rather, as ‘the very means of undoing Empire’ and its misery. As an integral ‘part of the insurrection’. It is to this acceptation of the term that we will refer throughout.

Unlike the general abstractions often implied by concepts such as “society” and “community”, we might contend here that the mode of friendship we are referring to can hardly be divorced from a concrete and eventful plane of practice. In other words, this friendship is not something that we are or have – the predicative category of the “friend”, or even a “virtue” in the Aristotelian sense – but something that we do together. It is a collective activity unfolding on the spot along the ever-morphing lines of lived complicities that form and inform us. As it is intended here, and unlike the productive coming together of commoning encountered earlier, friendship is a peculiar fold of social life that pre-exists its “resulting” subjects. Which is to say, in plainer terms, that friendship is something (or someplace) we find ourselves in, most certainly before we can intend it. Blanchot said it best when he described a radical type of friendship (camaraderie without preliminaries) [that is] vehiculated by the requirement of being there, not as a person or subject, but as the demonstrators of a movement [...] anonymous and impersonal. Understood in this way, friendship is the recognition of a bond that, to some extent, befalls us: not in the straightforwardly passive sense that it “happens” to us but, conversely, that “we” happen to and, perhaps better, as a result of it. In friendship, Agamben would

126 Ibid., 93.
127 Ibid., 25.
129 Montgomery and bergman, Joyful Militancy, 131.
132 Blanchot, The Unavowable Community, 32 (emphasis added).
say, we ‘do not share something (birth, law, place, taste): [we] are shared by the experience of friendship’.133

A sociality of friendship, we can now propose, thus appears as a particular form of generative mutuality and mutual generativity through which we cultivate a mode of being ‘already “outside ourselves”, beyond ourselves, given over, bound to others’.134 It is in this sense that Agamben arrives at the conclusion that friendship is not reducible to the mere encounter with another “I” – with an Other, but is instead an event of radical ‘desubjectification’135 that completely destabilises individual boundaries. It is this blurring of personal perimeters through which one is ‘no longer sure which ideas and mannerisms were “their own” and which belonged to the friend’,136 because they are both and neither at once. Still, if the peculiar sharing of friendship, unlike that of the commons, is ‘a sharing without an object’,137 without content other than itself, it is true that this often does unfold through acts of commoning. And yet, it unfolds beneath and careless of any plot and teleological configuration. This is what we mean when we say, with Harney and Moten, and as we will see in more depth in Chapter 4 and 5, that friendship is a practice of, in, and for the under-commons. It is a conspiracy in the commons, yet against the very idea of common ownership.

What, then, fuels this mode of sociality beyond propertied individuals? A tentative answer might now come: an insurrectionary power of complicity and care, a practice of care not primarily or properly directed toward “one another” but toward the dispossessive, dispossessed “between” of friendship. In other words, a ‘care for the event’, as Manning and Massumi would put it, which ‘assumes no commonality or ethos of consensus’.138 If approached this way, the particular mode of care at stake in friendship leaves room for and, indeed, attends to our precarious and precious singular plurality: without being based on

134 Butler and Athanasiou, Dispossession, 106.
136 Montgomery and bergman, Joyful Militancy, 90.
the ‘calculated equality’\textsuperscript{139} of a contractualistic exchange of sorts, and without ‘implying that we are all in the same situation, [...] erasing difference and antagonisms’.\textsuperscript{140} A social life of this ilk blooms through a resonance without sameness,\textsuperscript{141} through a polyrhythm without harmony, through a touch without authorship that crafts and animates these very bodies and, for a moment or three, their very feel of not being one.

\textbf{1.3 Nanopolitics}

\textit{1.3.1 Politics and the political: macro / micro}

In the Introduction and again at the beginning of this chapter we stated the intention for this research not to be solely concerned with advancing an abstract take on social life: rather, the ambition was explicitly that of working towards something of an intervention, regardless of how minor such an intervention might turn out to be. Indeed, this research is driven by the urge to deliver a ripple that would join many others in subtly yet obstinately contesting the smooth logistics of bodies through which capitalism thwarts our collective capacities to feel otherwise. Which is to say: our capacity for manners of being together to be enacted, kinetic polyrhythms to affect us, and haptic encounters to be possible that do not presuppose our participation as individuals. In other words, this study is ultimately committed to devising a modality of acting, a collective practice of sensing together that can be experimented with in bodily and motional ways. This practice, it will be then proposed throughout, aims to challenge the inherent experiential boundaries established and rendered desirable through individualised regimes of motion and perception. It seeks to oppose the capitalist imposition of ‘rhythms [...] at once absorptive and isolating’,\textsuperscript{142} grounded as they are in ‘proprietorial notions of the self’.\textsuperscript{143} It

\textsuperscript{139} Anonymous, ‘All The Terrible Things We Do to Each Other’, in \textit{Vortext}, by CrimethInc., 2012, 60.
\textsuperscript{140} Montgomery and bergman, \textit{Joyful Militancy}, 41.
\textsuperscript{141} See: Ibid., 126.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 25.
attempts to operate what Jacques Rancière might describe as a ‘redistribution of the sensible’.144

If we were now to address the specific political significance that this proposed intervention might claim to have, we should first and foremost make sure to eschew uncritical uses of the very concept of politics, lest we simplistically conceive this as something of an unspecified “theme” (i.e. research about politics as such). Design practice – which is the field of intervention that interests us here – is certainly not immune to this type of “thematisation” of politics. In this respect, Bianca Elzenbaumer of autonomist design collective Brave New Alps notes that design practice’s engagement with societal issues such as poverty or inequality, for instance, is at times driven by the uncritical framing of such problems in terms of ‘a yet unexploited market’ that otherwise politically agnostic designers ‘could profit from while at the same time being celebrated as “do-gooders”’.145 Such a reduction of politics to an object of study or label is perhaps representative of the type of academic research that Argentinian group Colectivo Situaciones wishes to move away from, when developing what they call instead ‘research militancy’ [militancia de investigación]:147 namely, ‘radical activism that happens to take the form of knowledge production’ – something that this research in many ways hopes to become an expression of.

Further, a light-hearted fetishisation of politics can also come paired with a misguided understanding of what we might call macropolitics as encompassing political life in its entirety – that is to say, confusing institutional “Politics” (with a capital “P”) with what is “political” more generally. At its most basic, colloquial

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143 Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 115.
146 Elzenbaumer, ‘Designing Economic Cultures’, 105.
148 Ibid., 74.
level – hence without wanting to bring into the picture the full theoretical complexity of this distinction\textsuperscript{149} – by macropolitics we here mean to indicate the type of “molar” activity in which large governmental bodies, organisations, and institutions are engaged, and which focuses on the systemic government and policing of (or influence over) whole populations or “publics”, often on a national or even global scale. By contrast, what is commonly referred to as micropolitics concerns “molecular” processes of subjectivation: namely, the working of power not only on us but also through us, as Foucault’s studies on biopolitics and “microphysics of power”\textsuperscript{150} famously show. That is, through the more mundane, informal, “minor” sphere of comportments, gestures, postures, and “interpersonal” relations: what is often referred to, problematically for the very reasons discussed earlier in the chapter, as the “personal” or the “private”. As Massumi and many others with him contend, attention to micropolitical processes can help us reveal how, increasingly, power ‘doesn’t just force us down certain paths, it puts the paths in us, so by the time we learn to follow its constraints we’re following ourselves’.\textsuperscript{151} This is precisely what we mean when we say that being interpellated as an individual, both discursively and performatively, is not so much (not always) the effect of a spectacular “top-down” coercion but, rather, is enacted and reproduced through suffused, everyday and seemingly appealing manners of relating.

Crucially, macro- and micropolitics should not be thought of as separate dimensions but, rather, as continuously interpenetrating, overlapping, and mutually dependent registers: ‘[m]icropolitical and macropolitical’, Massumi writes, ‘go together. One is never without the other. They are processual reciprocals. They aliment each other’.\textsuperscript{152} And yet, it is not uncommon for the macro sphere of “official politics”\textsuperscript{153} and its specific modus operandi – policymaking; legal frameworks and police enforcements; abstracted and abstracting.

\textsuperscript{149} E.g. see: Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 243-270; Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political, trans. George Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007 [1932]).


\textsuperscript{151} Massumi, Politics of Affect, 19.

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 81.

\textsuperscript{153} Invisible Committee, Now, 60.
democratic discourse through various kinds of electoralism and representation; professionalised trade-unionism; managerialism; etc. – to be misconstrued as the only ground where truly politically significant interventions can be articulated. In other words a ‘totalisation of the macropolitical’\textsuperscript{154} fatally conflates scale of the actors involved and political legitimacy, thus reducing political life to a specialist sphere of action reserved for “professionals”. Consequently, and more troublesome still, such a monopoly of macropolitics over our sense of what is political also works (whether intentionally or not) to obfuscate, neglect, divert our attention from and somewhat disqualify as secondary,\textsuperscript{155} “folk”,\textsuperscript{156} or even “unpolitical”, any effort of operating within what is, in fact, already intimately political in everyday relationality – in inconspicuous practices of simply being together, in social life. The Invisible Committee powerfully expresses the inherent, informal politicality of social life when they write that

> Everything is political that relates to the encounter, the friction, or the conflict between forms of life, between regimes of perception, between sensibilities, between worlds once this contact attains a certain threshold of intensity. The crossing of this threshold is signaled immediately by its effects: frontlines are drawn, friendships and enmities are affirmed, cracks appear in the uniform surface of the social.\textsuperscript{157}

As proposed in Chapter 2, design practice has a fairly immediate engagement in – if not even a privileged access to – micropolitical dynamics, since it essentially consists in constructing conditions of possibility for “encounters” of some kind or other. This is the ‘silent structuring agency’\textsuperscript{158} of which philosopher of design Tony Fry talks about: that is, design’s ‘directive force’, which ‘makes it inherently and profoundly political’, despite it being an otherwise ‘marginal figure on the agenda of institutional politics’.\textsuperscript{159} While the latter is precisely the level at which

\textsuperscript{154} Nanopolitics Group, ‘Nanopolitics: A First Outline of Our Experiments in Movement’, \textit{Lateral} 1, no. 1 (May 2012).


\textsuperscript{157} Invisible Committee, \textit{Now}, 62.


\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 11.
some prominent design scholars increasingly argue that design should intervene\textsuperscript{160} – hence often flirting with the lexicon of democracy, government, citizenship, public, policy, management, and leadership – we will see that this could not be further from the direction taken by this research.

### 1.3.2 Politics (and beyond) as collective experimentation

If all political life is being sucked into the macro black hole of official Politics, then, for what concerns the intervention being developed here, the matter is perhaps no longer one ‘of “doing politics differently”, but of doing something different from politics’.\textsuperscript{161} Even if casting aside all reservations about the strategic bankruptcy of institutional politics \textit{per se}, the fact that Politics now has an overwhelming interest in “the Economy” – to the point of becoming, as Brown claims, almost indistinguishable from if not entirely colonised by the latter\textsuperscript{162} – goes to further underscore the necessity of thinking political action outside of conventional frames. That is, outside of planes completely infected by the neoliberal ‘matrix of intelligibility’\textsuperscript{163} and working in tandem with the germ of ‘economic reductionism’\textsuperscript{164} that was discussed in previous sections. Which is not at all to say, however, that neoliberal economisation is restricted to macropolitical domains: quite the opposite, the self-entrepreneurialism described earlier on works on a micropolitical level just as much as it does on a macropolitical one. Indeed, it is perhaps correct to claim, with Montgomery and bergman, that ‘[capitalism]’s hold is increasingly affective: it suffuses our emotions, relationships, and desires’,\textsuperscript{165} economising even what is not immediately monetised. Hence we could argue that, by seeking to impose a


\textsuperscript{161} Invisible Committee, \textit{Now}, 52.

\textsuperscript{162} See: Brown, \textit{Undoing the Demos}, 62, 81-2.

\textsuperscript{163} Butler and Athanasiou, \textit{Dispossession}, 40.

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 42.

\textsuperscript{165} Montgomery and bergman, \textit{Joyful Militancy}, 51.
competitive global market as the only possible point of reference for all activities and comportments, neoliberal economisation effectively tries to subsume all micropolitical dynamics into the inherently macropolitical sphere of capital valorisation, blurring distinctions between the two registers and somewhat turning one into the other.

Because of this, Athanasiou warns, resistance to economisation is itself similarly devoured by this rationality at the very moment that it dismisses apparently non-economistic, or uneconomic, perspectives as being preoccupied with secondary, derivative, particularistic, inessential, and, “in the final analysis,” trivial matters and forms of politics.\textsuperscript{166}

Sequestering social life’s “politicality” from further colonisation by economising orthodoxy thus requires, Athanasiou continues, not ‘reducing our politics to an economist politics’, one whereby the economic realm ‘masquerades as the only really serious and robust arena of politics’.\textsuperscript{167} Perhaps, then, our task is that of contributing to “surrounding the surround”\textsuperscript{168} of Politics, as Harney and Moten suggest, by inventing or intensifying a ‘general antagonism’\textsuperscript{169} to Politics itself. A politics that is ‘anti-political’\textsuperscript{170} at its core. In this respect, this research wishes to take up Massumi’s appeal for the experimentation with ‘performative, theatrical or aesthetic’ forms of micropolitics that could ‘meet [economising] affective modulation with [non-economistic] affective modulation’.\textsuperscript{171} To this end, the intervention delineated throughout this thesis looks beyond economic analyses: beyond and outside of Politics, outside and beneath the official realm of ‘correctional institutions’\textsuperscript{172} (which is always already the institution of the correct), in order to ‘invent new idioms of theorizing, acting, and making coalitions’.\textsuperscript{173} Where to look, then?

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{166} Butler and Athanasiou, \textit{Dispossession}, 42.
\bibitem{167} Ibid.
\bibitem{168} See: Harney and Moten, \textit{The Undercommons}, 17-20.
\bibitem{169} Ibid., 20.
\bibitem{170} Ibid.
\bibitem{171} Massumi, \textit{Politics of Affect}, 34.
\bibitem{172} Harney and Moten, \textit{The Undercommons}, 20.
\bibitem{173} Butler and Athanasiou, \textit{Dispossession}, 185.
\end{thebibliography}
This intervention explores what the Invisible Committee describes as 'the insurrectionary power of simply being together and starting to move':174 that bodily, haptic, motional art of social life that can neither start from nor end with the individual, no matter how hard we try to convince ourselves of the contrary. We look into an “otherwise” that is neither a “not-yet” nor a “not-anymore” but, in fact, an “always-already-underway”. Because, regardless of how feeble and sparse it might often feel, we are traversed by this otherwise beside, beyond, and beneath the obstinacy of experiential individuality. In so doing, we will be attending to those precious everyday instances wherein we defy the multifarious interpellations that attempt to summon us as independent individuals or as sovereign unity, by instead ceasing to act, move, and feel as “one”. If, as was proposed earlier on, a radicalised mode of friendship is what is (or can be) found anytime the illusorily seamless veil clothing the independent, self-possessed individual is frayed and undone through mutual dispossession, this research attempts to treat these processes of “de-subjectivation” not only as ‘something we are subjected to’175 but also, as Plotegher advocates, as a process in which we can tangibly intervene, ‘a process which is not just the consequence of a condition but [that] can also become an experimental practice’.176

1.3.3 Politics from, with and through the body: nano

As a manner of (politically) taking a distance from Politics, of doing something other than deciding what to do, of doing something other than detachedly analysing how this or that system of oppression embodies us in certain ways – thereby turning our bodies into ‘an object or an abstract concept’177 – this research’s intervention tries instead to put these very bodies in play through what we will be henceforth referring to as nanopolitical experimentation. Which is to say – following the written and practiced propositions of the London-based Nanopolitics Group – a form of politics collectively construed as ‘a tangible

174 Invisible Committee, To Our Friends, 118.
175 Plotegher, 'What Can I Do With the Nothing I Have?', 15.
176 Ibid., 15-16 (emphasis added).
177 Nanopolitics Group, ‘Nanopolitics: A First Outline’. 
experiment of feeling and acting that’s based in our bodies and their ways of relating’.\footnote{Nanopolitics Group, \textit{Nanopolitics Handbook}, 19.} \footnote{Ibid., 21.} ‘[C]oming together through “nanopolitics”, the Group writes, ‘means to find new syntheses of movements [and] affects’.\footnote{Nanopolitics Group, ‘Nanopolitics: A First Outline’.} \footnote{Ibid (emphasis added).} \footnote{Ibid (emphasis added).} \footnote{Ibid.}

We might reasonably ask now: what is the “nano” in nanopolitics intended to express? And, for that matter, why even adding yet another prefix to the word “politics”? Contrary to what one might assume, the “nano” of nanopolitics does not exactly indicate a separate \textit{sphere} within the political, a dimension somewhat even smaller than a “micro” one. Which also means that, when faced with the rampant economisation of political life, turning to nanopolitics is not to be interpreted as something of a retreat, perhaps receding further “inward”, hence taking one more step towards the networked atomisation described earlier on. Rather, being ‘different yet complementary to the “micro” and the “macro”\footnote{Ibid (emphasis added).}, nanopolitics seeks to shift the attention from a concern with scale to one of \textit{‘registers of perception’}.\footnote{Ibid (emphasis added).} That is to say, just as ‘[i]n common parlance the prefix “nano” is used to indicate something [...] beyond what the eye can perceive’, the ‘politico-corporeal investigation into the social’ that we call here nanopolitics brings to the fore what is \textit{‘felt rather than seen’} in social life.\footnote{Ibid.} In the words of the Nanopolitics Group:

\begin{quote}
With “nano” we talk about how what occurs at the level of the group, the world, the institution or the social comes to exist under our skin, in our guts, through our voice, in our touch and in the ways we feel.\footnote{Ibid.}
\end{quote}

What then constitutes the specificity of nanopolitics, in its relation to macro and micro domains, is the particular way in which the sensing body is not only abstractedly addressed – invoked, scrutinised, theorised, upheld, \textit{assumed}, yet often all too insubstantial – but also activated, \textit{mobilised} (intended quite literally as in “made to move”) as a terrain of collective political experimentation that
would ‘not deny or simplify experience’. Nanopolitics, then, is a practice – it names a manner of foregrounding a certain (affective) dimension of experience. Or, more appropriately, it names an ever-expanding set of methods, comprising the most diverse ‘physical exercises and games’. Methods that are intended for the ‘invention of new modes of sensitivity and relation’ unfolding beyond and beneath the rigid perceptual boundaries that the reign of the individual relentlessly works to impose.

Now, this interest in the sensing body should not be impulsively dismissed as an unwitting reproduction and indeed bolstering of the privatised boundaries established by possessive individualism, perhaps akin to forms of ‘self-help and self-management [or] new ageist solipsism’. Far from encouraging yet more independent navel gazing or soul searching, nanopolitical practices are in fact to be conceived as unequivocally shared processes – to such an extent that even speaking of “collective” is perhaps but a necessary approximation. Indeed, the type of sensitivity at stake through this mode of experimentation, invoking here Butler’s wonderful articulation, is one that

is neither mine nor yours. It is not a possession, but a way of being comported toward another, already in the hands of the other, and so a mode of dispossession. To refer to “sensibility” in this sense is to refer to a constitutive relation to a sensuous outside.

This is why, as it was already suggested in our brief appraisal of micropolitics, we shouldn’t intend nanopolitics as being concerned with the “personal”, with what is of someone (of some-body) but, rather, engaged in a radical ‘reconsider[ation of] the relation between the self and others, between bodies and environments’. Bodies that are in no way experientially pre-given, pre-existing

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184 Ibid.
185 Ibid.
186 Nanopolitics Group, Nanopolitics Handbook, 11.
187 Ibid., 27.
188 Butler and Athanasiou, Dispossession, 95.
189 As the Nanopolitics Group writes: ‘Nanopolitics isn’t “personal” or “subjective” in the sense of being limited to the individual, nor ‘objective’ in the sense of social processes that simply happen to us’. See: Nanopolitics Group, Nanopolitics Handbook, 26.
190 Ibid., 14.
environments; and environments that, the Invisible Committee would say, in turn do not merely “environ” us but instead traverse our bodies. In other words, the appeal to “the body”, as itself site of political action, should not be confused with the naïve reintroduction through an individualist backdoor of a sociality of units as “matters of fact”, only this time grounded in the material security of an originary, wholly settled bundle of flesh: what we are talking about here is, once again, a process, a body-ing.

Taking its cue from the famous Spinozan-Deleuzian question asking “what a body can do?”, nanopolitics is an attempt to move beyond it. Or, better still, to move with it: to set this question (this question-ing) in motion by proposing to collectively do what bodies can do, rather than limiting our work to that of critical analysis. Which is to say, in the case of the Nanopolitics Group, the playful invention of rituals; theatrical practices involving props; collective walks and balance exercises; as well as other vocal, gestural, and breathing games: all intended as shared experiments in the process of which ‘bodies might learn or unlearn something’. Unlearn (and, of course, undo) the complete privatisation of perceptual boundaries, of sensibility; learn (and, of course, enact) new practices of shared ‘bodily attentiveness through which we can attend to and intensify what García calls our ‘intercorporeal relationality’. Such practices thus understand the notion of “attending”, of attention, in its original Latin sense: ad-tendere, a stretching towards, a leaning or a haptic manner of being inclined, by means of which a body exceeds its individual self, as it were, and ‘overcomes

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191 Invisible Committee, To Our Friends, 79.
193 ‘Perhaps nanopolitics is not about knowing what a body can do, but about doing what bodies can do’ Nanopolitics Group, Nanopolitics Handbook, 145.
194 Ibid.
195 Nanopolitics Group, ‘Nanopolitics: A First Outline’.
196 García, Un mundo común, 132.
the opposition between an inside and an outside’. To put it in different terms, nanopolitics might be said to consist in the experimentation with ways to pay heed to (and deepen) each body’s implication in inherently shared perceptual fields, ‘to give attention differently, to become and move together in other modes, rhythms’. In this respect, then, nanopolitics could be seen as one attempt to develop a “choreographic” approach to politics – one arguably not too distant from the aesthetic politics that Massumi and Manning advocate, and which we will address in Chapter 5. Choreographic because, as we have begun to imply, the bodies animated by this particular manner of paying attention are not somewhat “statically” sensing but first and foremost gestural bodies in motion. Indeed, nanopolitical experimentation primarily hinges on ‘finding new axes of joint movement’, as the Group clarifies,

When we say nanopolitics concerns movement, we mean movement quite concretely, as the movement of individual and collective bodies, of our tissues and fluids, our skins, bones and so forth.

Motion, as the ceaseless gestural expression of bodies’ reaching beyond themselves – beyond a deceptive perceptual self-containment, so as to respond to and correspond with those other bodies (both “human” and not) co-implicated in each situation – is thus engaged as a vehicle through which to explore new intimacies, new complicities, new forms of relationality. Ultimately, this study wishes to operate within a nanopolitical framework in order to devise ‘ways of recognising self-dispossession, that are materialised in forms of conduct and action’ that is to say, again, inventing ever-novel manners in which bodies can test themselves together, moving with and being moved by each other.

198 Nanopolitics Group, Nanopolitics Handbook, 162.
199 Nanopolitics Group, ‘Nanopolitics: A First Outline’.
201 Ibid., 22.
202 Butler and Athanasiou, Dispossession, 94.
1.3.4 Proto-politics

It was already noted that nanopolitics, as articulated by the homonymous group, is not a monolithic doctrine or a prescriptive set of procedures: ‘there is not a fixed methodology at the basis of nanopolitics’, as the Group itself puts it. Rather, it finds expression through a multiplicity of relational practices that share a certain approach to politics intended as a ‘playing field’, as something that engages our bodies and that our bodies can engage in in concrete and inventive ways. We will further discuss the relational nature of these practice in Chapter 2 and 5; however, it might be worth at least clarifying here that “relational practices” indicates activities that are collective not only in a methodological sense, but also in that the (re)production of collectivity is itself the aim. Further, it should be noted that the mode of political intervention that we are here calling “nanopolitics” is by no means exclusively found in what has been described as such up until this point. In fact, this is arguably but one useful way of naming and grouping an heterogeneous constellation of practices that similarly propose a politics from and with the body – most notably the “poli­te­ico­-aesthetic events” organised by Manning and Massumi through the SenseLab project, examined in Chapter 5.

Drawing on a series of existing bodily techniques – some more established than others, and ranging from the theatrical to the pedagogic or the therapeutic – the Nanopolitics Group has experimented with methods such as Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, Roberto Freire’s Soma, or forms of “technoshamanism”, and engaged in activities as diverse as ‘[w]orkshops, dinners, drifts, demonstrations, flashmobs, discussions; walking with eyes closed, sitting on each other’s heads, singing; and so forth’. As a fairly loose and open framework for the elaboration of radicalised practices of sociality, and because of its explicit desire to somewhat further “politicise” what is often deemed as ‘the “not serious”

204 Ibid., 11.
205 Ibid.
206 Ibid., 25.
or the whimsical, nanopolitics offers an abundance of valuable conceptual coordinates and inspiring experiences that have directly informed this research. One thing that, however, appears to be missing or at the very least largely under-explored within this type of work, and from which further nanopolitical experimentation could greatly benefit, is a closer, direct and robust engagement (both conceptual and pragmatic) with the notion of use. Indeed, despite one of the central methodological questions that supposedly arose from nanopolitical sessions being ‘[w]hat ethics and politics of “use” may we come up with in working across grassroots and copyrighted methods?’, the category of use is never fully thematised as such in the work of the Nanopolitics Group. That is to say, beyond some passing references to its theoretical significance and regardless of its unacknowledged yet arguably prominent experiential import, the notion of use has yet to be fully taken up as a critical and technical paradigm of action for this type of bodily-motional political experimentation. This is seemingly true not only for the (regrettably limited) work produced by the Nanopolitics Group, but also and more generally speaking for other forms of somatic or aesthetic politics that similarly foreground collective bodily experimentation.

The present elaboration, then, has as its point of departure the claim that “use” – intended as a technical mode of gesturing, a technical entanglement of bodies – can offer some invaluable untapped potential for further nanopolitical experimentation, hence representing a particular paradigm of proto-political action. By “proto-political”, a term borrowed with a certain liberty from Manning and Massumi, we mean here a modality of action that presents a latent political charge waiting to be activated. As we will see in Chapter 4, this study argues that, when its “politicality” is fully ‘brought out’, “use” can be mobilised as an important element for shared practices of motional entanglement and mutual experiential indebtedness. This proto-politicality of use thus brings us back to

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207 Nanopolitics Group, ‘Nanopolitics: A First Outline’.

208 Nanopolitics Group, Nanopolitics Handbook, 12.

209 Ibid., 138. Paolo Plotegher, one of the core members of the Nanopolitics Group, indirectly acknowledges the notion of “use” elsewhere when he writes: ‘Art can be something unsettling; also, it can be something we can use rather than just contemplate. Pleasurable or painful, art affects us, and this affective power is something we can make use of’. See: Plotegher, ‘What Can I Do With the Nothing I Have?’, 18.

210 Massumi, Politics of Affect, ix.
Fry’s words, encountered earlier on, regarding the ‘inherently and profoundly political’ character of design. If, as mentioned in the Introduction, a certain operational intimacy exists between design (as an infrastructuring activity) and use (as that which takes such an infrastructure as its starting point), we should be able to understand why this research wishes to adopt the former as its domain (and means) of intervention, incorporating design into nanopolitics’ diverse range of tactics. It is to this triangulation between political action, use, and design that we should now turn.

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211 Fry, Design as Politics, 11.
2. Intervention

The crucial question is not “what to do?”, but “how to do?”, and Being is less important than the “like-so”. Inoperativity does not mean inertia, but katargesis – that is to say, an operation in which the how completely substitutes the what, in which the life without form and the forms without life coincide in a form of life.¹

Giorgio Agamben, La Comunità Che Viene, 2001 [1990]: 93

We are taking up the realm of use as the central element in an exploration of affect and dispossessed sociality. Now, if affect, in its famous Spinozan connotation, entails asking not what a body is or should be but what it can do – what it is capable of² – likewise, this exploration is not preoccupied with what use (including the use of bodies) is or should be but, rather, with what it can do. Which is to say that, although at times this research might admittedly seem concerned with problems of ontology (but hopefully never of morality), we are here primarily questioning over what using/used (using-used) bodies are capable of, together. We are questioning, again, over what kind of intervention is possible, what intervention can be aeffective³ (affective-effective, in Stevphen Shukaitis’ terms), that would revolve around a radical re-articulation of use.

With that in mind, this chapter will serve to advance some contextual and methodological considerations in relation to the proposed intervention. The chapter will be divided in two parts. Starting with a brief description of this research’s creative point of departure, the first part will seek to establish a

¹ My translation of Agamben’s postscript [postilla] to La Comunità che Viene [The Coming Community], titled Tiqqun de la noche, published in the 2001 Italian edition only.
² In a famous 1978 lecture, Deleuze argues that ‘Spinoza […] never asks what we must do, he always asks what we are capable of, what’s in our power, ethics is a problem of power, never a problem of duty’. See: Gilles Deleuze, ‘On Spinoza’s Concept of Affect (lecture transcript) – Cours Vincennes 1978’, trans. Timothy S. Murphy, Webdeleuze, 24 January 1978.
context for the intervention. This will be done by examining a number of historical and contemporary examples of the ways in which design practitioners and theorists have engaged with questions of use and politics, as well as, crucially, with the two together: that is, with use being conceived as a form of socio-political experimentation. Some of these have directly inspired this research or perhaps incited an opposing reaction to them; others present “traits” and adopt strategies similar to this study that have instead been recognised along the way. It should be mentioned that our focus here will be almost exclusively directed toward those practices concerned with three-dimensional artefacts and, for the most part, admittedly limited to the context of the Global North.

Building on this overview, in the second part we will consider the methodology grounding this study, which has developed by means of a multi-layered exploration. Indeed, this research can be said to involve a combination of conceptual, material, and collectively enacted experimentation, jointly contributing to something of a methodological ensemble. Some of the difficulties stemming from incorporating several registers of investigation within a single research project will be addressed, before we can discuss each of these registers in turn and, finally, the particular interplay that has brought them together. It might be worth pointing out that, because ‘a reflection on method usually follows practical application, rather than preceding it’, in Agamben’s terms, this chapter is indeed to be intended as ‘a matter [...] of ultimate or penultimate thoughts [...]’, which can legitimately be articulated only after extensive research. Questions of methodology have not been approached here as a static “to-do list” entirely defined in advance: rather, this study has proceeded through a dynamic negotiation between anticipatory planning, ongoing reflexivity, and retrospective analysis, given by continuous reassessment of each register’s significance and participation within the ensemble.

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2.1 Context

2.1.1 Preamble

Methodologically speaking (and beyond), the intervention presented throughout this thesis has its origins in a design project that started as a practice-based MA research during my time at London’s Central Saint Martins (2011-2013), and was then further expanded in 2014 in occasion of Craft Council England’s yearly exhibition Collect. The complete project, pedestrianly titled Transforming the Ambiguous, comprised three “sculptural” chairs, each designed so that the intended function would be hidden in plain sight and could only be revealed through corporeal interaction with the piece. This way, it was claimed, the three artefacts would be functionally “incomplete” until the weight of a person’s body would compress the central block of upholstery foam and bend the top elements into place [Fig.1]. Only then would the “chairness” of each piece be finally exposed.

Fig. 1: Giovanni Marmont, Transforming the Ambiguous 1, 2013

Through a rejection of practical efficiency and attempted subversion of archetypal forms, the project nurtured a fairly naïve but genuine desire to oppose mainstream product design’s ethos. Not only because of the latter's contribution
to what Herbert Marcuse described as the ‘perfection of waste’\(^5\) – mere stylistic innovation of futile commodities – but also due to its obsession with operational ease (i.e. user-friendliness), deemed culpable of fuelling unthinking consumption and endorsing an understanding of human action limited to the completion of pragmatic tasks. In contrast to the narrow appreciation of the notion of use implied by this approach, *Transforming the Ambiguous* sought to experiment instead with more complex, intellectually richer “material dialogues” between persons and things. That is to say, it was hoped that rendering the pieces’ function accessible only by means of a proactive alteration of their structure would engage users in forms of reflexive, exploratory, poetic, playful, ‘non-verbal acts of communication’\(^6\). As we will discuss below, both in its general strategy and intentions *Transforming the Ambiguous* is indebted to a number of critical approaches to design practice, from which, in hindsight, this project has also inherited at least three significant interrelated issues. It might be worth summarising these here, before we leap into a review of this lineage in the sections that follow.

The first issue concerns the context in which *Transforming the Ambiguous* was presented: initially, within Central Saint Martins’ degree show; then, as part of a collectively curated group exhibition during Eindhoven’s Dutch Design Week; and lastly, displayed in its expanded form at London’s Saatchi Gallery, together with a selection of independent makers, within the crafts fair *Collect*. The latter context alone should suffice to cast some serious doubts on the radical ambitions animating the project: what kind of subversive intervention could be possibly afforded by exhibiting at a high-end art venue in Chelsea, alongside tens of prestigious galleries selling their pieces for exorbitant prices? The second issue regards the mode of interaction with the pieces. In each occasion, the project was showcased as something of a multimedia installation, comprising the pieces – placed atop low plinths in the second and third event – an explanatory text, and an edited video showing a highly dramatized interaction with the objects.

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actual bodily engagement with the pieces was allowed under my anxious supervision in the first and (to a lesser extent) second exhibition, the audience at Collect was explicitly asked (as advised by the curators) not to touch the artefacts. As rightly noted by design critic Kimberley Chandler in a blog-post dedicated to the project, this “frustrating” decision effectively ‘petrified’ the pieces, making them inaccessible and to be exclusively contemplated with the aid of the accompanying video. Again, if all one is allowed to do with these objects is ‘to complete [a] narrative in [one’s] mind’ – that is, to ‘look, but not touch’ – it is not clear how this is meant to challenge passive consumption and introduce richer modes of use. Which leads to the third issue: the ostensibly open and incomplete “narratives” materialised through the project are actually more akin to heavily authored statements. In fact, rather than accommodating unexpected interpretations and playful interactions, all three pieces presuppose a correct way of operating them, if one is to “reveal” the function for which they were intended – that of sitting. The next few sections will hopefully serve to identify the source of these shortcoming and pave the way for a different mode of practice.

2.1.2 Design and use

Design practice and theory have engaged with the question of use in multiple ways. A special, opening mention should go here to the work of Mazé (both independent and collaborative), which arguably represents to date the most robust and compelling investigation of the topic. Because of this, and despite her overall approach being ultimately different from the one pursued throughout this thesis, Mazé’s work will be mostly incorporated in our re-articulation of use in Chapter 4 – as a way of thinking with rather than about it. It will suffice to say here that what this study shares with Mazé is the intuition that design practice and research have much to gain from reigniting a certain probing curiosity.

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8 Ibid.
around the nature of “use itself”, as a question of actions prior to artefacts, production, and even users. Now, as an approximate schematisation, which in no way claims to be exhaustive and is in fact bound to rest on some necessary generalisations, we may suggest that at least four broad tendencies can be identified: use addressed in its relation to functionality and efficiency; use in its relation to the user and its intentions; use as itself a form of design; use as a field of object-mediated critical speculation. We should keep in mind that a great degree of crossover exists between some of these tentative categories, which therefore must not be intended as mutually exclusive. All four tendencies will be addressed in various ways throughout the thesis – as some have obviously informed this research’s outlook – but it might be advantageous to directly (if briefly) review them here.

First, use has been understood as an in-act expression of and/or search for functionality. This is, historically speaking, the dominant approach to use, and indeed its everyday colloquial acceptation. When use is considered (or indeed contested) from this perspective, it is often conceived as usefulness and pragmatic utility, as the fulfilment of an intended purpose in response to a need. In this sense, as discussed in Chapter 4, use and function become almost interchangeable concepts, to the point that an “incorrect” use of something – an interaction that does not correspond to what was intended “by design” – is often termed misuse. A more nuanced variation of this interest in the connection between use and function has emerged through studies that think about the former as an act of communication and the latter as the message that is communicated. In this case, products are seen to be a mediating vehicle within a process of interpretation and negotiation of meaning – or, in other terms, of function. This approach understands use as something akin to the act of decoding a “text” (the object), hence to be studied through methods and theories borrowed from semiotics and structuralist literary criticism. As a result, in both

variations, this first tendency primarily focuses on “artefacts”: on products and their material characteristics or “affordances”.¹²

Second, the question of use has also been conceived as a question of users: which is to say, a question of subjects rather than acts. These subjects are thus defined by their allegedly temporary role – that of “users” – bestowed upon them through interaction with an external “object” (the ontological implications of this claim and its temporalities will be further addressed in Chapter 3). When approached in these terms, acts of use are of interest, on the one hand, as expressions of people’s intentions, creativity, needs, desires, and interpretations of the material world; or, on the other hand – and overlapping here with the previous point, albeit from a slightly different angle – as the expression of acts of communications involving designers and users through the mediation of products. This is most notably the remit of what has come to be known as User-Centred Design (UCD): a type of design process that ‘aims at anticipating eventual use’,¹³ by way of studying users, their motivations and their reactions to prototypes or various material affordances, generally with the ultimate goal of creating a better ‘fit between people and designed things’¹⁴ and optimise efficiency. In this case, as Redström warns, the user itself is what is being designed and therefore risks becoming the object of a form of social engineering.¹⁵ Yet, this focus on the user is also proper to other attitudes that stress on the importance of participation while being generally critical of commercially-minded UCD¹⁶ and, in many ways, trying to turn its top-down outlook to its head. A number of researchers, largely drawing on disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, Science and Technology Studies (STS), and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), are interested in the role that design and use can

¹⁵ Ibid.
have in the construction of “publics” around certain socio-technical concerns. This form of design-led ethnography and sometimes “activism” – itself rather multifarious in methods and scope – engages “user-participants” into a collective exploratory process that is at times intended not so much as a problem-solving exercise but rather as a manner of “democratising” design processes, facilitating the formulation of complex and socially relevant questions, and provide insight into groups’ dynamics.¹⁷ Whatever the case, Mazé notes, user participation can happen ‘prior to design development (as in ethnographic studies, market surveys, or focus groups), in cycles of iterative design (as in “contextual”, “collaborative”, or “co-” design), or afterwards (as in usability testing).¹⁸

Third tendency: building on the correct observation that designers’ intentions not always or, in fact, rarely correspond to how “things” are eventually used in everyday life, some have suggested that use can be reimagined as a continuation of the design process at the hand of the user. That is to say, the argument goes, because people tend more or less unconsciously to appropriate what they use in unpredictable and often highly creative ways, use is to be conceived as form of design in its own right [Fig.2]. It is worth pointing out that this third attitude seems to implicitly accept an inherently teleological, goal-oriented acceptation of use, whether this use-as-design is a deliberate effort in “hacking” – i.e. adhocism¹⁹ – or an improvisational and spontaneous response to a need – what Uta Brandes et al. describe as ‘Non-Intentional Design’ (NID),²⁰ or what John Chris Jones discusses in terms of ‘continuous design and redesign’.²¹ Sara Ahmed provides an interesting example of this “designerly use” by noting how most country paths are quite literally designed through their use: ‘[t]he path


exists’, Ahmed points out, ‘because people have used it’. This tendency has in turn sparked the experimentation with a number of tactics revolving around deliberately unfinished [Fig.3], hackable, and ambiguous designs to foster opportunities for more or less open-ended acts of use and playful interaction, but also co-design processes, and, again, object-mediated communication.

Fig. 2: Use as design: hacked pallet in community garden. © Noni Young

Fig. 3: Jurgen Bey for Droog, Do Add “short-leg” chair, 2000. © Droog

22 Ahmed, ‘Queer Use’.
Fourth and last, use has been identified as a sphere of action that, because arising from interaction with given material conditions and being thus imbued with certain socio-cultural connotations, can be observed, experimented with, and mobilised so as to reveal or forecast established patterns of behaviour and question their ideological underpinnings. Such a critical work is frequently developed through the design of speculative and fictional scenarios, which revolve around prototypes or props that are either not meant to be used in actual bodily terms but only in the imagination – perhaps with the help of audio-visual narratives – or deployed in the context of participatory design research (thus intersecting with the second and, to some extent, the first tendencies discussed above). Allegedly, the aim of this kind of practice-based research is generally that of generating public debate about the ethics and politics of emerging technologies, which means that use is understood as an exemplary instantiation of such issues. This tendency, which often falls under the contentious banner of Critical and Speculative Design (CSD), has found multiple, sometimes contrasting expressions, and has been heavily scrutinised over the past decade.

Regardless of all discrepancies and overlaps between these four tendencies, regardless of whether they reinforce or challenge the status quo, and regardless of whether the focus is on consumer products, users’ subjectivities, potentials for autonomy and creative appropriation, social commentary and critique, or materially-mediated acts of rhetoric and communication, it is clear that the relationship between design practice and acts of use is one tinted by remarkably political undertones. How to account for design’s politicality then?

### 2.1.3 Design and politics

That the history of design is deeply entwined with that of capitalism is an argument that has been made countless times. We will therefore rehearse this claim only in passing here. Critics such as Victor Papanek\(^ {23} \) and, more recently, Guy Julier\(^ {24} \) as well as the already mentioned Fry – just to name some oft-cited

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examples amongst countless others – have abundantly discussed how design practice has been a central motor of capitalist value production: from its most obvious role in the ideation and production of mass consumer goods and fuelling of commodity culture through various forms of advertising, to its involvement in the post-Fordist growth of increasingly specialised and less tangible service economies;\(^{25}\) from its implicit promotion of neoliberal “values” (such as that of efficiency and productivity) and agendas (e.g. forms of greenwashing and eco-capitalism through sustainable design) to its more or less direct implication in colonialist endeavours of various kind.\(^{26}\) What is truly remarkable, though, is the extent to which, despite its instrumental proximity with the flows of capital and the logic of neoliberalism, at least in the popular imaginary, design practice has for the most part maintained a semblance of non-ideological technical “neutrality”. Remarkable, but certainly not surprising, given capitalism’s radical monopoly on the imagination that seeks to paint the current socio-political state of things as an undisputable natural order – leading, to mention but a handful of indicative examples, to slogans such as Margaret Thatcher’s infamous “there is no alternative”; to verdicts such as “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (reported by political theorist Fredric Jameson)\(^ {27}\); and to concepts such as that of “capitalist realism”,\(^ {28}\) coined by the late cultural critic Mark Fisher. The point here is that design practice has largely succeeded in presenting itself as not inherently political when, in fact, this has never been and, most important still, could never and will never be the case.

Because of this implication in all sorts of socio-political processes, a sizeable portion of the “professional” design community has long embarked in an assessment of the varied roles that design practice can and does have in

\(^{25}\) Elzenbaumer, ‘Designing Economic Cultures’; Julier, The Culture of Design.


macropolitical issues and large-scale systemic change. Not only, as mentioned in Chapter 1, through forms of participation in institutional and governmental operations (the “design for policymaking” discourse), but also by means of a longstanding preoccupation with pressing global issues such as climate change, pollution, and resources depletion. At first, within the expansive area of sustainable design – a sub-discipline that has proven to be politically ambiguous at best, and hugely reactionary at worst – and recently, through more sophisticated efforts such as Carnegie Mellon University’s Transition Design programme29 – the latter still being reformist in nature and ambitions though.30 Moreover, building on a long tradition of militancy in graphic design and illustration, a growing number of designers dealing with three-dimensional “products” are seeing their craft as a form of “activism”,31 with all the problems that this type of professionalisation of political action brings.32 Driven by explicitly political motives, these designers seek to create ‘overtly political tool[s]’, neither as mere “gadgets” nor as an ‘artless translation of slogans and images’, but ‘both to actively effect change and to raise awareness of where it is needed’.33 In this case, the role of the designers can tend to morph into that of “expert facilitators” within different kinds of participatory processes, wherein their task is to assist various constituencies: namely, ‘to locate and build on their potential, to open up possibilities, to challenge the collective imagination and to help in the fashioning of new dispositions’.34 Obviously, what is sometimes referred to as “design activism” is far from a uniform tendency, both in terms of

32 This is not the place for an in-depth discussion of “professional activism”. However, a concise and clear summary of the issue can be found, for example, in an interview between John Jordan and Stevphen Shukaitis, where the former states: “I’ve always had a problem with the term activist and activism, in that you have this kind of monopoly of people who change the world, assuming other people don’t change the world through their everyday activities or whatever” – see: Stevphen Shukaitis, Combination Acts: Notes on Collective Practice in the Undercommons (Colchester: Minor Compositions, 2019) 194.
34 Julier, The Culture of Design, 216.
methods and objectives. Julier, for example, names four ‘distinct but overlapping ways’ in which design and activism intersect: (1) through the ‘production of artefacts within social movements’; (2) by introducing a shift of ‘aims and methodologies’ that allows for a ‘foregrounding of social, environmental or political values’; (3) through the ‘adversarial’ creation of ‘an iterative set of contestations such as objects that challenge the status quo [...] or even provide citizen tools for revealing its more harmful aspects’;35 or (4) by means of ‘a designerly way of intervening into people’s lives’36 that involves ‘the development of artefacts that exist in real time and space’.37

As the vocabulary adopted here should suggest, these are practices whose intentions and political allegiances are rather diverse, and in some cases quite nebulous: ranging from the blithe thematisation of political issues mentioned earlier on, to social-democratic reformism and appeals to civic engagement or


“educated” citizenship; from consciousness raising endeavours – sometimes consisting of ‘merely proliferating signs and artefacts of resistance’, 38 as Elzenbaumer points out – to designerly forms of “direct action” that strive instead to construct radical ‘ways of doing and relating’ 39 – whether professionalised or not (the case of the Zone à Défendre or ZAD in Notre-Dames-des-Landes springs to mind here [Fig.4]). 40

Yet, if design represents nothing less than ‘the operative undercurrent of the everyday’, 41 as theorist Abby Mellick Lopes amongst others rightly suggests, its inconspicuous “politics” is often hidden behind and underneath ‘the seemingly innocuous and a-political’. 42 In other words, if design is always ‘already political’, 43 this is true even and particularly in its material organisation of the most mundane, trivial micro-dynamics and expressions of sociality (that are the focus of this research), hence without the need to address more dramatically political macro-issues or to attach the label “activism” to it. Indeed, Fry points out that ‘design gives material form and directionality to the ideological embodiment of a particular politics’. 44 This “giving material form”, this inherently political ‘material assertion’, 45 in design historian Damon Taylor’s terms, is what we might describe as a practice of infrastructuring: that is, as anticipated in the Introduction, a force or type of activity that works to make something else work.

It is appropriate to note that use of the term “infrastructuring” is not new in design literature, as several studies have already adopted and elaborated the concept, particularly in relation to participatory design methods. 46 Amongst

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38 Elzenbaumer, ‘Designing Economic Cultures’, 199.
39 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
44 Fry, Design as Politics, 6.
45 Damon Taylor, ‘Design Art Furniture and The Boundaries of Function: Communicative Objects, Performative Things’ (University of the Arts London and Falmouth University, 2011), xv.
46 E.g. see: Jamer Hunt, ‘Just Re-Do It: Tactical Formlessness and Everyday Consumption’, in Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life, ed. Andrew Blauvelt (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art
these – their substantial political distance from this research notwithstanding – Christopher Le Dantec and Carl DiSalvo advance a number of important concerns when advocating, for example, a form of design infrastructuring that would not be a mode of rigid social engineering but a way of ‘providing scaffolding for affective bonds’\textsuperscript{47} to develop and be sustained. Borrowing affect theorist Lauren Berlant’s definition, in this case design practice as infrastructuring ‘is the living mediation of what organises life’ and, as such, must be ‘defined by use and movement’,\textsuperscript{48} rather than in its own right (i.e. in terms of design, designing, or designed products). For what concerns this research, we are taking up the notion of infrastructuring precisely to indicate this “second order structuring” of conditions for experience – irrespective of the magnitude of the effects, scale of the processes, and size of the actors involved. Conditions that are thus set up through design practice but which, in turn, enable various forms of acting and interacting – that is, various forms of use and movement – whether in accordance or as resistance to such conditions. To put it again in Le Dantec and DiSalvo’s terms: in this research, as we will see again in Chapter 5, ‘the deployment of the technology is a beginning, not an end’, which ‘might serve as a catalysing factor’\textsuperscript{49}.

Having set these initial contextual parameters, which exclude from this research’s radar direct engagements with macropolitical issues, we should now briefly acknowledge a rich and heterogeneous tradition that intuits that design’s polticality is to be found just as much in its infrastructural intimacy with micropolitical experiences of use. Whether explicitly or implicitly, the examples presented below regard the latter as a relevant arena for the experimentation with alternatives to the logic of neoliberal capitalism and its modes of interpellation. Once again, we will not attempt an exhaustive appraisal of these


approaches to design in and of themselves – that is, assessing their overall ambitions, strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures in the eyes of commentators and fellow designers – since excellent reviews of this kind already abound.\footnote{E.g. see: Mazé and Redström, ‘Difficult Forms'; Mazé, \textit{Occupying Time}; Taylor, ‘Design Art Furniture'; Matt Malpass, ‘Contextualising Critical Design: Towards a Taxonomy of Critical Practice in Product Design’ (Nottingham Trent University, 2012).} Rather, the intention will be to focus on the type of engagement that these practices entertain with the question of use. Which also means that, while recognising the importance of undertakings that mobilise design itself as a micropolitical process of collectivity and commoning (most notably, the work of autonomist collective \textit{Brave New Alps}), we will limit ourselves to examine practices that are significant \textit{solely from the perspective of use}, due to their re-negotiation of this category of action. This summary, then, will serve to define the historical and contemporary contextual backdrop against which this research operates, so as to acknowledge the lineage of practice that its proposed intervention is in many ways indebted to, building on, \textit{and} even diverging from.

\section*{2.1.4 Design and politicised use: historical precedents}

At least since the 1950s (but in many ways already anticipated in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century by currents such as the \textit{Arts and Crafts} movement in Britain and \textit{De Stijl} in the Netherlands), designers began recognising their practice as a powerful medium of socio-political critique and experimentation. This way, a number of collectives emerged in the second half of the twentieth century that, largely inspired by the earlier artistic avant-gardes, sought to expand their remit beyond the economic and creative strictures of the industry. These groups explicitly framed their work in terms of the construction of realities alternative to those fostered and normalised by consumer capitalism. Celebrated examples of unambiguously politicised design practices can be found in the work of the so-called \textit{Disegno Radicale} (\textit{Radical Design}) in Italy during the 1950s and '60s; of the international movement known as \textit{Anti Design} in the '70s; of the milieu orbiting around the \textit{Memphis Group} [Fig.5] again in Italy, and the \textit{New Design} current in
Germany, in the ’80s; and of Dutch design collective-turned-brand *Droog* from the ’90s onwards.51

Fig. 5: Memphis Group, *Furniture collection*, 1981-1988. Courtesy of Dennis Zanone

What these groups shared was an overt attempt to challenge, subvert, or even outright reject those perceived to be bourgeois, dogmatic canons of “good design”: chiefly, the functionalist focus on practical efficiency famously encapsulated in Louis Sullivan’s maxim ‘form ever follows function’52 and shaped by the Modernist rationalism of the Bauhaus and the Ulm School, as well as the aversion to ornamental excess expressed by the likes of architect Adolf Loos.53

Very much in line with a general cultural shift across the Global North, then,

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these “politicised” (postmodern) design practices began flirting with conceptual art, experimenting with “poetic” expressivity, humour, provocation, symbolism, and espousing alternative aesthetic lexicons. Designers began repurposing and combining found or discarded objects so as to alter habitual actions, as is the case for example with Achille Castiglioni’s 1957 Sella stool [Fig.6], and sought inspiration from various forms of “low culture”. This, paired with the introduction of new fabrication techniques and materials, served to propose tangible expressions of social commentary and, more important from our perspective, to inspire novel behaviours and modes of conviviality [Fig.7].

As noted by Bernhard Bürdek, this blurring of the boundaries between design and art mirrored what already done by the ‘many artists [who] long beforehand dedicated themselves to working on utility objects”54 – Joseph Beuys’ Fat Chair and Marcel Duchamp’s “ready-mades” being some of the most obvious examples. However, in spite of all politically radical ambitions, more often than not this type of work ended up being almost instantaneously recuperated within the capitalist system of value production, often through the backdoor of the art

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market and gallery system as well as the glorification of the genius of individual designer-auteurs, all which turned these creations into potentially daring yet inconsequentially inaccessible statements. A history that, as we will see shortly, was bound to repeat itself.

Around the turn of the century, while the attempted optimisation of functionality-in-use had continued – inspired by new protagonists, such as cognitive psychologist Donald Norman, and under new banners, such as the “user-centred” design methods discussed earlier (UCD) as well as “human-computer interaction” (HCI) – a number of new approaches emerged that sought to rebel against commercially-driven problem-solving diktats imposed by the industry, questioning once again the equation of use with practical utility, and pursuing largely overt political ends. We shall now take a look at the relation to the question of use developed by some of these contemporary practices, proposing a number of loose and frequently intersecting strands that we will illustrate by way of a deliberate selection of examples.

2.1.5 Design and politicised use: contemporary context

Some designers have sought to develop an even more “promiscuous” relationship with the world of art and its marketplace by conceiving their creations as a sort of hybrid: what some commentators have indeed dubbed “design art” (or “DesignArt”). Drawing on various kinds of conceptual art, either vaguely inspired by or directly associated with the aforementioned Droog current, these practitioners produce ‘highly expressive’, sculptural pieces of furniture of various kind that are deliberately presented and ‘sold as though [they] were art’. These objects frequently represent material narratives and socio-political commentaries, often delivered through the peculiar aesthetics of the pieces or even a “theatricalised” making process, more so than through the construction of

57 Julier, The Culture of Design, 103.
unconventional situations of use. In fact, although such artefacts often ‘make the claim to be use objects’\(^{59}\) – to be “functional” and “functioning” things,\(^{60}\) so to speak – for the most part we could argue, with Taylor, that “[t]hese are things to be looked at rather than used”.\(^{61}\) Practitioners and academics such as Ralph Ball and Maxine Naylor indeed openly avow this attitude through what they call “design poetics”: a form of conceptual design that, they say, leaves behind Modernist concerns with efficiency and manufacturing issues, in order to instead ‘provide critical, ironic and playful commentary on our condition and our cultures of consumption’, thus treating objects ‘as cultural information [to] be contemplated’ [Fig.8].\(^{62}\)

![Image of a chair](image.jpg)

**Fig. 8:** Ralph Ball and Maxine Naylor, *Grey Stack – Archaeology*, 2003. © Studio Ball

For what concerns their use, Taylor notes that it would be misguided to regard some of this design simply ‘as another expression of the discourse of art’, as critic Alex Coles does for instance, given that they seem to instead interrogate ‘the

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\(^{59}\) Ibid., xvi.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 9.

relation between design and use’.63 And yet, Taylor also concedes that, largely because of how and where these things happen to exist more so than because of what they are,64 any act of use of these objects must be ‘inferred from the material affordances and physical scripts of the objects’65 rather than bodily experienced. Taylor is right in suggesting that, if incorporated into a vision of “new everyday life” – what Russian Constructivist Boris Arvatov termed a novyi byt66 – these are products that could be ‘used as a site of intervention into the ideological and political functioning of our material culture’, thus having a radical potential, performatively speaking. Indeed, if taken at face value, some of these projects do invite new forms of interactions or even completion of the pieces on the part of “users” [Fig. 9].

Fig. 9: Thomas Bernstrand for Droog, Do Swing lamp, 2000. © Droog

64 Ibid., 270.
65 Ibid., 27. We will return to the concepts of “affordance” and “script” in Chapter 4.
66 Ibid., 58.
Still, as Taylor himself acknowledges, the political significance of this work, as it currently stands, is dubious to say the least. Mainly produced and sold as one-offs or in limited editions by highly ambitious “design-artists”, bar some compelling exceptions – including a barrage of students’ work that sadly rarely escapes the limbo of “degree shows”, such as Lina-Marie Köppen’s ambitious exploration of open-ended affordances with Learn to Unlearn [Fig.10], and few exciting public space interventions such as Jeppe Hein’s Modified Social Benches series [Fig.11] – these are objects that are conceived with in mind a market populated by wealthy collectors and high-profile galleries or museums, when not as mere publicity stunts commissioned by commercial brands. It would appear that, in order to take further distance from the oppressive horizon of commodity consumption and efficiency demanded by commercial clients, many designer-artists resort, perhaps unwittingly, to the removal of their creations from any actual situation of use.

Fig. 10: Lina-Marie Köppen, Learn to Unlearn series, 2012. © Lina-Marie Köppen

67 Ibid., xv. Also see: Julier, The Culture of Design, 103.
A second, and very much related strand is what we have already called Critical and Speculative Design (CSD). As previously mentioned, it should be noted again that CSD has been both meticulously dissected\(^{68}\) and fiercely attacked\(^{69}\) over the past decade. Yet, it is entirely beyond the contained aims and scope of this overview to provide a comprehensive appraisal of the debate surrounding CSD, particularly because of the variegated character of this type of practice. Design researcher Tobie Kerridge observes that CSD is indeed ‘a slippery

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topic’ in that ‘[i]t means different things to different people at different times’, to the extent that some practitioners whose work might largely fit the mould even reject this label or use other terms altogether. Our task here will thus be restricted to outlining a few key characteristics of this diverse mode of practice exclusively as a way of illuminating its particular relation to the question of use. Indeed, while CSD flirts with the art world in a way that is similar to design art – i.e. exhibited in galleries and museums as one-offs, though not primarily meant for sale – unlike other designer-artists’ frequent ambivalence towards use, the latter is a central theme in this type of work and a specific discourse around use has emerged by means of it.

The term “critical design” and the main body of theoretical work attached to it is to be attributed to academics and design practitioners Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, around whom has revolved a loose but fairly large cohort of designers and researchers since the early 2000s – mostly within the orbit of London’s Royal College of Art, where the two professors established and ran the influential Design Interactions programme until 2015. The adjective “speculative”, something of a later addition, has been gradually adopted to describe a trait that, however, has been proper to most critical design since day one: namely, a specific focus on possible futures, particularly in relation to the development of new technologies and related habits. The point of departure for the work of Dunne & Raby is a critique of people’s ‘enslavement [...] to the conceptual models, values, and systems of thought’ in commodity culture, performed through passive consumption and propagated via what they term ‘affirmative design: design that reinforces the status quo’. Which is to say, mainstream, commercially motivated industrial and product design: an “immature” practice solely committed to solving pragmatic problems, hence void of ‘intellectual credibility’, and which unthinkingly ‘reinforces global capitalist values’ through the

70 Kerridge, ‘Designing Debate’, 34.
fabrication of false needs. In terms of intellectual posture and political leanings, as Simon Bowen as well as Jeffrey and Shaowen Bardzell rightly contend,\(^\text{74}\) echoes of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and the notion of the “culture industry” are unmistakeable in Dunne & Raby’s writings, in spite of the authors’ objections.\(^\text{75}\) Scattered nods to the thought of Jean Baudrillard and science fiction novelist J.G. Ballard, as well as a possible perfunctory reading of Guy Debord’s theory of the spectacle can also be found throughout their three books. Indeed, the pair repeatedly laments social conformity and mass stultification of subjects that they condescendingly view ‘as obedient and predictable users and consumers’,\(^\text{76}\) completely stripped of agency and alienated from ‘real human needs’\(^\text{77}\) because constantly under a spell that mainly goes by the name of “user-friendliness”.\(^\text{78}\)

As an antidote to this bamboozlement, Dunne and Raby propose a form of design that instead of striving for product optimisation and functional efficiency would encourage debate by ‘ask[ing] carefully crafted questions and mak[ing] us think’\(^\text{79}\) about complex cultural and political issues such as social isolation, death and euthanasia, emerging biotechnologies, mass-surveillance, as well as the ideological meta-workings of design itself. This, they suggest, could be achieved through the creation of speculative scenarios revolving around real yet fictional – “para-functional”, “post-optimal”, and “user-unfriendly”\(^\text{80}\) – products, belonging to equally fictional yet plausible (and often dystopian) futures. A move that, they claim, would in turn ‘challenge narrow assumptions, preconceptions, and givens about the role products play in everyday life’.\(^\text{81}\) In Dunne and Raby’s words, ‘[c]ritical design is critical thought translated into materiality. It is about thinking


\(^{75}\) Dunne and Raby, Speculative Everything, 35.

\(^{76}\) Ibid., 38.

\(^{77}\) Dunne and Raby, Design Noir, 6.

\(^{78}\) Dunne, Hertzian Tales, 21.

\(^{79}\) Dunne and Raby, Design Noir, 58.

\(^{80}\) Dunne, Hertzian Tales, 35-42.

\(^{81}\) Dunne and Raby, Speculative Everything, 34.
through design rather than through words'. 82 An illustrative example would be Dunne and Raby’s 2007 project *Technological Dreams*, which is part of the permanent collections of New York’s MoMA and of Paris’ *Fond national d’art contemporain*. 83 *Technological Dreams* [Fig. 12] explores some of the possible relationships that we might develop with robots in the near future by presenting four ‘technological cohabitants’, 84 each characterised by a specific trait – one is independent, one is nervous, one is vigilant, one is needy – which, in turn, affects their odd, sometimes mischievous behavioural response to a user’s interaction.

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 12:** Dunne and Raby, *Technological Dreams: No.1, Robots*, 2007. Credit: Simon King (2008) [As displayed in MoMA New York for the 2008 exhibition *Design and the Elastic Mind*]

Now, if leaving aside the sanctimonious universalising tone and their willful neglect of existing forms of resistance to capitalist rationality, Dunne and Raby’s recognition of design’s politically infrastructural role and their eagerness to expand its remit beyond servicing consumerism and improving efficiency is commendable. Indeed, their contribution to ignite a new wave of explicitly

82 Ibid., 35.
84 Ibid.
political design work should not be trivialised. And yet, it is in part their approach to the question of use that, perhaps, prevents this type of work from having the empowering effect that they allege. Let us take a closer look at this problematic aspect of Dunne and Raby’s projects, starting by reviewing the way in which they discuss three key elements in their articulation of critical design speculations: that is, the designer, the user, and the designed artefact.

Dunne clearly taps into the art world when he proposes that ‘designers could become more like authors’ who would be able ‘to create alternative contexts of use and need’. As a consequence it should not surprise if, despite their repeated but unconvincing claims that CSD seeks to “ask questions” and challenge normative futures, Dunne and Raby’s work ultimately appears to be more intent on producing authored ‘arguments or statements’ than it is about the actual exploration of issues. Those asked through this type of work, then, are arguably ‘questions that already contain their answer’ – a point to which we will return in Chapter 5. What about these designer-authors’ “audience”, namely, CSD’s “users”? Dunne and Raby write: ‘the user would become a protagonist and co-producer of narrative experience rather than a passive consumer of a product’s meaning’. Or, to put it in slightly less slogansening terms, for the two authors, users of CSD narratives should be encouraged to turn into ‘active “imaginers”:’ that is, into “observers” or “viewers”, or even ‘conceptual window shoppers’ who, upon encountering a given moral dilemma embedded in the work, ‘try things out in [their] minds’. These users/viewers/imaginers would be triggered to ‘entertain ideas about everyday life that might not be obvious’ and ‘construct in [their] minds a world shaped by different ideals, values, and beliefs’. Lastly, for what concerns CSD artefact, these would supposedly operate by ‘forc[ing] a

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85 Dunne, *Hertzian Tales*, 75.
86 Redström, “Towards User Design?”, 137.
88 Dunne and Raby, *Design Noir*, 46.
89 Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 93.
90 Dunne, *Hertzian Tales*, 145.
91 Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 140.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid., 90-1.
decision onto the user’. A decision that, however, does not need to correspond to any form of corporeal action given that what Dunne and Raby have in mind is some sort of vicarious use. Indeed, thanks to the audio-visual support that typically accompanies the objects [Fig.13] and which shows them being operated by actors, ‘[w]e don’t actually have to use the proposed products ourselves, it is by imagining them being used that they have an effect on us’. Which is to say that, ultimately, the question of use is here approached not as a matter of bodily enactment but exclusively as one of abstracted consciousness: a ‘psychological use’, as Dunne has it. In fact, Dunne and Raby insist that these ‘are products for the mind [...] they are intended to be used in the imagination’.

In other words, the artefacts produced through this brand of CSD are ‘props for nonexistent films’ – as they later described them – which, therefore, do not need to be actually working prototypes because they are not meant to ‘mimic

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94 Dunne and Raby, Design Noir, 46.
95 Ibid., 63.
96 Dunne, Hertzian Tales, 57.
97 Dunne and Raby, Design Noir, 64.
98 Dunne and Raby, Speculative Everything, 89.
reality or allow us to play act but to entertain new ideas’.\textsuperscript{99} We will return to this notion of “props” later on, in order to propose an antithetical perspective on their use. To summarise, Dunne and Raby – and with them influential “critical designers” such as James Auger, Noam Toran, Onkar Kular, and Julian Bleecker’s \textit{Near Future Laboratory}, amongst many others – deploy design practice as a form of artefact-mediated fictional storytelling, wherein use is intended to serve as the rhetorical device adopted by a designer-author, as Matt Malpass suggests.\textsuperscript{100}

A third mode of practice that is explicitly interested in the politicality of use is represented by the work of Bill Gaver and his colleagues within the \textit{Interaction Research Studio} (IRS hereafter) at London’s Goldsmiths University. Although initially associated or even collaborating with Dunne and Raby, these researchers have gradually developed a distinctive and arguably more compelling approach to the question of use. The main difference between the two strands is perhaps given by the fact that, unlike the almost entirely gallery- or web-based (hence corporeally inaccessible) critical speculations produced by many former and current Royal College of Art affiliates, the IRS has planted \textit{actual} public engagement and interaction at the very heart of their explorations. Such interactions frequently revolve around the use of what Gaver, in an article co-authored with Dunne himself and Elena Pacenti as far back as 1999, called \textit{cultural probes}. As the three authors described them, cultural probes are a design research strategy, explicitly inspired by the Situationist International and other artistic avant-gardes, consisting of sets of props – such as postcards, maps, and disposable cameras [Fig.14-15] – accompanied by a series of tasks and questionnaires involving the use of the items. These miscellaneous packs were ‘designed to provoke inspirational responses’\textsuperscript{101} from the volunteers and communities they were distributed to, hence not with the aim of arriving at ‘precise analyses or carefully controlled methodologies’ but, rather, as ‘ways to open new spaces for design’.\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 92.
\textsuperscript{100} Malpass, ‘Contextualising Critical Design’, 76.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 24.
The authors claimed that the data collected through these experiments was not to be *analysed* as such\textsuperscript{103} or even meant to provide solutions, since the primary

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 27.
intention was instead ‘to provide opportunities to discover new pleasures, new forms of sociability, and new cultural forms’ while, at the same time, ‘trying to shift current perceptions of technology functionally, aesthetically, culturally, and even politically’. Still, responses to the use of the probes appeared to inform a set of quasi-ethnographic observations, which eventually led to a new research phase and, more or less directly, proved instrumental to the ideation of design propositions. While Dunne gradually abandoned this methodology, focusing instead on the type of authored work described above, Gaver and colleagues at Goldsmiths adopted and developed it as a key element in their design “weaponry”, pairing it with a clear emphasis on deliberate aesthetic ambiguity and open-ended situations of use. 

Fig. 16: Interaction Research Studio, ProbeTools collection, 2018. © Interaction Research Studio

One recent example of cultural probes is the IRS’s project ProbeTools (2018) [Fig.16]. ProbeTools is a series of open-source customisable 3D printed cameras, to be used as playful props within participatory research processes. In

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104 Ibid., 25.
line with the original concept, the cameras are to be distributed to external participants, who are then assigned ‘collections of evocative tasks’ that involve the use of the probes and other items – as discussed above – as a way to ‘elicit inspiring responses’\textsuperscript{106} around a certain theme or issue. These responses are to be recorded by participants in a variety of ways (taking pictures obviously being one of them) and then sent back to the researchers. Interestingly, the IRS states that, ‘[i]mportant as the probes’ material forms are, it is \textit{the design of the tasks} that determines whether or not Probes are intriguing and revealing’.\textsuperscript{107} In other words, the focus of these activities is squarely on the actions performed [Fig.17], prior to the props used – an aspect that, as we will see, is absolutely central to this research too.

\textbf{Fig. 17:} Interaction Research Studio, \textit{ProbeTools in action}, 2018. © Interaction Research Studio

Further, the IRS’s reflections on the ProbeTools turn out to be revealing for what concerns another point of utmost significance for this research’s line of inquiry: that is, the issue of teleology. The IRS suggests that the designed tasks, if they are to be ‘rewarding for participants and surprising to researchers’, should


\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 34 (emphasis added).
involve ‘playful, open, or even absurd requests’. And this is because, the Studio explains,

> For participants, [playfulness and surprise] undermine ideas about research to encourage informal intimacy and creativity. For researchers, they produce observable evidence with enough uncertainty to leave room for the imagination.

Playfulness is thus identified by the IRS as a fruitful strategy that can be leveraged to balance the dryness of empirical research and, in so doing, bring about surprising insight. In other words, while the Probes, as we have seen, are of interest only insofar as they enable playful interactions (the tasks), such interactions are themselves valuable to the IRS not in themselves but only to the extent that they are generative of inspiring responses that could then inform, perhaps even indirectly, a subsequent design phase – or ethnographic studies, in the case for example of Gaver’s colleague and IRS affiliate Alex Wilkie. This apparent instrumentality becomes even more evident when the IRS somewhat surprisingly asserts that ‘clever opportunities for play that don’t reveal anything meaningful aren’t useful either’. Statements such as the one above make it clear that, ultimately, it is design and designing, not use, to be the IRS’s main concern. Not that this is necessarily troublesome in and of itself, of course. However, this teleological approach to playful interaction certainly does draw a line between the work of the IRS and what this thesis is gesturing towards, as we will discuss in later chapters.

And yet, the tension between open-ended playfulness and the applicability of what this mode of acting can unlock is not exactly a blind spot, completely left unthought in the articulation of cultural probes such as ProbeTools. Already in 2004, Gaver and a number of colleagues were keenly aware of how various employments of the Probes could alter quite significantly the nature of this research method. In an article of that year they noted that, since they were first

108 Ibid.
109 Ibid.
introduced, cultural probes had been adopted in problematic ways and within contexts seemingly ill-suited for what were the original intentions behind this strategy. Indeed, they wrote,

there has been a strong tendency to rationalize the Probes. People seem unsatisfied with the playful, subjective approach embodied by the original Probes, and so design theirs to ask specific questions and produce comprehensible results. They summarize the results, analyse them, even use them to produce requirements analyses.\(^{112}\)

This obsession with scientific rationalisation of participants’ encounters with these artefacts, Gaver and colleagues argued, ‘misses the point of the Probes’, since these instead ‘embod[y] an approach to design that recognizes and embraces the notion that knowledge has limits’.\(^{113}\) For a discipline and practice that – whether in pursuit of practical efficiency, of civic engagement, of disembodied aesthetic contemplation, or of thought-provoking dystopianism – seems predominantly traversed by a fascination with decision-making, with plots and assertions of various ilks, the ‘purposely uncontrolled and uncontrollable approach’\(^{114}\) that Gaver and his colleagues describe has some truly radical potential. A potential that, if it were to be taken to its most extreme conclusions and even beyond the IRS’s important contribution, could completely overthrow the “scientific appropriation” that the authors warn us about. Indeed, where the latter is ‘often justified as “taking full advantage of the Probes’ potential”, as if, by not analysing the results of our original Probes, we had let valuable information slip away’,\(^{115}\) the most subversive move is perhaps not so much given by a rejection of cold explanatory objectivity in favour of ‘empathetically’ ‘subjective interpretation’,\(^{116}\) as Gaver and colleagues propose. Which is to say, invoking Moten, that ‘rather than grasping over value’,\(^{117}\) albeit of a different kind, what we might want to do is to instead ‘structure a sociality centred on the


\(^{113}\) Ibid.

\(^{114}\) Ibid., 54.

\(^{115}\) Ibid., 53.

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 55.

invaluable’.\textsuperscript{118} As we will eventually discuss in chapters 3, 4, and particularly 5, it is precisely an incremental practice of “letting valuable information slip away” – a ‘ruthless critique of value’\textsuperscript{119} and outright disavowal of systems of valorisation altogether (with all difficulties that this clearly entails) – that might be able to turn design practice into a vector of conspiratorial use. A use beyond functionality, beyond interpretation, beyond capture, beyond plots.

\section*{2.2 Ensemble}

\subsection*{2.2.1 Terminology: the problem with “practice”}

Having outlined the trajectory of practice from which the intervention proposed here emerges, we should now begin to establish how this research has grappled with the combination of multiple registers of inquiry into a single methodological ensemble. It would seem important to start by providing some basic terminological and procedural coordinates, devoting some attention to the uneasy relation between “theory” and “practice” in academic research (but more generally in any form of political intervention) – a motif to which we will return toward the end of the thesis. Indeed, while this investigation was initially conceived as “practice-based research” – in accordance with the functional vagueness of standard academic lexicon – it soon became clear that the tension between conceptual and studio work could not have been left unexamined. If we are to understand the mutating roles played by these elements in their joint contribution to the progression of this study, we might want to start by taking a look at some of the ways in which the inclusion of “creative” work within research projects has been described in the literature, generally under the problematically generic banner of “practice”.

A first, common taxonomy proposes that “practice-related” research generally falls into one of two broad categories, being classifiable as either practice-based or practice-led. While acknowledging that these terms ‘are often

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 29.
used interchangeably’, Linda Candy insists on setting the two apart. Candy’s analysis essentially constructs research as the sum of two constituent parts: process and outcome – the former being the inquiry itself in its unfolding and the latter being the inquiry’s contribution to knowledge. It is only in practice-based research, she contends, that the outcomes of a creative “practical” process are included as ‘the basis of the contribution’ (i.e. the outcome). Maarit Mäkelä and her colleagues have similarly been concerned with the distinction between practice-based and practice-led research. What their studies describe as practice-led is a form of inquiry where practice operates primarily as a generative method rather than an output, as a means more so than an end: that is to say, practice creates the original content upon which the researcher critically reflects. Conversely, practice-based research is claimed to conceive practice as an exemplification and or validation of an already given theoretical framework. In each case these perspectives, both presenting a number of internal contradictions in their distinctions between the two categories, are thus concerned with defining how “practice” fits into a research project.

A second and more compelling articulation can be found in the work of Christopher Frayling, still influential some twenty-five years on. Frayling identifies three broad “attitudes” in practice-related research, which can be conducted into, through or for practice. In Frayling’s terms, research into art and design is quite simply defined as a research project that takes art or design as the subject of the investigation. This mode of research, as Mäkelä and colleagues note, is ‘traditional theoretical research’; as such, it does not include actual “studio work” as a means of conducting research nor as the outcome of the research – it is research about practice. Research through art and design, on the other hand, does involve studio work as a medium adopted in the formulation and/or communication of new knowledge. Finally, Frayling discusses the ‘thorny’

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121 Ibid., 1.
123 Christopher Frayling, ‘Research in Art and Design’ (London: Royal College of Art, 1993), 5.
research for art and design as a form of inquiry ‘where the end product is an artefact – where the thinking is, so to speak, embodied in the artefact’. In other words, research for practice could be interpreted as a form of applied research. It is a theoretical or archive-based inquiry informing, or perhaps leading to a practical outcome: a research activity that gathers foundational “reference material” for practice. Frayling ends up suggesting that “research for practice” is a rather controversial mode of study, since it is unclear why would people ‘want to call it research with a big “r” at all’, beyond the strategic attempt to attract valuable institutional funding. In any case, what we can infer from Frayling’s taxonomy is a concern that in many ways reverses that of Candy and Mäkelä: namely, it indicates an interest in how research relates to creative practice.

This brief analysis should show that, as Desmond Bell and Rod Stoneman note, ‘[w]hile practice-based research towards a doctorate [...] has been established now for over twenty years’ the relationship between “theory” and “practice” remains one of the ‘recurring and unresolved debates around this mode of scholarship’. Ultimately, however one might wish to approach it, it is the very articulation of practice and theory into a dichotomy that seems troublesome in and of itself, it being constructed by exploiting the vagueness of these two terms. What perhaps represents the biggest problem is the specific understanding of what Practice – practice as such – is, as well as the way in which this category is seemingly invoked in explicit opposition to that of research, itself intended as some sort of “extra” added to design or artistic work. In the taxonomies encountered above, we can see practice being implicitly constituted as the sum of two distinct parts: process and outcome – the former being intended as the designer’s (or artist’s) activity, the latter as some form of product emerging through such an activity. We could intend these two “moments” of practice as the making and the made.

125 Frayling, ‘Research in Art and Design’, 5.
126 Ibid.
128 Manning, The Minor Gesture, 27.
Building on this perspective, according to the above classifications, practice-related research focuses on either of these discrete moments (or even on both but still as separate). The fact that practice is largely equated to making and made is far from insignificant. Frayling himself has acknowledged and criticised narrow apprehensions of practice as limited to orthodox artistic activity, to a particular type of “making” and related “made”. Indeed, he notes, ‘[r]esearch is a practice, writing is a practice, doing science is a practice, doing design is a practice’. Still, while Frayling’s remark rightly emphasises the hazy threshold separating the activities that could and those that could not be understood as practice, it perhaps falls short of attending to another potential issue. Whether we deal with the making of artefacts (i.e. “doing design”) or any other activity listed by Frayling, his analysis seems to assume that the realm of practice ends with the completion of such processes on the part of the researcher-practitioner as the “creator”. Of course, the generative processuality of making and the knowledge somewhat embedded in what is made routinely contribute to research or represent the outcome of a research activity. However, other explorations exist – this project decidedly being one – that seek to extend their focus beyond the remit of the researcher-practitioner, and their concerns beyond making and made in and of themselves, in order to bring to the fore the forms of practice that such making and made enable – in our case, practices of use. When the latter is the case, in keeping with the terminology discussed earlier on, both making and made become of interest to the extent that they create infrastructural conditions for certain modes of sociality: which is to say, insofar as they enable forms of collective action.

This way, the tangible outputs of making-based studio work – the made in the form of material experiments, prototypes, and machines – might be intended as a set of props. Props that, however, have barely anything in common with those encountered earlier on while discussing Dunne and Raby’s brand of CSD: ‘in contrast to the “fictional truths” of children’s props’, the two authors claim in their latest book, ‘speculative design props are intended not to mimic reality or

allow us to play act but to entertain new ideas’. Conversely, if we consider what has been made throughout this exploration as props, we should instead imagine something akin to what discussed by Moten, when reflecting on conceptual work. Directly inspired by his kids’ unruly handling of toys, Moten argues that, with props,

what’s most important is that the thing is put in play. What’s most important about play is the interaction. [...] In the end, it’s the new way of being together and thinking together that’s important, and not the tool, not the prop. Or, the prop is important only insofar as it allows you to enter [a world]; but once you are there, it’s the relation and the activity that’s really what you want to emphasise.

Likewise, the props that have been made throughout this research’s experimental making have acquired significance within the inquiry because of the peculiar way in which they constitute a material infrastructure for certain modalities of social interaction.

Given the terminological hurdles we have run into up to this point, it would be fair to align with Darren Newbury’s claim that the ‘institutionalization of the division between reflection and action, theory and practice, has always been of dubious worth, and should be rejected’. As a consequence, it is here proposed a strategic and outright dismissal of this neat dichotomisation, so as to frame this research’s methodology outside of debates over the “practice-theory divide”. Yet, rather than simply abandoning the loaded terms “practice” and “theory” as such, we will opt instead for a deliberate jumbling of their relation, embracing the productive tension generated by the encounter of multiple registers of inquiry – not unlike Manning’s variant of “research-creation”, to be addressed towards the end of this chapter. Three such registers have been identified throughout this study, which will be hesitantly described (not defined!) as Tangible Theory, Intangible Practice, and Enactment. We should introduce each in turn, before we can reflect on their interplay.

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130 Dunne and Raby, Speculative Everything, 92.
131 Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 106 (emphasis added).
2.2.2 Register 1 // Tangible Theory

The first register, Tangible Theory, essentially encompasses various forms of prototype and prop making, as well as more open-ended forms of materials exploration. Taking a broad interest in systems of motion and transformation as its starting point, this element is neither expression nor validation of an existing theoretical framework. That is to say, what we are here calling Tangible Theory did not involve the mere extraction and transferral of concepts from a theoretical plane to a pragmatic one: it was not a question of “applying theory”, so to speak – of the mere execution of a making plan. Rather, it names a way of theorising via different means. A material-based theorising, as it were, tasked with the creation of several operational propositions: each opening up possible scenarios of use and interaction, each endowed with an intellectuality independent from its linguistic intelligibility.

The Tangible Theory register has progressed through a series of successive phases. The first such phase served to construct a certain material and aesthetic lexicon needed for this peculiar mode of thinking to develop. This has involved a process of observation and visual research. First, of existing design projects – some of which have been discussed in the first half of this chapter – that would resonate with the ideas emerging throughout the inquiry: these were interpreted against what had or had not been said about them, mostly by the creators themselves. Then, of the multiple ways in which mundane products transform through use: an opening padlock, a burning matchstick, a crumpled sheet of aluminium foil, an inflated balloon and so on. Interestingly, while initially searching for particular features in the artefacts observed that could help evaluate a set of theoretical assumptions, such a preoccupation gradually waned. This led, on one hand, to a dwindling concern with artefacts in and of themselves, in how objects would embody critique, in a Dunne and Raby-esque way; and, conversely, to a growing attention to the eventfulness of acts of use, to embodied and motional forms of social relations. That is, to material dialogues physically established between people and things, as well as between people
through things. This series of observations provided an invaluable theoretical contribution, prior to a series of operational tactics directly applicable in “practice”, in that it produced reflections that fed back into and indeed inspired the rearrangement of the whole terrain of inquiry.

This phase was followed by a first studio-based making activity, involving rather exploratory material tests and again pivoting around processes of structural and aesthetic transformation. The different modes of transformation explored through these tests were either reversible or irreversible; they were imagined as either resulting from the use of a hypothetical practical function or a precondition in order to access such a function. More than anything else, this experimental stage was a tentative effort of tangible utterance by means of playful, improvisational combinations of surfaces and various materials [Fig.18].

Fig. 18: Giovanni Marmont, Balloon experiment, 2017

We could perhaps understand this initial phase of making in terms of a warm-up process: a “tuning session” preceding and preparing the articulation of a more coherent, “formal” material orchestration. Yet, thinking again through Moten, the deliberate “informality” that these tests and experiments represented is one that
was not so much eradicated by successive formalisation, but out of which “form” itself necessarily had to emerge\textsuperscript{133} – a perspective somewhat redolent of other twentieth century currents such as \textit{Art Informel}.

The form that began to emerge from the informality of these experiments was a set of mock-ups and sketches, all riffs on the same theme of collective use because all invited the simultaneous interaction of two or more “users”. What the iterative development of these maquettes brought to the fore was a growing interest in mutual interference, reciprocity, hesitations, and coimplication at work between users via artefacts. A number of situations of use were then sketched, wherein the concurrent interaction of multiple users with a “reactive” structure would magnify the effect that they would have on one another’s field of action – hence following a principle akin to that of a common seesaw. After having investigated the rudiments of mechanical motion through the construction of several test-samples of varying complexity \textit{[Fig.19]}, the Tangible Theory, now equipped with sufficient “operational vocabulary”, entered a new and more focused phase of prototype making.

\textbf{Fig. 19:} Giovanni Marmont, \textit{Mechanical motion experiment, 2017}

\textsuperscript{133} Harney and Moten, \textit{The Undercommons}, 128–9.
This phase, drawing inspiration from kinetic art and various other examples of non-electronically assisted transformation, eventually culminated with the construction of a “kinetic machine” – to be discussed in detail in Chapter 5. One aspect that, however, might be worth mentioning here is that a number of preliminary visual schematisations, charting the type of reciprocal motion to be enabled by the machine, ended up revealing some significant criticalities. Indeed, these “if-then” flow-charts – known in engineering jargon as “functional specifications”, somewhat ironically considering our context – highlighted how certain articulations of the desired motion inspired by previous tests were running the risk of leading to forms of reward-laden games. Which would mean, for those interacting with and through these artefacts, entering a realm of utter instrumentality by promoting goal-oriented acts of use – something clearly far from what was hoped for.

2.2.3 Register 2 // Intangible Practice

Meanwhile – and this “meanwhile” is crucial methodologically speaking, as we will see in due course – the research also progressed through a second register involving another kind of “practice”: namely, what Manning (via Deleuze) describes as a ‘practice of concepts’.134 Just as the term Tangible Theory was meant to express the inherent intellectuality of material-based forms of “practice”, so the denominator Intangible Practice is here adopted as a way of recognising the “practicality” of abstract theorisation, here approached as ‘a creative process’135 in its own right. The task of this particular “craft” has thus been that of sculpting conceptual propositions and setting these in motion, as it were, so that they could become generative of new processes by getting manipulated, displaced, replaced, discarded, translated, (re)interpreted and (re)contextualised, paired and decoupled, made to improvise different roles while interacting with one another. In other words, the “intangible props” arising from this activity did not serve the purpose of refining a theoretical framework, with

135 Ibid., 11.
the intention of advancing the best assessment or most accurate reading of this or that theorist’s work. That is, the Intangible Practice does not aspire to be a “critical” practice: one wishing to indicate the most suitable path, to articulate a more appropriate or meaningful perspective on such and such issue. One that, as anthropologist David Scott puts it, ‘lays hold of a problem or a state of affairs and subjects it to an authoritative inquiry’;\textsuperscript{136} one that, in the always illuminating words of Montgomery and bergman, ‘is supposed to reveal the limits of current struggles, discover the mistakes and flawed ways of doing or thinking’ so as to ‘generate positions defined in opposition to others’.\textsuperscript{137}

This distance that the Intangible Practice wishes to establish from works of critique is important. Not least because of the way in which the very notion of “critique” has been invoked by both supporters and detractors of CSD practices, resulting in noxious brawls of mutual debunking and endless, exhausting, increasingly sophisticated yet increasingly stifling cycles of (sub-)disciplinary introspection.\textsuperscript{138} A fatigue with the ways of critique shall not be mistaken for an exhortation to accept anything, to respect any position as equally “valid” and “be nice to each other”. Moten is once again edifying in his repudiation of the “critical academic”: the ‘reduction of critique to debunking’, he notes, has led academics to ‘spend a whole lot of time thinking about stuff that they don’t want to do, thinking about stuff that they don’t want to be, rather than beginning with, and acting out, what they want’.\textsuperscript{139} Not only can critical scholarship thus become a fatal impediment to the elaboration of ways of being, thinking, writing, and doing otherwise: it is also often the expression of what Scott describes as ‘a solitary endeavor, the exercise of a singular, sovereign, and penetrating mind excavating the root of ills’.\textsuperscript{140} Precisely due to this character, Scott asserts that

\begin{itemize}
  \item it has proved difficult for critique to release itself from a certain formation and therefore to unlearn its will to power, its presumption of truth telling, its
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{136} Scott, ‘Preface’, ix.
\textsuperscript{137} Montgomery and bergman, Joyful Militancy, 26 (emphasis added).
\textsuperscript{139} Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 120-1.
\textsuperscript{140} Scott, ‘Preface’, ix.
suspicion of narrative, its masculinist and imperial arrogance, its narcissistic drive to hear the sound of its own voice.\textsuperscript{141}

What we encounter if we follow the anthropologist’s argument a little further demands consideration here, as he turns to none other than our journey’s “compass”: friendship. In contrast to critique’s fundamentally individualist intellectual vehemence, Scott proposes that friendship might invite us to consider an alternative model of dissenting thinking, one that is inherently \textit{dialogical} and \textit{collaborative} and one that works less in the direction of truth than of \textit{clarification}, a kind of sorting out of paths and perspectives and assumptions.\textsuperscript{142}

Because endowed with this particular theoretical bearing, the Intangible Practice has moved neither towards a set destination nor, more broadly speaking, in a linear fashion, as if gaining some kind of evidence along the way. It has instead grown dynamically through something that we might describe, with the help of a famous botanical metaphor introduced by Deleuze and Guattari, as a form of “rhizomatic” study. In what is arguably their magnum opus, \textit{A Thousand Plateaus} (1987), the two philosophers resort to the figure of the rhizome in order to discuss issues of structure, or seeming lack thereof, in relation to the most disparate contexts – including the book itself. A rhizome, such as various kinds of tuber (e.g. ginger) or weed, is a ‘subterranean stem [that] is absolutely different from roots and radicles’.\textsuperscript{143} Indeed, in contrast to root-trees, which present a certain unitary order and logical development from inception, Deleuze and Guattari explain that ‘any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other’\textsuperscript{144} and therefore the latter ‘has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (\textit{milieu}) from which it grows and from which it overspills’.\textsuperscript{145} This illustrative metaphor allows Deleuze and Guattari to discuss how a dynamic, heterogeneous assemblage of elements ‘necessarily changes in nature as it

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{143} Deleuze and Guattari, \textit{A Thousand Plateaus}, 5.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 22.
expands its connections’. Likewise, this research has continuously reassessed and refined the very set of issues at stake: not exactly through simple intuition as much as by drawing meaningful connections emerging within a constellation of new as well as existing concepts, perspectives, practices, and experiences.

It is also in this sense, then, that the Intangible Practice has less to do with critique than it does with a mode of theorising that Montgomery and bergman call instead “affirmative”: theory, they suggest, is affirmative when it ‘elaborate[s] on something people already intuit or sense’ by ‘explor[ing] connections and ask[ing] open-ended questions’, by looking for enabling complicities rather than obstructive flaws. Which is to say, by looking for what can be done with a text rather than what cannot; and by trying to express what we are for prior to what we are against. When theoretical work is approached in this manner, Montgomery and bergman propose that we are participating in something that ‘can celebrate and inspire, [something that] can move’.

Now, because what the Intangible Practice is ‘after is not a new critique or new position, but a process’, it engages with conceptual work as a form of creative compositional poetics. In this respect, this intangible register is heavily inspired by and indebted to, amongst others, the collaborative theoretical lyricism of Harney and Moten as well as that of Manning and Massumi – traces of which will certainly be spotted throughout this thesis – hopefully without coming across as crass parroting. The way these authors elaborate on their poetic prose and use of concepts can be illustrative here. Harney, for instance, describes his approach to theory as a form of ‘hacking concepts and squatting terms’: that is to say, as some sort of springboard that can serve to unlock new ways of thinking and moving. He then goes on to explain that what might be perceived as a repetitive style, due to his frequent revisions and rephrasing of the same ideas, actually functions as a deliberate effort to ‘show that [he is] playing with something rather than that it’s finished’. If intended in this way, theoretical

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146 Ibid., 7.
147 Montgomery and bergman, Joyful Militancy, 27.
148 Ibid.
149 Ibid., 28.
150 Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 105.
151 Ibid., 107.
writing can thus appear akin to the construction of a polyhedron: every little twist of perspective will reveal something new. On the other hand, however, a poetic approach to theory does not need to function solely as a practice of unleashing. Massumi points out that, within the context of his and Manning’s events planning with their *SenseLab*,

Naming is a technique for fixing the procedures, in the sense that you fix a compound. It gives you a practical handle on what region of potential you’ve collectively brought to provisional expression, and holds it together in a way that you can do things with.\(^\text{152}\)

This, then is the process that the Intangible Practice strived to pursue: nourishing a theory that would be affirmative and poetic, that would both open up paths for exploration and help pin ideas down so that we can act upon them in specific ways, so that stuff might be done with them. The abundant use of concepts throughout the chapters that follow is then to be intended as the gradual orchestration of a certain kind of “chorality”, whereby each new “voice” serves the purpose of intensifying the working of another, while at the same time modulating their combined effect.

### 2.2.4 Register 3 // Enactment

The last register contributing to this research’s methodological triptych is perhaps the most complex to discuss: for this reason, an entire chapter (Chapter 5) is dedicated to it. Still, a few preliminary notes about its nature and intent are in order, starting by defining the preoccupation that this element has with processes of collective experimentation. We might begin to account for what will henceforth be termed *Enactment* by saying that this register sought to deliberately construct a situation of use which would bring together a multiplicity of bodies, both human and not, under particular circumstances and as an exploration of affectivity. The kinetic machine brought about through the Tangible Theory element was (literally) used as material infrastructure around

\(^{152}\) Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, v70.
which a collective event was organised. The mediating action of the contraption, through the clumsy “dance” of use that this would enable, was set to render phenomena of mutual interference, reciprocity and motional coimplication “operatively intelligible”: that is to say, to magnify them to the point of becoming bodily perceptible beneath, and in fact regardless of, any form of rational evaluation. This means that what mattered was adamantly not to enable some bogus moment of consciousness-raising, snapping supposedly dazed people into awareness: rather, the point was to collectively and bodily act out and feel a sociality beyond the logic of self-possession.

In many ways, this register of inquiry can be seen to represent a coming together of the other two elements by means of their collective activation, their being “put in play”, in keeping with Moten’s earlier phrasing. As a more thorough discussion in Chapter 5 will explain, this “putting in play” – this activation – shall not be mistaken for a mode of applying “findings”, or a mere demonstrative representation of a resolved outcome – a grand finale, so to speak. Nor, conversely, was it meant to produce data to be then analysed or exploited, perhaps for an additional designing phase (although we will see that some issues emerge in this respect). Which is to say that the use of the machine was in no way part of an ethnographic study (i.e. the study of “participants” to be understood) nor of a usability test of some sort (i.e. the study of a machine to be improved). Rather, this operation must be intended as yet another exploratory stage, only more explicitly and playfully collective this time. Anticipating the trajectory taken in Chapter 4, then, it was a study with, not of.

When suggesting, as we have done above, that the Enactment involved the “deliberate construction of a situation”, echoes of French avant-garde group Situationist International (SI) are of course unmistakable, and indeed the influence of their work will be discussed at various points in this thesis. For now, we should note that, similarly to what proposed by the SI, the act of use as a constructed situation orchestrated through the Enactment was intended to be a “lived”, embodied, dynamic event, the outcome of which [...] was not knowable
in advance of its particular manifestations’. In fact, we will see in due course that the hope for this register was precisely that of challenging the sway of outcomes and results altogether. Indeed, in keeping with the Intangible Practice’s distance from critique, the Enactment too was less concerned with determining ‘a new direction for movements’ than it was in experimenting with ‘the process of movement itself’. The ethos described above clearly begs a number of important questions to do with the politics of participation. Again, although some of these issues are addressed in Chapter 5, given this intervention’s context examined in this chapter it might be helpful spending a few words here on participatory approaches to design practice.

Whether under the guise of Participatory Design, Collaborative Design, Co-Design or other banners, the remarkable surge over the past few decades of research projects revolving around the involvement of potential “end-users”, constituencies of various kinds, or other external contributors in design processes can hardly be overstated. Not only countless publications – some of which already mentioned – but even whole conferences, edited handbooks, and academic journals have been entirely dedicated to the subject. McCarthy and Wright have recently presented a compelling review (albeit mostly from a HCI perspective) of some of the many ways in which design projects come to include various modes of participation. Indeed, the primary interest underpinning the two authors’ methodical assessment seems to be that of showing how,

Although there is coherence in the category of participatory projects, it should not be imagined as referring to a homogeneous flat space in which all projects operate at the same level, on the same topics and issues, with the same interests.

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154 Montgomery and bergman, Joyful Militancy, 28.
156 McCarthy and Wright, Taking [A]part, 32.
It is particularly on the latter point – the question of interests – that we should reflect here. Indeed, if this research is extremely reluctant to adopt the term “participation”, this is because fetishizing and accepting this mode of practice as something intrinsically positive has given rise to numerous pernicious endeavours, whether intentionally or not. Irrespective of designers’ and artists’ intentions, as McCarthy and Wright amongst others warn, not only can participation quickly turn into an artificial impulse resulting in nothing more than institutionalised tokenism:157 many critics (particularly from the standpoint of artistic discourses)158 have also abundantly pointed out that beneath a surface of pseudo-democratic posture, ostensibly geared toward redistributions of agency, often lie poorly camouflaged neoliberal operations. It is difficult to ignore how, in the context of the so-called new economy, participation and collaboration have become mantras underpinning all sorts of ‘entrepreneurial […] DIY, hyper-capitalist collectivism159 that are primarily targeted at the co-creation of “value” and optimisation of profits.160 This type of ‘political cooption’161 – frequently trading on tropes of user- or community-driven “innovation” and “creativity” – ultimately represents either a blatant request of ‘contribution from participants in the form of unpaid labour, […] transferring some of the costs of the project to their beneficiaries’,162 or even more indirect and subtle forms of control, manipulation, and indoctrination under the pretence of inclusion and civic empowerment.163 Surely we do not need to turn again to Hartman’s already cited, invaluable work in order to understand how processes of ameliorative emancipation recurrently function to conceal a merely “cosmetic”164 shift in the nature of systemic oppression.

157 Ibid., 150.
159 Shukaitis, Imaginal Machines, 110.
162 Ibid.
163 Ibid., 5.
164 See: Bishop, Artificial Hells, 13.
As already indicated earlier in the chapter, however, in other less cynical cases what drives designers and research teams to welcome external “players” into a creative process appears to be genuine curiosity and an honest commitment to difference. In the attempt not to silence the voices of those ultimately affected by what is being designed, some practitioners vow to design with rather than for people. McCarthy and Wright suggest that, at its best, this participatory goodwill can find expression through the scaffolding, gathering, and particularly recognition of already existing voices. These are brought together in the effort of collectively exploring open-ended possibilities for relational practices, rather than ‘to capture lived experience [...] and reduce it to design requirements’. Perhaps unsurprisingly though, many such approaches still bear the gloating mark of social democratic reformism. Ezio Manzini, a foremost figure in design research milieus, offers a perfect example of this attitude when he advocates a practice of participatory design for ‘social innovation’ that would be ‘based on a renewed pact between citizens and the state’. The itch to relapse into the previously shunned mode of critical scholarship is strong here...

Now, regardless of intentions and attitudes, what most approaches to participation, collaboration and co-creation through design practice share seems to be the determination ‘to ensure that existing skills could be made a resource in the design process’. Or, in other words, the wish of capitalising – not necessarily or directly in financial terms – on the insight and skills provided by the involvement of a plurality of perspectives so as to arrive at a better, refined, fairer, improved result. Even McCarthy and Wright’s more cautious engagement with the politics of participation does not inhibit them from enthusiastically referring to participatory practices as being driven by an ‘exploitation of

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166 Ibid., 154.
167 Ibid., 20.
differences'. Of course, that may simply be a case of clumsy wording, but it might also be indicative of the underlying rhetoric of “improvement” that so habitually begets and justifies participation\textsuperscript{171} – whether in service of capital or of democracy (not that the two are antithetical). That is, much like the approach taken by Gaver and colleagues that we encountered earlier in the chapter, participation is seen almost without fail as something “valuable” \textit{because} something can be learnt, something can be refined, some-thing or indeed someone can be understood.\textsuperscript{172} When this is the ethos, the emphasis inevitably remains anchored to whatever is considered to be the \textit{outcome} brought about by a collective process: namely, a product, an environment, a service, some kind of knowledge, or, more broadly speaking, a solution to a problem. In other words, these are “in-order-to” collaborations, either informing a subsequent design phase or whereby the act of participating and the result of that very participation can be at least distinguished. Participation is, so to speak, a means to an end.

Clearly, it would be disingenuous to suggest that this kind of goal-oriented collaboration is invariably harmful. In fact, the caring, attentive, and inclusive practices described for example by McCarthy and Wright are commendable. Still, it is important to note that, when it comes to the Enactment, this is not what this research is interested in. Indeed, this project would sit rather uncomfortably in the company of most takes on participation mentioned above. Because it is a particular and situational ‘new set of relations’\textsuperscript{173} that is in focus in the Enactment, the practice of sociality that is expressed through it does not strive for additional legitimacy other than itself. That is, neither improvement of the kinetic machine nor some sort of mutual \textit{understanding} needed to result from the construction of this situation of use. As addressed in more depth in later chapters, the “participation” that the Enactment wished to choreograph was one that would hopefully evade as much as possible the paradigm of production – of productivity. Which is to say that the Enactment wished to be not even an “end

\textsuperscript{170} McCarthy and Wright, \textit{Taking [A]part}, 20.
\textsuperscript{171} See: ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{173} Harney and Moten, \textit{The Undercommons}, 106.
in itself”, but more appropriately something that Agamben has famously described as a ‘means without end’.174

2.2.5 Multivocality

Having proposed three registers on which this investigation operates, we should now have a better sense of the “idioms” that the research has moved across and brought together: not only linguistic (whether written or oral), but also material and kinetic. The challenge, however, is now that of clarifying the way in which these lexicons have intersected and jointly contributed to the unfolding of a single “project”. That is to say, we must understand how they have evolved and informed one another, how their relationship has morphed over time into a much more nuanced one than that proposed by the taxonomies encountered earlier on. What articulations such as those of Candy, Mäkelä, and Frayling present is essentially a linear development: either theory leads to design work or design work leads to theory; either a stock of knowledge is collected and then applied in practice or practice is itself generative of a theoretical construction. Even when an investigation is conceived as an iterative or “circular” process (something quite popular amongst design researchers), this normally indicates a series of sequential stages, one leading to the next in an orderly fashion. Conversely, the three elements at work here are not insular, self-contained, successive phases but rather a form of polyphony or ‘multivocality’.175 In other words, these registers have not lead one to another: they have lead one another through something of a permeable relationship, growing and being reconfigured throughout the study. For the most part these components – particularly the first two – shall thus be understood as concurrent and tightly combined parts, continuously inspiring and reshaping each other. Frustratingly, translating such simultaneity within this thesis is an effort to some extent doomed from inception given that, whatever the chosen structure, certain considerations will inevitably precede others, thus giving an impression of sequentiality. For example,

175 See: Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 136.
regardless of whether the kinetic machine is presented before or after (as is currently the case) the conceptual reconfiguration of use in Chapter 4, either way this will easily suggest that the same order applies to the development of these two activities. A reading of this kind cannot be discouraged more emphatically.

Within the ensemble, the Tangible Theory not only has worked toward the construction of the kinetic machine to be used during the Enactment: it has also helped to simultaneously unpack and generate theoretically rich ideas by identifying meaningful connection emerging throughout the rhizomatic study of the Intangible Practice. This way, in turn, the Intangible Practice has not simply provided operational coordinates for the Tangible Theory and Enactment elements, but at the same time has been “directed” by these in learning what to read and how to read it, in learning what to make of the concepts encountered by means of the slight shifts of attention suggested by the other two registers. The Enactment, although having admittedly begun at a later stage, during its various phases has also undoubtedly cast new light on some of the tangible and intangible material being developed, as well as on the nature of their interplay.

Which is why – loosely inspired by Moten’s elaboration on structure, tonality, and jazz improvisation in his *In The Break* 176 – the musical metaphor of the ensemble might serve us well here. Indeed, just as jazz ensembles are composed of several different yet mutually dependent “voices” that can only ever work together, the three elements presented here can neither function separately nor as a monolithic, unitary whole. An ensemble, Moten suggests, is not defined through ‘the distinction between the elements of the structure’ 177 but precisely through the irresolvable tension between singularity and totality. The purpose of describing the registers presented above as constitutive of a tripartite ensemble, then, is that of denying not the specificity of each singular element but their independence from one another. The point, in other words, is finding a way of reorganising them, so as to render the complexity of their interplay but doing so in a way that could ‘activate [the research’s] modalities of thought, its rhythms, in

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176 E.g. see: Moten, *In the Break*, 89.
177 Ibid., 55.
a new concertation’.\textsuperscript{178} Where Candy and Mäkelä focus on how “practice” fits into a research project, and Frayling on how research relates to “practice”, what we have essentially is a fulcrum around which comes to gravitate a subsidiary element. The question is: what new concertation would be possible for a project that seeks neither to bring theory closer to practice as a form of applied research, nor, conversely, to bring practice closer to theory in the sense of developing a theory of practice?\textsuperscript{179} What new concertation is made available by the experimentation with a “liminal” inquiry that strives to blur the very threshold between otherwise distinct phases of conceptualisation and action? If a multivocal methodological articulation were to be ‘decentralised’,\textsuperscript{180} relieved of the hierarchisation of its elements, what we would get can perhaps be illustrated by Manning’s appropriation of the term research-creation.

Adopted in Canadian institutions to describe approaches to research that combine ‘a creative, usually artistic contribution, and a written, more theoretical or philosophical one’, Manning contends that the term research-creation has been introduced primarily as ‘a funding category’ rather than as ‘a conceptual approach’ to academic work.\textsuperscript{181} And yet, if we shift the emphasis away from the two terms of this relationship and place it instead on their coexistence – on the hyphen that links the elements – Manning proposes that this classification can do ‘much more than what the funding agencies had in store for it: it generates new forms of experience; [...] it generates forms of knowledge that are extralinguistic’.\textsuperscript{182} Indeed, by paying attention to the ‘coming-into-relation of difference’\textsuperscript{183} – the difference between multiple registers of investigation – and indeed celebrating rather than diluting its complexity and heterogeneity, research-creation can open up ‘forms and forces of intellectuality that cut across normative accounts of what it means to know’.\textsuperscript{184} Further, Manning notes

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\textsuperscript{178} Manning and Massumi, Thought in the Act, ix.
\textsuperscript{180} Moten, In the Break, 55.
\textsuperscript{181} Manning, The Minor Gesture, 11.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 27.
\end{flushleft}
something else that is of great significance to this study: namely, the inherently collective nature of research-creation projects. ‘[C]ollective’, she claims ‘not because they are operated upon by several people, but because they make apparent, in the [“hyphenated”] way they come to a problem, that knowledge at its core is collective’.185 Tangible Theory, Intangible Practice, and Enactment thus represent one attempt at doing justice to the hyphen bringing them together differentially, coimplicating and complicating one another, and which orchestrates their ensemblic interplay.

185 Ibid., 13.
3. Technics

How do we contest an order that isn’t articulated in language, that is constructed step by step and wordlessly? An order that is embodied in the very objects of everyday life. An order whose political constitution is its material constitution. An order that is revealed [...] in the silence of optimal performance.

Invisible Committee, To Our Friends, 2015 [2014]: 86

Since this research, due to its attention to use, in many ways deals with complex encounters between “persons” and “things” – or, perhaps more appropriately, their entanglement – we shall begin by addressing the highly contentious question of technology. This is a question that the Invisible Committee suggests to still represent ‘a blind spot for revolutionary movements’. And that is because, they propose, ‘[o]bsessed as we are with a political idea of the revolution, we have neglected its technical dimension’. If we look past the committee’s flippant tone and frequent recourse to sweeping statements such as the one above, these observations should serve to convey the urgency of asking again a number of questions. What does it mean to think and act together technologically? Are we becoming increasingly shackled by technology, as we supposedly fail to dominate the tools we surround ourselves with, or is the relationship between “the human” and “the technological”, in fact, much knottier than what any master-slave trope might suggest? These are some of the issues we will be taking up in this chapter, as a way of preparing the ground for the re-articulation of use that will follow in Chapter 4, and which have also informed the research’s general approach to making.

1 Whenever these two terms have been used for simplicity, we should keep in mind the obvious inaccuracies that both express.
2 Invisible Committee, To Our Friends, 120.
3 Ibid., 95.
Within this context, our exploration will commence with the introduction of an “expansive” understanding of technological acting as not superficially limited to the interaction with digital technology, in order to then reject the idea that something of a “pre-technological” or “non-technological” human being has existed or could exist. As a way of problematizing clear-cut distinctions between human and technology, which goes hand-in-hand with the project of asserting individuals’ wholeness and ontological independence discussed in Chapter 1, we will turn here to the work of French philosopher Bernard Stiegler. Stiegler has built on the thought of Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Gilbert Simondon (among others) in order to formulate his particular understanding of “originary technicity”: the human’s always-already technical encounter with the world. Our analysis will then pause to reflect more carefully on some of the challenges posed by this originary bond between persons and things. This analysis will mostly hinge upon a reading of Heidegger’s highly influential work on technology, to which Stiegler’s thought is something of a response. Two key concepts introduced by the German philosopher throughout his later work will thus be examined: the notions of Gestell and Gelassenheit. We will see that these name respectively technology’s inherent danger – a totalising “unconcealment” of the world as mere resources to be exploited – and what is often understood as a possible gateway from it – in the form of an “open” mode of thinking, void of calculative demands towards what is encountered. Suggesting that a transition from Gestell to Gelassenheit needs not be intended as an exclusively metaphysical shift (as some have argued) we will consider how a different way of thinking technicity should be assisted by, rather than follow or precede, a different way of acting, of doing. It will then be proposed that this emphasis on transformative practice, as a re-programming of technicity, could be productively supplemented by Foucault’s analysis of what he called technologies (or practices) of the Self. Drawing the chapter to a close, Foucault will help us define the political significance of such an intervention into technical action and, ultimately, into the realm of use.

It is paramount to clarify a couple of things now: first, the order in which we will encounter the work of Stiegler and Heidegger, and, second, the relation
established here between Heidegger and Foucault. Although it might seem somewhat odd to start with Stiegler and then turn to Heidegger, given that the former is responding to and further elaborating the work of the latter, this sequence serves a purpose. That is, the aim is that of setting up Stiegler’s originary technicity as our horizon, so that we will arguably be better positioned to read what Heidegger had to say about technological acting from a perspective that can suit the progress of the current argument. This can thus be understood as the establishment of a claim – i.e. the human and the technological being ultimately one and the same – before we can “zoom in”, so to speak, and inspect more closely where such a claim takes our interpretation of Heidegger’s ruminations on technology and instrumentality. Indeed, the German philosopher addresses the latter aspect with particular lucidity and proposes conceptual handles that would be very useful to recover and take beyond both Heidegger himself and his detractors. For what instead concerns Heidegger and Foucault, the rationale for mobilising them together here is not to propose a Foucauldian reading of Heidegger, let alone a Heideggerian reading of Foucault, since the projects of the two thinkers are perhaps irreconcilable on several levels. Foucault himself has at times more or less directly framed his entire analysis as a reversal of Heideggerian phenomenology.4 Rather, the intention of this chapter is that of identifying, in the work of both Heidegger and Foucault, elements that could help the formulation and progression of our argument, indebted to but not necessarily aligning with either of the two projects. On the one hand, what Heidegger offers is a compelling diagnosis of a condition: a mode of thinking that he saw as increasingly and dangerously holding sway over human beings, thus producing a particular form of subject. On the other hand, it is argued that what can be learned from the late work of Foucault represents a fruitful terrain whence an antidote, or at least a form of resistance, to the condition described by Heidegger could be devised. The historical account that Foucault provides of certain practices, techniques and modes of subject constitution, particularly observed in Greco-Roman culture, will equip us with some valuable coordinates

for the construction of alternative experiences of interaction with and through artefacts. In other words, rather than thinking with Heidegger and/or Foucault, what follows is an attempt at thinking through their work. What this chapter is gesturing towards is neither a Heideggerian ontologising nor a Foucauldian historicising of the human in its complex relationship with the technological: it is, rather, the gathering of the conceptual weaponry required for the establishment of the politics of use that this study wishes to develop.

### 3.1 Technicity

#### 3.1.1 Thick imbroglio

A tendency seems to pervade popular imaginaries about technology: one that, to some extent, associates the term exclusively with electronic goods, computational devices, digital information systems, algorithms, and so on. Which is to say, colloquially speaking, with “high-tech”, with technology's proximity to scientific advancements. While this is a reasonable response to the undeniable specificity of the type of technology mentioned above, such a perspective also risks producing a problematic exceptionalisation. It can, in other words, turn a blind eye and indeed completely obfuscate or even naturalise the powerful, infrastructural role of more humble non-computational technologies within social life. A more comprehensive view on technology might instead be given by the way Agamben takes up and further expands the Foucauldian notion of “apparatus”. Agamben writes:

> I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings.⁵

If considered from this standpoint, then, an item of clothing, a mug, a pencil, a chair, a book, a bicycle, and so on, all legitimately fall into the category of

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technological apparatuses just as much as, say, an LCD screen or a dating app do. As a consequence of this crucial shift we can appreciate the extent to which, as Agamben argues, ‘there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modeled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatus’\(^6\) – by technology.

We cannot stress enough that paying attention to people’s interaction with “lower”, less striking forms of technology too, as already mentioned, is not intended to minimise the distinctive impact that things such as smartphones, the Internet, CCTV cameras, 3D printers, drones, and big data do have on “us”. Nor is this to be taken as manifestation of a Luddite-esque nostalgia for artisanal, pre-industrial, pre-digital life. Quite the contrary, this is meant to draw attention to and challenge a fantasy that bolsters that very nostalgia. That is, the fabrication of a narrative revolving around the myth of technological rupture: a rupture between a prior non-technological condition and a contemporary technological one, which in turn participates in the construction of a certain ontological discourse around “the human”. To put this in other terms, the way of distinguishing between “old” and “new” technologies sketched above can function to paint “low-tech” tools and systems as reassuringly neutral – as things in our control – with the effect of giving us a false sense of mastery. Conversely, according to this old-new divide, computational technologies might be seen as constantly threatening to disrupt and corrupt an otherwise uncontaminated humanity. Media scholar Florian Cramer describes this process as a ‘fiction of agency’ and, interestingly, he links this to ‘the very notion of the self-made’\(^7\) – a delusion that we have seen to be integral to the sustainment of the self-possessed, independent individual.

Now, together with concerns over the social engineering ambitions propounded by many “user-centred” approaches, this appeal to protect the alleged purity of the human from the artificiality of technology is perhaps what animates the frequent ostracising of the figure of the user in design-related discourses. Researchers Julka Almquist and Julia Lupton, for instance, argue that

\(^6\) Ibid., 15.
‘the idea of the user [is] a concept that has at once hollowed the human subject and reduced subjectivity to the exercise of a function’. An even clearer example of this humanist stance is found in the work of Redström. In an oft-cited 2006 article, Redström claims that ‘people, not users, inhabit the world’, an assertion that serves him to leverage an important critique towards designers’ attempts at controlling people’s eventual interpretation of and interaction with artefacts. However, Redström’s ontological prioritisation of personhood over “userhood” is unconvincing, being grounded in a dubious opposition of subjects and objects, of persons and things, which should not remain unexamined here. ‘[T]he concept of a “user”, he indeed continues, ‘is based on an object-centric perspective, the person defined in relation to the object’: a perspective that insinuates the existence of a human subject somewhat uncontaminated by its relation to artefacts. Contrary to this claim, we will try to show here that, in fact, there is no “person” prior to a “user” and acts of use: that is, there is no “subject” that first inhabits the world and then becomes a user of technical “objects”. We shall then be questioning the dynamics at work between human and non-human actants, to adopt Bruno Latour’s parlance, once the material world in which these operate is stripped of a façade of neutrality and the realm of human action is thus revealed to be what the sociologist describes as a ‘thick imbroglio’.

3.1.2 Technology as milieu

Understanding inorganic, “human-made” objects as a much more complex reality than a mere stream of ever-compliant utility tools means attending both to their obstructive ‘recalcitrance’ as well as to their powerfully productive, lively ‘vibrancy’, as theorist Jane Bennett calls this thingly force. It means attending to their performative quality. That is to say, in Taylor’s terms, recognising that

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10 Ibid.
13 Ibid., xvii.
“artefacts ‘act upon us as we use them and [...] contain in their being the protocols and disciplinary forces of their time’.” Unlike other design theorists interested in performativity, such as Kristina Niedderer and more recently Gareth Williams, who attribute this performatve quality only to a particular class of specifically designed artefacts, Taylor rightly differs and clarifies instead that all artefacts – some more explicitly than others – are performative. If taken at face value, this might appear to suggest that human beings, in turn, are somewhat ‘artefacts of their artefacts’: a view that not only reverses Aristotelian accounts of technology ‘as essentially inert, neutral prosthesis’, but also raises obvious questions regarding the capacity for action of human subjects within the mechanics of everyday life. The intention to move beyond the problematic anthropocentric trope of the self-constituting human agent has long been central to the study of person-thing interactions within the fields of material culture and philosophy of technology as well as Science and Technology Studies (STS). Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) is a prime example of this kind of theoretical effort. Artefacts, Latour notes, ‘might authorise, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid and so on’. Yet, what we find in Latour is not an utterly techno-deterministic perspective but, instead, a more compelling splintering of the notion of agency, which is made social. As ‘an association between entities’, some human some non-human, agency thus ceases to be conceived as the sole property of a subject.

Building on this premise, what follows will first make a case for rejecting an understanding of the human capacity for action in terms of negotiations of agency, positioned on a linear spectrum, and oscillating between two polarities: on one hand, the absolute mastery of humans over instruments at their complete disposal; on the other, a gloomy dictatorship of things over supposedly passive

14 Taylor, ‘Design Art Furniture’, i.
18 Latour, Reassembling the Social, 72.
19 Ibid., 65.
users, slaves at the mercy of their own tools. It is instead claimed that these two allegedly opposite poles are far more entangled than one might assume and by no means mutually exclusive. In fact, we will see that the two can even become co-dependent, perhaps even co-constitutive of the very same phenomenon. Therefore, even simply framing the issue as a matter of degrees of agency, on a hypothetical continuum ranging from “complete control” to “complete subjugation” is perhaps also inadequate. It is here proposed that dichotomising these two aspects can be deceptive because, at times, people might well appear to be both masters and slaves simultaneously. Manning shares a similar distrust of the kind of accounts described above when she asks whether we can ‘imagine not being the masters of our acts, without falling prey to the idea that if we are not master, someone or something else must be’. This wariness is echoed by anthropologist Tim Ingold, who writes:

> Just because not everything happens according to one’s own volition does not, however, mean that someone else is in charge, or that agency is more widely distributed. It means, rather, that there must be something wrong with an account of action which presumes that whatever happens to us is an effect of some agency or other. 

Here is where a reading of Stiegler’s seminal work will become helpful. Indeed we will see that, as Howard Caygill suggested in an analysis of the French philosopher’s celebrated first volume of his Technics and Time trilogy, for Stiegler ‘technology is a milieu or an ecology’ and as such needs to be intended as ‘constitutive of’ rather than ‘extraneous to the definition of the human’.

### 3.1.3 Orignary dehumanisation

Invoking a famous myth about the figures of Prometheus and Epimetheus – the Greek gods responsible for the attribution of qualities to all beings coming to life

20 Manning, The Minor Gesture, 120.


the point of departure for Stiegler’s argument is that the human is born in a condition of “default”, of lack. According to the myth, this lack is the result of a fault: the fault of Epimetheus. The human’s natal de-fault-ness is the consequence of Epimetheus’ forgetfulness in his distributive task, which leaves the human devoid of qualities, and is remedied by his brother Prometheus’ theft of fire (here the obvious emblem of technology) stolen from the workshop of Hephaestus and then gifted to the human. This narrative prompts Stiegler to address the ‘invention of the human’ and the ambiguity that the genitive creates here, leading him to inquire: “Who” or “what” does the inventing? “Who” or “what” is invented?” Or, in other words: is the human inventing the tool or being invented by it? While refusing to side with either of the two options, Stiegler asks whether one must not instead ‘proceed down a path beyond or below every difference between a who and a what’. And it is exactly in this direction that, with him, we are headed.

Stiegler’s skepticism towards these polarizing perspectives is born out of his dissatisfaction with a certain understanding of technics [that] dominates all the fields of discourse [...] articulated by categories – ends and means, subjects and objects, nature and culture – which only function and make sense in these oppositional pairs’.

The philosopher then notes that the same logic drives the ‘false alternative’ between each of the two terms in the couplet anthropology-technology. This is what he claims to be one of several oppositions ‘inherited from metaphysics’ in which, according to Stiegler, ‘prevailing understandings of contemporary technics’ are caught up. Animated by a keen alertness to the ‘difficulty of delimiting the field of technics’ that we have already found in Agamben,
Stiegler’s search for a more compelling way of articulating the relation between human and technical leads him to the anthropology of André Leroi-Gourhan. Stiegler notes that the latter ‘radically undermines these categorial oppositions and perhaps makes them obsolete’, eventually resulting in an anthropology that ‘cannot be constituted otherwise than as a technology’.\(^{30}\) What this complete overlapping of anthropology and technology does is calling into question the type of linear sequentiality that justifies discourses of both anthropocentrism and technocentrism. This ‘illusion of succession’\(^{31}\) is perfectly exemplified by Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s famous discussion on the “state of nature” in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, which Stiegler suggests to be hinging on a clear distinction between two consecutive moments: namely, ‘those of purity and corruption, of before and after’.\(^{32}\) Mounting a critique of Hobbes’ portrayal of the state of nature already encountered in Chapter 1 – ‘solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short’\(^{33}\) – the philosophy of Rousseau indeed upholds an opposed view which romanticizes ‘the man of pure nature’, who is then ‘replaced by the man of the fall, of technics and of society’\(^{34}\) In other words, Rousseau’s human is one whose naturally uncontaminated interiority is forever corrupted, forever tarnished, through contact with an artificial exterior. By contrast, Stiegler explains, in Leroi-Gourhan interior and exterior with respect to the human are

constituted in a movement that invents both one and the other: a moment in which they invent each other respectively, as if there were a technological maieutic of what is called humanity. The interior and the exterior are the same thing, the inside is the outside, since [the human] (the interior) is essentially defined by the tool (the exterior).\(^{35}\)

What this means is that the moment of exteriorization of the human, given by its technologically-mediated experience of the world, is actually simultaneously constitutive of its interiority, of its humanity. Or, in other words, ‘interiority is

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 91.
\(^{31}\) Ibid., 142.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., 101.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., 142.
nothing outside of its exteriorization" and conversely, precisely because 'the human invents [it]self in the technical by inventing the tool – by becoming exteriorized techno-logically'.

What we can learn from Stiegler's reading of Leroi-Gourhan, then, is a more nuanced appreciation of the "prosthetic" character of technology and its foundational role for the notion of the human: "[t]he prosthesis", he notes, "is not a mere extension of the human body; it is the constitution of this body qua "human". A relationship that therefore engenders something of a paradox, for the human thus understood emerges as 'a living being characterized in its forms of life by the nonliving'. At this point, if we were to return for a moment to Rousseau's preoccupation with the alleged natural purity of the human, we might finally join Stiegler in asking: "do we not see, in this original human, that "human nature" consists only in its technicity, in its denaturalization?" And if the answer is still "no", Stiegler argues that this refusal might be explained by means of a clever metaphor: the entanglement of human and technical, he writes, is akin to that of fish and wetness. How? Fish, as a passage of Aristotle's treatise *De Anima* points out, must be entirely unaware of the very notion of "wet" since, by living in water, 'everything that can be touched and everything that is, is for them wet'. The paradoxical relationship between fish and wetness is thus laid bare: fish 'see only what is wet, but that means that the wet is the only thing they do not see'. By the same token, if we agree with Stiegler that the "nature" of the human consists only in its denaturalisation, in its dehumanisation, in its originary technicity, it should come as no surprise that this very technicity is the only thing the human does not (and perhaps cannot) see.

Now, if we accept that technology is always-already implicated in and indeed undistinguishable from the very being of the human in its historical unfolding, and if the human’s ‘relation to the world is not given in the least, but

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36 Ibid., 152.
37 Ibid., 141.
38 Ibid., 152-3.
39 Ibid., 50.
40 Ibid., 148.
41 Ibid., 109.
42 Ibid.
rather the result of a whole elaboration [thus] essentially artificial', we must then attend to the numerous implications of this deep entanglement. Not only that such a deep entanglement exists, but also what form can this be said to predominantly take in the specificity of the contemporary context needs being investigated. Moreover, we shall confront the mode of social life emerging out of this entwinement as well as, crucially, whether this could potentially be altered and how. Our next step, then, will bring us to confront Heidegger's influential work on technological thinking and acting. It is important to note that the following discussion is not meant to directly advance or correct contemporary debates around the question of technology. Rather, the intention here is to engage with such debates in generative ways. A synthesis – rather than a chronologically ordered, linear exegesis – is thus being developed to devise ways of extracting certain Heideggerian concepts (Gestell and Gelassenheit) in the construction of our argument. Particularly, it is proposed to critically re-read such concepts through the lens of Stiegler's notion of technicity presented above.

3.2 Mastery

3.2.1 Revealing: Gestell

In 1954 Heidegger first published the seminal essay The Question Concerning Technology, which was to become a point of reference for many philosophers of technology and had the intent of uncovering no less than the essence of technology. The first thing that must be noted is that Heidegger's analysis is not primarily concerned with technological “things” in and of themselves. Indeed, he claims,

technology is not equivalent to the essence of technology. When we are seeking the essence of “tree”, we have to become aware that That which pervades every

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43 Invisible Committee, To Our Friends, 121-2.
This remark, unambiguous as it might seem, shall not be quickly dismissed, for it has led commentators to diverging interpretations, as we will see later on. Secondly, and something easily overlooked due to the intricacy of Heidegger's reasoning, the essence of technology cannot be exclusively reduced to its pragmatic instrumentality, to it being an ‘instrumentum’ or a means to an end. Again, the German philosopher claims, while this ‘instrumental definition’ is indeed true for how technological things are encountered, it still does not identify the essence that permeates them. If this were the case, the resolve to assert our will, taming technology through enhanced mastery, would be all that is required to us. A perspective such as this, whereby ‘[e]verything depends on our manipulating technology in the proper manner as a means’ appears to be endorsed by certain Marxian analyses that betray a simplistic faith in emancipation from capitalist oppression by means of technological progress or automation (e.g. the so-called left “accelerationism”). Andrew Feenberg suggests that these approaches are supported by the ‘many ambiguities in Marx's writings on technology', and trade on ‘[his] occasional attempts to fend off charges of romanticism with a naïve instrumentalist account of technology' given that, he claims, Marx ‘carefully limited his criticism to the “bad use” of machinery’. More interesting still, Stiegler rightly warns us against this attitude when he writes that 'technocentrism is also, is still, a figure of anthropocentrism, is still understood as such – as mastery and possession of nature', of the human's own nature. In contrast to these views, the essence of technology that

46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
50 Stiegler, Technics and Time, 1, 93.
Heidegger is describing, although indeed implying instrumentality, has to be grasped as a particular ‘way of revealing’.51 Thus understood, technology’s fundamental instrumentality is actually grounded in causality, intended as causing the coming to presence of something. Or, in Heidegger’s slightly bemusing words, a ‘bringing-forth’ of something into ‘presencing [...] hither out of concealment forth into unconcealment’.52 Further, we learn that “revealing” belongs to the domain of alētheia, of the ‘coming to presence of truth’.53 What is at stake, then, what is being “unconcealed” through technological mediation, Heidegger argues, is the very world of which we are part. This then brings us to the core of Heidegger’s analysis: the mode of revealing that is characteristic of technology, he claims, consists in the whole world ‘presencing’54 as a mere stockpile of resources that human beings are encouraged to summon and exploit. Crucially, such a mode of revealing thus ceases to occur as the spontaneous bringing-forth of “poietic” unfolding that characterises artistic practices, for instance: what we witness is instead a form of revealing as ‘challenging-forth’, as a form of extraction.55 This way, ‘[e]verywhere everything is ordered [...] to be immediately at hand’, thus reduced to ‘standing-reserve’56 [Bestand] through a process that Heidegger calls Gestell: enframing. Technology’s essence can thus be intended as the setting in motion of a tendency of constant instrumental demand that extends to the totality of the existent, a way of thinking about the world as nothing but ‘equipmentality’:57 an endless series of in-order-to utility tools ready to be exploited. Not exclusively technological things then,58 but the entire world – social life included, if we think for instance about the concept of “human resources” already mentioned – is thus “revealed” as means to an end. Everything is enframed, everything is in question.

52 Ibid., 11.
53 Ibid., 33.
54 Ibid., 9.
55 Ibid., 14-5.
56 Ibid., 17.
The continuity between the totalising logic of value calculation and extraction described by Heidegger and the economisation discussed in Chapter 1 through Brown and Foucault is quite remarkable. Further, this seemingly inescapable tendency of pure instrumentality brings to light the paradox mentioned earlier in regards to the master-slave dichotomy: according to Heidegger, we are enslaved precisely through an insatiable will to absolute mastery of the world, through an increasingly ‘single way of revealing’. That is, the very obsession with total control, optimal ordering, and mastery of the world (of “our” world) that we have seen to characterise neoliberal imaginaries, is itself a form of somewhat covert slavery to technological things. So much so that, as summarised by Heideggerian scholar Hubert Dreyfus together with Charles Spinosa, a form of ‘technological imperative’ gives rise to a scenario whereby ‘[w]e are standing reserve as much as any of the technological stuff around us’. Or, as Heidegger himself explicitly notes elsewhere, the human’s ‘unconditional mastery over the earth, and the execution of this will, harbour within themselves that subjugation to technology’.

3.2.2 Non-willing: Gelassenheit

What we begin to see is that the chief concern in Heidegger’s critique of technology is the emergence and spread of a specific mode of thinking (and therefore being-in) the world. Which of course begs the question: can an alternative to such a mode of thinking be developed and, if so, what would that be? Heidegger directly addressed these questions a few years later, by


61 Martin Heidegger, Basic Concepts, trans. Gary E. Aylesworth (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993 [1981]) 14. It is perhaps worth noting that this concern for the totalising tendency of technological rationality has been often likened to Herbert Marcuse’s portrayal of what he described as a ‘one-dimensional’ culture, as well as to Jacques Ellul’s equally despairing analysis of technological domination through efficiency. See: Marcuse, One Dimensional Man; Ellul, The Technological Society.
formulating the concept of *Gelassenheit* in a series of writings that had enjoyed far less attention up until very recently. The argument here primarily hinges upon the opposition between ‘calculative thinking’ – i.e. what we have seen to emerge through *Gestell* – and what Heidegger calls instead ‘meditative thinking’. Building on his elaboration of the great danger of *Gestell* as a single way of revealing, Heidegger warns us of the perils of a ‘calculative thinking’ that may someday come to be accepted and practiced as the only way of thinking’.

Thinking that is “meditative” (or “contemplative”), he then claims, is precisely what could enable us to eventually overcome the reifying disclosure of the world that is proper of calculative enframing. This is because such a mode of thinking, being radically stripped of instrumental demands towards what is encountered, instead remains meditatively ‘open to its content, open to what is given’.

Engaging in the openness of this mode of thinking entails an attitude of *Gelassenheit*, a term that Heidegger borrows from one of his main inspirations, the mystic Meister Eckhart, often rendered in English as *releasement*. What is, then, that thinking must be released from for it to be “open to its content” and therefore meditative? Heidegger’s rather cryptic response is that thinking must be rid of and disentangled from *willing*. Running the risk of oversimplifying Heidegger’s rationale, one could perhaps say that what he has in mind here is a thinking that would be primarily concerned with itself as an undirected exploratory process, rather than with the result of such a process. Metaphorically speaking, a similar difference might be said to exist between walking in order to reach a destination and walking as strolling, as intentionally purpose-free wandering – an analogy to which we will return later. Still, what makes the above assertion profoundly counterintuitive is that, of course, to relinquish willful

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64 Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 46.
65 Ibid. The term *besinnliche* has also been translated as “contemplative”.
66 Ibid., 56.
67 Ibid., 24-5.
68 Ibid., 59.
thinking and give way to a posture that Heidegger calls ‘non-willing’ or sometimes “letting” surely requires an effort in itself, a sort of resolve. That is to say, ‘willingly to renounce willing’. An operation, it could be noted in passing, not dissimilar from the ‘movement to sovereignly deny sovereignty’ with which over two decades later Blanchot described the experience of community; as well as from Moten’s take on consensual self-dispossession that will be addressed in the next chapter. Moten in particular has even acknowledged this conceptual proximity. In any case, this admittedly abstruse, almost paradoxical argument has inevitably resulted in diverging interpretations of the thrust of Heidegger’s analysis. Some clarification is thus in order.

First, the notions of non-willing and releasement must not lead to the hasty conclusion that what Heidegger urges is a form of reactionary pseudo-primitivism or unlikely return to some kind of pre-technological age. In this respect, Dreyfus and Spinosa suggest that, although evident signs abound of Heidegger’s sympathy for and romanticisation of traditional peasant life, ‘he worked out a position that goes well beyond them’. This is already glaringly clear at the onset of The Question Concerning Technology, since the aim of Heidegger’s investigation was indeed that of preparing ‘a free relationship to [technology]’ that ‘in no way confines us to a stultified compulsion […] to rebel helplessly against it’. And yet, the same caveat is expressed even more straightforwardly in his later formulation of Gelassenheit. Indeed, Heidegger explicitly concedes that ‘[i]t would be foolish to attack technology blindly’. On the contrary, he proposes,

We can affirm the unavoidable use of technical devices, and also deny them the right to dominate us […] I would call this comportment toward technology

\[\text{\begin{enumerate}
\item[Ibid.]
\item[Ibid.]
\item[Blanchot, The Unavowable Community, 25.]
\item[Moten, A Poetics of the Undercommons, 22.]
\item[Dreyfus and Spinosa, 'Further Reflections on Heidegger, Technology, and the Everyday', 340. An analogous argument is presented throughout the essays contained in a recently published volume on the topic - see: Wendland, Merwin, and Hadjoannou, Heidegger On Technology.]
\item[Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', 3.]
\item[Ibid., 25-6.]
\item[Heidegger, Discourse on Thinking, 53.]
\end{enumerate}}\]
which expresses "yes" and at the same time "no", by an old word, releasement toward things.\textsuperscript{77}

We can see, then, that the alternative relation to technology that Heidegger is gesturing toward is not the form of total rejection that philosopher Peter-Paul Verbeek, for instance, seems to attribute to the concept of Gelassenheit\textsuperscript{78} – and which, as we will see later on in the chapter, he swiftly sets up in opposition to Foucault’s work on power. Rather, the term names a way of being at once immersed in yet unshackled by technology and technological things: a comportment of releasement toward, not from things [Gelassenheit zu den Dingen]. In other words, the object of this attitude of non-willing is not technology in its material manifestation, not technological things, but rather a specific, all encompassing will to mastery and calculative thinking. That is, Heidegger’s releasement is a relationship with technology, albeit a different and “freed” one.

A second matter of controversy is that, again contrarily to what Verbeek appears to infer, Heidegger’s proposition is not meant to encourage a form of mindless quietism or abstracted passivity, ‘weakly allowing things to slide and drift along’.\textsuperscript{79} Indeed, as Heidegger himself contends: ‘releasement lies […] outside the distinction between activity and passivity’.\textsuperscript{80} Not only must one will non-willing, as mentioned above. Also, one must not intend the process of releasement, as Verbeek does, as a purely metaphysical undertaking whereby thinking differently alone would suffice.\textsuperscript{81} Granted, Heidegger’s ultimate focus is indeed on the mode of thinking that could unlock a richer dimension of revealing – therefore participating to a richer mode of being. Nevertheless, we shall see that this does not undermine the importance that acting, and therefore the performative worldliness of bodily person-thing entanglements, has in

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 54 (emphasis added).


\textsuperscript{79} Heidegger, Discourse on Thinking, 61.


\textsuperscript{81} Verbeek, Moralizing Technology, 72.
Heidegger’s *Gelassenheit*. In fact, Mark Wrathall insists, for Heidegger ‘thinking depends on the body’ as it necessarily requires ‘bodily attunements and movements, bodily interactions with the environment’.\(^\text{82}\) After all, as spelled out by Agamben, ‘in the materiality of corporeal processes and of habitual ways of life no less than in theory, there and only there is there thought’.\(^\text{83}\)

### 3.2.3 Epochally calculative

Now, aside from advancing a compelling case for distancing Heidegger’s position from easy charges of technophobic nostalgia, Dreyfus and Spinosa unwittingly offer to us further fruitful material for reflection. When Heidegger discusses the difference between modern and earlier technology (which we have already challenged through Stiegler), it is of utmost importance that we bear in mind, once again, what opened his investigation: namely, the distinction between the *essence* of technology – that we have seen to be a mode of thinking or, better, a tendency of revealing – and technological *artefacts*. Similarly, Heidegger’s analysis of modern technology must not be mistaken for an assessment of modern technological “tools”. In Dreyfus and Spinosa (but they are certainly not alone here) this distinction results somewhat ignored by their unconvincing, slightly confused interpretation of *technicity*: technicity, they assert, is ‘the technological style of life’.\(^\text{84}\) That is to say: something of a “modern” epochal condition from which, therefore, not only we should distance ourselves, but we might even be able to step out.\(^\text{85}\) How? Dreyfus and Spinosa bring the example of Japanese culture where, they claim, ‘nontecnological practices and lifestyles exist alongside the most advanced hi-tech production and consumption’,\(^\text{86}\) as purportedly demonstrated by the coexistence in Japanese everyday life of

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\(^{83}\) Agamben, *Means without End*, 12.


\(^{85}\) Ibid., 343.

\(^{86}\) Ibid., 342.
Styrofoam cups as well as porcelain teacups.\textsuperscript{87} This way, Dreyfus and Spinosa seem to have problematically (and ludicrously) collapsed technicity, technology and technological artefacts into an indissoluble trinity: technicity as always emerging from a certain breed of technological artefacts, and always engendering a certain mode of thinking that can be called technological.

On the contrary, a more promising approach to the question of technology as \textit{Gestell} would perhaps require that we operate a much clearer schism between these elements, particularly the first two. On one hand, and unlike (technology as) \textit{Gestell}, we have already seen that technicity shall not be misunderstood as the historically specific way things are revealed to us today, ‘as our current mode of revealing things and people’.\textsuperscript{88} Rather, technicity is the very ontological prerequisite for revealing as such, the condition of possibility for anything to be disclosed at all to what we may call the human. Stiegler himself has responded to and dismissed this type of perspective, as endorsed by Dreyfus as well as by Jacques Rolland: ‘escaping the hold of technics’\textsuperscript{89} in Heidegger is not even a question, as Stiegler disputes, the alternative simply does not exist. If Heidegger’s view on the entanglement of human and technology is not as radical as Stiegler’s, this does not mean that he is suggesting the abandonment of technological tools. Again, technicity is not equivalent to technology. Nor, as discussed earlier, should we rush to the conclusion that technology as calculative thinking is directly and irrevocably effectuated by a distinct class of artefacts.

It is certainly true that practices can (and do) exist outside of calculative thinking by ‘resist[ing] optimisation’,\textsuperscript{90} while not hopelessly rejecting technicity. However, the ‘transformation of our optimising style of life’\textsuperscript{91} that Dreyfus and Spinosa hope for should be grounded in something much more sophisticated than the mere coexistence - when not the outright abandonment – of “hi-tech” objects with “traditional” low-tech products, as if the latter were somehow

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 343.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 341 (emphasis added).
\textsuperscript{89} Roland cited in Stiegler, \textit{Technics and Time}, 1, 208.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 343.
neutral tools. Such an approach can hardly succeed in dragging artefacts out of a condition of mere ‘equipmentality’ and ‘serviceability’, for these would continue being confined to a dimension of ‘in-order-to’ instrumentality, experienced as mute servants to the will of a master as described earlier on. Still, despite confusing Heidegger’s analysis of technology for a ‘criticism of technicity’, Dreyfus and Spinosa are in the end absolutely correct in suggesting that ‘Heidegger seeks to make us see that our practices are needed as the place where an understanding of being can establish itself’. What is urgently required, then, is an intervention onto an epochally calculative modality of thinking and disclosing of the world, not directly by means of different tools or special devices but by means of radically different ‘everyday practices’ of use. This is far from suggesting that artefacts should be entirely out of the picture, though. However, if ‘[t]echnology is the systematising of the most effective techniques’, if it names the hegemonic focus onto the ‘quantifiable productivity of the techniques’, then it is on the level of techniques that we must begin to operate a transformation: which is to say, on the level of action. And this is where other readings of Heidegger could open up valuable avenues for our inquiry, in order to borrow certain elements without holding any pretence of rectifying specific interpretations.

3.3 Alteration

3.3.1 Practical a priori

One fruitful way of understanding the centrality that action can hold within a Heideggerian analysis of technology could now be to turn to Reiner Schürmann’s 1982 remarkable book Le Principe D’Anarchie: Heidegger Et La Question de L’Agir

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93 Heidegger, Being and Time, 97.
95 Ibid., 343 (emphasis added).
96 Ibid.
97 Invisible Committee, To Our Friends, 123.
(oddly translated as Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy). Particularly throughout a chapter eloquently titled Acting, the Condition for Thinking, Schürmann discusses something that will be extremely useful to the present discussion: namely, what he calls a ‘practical a priori’. He notes that, in Heidegger, thinking is ‘made dependent upon a practical condition’ and ‘is a consequent inasmuch as it does not arise without preparation’. This practical a priori, Schürmann contends, can be found throughout the entire Heideggerian oeuvre, even beyond the work more explicitly concerned with technology. When looking at the opening of Being and Time, for instance, one finds the two following questions and answers:

Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word “being”? Not at all. So it is fitting that we should raise anew the question of the meaning of Being. But are we nowadays even perplexed at our inability to understand the expression “Being”? Not at all. So first of all we must reawaken an understanding for the meaning of this question.

What Schürmann argues is that, while the first question deals with a strictly philosophical issue as it ‘concerns something to be known or thought’, the second one ‘is no longer cognitive, concerning knowledge and ignorance. It is not even philosophical anymore’. Rather, he continues, this second question points to a type of ‘comportment’. It points to a perplexity that must be awoken as necessary and – to some extent – preparatory condition of possibility in order to then confront the first, more properly philosophical question. Or, in Schürmann’s terms: a ‘practical modification of existence has systematic priority over its “philosophical” analysis’. Which, crucially, holds true for the notion of releasement too: ‘[t]o understand releasement, one must be released’. Schürmann is here suggesting that it is from within the plane of action that a

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99 Ibid., 235.
100 Heidegger, Being and Time, 19.
101 Schürmann, Heidegger on Being and Acting, 237.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid., 238 (emphasis added).
104 Ibid., 236.
different mode of thought could flourish. In other words, it is through an alteration of the epochal *a priori* – the ‘transformation of the practical *a priori* “willing” into the practical *a priori* “letting”’ ¹⁰⁵ – that another technological “economy” might brew. And yet, Schürmann proceeds to warn us, “[t]his is not to say, with Sartre, that “man is what he does”, but rather that man thinks as he acts’. ¹⁰⁶ So the question is not merely one of sequentiality but rather of conditions: ‘a mode of thinking is made dependent on a mode of living’. ¹⁰⁷

To summarise, what we have proposed so far, then, is that: (1) technology, as a form of revealing rather than its manifold articulations as technological artefacts, might be said to nurture a progressively totalising mode of thinking and “unconcealment” of the whole world as mere standing-reserve, thus holding sway over the human through a delusional desire for complete mastery; (2) it is suggested that an unshackled relation to technology would instead rest upon a way of thinking that is fundamentally open to its content, that lets the world disclose itself before us and with us – rather than for us – through releasement from a will to domination, hence refraining from calculative demands and logistical optimisation; (3) this mode of thinking is systematically dependent on a mode of action – on a practical *a priori* – which therefore also needs to be accordingly transformed. It is now timely to discuss in more depth the conditions upon which such modified practices and technical interactions might rest.

A transformed practical *a priori*, intended as a preparatory exercise, would arguably need to mirror the traits proper to the transformed mode of thinking it aims to spawn. This practice would then be, as it were, a form of meditative practice, a mode of contemplative doing not underpinned by instrumental demands: a “non-willing practice” concerned with itself as an improvisationally open process. If such a released practice is to be articulated, though, we shall begin to consider what this would mean in terms of the actual ‘unavoidable use of technical devices’. ¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the practice discussed here – always-already technical, emerging from within technicity – is one mediated by and revolving

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¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 250 (punctuation slightly altered).
¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 243.
¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 237.
¹⁰⁸ Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 54.
around entanglements with artefacts, around those acts of use that Heidegger acknowledges to be inevitable and through which a freed relationship between persons and things might be established, together with a different way of thinking “technologically”. Also of interest to our exploration, Schürmann proposes that explicit indications can be found throughout the Heideggerian corpus conceding that ‘[r]esponding and corresponding to the essence of technology cannot be an individual affair’,\textsuperscript{109} meaning that a transformed practical \textit{a priori} will ‘necessarily be collective’\textsuperscript{110} and therefore political.

How are we, then, to understand and reimagine these acts of use according to the simultaneous “yes” and “no” posture of \textit{Gelassenheit}? And, consequently, how can such a reprogramming of the idea of use and person-thing relationships strategically participate in the opening of a different mode of sociality? If these and other ethically and politically relevant pragmatic preoccupations remain largely unanswered in Heidegger’s assessment,\textsuperscript{111} we will not simply abandon the conceptual richness of his work altogether, but instead seize the opportunity that this lack presents. Which is to say, the opportunity of inventively (and irreverently) taking up Heidegger’s writing so as to ‘draft a program of action’\textsuperscript{112} from it – a task that, Schürmann argues, the German philosopher has simply left open to others.

\textbf{3.3.2 Technologies of the self}

We have seen at the beginning of this chapter how technology is best grasped in its co-constitutive overlap with anthropology, as technicity: as always already inserted and participating in the construction and reconstruction of the human – hence its importance for our intervention. We have then further developed this claim throughout the rest of the chapter by proposing that the specific form of hold that currently seems to characterise technicity – a totalising tendency of

\textsuperscript{109} Schürmann, \textit{Heidegger on Being and Acting}, 241.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 240-1.
\textsuperscript{111} On this point, Bret W. Davis notes that, by the time Heidegger developed the notion of \textit{Gelassenheit} (i.e. after his involvement with Nazism), he ‘had precious little to say about ethics [and] politics’ – see: Davis, ‘Heidegger’s Releasement’, 145.
\textsuperscript{112} Schürmann, \textit{Heidegger on Being and Acting}, 244.
revealing that Heidegger called *Gestell* – cannot be overcome in simple terms of enhanced mastery. However, if assertions of a subject’s agency onto technological objects won’t save us, even less so will complete rejection and retreat to a romanticised and purportedly non-technological past. Rather, the question of technology must be confronted by means of a form of experimental practice – or set of practices – that could simultaneously construct the condition of possibility for a different rationality to emerge. These practices are, as reiterated numerous times already, chained to an ineluctable technical dimension, to what Stiegler described as the human’s originary technicity.

When read this way, some proximity and indeed compatibility can begin to be seen between Heidegger’s assessment and certain elements of Foucault’s late work. Although it may sound like a bit of a stretch to consider the latter as a philosopher of technology, at least in the proper sense of the term, he did develop an interesting perspective on technology (and technical acting) as a relation between means and ends that can help advance our elaboration. Verbeek, for one, makes a promising recourse to Foucault. However, as mentioned above, the technophobic Heidegger painted by his critique has prevented Verbeek from engaging in a combined reading of the two thinkers. We will instead try to do just that here, mobilising Foucault in concert with, rather than contra, Heidegger, in the attempt to enrich our elaboration of the transformed mode of technical acting we have begun to sketch. A synthesis of the two authors is helpful here primarily for two reasons. First, Foucault’s attention to actual historical examples of “technical” processes and practices of comportamental alteration – what he called “technologies of the self” – can arguably well supplement the premises set up by Heidegger but left too opaque in the work of the German philosopher. Indeed, if for Foucault power and the disciplinary rationalities upon which this rests are technical (the example of the prison is but the most famous), so is the form that practices of active resistance

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to these rationalities take. Caygill too has drawn attention to this aspect, commenting on how Foucault's work, like Stiegler's, essentially views 'the technical milieu [as] itself a site of resistance'. Because according to Foucault 'politics, governance, itself is a technology', Caygill argues, 'the ways in which we are dominated and resist are themselves thoroughly technical'. Second, since it is predominantly the work of Heidegger and Foucault that has set in motion Agamben's re-articulation of “use” to be discussed throughout the next chapter, an appraisal of both authors will arguably equip us with a better understanding of the latter's theoretical foundations.

Agamben himself introduces a first connection between Heidegger's *Gestell* and the Foucauldian concepts of *apparatus* (or *dispositif*) when he notes that

> What is common to all these terms is that they refer back to this *oikonomia*, that is, to a set of practices, bodies of knowledge, measures, and institutions that aim to manage, govern, control, and orient - in a way that purports to be useful - the behaviours, gestures, and thoughts of human beings.

Now, an unambiguous preoccupation with actual practices is perhaps more explicitly spelled out in Foucault than it ever is in Heidegger, notwithstanding Schürmann's fascinating interpretation. Through a series of lectures and studies developed in the 1980s, Foucault famously shifted his attention onto those micro-practices through which people come to take an active role within "processes of subjectivation" (i.e. their becoming subjects) rather than being regarded as the passive objects of total domination, as the mere outcome of power. Of course, on the one hand, such practices can represent a precursor of the forms of neoliberal self-discipline and governmentality described in Chapter 1: that is, returning to Massumi's phrasing, the notion that power 'doesn't just force us down certain paths, it puts the paths in us'. On the other hand, though, these processes can (and perhaps must) also identify the plane onto which to intervene, if

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116 Ibid.
117 Agamben, 'What Is an Apparatus?', 12.
experimentations with other modes of comportment and forms of subjectivation are to be devised. Again, recalling Plotegher's earlier exhortation, because subjectivation is often ‘not just the consequence of a condition’, since it is actively performed, ‘it can also become an experimental practice’. That being said, Foucault was particularly interested in a set of historically specific modes of becoming subjects. He examined a number of procedures or “techniques” that, in Hellenic and Roman culture, were ‘suggested or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it, or transform it […], through relations of self-mastery or self-knowledge’. That is, Foucault became preoccupied with how one should “govern oneself” by performing actions in which one is oneself the objective of those actions. It is against this backdrop that the French philosopher embarked on an extensive exploration of what he notoriously referred to as the “care of the self” [epimeleia heautou]. It must be noted that Foucault was not interested in procedures found in Greek ethics as representative of viable alternatives to contemporary circumstances. Nevertheless, he argued that much could be learnt by probing the development and evolution of such procedures.

Foucault contends that four major types of technologies can be identified, which ‘hardly ever function separately’, and that enable human beings to ‘develop knowledge about themselves’ through ‘very specific “truth games”:’

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119 Plotegher, ‘What Can I Do With the Nothing I Have?’, 15-6.
121 Ibid.
125 Ibid., 224.
(1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivising of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conducts, and a way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality. [...] Each implies certain modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes.\footnote{126}

For what concerns the last class in Foucault’s list – technologies of the self – the philosopher elsewhere explains that this care of the self was to be intended as ‘not just a principle but a constant practice [ ... ] a whole domain of complex and regulated activities’,\footnote{127} elaborated in great detail, of the self upon the self. This set of practices involved a process of ‘askēsis’,\footnote{128} which Verbeek summarises as an attempt to ‘develop a distance from anything that otherwise remains self-evident’.\footnote{129} Importantly, as Verbeek rightly points out, such a distance was to be caused not through renunciation, not through abandonment of things and pleasures: that is to say, not through the notion of asceticism we have inherited from a Christian morality that still looms large over the secularised western culture. For the Greeks, the notion of askēsis indicated a set of unlearning exercises – some of which entailed ‘training in a real situation, even if it has been artificially induced’\footnote{130} – that was in fact to emerge by meddling with apparatuses of power.\footnote{131} As such, and not unlike Schürmann’s take on Gelassenheit, acquiring certain attitudes through technologies of the self meant engaging in actual practices in a manner that would go far beyond the mere redirection of one’s attentiveness towards oneself, far beyond abstracted reflexivity. It is precisely by

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  \item \textbf{126} Ibid., 224-5.
  \item \textbf{129} Verbeek, Moralizing Technology, 78.
  \item \textbf{130} Foucault, ‘Technologies of the Self’, 240.
  \item \textbf{131} See: Foucault, ‘The Hermeneutics of the Subject’, 97.
\end{itemize}
attending to the fluctuating relationship between knowledge and care of oneself that Foucault can offer an important contribution here.

### 3.3.3 Knowledge and care

While the practice of the “care of the self” is historically connected to the famous Delphic imperative to “know oneself” [*gnōthi seauton*], Foucault suggests that the sequential articulation between the two has undergone a number of profound shifts throughout various historical moments. If we are now accustomed to the prioritisation of knowledge of oneself – as originally found in Plato’s *Alcibiades* – over a care of oneself that Christian asceticism has taught us to equate with self-absorption and thus deemed immoral, this has not always been the case. Indeed, Foucault points to an ‘inversion in the hierarchy of the two principles’ occurring in Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods (that is, post-Plato and pre-Christian asceticism). In other words, at a certain stage in Greco-Roman culture the knowledge of oneself appears to be subordinated to the care of the self, which in turn acquires methodological precedence. Beyond the striking tactical proximity to Schürmann’s practical *a priori*, Foucault argues that this inversion in the relation between awareness and care denotes something even more important – something that perhaps represents the most remarkable rupture with Heidegger’s formulation. Foucault tells us that, unlike in Plato where the knowledge of oneself is intended as the rediscovering of a hidden and originary nature of one’s soul, in Stoic authors such as Seneca, for example, the same knowledge is instead understood as ‘one that did not reside in [the subject]’. In other words, the knowledge of oneself that the Stoic care of the self gives access to is not to be *uncovered*, deciphered, or exhumed from within: it is instead to be incorporated through ‘progressive exercises of memorisation’, it is to be *constructed*. The aim then, Foucault continues, was ‘to make this learned,

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133 Ibid., 228.
134 Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 102.
135 Ibid., 101.
136 Ibid.
memorised truth, progressively put into practice’: care as a form of transformative apprenticeship, leading to the ‘absorption of a truth [...] assimilated so thoroughly that it becomes a part of oneself, an abiding, always-active, inner principle of action’. This shift brings about significant consequences, since it might allow us to rethink Gelassenheit as a form of askēsis: that is, beyond any final preoccupation with the unearthing of any alleged authenticity of Being to which Heidegger ultimately remained anchored, so as to focus entirely on processual emergence instead.

In an interview conducted in 1984, Foucault again returns to his understanding of askēsis or ‘ascetic practice’, describing it as ‘an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain a certain mode of being’. What follows this summary is of crucial relevance to our argument, given that Foucault introduces a distinction between processes of liberation and practices of freedom. The philosopher is at one point asked whether askēsis, as he formulates it, could be understood as a process of liberation. To which he responds:

I have always been somewhat suspicious of the notion of liberation, because if it is not treated with precautions and within certain limits, one runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical, economic, and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression [...] This is why I emphasise practices of freedom over processes if liberation.140

This way, as noted by Verbeek, in Foucault ‘[f]reedom becomes an activity, a practice of dealing with power’141 rather than the attainment of some kind of detached status. Which is to say, on the one hand, that the techniques of transformation of the experience of oneself142 that Foucault terms “care of the

137 Ibid., 102.
138 Ibid., 100-1 (emphasis added).
140 Ibid., 282-3.
141 Verbeek, Moralizing Technology, 73.
self” indicate a way of actively participating in, rather than completely avoiding, relations of power. We are reminded here of the distinction addressed in Chapter 1 between the neoliberal understanding of freedom as individualist uprootedness and freedom as participation to ethico-political relationality. On the other hand, and more important still, because askēsis is not an attempt to liberate an otherwise trapped self, but rather to transform and constitute oneself as the subject of a certain conduct, what seems to be ultimately at stake through the care of the self is not so much what one becomes as a result of the activity. In fact, elsewhere Foucault suggests that, when framed as a practice of freedom, ‘[t]he care of the self is the care of the activity and not the care of the soul-as-substance’.143

What is emerging here, then, is that speaking of a self that one must care for becomes a matter of speaking neither of a “what” nor of a “who”, but instead of a procedural “how”. Agamben – for whom this question of the “how”, of modality, is absolutely central – perfectly expresses this when he says that “Self” for Foucault is not a substance nor the objectifiable result of an operation [...]: it is the operation itself.144 Indeed, this radical identification of the subject with the practical experiences through which it is constituted allows Foucault to suggest that, for the Greeks and Romans, ‘attending to oneself is [...] not just a momentary preparation for living; it is a form of living’.145 Or, as he calls it elsewhere, an ‘art of living’.146 To summarise, then: if (a) Stiegler has taught us to move past problematic distinctions between the human and the technical, between “what” and “who”, as well as between old and new technology; and (b) Heidegger (via Schürmann) has showed us that the progressive folding of all modes of revealing into a single calculative rationality that increasingly guides technical acting must be countered through a practice of willful renunciation of mastery; then (c) what Foucault can add to this complex picture is a sense of how it is the continued assimilation and sustainment of a principle of action, rather

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145 Foucault, ‘The Hermeneutics of the Subject’, 96.
than the achievement of a liberated state, that this technologically-mediated process should be preoccupied with and care about.

We might ask now: what about the artefacts, the technological infrastructure that we have intended to consider as part of our intervention? How does the notion of “use” fit into this narrative? In order to begin addressing these questions, Foucault can again set us in the right direction when he observes that, in Plato’s *Alcibiades*, the very notion of “self” was not to do with ‘clothing, tools, or possessions’;\(^{147}\) rather, the ground from which one had to depart ‘[was] to be found in the *principle that uses these tools*.\(^{148}\) Once more, the distinction between technological tools and technological rationality is important here. The care of the self thus emerges as a care of use or, better still, a “care-in-use” or even a “care-as-use”. As we will discuss in depth throughout the next chapter, it is exactly by attending to its entwinement with use that Agamben has further elaborated on Foucault’s care of the self. While suggesting that the latter has mentioned but never properly thematised the question of “use-of-oneself”,\(^{149}\) Agamben indeed proposes that ‘[t]he relation of use [...] constitutes precisely the primary dimension in which subjectivity is constituted’,\(^{150}\) since such a thing as a “care-of-oneself” can become possible ‘only insofar as a human being is introduced as subject into a series of relations of use’.\(^{151}\) As a result, he contends that because the ‘subject of use must take care of itself insofar as it is in a relationship of use with things or persons’, not the other way around, primacy should be given to ‘the relations of use over care-of-oneself’.\(^{152}\)

It is then in the realm of use that an apprenticeship of technological opening, of the willful refusal of complete control that is described by *Gelassenheit*, could take place. An act of use whereby a principle of opening – the *a priori* “letting” or “non-willing” – is not so much intended as a result, not simply as an end, but rather as the sustainment of openness itself. Our exploration will then continue by attempting to reprogram use as a practice of entanglement of

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\(^{147}\) Foucault, “Technologies of the Self”, 230.
\(^{148}\) Ibid. (emphasis added).
\(^{149}\) Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 33.
\(^{150}\) Ibid., 33-4.
\(^{151}\) Ibid., 33.
\(^{152}\) Ibid.
persons and things through which a care beyond and outside of enframing instrumentality (as well as beyond the self as individual agent that Foucault was mostly concerned with) could be elaborated.
4. Use

The knobby baby stood up. His face was a glare of sunlight and anger. His diapers were about to fall off. “Mine!” he said in a high, ringing voice. “Mine sun!” “It is not yours,” the one-eyed woman said with the mildness of utter certainty. “Nothing is yours. It is to use. It is to share. If you will not share it you cannot use it.”

Ursula K. Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 2002 [1974]: 26

Can we design – itself a technical mode of willing, of planning – for acts of use as Gelassenheit, that is, for non-willing? Our discussion in Chapter 3 has begun to offer a set of interrelated propositions: from Stiegler’s understanding of the human’s originary technicity; to Heidegger’s idea of willful abandonment of calculative mastery; to Schürmann’s tactical prioritisation of practice over abstracted rumination; to Foucault’s preoccupation with transformative technologies of the self on the self. Taken together, these have served to foreground technical experimentation – the acting out of this or that technique – over an all too frequent reliance on abstracted consciousness-raising critique, as an important plane onto which to elaborate radical responses to the question of sociality. It was then suggested that, if we are to devise new modes of acting, if we are to begin dismantling the enframing character of our technicity, we better turn our attention to person-artefact entanglements. Which is to say, we should carefully rethink and indeed re-enact the way we meddle with the “stage” and “props” – with the material infrastructure – through which acting as such arises and unfolds. The point, then, is that of creating the conditions for experimental practices that would not flinch from the use of technical artefacts, while at the same time relinquish complete control over technical action. A control that clearly works hand in glove with the unencumbered autarchy and possessive individualism we are here trying to sabotage, if only momentarily.
Building on this premise, Chapter 4 engages two concepts, “use” and “dispossession”, in order to explore their interplay. Addressing these in turn, the following elaboration will initially invite us to consider a number of ambiguities that are found in the most colloquial acceptation of the term “use”. Largely drawing on Giorgio Agamben’s work, it is suggested that such ambiguities, if sufficiently probed, can open up opportunities for the experimentation with modes of technical action unmarred by calculative enframing. We will see that Agamben approaches his radicalisation of the paradigm of use from a variety of angles, mostly in relation to juridical categories but also with incursions into theology and linguistics. The Italian philosopher often works by picking apart a number of established dichotomies – such as sacred/profane, active/passive, means/end, construction/destruction – eventually claiming that “use” is that category which can collapse them.

We will thus commence by untangling the hazy relation binding together the binomial use/function (i.e. means/end), so as to arrive at the formulation of use as an improvisational mode of acting transcending teleological explanations – a ‘pure means’.¹ It will then be suggested that such an open-ended form of activity may find a blueprint in the subversively playful endeavours of French revolutionary group Situationist International. This will lead us to consider the deep reciprocity that a comportment of this kind implies between “user” and “used”: a relational mutuality that complicates any clear-cut distinction between effecting subject and affected object, situating use onto the plane of affect. What we will try to suggest here is that Agamben’s work, if taken seriously from a perspective of corporeal practice, allows us to rethink use as the combination of a certain “how” and a certain “with”, jointly affording a dispossession of the self.

And it is the problematic notion of dispossession that will eventually be examined in the latter part of the chapter, primarily by turning to the work of Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou first and Stefano Harney and Fred Moten afterwards. Distancing the term from the “oppressive” sense with which it is more routinely associated, we will try to show that a certain continuity can be traced between a radicalised use and the mode of dispossession around which revolve

¹ Agamben, Means without End, x.
what Harney and Moten have famously named “the undercommons” – a term that will be explained in due course. Arguing that an undercommon dispossession too might be understood as a combination of a “how” and a “with”, this chapter will eventually propose that both concepts together point to the embodied exploration of and experimentation with a sociality that does not begin from the private, appropriative sovereignty of the individual, of the “One”.

What can be learnt, what coordinates for collective action can spawn from this conceptual dyad, then? What if we were to take the remark in the epigraph above – “if you will not share it you cannot use it” – uttered by one of Ursula Le Guin’s characters in her classic novel The Dispossessed, not as a mere admonition but as an ontological stipulation, as a politically significant principle for acting? Finally, can a dispossession of, in, and as use pose a challenge to the ‘proprietorial notions of the self’ that threaten to colonise our (inter)acting? More so than an accurate exegesis, what is attempted here, similarly to Chapter 3, is to follow around the work of a number of authors and perform a loose synthesis. When observed against a backdrop of nanopolitical experimentation, dispossession and use might jointly help activate shared sensitivities and amplify to the point of perceptibility the dissident complicities already existing beyond and underneath individual intentionalities. Throughout this elaboration we will at times secure the theoretical threads encountered by composing a number of “conceptual knots”, which will function as incremental operational coordinates and will be signalled as such.

4.1 Use as function

4.1.1 Scripts

It would now seem appropriate to focus our attention onto the very notion of “use” as such, and to do so through a critical lens, in order to first disentangle it from dominant yet problematic acceptations. Invoking Michel de Certeau’s classic 1980 study The Practice of Everyday Life, then, we might say that here

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2 Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 115.
‘[u]se must be analysed in itself’. It is arguably unproblematic to suggest that, colloquially speaking, use names an action of a subject onto an “object”, in a way that is functional to the achievement of an end goal. This way, the use of something (an artefact, for instance) presented as an instrumental effort that is operated in order to arrive at or cause a result, essentially identifies an act that is given legitimacy through something external to it: its purpose, its telos, its function. Thus understood, the artefact encountered itself inevitably remains confined to the status of tool: an “in-order-to” device. Consequently, its chief feature would appear to be its efficient function-\textit{ing}: its usefulness, in a pragmatic sense, in enabling the fulfilment of a plan. The apprehension of use described here seems to confirm the reach of the calculative thinking that Heidegger took issue with and, conversely, how glaringly at odds it is with the non-willing and radically open relationship with technology that was discussed earlier on. It is the very root of this paradigm of use that we will attempt to examine, in order to free it (to release it) and eventually open it through the deactivation – or ‘destitution’, as Agamben has it – of the ‘strong “utilitarian” connotation’ with which it has been invested.

As discussed in Chapter 2, narrow, efficiency-obsessed understandings of functionality have been abundantly disputed in some design milieus. We have noted that a first liberating step for both practitioners and scholars has been that of challenging the allegedly inescapable coupling of functionality with practical utility that had dominated mainstream design discourses, extending the former beyond the latter. However, a second and even more resilient binary can perhaps be put into question now, which the previous operation has mostly left unchallenged: namely, the coupling of functionality with use itself. Indeed, the very notion of function, intended as an inferred plan of action or a “script”, regardless of what that plan would entail, clearly still betrays a mode of willing, something of a calculative demand towards the artefact encountered. The concept of the “script”, as formulated by Madeleine Akrich in an influential 1992

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\begin{enumerate}
\item de Certeau, \textit{The Practice of Everyday Life}, 32.
\item Ibid., 67.
\end{enumerate}
essay, is of interest to this analysis and warrants closer inspection here. Akrich’s work is informed by Latour’s articulation of Actor-Network Theory, as well as by psychologist James Gibson’s contentious theory of affordances already mentioned in passing earlier on. In a nutshell, the latter suggested that an ‘object offers what it does because of what it is’:\textsuperscript{6} that is, its use is dictated by its pre-existing material conformation and attributes (or affordances). As Almquist and Lupton contend, though, this means that Gibson’s ‘affordance precedes subjectivity, interpretation, use, and meaning’.\textsuperscript{7} For her part, Akrich posited that acts of designing ultimately represent the attempted inscription, whether explicit or not, of complex world-views into the object of their making. In her own words, designers

necessarily make hypothesis about the entities that make up the world into which the object is to be inserted. Designers define actors with specific tastes, competences, motives, aspirations, political prejudices, and the rest, and they assume that morality, technology, science, and economy will evolve in particular ways. A large part of the work of innovators is that of "inscribing" this vision of (or prediction about) the world in the technical content of the new object. I will call the end product of this work a "script" or a "scenario".\textsuperscript{8}

The attempt of forecasting and binding both persons and things to very specific roles within a very specific economy of “entities”, Akrich maintains, is an operation producing something that is akin to a ‘film script’.\textsuperscript{9} Still, she also clarifies that it is by no means guaranteed that this framework of action, its specific roles assigned to each “actor”, will be eventually taken up in the way it had been predicted by designers. In fact, those encountering a given object might instead appropriate it in highly unexpected ways and ‘define quite different roles of their own’.\textsuperscript{10} Put differently, Akrich concedes that, although ‘technical objects contain and produce a specific geography of responsibilities’, this geography ‘is open and can be resisted’.\textsuperscript{11} This uneasy relation between designers’ intentions

\textsuperscript{6} Gibson, \textit{The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception}, 130.
\textsuperscript{7} Almquist and Lupton, ‘Affording Meaning’, 7.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 208.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 207.
and users’ interpretations has been a prominent theme in design research. Indeed, at least since the 1980s, this has generated numerous debates around the nexus, or lack thereof, between form-giving and decoding of meaning, as well as whether acts of designing can be understood as forms of communication or rhetoric\textsuperscript{12} – as discussed in Chapter 2.

### 4.1.2 On-going achievements

Taylor suggests that the main contribution offered by Akrich’s concept of scripts being to some extent encoded into objects is that it provides ‘a methodological tool for the study of design, as it constitutes a mechanism for conceptualising the relation between production and use’.\textsuperscript{13} However, one could wonder at this point whether what is at stake in the ‘trope of the physical script’ – of artefacts containing ‘a form of metaphorical instruction manual’\textsuperscript{14} – has perhaps less to do with the relation between production and use than with that between production and function: that is to say, with a contention over meaning rather than action. Of course, the boundary separating the two is paper-thin, but at least in the context of this research it should not be understated. If, for example, ‘[t]he practical affordances of the chair, its physical script, are a speech act, an enunciation which says “sit”’,\textsuperscript{15} what such a physical script is communicating implies an aim. “Sit”, an intention that precedes the action, not “sitting”, the unfolding and sustaining of that action in its eventfulness. This distinction becomes even clearer if use is intended, as Redström puts it, as ‘an on-going achievement, the results of a continuous process of encounters with objects and how one acts upon them’.\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, one does not necessarily need to actually experience, in physical and temporal terms, the act itself of sitting in order to

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\textsuperscript{13} Taylor, ‘Design Art Furniture’, 66–7.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 67.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 147.

decipher (or de-script) the physical script of a chair. This is regardless of whether one understands the “proper” meaning of the chair as an exhortation to act in such and such a way in order to sit or, alternatively, one assigns to it a completely different import.

Yet, this is not at all to say that the process of interpretation of an object, in terms of the decoding of a script, is unimportant. Nor it is here suggested that such a script, together with the broader socio-cultural script and ecology of which the object is part, cannot indeed suggest an act. Rather, the point is that, if probing the notion of use as such, as we set out to do earlier on, Akrich’s formulation makes all the more apparent the urgency of cutting the conceptual knot that ties together a plan of action (function) and the action itself (use). As Theodora Vardouli notes, however, ‘there is little consensus about how the concepts of function and use relate to each other’, hence the frequent assumption that the two are in fact inextricably co-dependent. This assumption appears to be very much present in most of the design work that was discussed in Chapter 2. In these cases, a critique of functionalism and the strategic rejection of efficiency have often failed to get to the bottom of the question of use, resulting instead in the unfortunate trading of bodily use “value” for ‘exhibition-value’. That is, most critical designers and design-artists have caused the complete removal of their projects from the sphere of everyday use and bodily action, favouring instead the highly curated setting offered by galleries or museums and forms of “encounters” entirely confined within the domain of imagination.

4.1.3 Beyond teleology

It is through the work of Agamben that we can now begin to entertain a more radical appreciation of use. If we dare to look beyond Agamben’s earlier work on “bare life” and the “state of exception” that many scholars seem to be entirely preoccupied with, the notion of use has arguably become a central theme within the thought of the Italian philosopher. Indeed, Agamben has repeatedly

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addressed the question of use in its uncomfortable relation to other concepts such as function, consumption, productivity, rule, and property. We will now examine some of the key aspects of the philosopher’s attempted ‘elaboration of a theory of use – of which’, he claims, ‘Western philosophy lacks even the most elementary principles’. This is an effort that appears somewhat scattered across his writings and which, we should remember, must be read as a continuation of Foucault’s late work on the “care of the self” discussed in the previous chapter.

In The Use of Bodies, ninth and final volume of his twenty-year long project Homo Sacer, Agamben directly confronts the difficulty of decoupling use and function. When discussing the Aristotelian distinction between ‘productive instruments and instruments of use (which produce nothing except their use)’, Agamben acknowledges that

> We are so accustomed to thinking of use and instrumentality as a function of an external goal that it is not easy for us to understand a dimension of use entirely independent of an end.

If we are to understand the meaning of use, he continues, we must then begin by separating it ‘from the sphere of poiesis and production, in order to restore it to the sphere […] of praxis’. Agamben’s recourse to Aristotle provides yet another interesting insight only a few pages later, as he probes even further – in a remarkably Arendtian fashion – this distinction between poiesis and praxis. Agamben observes that, in Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, while the former is defined by the presence of an external end (a telos), the latter is a mode of acting that ‘is in itself the end’. With the former we are clearly returning to the colloquial understanding of use with which we had started this analysis: namely,

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20 Agamben, The Use of Bodies, 12. It is worth point out, given what discussed in Chapter 3, that the Aristotelian analysis that Agamben is here examining was preoccupied with defining use in relation to the slave’s body.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
24 Agamben, The Use of Bodies, 21.
a *poietic* mode of doing, an act that is entirely bound to the production of a result other than its own unfolding and that, as such, ‘necessarily has both its end and its limit outside itself’,\(^{25}\) as Agamben suggests elsewhere. Central to this sharp contrast between *poiesis* and praxis – and here the connection to Heideggerian *Gelassenheit* is made evident – is thus the relation between act and will. In *poietic* activity, the will must extend its limit outside of action, in order to achieve the “production” of something other than that action: the will is immediately projected beyond the act, it wills something other than that act as its objective. By contrast, because ‘central to praxis was the idea of the will that finds its immediate expression in an act’,\(^{26}\) in praxis the limit of the will remains internal to the act: that is, the objective of the will is the action itself. What Agamben proposes by means of this distinction, then, is that use, being a form of praxis rather than *poiesis*, belongs not to the sphere of production but to that of “experience”.

Further, Agamben finds in Lucretius an analogous theorisation of use as ‘completely emancipated from every relation to a predetermined end [...] beyond every teleology’.\(^{27}\) Here, through a fascinating reflection on the use that living beings make of their body parts, it is suggested that the function of some-thing (a limb, in Lucretius’ case) is *created* through use, rather than being a pre-existing guiding principle. Understood in this way, use precedes and invents the function of what one “enters” into a relation with through the unfolding of that very act, of that very relation, hence completely inverting Akrich’s formulation. This way Lucretius can argue that ‘[t]he origin of the tongue was far anterior to speech’.\(^{28}\) Consequently, function can be intended as an elusive yet distinct and secondary “stage” within a process of use. Mazé seemingly comes much to the same conclusion when she writes that ‘we might understand rules, plans and procedures to be a consequence – not just a cause – of the fact that people choose to follow and thus sustain them’.\(^{29}\)

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 68.
\(^{27}\) Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 51.
\(^{28}\) Lucretius cited in ibid.
\(^{29}\) Mazé, *Occupying Time*, 114.
4.2 Use as how

4.2.1 Play

What Agamben begins to offer through his analysis is the possibility to isolate use and approach it as radically autonomous from the function that would otherwise eventually emerge through it (whether habitually or inventively). We can see how this operation points in a direction that is in many ways similar to the type of willful non-willing of which Gelassenheit is the name. That is, the emergence of function could be resolutely neutralised or perhaps indefinitely postponed through a form of use that is ceaselessly and creatively reinvented, a use that is ever-unfolding and spontaneously improvisational, as Vardouli proposes. 30 The seemingly daunting, almost utopian task of conceiving a modality of use that is utterly disinterested, open-ended, improvisational, and spontaneous, actually names something as mundane as our ubiquitous interaction with technology: that is, play.

Two important texts should be acknowledged here, even if only in passing, which have both offered a major contribution to the study of play acts: Johan Huizinga’s 1938 book *Homo Ludens* and Roger Caillois’ direct response to it in his 1958 work *Man, Play and Games*. In his landmark study Huizinga tried to show that culture emerges as play, that ‘in its earliest phases [it] has the play-character’. 31 Which begs the question: what does he mean when he speaks of “play-character”? The sociologist proposed a number of key attributes: play, he claimed, is voluntary in nature 32 and disinterested, 33 it proceeds ‘according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner’, 34 but most important of all, it is fundamentally separate in time and space from everyday life. 35 While broadly subscribing to Huizinga’s definition, Caillois’ analysis offers some additional

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32 Ibid., 28.
33 Ibid., 9.
34 Ibid., 13.
considerations. First, he contends that the formulation proposed by Huizinga ignores those activities not bound to rules such as pretend play. \(^\text{36}\) Caillois writes:

> No fixed or rigid rules exist for [...] games, in general, which presuppose free improvisation, and the chief attraction of which lies in the pleasure of playing a role, of acting as if one were someone or something else. \(^\text{37}\)

Second, he claims that play is an inherently “wasteful” activity, \(^\text{38}\) without however attaching to the term a negative connotation. Indeed, what Caillois means is that, even in cases such as gambling in which property or money is exchanged, in play nothing is being produced: play is essentially ‘unproductive’. \(^\text{39}\) Third, Caillois proposes that all kinds of play fall onto ‘a continuum between two opposite poles’ \(^\text{40}\) or styles of play: paidia and ludus. The former indicates those exuberant activities characterised by ‘free improvisation’. \(^\text{41}\) The latter names instead highly skilful and disciplined activities, presenting ‘a growing tendency to bind [play] with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions’. \(^\text{42}\)

One aspect that Huizinga fails to notice, and which Caillois register but ultimately does not fully thematise, is an important difference between play and games. This is a delicate and important distinction over which not only Huizinga and Caillois but Agamben’s analysis too seems to gloss, except perhaps for a brief passage, \(^\text{43}\) likely due to a linguistic hurdle more so than to a conceptual one. The essential contrast between games and play has instead been accurately captured by Taylor. Games, he observes, ‘contain a (usually explicit) script [...] whereas play can be said to be much broader and open’. \(^\text{44}\) Further, as Ben Matthews et al. note, play ‘can be the suspension of goal-directed activity (whereas most games


\(^{37}\) Ibid., 8.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 5-6.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 10.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 13.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.

\(^{43}\) See: Agamben, ‘In Praise of Profanation’, 75-6. The Italian language happens to flatten any difference between the two terms by rendering both as gioco (noun) and giocare (verb), which has consequently resulted in the English translation of Agamben’s text adopting both terms interchangeably.

\(^{44}\) Taylor, ‘Design Art Furniture’, 151.
trade on ultimate goals, winners and losers, etc.). Play can be for play’s sake.\(^{45}\) That is to say, unlike play, the realm of games is grounded in a pre-existing rule or set of rules that, if followed, will guide those involved in the game to the achievement of an equally pre-determined goal. Of course, the same holds true for those “rules” – received or invented – implied in and regulating the “proper” use of some-thing. The rule is immanent to the game just as function is immanent to an instrumental apprehension of use. Or, to explain this through an example: just as kicking a ball does not alone define football, similarly interacting with a chair does not alone lead to the function of sitting.

\subsection*{4.2.2 Coordinate 1 // Profanation}

But let us return to Agamben. Play, he argues, ‘is a relationship with objects and human behaviour’\(^ {46}\) which should be discussed in relation to the religious sphere, particularly to the act of profanation. Indeed, the philosopher remarks in an essay titled In Praise of Profanation that ‘[t]here seems to be a peculiar relationship between “using” and “profaning” that we must clarify’.\(^ {47}\) The close link between divinatory rituals and play had already been examined by Huizinga, but whereas the latter’s insistence on play’s removal from everyday activity leads him to link such separateness to that defining sacred rites,\(^ {48}\) almost the opposite is put forth by Agamben’s analysis. Agamben is initially preoccupied with how the passage from profane to sacred rests on the apparatus of sacrifice and a fundamental caesura that appropriately transposes “things” (i.e. the object of the sacrifice) from the sphere of human affairs to that of the divine. Conversely – and here is the crux of his articulation – the opposite motion from sacred to profane (profanation) can be caused ‘by means of an entirely inappropriate use (or,

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\(^{47}\) Agamben, ‘In Praise of Profanation’, 74.

\(^{48}\) See: Huizinga, Homo Ludens, 19-27.
rather, reuse)’ of what is being manipulated during the rite.\textsuperscript{49} Agamben then tells us, via linguist Émile Benveniste’s study on play, that while the sacrifice revolves around the ‘conjunction of the myth that tells the story [i.e. the meaning] and the rite that reproduces and stages it [i.e. the act]’, play is the inappropriate use that ‘breaks this unity’ by preserving only one of the two terms.\textsuperscript{50} For instance, physical play was originally intended as the (re)enactment of a sacred rite emptied of its traditional meaning. For the sake of continuity, we could perhaps assign to the terms “myth” and “rite” the parallel significations “function” (or script) and “act of use”, thus describing as play the rite of physically using, say, a chair that is however emptied of its proper meaning (its myth) of sitting.

What, then, is the role of profanation as an inappropriate use in its relation to the religious apparatus? Agamben argues that the separation between sacred and profane unambiguously lies at the heart of any religion, and indeed represents its very condition of possibility. This observation allows him to suggest that ‘[i]t is not disbelief and indifference toward the divine […] that stand in opposition to religion, but “negligence”’.\textsuperscript{51} Negligence, he specifies, intended here not simply as “neglect” but, rather, as ‘a new dimension of use’\textsuperscript{52} through ‘a behaviour that is free and “distracted” (that is to say, released from the religio of norms) before things and their use’.\textsuperscript{53} Free, then, because inattentive to any original meaning in the formal separation between sacred and profane as well as, consequently, in that between propriety and impropriety – rather than erasing rites altogether. Indeed, Agamben continues, ‘[t]o profane means to open the possibility of a special form of negligence, which ignores separation or, rather, puts it to a particular use’.\textsuperscript{54} As he emphasises over and over again, ‘the example of play clearly shows’ that the operation of (use as) profanation does not involve the mere abolition of the sacred altogether, in order to then ‘restore something

\textsuperscript{49} Agamben, ‘In Praise of Profanation’, 75.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 76.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 75. Agamben shows that the term religio comes not from religare (to unite) but from relegere (reread), which ‘indicates the stance of scrupulousness and attention that must be adopted in relations with the gods’ – see: ibid., 74-5.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 75.
like a natural use that existed before being separated’.\textsuperscript{55} Quite the opposite: as German Primera suggests, for Agamben “to use” ultimately means not sheer withdrawal or scrupulous accuracy but, rather, ‘to liberate an object, to suspend its economy, to render it inoperative’.\textsuperscript{56} It means to play with artefacts and the rules that seek to govern them ‘just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good’, as Agamben writes elsewhere.\textsuperscript{57}

Now, what is of great interest to our exploration in the above discussion about religion, norms and negligence, is the significance that Agamben’s articulation of use as profanation acquires when read alongside Heidegger’s notions of \textit{Gestell} and \textit{Gelassenheit} that were addressed in Chapter 3. Indeed, if Heidegger was right in claiming that calculative thinking, with its imposition of optimal efficiency as a single way of revealing, is the moving force governing technical acting (i.e. use), and if we agree that today – some sixty years later – this is still if not even more the case, then we might wonder whether this enframing has eventually assumed a quasi-sacred, religious-like status. Not only should we reiterate that breaking the spell of \textit{Gestell} does not require abandonment or return to an uncontaminated past, as already argued at length; we should also note that the task with which we are presented is not even one that calls for the invention of new rituals altogether but, rather, for the profanation of existing ones and their governing principle of instrumental efficiency. What is needed is not something other than, say, sitting, but a profaned approach to the same act. That is to say, a festive profanation of our acting through the interruption of ‘the reasons and purposes that define it’,\textsuperscript{58} a dance-like doing that affords ‘the liberation of the body from its utilitarian movements’.\textsuperscript{59} Acts of use, if reprogrammed as experiments in playful profanation, could emerge as the sustainment of an open doing that does not

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 85.
\textsuperscript{56} German Eduardo Primera, ‘The Political Ontology of Giorgio Agamben: Bare Life and the Governmental Machine’ (University of Brighton, 2016), 153.
\textsuperscript{58} Agamben, ‘What Is a Destituent Power?’, 69.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 70.
need to arrive anywhere specific: turned, as beautifully put by Schürmann, ‘into a groundless play without why’.\textsuperscript{60}

\subsection*{4.2.3 \textit{Coordinate 2 // Gesture}}

Let us now take a closer look at another passage from the same text on profanation. We have seen that, in forms of profanation such as that of play, the ritualistic behaviours at stake ‘are not effaced’: perhaps through the substitution of the object around which the rite revolves, they are instead ‘deactivated and thus opened to a new, possible use’.\textsuperscript{61} Yet, we are here still circling around the main issue. ‘But what sort of use?’, Agamben then asks.\textsuperscript{62} And it is at this point that we finally plunge into the technicality of play and profanation, as we learn that this “new” understanding of use

consists in freeing a behaviour from its genetic \textit{inscription} within a given sphere [...] The freed behaviour still reproduces and mimics the forms of the activity from which it has been emancipated, but, in emptying them of their sense and of any obligatory relationship to an end, it opens them and makes them available for a new use. [...] this play stages the very same behaviours that define [the ritual]. The activity that results from this thus becomes a pure means, that is, a praxis that, while firmly maintaining its nature as a means, is emancipated from its relationship to an end; it has joyously forgotten its goal and can now show itself as such, as \textit{a means without an end}. The creation of a new use is possible only by deactivating an old use, rendering it inoperative.\textsuperscript{63}

A number of important considerations could now be made. The first one concerns the “genetic inscription” from which use is freed, and thus opened, when articulated as play – as the profanation of inappropriate use. Impropriety in use is not that act which simply reverses the propriety of a script, of a genetically inscripted protocol of action: rather, it is that use which makes the concept itself of the script lose any meaning as such. Improper, then, is that act of use which is radically open to situational emergence: not a mere reversal of “use-as-willing”

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\textsuperscript{60} Schürmann, \textit{Heidegger on Being and Acting}, 243.
\textsuperscript{61} Agamben, ‘In Praise of Profanation’, 85.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 85-6 (emphasis added).
\end{flushleft}
but a much more drastic and deliberate removal of use from the logic of willing as such, from the logic of utility and the presence of an end. Use as playful profanation thus affords the opening that was discussed at the end of the last chapter: not an opening to another, more appropriate use to be discovered (i.e. a practice of liberation), but the opening of use itself that we set out to formulate (i.e. a practice of freedom). Nor is this the abstracted “rhetorical use” discussed in Chapter 2: while mimicking the mode of activity that is profaned – such as, just to insist on the same example, that of sitting – play instead releases use from the religio of the norms that govern that interaction – i.e. how the act of sitting should unfold and, more important still, what we understand it to be.

Playful profanation as openness in use leads to a second consideration, taking us back to one of this research’s initial claims: that is to say, to the political dimension of use. In suggesting that ‘[p]lay as an organ of profanation is in decline everywhere’, Agamben contends that ‘[t]o return to play its purely profane vocation is a political task’. Why? Because, he argues, ‘the “profanation” of play does not solely concern the religious sphere’; and where profanation of use is everywhere obliterated and made impossible, there we find, today, the spheres of either obedient commodity consumption or detached ‘spectacular exhibition’. That is to say, we find the increasingly unprofanable, secularised form of divine domination over our acting that is the ‘capitalist religion’. Resisting this progressive preclusion of profanation and finding new modes of playful use, Agamben then concludes, represents ‘the political task of the coming generation’.

Finally, a third crucial consideration has to do with this operation becoming “pure means” and entailing the joyful forgetting of its goal proper of a “means without end”, of “pure praxis”. But what does it mean for use to be understood as pure praxis, as a means without end? We have addressed earlier on

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64 Ibid., 76.
65 Ibid., 77.
66 Ibid., 76.
67 Ibid., 81.
68 Ibid., 82. Also see Agamben on Walter Benjamin’s theological explanation of capitalism (ibid., 80).
69 Ibid., 92. For a similar argument, also see: Taylor, ‘Design Art Furniture’, 156.
the fundamental distinction between the two Aristotelian dimensions of action as *poiesis* and praxis, naming respectively “a means to an end” and “an end in itself”. However, Agamben finds in the writings of ancient Roman scholar Varro ‘a third type of action alongside the other two’.

This is the terrain of *gesture*: a mode of action that ‘breaks with the false alternative between ends and means’. And it is indeed the sphere of gesture that, being ‘neither use value nor exchange value’ as Agamben has it, could represent ‘the other side of the commodity’ and propel a profanation of the capitalist religion. Gesture, we might say, is what is found once use has been successfully profaned: that is, once it has been stripped of its instrumentally proper, functionally “poietic” residue, and is returned to us as the open, “unproductive” impropriety of play.

The gestural practice of playful use can therefore be intended as an undirected process of discovery whereby one gets willingly lost in a ‘delight internal to the act’. Indeed, Agamben notes that the cardinal peculiarity of gesture ‘is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported’: that is, something is turned into and sustained as pure “processuality”. This processual “unproductivity” of use – reminiscent of Caillois’ take on the wastefulness of play – is what Agamben refers to as *inoperativity*: a potentially deceiving term that, as the philosopher summarises elsewhere, ‘does not mean inertia, but [...] an operation whereby the *how* completely substitutes the *what*’. Much like what we have seen with Foucault’s *askēsis* (that set of practices of the self on the self whereby what was at stake was a care for the activity rather than for the result of that activity), the “something” that is endured and supported in gesture, then, is the activity itself in its unproductive (i.e. inoperative) openness. In the case of *askēsis*, this sustainment was said to entail a deliberate intensification of a given practice, which would then acquire the character of an apprenticeship of sorts: an exercise that strives

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71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 80.
73 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 51.
to progressively assimilate a certain conduct not as a result but as an abiding principle of action. Similarly, if intended as a gestural operation (rather than as poiesis or praxis), a playfully profane act of use becomes an exploratory exercise of intensification and assimilation of a certain comportment (a wilful rejection of mastery), of a “how”. It becomes, in other words, an attempt in obtaining, sustaining, and exhibiting a postural consistency as 'pure mediality'.

4.2.4 Coordinate 3 // Drift

We have so far worked our way through three conceptualisations of technical action – as found in Heidegger, in Foucault, and now in Agamben – which have began to furnish this enquiry with some coordinates. Still, our treatment of such propositions has admittedly remained couched in fairly abstract terms. How would the modality of use articulated up to this point look and indeed feel, when put in play? What are the complexities, implications and opportunities that such a radicalised use could bring about, were it to be concretely activated? One possible prototype for the exploratory activity described here could perhaps be found in the work of French avant-garde and revolutionary group Situationist International (SI) – officially active between 1957 and 1972 but still highly influential to this day across several fields – and its short-lived predecessor Letterist International (1952-1957).

Particularly in their early years, the SI devised a unitary programme intended to counter the experiential poverty of daily life, advocating its radical alteration through the deliberate “construction of situations”, already mentioned in passing in Chapter 2. To summarise, constructed situations essentially involved techniques for experimental comportment [comportement expérimental], not exclusively theorised but also enacted by members of the group. As Tom Bunyard notes, ‘[c]onstructed situations [...] were deliberately designed so as to include chance elements’, which ‘were held to render lived

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76 Agamben, Means without End, 59.
experience potentially ludic'.\footnote{78} This way, he continues, ‘[l]ife, as realised art, would become akin to play’.\footnote{79} Central to this work was, on one hand, a fierce criticism of modernist functionalism and ‘urbanistic hyper-planning’,\footnote{80} as well as, on the other hand, an attempt to reignite an element of spontaneous creativity and adventurousness within daily existence, rather than at a remove from it. One notable situationist technique, already introduced during the Letterist phase and inspired by Dadaist and Surrealists walking experiments, was that of the dérive, French for “drift”. Dérives ‘entailed “drifting” through the city, [...] following no prior plan other than the whims and desires provoked by the local ambiances’.\footnote{81} This technique ultimately intended to afford a condition of permanent play \textit{[jeu permanent]} through an incessant ‘succession of new fields of chance’.\footnote{82}

As this brief summary might begin to reveal, the situationist dérive retains a number of more or less obvious similarities to the radicalised use that has been sketched so far. First, it might not be too much of a stretch to understand the strategic nature of dérives as somewhat akin to the Heideggerian resolve for non-willing, since the intentional gratuitousness of the SI’s exposure to chance appears remarkably close to the willful “openness to what is given” of \textit{Gelassenheit}. If we consider that those engaging in dérives ‘drop [...] their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attraction of the terrain and the encounters they find there’,\footnote{83} the parallel with Heidegger’s releasement seems very clear. In a fashion not too dissimilar from Heidegger’s formulation, the work of the SI sought to ‘accommodate a certain degree of “letting go”’\footnote{84} by somehow reconciling the contradictory combination of meticulous planning and radical openness to the transitory nature of constructed situations. That is to say, the SI attempted to harmonise the tension

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\footnote{78}{Tom Bunyard, \textit{Debord, Time and Spectacle: Hegelian Marxism and Situationist Theory} (Leiden: Brill, 2018) 70.}
\footnote{79}{Ibid.}
\footnote{80}{Tom McDonough, ed., \textit{The Situationists and The City} (London: Verso, 2009) 20.}
\footnote{81}{Bunyard, \textit{Debord, Time and Spectacle}, 88.}
\footnote{82}{Tom Bunyard, ‘A Genealogy and Critique of Guy Debord’s Theory of Spectacle’ (Goldsmiths, University of London, 2011), 74.}
\footnote{84}{Simon Sadler, \textit{The Situationist City} (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998) 78.}
between strategic organisation and a ‘practice of passionate uprooting’—the *dérive* being an obvious example of this. On this point, Bunyard suggests that Guy Debord (SI’s undisputed central figure) elaborated a conception of “strategy” inherited from Hegelian Marxism and which, as a form of ‘practical theory’, should be read not as a prioritisation of thought over action but, rather, as the co-constitution of the two simultaneously.

A second significant consideration that can be made is one exposing a potential parallel between the SI’s constructed situations and Foucault’s account of askēsis. If we remember that this type of exercise was to be intended as ‘training in a real situation, even if it has been artificially induced’, it is hard not to spot the terminological and strategic proximity between askēsis and the ethos of constructed situation. The most remarkable correspondence between askēsis and practices such as that of the *dérive*, however, is represented by the perceived implications that both have in processes of subjectivation. Just as askēsis is to be understood, again, as the gradual assimilation of ‘a permanent principle of action’, so does Debord clarify that, through constructed situations, ‘the application of this will to ludic creation must be extended to all known forms of human relationships’—including friendship and love. That is to say: contrarily to what proposed by Huizinga and Caillois, the playfulness of constructed situations, far from being segregated to an exceptional domain, was instead imagined as part of a project that would gradually encompass the totality of social life.

The fact that the most striking points of contact, however, are to be found between the SI’s tactics and Agamben’s thought should come as no surprise. Indeed, not only has the latter extensively engaged with, been influenced by, and written about the work of the SI, but he also established an amicable relationship and correspondence with Debord. Echoes of Debord’s strategic thinking can be

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89 Ibid., 239.
recognised across a large portion of Agamben’s work, either directly acknowledged or more subtly veiled. The former is the case for Agamben’s articulation of gesture, which the philosopher exemplifies precisely through reference to the SI’s constructed situations.\(^91\) Although admittedly lacking Agamben’s punctiliousness in his analysis of the relationship between means and ends, Debord indeed described the situationist drift as a ‘technique of locomotion without a goal’,\(^92\) essentially understanding this activity as existing entirely beyond ‘utilitarian imperatives’.\(^93\) Moreover, and perhaps the most obvious (yet not directly referenced) of all analogies proposed here, Agamben’s apprehension of playful use as a form of profanation bears an unmistakable conceptual closeness to the SI’s ‘will to ludic creation’.\(^94\) In The Revolution of Everyday Life, Raoul Vaneigem – another prominent SI member – unambiguously spells out the connection between play, rules and sacred rites as follows:

> Once the idea of sacrifice appears the game becomes sacrosanct and its rules become rites. In true play, the rules encompass ways of getting round the rules, of playing with them. In the realm of the sacred, by contrast, rituals are not to be toyed with, they can only be broken, transgressed. [...] Only play deconsecrates – opening the door to boundless freedom.\(^95\)

Immediately after this remark, Vaneigem mentions the importance of play for another key Situationist technique, which is in many ways complementary to that of the dérive: the tactic of détournement. ‘Play’, he notes, ‘is the principle of détournement, the freedom to repurpose, to change the meaning of everything that serves Power’.\(^96\) Which is to say that détournement essentially entails the same operation as that of profanation: the negligent deactivation of existing processes of use that, by ‘refusing to acknowledge any inherent value they might

\(^{91}\) See: Agamben, Means without End, 80.


\(^{93}\) Letterist International, ‘Architecture and Play’ (1955), in The Situationists and The City, ed. Tom McDonough (London: Verso, 2009), 47. Debord was the editor of the issue (#20) of the letterist information bulletin Potlatch that featured this short text.


\(^{96}\) Ibid.
claim to have’,\(^\text{97}\) are opened to playful improvisation. When Sadie Plant writes that ‘to dérive was [...] to seek out reasons for movement other than those for which an environment was designed’,\(^\text{98}\) we can see that the point here was not to establish a more appropriate deployment of an environment but, rather, to do away with the necessity of assigning to its use a specific function. Further, since dérives meant to uncover ‘interstitial spaces that might be salvaged from the dominant culture, and, once isolated, put to new use’,\(^\text{99}\) this mode of playful profanation through use is to be intended as an inherently political task. This is expressed in rather plain terms in SI critic Libero Andreotti’s analysis of the dérive, central to which, he claims, ‘was the awareness of exploring forms of life radically beyond the capitalist work ethic’ and its productivist imperatives.\(^\text{100}\)

Especially when understood through the lens of détournement, the practice of the dérive thus named a particular use of one’s surroundings through which the SI aspired to unlock the experimentation with alternative modes of experience and subjectivity. Indeed, as Bunyard suggests, Debord essentially ‘views the human subject as a processual, self-constitutive entity, characterised by a continual, dialectical interaction with the objective world’.\(^\text{101}\) But, we may argue, the modality of such interaction (of use), as exemplified by dérives, required playing with, more so than through, the city. A shift that signals a profound mutuality with the material infrastructures encountered throughout these profane experiences of use: a mutuality arising through abdication of individual control over a situation. And it is indeed this reciprocity that we should now address, in order to examine the peculiar “with” of use.


\(\text{101}\) Bunyard, *Debord, Time and Spectacle*, 219.
4.3 Use as with

4.3.1 Comradeship, confabulations, coalitions

Despite their interest in artistic, graphic, architectural and urban interventions, the SI strangely ignored the sphere of mundane technical artefacts. Strangely, because of the almost boundless reservoir of “détournable” cultural elements of which basic tools and devices are composed. As already elaborated in Chapter 3, these elements silently usher us through our daily experience of the world, thus being inevitably implicated in the unfolding of social life. What would it mean, then, to devise a profane (or released) modality of acting and playing with, rather than solely through artefacts, as a form of drift?

To begin with, instead of being picked up simply as servile instruments of play, the artefacts involved in these activities could perhaps be regarded as drifting companions, even as comrades. In which case, these might become inorganic entities with which users engage in something of a conspiratorial material confabulation. To understand experiences of use as grounded in this form of comradeship would seem to necessitate, as we have already begun to suggest, the development of a deep mutuality, a profound reciprocity at work between “users” and “used”. If such reciprocity were to be achieved, these would both – together and simultaneously – evade any master/slave dichotomy, entering instead a coalition of bodies concertedly involved in ‘playful-constructive behaviour’. The performativity of the artefacts taking part in such a coalition ultimately consists not in fuelling mastery but in the recruitment – the ‘material interpellation’ – of a particular breed of user: a negligent user that embraces the humble yet insurgent power of play as a profane exercise. An

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exercise that, because working to elide the experiential segregation through which the sacredness of norms is preserved, should strive to become increasingly integrated within everyday conduct, rather than remaining ‘an intermezzo, an interlude in our daily lives’, as Huizinga suggested is true of play.\textsuperscript{105} Let us now take a closer look at the reciprocity implied by the mode of use we have been formulating.

\textbf{4.3.2 Coordinate 4 // Affectivity}

It has already been suggested that acts of use can be somewhat akin to material dialogues, to non-verbal exchanges of information. Importantly, however, this “conversation” is not only one between designers and users, as a rhetorical effort in authorial persuasion,\textsuperscript{106} but also between users and (as well as through) artefacts.\textsuperscript{107} Akrich’s important analytic lens of the “script” addressed earlier on, while also describing a form of communication, seems to fall short of attending to the reciprocal flow of information at play in acts of use. It does indeed appear rather unidirectional, somewhat static, for the communication appears to travel from the designer inscribing a certain protocol of action into an object to the user who receives it, either the way it was intended or not. Consequently, (a) the artefact is seen as but a mediating channel of communication, and (b) collective practices of use are similarly difficult to account for. But use, as Mazé rightly notes, ‘cannot be reduced to discrete acts of perception and interpretation’.\textsuperscript{108} Treating use as a material confabulation, as a form of \textit{haptic and ongoing exchange}, seems perhaps more fitting for the operation that we have sought to articulate throughout. The extent of this circulation of forces and intimate mingling of users and “used” – but also amongst users via the “used” – can now begin to be made even more evident through a linguistic consideration.

Again in \textit{The Use of Bodies}, Agamben dedicates a fascinating chapter to the perplexing etymology of the Greek verb \textit{chresthai}, ordinarily rendered as “to

\textsuperscript{105} Huizinga, \textit{Homo Ludens}, 9.
\textsuperscript{106} See: Buchanan, ‘Declaration by Design’.
\textsuperscript{107} See: Crilly et al., ‘Design as Communication’; Vardouli, ‘Making Use’.
\textsuperscript{108} Mazé, \textit{Occupying Time}, iii.
use” – a term already appearing, albeit less predominantly, in Foucault’s work.\textsuperscript{109} Resorting to the studies of linguists George Redard and Émile Benveniste, Agamben shows that such a translation, at least in its contemporary understanding, enormously oversimplifies the original richness of *chresthai*. Indeed, he specifies, the verb was intended to convey

a matter of a relationship with something [...] a relation so close between subject and object that not only is the subject intimately modified, but the boundaries between the two terms of the relationship even seem indeterminated.\textsuperscript{110}

This leads Agamben to suggest that the contemporary connotation of use as an instrumental act therefore ‘emerges as inadequate to grasp the meaning of the Greek verb’.\textsuperscript{111} And this is because the principal peculiarity of *chresthai* – of which the colloquial understanding of use has been notably deprived – is that, in it, the seemingly impenetrable semantic partition dividing active and passive voices collapses. That is to say: *chresthai* belongs to a class of verbs that, being ‘neither active nor passive’, are instead expressed in what grammarians called a ‘middle diathesis’, and therefore both active and passive together, both “using” and “used” simultaneously.\textsuperscript{112} As Ingold notes in his review of the same study by Benveniste, the use of the middle voice is far from an obscure, insignificant vagary. Ingold instead argues that the contrary is true, given that ‘the active/passive opposition is neither ancient nor universal’.\textsuperscript{113} In fact, he points out in regard to this opposition that ‘[p]lenty of non-Indo-European languages do not have it, and even within the Indo-European fold it has emerged historically from a decomposition of [...] the “middle voice”’.\textsuperscript{114} Ingold then observes that it is precisely through this dissolution of the middle voice that we have inherited the articulation of agency as the property of an active “doer” that was described in

\textsuperscript{109} See: Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 33.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 25-6.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid. Recall that the same was proposed by Heidegger about *Gelassenheit*.
\textsuperscript{113} Ingold, ‘On Human Correspondence’, 17.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
Chapter 3 – and which, he adds, achieved the split of ‘the doer from the deed’. 115 Let us now reflect on some of the significant implications that rethinking use as a mode of action in the middle voice can present for this exploration.

A first, major implication concerns the “place” of the subject(s) of the act with respect to the process of use and the “motion”, so to speak, of its effect. The process taking place in the active and passive voices is one either starting or ending with the subject of the action respectively: such a subject is thus either one effecting or affected by the unfolding of the action. That is, either acting or acted upon. In other words, active and passive voices denote two antithetical linear motions for the action at stake: in the former, the action moves outward and beyond the subject as “agent”, who is the originator of that action; in the latter, the motion travels inward, reaching the sphere of the subject as “patient”, 116 who is the receiver of an action that originated externally from it. By contrast, in the middle voice both the linear directionality and locus of the action are muddled and so is, consequently, the relation that the subject has with that action. Indeed, what Benveniste’s research proposes is that, in the middle voice, ‘the verb indicates a process that takes place in the subject: the subject is internal to the process’. 117 Further, and given that ‘here the subject is the seat of the process’, 118 a verb in the middle diathesis such as chresthai names an action through which the subject ‘effects in being affected’. 119 What Benveniste means by this is that the subject of a verb in the middle voice essentially ‘achieves something which is being achieved in [it]’. 120 An achievement that, we should remember, in the case of profane use expresses not the obtainment of an end state or goal but, rather, an ongoing unfolding.

And yet, we should not rush to the conclusion that ‘the singular threshold that the middle voice establishes’ 121 simply names a reflexive mode of action,

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115 Ibid.
116 ‘Paziente’ [patient] is the Italian term used by Agamben to name the subject of a passive verb: a subject who, in his ‘passione’ [passion], is affected and acted upon. See: Giorgio Agamben, L’uso dei corpi, (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2014a) 55.
117 Benveniste cited in Agamben, The Use of Bodies, 27.
118 Ibid.
119 Benveniste cited in Agamben, ‘What Is a Destituent Power?’, 68.
120 Agamben, The Use of Bodies, 27.
121 Ibid., 28.
thus falling into some sort of solipsism of the subject. In fact, the above operation is at work ‘even if this process [...] demands an object’\(^\text{122}\) or, we may say, precisely because of it. Agamben indeed continues:

> to enter into a relation of use with something, I must be affected by it, constitute myself as the one who makes use of it. Human being and world are, in use, in a *relationship of absolute and reciprocal immanence*; in the using of something, it is the very being of the one using that is first of all at stake.\(^\text{123}\)

Granted, in this sense the subject of *chresthai* seems to be both agent and patient, both effecting and affected. But at one condition: that this subject is engaged in some sort of relationship – and one of “absolute and reciprocal immanence” no less – with something and/or someone. A relationship that, thus, actually swathes the roles of subject and object, user and used, person and thing, in a web of reciprocal coimplication and interference, to the point of troubling the very boundaries upon which these categories rest. This way, Agamben tells us, use as *chresthai* could be defined as ‘*the affection that a body receives inasmuch as it is in relation with another body*’.\(^\text{124}\) The Spinozan-Deleuzian lineage discussed in the Introduction is here unmistakable, given that Agamben’s use appears extraordinarily similar to these philosophers’ conceptualisation of “affect”. Following Agamben, then, we might say that use is reconfigured as an expression of *affectivity*.

Understanding use as an action in the middle voice bears a second and pivotal implication. Indeed, the reciprocal immanence of the “subject” – if we can still call it so – of an act of use with what and/or who is encountered through that act, brings about ‘a radical transformation of the ontology (an ontology in the middle voice) of the concept of “subject” itself’.\(^\text{125}\) By neutralising the watertight conceptual threshold that enables any distinction between subject and object of an action our focus is fundamentally shifted. When he says that, through the operation of *chresthai*, what is at stake is ‘not a subject that uses an object, but a

\(^{122}\) Ibid., 27.
\(^{123}\) Ibid., 30 (emphasis added).
\(^{124}\) Agamben, ‘What Is a Destituent Power?’, 69 (emphasis in original).
\(^{125}\) Ibid.
subject that constitutes itself only through the using, the being in relation with an other.\textsuperscript{126} Agamben points to a “zone of indistinction”,\textsuperscript{127} as he often puts it. Which is to say, he points not simply to a form of dialectical reconciliation of the categories of subject and object, but to an operation that seeks to radically undermine the construction of these very categories in and of themselves. An event of use thus construed is necessarily “pre-subjective”, to use Massumi’s expression, in the sense that any idea of “subject” and “object” is nothing but a ‘post-facto reflection’ since use ‘is reducible to neither taken separately’.\textsuperscript{128} Use, as such, as an unfolding event, might ‘only retrospectively be “owned”, or owed up to’.\textsuperscript{129}

An ontology in the middle voice, being entirely constructed upon the event of an entanglement of bodies – whether human or non-human – is indeed one revolving around what passes amongst these bodies, rather than what happens in or to individual entities. Not only, then, is Agamben’s articulation of use suggestive of an ontology of the “how” (or a ‘modal ontology’,\textsuperscript{130} as he also calls it): it is also and categorically an ontology of the “with”, a social ontology. The coexistence of “how” and “with” that Agamben’s study of chresthai seeks to bring to light is made evident in the words of Redard, which Agamben reports:

Of course, chraomai means: I use, I utilize (an instrument, a tool). But equally chraomai may designate my behaviour or my attitude. [...] So chraomai is also a certain attitude. Chresthai also designates a certain type of relationship with other people.\textsuperscript{131}

What can use be, then, according to what has been said up to this point? The passage above might offer the opportunity for a schematic review before we move forward. Drawing on Agamben’s work on the paradigm of use, what we have proposed so far can essentially be summarised by means of two interconnected propositions. First, use can be a “certain attitude” of playful profanation and

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid. (emphasis added).
\textsuperscript{127} E.g. see: Agamben, The Use of Bodies, 29.
\textsuperscript{128} Massumi, Politics of Affect, 94.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{130} Agamben, The Use of Bodies, 175.
\textsuperscript{131} Redard cited in Agamben, The Use of Bodies, 31.
exploratory gesturing. This certain “how” is in turn both manifested within and made possible by means of engaging in a “certain type of relationship”: the affectivity and reciprocal immanence of a pre-subjective “with”.

4.3.3 Coordinate 5 // Inappropriability

There is however another element that, although implied just above, has so far remained on the edges of this formulation and to which we shall now turn. This element, which in some ways binds together the “certain how” and “certain with” of what we may tentatively call a sociality of use, should now be finally brought to the fore as, according to Agamben, use’s paramount hallmark. That is to say, in the work of the Italian philosopher use is established as a politically central category that is directly antithetical to possession, hence ‘defined negatively with respect to ownership’; a mode of relating through which one neither straightforwardly possesses nor is being possessed. Indeed, already in a study titled The Highest Poverty Agamben specifies that use is ‘a relation to the world insofar as it is inappropriable’. Rather than the simple opposite of ownership, use therefore comes to represent that act which deactivates any proprietorial mode of relating: “if you will not share it you cannot use it”, Le Guin’s character would say. In this terms, returning to the “how” of playful profanation, use functions as a profanation of the sacredness of property. This deactivation through use of proprietorial modes of relating points to what Agamben refers to as ‘destituent power’; a power that obliterates a given regime without however establishing a new one. Political theorist Saul Newman interprets Agamben’s destituent power in rather explicative terms, when he identifies it as an insurrectionary ‘exodus from the order of sovereignty altogether’. A mode of acting that is destituent is, in Agamben’s words, one ‘that can never be grasped in terms of either expropriation or appropriation but that can be grasped, rather,

133 Agamben, The Highest Poverty, 144.
134 In Italian “potenza destituente”, see: Agamben, ‘What Is a Destituent Power?’.
only as use\textsuperscript{136}. Use is thus a form of destituent practice in that, by remaining entirely outside of the fold of appropriation – or indeed within that of “inappropriability” – can never return to the domain of proprietorial sovereignty.

The importance of this mechanism of “destitution through use” of the logic of proprietorial sovereignty is here absolutely key. Why? Because if (i) ‘in the using of something, it is the very being of the one using that is first of all at stake’\textsuperscript{137} as Agamben argues; but also if, as we have now established, (2) use identifies a relation of absolute inappropriability; then (3) it is the “subject” itself that, through the relation of use by which it is constituted, can never be appropriated – can never become property. To put this in more straightforward terms: that which through use becomes inappropriable is no less than oneself, a “using self” thus extracted from the logic of possession. Which is why Agamben draws attention to Foucault’s late development, alongside the notion of “care of the self”, of a new formula: ‘se déprendre de soi-même’\textsuperscript{138}, the literal translation of which, interestingly, is ‘to release oneself from oneself’.\textsuperscript{139} Following the trajectory developed thus far, we could perhaps suggest that “se déprendre de soi-même” might come to indicate not so much a “self-detachment” or “disassemblment of the self”, as Foucault’s translator Paul Rabinow proposes,\textsuperscript{140} but instead a form of self-dispossession. Indeed, as Agamben explains himself, through this formula the mostly individualistic notion of care-of-oneself ’gives place to a dispossession […] of the self, where it again becomes mixed up with use’\textsuperscript{141}. A dispossession, then, achieved through and, more important still, as use.

### 4.3.4 Coordinate 6 // Outside

As we take the concluding steps in this elaboration, it is worth considering how the form of self-dispossession through use to which we have arrived also goes to animate the atypical understanding that Agamben develops around the concept

\textsuperscript{136} Agamben, \textit{Means without End}, 117.
\textsuperscript{137} Agamben, \textit{The Use of Bodies}, 30.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{140} See: Rabinow, ‘Introduction: The History of Systems of Thought’, xxxviii (emphasis added).
\textsuperscript{141} See: ibid., xxxviii-xl.
\textsuperscript{141} Agamben, \textit{The Use of Bodies}, 34.
of “poverty”. Informed by his study of practices of Monasticism, and particularly of Franciscanism, the philosopher proposes to approach the notion of poverty in a way that would ‘liberate this concept from the negative dimension within which it remains each time embroiled’:142 which is to say, as not purely dependent on and representing the opposite of “wealth” – a wealth one has been deprived of. It is starting from this caveat that we should begin to understand Agamben’s undertaking, lest we end up reading it, as Newman does, as a ‘sort of radical, yet ultimately self-sacrificial, passivity’.143 In fact, what Agamben is trying to do is to reconstruct poverty as signifying neither lack nor submissive renunciation but, rather, as a practice of outright refusal of the very logic of property. To be sure, this is not to be interpreted as a desire to romanticise material indigence as such. In fact, it is important to note that Agamben wishes to think poverty ‘as an ontological category […]', to think it not only in relation to having, but also and primarily in relation to being’.144 This way, for Agamben, poverty is radicalised by becoming first and foremost the process of maintaining a relation to one’s being as inappropriable: such a relation is given, again, as a relation of use.

Now, isn’t this procedure directing us precisely toward the mode of sociality that we sought not only to locate theoretically but also to experiment with on the plane of technicity? After all, we have just seen that the “certain with”, the particular sociality at stake in a politics in the middle voice – which is to say, in a politics of use – is categorically not appropriable, neither individually nor collectively, neither through addition nor through synthesis of units. Still, through Agamben’s discussion of ontological poverty, we have also suggested that use is not a matter of straightforward subtraction either, at least if this were to imply a complete destruction of oneself in the sense of self-sacrifice, passivity, and indifference. What then? A way out of this impasse can perhaps be offered by Sergei Prozorov, as he lucidly draws attention to a distinction to be made between destruction and subtraction, in relation to the destituent ambitions of Agamben’s political project. In his assessment, Prozorov suggests that, for

143 Newman, ‘What Is an Insurrection?’, 296. Note the similarity, in terms of both line of argument and criticism, with the appraisal of Heidegger’s concept of Gelassenheit.
144 Agamben, Creazione e anarchia, 59 (translation mine).
Agamben, revolutionary destruction represents a form of “constituent power”, for an attempt to overthrow the present order serves the purpose of replacing it with a newly composed one. That is, a new “master” (i.e. a new function) in lieu of the old one. In contrast to destruction, however, the logic of destituent power is one of insurrectionary subtraction in terms of flight – as in “subtracting oneself from” – ‘by virtue of its avoidance of any engagement with what it negates’.¹⁴⁵ namely ‘the Master-Slave relation’ itself.¹⁴⁶

Can this self-dispossession in use be thus understood as a destitution by means of flight from the logic of possession altogether? Can it be understood not as simple deprivation of wealth but, again, as joining something that Moten calls ‘a sociality centred on the invaluable’?¹⁴⁷ What if a “self” – whatever that means by now – were to be performed not as a matter of property to begin with, not as wealth or a value to keep, but instead as something to be deliberately lost (something to destitute), to be given away, again and again, in and through this peculiar affectivity of use? A relation of use of this kind can then come to represent what Agamben, in his early work The Coming Community, had already described as ‘the event of an outside’.¹⁴⁸ That is to say, the event of a threshold, the ecstatic ‘experience of [a] limit, the experience of being-within an outside’.¹⁴⁹

Which is why the locus of this politics of use, although certainly depending on rather than destructing the elements at play in each relation of use (whether persons or artefacts) has to be found in the liminal, affective space between them: the territory that is because of “me” but not “mine” as such. Ingold is implying something very similar to this when he argues that

if we enter into a relationship, does this not bring into existence something new that is neither you nor I, but into which we have both yielded something of our respective selves?¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 143.
¹⁴⁷ Moten, A Poetics of the Undercommons, 32.
¹⁴⁸ Agamben, The Coming Community, 67.
¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 68. In the same passage, Agamben also refers to an ek-stasis, the Greek term for the event of standing [stasis] outside [ek] of oneself.
¹⁵⁰ Ingold, ‘On Human Correspondence’, 11.
This articulation of use as a destituent dispossession in, of, and for something of an “outside within”, which Agamben suggests furnishes ‘a new figure of human praxis’ and deactivates the roles of subject and object, effectively entails something of a particular sabotage. A sabotage, that is to say, in the form of a playful profanation not only of artefacts but, more importantly, of those using them: of one’s somatic and kinetic sense of self as a sacred, separate, bounded, private dimension.

Despite its distinctive richness and expansive set of conceptual propositions, it might not be ungenerous to argue that Agamben’s work rarely offers much more than scattered, ambiguous hints as to how an enactment of this new mode of destituent praxis might actually look like and feel. The playing of children with obsolete objects? The improvisational gesturing of a dancing body? Similarly, neither the practices of Monasticism examined by Agamben nor the Greek and Roman exercises of askēsis studied by Foucault should be blithely idealised. Hence we must find ways of exploring this destituent flight through concrete forms of corporeal practice, rather than as mere thought experiments, incorporating it into a nanopolitics of use. A mode of acting, a mode of moving and being moved, that is collectively choreographed and bodily orchestrated, rooted in the becoming one another’s condition of possibility for acting. We must find ways of reconsidering this strange dance of use as a touch without single authorship: as a mode, in Garcés’ words, of ‘consenting to be affected’ by the gesturing of others. Particularly if taken up in combination with other dissident traditions, the humble force of this mode of entanglement might emerge as a quietly insurrectionary one: the queering of use that Sarah Ahmed has recently been calling for, or the ‘fugitivity of use’ to which Harney refers. A dispossessed use, as and for fugitivity.

151 Agamben, The Use of Bodies, 30.
152 See: Agamben, State of Exception, 64; Agamben, ‘In Praise of Profanation’, 76.
153 Agamben, ‘What Is a Destituent Power?’, 70. Also see Erin Manning’s 2007 work on affect and dance, Politics of Touch, itself explicitly influenced by Agamben’s writing on gesture: Erin Manning, Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
154 Garcés, Un mundo común, 69.
155 See: Ahmed, ‘Queer Use’.
4.4 Use as dispossession

4.4.1 Aporetic dispossession

Before we can directly confront the fugitivity of this dispossessed and dispossessive paradigm of action, the notion itself of “dispossession” needs more careful unpacking. To signal the necessity of addressing the far from unproblematic connotations attached to the idea and, most importantly, to experiences of dispossession is perhaps stating the obvious. Unsurprisingly, given the subject matter, much can and must be learned in this respect from radical work operating on registers of intelligibility that advance marginalised perspectives, as is the case, for example, with queer, feminist, indigenous, and black studies. Perspectives, histories, practices that, as Harney notes, Agamben has instead ignored157 but which similarly work to radically and practically trouble the relationship between means and ends. Perspectives that take as their point of departure the material conditions and somatic experiences of those bodies onto which certain identities are injuriously imposed, to which subjectivity itself has been denied, and for which the term “dispossession” could and does acquire very different tonalities.158 Those bodies for which, in other words, flight and fugitivity have historically signified a question of survival, a necessity more so than a possibility. Without wishing to de-contextualise or appropriate the specificities of past and current struggles (and certainly without claims of advancing their critical appraisal), this study pledges to listen, to incorporate and experiment with some of the force and vitality that is found in a heterogeneity of histories, voices, practices.

One such prominent standpoint is that of Butler, particularly through her work in collaboration with Athanasiou, as the two authors delivered a gripping investigation into the notion of dispossession in a homonymous book. The fundamental premise of their work is that dispossession is an inherently aporetic

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157 Ibid.
concept that, as such, ‘could not remain an unambivalent political ideal’.\textsuperscript{159} And yet, despite such inevitable ambiguities the authors insist that ‘the idea of the unitary subject’ – which is always and above all a self-possessing subject – ‘serves a form of power that must be challenged and undone’: namely, what they define as a “masculinist”, violent project of ‘mastery over the domain of life’.\textsuperscript{160} Butler and Athanasiou propose that the emergence of ethically and politically grounded resistance to this power thus unavoidably depend on opposition to what Hartman already described as ‘the sanctity of property and proprietorial notions of the self’.\textsuperscript{161} We should therefore pay heed to this dual nature of dispossession, as it is addressed by the two theorists.

Butler and Athanasiou note that, on one hand, if intended as a mode of subjugation, dispossession connotes a ‘form of suffering for those displaced and colonised’,\textsuperscript{162} administered through a heterogeneous set of ‘imposed injuries, painful interpellations, occlusions, and foreclosures’.\textsuperscript{163} In this case, for instance, one can immediately think about the forcefully induced dispossession to which many populations are submitted by settler regimes via colonial acts of territorial occupation and resource deprivation. As already implied above, though, one should just as much consider the perhaps less sensationally dramatic yet equally violent and ubiquitous normative processes of subjection that regulate, negate, or administer gender and racial identities by means of an ‘inaugural submission of the subject-to-be’.\textsuperscript{164} Clearly, this first modality of dispossession has nothing to do with a way of operating in the middle voice, of “effecting in being affected” – with the insurgent sociality of use that was described earlier on. Quite the opposite, this is the passivity, the sheer “passion”, displayed by and through acts of imposed, utterly oppressive dispossession.

And yet, on the other hand, Butler and Athanasiou suggest that the same term can also acquire a drastically different valence. Indeed, when identifying a condition of being ‘moved to the other and by the other – exposed to and affected

\textsuperscript{159} Butler and Athanasiou, Dispossession, ix.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{161} Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 115.
\textsuperscript{162} Butler and Athanasiou, Dispossession, ix.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 1.
by the other’s vulnerability’, by taking flight from the fold of possessive individualism and neoliberal governmentality. Which is to say: ‘thinking about dispossession beyond the logic of possession as a resource for a reorientation of politics’. This way, echoing Agamben, “dispossession” comes to indicate ‘a condition that is not simply countered by appropriation, a term that re-establishes possession and property as the primary prerogatives of self-authoring personhood’. Rather, this mode of dispossession would instead serve to undermine (to destitute) the apparatus itself of ‘propertied human subjectivity’, the “self” as one’s property. This second acceptation would then require approaching a dispossession of oneself as a process ‘that marks the limits of self-sufficiency’, the experience of a sociality that indeed both welcomes and necessitates ‘letting oneself become dispossessed’, a way of ‘being disposed to be undone’. This concomitant avowal and need of dispossession situates this mode of sociality (again like Agamben’s use) onto a twofold plane whereby vulnerability and exposure are established as both political coordinates and ontological categories. Which is to say, in other words, that the political project we are trying to sketch is one that also depends on the tactical recognition of the fundamental precariousness of “singular” lives, of bodies’ general condition of mutual dependence, of the fact that ‘we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them’. The question then, for this “onto-politics” of dispossession, is to perceive ontology ‘not [as] a space of power but rather [as] one of vulnerability’ (a vulnerability that, we shall not forget though, is ‘allocated differentially amongst bodies). The question is to perceive (literally, here) oneself exclusively as

165 Ibid.
166 Ibid., 126.
167 Ibid., 6.
168 Ibid., 27.
169 Ibid., 3.
170 Ibid., 1.
171 Ibid., 93.
172 See: Butler, Precarious Life.
173 Ibid., 24.
174 Garcés, Un mundo común, 15.
175 Butler, Precarious Life, 31.
‘the event of [one’s] multiple exposures’,\textsuperscript{176} whereby ‘I recognize myself in the state of not being myself, of being dispossessed of myself’.\textsuperscript{177} This would mean, in Butler's words, to mount something of ‘an insurrection at the level of ontology’.\textsuperscript{178}

Butler and Athanasiou ultimately contend that our task is thus to meet dispossession with dispossession. Or, in other words, ‘to become dispossessed of the sovereign self and enter into forms of collectivity’\textsuperscript{179} that would \textit{at the same time} serve to contrast structural, oppressive forms of dispossession such as those mentioned above. How, then, can we now articulate and experiment with ‘the state of dispossession that we seek and that we embrace’?\textsuperscript{180} And, subsequently, how can we move from a “state” of dispossession – which might somehow be confused again with a property – to a bodily process, indeed to a use of, in, and as dispossession? Our intention here is therefore precisely that of establishing a practice of use as one of the possible ‘new idioms for contemporary critical agency’\textsuperscript{181} that Athanasiou invites us to develop. Having briefly outlined the ambiguity in which the notion of dispossession is embroiled, which relentlessly pulls the term in opposite directions, torn between debilitating individual subjugation and invigorating collective action, we should now aim our attention onto the latter. And we should do so in order to identify a number of final coordinates that can be traced in the conceptual convergence of use and dispossession. If a radical paradigm of use can represent one of the ‘multiple ways in which bodies are “beside themselves,” dispossessed, comported beyond themselves’,\textsuperscript{182} as Butler and Athanasiou put it, then this study can hopefully go some way towards proposing modes of dispossession ‘that are materialized in forms of conduct and action’,\textsuperscript{183} as we set out to do.

\textbf{4.4.2 Coordinate 7 // Study}

\textsuperscript{176} Butler and Athanasiou, \textit{Dispossession}, 32.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., 118.
\textsuperscript{178} Butler, \textit{Pecarious Life}, 33.
\textsuperscript{179} Butler and Athanasiou, \textit{Dispossession}, xi.
\textsuperscript{180} Halberstam, 'The Wild Beyond: With and For the Undercommons', 11.
\textsuperscript{181} Butler and Athanasiou, \textit{Dispossession}, 27.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 178.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 94.
It is in the work of Harney and Moten that the notion of dispossession, in its subversively enabling sense, acquires its most significant connotations with respect to our effort of reconstructing use anew. By way of a distinctively lyrical prose, the writing of Harney and Moten gives access to an extraordinarily rich conceptual universe, primarily through their engagement with the “black radical tradition” and the development of a particular articulation of “blackness”, as an ontological disruption of the self-possessed subject. According to Moten, although being more readily accessible to black people because of historical circumstances, such a disruption is one that anyone ‘has the right and an option to claim’. Similarly to “queerness”, then, Moten proposes that blackness is a subversive ‘general condition’ that animates a process of ‘social poetics’ revolving around a sheer refusal to be normatively and individually subjectified. This is a rejected interpellation of sorts, enacted before or (perhaps more accurately) underneath the taking place of that injurious, oppressive process that ceaselessly seeks to hail us and construct us as separate subjects, when not to deprive some of the status of subject altogether. Harney and Moten explain that what can drive this refusal is the recognition that ‘it is the recourse to self-possession in the face of dispossession [...] that represents the real danger’. How is this insurgent disavowal to be enacted, though? Harney and Moten cryptically respond: through a ‘fugitive art of social life’. Let us delve into their work to consider some key aspects of this dispossessed mode of collectivity and how it relates to use.

In Harney and Moten’s joint elaboration, dispossession represents one of, if not the core “inclination”, so to speak, displayed by those operating in what the two authors have famously called “the undercommons”. The link to the idea of “the commons” is obvious here. And yet, as already anticipated in Chapter 1, where the collectivity of the commons is predicated upon shared ownership

184 Moten, A Poetics of the Undercommons, 30.
185 Ibid., 29.
186 Ibid., 24.
187 Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 17.
188 Ibid., 73.
hence revolving around possession, being “in” the undercommons means reversing this logic and coming together through mutual self-dispossession instead. It means, in keeping with Agamben’s terminology, coming together through a collective destitution of the very logic of possession. We could say that more so than an actual place, the undercommons indicate the informal sociality unfolding everywhere beneath the ground and at the edges of established, policed, and formally regulated “public” life. In and through the undercommons, dispossession thus comes to mean a ‘kind of comportment or ongoing experiment’; the ‘general and generative antagonism’ that a non-sovereign manner of relating to one another expresses and enacts against the atomising rule of logistical human capital. Which is to say: ‘beyond and beneath [the] enclosure’ of institutionally sanctioned social life and the independent subjects that this produces and presupposes in a single stroke.

What is of the greatest relevance to our reconfiguration of use is that Harney and Moten explicitly speak about this mode of undercommon dispossession not so much in terms of a predicate of being but as a practice (or set of practices). Harney, together with artist Valentina Desideri, spells this out clearly when suggesting that ‘[t]he undercommons is a place of performance, performativity, ensemble, and improvisation’. And yet, Harney and Moten also warn us that this performance, this performative practice, is not to be misunderstood as an “exceptional” mode of acting: it does not indicate that our acting might ‘require some other step and that we need to practice something else’ altogether. In fact, mundane everyday activities such as ‘talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering’ do not require being ennobled in some way or another when undertaken in a truly collective spirit. They instead bear an ‘incessant and irreversible intellectuality’ that is inherent to them but which necessitates being recognised, acted upon, and

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189 Ibid., 112.
190 Ibid., 17.
191 Ibid.
193 Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 146.
194 Ibid., 110.
195 Ibid.
intensified. Our question of the proto-political quality of use discussed in Chapter 1 is here returned to us with renewed significance: it is not something other than use that needs being developed, but another collective relation to use. Still, if not other steps and activities, there is something that the dispossession of the undercommons does require: ‘it requires elaboration, it requires improvisation, it requires a kind of rehearsal. It requires things’.196 Which is to say, of course, that the type of elaboration, improvisation, and rehearsal to which Harney and Moten are referring should not overlook what was earlier identified as our technicity. It means, in other words, that it requires the incessant entanglement with, and use of “things”, as a reservoir of insurgent potential and field for intervention.

Now, if we keep following Harney and Moten on their trajectory, we might also propose that the social life to which we are given access by such an undercommon mode of use is one developed through, predicated upon, and enacted as what they call study. What the two have in mind in this case is a very particular manner of studying: one that, while always already happening, as mentioned – in informal and often unnoticed ways, in ordinary as well as unexpected places – is completely disconnected from any form of privatisation through credit and processes of accreditation.197 Not a calculative study “to”, as it is often intended, particularly (yet not exclusively) in academic settings, but instead a study “with”: a study as and for the collective cultivation and circulation not of credit but of a shared debt that ‘cannot be repaid’198 and which in fact was never meant to be repaid. A ‘bad debt’,199 as Harney and Moten put it: an unpayable ‘[m]utual debt’200 as a way of owing oneself to one another, rather than owning one another and what is experienced. By way of making those engaging in this practice ever more deeply indebted to one another, this is ultimately a mode

196 Ibid., 156 (emphasis added).
198 Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 61.
199 Ibid.
200 Ibid., 67.
of study that Moten suggests to be ‘so radical that it probably destabilises the
very social form or idea of “one another”’. 201

4.4.3 Coordinate 8 // Hapticality

Not only we are here reminded of Esposito’s munus briefly discussed in Chapter 1,
but it should also be noted that a link to “study” is not entirely foreign to
Agamben’s rethinking of use. If use must ‘be freed from its own value’ in the
profane way proposed earlier on, Agamben indeed claims that ‘[t]his liberation is
the task of study, or of play’. 202 Harney himself has acknowledged a certain
proximity of his and Moten’s elaboration to Agamben’s work on use. Yet, as
mentioned, he also blames the Italian philosopher for ‘his wilful disregard of the
black radical tradition’ and the historical importance of the latter for any project
wishing to contribute to the formulation of a ‘fugitivity of use’. 203 Which is also to
say, to a radicalisation of the relation between means and ends beyond the
classical Aristotelian framework of masters and slaves.

Further, if referring to this practice as “study” might tempt us to think that
what Harney and Moten have in mind is a “disembodied” cognitive practice, let
us not be deceived, for disembodied practice it is not. Indeed, the two tell us, in
circumstances where ‘[l]ogistical populations’ are led ‘to feel without emotion, to
move without friction, to adapt without question, to translate without pause, to
connect without interruption’, 204 the mutual immunisation of self-possessed
individuals that the authors are concerned with acquires markedly sensorial
connotations. And it is precisely this bodily register that this research is trying to
take seriously, in its attempt to operate on the somatic plane of nanopolitical
interventions. Now, the dispossession through study being proposed here can
represent what Butler and Athanasiou described as ‘a sense of dispossession as
disposition’. 205 Such a disposition of dispossession names a mode of performing
in, as, and for what Moten elsewhere calls an ‘inappropriable ecstasies’ of being

201 Ibid., 156.
202 Agamben, State of Exception, 64.
204 Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 91.
205 Butler and Athanasiou, Dispossession, 106.
‘taken out’\textsuperscript{206} – and here, once again, the conceptual and terminological closeness to Agamben is difficult to ignore. In sheer opposition to the logistical compartmentalisation of individuals just mentioned, then, what Moten is describing is the dispossessed “outside” and “between” of affects and frictions, of doubts and hesitations, of intervals and interference. It might be, in other and by now familiar words, the inappropriable sociality, the profanely improvisational middle voice of use. To adopt such a disposition of dispossession, Harney and Moten then propose, fundamentally rests on ‘the capacity to feel though others, for others to feel through you’: it rests on ‘a feel for feeling others feeling you’\textsuperscript{207}.

In their work, this sensorial intensification, circulation, and deepening is given a specific name: \textit{hapticity}, ‘the touch of the undercommons’.\textsuperscript{208} The ‘feel we might call hapticity’, they then explain in a particularly poetic passage, ‘is modernity’s insurgent feel, its inherited caress, [...] the feel that no individual can stand, and no state abide’\textsuperscript{209} A feel that, as we will see shortly, must start from and be entirely built upon a particular type of consent: a collective, wilful consent not to be “one”, so as to divest oneself of the fictitious ‘autarchic pretence’,\textsuperscript{210} as Adriana Cavarero calls it, of completeness and individual self-sufficiency.

What conceptual and practical coordinates for collective motion can eventually be expressed through this re-articulation of use? What new perspectives have been offered by the work examined throughout – from Agamben all the way up to Harney and Moten – that can guide a reconstruction of use intended as a form of dispossession, as well as dispossession being approached in terms of a particular mode of use? Which is also to ask, finally, whether a use of dispossession and a dispossession of use can serve to undo – at least momentarily, at least intermittently – modalities of acting, of moving, of feeling that hinge on the individual \textit{intentionality} that a self-possessed subject presupposes. It is now time to propose a final coordinate that could assist us in better defining what a dispossessive act of use might entail, if this were to be

\textsuperscript{206} Moten, \textit{In the Break}, 201.
\textsuperscript{207} Harney and Moten, \textit{The Undercommons}, 98.
\textsuperscript{208} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{210} Cavarero, \textit{Inclinations}, 130.
turned into a tangible experiment in hapticality, into a form of *studious use*. If turned, that is to say, into an ‘experiment with the borders and affects of being other than one’.211

### 4.4.4 Coordinate 9 // Attentionality

So far, through the course of this chapter, eight coordinates have been offered that may conduct to a reprogramming of the paradigm of use as a helpful nanopolitical category. One, that is, which could be fit for the purpose of inventing, discovering, and maintaining modes of sociality that are currently thwarted by neoliberal individualism. A category, then, that could be incorporated into ‘a practice of sensibilities, an *experiment in living politics from, with and through the body*,’212 and which could ground the shared processes of ‘movement [and] touch’213 that we have called “nanopolitics”. We should briefly recall such coordinates and weave them again together, before introducing a ninth and last one that in some ways represents the very fibre of which each thread in this conceptual tapestry is composed.

First, following Agamben, we have suggested that a radicalisation of use would be akin to a form of *profanation* (1): which is to say, the rehearsing of a ritual (the act of use) that is released from the otherwise “sacred” hold that binds it to its original purpose (its functionality). This would serve to open this mode of (inter)acting to a new, playful way of operating that, by maintaining a distance from any teleological motivation, would belong to the sphere of *gesture* (2), of pure means. We have then clarified that this mode of acting should be guided by the emergent improvisation of an exploratory *drift* (3), as elaborated by the SI. A drift that, importantly, is immediately plural, intimately relational, given that to expose oneself to unexpected material cues for action – rather than being directed by predetermined rules and ends – means acting in the middle voice. Which is to say, acting in a way that allows for the simultaneity of action and passion characterising the *affectivity* (4) of a liminal “with”. This way, use could

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211 Harney and Desideri, ‘A Conspiracy Without a Plot’, 128.
213 Ibid., 27.
be revealed to be a destituent power: namely, a mode of acting which, because of
an impossibility of neatly ascribing it to a subject acting onto an object, in its
utter inappropriability (5) deactivates the dominion of the self-possessed
individual over the realm of action. Such a process has eventually been identified
as an enabling practice of dispossession: a process through which to exit the logic
of possession altogether and collectively inhabit this gestural outside (6) of
“oneself”. A use construed in this manner can be intended, in Butler and
Athanasiou’s words, as a way of ‘being beside oneself: taken out, given over,
moved, and moving’.\textsuperscript{214} Inspired by the work of Harney and Moten, and what
they have dubbed “the undercommons”, we then proposed that such a ‘corporeal
dynamic of relatedness [and] mutual vulnerability\textsuperscript{215} is one that, albeit already at
work everywhere, requires elaboration and nurturing. Not through appropriation
but, rather, by way of growing ever more indebted to one another. A process
of this sort can be understood as the collective art of cultivating an unpayable
mutual debt: an art that Harney and Moten call study (7). Finally, we have sought
to emphasise the somatic dimension of this studious practice by describing its
sensorial character as hapticity (8): that is, as Harney describes it elsewhere, an
‘ability to be in the feel of each other’\textsuperscript{216} through a ‘collective organisation of our
senses’\textsuperscript{217} that refutes the imposition of clearly defined perceptual boundaries.

Now, despite Harney’s legitimate caution in drawing comparisons with
Agamben’s work, what he and Moten are expressing when formulating the haptic
sociality of the undercommons is arguably not so distant from the Italian
philosopher’s idea of destituent power.\textsuperscript{218} This is a destitution that, in Harney
and Moten, does not culminate with supplanting the regime of “means-to-end”
instrumentality with the possessive logic of the individual as an “end in itself”: ‘a
figure who posits himself as self-made, self-sufficient, and self-determined’,\textsuperscript{219} in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{214} Butler and Athanasiou, \textit{Dispossession}, 117.
\item \textsuperscript{215} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{216} Cuppini and Frapporti, ‘Logistics Genealogies: A Dialogue with Stefano Harney’, 100.
\item \textsuperscript{217} Ibid., 110.
\item \textsuperscript{218} A similar claim, linking undercommons and destituent power, has been recently advanced by
be done? – Columbia Center for Contemporary Critical Thought, 25 February 2019,
\item \textsuperscript{219} Cuppini and Frapporti, ‘Logistics Genealogies: A Dialogue with Stefano Harney’, 100.
\end{itemize}
Harney’s terms. A destitution that, as hapticity, names instead a process of remaining outside of oneself through an experiment with (dis)continuities that Garcés might refer to as a practice of radical ‘unfinishedness’. Indeed, operating in and for the undercommons means to partake in an insubordinate rejection of the neoliberal duty of being “one” – of being a complete, unitary subject. To use in the undercommons thus means being ‘for a dispossession of ourselves’, it means to ‘become even less of [one]self’ throughout the multiple mundane ways we operate. This, Harney and Moten continue, amounts to

allowing ourselves to be possessed in certain other ways, allowing ourselves to consent not to be one, at a moment that also lets people act on us and through us, and doesn’t constantly require us re-constituting ourselves.

This consent – not to be one, not to be complete, not to be a single being – to which we have alluded earlier on, is an explicit reference to the work of influential Caribbean poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant. It is to this peculiar form of consent, as well as more generally to Glissant’s “poetics of relation”, that both Harney and Moten frequently return and which is indeed to be understood as the kernel of their whole elaboration. We shall now see how this practice of consenting not to be one – of not being the end with which this study had started – can point us to our last coordinate, and indeed identify the foundation for the other eight already proposed.

Harney, in his work with Valentina Desideri, has further discussed and built on Glissant’s expression and its centrality to the undercommons. The sociality of the undercommons, they indeed propose, is a form of ‘experiment conducted within and against ourselves, with and for others’, which is meant to make us feel as both less and more than one. It is meant to make us feel, act and live as other than one: ‘other than the one of the individual and other than

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220 Garcés, Un mundo común, 146-7.
221 Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 146.
222 Ibid. (emphasis added).
223 ‘Consent not to be a single being’, as Fred Moten notes, ‘is Christopher Wink’s translation of Glissant’s French phrase consent à n’être plus un seul’, as found in a conversation between Glissant and Manthia Diawara. See: Moten, Black and Blur, xv. Moten has even adopted the same formula as the general title for his most recent trilogy.
224 Harney and Desideri, ‘A Conspiracy Without a Plot’, 126.
the one of the collective'.\textsuperscript{225} Such an apparently paradoxical mode of acting and feeling is to be found in something of an infrapersonal or, better still, a non-personal conspiratorial complicity that Harney and Desideri call ‘the accomplice’.\textsuperscript{226} When alone, they propose, to live and act as and through the accomplice is the disposition that ‘guides us away from being only ourselves, being only one’, and which ‘unmakes us as more than one, and guides us to live as other than one’.\textsuperscript{227} Conversely, when with others, the accomplice makes possible or indeed sustains an opening, it unlocks a radical exposure that ‘guides us to be less than one, less than others, to be possessed by a dispossession, to give access, to give way and make a conspiracy that does not add up’.\textsuperscript{228}

This way, then, as an undercommon operation “of” the accomplice, use becomes a form of what the Invisible Committee may call ‘practical complicity’\textsuperscript{229} – a “technicity of complicity”. If, as Harney and Desideri finally suggest, the undercommons ‘is a place to invoke the conditions of attention together’,\textsuperscript{230} an undercommon use is that which replaces the intentional, masterful mode of motion with an attentional one. Ingold explains that, unlike volitional intentionality, attentionality (9) is predicated upon ‘participation in the environment’ rather than ‘consciously directed by a subject, as if shining a spotlight on the world’.\textsuperscript{231} As the anthropologist emphasises, this mode of attentionality is not antithetical to distraction but, in fact, somehow relies on it. Relying on a shift, on what Massumi describes as a ‘momentary cut [...] interrupting whatever continuities are in progress’.\textsuperscript{232} Indeed, ‘[i]n every shift of attention’, Massumi continues, ‘there is an interruption’.\textsuperscript{233} an interruption of the individual’s experiential “oneness” revealing the immediate plurality of use. Acting attentionally thus means being captured by a collective situation, rather

\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 128.
\textsuperscript{226} Ibid., 126. Also expressed in Italian as ‘la complicità’.
\textsuperscript{227} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{228} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{229} Invisible Committee, \textit{To Our Friends}, 54.
\textsuperscript{230} Harney and Desideri, ‘A Conspiracy Without a Plot’, 128.
\textsuperscript{231} Ingold, ‘On Human Correspondence’, 19.
\textsuperscript{232} Massumi, \textit{Politics of Affect}, 53.
\textsuperscript{233} Ibid.
than capturing it, as a sort of non-oppressive experiential ‘abduction’.234 And this is because the attunement to a situation imposed by this mode of acting, of using, is one whereby awareness is ‘not of but with’.235 Which means that, Ingold concludes,

Where “of-ness” makes the other to which one attends into its object, and ticks it off, “with-ness” saves the other from objectification by bringing it alongside as an accomplice. It turns othering into togethering, interaction into correspondence.236

Our ninth and last coordinate thus echoes the nanopolitical invocation of ‘learning other attentional and sensing modalities [in order to] invent new ways of taking care’.237 As we will see in the next chapter, then, the complicit attentionality of use sets the stage for a subversive exercise: a haptic correspondence, a way of moving and being moved, orchestrated across bodies that consent not to be one. Across and within the continuities and discontinuities of their undercommon gestures.

234 Ibid., 10.
235 Ingold, ‘On Human Correspondence’, 19.
236 Ibid., 19-20 (emphasis added).
237 Nanopolitics Group, Nanopolitics Handbook, 22.
5. **Enactment**

Not having relations of production with our world or between ourselves means never letting the search for results become more important than the attention to the process. [...] Communising a place means: setting its use free, and on the basis of this liberation experimenting with refined, intensified, and complexified relations.

*Anonymous, Call / Appel, 2003: 68*

To the extent that the previous chapter – dedicated to a reprogramming of the paradigm of use – has worked incrementally toward the formulation of a number of coordinates, this chapter seeks to chart the attempted *activation* of such coordinates throughout the designing and staging of a collective exercise. “Activation” is here to be understood, returning once again to Moten’s phrasing already encountered in Chapter 2, as the tentative effort of putting a set of conceptual and material tools in play, and of experimenting with them in embodied ways. However, to reiterate a warning issued in Chapter 2, let the structural arrangement of this thesis not fool us here. In fact, this activation process has certainly not meant the simple transposition of a theoretical apparatus into action. That is to say, it would be incorrect to interpret this register of inquiry as the crudely pragmatic *mise-en-scène* of an idea, effectively marking the interruption of theoretical elaboration. Rather, this activation has itself gradually emerged and (literally) taken shape as and through its own form of intellectuality. An intellectuality that, as elaborated in Chapter 2, has in turn reshaped and rearranged the very theoretical coordinates that were being activated, thanks to a complex interplay of registers. Not only a “playing-out” of, but also a “playing-with” ideas. In other words, picking things up where we left them at the end of Chapter 4, this activation has been yet another form of what Harney and Moten describe as “study”. A session of collective study that, in this
case, mostly pivoted around the use of a kinetic machine, and to which a number of friends were formally invited, with the promise of spending a few hours together: talking, eating, drinking, moving, and – of course – using. Chapter 5 thus traces the effort of working through some of the issues raised by this session, here mostly referred to as “Enactment”, which walked a thin line between planning and spontaneity.

The chapter begins with the attempt to render the complexity of this muted yet persistent “intellectuality-in-action”, initially by drawing on the work of Manning and Massumi. Indeed, the copious collection of propositions generated by the two authors, primarily through their experiences with Manning’s SenseLab project,¹ can help here to illustrate some of the intentions and developments of the Enactment. In particular, three such propositions will be presented here: namely, choreographic thinking, differential attunement and enabling constraint. We will review this handy theoretical arsenal, trying to unravel the intricate interplay binding these concepts together and identify their relevance to what was discussed in earlier chapters. To this analysis will follow a more focused elaboration – by means of a set of caveats, clarifications, and examples of kindred practices with which this activity shares some traits – of the type of activation that the Enactment strives to afford.

The second and central section of this chapter will present a “report”, so to speak, of the Enactment session in its entirety – from initial planning all the way to its conclusion. The report will concentrate as much as possible on describing the procedural aspects of the Enactment – i.e. how things happened, the process: not as a preposterous effort in empirical neutrality, but instead as a manner of flinching from the lure of hermeneutical capture – i.e. what happened – that would impose an interpretation of the Enactment’s inherently plural and emergent experiential dimension. The activity has been divided into seven “acts”, the confines of which – it must be acknowledged – are anything but firm and, in fact, partly imposed by the inevitable artificiality of a written (academic) account.

¹ The SenseLab is a Montreal-based research-creation (see Ch.2) project launched in 2004 by Erin Manning that, amongst other activities, has hosted a number of experimental events, through which a network of artists, academics, and activists have sought to explore ways of intersecting fields such as philosophy, performance art, and event design. See: SenseLab, ‘SenseLab | A Laboratory for Thought in Motion’, https://senselab.ca/wp2/.
Importantly, the structure of this report seeks to dissuade from reductively reading the Enactment as entirely limited to the phase of corporeal exercise of use, which is instead only one of the session’s constituent parts – albeit a crucial one.

The chapter will finally draw to a close with a series of post-session reflections, again not so much on the event’s content but, rather, on its form – on its “processuality”. This section will address some of the ambitions for this session vis-à-vis some of the limitations that this project encountered due to the very context in which it was developed. These conclusive remarks will provide a possible interpretive lens through which the relevance of the nanopolitical intervention proposed here might begin to be accounted for.

5.1 Activating coordinates

5.1.1 Activation 1 // Choreographic thinking

It has already been flagged, both above and earlier on, that something knottier than the simple “playing out” of previously formulated theoretical content is at stake in the Enactment. In fact, it will hopefully be clear by now that grappling with tensions and supposed distinctions between “conceptual” and “practical” work – as well as with other related binary oppositions such as form/content, means/ends, process/outcome – is one of the recurrent motifs animating this whole study. As we have seen, this is indeed the principal reason behind the somewhat recalcitrant use of terms like Intangible Practice and Tangible Theory, to describe the research’s methodological approach: a deliberate signalling of the porous boundaries between various registers of inquiry. A “porosity” that this research has vowed to take seriously, rather than suppressing it. It was already discussed in Chapter 2 that while the Enactment sits rather uncomfortably across intangible and tangible registers, it does not represent a dialectical resolution of the two in that it retains its own specificity within the research’s tripartite ensemble. A notion that can help us in the effort of further untangling this complexity is that of “choreographic thinking”, as articulated by Manning and
Massumi (alongside other adjacent, frequently overlapping concepts and phrasings such as “thinking-feeling”).

At a very schematic level, choreographic thinking can perhaps be understood as both a plane of intelligibility and a mode of inquiry at once, springing from the perceived necessity of approaching questions of affective political experimentation in ways that – like with nanopolitics – could do justice to, and indeed foreground the importance of embodied investigation. In his book *Politics of Affect*, Massumi appears to be suggesting exactly this when he states that ‘[t]hinking through affect is not just reflecting on it. It is thought taking the plunge’ into action. Because affect, he says, ‘is only understood as enacted’, this understanding, this intelligibility of affect, is irreducibly ‘one with the action […] a thinking-feeling’. It is a practiced, ‘enactive understanding’ that, according to Massumi, strives not for phenomenological interpretations but instead for the formulation of *propositions*, ‘less in the logical sense than in the sense of an invitation’. Choreographic thinking, as it is explored through the SenseLab’s events, consists in the strategic elaboration of corporeal exercises and ‘relational techniques’. What is key here, in order to grasp the methodological relevance of choreographic thinking to this research, is to start by getting a clearer sense of Manning’s understanding of “choreography”, a term that can lend itself to deceptive interpretations. While this word might be more conventionally associated with forms of premeditated procedural ordering, perhaps even of behavioural discipline – that is, with sets of given instructions and a meticulous logistics of bodily motion – this is not at all what Manning has in mind.

The word “choreographic”, in choreographic thinking, comes to acquire a double valence. First, as we have already began to express, it emphasises the bodily and explicitly kinetic character of a mode of inquiry: one whereby thinking and feeling happen in unison (a thinking-feeling), and through which a ‘complex

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3 Ibid., vii.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 94.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 50-1.
8 Ibid., 97.
ecology of incipient movement’ is “made felt”, more so than abstractedly and accurately analysed.9 Choreography thus intended is a mode of ‘writing in chorus, with our bodies’,10 as the Nanopolitics Group might describe it. But, second, here “choreographic” also describes the specific strategic manner in which thought “takes the plunge”: namely, through the curation of a certain set of conditions for a collective entrance and tuning into an open-ended event. Importantly – and here things may start getting a little counter-intuitive – in relation to this second point, Manning and Massumi claim that this “curatorial” effort is not prescriptive: that is, this type of choreographic work is not meant to operate a channelling or express an attempt at moulding experience. How so? ‘Choreography at its best’, Manning contends, ‘is not about aligning bodies to precomposed shapes’.11 Rather, she goes on to explain, the choreographic techniques she and the SenseLab are interested in are ultimately intended to ‘create the conditions for the opening of a field of experience to a different way of functioning’.12 Of course, the keyword here is, once again – hence summoning back our earlier discussions of Heidegger’s Gelassenheit and Agamben’s profanation – “opening”. Indeed, as Massumi proposes, relational techniques that deploy this mode of thinking-feeling can be practiced to modulate unfolding events [… ] and have the potential of reorienting tendencies towards different ends, without predesignating exactly what they are. […] Tendencies are oriented, but open-ended.13

Which is to say that choreographic thinking is a matter of curating a collectivised (bodily) access to an issue: the orchestrated way into an event, not the way out – the outcome.

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12 Ibid., 125.
5.1.2 Activation 2 // Differential attunements

The problem is then to understand how, through choreographic thinking, otherwise nearly antithetical concepts such as curation/modulation and open-endedness, could come to co-exist, and in fact become “mutually inclusive”, to adopt Massumi’s locution.\(^\text{14}\) Now, a second term that keeps cropping up throughout Manning and Massumi’s writings and which can assist us here is “attunement”. At face value, this concept – which the two authors borrow from psychologist Daniel Stern – might appear just as ambivalent as their use of the term “choreographic”. And yet, it is perhaps the key through which the tension between curatorial modulation and improvisational open-endedness can be resolved, in a manner that highly resonates with our discussion on attentionality at the end of Chapter 4. Initially, the term might be intuitively associated with ideas of consensus and homogenisation that are clearly redolent of comportment policing. “Attunement” as in tuning one to the other: a normalisation, a harmony whereby ‘diversity disappears into the unity of that effect’ and which ‘subsume[s] the singularity of the contributing actions that come into relation’.\(^\text{15}\) We can clearly see how this acceptation of attunement would mirror what was discussed in Chapter 1 in terms of, on one hand, the authoritarian impulse that permeates conceptions of community as fusion, and, on the other hand, the contract-driven “consensus” that holds together the neoliberal fiction of a global “society” of individuals. On the contrary, though, the attunement that Manning and Massumi speak about is of a different or, better, differential kind: a ‘differential attunement’ that, as it were, concerns synchrony rather than symmetry.\(^\text{16}\)

Massumi explains that the concept of differential attunement indicates a process that ‘finds difference in unison, and concertation in difference’.\(^\text{17}\) Which is to say that if any “sameness” is caused by this mode of attunement, this refers not to a homogenised affective result, but to the event itself in its processual unfolding: ‘affective difference in the same event’, as in different “outcomes” from

\(^{14}\) See: ibid., 105.
\(^{15}\) Manning and Massumi, *Thought in the Act*, 118.
\(^{16}\) Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 95.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 56.
a shared process. This means that, through differential attunement, the complex heterogeneity proper of a collective situation, and to which each body contributes to, is not diminished or even cast aside altogether but rather ‘indexed to the same cut, primed to the same cue, shocked in concert’. Massumi continues, and it is here worth quoting in full:

What happens is a collective event. It’s distributed across those bodies. Since each body will carry a different set of tendencies and capacities, there is no guarantee that they will act in unison even if they are cued in concert. However different their eventual actions, all will have unfolded from the same suspense. They will have been attuned – differentially – to the same interruptive commotion.

At this point, one might be left wondering about the reason for this effort in curatorial attunement: why not simply leave full scope for improvisational openness? Is it really necessary to choreograph conditions of entrance into a collective event? Why interfering with and/or interrupting people’s capacity for spontaneous and creative improvisation?

5.1.3 Activation 3 // Enabling constraints

Manning and Massumi’s response to the above concerns primarily hinges on the claim that ‘in and of itself openness does not create the conditions for collaborative exploration’. Which is to say that in their attempt to create the conditions for an opening in and of practice – that is, ‘to set certain conditions in place allowing for an inventive interaction to occur’ – Manning and Massumi nevertheless strive to reject an utterly neoliberal understanding of improvisation as mere “anything-goes” attitude. Indeed, Massumi shrewdly remarks, ‘if anything goes, nothing will come’. Self-evident as it may sound, this is a precious advice for all design practices that, as a result of their reaction to the

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18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 55.
20 Ibid., 55-6 (emphasis added).
21 Manning and Massumi, Thought in the Act, 94.
22 Massumi, Politics of Affect, 175.
23 Ibid.
type of behavioural engineering described in Chapter 2 when discussing User-Centred Design, have found themselves immobilised by a fear of any form of constraint, as if these were to automatically chain users to normative roles. But, as Massumi notes, ‘freedom always arises from constraint – it’s a creative conversion of it’, particularly if freedom is intended in the non-individualistic way presented in Chapter 1. Rather than pursuing ‘an escape into an aesthetic field of free choice and unfettered expression’ so as to retreat and conveniently take shelter into an ‘unconstrained environment’, Manning and Massumi instead wish to make a case for a form of ‘aesthetic politics’ of ‘structured improvisation’. What the two authors mean here is that, if improvisation is to unfold as a process that is collective through and through rather than individual, if we are to engage in a “polyrhythmic togetherness” (or, in keeping with Ingold, in a correspondence) ‘in the course of which something unexpected might emerge’, this improvisation may be activated through shared experimentation with “enabling constraints”.

In Massumi’s terms, crafting enabling constraints, a relational technique that is absolutely central to the work done at the SenseLab, consists in developing a number of “poetico-procedural mechanisms of interference to be then embedded into a collective event. Rather than outright obstructions, and in line with the type of choreographic work described earlier, these constraints are enabling in that they are meant to modulate a field of collective action, to poetically inspire and operationally render possible certain modes of motion in ways that are not rigidly prescriptive and pre-scripted. In other words, enabling constraints are supposed to be

sets of designed constraints that are meant to create specific conditions for creative interaction where something is set to happen, but there is no pre-

\[\text{24 Ibid., 39.}\]
\[\text{25 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{26 Ibid., 68.}\]
\[\text{27 Ibid., 175.}\]
\[\text{28 A 'polyrhythmic coming-differently together through the same event'. See: Manning and Massumi, Thought in the Act, 119.}\]
\[\text{29 Massumi, Politics of Affect, 175.}\]
\[\text{30 Ibid.}\]
conceived notion of exactly what the outcome will be or should be. No deliverable. All process.\textsuperscript{31}

To summarise, we can attempt to string together the three concepts presented above, as they jointly describe a particular mode of study. Choreographic thinking (1), as articulated throughout Manning and Massumi’s work, is a form of multi-register experimentation with relational techniques, which involves the planning and designing of enabling constraints (3). Such constraints are embedded into an event in order to afford not behavioural discipline but the initial conditions for collective moments of structured improvisation with new processes. This way, an exploration of given themes or issues is activated as a shared process to which participants attune, together yet differentially (2).

\textbf{5.1.4 Activation 4 // Mechanisms of interference}

We should now briefly pause and reflect on how the conceptual triptych reviewed above relates both to the coordinates for radicalised use presented in Chapter 4 (which the Enactment strives to activate) and to this research’s methodology more generally speaking. To begin with, Manning and Massumi’s choreographic thinking furnishes an unambiguously politicised approach to account for the incorporation and coexistence of different registers of inquiry within this study. What is more, they do so in a manner that does not immediately imply subordinating one register to the others. Its emphasis on making certain dynamics \textit{felt} more so than analytically “understood”, so to speak, perceptively attends to experiential, somatic and kinetic processes in their inherent intellectuality, without reducing them to forms of applied theory or instrumentalising them as generative practice. In many ways then, as we will see throughout the chapter, the sensuous mode of “corporeal thought” presented by the notion of choreographic thinking describes quite fittingly the haptic, undercommon practice of study that we have eventually arrived at via our re-articulation of use.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 73.
Moreover, Manning and Massumi show how we might (and in fact, they suggest, we should) aim to reconcile modulation and openness, curation and improvisation – a reconciliation that is absolutely central to the intervention proposed here with the Enactment. Ultimately, if we were to retrace our journey, from Heidegger all the way to Harney and Moten, the practice sketched out by the SenseLab’s events goes some way towards reclaiming and experimenting with that enabling space of tension that seemed to be at the core of each one of the main theoretical frameworks encountered thus far. Namely, the tension between willing and non-willing in Heidegger’s Gelassenheit, between means and ends in Agamben’s gestural profanation of use, between planning and informality in Harney and Moten’s study as radical indebtedness. In this respect, for example, it is telling that, as Manning and Massumi claim, ‘the role of the techniques of relation would not be to “frame” the interaction’:32 openness without framing, or perhaps, we may say, without enframing – Gelassenheit without Gestell. And again, if we were to read Manning and Massumi with Harney and Moten, we could contend that ‘in and of itself openness does not create the conditions for collaborative exploration’33 just as much as the informal indebtedness of undercommon study, although always already happening, still ‘requires elaboration’ and ‘a kind of rehearsal’34 in order to deepen our complicities.

Further, to an even greater magnitude and evidencing an even more explicit line of continuity with what discussed earlier, Manning and Massumi’s conceptual arsenal (and related corporeal practices) can directly help us grapple with another important tension: that outlined by Ingold between attention and distraction, with which the previous chapter ended. Indeed, as Massumi notes in relation to the notion of differential attunement, “[a]ttunement” refers to the direct capture of attention and energies by the event’.35 To which follows that, he continues, although ‘we each are taken into the event from a different angle, and move out of it following our own singular trajectories’, the manner in which choreographic thinking operates and affords this peculiar “abduction” revolves

32 Manning and Massumi, Thought in the Act, 92.
33 Ibid., 94.
34 Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 156.
35 Massumi, Politics of Affect, 115 (emphasis added).
around the elaboration of constraints that could be ‘snapping us to attention together’.36 A shared distraction causing shared attention(ality): an affective “concerted shock”, to paraphrase again Massumi.37

It is important to clarify here that with the term “shock” Massumi does not intend to express a traumatic or even out of the ordinary process. Affective shocks, he proposes, are instead ubiquitous and could be as feeble and unexceptional as ‘a change in focus, or a rustle at the periphery of vision that draws the gaze towards it’: in other words, a ‘microshock’.38 By the same token, designing enabling constraints can be taken to be a craft essentially aimed at provoking collective microshocks and thus concerned with ‘micperception’39 and the micropolitical domain – notions that Massumi borrows from Deleuze and Guattari. Following Massumi, because affective microshocks can often even ‘pass unnoticed’40 in their ordinary pervasiveness, the choreographic thinking that this study deploys can be intended as a micropolitical (and indeed nanopolitical) intervention in that it involves ‘modulating a situation in a way that amplifies a previously unfelt potential to the point of perceptibility’.41

Human geographer Leila Dawney, who not unlike the Nanopolitics Group is cointerested in affect and ‘the somatisation of politics’, has similarly emphasised the political importance of perceptual interruptions as ‘a corporal moment […] that halts and disrupts the flow of experience’.42 Dawney claims that, when amplified to the point of perceptibility – or of “operational intelligibility”, as proposed in Chapter 2 – experiential interruptions can be used as analytical lenses through which oscillations between processes of individual subjectivation and ‘the sociality of affect’43 can be detected and critically observed. Interestingly, she suggests that attending to this form of intensified experiential interruption, by way of ‘focusing on the event of body/subject being

36 Ibid.
37 See: ibid., 55.
38 Ibid., 53.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 58.
43 Ibid., 631.
out of synch’ hence being confronted with the inevitably social forces from which subjects “emerge”, ‘can be thought of as a limit practice insofar as it operates to “wrench the subject from itself” (explicitly referring here to the Foucauldian “se déprendre de soi-même” already encountered earlier on). Which is of course to say that this limit practice of becoming attentive to the interruption can be intended as a dispossession practice, in that it serves to reveal and make felt the “not one”, the accomplice. Indeed, as Dawney continues, this practice ‘can be used as a way of making present the workings of power in the production of the subject, through the use of one’s own body and that of others as indicators’: a haptic practice of the accomplice, which, through use, undoes the subject and attunes to the immediate plurality of a situation.

Now, if neoliberal capitalism, as already suggested amongst others by Harney and Moten, operates largely as and through logistics – that is to say, through streamlined, uninterrupted ordering, calculation, management, supply and circulation of individual goods, resources, people, but also and most importantly of individual intelligences and capacities – one thing it cannot tolerate is perhaps an insurgency elaborated as a collective art of interruptions. To put this in other terms, if neoliberal capitalism is governance through movement, requiring the separability of its units in order to ensure calculability and control over its smooth functioning at all time, one thing it cannot abide ought to be a form of motion that instead deliberately jumbles up individualising demarcations between singular bodies, their sensing capacities, their intentions and attentions. Such a humbly subversive practice here consists in the aesthetic invention and emission of haptic and kinetic disturbances that, similarly to what proposed by Dawney, make felt and intensify the emergent, immediately plural...

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44 Ibid., 635.
46 Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 84-99. For similar links between capitalism and logistics, also see: Charmaine Chua, ‘Logistics, Capitalist Circulation, Chokepoints’, The Disorder Of Things, 9 September 2014; Deborah Cowen, The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); but also a chapter titled Power is Logistic. Block Everything! in Invisible Committee, To Our Friends, 81-98.
47 See: Cowen, The Deadly Life of Logistics, 1-21. It is worth underscoring the importance of the preposition “through” in the above phrasing “governance through movement”: logistics does not simply indicate the exercise of governance over movement, but turns movement itself into an instrument of governance. Also see: Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 92; André Lepecki, Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).
correspondence that is always already underway in the undercommons. Constructing enabling constraints as mechanisms of interference becomes an act of replacing the “movement without friction” of ‘logistical populations’ with what Massumi terms an ‘interruptive commotion’ inasmuch as this is a “commotion”: a call to shared motion. That is to say, inasmuch as this is not simple responsiveness, as in instances of action-reaction, but a motion without identifiable authorship whereby it is not even entirely clear who “acted” and who “reacted”. It is a call to move together yet differentially; an invitation to join a playful dance of mutual interference that may allow meddling with individualised intentionality.

From the nanopolitical perspective adopted here and implemented through a design intervention, this leaves us with a number of interrelated questions: ‘[h]ow can we make this bodily attentiveness [...] happen collectively in situations’? What kind of enabling constraints can be designed and embedded in the Enactment, so that the attentionality thus provoked can result in an attunement to the non-personal “each other” of a genuinely plural situation? What conditions can be set in place so that this “thought taking the plunge” occurs through a mode of motion that, with Ingold, is not interaction but correspondence, or, with Harney and Desideri, is not “one” but of the accomplice? Lastly, if just as the awareness of attentionality was said to imply with-ness rather than of-ness, and if this commotion as motional correspondence has to involve curation, planning, and indeed coordination, how are we to make this a “coordination with” – a concerted complicity – rather than a crassly managerial “coordination of”?

5.1.5 Kinetic machine

In the specific case of this Enactment, a number of enabling constraints have punctuated a collective activity – some intended, some imposed by the circumstances. Although these constraints will mainly be discussed later in the

48 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 91.
50 Nanopolitics Group, ‘Nanopolitics: A First Outline’.
chapter, throughout the report and in the final reflections, amongst those that were purposefully choreographed one needs some special consideration here: what we might call a *kinetic machine* [Fig.20]. Indeed, if only because of its prominent material presence and directly obvious relation to the realm of use, this machine arguably represents the principal enabling constraint that was deliberately designed and embedded into the Enactment. By “kinetic”, as already mentioned in Chapter 2, it is here meant a machine composed of moving parts.

![Kinetic Machine](image)

*Fig. 20: Giovanni Marmont, Kinetic Machine, 2018*

At the most schematic level, this machine is composed of three elements: two “satellites” and a “node”. The two satellites could perhaps be classifiable, at least for simplicity (as well as due to dimensions and height possibly “inviting” a certain modality of use), as pivoting stools. Each of these two satellites consists of a wooden panel mounted onto a steel pole, which is itself part and vertical axis of a rotating mechanism. The mechanism in turn sits on a platform resting on a set of four springs housed within something of a chassis. Each satellite’s rotating mechanism of includes a bike gear onto which is mounted a standard bike chain that links it to the node. The node is composed of a steel pole, bolted onto a
chassis identical to those of the satellites, and which serves as vertical rotating axis for the set of gears that engage with the bike chains, and thus connect the three elements. This way, the motion produced throughout the rotation of either of the satellites will transfer the same motion to the other via the mediating transmission of the node.

However – and this is the key feature of the machine – the rotating mechanisms on both satellites also comprise a “lock system” [Fig.21]: unless the top panels (and therefore, with them, the rotating mechanisms too) are compressed and pushed downward by the weight of a body, the rotating mechanisms engage with dowels in the chassis and therefore impede rotation. Because, as noted above, the two satellites are connected via the node and so is their motion, this means that the whole machine will be locked and no rotation will be possible unless both satellites are compressed – that is to say, unless they are both in use [Fig.22].

Fig. 21: Giovanni Marmont, *Kinetic Machine "lock system"*, 2018
Now, on one hand, the construction of the machine attempted to give tangible substance to the coordinates that were being explored throughout the re-articulation of use presented in the previous chapter, by deliberately endowing the machine with certain “affordances”. Take, for example, the general appearance of the satellites: if this quite explicitly conforms to a familiar visual language – according to which certain features are likely to suggest “stool” – it is because such a language is not abandoned per se. That is to say, the “rite” of sitting is not simply abolished, but rather profaned, its sacred postural “proper-ness” being neglected: a profanation that is here technically made possible (hence not exactly in-scripted, so to speak) through the introduction of elements of distraction (the rotation mechanism) into the object around which the rite revolves. Through this alteration, the artefact can thus be opened to a new use, “liberated” through the “suspension of its economy”.51 Further, it is perhaps unnecessary to even point out that the “role” of the node was that of displacing, if only in its most gawkily obvious visual and material sense, the site of motional interference, locating it not on the satellites – hence belonging to them – but into an inappropriable between given by the three elements together. This “middle”

made tangible thus mediates an action with no clearly identifiable authorship – blurring the threshold between action and passion, effecting and being affected, moving and being moved.

And yet, on the other hand, this making process has also been a prime example of what in Chapter 2 was termed “Tangible Theory”. That is, this work has not been a simple manner of “applying theory”, for it has actively contributed to the shaping of the conceptual framework from which it emerged (again, affected but also effecting), by means of a kind of post-rationalisation. While sometimes dismissed as disingenuous attribution of purpose – when relating to an artistic or designerly processes – here post-rationalisation via Tangible Theory has instead guided the concept-making work (Intangible Practice) in important directions. A case in point would be the design of the “lock system”: when observed “phenomenologically”, the two-tier\(^{52}\) functioning of this lock – together with the compression of the springs that allow the slight downward motion of the satellites underneath the weight of each body – essentially seemed to “haptically dramatize”, to amplify to the point of perceptibility, a peculiar manner of giving way by means of one’s very entrance into a field of interference. In other words, the lock signals the passing of a threshold: namely, what we might call a bodily “consent not to be a single being”. This notion of “consent” was subsequently explored in theoretical terms through Harney and Moten’s concept of hapticality, as we have seen in the previous chapter.\(^{53}\)

The kinetic machine was embedded in the collective event as an enabling constraint, with the attempt to activate the radicalised mode of use discussed in Chapter 4. Which is to say, with the attempt to experiment with it: to experiment with a dispossessed feel of bodily vulnerability and motional interference, rendered in their differential (or asymmetric) allocation\(^{54}\) and amplified to the point of operational intelligibility. In other words, this enabling constraint was designed and incorporated into the Enactment to make felt the dance-like gesturing that (meanwhile) was being theoretically elaborated largely through

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52 That is to say, requiring two steps for complete rotational freedom to be achieved.
53 Again, no structural arrangement of this thesis could appropriately render this peculiar interplay of registers.
54 Butler, Precarious Life, 31.
Agamben’s work, and then further refined mostly by thinking with Butler and Athanasiou and Harney and Moten. As we will see in what follows, and as already anticipated in Chapter 2, then, this should not lead to the assumption – albeit understandable – that activation followed theory, as some kind of verification of what only conceptually articulated up until then. In fact, and reaffirming what proposed above, a process of “concept-making” not only preceded and led to the Enactment, but also followed it and, more important still, carried on throughout it. “Thought taking the plunge”, a choreographic “thinking-feeling”.

One last and slightly anecdotal observation should be made here, before venturing any further, regarding the construction of the machine. Upon completion of the making process – which was carried out with the help of a number of people, equally skilled and generous – and as the time came for the rotating and locking mechanisms to be “tested”, it became clear that not even this phase could be approached individually. That is to say that, beyond any conscious intention, both the mechanism embedded in the kinetic machine just built and the mode of reciprocal motion that this was meant to give rise to had no way of even being observed in any concretely operational sense without a concerted collective effort. Any “functioning”, so to speak, of the machine was in fact entirely dependent on a moment of sociality, of sharing. This apparently banal and, in hindsight, completely obvious realisation seemed to materially signal a certain folding together of the research’s operational progression and its subject matter – a folding that suddenly gave the latter substance, making it tangible.55 Indeed, all moments of which this exploration has been composed – including all phases of the Enactment reported below – could be seen as various expressions of the dispossessed sociality that this whole research has sought to attend to. In other words, this work has not being solely about dispossessed sociality but also itself a series of experiments in dispossession, for all moments of this research have necessitated and welcomed – each in its own particular way – instances of interference, contamination, conviviality, exposure, and coimplication.

55 This phrasing is inspired by a passage of the same anonymous “Call” that opens this chapter (and discussed later on): ‘To get organised means: to give substance to a situation. Making it real, tangible’ – see: Anonymous, ‘Call / Appel’, 9.
5.1.6 Caveats and propositions

Having discussed the theoretico-methodological underpinnings of the Enactment, and having begun to define the continuity between these and the mode of dispossessed use that we are here attempting to activate, it is now necessary to put forward a number of clarifications. Indeed, because of its proximity – whether actual or only apparent – with other modes of research that involve collective bodily activities and the use of “artefacts”, the Enactment could easily emerge misconstrued. To this end, a set of caveats will be offered in this section, followed by a set of slightly more “affirmative” proposition aimed at better defining the nature of this activity, particularly in relation to those critical design practices assessed in the first half of Chapter 2.

As a matter of utmost priority, and as anticipated in Chapter 2, we should specify that the Enactment session is not a way of proving or supporting an argument. It does not claim nor wishes to represent a solution to a problem – an answer to a question – but rather a way of exploring, addressing, and even inhabiting it. Not least because, as stated in the very first lines of this thesis, the “problem” at hand and which animates this study – that of being together, of sociality – is not one that can or even should be “solved”. As a result, the session is neither *generative*, producing data for an ethnographic study (a) or a usability test (b), nor *illustrative*, as a “grand finale” of some sort (c), but rather *emergent*, as involving the dynamism of unfolding eventfulness. As explained earlier on, this is mostly due to the complex and non-sequential organisation of registers of inquiry within a methodological ensemble, as well as to the hazy relationship between “practice” and “theory” within this research as a whole. A more detailed review of what sets the Enactment apart from generative or illustrative research activities might be beneficial here.

a. On the one hand, that the Enactment is not supposed to be a “generative” practice means that the session is not intended to provide empirical evidence – neither quantitative nor qualitative – about how different types of “users” across various demographics interact with the kinetic machine. The session,
for example, is not concerned with users’ individual identities, seeking to detect diversities in terms of reactions and responses according to defined groups – e.g. according to age, ethnicity, gender, ability, etc. – or, more generally, according to different social circumstances and interests. This is not in order to flatten experience by downplaying the significance of such specificities, but because the focus here is entirely on developing a method, on a process rather than on ethnographic observation and interpretation of the unfolding action: that is, not on what this means but on how it means.

b. Equally, on the other hand, this session is not conceived as a way of gathering and extracting information that will then lead to either the refinement of the machine or a further design stage, as is the case with the Cultural Probes discussed in Chapter 2. The activity is not meant to arrive at a bettered version of the machine because the machine is not the ultimate focus of the action, but rather one of the elements in play. Which is not at all to say that the structural arrangement and affordances of the machine are irrelevant to the unfolding of the action (quite the contrary!) but that its improvement, whatever that would mean in this context, is not of interest here. It means that, similarly to Joseph Beuys’ “social sculptures”, what matters throughout this activity is not the “made” in and of itself but rather, in more expansive terms, ‘the kinds of relations and connections animated and made possible by it’\footnote{Shukaitis, \textit{Imaginal Machines}, 27.} – something to which we will return in the next section. Many variations of the machine are possible and have indeed been considered, sketched, discussed, or even just imagined for future experiments. The choice of the one eventually used is to be primarily attributed to restrictions of time and resources, rather than due to some sort of expected exceptional suitability for the session. Some of these restrictions will be further considered in due course.

c. Lastly, and as already explained repeatedly, this session is not a simple “exemplification” of theory, intended as a moment that denotes the
conclusion of intellectual elaboration and that seeks to physically represent its outcome. It is therefore not at all to be confused with a form of “applied theory” – nor with Dunne and Raby’s strand of CSD, for example. Quite the contrary, it is in fact an opening for further study, albeit in corporeal, collective, and undercommon ways. This is to say that what is going on here is not a moment of “...and this is how we do/did it”, but rather one of “how does it feel to do things this way together?”. All the above also points to the fact that this Enactment is not quite a work-in-progress either. For not only it is tentative and incomplete: this very tentativeness and incompleteness are here embraced, in the effort to suspend and reject any sense of advancement towards the achievement of “results”, which the notion of “progress” inevitably implies. The Enactment thus seeks to obstinately inhabit the fragility of the event, in its exploratory (albeit structured) openness, through what Agamben calls “inoperativity” and Moten defines as a ‘disavowal of the very idea of an endpoint’.\(^57\) Perhaps, then, we could suggest that the Enactment, because of this vaguely quixotic repudiation of compulsive “productivism”, is instead a form of what some shrewd comrades may describe as a “shirk-in-recess”:\(^58\) an activity deliberately avoiding “progression”, remaining momentarily suspended (perhaps even lost) in a process with no discernable target on its horizon.

What is this activity about, then? It was already proposed in the Introduction that this research intended to offer a dual contribution: on one hand, in terms of theoretical content; on the other hand, in terms of method, of process. That is to say, the research set up to construct a radical articulation of use as sociality, as well as to elaborate and advance a manner of experimenting with it, tangibly. Rather than verifying the correctness or validity of theoretical content, this second, methodological contribution thus proposes one mode of activating and making felt the coordinates that would progressively emerge from

\(^{57}\) Moten, Stolen Life, 227.

\(^{58}\) I am indebted for the use of the term “shirk-in-recess” to the wits and wayward inventiveness of friends and recurrent interlocutors Megan Archer, Lars Cornelissen, and Joel Nicholson-Roberts.
the concomitant conceptual work. The aim of the Enactment, then, is quite simply that of staging a situation, an event, and of collectively exploring its vitality. This session intends to truly put in play and rehearse a radical re-articulation of use as a technical practice of social life: a choreographed affectivity, set in motion through an encounter with enabling constraints and by means of a playful bodily correspondence. This activity, then, attempts to craft the conditions for a collective exercise of “thought in motion”, for a form of choreographic thinking to emerge.

In this respect the Enactment session follows what proposed by Manning when, through her reading of Henri Bergson’s work, she suggests that the real challenge ‘involves crafting the conditions not to solve problems, or to resolve questions, but to illuminate regions of thought’. However, this focus on addressing or even finding issues, rather than wishing to resolve them, should not be mistakenly likened to the forms of CSD practices discussed earlier on that purport to be “asking questions”. The difference is here subtle yet significant, since CSD work such as that of Dunne and Raby often tends to be more concerned with the production of authored statements than it is about the genuine exploration of unresolved or even unresolvable issues. As already expressed in Chapter 2, mainly due to the manner in which they are presented, the questions asked by the type of CSD to which we are referring here are ‘questions that already contain their answer’. That is to say, Dunne and Raby’s speculative and fictional “what-if” scenarios for example (and unlike IRS’s Cultural Probes) might purport to confront us with moral dilemmas but are hardly as “open” as they claim. Indeed, if their “viewers” might form diverging responses to such scenarios this does not make their narratives any less “complete” or “concluded” (even in their ambiguity).

The Enactment session is instead to be understood as a process of ‘patient experimentation’ through which ‘[w]hat emerges will be another mode of encounter, another problem, another opening onto the political’: an opening onto the problem of sociality. It is, in other words, an attempt at choreographing

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59 Manning, The Minor Gesture, 10.
60 Ibid., 12.
61 Ibid., 13.
and activating ‘potential paths for collective exploration’62 in bodily ways and through the collective encounter with shared constraints. ‘What matters’, writes Manning, ‘is how the constraint embedded in the procedure becomes enabling of new processes’:63 which, in our case, means enabling of new manners of cultivating attentionality, together. Inspired as it is by the work of Harney and Moten, this session is thus a way of exploring and experimenting with a deliberately intensified bodily feel of being each other’s condition of possibility for action, of not being “one” – an exercise in hapticality. This feel is here made operatively intelligible, it is activated, through the attempted rehearsal of a technicity of dispossession as well as the dispossession of technicity: an explicitly technical mode of giving way to being undone as other than “one”, and the undoing of our always immediately technical encounter of the world perceived as a private experience.

Further, the interest here is not that of producing anything through the session other than the Enactment itself as an encounter: as a fleeting and situated instantiation of a certain sociality, rather than for it – for something to come. This, however, does not necessarily mean that nothing at all is produced. As we will see again later, it would be at best naïve and at worst disingenuous to ignore that the acts of visually recording parts of the session or even simply writing about it here do in fact turn the Enactment into something of a mechanism of production of “content”. Still, this production should not be read as the ultimate purpose or a measure of valorisation of the Enactment as process. This production is instead arguably inevitable (and regrettable) part and parcel of research work in the neoliberal academy. The point, then, is not so much what happened – as in what came out of this situation in terms of a stock of knowledge or material for a subsequent debate or design – but rather that it happened, that there has been the activation and sharing of a moment of mutual interference and reciprocal vulnerability absolutely specific to that very situation. An attitude of this kind is perhaps similar to what Colectivo Situaciones describe as “research militancy”: through this type of inquiry, the group indeed claims, ‘intensity does

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62 Massumi, Politics of Affect, 135.
63 Manning, The Minor Gesture, 91.
not lie so much in that which is produced (that which is communicable) as in the
process of production itself (that which is lost in communication).\textsuperscript{64} To this end,
and in line with what previously suggested, the Enactment session was
choreographed to resist (as much as is allowed by the format of this study) the
need of it being (re)turned into a “product” – enclosed and captured into a
mechanism of (intellectual) production. How? By refusing to provide a single
official narrativisation – which is to say the hermeneutical process of “making
sense” of and attributing meaning to the act(s), rendering gestures legible,
explaining complicities. The format and recounting of the Enactment thus seek
to reject the necessity for any validating explanation beyond a methodological
one: that is, beyond the fact that a number of bodies have been prompted to
move and being moved together in such and such a way, feeling each other in the
process. The recording of this Enactment, then, is just that: a recording – the
immediacy of an audio-visual report on the embodied experimentation with
collective, somatic, and kinetic dispossession.

\textbf{5.1.7 Some resonances}

In Shukaitis’ words, then, it could be said that the Enactment is ‘a process that is
not necessarily predicated upon the creation of meaning, but as an intervention
or opening into a system of relations’.\textsuperscript{65} Clearly, this is far from uncharted
territory. In fact, particularly when looking beyond the designerly modes of
experimentation addressed in Chapter 2, many of the ideas and processes
presented here resonate with disparate efforts, both practical and theoretical,
both past and contemporary. Some of said work has directly inspired the
Enactment or incited a reaction in opposition to it. In other cases, similar traits
have been “recognised” at some point along the way, just as one recognises a
shared direction or familiar gait in a fellow traveller.

We have seen in Chapter 1 that nanopolitics draws on a variety of
techniques – from Augusto Boal’s therapeutic \textit{Theatre of the Oppressed} and

\textsuperscript{64} Colectivo Situaciones, ‘Continental Drift’, 81.
\textsuperscript{65} Shukaitis, \textit{Imaginal Machines}, 116.
technoshamanism to more mundane activities such as cooking and walking together – so as to politicise and collectivise the body’s affectivity. Further, if re-read through the lens of Manning and Massumi’s work, the IRS’s *ProbeTools* encountered in Chapter 2 could perhaps be understood as some sort of enabling constraint: playful material “disturbances” designed and embedded into a real situation in the hope that the interference they produce might open up new processes and dialogues. It was also noted in Chapter 4 how the SI’s constructed situations – for example by means of *dérives* and acts of *détournement* – can furnish a relevant historical precedent for the type of ‘organised spontaneity’, as Simon Sadler has described it, that this intervention too wishes to propose. Not unlike the Enactment, through a ‘combination of chance and planning’ the SI sought to alter facets of the ‘material environment of life and the behaviours which that environment gives rise to and which radically transform it’.

Still, there is arguably much more than the above that resonates with what proposed in this thesis. With that in mind, this section will briefly acknowledge some ways in which the question of sociality in its corporeal dimension has been addressed in similar terms *outside* of design discourses and practices, particularly within the realm of participatory and performance art, including forms of theatre, installation-based work, and experimental dance. Clearly without any intention of providing an extensive overview, but in the same spirit of (un)disciplinary curiosity discussed in the Introduction, we will here take a quick look at a few kindred activities and conceptualisations. To assess these and engage in any great detail with an incredibly vast body of literature (let alone to advance an original critique) is obviously an effort entirely beyond the limited scope of this study. Yet, the examples that follow cannot remain entirely unmentioned, if only because it is precisely a more robust attention to some of these and the debates surrounding them that might propel future developments of this study.

In her important book *Artificial Hells* (2012), art critic Claire Bishop produced a remarkable appraisal of contemporary participatory art, discussing its politics and ambiguous disciplinary boundaries, and tracing its historical

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66 Sadler, *The Situationist City*, 78.
67 Ibid.
background. Bishop describes the type of participatory art covered in her book as comprising those “creative” activities wherein

the artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of situations; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term project with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a “viewer” or “beholder”, is now repositioned as co-producer or participant.69

This schematic definition should already suffice in order to identify some shared ground between the Enactment and the kind of participatory art Bishop is concerned with. Namely, the intention to primarily ‘emphasise process over a definitive image, concept or object’ (i.e. an outcome), in order to concentrate on ‘what is invisible: a group dynamic, a social situation, a change of energy’.70 Further, and perhaps even more crucial, Bishop contends that contemporary participatory art often takes as its point of departure a ‘denigration of the individual, who becomes synonymous with the values of Cold War liberalism and its transformation into neoliberalism’,71 so as to affirm instead the importance of collectivity. Bishop then notes that an important precedent for this type of art is represented by the so-called Happenings.

The technical term “Happening” described a radicalised form of theatre, mainly inspired by the improvisational work of John Cage and Jackson Pollock, elaborated by an international host of artists since the 1960s, and poised to become a point of reference for many subsequent artistic endeavours. Initially theorised and staged by American artist Allan Kaprow, Happenings were theatrical events that, as Bishop writes, ‘deliberately rejected plot, character, narrative structure and the audience/performer division’.72 Indeed, Happenings hinged on the artists’ direct engagement with the audience throughout a series of loosely scored scenes, inviting and indeed inciting spontaneous reactions from all

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69 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 2.
70 Ibid., 6. It should be noted that, on the other hand and as expressed before, the Enactment has instead no interest whatsoever in ‘a raised consciousness’, which is also listed by Bishop in this same passage.
71 Ibid., 12.
72 Ibid., 94.
those present during the performance. If a desire to choreograph moments of collective improvisation is a clear point of contact between the Enactment and Happenings, this link is further strengthened if we consider Kaprow’s famed definition of art as ‘just paying attention’.73 Despite the SI’s well-documented antipathy for this format – a practice which they considered to be naïve, ‘derivative of their own’, and lacking in ‘poetic intensity’ – Bishop argues that these accusations were at least in part misplaced, given that highly transgressive Happenings such as those staged in France by Jean-Jacques Lebel, for example, were actually anything but mild.74 In fact, she continues, these afforded access ‘into a space of collective transformation where categories of individual and social, conscious and unconscious, active and passive, would purportedly disintegrate’. 75 Moreover, Bishop contends that if US Happenings were admittedly politically tame when not avowedly apolitical, European Happenings instead ‘contained a conscious socio-political critique of affluent consumer society’ and of the bourgeois notion of art as a detached sphere.76

It is in the wake of this mode of experimental reaction against the passivity produced by a separation of art from everyday life that emerged a form of participatory art that curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud has described as “relational aesthetic” in an influential, homonymous essay.77 The type of art assessed throughout Bourriaud’s text is one that revolves around staged moments of open-ended conviviality and which takes the collective creation of meaning not only as its central theme but also as the “matter” itself of the artwork. In the critic’s own words, then, relational aesthetics names a tendency developing in the

74 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 100-1.
75 Ibid., 101.
76 Ibid., 94-5.
77 Nicolas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2009 [1998]). It is worth pointing out that, in a short essay published exactly a decade later, design theorist Andrew Blauvelt has described a very similar relational tendency in design practices, which he termed “relational design”, although surprisingly without any mention neither of Bourriaud’s work nor of its critical legacy – see: Andrew Blauvelt, ‘Towards Relational Design’, Design Observer 3 (2008).
1990s whereby art ‘take[s] as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space’.\textsuperscript{78} Not unlike the Enactment, this approach then signals a shift of interest towards ‘the temporary collectives and communities that coalesce for the purpose of producing the [artwork]’, as Shukaitis writes, prior to the artwork itself.\textsuperscript{79} Another aspect of particular interest to our discussion is that, although often adopting the installation format as a springboard for conviviality, thus involving three-dimensional structures and props, ‘relational art works insist upon use rather than contemplation’.\textsuperscript{80} Conceptual artist Liam Gillick’s 1992 \textit{Pinboard Project}, just to cite one of Bishop’s and Bourriaud’s examples, indeed comprised ‘a bulletin board containing instructions for use [and] potential items for inclusion on the board’, thus exploring ‘the space between sculpture and functional design’\textsuperscript{81} and considering ‘the presence [and actions] of an audience [as] an essential component of [the artwork]’.\textsuperscript{82}

Another set of interesting similarities to what is proposed via the Enactment can be found in some dance-related experimental practices and theoretical articulations. This is of course unsurprising, not only given this study’s emphasis on bodily motion but also because of how the dance-form and particularly questions of choreography have already featured quite prominently throughout. If Manning herself has provided a powerful exploration of the complex politicality of the dancing body through the example of Argentinian tango,\textsuperscript{83} let us instead briefly consider here a dance practice known as “contact improvisation”. Theoretically and practically pioneered in the early 1970s by dancer and choreographer Steve Paxton, and influenced by Asian martial arts

\textsuperscript{78} Bourriaud, \textit{Relational Aesthetics}, 14.
\textsuperscript{79} Shukaitis, \textit{Imaginal Machines}, 107.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 58.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 61.
\textsuperscript{83} See: Manning, \textit{Politics of Touch}. 
such as aikido and tai chi, at its very basic *contact improvisation* is a mode of dance that

is rooted in partnering and is based on the senses of touch and balance through which information concerning each other’s movement is transmitted to the partners respectively. It differs from the partnering of classical ballet in the sense that no set choreography or rules apply. Through actions such as rolling, crawling, falling, jumping, taking and giving each other’s body weight, the improvisation proceeds in an open-ended way. *Sensing, rather than preset intentions, provides the desired motivation for the dance movements, and movement free from prior convention is one of the outcomes.*

As anthropologist Cynthia Novack explains, during this spontaneous mutuality of, as well as in motion, contact improvisers ‘often yield rather than resist’, participating in a collaborative exercise or ‘social dance’ that, at least at its inception, was meant to literally embody egalitarian sentiments of solidarity and cooperation. Because of its rejection of any dominating figure dictating which moves are to be executed, and due to its inherently collective format, contact improvisation relies entirely on an emergent, somatic, and kinetic negotiation between partners. As such, and similarly to the Enactment, this experimental dance seeks to deploy bodily motion as a strategy for ‘developing our “habit of attention”’.

Stepping even closer to our articulation and activation of a kinetic sociality of use, the work of performance theorist André Lepecki can illuminate some further intersections between the Enactment and experimental dance, as he considered ‘the noticeable presence of objects as main performative elements’ in some forms of contemporary performance art. In a 2012 essay, Lepecki analyses

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87 Ibid., 11.

88 Ibid.


90 André Lepecki, ‘Moving as Thing: Choreographic Critiques of the Object’, *October*, 2012, 75. My gratitude here goes to Neslihan Tepehuan for bringing this essay to my attention.
a number of occurrences in which ‘choreographers bring stuff onto stages and into rooms and galleries’\(^91\) in a rather unconventional way: that is, not as simple inert tools to be manipulated by actors and dancers but, rather, as ‘vectors of subjectivation’ or even ‘surrogate performers’\(^92\) that are radically ‘emptied out of all instrumental use’. \(^93\) In relation to cases such as Yingmei Duan’s 2008 performance *Rubbish City* – which featured a ‘labyrinth of rubbish’ punctuated by the performances of five actors as ‘ghostly presences’\(^94\) – Lepecki argues that ‘objects and subjects are both stripped of instrumentality, functionality, value, and identity’ and are thus made to ‘tarry alongside’ each other.\(^95\)

Now, if both the avant-gardes and relational art represent a reaction against the questionable politics of passive spectatorship, what came out of this move gave rise to yet another set of critically debated issues to do with the politics of participation instead. Some of these overlap with (and in fact predate) what already discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to participatory design, such as the potential instrumentalisation and depoliticisation of social inclusion that some participatory practices engage in, turning participation into an empty buzzword or, worse, into a weapon in the service of social conformity\(^96\) and commodified ‘entrepreneurial collectivism’.\(^97\) Yet, a few additional points should now be made. Specifically in response to the notion of relational aesthetics, Bishop contends that because the modes of interaction that this work fosters can be politically ambiguous, despite Bourriaud’s claims, relational art should by no means be ‘automatically assumed to be democratic and therefore good’.\(^98\) Further, according to Bourriaud, relational art operates by creating what he calls ‘social interstices’.\(^99\) Which is to say, spaces of democratic encounter and exchange existing within the dominant capitalist frame but which, rather than directly engaging in a broad form of social critique that Bourriaud deems as

\(^{91}\) Ibid., 76.

\(^{92}\) Ibid.

\(^{93}\) Ibid., 79.

\(^{94}\) Ibid., 78.

\(^{95}\) Ibid., 81 (slightly altered).


\(^{97}\) Shukaitis, *Combination Acts*, 16.

\(^{98}\) Bishop, ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’, 65.

'futile', instead limit themselves to proposing alternative modes of togetherness as ‘everyday micro-utopias’. A problematic and unconvincing divorce of structural conditions and micro-interventions that Shukaitis rightly contests. Indeed, he writes,

There are many ways to congeal and conjoin minor articulations informed by and relating to large social questions, that are fundamentally concerned with an overall social critique, without having that critique determine and overly confine these practices.

As already argued in Chapter 1, it is indeed this kind of cynical micro-macro split that produces a ‘Trotskyite’ marginalisation of micropolitical interventions as irrelevant to “the bigger picture” – irrelevant to where the “real politics” is – and to which, needless to say, the nanopolitical intentions that animate the Enactment do not wish to subscribe.

Regarding experimental dance, let us consider two crucial issues. First, it must not be ignored that, as contact improvisation has grown in popularity since the ’70s and its practice has consequently diversified, in some cases this has diverted quite substantially from what Paxton had in mind. Performer and scholar Robert Turner has indeed pointed out that, despite Paxton’s explicit emphasis on ‘CI’s potential to produce freedom for the group’, throughout subsequent developments this has instead largely been ‘characterised as a therapy developing the individual’s “personal power and strength of presence”’ and which is ‘almost never discussed as affecting change in political power’.

This way, Turner concludes that newer iterations of contact improvisation ultimately have sought to reframe the practice in a way that is ‘more amenable to (or even as a variation of) American liberal cultural practice’, thus becoming a depoliticised ‘personal aesthetics, a celebration of individualism and individual experience’. Second, in his piercing 2006 book Exhausting Dance, Lepecki perceptively warns us against automatically positive connotations of motion and

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100 Ibid., 31.
101 Shukaitis, Imaginal Machines, 108.
102 Ibid.
104 Ibid., 130.
becoming ‘as that which will always apply its force towards a politics of progress’ and against the mistakenly assumed fixity of dominant, reactionary politics. In a context where, instead and as already discussed, individualised subjects are constantly made to transform, adjust, improve, become by the rapacious regime of neoliberal logistics, it is not mobility per se but a specific grammar of kinesis that must be developed as an alternative. That is to say, a type of motion that would instead incorporate, magnify, or even entirely hinge on what Lepecki calls ‘kinesthetic stuttering’, and which would attempt a ‘choreographic interruption of “flow or a continuum of movement”’. Or, as Montgomery and bergman put it, ‘the hesitations and stammerings that come through the encounter with other ways of living and fighting’. What follows represents one such attempt.

5.2 An exercise in seven acts

As was anticipated earlier, the Enactment session can easily run the risk of being superficially equated with the phase of motional experimentation alone – that is, with the playful use of the kinetic machine. While understandable, if only because of the contraption’s conspicuous material presence, such an assessment would however be both problematic and incorrect.

In fact, were the “phase” of use to be considered in isolation, excessive emphasis would end up being placed on the machine itself, arguably casting this as the end result of a concluded and antecedent process (i.e. the “grand finale” effect) – rather than on the emergence, largely around it, of a moment of sociality and undercommon study far more complex than that. Such an assessment would then fail to account for the more layered experiential assemblage of which the act of use of the machine represented but the centrepiece. In other words: of course, this playful phase does indeed represent the pivotal moment around which the event has been choreographed; and yet, drawing attention solely on it would actually strip this part of the activity (let alone the Enactment as a whole) of its

105 Lepecki, Exhausting Dance, 12.
106 Ibid., 1.
107 Montgomery and bergman, Joyful Militancy, 182.
more expansive nanopolitical significance. Such significance must instead be read in conjunction with other elements, perhaps less “dramatic” yet highly meaningful, of which the activity is composed.

The Enactment’s coveted intensity is thus to be identified in the concerted interplay between various moments: moments of play – of course – but also moments of scheming, of reflection, of conviviality, and, in keeping with Lepecki’s invocation, even of a kind of idleness. To this end, the activity can perhaps be construed as an exercise comprising seven acts: planning, call, threshold, overture, play, hiatus, flight. It is crucial to reiterate that, throughout the review of each act, we will be focusing whenever and however possible on their methodological-strategic grounds and nanopolitical significance only, thus desisting from constructing a hermeneutical narrativisation of the participants’ experience. We will concentrate on how certain enabling constraints were set up and why certain choreographic decisions were taken, while trying not to turn this chronicle into an instruction manual that might inadvertently merge a proposed “how to do” together not only with a specific (and supposedly replicable) “what to do” but also, and even worse, with a “what to feel”.108

5.2.1 First act: Planning

The process of planning for the Enactment, largely inspired by informal bits of dialogues with a number of more or less frequent interlocutors (as if this were ever not the case!), turned out to be punctuated not only or, in fact, not primarily by the expected array of propositional questions related to the format – e.g. where to hold the event? who to invite? how much information to reveal? etc. Indeed, almost every single embryonic attempt to answer such questions was soon met and systematically undercut by a series of dismissive “why?” queries: why even asking this or that question to begin with? This doubtfulness, ruthlessly challenging the very legitimacy supporting each propositional evaluation,

108 This excessively instructional tone, conflating “how to do” and “what to do” into an operational manual of sorts, is a limitation that Paolo Plotegher attributes to the second half of the Invisible Committee’s book The Coming Insurrection – a criticism that this study has taken into consideration. See: Plotegher, ‘What Can I Do With the Nothing I Have?’, 285.
however, was not the manifestation of some kind of defeatist impulse. Rather, it signalled a process of methodological unlearning being underway. Which is to say, it was a way of gradually leaving behind a set of instinctively familiar manners of organising and thinking about collective events that could bring no result other than that of reproducing the evaluative and productivist formalisms of which the Enactment was hoping to divest itself.

This shouldn’t be taken to mean that all decisions were eventually rejected in favour of the “anything goes” attitude discussed by Massumi, but instead that certain seemingly crucial considerations ended up losing most of their relevance. And this is because questions concerning, just to provide some illustrative examples, the experimentation with a plurality of formats, or the identity-based “qualities” of participants to be invited, or even the extent to which participants should or should not have been made aware of the nature of the kinetic machine, appeared to betray an “extractivist” urge aimed at constructing the best possible conditions for the harvesting of information. In simpler terms, this set of questions essentially responded to the need of understanding the Enactment in productive terms: that is, to turn this activity into an instrument of production of data that could validate and retrospectively attribute meaning to the event.

The phase of planning, in line with what emerged from our earlier review of choreographic thinking, thus required a particular mode of initial curatorial work. A dual process of simultaneous activation and deactivation, so to speak: activation of enabling constraints, as a set of designed conditions of entrance into (or, perhaps, even as) the various moments composing the event; deactivation of compulsions to forecast and control the unfolding of the Enactment, all the way to its “conclusions” (in terms of meaning rather than strictly temporal). Once again, we should here refrain from strictly “sequential” readings of this activity, since this planning process actually began while the kinetic machine was still under construction.
5.2.2 Second act: Call

Of course, one question that proved to be particularly complex, in terms of curatorial effort, had to do with the selection of participants to be invited. In this regard, the first impulsive considerations treated this process as some sort of recruitment procedure. A recruitment that appeared to be less concerned with actual “people” than with “identities” – whether normatively imposed or elective. In other words, the main preoccupation seemed to be the desire to source the most diversified portfolio of individual features possible. To be sure, rather than a tokenistic politics of inclusion and representation, this was primarily, unthinkingly, and maybe even more problematically a manner of ensuring an increased breadth of responses according to stagnant and easily recognisable categories and bodily features: the more features, the more data. And yet, what was the use of the data thus gathered going to be if, as previously claimed, the Enactment has neither ethnographic nor engineering ambitions? What was the point of “hunting” and artificially increasing the diversity of responses to the activity (by rehearsing neoliberal mechanisms of imposed subjectivation no less!), if the Enactment had pledged to be “no deliverable, all process” – in Massumi’s terms – hence making a point of resulting in nothing other than the event itself? Moreover, wouldn’t this ultimately come to represent an exploitative instance of what Bishop termed “outsourced authenticity”, merely asking people ‘to perform an aspect of their identity’?109 Once the inevitable “axe of doubt” descended upon these questions and no compelling answer ensued, a different selection criterion was sought by eventually returning to one of (if not the) central issue upon which this whole study had been built: friendship.

Was not friendship, after all, what the research had set itself to discuss and experiment with since its inception? Perhaps a genuine exploration of friendship must happen from within friendship. Perhaps it must begin with intimacies and complicities that, as it has been claimed throughout, have nothing to do with individual(ising) ontological predicates and, more important still, do not need to be engineered because always already there. Complicities that cannot

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109 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 220.
be staged simply through enforced tokenism and superficially defined “diversity”, but only established and intensified as and through the sharing of a process, as and through a manner of addressing each other and being vulnerable together. Perhaps, like the Invisible Committee urges, this Enactment should indeed begin ‘from where [we] are, from the milieu [we] frequent, the territory [we] inhabit’ – whatever that is at any given point in time – rather than feeling compelled to always look elsewhere first. And so, because this would mean to ‘start instead from [...] the ties that link [us] to what is going on around [us]’, the decision was taken to simply send a call out to a number of friends [Fig.23].

The tone of this “call” was hoping to signal, in a manner to some extent inspired in its urgency by an anonymous text of the same name, that something had already been set in motion and that friends were invited to tag along. Which is to say that the intention was for the invite not to be framed as a formal “request” for a contribution to come, but rather to be received as the performative acknowledgement of a complicity that had already started, informally, by means of the issuing of the call itself – and which is why the call must be understood as integral part of the Enactment. On this point, while discussing the practices of the occupation movement in London, Harney proposes a lucid elaboration of the distinction between request, demand, and call, which can offer further clarification. Unlike requests or demands for something to be granted by or despite an external agent (an authority), Harney claims, ‘some kind of demand [is] already being enacted, fulfilled in the call itself’. And it is precisely this kind of unmediated immediacy that this call was hoping to transmit.

To this end, the text of the call, sent by email with subject “Invite – Not One: A collective exercise of thought in motion”, read as follows:

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110 Invisible Committee, To Our Friends, 228. The same exhortation of ‘starting from where we are and seeking affinities with others’ is echoed by Montgomery and bergman too – see: Montgomery and bergman, Joyful Militancy, 107.
111 Ibid., 163-4.
112 Anonymous, ‘Call / Appel’. This pamphlet, originally self-published in French with the title Appel and later translated and distributed online, is often attributed to members of the philosophical collectives Tiqqun and Invisible Committee, due to remarkable stylistic similarities, although this rumoured authorship has never been confirmed.
113 Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 134 (emphasis added).
“You are invited to take part in a collective exercise. This session will involve concerted experimentation with movement and play through the mediation of a kinetic machine. You won’t be studied; your reactions won’t be studied; your reflections won’t be studied. And yet, we will all be studying, together: by acting and reacting, interfering and resonating, moving and being moved.”

CALL FOR PARTICIPATION
Not One: A collective exercise of thought in motion

When
Thursday 5th July, 2.00pm-4.30pm

Where
Dorset Place Building
Rooms 501-502 (Fifth Floor)
University of Brighton
3 Dorset Place, Brighton BN2 1ST

What
You are invited to take part in a collective exercise. This session will involve concerted experimentation with movement and play through the mediation of a kinetic machine. You won’t be studied; your reactions won’t be studied; your reflections won’t be studied. And yet, we will all be studying, together: by acting and reacting, interfering and resonating, moving and being moved.

Why
This activity is part of my PhD research. However, I am not interested in results or data as such: I am not interested in what happens throughout the session, but rather that it happens. I am less interested in what this means than in how it means. I am interested in activation, rather than outcomes. This is an event, not a test.

Consent
The activity will be recorded, which means that you will be asked for permission to be filmed and photographed. Of course, you can request to be anonymised, which will not prevent your participation in the activity. No data as such will be extracted through the event, but there will be time for any question you might have about “outcomes”. More details regarding your participation will be explained on the day.

PLEASE CONFIRM YOUR ATTENDANCE, THANK YOU!

Fig. 23: Giovanni Marmont, Enactment "Call for participation", 2018
5.2.3 Third act: Threshold

Now, if a curatorial work intended to cultivate differential attunement is an effort to create shared conditions of entrance into an event, clearly this must carefully attend not only to the “virtual” entry (the call, in this case), but to the actual, material, environmental, corporeal transition into that event too. This moment is what Manning and Massumi describe as an ‘inaugural passage: the initial passing of the threshold into the event’.\(^{114}\) Much like with the initial phase of planning – and, as we will see, with the ensuing phase of dialogue – in order to positively activate ‘certain presuppositions and anticipatory tendencies’\(^{115}\) for a collective instance of experimentation and sociality, the arrangement of this moment of liminality also required an important process of deactivation. A conscious attempt was then made to ‘disable participants' habitual presuppositions’;\(^{116}\) that is, it seemed important that the same informality characterising the call would be consistently reflected in the event itself from the get-go, neutralising as much as possible the atmosphere of task-ridden formality and preoccupation with “getting stuff done” that way too often prevail in research-related events.

To this end, in a similar vein to what reported in Manning and Massumi’s account of SenseLab’s inaugural event Dancing the Virtual (2005), it was determined that the passing threshold into this Enactment had to be in the spirit of convivial hospitality. Not in the sense of there being a “host” receiving “guests”, but rather as a diffused and non-personal feel of hospitality being materialised in the situation. Without getting too deeply entangled with the philosophical baggage attached to these terms,\(^ {117}\) what is meant here is simply that it seemed crucial to endow the Enactment and the physical space in which this was set to unfold with a certain welcoming and “de-professionalised” tonality. As a way of ‘breaking expectations in a gentle and inviting way’,\(^ {118}\) then, the first thing that

\(^{114}\) Manning and Massumi, Thought in the Act, 98.

\(^{115}\) Ibid.

\(^{116}\) Ibid.


\(^{118}\) Massumi, Politics of Affect, 74.
those who had responded to the call encountered, upon their entrance into the first of two rooms, was a table with an assorted selection of snacks and beverages. Because of its unpretentious nature and arrangement, this was not meant to recall the corporate language of the “symposium catering” but was rather presented as something of an indoor picnic, ‘in a way that called forth the rituals of conviviality surrounding shared eating in noninstitutional settings’.\textsuperscript{119}

It is important to note that this tactical informality was adopted not primarily for its expected \textit{effectiveness} – in terms of its suitability for the achievement of a desired result – but rather for its \textit{affectiveness}, for its contribution in the strategic creation of an intensely relational field as a shared point of departure.\textsuperscript{120} Which, of course, makes the Enactment’s proximity with the relational art and Happenings discussed above even more pronounced.

5.2.4 Fourth act: Overture

The actual day of the exercise began with a “welcome session”, during which the participants were each given a booklet and a consent form. The booklet contained a programme for the day – comprising four parts: Welcome, Activation, Break, Discussion – followed by a written “introduction” to the Enactment. This text offered some caveats and propositions regarding the aim of the session (as reported in section 5.1.6), without however wishing to achieve any great degree of explanatory clarity regarding the Enactment’s pragmatico-operational details and their theoretical underpinnings. The booklet opted instead for a slightly more “poetic” prose.

Particular emphasis was placed on communicating that the intention was not that of studying participants and their reactions, but rather that of offering an invitation to join a collective exercise. Which is to say, in keeping with Harney and Moten, to offer the occasion for a collective mode of study. This caveat was crucial, much like the deactivation of habitual conducts attempted through the event’s threshold, in order to discourage learned behaviours and distance the

\textsuperscript{119} Manning and Massumi, \textit{Thought in the Act}, 100.

\textsuperscript{120} This tension between the “effectiveness” and “affectiveness” of a tactic is originally discussed by Stevphen Shukaitis. See: Shukaitis, \textit{Imaginal Machines}, 142.
Enactment from customary rituals attached to ideas and performances of “test”, “workshop”, and “experiment”, when these are intended as evidence-motivated activities. The booklet explained that, yes, the session was going to be filmed and photographed, but that would not mean that the participants’ reflections or their bodily motion were going to be used as research “data” *per se*. In Manning and Massumi’s words, the text sought to dispel ‘those tendencies ingrained [...] by the conventional genres of interaction in the art and academic world’,¹²¹ to instead prime participants for an ethos of experiential generosity and vulnerability. No specific result was expected of them nor would be derived from their “performances”, not least because, again, there was not even any clear agenda driving the whole activity.

Participants were invited to read and discuss amongst themselves the text, their expectations for the session, and whatever else they thought relevant or interesting. The focus was squarely and deliberately on enabling an undirected dialogue between participants, thus avoiding any formal instructional presentation of the project. And yet, in keeping with the desire for the Enactment not to be primarily a study of but rather a study with, it seemed equally problematic to construct an improbable observer position – extracted and detached, inaccessible and overseeing – opposed to observed participants, absorbed in the action – as is arguably the case with design tactics such as cultural probes. Which means that with the term “participant” we are referring here to *all* those who were present for the activity: inviter and invited, caller and respondents, researcher and friends. *All* differentially immersed in a moment of sociality; *all* indebted, no creditors; *all* participating in a general and shared incompleteness¹²² (an ambition in part disappointed, as we will see towards the end of this chapter). And so, this conversation was also the opportunity for discussing some of the motivations and theory behind the Enactment – which is also to say, behind the call – while sharing the desire for this not to degenerate into the competency-bound “verticalism” of a Q&A session. This dialogue

¹²¹ Manning and Massumi, *Thought in the Act*, 98.

¹²² Harney and Moten beautifully discuss this desire to fully inhabit and reclaim a radical incompleteness as shared brokenness in a recent interview. See: Harney and Moten, ‘Conversación Los Abajocomunes’.
continued until a certain impatience for the session to move on to the phase of playful use was more or less directly expressed by some participants.

5.2.5 Fifth act: Play

Following the phase of conversation, all participants moved to the second of two rooms, where the kinetic machine was located, together with some chairs and tables. No procedural instructions were given or tasks assigned to the participants, other than to “use” the machine. One person volunteered to interact with the machine first, after which other participants joined the action by self-directedly coordinated the unfolding of the rest of the session. Strategizing, commenting, observing, taking turns, inviting each other into the action, improvising unexpected and often humorous ways of approaching the machine, exploring the machine itself as a materialised accomplice – neither object nor subject of their collective and collectivised care, but rather both at once [Fig.24].

Fig. 24: Giovanni Marmont, Enactment session 1, 2018
The bodily correspondence enacted thus took the shape of a play of rhythms: a ludic and relational ‘enthusiasm of the body’ – as Massumi might describe it by way of Raymond Ruyer – arranged on the spot and entirely according to the participants’ emergent collective interests and mechanical contingencies. Paxton’s contact improvisation comes back to mind here [Fig. 25-26].

![Fig. 25: Giovanni Marmont, Enactment session 2, 2018](image)

It is hardly possible to speak in more depth about this phase of action without falling prey to a hermeneutical impulse, stepping beyond the descriptive limits that were set up earlier on. Of course, something of the affective vitality spawned throughout this collective experience of use will inevitably be captured and expressed by the images included in this chapter. Yet, while this admittedly regretful visual seizure seemed necessary, given the broader academic context of the Enactment and as previously acknowledged, it is nevertheless hoped that the photographic medium alone will here at least operate on a less prescriptive register of intelligibility compared to a written textual explanation.

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123 Massumi, Politics of Affect, 141.
124 For some key discussions of the tension between written text and image, see for example: Roland Barthes, Image Music Text, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977);
realisation makes the eventual inclusion in this account of any picture seem at best unjustified, we should consider that the point here is not to erase any trace of complexity, feigning a flawlessly thought-through activity, but instead to attend to these very dilemmas. On this same point, Bishop argues that

To grasp participatory art from images alone is almost impossible: casual photographs of people talking, eating, attending a workshop or screening or seminar tell us very little, almost nothing, about the concept and context of a given project. They rarely provide more than fragmentary evidence, and convey nothing of the affective dynamic that propels artists to make these projects and people to participate in them.125

If Bishop’s claim is correct, could this not be used strategically? Could this way of telling “little, almost nothing” about the actual affective dynamics at play in a collective event not be itself a politically motivated choice?

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125 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 5 (emphasis added).

Regardless of the answer, though, one last thing that is probably worth mentioning about this playful moment is that even the repeated (and unintentional!) “malfunctioning” of the machine turned out to be an occasion for other complicity to be performed [Fig. 27]. Indeed, it turned out that not even “repairing” the mechanism was pragmatically feasible by one person alone. So these new, unforeseen circumstances ended up providing a new, unforeseen pretext for collectively playing with – which is also to say, using – the machine.

Fig. 27: Giovanni Marmont, Kinetic Machine malfunctioning, 2018

5.2.6 Sixth act: Hiatus

While planning for this Enactment, something that was taken into careful consideration, together with the tone of informality already discussed, was the danger for any activity to morph into depleting hyper-activity – for bodies to be rendered hyper-active.126 Of course fatigue can at times be a joyful aftermath to any burst of bodily enthusiasm, the testament to an intense haptic affection. However, exhaustion can also and frequently emerge out of a deeply ingrained

neoliberal sense of duty, out of the constant stream of received or self-imposed tasks that come to punctuate our lives, out of the overstimulation that relentlessly demands our somatic response and our will to achieve. Political life, of whatever type, is obviously far from immune to this hyper-activism: ‘[t]oo often’, the Nanopolitics Group indeed notes, even ‘our political activism mirrors the hyper-productive mode of our work’.127 In their piercing account of the phenomenon they call “rigid radicalism”, Montgomery and bergman take a closer look at political hyper-activism and observe that this latter form of exhaustion is particularly widespread in “radical” milieus, ‘precisely where we are supposed to feel most alive’.128 This type of fatigue can be sensed, for instance, ‘when we feel the need to perform in certain ways [...] and make the right gestures’.129

Arguably, this noxious hyper-activism can be traced back to a very narrow understanding of “action” in and of itself. Such is Garcés’ assessment, which warns us that conflating “action” [acción] and “activity” [actividad] can turn into ‘a trap in which the rhythm of productivity continues to prevail’.130 Garcés proposes that, if we are to disentangle our acting from the web of productivism in which it is embroiled – that is, in keeping with Agamben, extracting it from the sphere of both poiesis and praxis – we must begin by going ‘beyond the dominion of activity, towards a broader concept of action’.131 Crucially, she contends, this operation would require that we cease dismissing ‘any period of “inactivity” [as] a hindrance to cultural life’.132 The expanded mode of action thus articulated emerges as one that ‘includes inactivity, dead times, impasses, detours, errors, tiredness, disorientation, the need to think it all again’.133 In order to ‘avoid the quick exhaustion to which any cultural, creative or academic proposal is subjected today’,134 then, a phase of respite followed that of playful use. During this moment of open “idleness”, some participants returned to the first room to have some more food or drinks, some wandered out of the building to catch

127 Ibid., 28.
128 Montgomery and bergman, Joyful Militancy, 20.
129 Ibid., 168.
130 Garcés, Un mundo común, 83.
131 Ibid., 84.
132 Ibid., 83.
133 Ibid., 84.
134 Ibid.
some fresh air or have a smoke, some chatted about all sorts of topics – including but not limited to the experience just shared.

5.2.7 Seventh act: Flight

Lastly, everyone reconvened in the second room (the one where the kinetic machine was located) for a conclusive phase of collective reflection on the Enactment as a whole – which was not to be recorded in any way. Once again, the overt intention was for this exchange not to turn into a traditional Q&A session that would mostly reproduce and magnify clear demarcations between inquiring “audience” and responding “authors” – not least because the “author” here had very few answers to provide (if any). Indeed, rather than encouraging a genuine correspondence – as the shared exposure and cultivation of a dispossessed/dispossessive unpayable debt – more often than not this format seeks by its very nature to offer the facile gratification of a sense of resolution and “proper” closure, of the re-establishment in the narrative of something like a lost equilibrium – whether or not doubts are eventually cleared and consensus over “meaning” is reached.\(^\text{135}\)

And yet, this tired ritual infests so many “cultural”, artistic, and academic activities that avoiding or at the very least trying to diminish its “anaesthetic” effect is no easy task. To this end, it was attempted (only in part successfully) to contrast such a tendency by means of a diffusion of retrospective “ownership”, perhaps “ownership”, over the event and its meaning, as already stated in the booklet. Which is to say: by explicitly noting that questions were bound to be collectively \textit{explored} rather than \textit{answered}, and that neither authorial explanations nor resolutions were on offer, because the event was bound to be nothing other than what participants made of it; by not proposing a specific set of themes to be addressed; by providing less “this is why so and so was done” and more “how might we respond to what happened?”. Ultimately, this was an attempt at letting people exit the Enactment as differentially as they had entered

\(^{135}\) Massumi makes a similar observation about plenaries. See: Massumi, \textit{Politics of Affect}, 75.
it earlier on, albeit (hopefully) with the shared and intensified bodily feel of having, for a moment, consented not to be “one”.

5.3 Postscript

Through a theoretical and methodological review of the Enactment, this chapter has offered a number of opportunities for further reflection, not only on this activity but also on the research as a whole. While these will be discussed more extensively in the thesis' Coda, this last section will serve as an opportunity to propose some final remarks that will help us formulate several concluding questions. Again, it could not be stressed enough that our concern here should remain squarely centred on issues of process, rather than on results: that is to say, what follows will not be an evaluation of efficacy as such, but a brief exploration of the potentialities introduced and limitations encountered through the Enactment. In this respect, two tightly interrelated issues came to light with particular insistence during the various phases of the Enactment, and are therefore worth spending a few more words on here: namely, the question of teleology and the politics of recording – both of which, of course, ultimately relate to wider “meta-questions” of valorisation, broadly understood.

Particularly throughout our re-articulation of the notion of use in Chapter 4, it was noted that the mode of collective acting that this study was seeking to conceptually arrive at, and corporeally activate through the Enactment, was to be situated within the dance-like realm of gesture – of means without end. In its sheer opposition to the sphere of poiesis (production, means-to-end) but also of praxis (end in itself), this intention thus poses itself as a problem of teleology. Or, more accurately, as the possible rejection of teleology altogether, as a deliberate disregard for results in favour of a totalising attention to the elaboration and activation of a shared process. And so, a great deal of the curatorial work that brought the Enactment to life had to be devoted to the deactivation, wherever possible, of any expectancy in the participants that something, at some point throughout the process and yet distinguishable from the process itself, was going to be “harvested”, thus attributing meaning to the session – an “end”. On the
contrary, the Enactment attempted to embrace its commitment, as Paolo Plotegher suggests in his analysis of the Invisible Committee's work, of approaching

politics as getting together, not necessarily with the aim of deciding something, but as moments of “collective crystallization” in the form of a decision as something that takes hold of us.136

This question of the rejection of teleology, if further extended and situated within the context of this study, encounters a major obstacle. Indeed, it must be unequivocally acknowledged that the nature of the PhD format (specifically) and of academic research (more generally) made it very difficult to remain entirely faithful to the original ambition for the Enactment not to turn into an instrument of production of anything other than more of itself. Not only difficult but, in fact, nearly impossible, if not through a certain “artificiality” of the report. Indeed, as Harney and Moten have noted, the type of study that is recognised by the institution of the neoliberal university in which we operate is, by its very nature, one that is entirely predicated upon and revolving around a process of credit received only through the delivery of a result: a (privatised) accreditation through accomplishment.137 So it should come as immediately obvious that any exploration that seeks to take seriously enough – and indeed fully inhabit – the experientially mutual and unpayable debt that is cultivated and which circulates through collective experimentation, is at least to some extent doomed in such a context. In fact, this effort becomes entangled in a dilemma of sorts, trying to speak the unspeakable, to say what should not be said. A dilemma that solicited several crucial questions – some prompted by collective moments of reflection in the event, others approached in retrospective through the writing of this chapter: how to ground this research into something that is by nature emergent, hence to be felt more so than understood? how to activate a study with, without reducing it to a study of? how to communicate a dispossessed sociality without this communication taking the form of a “privatising” capture? how to “tell”, as it

136 Plotegher, ‘What Can I Do With the Nothing I Have?’, 288 (emphasis added).
137 See: Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 67-8, n.4.
were, without “showing”? And returning to the invocation with which this chapter had started, finally: how do we relate to each other outside the realm of production,\textsuperscript{138} not turning a moment of undercommon sociality ‘into something useful’,\textsuperscript{139} yet within an academic setting?

Perhaps the answer to this latter question is simply that we cannot, perhaps it is that we should not. Or, perhaps, in and through the undercommons of the university certain vulnerabilities, certain dispossessed ways of being together, certain conspiratorial complicities and manners of corresponding can be cultivated despite the university, despite its entrenched apparatus of experiential capture. In keeping with Harney and Moten, this means being whenever and however possible in, not of, the university, together:\textsuperscript{140} operating in the university as a place of encounter and planning underneath, yet not necessarily outside, the regime of intelligibility that this requires. It is in this sense that, perhaps, we could understand the context of this research as itself becoming a particular form of enabling constraint: an “impediment” that, in working with it, compels us to find other paths for next time, to experiment with other processes, to elaborate other modes of deepening our mutual indebtedness, to refine other subversive ways of pretending. Pretending that we are “sticking to the plan”; that something, after all, will be decided through our getting together; that we are working towards completion, and that we are working to complete. To complete the work, to complete ourselves – as one. All while something else is circulating between us, something that ‘emerges from the enclosure’ but is ‘within and against enclosure’, something that ‘always escapes settlement’.\textsuperscript{141}

Namely, what Harney and Desideri call a ‘conspiracy without a plot’: a conspiracy that ‘can only produce more of itself’\textsuperscript{142} by setting off on a ‘fugitive trail’ for which ‘escape is its direction’.\textsuperscript{143}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{138} See: Anonymous, ‘Call / Appel’, 68.
\textsuperscript{139} Nanopolitics Group, \textit{Nanopolitics Handbook}, 34.
\textsuperscript{140} See: Harney and Moten, \textit{The Undercommons}, 26.
\textsuperscript{141} Harney and Desideri, ‘A Conspiracy Without a Plot’, 128.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 125.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 127.
\end{flushright}
6. Coda

A terminally ill woman asks her husband to tell her a story so as to alleviate her unbearable pains. No sooner does he begin his tale than she stops him: “No, not like that. I want you to speak to me in an unknown language”. “Unknown?” He asks. “A language that doesn’t exist. For I have such a need not to understand anything at all”. The husband asks himself: how can you speak a language that doesn’t exist? He starts off by mumbling some strange words and feels like a fool, as if he were establishing his inability to be human. But gradually, he begins to feel more at ease with this language that is devoid of rules. And he no longer knows whether he’s speaking, singing, or praying. [...] When we were children, all of us experienced that first language, the language of chaos, all of us enjoyed that divine moment when our life was capable of being all lives, and the world still awaited a destiny.

Mia Couto, Languages We Don’t Know We Know, 2015: 81-82

And so here we are: back to the end, to an end. If this journey had started by trying to do away with an end that masquerades as the beginning (i.e. the figure of the individual), we are now concluding it by joining those who try to collectively start from a different “beginning”, those whose narratives are without an end, those insisting on not being an end. Those, in other words, experimenting with practices of social life that wish to sabotage the neoliberal fantasy of individual independence and aspirations of unhindered control over oneself. Indeed, what set us in motion was first and foremost a desire to rethink and rehearse the question of sociality anew, in such a way that would require neither a condition of originary separateness of its “members”, nor erasure of difference and singular expressions of life in terms of uniformity. In other words, we have established a desire to gesture towards what Ferreira da Silva calls “difference
without separability” and which we might also describe now as a practice of entanglement through use. Let us review how we have proceeded, before we can advance some final considerations.

An initial warning launched Chapter 1: reducing individualism to a problem of simple selfishness would be missing the point, for this means leaving unchallenged a much more fundamental and seemingly innocent mechanism. This mechanism, which Macpherson has famously termed “possessive individualism”, encourages each subject to conduct itself as if this very “self” were its own exclusive property and responsibility. Whenever and wherever successful, this complex process of individuation reconstructs social life as something of an afterthought, rather than a precondition. And if the only apparently antithetical notion of “community” is again ever more deeply entwined with fascistoid rhetoric or showing its lines of continuity with neoliberal capitalism, it was proposed that another articulation of sociality could be found in practices that we may call “friendship”: emergent ties that ceaselessly pull us outside and beyond ourselves. We then established that, given possessive individualism’s not only discursive but also kinetic and somatic character, our terrain of operation was going to be that of bodily exploration. Drawing on what proposed by the Nanopolitics Group, we thus opted to devise new ways of moving and sensing together by focusing here on the realm of “use”, as a particularly fertile but lesser-probed terrain of political experimentation.

Building on this intention, in the first half of Chapter 2 we have then sought to do two things. First, to identify the many ways in which design practices confront the question of use as directly or incidentally central to their activities. Second, to elaborate on the manners in which design’s infrastructuring power has been deployed within interventions bearing explicit political ambitions. We have then assessed a number of artefact-based examples, both historical and contemporary, that have attempted to rethink use as a way of encouraging other modes of sociality. This contextual review paved the way for an articulation of this research’s methodological approach, presented in the second half of the chapter. It was determined that the proposed intervention was to develop by means of a combination of three registers of investigation, here
termed *Tangible Theory, Intangible Practice*, and *Enactment*. These name respectively: a form of exploratory making and material experimentation; a process of crafting and blending a set of conceptual coordinates; and the choreographing of a collective situation that would revolve around a radicalised mode of use. The chapter eventually closed by suggesting that these three registers shall be understood as contributing to something of a methodological *ensemble*, hence (a)effective only through their complex interplay.

Having defined the type of intervention that this research wishes to offer, Chapter 3 took us to the roots of the question of use by considering the relation between the human and the technological that underpins it. A relation that, it was claimed through Stiegler’s work, can be properly grasped only as mutually constitutive – therefore to act is always already to act technologically. We then contended, with Heidegger, that what characterises this originary *technicity* in the current context is an increasingly totalising tendency toward mastery and calculation. Yet, an alternative to this calculative relationship with technology would require willingly refraining not from the *use* of technical “things” but from the instrumental impulse to control that tends to guide it. We then sought to better understand the political stakes implied by the technical transformation of our conduct by turning our attention to the Greek and Roman exercises that Foucault calls “technologies of the self”. As illustrated by these historical examples, to address this transformation as a practice of freedom a radical shift of focus is needed: from care for the subject as *result* of certain exercises to care for the exercises themselves, to be progressively turned into an abiding principle of acting. The chapter closed with Agamben’s claim that, in order to introduce a new mode of care for our technical acting, it is at the level of “use” that we should operate.

And it is indeed toward a reprogramming of use that Chapter 4 tried to work, proposing a set of coordinates along the way. Assisted by Agamben, it was argued that subtracting use from its teleological dimension points us to the disinterested realm of play: a cunning ritual that the philosopher links to the act of profanation and negligence toward the rules governing the sacred. According to Agamben, playful use is neither a productive act nor simple praxis but instead
names a gestural endurance of pure mediality, of which the “situations” elaborated by the SI may represent an example. Observing the situationist dérives began to reveal the deep reciprocity between users and “used” characterising these playful activities: a reciprocity so profound as to cast use as neither properly active nor passive, but instead both at once. To use means to be both effecting and affected by the action. By the same token, to use means to entertain a relationship with the world whereby the experiential boundaries imposed by the notion of the individual self are undermined to such an extent that this very self cannot be understood as one’s own anymore. Since it thus appears to constitute “subjects” precisely through their unmaking, we proposed that use could be rethought as a “dispossessive” force. Inspired by the work of Butler and Athanasiou, first, and then of Harney and Moten, we have tried to reconceive dispossession as a collectively empowering practice, rather than as a state of oppression and deprivation, growing out of the peculiar mutual indebtedness of attentional, haptic modes of study.

Chapter 5 concluded this exploration by retracing the activation of the mode of use articulated in the previous chapter. We began by discussing some key procedural aspects. Mobilising the work of Manning and Massumi, it was proposed that this activity was to introduce an assorted set of enabling constraints into a collective event. The hope was for these to allow a number of people to participate in a shared process yet without the need of working toward any form of consensus. The main constraint designed was here represented by a kinetic machine that operated as a mechanism of interference, in that it momentarily stripped users interacting with and through it of their motional independence, allowing them to instead explore a magnified sense of coimplication in the same gesture. An account was then given of the actual exercise, which was retrospectively broken down into seven “acts”. We addressed each of these in turn, attempting to convey something of the Enactment’s pragmatic and processual articulation, while at the same time withholding a univocal interpretation of the event and of the participants’ experience of it. This sparked a final assessment of some difficulties faced throughout the research: if a desire to preserve the Enactment’s radical unproductivity was severely hampered
by the nature and context of the exploration, it was also suggested that it is perhaps in the very effort of collectively eluding institutionally imposed manners of relating that undercommon forms of complicity can be rehearsed and flourish.

Now, two major questions were said to animate this investigation. The first: how can the notion of “use” help us rethink social life? The second: how can “use” be turned into an intervention capable of momentarily undoing individualism? It is finally time to review how this tortuous journey has sought to find responses to these questions. Let us address the latter query first.

**Design prefiguration**

When assessing in Chapter 2 the type of design work commonly associated with the banner “critical and speculative design” (CSD), the future-focused nature of these practices was cursorily noted. Unlike some other explicitly speculative work produced by design researchers at Goldsmiths, in the case of IRS’s *ProbeTools* this is not a particularly prominent feature. Nevertheless, it is arguably given by the simple fact that any use of the probes is meant to generate results to be interpreted, from which to learn something, and which should thus inspire further research activities. In other words, *ProbeTools*’ intrinsic futurity is manifested in the vaguely instrumentalised recourse to playful interaction as a generative practice: ‘clever opportunities for play that don’t reveal anything meaningful aren’t useful either’,¹ as the IRS writes. In the case of Dunne and Raby’s “what if?” scenarios, however, a preoccupation with forecasting and questions of temporality is much more pronounced. Indeed, not only their fictional speculations are *about* possible futures: more remarkably, the *use* of their props and the “unreality” that these open up belong to that same future too, not to the here and now. In a passage of *Speculative Everything*, Dunne and Raby hence explicitly distance their projects from what they call ‘prefigurative futures’ or ‘pre-enactments’: practices that, they argue, ‘also use props to transport viewers’ imagination but [...] in this role they are bringing a specific future to the

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present so that it can be partially experienced in advance’. By contrast, what the two researchers propose is for their ‘props to transport viewers’ imagination into a thought experiment’, so that in the act of picturing these props being handled in a possible future setting we could assess whether or not those are the kind of world we would prefer to inhabit and the kind of use we would prefer to perform.

Beyond all that has already been said about Dunne and Raby’s work both above and elsewhere, it is perhaps this point that can now offer an opportunity, not so much to reaffirm this research’s intended rupture with some CSD, but to clarify something crucial about the intervention discussed throughout. Something to do, indeed, with the same concept of prefiguration that Dunne and Raby reject and the IRS has not taken up. Much has and still could be written on prefiguration and “prefigurative politics” as such, but let us only focus here on some of the basics in strategic and contemporary terms – thus bypassing fascinating assessments of the concept’s historical emergence and its theological inheritance. Prefiguration describes a principle for action that, together with other notions such as “direct action” and “mutual aid”, is frequently linked to the anarchist tradition, radical indigenous experiences such as that of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, and social movements like Occupy. Mathijs van de Sande, for one, proposes a helpful definition of prefiguration as referring to

a political action, practice, movement, moment or development in which certain political ideals are experimentally actualised in the “here and now”, rather than hoped to be realised in a distant future. Thus, in prefigurative practices, the means applied are deemed to embody or “mirror” the ends one strives to realise.

2 Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 93.
3 Ibid.
This leads van de Sande to suggest that prefiguration ultimately comprises three key elements. First, a collapse or bridging of the temporal gulf between future vision and present action: which is to say that prefiguration entails an immediate activation or ‘real-time realisation in practice’ of desired alternatives to the current state of things, ‘however tentative and contorted’ these might be. Still, van de Sande also clarifies that this is not to be simplistically interpreted as a ‘realisation of a political programme formulated prior to its implementation’. Which takes us to the second element: prefiguration indicates an ‘inherently experimental and experiential practice’. It is therefore a radically exploratory, open-ended way of operating that Marianne Maeckelbergh describes as ‘a strategy that is more concerned with creating than predicting’. This way, alternative modes of relating and doing are not simply theorised, explained, described, forecasted as a future goal: they are instead enacted, performed ‘by actively setting up alternative structures so that people can experience for themselves what is possible’, if only momentarily. Third and last element in van de Sande’s analysis: prefiguration names a mode of practice whereby ‘no clear distinction between means and ends can be made’. This aspect essentially stems from a rejection of the consequentialist idea that if “the end justifies the means” (typical of authoritarian Marxism) freedom may be imposed through coercion. By contrast, Maeckelbergh notes, prefigurative are those practices that, just like the one developed throughout this research, deliberately eschew emphasis on the evaluation of strategic efficacy, on the achievement of fixed results, and are instead entirely concerned with the exploration of new processes, with ‘questions of how’.

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7 Ibid., 231.
10 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 16-7.
The latter is an important and contested point, because of the multiple angles from which this means-ends tension has been approached. As Luke Yates points out, while some use the term prefigurative politics solely in reference to horizontal forms of decision-making and organisation in protest movements, others such as Maeckelbergh extend the same notion to include the desire to build alternatives by way of an ‘additional set of activities and/or goals to political mobilisation’, by trying out experimental modes of relating and operating collectively. Particularly in this more expansive acceptation, then, the question of prefiguration seems to take us well beyond a mere consistency between means and ends, well beyond a simple ‘reformulation of cliché’d credos such as “be the change you want” or “practice what you preach”, as van de Sande puts it. Rather, he notes elsewhere, ‘in a prefigurative account of political action the relationship between [means and ends] is itself problematised’: or, we may say if returning to what was discussed in Chapter 4, this relationship is destituted altogether, so as to restore action to the playfully open plane of pure gestural mediality. It is arguably this perspective that can best explain the oft-cited Zapatistas’ motto “preguntando caminamos” (“asking we walk”): not so much asking in order to walk and not even asking while walking, but rather a style of moving questioningly and of questioning motionally. Asking as walking, and vice versa, as a mode of choreographic thinking that represents an experiment not for but of sociality in its own right.

In answer to the question “how to turn use into an intervention capable of momentarily undoing individualism”, then, what proposed throughout is a form of design prefiguration. And this is because what has been attempted is neither thinking in order to use (à la Dunne and Raby) nor of using in order to think (as with the ProbeTools): this has not been a “what if” speculation but an “as if” prefiguration of attentional motion through dispossessive use. And if we consider, with Yates, that ‘prefigurative politics usually involves intervention or

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consolidation in material environments’, it is the hope of this research to have provided one example that could encourage other makers and designers too to join this prefigurative sabotage of the individual. How, we shall eventually ask, has use helped us in the task of rearticulating social life?

**Nanopoetics of use**

We conclude our journey, once again, by joining those that, by “askingly walking”, insist on not having and indeed on not being an end. Those seeking to be simply means, finding ever-new creative ways of exploring and deepening mutual indebtedness, circulating it against all odds. Which is to say that we conclude with the hope of having moved (both metaphorically and literally) a little closer to those ‘[o]ther histories, other ways of living’ that, as Harney contends,

might suggest to us that not being capable of being an end in oneself, indeed, of ever fully being oneself, is in fact a way to disabuse this “oneself” delusion and place the incomplete self in the hands of others for use, for service, for love.19

We conclude, finally, with the hope of having participated in the formulation of what Mozambican writer Mia Couto might describe as a “language we don’t know we know”: a rule-less hence playful language through which – hijacking the epigraph above – we no longer know whether we are using, dancing, or studying. Perhaps all three at once. A language that, however, does exist: buried yet pulsating, as the ‘sociopoetic force’20 of undercommon friendship. We conclude after having added a few minor coordinates, in alliance with many others, to a new grammar of motion: a nanopolitics or, better at this point, a **nanopoetics of use**. This poetics is not an introspective excavation towards self-knowledge. It is not, somewhat following Glissant’s poetics of Relation, a privatised and

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19 Cuppini and Frappoli, ‘Logistics Genealogies: A Dialogue with Stefano Harney’, 100 (emphasis added).
'vertiginous extension [...] toward the abysses [one] carries within [one]self', but rather a manner of radiating outward, through precarious forms of somatic correspondence with a world that unmakes our alleged one-ness. Yes, a poetics: one that however operates not only at the level of words, whether written or spoken, but also at that of movements and senses, at the nano level of what is haptically and kinetically perceived on and through our skin, our flesh, our bodies.

This research has thus taken up the act of use in its strictly “technical” meaning, as an originary entanglement between persons and (as well as through) artefacts or environments, and has radically reconsidered it as a potential field of socio-political struggle. In other words, we have attempted to reformulate use as a practical way of recognising traces of affect – those ‘enigmatic traces of others’ that Butler powerfully reminds us are part of what we singularly are and which infect the infection of possessive individualism. To be sure, the kind of experimental poetics prefigured here is far from being resolved: as already suggested, for example, a fruitful interplay could emerge by connecting this artefact-mediated work to a rich tradition in dance and performance studies that similarly challenges the individual’s motional independence. Still, for the time being, we have undertaken a few little steps towards a use by means of which, to put it in Caillois’ terms, ‘the individual breaks the boundaries of [its] skin and occupies the other side of [its] senses’. Use as an unassuming social realm where subjectivities are formed. But equally, it has been argued throughout, where the same subjectivities can potentially be shattered, undone, queered, dispossessed, and collectively reconfigured as not “one”.

22 Butler, Precarious Life, 46.
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