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# Another use, another sociality

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**ARTICLE**

*Another Use, Another Sociality:* **Some reflections on Giorgio Agamben's radicalization of use**

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**ABSTRACT** This article addresses Giorgio Agamben's radicalization of the category of *use*, attempting to map out some of the key insights this yields, and seeking to establish the importance that this longstanding preoccupation of the Italian philosopher can have for design studies. It will be proposed that rethinking use with Agamben means rethinking the way we relate not only to artifacts but also to each other, thus possibly inspiring the design of experimental practices of sociality. In other words, it means reconsidering the way we organize and reorganize our senses and movements throughout everyday instances of entanglement with the world. Design debates have tended to subordinate the question of use to concerns over users, artifacts, and production. This exploration pledges instead to focus on alternative potentialities for *use itself*, ultimately interpreting Agamben's articulation as the interplay of a certain attitude and a certain relationality that might, if only intermittently, take us beyond the individuating logic of sovereign intentionality.

"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."

(Le Guin 2002 [1974])

## Introduction

What would it mean to take the above remark – "if you will not share it you cannot use it," uttered by one of novelist Ursula Le Guin's characters in her 1974 classic *The Dispossessed* – not so much as a generic prohibition but as a more fundamental impossibility? Which is to say: what if that "cannot" were to point to an understanding of use as inevitably *requiring* a peculiar type of sharing? Moreover, what if we were to now read the same remark with Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who proposes that "the relation of use … constitutes precisely the primary dimension in which subjectivity is constituted" (Agamben 2015, 33–34)?[1] It is by following this line of questioning that this article attempts to rethink use as a practice through which what is ultimately shared is first and foremost an otherwise bounded, possessive sense of self: a practice of *being* shared that can be amplified and rendered perceivable through use.[2] Of course, the sphere of use has long been recognized as a socio-politically significant domain of acting (chiefly, de Certeau 2013). However, what I want to reflect on here is whether this category can also offer fertile ground upon which to elaborate a more drastic "collective organization of our senses" (Harney et al. 2018, 110). That is to say, this article wishes to consider how we might challenge, even sabotage – if only intermittently – the ways in which use operates as a mechanism of individuation, of separation between ostensibly discrete entities: between subject and object, user and used, agent and patient, me and not-me. What animates this exploration, then, is a preoccupation with the interplay between acts

of use and experimental practices of social life, as well as with how interrogating our understanding of the former may help us radically reorient our approach to the latter.[3]

In order to address these questions, my intention here is to chart how the category of use has been reconsidered throughout Agamben's writings. After a schematic opening outline of design's engagement with both the question of use and Agamben's thought, the article will examine several ambiguities that are found in colloquial acceptations of the term "use." It is my wager that, by probing these ambiguities, Agamben's elaboration allows us to rethink use beyond familiar frameworks and deep-rooted strictures in much design literature that, I would argue, tend to leave unchallenged the individuation of use, when not in fact reinvigorating it. Indeed, as we shall see, Agamben's use combines a certain *how* and a certain *with* – a manner and a relationality – that can jointly open up opportunities for forms of action disconnected from the logics of functionality, intentionality, and agency that use is most frequently associated with. The Italian philosopher approaches his radicalization of use from a variety of angles – mostly in relation to juridical, theological, and linguistic categories – picking apart several established dichotomies and showing that use is that domain which ultimately collapses them. This way, use emerges reprogrammed, so to speak, as neither the expression of unencumbered individual self-determination nor the concerted effort of a network of "agents" but, rather, as an event that complicates any clear-cut distinctions between effecting and affected, active and passive, subject and object. Throughout this elaboration I will secure some of the theoretical threads encountered by composing a few *conceptual knots* which will function as incremental coordinates and will be signaled as such.

**Design and use, design and Agamben**

The spheres of design and use are entangled in a complicated relationship, despite the former enjoying significant operational proximity, as well as a privileged theoretical access, to the latter. Indeed, as I have noted elsewhere,[4] the notion of use has largely remained a proxy for the investigation of other, frequently overlapping issues, such as the figure of the user (Redström 2006; Wilkie 2010), everyday creativity (Brandes et al. 2009; Jencks and Silver 2013), explorations of speculative and fictional futures (Auger 2013; Dunne and Raby 2013), the semiotics of affordances (Buchanan 1985; Crilly et al. 2008), and – chiefly – contested questions of functionality (Norman 2002; Redström 2008).[5] In other words, although the absolute centrality of use to design *has* been registered – whether superficially assumed or more carefully probed, not least through dubious claims of design exceptionality[6] – to the point of appearing self-evident, scant attention has been devoted to use as a practice entirely *in its own right*. Consequently, as Toke Riis Ebbsen (2019, 53) has recently contended, "the concept of use in design is, if not overseen, then at least underprioritized." Apart from Ebbsen's (2019, 55) important call for "a closer examination and revival of the concept of use" in design research, rare exceptions to this subordination of use to neighboring preoccupations can be found in Theodora Vardouli's (2015) lucid classification of different designerly "attitudes" towards use[7] and, even more prominently, in the work, both individual and collaborative, of design theorist Ramia Mazé. Particularly in *Occupying Time*, over ten years on still the most robust and compelling investigation on the topic of use from a design perspective, Mazé (2007, 128) emphasizes how design is "an intervention into ongoing cultures of use," thus upholding the theoretical autonomy and critical significance of the latter: which is to say, "design matters, but so does use."

The domain of use has been given some critical attention even beyond design-specific debates. And if Sara Ahmed's latest offering *What's the Use?* (2019) is a notable example of

this tendency, I would argue that no one has invested the notion of use with philosophical and political currency more than Agamben. Yet, the Italian philosopher is a decidedly marginal figure in design scholarship: to my knowledge, not more than a handful of studies (see Jackson 2009; Fry 2010; Boano and Talocci 2017; Buwert 2017) engaged with his thought beyond passing mentions, and it is only in the work of urban design scholars Camillo Boano and Giorgio Talocci (2014) that Agamben's preoccupation with use has been picked up, but not directly thematised.[8] Indeed, if he is at all on design researchers' radar, Agamben is probably most associated to his formulation of the biopolitical concepts of *state of exception* and *bare life*.[9] Because it is my contention that rethinking use with Agamben can offer invaluable conceptual tools for design research and experimentation, I hope that this article will serve to highlight *some* of these.[10]


## Decoupling use and function

Colloquially speaking, *use* names a practical expression of individual intentionality: an action of a subject onto an object that is aimed at the achievement of an end goal. Or, "a process in which some user acts to achieve a purpose in interaction with an artefact," as Ebbsen has it (2019, 57). This way, the use of some thing, presented as an instrumental effort operated in order to arrive at or cause a result, identifies an act that is given legitimacy through something external to it: its purpose, its *telos*, its function. Thus understood, the artifact that is encountered remains inevitably confined to the status of an "in-order-to" device, the chief feature of which would appear to be its efficient function-*ing* – its usefulness, in a pragmatic sense, in enabling the fulfilment of a plan.[11] It is this "strong 'utilitarian' connotation" (Agamben 2014b, 67) with which use has been invested that this article will attempt to examine and, eventually, deactivate. Indeed, if a narrow coupling of functionality with

efficiency has been disputed in some design milieus – such as what has come to be known as Critical and Speculative Design (e.g., Dunne and Raby 2001; Ball and Naylor 2006) – a second and even more resilient binary can perhaps be called into question now: namely, the coupling of functionality with use itself.

Function and use are frequently assumed to be inextricably co-dependent (Vardouli 2015), even when it comes to more sophisticated articulations. For instance, sociologist Madeleine Akrich (1992, 207) famously posited that acts of use consist in the decoding – whether in expected or inventive ways – of "scripts" that are designed into objects and which "produce a specific geography of responsibilities." This view still casts use as a materially mediated transaction of sorts whereby intention precedes action, function precedes use, making even more apparent the urgency of cutting the knot that ties together a *plan* of action (function) and the action *itself* (use). It is through the work of Agamben that, I think, we can gain access to a more radical appreciation of use, as this notion and its uncomfortable relation to other concepts have become increasingly central to the thought of the Italian philosopher. I will thus examine some of the key aspects of Agamben's attempted "elaboration of a theory of use – of which," he claims, "Western philosophy lacks even the most elementary principles" (Agamben 2013a, xiii). This effort appears somewhat scattered across his writings and, as we will see, must perhaps be read as a continuation of Michel Foucault's late work on the "care of the self."[12]

In *The Use of Bodies*, the final instalment of his *Homo Sacer* project, Agamben directly addresses the difficulty of decoupling use and function. Taking up Aristotle's distinction between "productive instruments and instruments of use (which produce nothing except their use)," Agamben (2015, 12) notes 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 grasp a different meaning of use, he continues, we must therefore begin by separating it "from the sphere of *poiesis* and production, in order to restore it to the sphere…of praxis" (2015, 12). In fact, Agamben observes that, according to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the former (*poiesis*) is an act defined by the presence of an external end, thus entirely bound to the production of a result other than its own unfolding; the latter (praxis) is instead an "unproductive" mode of acting that "is in itself the end" (2015, 20–1). Central to this sharp contrast between *poiesis* and praxis, then, is the relation between act and will. In poietic activity, the will must extend its limit outside of an 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" (Agamben 1999b, 68), in praxis the limit of the will remains internal to the act: that is, the objective of the will is the action itself.

Furthermore, Agamben (2015, 51) finds in Lucretius an analogous conceptualization of use as "completely emancipated from every relation to a predetermined end…beyond every teleology." Here, through a 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 the principle guiding use. Understood in this way, use *precedes* the function of whatever one enters into a relation with, and indeed *invents* this function throughout the unfolding of that very relation – hence inverting Akrich's formulation. Consequently, a function can be intended as an elusive yet *distinct stage* within a process of use, perhaps as an *effect* of it. Mazé (2007, 114) 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."

## Use as *how*

What Agamben begins to offer through his analysis is the possibility to *isolate* use and approach it as spontaneously improvisational and radically autonomous from whatever function might eventually emerge through (or be reproduced by) it – a perspective akin to what Vardouli (2015, 140) describes as "use-centric," whereby use is intended as "an open-ended and temporally unfolding process that can be theorized and described independently from intentions and actions in the context of design." The seemingly daunting task of dissociating use from function, indefinitely suspending the teleological economy in which use is otherwise embroiled, is routinely found in the domain of *play*.[13] Indeed, as Ben Matthews et al. (2008, 62) have noted, if *games* are grounded in pre-existing sets of rules and objectives, play "can be the *suspension* of goal-directed activity … Play can be for play's sake." Rules and objectives – whether received or invented – precede and lead games just as function precedes and leads an intentional apprehension of use. Conversely, in play, whatever "rule" might emerge is ceaselessly *generated through, hence entirely immanent to, use*.[14]

### *Coordinate 1 // Profanation*

It is worth noting that designers have long attended to the potentialities of play. However, I would argue that, not without exceptions,[15] many design researchers tend to adopt playfulness in somewhat instrumental terms, by making play "useful": a strategy to elicit unexpected responses that, in turn, can inspire subsequent phases of designing or analysis – as is the case, for example, with the *cultural probes* devised by Bill Gaver's Interaction Research Studio (e.g., IRS 2019, 34–5; also Marmont 2019, 102–8). But let us return to Agamben: play, he argues (2007b, 81), "is a relationship with objects and human behavior"

which should be discussed in connection with the religious sphere and particularly with the act of *profanation*.[16] Indeed, in the essay *In Praise of Profanation*, he remarks that "there seems to be a peculiar relationship between 'using' and 'profaning' that we must clarify" (2007a, 74). Agamben notes that a separation between sacred and profane unambiguously lies at the heart of any religion, and indeed represents its very condition of possibility. Further, he claims (2007a, 75), whereas the apparatus of sacrifice rests on the "conjunction of the myth that tells the story [i.e. meaning] and the rite that reproduces and stages it [i.e. act itself]," profanation involves the acting out of a ritual that has been completely emptied of its original significance. Such a disjunction is achieved through a substitution or "an entirely inappropriate use (or, rather, reuse)" (2007a, 75) of what is being manipulated during the rite. The name of this inappropriate use is play. Crucially, playful use allows to "open the possibility of a special form of negligence" (2007a, 75), not as mere *neglect* or wholesale abolition of rituals altogether, in order to then "regain an uncontaminated use that lies either beyond or before it" (2007a, 85). Rather, the negligence of profanation expresses "a behavior that is free and 'distracted' (that is to say, released from the *religio* of norms) before things and their use" (2007a, 75). In other words, this "new dimension of use" (2007a, 76) unlocked through profanation is free because *inattentive* and *indifferent* towards – rather than entirely erasing – the sacredness given by the unity of the rite itself and the meaning underpinning it.

Importantly, Agamben (2007a, 76) claims that this profanatory operation of use is of the utmost political significance because "play as an organ of profanation is in decline everywhere," well beyond the religious sphere, through a secularization of liturgies and theological concepts. Indeed, it is where the profanatory power of use is utterly obliterated that we find today the domains of commodity consumption, on the one hand, and of "spectacular exhibition" through a "museification of the world", on the other hand (2007a,

82–83).[17] Which is to say, we find an increasingly unprofanable apparatus of power governing our acting: the "capitalist religion" (2007a, 82). Resisting this progressive preclusion of profanation and finding new modes of playful use, Agamben (2007a, 92) concludes, represents "the political task of the coming generation." Now, if the "religion" governing use is indeed utility, as proposed earlier, and if the sacredness of the latter is given by the conjunction between an act of use and its meaning as functionality, what Agamben shows us is that the task with which we are presented is not one requiring the invention of altogether new practices (or functions) but, rather, one calling for the profanation of existing ones. What is needed is not something *other* than, say, perching on a chair or kicking a ball, but a profane approach to these same acts, "freeing a behavior from its genetic inscription within a given sphere" (2007a, 85). In other words, what is needed is the interruption or deactivation of "the reasons and purposes that define it," as Agamben writes elsewhere, through a dance-like doing that mimics rituals while affording "the liberation of the body from its utilitarian movements" (2014b, 69–70).

Let us return for a moment to Akrich. By "emptying [acts of use] of their sense and of any obligatory relationship to an end" (Agamben 2007a, 86) – hence freeing them from their "genetic inscription" – profane, playful use is not an act that simply reverses or alters the propriety of an inscripted protocol of action but, rather, one which makes the concept itself of a script lose any meaning as such. Profane, then, is that practice of use which is radically open to situational emergence: it denotes a drastic removal of use from the logic of utility and tyranny of ends.


*Coordinate 2 // Gesture*

Adopting such a profanatory approach to use further complicates the Aristotelian distinction addressed above between means-to-end productivity – *poiesis* – and acting as end-in-itself – praxis. What emerges through this operation is, as Agamben (2007a, 86; my emphasis) contends,

> 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 *a means without an end*. The creation of a new use is possible only by deactivating an old use, rendering it *inoperative*.

We should now pause and reflect on the significance of use becoming "pure means"[18] – a "means without end." In an essay of the same name, *Means without End*, Agamben (2000, 57) turns to the writings of Roman scholar Varro to discover what appears to be neither *poiesis* nor praxis but, in fact, "a third type of action alongside the other two." This is the terrain of *gesture*: a domain that "breaks with the false alternative between ends and means" (2000, 57). A sphere that, Agamben continues (2000, 80), being "neither use value nor exchange value," could represent "the other side of the commodity" and allow us to profane the religion of capitalist consumption. Gesture, we might say, is what is found once use has been successfully profaned: once it has been stripped of its instrumentally proper, functionally "poietic" residue, and is returned to us as the open, radically unproductive incompleteness of play.

A gestural practice of use can therefore be intended as an undirected, aimless process of discovery whereby one gets willingly lost in what Agamben (2015, 51) calls a "delight internal to the act." Indeed, the cardinal peculiarity of gesture "is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported" (Agamben 2000, 57): that is, something is turned into, and sustained as pure processuality rather than being

realized and expressed by the attainment of a result – arguably setting Agamben's use apart from the "productive" character of what Vardouli (2015, 150) calls "making use." To use is, in this "gestic" sense, to dwell in a potentiality that is never extinguished, that never passes into the actuality implied by the notions of function or script: gestural use is a display of "impotentiality," as Agamben names the experience of a potentiality that suspends and thus "survives actuality" (Agamben 1999a, 183–184).[19] This processual unproductivity of use is what the Italian philosopher refers to as *inoperativity*: a frequently misunderstood term that, as the philosopher summarizes elsewhere (Agamben 2001, 93; my translation), "does not mean inertia, but…an operation whereby the *how* completely substitutes the *what*."[20] This "something" that is endured and supported in gesture, then, is nothing other than the activity itself, in its utterly suspended openness.[21] If reprogrammed as gestural experiments in playful profanation, rather than as *poiesis* or even praxis, use becomes the exercise of preserving and exhibiting a certain *modus operandi*: a certain *how*, without destination and beyond explanation.

## Use as *with*

In a study addressing Agamben's elaboration of gesture, Lucia Ruprecht (2017, 4) describes this mode of acting "as an opening of the body beyond itself, as something that is often, or perhaps even necessarily, relational." And indeed, through his effort of "calling into question the centrality of action [praxis] and making [*poiesis*] for the political" (Agamben 2015, 23), Agamben is committed to rethinking use not only in terms of its unproductive processuality, in terms of its *how*, but also as a fundamentally ethical and socio-political terrain, as a *with*. Of course, that use is an inherently relational domain is nothing unheard of in design research, since much has been written about the dialogical, rhetorical, or networked nature of person-

artefact interactions (e.g., Latour 2005; Buchanan 1985; Crilly et al. 2008). Still, Agamben's perspective arguably diverges from the insistence on "perception and interpretation" (Mazé 2007, 111), on artifact-mediated "communicative and linguistic meaning-negotiation" (Ebbsen 2019, 55), as well as on mere redistributions of agency (e.g., Bennett 2010) that much design scholarship tends to emphasize. Let us inspect the distinctive *with-ness* of Agamben's use.

### Coordinate 3 // Affectivity

In *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben dedicates an entire chapter to the etymology of the Greek verb *chresthai*, a term discussed but never properly thematized in Foucault's investigation on the care of the self, ordinarily rendered as "to use" (2015, 25). Turning to linguists George Redard and Émile Benveniste, Agamben shows that such a translation, in its contemporary understanding marked by utilitarian connotations, enormously oversimplifies the original complexity of *chresthai*. How so?

*Chresthai* belongs to a class of verbs expressed in what grammarians call "*middle diathesis*" (2015, 27), or middle voice: verbs that are simultaneously active *and* passive. Middle-voiced verbs are far from an obscure and insignificant linguistic oddity, as Tim Ingold observes (2017, 17):[22] in fact, the anthropologist points out that the active/passive opposition found today in most Indo-European languages not only is "neither ancient nor universal" but has "emerged historically from a decomposition of…the 'middle voice.'" Which leads Ingold to argue that it is precisely through this dissolution that we have inherited the articulation of agency as the *property* of a "doer" separated from its deed, whereby an action either emanates out of an effecting "agent" (active) or reaches an affected "patient"[23] from outside (passive). By contrast, the subject of a middle-voiced verb such as *chresthai* is "internal to the

process" (Benveniste cited in Agamben 2015, 27), and therefore both effecting *and* affected by the action at once. Or, more precisely still, the subject of *chresthai* "effects *in being affected*" (Benveniste cited in Agamben 2014b, 68; my emphasis). Indeed, as Agamben notes (2015, 30), "to enter into a relation of use with something, I must be affected by it": in other words, affection is the very condition of possibility for the effecting of an action.

Consequently, what we are here presented with is not a form of solipsistic reflexivity either, for a middle-voiced use requires and is entirely predicated upon this effecting–affected "subject" partaking in a relationship with something/someone that we might be tempted to call an "object." This way, Agamben concludes in a clear Spinozan-Deleuzian fashion, use can be defined as "the affection that a body receives *inasmuch as it is in relation with another body*" (2014b, 69). However, what is most remarkable in this reconfiguration of use as an expression of *affectivity* is the particular kind of relationship undergirding it: "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," as Agamben puts it (2015, 25–26). This indeterminacy in and of use is given as a "*relationship of absolute and reciprocal immanence*" wherein user and used are entangled to such an extent that, Agamben further elaborates, "in the using of something, it is the very being of the one using that is first of all at stake" (2015, 30).

The relationship of "absolute and reciprocal immanence" that use (as *chresthai*) establishes thus entwines subject and object, user and used, person and thing, doer and deed, in a web of mutual coimplication and complication, to the point of undermining the very ontological thresholds upon which these categories and their binary opposition rest. This is true, above all, for "the concept of 'subject' itself" (2014b, 69). When he says that what is at stake in use is "not a subject that uses an object, but a subject that *constitutes itself only*

*through the using*, the being in relation with an other" (2014b, 69; my emphasis), Agamben

therefore points to an action that is necessarily *pre*-subjective, which is to say that the user-

that-acts (the "subject") is but a post-rationalization of a partial, singular experience of a *prior*

and much more complex entanglement.

An ontology in the middle voice, an ontology of use, being entirely constructed upon

the event of an entanglement of bodies – whether human or not – is therefore one revolving

around what *passes amongst* these bodies, rather than what happens *in* or *to* putatively

distinct entities. Not only, then, is Agamben's articulation of use suggesting an ontology of

the *how* – a "modal ontology" (Agamben 2015, 175): it is also and categorically an ontology

of the *with*, a social ontology, so to speak. This coexistence of how and with that Agamben's

study of use brings to light is made evident in a passage by Redard:

> Of course, *chraomai* means: I use, I utilize (an instrument, a tool). But equally
>
> *chraomai* may designate my behavior or my attitude. … So *chraomai* is also a certain
>
> attitude. *Chresthai* also designates a certain type of relationship with other people.
>
> (Redard cited in Agamben 2015, 31)

*Coordinate 4 // Inappropriability*

The excerpt above offers the opportunity for a schematic review, before we take our

concluding steps. Rethinking the paradigm of use with Agamben can essentially be

summarized by two interconnected propositions. First, use can be a "certain attitude" of

playful, gestural profanation. Second, this certain how is in turn both manifested within and

made possible by partaking in a "certain type of relationship": the affectivity and reciprocal

immanence of a pre-subjective with. There is another element, however, that has so far

remained on the edges of this formulation, and to which I shall now turn. This element,

binding together the certain how and certain with of what we might tentatively call a *sociality of use*, represents use's paramount hallmark in Agamben's elaboration. For Agamben, use is established as a political category that deeply troubles the notion of property, of ownership, although not merely in antithetical or negative terms. Rather, use is a mode of relating through which one neither straightforwardly possesses nor is being possessed. This is explicitly spelled out when, in *The Highest Poverty*, Agamben (2013a, 144) 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 name that acting which deactivates any proprietorial modes of relating: "if you will not share it you cannot use it," Le Guin's character would say.

Use altogether profanes the sacredness of property-in-action – which is also to say intentionality – making it a form of what Agamben (2014b) calls a "destituent power." Unlike *constituent* power, which is the sovereign destruction and overthrowing of a present order so as to replace it with a newly composed one, the logic of Agamben's destituent power is one of *flight*: a subtraction *from* order and ordering itself, a way of *remaining* entirely outside of the fold of proprietorial sovereignty. Destituent is a practice that, in other words, "can never be grasped in terms of either expropriation or appropriation but that can be grasped, rather, only as *use*" (Agamben 2000, 117). The importance of this mechanism of destitution through and as use of the logic of property is absolutely key here. Why? Because, we should recall, if (1) "in the using of something, it is the very being of the one using that is first of all at stake" (Agamben 2015, 30); but also if (2) use identifies a relation of absolute inappropriability; then (3) it is this "using subject" itself that, through the relation of use by which it is constituted (or, more accurately, destituted), can never be appropriated – can never become property. To put this in more straightforward terms: *that which through use becomes and is maintained as radically inappropriable is no less than oneself*, a "using self"

thus extracted from the logic of (self-)possession. Which is why Agamben (2015, 34) draws attention to Foucault's late development, alongside the notion of "care of the self," of a new formula: *"se déprendre de soi-même."* Signifying neither lack nor renunciation, and certainly not self-sacrificial passivity either, I would argue that this precept comes to indicate not so much a "self-detachment" or "disassemblement of the self," as Foucault's translator Paul Rabinow (2000, xxxviii–xl) proposes, but more accurately a form of *self-dispossession*. Indeed, as Agamben himself explains (2015, 34), through this formula the otherwise largely individualistic notion of care-of-oneself "gives place to a dispossession and abandonment of the self, where it again becomes mixed up with use." A dispossession achieved through and *as* use.

Self-dispossessive use hence enacts an atypical form of 'poverty', one that Agamben, drawing in particular on the example of the Franciscan order (2013a), wishes to think "not only in relation to having, but also and primarily in relation to being": that is to say, not as romanticized material indigence but, he clarifies, "as an ontological category" (2017, 59; my translation). Instead of being purely dependent on, and representing the flipside of, *wealth* – a wealth or value one has been deprived of – the practice of ontological poverty that Agamben finds in the domain of use is perhaps better described by what Fred Moten (2016, 32) calls "a sociality centered on the invaluable": an originary and general indebtedness that, as Moten notes elsewhere, "probably destabilizes the very social form or idea of 'one another'" (Harney and Moten 2013, 154).

**Conclusion**

What if that which we understand as "the self" is but a deluded hangover from a prior experiential entanglement, from the peculiar, profane, affectivity of use? What if this self is not what is asserted and congealed but what is (momentarily) lost and given away, as a means, in and through use? A relation of use, when intended in these terms, may be grasped as a threshold, or what Agamben (2013b, 68) had already defined in *The Coming Community* as "the experience of being-*within* an *outside*" – an "ek-stasis." This articulation of use as an ecstatic self-dispossession in, of, and for an *outside-within*, which Agamben (2015, 30) suggests furnishes "a new figure of human praxis," effectively entails something of a particular sabotage. A sabotage in the form of a destituent profanation of both artifacts and, more importantly, those "using" them, of users: a sabotage of one's somatic and kinetic sense of self as a sacred, separate, private, bounded dimension.

Now, despite its distinctive richness, Agamben's work rarely offers much more than scattered, ambiguous hints as to how an enactment of this self-dispossessive practice of use might actually look and *feel* like. The playing of children with obsolete objects (Agamben 2005, 64; 2007b, 76)? The improvisational gesturing of a dancing body (Agamben 2014b, 70)? This assessment has sought to identify some of the coordinates sprinkled throughout Agamben's longstanding engagement with the question of use, not as an exegetic exercise but in the hope that these could then be rearranged within new compositions. To dictate what design researchers are to do with these coordinates, what form should these new compositions take, to imbue them with a proper function, clearly would be missing the point. Still, for one thing, perhaps what Agamben's formulation might invite us to do is to see use not *just* as a capacity to *act upon* the world and others, to assert one's agency, but also as an expression of how we are affected, constituted, and ultimately destituted by them. A shift of this kind is obviously significant for designers because it challenges us not only to concoct

tools to empower or enhance *agency* (a doubtlessly vital task!) but *also*, perhaps, to perceive more intensely and indeed cultivate our affectability:[24] how we are always already interfering with, implicated in, and indebted to each other – even if asymmetrically of course.

Moreover, such coordinates should perhaps be taken up in combination with other dissident traditions that, as Harney noted, Agamben has so far ignored (Harney et al. 2018, 100) but which similarly work to pragmatically trouble the relationship between means and ends. This is the case, for example, for the queering of use that Ahmed (2019) has recently been calling for, as well as for the "*fugitivity of use*" (Harney et al. 2018, 100) that Harney has been formulating with Moten by means of their engagement with the Black radical tradition (Harney and Moten 2021). We must find ways to think and practice this queer flight of use through concrete forms of corporeal experiments: through modes of moving and being moved that are collectively organized, somatically orchestrated, and rooted in the becoming each other's condition of possibility for acting.

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## Notes

1. I have discussed elsewhere how this fundamentally challenges humanist critiques of "the user" as an inherently passive figure (Marmont 2019, 134–5).
2. It might be worth noting a certain proximity between the approach to use developed here and influential interventions in design studies on what scholars such as Ann-Marie Willis and Tony Fry have called "ontological design" (see Willis 2006). Nevertheless, chiefly inspired by the thought of Fred Moten (e.g., Moten 2013), the reconfiguring of use I am wrestling towards is invested not in what lies within ontology, nor properly against it either, but rather *before*

and *underneath* ontology's reductive and derivative capture of what is already in common: an *ante*-ontological use.

3. I am here aligning myself with many theorists who have reflected on, and/or proposed alternatives to, the individual self-possession characterizing liberal modes of subjectivation: Harney and Moten 2013, Macpherson 2011, Hartman 1997, Barad 2007, Manning and Massumi 2014, Butler and Athanasiou 2013, to name but a few.

4. Marmont 2019.

5. The study of use in design research is often subsumed under, when not eclipsed by, the question of functionality, to the point that the two often seem indistinguishable both conceptually and pragmatically (see Vardouli 2015). It is worth pointing out that even the many critical perspectives that have sought to challenge an obsession with efficiency and user-friendliness still seem to fall short of appreciating use entirely *outside* of a teleological framework, which is to say beyond function-based disputes. For example, see the essays in Blauvelt 2003.

6. See Cameron Tonkinwise's assertion (2014, 15) that use is a "realm that differentiates [design] from all other forms of culture." Although it seems to me that Tonkinwise's design exceptionalism rests on shaky grounds, both conceptually and pragmatically, he is right in noting design's obsession with functionality and that "a critical account of use value, remains underdeveloped" in design studies (2014, 16).

7. In her analysis, Vardouli (2015, 139) identifies three different "attitudes" through which design research articulates "the relationship between the design, function, and use of artifacts": namely, "design-centric, communicative, and use-centric," each corresponding "to a different set of theoretical commitments about the prime actors, contexts, or operations by which [human-artifact] engagements are to be conceptualized." As I mention later on, the third attitude is somewhat close to Agamben's project.

8. More so than on use itself, Boano and Talocci have focused on Agamben's notion of profanation, which we will see to be central to the question of use.

9. See Agamben 2005 and 1998. For an outstanding example of design research's engagement with these concepts, see Keshavarz 2016.

10. I should stress that I am not aiming for exhaustiveness here: over the years, Agamben has weaved a complex web of interconnected concepts that are best grasped within the context of his larger project, but the full extent and genealogy of which clearly exceeds the limited scope of this study. The more modest ambition of this article is to provide a design readership unfamiliar with Agamben's work with several entry points into his investigation of use. On this topic, Bonacci (2020) offers some important reflections on different but complementary aspects of Agamben's use, primarily in relation to the notions of form-of-life, habit, and potentiality.

11. Vermaas and Houkes (2016, 29) have sought to distinguish design-led *functionality* from users' *intentionality*, or "use plans": the former representing the "standard view" and descriptive appreciation of what a given artefact had been *designed* for; the latter being instead "structured sequences of considered actions, rather than in terms of (only) functions," that is devised by the user. Needless to say, Vermaas and Wybo's cognitivist approach remains fully and avowedly invested in the very teleological intentionalism that this article instead seeks to call into question as the only possible way to account for acts of use.

12. Foucault recounted the ways in which the ancient Greeks and Romans understood subjectivity as an ethical and deliberate "*practice* of the self on the self" (see Foucault 2005, 317: my emphasis), rather than as the uncovering or recovering of a static, pre-existing inner truth – as was instead suggested by the famous Delphic imperative to "*know* oneself." Whereas Foucault focuses on processes of subjectivation as practices of *care* of oneself, as we will see, Agamben (2015, 34) argues that such care can only be possible as a relation of *use* of oneself. Clear echoes of Walter Benjamin also abound in Agamben's study on use, together with the

Heideggerian critique of instrumental rationality (chiefly, Heidegger 2015) that the Italian philosopher takes up and further elaborates. Still, it is Agamben himself who indicates the Foucauldian lineage as his pivotal point of departure in this particular case (Agamben 2015, 33). For more on Foucault's and Heidegger's influence on Agamben's use, see Marmont 2019, as well as Kotsko and Salzani 2017.

13. Two important texts should be acknowledged at this point, even if only in passing: Johan Huizinga's 1938 classic study *Homo Ludens*, and Roger Caillois' direct response to it in his 1958 work *Man, Play and Games*.

14. Rules in play are supple and constantly reassessed. To explain this through an example: just as kicking a ball does not alone define football, interacting with a chair does not alone lead to the function "sitting." Agamben discusses at length this immanence and the peculiar relationship between rule and use through the example of monasticism and the Franciscan order (Agamben 2013a).

15. I am thinking here of examples such as Jeppe Hein's *Modified Social Benches* series or Lina-Marie Köppen's *Learn to Unlearn* project, where play does not figure as a "design strategy."

16. For more on Agamben's profanation and its relevance to design, see Boano and Talocci 2014.

17. A similar point has inspired critiques of critical and speculative designers' removal of their work from the sphere of actual, corporeal use, favoring instead forms of contemplative encounters within galleries' or museums' curated settings – see Mazé (2007, 228), but also Mazé and Redström (2009, 33).

18. A term that Agamben inherits from Walter Benjamin.

19. Although im/potentiality is an important and recurrent theme in Agamben's work, the limited scope of this article does not allow for a more detailed discussion of this concept here.

20. Inoperativity is another concept that has gained increased significance in Agamben's writings and which I have explored in more depth elsewhere – see Marmont and Primera 2020.

21. In this prioritizing of process (subjectivation) over outcome (subjectivity), Agamben is here explicitly building on Foucault's already-mentioned studies on the 'care of the self', which the French philosopher indeed described as "care of the activity and not the care of the soul-as-substance" (2000, 230–1). It is worth mentioning that Redström (2006, 131) appears to sense the significance of 'suspension-in-use' when he describes use as an "on-going achievement," and this same event of *lingering in use* has more recently been described along very similar lines by Ahmed under the rubric of *queer use* (2019, 206–8): the freeing of use from normative frameworks without re-establishing new ones.

22. Jane Bennett (2020) has recently reflected on the affective possibilities of "middle-voiced" verbs. Bennett's insistence on, rather than sidelining of, the framework of 'agency' is where her trajectory diverges from the one pursued here.

23. *"Paziente"* [patient] is how Agamben calls the subject of a passive verb: a subject who, in their *"passione"* [passion], is affected and acted upon (see Agamben 2014a, 55).

24. See Silva (2007)

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