HUMAN CREATIVITY DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PROJECT *PANDEMIC OBJECTS* AS AN EXAMPLE OF SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON DESIGN

Paulina ROJEK-ADAMEK ⓘD *

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Pedagogical University of Cracow, ul. Podchorążych 2, 30–084 Kraków, Poland

Abstract. This article proposes to look at how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the valuation of the world of material culture, and how the subject itself can become an inspiration to describe this particular time. Naive anthropomorphism, and thus criticism of the view of the superior role of human, although present for many years, has taken on a new meaning at this particular time. As a theoretical framework for presenting the proposed issues, I adopt the reference to the interpretation of the concept of an "object" present in the social sciences and humanities, as well as the role of designers and the explication of design in the literature. The picture will be complemented by a reference to the *Pandemic Objects* project, implemented in 2020 by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, United Kingdom.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, creativity, material culture, sociology of design, sociology of objects, Victoria and Albert Museum.

Introduction

> "Things lend orientation and give a sense of direction to how people relate physically to the world around them, not least in providing the physical manifestation, the material evidence of a particular sense of group and individual identity" (Attfield, 2000, p. 14).

The time when this article is written can be described as a that of a global crisis. The SARS-CoV-2 virus, originally detected in 2019 in China, quickly spread to other countries, triggering the global COVID-19 pandemic. Today, it is impossible to assess its consequences for various areas of life, but the statistical data on the scale of the disease and economic losses leave no illusions that we are dealing with a phenomenon that is extremely dramatic. As the data at the end of the third quarter of 2021 shows, the total number of confirmed cases of the disease in the world was close to 280 million, and over five million people had

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*Corresponding author. E-mail: *paulina.rojek-adamek@up.krakow.pl*

died (World Health Organization, 2021). Despite the restrictions on migration, the need to maintain social distancing and compliance with sanitary safety rules, the SARS-CoV-2 virus has still not been contained. Some hope is given by process of vaccination of the population which started at the end of 2020. However, this takes quite a long time, and people's attitudes towards assessing vaccine safety are not positive everywhere, which will certainly have an impact on the final victory in the fight against the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The effects of general lockdown were felt very quickly. Many branches of the economy had to suspend their current activities – production or services, offices, schools – and, although they were still working, introduced a new mode and organisation of work. Most people had to stay at home, changing their current lifestyle into one based – like never before – on maintaining relationships with the outside world mainly by remote forms of communication supported by digital technology. All traditional places where the risk of meeting the "other" was assessed by the COVID-19 pandemic managers as disturbingly high, that is, restaurants, sports and cultural institutions have been excluded from activity in the traditional sense. At some points, it was possible to visit museums, but only virtually; it was possible to use restaurants, but only if the food was consumed in your own home; you could travel – but only if you possessed a document confirming you had been vaccinated or had had the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Other similar examples can be given.

In addition to the feelings of isolation and the acute lack of contact with others, the new situation also forced the need to quickly acquire new competences, as well as adapt the physical environment to new conditions. Wherever it was possible to move to an online workflow, it was done almost immediately. Devices in the information and communications technology area have gained completely new importance in private life and access to the internet has become the key to functioning in professional life, education and maintaining relationships with others. Never before in history has a computer or smartphone seemed such an indispensable element of everyday equipment. There is no doubt that these devices have taken on a new meaning: the extension of the human hand (Bell, 1996). The question is, however, is it only this? The aim of the article is to show the COVID-19 pandemic through the prism of a world of things, familiar and every day, but, at this particular time, taking on new functions and meanings, whether they are based on traditional or modern technology.

When exploring the role of an object in a COVID-19 pandemic, we will refer to the catalogue of objects selected as part of the *Pandemic Objects* project carried out by the Victoria and Albert Museum (VAM) in London. This is not artists, but simply people experiencing a COVID-19 pandemic, who, under curatorial supervision, created an exhibition recording a special moment in world history.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Things in social sciences and humanities

The object – after Krajewski (2013) – is

> "something that can be grasped, embraced by a hand, transferred to another place, something that can be used for something, used as a means of achieving our intentions" (2013, p. 21).

In the research approach, the world of things can be viewed from different perspectives, and the interest in the subject has been visible since the earliest times in philosophy, art, science or culture. The importance of understanding the essence of matter can be seen in the views of Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and René Descartes. As Barański writes:

> "In each of these systems of thought one can point to this invariably present dualism – some form of actualization of the Platonic idea-matter opposition. So, we have oppositions: creator-created thing, thought-thing, subject-object, ideal-current, normal-deviating from the norm, positive-negative, essence-accident, original-imitation – to name only a few of the most important" (2007, p. 9, cf. in Pearce, 1993, p. 18).

From an anthropological basis, the issue of things constitutes a fundamental part of the discipline's interests and research. Getting to know material culture as a trace of human activity allows the specifics of the researched community to be recreated and an understanding of the context in which certain meanings and functions were assigned to things. The primacy of interest in the subject was present in evolutionists, who treated it as the main source of knowledge about culture, which over time – for functionalists and structuralists – lost its importance, placing human activity in the centre of interest, and relegating material manifestations of its culture to the background. The return to these interests took place only with the development of the consumer culture, that is, in the second half of the 20th century (Waszczyńska, 2015, p. 13). Although many researchers have taken up this subject, it was Arjun Appadurai who first began a scientific discussion on the social meaning of things. He affirms the necessity of adopting a research attitude which draws attention to things themselves, where the primary role in the human-thing relationship is played by social transactions involving things (Appadurai, 2003, p. 5, after Barański, 2007, p. 19). Dant (2005) speaks in a similar vein; for him the understanding of what is social should take into account the understanding of the meaning of things with equal interest (Barański, 2007, p. 11). In the world of material culture, objects become "agents", they are the driving force:

> "Objects are incorporated into the life of a person and extend his or her being in the world, both the material world and the social world. Looked at from the perspective of society, the object is a vehicle of the intentions and designs of the culture that can shape the actions of the individual" (Dant, 2005, p. 60).

This agency in the humanities is described in different categories – "turn to things", "performative turn" – which means that it is simultaneously attributed to both human and non-human beings. On the other hand, changes resulting from the activity of the subject are seen as the effect of cooperation between people and non-people (Domańska, 2007, pp. 52–53). At this point, it is worth referring to the sociological tradition, in which describing subjects – as Krajewski (2013) synthesises – appears within various concepts and theoretical directions. These include: 1. The materialistic direction of sociology – objects as an effect of the material exchange of goods and work, as a result of which objects are created and serve to explain social life in accordance with a materialistic vision inspired by Marx and Engels' (1955) views; 2. The positivist approach – objects as a social fact are a source of knowledge about social life, how it is organised, diversified and what processes of change it undergoes (material culture as a manifestation of social processes); 3. The economic approach – objects as an area of economic analysis of social change processes, that is, production, consumption, and

the role of technology; 4. The humanistic direction – objects as the carrier of meanings and their role in the process of broadcasting, categorising reality and perpetuating human-created meanings (including Mead, 1972; Blumer, 1986; Goffman, 2005); 5. The critical approach – subjects analysed from the perspective of criticism of mass society (including Veblen, 1998) and criticism of capitalism (including Horkheimer, Adorno, 1994; Debord, 2006; Krajewski, 2013, pp. 28–31).

In addition to anthropology and sociology, psychology also includes many aspects of the research of this relationship, including emotional relationships with things. Objects, apart from being carriers of individual and collective memory, also provide a sense of security in the psychological sense. According to Tisseron (2016), objects are, in an equivalent way, "incorporated" into the mental states of individuals, and contact with things does not result solely from their function or symbolic meaning. Objects are related to our individual identity and sense of "self" in relationships with other people. Through stories, feelings or the need for security that subjectively connect us with specific things, they become part of us, our environment and allow us to isolate ourselves from the outside world. Although, as empha-sised – referring to the concept of the habitus by Bourdieu (1984) – the meanings assigned to objects may be a consequence of common practices learned from the surrounding society, they are not fixed once and for all or permanently:

> "The way that material objects provide a bridge between the inner psychic life of the individual and the outer social life of the world around is not fixed but varies and may involve contradictory or reversible meanings" (Dant, 2005, p. 63, after Tisseron, 2016).

Many contemporary analyses of materiality focus on the object as a mediator between the human world and the non-living world. From the sociological perspective, this means adopting a view on the relational nature of social phenomena and processes, that is, in this particular case the need to study the connections between the world of people and the world of objects. For sociologists of what is social – writes Bruno Latour – order was the rule, while decay, change or creation were exceptions. For the sociologists of relation, the rule is performance, and the troublesome exception is any kind of stability lasting for a long period and on a large scale (Latour, 2010, p. 50). Assuming this perspective, we are more interested in action than the object and the subject itself, and therefore what happens "between" ac-tors (including within the framework of the actor–network theory proposed by Latour). In practice, this means studying the connections rather than focusing on the description of the substance, the thing at the centre of the relationship (Attfield, 2000). For neither a thing could exist without man, nor could a man (creator) create without their participation. As the supporters of such a view postulate (including Latour, 2010), this relationship is relatively symmetrical (Krajewski, 2013).

It is crucial to consider the fact that objects are created as a result of human activity and most are a deliberate and conscious act of creation. Literature abounds in various definitions and interpretations of the creativity concept and, although the aim of the article is not to thoroughly analyse the process of releasing creative powers, it should be emphasized that it is a very complex process depending on different factors. These are both internal conditions, such as cognitive strengths, personality, or motivation and external components included in social environment (Hofreiter et al., 2021), *i.e.* like living conditions in which an individual

builds social relations (work, school) and the norms and values that shape personality and sense of identity.

When the analysis concerns creativity seen through the prism of modern design solutions that contribute to improving the quality of life of the community it is usually assumed that it is the process of developing and expressing innovative ideas, important due to their useful character. From this perspective, creativity means a synthesis of knowledge, creative action and programmatic pragmatism (Leonard & Swap, 1999). In presented article limiting this approach only would be too simplistic, because the discussed creativity concerns an exceptional time in the history of the world. The COVID-19 pandemic is a period that we can confidently call the time of asking questions about the value of human life, about the chances of building a safe future. In such moments, the perception of the goal usually served by human creativity, this time has the dimension of personal protection and ensuring a sense of security (Chen & Bonanno, 2020). The link between creativity and well-being indicators is researched by specialists in various fields, but psychologists in particular provide many explanations, which has been described in detail by Orkibi (2021). Studying the ability to respond creatively to stressful situations, which certainly are include the time of a COVID-19 pandemic, the author recalls the works of classical researchers such as Moreno (1955, 1964), for whom creativity is essential for adapting to life changes and unexpected challenges (J. L. Moreno & F. B. Moreno, 1955), Rogers (1995, pp. 347–362) who treated creativity as an underlying motivational force for growth, and Maslow (1999, pp. 149–161) who seemed it as a factor for facilitates self-actualization (Orkibi, 2021).

The authors from this research field also refer to the positive psychology trend, which assumes that creativity is a cognitive character strengths under the virtues of wisdom and knowledge (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It is worth to note that the trend of positive psychology also aroused interest among designers and resulted in an approach defined as positive design. Such a positive design pays special attention to the recipients' needs, their values important from the perspective of being a member of the community, and consequently contributes to the feeling of happiness. It is a general term for all forms of design, including design research and design goals, where the impact of design on the subjective well-being of individuals and communities is assessed (Desmet & Pohlmeyer, 2013, p. 6). It is an approach that, apart from delivering the finished product, provokes the user to develop himself, stimulate and inspire himself to creative activities to achieve happiness and self-fulfilment.

The social life of an object and its act of creation is a result of various conditions. The context of its use and the user's needs, which, especially at borderline moments – such as the experienced COVID-19 pandemic – may deconstruct the established rules of reading things, changing their originally assigned meaning. The social interest in various forms of empowerment, beyond the purely human context, which is worth noting, is also not indifferent to the ways in which subjects are learned, researched and described.

1.2. Design as a meaning of things

Design is a deliberate action that serves to meet specific needs or, as the designers say, to solve problems. Today, there is no one comprehensive definition of design, since it has long gone beyond the fields of art, science or research into relations with industry. Design is a

conceptual activity that expresses thoughts through form or action, and like so many other human activities is embedded in two worlds: Physical/biological (where people live and where things work) and social (where human beings talk and things matter). Therefore, defined as problem solving, it may indicate both its role in the first world (physical and biological) and in the social world (Manzini, 2015, p. 35). Design is not only about physical components and can equally apply to service design, but it is the problems of causing a change in the world of material culture that are referred to in the first place. Design is also a way to give meaning to the things and "translate" the ways in which they are used. Objects are thus the emancipation of design activities, they grow "from the hand" of a man (the creator, designer, cf. Attfield, 2000), and through their functions they are intended to serve defined needs. So, when we talk about design, we also think about the relationship with the user, which means that the design of things can be viewed from a three-dimensional perspective:

1) Industrial design: includes the creation and development of detailed concepts that optimise the function, value and appearance of products for the mutual benefit of both the user and the manufacturer;

2) Interaction design: the emphasis is on how people interact with technology. It is based on the principles and knowledge of psychology, design, art, and the study of emotions to ensure a positive, enjoyable experience;

3) Experience design: the practice of designing products, processes, services with an emphasis on quality and the joy of the total experience (Norman, 2013, p. 5).

In order to understand the role of the object from a design perspective, it is certainly necessary to recall the basic principles underlying design activities. Moving between the descriptive terms that affect the appearance of things, such as nice or aesthetically pleasing, through the sensations that provide pleasant feelings or directly the design function, so useful, functional, *etc.*, and finally, as Don Norman said, to the features that guide the user in how to deal with the design-product (the possibilities of "discovering and understanding") show how multifaceted the actions of designers are. So, to design is not a simple task, and the difficulty is due, among other things, to the fact that the designer's role is "anticipation". This, however, often raises the question of how to reconcile the need to anticipate the expectations of diverse recipients – the manufacturer expects something that is economically treated, the seller something that will be attractive to the shop's customers, while the buyer appreciates the price and appearance (although, ultimately, at home its functionality and usability) (Norman, 2013, pp. 35–36). What is more, the challenge for designers is also to design the product in such a way that it brings positive experiences and does not lead to frustration. Badly made products are useless. Machines, devices and everyday objects have specific functions assigned to them in the process of their design. However, while in laboratory conditions, "unencumbered" by the context of borderline experiences like a COVID-19 pandemic, all these principles of good design seem realistic, in specific conditions – not previously predictable – their application and the anticipation of the needs, contexts and meanings of things becomes difficult to grasp. At this particular time of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a change in the way things were incorporated into everyday activities, which did not remain indifferent to the role of the recipient. Despite the fact that the present day is called the time of "saturation with design" (Lash & Urry, 1987; Scott, 1988), it turned out that, to a surprisingly high

degree, we must – or prefer to – rely on ourselves. Thus, the role of traditionally perceived design from the point of view of experiencing the everyday life of that time has become of secondary importance. Not only because during the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a change in the individual valuation of the things needed to perform daily duties (*e.g.*, planning, organising, controlling), but also in the practices for which the objects are used. The apartment room (private space) has become a workplace, and its interior, a public participant in business meetings (public space). The importance of objects in the social sense has also changed. Examples include items originally designed to be physically and socially close, such as a park bench, a playground for children, or municipal gyms. In the COVID-19 pandemic, they lost their function. Moreover, their hitherto importance has been completely reversed – places of contact (*e.g.*, a bench) have become a site of dangerous SARS-CoV-2 virus transmission; a place we avoid. How the perception of everyday objects has changed in this relatively short period of time is well illustrated in the project *Pandemic Objects* by the VAM. As part of this initiative, the curators collected several dozen proposals to describe the meaning and role of subjects that are subjectively specific to the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Proposals for well-known and, it seemed, definite objects sent by "ordinary people" not only served to organise the *Pandemic Objects* exhibition, but also turned out to be an important pretext for reflection on materiality in general.

2. Research methodology and sample characteristics

The presented material is the result of the content analysis of existing materials published in official documents from the project initiative by the VAM in London called *Pandemic Objects*. In order to complete the analysis, the statements of the curators of the exhibition were obtained via electronic mail contact and used in the text. All materials were collected in 2021.

2.1. Pandemic objects – time recording

The *Pandemic Objects* project is an initiative of the VAM launched in 2020, at a time when there was no longer any doubt that the SARS-CoV-2 virus caused the global COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this project was to collect and present everyday items that took on new meaning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, everyone could take part in this project by sending a photo along with the argumentation of the choice made. As the exhibition curator Brendan Cormie (Warburg Institute, 2020) emphasises, there were no specific guidelines or restrictions as to the type of item. This is why the photos of things that finally appeared on the blog presented both elements of architecture and everyday objects – material things – but also of immaterial things, such as dreams:

> "<…> a host of everyday often-overlooked 'objects' (in the widest possible sense of the term) are suddenly charged with new urgency. Toilet paper becomes a symbol of public panic, a forehead thermometer a tool for social control, convention centres become hospitals, while parks become contested public commodities. By compiling these objects and reflecting on their changing purpose and meaning, this space aims to paint a unique picture of the pandemic and the pivotal role objects play within it" (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2020).

From the information obtained by the author of the text directly from the curator of this project, Cormie, by email and findings from his conversations with Professor Bill Sherman (Warburg Institute, 2020), it can be concluded that some assumptions were adopted. However, they were concerned not so much with the presented categories of items, but rather the relationship in which they appear in contact with the social world. Although in this case the portrait of the COVID-19 pandemic through the prism of an object is based solely on the proposals presented by the VAM, many have become a global symbol of experiencing this time. The project's curator – Cormie – distinguished seven categories for grouping the collected proposals. These categories are:

1) *Communication is a matter of life and death*. In this area, there are examples such as the editorial layer, for example, hand-made inscriptions by shop and restaurant owners, which were to inform the environment about a change in a simple and quick way, for example, about a temporary suspension of activity. Inscriptions visible in public spaces, surrounding the facades of buildings, hung on balconies or from windows, also expressed solidarity and support for the groups most involved in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of the United Kingdom, it was mainly recognition of the National Health Service (NHS), symbolised by a rainbow. These inscriptions were created spontaneously, without the official regulations or commercial rules accompanying visual communication. Often, their goal, apart from providing information, was to build a relationship with the client without formal conditions;

2) *The COVID-19 pandemic is challenging our ideas of what a home is* (and its limitations). The next group consisted of proposals that showed how we define our home and place of residence in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The closing time forced new definitions of the meaning of private space, which at that time ceased to be a space by choice, but became a necessity. Cut off from the world outside, we tried to create a semblance of normality and mix the "place" with "space". The place is organised (Tuan, 2001), closed and safe (although this word now takes on a new meaning). The space is open, giving a sense of freedom and the ability to implement our plans and higher needs. At this particular time, as we lost "space", only "place" remained. This place has become a field of experiments and attempts to open up to the world, and at the same time adapt to the needs of the inhabitants as much as possible. Work, rest, sport, relaxation and sleep – all this had to take place in a limited and closed room. Therefore, changes were often made to home decorations (*e.g.*, flower pots), to the arrangement of the rooms (so as to create a quiet place to work online) or to the separation of places for developing hobbies (*e.g.*, a place for a sewing machine);

3) *Material flows are more important than ever*. Objects whose task was to define the limits of physical accessibility and ensure safety in public spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic played a key role. Everything that could protect against unwanted contact with another person became the subject of primary needs, often also in short supply. Latex gloves, masks or barricades cutting off communication routes in public spaces gained a new meaning. Not only because it was almost unconditionally necessary to comply with the application of the rules, but also because along with these needs, the existing priorities were verified. At that time, unfortunately, it was also seen how

quickly the issue of environmental protection can become of secondary importance. Heaps of plastic (remains of sanitising items) filled baskets, even streets, and yet the consumption of these materials was not reduced and proper attention was not paid to segregating them by the principles of sustainable development. The protection of the individual became the priority;

4) *Old technologies are more important than you would think*. For many people, the COVID-19 pandemic has become a time of discovering or returning to forgotten traditional skills and production techniques. The fact that we were locked up and isolated provoked us to look for different ways to survive without leaving home, but more importantly, it clearly showed how dependent we are on others. The traditional community was characterised by relative autarky, in modern society we are used to relying on others, which in these particular conditions turned out to be impossible. In order to satisfy various needs (*e.g.*, having a protective mask), solutions that have lost their importance in the present day have been returned. Traditional crafts and skills that were passed down through the generations, such as sewing, mending, weaving or baking bread, gained importance, and items such as sewing machines have become an icon of coping with everyday life in this difficult time;

5) *We need to think about universal rights to objects*. The uniqueness of the time of the COVID-19 pandemic also shows the extent of social exclusion and inequality. Although it seemed that in most developed countries the problem of digital exclusion no longer existed (the number of households with access to the internet or people with digital skills is mostly satisfactory), the COVID-19 pandemic revealed how distorted this image can be. The necessity to work and learn remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that, in fact, access to the necessary hardware (laptops) or software is not so common and obvious. Therefore, along with the COVID-19 pandemic, there were voices about the need for free access to digital equipment on the same terms as access to places of rest and relaxation, to green spaces. Thus, not only access to equipment, but networking – literally and figuratively – during the COVID-19 pandemic has become synonymous with participation in social, public and economic life;

6) *We need new tools grieve* (*stop doomscrolling*). The COVID-19 pandemic is also a time of mourning and reconciliation with the death of loved ones. The images conveyed by the media during the COVID-19 pandemic's peaks were not optimistic. Mass dying, the lack of places for burial (*e.g.*, in India), the lack of health services and funeral officials to commemorate death dominated reports from various parts of the world. This time is therefore also a moment for designers of funeral accessories – mourning jewellery, for artists who with their creativity helped to express a sense of loss and struggle with these difficult experiences;

7) *What makes for a resilient society* – creative skills and access to tools. Many objects, including the ordinary, simple ones – chalk for drawing, paints – have become a factor in developing individual creativity. The result was the appearance of banners taking on the functions of social advertising (*e.g.*, support for the NHS), replacing the work of professional graphic designers and communication specialists. Although often ineptly made, they served as an important visual "message" for the community.

At this time, that is, in October, 2021, over 70 submitted and selected proposals can be viewed on the VAM's website. Among such a diverse set it is impossible to objectively indicate which are the most characteristic and universal for the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. This choice is as selective as the individual perception of that time, filtered by the life situation (professional, health, social) of the author of the work and their COVID-19 pandemic experience. We usually look at objects and their functions from the perspective of what we can achieve thanks to them. At this particular time, users began to focus on the functions of things that not only enable them to act (meet a need), but also prevent others from doing something that may be socially harmful, such as the obligation to use trolleys when shopping, not only to carry shopping items, but also as a natural distancing "measure" in the shop space. This is the time when the functions originally conferred by designers were "denied" by the need for new user experiences or new applications, such as home furniture that became a place of work, temporary office furniture. Despite subjective choices, this had common elements, which are part of the perception of design as a universal activity, which was previously confined to a closed circle of designers. As Papanek (1971) wrote, "all people are designers". These words during the COVID-19 pandemic were given a special tone, and the time experienced showed that people not only returned to traditional techniques and methods of using tools, but also created a change to the "existing situation in preference" (Simon, 1996). For advocates of a broad definition of design, this connotation best reflects its meaning.

Conclusions and discussion

COVID-19 pandemic and design are two words that have their defining exponents. Although the first is much easier to describe, with the second – design – researchers still have a problem. Specialists in different fields are constantly making efforts to define what design is; what it signals, expresses and functions as. However, it is still problematic to completely define design. Combined with the word *pandemic* and in the context of the role of objects during special collective experiences, it shows that the search for clarification of the terminology, ending with questions about what kind of design we are talking about and under what discipline, does not seem to matter much at this point. A broad definition of design, accepting the fact that we are all designers, seems to be the best fit. The COVID-19 pandemic has also uncovered how – in a world that Guy Debord called the "society of the spectacle" – we define needs and hide what is actually just a whim under this cover. This time has revised all that is essential and most important in material reality. The pursuit of a new, newer one (Veblen, 1998; Baudrillard, 2006; Debord, 2006) has been heavily verified. In the world of mass consumption, the age of algorithms (Szpunar, 2019), there has been a kind of crack/suspension in the pursuit of what the spectacle can help to play. The props took on a different meaning – their value began to be expressed rather in the ability to protect the individual and sustain life activities, than to create images for the purposes of relationships with others. However, this does not mean that there will be no reversion to the old behaviour. As Dant writes:

> "<…> the study of consumption has tended to focus either on the ways in which commodities are appropriated through buying and selling (advertising, shopping, desire

for the new, the appeal to individual identity, etc.) or it has attempted to articulate consumption as a way of social structural alignment, through social class, emulation, ostentation and the habitus. Rewarding as these studies have been, they have often overlooked the mundane, routine ways in which material objects are taken up in everyday lives" (2005, p. 32).

The fundamental question is, how the world will change after the COVID-19 pandemic and what might it mean for projects? It touches on not only the issue of greater attention to the understanding of the human-object relationship, the role of the user-centered design, but also the attitudes of users and the social responsibility of designers. Will the COVID-19 pandemic really reduce the need for possessions? Or maybe, on the contrary, will users try to make up for "lost" time when participating in market games? The crisis situation – a breakthrough, turning point – is a moment of profound changes followed by a new balance of power, new political and economic relations. The COVID-19 pandemic was undoubtedly a time of verification of the established rules of social coexistence, which in subjective experiences appeared as a time of increased risk, but also a time of great challenges. We tried to deal with new problems by taking various actions, including those aimed at creating a friendly and safe environment for survival. This experience has shown that people quite efficiently adapt to new circumstances, undertake many creative activities to recreate the conditions in which they functioned in high quality in the past.

The presented activities in the area of (user) design have shown, first of all, that people creatively look for tools and the possibility of such adaptation; they acquire new skills and use available resources to create a safe and friendly world. Secondly, the time of increased risk also have brought a lot of important conclusions for the designer community itself. As Norman (2005) said, many design problems are related to complex social and political issues, which makes designers not only specialists in shaping but also researchers and scientists. The way in which users were able to use their creative potential in exceptional conditions can be one of the arguments for the development of the concept of participatory design. This approach has been known for years, but not all designers are willing to involve users in the design process to a greater extent than just evaluating the prepared solutions. For the designer community, perhaps this time will also be a strong argument in favour of directing more attention from affirmative attitudes to reflection on a critical and speculative understanding of design. ADunne and Raby, promoters and co-creators of this approach to design, point out that:

> "Design can be described as falling into two very broad categories: affirmative design and critical design. The former reinforces how things are now, it conforms to cultural, social, technical and economic expectation. Most design falls into this category. The latter rejects how things are now as being the only possibility, it provides a critique of the prevailing situation through designs that embody alternative social, cultural, technical or economic values" (2021, p. 58).

The COVID-19 pandemic "written in object" may also become a good pretext for a deeper reflection not only on the materiality and fragility of this world, but also for the design community's debate on the role of contemporary design and the role of designers themselves in the COVID-19 post-pandemic world.

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