

# Preface to the 2020 edition

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Where the world of objects is no longer taken seriously,  
the world of the subject must vanish with it

*Georg Lukács*

At bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extra-ordinary, uncanny

*Martin Heidegger*

'Why brilliant fashion-designers, a notoriously non-analytic breed, sometimes succeed in anticipating the shape of things to come better than professional predictors, is one of the most obscure questions in history; and, for the historian of culture, one of the most central.' So reads the enigmatic – and in his book unanswered – opening sentence of Eric Hobsbawm's chapter on the arts in *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*. The curiosity of this sentence is double: Why Hobsbawm, one of the premier historians of his generation, would open his chapter on the arts by alluding to fashion at all (not, at least until recently, a central concern either of culture or of political economy) but why, too, is it so redolent and enigmatic? Fashion is the point where material culture, the body and its many identities (gendered, personal, social and cultural) intertwine in anticipation of attitude and sensibility; where the 'things with attitude' that are produced in the sometimes-extraordinary acts of felt translation turn out to be the emblem of that which is yet without a name. If the body is the site where, as Judy Attfield says, the transactions of the systems that construct identity most sharply come together in 'the interrelations of gender and objects – two of the most fundamental components of the cultural framework which holds together our sense of social identity' (p. 199) then it is hardly surprising that the articles that transform the body into the emblem of these interrelationships should be capable of being acutely tuned to Hobsbawm's 'anticipating the shape of things to come'.

Judy Attfield, too, begins her original preface to *Wild Things* with the enigma of fashion – in this case with her design students and their seemingly intuitive ability to have ‘some sort of advance warning system’ that sensed new cultural developments, but which she understands as a drive to sense and express identity. The act of expression, here, means something akin to going *into* one’s felt experience and doing what, to a degree, all designing/making does. It also points to what *everyone* has done in their manipulations and organizing of their material worlds. To do this in the deepest sense of the personal is extremely rare. Fashion, as a business – just as professional design as a whole – owes its appeal, at least in part, as a substitute for doing this.

On the other side, however, this process is not rare at all:

The way people objectify that desire [to go into personal experience and find ways of putting it into the world] in the making, unmaking and remaking of their material worlds is a pervasive activity in people’s lives one way or another ... demonstrated in the vast array of things that testify to the importance of the sense of unique difference and individuality which activate people’s sense of agency.

(pp. xi)

These ‘things’ we make all amount to the material (and today, increasingly immaterial) culture of everyday life. They stand as testaments not only to the exchange economy and culture from which, most of the time, these things arise but also in their deployment to the ‘deeply felt reality of the search for, and the belief in a true self’ (p. xii).

This is one of Attfield’s most basic theses: that the material and immaterial aspects of the everyday also represents a necessary moment in creating a sense of identity through design – whether it be as an individual or, collectively, as part of a group. Attfield takes pains to point out that the attitude required in sustaining creative acts should ‘not just [be confined to] the realm of design’, for it is essential to ‘one of the most fundamental of all the life-enhancing acts—that of creativity’ (p. xi).

The enigma, both for designing and for material culture, is found in the processes of the *translation* of felt experience into material (or experiential) form where design enters the picture both professionally and in the broader sense of giving or endowing things with what Attfield calls ‘attitude’ – where ‘attitude’ is both an intended felt aspect of the thing and the impetus that compels us to translate a sense of wildness into things in order to receive that type of experience back – concretely, reciprocally and recurrently.

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However, from the side of professional design there are limits to this process. The obvious point to be made is that once these things enter the world, designers are only one (and not always the most significant) aspect of understanding how a thing ‘works’. In reality, ‘producers’ and ‘users’ play equally significant roles in determining the work of things: the first, above all, plays an important role in terms of determining the nominal *limits* of products and experiences;

the second is in control of the reception of said products and experiences as well as their contextual adaptation and subtle transformations in meaning (and sometimes form) as they are brought into (and deployed within) a person's life.

It is increasingly difficult to differentiate the designed object (the thing with *designed* attitude) from the object that has developed 'attitude' over time. Looking at things in such a simplistic manner relativizes ('demotes') design, but as Attfield maintains, the reintegration of the demoted object as just one type of object within a wider world of goods 'contextualize[s] it within an expanded cultural field' (p. xii) – the field in which design lives and dies. In her words, to link together design with material culture allows for a type of analysis that can follow 'design products beyond the point of sale to examine how modern artefacts are appropriated by consumers and transformed from manufactured products to become the stuff of everyday life that have a direct involvement with *matters*, both literally and figuratively, of identity' (p. 2–3).

To place designing in the context of the 'the material culture of everyday life', as Attfield calls it, 'acknowledges the physical object in all its materiality and encompasses the work of design, making, distributing, consuming, using, discarding, recycling and so on'. She adds, 'but above all it focuses on how things have gone through all those stages as part of the mediation process between people and the physical world at different stages in their biographies' (p. 3). It is this relationship that gives this book its duality.

This duality takes us into the other side of inquiry. As Attfield admits, 'this is a contradictory project, because although its main focus is on the material object, it is not really about things in themselves but about how people make sense of the world through physical objects' (p. 1). Methodologically, Attfield describes the book as a study 'situated at the dynamic point of interplay between animate and inanimate worlds in order to look beyond the material world of mere things in themselves and reconsider their complex role in the relationship between objects and subjects' (p. 1). This is perhaps the key relationship for human beings today when the world is received as nothing but an agglomerated ensemble of artificial entities and systems. Because of the intensity of this relation, which despite our superficial ability to manipulate it has in many ways become too complex to register, we lose sight not only of it but of ourselves. To think of our relationships to things – particularly in their 'wild' state – is to start to re-think how we, as people, are in the world (and by implication, the real subject of designing is, of course, not design at all but ourselves in our dependent relations with the world). Thought in this way, the study and comprehension of the material culture of everyday life becomes a necessary aspect of subjective and social understanding – the reverse of how it has traditionally been understood.

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Twenty years after its initial publication, Judy Attfield's *Wild Things* is still an ambitious book – a quality that perhaps carries the justification for its reprinting. In 2001, the book was praised by anthropologists and consumption scholars, but within the tight-knit world of design, it feels like it somehow got lost along

the way. As the rise of interface, simulation and new consumption patterns defined everyday life in the twenty-first century, design discourse somehow felt like it needed to contextualize the rising stakes of a globalized, device- and cloud-driven world. Design was for solving the world's problems, or at least for containing the highest form of expression readily available and for a price. It's true, design can still be these things, but with the proliferation of stuff taking up various material forms in our daily life, a lingering question remains to be answered. What does it all mean and for whom? That *Wild Things* has taken on a new relevance in the fields of design history and design studies is in part because it begins to answer this question. That the book retains its force is because it is still rare in its subject matter and methodology. 'The only way to tackle this combination of the everyday and abstract theory has been to adopt a style of tacking back and forth between rhetorical questions, theoretical devices, items taken from the personal minutia of everyday life and illustrative case studies,' Attfield writes (p. xi). Because of this, *Wild Things* serves as a beacon for those in a number of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences who can't shake off a determination to do right by everyday 'things' – things which perhaps were once designed objects at the point of production and consumption, but through the course of living alongside their users in domestic space have become undone – too familiar to be considered, too strange to be encompassed by standard academic categories.

The everyday has always been a subject both particular and abstract, which makes it increasingly difficult to theorize, especially in our current cultural climate which challenges the parameters of material culture. Writing as a practice thus holds an important place in trying to reconnect the creative activity of design with the seemingly impenetrable realm of the everyday. Attfield's writing in *Wild Things* makes such an expansion of design to the everyday tangible and even digestible to historians, critics and practitioners.

By articulating design as 'things with attitude', she gave us a vocabulary to describe how objects are negotiated and transformed through life from shiny new things into 'wild things that don't quite fit anywhere' (p. 4) – especially within the scope of academic inquiry – thus opening the field of design studies to a new sense of urgency in exploring how design operates as both a collection of things and the activity that gives them their attitude.

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Attfield's career was highlighted by many contributions to the field as a feminist scholar of design – a title she assumed because her work took on the political tinge of difference.<sup>1</sup> She questioned the parameters that defined the accepted institutional history of design at the time. She had a designerly focus that made her question the relevance of design history and the history of design but coupled this with an academic's ability to synthesize, contextualize and analyse information to her best advantage in order to research experiences of design that were true to life. She transformed her field by making the strongest case

<sup>1</sup> For more on this aspect of her work see the afterword by Jo Turney included in this volume.

for how using, consuming, discarding, forgetting and treasuring non-special things were essential to understand design's role in cultural production. The following paragraph captures her approach:

Design as a practice of modernity signifies the possibility of social change. ... Such a view only makes sense when the concept of modernity is relocated beyond the aesthetic moralizing frame that restricts the incursion of any versions which do not conform to the canon of 'good design' – the term synonymous with 'modern' that has until very recently been the only qualification needed to allow objects entry through the gates of conventional design history. Thus it is necessary to include, rather than exclude, objects that defy the definition of good design – those 'things with attitude' that don't fit into the description of 'good', that disreputable wild and dangerous rabble of 'objects that talk back'. The type of things that import 'poor taste', badly behaved 'trifles', fancy goods, the kitsch, the fetish, the domestic, the decorative and the feminine, the bric-a-brac that exudes unashamed materiality. (p. 26)

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In this process, *Wild Things* was a natural evolution of her thinking on design and intersectionality. Judy Attfield's originality was to show that the personalization of things is not separate from their design, but it is integral to them. She shows this in a few well-selected case studies that explain what kinds of 'things' the book examines in Part I, followed by the themes these things mediate in Part II and the contexts necessary for their transformation in Part III.

One of these examples appears in Chapter 7, which explores the spatial dimension of things. In it, she examines the home, and more specifically, the facades of similar semi-detached houses occupying the same street, noting the personality of the homeowner who chose to display a sense of classicism through 'sham ionic columns' whereas another preferred the style of a Georgian panelled door with fluted pilasters (p. 161). Overtime, these houses were updated by their inhabitants, thus transforming the architect's original intention of providing a sense of 'ordinary' living in homogenized suburbia into an extraordinary mishmash of styles made possible by private roads and home improvement stores. Though, it is important to note that the use of extraordinary here does not necessarily mean drawing attention onto itself. Wild things can be negotiated to conform rather than stand out.

Throughout the book, Attfield makes such inferences by examining authenticity in reproduction furniture, the passing of time through clothes, and how the ordering of space is a kind of design that happens well after consumption as a lifelong conversation with how things fit into our lives.

*Wild Things* is a book adamant on particular and specific examples of design in everyday life, a choice Attfield 'make[s] no apology for concentrating on' (p. xi). Yet, even in her choice of what to examine within these pages,

Attfield's method of questioning design transcends these examples to provide a theoretical framework for examining design in daily practice. As Ben Highmore wrote in his 2001 review of the book, *Wild Things* 'is not a book to agree with or disagree with, but a book to *think with* (and what more could you ask for?)'.<sup>2</sup>

*Wild Things* opened up the possibility of thinking about design in the everyday from a different point of view that contrasted such attempts that were clearly written for designers to design better products for everyday consumption. The problem with preaching that design exists in the everyday without acknowledging the fact that everyone, especially non-designers, already practices design on a daily basis is a perpetuation of the divide that separates where design ends and consumption begins. If we are ever to accept that design is a social activity beyond its hierarchical structure, a book like *Wild Things* is desperately needed to remind us of this important work.

In my own thinking on the role of design in everyday life, I often face questions from colleagues and mentors asking me to define who my work is for. Is it for designers? Is it for everyday users? Is 'user' even the right word in this context? *Wild Things* is a book that pushes design discourse to an uncomfortable place for designers, or even scholars, who are hesitant to let go of the supposed weight of their contributions when they relegate design to the masses, who might not care that the work they do in living is essentially a part of the design process. It centrally implicates the production of things under a capitalist system as no better or worse than how those things are appropriated – so far from design that they are considered clutter. Attfield chose to write about everyday things within the context of their use as their meaning and, in doing so, recognizes that without these things, concepts such as change, containment, space, time and the body are difficult to come to an understanding of as a human being, let alone as a scholar. In the exercise of positioning my work as indebted to the ideas Attfield put forth in this book, I imagine who else might have found value in its pages. My mind immediately goes to Daniel Miller, the anthropologist and steward of material culture studies who was one of Attfield's PhD supervisors. In an obituary following Attfield's untimely death in 2006, Miller singlehandedly credited her quietly radical work as having changed the scope and impact of design history, redefining it from 'hagiographic accounts of great designers and the history of great designs, both of which almost entirely ignored the wider context of understanding the form and style of the world of goods most people lived with' to a 'study of the intimate relationship between populations and the common form and design of mundane material culture'.<sup>3</sup> Miller was suspicious of design history's approach of singling out exemplary objects, which contributed to a biased canon of knowledge that preserves an exclusionary principle of design. If anyone was to convince him otherwise, it would have been Attfield, who prefaced her

<sup>2</sup> Ben Highmore, 'Reviewed Work(s): Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life by Judy Attfield,' *Journal of Design History*, No. 3 (2001): 250, emphasis in original.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Miller, 'Judy Attfield (Obituary),' *Material World*, 19 December, 2006, <http://www.materialworldblog.com/2006/12/judy-attfield/>.

own theoretical musings on things against what she calls ‘the gentrification of design through changes in the education system’ (p. 48), which did more to separate design from its social roots and instead connected the idea of design with value (‘good/bad’ design) or professional titles that reflected the emerging field’s self-conscious distinction from the fine arts.

Attfield is especially forthcoming in the beginning pages of this book when she claims that inside, you will not find a complete history of design much less a ‘fully formulated theory’ (p. 5), but instead you will find a means of understanding the complex entangled world of the everyday through the much-needed lens of design.

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But why should we look at ‘wild things’ with a designerly perspective rather than an anthropological or psychological one – especially when so much of material culture is personal, embodied and social? A simple answer would be because since this book has been written, very few texts, especially in design, have dared to engage with the everyday in an honest manner. Miller went on to describe her legacy as a proponent of the ‘politics of respect’.<sup>4</sup> A few minutes with this book and you will understand what he means. Attfield pays respect to colleagues and theoreticians who have informed her work, pointing the reader to the ideas of Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Kathy Peiss, Adrian Forty, Victor Margolin, Cheryl Buckley, Pat Kirkham and Miller himself among many others who help contextualize the bridging of design with anthropology.

But there is a secondary meaning to the politics of respect that belongs to Attfield alone, and it is found in her choice to study this topic and to entertain it with the intensity of a book. She came from a school of thinkers who insisted on thinking about design as, foremost, an activity, and subsequently, as the objectification of such an activity.

If design is both process and product, this would lead us to believe that the expansive field of design is just as messy and wild as the everyday. Perhaps that is why designers are fascinated with trying to capture it in the objects they make, which we know to be an impossible task. As tactical and user-centric as designs aspire to be at a given moment in time, designers naturally fail to recognize that they are mere actors on the stage of everyday life. The things designers make populate the stage, but Attfield was keen to recognize that it is possible to talk about things beyond their commodity status, what some may call the object’s afterlife. And moreover, she led by example how to talk about design beyond the neat boxes of history, demonstrating how without this emphasis on design in particular, the making and unmaking of our material world would have gaps in its theory.

‘Just as semiotics has done so much to increase our knowledge of visual culture, the non-verbal nature of the material world referred to in this project cannot entirely be explained through language,’ she writes (p. 12). She articulates

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

the dance between design on the one hand and everything else on the other by reminding us, again, that design with a capital D is just one type of thing among a variety of things that make up the material world. To understand ‘Design’ as things *with attitude* implies that the attitude of the designer is embedded into the object by some sort of visual signature. However, we know that things, at their most ordinary, ‘do not have the high-profile visuality of “design”’ (p. 12), yet we similarly embed objects with our own attitudes, performing a kind of design that transforms ‘commodities [in]to personal “effects”’ (p. 112). Things which recede into the background of daily life and are forgotten until needed are not without attitude – they merely possess a different type of attitude, which she calls “‘design” in the lowercase’ (p. 25). This leads Attfield to her most important contribution to the field of design in articulating that design can be found in great instances of ingenuity, but also – and more importantly – ‘as a process through which individuals and groups construct their identity, experience modernity and deal with social change’ (p. 11).

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When Attfield discusses the activity of designing in this book, it is not only the practice of architects, industrial designers, product designers and the like. If design is to be believed to be a social activity, it must also be extended to the day-to-day lives of mothers and fathers, teenagers, the elderly, hairdressers, gardeners, tailors and home cooks.

In her study of containment, Judy Attfield came across Mrs Winter who owned a 1950s ‘non-Utility’ dressing table she bought herself. At the time, this type of purchase was a source of pride that contrasted the bare-bones wartime Utility furniture. Contained in the dressing table was a sense of independence, which transformed under the context of getting married and moving to the suburbs. The changing styles of furniture, room sizes and dressing practices soon rendered the non-Utility furniture, well, useless. But Mrs Winter still furnished it with objects that were drawn to this type of piece and thus designed to ‘go together’, such as matching candlesticks and powder puffs, always underlined by a dolly. Thirty-five years later, the dressing table assumed a new attitude, transforming from outdated to ‘antique’ when a friend commented on its craftsmanship. And though it remained almost a shrine to her old self, ‘guarding traditional home values and an outdated culture of feminine beauty’ (p.134), it defined Mrs Winter throughout her life. Her hesitance to get rid of it describes a subtler way theory can engage design in personal world-making:

The appropriation of meaning happens at the point of production or conversely well beyond the act of consumption. Thus incorporating things into the material culture of everyday life can take place through such banal acts as the disposition of furniture within a domestic interior or the use of dress to ‘fit-in’, rather than dressing-up to ‘stand out’, so to speak. Whereas in some cases an individual may find it alienating to be different and would rather feel part of a group by blending in, others set out to make a spectacle of themselves. Either way it is all too easy to overlook the banal as the site



of meaning construction for it is in the ordinariness of the everyday that people interact with their own particular place and time. The circumscribed space in which they find themselves enmeshed is where there is any possibility of agency. (p. 73)

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With an abundance of things all around us, reading this book now is a refreshing take against dogmatic criticism of consumption. Designers are trained to question why certain products should exist, and increasingly, consumers are questioning whether they need every product in their orbit, ascribing to an ethos that ruthlessly questions: ‘Does it spark joy?’<sup>5</sup> This leads to different trends that poach on the principles of good design and ‘form follows function’ in effort to sell a certain type of product that fits into a worldview, but without a certain level of individualization to personal circumstance, taste and space, this would be nothing more than a blanket argument that claims you are no more than what you buy, eat or wear at a given time. *Wild Things* acknowledges this assumption and goes beyond it in such a way that only design can do because it is an activity concerned with agency.

For the everyday multi-hyphenate, there isn’t necessarily the same weight felt by designers who are acutely aware of the consequences of their designs, yet there are real consequences to banal, ritualistic activities we now are able to classify as design. *Wild Things* is a book that provides new insight every time you return to it. It synthesizes the conversations in design taking place during the turn of the century by contextualizing a rhythm in discourse that teeters between the tangible, material, objectified world of goods and the symbolic, participatory and reactionary world of consumption. Design can happen before, between and beyond the two worlds, but one thing is undeniable – things are evidence of their making. They demonstrate the negotiation between humans and their ideas of authenticity, time and order. How important those themes are to everyday life is quietly felt but ultimately revealed in this book. Wild things become us.

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<sup>5</sup> This expression is taken from the popular self-help book by Marie Kondo, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2014).