

# Perfectly Odd Connections

Thomas Lommée's radical optimism

Physically, Thomas Lommée often occupies a space in Brussels, but where is his head at, really? With group, collaborative, and solo projects for corporate and cultural clients that range from Droog Lab, the Liege & Istanbul Design Biennials, Z33, Samsung, and the ongoing work of the Intrastructures studio, this proponent of open design sees the role of designers as one "shifting from being inventors towards being observers, connectors and entrepreneurs." As he now starts preparations for a project on mobility in the Belgian city of Genk, which has recently seen the loss of thousands of jobs as a result of the closure of its Ford factory, Lommée visually maps his creative world and shows how one of his definitions of design: "Spreading enthusiasm. Not fearing radical optimism", shapes this approach.

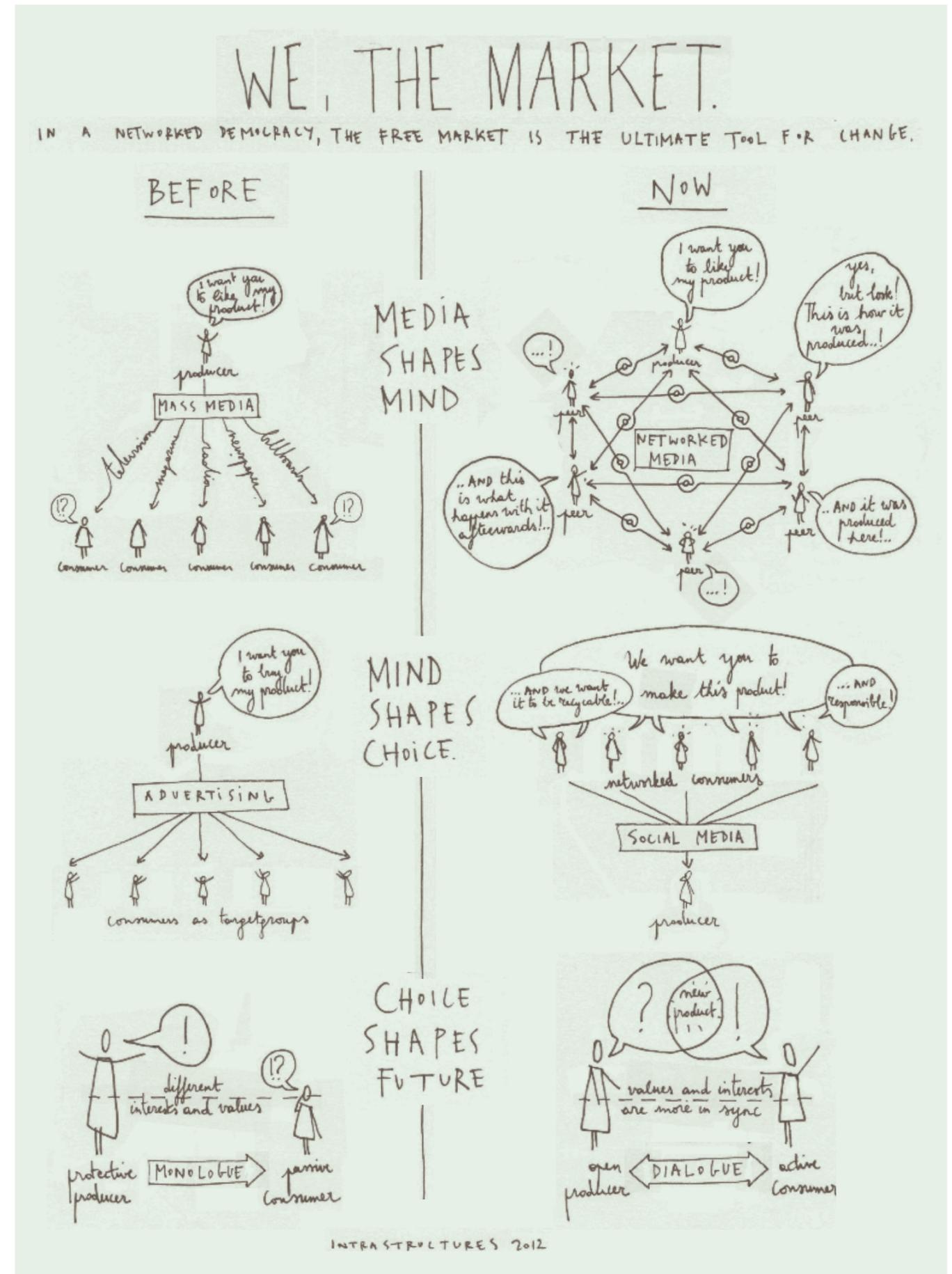
TEXT: EMMA FIRMIN  
VISUAL ESSAY & LAYOUT: THOMAS LOMMÉE

"Gather support. Share drawings. Consider comments. Label materials. Standardise dimensions. Allow disassembly. Exchange skills. Prototype designs. Outsource production. Personalise sales. Allow hacking. Facilitate clustering. Stimulate growth. Transform waste."\* Sound like a manifesto? A personal utopia? A public hell? Well, even in their definition and interpretation, words are open... Thomas Lommée is no fundamentalist, and most definitely a pragmatist. Not a hoarder of knowledge and ideas who is happy in a private zoo of self-congratulation, his research and experiments in 'open design' manifest a vision within a matrix of software, hardware and society, all of which "stand or fall in a belief in humanity." Such a statement encourages a shift away from the clichés of cynicism, distrust and hyper individualism, echoing the apparent paradox of gift exchange that Lewis Hyde examines in the book, *The Gift, How The Creative Spirit Transforms the World*: "when the gift is used, it is not used up. Quite the opposite, in fact: the gift that is not used will be lost, while the one that is passed along remains abundant." As such, for Lommée, 'open design' is a myriad of systems that allow for a culture

of community to be generated. It is transparent, accessible, flexible, and its component parts invite repair, adaptation and intervention - common sense in modular form; a set of authentic questions, more than a definitive blueprint.

## HANDS-ON

From amateur enthusiasts of the VW's air-cooled engine to the Occupy activists on Wall Street, the tools of open source design allow for synchronicity between varying scales. The weekend tinkerer and lone voice are now globally networked, infrastructure connections and communication transforming a trend into a movement. Lommée is no rose-tinted glasses wearer; when it comes to objects from bicycles to water boilers, building multiple lives into their design means they have to work. And money is no taboo. For him, open design does not equate with free design, somehow it has to generate an economy. This could mean the protection of components parts, decentralised financing platforms such as Kickstarter and Jile, or publicly voted competitions that use crowdsourcing and micro-industries like





1

'DOWN ON ME', KEENAN CAHILL AND 50 CENT (1)  
Photo taken during the filming of a YouTube movie originally featured on Chelsea Lately, 2010  
[www.keenansroom.com](http://www.keenansroom.com)  
Photo: © David Graham/Rise Management



2

TRACE UNITY FREERUNNING (2)  
By Blake Thor Barrett, presented by American Parkour  
Screenshot from YouTube movie  
[www.americanparkour.com](http://www.americanparkour.com)  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKHkI18GDLk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKHkI18GDLk)  
Image courtesy of Blake Thor Barrett



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SCREENSHOT, 2012 (3)  
© Thomas Lommée/  
[Intrastructures.net](http://Intrastructures.net)

PIRATE PARTY LOGO (4)  
[www.pp-international.net](http://www.pp-international.net)

POSTER, 2012 (5)  
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**THE NEXT  
BIG THING  
WILL BE  
A LOT OF  
SMALL  
THINGS.**

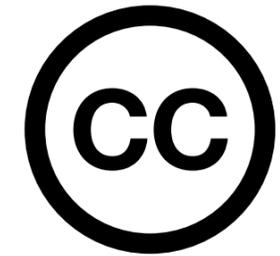
*Evolution becomes revolution*

1



*Mass-produced becomes personalised*

3



*Copy becomes culture*

4



*Transportation means become transportation flows*

2



*Objects become puzzles*

5

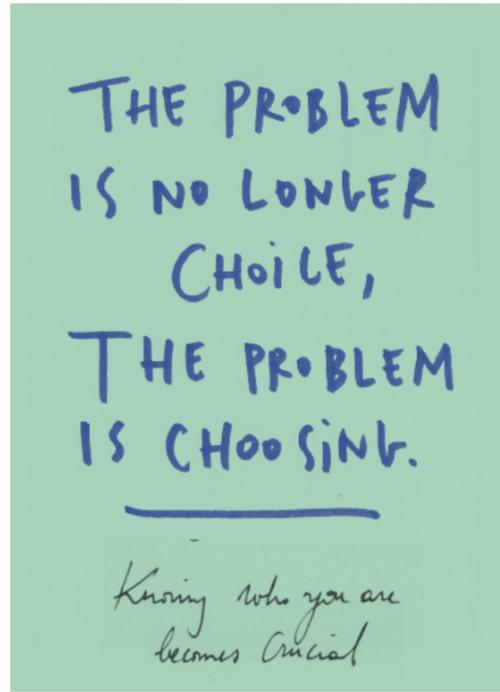
POSTER, 2012 (1)  
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MULTI-SERVICE VEHICLE BY  
THOMAS LOMMÉE FOR DROOG  
LAB (2)  
Recently featured in 'Identity  
Land: space for a million  
identities' by Droog Lab with Erik  
Kessels, in partnership with Z33,  
Hasselt, Belgium, 2012  
[www.drooglab.com](http://www.drooglab.com)  
© Thomas Lommée/  
Intrastructures.net

A 1992 HONDA CIVIC CX (3)  
Aerodynamically modified by  
Mike Turner, a member  
of EcoModder.com  
[www.aerocivic.com](http://www.aerocivic.com)  
Photo: © Mike Turner

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It moves the default to  
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DYNAMIC PUZZLE  
STRUCTURES (5)  
The power grid as an example  
of a system that uses open  
standards  
© Thomas Lommée/  
Intrastructures.net



1

that of Local Motors. Whatever the project, Lommée knows that if you don't have a good answer to 'what's in it for me' your 'thing' won't take off. Open design is not about reinventing human nature, language, or the wheel, for that matter. After all, a puncture repair kit has stood the test of time. (Actually, the flat tyre fixer is a welcome fly-in-the-ointment to the belief that only the economics of abundance or scarcity provide the context for repair).

Lommée's 'open design' questions the defensiveness that the perfection of mass production demands: its sheer volume generates a lot of products that are the result of compromise. He is not zealously seeking world domination; if his ideas appeal to one-percent of his network then it is of interest, but putting the 'product' up-front in the process is about changing the system from a monologue to a dialogue. Globally, that's a lot of noise, and it requires self-discipline to avoid chaos, yet for Lommée the potential of open source, from politics to 3D printing, means things will get more messy, but maybe more humane. From our professional to our private lives, he advocates a less monolithic approach, suggesting a rerouting such that while the big will inevitably get bigger, the big can also be bypassed.

#### PUZZLING DEMOCRACY

When he was younger, Lommée and a friend bought two beat-up old VW beetles, stripped them down and rebuilt one of them, using the other for spare parts. There was a local mechanic who specialised in these cars, and they were able exchange parts with him for advice – an equally valuable resource for amateur car builders. You could file this activity and experience under a number of tags, but for



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Lommée it's like a puzzle that is more interesting because of the number of pieces that make up the whole. It's not a question of complexity or rocket science. He cites the way Lego never becomes waste, its conceptual sustainability and inherent properties of construction and deconstruction meaning that its shelf life is open-ended. You grow up, maybe you have kids, they grow up, but Lego is a globally active heirloom of play that defies the ageing process. Your pieces get passed onto the neighbours, the school, friends, family, charity, and make it from between-the-sofa-cushions to the other side of world.

In Lommée's work there are no physical borders to a conceptual mainland or peninsula, instead it is anchored in a place where generosity is a prominent topographical feature that invites rather directs thought. Just take a look at the YouTube clip of Keenan Cahill lip-synching with 50 Cent that makes up part of this visual collage: what does the boy in the bedroom, who has been viewed by millions of people around the world, say to your heart and mind? Open up? In balancing the scales, Lommée also looks to the past, sees the collapse of societies such as those on Easter Island, or how totalitarian propaganda utilises the power of mass social contact but counters it with urbanist and writer Jane Jacobs' community-based approach to city building, and ultimately trusts in the idea that democracy is everyone checking on everyone. <

[www.openstructures.net](http://www.openstructures.net)  
[intrastructures.net](http://intrastructures.net)

\* Taken from the poster of the 'how-to' manual for Yes! We're Open, an exhibition by Thomas Lommée at the Innovation Festival Kortrijk, 2010, Belgium

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