

CONTEMPORARY FREEDOM

FREEDOM & DESIGN: AN APPROACH

Freedom is rarely absolute. Rather than describing a state of complete independence, it unfolds within social, political and material conditions. It is most essential when freedom can be understood as the ability to act and think without immediate constraint. Yet this definition remains incomplete. Freedom always exists in relation to something, shaped by laws, norms, resources and power structures. Freedom is then described along at least two dimensions: negative freedom, freedom from constraint (such as coercion or restriction), and positive freedom, the freedom to act (to participate, express or create). In reality, these types are unevenly distributed and interpreted. This is also true for liberal states, which place concepts of freedom at their moral foundation. What constitutes freedom for one person may imply limitation for another. In a globally interconnected world, freedom is increasingly being frequently linked to the conditions under which others live. Freedom is therefore not a fixed state, but a relationship — one that is continuously negotiated. In Germany, this "state of freedom" is defined in the Basic Law and defined as a theoretical foundation for social conduct. The word "free" appears here in various forms around 64 times. This exhibition approaches concepts of freedom through design. Prisons are a straightforward example of how design can mediate freedom. Here, design is not understood as the isolated shaping of objects, but as a mediating practice within complex systems. It shapes the spaces we inhabit, the infrastructures we depend on, and the interfaces through which we interact. In this way, design influences who has access — to information, to opportunities, to the negotiation of freedom — and who does not.

At the same time, design plays a central role in the negotiation of freedom. As a practice, design is not only a means to create, but also a way to negotiate. Standards emerge of bodies, behaviours and forms of participation, often excluding those who do not conform to them. Even well-intentioned design can reinforce inequalities and create underlying complexities. "Positions on Freedom, Design and Its Boundaries" explores these dynamics. Rather than offering a single definition, the exhibition understands freedom as a contested and relational concept. Through objects, systems and narratives, it reflects on how freedom is produced, limited and experienced — and how design might contribute to rethinking and expanding it. The exhibition is a design influence who has access — to information, to opportunities, to the negotiation of freedom — and who does not.

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The exhibition is an official project within the framework of World Design Capital 2026 and was realised as part of the thing Magazine, an initiative by the thing Magazine. Developed in partnership with USM and the Frankfurt Museum of Contemporary Art, the exhibition is negotiated within the tension between institutional structures and corporate interests.

Why "Positions on Freedom, Design and Its Boundaries", ANTON RAHLWES, 2026

By bringing things into the world, designers shape our understanding of what is possible. Design is therefore not a neutral discipline. Even when it is not driven by explicit political intent, it carries political dimensions, through its materials, modes of production, processes of standardisation and questions of access. "Positions on Freedom" approaches design as a practice deeply embedded in social, economic and political contexts. Design does not only produce solutions; it also generates exclusions, hierarchies and new forms of normality. Within this framework, freedom does not appear as a given condition, but as something that is continuously shaped through these processes.

A central observation runs throughout the exhibition: freedom is inherently ambivalent. It can be understood in relation to its limits, whether spatial, social or individual. Design makes these tensions visible and negotiable, while also revealing the consequences of unfreedom.

The exhibition treats its title as a method. Structured in three parts, it unfolds the topic as a field through newly commissioned works by invited designers, a reader featuring theoretical contributions and conversations and a group exhibition developed through an open call and in collaboration with the museum.

Furthermore, the exhibition is guided by a curatorial position that does not understand freedom as the right of the strongest. Instead, it frames freedom as grounded in universal human rights and in forms of solidarity and empathy — among people and in relation to the environment.

Anton Rahlwies is a curator and writer working at the intersection of design, aesthetics and cultural discourse. He is co-founder of the thing Magazine and co-initiator and co-curator of the first Concept Biennale in Berlin.

Pos. 1
Gedankenräume, Anton & Lotfi Defant, 2026

The scenography of this exhibition is structured through three architectural interventions: a wall, a flat pedestal layer and two cubes. Together, they translate the curatorial framework into space. Each intervention corresponds to one of the exhibition's components — the reader, the group exhibition and the fellows — and explores how spatial design shapes the conditions under which freedom can be experienced.

The concept of freedom is understood here not as an absolute state, but as something shaped by limits and by something formed within constraints. It emerges from a built environment shaped by histories of destruction, construction and rearrangement. Within this context, the barrier becomes a central motif. Commonly perceived as a structure that restricts access and defines the conditions of possibility. This idea is translated into spatial form through minimal yet monumental display structures. The exhibition is structured around monolithic plinths based on the modular grid of the USM Haller system, referencing notions of standardisation and objecthood. Across the three interventions, distinct spatial conditions unfold, blocking, revealing and negotiating the boundaries of freedom. Each of the six interventions shapes how visitors engage, subtly directing what can be accessed or withheld. Lotfi Defant is a Berlin-based fashion designer and co-founder of network, a platform operating at the intersection of fashion, design, art and creative direction. Through an interdisciplinary approach, network brings together practitioners from fashion, product design, architecture, graphic design and film to develop collaborative formats.

Anton Defant is a Berlin-based fashion designer based in Berlin. His practice operates between product and sculpture, using space, furniture, and everyday objects as material. His work is defined by a conceptual approach grounded in a commitment to clarity, logic and precision.

Pos. 3
Living Archive of Freedom & Freedom, Autostrada Studios, 2026

Almost everything in this world is touched by design. The text you are reading now is, too. The result of numerous design decisions: typeface, paper, printing process, letter spacing, line height and more. In exhibitions in particular, visual design is one of the key tools of communication. Yet this contribution is rarely addressed or made explicit. Here, things are different. "Living Archive of Design & Freedom" was developed by the design and branding studio Autostrada Studios in Berlin. His practice operates between product and sculpture, using space, furniture, and everyday objects as material. His work is defined by a conceptual approach grounded in a commitment to clarity, logic and precision.

works on display. It brings together the essential information about the projects and makes it available in formats adapted to each context. At the same time, the list develops its own aesthetic quality — a kind of fetishisation of data. On this basis, the visual identity has been extended to further formats: a grid for the text, a mesh for the informational poster within the exhibition. Precisely because the list itself contains few visual elements, the choice of typeface becomes all the more significant. The decision to use the Garamond family is no coincidence. It is one of the oldest typeset styles still in use today, widely available as a standard font across digital systems, and traces back to the French punchcutter Claude Garamond in the sixteenth century. As a serif typeface with the small spaces between letters at the ends of letters it is known for its readability and has traditionally been used above all in book printing. In this sense, Garamond is a fitting choice for an exhibition on design and freedom: it points both to the origins of the printing industry and to the way in which it and its translation into the digital present, to projects across scales — from objects to exhibitions to long-term design strategy.

THE THING FELLOWS • USM

Within the framework of this exhibition, three designers were invited to develop new positions on the theme of freedom. Their practices span different disciplines and operate at the intersection of design and art, starting point, they were provided with a budget as well as the full set of components from the best-selling USM Haller configuration. The modular design system functions not only as a material, but also as a conceptual tool. The industrial design system offers a framework that simultaneously allows for openness and individual appropriation. The goal was explicitly not to develop new products for USM, but to produce independent, artistic interventions. The modular design system offers a framework that simultaneously allows for openness and individual appropriation. The goal was explicitly not to develop new products for USM, but to produce independent, artistic interventions. The modular design system offers a framework that simultaneously allows for openness and individual appropriation. The goal was explicitly not to develop new products for USM, but to produce independent, artistic interventions.

Pos. 4
Frankfurt Cabinet, Fatma Çankaya, 2026

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Pos. 5
"Freedom Is Contingent", Kelly Walters on Education and Black Visual History, 2026

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Between, Mio Kojima on German-Asian Identity Negotiations in Art and Design Schools, 2026

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Pos. 7
Liberty or La Morte, Vera Sacchetti on Design, Democracy and Freedom, 2026

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Pos. 8
Alllegedly Alluring Aesthetics, Anouk Melles on Art, Design, Aggression on the Bourgeois, 2026

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Pos. 9
Arbist Capitalism and Design by Djamal Elangui Okoro, 2026

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Pos. 10
"I Can't Imagine an Industry That Wouldn't Benefit More From a Discussion of Ethics", Inga Krümme in Conversation with James Hrust on Violence and Design, 2026

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The Big Shift Show, Anton Rahlwies on Fashion and Critical Masculinities, 2026

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Pos. 12
The Soft Shell of a World", Catarina Kohler on Writing, Arabic "taal huna" (come here) and the Paralysis by the Kurdish-Syrian rapper Hasan, who performs this persona in his videos. Since 2024, "Talahor" has developed into a prominent, often satirical TikTok trend, with Anton Rahlwies as its unofficial captain.

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What We Can Learn From Arendt About Design and Freedom by Mara Reckles, 2026

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Pos. 15
"A Truly Unbiased AI Is Not Possible", Serena Dorkova on AI Regulation and Black Feminism, 2026

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chromium as essential components of industrial production. The choice of materials creates a deliberate tension. While the chromed system presents a smooth, almost dematerialised surface that conceals its origins, wood or other make their production visible. They point to resources and global interdependencies that usually remain hidden within the finished object. In this way, the supposedly "timeless" system is re-situated within a material and historical context. Within this juxtaposition, an expanded notion of freedom is articulated as the ability not only to use existing systems, but to question and reconfigure them. The proposed elements are not conceived as finished products, but as a proposition, an attempt to render the system more open and legible. Johanna Seelmann is a designer working between Reykjavik and Leipzig, with an international practice spanning product design, spatial installations and strategic consultancy. Her studio collaborates with institutions, brands and cultural organisations to bring rigorous thinking and material sensitivity to projects across scales — from objects to exhibitions to long-term design strategy.

READER

Objects do not have intentions. They reflect what we project onto them. Because these interpretations can be partial or altered by prior assumptions, additional and more layered context can help to open up new perspectives. For this reason, a reader has been developed alongside the objects presented here. It can be understood as an independent collection of perspectives on freedom and design. By reading within the exhibition or purchased at the museum shop and via the thingmagazine.com for 22 Euros. The reader is currently only available in English. Touching permitted.

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Chair With Armrest, Benjamin Nagy, 2026

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ger embedded in the landscape but regulated through infrastructure. *Studio Ebbkiss* is a Zurich-based design practice founded in 2020 by industrial designer Denizay Apuoglu and architect Jonas Kissling. Their work operates between research and design, focusing on material flows, industrial residues, and urban approaches to making.

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