

# DESIGNING ECONOMIC CULTURES

Cultivating socially and politically  
engaged design practices against  
procedures of precarisation

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby certify that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Bianca Elzenbaumer

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account about the economic and other resources that supported this research, see appendix K.

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## ABSTRACT

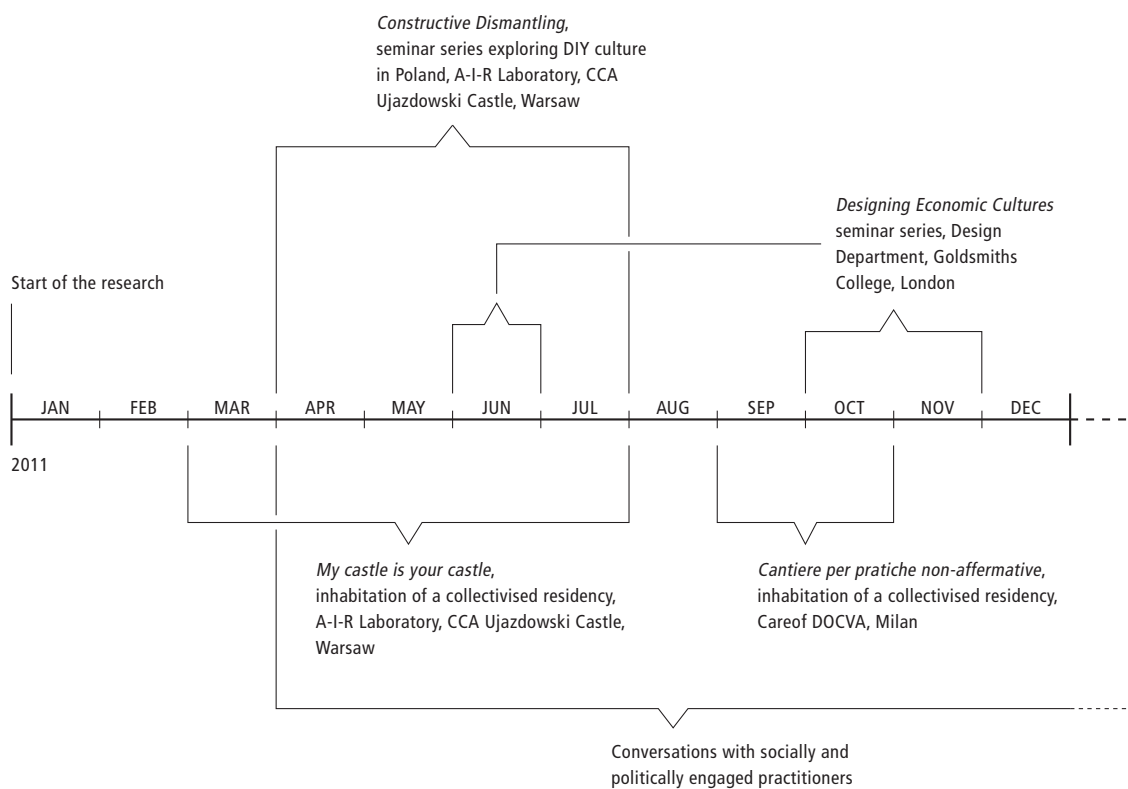
This practice-based research sets out to investigate and intervene in the tense relationship between the production of socially and politically relevant design work and the socio-economic precariousness many designers experience. Starting from an engagement with the precarious working conditions of designers, their genealogy over the last 30+ years and the role precarisation plays in forming docile creative subjects, the research moves on to a wider critique of the political economy and its precarising value practices. Based on this analysis, it then considers the strategic possibilities of mobilising design practices around commonly produced, used and reproduced resources in order to undo procedures of precarisation.

The trajectory of this process of exploration is shaped by a series of practical experiments constructed around the inhabitation of micro-economies of support that allowed for a collective engagement with the issues and strategies researched. These inhabitations took as their starting point the resources my own design practice, Brave New Alps, was offered throughout the course of this research. Thus, they took the form of two shared residencies, one of three months in Warsaw (*My castle is your castle*) and a second of two months in Milan (*Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative*), out of which a design collective emerged that still works together. It is the experience of living through these support structures that directs the engagement with theory in order to establish decisive elements to overcome blockages and loops in practice.

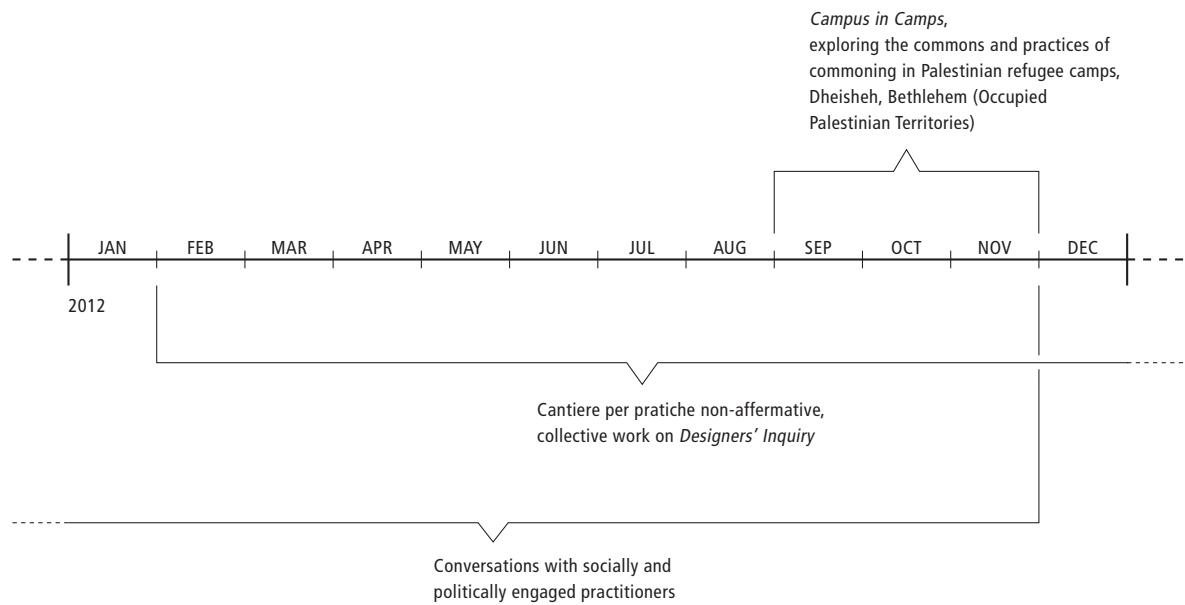
The core elements that emerged as helpful in moving this research forward were characterised by an engagement with how designers are trained to accept and reproduce the conditions that precarise them, with how this training inserts itself in the wider logic of a capitalist economy and, finally, with how noncapitalist values can serve as points of orientation for constructing de-precaring design practices. In considering these key points, the aim of this research is to provide a series of both conceptual and practical tools for designers that can be mobilised in the creation of economic cultures that defy precarisation within and beyond the field of the profession. However, the research is not primarily concerned with stabilising precarious design practices as they are, but rather with creating conditions in which it is possible for designers to imagine and actuate what they could become when not pressured by precariousness to conform to the needs of the market.

## TIMELINE

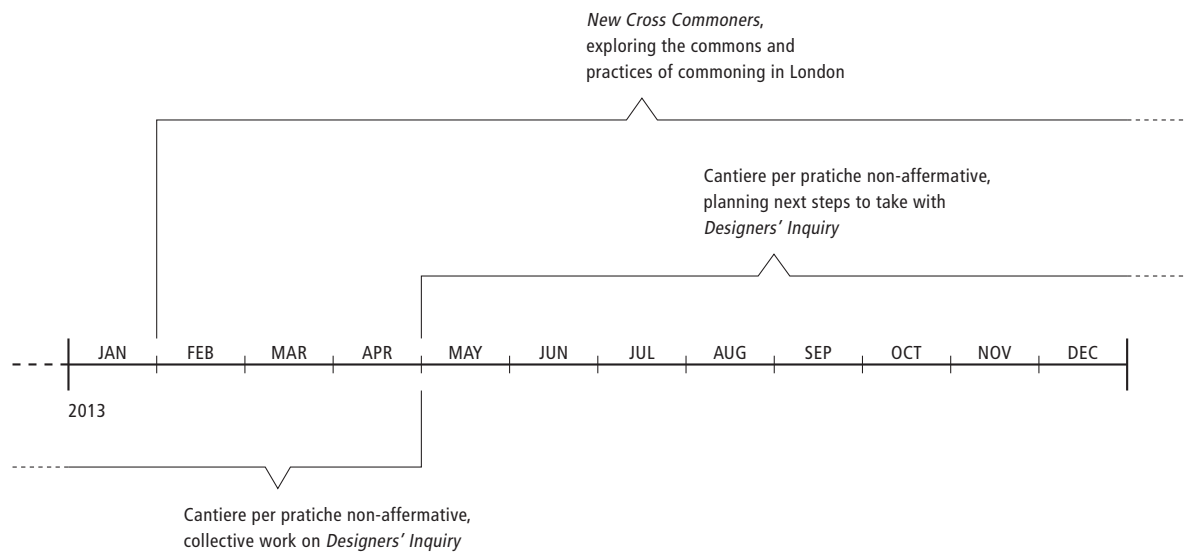
### OVERVIEW OF PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH ELEMENTS



**TIMELINE**  
**OVERVIEW OF PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH ELEMENTS**  
(continued)



**TIMELINE**  
**OVERVIEW OF PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH ELEMENTS**  
(continued)



## VISUAL ABSTRACT



FIGURE 1 The website accompanying the research, [www.designingeconomiccultures.net](http://www.designingeconomiccultures.net)



**FIGURE 2** *My castle is your castle* – inhabitation of an economy of support, a collectivised artist residency at A-I-R Laboratory, Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, April to July 2011



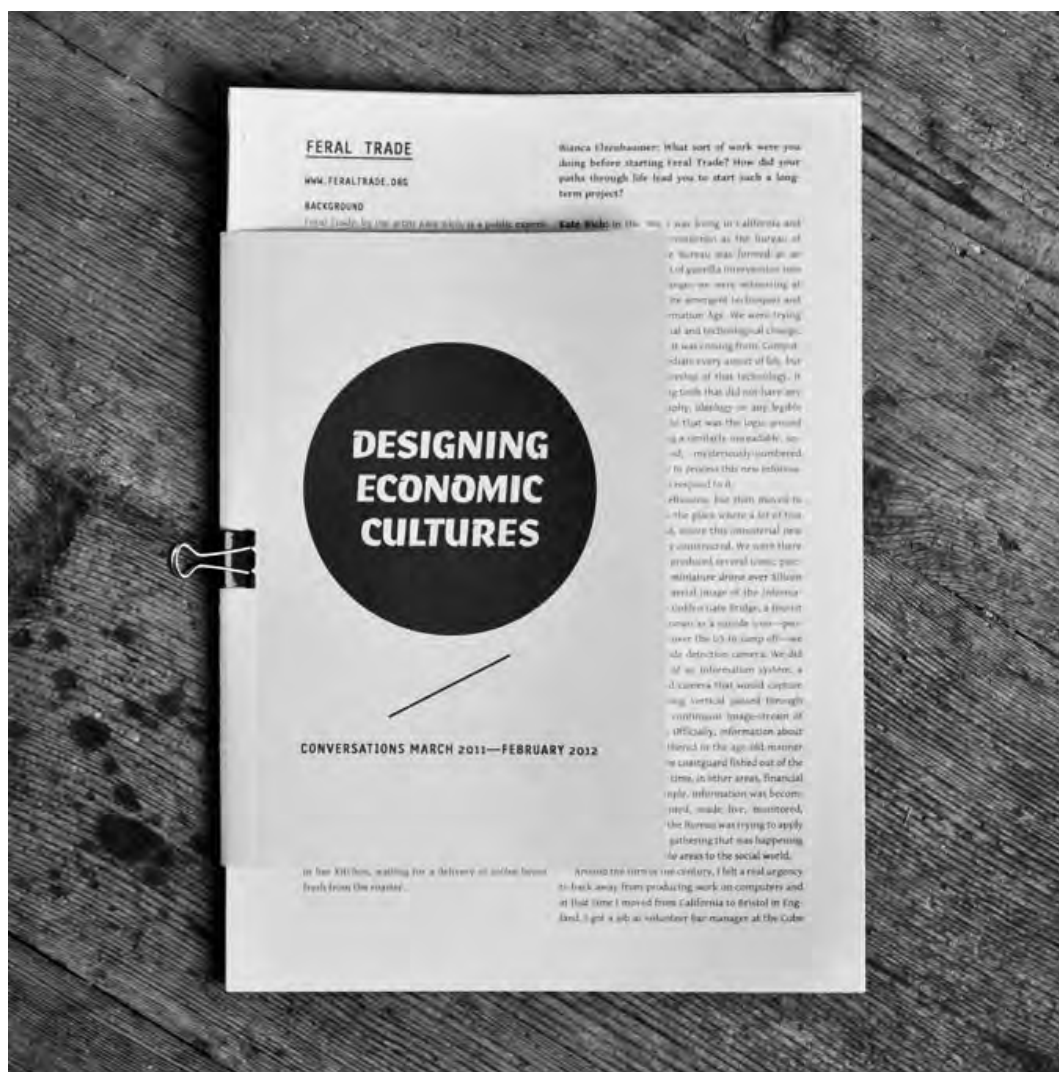
**FIGURE 3** *Constructive dismantling* – a seminar series on DIY cultures in Poland before and after 1989, A-I-R Laboratory, CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, May to July 2011





**FIGURE 4** *Public A-I-R micro-festival – three days of activities around the theme of alternative economies, CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, 29-31 July 2011*





**FIGURE 5** Conversations with socially and politically engaged practitioners – edited and disseminated both online and in print



**FIGURE 6** *Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative* – inhabitation of an economy of support, a collectivised residency at Careof DOCVA, Milan, September and October 2011



**FIGURE 7** *Designers' Inquiry* – an investigation into the socio-economic conditions of the designers in Italy, Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative, 2012/2013



**FIGURE 8** *Commons & Commoning* – exploring the common(s) in Palestinian refugee camps in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Campus in Camps, September to November 2012





**FIGURE 9** New Cross Commoners – exploring commons and practices of commoning in the London neighbourhood of New Cross, February 2013 – ongoing

# INTRODUCTION

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Many designers experience a tense relationship between their desire to produce work that questions given power relations and their need to produce work that sells so that they can make a living. Precarious working conditions – marked by insecure, contingent and flexible work – furthermore influence not only the kind of issues designers dedicate their skills and time to, but also the ways in which they approach them. In the assurance of a foreseeable career and life narrative, critical social engagement in design is often being sacrificed or diminished in order to cater to the needs of the market. My personal experience of a whole range of symptoms of precariousness, including highly insecure working arrangements, the constant need for maximum flexibility and its associated anxieties, has led me to question the long-term sustainability of critically-engaged design practices. However, I also observed designers experiencing similarly precarious conditions, who had chosen to comply with the needs of the market in an attempt to escape precariousness. From this situation, the question emerges of how, as designers, we can contribute to the creation of economic cultures that allow practitioners to pursue critically-engaged projects. How to create work settings and support structures that positively affect designers' abilities to address unconventional environmental, political and social issues? What values and standpoints to adopt in the creation of such enabling structures?

Starting from this initial observation and the resulting questions, through practice-based research, we will investigate how to get out of the current undesirable deadlock of choices that many designers are presented with. We will explore three main areas: firstly, we will examine how precariousness plays out in the lives of designers and its developments in this respect over the past 30+ years of neoliberal politics. By drawing on the work of Foucault, we will focus on how precariousness is entangled in the shaping of subjectivity and modes of practice of designers. Secondly, we will engage in an analysis of precarising procedures through a critique of the capitalist mode of production. Here we will consider how capitalist values shape the social practices according to which designers approach the use of time, the definition of innovation and the formation of social relations. Thirdly, we will explore a range of autonomist and feminist autonomist social practices that designers could draw on for the creation of de-precarising work settings and support structures.

In working through these three areas, drawing both on practice as well as on theory, we will build up a series of practical as well as conceptual tools that can

be deployed for re-routing the relation between critically engaged design practices and precariousness. By exploring how we are formed as creative subjects and how precarising values are ingrained in our lives, we will put together a tool-box of concepts, values and practices for precarious designers that has the potential to open up possibilities of thinking, feeling and intervening in the world that may be less apparent at the moment.<sup>2</sup> In the construction of such an operational tool-box of concepts, values and practices, the necessity for designers to engage in different economic becoming emerges particularly in relation to the desire to sustain long-term critical social engagement in design. Throughout this research it becomes apparent that a quest for the long-term sustainability of such practices requires the active political engagement of designers in terms of how they organise both their practices and their lives in order not to constantly reinforce and reproduce precarising procedures. Aiming to produce critically-engaged content whilst practicing in conventional ways underestimates the substantial potential designers have to contribute to social change not only through the content of their work, but also through their ways of doing and being.

To go further by reframing the issues around designers and precariousness in relation to designers' subjectivities, this thesis not only proposes ways of dealing with precarising procedures beyond the individual level, but also elaborates theoretical points of orientation that allow for a more strategic evaluation of how designers are – and can – contribute to social transformation more generally. Thus, the prático-theoretical tool-box elaborated through this research can complement the teaching of design as well as already existing design practices, because the knowledges and strategies elaborated can be mobilised by multiple actors who want to strategically foster transformative design practices. An engagement with how power relations play out in precarising procedures, paired with a feminist and autonomist Marxist critique of the political economy and the social practices this critique fosters, can constitute a basis on which to imagine cultures that undo the dynamics of precarisation. By proposing noncapitalist points of orientation for designers, the

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2 This approach relates to the way Gilles Deleuze, in a conversation with Michel Foucault, defines theory as a tool-box that needs to function and be of use beyond itself: Michel Foucault, "Intellectuals and Power," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald Fernand Bouchard (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p.208. Furthermore, it relates to the way Brian Massumi enriches the idea of the tool-box by proposing to test the functionality of a concept through a series of questions: "The question is not: is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make possible to think? What new emotions does it make possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body?" Brian Massumi, "Translator's Foreword: Pleasures of Philosophy," in *A Thousand Plateaus by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari* (London: Continuum Books, 2004), p.xv-xvi.



initial questions around precariousness are gradually shifted from an individual to a collective plane that allows for a strategic redefinition of contemporary design practices.

### **Research approach**

The approach to generating this prático-theoretical tool-box is influenced by the way my own collaborative design practice *Brave New Alps*, in which I have engaged since 2005 with my *compagno* Fabio Franz, works through issues by literally “inhabiting” them. This means that we enter or create the contexts we are working on and inhabit them on a daily basis for certain periods of time. When, for example, we decided to work on alternative pedagogical approaches to teaching during our MA, we set up a self-organised department that we ran together with about thirty fellow students over the period of seven weeks.<sup>3</sup> This method of inhabitation, that constitutes the major practical tool for this design research, was initially inspired by Irit Rogoff’s reflection on how meaning is produced differently through the multiple relations that are generated when living through things. It is an approach to knowledge production rooted in feminist practice that implies entering an issue through a process of experience and experimentation, thus engaging in what Rogoff calls “embodied criticality.”<sup>4</sup> What we find inspiring about this feminist approach is that it denies a reliance on unmoveable assumptions, that by wholly investing one’s subjectivity, one removes the distance, which might allow for a safe and disembodied analysis and design proposal.

By adopting an embodied approach to the issues of this research, we aim to generate what feminist theorist Donna Haraway refers to as “situated knowledges,” i.e. knowledges that are generated from an always specific standpoint and that do not distance the knowing subject from everybody else but instead engages in collective processes of knowledge production. In this sense, we understand situated knowledges as always embodied and thus complex as well as contradictory rather than (apparently) objective, disembodied and simplistic.<sup>5</sup> This feminist approach to knowledge production that goes back to a critique of a seemingly neutral knowledge

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3 The period of pre- and post-inhabitation extended over the whole academic year, see Bianca Elzenbaumer et al., eds., *Department 21* (London: Royal College of Art, 2010).

4 Irit Rogoff, “‘Smuggling’ - an Embodied Criticality,” transversal, <http://eipcp.net/dlfiles/rogoff-smuggling>.

5 Donna Jeanne Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

produced from the male, white and Western standpoint, acknowledges, as Sandra Harding points out, that “knowledge is constructed through political desires, interests and values,”<sup>6</sup> and that these are too often about securing the exploitation, oppression or invisibility of others. Therefore, inhabiting this research with the desire to create situated knowledges is also an attempt to collectively address Foucault’s question of “how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them.”<sup>7</sup> In being informed by such questions, this design research is also continually accompanied by the question of who the created knowledges are siding with, in what ways they are doing so and what kind of society they are instrumental in creating.

Adopting this feminist approach, then, means that our position gradually shifts and adjusts as we develop the tool-box with which to intervene in the processes of precarisation. It also means that by inhabiting this research, we are not only laying our design practice open to transformation, but also our subjectivities. Furthermore, we will reflect on and experiment with ways in which to synchronise the desire to create socially relevant design work with the design processes we adopt and the lives by which we sustain such production. In this sense, this research is not primarily about finding ways in which precarious designers can stabilise their existing working lives, but about creating economic cultures that make space for transformations, space to experiment with what a “meaningful” design practice can entail today.

By assuming that “the personal is political,”<sup>8</sup> we will move from analysing our and other designers’ personal troubles with precariousness to an engagement with the wider economic and political procedures that generate these troubles. In this move from the concrete to the abstract, we will generate “relays” between practice and theory in order to both overcome blockages or loops in practice and to

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6 Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women’s Lives* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1991), p.146.

7 In his 1978 lecture to the *Société française de la philosophie*, Foucault proposes, “the art of not being governed quite so much” as a first definition of critique. Here he refers to governmentalisation as the subjugation of individuals through the arts of government as exercised, for example, by pedagogy, politics and economics. Michel Foucault, “What Is Critique?,” in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), p.44-47.

8 This slogan accompanied the work of feminist consciousness raising groups in the 1960s. See Carol Hanisch, “The Personal Is Political,” <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PersonalisPol.pdf>.

evaluate and inform theory.<sup>9</sup> During this process, we will always return back – if at times in a zigzagging fashion – to the concrete in the various areas of our lives in order to transform them. In doing so, we are borrowing from a line of engagement within what is termed “militant research,” i.e. a way of doing research that wants to collectively re-appropriate the capacity of “worlds-making,” a kind of research that “questions, problematises and pushes the real through a series of concrete procedures”<sup>10</sup> and that, through its collective element, constantly questions the role of a leading expert figure, who apparently refashions the world on his own.

Therefore, the research not only introduces questions in “places where formerly there was a seeming consensus about what one did and how one went about it,”<sup>11</sup> as prefigured by Rogoff’s embodied criticality, but will also propose other ways of doing and becoming that we can experiment with. In doing so, our focus is on collective becomings beyond precariousness, because there is no way we can immerse ourselves alone in our present in order to transform it. Being, however, aware that the complexities around processes of precariousness necessarily exceed our capacity to know them,<sup>12</sup> we attempt to make sense of them from the angle of precarious designers who perceive precariousness not so much as a monolith than as a series of procedures of precarisation in which it is possible to intervene.

Regarding the way the research unfolded, it was inscribed in an attempt to structure it in ways that allowed for the framing of questions and possible actions, both in relation to practice as well as theory, together with other practitioners. From the outset, there was a desire for the research to exist in and interact with the world throughout its evolution, rather than to place it in the world only once completed. Therefore, the research entailed two intense inhabitations during which, with my own practice Brave New Alps, I shared a working and living space over an extended period of time with other practitioners, working through the research questions by living them out. Moreover, the research was opened up to a larger public through a website that, as the research advanced, built up in content,

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9 Deleuze evokes the image of relays between theory and practice in order to pierce through the wall of theory. Foucault, “Intellectuals and Power,” p.205-06.

10 Precarias a la Deriva cited by Team Colors Collective, “Workshop: What Is Militant Research?,” <http://teamcolors.wordpress.com/2009/06/08/workshop-what-is-militant-research/>. For a genealogy of militant research, see: Marta Malo de Molina, “Common Notions,” transversal, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406/malo/en> and <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0707/malo/en>.

11 Irit Rogoff, “What Is a Theorist?,” <http://www.kein.org/node/62>.

12 John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), p.6.

served – and continues to serve – as a tool for other designers who might be asking similar questions.<sup>13</sup> On this website, the research activities that were open to the public are documented, such as the series of seminars I organised at Goldsmiths revolving around my initial research questions. This allowed me to open questions up for conversation with other designers, as well as to enter into conversation with practitioners who had already investigated different aspects of these questions in their work. These moments of opening up the research for debate, were important, as through them, it became evident how little many design students knew about the world of work (especially if they have never been out of education), how there is a tendency to idealise future working lives and how very often conversation among designers is lacking conceptual points of orientation that could help make sense of the precarising dynamics within the creative industries.<sup>14</sup> The knowledges created through these seminars, and through other moments when the research was presented publicly within the context of design,<sup>15</sup> were important triggers for introducing theoretical elements into this thesis which might support designers in more clearly identifying precarising procedures which are too often taken as the norm that cannot be challenged.

The following further moments throughout this research were points at which Fabio and I intensely engaged with others in thinking through the questions and tentative answers we were formulating, which I will expand later: in 2011, a series of seminars looking specifically into DIY practices of providing for one's needs at Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw; in 2012, the production of a fanzine on the common and the commons within Campus in Camps, an experimental university programme within the Palestinian refugee camp of Dheisheh; since February 2013, the exploration of commons and practices of commoning within the framework of the London-based group New Cross Commoners.

This opening up and collectivising of the research prompted not only new paths for investigation, but through the people, discussions and shared experiences, constituted new desires for action. The various – and at times interrelated – collectivities that emerged from the research process have also become the very structures that made it possible to imagine strategies and tactics against precarisation, which

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13 [www.designingeconomiccultures.net](http://www.designingeconomiccultures.net)

14 See appendix A for the topics and invited speakers of each seminar.

15 See appendix I for a timeline of these moments of public engagement.

from an individualised position would not have been apparent. Moreover, this collective engagement allowed a rethinking of what design practices can become today if they want to critically engage with existing power relations.<sup>16</sup>

### **Backdrop of this research**

Since the writing of the proposal for this practice-based research in the summer 2010, we have lived through a tightening of austerity measures in many European countries. These measures imposed by politicians, the European Central Bank and international rating agencies, should consolidate national budgets that have been wrecked by bailing out the banks as well as through years of systemic overspending and under-taxation of corporations and the wealthy. In their desperate attempts to save national economies, politicians have begun to engage in savage cuts to welfare and culture: health services have been cut and privatised; pensions and benefits are being cut, while taxes are placed on goods of daily use so that they hit the majority of workers rather than the particularly wealthy; education has been made prohibitively expensive in places like the UK; research – especially in the humanities – has been made unfeasible in places like Italy. Meanwhile, asking for social justice and a critical engagement with the unfolding global processes has become marked as too leftist and not a priority on the nationalist, self-protective agendas of many. These developments, which are affecting us all, but perhaps even more so the strong protests against them such as the 15M in Spain or Occupy in the US and the UK, have undoubtedly contributed to shaping and, at times, radicalising this research. These developments constantly fuelled the desire to go to the root of precariousness and to look for theoretical, as well as practical, proposals that are rooted in a radical critique of the political economy. Moreover, they have prompted me to consider precariousness not as a given and static state of things, but rather as a process of precarisation that can be accelerated, slowed down, directed and resisted.<sup>17</sup>

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16 To complicate the fact that the need – as well as desire – for more collective work emerged ever more strongly throughout this research, my own and my common practice with Fabio is put in a tricky position, since for this research to be validated as a PhD it requires independent, individual work. So this is a curious and at times unfortunate, as well as tense, position to be in, especially in regards to writing up this thesis, as this activity remained most solidly individualised due to the fact that my precarious fellow practitioners have little time to sit down in order to craft texts collectively.

17 This approach is also reflected in how Isabell Lorey describes precariousness as an ongoing process of becoming precarious governing people by the means of insecurity. See Isabell Lorey, "Governmentality and Self-Precarization," transversal, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/en/print> ; Isabell Lorey, "Governmental Precarization," transversal, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0811/lorey/en>.

Given the situated approach I bring to this practice-based research, a note on my own background in relation to precariousness and social engagement – both in terms of upbringing and design practice – seems due in order to clarify the direction of the research. I have grown up as the only child of a single mother, who, after her separation from my father, was stranded with a bank loan that, at times, took on extremely high interest rates due to the recession of the 1980s. Thus, my upbringing in a small village in the Italian Alps was marked by the constant threat of having our house and small local café reposessed by the bank. This situation meant that my mother was constantly working in order to repay the loan, whilst my father was mostly absent exploring the opportunities opened up to him by having left his job in the factory and subsequently dedicating himself to being a ski teacher within the newly emerging tourist industry. Thus, for most of my childhood, I saw my mother struggling with debt, the consequences of overwork and the task of taking care of me. This did mean that I was free to spend my time outside of kindergarten and school to roam the village with other local children or on my own. Moreover, it meant not only that my grandmother and one of my aunts would often take care of me, but that I would also spend a lot of time at my mother's local café interacting with a diverse group of locals of all ages and, in this sense, that more generally I experienced a childhood being “taken care of” by the local community.

More recently, my position with regards to precariousness and social issues has been marked by my collaborative practice Brave New Alps in which I engage with my *compagno* Fabio Franz. We began working together during our BA in 2005, feeling that together we could make of design what we had both wanted it to be. Prior to collaborating, we disliked the goals towards which we were urged to apply our lateral thinking and creative skills. However, having begun working together, we realised that we could in fact use these skills to work on a combination of social, political and environmental issues, through both self-initiated and commissioned projects. Furthermore, since our undergraduate course, we have integrated our practice in a series of experiences that have significantly shaped our thinking: for example, a year of social service with drug addicts during which we realised the extent to which public services are more interested in removing addicts from an otherwise smoothly-running society rather than supporting them in changing their situation. Subsequently, I completed an MA in Mediation and International Peacekeeping that introduced approaches to non-violent communication and that took us several times as Brave New Alps to Palestine, where we explored what our design skills could

bring to shifting the grounds of discussion around the conflict there. Equipped with these kinds of experiences and experimentation, we both went on to do MAs in design during which we would often hear comments about the impossibility of making a living were we to continue to hold on to our “idealist” approach – a position we did not want to accept unchallenged. The combination of these personal experiences, more complex than presented here in an abbreviated form, are, I believe, significant as to how my analysis, attention and desires move through this research.

### **Outline of thesis structure**

The structure of this thesis is an attempt to interweave practice and theory, whilst allowing them both space to unfold. Thus we work our way through the research questions by moving back and forth between practice and theory, seeing how, with each instance of prático-theoretical engagement, the possibilities of re-routing procedures of precarisation are adjusted, shifted and multiplied. Prompted by blockages in design practice, we will thus engage with theory in the desire to construct not only an adequate but an operative, theoretical horizon, one that supports the construction of openings where none could previously have been imagined. This constructed theoretical horizon is then explored through practice, which almost inevitably demands a return to theory in order to rework, increase and fine tune the theoretical points of orientation in order to relate them more closely to the necessities and complexities of practice.

Regarding terminology, it is important to note that I decided not to use the term “precarity” – an English neologism from the Italian *precarietà* – because it is already very much tied to specific movements and protests against precariousness that began to unfold in Mediterranean European countries from 2000 onwards.<sup>18</sup> I recognise these movements not only as inspiration for this research, but as extremely important in having brought precarity into public debate. However, I consider the term “precariousness” as more useful for my argument, being less tied to a specific,

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18 To cite only a few collectives that are part of this movement: in France, Les intermittents du spectacle emerged in 2002. In Italy, the Chainworkers have been active since 1999; in 2001, they began the MayDay Parade, a day dedicated to raising the issue of precarity within public space and in 2004, the group created San Precario, the patron saint of the precarious, in 2005 they started the anti-fashion label, Serpica Naro.

For an account of precarity struggles, see, for example María Isabel Casas-Cortés, “Social Movements as Sites of Knowledge Production: Precarious Work, the Fate of Care and Activist Research in a Globalizing Spain” (University of North Carolina, 2009), p.321-418. Marcello Tari and Ilaria Vanni, “On the Life and Deeds of San Precario, Patron Saint of Precarious Workers and Lives,” [http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/vanni\\_tari\\_print.html](http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/vanni_tari_print.html).; Brave New Alps, “Conversations: Zoe Romano,” <http://www.designingeconomiccultures.net/zoe-romano/>. Brave New Alps, “Conversations: Image-Shift,” <http://www.designingeconomiccultures.net/image-shift/>.



recent historic period and location, instead read as denoting a condition that accompanies the capitalist mode of production since its initial developments.<sup>19</sup> Thus, in using this term, I want to explicitly tie my argumentation more widely to the working and living conditions generated by a capitalist economy. This also means that in the following exploration of how designers can contribute to alternative economic cultures, the focus is not only on how to de-precarise designers as they currently exist, but will circle around the desire to substantially challenge and reinvent the way designers work and live – to consider how to employ creativity not to sustain a competitive market economy but rather to invent other ways of living and relating to one another.

### *Part 1 – Precarisation of designers as a modulating procedure*

In Part 1, it is the experience of precariousness among designers that prompts the engagement in sociological research in order to help make sense of the messy precarious working conditions designers experience, but seldom speak about in systemic terms. Here, we will draw primarily on the work of feminist sociologists Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill, alongside a bottom-up inquiry that I produced together with the Italian design collective *Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative* (Construction site for non-affirmative practice) between 2012 and 2013. Following these sociological accounts, we will trace how the precariousness designers experience today has developed since the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist production. This contextualisation of present conditions, which draws, amongst others, on an analysis of management literature produced by sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, is useful to avoid fostering a victimisation of precarious designers that fails to see the bigger economic picture.

From this outline of empirical and historical circumstances around precariousness, we will move on to reflect on the first peer-to-peer support structure set up by Brave New Alps in order to inhabit the possibilities and blockages related to attempts of undoing procedures of precarisation through the sharing of

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19 Here, I am also following Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt's suggestion that precariousness denotes "all forms of insecure, contingent, flexible work – from illegalised, casualised and temporary employment, to homeworking, piecework and freelancing. In turn, precarity signifies both the multiplication of precarious, unstable, insecure forms of living and, simultaneously, new forms of political struggle and solidarity that reach beyond the traditional models of the political party or trade union." See Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt, "In the Social Factory?," *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 7-8 (2008): p.3. In doing so, I make a more specific use of the term than Judith Butler, who, in her reflections on the violent political developments after the attacks to the Twin Towers in 2001, denotes "precarious life" as being exposed to a consideration of what life is grievable and therefore liveable: Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p.30.



material resources. This inhabitation, entitled *My castle is your castle*, took place during a five-month stay in Warsaw at the *Artist-In-Residence Laboratory* of the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle. It consisted in the “collectivisation” of the residency’s resources by sharing them with six other practitioners over a period of three months. Moreover, we decided to use a portion of our production budget to organise a series of public seminars to explore how Polish DIY culture dealt with economic constraints before and after the fall of the socialist regime in 1989. The experience of this first inhabitation and the engagement with activist DIY culture, brought to the fore the extent to which, as designers and practitioners in adjacent fields, we are intrinsically “coded” to take precariousness as the norm. Through reflection on the inhabitation, it becomes distinctly apparent that our unquestioned ways of working and living are often closely tied into precarising procedures.

To reflect on these (self-)precarising behaviours we return to theory to better understand how these behaviours are generated and, thus, how they might be overcome. We draw on Foucault’s notion of governmentality in relation to discipline and techniques of the self, alongside Deleuze’s notion of control societies. Thinking with Foucault and Deleuze helps clarify the crucial role design education, as well as the discourse around what constitutes an appropriate design practice, play in (re)producing processes of precarisation through the production of docile, creative subjects.

By moving back and forth between practice and theory, in this first part of the thesis we will assemble a series of tools that help define the main procedures of precarisation, their symptoms, as well as their recent historical development. Moreover, we venture to develop tools to detect the blockages within ourselves that we need to overcome if wanting to design precariousness out of our lives.

### *Intermezzo<sup>20</sup> – Capitalist value production, designers and precarisation*

In the Intermezzo, we look at how processes of precarisation are related to capitalist modes of production. Here, we analyse the extent to which precarisation is a crucial element in the maximisation of profits within this specific economic system. To trace how and why practices around precariousness are embedded in the capitalist economy, we first draw on the work of Karl Marx to explore the basic principles that capital accumulation relies on and how they play out in practice. In doing so,

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20 This part is titled Intermezzo because it stands as a purely reflective excursus between Part 1 and Part 2, which are both constructed around the two major inhabitations undertaken within the framework of this research.

we untangle the core principles of, among others, the processes of exchange and of the production of surplus value that take place within capitalism. Furthermore, we engage with how productive labour is defined by capital and how this definition is instrumental in generating a precarious class of workers. Once we have assembled a series of theoretical tools that allows for a strategic analysis of the precarising processes unfolding in a capitalist economy, we use them to trace the social practices they foster and how they play out in the working lives of designers.

In this second step, when we move from the abstract to the concrete, we take up Massimo De Angelis' suggestion that the values we take for granted (or that we aspire to) are also the ones that influence our everyday practices within capitalism.<sup>21</sup> We adopt this as an understanding of capitalist principles in order to analyse how everyday practices of time, innovation and competition unfold within the field of design. Here we focus, for example, on absurd practices of free labour and the discourse that accompanies them, on the often problematic and actually precarising approaches to social innovation and entrepreneurship, and finally, on how competition as a mode of social relation fragments designers and produces constraints rather than "freedom."

Through the analysis of the Intermezzo, we build up a series of analytical tools that allow us to see an economic culture as collectively established and maintained through everyday practices. These tools serve not only for analysis, however, but can also be deployed for the strategic modulation of concrete practices in order to undo and/or exit precarising procedures. In this function, these tools are crucial in approaching Part 2 of this thesis.

### *Part 2 – Designing commons against precarisation*

In Part 2, we explore a series of socio-economic values and practices of counter-conduct that designers could adopt to re-route their practices, and their lives, away from precarising procedures. Deploying the conceptual tools developed in Part 1 and the Intermezzo, we here draw on autonomist and feminist Marxist writings in order to consider how designers could change their practices with regards to content, processes, social relations, and self-perception. We begin by drawing on the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, since in their writings they have extensively engaged with the possibilities of counter-conduct within cognitive work. Through

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21 Massimo De Angelis, *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

this, we engage with the concept of “biopolitical production” as the potential creation of social practices by subjects that refuse to comply with imposed discipline and control.<sup>22</sup> We also consider the concept of “the common” as an element that allows us to break out of individualised imaginaries. Furthermore, we explore the autonomist proposal of the “refusal of work,” albeit through the feminist inflection given to it by Kathi Weeks, understood not as an end to all activities, but by a proliferation of activities that experiment with different social relations and modes of production.

Having thought through these autonomist approaches, we move to an analysis of the core inhabitation and experimentation of this research, the *Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative*. We trace the unfolding of the two-month collectivised residency in Milan at Careof DOVCA, a non-profit space for contemporary artistic research, which I organised with Brave New Alps in September and October 2011. Here, we see how the experience in Warsaw and the initial engagement with autonomist writings prompted the setting up of a space that would allow for more strategic sharing, reflecting and researching of methods to undo procedures of precarisation. Having outlined how the co-residency unfolded in this instance, we trace how from it the *Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative* emerged as a collective of designers who have since continued to work and research together. In engaging with how the activities the collective – of which I am part – have since developed, we focus on the bottom-up investigation of the socio-economic conditions of designers in Italy, *Designers’ Inquiry*, that the collective produced between February 2012 and April 2013. Reflecting on the *Cantiere* is then a way to analyse one of the many forms a collective engagement with processes of precarisation can take among designers.

Following the questions raised by this inhabitation and our subsequent collective becoming, we explore a series of feminist Marxist concepts that move closer towards the messiness, complexity and material constraints that emerge when wanting to undo the everyday experiences of precariousness. Through the work of, in particular, Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Massimo De Angelis, we explore the potential the practice of commoning has to re-route design practice as a mode of addressing our needs and desires collectively without being tied to the precarising mechanisms of the market. In this exploration of the potential of commoning, we further tie into reflections on the work of reproduction and practices

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22 Hardt and Negri elaborate on biopolitical production in all three volumes of their trilogy, *Empire*, *Multitude* and *Commonwealth*. See for example, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), p.151-52.

of care as important elements in the (re)creation of human beings by responding to their needs and desires rather than to the needs of the economy for docile workers. This exploration will be relayed through collective practice-based engagements with concrete practices of commoning taking place in both the Palestinian refugee camp of Dheisheh (Occupied Palestinian Territories) and the London neighbourhood of New Cross. This series of relay processes finally leads to a proposal of how time, innovation and social relations could be appropriated along the value practices of the commons, towards creating ways of life that are de-precarising both for designers as well as those designed for.

## **PART 1**

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Precarisation of designers as a  
modulating procedure

## 1. INTRODUCTION TO PART 1

Design students are producing an astonishing amount of work that is driven by social, environmental and political concerns. What is even more astonishing is how few of these concerns remain once they start working in the ‘real’ world. The social, environmental and political engagement undertaken by design students very often fades away after graduation, or at the latest around the age of 35,<sup>23</sup> when they have become exhausted by precarious working conditions characterised by lack of material welfare, stability and security. Indeed, working as a ‘regular’ design practitioner is already difficult within the creative industries and although taking a critical position towards serving the needs of the market seems plausible to many, it is also perceived as a tough stance to take within the current economic system. And so it is widely accepted that designers, at some point, will necessarily need to make a choice between financial stability and meaningful work. Not wanting to take this dynamic as a given, how can we create and cultivate economic cultures that allow for the continued development of socially and politically engaged design practices?

To begin to explore this tricky yet pressing question, in Part 1 of this thesis, by drawing on sociological accounts as well as an inquiry I co-produced throughout this research,<sup>24</sup> I will trace the diffuse precarious working and living conditions designers find themselves embedded in and will look at how these contribute to encouraging designers to give up on their social, environmental and political concerns. By taking this almost bird’s-eye view on the situation of designers, it becomes possible to comprehend the problems and difficulties of single designers as systemic and not simply tied to individuals.

To proceed with the mapping of the current precariousness of designers, I will consider how today’s conditions have gradually developed over the last forty years with the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist production. In doing so, I will outline how current conditions and perspectives of the future have changed for contemporary designers in comparison to older generations, I will also define precarious

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23 Both in a conversation with Adrian de la Court, teaching at the Institute for Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship (ICCE) at Goldsmiths College, London, and in an interview with Henning Krause, president of the German association of graphic designers (BDG), it was mentioned that designers of any kind are dropping out of the profession between the ages of 35 to 40 because of the insecure working conditions.

24 See chapter 13 for an account of how this inquiry has been produced. See appendix B for an original copy of the report or download it from Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative, “Designers’ Inquiry: An Inquiry on the Socio-Economic Condition of Designers in Italy,” <http://www.pratichenonaffermative.net/inquiry/en/>. (subsequently abbreviated as Cantiere, *Inquiry*)

designers in relation to other precarious workers to underline the political relevance of engaging with this issue.

After this initial mapping, I will recount and reflect on the first practical experiment, *My castle is your castle*, through which – with my collaborative practice Brave New Alps – I attempted to live through possible critical engagements with precariousness early on in this research. This experiment was set up as an inhabitation in spring/summer 2011 at the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw and consisted in the collectivisation of an artist residency. In analysing this first physical inhabitation of my research questions, I will primarily draw on reflections triggered by engagement with Polish activist groups which took place during the same period.

Prompted by the experience of *My castle is your castle*, I will analyse the extent to which designers are not only disciplined into, but they themselves constantly conform to, a mode of working and living that perpetuates, accelerates and exacerbates precariousness. In this analysis, I will particularly draw on the work around governmentality, discipline and control produced by Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, as well as its contemporary declinations through Gerald Raunig. By tracing procedures of (self-)precarisation both within the creative industries and within design education, I will, however, also consider the potential for resistance inherent to this situation once designers begin to see it not as an exclusively personal issue, but as a systemic feature of our current economic culture.

## 2. ELEMENTS OF PRECARIOUSNESS

Being passionate about one's work, jumping from one commissioned project to the next, accepting new commissions even when overworked, keeping several commissions going at the same time, accepting work even when underpaid, establishing bulimic work patterns, having work taking over life, doing without sick pay, paid vacations and unemployment compensation, having no or only minimal social protection, while just about making it to the end of the month: this is what working as a designer today involves for many between the ages of 25 to 45, irrespective of the type of projects undertaken.<sup>25</sup>

To struggle with a combination of these conditions, which imply that work has taken over life by being unable to plan for a more economically certain future, is what characterises the experience of many designers – whether they define themselves as precarious or not. With the tendency among designers to either work freelance or to become a small business owner in the long-term,<sup>26</sup> it is impressive to see that sociological accounts of the field report that freelancers and small business owners tend to work, on average, an impressive 65 hours per week, rarely taking holidays.<sup>27</sup> However, this tendency goes hand-in-hand with designers experiencing profound anxieties about making ends meet, both in the short run (“will I be able to pay my rent?”) and in the long run (“will I ever be able to retire?”) as well as in regards of all the things that come in between (“I better not get seriously ill”, “having kids is not an option”, “I’ll never afford my own place to live”).

Today, few designers are not touched by the symptoms of poor pay, unpredictability and long term insecurity that come with precariousness, and those who are not directly are at least very often threatened by them as a daunting prospect always on the horizon. Whilst some designers might be better-off at the points when their work sells, this does not change the fact that within the creative industries

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25 For detailed sociological accounts of designers' working conditions, see for instance, Angela McRobbie, “From Holloway to Hollywood: Happiness at Work in the New Cultural Economy?,” in *Cultural Economy: Cultural Analysis and Commercial Life*, ed. Paul Du Gay and Micheal Pryke (London: Sage, 2002)., Rosalind Gill, “Cool, Creative and Egalitarian? : Exploring Gender in Project-Based New Media Work in Europe,” *Information, Communication & Society* 5, no. 1 (2002). See also, “Variant, Issue 41, Spring 2011,” <http://www.variant.org.uk/issue41.html>.

26 In a conversation with Henning Krause, president of the German association of communication designers BDG, he mentioned that in Germany at the age of 40, designers generally need to set up an independent small business even when they have been more or less precariously employed, since agencies and studios prefer to employ recent graduates who have fresh ideas and more energy.

27 Rosalind Gill, “Technobohemians or the New Cybertariat? New Media Work in Amsterdam a Decade after the Web,” in *Notebooks* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2007), p.8.



people are always only as good as their last project.<sup>28</sup> Should that chain of “performance” break – due to exhaustion, illness, family life, a too critical turn in one’s practice or for any other reason – most designers risk slipping into the daily struggles of the highly educated yet precarious creative crowd.<sup>29</sup>

### **Predictable unpredictability and poor pay**

When considering the whole professional field of design, the unpredictability many designers perceive as their individual weakness, turns out to be systemic. It is the norm to not know how long a contract will last, or when the next freelance job will come along, or even exactly how much work a commission will require.<sup>30</sup> This unpredictability implies, for many, striving to stay employable or commissionable for the next job by taking on more work than one can handle, doing unpaid overtime, taking on underpaid work or accepting projects without too many critical questions.

The effects of handling the unpredictability of work individually – since always in “healthy” competition with everyone else – leads many designers to subject themselves to bulimic work and chaotic sleeping patterns, unhealthy eating habits and to the abuse of legal and illegal substances to keep themselves productive and, thus, competitive in the market. These behaviours, as located on the backdrop of unpredictability, result in high levels of stress and anxiety, which in turn result in strained bodies, exhaustion, burn-out, premature heart attacks and strokes as well as mental and emotional disorders and depression.<sup>31</sup> However, in terms of how the field of design is currently structured, such exhaustion through a total dedication to design work becomes either an issue not to be mentioned in public so as to admit weakness for which only you are to blame or otherwise a matter to be spoken of with pride to testify one’s commitment to the field.<sup>32</sup>

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28 Helen Blair, “You’re Only as Good as Your Last Job: The Labour Process and Labour Market in the British Film Industry,” *Work, Employment and Society* 15(1)(2001).

29 Alexandra Manske and Norman Ludwig, “Bildung Als Statusgarant? Über Die Lose Verbindung Zwischen Qualifikation Und Status Bei Hochqualifizierten,” *Vorgänge* 2010, no. 03 (2010): p.96.

30 Gill, “Technobohemians.”

31 Andy C. Pratt, “New Media, the New Economy and New Spaces,” *Geoforum* 31, no. 4 (2000); Gill, “Technobohemians,” p.9; Guillaume Paoli, “Demotivational Training,” transversal, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0704/paoli/en/print>; Cantieri, *Inquiry*, p.21-27

32 This is an observation made throughout eight years of design education and work – which in my case, as well as for many others, overlap timewise. There are numerous “hero stories” of people collapsing, having a breakdown, working with fever and so on.

However, most often, there is little chance that such total dedication will lead to the affluence one might desire to gain from it. As a study by the German professional association for communication design (BDG) shows,<sup>33</sup> designers tend to remain in the national lower to mid-income brackets throughout all their working lives, because higher-paid positions within the creative industries are systematically occupied by economists, lawyers and publishers.<sup>34</sup> In numerical terms, this means that even experienced designers in Germany will rarely earn more than €40,000 a year, which corresponds to the entry-level salary of an engineering management graduate (*Wirtschaftsingenieur*), and as many as 20 per cent of designers will earn an income that hovers around the statistically established poverty line of €925 per month. This fact is even more alarming when considering that the BDG study focused on employed designers only and did not consider the precariously-placed freelancers that are, for instance, trying to earn a living in a city such as Berlin.

### **Lack of security ahead**

Beyond the unpredictability of work and generalised low income, designers also face insecurity in the long-term: most designers are not part of any pension scheme, have no insurance against the inability-to-work and do not have support for parental leave.<sup>35</sup> Thus being a precarious worker also means that the responsibility and measures for periods in life where one cannot work are to be solely borne by the individual. This might represent less of a problem for the few who made it into the “upper” income range or for those knowing that if all else fails they can count on their family’s wealth. But for those designers whose earnings are below the minimum income level or just enough to make a decent living and who cannot count on any other support, this situation (especially when female) becomes a poverty risk when having children, becoming unable to work or in old age.<sup>36</sup> The struggle with this lack of security in the long-term currently forces many to participate in the individualised competition to succeed above others for as long as they can, without

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33 BDG, “Gehaltsreport-2010,” (Berlin: Berufsverband der Deutschen Kommunikationsdesigner, 2011). The results of the study in Germany are also emerging among designers working in Italy. See: Cantieri, *Inquiry*, p.8-13

34 For a more detailed analysis of the BDG-study, see Manske and Ludwig, “Bildung Als Statusgarant?.”

35 Cantieri, *Inquiry*, p.32

36 For gender inequality in the creative industries see: Gill, “Technobohemians.” Cantieri, *Inquiry*, p.25-27

any viable alternative options.<sup>37</sup>

Given this lack of security and the strategies it currently prompts at a personal level, it becomes questionable if discourses, such as that of urban studies theorist Richard Florida, who suggests creatives would prefer to live in highly stimulating “creative cities” and defer “time-consuming obligations”<sup>38</sup> like parenting, are in reality a genuine creative tendency. Might we not also read them as the only potential behaviour that designers are today presented with if wanting to make a living? Discourses like Florida’s, that are not only dear to policy makers but often also to designers themselves, have no place for workers with ordinary, bodily needs: human creativity is assumed to be a “virtually limitless resource”<sup>39</sup> that is fuelled by intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards, i.e. a resource whose activation makes workers happy no matter how much they are paid. By not taking into account the deleterious effects of precarious working conditions such discourses strategically assume that workers such as designers need nothing more than creative inputs in order to be nurtured and, thus, not only does this entangle designers in flawed visions of themselves, but also frees policy makers from their responsibility to intervene against precarising elements, such as the structural lack of long term security.

In this sense, considering the various structural elements that contribute to the precarisation of designers, including poor pay, unpredictability and lack of long term security, it becomes clear that precariousness functions in direct relation to power within the current economic system which not only dictates, but also subtly influences, designers’ decisions as to what issues they ought to dedicate their time and skills to. However, when considering the ways in which the process of precarisation that designers are struggling with has changed and accelerated even only in the three years of this research (during which time the economic crisis that exploded in 2008 began to bite ever harder), it becomes important to investigate how and why the current economic culture has developed in recent history.

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37 Ibid; Jörn Morisse and Rasmus Engler, *Wovon Lebst Du Eigentlich? Vom Überleben in Prekären Zeiten* (München: Piper Verlag, 2007); BDG, “Gehaltsreport-2010.” The extent to which creatives are exposed to these social insecurities clearly varies between European countries as some nations have state provisions in place for securing social benefits for creatives, such as the ‘Künstlersozialkasse’ (KSK – artist’s social insurance) in Germany. For more details on the KSK, see <http://www.kuenstlersozialkasse.de/> and Manske and Ludwig, “Bildung Als Statusgarant?.”

38 Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), p.14.

39 Ibid., p.xiv.

### 3. PRECARIOUSNESS AS A POST-FORDIST SYMPTOM?

In an outline of recent historical developments, the precarious working conditions known by designers today can be seen as embedded in the changes brought about by a shift from Fordist to post-Fordist production in the global North/West.<sup>40</sup> This shift occurred because the further growth of profits based on a Fordist regime of production were stalled both by the inherent contradictions within the system as well as by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that rebelled against the forms of work and life that this form of production entailed.<sup>41</sup> Thus, in the 1970s, a shift in the system of production and the organisation of work began: assembly-line production carried out by relatively well-paid workers in the global North/West was further automated and transferred to countries in the global South/East with cheaper labour power, longer working hours and fewer taxes and regulations. In the meantime, production in the global North/West shifted towards information- and service-based industries. Thus, work in the global North/West began to be organised in a manner that emphasised self-management and the investment of the self in work, largely doing away with the top down, strictly hierarchical and often de-personalising organisation of work that was prevalent in Fordism.<sup>42</sup> This shift was, however, further accompanied by the erosion of previously granted job security and social security measures, which in turn precarised workers.

Historically, this precarisation of the labour force through a shift from Fordism to post-Fordism can be read as a disciplining response of capital and the state to the anti-capitalist social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which pressured the state and employers with demands for less alienating work, social justice and cultural liberation by occupying factories, taking over universities and blocking the streets.<sup>43</sup> While these movements rebelled against most disciplining social conventions and

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40 For an overview on post-Fordism, see for example: Ash Amin, "Post-Fordism: Models, Fantasies and Phantoms of Transition," in *Post-Fordism: A Reader*, ed. Ash Amin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1995). For an overview of Fordism, see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1990), p.125-40.

41 For a theorisation of the variety of factors involved in this transition, see Harvey, *Postmodernity*, p.173-88.

42 For a detailed analysis of the shift in management techniques from Fordism to post-Fordism, see Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2005).

43 See for example: Kristin Ross, "Forms and Practices," in *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002). "1962-1973: Worker and Student Struggles in Italy," <http://libcom.org/history/1962-1973-worker-student-struggles-italy>. Big Flame Women's Commission, "Fighting for Feminism: The 'Women Question' in an Italian Revolutionary Group," <http://libcom.org/library/fighting-feminism-womens-question-italian-revolutionary-group-0>.

were often reinforcing each other's demands, the labour movement specifically rebelled against what Richard Sennett calls the "iron cage" of work.<sup>44</sup> A cage, which, on the one hand, had given workers a clear, foreseeable structure for their "career" and life narrative, but that, on the other hand had structured people's lives in such a strict, monotonous and exhausting way that it was not desirable.<sup>45</sup>

The struggles in those years took on an intensity that would block a country's economy for weeks. The strength of the workers was impressive compared to today, possibly because they could still base their power as a collective body on concessions gained through previous struggles that had, for example, achieved the shortening of the working day, higher levels of safety on the workplace and broad welfare benefits.<sup>46</sup> In fact, social philosopher André Gorz argues that the massive protests of the 1960s could have led to a liberation of work and to the emergence of a different society as well as economy, but the strategy adopted by those in power, besides violently crushing the movements,<sup>47</sup> was to bring the "rebellious working classes into line by abolishing 'work', while continuing to make 'work' the basis of social belonging and rights, and the obligatory path to self-esteem and the esteem of others."<sup>48</sup> In short, through the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, people's working arrangements were made precarious, both structurally as well as in their self-perception, by taking away the very thing that was still required for making a living and for gaining social recognition.

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44 Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007), p.31.

45 For a picture of that "iron cage" see, for example: Elio Petri, "La Classe Operaia Va in Paradiso (the Working Class Goes to Paradise)," (1971). For a picture of how the industrial working processes are still present today in their monotony, see the following video art work: Ali Kazma, *Jean Factory*, 2008. See also contemporary amateur footage shot in Asian factories, like: "Worker Has Super Fast Hands," [https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=NZK5kkcJypg#](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=NZK5kkcJypg#)!

46 The strength of the working class in the global North/West in the 1950s and 1960s, which not only saw it gaining rights and improvements in its living standards outside work, cannot only be read as a result of the cohesiveness of industrial workers and students. It must also be seen in connection with factors like the continued exploitation of colonial populations, the unpaid reproductive labour performed by women, the access to cheap oil, and the massive need to rebuild large parts of Europe after WWII. The *People's History* in Manchester (UK) as well as the *Working Class Movement Library* in Salford (UK) are tracing the history of workers' struggles in the UK since the advent of the industrial revolution with rich historic material – albeit with a weak elaboration of the role of women and colonial populations in these struggles.

47 See for example the fact that in 1979 the Italian state crushed the *autonomia* movement by imprisoning 1500 militant workers and theorists. For an account, see Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi, eds., *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Semiotext(e), 2007).

48 André Gorz, *Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-Based Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), p.4.

## Neoliberal politics

The precarisation of workers was, from the end of the 1970s onwards, heavily supported by neoliberal politics, and politicians such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Neoliberal politics would, on the one hand, commodify everything (hence also the rise of the service industry) and, on the other hand, would discipline labourers by making work flexible and cheap by breaking its collective power through harsh legislation.<sup>49</sup> This neoliberal move to discipline workers was justified by the argument that if lower production costs could not be established through workers' flexibility, corporations would transfer production and investment to 'cheaper' countries and finance capital would move with them, which would have disastrous consequences for the countries of the global North/West.

So while workers' protests were crushed,<sup>50</sup> the hard-fought welfare provisions, which in the global North/West guaranteed free education and health care, as well as social housing and pensions, began to be dismantled.<sup>51</sup> This was because neoliberal politics, based on deregulation and privatisation, withdrew state involvement from many areas of social provision.<sup>52</sup> Marxist geographer David Harvey, in his analysis of this neoliberal process, points out how the withdrawal of the welfare state proved (and still proves) deleterious to workers' freedom and well-being because it dismantled the social safety net that protected the rebellious workers from impoverishment and the kind of precariousness that today functions as a mechanism of control for human activity.<sup>53</sup>

## Transformation of design

In relation to the field of design, we see that the shift in production was accompanied in the field of culture by what is often described as a shift from modernism to

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49 For the emergence of precariousness through neoliberalism, see, for example: Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011). p.6; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

50 Decisive defeats of the workers' struggles have been, for example, the layoff of more than 14,000 workers at the FIAT plant in Italy in 1979 through the computerisation of production; or the breakdown of the miners' strike in the UK in 1984, which had wanted to prevent the closing down of 20 mines and the layoff of 20,000 workers.

51 It needs to be noted that although the welfare state had many benefits, it still had many drawbacks: for example that the work women perform in the home was not granted the same rights as the work of men in the factories.

52 Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, p.3.

53 Ibid., p.76.

postmodernism.<sup>54</sup> Whilst the numbers of industrial workers in the global North/West were sharply declining, the design profession saw an exponential growth in the 1980s. According to design historian Guy Julier, this growth was not due to design for manufacture but to design for the service sector and was marked by a convergence between design and other commercial practices such as advertising, management consultancy and public relations.<sup>55</sup> Julier points to three neoliberal phenomena which contributed to this increase, particularly in communication design: the need for the growing amount of mergers to be re-branded, the need for privatised state industries and services to be positioned in a competitive market, and the massively growing finance sector that opened up a design market for corporate finance literature.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, at the beginning of the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher, the conservative prime minister of the UK, endorsed the design profession for its considerable profit potential and advised designers to “be more aggressive in selling themselves to industry as wealth creators.”<sup>57</sup> This governmental position was then taken up by the country’s Design Council, which in 1983 launched the slogan ‘Design for Profit’, firmly re-inscribing the telos of the design profession in the market economy.<sup>58</sup> However, Julier reminds us that the boom of design in the 1980s was partly broken by the recession at the beginning of the 1990s and that, within the field of design, this marked the advent of post-Fordist modes of outsourcing: design consultancies would no longer employ designers on traditional contracts, but would hire them only for specific project tasks, thus avoiding extra costs for the company whilst rendering designers precarious. Given this development, in the 1990s designers were pushed to inscribe their practices more rigorously within business and commercial culture, following the maxim of “faster, better, cheaper” in order to keep themselves afloat in an increasingly competitive market.<sup>59</sup>

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54 For discussions about the contested nature of the shift from modernism to postmodernism, see for example, Harvey, *Postmodernity*, p.42. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p.13.

55 Guy Julier, *The Culture of Design* (London: SAGE, 2008), p.19-20. Jameson denotes this shift described by Julier as the postmodernist integration of aesthetic production into commodity production generally, see Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.4.

56 Julier, *Culture of Design*, p.26-28.

57 Margaret Thatcher cited by Guy Julier, drawing on a 1991 publication by Whitely: *ibid.*, p.26.

58 *Ibid.*

59 *Ibid.*, p.30-37.



### Incorporation of critique

Placing the developments of the design profession into the broader shift from Fordist to post-Fordist production, it is also interesting to note how it aligns with the emergence of the “flexible worker,” who adapts to whatever (precarious) working conditions are proposed to him or her. However, as sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello point out, this emergence of the flexible worker was marked and initially made desirable by an incorporation of the ‘artistic critique’ of the ‘iron cage’ that the protest movements of the 1960s and ‘70s voiced:<sup>60</sup> the flexibilisation clearly incorporated *creativity* since emerging information technologies were fuelled by inventiveness, imagination and innovation; it incorporated the desire for *autonomy* by proposing new, more individualised enterprise mechanisms and by substituting costly supervision with self-management, i.e. with a monitoring of the self in order to keep productive; finally, it incorporated *authenticity* through production in short series, the rise in importance of fashion, leisure and service sectors that would all respond to individual desires of consumption. The combination of these factors is indeed, then, the very element that fulfils the descriptions of postmodernism, shaping what design historians Adamson and Pavitt call today’s “permissive, fluid and hyper-commodified situation of design.”<sup>61</sup>

But, as Boltanski and Chiapello further point out, the incorporation of the ‘artistic critique’ manifested itself while dismissing the ‘social critique’ with which it has been coupled in the social movements, a critique that demanded social justice, equality and solidarity, and which was much of the time inscribed in anti-capitalist desires.<sup>62</sup> By separating artistic from social demands their subversive power was neutralised and the artistic demands – like autonomy, spontaneity, conviviality, creativity – became manageable as objectives in their own right. By establishing flexible, individual workers as entrepreneurs of the self, who, in order to be successful, needed to be autonomous, spontaneous, authentic, convivial and have visionary intuition, the collectivity that represented the strength of the movements was broken. This transition to establishing workers as entrepreneurs of the self led to the

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60 Boltanski and Chiapello, *Spirit of Capitalism*, p.326.

61 Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt, “Postmodernism: Style and Subversion,” in *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970-1990*, ed. Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt (London: V&A Publishers, 2011), p.95. Harvey describes this shift as the cultural mass, that heavily drew upon social movements, cut loose and shaped its own identity around money, power, individualism and entrepreneurialism. See Harvey, *Postmodernity*, p.348.

62 See Boltanski and Chiapello, *Spirit of Capitalism*, p.185. See also: Kristin Ross, *May ‘68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

spreading of precarious working conditions as workers would no longer negotiate their contracts collectively, but would do so on an individual basis, always focused on the maximisation of individual interests, regardless of the consequences this would have for other workers.<sup>63</sup>

### **The whole personality at work**

Considering today's flexible and precarious working conditions, it is important to note the extent to which the demise of the social critique is debilitating for many. As Richard Sennett points out, the ones who can prosper in this contemporary, flexible, networked context are those having the ability to deal with short-term relations at work, as well as with reduced perspectives of the future,<sup>64</sup> and who are thus flexible enough to take up the most unexpected opportunities.<sup>65</sup> The development of work in such a flexible, as well as precarious, direction has been possible because, post-Fordism, an emphasis on the service industry was developed. Autonomist sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato describes this service-oriented work as "immaterial labour," a form of labour that "produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity."<sup>66</sup> This formalisation of previously unconsidered activities could not only exist without enormous infrastructure in the global North/West (albeit that much of it still heavily relies on industrial production in other parts of the world), but could also incorporate a vast amount of human activities that had not previously been considered productive labour, such as "activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion."<sup>67</sup>

As we can see, Lazzarato's description of immaterial labour quite aptly fits the work of contemporary designers. And in fact, design jobs can be perceived as authoritatively requiring cooperation and collective coordination, in the sense that "one *has* to express oneself, one *has* to speak, communicate, cooperate and so

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63 Stuart Hall, "Brave New World," *Marxism Today*, no. October (1988): p.24.

64 Sennett, *New Capitalism*, p.31.

65 Ibid., p.126.

66 Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labour," in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p.133.

67 Ibid.

forth.”<sup>68</sup> To manage workers engaged in such jobs, i.e. to make them productive, implies the drive to have these workers fully investing their souls in the workplace.<sup>69</sup> In this sense, we can see designers, with their passionate attachment to work, as contemporary “model workers”, workers that this economic culture would definitely like to see more of.

### Historical and geographical context

When, after this focus on how the procedures of precarisation that designers are exposed to have developed over approximately the last 40 years, we set them into a much broader historical, geographical and social context, something curious occurs: we see that as a phenomenon of the capitalist labour market, procedures of precarisation – in different form and intensity – have always been present. Historically, precarious (but also outright dangerous) working conditions have accompanied the emergence and development of capitalism and have only been contained in the countries of the global North/West through working class struggles for more rights.<sup>70</sup> Geographically, severe precariousness has been a constant for exploited workers in the global South/East and constituted, and still constitutes, the basis for the affluence of the global North/West.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, socially, precariousness has been long present for women doing apparently unproductive work in the home and for all other workers who have not been recognised as productive or legal in a capitalist society.<sup>72</sup> However, for now, let us only keep in mind this broader context of precariousness as something that we will explore in more depth in the Intermezzo of this thesis.

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68 Ibid., p.135.

69 Ibid., p.134. For an elaboration on the pathologies this passion and investments of the soul generate, see Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009).

70 For the development of work in the capitalist mode of production, see, for example, the permanent exhibition at the People's History Museum in Manchester or the industrial museum Armley Mills in Leeds. Moreover, note that capitalism, especially in its inception, has been heavily interlinked with slavery. For the connection between capitalism and slavery, see, for example, the *London Sugar Slavery Gallery* at the Museum of London Docklands. See also: Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004).

71 See, for example: Naomi Klein, *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs* (London: Flamingo, 2001); Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2008).

72 See the following texts for the historical and geographical context of precariousness: Mitropoulos, “Precari-Us?.”; Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, “Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 7-8 (2008). For a feminist view on precariousness, see for example: Silvia Federici, “Precarious Labour: A Feminist Viewpoint,” *Variant: cross currents in culture*, no. 37 (2010).

### Questions to address in practice

From this overview of the precarising elements that designers are confronted with, it emerges that although modulating the contents of one's work according to what is rewarded by the market can improve an individual designer's economic situation, this will hardly lead to a life of affluence, let alone stability and security as might still be generally assumed. It also emerges that such a move does not automatically relieve the designer of overwork or sacrificing quality of life for work, nor does it improve the working conditions of designers in general. To achieve a qualitative improvement in content and working conditions, more inventive and collective measures need to be established.

Having exposed the main structural elements of precarisation, it becomes clear that it is often a passionate attachment to working as designers which primarily contributes to render people vulnerable and often willingly exposed to working conditions that are detrimental in the long run. Given the connection between passion and precariousness, the question arises of how to create spaces in which to disassociate one's passion from the mechanisms of control of the market. How to create spaces that make it possible to challenge and reinvent the way designers work and live? How to create spaces in which to employ creativity not to sustain a competitive market economy, but rather to invent alternative economies that break with unpredictability, insecurity and poor remuneration as mechanisms of control?

In order to explore these questions in and through practice, Fabio and I branched out in two directions: learning from other practitioners' experiences and beginning to experiment ourselves with what such spaces could be like. To learn through the situated knowledges of other people who are producing socially and politically engaged work – within and beyond design – we began to visit practitioners throughout Europe to engage in conversations with them about the structures that they rely on to sustain themselves, the obstacles they encounter and how they try to overcome them. Conducting these conversations in kitchens, studios, workshop, cafés and squats, allowed us to see how people always formulate specific strategies and tactics to keep their practices afloat despite precariousness. Engaging in these conversations, while at the same time beginning to experiment ourselves with the creation of spaces in which precariousness could be challenged, was a way to check back on what and how we did things, but was also a way to ask questions together. Furthermore, we began to edit and publish these conversations online in order for

them to serve as tools of orientation for other practitioners who might be trying to break out of an individualistic and entrepreneurial mode of practice.<sup>73</sup>

The knowledges gathered through these exchanges, which in some cases developed into friendships or collaborations, are woven in and out of this thesis, constituting the context of practice within which we began to situate ourselves and which would continue to inform the ways in which we reflect on our own experimental support structures against precarisation. How they do so will become apparent in the next section, which will be wholly dedicated to recounting and thinking through a space created by Brave New Alps in 2011 in order to begin to inhabit the question of (as well as the tentative answer to) what a physical space from and within which to challenge precariousness could be like.

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73 To get a flavour of these conversations and the context they created for this research, see appendix C for a series of edited transcripts. Alternatively, see <http://www.designingeconomiccultures.net>

#### 4. INHABITING AN ECONOMY OF SUPPORT: *MY CASTLE IS YOUR CASTLE*

The inhabitation *My castle is your castle* (April to July, 2011) was the initial experiment in how to intervene in the procedures of precarisation that designers are entangled in. It was an experiment on a micro-scale that had as its objective to explore how, as designers, we can create other economic cultures in our everyday, or, in the words of economic geographer Katherine Gibson, how we can “take back the economy any time, any place,”<sup>74</sup> without waiting until an ideal situation, idea or opportunity presents itself some time in an indefinite future. To set up this first experiment that would allow us to gain embodied knowledges of the obstacles such a “taking back” might entail, Fabio and I drew on the means available to us through a five-months artist residency at the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw. This residency gave us access to a 25m<sup>2</sup> working and living space, a travel and production budget, the access to communal living and working spaces and the support of four dedicated female curators.<sup>75</sup>

When starting the residency in March 2011, we were three months into this research and grappling with the symptoms of precariousness and their genealogy as introduced in the previous section. At the same time, we were looking around us to investigate how other socially and politically engaged designers keep their practices afloat. Doing so, we came across the work of the Chicago-based art and design collective Temporary Services, who in their work emphasise the importance of grounding a resistance to the dominant culture in physical space.<sup>76</sup> It was then a combination of our research into the symptoms of precarisation and the idea to ground resistance against them (or at least find other ways of dealing with them) in space in the here and now, that encouraged us to come up with a twofold plan for initiating an economy of support based on the resources of our residency: on the one hand, we decided to “collectivise” the residency by inviting practitioners with an affinity to our research to share the space and the resources with us, thus trying to give “breathing

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74 Katherine Gibson, “Take Back the Economy, Any Time, Any Place: A Manual for Constituting Community Economies,” in *Designing and transforming capitalism* (Aarhus 2012).

75 In autumn 2010, we had won an artist prize offered by Museion, the contemporary art centre of our Italian home region Trentino-Alto Adige. The prize was a five months stay at the Artist-In-Residence-Laboratory of CCA Ujazdowski Castle. Moreover, the prize comprised a 5,000€ living allowance, 1,600€ travel budget and an 8,000€ production budget, sponsored by the foundation of the regional bank *Südtiroler Sparkasse*.

76 Brett Bloom, “Radical Space for Art in a Time of Forced Privatization and Market Dominance,” [http://www.temporaryservices.org/making\\_room\\_collab.pdf](http://www.temporaryservices.org/making_room_collab.pdf).

space” to practices which were not necessarily commercially oriented, and on the other hand, we decided to use the budget of our residency to set up a public seminar, *Constructive dismantling*, to investigate what sharing of resources and self-organisation had taken place in Polish society during socialist times, and what had survived and/or what new forms were created after the fall of the regime in 1989.<sup>77</sup> In choosing to experiment with these two strands, we hoped that this would bring openings (but possibly also obstacles) to our research in places where we would not expect them and that they would enable us to ask questions we could not yet formulate.

### Preparation

Once the desire was formed to transform “our” castle also into someone else’s castle, we were both thrilled, intimidated and doubtful by what this would entail: how to feel at ease sharing a space with someone we might not know well? How to share the resources we had, while still keeping some privacy and space for ourselves? How to actually ensure the experiment was a positive experience? And was it actually a good idea at all to share resources that you obtained and possibly only “deserve” because you worked hard in the past?

To address some of our preoccupations, we opted for the transformation of our 25m<sup>2</sup> studio space into two distinct spaces that could be inhabited relatively independently. This way we hoped to create a space in which our guests would feel welcome and that would allow for a sense of ownership over the space, while at the same time allowing for openness as well as privacy for our co-residents and us.<sup>78</sup> Once we felt comfortable with the spatial plan for collectivising the residency, the question came up more concretely of who our co-residents might be. Not being sure we could cope with sharing the space with whoever expressed interest, we decided to ‘play it safe’ and to send the invite to the co-residency only to people we had at least once positively connected with in our lives.

So at the end of March 2011, after a series of consultations with our hosting curators, we sent out an open call to our extended mailing list stating that we had just begun working on research into precariousness and that for our residency in Poland we wanted to offer other designers and practitioners related to the field of design

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77 For details about these seminars, see Brave New Alps, “Constructive Dismantling Seminars,” <http://www.designingeconomiccultures.net/category/organised-seminars/>.

78 We developed the idea for the space together with Polish furniture-maker Pawel Jasiewicz, who we met during the first month in Warsaw.



the possibility to come to Warsaw for a period of one to three weeks. After having had replies from a variety of people to this invite, within twenty days, we coordinated the times and spaces for the co-residency between May and July 2011 and settled for inviting six practitioners across a variety of disciplines: a female British sculptor with Polish origins, a female British-Nigerian curator, a male Irish graphic designer, a male British Germany-based artist, a male British architect and a female Russian illustrator.<sup>79</sup>

### Unfolding

Finally, by the end of April, after almost two months of reflection and preparation, we were physically sharing our residency resources, inhabiting our first micro-economy of support. Our co-residents stayed with us for periods ranging from four to thirty days, and with each resident we discovered different dynamics of sharing and being together developed. As we had tried to create a very open framework for collectivising the residency, we also attempted not to put any pressure on people to produce or do anything specific during their stay, so that everyone could get out of it what they needed and wanted.

Therefore, we saw some co-residents focusing on networking with Polish curators and institutions, some connecting with other artists in residence, others again using the time to explore the city for inspiration for future work, while some plunged into making work with whatever they could find around – or in fact, depending on the length of their stay, engaging in a mixture of these activities. So while we saw our co-residents engaged in their activities, they saw us pursuing our research: organising seminars and conducting interviews to explore Polish DIY activist culture under socialism and subsequently under capitalism. From time to time, there would be overlaps between our activities, but generally each of us would pursue his or her own path.

Eating together in the subsidised restaurant of the museum or cooking together, became an important factor with some co-residents. But again, this varied substantially from one person to the other and so it could be said that with our six co-residents we went through different modes of sharing, each being characterised by a different mixture of convivial modes of work and leisure.

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79 A US-American female graphic designer, who had originally contacted us to do an internship with us and to whom we proposed the co-residency instead, could not come along as she had found a paid job in the USA. The female Russian illustrator took her space up last-minute.

## Reflections

Considering the way the co-residency unfolded, with each of us individually working alongside each other, it felt like we had set up an economy of support that enabled others to move forward in their practice, but that within itself did not substantially challenge the standard, precarising modes of working of the creative industries. In many ways, we might suggest say that the co-residency felt a bit like any shared studio space, whether dedicated to research on precariousness or not.

This situation revealed many questions to us, particularly in comparison to what we had learned from the seminars, interviews and time spent with Polish DIY activist groups.<sup>80</sup> Through engagement with groups such as the anarchist Warsaw Food Co-operative, The Nonformal University of Teremiski, or the co-operatively run Emma Hostel, we not only learned more about how to self-organise education, housing, food provisioning and cultural production,<sup>81</sup> but in spending time with the people involved in such self-organised, leftist economic cultures it was brought to the fore the extent to which all of them found it important to actively challenge dominant ways of doing and being in their area of engagement.

The two levels that these groups challenged most were related to time and social relations: they all worked towards a *long-term* as well as *collective* engagement in the issues they wanted to transform. The elements of endurance in time and collectivity we encountered in them, were that which in most cases allowed for the emergence of an affective dimension, a dimension of care for each other, which helped the people involved to challenge the subjectivities they were asked to conform to in Polish society: many of the people we met or learned about during the seminars and site visits attempted to break out of the more generally pre-figured aspirational path towards living a middle-class life of individual success in one's respective profession. Most were attempting to live out ways of being and doing that could actively contribute to the egalitarian, yet heterogeneous societies they desired. In doing so, many were operating counter to the expectations of their social environment, but they continued on their paths because they were embedded in an economy of support that would reinforce their actions and choices not only on material, but

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80 For an account of the seminars with human geographer Piotr Juskowiak, architect Jakub Szczesny, sociologist Adrian Zandberg and cultural theorist Teodor Ajder, see: <http://www.designingeconomiccultures.net/category/organised-seminars/>

81 For an edited transcript of conversations with these activists, see appendix C or: Brave New Alps, "Designing Economic Cultures," <http://www.designingeconomiccultures.net/>.

also on affective and intellectual levels.

So by living through *My castle is your castle*, whilst also encountering these other ways of operating outside the creative industries, we realised that our micro-economy of support was lacking some important substance that could have allowed us to enter a dimension that could significantly extend beyond the days or weeks spent together in the co-residency. In this sense, from this micro-experiment, we deduced that on a larger scale to intervene only in the material procedures of precarisation would not necessarily challenge precariousness in general. Besides this major insight, from our reflections on this first inhabitation of our research questions, six more issues came to the fore for further investigation and experimentation:

a) Creating a very open framework for an economy of support easily creates a depoliticised context in which our doing is not radically questioned. There is a need to create frameworks for experimenting with economic cultures into which one cannot simply flow with the usual modes of being and working that are characterised by individualisation. Frameworks would need to be created that support the emergence of a collective dimension of doing.

b) Power relations cannot simply be dissolved through self-organisation, but must be worked on consciously, as otherwise they tend simply to be reproduced on a smaller scale. In the case of this first experiment, they had simply been shifted from the institution onto us, since we still set up a minimal selection process and automatically kept on referring to our co-residents as ‘guests’ throughout the whole time. Would power relations be diluted or distributed if we imagined a proliferation of peer-to-peer support structures? What if ever more designers saw sharing resources as part of their practice?

c) There is a necessity to create frameworks in which we do not continuously blur work and recreation, or where we almost establish frameworks of “recreation through work.” This would probably entail creating spaces where mutual care for our well-being is prioritised over work and where there is a degree of protection from the productiveness that is required within the context of the creative industries. But this brings up questions of how we define what it means to be productive. How do we define what counts as work and what does not?

d) There is a need to supplement short-term, spontaneous or sporadic support structures against precarisation with long term ones as this would allow the inclusion of people who do not have the privilege of flexibility, which, as we have seen, is one of the elements involved in procedures of precarisation.

e) Creating translocal connections is important, but there also seems to be a need to create connections that are not spatially dispersed in order to allow for the creation of more close-knit and possibly long-term economies of support.

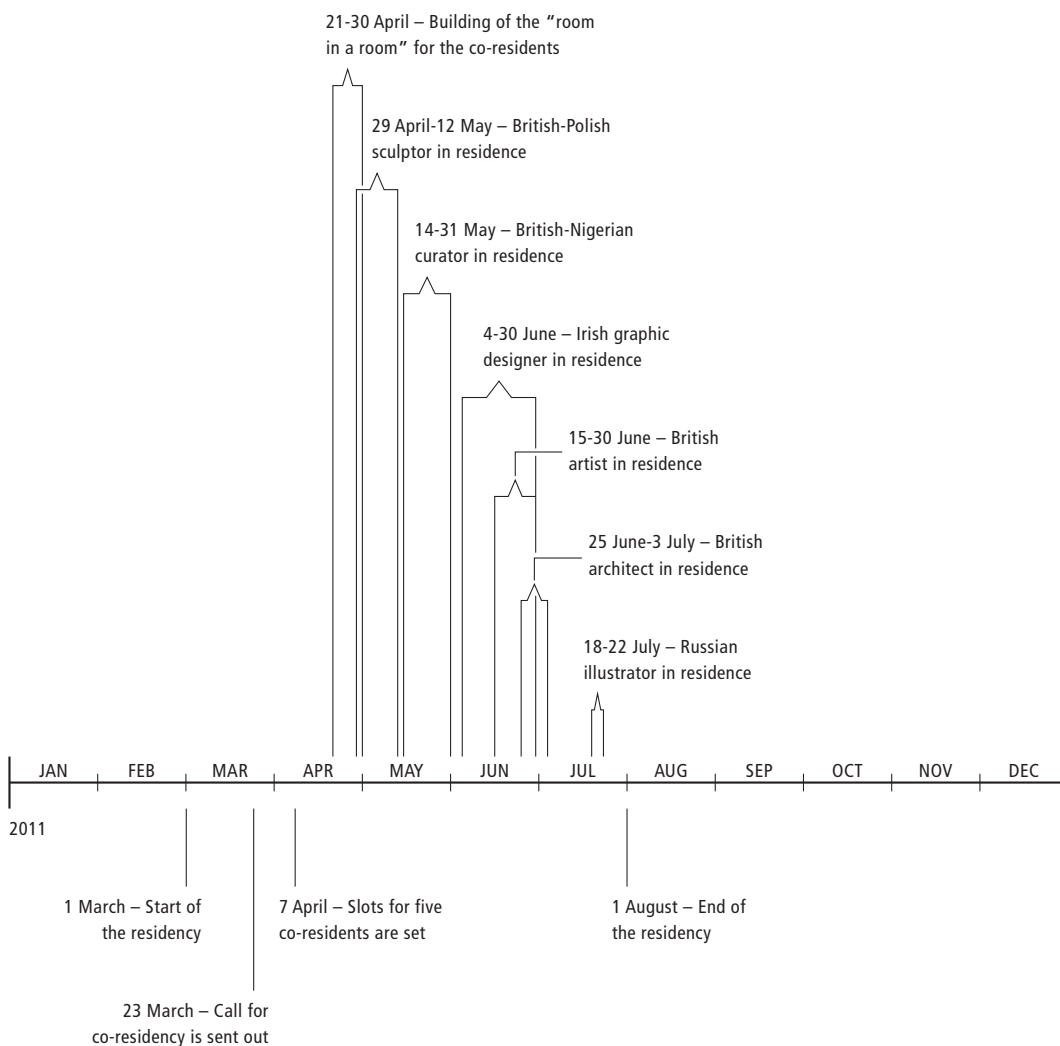
f) Addressing one's doubts and insecurities around beginning to experiment with economies of support is important, however, it is also important not to get blocked by them. From this experiment, we learned that once you start experimenting with other ways of doing, initial preoccupations mostly dissolve and even seem foolish in hindsight, while instead they bring up new and unexpected questions.

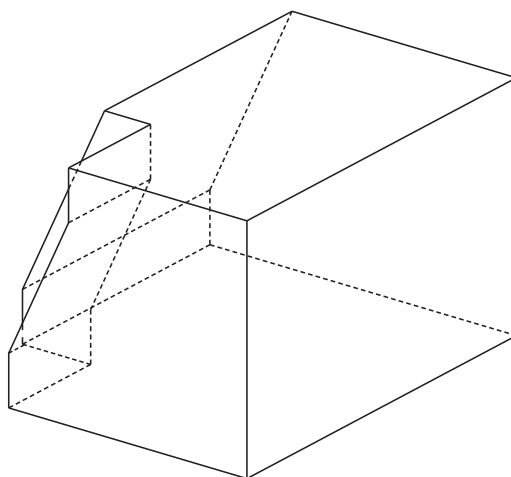
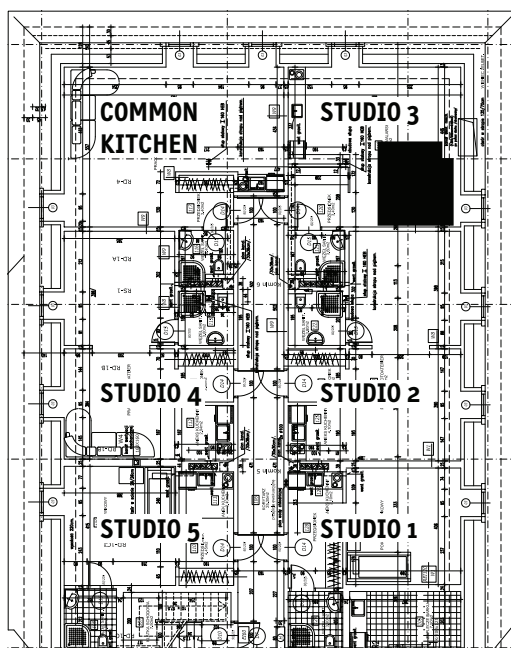
With these issues raised, this first experiment, even in its micro-dimension, quite powerfully showed us the limits of our habitual thinking and acting, which seem to reproduce what we more or less are already familiar with. In doing so, it led us to question how and to what extent, as designers, we have internalised ways of thinking, doing and relating to each other that make us functional as well as vulnerable to the procedures of precarisation we are presented with. In this sense, the unfolding of the residency, allowed us to begin to explore more complex questions that concern not only the material support structures needed to respond to precariousness, but also the relational and theoretical tools we need to build in order to deal with precariousness in more strategic ways.

## Timeline:

### *My castle is your castle*

#### at A-I-R Laboratory, CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw





**FIGURE 10 and 11 above** Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) Ujazdowski Castle and the Laboratorium building that in its left wing hosts five studios for artists in residence, March 2011

**FIGURE 12 and 13 middle** The studio-apartment that was allocated to us and the floor plan of the left wing of the Laboratorium building with the blackened out space intended to be allocated to the "room in a room" structure for our co-residents

**FIGURE 14 below** The shape of the planned "room in a room" structure, adapting to the shape of the studio (roughly 3,30 x 3 x 2,30 m)





**FIGURE 15 above** Construction of the structure for our co-residents over a period of nine days with Pawel Jasiewicz and Anna Sikorska, 21-30 April 2011

**FIGURE 16 to 18 below** The “room in a room” is ready for welcoming our co-residents, 1 May 2011



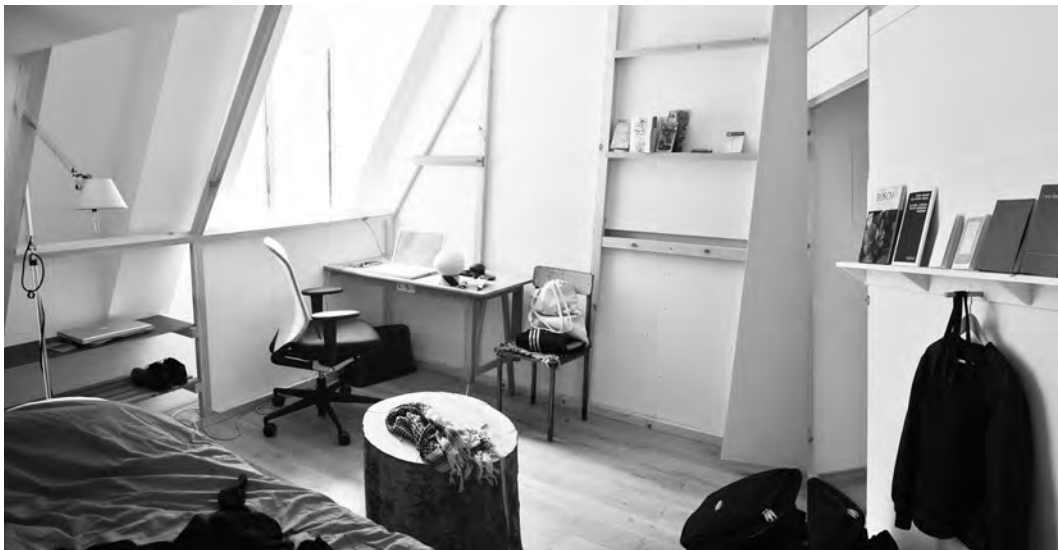
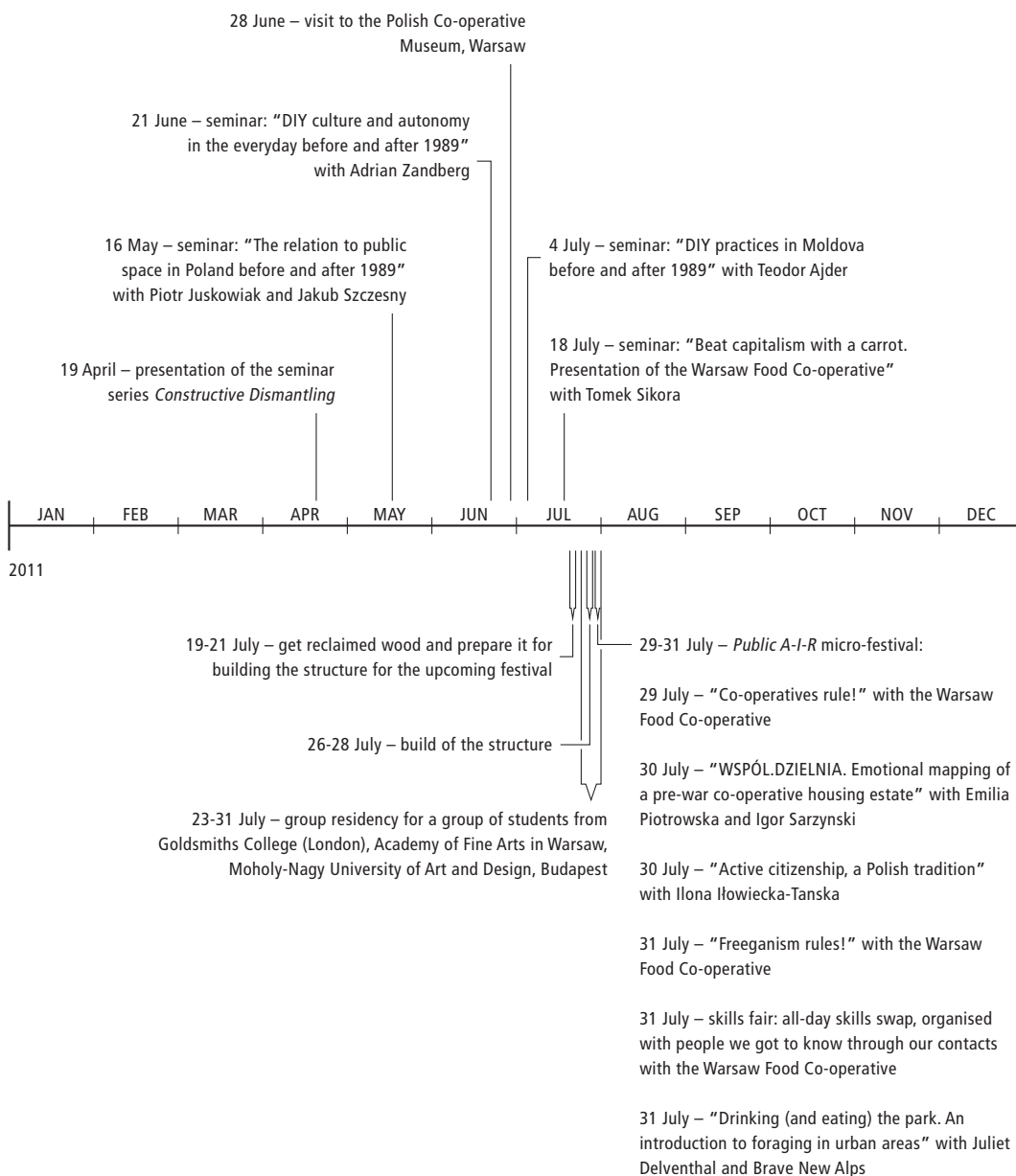


FIGURE 19 and 20 The co-residency space in use, May to July 2011

## Timeline:

### ***Constructive Dismantling and Public A-I-R micro-festival*** **at A-I-R Laboratory, CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw**





**FIGURE 21 above** *Constructive Dismantling* – seminar with Tomek Sikora of the Warsaw Food Co-operative in the communal kitchen of A-I-R Laboratory, 18 July 2011

**FIGURE 22 below** *Constructive Dismantling* – visit to the Warsaw Museum of Co-operatives, 28 June 2011



**FIGURE 23 above** Public A-I-R micro-festival – opening evening, cooking “stone soup” with chef-in-residence Juliet Delventhal, public park surrounding CCA Ujazdowski Castle, 29 July 2011

**FIGURE 24 below** Public A-I-R micro-festival – Vietnamese-Polish chef Ngo Van Tuong speaks about the cuisine of the Vietnamese community in Poland, 31 July 2011





**FIGURE 25 to 30 above** *Public A-I-R* micro-festival – “Co-operatives Rule!” with members of the Warsaw Food Co-op; “WSPÓŁ.DZIELNIA – emotional mapping of a pre-war cooperative housing estate” – a presentations by pedagogues and community activists Emilia Piotrowska and Igor Sarzynski; “skills exchange” – learning to use a compass; “Foraging in the Park” with Juliet Delventhal and Brave New Alps; “Drinking the Park” – serving elderflower cordial made from flowers foraged in the park; preparing Springrolls Warsaw Style with Dorota Podlaska and Ngo Van Tuong, 30 and 31 July 2011

**FIGURE 31 below** *Public A-I-R* micro-festival – the festival in one of the sunny moments between the heavy showers, 30 July 2011

## 5. PRECARIOUSNESS AS THE EVER TRANSFORMING NORM

Given the issues raised when inhabiting our first micro-economy of support, it is necessary to consider to what extent procedures of precarisation are not only constituted by external factors, but by the subjectivities we are assuming as designers within the creative industries. For this analysis, I will draw on Michel Foucault's and Gilles Deleuze's work around how governmentality operates in making us as subjects. By considering the technologies of power and the self as theorised by Foucault, I will explore how power relations around precariousness are played out in the field of design to determine and modulate the conduct of individuals and how they contribute to designers effecting operations on their own bodies, thoughts, conduct and way of being in order to transform themselves.<sup>82</sup>

### **Governmentality and techniques of power**

To read the precariousness of designers and the behaviours associated with it through Foucault and Deleuze allows us to see connections between "governmentality," as constituted by technologies of domination of others, technologies of the self and modulations through control, and economic reason.<sup>83</sup> Throughout Foucault's work, we find a focus on how power relations operate in society to shape subjectivities through an ensemble of techniques that is applied at every level of the social body to ensure, very often, the maintenance and development of production relations that suit the economic processes of their time.<sup>84</sup> In his analysis of the techniques of power, Foucault unravels how these are played out to shape bodies (and minds) in order to increase their forces in terms of economic utility, and to diminish these same forces in terms of resistance.<sup>85</sup> Regarding the technologies of the self, Foucault analyses how we constitute ourselves as subjects according to models that are proposed, suggested, imposed on us by our culture, society and social group.<sup>86</sup>

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82 Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Michel Foucault: Ethics - Subjectivity and Truth; the Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 1997), p.225.

83 Ibid. See also: Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies," in *Negotiations, 1972-1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

84 See for example: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p.140; Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality: With Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault* ed. Graham Burchell, et al. (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

85 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p.138.

86 Foucault, "Practice of Freedom," p.291.

The way disciplinary techniques of power are adopted is outlined by Foucault using the example of soldiers who, by the late eighteenth century, had become professional figures that could be formed like clay: subjects that, through disciplinary techniques, could be made pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit, made into docile bodies that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved.<sup>87</sup> The uninterrupted coercion and supervising processes of soldiers began to be adapted to ensure that these professionals operated as desired – with necessary technique, speed and efficiency. With the rise of governmentality, which went hand-in-hand with the rise of capitalism,<sup>88</sup> disciplining mechanisms developed to comprise of a whole micro-penalty of time, activity, behaviour, speech, body and sexuality, whose punishment would extend from light physical punishment to minor deprivations and petty humiliations.<sup>89</sup> In this way, a system of gratification and punishment was established that served the production of subjected and practiced “docile bodies” – economically productive and obedient. Within the disciplining institutions Foucault describes as shaping people’s docile conduct according to governmental desires, which besides the military comprised of factories, schools, hospitals and the family, collective dispositions are being systemically broken up. Each individual has his- or her-own place and each place is individual, in order for the disciplining entity to create a “learning machine” that allows for efficient supervising, hierarchising and rewarding. The useless or dangerous multitude of bodies is thus transformed into “ordered multiplicities” that can be disciplined.<sup>90</sup>

After Foucault’s death, Deleuze takes up his principles of discipline and elaborated on them by stating that we no longer live in disciplinary societies, but have entered control societies. Here, Deleuze proposes that power relations are deeply rooted in the social nexus and contribute to a modulation of people’s behaviours and desires through more subtle procedures of control, which function according to governmental perception of the economically favourable.<sup>91</sup> These subtle procedures, which we certainly also find within the precarisation of designers, include the modulation of retribution according to individual merit, the proposal of competition as

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87 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.135-36.

88 Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, p.16.

89 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.178.

90 Ibid., p.143-48.

91 Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972-1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p.177-82.



a healthy and motivating force, and the replacement of fixed periods of education by permanent training accompanied by continuous control. However, according to Deleuze, the particularity of control societies is also that people rather than rebelling against these procedures, “strangely boast of being ‘motivated’; they re-request apprenticeships and permanent training.”<sup>92</sup> This is an attitude that became very apparent in the discussion following the seminar series I organised at Goldsmiths, where MA students with work experience would, for instance, define the pressures of precariousness as that which pushes them to put extra effort into their design projects and which ultimately makes them produce better work.

However, I would argue, along with philosopher Judith Revel and philosopher and art theorist Gerald Raunig,<sup>93</sup> that although today many social institutions being dismantled and we are indeed experiencing the modulating procedures of control described by Deleuze, we still experience Foucault’s notion of discipline both through design education as well as through the techniques of the self, through which we model ourselves according to what we learn to be normal, decent and logical. And where Foucault has elaborated on techniques of the self in regards to sexuality, this also proves to be a useful analytical tool to think about how we relate and fashion ourselves as designers. Following Raunig’s proposal of the “modulating university” as both a standardising as well as a modulating institution,<sup>94</sup> I will analyse how, throughout education, designers are formed to be “industry-ready” and, as a result, “precariousness-ready” creative subjects. To do so, I will trace how some of the issues raised by *My castle is your castle* can be traced back to the conduct designers are trained to adopt in order to be ready for the creative industries, how they are made *pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit*, but also ready to constantly re-form and de-form themselves.

The importance of this analysis is underlined by relating the power relations precariousness represents back to Foucault’s notion that “every power relationship implies at least *in potentia* a strategy of struggle,”<sup>95</sup> because it can be exercised only

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92 Ibid., p.182.

93 See: Judith Revel, “Per Una Biopolitica Della Moltitudine,” in *Biopolitica Minore*, ed. Paolo Peticari (Roma: manifestolibri, 2003), p.60-61. Gerald Raunig, *Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013), p.45-46.

94 Raunig, *Factories of Knowledge*, p.29.

95 Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p.225.

over free subjects. Thus, I argue that tracing how designers are made docile, creative subjects represents an important step when wanting to challenge more consciously and strategically the techniques of power and control that contribute to the precarisation of designers.<sup>96</sup>

### A depoliticised context

To unravel how designers are made docile creative subjects it is useful to examine the complex sociocultural formations (Foucault's *dispositifs*) within which designers are first studying and then working, and which, amongst others, consist of education, the discourse around what defines success and the functioning of the creative industries. In relation to the difficulties constituted by precarisation that, in particular, socially engaged designers experience, the analysis of the creative industries by feminist sociologist Angela McRobbie is telling, particularly because her research is directed at socially and politically engaged subcultures within them. Through her research, McRobbie defines the creative industries as largely depoliticised: she observes how cultural production, which was once deeply embedded in social institutions and practiced as a "way of life", tends today to be ever more read primarily and immediately in terms of commercial opportunities.<sup>97</sup>

Every idea and every product, even of counter-culture, tends to be instantly evaluated for its economic potential. This "commercial thinking" is an attitude that is taken up as the norm to which to conform by most actors gravitating toward the industry, ranging from cultural and educational institutions to the practitioners themselves. In this process of commercialisation, social engagement and "critical creativity" are squeezed out,<sup>98</sup> without eliminating, paradoxically, the irregular and insecure living being made by creatives, but rather intensifying it as everyone becomes trapped in a rat race against everyone else.<sup>99</sup> With so much emphasis on a total mobilisation of the self, in which every bit of potential should be put to good

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96 For an account on the connection between governmentality and cultural work, especially in relation to how cultural policies seek to offer cultural workers "solutions" that are desirable for the market, see Mark Banks, *The Politics of Cultural Work* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.46-52.

97 McRobbie, "Holloway to Hollywood," p.98. In referring to cultural production as a way of life, McRobbie takes up Raymond Williams' notion of culture as ordinary, as a way of life that is constituted both by common meanings and the arts, see Raymond Williams, "Culture Is Ordinary," in *The Everyday Life Reader*, ed. Ben Highmore (London: Routledge, 2002), p.93.

98 Angela McRobbie, "Clubs to Companies: Notes on the Decline of Political Culture in Speeded up Creative Worlds," *Cultural studies* 16, no. 4 (2002): p.520.

99 McRobbie, "Holloway to Hollywood," p.98.

economic use, all forms of solidarity and cooperation that go beyond an economic benefit tend to be neglected in favour of an individualised competition for money and success,<sup>100</sup> thus contributing to the self-precarisation of designers.

### **Designers modulated as *homines oeconomici***

McRobbie's outline of the depoliticised context of the creative industries, which nevertheless requires a total mobilisation of the self, resonates not only with my own experience, but with what Foucault describes as the formation of neoliberal *homo oeconomicus*: the entrepreneur of the self, a subject that is the source of one's earnings and that thus applies economic rationality to behaviours that would not previously have been read in economic terms before, such as creativity, friendship or affects.<sup>101</sup> This attitude connects to the maxim for success often projected within design education: "if it doesn't make money it's your hobby."<sup>102</sup> In its simplicity and manifesto-like feel, such a maxim, at its root, tries to eliminate any critical questioning of the techniques of power that shape design practices towards such a mentality, towards the perpetuation of self-precarising attitudes.

Indeed, reading guidebooks for designers like "*How to be a graphic designer without losing your soul*" by graphic designer Adrian Shaughnessy,<sup>103</sup> reveals the extent to which the depoliticised rational of *homo oeconomicus* is constantly taken as the primary model through which to fashion oneself, even when considering the incorporation of social critique into one's work. Despite Shaughnessy, for instance, opening up big questions about the "integrity" of designers in relation to the creative industries, noting, for example, the difficulty of "preserving integrity in the remorseless climate of modern business,"<sup>104</sup> he closes these questions down as quickly as he throws them up. He continuously avoids the difficulties he recognises,

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100 Angela McRobbie, "The Los Angelisation of London," transversal, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0207/mcrobbe/en>.

101 See Foucault lectures at the Collège de France from the 14, 21 and 28 March 1979: Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, ed. Michel Senellart (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

102 A phrase used by a trainer in a career services session for MA design students that I attended in March 2011, and that brings to light the attitude that many design schools foster.

103 Adrian Shaughnessy, *How to Be a Graphic Designer without Losing Your Soul* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005).

104 Ibid., p.25.

instead making them a matter of individual responsibility through statements like the following:

And although the great Josef-Müller Brockmann said ‘All design work has a political character,’ this book assumes that political questions are a matter of individual consciences.<sup>105</sup>

Thus, by conscripting the argument in a statement such as Brockmann’s towards a (neo)liberal discourse solely focused on the individual, the author forgoes potentially radical and much-needed discussions about the functioning and value-practices of the creative industries in favour of the idea of the “proper conduct of designers”:<sup>106</sup> a conduct that navigates an extremely competitive market through individual choices.<sup>107</sup> In doing so, Shaughnessy implies that designerly conduct needs to take competition and commercialisation as a given, rather than something to discuss, confront and determine collectively. By reducing the political character of design to something that is up to our individual consciousness,<sup>108</sup> he forgets that the political is generally defined as that which is played out collectively. Furthermore, he does not acknowledge that every design, as well as the way we practice as designers, is expressing a politics, whether it sides with a hegemonic view of society or not.

However, it is interesting to note that Shaughnessy refers to the individualised behaviour he proposes within the creative industries as “proper conduct,” since Foucault, when speaking about the techniques of power, also refers to “conduct.” In Foucault’s analysis, conduct refers both to “leading others” as well as behaving within a more or less open field of possibilities.<sup>109</sup> Thus the way Shaughnessy refers to *proper conduct*, represents both a technique of power exercised through the guide-book, as well as a technique of the self through which one constantly modulates one’s own behaviour according to the needs of the market: never trying to step out

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p.14.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p.25.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p.14.

<sup>109</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.220-21. Foucault also refers to this double meaning of conduct as “conduire des conduits,” see: Michel Foucault, *Dits Et Ecrits IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p.237.

of the given constraints, but instead trying to create the best possible economic deal whilst accommodating one's ethical values within these constraints.

As such, Shaughnessy presents the creative industries to designers as a deadlock of competitiveness and individualisation, in which family and financial commitments are pressuring everyone to make unpleasant compromises. Moreover, making these compromises is pictured as something quite normal as long as they can be read in the logic of *homo oeconomicus*, because “hang on, what’s so bad about giving clients what they want? Isn’t design a service industry?”<sup>110</sup> But picturing designers as a *homines oeconomici*, even when they do not want to lose their soul, means to modulate them as “docile” in Foucauldian terms, “as someone manageable, someone who responds systematically to systemic modifications artificially introduced into the environment.”<sup>111</sup> This perspective on designers, I argue, underlines precisely the depoliticised context of the creative industries, in which – not even in a book with such a pressing title – is there space for a proposal to collectively challenge the subservient service telos of designers, space for the strategic development of “revolts of conduct,”<sup>112</sup> which *in potentia* are always present, no doubt especially amongst readers picking up a book with the given title.

### **Design education and precarisation**

Guidebooks for designers do not function alone as modulating and normalising procedures, but are connected to other apparatus that, in relation to the needs of governmentality, constantly compare, differentiate, hierarchise, homogenise and exclude people according to a range of “degrees of normality” that indicate membership to a social body.<sup>113</sup> Within this social body, higher and lower ranks themselves function as reward and punishment, inviting designers to conform or modulate themselves to what is considered as the norm. In this perspective, design schools function as an apparatus that contributes to initiating the continuous process of shaping and re-shaping of designers. To think through the normalising procedures of design education in relation to precariousness, I will focus on two

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110 Shaughnessy, *Without Losing Your Soul* p.13.

111 Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, p.270.

112 Michel Senellart, “Course Context,” in Michel Foucault. *Security, Territory, Population*, ed. ibid. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.372.

113 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.182-84.

elements of conduct that emerged strongly, namely the surrender of life to work and the focus on individual progress. Although there are many other behaviours that are normalised throughout design education, these two, enmeshed with the underlying ethos of *homo oeconomicus*, particularly tie into perpetuating the (self-) precarisation of designers.

“You are a designer 24/7.” This slogan of an Italian design school succinctly makes the point that which many design schools teach: to work as a designer means to be constantly ready to observe, learn, make connections, network, work. There is no leaving work behind at 5 o’clock, instead a readiness to perform design tasks that can become claustrophobic.<sup>114</sup> Indeed, the centrality of creativity, affects and knowledge to the work of designers tends to incorporate all they do, feel and experience into work, but simultaneously sees work leaking into all they do. When being trained within the logic of *homo oeconomicus*, designers run the danger of investing, or at least being urged to invest, every bit of time, attention, energy and affect into work. Activating and developing creative skills, which in principle for designers feels like a satisfying activity, becomes a strain when it is constantly subsumed to work and to functioning economically.<sup>115</sup> By advocating, whether overtly or covertly, design as a 24/7 occupation, there is the risk of removing all stops and emergency breaks that designers need as a form of self-protection within the creative industries, where the overlap of passions and work easily leads to (self-)exploitation, self-sacrifice and ultimately exhaustion.

The formula of “being a designer 24/7” also points towards the importance of social relations for securing paid work since within the creative industries, the “right” social relations are of primary importance for securing an income as well as “success.” However, the importance of social relations easily leads to their instrumentalisation in what cultural theorist Andreas Wittel calls “network sociality.” With this term, he refers to a sociality that is distinguished by its informational character, as it is “not based on mutual experience or common history, but primarily on an exchange of data and on ‘catching up.’”<sup>116</sup> Thus, being with others, for designers today, can most often mean networking, i.e. constructing connections

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114 See, for instance, the psychological issues, as well as the use of performance enhancing substances, that emerged from the research in Italy: Cantieri, *Inquiry*, p.22-25

115 See, for instance, books for designers that elaborate on how to endure creativity: Frank Berzbach, *Kreativität Aushalten: Psychologie Für Designer* (Mainz: Schmidt, 2010).

116 Andreas Wittel, “Toward a Network Sociality,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 18, no. 6 (2001): p.51.

that will be helpful in forwarding a “creative career,” and in this sense, it resonates when Wittel goes on to observe that today, “working practices have become increasingly networking practices.”<sup>117</sup> Going to openings and networking events or simply hanging out in trendy places, all become part of a mechanism to secure paid work, as it is at these occasions that people mingle and talk about their future plans, for which they might need collaborators.

And again, we can observe how design schools are preparing students for entering such an environment of network sociality by reproducing it at various levels within the institution: collaborations are encouraged, but not as a mode of building strong, collective subjectivities that could confront the precarising mechanisms of the creative industries, but as a mode of producing more innovative projects. Being professional is portrayed as being able to successfully produce work with whomever, no matter what “private” social relations or preferences might exist. The productive management of short-term relationships is in fact a quality that sociologist Richard Sennett points out to be a winning asset in today’s flexible labour market,<sup>118</sup> and so designers are trained to refine that skill throughout education: networking events are organised, career services emphasise the importance of connecting to the right people and “hanging out” at the local bar in the evenings is proposed as the most appropriate method for finding collaborators. Moreover, the managers and tutors of today’s design schools are themselves actively constructing informational social networks that can spur the success of their graduates. And indeed, the more “important” connections a design school (or a department within it) has, the closer to the “top” it is at an institutional level, and the more privileged its graduates will be when starting their working lives.

Interestingly, the designers who will do best in such a networked structure are those most able to successfully hide the commodification of social relationships. But then, as Boltanski and Chiapello point out, when work and play overlap, it often becomes difficult to distinguish between a genuine affinity to someone or a bonding that stops the moment a joint project is concluded.<sup>119</sup> However, being embedded in an environment of network sociality often leads to the perception that any social situation is not only a moment in which to make useful connections, but also a

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117 Ibid., p.53.

118 Sennett, *New Capitalism*, p.4.

119 Boltanski and Chiapello, *Spirit of Capitalism*, p.98.



moment in which one is judged and, thus, down- or up-graded in the opportunities for paid, or, at least, interesting work, leaving one feeling continually trapped in a “diffuse job interview.”<sup>120</sup>

This focus on the informational quality of social relations, always attentive to their (potential) economic value, leads, during education, to what McRobbie describes as a “double process of de-socialisation,” marked, on the one hand, by the extended celebrity culture perpetuated by a commercial media who focus on single, outstanding personalities and, on the other hand, by social structures themselves, within which people increasingly have to become their own-microstructures in order to secure their survival.<sup>121</sup> These processes of individualisation are, however, described as seemingly marked by choice, that of an individualised dream of affluence based on sheer effort,<sup>122</sup> as well as the talent that lays within all of us and that apparently only we need skillfully tap into.<sup>123</sup> But just as we accept as the norm the modulation of ourselves as designers according to such patterns of thinking and behaving, we are at once rendered more vulnerable to the poor pay, unpredictability and insecurity of precariousness, because within this focus on the self, there remains little space for collectivity and solidarity – not of the old, union-style kind nor a more contemporary one.<sup>124</sup> Thus, the majority of designers coming out of an educational setting that reinforces individualisation, appear to work and drift alongside each other in relative isolation: enclosed in their own passion for work, eager to sooner or later “make it”, to land “The Big Project” that will solve all their problems and which will reward them for years of self-exploitation, while everyone else will just need to keep on trying hard. And, as we realised during *My castle is your castle*, such individualising and precarising reasoning is taken as the norm and cannot be transformed solely through single, sporadic or simply material support structures for designers, but needs to be considered in terms of long-term stability, allowing for a questioning of the subjectivity designers have come to assume.

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120 This perception was singled out and discussed during a workshop with the Carrotworkers’ Collective in Milan during the second inhabitation of this research, the *Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative*, in October 2011.

121 McRobbie, “Clubs to Companies,” p.158.

122 McRobbie, “Holloway to Hollywood,” p.104.

123 Ibid., p.101.

124 Angela McRobbie, “Re-Thinking Creative Economy as Radical Social Enterprise,” <http://www.angelamcrobbe.com/2010/11/art-and-labour/>. See also the almost complete unawareness of Italian designers with regards organisation around their rights as workers: *Cantiere, Inquiry*, p.30-34

Considering the way design education works today as a modulating procedure that directs one towards, rather than against, precariousness, it is no wonder that many graduates only learn about the harsh rules of the labour market once they enter (or try to enter with dignity) the world of work. Thus, they can easily assume that when facing precariousness, it is due to personal failure: not having worked hard enough, not being sociable enough, not being talented enough. This unpreparedness to encounter the adversities of poor pay, unpredictability and long-term insecurity means, then, that most designers end up dealing with the effects of precariousness on their own, which in turn leaves them extremely vulnerable. In this sense, it is problematic that design students are considered to be made “industry-ready” through discourses of entrepreneurialism, whereby juggling multiple jobs in order to make a living is not considered a problem, but a “portfolio career.” This is because such a discourse does not acknowledge the option that today, a necessary part of designers’ work might be to collectively challenge precarising elements of the market through all means possible – through unionisation, for example, and possibly even more so – through innovative ways of self-organisation.<sup>125</sup> From this view of design as emerging from a combination of auto-ethnography and sociological accounts, it becomes clear that as long as we are taught as designers to accept the working conditions of the creative industries as the norm to which we have to modulate ourselves, we will endlessly continue to pit ourselves against each other, making it hard for most to survive, let alone to produce work that is socially meaningful outside the scope of the market.

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125 Unionisation could be an option, though a difficult one, as even in sectors of the creative industries where some workers are unionised, such as broadcasting, freelancers shy away from asking for adequate payment for their services out of fear that the employer might opt for someone cheaper for the next job. See: David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, “‘A Very Complicated Version of Freedom’: Conditions and Experiences of Creative Labour in Three Cultural Industries,” *Variant: cross currents in culture* (2011). Also, conversations with activists of ReRePre (the Italian network of precarious editorial workers) have underlined the inability of unions to engage with the complexity of the situation of precarious cognitive workers. Moreover, in an interview with Henning Krause, the president of the German association of graphic designers BDG, he mentioned that out of 100,000 communication designers in Germany, only 500 are part of the BDG, and when including all similar associations in the country, the number still only comprises 5,000. An analogous situation of non-affiliation can be found in Italy, see: Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative, “Designers’ Inquiry” p.32. However, in the US, over 200,000 freelancers working in a whole range of sectors have come together to stand up for their rights, see “Freelancers Union,” <http://www.freelancersunion.org/>.

## 6. CONCLUSION OF PART 1

In this chapter we have seen how precarious working conditions impact the lives and practices of designers and how in their development over the past 30+ years, procedures of precarisation have squeezed both the social and political engagement out of people. We have also seen to what extent the subjectivity of designers contributes to the perpetuation of modes of working and living that perpetuate precariousness. Furthermore, it has come to the fore how mechanisms of governmentality, played out in education as well as in the creative industries, both discipline, as well as invite, designers to modulate themselves according to what is apparently to be expected and rewarded by the market. Having seen how these various procedures are undermining the range of actions and the life quality of designers, this initial mapping of the field prompts the question, what it would take to reinforce the counter-powers of designers in order to be better prepared to challenge procedures of precarisation? What would it take to make designers “ready-for-life,” ready to set up and sustain practices that not only have space for social and political engagement, but also for having children, being ill, or wanting to care for others?

To launch into the exploration of practical, as well as conceptual tools to reinforce designers’ counter-conduct, in the next part I explore more precisely how the precarisation of designers is instrumental to the capitalist economic system we are in. In doing so, I will build up conceptual tools that not only allow designers to inform their counter-conduct by looking beyond what is generally taken as the norm, but support them in imagining ways of practicing design that build towards de-precarising cultures of working and living.

## **INTERMEZZO**

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Capitalist value production,  
designers and precarisation

## 7. INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERMEZZO

Why and how is the precarisation of designers tied to the production of value in a capitalist economy? To think through the dynamics of the links between precariousness and capital, we will engage in a strategic critique of the political economy, i.e. a critique of how wealth is produced and distributed in a capitalist society. The need to introduce such a critique in this research, is necessary, on the one hand, in order to see behind the surface of the precariousness that affects designers, and on the other hand, as a vital passage for designers wanting to imagine the creation of economic cultures that do not unquestionably reproduce the precarisation and other pitfalls of a capitalist one. Furthermore, I am convinced that, as designers, we should be urged to engage with such a critique, particularly since the financial collapse of 2008 has led to a fiscal crisis that is unfolding as a destructive force as I write.<sup>126</sup> I see this engagement with Marxist concepts as necessary in order for designers to take up at least one of the possible positions from which to thoroughly question the assumptions about society and the economy they bring to and express through their work.<sup>127</sup>

To prepare us for such a critical reading, the first part of the Intermezzo – drawing on the work of Karl Marx – will introduce a series of concepts of how capitalist value production and accumulation can be understood in their basic form. The introduction of these concepts is important as a critique of capitalism is not generally part of design curricula and thus designers are very often lacking concepts to ground their social critique. Moreover, to engage in contemporary critiques of precariousness, covering core concepts these critiques refer to is crucial. Therefore, the Intermezzo aims at enriching the conceptual tool-box of designers who want to address precariousness by subverting, hacking and (re)appropriating the production and distribution of wealth. Marx's ground-up critique of the capitalist mode of

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126 The unfolding fiscal crisis means that all over Europe the welfare state is cut back to meet the financial crisis. In Greece, people face savage cuts, while being pressured to vote for neoliberal politics. In Italy, the crisis has placed an unelected neoliberal prime minister in charge of saving the state. The failure of the Euro is announced every other week and the people seem to have taken the streets without being able to pressure politicians. For a summary of how the crisis unfolded between 2007 and 2012, see the editors introduction to: Manuel Castells et al., eds., *Aftermath: The Cultures of the Economic Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.xiii-13.

127 In fact, the crisis has already prompted Marx to come back into mainstream discussions, even if often in the perverted guise of the theorist who can help to save capitalism in this moment of crisis. See, for example, the following cover story, "What Would Marx Think?," *Time Magazine*, 2 February 2009. For more press clippings taking up Marx since the economic crisis, see Christian Fuchs and Vincent Mosco, "Introduction: Marx Is Back - the Importance of Marxist Theory and Research for Critical Communication Studies Today," *tripleC* 10, no. 2 (2012): p.127.

production, that aims not only at interpreting the world but at changing it,<sup>128</sup> is still a powerful tool of analysis today. The concepts introduced here will indeed inform the less analytical and more propositive exploration of Part 2, which will engage with contemporary autonomist and feminist Marxist strategies to undo procedures of precarisation. In fact, already in the Intermezzo, through a strategic reading that aims to equip designers with the tools to intervene in procedures of precarisation, we will be following an autonomist and feminist Marxism that aims to strengthen the potential for workers to subvert given dynamics of exploitation and subjectivation by capital.<sup>129</sup> In this sense, the Marxist reading of the capitalist mode of production that I propose is not one of a totality that cannot be challenged and of a history that is linear, but is rather a post-structuralist-inspired reading that aims to contribute to the insights designers have of this economic system in order to strengthen their potential for designing and enacting ruptures.<sup>130</sup>

To work through the implications of a capitalist economy, we first consider some of its core principles and their processual functioning as a way to make visible some of the normalised logics of the economic system we are living in. We then unpack how these principles manifest themselves in the working lives of designers. To do so, we engage with three areas of major relevance from the perspective of designers who do not want to take precariousness as a given: practices of time, innovation and competition. In moving through an analysis of these areas, the aim is to build a series of strategic, conceptual tools that can support designers in building a practice that is sustainable and meaningful in the long-term, both for themselves and for the people they design for.

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128 Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

129 For an overview of the autonomist and feminist Marxist approach to reading the dynamics of capital, see for example, the preface and the introduction to: Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2000).

130 The inspiration for this reading is drawn from Antonio Negri's approach to Marx's *Grundrisse*, where he states that reality is not linear and that jumps and turns in it are produced by participating subjects. See Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse* (New York: Autonomedia, 1991), p.56.

## 8. CAPITALIST VALUE PRODUCTION AND ACCUMULATION

In what follows, we engage with the core principles of the capitalist mode of production so that they can function as points of orientation when considering how precariousness and precarisation play out for, and amongst designers. Here, these principles are rough-cut, despite their diversity of nuances throughout capitalist societies. In their roughness, they serve as elements of reference when wanting to further understand why designers encounter precarious working and living conditions and why it is impossible to undo them through individualised actions.

### **Capital as a social relation and as a process**

Capitalism is an economic system that can be described in many ways: conventional economists would probably suggest that capitalism is a market economy. This is a correct, yet simplistic description that does not acknowledge how capital functions in society and its effects on people's lives. A more fruitful definition, especially for the case I am trying to make about precariousness, can be found with Marx, who, in engaging in a ground-up critique of capitalism, always situates the functioning of capital within an economic, political and philosophical discourse, and thus addresses his critique not to capitalism as a monolithic thing, but to *capital as a social relation*. A social relation that is given when the means of production are separated from the producers, when they are owned by some people, while others own only their labour-power. This implies that such a separation is only overcome by bringing together the means of production and the producers in an exchange of seeming equality, i.e. when workers accept to sell their labour-power to the employers for a defined period of time. However, in the capitalist mode of production, this apparent equality between workers and employers is broken once the worker accepts a contract. From that moment onwards, all their capacities will be directed towards working under the command of the employer in order to increase the wealth of the latter.<sup>131</sup>

This unequal exchange is based on the fact that workers, without possession of – or access to – the means necessary to (re)produce their livelihoods, need to sell their labour-power as a commodity on the labour market in order to then be paid a wage with which to buy back from the market what they need in order to live. In this exchange of labour-power for wages, workers are set to work to produce wealth, but

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131 Bruna Ingrao and Fabio Ranchetti, *Il Mercato Nel Pensiero Economico* (Milano: Hoepli, 1996), p.171.



then only paid a fraction of the wealth which they produced. Were it otherwise, the capitalists would not gain anything out of this process. In this sense, Marx's capital social relation implies that the production of livelihoods passes through the market and that some people profit from this process, while others are lose out. Moreover, as autonomist philosopher Jason Read reminds us, capital as a social relation also always implies the production of subjectivities that are functional to it and with them, the creation of normalised quotidian practices, habits and subjective comportments.<sup>132</sup>

With regards to the capital social relation being marked by unequal processes of exchange, David Harvey points out that capital is a process, not a thing, and, as such, exists only as long as it is in motion.<sup>133</sup> This need for motion means that for capital(ism) to exist, commodities need to be exchanged on the market with a (more or less constant) rate of profit that allows for the capitalist accumulation process to continue. For this reason, much effort within a capitalist economy is focused on keeping that process of exchange and accumulation fluid, by, for example, allowing people to pre-finance their needs and desires through credit or bombarding people with advertising. Thus, when today we speak of neoliberal politics and the “commodification of everything,” we imply that the satisfaction of needs and desires – and with them the production of subjectivity – are ever more closely bound to processes of accumulation. Today, capital puts to work ever more lifestyles, desires and knowledges:<sup>134</sup> primary needs like education and health care, but also culture and information, are being commodified in order to fuel processes of accumulation, even if this very often means precarising people's lives and enhancing the divide between those with and those without money.

### Unintelligibility of commodities

In a capitalist society, the value of commodities – which in themselves are made up of human labour, raw materials and the means of production that went into them – is not defined by the use-value they have, but by the monetary value they can be translated into when passing through the market. This translation of the value of a commodity into money and the processes of layering that accompany it, are what

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132 Jason Read, *The Micro-Politics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p.36-42.

133 David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital* (London: Verso, 2010), p.12.

134 Read, *Micro-Politics of Capital*, p.18.

Marx calls “the fetishism of the commodity and its secret.”<sup>135</sup> In this, he means that money conceals the labour processes behind commodities and that people no longer relate to each other as social human beings, but relate to each other through commodities encountered on the market.<sup>136</sup> This has today become so complex that, as Frederic Jameson points out, it is often not even conceivable to people: daily experiences are interlinked with processes all over the world, but yet are not accessible to the immediate, lived experience.<sup>137</sup>

Translated into a practical example, this means that, considering an object such as a computer, the owner cannot possibly know what the working conditions were for all the people that were involved in the process of putting the object onto an office table. There are a vast amount of globally distributed labour-processes involved in producing, delivering and ultimately disposing of a computer: the mining of raw materials, the generation of the energy needed for transport and production, the production and assembling of the parts, bringing it to the shop and selling it, not to mention designing the computer, generating the operational system to run on it, producing the advertising for it, as well as the processes that enter into the picture once the computer is disposed of. Each of these processes, when unpacked, might reveal working conditions and environmental side-effects which are less than desirable.<sup>138</sup> However, none of these conditions and side-effects are directly intelligible in the product as it is bought over the counter.

These long chains of production imply a large amount of mediation within which antagonisms between workers around the world are created. Within these antagonisms, the wealth of each relatively better-off labourer is very likely to be based on the exploitation of labourers (or of nature, which similarly impacts directly on those living from that nature) further down the chain, all in order for the capitalists to maximise their profits.

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135 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume I* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), p.163.

136 Ibid., p.165-66.

137 Frederic Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), p.349.

138 For the various conditions implied in the production of computers around the world, see for example: Elizabeth Dias, “First Blood Diamonds, Now Blood Computers?,” <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1912594,00.html>. Wu Ming 1, “Fetishism of Digital Commodities and Hidden Exploitation: The Cases of Amazon and Apple,” <http://www.wumingfoundation.com/english/wumingblog/?p=1895>. Andrew Ross, *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004). “Processed World,” <http://www.processedworld.com/>; Franco Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation* (London: Minor Compositions, 2009); Jennifer Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), p.127-46.

## Two processes of exchange

To begin to understand how value is produced and accumulated, it is important to note that within a capitalist economy there are two main exchange circuits taking place: one that starts out with the commodity (C), then exchanged for money (M) in order to then return to the commodity form (C) – C-M-C. The other begins with money (M), exchanged for a commodity (C), to then return to the money form (M) – M-C-M.<sup>139</sup>

Workers are mainly involved in the Commodity-Money-Commodity process, going from the particular, i.e. their labour-power as commodity (C), to the universal, i.e. money in the form of a wage (M), to then go back to the particular by using the money earned to buy the commodities needed or wanted (C).<sup>140</sup> This route, from a particular commodity to the universal of money in order to then go back to the particular of a commodity, obviously represents a complicated process: the worker enters the market needing to find someone who wants the commodity s/he possess (this is the commodity of labour-power, which for designers is also made up of social skills and creativity) in order to sell it for money with which s/he can then buy the commodity s/he needed or wanted in the first place. The capitalists, on the other hand, are mainly involved in the Money-Commodity-Money process, in which they enter the market with money, buy the commodities they want (generally these are labour-power and means of production), set them to work and then exchange the produced commodities to end up again with money.

Considering these two processes of exchange, it is easier to enter the market already with the universal of money, in order to then buy the particular commodity wanted. And in fact, those who command the universal (M), are in a more powerful position socially than those who command the particular (C). In contrast to commodities, money can effectively be accumulated endlessly, since money is independent of all limits, and “no one directly needs to purchase because he has just sold.”<sup>141</sup> We can thus see that people who are in the position to accumulate money for future needs and investments are, at the same time, appropriating social power, because they are the ones in the position to directly convert what they own into any other commodity,

139 Marx, *Capital*. V1, p.188-244.

140 Today, workers are also involved in M-C-M circuits, for example, when they invest money earned into pension funds. At that moment in the process, they become capitalists.

141 Marx, *Capital*. V1, p.208.

rather than first selling their labour-power. At a collective level, this differentiation of social and monetary power then becomes the main constituent of class-power.

What can be seen when further comparing the M-C-M to the C-M-C circulation is that not all money is necessarily capital. Capital is created when someone decides to use money in a certain way. Thus, capital arises only when money is inserted into a M-C-M circulation:<sup>142</sup> would this circulation be based on equivalence, we would start out with €100, exchange it for a commodity, and then exchange that commodity back for €100. Such a circulation based on equivalence would not be in the interest of whoever engages in such lengthy and often risky processes of exchange. The interest in an exchange that ends in money, not in a use-value in the form of a commodity to be consumed, is the augmentation of the initial amount of money, for example: €100 → commodity → €120 (M-C-M').

It is in this M-C-M' circulation that money becomes capital, as its owner “releases the money, but only with the cunning intention of getting it back again. The money therefore is not spent, it is merely advanced.”<sup>143</sup> The increment reached on the original sum advanced is then referred to as “surplus-value” and within capitalism, as it is a process and not a thing, this circulation geared towards the production of surplus-value needs to continue endlessly and thus requires constant growth.<sup>144</sup> Were this constant growth from M to M' to stop, capitalism would come to a halt, or at least enter into heavy crisis, as no profits would be being made. This also means that a capitalist – whether being good, bad, “green”, social, power-hungry or humble – due to the fierce competition of who can “make it” on the market, needs to continuously reinvest some of the surplus generated. Only in this way can s/he preserve his/her capital and continue to be a capitalist.<sup>145</sup> So for the money-owners, the system has to grow, and when it does not, there is a crisis. And in a crisis, all good social and environmental purposes easily to down the drain – whether considering a single capitalist or the collective behaviour in a national or global economy – as the need for self-preservation on the market prevails over other necessities. These dynamics will be better addressed further on, when we consider the role innovation plays within a competitive capitalist economy.

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142 For an elaboration on the transformation of money into capital, see *ibid.*, p.247-48.

143 *Ibid.*, p.249.

144 *Ibid.*, p.254.

145 *Ibid.*, p.739.

### **Production of surplus-value**

Looking at the M-C-M' circulation, the question emerges, where is the surplus-money resulting from such a circulation coming from? How is it generated? How does the money-owner get more out of this process than he has put into it? What puts him in a privileged position in this M-C-M formula? <sup>146</sup>

For this formula to work, the money-owner needs to find a commodity on the market that possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value. He needs to find a commodity that, in being consumed, creates more value than that which it requires to buy it in the first place.<sup>147</sup> The commodity on the market that foremost corresponds to this requirement is labour-power: the worker selling his/her labour-power to the money-owner is in fact selling a commodity that consists of the mental and physical capabilities of a human being that can be set to work.<sup>148</sup> By selling these human capabilities as labour-power, the potential to produce use-value for exchange on the market is traded.

However, for the money-owner to gain surplus-value out of the acquisition of labour-power, he needs to make sure that the labour-power given to him allows him to make more money than that which he finally pays the labourer. For such a situation to become possible, in which the workers are actually willing to first sell their labour-power to produce commodities that they then buy back with their wage in order to live, Marx notes that, historically

the owner of money must find the free worker available on the commodity market; and this worker must be free in a double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale, i.e. he is rid of them, he is free of all the objects needed for the realization of his labour-power.<sup>149</sup>

In other words, it is necessary for the money-owner to find people on the market who possess nothing but their labour-power to sell, i.e. people who do not

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p.269.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p.270.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p.272-73.

themselves have access to the means of production for securing their subsistence, people who, in order to survive, need – and, to a certain extent want – to access money by selling their ability to work.<sup>150</sup> Once this process is set in motion, it continually reproduces itself, becomes normalised and becomes entangled in global chains of interdependency that are difficult to untangle. In fact, many workers today do not feel compelled to ask where the necessity to work for a wage or fee stems from and, when this question is asked, possible alternatives to making a living are scarce.

### Definition of productive labour

In this process of exchange and accumulation, it is crucial for capital to establish the value of labour-power over a tight definition of productivity: being productive within capitalism means being able to produce surplus-value.<sup>151</sup> Activities that do not fit this narrow definition are deemed unproductive and besides not being attributed a money-value, they are also devalued socially. Through this definition, capital narrows down the scope of accepted activities, and excludes all those being labelled as “unproductive” of the social contract, which would guarantee a basic set of rights, as well as access to money.<sup>152</sup>

A central example of how this tight definition plays out in social relations and exploitative practices is the way reproductive labour, i.e. the work put into caring for waged labourers and their children or elderly family members, has long been considered unproductive (by capitalists and Marxists alike), and has thus devalued the social position of the people carrying out this kind of work. However, the work of feminist Marxists in the 1970s brought to the fore that although reproductive labour has constantly been labelled as unproductive, it significantly reduces the living costs of the male worker’s family, who in turn can be paid a lower wage.<sup>153</sup> They thus argued that not only the capitalist employer, but also the economic

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150 As Read points out in reference to the unpublished chapter “Results of the Immediate Process of Production” of Marx’s *Capital*, once capitalism is up and running, the free worker, in contrast to the slave, is compelled by his own wants. See Read, *Micro-Politics of Capital*, p.99.

151 For a definition of productive labour see the elaborations on how absolute and relative surplus-value are produced in capitalism: Marx, *Capital*. V1, p.644.

152 Silvia Federici, “Wages against Housework,” (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975), p.2.

153 See for example: Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, “Women and the Subversion of the Community,” <http://libcom.org/library/power-women-subversion-community-della-costa-selma-james>; Federici, “Against Housework.” Maria Mies et al., *Women: The Last Colony* (London: Zed, 1988). Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 1995).

competitiveness of a nation-state,<sup>154</sup> profits not only from the labour-power of the male worker, but also from the unpaid labour his wife, mother or sister puts into reproducing the male worker and into producing new labour-power by raising children whose subjectivities are formed to docilely and eagerly fit into the labour-market.<sup>155</sup>

Following this analysis of what needs to be considered productive labour within a capitalist society, we can recognise that the wage-relation within capitalism hides much of the unpaid labour upon which capital accumulation is premised.<sup>156</sup> Were it not for the unpaid, unrecognised and ‘unproductive’ labour that goes into maintaining workers productive (both by caring for them and the environment they live in), capitalism could not exist. The importance of this feminist Marxist analysis of what is officially labelled productive work and its effects on subjectivity is particularly important in relation to the precariousness of designers and the strategies of counter-conduct that can be derived from it. We will thus take up this critique again when considering how capitalist practices of time are framed and, in Part 2, we consider how feminist practices can inspire the enactment of de-precariating counter-conducts.

### **Production of the working class**

Considering the situation that sees the capitalist on one side and people possessing only their labour-power (with different degrees of value) on the other, it is important to point out that this situation is not a natural given. Rather, it has been constructed, and is still being constructed, through a long, historical process during which people are separated from the means of (re)production necessary to secure their survival and to address their desires autonomously from the market.

Marx referred to this process of separation between the people and the means of production as “primitive accumulation,” during which commonly shared resources are enclosed, i.e. taken away from common use and either privatised or taken into state ownership.<sup>157</sup> In this process of accumulation on one side and dispossession

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154 For a contemporary elaboration on the economic wealth of reproductive labour, see Tito Boeri et al., eds., *Working Hours and Job Sharing in the Eu and USA: Are Europeans Lazy? Or Americans Crazy?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

155 Federici, “Against Housework,” p.5.

156 Federici, “Precarious Labour.”

157 Marx, *Capital*. V1, p.714.



on the other, the social means of subsistence and production – the commons – are turned into private property for the use of capital, while the producers that relied on them to guarantee their livelihoods are turned into wage-labourers.<sup>158</sup> This enclosure of commons, i.e. of resources that are cheaply available, is still continuing today, even within countries that appear to be already fully capitalist. The precarisation of workers can be understood as part of these processes of enclosure, where rights are taken away and the welfare state is dismantled, no matter how many people take to the streets and how much violent police action it takes to crush the protests against such precarising measures. But enclosures today are also taking place through more subtle means in, for instance, the attempted enclosure of people's imagination through the popular suggestion of the impossibility of imagining a socio-economic system that differs from the one rotating around capital.<sup>159</sup> However, as we will see extensively in Part 2, movements around the protection and creation of commons are today also one of the main sites of struggle against precarisation and exploitation.

The mechanism of capitalist value production as just laid out are rather clear cut, in which “one subject (capital) controls the other subject (working class) through the *imposition of work* and surplus work.”<sup>160</sup> Yet, in contemporary society, we experience a blurring of the boundary between workers and capitalists. Workers are, for example, not only forced but lured into becoming micro-capitalists through the necessity to secure their future through, for example, private pension schemes that invest on the stock market, and, as we have seen in Part 1, through the ways people are broadly normalised into behaving as *homo oeconomicus* – always eager to profit in some way from their actions, seeing, for example, education as an investment in their future selves. This means that levels of complexity are reached that make it difficult to imagine how to break through the capital social relation, in which we are often both money-owners and workers. Consider, for example, small design studios that operate as businesses, possibly drawing on the underpaid or unpaid work of interns, but who themselves are struggling to earn a living and have possibly been

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158 Ibid., p.874-75.

159 As an often quoted phrase points out, for most people today it seems to be easier to imagine the end of the world rather than the end of capitalism. Regarding this phrase, it is not clear who it can be attributed to exactly. It first appeared in written form in the text *Future City* by Frederic Jameson in the *New Left Review* in 2003. For a discussion about the origin of this quote, see <http://qlipoth.blogspot.com/2009/11/easier-to-imagine-end-of-world.html>

160 Harry Cleaver, *Translator's Introductions. Marx Beyond Marx by Antonio Negri* (New York: Autonomedia, 1991), p.xxi.

urged to open their own studio since no other option could be seen on the horizon.

Having worked through some basic concepts and functions of the capitalist mode of production, we will move to the next section of the Intermezzo, where we explore how these concepts play out in the everyday practices of designers, and the further ramifications this implies.

## 9. PRECARISING VALUE PRACTICES OF CAPITAL

Autonomist economist Massimo De Angelis points out that, in our society, we are continuously (re)producing capitalism because the values we have learned to consider important, desirable and a priority, are based on principles that capital accumulation relies on. Thus, by orienting our everyday practices around these economic values, we are co-producing the very social form, organisational reach, modes of doing and relating that are rendering us, and others, precarious. In this section, in order to disentangle some of the complexities of the capital social relation, what it values and how it plays out concretely in the lives of designers, we follow De Angelis' suggestion to analyse how capital as a social force "aspires to colonise life with its peculiar mode of doing and articulating social powers."<sup>161</sup> By analysing how capital's modes of doing and articulating social powers act in precarising designers, and with them many others, it becomes possible to see how some of our ways of doing and social relations can be disentangled from capital and its precarising effects. Thus, we will now focus on how capitalist practices of time, innovation and fragmentation manifest themselves in the lives of designers.

### **Precarising practices of time within design**

Snatching as much of people's (unpaid) time as possible, during work and during leisure: this is a major element of the capital social relation and one which manifests itself prominently within the design profession. The way in which this snatching of time is endorsed within the field of design can be exemplified by analysing the practice of the Toronto-based Institute without Boundaries (IwB), a postgraduate design course started in 2003 as a collaboration between The School of Design at George Brown College and graphic designer Bruce Mau. Tracing how the course was advertised and subsequently unfolded reveals how several crucial boundaries had really been done away with, namely the ones between education and exploitation. I would argue that, especially during the first years, during which Mau was involved,<sup>162</sup> the course was, in fact, a high-profile internship: marketed as a highly

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<sup>161</sup> Massimo De Angelis, *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), p.13.

<sup>162</sup> Once the initial project *Massive Change* was concluded, Mau appears to have withdrawn, and in 2012 he is evident neither as part of staff nor faculty members. From the blog of the program we learn that students still visit his studio every year: Institute without Boundaries, "Blog," <http://worldhouse.ca/blog/>.

experimental and engaged study program, prospective students were expected to pay large amounts of money to be allowed to work within Bruce Mau Studio for the period of twelve months.<sup>163</sup>

Between 2003 and 2005, students with undergraduate degrees were recruited on the program on the premise of working on a project called *Massive Change*, which had been previously commissioned to Bruce Mau Studio by the Vancouver Art Gallery and that would address the future of design. Applicants for the program were advised that they would be required to work 40+ hours per week and, thus, working a part-time job on the side was not recommended.<sup>164</sup> However, applicants were offered help in accessing loans in order to be able to pay for the program.<sup>165</sup> Moreover, between 2002 and 2005, the IwB website further informed applicants, that, as a critical member of the design team, each student would share responsibility for ensuring that the developed project met the high standards of Bruce Mau Studio.<sup>166</sup> This note, which reads with some irony in an outline of a 'study programme,' becomes yet more incredible when it adds that applicants "will be expected to lease an Apple iBook at an approximate annual cost of \$1,600.00 (Cdn.), with the opportunity to buy out the computer at the end of the year for market value."<sup>167</sup>

The ambiguous premise on which the 'study programme' was advertised becomes even more explicit when reading the book *Massive Change* that accompanied the eventual exhibition after the second year of the programme.<sup>168</sup> Here, Mau states that the enormous commission by the Vancouver Art Gallery which resulted in *Massive Change* (a project that gained him and the IwB huge exposure in the field of design) would not have been possible were it not for the ingenious idea of combining the elaboration of the commission with an invite to develop an educational

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163 In 2002, fees for home students were set at \$12,000 (Cdn.) and for international students at \$19,500 (Cdn.). The website as of October 2002, stating fees for 2003, was accessed through the internet archive "Wayback Machine" at: Institute without Boundaries, "Frequently Asked Questions," <http://web.archive.org/web/20021220004415/http://www.gbrownc.on.ca/institutewithoutboundaries/faq.html>.

164 Ibid.

165 Ibid.. This is an interesting note, since just four years earlier, Mau published a design manifesto that apparently outlines the ethos of his studio, which at point 31 states, "Don't borrow money": Bruce Mau, "Incomplete Manifesto for Growth," <http://www.brucemaudesign.com/4817/112450/work/incomplete-manifesto-for-growth>.

166 Institute without Boundaries, "How Will I Learn?," <http://web.archive.org/web/20021220003315/http://www.gbrownc.on.ca/institutewithoutboundaries/question6.html>.

167 Institute without Boundaries, "Frequently Asked Questions".

168 Bruce Mau and Jennifer Leonard, *Massive Change* (London: Phaidon, 2004).

program together with George Brown College.<sup>169</sup> And indeed, with this move, Mau and the IwB have not only advocated an approach that is “about the design of the world” rather than about the world of design,<sup>170</sup> but they have also opened up a new and distinctly worrying territory in design education by pushing practices of free-labour to their extreme.

The absurdity of such free-labour, or rather ‘pay-to-labour,’ is made possible by framing the whole endeavour as a breaking out of narrow specialisations, as a testing ground for post-Fordist modes of production, and by accrediting the whole programme through an established college.<sup>171</sup> And in fact, considering how the boundaries of the factory have dissolved with post-Fordism and the ways in which work leaks into all areas of life, in those first years with Mau, the IwB has pushed the boundaries of how, within the field of design, unpaid time can be snatched from people and put to work for someone else’s profits – albeit in the promise of an education, high-profile contacts and a prestigious work experience, which all supposedly contribute to the development of a future career.<sup>172</sup>

However, every time designers try to meet their ambitions (or perhaps even their lack of a better option) through the offer of free-labour (or even by paying their way into high-profile internships, as with the IwB), this contributes to a negative spiral for almost everyone: why might someone ever again pay for something when it is instead possible to have it for free? Every time unpaid labour is performed, the flawed perception is reinforced that certain kinds of work have lost all monetary value.<sup>173</sup> The consequence of this proliferation of free-labour is the effective erosion of stable jobs, as well as an augmentation of pressure on those who manage to acquire a paid contract. Pressure to do over-time rises: pressure to give

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169 For Mau’s statements on the inception of the *Institute without Boundaries* see *ibid.*, p.20; Kathryn Simon, “Bruce Mau,” BOMB Magazine, <http://bombsite.com/issues/91/articles/2732>.

170 The ubiquitously found quote from Mau on the project is: “*Massive Change* is not about the world of design; it’s about the design of the world.”

171 Leitmotifs of the course from 2002 retrieved from: “Institute without Boundaries,” <http://web.archive.org/web/20021002221205/http://www.institutewithoutboundaries.com/>.

172 Since Bruce Mau left the program, the studio space is hosted within George Brown College, but the course still seems to function like a design consultancy (indeed, it defines itself as a Toronto-based design studio) that can be hired or engaged by clients/partners in helping them to solve their problems. For the academic year 2012/2013, the program’s client/partner is the Dublin City Council and the year is dedicated to prototyping a „new model for solving important issues challenging 21st century cities.” See “Institute without Boundaries,” <http://worldhouse.ca/>. Barry Sheehan, “The Dublin Project,” <http://thedublinproject.com/the-dublin-project/>.

173 Ross Perlin, *Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy* (London/New York: Verso, 2011), p.xv.

ever more unpaid time to one's employer in order to avoid being thrown back into the labour-market, where others are waiting to take over that job or internship.<sup>174</sup>

The continuous escalation of more or less subtle invitations to perform free-labour, creates a climate in which giving one's time and labour-power for free seems a normality, and even a necessity if one is ever to get into a respectable, as well as paid, position. However, when looking at the monetary transactions behind the often sweetened discourse and exploitative practice of free-labour, it becomes evident that it is in fact the free-labourers' families, governments' tax money, EU money or the credit-arrangements of the free-labourers themselves that are subsidising the companies or organisations they work for. This is because savings, stipends or credit-money are covering the unpaid workers' needs for housing, food, transport and so on, and are, thus, quietly but directly subsidising their employers: workers are themselves paying for their reproduction as workers, a function that should actually be performed by whoever puts that labour-power to work and profits from it. And to clarify, also making coffee, photocopying, tidying up storage or finishing a project with a couple of extra hours at home, all contribute to the profit an "employer" is making.

### **The basic principles of capitalist practices of time**

But to take a step back, it is necessary to analyse how an exploitative practice such as the one proposed by the IwB, and by many others who profit from free-labour, fits into the bigger picture of how the capital social relation renders time. This relation classically establishes that, once workers have sold their working day to the capitalist, the latter is eager to use the time acquired in the most efficient way possible. This is so, because the most efficient use of the labour-time/labour-power acquired maximises the valorisation of the capital already invested in machines and materials. In this logic of valorisation, every extra minute of labour that can be squeezed out of the worker increases the amount of surplus-value produced for the capitalist.

The principle underlying this logic is that surplus-value is generated by having the worker work longer than it takes to generate his or her salary: if the value of a day's work amounts to €100 and these €100 of value can be created through half a day's labour, then the worker is giving his or her labour for free to the capitalist for

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174 Both the study of the BDG in Germany and the *Designers' Inquiry* in Italy show that doing over-time is often required but seldom paid for in the world of design. Moreover, throughout this research, accounts of people being pressured through subtle mobbing techniques have emerged, for example, being continuously asked if they are working part-time whenever they leave the design agency after a regular, eight-hour working day.

the rest of the day.<sup>175</sup> Thus, the more time without remuneration the worker gives to the capitalist, the more surplus-value the latter can gain from what is produced during a working day. If the worker can even be convinced to pay for being allowed to perform free-labour – for instance through the social pressure created through an oversupply of labourers as we will see in more detail later – this is of course the best situation for the capitalist.

This dynamic clearly creates a situation that disadvantages the worker, but, as we have already seen in the previous section, the worker within capitalism is generally put in a position within which s/he cannot refuse waged labour as it is the only option s/he is given by which to make a living. However, since the inception of capital as a social relation, there has been a constant struggle with regards the value of a working day, i.e. how much workers need to be paid in return for their labour-power. This struggle has generally been determined by the definition of “socially necessary labour-time,” which is classically defined as the time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production *normal for a given society* and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour *prevalent in that society* (italics mine).<sup>176</sup> The focus on defining the value of labour-time as that which is socially necessary is crucial (as we will see later on in more detail in the section on practices of competition and fragmentation), as this social necessity varies from place to place. Thus wages are defined by the socially necessary labour-time needed to reproduce labour-power by paying for housing, food, health care, transport and so on, which vary greatly between countries, especially when considered on a global scale.<sup>177</sup>

Following the logic of socially necessary labour-time, the working day within capitalism is classically defined as being made up of the time necessary to produce the daily average means of subsistence for the worker and the time necessary to produce surplus value for the capitalist. This composition can be pictured as follows: a line A – – – – B representing the length of the socially necessary labour-time to produce the equivalent of the labourers’ means of subsistence – here we assume it is six hours. The labour is then extended beyond AB by two hours

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175 Marx, *Capital*. V1, p.300.

176 Ibid., p.129.

177 The level of poverty, which in turn defines the minimum wage for workers, is defined through a calculation of the cost of a basic commodity bundle, which contains the goods assumed to be necessary for a basic lifestyle in a given society. It is around the composition of this bundle that political class struggle emerges, as it is the manipulation of its content that decides on the wages to be paid. See for example: *ibid.*, p.275.



(A – – – – – B – – C), during which the surplus value for the capitalist is produced. AB thus represents the necessary labour-time, which defines the wage, while BC represents the surplus labour-time given to the employer without remuneration.<sup>178</sup>

This exemplifies well how in a capitalist mode of production, labour can never be reduced to AB, or to what is necessary to live well, as it is precisely BC that ensures the capitalist's profit. It is between A and C that the working day fluctuates, whereby the capitalist gains more, the shorter AB is in relation to BC.<sup>179</sup> Consequently, a struggle over time between the class of capitalists and the class of workers emerges: for the capitalists, the length of the working day should be as long as possible, but in opposition the workers need time to satisfy their physical, affective and intellectual needs. Workers need to eat, sleep, love, care, learn, but they also need to defend themselves from a working day that would effectively shorten their life by completely exhausting them.<sup>180</sup>

Currently, designers, especially when working freelance, are mostly left to themselves when needing to establish the levels of socially-necessary labour time that goes into their design work. The fact that, in many countries, there does not exist an easily accessible and applicable scale of fees that could be adapted to the range and levels of work, penalises designers. Data collected through *Designers' Inquiry* reveals, for example, that young designers are primarily applying somewhat arbitrary measures in order to define their fees and often undersell their labour-power,<sup>181</sup> thus lowering the general perception of the money-value of design work. Clearly, it can be argued that this underselling is also the result of the sheer amount of designers looking for work and that the resulting competition between them pushes fees down. However, given the almost complete lack of useful points of orientation to what might constitute a proper fee undoubtedly exacerbates the situation. Moreover, designers' inclination towards sacrificing their labour-time in order to work with clients who are perceived as prestigious, needs to be considered as, indeed, both freelancers as well as design studios tend to also take into consideration the symbolic or social capital, i.e. the prestige and connections they

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178 Ibid. p.430

179 Ibid., p.431.

180 Ibid., p.342-44.

181 Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative, "Designers' Inquiry" p.11-16.

acquire,<sup>182</sup> when working with or for (and this distinction is often blurred) someone they perceive as important.<sup>183</sup>

### **Normalisation of capitalist practices of time**

When thinking through the time-practices valued by the capital social relation, it is useful to consider how the notion of time, according to which people function today, has been modulated over centuries through time-disciplining techniques. This modulation in capitalism has been – and still is – crucial, precisely because time-discipline decisively determines how much free-labour can be appropriated for the production of surplus-value. As one of the factory inspectors cited by Marx noted, “moments are the elements of profit,”<sup>184</sup> which make the management of workers’ time crucial within capitalism. Consequently, with the development of capitalism, a tight time-discipline at work became crucial for the capitalist: setting exact times for breaks, implementing a system of fines and the supervision of the labour-process, streamlining the production process, even stealing workers’ time by turning the factory clock forward in the morning and backward in the evening became common practice.<sup>185</sup>

And in fact, the notion of temporality and time as we know today in the global North/West is socially constructed. It is in capitalism that the idea of a working day, a working week and a working life has been established, whereby to normalise such concepts of time in relation to wage-labour, a temporal disciplining of societies needed to take place. It required centuries until workers were compelled by social conditions to sell their whole, active life-time to the capitalist in return for their conventional means of subsistence.<sup>186</sup> In England, for example, for the greater part of the eighteenth century, workers would still only work as much as necessary to live: if four days could cover their needs, they would not work for the rest of the week. When they could avoid the drudgery of wage labour, with all its additional

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182 Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).

183 Adam Arvidsson et al., “Passionate Work? Labour Conditions in the Milan Fashion Industry,” *Journal for Cultural Research* 14, no. 3 (2010).

184 Marx, *Capital*. V1, p.352.

185 Ibid., p.349-50.

186 Ibid., p.382.

disciplining within the factory, they would simply avoid doing so.<sup>187</sup> Thus, to reach our contemporary, embodied notion of temporality, in which work dictates the rhythms of our lives, it took centuries of, what Foucault would describe as, forms and techniques of power that act locally in order to subject people to the discipline of the workplace.<sup>188</sup> It took violence and social pressure in order to have people function according to the time-logic of capital.<sup>189</sup>

And still today, a large part of education is geared towards insisting people stick to given timeframes, work within deadlines, and measure activities to a clock and a calendar respectively. With regards the ways in which designers are being time-disciplined through tight deadlines of project work at university, through career-services that teach techniques of time- and self-management, but, above all, by being taught to love one's work as the activity through which to be most oneself, these measures can all be read as techniques to ensure the productivity of even those designers who will be precarious, those working freelance or pursuing their own thing. It is a form of control that is instilled within the individual in order that s/he functions according to the rules of productivity even when, or maybe today *especially* when, they are *not* in a regular job, when they are precariously moving in and out of paid work. It is apparent that revealing one's time-discipline is perceived as a prerequisite to getting into an ever more slightly privileged position within the world of precariousness: being ready to invest all time necessary to stick to a tight deadline, to be acquainted and comfortable with high-pressure, short-term projects and collaborations, to time-manage oneself to be efficiently streamlined in one's daily, monthly and yearly attitudes, deferring time-consuming desires or needs to an indefinite future.

Considering this normalisation of time-discipline, the most radical gesture today would seem to be to break with this internalised productive notion of time; to find a rhythm and a pace that is not consciously or unconsciously geared towards productivity, but towards a good life. Many designers are far from such a gesture at the moment, and what is more, many are not only submitting themselves to today's

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187 Ibid., p.385.

188 For how Foucault relates to the disciplining described by Marx, especially in chapter 10 of *Capital*, see the lecture he gave in Salvador de Bahia in 1976: Michel Foucault, "The Mesh of Power," <http://viewpointmag.com/2012/09/12/the-mesh-of-power/>.

189 For accounts of the violence and social pressure, see for example: Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*; Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 1991); Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*.

systemically unstable time-frames with the associated levels of pressure to perform, but are doing so by giving their time and labour-power for free to others, in the hope that they might gain from it at a later moment in time.

Considering that today it is commonplace in the creative industries for free-labour to be both assumed and carried out, the struggles to shorten the length of the working day and for better wages that have been fought in the past, seem far removed. But given that money-owners always and necessarily tend to find ways to shorten the length of the socially necessary labour-time, i.e. the workers' labour time that needs to be paid in order to allow the workers to live, it is clear that the more this time is reduced, the greater the profits they make.

To begin from this assumption of capital's compulsory reduction of socially-necessary labour-time, when reading the discourse around free and underpaid labour in the creative industries, we can see how intrinsic rewards and self-realization underlying much creative work are instrumental in allowing creatives tolerate being exploited by their "employers."

Moreover, this discourse can be read in parallel to the discourse around the free-labour performed by women in the household, as a labour of love. When in the 1970s feminist Marxist Silvia Federici writes that capital had to convince women that housework is a natural, unavoidable, even fulfilling, and thus unwaged activity, the same could be said about the work of many designers today.<sup>190</sup> Although design is today conceived as a major driver of the economy, being "allowed" to perform creative work (which often is indeed not that creative at all) is still largely perceived as something to be grateful for, rather than something designers should expect decent remuneration for. Consequently, the offers of as well as requests for free-labour, which surround designers on all sides, are portrayed as "great opportunities," when in fact they are compelling people to dedicate their time and labour-power for free for someone else's gain.

To add to this discourse around free, creative labour is that institutions such as universities tend to become ever more complicit in it. Since the Bologna Process,<sup>191</sup> for example, through which initiative periods of free labour were not only

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190 Federici, "Against Housework," p.2.

191 The Bologna Process was initiated in 1999 and aimed at homogenising education across Europe to create the European Higher Education Area. It introduced the BA, MA and PhD structure to studies across Europe and included an internship to a 3-year BA. For a critical engagement with the Bologna Process and its consequences, see, for example: Edu-factory, <http://www.edu-factory.org/wp/>.

normalised but institutionalised by framing them as a learning process, young designers are trained, just as are other students, to buy into the logic of free internships to get a foot in the door, to help build a professional network and to ‘allow’ people to gain experience. Once out of education, the myth of this mechanism for securing a stable, paid position persists and people continue to readily take on unpaid labour following a carrot promising not only payment and stability, but also success, happiness and a meaningful experience.<sup>192</sup>

As pointed out in the example of the IwB, these practices of time around free-labour are fuelling a negative spiral. A spiral that is propelled, on the one hand, by many young designers relying on the savings their parents accumulated through stable jobs and pension schemes, and, on the other hand, by the existence of enough people still believing in the carrot and willing to take on debts in order to pursue a “career.” But this cycle could soon be exhausted when it becomes the turn of the precarious generation to support their offspring. At that point, there will be nothing left to support people the way we see it currently happen.<sup>193</sup>

Moreover, when considering how present capitalist practices of time will affect people’s future, it is important to point out that, since the financial crisis, a system of debt has been revealed that enslaves the time of the future. Financing one’s education, health, housing and so on through an accumulation of debt, occupies the present and the future with the pressure to pay back the credit-money owed. In times when work is precarious, such a situation renders, the indebted designer, for example, even more precarious. Moreover, the constant need for a certain amount of money to cover the monthly repayments easily squeezes out social and political engagement in design, since it takes away all freedom to negotiate or refuse work which does not fit one’s political agenda. Furthermore, financially-pressured designers who engage in work that is snatching large amounts of unpaid or underpaid time from them, are left with little or no space to produce work which might challenge the status quo of the very society that is keeping them in their precarious position in the first place.

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192 Carrotworkers’ Collective, “Surviving Internships: A Counter Guide to Free Labour in the Arts,” (London 2011).

193 As already mentioned in Part 1, student debt is soaring, but as it emerged, for example, from a conversation with a well-known U.S. designer, people who have themselves had the privilege to go through private education, cannot afford to offer the same to their children as the income generated through their design work does not allow for it.

### Capitalist practices of innovation

In a capitalist mode of production, practices of time are closely linked to practices of innovation. This is because once the length of the working day has been legally established under the pressure of political struggles, the production of surplus value can no longer be increased through the extension of the working hours. At this point, what needs to happen to secure the gain of more surplus value is a revolutionising of the labour process itself.<sup>194</sup> This innovation can be performed in various areas, for example, in the production and distribution process, in the type of commodities produced or in the management of workers. Innovation in these areas is crucial because, as Marx points out,

the real value of a commodity ... is not its individual, but its social value; that is to say, its value is not measured by the labour-time that the article costs the producer in each individual case, but by the labour-time socially required for production.<sup>195</sup>

In other words, if a single capitalist begins to apply a new production method that lowers his costs of production, he can still sell the produced commodity at its social value and can hence realise an extra surplus-value in comparison to his competitors, with their more costly processes or to less innovative products. As long as this single capitalist is the only one to apply this new method, he has the competitive advantage and can even sell his goods slightly below the social average value, while still not making a loss. Acting this way, he can make a huge profit by taking over the market, squeezing out those producing with costs slightly over the social average.

As we have seen in Part 1, innovation of production processes was also at the root of the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism: not only outsourcing and the computerization of production, but also the incorporation of a social critique into management discourse, have been some of the major innovations marking this transition. This subsequently marked the shift from stable to precarious jobs in the global North/West, and precarising workers with new, innovative contracts and working

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194 Marx, *Capital*. V1, p.430-31.

195 Ibid., p.434.

arrangements gave employers a competitive advantage on the market.<sup>196</sup>

The incessant search for innovation is normalised and normed by what Marx refers to as the “coercive law of competition.” This law forces capitalists to try to be ahead of other competitors within the market in order to continuously increase the surplus value produced and to avoid going bankrupt.<sup>197</sup> It is within this logic of competition that many of the links between innovation and design work can be read: for example, high-tech companies allow designers and other professionals to freely experiment in their labs while attempting to catch as much of their free time as possible, through “after-work” activities or by allowing time for “play,” which is geared towards producing that one, innovative leap that will give the company the decisive competitive advantage in the market.

The logic of competition is also what drives companies, venture capitalists or angel investors to support small, creative start-ups.<sup>198</sup> As past experiences have shown, innovation is distinctly linked to smallness: patents developed by small firms are twice as likely to be among the top 1% of patents that subsequently register a high economic impact.<sup>199</sup> It is thus no surprise that investment flows in this direction, especially in the technology sectors. However, it is also interesting to note that economists underline the necessity that creative and radical innovators should be urged to leave a new venture after it is up and running, as their mind-set often conflicts with that which is necessary in order to grow and consolidate a company.<sup>200</sup> This might well be because an innovative mind is not necessarily interested in participating in the dynamics of the “coercive law of competition.”

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196 However, if through various innovations there is a dramatic increase in productivity, precariousness is not necessarily the result for all workers: a dramatic increase in productivity could bring the costs of production for a commodity, as well as its money-value on the market, way down. If then a fragment of that savings in production costs is passed on to the workers in the form of higher wages, the rate of exploitation could be increased while at the same time increasing the physical living standards of the workers. This means that the capitalist could move from a A ----- B -- C situation to a A -- B ----- C situation, i.e. he could get more unremunerated labour-power, while the workers could still be able to buy loads more of commodities on the market. What is not perceived by workers benefitting from this paradoxical situation, is that their living standards are propped up by exploitation and environmental pollution somewhere else in the process of production. As a dynamic, this high rate of exploitation paired with a rise in living standards for workers has been working, especially in the U.S. until the 1970s, but since, the gains in productivity have not been passed on anymore. The profit has been taken by a minority and social inequalities increased dramatically. See Harvey, *Companion*, p.170-71.

197 Marx, *Capital*. V1, p.433.

198 Venture capitalists invest the pooled money of others, while angel investors generally invest their own capital.

199 Geoff Mulgan et al., “Social Innovation: What It Is, Why It Matters and How It Can Be Accelerated,” (London: The Young Foundation, 2007), p.42.

200 Ibid., p.25.



### **Design innovation as a good in itself?**

Since today, innovation is often portrayed as a good in itself, it is interesting to reflect on the social results produced by the connection between value-practices of innovation and design. Being involved in the race for new innovations is, in fact, the activity that often prevents designers from being highly precarious. However, it is important to point out that innovation today, especially in the field of mass-technology, is closely linked to the exploitation of both highly precarious workers and natural resources in the cycles of production, marketing and disposal cycles of these products.<sup>201</sup> Were there to be no exploitation involved in this chain of production, many innovations would not contribute to economic growth in the way they currently do.

Moreover, in respect to the role of machinery in improving people's lives, the introduction of household appliances and its consequences is an interesting case to consider as the machinery has been designed in the spirit of alleviating the toil of reproductive work. But as an analysis of their introduction in rural Germany in the 1950s shows,<sup>202</sup> the hope that appliances such as freezers and washing machines would reduce work and increase free-time for women did not come true. Instead, they allowed women to handle greater amounts of work in the home and on the farm, which in turn allowed men to hand their tasks over to women and to take up work in the factories of the towns. In this instance, the introduction of electronic household appliances did not bring the promised free-time for women, but rather contributed to tie women closer to their "naturalised" role of unpaid housewives whilst increasing the base of men competing to be enrolled into wage-labour. This example suggests that design innovation alone design does not necessarily improve the overall situation of people. In this sense, the introduction of household appliances could have been a liberating, potentially revolutionary force in society, but as it did not go along with a politicization of the workers in regards of how this innovation could really serve their objectives, it only served to tie people more closely into the precarising capital social relation.

Considering how often innovation is instrumental in the expansion of capital's exploitative social relation, it becomes necessary for designers to closely

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201 See for example: Wu Ming 1, "Digital Commodities". For an account of the importance of the exploitation for the Italian legal as well as illegal economy, see for example: Brave New Alps, "Laboratorio Campano," <http://www.laboratoriocampano.org/>.

202 Thomas Fuchs, "Einst Mühsam Walten, Jetzt Ein Schnelles Schalten" in *Oikos. Von Der Feuerstelle Zur Mikrowelle: Haushalt Und Wohnen Im Wandel*, ed. Michael Andritzky (Gießen: Anbas-Verlag, 1992).

interrogate how the innovation furthered by their designs contributes to particular sorts of approaches to the world. With regards to design that aims to address immediate social issues, there is a need to carefully ask with what agenda, worldview and underlying assumptions of value the designers approach these issues. If, for example, we consider design for development, South African designer Ralph Borland reminds us that, in the 1960s and 1970s, designers working in this field voiced an acute, critical attitude towards framing approaches to solve global inequality in terms of “first world economic practices.”<sup>203</sup> Practitioners at the time, like Gui Bonsiepe, were sceptical about the ability of the market and consumable goods to resolve anything, given that these register only the needs that can be satisfied by commodities.<sup>204</sup> Today, instead, exhibitions like *Design for the Other 90%*<sup>205</sup> tie into a discourse about social issues and poverty that encourages designers and entrepreneurs to innovate for “the poor”<sup>206</sup> out of self-interest, because the billions of poor in the world represent a huge market for affordable products and services.<sup>207</sup> The proposal here is that if designers were to comprehend the potential of this market, they could profit from it while at the same time being celebrated as “do-gooders”.<sup>208</sup>

Such contemporary arguments for design are inscribing themselves in issues of global concern, but, unfortunately, do so without questioning larger, global mechanisms that are producing poverty in the first place and their own ingrained *homo oeconomicus* approach to the world. This fact is, underlined, for example, in how the catalogue accompanying *Design for the Other 90%* is devoid of any overt politics, simply takes poverty as a given. There is not one essay or fact sheet reflecting on how “the poor” the exhibition is concerned with came into being, how they have been – and are still being – impoverished through colonial or neo-colonial practices such as

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203 Ralph Borland, “Radical Plumbers and Playpumps: Objects in Development” (Trinity College, 2011), p.53.

204 Ibid.

205 Cynthia E. Smith, ed. *Design for the Other 90%* (New York: Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum Smithsonian Institution, 2007); “Design for the Other 90%,” Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, <http://www.cooperhewitt.org/tags/design-other-90>.

206 I use inverted commas for “the poor” as the parameters used to define who counts as poor are too reduced to how little money people live on a day (for example, \$1 or \$2 a day), tacitly implying that this life is necessarily a more miserable life than ‘ours’ in the global North/West, which is a position that I do not subscribe to.

207 The *Design for the Other 90%* catalogue subscribes to this view throughout, but it is expressed most evidently in Paul Polak’s contribution: Paul Polak, “Design for the Other Ninety Percent,” in *Design for the Other 90%*, ed. Cynthia E. Smith (New York: Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum Smithsonian Institution, 2007).

208 For another charitable, bourgeois proposal of ‘do good’ for graphic designers, see David B. Berman, *Do Good Design: How Designers Can Change the World* (Berkley: New Riders, 2009).

those (re)produced through globalization.<sup>209</sup> In lacking such contextualisation, many of the proposals made for new areas of engagement for designers are uncritically tying into conventional discourses of capital: “the poor” are framed as clients forming a yet unexploited market. And as we (apparently) live in a world where only money can secure access to food, shelter, clean water, health or education, the suggestion is that it is only when designers provide “the poor” with “the means to become entrepreneurs in their own right,” that they will succeed in devising innovative “solutions to the causes of poverty.”<sup>210</sup> All this is not to say that designers should not engage in issues of poverty and inequality, but to stress the need for a thorough examination of unquestioned assumptions and the consideration of models for the (re)production of livelihoods that do not unquestionably rely on Western business models.

Arguments around design like the ones promoted by *Design for the Other 90%* sadly leave proposals for engaged design practices devoid their social critique: by strengthening the reasons for individualistic searches for profit the desire to tackle issues around poverty and inequality are recuperated into a capitalist discourse of innovation. Thus, the *homo oeconomicus* incorporated over decades by people in the global North/West is simplistically projected onto everyone else in the world, by stating that, for example,

the poorest people in the world are just like you and me. No matter how community-minded we are, we will take care of the needs of our family first. And we value the most the items we had to work for.<sup>211</sup>

In such a discourse, often found in relation to social innovation, concerns about other people’s lives are mobilised, whilst not threatening at all the principles of capitalist accumulation and exploitation that generate these issues in the first place. In fact, the argument that social innovation is the production of new ideas that meets

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209 For a brief overview of the ways globalisation has impoverished people in developing and formerly colonial countries, see for example: David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011), p.2-6.

210 Cynthia E. Smith, “World Designs to End Poverty,” in *Design for the Other 90%*, ed. ibid. (New York: Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum Smithsonian Institution, 2007), p.16.

211 Martin Fisher, “Design to Kickstart Income,” in *Design for the Other 90%*, ed. Cynthia E. Smith (New York: Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum Smithsonian Institution, 2007).

unmet needs,<sup>212</sup> too often sweetens processes involved in the commodification, and thus precarization, of everything. So, although social innovation is concerned with pressing issues around health, education and care, it too often proposes to address these by a unquestioned movement through the market, thus tying ever more people and areas of life into a precarising capital social relation.

In fact, to reflect on the movement of recuperation of desire and critique that exists in many discourses around social innovation, it is useful to draw on Boltanski and Chiapello, who argue that, in certain conditions, the recuperation of critique can even

*elude the requirement of strengthening the mechanisms of justice by making itself more difficult to decipher, by 'clouding the issue'. According to this scenario, the response to critique leads not to the establishment of more just mechanisms but to a change in the modes of profit creation, such that the world is momentarily disrupted with respect to previous referents, and in a state that is extremely difficult to decipher. ... The old world it condemned has disappeared, but people do not know what to make of the new one.*<sup>213</sup>

The disorientation generated by the debate around social innovation is clearly linked to the profundity of the issues it wants to tackle, given that it is undoubtedly difficult not to be compelled by arguments that promise to solve problems around poverty, disease and social exclusion. Furthermore, areas of friction are often downplayed or smoothed out, for example when Charles Leadbeater speaks about social innovation through the internet.<sup>214</sup> In doing so, he completely dismisses the toxic materiality and global divide of access that accompanies this medium, and is thus able to make a rather sleek, immaterial and enthusiastic case for such practices of innovation. When such accounts of innovation are presented, it is left to the readers themselves to draw connections between conflicting information presented at different points in the narrative and to analyse the complex processes behind the

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212 Mulgan et al., "Social Innovation," p.8.

213 Boltanski and Chiapello, *Spirit of Capitalism*, p.29.

214 Charles Leadbeater, *We-Think: Mass Innovation, Not Mass Production* (London: Profile Books, 2008).

examples of good-practice presented, in order to be able to make critical sense of it.<sup>215</sup>

Among designers, the disorientation between practices that “do-good” and those that, often unintentionally, create further precariousness, is also generated by a lacking awareness of how the capital social relation functions. This means that designers are often limiting themselves to addressing the symptoms rather than the underlying, exploitative social practices. This situation is perpetuated by the fact that, while much discussion takes place within the field of design around social or green entrepreneurship, the idea and practice of entrepreneurship – often themselves part of the problem – are seldom discussed. And thus the desire of young (or even, often, slightly older and already semi-exhausted) designers to make a living through meaningful work is channelled into sweetened entrepreneurialism. In this way, a thorough questioning of why certain situations develop around which designers want to create meaningful projects, is dismissed. Through this dismissal, the possibility of addressing these issues in more inventive ways, through practices of “counter-innovation” that displace the capital social relation and with it, precariousness, are lost.

### **Social practices of fragmentation**

Besides the “coercive law of competition” reigning amongst capitalists, the capital social relation fosters fragmenting social practices at all levels of society, with competition being among the primary of these practices. As De Angelis points out, competition is so engrained in capitalist society that people seem to be rendered speechless in relation to this dominant relational mode, even claiming that it is simply a fact of life through which the economy is articulated, just as it might have once been claimed that patriarchy is an unquestionable fact of life.<sup>216</sup> Furthermore, most designers take competition and its precarising effects, within and beyond the field of design, as a given. A given towards which their bodies and minds must be continuously trained, in order to make sure they reason and function in ways that secure them a competitive advantage over others. As we have seen in Part 1, design

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215 The report on social innovation by Mulgan, for example, cites the *Grameen Bank* and fair trade as world changing social innovations, without considering the many – more or less hidden – problems these bring with them: Mulgan et al., “Social Innovation,” p.47. For a critique of micro-finance as proposed by *Grameen Bank* see for example: Lamia Karim, “An Analysis of Microfinance in Bangladesh,” *Conversations on diplomacy and power politics*, <http://diplomacyandpower.blogspot.co.uk/2009/03/true-state-of-microfinance-in.html>. For a critique of fair trade, see for example: Fred Pearce, *Confessions of an Eco-Sinner* (London: Eden Project Books, 2008), p.27-35.

216 De Angelis, *Beginning of History*, p.xi.

education is also geared towards preparing students with the individualising skills supposedly necessary to succeed in the market and to be ready to play to the rules of a fragmented profession. In fact, we have also seen how the market rewards some and punishes others through procedures of control and normalisation. Moreover, in the section on practices of time, we have considered how the precarising practices of free-labour within design also heavily rely on the persuasiveness of competition: paying, for example, to be allowed to perform free-labour in a prestigious studio can be read as building up the social and cultural capital that will later provide a competitive advantage in the market, to stand out amongst others.

The competitive practices that designers experience and perform are not simply confined to their professional field but are intrinsic to capitalist societies, whose function depends on pitting people's livelihoods against each other in an endless rat race.<sup>217</sup> This rat race of competition and fragmentation is played out at all levels: it sets one social class against another, one gender against another, one ethnicity against another, one language group against another, and so on and so forth. Especially in a globalised capitalist economy, the mass of cheap energy, raw materials, assembled goods and services can only be produced by setting the working and living conditions of people against each other. As De Angelis explains, this is because

capital's form of global interdependence means that my going to work to day and eagerly complying with all the requirements of a competitive society and economy implies that my actions have an effect on somebody else somewhere in the world. To put it bluntly, the competitive market logic implies one of three things: 'we' are more efficient than 'them' and thus we contribute to their ruin; 'they' are more efficient than us so 'they' are contributing to 'our' ruin; or the two opposites are true alternately, resulting in an endless rat race that ruins both 'their' and 'our' lives.<sup>218</sup>

This antagonism between "us" and "them" plays out both on an individual and a collective scale: our area of the world against theirs, our nation against theirs, our region against theirs, our city against theirs, our borough against theirs, our business against theirs, our work unit against theirs, me against you. This setting

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., p.41.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., p.153.

of one against the other can manifest itself either in the stark, mediated tensions of the survival of computer-dependent designers as tied to the destruction of other people's habitats and lives, or in the more directly intelligible oppositions in which someone might need to rely on someone else's socially devalued cheap or free-labour simply to be able to be in the position to perform their own job.<sup>219</sup> In this respect, the autonomist economist Harry Cleaver points out how the power differentials created amongst people through capitalist practices function to discipline and control them:

The waged are used to mediate the relation between capital and the unwaged. The higher waged are used to mediate the relations between capital and the lower waged. Or, inversely, the unwaged are used by capital to discipline the waged; the low waged are used to discipline the high waged.<sup>220</sup>

In this sense, the “divide and rule” of the capital social relation is based on pitting diversities against each other, which then result in hierarchies of power and differentiated access to resources at all levels of society.<sup>221</sup> These fragmenting differences manifest themselves not only through class but also through gender, race, sexual orientation and many more diversities that can be mobilised for creating opposites.

In the work and lives of designers, the competition and fragmentation resulting from such oppositions has furthermore been rendered fierce by the large number of “industry-ready” graduates that enter the market every year, a number that has been steadily rising with the transition to post-Fordism. For now, this saturation of the creative-labour market has resulted in a climate of competitiveness that makes it easy for the industries to draw on a readily available “reserve army” of freelance

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219 As to how livelihoods are pitted against each other in a globalised capitalist economy, see for example Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russel Hochschild, eds., *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (London: Granta, 2003).

220 Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*, p.160.

221 De Angelis, *Beginning of History*, p.173.



designers.<sup>222</sup> Furthermore, it has created a situation in which small design studios engaged in what could be considered reasonable cultural work, need to rely on the free or underpaid labour of other designers in order to keep afloat in the market, thus ultimately exhausting each other rather than joining forces to confront the procedures that have created that exploitative situation in the first place. However, as we will discuss in more depth in Part 2, this is not a situation that needs to exist indefinitely.

Besides competition between designers, it is also worth considering – even if here we can only do so in passing – how the results of design work are themselves very often contributing to practices of fragmentation by closely tying into the production and marketing of commodities that rely on exploitative chains of production and reinforce class differences. As sociologist Celia Lury explains, the consumer culture we are today thoroughly embedded in is not only shaped by class relations, but is also implicated in how we understand ourselves, our social belongings and politics.<sup>223</sup> In fact, by drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, the commodities we consume can be read as means through which the cultural representation of our social situation can be manipulated.<sup>224</sup> Through this lens, we can see how the role of design could be considered crucial in both fragmenting and consolidating social groups: housing, clothing, technological objects, but also social environments, such as places for consumption or vacation, signify and differentiate social status, towards which ends people are often willing to take precarising choices.

### Individualising debt

Since the financial crisis hit in 2008, it has become clear that debt is a condition that today affects millions of people, either directly or indirectly. Furthermore, among designers, debt becomes an ever increasing issue as ever more design graduates have a student loan to pay off. Where there is neither a wealthy family nor an alternative source of funding to back up educational expenses, a considerable number of graduates enter the creative industries with debt to pay off. Leaving education with

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222 Marx describes the industrial reserve army originally as “a necessary product of accumulation of the development of wealth on a capitalist basis, this surplus population also becomes, conversely, the lever of capitalist accumulation, indeed it becomes a condition for the existence of the capitalist mode of production. It forms a disposable industrial reserve army, which belongs to capital just as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost. Independently of the limits of actual increase of population, it creates a mass of human material always ready for exploitation by capital in the interest of capital’s own changing valorisation requirements.” See Marx, *Capital*. V1, p.784.

223 Celia Lury, *Consumer Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), p.6.

224 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984).

this baggage leaves little space for personal development and criticality, instead forcing designers to accept every possible job in order to relieve this financial burden.<sup>225</sup> The entrapment created by debt is succinctly phrased by Maurizio Lazzarato: “the debtor is ‘free,’ but his actions, his behaviour, are confined to the limits defined by the debt entered into.”<sup>226</sup>

Silvia Federici describes the debts accumulated for education as a consequence of the financialisation of our lives: the state is significantly disinvesting in the reproduction of workers, who have to reason as *homo oeconomicus* in ever more areas of their lives, constantly urged to invest in themselves to be fit for work.<sup>227</sup> Federici succinctly summarises the rhetoric that accompanies this financialisation through the example of education: if you do not have (good, high, prestigious) education, your life will be miserable, you will have the most unsatisfactory job. To get a satisfactory job, you need a certificate and this is something that you need to pay for. This neoliberal rhetoric frames education – but also many other areas of life that have become financialised – as an investment in one’s social and cultural capital, an investment in the self. Education is no longer seen as contributing to society, to the productivity of one’s employer, but instead as an individualistic act that comes with the imperative to shoulder alone all the difficulties associated with repaying the debt one might have incurred through this investment.

The social fragmentation that is produced by portraying the debtor-creditor relationship as one of self-investment has strong rippling effects. On the one hand, as Federici underlines, it constitutes a new class relation that individualises the relation of exploitation. On the other hand, as Lazzarato points out, it shapes people’s subjectivity around guilt: not only have debtors sold their future time to the creditors, they are also perceived (and largely perceive themselves) as being involved in some kind of moral indebtedness. Thus, debt can function as a powerful tool that at one and the same time undermines collectivity and exercises social control over people’s present and future decisions. Furthermore, as David Graeber puts it, debt has historically been the most effective way to justify relations founded on violence.

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225 For an account of student debt, which in the US amounted to one trillion on April 25<sup>th</sup> 2012, see: Ann Larson and Malav Kanuga, “April 25th Is ‘1t Day’: Occupy Student Debt,” <http://www.edu-factory.org/wp/april-25th-is-%E2%80%9C1t-day%E2%80%9D-occupy-student-debt/>.

226 Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012).

227 Federici, Silvia, “From Commoning to Debt: Microcredit, Student Debt and the Disinvestment in Reproduction” (Centre for Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths College, London, 12.11.2012)

Debt justifies that which would otherwise seem outrageous and obscene, “because it immediately makes it seem that it’s the victim who is doing something wrong.”<sup>228</sup>

However, for designers, it is important to consider the fragmenting consequences of debt not only in relation to dealing with precariousness in their own professional field and possibly also their own life, but also as a factor to account for when designing for others. This is particularly the case when engaging in projects that might involve communities and micro-credit as development tactics. Because as anthropologist Lamia Karim shows, in a study of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, that debt through micro-credit – which is mainly aimed at female clients who need to group together to access money – often ties women into spirals of struggle that use their sense of honour and shame as leverage to pressure them to pay back their loans at all costs.<sup>229</sup> Consequently, these practices destroy the tight-knit social fabric that women rely on in rural areas: a woman’s failure to repay makes her and her family outcasts who can no longer count on the solidarity of their community. For reasons like this, it is important for designers to be aware of dynamics around debt, as too often solutions like micro-finance are now also in the crisis ridden global North/West presented as uncontested social innovation to which one can securely tie the market-penetration of one’s design proposals.<sup>230</sup>

Having outlined the precarising practices of fragmentation that develop around competition and debt, it becomes clear that, very often, the freedom and privileges gained by one strand of workers necessarily implies a lack of freedom and increased precariousness for other workers. It is precisely because of the interconnectedness of workers in the global market that it is important to conceive of struggles against precariousness that go beyond addressing the symptoms and issues of a single category or person. To begin to address precariousness from one circumscribed condition, such as that of designers, can be an important starting point, but in order to contribute to a wider form of social change, the struggle needs to go beyond this initial context. Because what is the worth of freedom, if it is build on the un-freedom of others?

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228 Graeber, *Debt*, p.5.

229 Karim, “Microfinance Bangladesh”.

230 Consider, for instance, that the globally acclaimed Grameen Bank has opened branches in several places in the US, such as Queens, Brooklyn and Bronx. Moreover, payday loan companies like Wonga – offering short-term, high-cost credit – are targeting people ever more intensely.

## 10. CONCLUSION OF THE INTERMEZZO

In this Intermezzo we have seen how precariousness, as designers know it today, is not a given, but a socio-economic relation constructed according to the necessities of the value-production in a capitalist society. From this analysis, it has emerged how designers are entangled in everyday activities and relations of exploitation, which are often not primarily perceived as such since they are taken for the norm. However, to begin to work through some of the procedures of the capitalist mode of production substantially adds to the conceptual tool-box on which to draw to understand the contexts in which designers intervene. These tools are especially useful not only when wanting to counter the precariousness of designers, but also when wanting to comprehend what contributes to the creation of the symptoms of social, political and environmental issues that designers might want to work on.

Being now equipped with more conceptual tools that allow us to see what designers might need to challenge with their counter-conduct against precarisation, in the final part of this thesis, we explore how to move towards practices that actively counter precariousness and contribute to the construction of de-precarising economic cultures. To do so, we will draw on autonomist and feminist Marxists writings that inscribe themselves in a long tradition of people pushing “in-against-and-beyond” capital.<sup>231</sup> To unpack with these writings, we reflect on a second inhabitation, namely the *Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative* (Construction site of non-affirmative practice) that again engages the issues of precariousness through practice.

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231 “In-against-and-beyond” is a labourers’ stance that autonomist Marxist John Holloway continually refers to in: John Holloway, *Crack Capitalism* (New York: Pluto Press, 2010).

## PART 2

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Designing commons against  
precarisation

## 11. INTRODUCTION TO PART 2

The pressing question that we have to ask ourselves at this point is how the social practices of production we are engaged in as designers can be transformed through an inventive collective refusal of the procedures that render us precarious. To explore possible strategies to transform the power relations and associated forms of subjectivation, we first work through the conceptual tools developed out of a tradition of autonomist Marxist thought. Here, we primarily engage with concepts of bi-political production, the common and the refusal of work as developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and the proposals for transformation that Kathi Weeks and Judith Revel make in relation to these concepts. We then work through these concepts and proposals in practice by engaging with the knowledges created during a second inhabitation, namely the *Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative* (*Construction site for non-affirmative practice*). From the necessities, blockages and openings arising out of that inhabitation, we move to an engagement with autonomist feminist writings, particularly those by Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Massimo De Angelis, who are especially concerned with the social practices required to overcome precariousness, or what Federici calls a “permanent reproductive crisis.”<sup>232</sup>

Both the strands of thought, employed here consider helpful approaches to undo procedures of precarisation, have their roots in the operaista movement that developed in Italy from the 1950s onwards, subsequently developing along different points of focus.<sup>233</sup> Contemporary autonomist Marxism has as its touchstone the poststructuralist theories of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, with a particular focus on the subversive potential of the “most advanced” section of workers, i.e. cognitive workers, as which designers qualify. It is attractive for designers to consider a possible counter-conduct to precariousness by drawing on autonomist Marxist concepts because such an approach rejects history as a linear progression and conceives of capitalism as a system in which the capital social relation creates, and inevitably relies on, the antagonism between two subjectivities: one informed by

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232 Marina Vishmidt, “Permanent Reproductive Crisis: An Interview with Silvia Federici,” Mute, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/permanent-reproductive-crisis-interview-silvia-federici>.

233 For a historical overview of the development of autonomist and feminist Marxism starting from Operaismo, see, for example, the introduction to: Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*. For a more specific discussion autonomist Marxism and workers struggles in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s see: Lotringer and Marazzi, *Autonomia*.

capital, the other by labour.<sup>234</sup> Thus, as a political theory, it emphasises the autonomy and creativity of labour as the non-linear driving force of history. In the 1970s, having seen how the inception of post-Fordism had already begun to spread from the factory to the whole of society,<sup>235</sup> the autonomist Marxists declared a refusal to “separate economics from politics, and politics from existence.”<sup>236</sup> It is the latter which closely connects them to autonomist feminist thinkers, who have as their touchstone a feminist critique of Marx, showing that not only wage labourers are productive for capital. However, feminist Autonomists root their writing strongly in the concrete experiences of feminist as well as anti- and post-colonial struggles, and contrary to autonomist Marxists, who focus strongly on immaterial labour, they insist that subversion could erupt at any point in the global chains of production and exploitation.

In exploring these two strands to build strategies against the procedures of precarisation, we rely on the fact that, on the one hand, these theories connect closely to Foucault’s analysis of power as being diffuse in society – thus counter-power can potentially erupt at any point – whilst, on the other hand, the fact that they build on a tradition of labouring, female and colonial subjects that “autonomously,”<sup>237</sup> yet collectively, challenge the exploitation and oppression of the capital social relation. We thus engage, both through theory and practice, with autonomist concepts of subjectivation, production and reproduction, the refusal of work, the common(s) and practices of commoning. In doing so, the concepts developed throughout Part 1 and the Intermezzo will be employed as tools to build up subversive approaches to practices of time, innovation and social relations that can challenge precariousness, whilst at the same time actively constructing economic cultures that function according to values other than the precarising ones of capital.

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234 Jim Fleming, “Editor’s Prefaces,” in *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, ed. ibid. (New York: Autonomedia, 1991), p.xxvii.

235 Antonio Negri, *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p.204.

236 Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi, “The Return of Politics,” in *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*, ed. ibid. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Semiotext(e), 2007), p.9.

237 ‘Autonomously’ here refers to the fact that these struggles have refused to rely on hierarchically-organised institutions like unions and parties in order to make their demands heard. Rather, they found ways to connect horizontally among the subjects in struggle and to self-organise strikes and other forms of resistance.



## 12. AUTONOMIST MARXISM, SUBJECTIVITY AND THE REFUSAL OF WORK

For Autonomist thinkers, in line with poststructuralist thought, the production of subjectivity is the major terrain on which political struggles take place. Starting from this approach, we can imagine, as designers, what processes of subjectivation we could set in motion to break with the docile yet productive subjectivities fostered, by, amongst others, design education and the creative industries, which ultimately contribute to render designers precarious. Having seen in Part 1 and the Intermezzo the power relations that precarisation relies on, having located their position, found their multiple points of application and seen some of the educational as well as discursive methods through which this form of power is applied, we now explore to what extent Autonomist thought could help us in refusing the kind of precarisation and individualisation that we experience.<sup>238</sup>

Autonomists argue that although as workers we are subordinated to capital, and at least a portion of the wealth we produce is constantly stolen from us, we are not powerless. In fact, they project us as extremely powerful because through our labour, constituted also by our skills and creativity, we are the source of all wealth.<sup>239</sup> Perceiving ourselves as powerful and in a position to act is important in times when precarisation tends to make us feel downhearted. However, they also emphasise that to be able to use of our time and skills in a way that resists that which is prefigured for us, there is a need to act collectively, to become a constituent power that goes beyond the individual. Given the increased fragmentation of not only designers, but all of society, this approach implies a need to find strategies that allow us to create collective subjectivities engaged in counter-conduct. However, this move against precarisation cannot be primarily about rendering what we are more stable and secure. Rather, it needs to be considered as a process focused on “our becoming-other,”<sup>240</sup> one that thus requires inventiveness, creativity and experimentation – which indeed can be powerful agents in bringing designers into the process. To engage in the proposals made not only by Hardt and Negri, but also by thinkers close to them such as the Foucault scholar Judith Revel and feminist theorist Kathi

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238 This kind of analysis as well as an exploration of possible counter-conducts, refers back to Foucault's way of proceeding when confronting power relations: Foucault, “Subject and Power,” p.210.

239 For this argument, see for example: Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), p.333.

240 Deleuze cited in: Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, p.x.

Weeks, make, we explore the potential their elaborations on biopolitical production, the common and the refusal of work hold for the de-precarisation of designers.

### **Designers, biopolitical production and the common**

Starting from an analysis of societies of control and the ways in which immaterial labour – within which we include design – is manifest in them,<sup>241</sup> Hardt and Negri theorise the productional modes of post-Fordism as potential sites in which this process of “becoming other” can be located. This is because they see post-Fordist production as focusing on the production of ideas, codes, images, affects and social relationships, which are all sites of the production of subjectivity and which have the potential to be mobilised toward a transformative process.<sup>242</sup> When framing post-Fordist work within the terrain of the production of subjectivity, Hardt and Negri take up Foucault’s notions of biopower and biopolitics. Thus, in their reading of Foucault, they identify biopower as the power over life the latter, biopolitics, as the “power of life to resist and determine an alternative production of subjectivity.”<sup>243</sup> They then go further by framing post-Fordist production as a biopolitical production that, despite fuelling capital accumulation through cooperation, autonomous work and network organisation,<sup>244</sup> produces “the common.” The common, as described by Hardt and Negri, are forms of knowledge, languages, codes, information and affects that can neither be considered public nor private, neither regulated by the state nor by individuals, but instead by its community of producers and users.<sup>245</sup> They also define the production of the common as a production of subjectivity that is potentially inscribed in a counter-conduct. When exploring the potential of the common through its difference from the private and the public, it is important to keep in mind that in autonomist Marxists thought they both are considered to be representative of capital, since the state is conceptualised as guaranteeing the right to private property, a cornerstone of capitalist society, whilst also administering public property according to its own governmental rules, which do not always

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241 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), p.22-41.

242 Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, p.172.

243 Ibid., p.57.

244 Ibid., p.353.

245 Ibid., p.viii.

respond to the needs and desire of the population.<sup>246</sup>

When we now consider the manifold ways of practicing design, we can undoubtedly see them as falling into the category of biopolitical production, since images and imaginaries are created, codes are conceived, affects are produced and social relationships are forged. However, from the point of view of practice, it would be difficult to argue that the biopolitical labour of designers, even in the instances when it creates the common, automatically foster acts of resistance. Most often than not the contrary is true. In this sense, Paolo Virno's note that post-Fordist labour represents only the potential for creating a new world, a potential which will not automatically or necessarily actuate itself,<sup>247</sup> is a significant one. It reminds designers that for a "becoming other" that builds de-precaring ways of being and living, the biopolitical production they engage in must be, to varying degrees, politicised. However, as we have seen with the problems of precariousness politically and socially engaged designers face, it is not sustainable in the long-term to only engage in a politicised biopolitical production of the common. In this problematisation of Hardt and Negri's approach, Matteo Pasquinelli's reflection on real-life practices around the production of the common is enlightening:

Immaterial conflict is the norm between intellectual workers, despite all the rhetoric of knowledge sharing and digital commons. It is manifested in the well-known rivalry within academia and the art world, to the economy of references, the race of deadlines, the competition for festival selection and between festivals themselves, the envious and suspicious attitudes among activists.<sup>248</sup>

This conflict is the norm because, although Hardt and Negri rightly point out that ideas do not lose their potential to function when shared with others,<sup>249</sup> the

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246 For an elaboration of the difference between the private, the public and the common, see *ibid.*, p.272-73. See also, Ugo Mattei, "Eine Kurze Phänomenologie Der Commons," in *Commons: Für Eine Neue Politik Jenseits Von Markt Und Staat*, ed. Silke Helfrich (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012).

247 For Paolo Virno's reflection on the ambiguities of post-Fordist labour, see: Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (Los Angeles, New York: Semiotext(e), 2004); Paolo Virno, *Mondanità: L' Idea Di 'Mondo' Tra Esperienza Sensibile E Sfera Pubblica* (Roma: Manifestolibri, 1994).

248 Matteo Pasquinelli, *Animal Spirits: A Bestiary of the Commons* (Amsterdam/Rotterdam: NAI Publishers / Institute of Network Cultures, 2008), p.49.

249 Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, p.283-84.

wage conditions within post-Fordism appear to follow the same laws as ever.<sup>250</sup> Thus, rivalry among intellectual workers is not created by the common they create, i.e. the open-access codes, languages, knowledges and affects, but by its function within the real economy. Once an idea is attributed to an author or a common is produced and shared for free, it is difficult to make a living from it. Unlike material and social commons that produce and reproduce the goods that nourish or shelter people, the immaterial common produced by cognitive workers does none of this. Thus, it is unable to rupture our dependence on wage labour since those producing the common are still required to earn the money to pay for that which is necessary in order to reproduce themselves.<sup>251</sup>

More positively, however, the biopolitical production of the common can also be linked to material production such as in the case of “open design,” whose makers allow for its free distribution, documentation and modification.<sup>252</sup> We might here ask a series of questions that allow us to consider if, and to what extent, such a case might be employed strategically to resist precarisation and to determine an alternative production of subjectivity. We can thus ask, what is the language that designers use when describing open design and what does this language tell us about a possible transformation inherent to this kind of design? What do designers and producers behind 3D printers, such as MakerBot, mean when they ask, “what kind project can we, as a worldwide community of sharing, do together?”<sup>253</sup> What do they mean by “project” and what is the political agenda of the projects they might have in mind? Do they conceive of them in relation to the successes of 3D-printing they make reference to, namely the printing of vodka glasses during a tech-fair? What do they mean by “world-wide community”? Does this community, in any sense, include those who mine the materials needed to make 3D printing possible in the first place? What do they mean by “sharing”? Does this sharing also refer to the profits

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250 Pasquinelli, *Animal Spirits*, p.81.

251 Moreover, Autonomists argue that it is in the city that the biopolitical production of the common thrives, but where simultaneously capital leeches into the common and the people who most often enthusiastically produce it. This leeching is taking the form of precarious labour, debts and rent. For a discussion of this relation, see for example: *ibid.*

252 Bas Van Abel et al., eds., *Open Design Now: Why Design Cannot Remain Exclusive* (Amsterdam: BIS Publishers, 2011), p.11.

253 Bre Pettis, “Made in My Backyard,” in *Open Design Now: Why Design Can Not Remain Exclusive*, ed. Bas van Abel, et al. (Amsterdam: BIS Publishers, 2011).

made from selling 3D printing kits, which are now worth \$10 million?<sup>254</sup> If the answers to all these tentative questions neatly replicate capitalist value-practices that rely on exploitation and fragmentation, then the implications in terms of breaking the precariousness of the chains of people involved do not appear promising. Instead, this might simply lead to a new round of accumulation that bears similarity with how Marx described the cottage industry of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when production of “slave-cotton” was taking place within people’s dwellings and the value from this production was extracted and channelled into the hands of only a few.<sup>255</sup> Should, however, the answers reveal value-practices that defy the capital social relation and instead reappropriate value in ways that are de-precaring for many, then we might begin to see a potent process of “becoming other” to unfold.

For such transformative answers to become a possibility, there is a need for designers to engage in the complexities of the processes that go on beyond the common of languages, images, codes, and knowledge they produce. Currently, too many examples of open design subscribe to what the P2P Foundation, studying the impact of peer-to-peer technology, describes as the possibility for large, private firms to create and capture value around and on top of the common.<sup>256</sup> The P2P Foundation’s advice to corporations that might be afraid of open design and the collaborative economy is to see the common as a source of knowledge and innovation and as a pool of value to which they can contribute in small portions, but out of which they receive the totality of the common in return: “Give a brick, get a house.”<sup>257</sup> This move, which is not concerned with substantially transforming the economy, but rather about transforming the way accumulation happens, does not address the working conditions of the people involved in the production of value. The MakerBot, for example, besides the labour that went into its realisation, relies on the availability of free designs online on websites such as Thingiverse, while the 3D-printer itself, the materials for printing or the journals for the 3D-community, are lucratively mobilised. In this sense, the common represented by free software and designs is critical in the selling of more hardware. Thus, the promise made, for example, by open design and 3D-printing, of never needing to buy anything

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254 P2P Foundation, “A Synthetic Overview of the Collaborative Economy,” (2012), p.203.

255 See the passages on modern domestic industry and its transformation in: Marx, *Capital*. V1, p.555-601.

256 P2P Foundation, “Collaborative Economy,” p.165.

257 Ibid., p.166.

again, proves to be empty, since the act of buying or going through the market is not made superfluous but is simply shifted from one commodity to another. In this sense, the production of the common through open design relies on a language that mobilises people's desire for another way of producing and living, but in reality does not support them to build an economy that could fuel collective processes of de-precarisation.

However, even if, for now, Hardt and Negri's theorisation of biopolitical production as resistance does not really seem to take effect in the work of designers, it remains powerful as a reminder of the potential for change inherent in the skills. It might prompt designers to give a direction to their creation of knowledge, affects, social relations, codes, and languages, towards building paths away from precariousness.

### Designers within the multitude

Towards this building of paths away from precariousness (in terms of Autonomist thought), the concept of "the multitude" is another element that can be of inspiration for designers, given the multitude gestures based on the common produced through biopolitical labour towards the possibility of coming together. This coming together, while producing the common, is then imagined as providing both the means of encounter and the possibility to freely express differences.<sup>258</sup> In this sense, Hardt and Negri imagine the multitude as the organisational structure that provides the means for building a democracy that is not based on formal structures and relations, but rather on how we relate to each other.<sup>259</sup> Autonomists trace this conception of the multitude in relation to democracy back to Spinoza, who in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, theorised it as a political concept that runs counter to the concept of "the people" as theorised by Hobbes, underpinning the whole project of the nation state. Thus, as a concept, it locates the constituent creative element of society within people themselves, rather than in any top-down movement of power.<sup>260</sup>

When considering the multitude as described by Hardt and Negri, it becomes clear that as an abstract concept, it cannot be brought into the everyday without

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258 Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p.xiv.

259 Ibid., p.94.

260 For how Hardt and Negri as well as Virno relate back to Spinoza's *Ethics* and *Tractatus Politicus*, see: *ibid.*, p.189-94. Virno, *Grammar of the Multitude*, p.21-20. See also: Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

frictions or modifications. However, in relation to the fragmentation designers experience, it is possible to imagine adopting the multitude as a point of orientation along which to organise against precariousness, without losing one's singularity in this coming together. As such a point of orientation, it opens up the possibility of imagining ways of working and living together while remaining singular, without either being hyper-fragmented or melting into a single, grey mass. Thus, imagining designers as part of the multitude also means imagining what might happen were they to let go of an individualistic and competitive approach, in favour of an experimentation with collective forms of making and producing that challenge the procedures of precarisation. In this way, designers might attempt to find a political voice – regarding both their economic and their social roles in society – that links them to other struggles: from a design community often put to work in precarious conditions towards the accumulation of others, we can envisage gaining control over biopolitical activities in order to substantially shift power relations.

As Judith Revel points out, gaining control over biopolitical production reveals the fact that in a regime of biopower, our lives themselves are not only invested with power, but our lives themselves also become power: we are not only disciplined and controlled, but we also always resist it. Thus, power can be localised within our very lives: in our work, languages, bodies, affects, desires and sexuality.<sup>261</sup> And so it is by mobilising the power of our lives – in all its different forms – that we can reappropriate that which is necessary for our lives not to be precarious. By mobilising the power of our lives and creativity, can we attempt to follow Revel's call to "resist and produce, to resist through production, to produce while resisting?"<sup>262</sup>

Revel's call to the multitude for production and resistance connects to the Autonomist call for the "refusal of work," a call that was strong in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s, but that more broadly refers to a tradition of radical workers around the world who "have always tried to get out of work, to subtract themselves from exploitation and the capitalist relation."<sup>263</sup> However, when Autonomists speak of the refusal of work, they do not invoke the end of activity, production or innovation, but rather imply a movement of invention that goes beyond capital, that provokes

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261 Revel, "Biopolitica Della Moltitudine," p.65.

262 My own translation of "Opporsi e produrre, opporsi producendo, produrre opponendosi (...)", *ibid.*

263 Michael Hardt, "Introduction: Laboratory Italy," in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p.5. See for example also: Paul Lafargue, "The Right to Be Lazy," in *The Right to Be Lazy: Essays by Paul Lafargue*, ed. Bernard Marszałek (Oakland: AK Press, 2011).



yet unimagined relations of producing and reproducing livelihoods that allow and facilitate the expansion of creative powers.<sup>264</sup>

For precarious designers, a collective refusal that moves towards the yet unimagined is powerful. What more challenging and imaginative brief to take up than to employ our skills and creativity to find ways to undo the procedures of precarisation? This claim against precarisation also speaks of the liberation of our time, skills and creativity from the telos of the market, whilst prompting designers to contribute to the imagination and constitution of a life in common. This refusal encourages a focus on what we can become when we imagine and engage with the expansion of our collective needs and desires in ways that exceed what capital can “offer.” Only when we begin to resist a market- and work-logic and the kind of subjectivity that renders us precarious, can we begin to contribute to the constitution of alternative, not-precarising economic cultures.

At the present state of precariousness, however, such a refusal cannot be performed from one day to the next. Therefore, Kathi Weeks strategically suggests that it is important to structure the demand against capitalist forms of work (and thus also against procedures of precarisation) at different levels: to ask for more money, to ask for better work and to ask for less work – but not in order to stay the way we are, but in order to gain the space that allows us to become different.<sup>265</sup> We can imagine that, through a combination of these demands, it might become possible to gain the time, the money and the serenity to imagine and produce that which can be, and that which we can become, *beyond* the prefigured telos of the design profession and the social system it is embedded in. The desire to go beyond the telos of the profession then also requires going beyond considering ourselves only within our faculty as designers. Precarisation not only takes place within work, and even within work, it is not the same for everyone, suffice to point out the gender inequalities within and beyond the field of design.<sup>266</sup> In fact, Weeks also points out that for the refusal of work claim to significantly impact on society, it needs to be

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264 Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, p.332-33. However, the refusal of work is also directly affecting capital accumulation because the value of the means of production is not being passed on to commodities. Thus, strikes, wildcat strikes, mass walk-outs, slowing down or sabotaging production, are all effective means when wanting to pressure employers and the state.

265 Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press 2011), p.104.

266 See for example the difference having children makes for female or male designers: Cantieri per pratiche non-affermative, “Designers’ Inquiry” p.25.

constructed from a feminist point of view. She argues that a social system around capital, in which women are generally urged to provide free labour, ensures that working for wages or relying on a gendered family setting are the only ways through which most of us can meet our basic needs.<sup>267</sup> Crucially, she underlines how it is not sufficient to refuse waged work, but that one must be able to construct a refusal that also addresses the gendered and privatised model of the family as the central organising structure of our reproduction.<sup>268</sup> Only by refusing work that is controlled by capital both in the market and within the family, can the strategy of refusal really embody a transformative politics of everyday life. Such a politics might produce yet unformulated demands that address the personal relations and household configurations we would prefer to base the (re)production of our livelihoods on.<sup>269</sup>

It is important for designers to keep in mind precarisation and this double movement within and beyond work, since the professional field itself still largely draws on conceptions influenced by a male worldview, both in what is understood to be good and worthwhile design as well as in the latent (or often not so latent) sexism present within the profession itself. Without challenging this male centred conception of the world, which manifests itself within and beyond design, it is difficult to imagine that refusal of work and precarisation would be directed where *all of us* would want to be. This double movement against precarisation, then, urges us – and this is crucial – to collectively ask questions about our lives outside work: how do we want to live, how do we want to relate to each other, how do we want to reproduce our lives? In the next section, we will analyse an inhabitation that was set up in order to engage with these questions in practice and to formulate and live out tentative answers with other socially and politically engaged designers.

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267 And indeed, even many designers need to rely on the support of their families to even remain within their profession. See: *ibid.*, p.11-13.

268 Weeks, *Problem with Work*, p.110.

269 *Ibid.*, p.169-70.

### 13. INHABITING AN ECONOMY OF SUPPORT: *CANTIERE PER PRATICHE NON-AFFERMATIVE*

#### **Premises and preparation**

As designers we are not only exposed, but also implicated in the procedures and power relations of precarisation. Thus, wanting to challenge them also means wanting to change our relationship to others. As we have seen, fragmentation among designers only exacerbates precariousness and a shift in power relations as to how we organise our ways of working and living is a difficult endeavour. According to this realisation, for the second inhabitation of this research, Fabio and I wanted to experiment with the creation of a context in which to challenge individualistic career- or survival-thinking. We wanted to create a context in which the biopolitical production designers engage in could potentially build towards a common of solidarity and collectivity.

Knowing that proceeding through inhabitations always shapes our subjectivities, we this time assumed that there would be no way to change the processes of precarisation without changing ourselves, and that there would be no way to change ourselves without changing our modes of practising design and relating to each other. Therefore, with a desire to experience collectivity as a multitude in which singularities are valued and to experiment with a creative refusal of standard modes of working, we decided to collectivise a second residency, this time in Milan at Careof DOCVA, a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to contemporary cultural production. Having begun to negotiate the terms of this second residency while still in Warsaw, we aimed to create and share a politicised space that would challenge the tight frames of temporality, innovation and competition of the creative industries. We hoped that such a space would allow for a “becoming other” to unfold, even if we could not predict what that “other” might be.

The preparation of the two-month residency, which allowed for the use of a 150m<sup>2</sup> project space as well as adjacent living space plus a €3,600 grant,<sup>270</sup> was in many ways, a messy process. This process of preparation was driven by a combination of the parameters given by our host and those of both our conscious and our intuitive decisions, influenced by the experiences of the co-residency in Warsaw and by inspiration drawn from Autonomist writings. Thus this second residency,

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270 The money was granted by the the regional fund for culture of the Autonomous Province of South Tyrol (Italy).

although more informed by theoretical knowledge, was not simply a linear move from theory to practice. Even the preparations revealed that many of the attractive Autonomist concepts would serve more as points of orientation on the horizon than allowing for an approximate navigation, rather than a recipe that could be followed to shift and re-appropriate the power relations of precarisation: reality and practice proved too complex, too implicated in social relations, material constraints and personal hesitations to move along simply according to theoretical constructions. Thus, even if theoretical constructions are recognised as inspiring and vital in order to pierce through blockages in practice, the conflicting front lines running through us are so many that it is difficult to address, let alone “exit,” them all at once. Moreover, it takes time to produce the structures and subjectivities that allow us to resist, as well as to define, other ways of doing that are inspired by theory. It takes time, especially, if it is about constructing them in ways that we can effectively sustain in the long-term. However, one needs to start somewhere and another two months of sharing a residency seemed a good (re)entry point.

#### *Creating a politicised space*

Given the difficulty for designers to separate life and work, our desire was to create a space in which the biopolitical production of up to ten recent graduates from Italian design schools, whose work focuses on social, political or environmental issues, could at once become a movement of refusal, as well as of creation, of production and resistance that could nourish multiple ways of “doing.”<sup>271</sup> This implied that in terms of this shared residency, we did not want to reproduce the short-term, consecutive and a-political engagement with others that the residency in Warsaw found itself inscribed in. Rather, we wanted to create a space in which minds and bodies could meet for a prolonged period of time, breaking with the fragmentation designers experience in their everyday. We wanted to create a situation, then, that at least *in potentia*, would allow for the possibility to band together, to form what Hardt and Negri call “a social body that is more powerful than any of our individual bodies alone.”<sup>272</sup> Without exiting the individualised existence of designers, we decided there would be little chance of imagining and enacting a social and economic

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271 For the Mexico-based Autonomist sociologist John Holloway, “doing” is the activity that opposes abstract labour. See: Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*.

272 Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, p.180.

culture that could challenge precarisation through acts of refusal and constitution. In order for this politicisation to be initiated and substantialised by theoretical engagement, we also decided to organise a series of seminars that would circle around precariousness and the designer's role in the economy. For these seminars, we invited the heterodox economist Hervé Baron, who had been recommended to us by autonomist economist Andrea Fumagalli, and who would engage with us in discussion about the social imaginary in capitalism.<sup>273</sup>

### *Power*

During this second inhabitation, we also wanted to find ways to address the issue of power: in Warsaw, the framework we had chosen in order to share the residency had only moved the power we wanted to contest, i.e. the power related to the exclusivity of residencies and of the procedures of precarisation, from the institution onto us. However, as Foucault points out, power never goes away, but can only be shifted or lived differently. Therefore, we felt an urgency to shift power from hierarchical structures to a distribution of power that would allow everyone involved to have agency over the shared residency.

Furthermore, in Milan, an initial hierarchy had again been established, with us as the “gatekeepers” of the shared residency. We were not only the ones choosing the co-residents, but were again the main reference points for the curators. But this time, we were able to be much clearer in articulating to the curators what this shared residency should be about and how we wanted it to operate as belonging in the same degree to everyone involved. Regarding the power Fabio and I embodied with regards to the other designers we would invite, we framed our roles as facilitators, making it clear to ourselves that this time, unlike in Warsaw, we would dedicate most of our time to this role and would value it, even if it does often leave you with a feeling of not having done anything, simply because you might not be able to see the tangible result of your efforts.

To further consider measures to share or dissipate power, we engaged with reflections on the micropolitics of groups as proposed by the Belgian activist David

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273 Baron describes himself as an economist with a passion for philosophy. In fact, he combines a post-Kenynsian approach to institutional economics with the philosophy of Cornelius Castoriadis. From June 2011 onwards, we had a series of online conversations and e-mail exchanges with Baron in order to establish what angle his seminars could take in Milan.

Vercautern.<sup>274</sup> He proposes a series of anti-hierarchical artifices for groups, based on his own experiences in activist groups, as well as his readings of Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari and the American ecofeminist Starhawk. From the many artifices proposed by Vercautern, which address both issues coming up in groups that are constituting themselves and groups that are in crisis, we primarily adopted the following in the construction site: to not only focus on macropolitics, like objectives to be reached, programs to be drawn or diaries to be filled, but to focus on the micropolitics, around the tone and the words we use, our bodily attitudes, the times that we give ourselves and the relations of power that will be exercised between us; to make de facto power structures visible so that they can be contested and negotiated; to rotate the roles the unfolding of the collective residency would require, so that roles with more or less power would be exchanged and experienced by everyone; to trust the collective intelligence of the group.

#### *Open call*

In order to invite people to share the space, we circulated an open call through the mailing lists of Italian design schools, stating that the collectivised residency, which we called *Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative* (Construction site for non-affirmative practice),<sup>275</sup> wanted to constitute a buffer between getting out of education and going into work, a buffer which, we hoped, would allow people to further develop critical projects they might have begun for their final thesis. We also stated that this initiative was part of our research into precariousness and alternative economic cultures, formed around the question of what organisational structures and strategies could support designers who want to contribute to a more equal, just and un-alienated society. We further stated that we would contribute to the space with the organisation of a series of eight seminars and encounters that explore the implications for designers within the capitalist economy. We stated that the shared residency implied that everyone invited could use the gallery space to their liking, but that, as we had been unable to negotiate the shared use of the living space, everyone needed to make their own provisions for sleeping.

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274 David Vercautern, *Micropolitiques Des Groupes: Pour Une Écologies Des Pratiques Collectives* (Paris: Les prairies ordinaires, 2011).

275 The “non-affirmative” in the title hints at the discussion within design that splits design work into two areas: one affirmative of social norms and one (potentially) critical of them. For how this distinction is roughly laid out in this discussion, see Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, “A/B,” <http://www.dunneandraby.co.uk/content/projects/476/0>.

The decision to invite only people who speak Italian was, at the time, driven by a desire to create, for at least two months, a space in which language would not be a barrier for discussions and engagement. Having always studied in multilingual contexts, we wanted, for once, to avoid the inhibitions and obstacles created by having to use English to converse about the complex issues that affect our lives – a language which, for many Italian designers, constitutes a major obstacle. Moreover, we felt that by bringing together precarious designers who are confronting the same context (marked by chronic under-funding of the cultural and educational sectors, the strong political and economic effects of the financial crisis, the messiness of the Italian legislation and tax system that regulates work and the sexism that pervades all of society), it would allow us to make our discussions more focused and rooted in everyone's daily experiences, which, in turn, we hoped would represent a concrete basis on which different desires could grow. Finally, we also hoped that by inviting people who live “close enough” to each other it would allow for relations to emerge that might not be, by sheer distance, tied to a two-month period, but that could, at least potentially, have the “spatial ability” to be cultivated beyond the period of the collectivised residency.

After having sent out the open call in mid-July 2011, by the first week of August we had sixteen responses to it. From these, we chose ten people who we thought could benefit from the time in Milan and whose expectations for the shared residency were not overrated in terms of what it could bring to their practice. So by the first week of August, we invited the following practitioners to share the residency: a female illustrator (MA - ISIA<sup>276</sup>), who has produced a thesis that aimed at introducing Italian graphic designers to more critical theory; a male infographic designer (BA - IUAV<sup>277</sup>), who had produced a publication on environmental degradation and its consequences on health; a female product designer (BA - UNIBZ<sup>278</sup>), who narrated stories about precariousness through objects and spatial arrangements; a male communication designer (BA - UNIBZ), who had produced work on migration and prejudice; a female communication designer (MA - IUAV), who had produced a thesis on the image production around the Italian starlet system; a male designer (BA - UNIBZ), who had produced a performance on illegal trafficking of small arms

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276 Istituto Superiore per le Industrie Artistiche, Urbino.

277 Università IUAV di Venezia.

278 Free University of Bozen-Bolzano.



departing from Italy; an all-male collective of three graphic designers and one product designer (all MA - IUAV), who work on the revival of medium-scale manufacturing in Italy.

### **Unfolding of the collective residency**

After these initial considerations and preparations, at the beginning of September 2011, all co-residents – Fabio and I included – finally met around a few roughly-constructed tables in an otherwise empty project space. During these first days of the shared residency, there was a general sense of being a bit lost: eight almost empty weeks before us, a new city and routine to get acquainted to, a group of new people to share a space and ideas with and, above all, the big question of what to expect or make from this shared construction site for non-affirmative practice.

In order to take some first steps that could give shape to the residency, we decided to start with a series of presentations where each of us could introduce his or her past projects so that we would all get a sense of who we are, what we do and what our respective interests are. We then also arranged, together with our curators, a series of visits to museums and design studios so that we would get to know the cultural complex the project space was embedded in, as well as the wider Milanese context.<sup>279</sup> Furthermore, we decided that, in pairs, we would take turns to prepare lunch for the whole group, as this would help to keep everyone's costs down.

During the first weeks, working in the shared space was quite awkward. On the one hand, because of our sense of being lost, on the other hand, because the space itself had acoustics that made it difficult to speak to each other. So at the beginning, there was a lot of “what?”, “sorry?”, “can you repeat?” throughout our conversations, until we found a table arrangement that would allow for “comfortable” conversation. Besides getting used to sharing the co-working space, cooking for each other was also initially a bit of a challenge until we realised that – besides always needing to prepare a gluten-free, vegan and dairy-free version of each dish – no-one was picky and everyone had at least one winning dish in their cookery repertoire. Thus, once this initial hurdle around cooking for each other was taken, leaving the co-working space and having lunch together in the flat of the residency became a daily moment of pleasure and conviviality but also a moment of exchange

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279 Careof DOCVA is part of La Fabbrica del Vapore, a cultural complex hosted within an old steam lock factory. There are about ten other cultural organisations and design studios hosted in the same complex.

around anxieties of precariousness that could, at times, take up almost the whole afternoon. Unrestricted by the screens that reminded us of work to do or the for attention from pop-up messages from social networks, during these afternoons we would remain around the table drinking coffee, sharing experiences of our lives as precarious designers, laughing at the irony of it all, but also bolstering our confidence to refuse to accept certain conditions of work again. In other situations, we would do the washing up and prepare ingredients for dinner whilst chatting about how we envisaged our practices would ideally evolve, but also about the anxieties of possibly needing to take on jobs that would grind us down. If, then, we still felt like not going back to the project space, we would move to the living room to keep on grappling with questions of where to start changing the things that cause us to be anxious, overworked and/or frustrated.

The transition from awkwardness to conviviality, both in the project space and the kitchen, was also greatly encouraged by the first series of seminars on the social imaginary in capitalism, which Hervé Baron led during the third week. The seminars, which were open to the public and usually took about four hours, were aimed at giving an introduction to how capitalism, the very system that precarises us, has developed, how it is implicated in the construction of social imaginaries and how it relies on the construction of specific subjectivities. The seminars took as their starting point the work of the philosopher and economist Cornelius Castoriadis and from there discussed the interplay between how we shape the social imaginary and how it shapes us, i.e. the modalities through which a society reproduces the representation of itself and how it establishes its own identity through this representation.<sup>280</sup> Here we focused on analysing how today “the economy” is only what “the economy” defines as such, how the social imaginary relates to our ambitions and how being a very specialised worker makes it more difficult to escape the various control mechanisms present in society. We further discussed, in a more propositive vein, the need to construct new institutions and imaginaries that undo the very ambitions that precarise us.

In this sense, the aim of these seminars was not to propose ready solutions to our questions of what the role of designers is within the economy and to how this

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280 The work of Castoriadis, especially the one developed within the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (1949 and 1965), was influential in the development of autonomist Marxist thought in Italy. This work focused on an antistalinist conception of workers' autonomy in the form of workers' self-management. For a more detailed account of this connection, see Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*, p.63-66.

role can be played out differently, but to stimulate questions and doubts, to create stimulating relays between Baron's theoretical expositions and our experiences as derived from practice. In this, the seminars succeeded and indeed, the first four days with Baron were not only intellectual marathons for everyone following his argumentation, but were also excellent stimulators for animated discussions that would continue over a residency-cooked dinner and extend way beyond midnight. In fact, I believe that Baron's passionate "performance" during the seminars and his eccentric, yet shy, character paired with his personal story of having made a living as a waiter rather than as a hard-core economist, pushed all of us to expose our own political desires as well as our ambitions, perplexities and anxieties around working as designers. This "coming out" was in turn crucial in constructing a common ground between us, very much circulating around questions such as, "how to have a critical approach in a system that is rotten in all parts," "can we begin to consider every action a political action," "how to transform the figure of the designer into a figure that is perceived and can be lived in all its complexity," "how to be independent in a system that grinds you down," "where to begin from in order to substantially change this situation."

In the weeks following the first four seminars with Baron, we used our time and collective energies to explore these questions, as well as various delineations of them, through a series of research activities organised according to where the focus of everyone's particular practice lay. The second week of October, we collaboratively organised a series of public events dedicated to exploring the practices of activist groups who challenge procedures of precarisation. The first of these meetings was with San Precario, a Milan-based collective that mobilises against exploitation in the service sector, using direct action to pressure over-exploitative employers. In conversation with them, our questions circulated around their humorous direct action strategies with which they aim to rupture the dominant discourse in Italy which portrays being exposed to precariousness as a personal misfortune, as a situation that makes others feel pity for you, but also a situation that you can get out of if only you persevere in trying hard to be a good, successful worker. By sharing their actions and insights into procedures of precarisation that are transversal across a variety of professions, San Precario left us with the insight they had made their own

driving principle: there is nothing left to lose, but all to invent.<sup>281</sup>

The second meeting was with two Italian members of the London-based Carrot-workers' Collective that campaigns against un- and underpaid internships in the cultural sector. With them, the discussion circled around the way the promise of a better – or even successful – future, which always seems to linger around the next corner, is sustainably keeping cultural workers productive, no matter how low their pay and how long their hours of work. Furthermore, we considered the role taboos, like speaking about money, anxieties and skewed power relations, have in making precariousness an individualising experience and how the Collective is using the production of photoromances depicting these taboos as a tool to transform an individualising experience into one that can bring cultural workers together.<sup>282</sup>

In the last meeting in this series, we encountered Serpica Naro, a Milan-based collective that takes action against exploitative practices in the fashion industry and that actively tries to build a counter-system of garment production. Our discussion with them focused particularly on how they attempt to break the consent fashion-workers at all levels perform towards this industry. We learned how they do so by exposing the downfalls of the industry through pranks, while also facilitating the production and circulation of garments outside standard fashion circuits.<sup>283</sup> Closing the week with them meant to close a week of intense engagement with the experiences of workers who try to challenge procedures of precarisation, to get inspired and to consider what sort of actions the field of design that we knew would require in order to be transformed.

Behind the scenes of these and many other activities that were open to the public (see timetable at the end of this section), we continued to experiment away from the various activities that were not open to the public accountability of the project space. For example, we explored practices of freeganism by visiting the “*mercati generali*” on a Saturday when vendors are leaving behind the fruits and vegetables they could not sell on Monday. Such moments as these were when we enjoyed thinking about the possibilities and difficulties related to ways of providing life's

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281 To learn more about the actions of San Precario, see for example Tarì and Vanni, “On the Life and Deeds of San Precario, Patron Saint of Precarious Workers and Lives”; San Precario, “95 Tesi Sulla Precarietà Di San Precario,” Chainworkers, <http://www.chainworkers.org/node/611>; Brave New Alps, “Conversations: Zoe Romano”.

282 See for example, Carrotworkers' Collective, “Surviving Internships.”

283 Serpica Naro developed out of San Precario, of which it is in fact an anagram. “Serpica Naro,” <http://www.serpicanaro.com/>.

necessities whilst circumnavigating the use of money. We also visited community-supported agriculture groups and social centres, went to lectures (for example by Franco Berardi), watched documentaries (like *The Take* by Naomi Klein) and, above all, spent a lot of time discussing whilst cooking and eating together.

In the activities we engaged in throughout the two months of the co-residency, whether in or outside the project space, the question that persistently came up was how to activate our creativity and skills in ways that were not dictated by the market and that did not rely on the precarisation of others. As we collectively began to realise how the capital social relation plays out in our lives, our desire grew to continue to collectively experiment with building support structures that would allow us to research and experiment with ways of co-producing our livelihoods: the desire to discover how to practice as designers in ways that have the potential to not only resist our own, but also other people's precarisation, while contributing to the creation of other social imaginaries.<sup>284</sup>

### **Reflections on the shared residency**

Reflecting on what unfolded during the eight weeks in Milan, it could be described in Franco Berardi's words as the unfolding of a singular process of producing a singular world of sociality.<sup>285</sup> It was the creation of a world of sociality in which political action could be seen as the desire to break with the individuality, fragmentation, competition and precariousness we live with as designers. In this light, the collectivised residency could also be seen as an attempt to live the world we might want to create – and here I say “might” because whilst we know we want to move away from precarisation and fragmentation, we do not have one clear destination. This, however, does not mean that we cannot begin to move from where we are, but rather that we can experiment with breaking the separation between means and ends, to try to make the means the ends, while retaining the freedom to change route when necessary without becoming dogmatic.

In Milan, the experimentation with acts of resisting and producing, resisting through production and producing while resisting, implied also a collective

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284 To get a flavour of the kind of discussions that the shared residency triggered, see appendix D for an edited and translated piece of collective writing that we undertook at the end of the residency. This piece was later published in the Italian magazine *Unità di Crisi*, “Orientation,” *Krisis* 2013. The appendix also contains the unedited, Italian version of this piece of writing.

285 Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody*, p.83.

consideration of how our qualities and skills as designers can be uncoupled from their constant implication in precarising procedures. Thus, we were able to begin to slowly establish our political action by attempting to bring together what Boltanski and Chiapello identify as artistic and social critique: bringing together our desire for social justice and equality with our desire for a world of spontaneity, conviviality and sensitivity to difference.<sup>286</sup> By formulating questions around these desires, the sharing of a space for co-working was transformed into a space for collective research: we had built an initial common ground by sharing both the working and the living space, by mapping the ways in which us and others were affected by precariousness, and by the recurrent questioning of how to redefine the role of designers in contemporary, crisis-ridden societies.

#### *Living space and care*

One of the observations that emerged from this collectivised residency was the importance that the shared cooking and eating space had in acting like a sort of glue or fertiliser for us as a group. The way we used the apartment space of the residency transformed the *Cantiere* from a pure co-working space into a co-living space to the extent that towards the end of the eight weeks, we would almost tend to spend more time together in the kitchen than in the project space. In this co-living situation, what emerged most strongly was a great attention to caring for one another, a care that was initially catalysed by cooking for each other and that then extended to supporting each other in coping with our doubts and fears, in sharing the elements of economic or social pressure that each of us was exposed to. Whilst we had not consciously decided to care for one another, we could say that sharing equally the task of cooking meant that we had to immediately pay attention to each other: allergies had to be avoided, politically-driven eating habits accommodated, but above all, hungry bellies had to be filled. Doing so meant to give the kind of attention to each other that simply working together could not have brought about.

Reflecting on the residency in hindsight, the element of mutual care that emerged brought to the fore how important affective and intellectual support structures are when dealing with the diverse obstacles and uncertainties that precariousness brings. To be in an environment with the possibility to freely express doubts, fears and desires, to show weaknesses, where to strategise together, proved

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286 Boltanski and Chiapello, *Spirit of Capitalism*, p.97.

crucial in letting the questions around how to deal with precariousness emerge, while at the same time experiencing the potential to tackle these collectively. In fact, studying and researching together in an environment of mutual care was what most of us valued in the shared residency. Having all previously worked in other studio settings, we understood that our time together could equally have not produced this outcome, that we could have exited the shared residency much the same as when we entered it. However, we had been able to get out of individualised positions, which allowed us to experience the emergence of a collective subjectivity that we wanted to sustain and develop beyond the period in Milan. Furthermore, the emerging elements of collectivity had allowed us to begin to challenge acquired value-systems of time, innovation and competition. It allowed us to be in a position from which to imagine the design and implementation of diverse, multiple and interlinked support structures from which to begin to resist procedures of precarisation productively.

In relation to the autonomist writings that inspired the direction of this second residency, the element of care that we experienced brought up issues with the remoteness, as well as weakness, with which care is addressed when Hardt and Negri theorise the disruptive potentials of biopolitical production. Although they speak about love as the centre for the production of social life,<sup>287</sup> the very processes that would make up the daily practice of love are mostly falling by the wayside. The experiences in Milan brought to the fore that mutual care, enacted in the small gestures of the everyday, is a major element in creating empowering social relations – the very thing that, in my understanding, is a core aspect of what biopolitical production as counter-conduct is about. Embodied knowledges of the importance of care when wanting to construct economies of support against precarisation thus redirected my attention from autonomist Marxist thought to autonomist feminist practices, since their notion of “counterplanning from the kitchen”<sup>288</sup> promised to bring an angle to this research that I had, until now, only touched upon in the definition of reproductive labour. Hence, in the last section of this thesis, we will engage in building further tools against precarisation through an engagement with feminist concepts and practices related to care.

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287 Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, p.xii.

288 See for instance the title of a text from 1975: Silvia Federici and Nicole Cox, “Counterplanning from the Kitchen,” in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* ed. Silvia Federici (Oakland: PM Press, 2012).



### *Accessibility and sustainability*

In discussions about the initial experiment in Milan, a node that emerged as problematic was the question of accessibility and the sustainability of the collectivised residency as a politicised co-working and co-research space. This problem of accessibility was for us exemplarily marked by the fact that although the residency-apartment had the capacity to host everyone taking part in the *Cantiere*, for the curator of the residency, opening up the living space to the other designers sharing the work space, was an absolute ‘no go’. On the one hand, this was due to internal politics within the cultural complex La Fabbrica del Vapore who host the residency, to avoid implying that the apartment was an easily accessible resource. On the other hand, it was because already opening up the project space to practitioners who had not been selected by the curator represented an element of uncertainty that seemed difficult to deal with. Clearly, not being able to offer housing to any of the designers we would invite was a big limitation on who could actually participate. Indeed, most people who responded to the open call did so because they had enough family support to either cover their living costs or to offer some security should their plans to make a living through design work fail. This meant that from its outset, this experiment could only undo the fragmentation between designers who could already count on some form of security. It also meant that for such a space to become sustainable on a longer term, especially in a state like Italy which notoriously underfunds its cultural sector, alternative forms of access to the means of reproduction would need to be found.

Now, rather than seeing the downfalls around accessibility and sustainability as absolutely disqualifying the approach taken, I would rather want to take them as two major issues to be addressed in possible further initiatives to build upon and from this experience. It is important to acknowledge the mechanisms of exclusion and the instability of the reproduction of such spaces and to find ways to address these mechanisms in order for such spaces to become both socially and economically sustainable. Therefore, I think such downfalls as we encountered in Milan should not prevent us from experimenting with ways to counter precarisation. The important thing is not to exploit the experimentation with such collectivised spaces in order to gain privileges for a confined group of people, but to use them to actively strategise against precariousness in ways that go beyond the situation of the people involved and that transverse not only issues of our own profession, but of society at large.

Indeed, a question that emerged over and over again in our discussions about the sustainability of such an endeavour was how our desire to undo the procedures that precarise us connect up to the precariousness and exploitation of other people around the world. Questions of local as well as global power differentials were raised in relation to who produces our means of production and reproduction even in moments when we might be gaining some autonomy from precarisation for ourselves. So much of our work and lives as designers relies on the exploitation of others, such that seeing a light at the end of the tunnel is at times impossible. In relation to this impossibility, Negri and Hardt's proposal that the most advanced section of worker – which they define as cognitive workers and that would thus include designers – but as a revolutionary force seems to appear to be self-contradictory. However, it is a contradiction that urges us to consider ways of working, living and organising that go beyond our own concerns and that intervene in the power differentials we see among the precarious and exploited.

Hence, becoming active beyond the concerns of a confined group is something that needs to be sought actively and continuously, because, as De Angelis reminds us, in a society where the capital social relation is pervasive, “each ‘scale’ of social productive aggregation, (an individual, a ‘firm’, a city, a district, a county a macro-region or a free trade area) faces strong pressure to turn into a node set against the respective ‘rest of the world’.”<sup>289</sup> And in fact, as the collective formed in Milan, questions were raised and remained open around the issue of how to become more inclusive and more sustainable at the same time. Pressure to make a living and to access what we need by going over the money-form, is high and with it, the lure of commodifying what we do, to render our time within the work of the collective productive. As long as there are no material support structures in place that protect us at least to some degree from the coercive forces of the market, operating through it is the only way in which we are allowed to live – even if we have created an immaterial common that binds us together. But, as we have tried to experiment through this research, there are ways to go through the market that are less precarising than others.

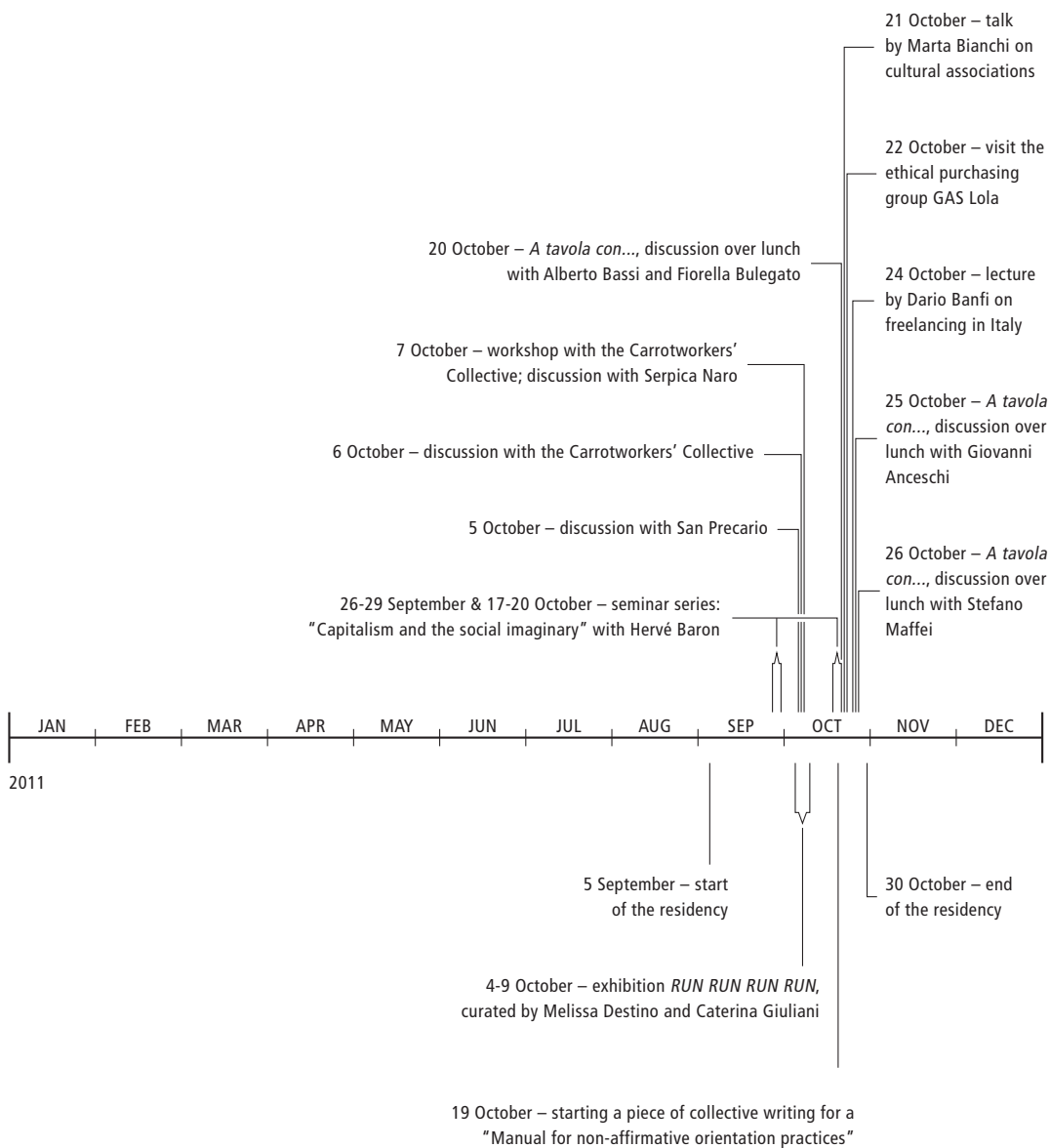
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289 De Angelis, *Beginning of History*, p.218.

## Timeline:

### *Cantieri per pratiche non-affermative*

#### at Careof DOCVA, Milan





**FIGURE 32 top** *Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative* – the project space just before the first encounter with all co-residents, 5 September 2011

**FIGURE 33 bottom** Getting to know each others work through three days of initial presentations, 7-9 September 2011



**FIGURES 34 and 35** The project space during the second week of the co-residency (*above*) and during the second-last week (*below*) – reflecting how the dynamic between the co-residents has changed, 12-16 September and 17-22 October 2011





**FIGURES 36 and 37** *The social imaginary in capitalism*, a series of eight seminars with economist Hervé Baron, 26 September 2011 (above) and 18 October 2011 (below)



**FIGURES 38, 39 and 40** Discussions with three collectives organising against precariousness: San Precario, 4 October 2011 (*above*), the Carrotworkers' Collective, 5 October 2011 (*middle*) and Serpica Naro, 7 October 2011 (*below*)





**FIGURE 41 above** High-school students being introduced to the issues worked on within the *Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative*, 8 October 2011

**FIGURE 42 below** *Run, run, run, run* – Melissa Destino and Caterina Giuliani giving visitors a guided tour to the exhibition on precariousness curated by them, 8 October 2011



**FIGURE 43 to 46** The living space of the residency, used daily for cooking, eating and planning together, September and October 2011



**FIGURE 47 above** *A tavola con ...* Alberto Bassi and Fiorella Bulegato, one of three lunch-time conversations with invited guests about the possibility of reviving small to medium scale manufacturing in Italy, 20 October 2011

**FIGURES 48 and 49** Two of the many informal (thus scarcely documented) instances in which we explored practices of collective organising outside the spaces of the Fabbrica del Vapore: sourcing left-over vegetables and fruit from the Mercati Generali, 23 September 2011, (*middle*) and visiting the people of the solidarity buying group GAS Lola, 21 October 2011 (*below*)

### **Becoming a collective – a collective becoming**

Throughout the eight weeks spent in Milan, our desire to keep on researching together grew and, as the last week approached, we decided to continue to work together, trying to form a collective. So, since November 2011, we have been experimenting with becoming a collective. To do so, we have together formulated a mission statement of sorts which we intend to help keep us on track. We have also set up a website that collects what we do in order to give us a sense that what we engage in collectively is not simply dissipating in a void. The current description of the collective (who decided to stick with the description *Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative*) states that we are

working to pose questions, study and experiment with support structures for critically engaged design practices.

As designers, we feel deeply involved not only in the making of objects, but also in the creation of relations, processes, languages and collective imaginaries. As a consequence, we believe that our research should raise questions about what kind of society we want to contribute to with our work and to question the role we play in the economic system we are living in.

The Construction site is a virtual and physical space, where we carry on this research and where we try to translate it into practice according to modalities that are verified step by step. The Construction site is also a place in which we take care of our “becoming collective”. We are open to various forms of collaboration and to whoever is interested in participating.<sup>290</sup>

Admittedly, this statement is ambitious, but it is precisely this ambition which keeps us together and fuels our desire to put in common our time, knowledge, skills, affects and energies in order create tools of analysis that are helpful in understanding and intervening in the complexity of the contemporary world.

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290 “Cantiere - About,” <http://pratichenonaffermative.net/en/about/>.



### Researching together: *Designers' Inquiry*<sup>291</sup>

From our desire to continue to research together, there grew our first “big” collective project: *Designers' Inquiry*.<sup>292</sup> This project is an investigation into the socio-economic conditions of designers in Italy, which we developed between February 2012 and April 2013.<sup>293</sup> The idea of producing an inquiry came out of the discussions we had after a presentation we made in an Italian design school in December 2011. During the presentation of our collective experience, we spoke, among other things, about the precariousness that accompanies designers today and the difficulty of the transition from being a student to becoming a worker. After our presentation, students were especially keen to find out more on this particular topic. However, in the discussion, two male, mid-aged tutors attempted to de-potentialise our experiences and arguments by attributing them to our personal inability to deal with the market. The de-potentialising comments, coming from such a privileged position, irritated us and led us to discussions about how design students are educated with very little concern – and maybe even awareness – of what the contemporary world of work looks like and that perhaps there is a need to intervene in this situation.

The experience of that evening and subsequent discussions brought us to the point where we wanted to find or create a tool that would allow us to engage a wider group of designers the question of what it means to work as a designer today and what desires there are to change the current situation. Thus, in looking for a suitable tool for this endeavour, we began a process of self-education on the production of knowledge from below that aims from its inception at a transformation of studied reality. The core text around which we developed our learning process was Marta Malo de Molina's *Common Notions*. In this text, the activist of the Spanish collective *Precarias a la deriva*, traces a genealogy of tools used in the movements of self-organisation that aim(ed) at creating knowledges that could be used strategically in each movement's respective struggles.<sup>294</sup> Branching out from this text, we also came across Marx's workers' inquiry of 1880, which he had developed not only

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291 A first version of this section has been prepared together with Caterina Giuliani, a member of the collective, for the ephemera conference “The politics of workers' inquiry” in May 2013 at Essex University.

292 See appendix B for the report of the inquiry.

293 Regarding the time-frame of the inquiry, it is important to note that as a collective we are working at our own pace, trying to keep into consideration that everyone involved is needing to deal with how to make a living and so the time spent on collective research is always being cut out from messy, precarious working lives.

294 Malo de Molina, “Common Notions”.

to assemble facts about the conditions of French workers, but also to make workers reflect critically on their conditions and their context.<sup>295</sup> Besides being struck by the fact that many of Marx's one hundred questions are still relevant today, we found that this kind of inquiry would constitute for us a tool to both initiate a discussion, as well as solidify a base of common experiences on which to build further actions and interventions to transform reality.

Through this process of self-education, we also came to see the inquiry as a phase and a tool inserted into a much larger process of investigation that we are engaged in and that borrows freely from methods and experiences developed in the past: consciousness-raising groups and critical pedagogy,<sup>296</sup> Italian co-research,<sup>297</sup> participatory action-research,<sup>298</sup> inquiries and militant research.<sup>299</sup> Thus, although we were aware of the range of sociological research that had been done into the working conditions of designers in Europe,<sup>300</sup> we nevertheless felt the need to produce an inquiry that would not only be an analysis but a tool that could impact on how designers perceive themselves. In this sense, by producing an inquiry ourselves amongst our peers and inserting it into a larger collective research process, we really wanted to spur a much-needed reflection *among* designers rather than *on* designers. By choosing the format of a questionnaire that, by an empiricist sociologist, might be judged biased as well as randomly distributed among participants, we were simply making an attempt to get as many designers as possible involved in a critical reflection on their conditions, with the intention of ultimately opening up a path for a common struggle against procedures of precarisation and towards the transformation of the designer's role in society.

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295 Karl Marx, "A Workers' Inquiry," <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/04/20.htm>.

296 For example: Kathie Sarachild, "Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon," in *Feminist Revolution*, ed. Redstockings (New York: Random House, 1978). Paolo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (London/New York: Continuum, 2007).

297 For example: Romano Alquati, *Per Fare Conricerca* (Padova: Calusca Edizioni, 1993). Raniero Panzieri, "Uso Socialista Dell'inchiesta Operaia," transversal, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406/panzieri/it/print>. Gigi Roggero, "Appendice. Strumenti D'inchiesta," in *Precariopoli. Parole E Pratiche Delle Nuove Lotte Sul Lavoro* (Roma: Manifestolibri, 2005).

298 For example: Yoland Wadsworth, "What Is Participatory Action Research?," <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/ari/p-ywadsworth98.html>

299 For example: Team Colors Collective, "Workshop: What Is Militant Research?"; Stevphen Shukaitis and David Graeber, eds., *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations, Collective Theorization* (Oakland/Edinburgh: AK Press, 2007); Colectivo Situaciones, "On the Researcher-Militant," transversal, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406/colectivosituaciones/en>

300 For example, Gill, "Technobohemians."; "Variant, Issue 41, Spring 2011". Arvidsson, Malossi, and Serpica Naro, "Passionate Work?."

So studying experiences of bottom-up research and trying to create a combination of tools that could work for us, we finally built a questionnaire of 78 questions that invited designers to reflect on seven areas of their lives: their family background, their working conditions, the way they encounter(ed) internships, their satisfaction, their working environment and their health, their thoughts on the figure of the designer in society and, finally, their experience regarding the organisation around their rights as workers. Having elaborated on these questions, which we hoped would invite designers to think about the wide range of influences their work has on all areas of their lives, we launched the inquiry through an anonymous online questionnaire in April 2012 during the Milan Design Week.

After having collected 767 fully-completed online questionnaires over a period of two months,<sup>301</sup> we began to take a series of “opening” steps in the elaboration of the answers by organising two workshops, each lasting several days, during which other designers could join us to evaluate and visualise the data and testimonies collected. For us, these workshops were moments during which to involve more designers in in depth discussions and reflections about procedures of precarisation, and although these sessions might not always have been as productive as we wished in terms of finalising any work – always leaving much work to do between these collective moments – they were important instances in which to extend the discussion and actively involve more people. Engaging with the elaboration of the collected data was, at times, depressing, since so many areas of designers’ lives were negatively affected by their work (or non-work). Furthermore, throughout the qualitative parts of the inquiry, there emerged a common sense of resignation that things will not change and possibly will only get worse. However, studying the results of the inquiry closely and breaking them down into small parts according to the various sections, there emerged in our discussion a strong sense of hope and pugnacity as we saw how procedures of precarisation could be undone starting from many different areas and direction. Thus, rather than feeling overwhelmed by the monolithic nature of precariousness, we finally got a sense that undoing procedures of precarisation was possible. It might not be possible to do away with all of them at once, but one by one or even a couple a time, they could be tackled to make space for other ways of doing and becoming.

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301 The design specialisation of our participants was ranged from graphic, web and product design to animation, fashion, illustration, architecture and design research. We did not want to restrict the inquiry to any specific specialisation as, from our own experience, we know that today many designers constantly move between these fields.



After 14 months of more or less intense work on the inquiry, by April 2013 the report of the results was finally ready to be launched. Again, we chose the Milan Design Week to do so, simply because it is the moment of a major concentration of Italian and international designers in one place and so we could metaphorically be seen as being present at the factory gates were it the 1950s and 1960s. Through a collaboration with the Italian national newspaper *La Stampa* – which as a relationship in itself sparked many difficult discussions within the collective about complicity with precarising working modes in other fields – we also spread the word about the inquiry beyond the field of design.<sup>302</sup>

As I write, these events of April 2013 are just a few weeks old and the collective is entering a phase in which we want to build initiatives, actions and workshops based on the results in order to intervene in the status quo of precarious working conditions.

### **Reflections on our becoming collective**

Considering that the co-residency transformed into a collective that still keeps on working together, I would like to think that in Milan, we built together the beginning of a co-research,<sup>303</sup> which could be described, in the words of Romano Alquati, as a process of engagement with a world found unacceptable, a process driven by the will to transform this world into not only the direction of one's individual, but above all one's collective desires.<sup>304</sup> However, as a group of people embarking on the process of becoming a collective that might allow us to “become other,” the difficulty we most clearly encounter is that we are now dispersed all over Italy (and at times all over Europe), while also lacking a reliable material support structure for our activities.

The physical distance between us, often imposed by our respective work commitments as well as the price of travel tickets, binds us to handle conversations

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302 See appendix E for our contribution.

303 Co-research, or *conricerca* in Italian, emerged in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s as a way of using the tools of the social sciences as tools to support class struggle. Main exponents of Italian *conricerca* were Romano Alquati, Danilo Montaldi, Raniero Panzieri and Mario Tronti. Giggi Roggero, a former student of Alquati and one of today's major exponents of co-research in Italy, describes the co-researcher as one who wants to destroy the object of his study. Given this definition, I believe that the work of the *Cantiere* is more nuanced, as whilst we want to “destroy” procedures of precarisation, we also want to use the knowledge we create through co-research to build up other ways of doing. Thus, I would suggest we generally feel closer to what today is described as “militant research,” a research that re-appropriates the capacity of worlds-making.

304 Alquati, *Fare Conricerca*, p.119.

online, which in turn is tedious and lacks the element of conviviality and care that marks the periods when we spend time together in “the real world.” Thus, our activities together, which for most of us are taking place outside other commitments which secure our livelihoods, at times risk becoming black holes that absorb rather than amplify our energies. Given this situation, the affective and intellectual support structure against precarisation that we built among us is itself always precarious, always exposed to the threat that someone retreats from an engagement with the collective because the pressure to somehow make a living remains high. However, since November 2011, we have managed (in different constellations) to still meet in person every two or three months for several days at a time. For these energising gatherings, we can luckily still count on the support of Careof DOC-VA, who let us use their residency space a couple of times a year for short periods of time – although they themselves are now undergoing cuts in funding and the precarisation of their working contracts, so this breathing space might be closing down as well. Furthermore, for our gatherings we count on our own flexibility to host one another in often quite improvised ways in our own homes, on commissions for running workshop or doing talks, as well as on little “work-arounds” in order to access resources that allow the work of the collective to continue. In the situation we are living through at the moment as a collective, which is not self-sustaining, our remaining a collective has become closely bound to working together on something concrete, like writing collective texts for publications, organising workshops or going on a summer retreat.<sup>305</sup> It seems that since the shared working and living space has gone, which had allowed for the fluid combination of individual as well as collective work, for incidentality and the sense that we were living out a proper economy of support for our practices, we are now at a point where our counter-planning needs to be scheduled into our busy days. This situation could lead to a dissolution of our collective becoming, but we are still working on swinging the situation around, using our design skills to create a support structure that also works at a material level to our favour.<sup>306</sup>

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305 As a collective we have published several texts and interviews in Italian design magazines and newspapers in which we reflect on the issues that move us. See appendix F for these published materials.

306 Here it is important to remember for us that collective decisions are built up gradually and for them to be sustainable even when they are radical, they cannot really happen from one day to the next. To remind us of this, we like to remember what we learned from our visit in February 2012, to the Teatro Valle Occupato in Rome: the communards (as they call themselves) did not decide from one day to the next to force access to these unused resources, however they have built up to it over years of collective work and campaigning for better protection as workers (especially within the field of acting).

Our collective becoming has, however, positively impacted on our respective practices: as Brave New Alps, we are now able to imagine that we could root our practice in the alpine area we come from, mobilising and sharing the network of resources we have access to through our families and other social networks; the female product designer involved in the Cantiere, who also comes from a rural place in the Alps, has decided to combine her design work with the farm work of her parents, who, over the last 25 years, have built up a berry farm; the male graphic designer from Trieste is now using his excellent cooking and foraging skills to run courses with migrant workers; the female illustrator is so compelled by the approach of militant research that she is now exploring ways in which to get children involved in this kind of undoing and re-making of the world. While everyone is planning and building his or her own practice based on their respective hometowns and resources they can, to a greater or lesser extent, draw on, we are also all continuously in conversation as to how our efforts could add up, how we could strengthen each other and how this will all build up to a more general subversion of what design work is, or can be, about.

#### *Collectivity and horizontality*

For the collective emerging from the shared residency, the desire also grew to contribute to a reformulation of ways in which we could work together that address issues that go beyond our group, whilst doing so in ways that are not fully or implicitly tied to precarising procedures. In this endeavour, the concept of the multitude is a helpful stepping stone for us as it allows us to consider the possibilities of exiting individualisation and entering collectivity without melting into one voice, without giving up the freedom to express dissent without obligation to power. It is in working with this concept that we challenge the understanding of ourselves and the way we interact with each other. This manifests itself in a ‘becoming collective’ as well as a “becoming other,” during which we attempt to rotate roles and responsibilities in order to avoid the creeping in of unwanted power relations.

Furthermore, we continuously try to propose openings for others to join in order to avoid the trap of becoming a sclerotic “career collective,” since the pressure to conform to conventional modalities of being and doing not only stems from precariousness, but also from peers, families and from within our well-disciplined and controlled selves. Towards this attempt, John Holloway’s idea of horizontality, i.e. “that all should be involved in decision-making processes on an equal basis and that

there should be no leaders,”<sup>307</sup> is useful since he describes it as an idea that is difficult to make work as an absolute rule and that it is thus more helpful to think of it instead as a constant struggle against verticality. Taking horizontality as a constant commitment is useful in two ways: it takes away some of the pressure, as well as the frustration, of ‘failure’ and it reminds us that keeping an open structure means keeping discussions diverse. Taking away pressure is an important point, particularly in moments when frictions arise around ways of doing and when people leave or join the collective. In these moments, taking horizontality as a project rather than a rule, helps to reflect on what is happening and to deal with it constructively rather than falling into (self-) accusations of not being able to live up to the rule.

Reflecting how knowledges created through this research tie into the work of the Cantiere, might effectively be tending to go against horizontality, given that I am the one who (currently) has most time to grapple with the issues we are collectively working through. However, as I and everyone else is aware of this, we are working towards not letting this situation escape into unspoken verticality. I like to think that for the collective, this situation is working at our advantage currently, until my bursary runs out. Thus for now, even though the Cantiere came out of an experiment set up by Fabio and I, we have embarked, in the words of Malo de Molina, in a bottom-up research process that is “an open trip, in which we know the origin and how it started, but we do not know where it will finish.”<sup>308</sup> Considering what this trip brought to this thesis, I know that the work with the collective opened up ways of thinking and intervening in procedures of precarisation that I would not have seen or imagined without it.

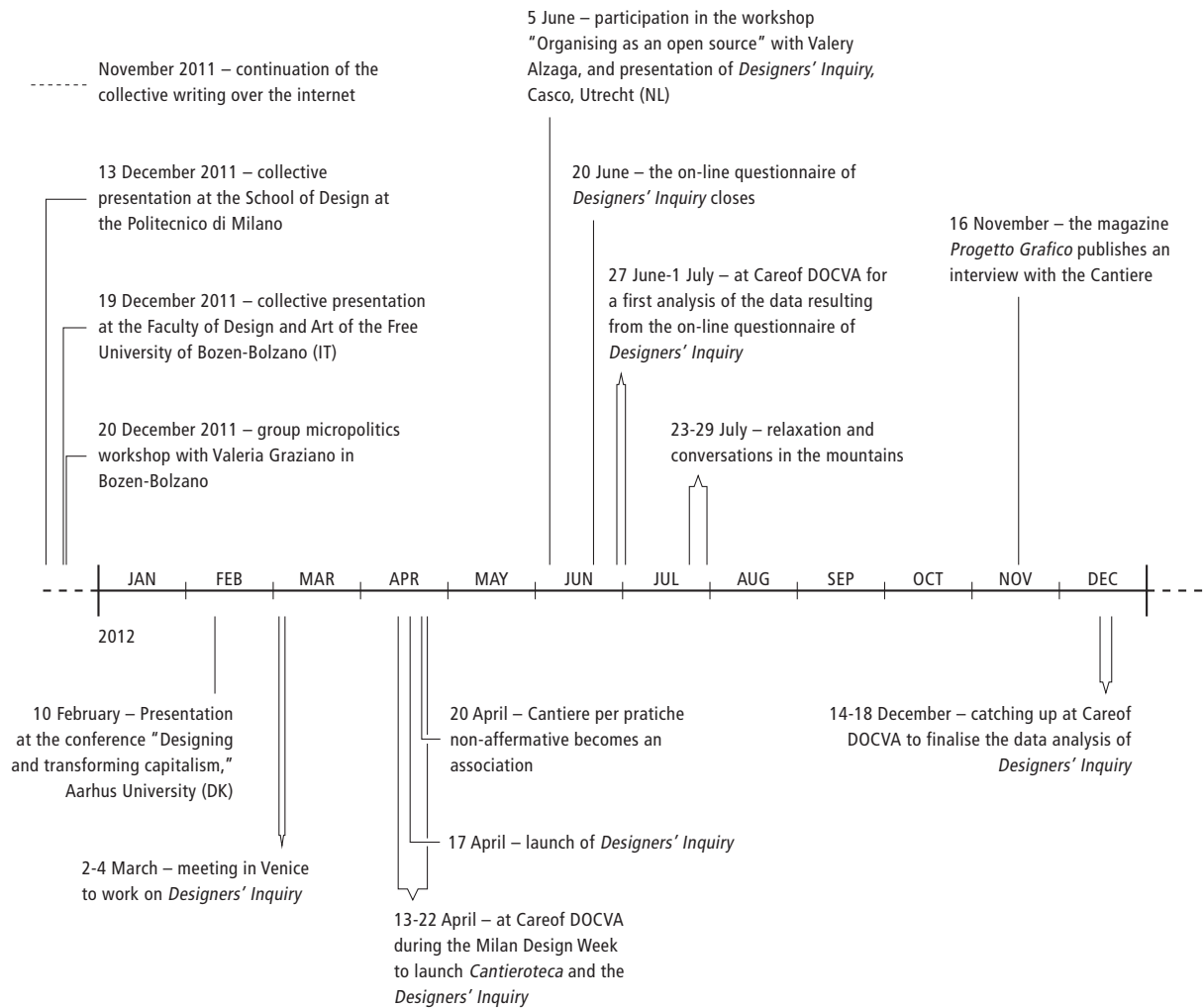
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307 Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*, p.43.

308 Marta Malo de Molina, “Common Notions, Part 2: Institutional Analysis, Participatory Action-Research, Militant Research,” transversal, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0707/malo/en>.

## Timeline:

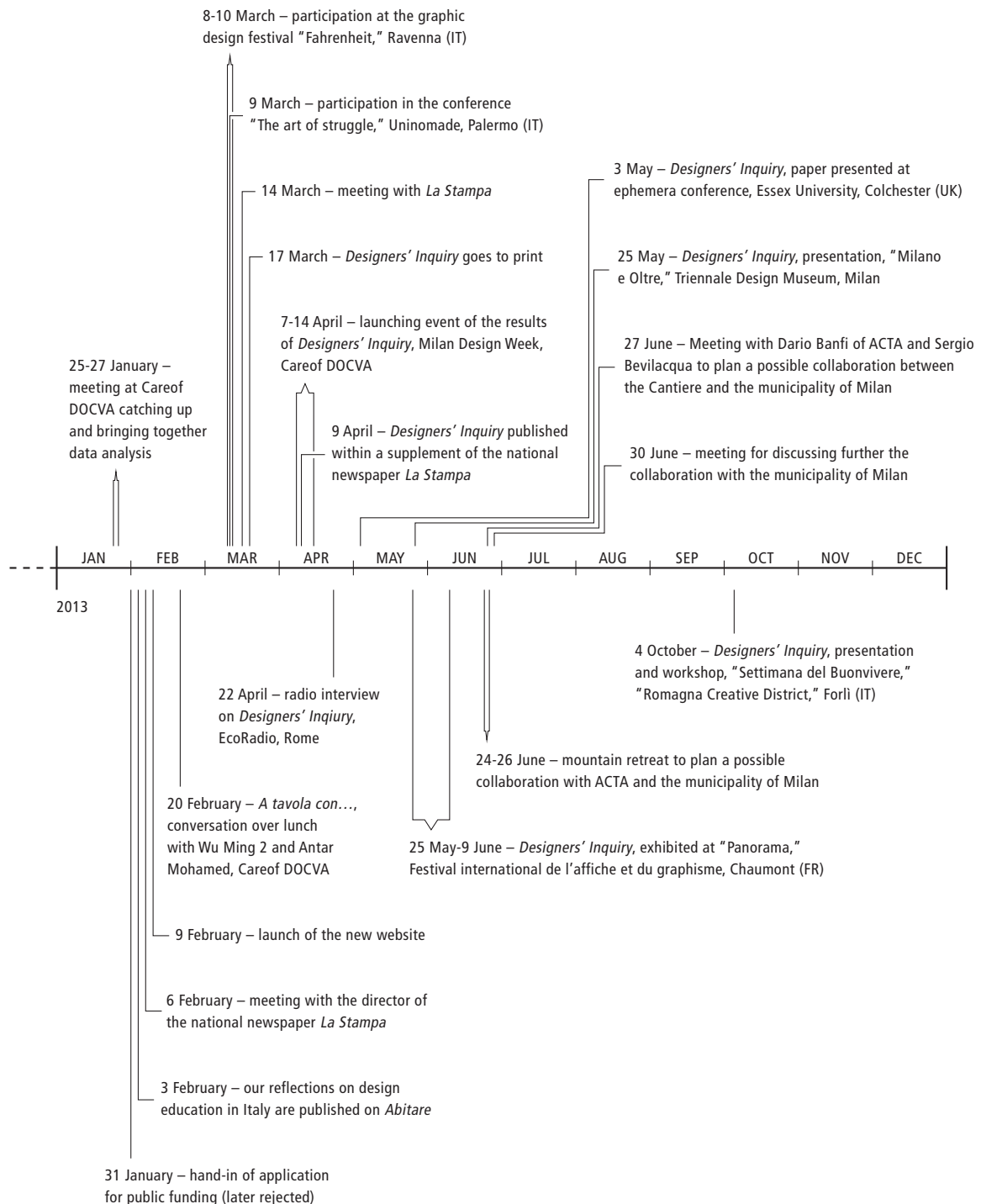
### Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative – becoming collective<sup>309</sup>



309 Throughout all this time, we also had numerous online conversations and met each other in small groups of two to three people – depending on our current (dis-)location.

## Timeline:

### Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative – becoming collective (continued)





**FIGURE 50 and 51 above** *Designers' Inquiry* – posters and leaf-lets for the launch of the online questionnaire during the Milan Design Week, Careof DOCVA, 17-22 April 2012

**FIGURE 52 below** Workshop with labour organizer Valery Alzaga, Casco, Utrecht, 5 June 2012





**FIGURE 53 above** *Designers' Inquiry* – first collective analysis of the collected data, FDV Residency, Milan, 29 June to 1 July 2012

**FIGURE 54 below** *Designers' Inquiry* – open workshop to visualise the elaborated data, FDV Residency, Milan, 25-27 January 2013

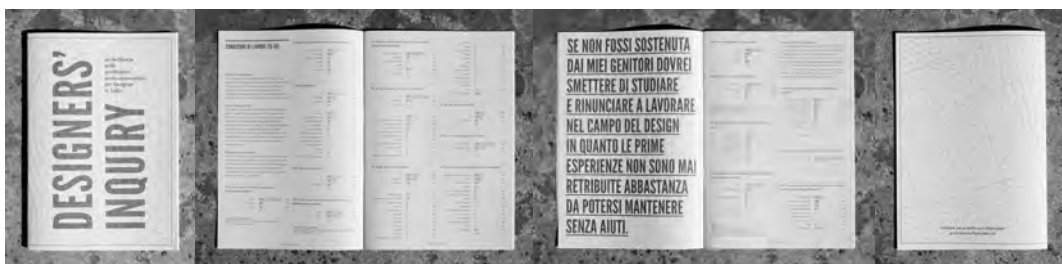


FIGURE 55 and 56 *Designers' Inquiry* – launch of the report during the Milan Design Week, Careof DOCVA, 7-14 April 2013



**FIGURE 57 above** Collective presentation at the Faculty of Design and Art of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano (IT), 19 December 2011

**FIGURE 58 middle** Micropolitics workshop with Valeria Graziano, Bozen-Bolzano (IT), 20 December 2011

**FIGURE 59 below** *Designers' Inquiry* – presentation at "Milano e Oltre", Triennale Design Museum, Milan, 25 May 2013





FIGURE 60 to 63 Summer retreat in the Italian Alps, Nomi, 23-29 July 2012

### Overall reflections on this inhabitation

The situated, embodied knowledges created through the engagement with the *Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative* were a real turning point in this research: they let us experience the potential for undoing procedures of precarisation that unfold when we step out of our comfort zone and orient our doing along noncapitalist values. Compared to the first inhabitation in Warsaw, the space created in Milan allowed us to question ourselves and to challenge our ways of doing even beyond the eight initial weeks. While the experience in Warsaw raised issues about the docile subjectivities designers are trained to assume and taught us that a change in material structure does not necessarily render us less precarious, the activities with the *Cantiere* threw back to us the fact that a change in subjectivity must go hand-in-hand with a change in material structures and ways of doing to enable us to move towards a “becoming other” that is de-precarising in all areas of our lives. Within the *Cantiere*, we have not yet achieved the balance that would allow to really sustain the collective, however in our own particular design practices, our collective research has already encouraged a variety of us to build more sustainable arrangements for ourselves that can also be opened up to others.

In terms of an engagement with theory, this experience has made me realise that although the Italian Autonomist thought produced by and around Negri opens up how we can think of design practice in politicised ways, these theories do not necessarily offer concrete strategies of how to sustain what they call “exit” or “refusal or work.” Moreover, having engaged on various occasions with activities organised by Italian activists who refer to autonomist thought, these encounters were very often perceived as patronising, stifling, in love with the straightforwardness of abstract ideas rather than with the messiness of practice and they often ended in the silencing of critical voices or in discussions around what actions might be judged as radical enough.<sup>310</sup> On these occasions, my personal reaction was to think that if a “de-precarising revolution” was to feel like this, I would have serious doubts about wanting to be part of it. Nevertheless, I still consider Italian Autonomist thought valuable, but that it needs to be challenged through practice and other kind of approaches of how to move towards a just and equal society. Practice has this fantastic (and, at times, damned) ability to test concepts, to set them to work

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310 Here I refer especially to the *Commonwear* seminars (spring 2012) and the seminar *The art of struggle* (March 2013) organised by Uninomade.

and to see if they hold, but also to demand more, or other, concepts to make sense of its functioning in the world and to reorient itself when it gets stuck.

Thus the engagement with the Cantiere energised a trajectory of collective activities against precarisation, but also brought up really interesting questions and obstacles to work through in the continuation of our, at times more, at times less, intertwined research paths: How can we mobilise our immaterial, social and material resources along values and through practices that create de-precarising procedures and support structures which are sustainable in the long-term? How can we mobilise them in ways that produce de-precarising effects beyond ourselves or a relative small group of people? How can we valorise the political aspect of the element of care that emerged among us? How can we bring more concrete micro- as well as nanopolitical procedures against precarisation into our lives? How can we mobilise situated and embodied theories in order to inspire a strategic and practice-oriented (re)formulation of how we go about organising our lives and design practices together with others? To explore these questions, in the next section of this thesis, we engage with feminist autonomist approaches to work and the commons. To think through their proposals and to formulate tools for re-orienting design practice, we also draw on the experiences gathered around the commons in Dheisheh (Occupied Palestinian Territories) and in New Cross (London).

#### 14. AUTONOMIST FEMINIST MARXISM, COMMONING AND CARE

Autonomist feminist activists and thinkers are closely concerned with issues of exploitation and coercion related to the reproduction of our livelihoods. In their emergence in Italy, and internationally in the 1970s,<sup>311</sup> they produced a ground-breaking critique of Marx and Marxism by stating how important the unpaid reproductive labour performed by women world-wide was for the continued accumulation of capital. Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James' seminal work "Women and the subversion of the community" and subsequent writings by members of the international group Wages for Housework, exposed how women's exploitation by, and production for capital, is hidden in the social factory because they do not get paid for the hours spent on care work that ensures (male) workers are able to go to work day after day.<sup>312</sup>

From this critique developed in the 1970s, the contemporary current of autonomist feminist thinkers – which, for my purpose, I group around Silvia Federici and Massimo De Angelis<sup>313</sup> – argue that the most intense struggles against precarisation are being fought in places where capital is threatening people's livelihoods, i.e. in places where people are exposed to, amongst other things, land expropriation, environmental destruction and soaring food prices. Thus, unlike autonomists closer to Hardt and Negri, they untie the potential for social change from the most advanced sector of workers. This also means that they focus less on the immaterial common of languages, codes and knowledges in their discussion of the potential for autonomy from the capital social relation held by collectively produced and used resources, but more on the potential held by material and social commons. They develop Marx's analysis of the commons and their enclosure in their approach to collectively held resources today, while at the same time challenging capitalist appropriations of the commons. They do so by persistently asking how commons can

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311 For an overview of the development of autonomist feminist thought in Italy, see: Mariarosa Dalla Costa, "Workersim, Feminism and Some Efforts of the United Nations," <http://www.commoner.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/the-operai-maria-rosa-final-version.pdf>.

312 Dalla Costa and James' pamphlet of 1971 is today often referred to as the "Communist Manifesto of the 21<sup>st</sup> century": Dalla Costa and James, "Subversion of the Community".

313 In this strand of thinkers, I also include the people involved in the Midnight Notes Collective, like Harry Cleaver, and George Caffentzis.



concretely shift power towards workers within the capital social relation,<sup>314</sup> which is why we are taking their approach here in order to concretely envisage how the obstacles encountered with and by the Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative might be overcome.

### **Commons and enclosures**

To proceed with an engagement with autonomist feminist thought, it is first useful to clarify what they refer to when speaking about the commons. Historically, commons were, for example, pieces of land that people – who held common rights – could access to graze their animals, collect firewood, turf and fruits as well as to provide for other subsistence needs.<sup>315</sup> The gradual enclosure of these commons meant that rights of common use were taken away from people and social power shifted towards money-owners. Marx's accounts of these enclosures highlights how they were supported by both the state and the church, and that while states became progressively more wealthy, their populations steadily became impoverished. This process of taking away rights of common use which had secured people's reproduction, was taken even further by the so-called 'clearing of estates' by which those living on the newly-enclosed pieces of land were moved elsewhere. The consequence of these enclosures was the incorporation of soil into capital and the creation of the required supplies of "free" and rightless proletarians who could then only secure their survival by joining the emerging urban industries.<sup>316</sup>

This expropriation was by no means a peaceful one, but was enforced with violence. Brutal state and church power was used to discipline the dispossessed and enforce these transformations onto them: incarceration, violent punishment and executions were the primary means to force people to sell their labour power.<sup>317</sup> This same violence was used to break women's power in the community, who,

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314 Their anti-capitalist stand thus differs significantly from a more mainstream economic approach to the commons, which generally asks how shared resources can be governed so that they become productive within a capitalist economy. For a discussion of this difference in approach, see George Caffentzis, "The Future of "the Commons": Neoliberalism's "Plan B" or the Original Disaccumulation of Capital?," *New Formations*, no. 69 (2010). For how commons are theorised as functioning profitably within a capitalist economy, see for example Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

315 Commons were not in themselves egalitarian as not everyone could access them. For the access and use of commons in England, see: J.M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

316 For an account of these enclosures also called "primitive accumulation," see Marx, *Capital*. VI, p.886-95.

317 *Ibid.*, p.897-98. See also Linebaugh, *London Hanged*.

through their reproductive work and their knowledges in relation to health, largely contributed to the independence of communities. Silvia Federici, in a meticulous study of the violent disciplining of women that accompanied enclosures, traces how women were forced into slave-like roles that devalued reproductive work.<sup>318</sup> Moreover, autonomist feminist thinkers state that these processes of enclosure are far from being over: today, enclosures and violence are still necessary in the global expansion of capitalism and, just as in Marx's time, it is not simply naturally that the owners of the means of production and subsistence find the workers freely available on the market as sellers of their own labour-power.<sup>319</sup> Instead, this situation needs to be created – evidently by all means possible – and sustained by precarising workers and dismantling the welfare state, no matter how many people take to the streets and how much violent police action is needed to crush the protests.<sup>320</sup> Enclosures are even taking place through more subtle means like, for instance, the attempted enclosure of people's imagination so that it almost seems impossible to imagine a socio-economic system that differs from the one rotating around capital.

Thus, through the enclosure of commons the capitalist social relation is being re-produced by incessantly forcing workers to sell their labour-power in order to live, whilst capitalists continue to enrich themselves in the process.<sup>321</sup> Therefore, we can see how through constant – whether more or less violent – processes of enclosure, the capital social relation continuously reproduces not only itself but also a class of people dependent on wages.<sup>322</sup>

### **An autonomist feminist approach to the commons**

Proposing to explore an autonomist feminist line of thought to tackle particularly material issues of precariousness, means to move the focus from an immaterial conception of “the common” to a very material conception of “the commons,” which, in itself, holds a strong relation to reproductive work as a means to

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318 See, Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*. For a further account of the enclosure of the female body and mind, see: Mies, Bennholdt-Thomson, and Werlhof, *Women: The Last Colony*.

319 Marx, *Capital*. V1, p.274.

320 For elaborations on continued enclosures, see for example Midnight Notes Collective, “The New Enclosures,” <http://www.midnightnotes.org/newenclos.html>.

321 Marx, *Capital*. V1, p.723.

322 Ibid., p.724.

securing livelihoods outside the precarising constraints of the market.<sup>323</sup> In fact, the way autonomist feminist thought addresses issues of precariousness can be summarised with De Angelis' words, who states that his interest in the commons "is grounded in a desire for the *conditions* necessary to promote social justice, sustainability, and happy lives for all."<sup>324</sup>

In grounding the desire for a different society in the production and reproduction of anti-capitalist commons, De Angelis further clarifies that, from an autonomist feminist viewpoint, commons are not resources in common-use as they might be defined within neoliberal capitalist policy, but they are the base on which social practices other to those defined by the capital social relation are built.<sup>325</sup> In this sense, commons need to be thought of as standing in antithesis to all forms of enclosure and exploitation. They cannot only be imagined as playing a crucial role in (re)defining how we co-produce our livelihoods, but also as the very means through which we can limit our role in reproducing precarising procedures and through which society can be substantially transformed. Thus, commons are perceived by autonomist feminist thinkers as positioned within a field of power relations, in which they are not only sites of extraordinary possibility, but also sites of struggle, since their remains high potential that they do not become transformative, but instead merely attempt to give a human face to capitalist exploitation.<sup>326</sup>

When considering how, as designers, we could mobilise the commons to create non-precariating economic cultures, the image that De Angelis evokes of the commons standing on three columns is useful in order to understand the conceptual and practical tools they require us to build.<sup>327</sup> Firstly, the commons are based on commonly produced, used and reproduced resources – whether material, social or immaterial – that contribute to the reproduction of livelihoods outside the market. Secondly, the commons necessitate the building of a heterogeneous, non-

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323 In the work of Federici and De Angelis on the commons resonates also the work on the subsistence perspective developed by eco-feminists, see for example Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 1993). Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Maria Mies, *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy* (London/New York: Zed Books, 1999).

324 An Architektur, "On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides," *e-flux journal* June-August, no. 17 (2010).

325 De Angelis, *Beginning of History*, p.145.

326 For an elaboration on the potential of co-optation of the commons, see for example Silvia Federici, "Women, Reproduction, and the Construction of Commons " <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBBbVpbmRP0>.

327 An Architektur, "On the Commons," p.2-3.

essentialist and often trans-local community that takes care of them, that negotiates, as well as regulates, their use so that they do not end up being depleted.<sup>328</sup> Thirdly, they rely on the practice of commoning, i.e. the pro-active act of collectively producing and taking care of the commons through horizontal processes.<sup>329</sup> Based on these three elements, an autonomist feminist notion of the commons acknowledges the possibility of a virtuous yet constantly negotiated, interdependence between people.<sup>330</sup> Furthermore, they highlight the element of care linked to the commons, given that the ethics of care as described by feminist political scientist Joan Tronto, implies a shift from the dilemma between autonomy and dependency to a more sophisticated notion of interdependence that considers the multiple viewpoints and needs of the people involved.<sup>331</sup> Silvia Federici and Camille Barbagallo, for example, underline the importance of connecting the commons with care and reproduction towards the development of “self-reproducing movements,” i.e. movements that do not “separate political work from the activities necessary to the reproduction of our life, for no struggle is sustainable that ignores the needs, experiences, and practices that reproducing ourselves entails.”<sup>332</sup> For designers wanting to challenge precarisation, this would imply avoiding a separation between the activism developed within design practices and the practices and needs of reproduction.

For designers, such a commons-based approach to undoing precarisation means taking all paid and unpaid workers as a frame of reference for their practices and lives in order to avoid falling into the dynamics of the capitalist mode of production which constantly pits the livelihoods of singularities against each other.<sup>333</sup> In fact, Harry Cleaver reminds us that in order to effectively address precariousness, it is not enough to think globally and act locally, but that it is necessary to consider how

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328 In fact, for a long time, commons have been dismissed as unviable based on observations made by Garrett Hardin that commons necessarily end up being depleted. However, in his analysis, he had no place for a negotiating community but only for greedy individuals. See: Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science* 162, no. 3859 (1968).

329 The term ‘commoning’ has been introduced by autonomist Marxist historian Peter Linebaugh, “The Who and Whom of Liberty Taking,” *Mute Magazine*, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/who-and-whom-liberty-taking>.

330 Here their conception of community links to critical accounts by Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

331 Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.101-02.

332 See the introduction to “Carework and the commons”: Silvia Federici and Camille Barbagallo, “Introduction,” *The Commoner*, no. 15 (2012).

333 De Angelis, *Beginning of History*, p.117.

our local actions can complement each other, whilst allowing the lines of flight of commoning to take off in many different directions.<sup>334</sup> Considering the work we do as designers, where can we begin to enact a multiplicity of ways in which to bring together a sustainable politics and practice of the commons, both in our practice and in our lives? How to practice along the commons in order to design precarisation out of our, and other people's, lives? How can we design in order to shift power relations between production and reproduction so that the precarising and exploitative conditions under which we eat, sleep, travel, laugh, wear, communicate or work are no longer taken for granted?

Before trying to answer these questions specifically in relation to design, we will take an excursion into two practice-based investigations of the commons that were of major importance when grappling with the potential practices of commoning could have in our lives. The first excursion takes us to Campus in Camps, an experimental university programme within the Palestinian refugee camp of Dheisheh, where Fabio and I had the opportunity – alongside others – to test whether the notions and practices around the commons could hold even in such a complex and highly conflicted context. The second excursion takes us to an engagement with the New Cross Commoners, a group of people living in the neighbourhood of Goldsmiths College, together with whom I explored practices of commoning in London.

### **Campus in Camps – commoning in Palestinian refugee camps**

In autumn 2012, Fabio and I joined the university programme Campus in Camps,<sup>335</sup> located in the Palestinian refugee camp of Dheisheh next to Bethlehem, as project activators.<sup>336</sup> Joining the programme, gave us the opportunity to ask – together with 15 Palestinian refugees<sup>337</sup> – a series of questions around the notion of the commons

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334 Massimo De Angelis, "An Interview with Harry Cleaver," <https://webpace.utexas.edu/hcleaver/www/InterviewwithHarryCleaver.html>.

335 The aim of the two-year programme, initiated in January 2012, is to explore and produce "new forms of representation of camps and refugees beyond the static and traditional symbols of victimisation, passivity and poverty." "Campus in Camps - About," <http://www.campusincamps.ps/en/about/>. The programme is supported by the GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). It is delivered in collaboration with Al Quds University (Jerusalem) and Bard College (New York).

336 The role of project activators within the programme is to support participants in concretely realising projects that create new imaginaries around what it means to be a refugee and what is needed to create an empowering culture within the camps. Our research work as project activators was made possible through the funding of the GIZ and Movin'Up – mobility grants for young artists based in Italy.

337 All participants had already completed BA degrees in a variety of subjects, such as business administration, social work and media studies, and they were all paid a monthly stipend.

and commoning: How do the values and practices of the common(s) function in a non-Western context? Can they bring new perspectives to contexts that are more demanding than the precariousness of designers? What can they, contribute, for example, to the unblocking of extremely complex situations like the one of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Having previously thoroughly engaged with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict whilst working with programme initiators Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal as part of *Decolonizing Architecture*,<sup>338</sup> we were intrigued, after almost two years of focusing on the issues of precarious designers, by the possibilities of taking the knowledges and tools we had built up to a context that had the potential to both undo, as well as to enrich, concepts that might be proven to work fine in a European context.

On arrival, we were introduced to the issues, approaches and theories the participants had already engaged in, among which was the autonomist notion of the common, as well as an appreciation of Islamic traditions of shared property.<sup>339</sup> Moreover, we learned that, together with the critical pedagogue Munir Fashi, the participants had decided to start publishing a collective dictionary, in the form of a fanzine, that would allow them to share their reflections on Palestinian refugee-hood with the wider local, as well as trans-local, community. So with our and three more project activators' arrival, the moment had come to give concrete form to the participants' ideas and desires.

For the creation of the first issue of the fanzine, Fabio and I teamed up with the participants who were interested in reflecting on the common(s) in relation to the refugee camps they had grown up in. To do so, we began by walking around the camp of Dheisheh and the neighbouring sprawl-city of Doha, which is also mainly populated by refugees for whom, due to the growing population since 1949, there was no more space within the confines of the camp. During our daily walks and discussions, which extended over a period of four weeks, we asked questions about the use of space and property in the camp and in the adjacent city and were always attentive to discussing what forms of social relations these uses engendered. Here

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338 *Decolonizing Architecture*, which is now more precisely called *Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency*, started in 2007 in order to reimagine how Israeli colonial architecture could be subverted, reused, profaned and recycled once conflict between the parts was settled, but also on those occasions in which the Israeli Military Force retreats and leaves its built structures behind. For more information, see "Decolonizing Architecture," <http://www.decolonizing.ps/site/>.

339 For shared property in Islamic traditions, like the *waqf*, see Siraj Sait and Hilary Lim, *Land, Law and Islam: Property and Human Rights in the Muslim World* (London: Zed, 2006).

it became clear that, while Doha functioned according to private property rules as in any other city, Dheisheh did not have a clear notion of private property, since houses were built on land rented by the United Nations.<sup>340</sup> The ambiguity of who owns what and the social practices resulting from it, led us to think about the camps themselves as being a common: there is no intervention by state planning to regulate the camps and houses are, for example, extended in vernacular ways through negotiations with neighbours rather than carried out in accordance to the UNRWA planning regulations.<sup>341</sup> Administrative matters, disputes and crime are also taken care of by the Popular Committees of each camp rather than through appeal to the Palestinian National Authorities. Moreover, since 1949, the barren land of the hillside on which the Dheisheh refugee camp has been established had been transformed into a sort of urban park, as densely packed with plants as it is with concrete shelters: loquat and mulberry trees branch out into the streets from small gardens, prickly pears line the alleys, vines climb along walls and olive trees proudly stand their ground – all contributing to independent local food production.

By producing a fanzine that reflects on the camps as commons and the micro-practices of commoning that maintain the camps,<sup>342</sup> it emerged that a built-up environment which is collectively produced and managed through activities of collective negotiation, can feel emancipatory, both to those within and those outside, almost as if it were an island of self-rule within a territory intensely regulated by (colonial) state control. However, it also became clear that whilst what, at some levels, might be considered an emancipatory common, at other levels – such as gender and sexual orientation – might be considered discriminating and oppressive. Thus, while producing the fanzine, the question emerged of the variety of elements and processes that were necessary in order to effectively create a culture of commoning that avoids pitting people against each other and that is emancipatory for everyone involved in its production and its reproduction.

Besides the production of the fanzine, another opportunity to think about the commons and commoning was provided by the course *Agriculture as Resistance*,

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340 During our research, it became clear that the knowledge about who owns the land on which Dheisheh is built is very confused and that this confusion provokes myths about the future of the camp.

341 Of course here it would be interesting to also reflect on the role that the weekly, and at times also daily, incursions of the Israeli military play in terms of urban planning. Take, for example, the instance when in 2002, the Hawashin neighbourhood in the refugee camp of Jenin was bulldozed to the ground.

342 See appendix G for the first issue of the fanzine.



run by Vivien Sansour during our stay. Engaging in her seminar activities made us realise how activities related to the maintenance of “generational commons” such as olive trees and terraced fields, which were hundreds of years old, struggle to be seen as radical or even slightly significant political acts. For participants of Campus in Camps framed these activities as “normal”, as something that had always existed, something that has no political value. Thus, we were also able to reflect on how, within this conflict and the progressive context of Campus in Camps, the possibilities of defining other ways of doing were limited by what could be read as capitalist logics of framing what constitutes a valuable activity.

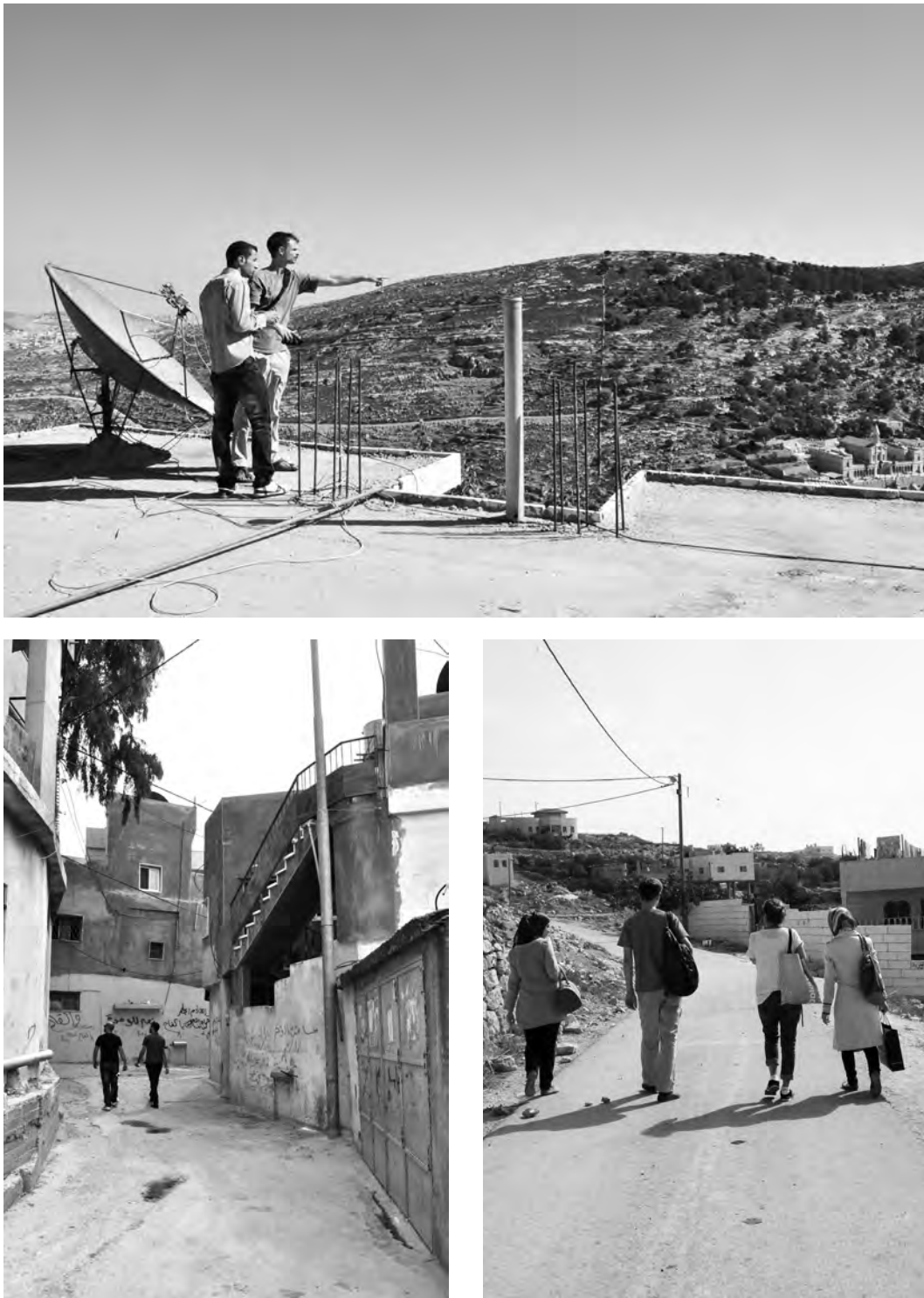
Overall, thinking through the common(s) in the context of Campus in Camps, rather than undoing notions built up throughout the research up to that point, only reinforced our conception of the transformative potential of the commons, since in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they proved to be powerful tools to unhinge entrenched conceptions of how to relate to one another across manifold lines of division.



**FIGURE 64 above** Dheisheh refugee camp, overlooked from just outside the Campus in Camps building; on the opposite hill raises the city of Doha

**FIGURE 65 middle** Campus in Camps – the building hosting the experimental programme (on the ground floor) within the park of the cultural centre Al Feneiq

**FIGURE 66 below** Campus in Camps – one of the regular Monday-meetings between the participants, Alessandro Petti (programme leader), Sandi Hilal (UNRWA representative) and the project activators



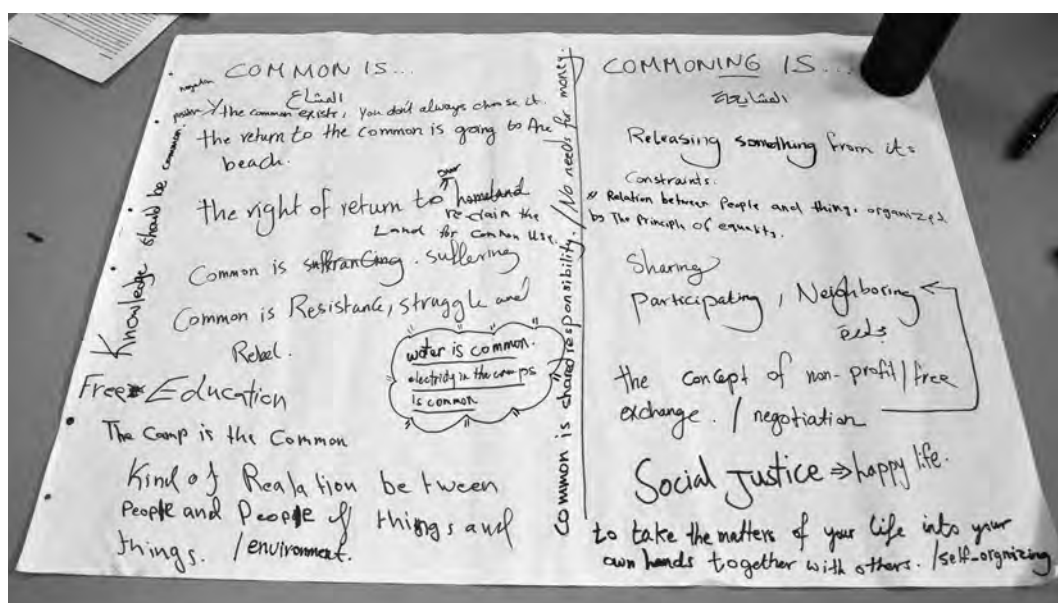
**FIGURE 67 to 69** *Commons & Commoning* – searching for areas of commoning in the urban and rural fabric in and around the camps, Dheisheh and Al-Fawwar refugee camps, September and October 2012





**FIGURE 70 below** *Commons & Commoning* – visit to a women's agricultural co-operative, discussing agriculture as a strategy of resistance, Derbalut, 15 September 2012

**FIGURE 71 above** *Commons & Commoning* – learning to make bread while discussing the work around producing, making and eating food as a practice of commoning, Dheisheh, 2 October 2012



**FIGURE 72 above** *Commons & Commoning* – the fanzine group sorting out the knowledges gathered through practical and theoretical engagements with the commons, October 2012

**FIGURE 73 below** *Commons & Commoning* – after months of studying and researching, the participants appreciate the first concrete output of their work: the first issues of their *Collective Dictionary* project, 10 October 2012

### **New Cross Commoners – commoning in London**

In February 2013, after several months of discussion about the politics of the commons with fellow Goldsmiths students Paolo Plotegher, Caterina Giuliani and Orsalia Dimitriou, we collectively initiated an open research group – the New Cross Commoners – that would engage in activities of commoning which existed in New Cross, a relatively deprived neighbourhood within which the college is located and of which we are residents. We began this research group by running almost weekly get-togethers during which we read texts on the commons and discussed them in relation to the neighbourhood, as well as to our lives. We would also visit places of commoning in the area – like the Sanford Housing Co-op and the self-organised local library – and we would invite people dedicated to practices of commoning to share their experiences with our group. Furthermore, we ran workshops to map the resources, desires and needs held by the people involved in the group and to imagine ways in which we could build connections between them.<sup>343</sup>

By now – September 2013 – the New Cross Commoners have developed into a group of people constituted by Goldsmiths students and local activists alike, all of whom are in some form, affected by procedures of precarisation. Following the initial discussions and mappings, the group is now trying to develop ways in which to contribute to everyday life in this local area through de-precaring activities of commoning. The direction we are currently moving towards is taking over a local empty space, to activate it around shared desires and needs with others living locally. For now, two of the greatest needs within the group are supporting our subsistence and connecting with others in the area, especially across lines of race and class.<sup>344</sup>

As part of my practice-based research, the engagement with the New Cross Commoners was an important platform from where to discuss and enact practices of commoning, bridging the gap between theory and practice. Leaving aside academic language, the New Cross Commoners allowed for an examination, as well as a confirmation, of the potential for de-precaring, social justice and sustainability held by the commons when enacted in everyday life beyond the circumscribed field of a specific profession.<sup>345</sup>

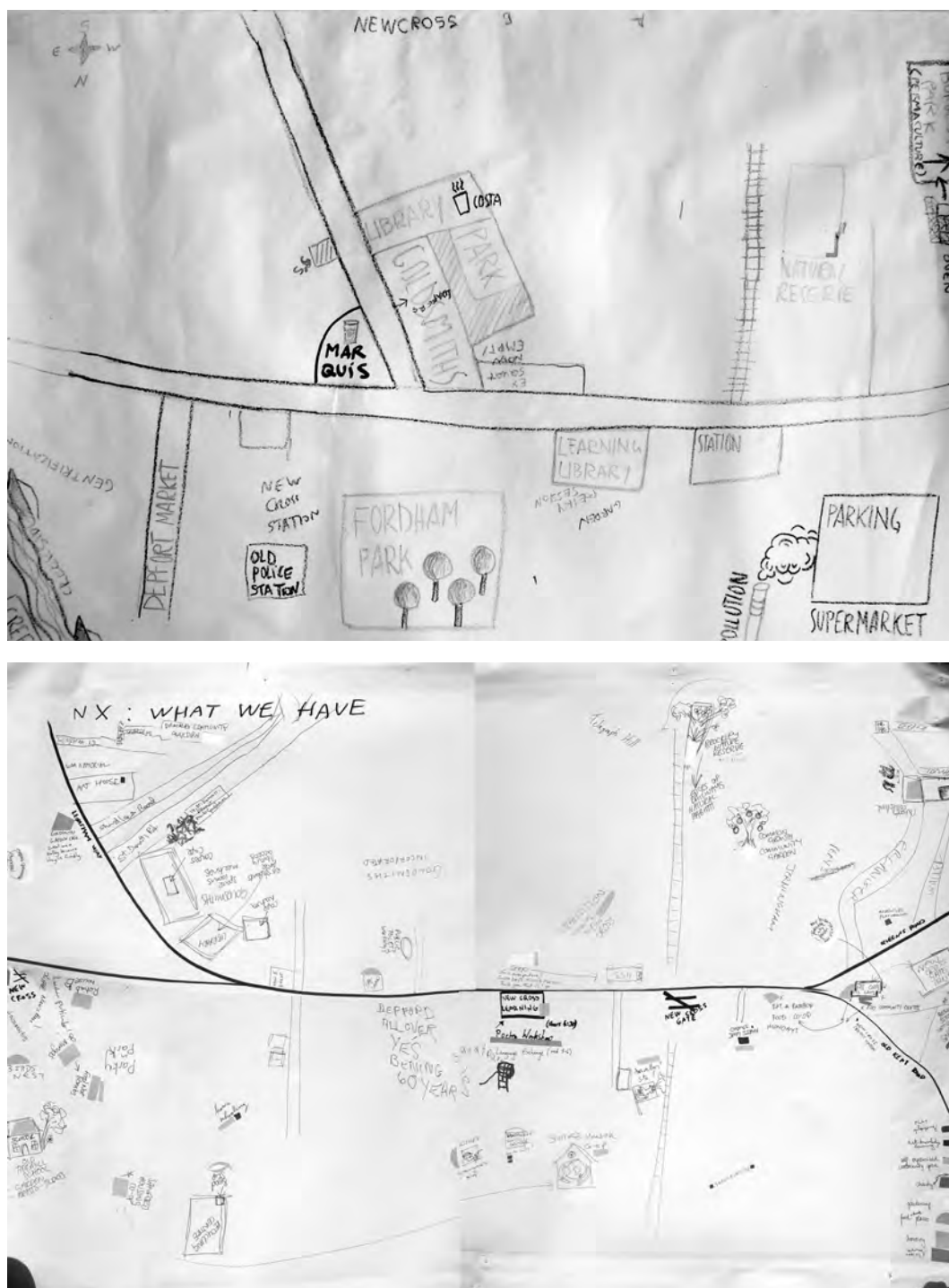
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343 See appendix H for a list of the activities.

344 For the most current, and hopefully by then more concrete, developments of the New Cross Commoners, see: "New Cross Commoners," <http://newxcommoners.wordpress.com>.

345 For thoughts and approaches developed with the New Cross Commoners, see appendix H for an almost print-ready draft of the fanzine we produced.





**FIGURE 74 and 75** Maps of commons in New Cross – the first map (*above*) was drawn during the first meeting of the New Cross Commoners, 9 February 2013, while the second (*below*) was produced eight months later during a workshop in Fordham Park, 14 September 2013





**FIGURE 76 above** First meeting at the self-organised library New Cross Learning, 9 February 2013

**FIGURE 77 below** Visit to Sanford Housing Co-op – accompanied by a reading on how housing could be tackled through a commons-approach, 16 February 2013



**FIGURE 78 above** *Circulation of the commons* – workshop on visualising how we could circulate resources between us and the other people living locally, Goldsmiths College, 16 March 2013

**FIGURE 79 below** *Mapping spaces for commons* – workshop to map unused spaces in New Cross, Fordham Park, 16 June 2013





**FIGURE 80** *above left* Visit and gardening at Burgess Park Food Project, 2 March 2013

**FIGURE 81** *above right* Guided visit to the New Cross Cutting, a nature reserve along the railway lines, 11 May 2013

**FIGURE 82** *below* Guided tour to Hackney Wick with Andreas Lang of public works, 19 October 2013

## 15. DE-PRECARISING VALUE PRACTICES OF THE COMMONS

Having introduced autonomist feminist approaches to the commons, in this last section we elaborate on them further in order to put forward a series of proposals – to be tested in practice – of how designers could transform the currently dominant and – as we have seen – precarising practices of time, innovation and social relation within and beyond their field of profession.

### **Re-considering practices of time**

Refusing to dedicate ourselves to precarising work arrangements is an autonomist strategy we could deploy as design-workers in order to reclaim our time for other things in life. However, such a refusal is a difficult choice for designers to make. This is not only because, in conventionally-structured lives, money (and usually quite a lot of it) needs to come from somewhere, but also because it seems difficult to refuse proposals for design work when doing that kind of work is when the majority of us feel our potential is most realised. Moreover, we might ask if it makes any sense to free our time from (under)paid work to then do (also often precarising) self-initiated projects, which might easily be capitalised on by others? A similar dilemma was encountered by feminists in the 1960s and 1970s around reclaiming their time through the refusal of work: the strategy of refusal made a lot of sense for factory workers, but for women who were bound to reproductive labour in the home, the issues of refusal was less straightforward. How to refuse the work that reproduces those you care about? You might despise the conditions under which you must do that work, but nevertheless, you care for those your unpaid and unrecognised work reproduces.

To undo the paralysing nature of this dilemma, Federici – along with other feminist Marxists – underline the importance of defining the difference between work that reproduces human beings and work that produces them as docile labour-power.<sup>346</sup> When adopting this approach in all activities in our lives that on a daily basis contribute to reproduce our livelihoods – whether this is designing, researching, caring for others and ourselves – we can then see in all of them the potential for subverting the procedures that precarise ourselves and others. Employing this distinction in our approach to the use of time means that even time spent in more

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346 Federici, "Precarious Labour," p.24.

or less precarious work can be used to feed processes of transformative commoning within and beyond it. It also means we can begin to identify what to do in order to reproduce ourselves, from where we can begin to experiment with ways in which to transform these activities so as to shift power away from capital and onto us. We could, for instance, use our time to experiment with ways to access what we need through collective processes and arrangements rather than by relying on (hard-earned) money. For such experiments to become viable, both in our imagination as well as in practice, it is crucial to reconsider the social and economic value we give to time spent on reproductive work, to break with the worthless framing attributed to it within the capital social relation.<sup>347</sup>

Such a revaluation of time spent on directly reproductive work would, for example, value care over efficiency, but would also remind us, designers, why we sell our time and skills in the first place: to secure our reproduction. So why not value reproductive activities, the social relations as well as the subversive potential that comes with them, in the first place? When, for instance, using our time to experiment together in the creation and maintenance of commons to secure parts of our reproduction outside the market, our potential to create, as well as sustain, them multiplies and with it, our capacity to apply pressure for change onto the current economic system. This experimentation would, then, no longer be about using our time to access, do, or be what we already want, do, or are, but would be about allowing us to experiment more fully “with different kinds of lives, with wanting, doing, and being otherwise.”<sup>348</sup>

### **Reframing practices of innovation**

An experimentation with different kinds of life, away from precarising procedures, requires also a reframing of what we perceive as innovation. When we consider innovation from the point of view of the commons (in their antithetical form to capital), we can define it by the extent to which new ways of doing and organising defend existing or create new, commons which in turn support life outside the precarising procedures of the capital social relation. Were innovation valued by capital generally goes hand-in-hand with increasing people’s dependence on the market,

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347 For a historical overview of the devaluation of reproductive work, see: Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*. For an overview of the marginalisation of “care” as a political concept, see: Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*.

348 Weeks, *Problem with Work*, p.145.

then innovation valued by commons (and commoners) increases people's autonomy *from* the market, and thus from wage-labour. This means that if we define social practices of innovation around the commons, we can evaluate their contribution to society by the extent to which they contribute to granting people autonomy from the precarising forces of the market and to which they support us in undoing the value-practices of capital.

Such a shift in perspective in thinking about innovation allows designers to orient and evaluate their efforts more specifically against their own and other's precariousness, and towards social change more generally. When structuring one's design practice, such a shift in perspective makes it easier to challenge simplistic logics and models of practice within the competitive, yet ultimately precarising, model of entrepreneurship where, in order to make a living, what is most important is the "outperformance of *others*."<sup>349</sup> In having (anti-capitalist) commons and commoning as a point of orientation when constructing support structures that should allow designers to become less market-oriented – and less precarious – what possibilities does this open up, not only for the imagination but for the construction of structures that might enable a less competitive co-production of livelihoods?

By considering not only the activity of design itself as valuable in making a living, but by also valuing other (re)productive activities, it might become possible to construct material and social support structures which depart from specifically personal and/or collective situations. Moreover, to begin to approach working as a designer in this way would mean to contribute to social change not only through the production of designs, but through the working processes and the organisational forms of life that accompany and sustain such practice. Through an experimentation with such multifaceted structures, it might also be possible to experiment with the question of what the role and the potential of the designer is in society today, in relation to strengthening the emergence of alternative economic cultures all around us.<sup>350</sup>

Such an approach to innovation would, then, not only allow for strategic experimentation with the way design practices are run and structured, but it would also

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349 De Angelis, *Beginning of History*, p.5.

350 In the field of architecture, such experimentations with the commons have already been concretely advanced in recent years. See for example, the structures developed by aaa (atelier d'architecture autogérée) in Paris, where they propose to develop architecture along lines that no longer segregate and exclude but that assemble, socialise and eventually politicise: atelier d'architecture autogérée, "R-Urban," <http://r-urban.net/en/>.



allow for a different approach to what we design for others, such that, for instance, processes of de-precarising commoning could be facilitated across society. If much of today's design of communication, services and products is structured around the value-practices of capital – even when delivered in the form of open or social design simply because the values of capital are taken as the norm – there is enormous potential for dedicating our attention and skills to (re)create such designs through processes of commoning that allow for autonomy from the coercive forces of the market.

In considering how to facilitate processes of commoning, and thus de-precarisation, French philosopher Bernard Stiegler's notion of de-proletarianisation might be a source of inspiration, particularly if considered with a feminist inflection, because it reminds us of the broader condition the design process should contribute to undo. Stiegler describes proletarianisation as the vast process of the destruction of *savoir-faire* that was necessary as a precondition, besides the enclosure of material resources, to actually create a pool of readily-available labour-force who could not survive without wage-labour.<sup>351</sup> In tracing this process of proletarianisation up to the present day, he adds to it a loss of *savoir-vivre* and *savoir-théoriser*, which further exposes people to the precarising forces of the market.<sup>352</sup> It is in his analysis of the contemporary that he also considers the work of designers, in the form of the creative workforce, who he describes as being

merely creators of that kind of “value” which is *capable of being evaluated on the market ...* but who do not create any works or open up any work [*mais qui n’œuvrent à rien du tout*].<sup>353</sup>

In many ways this description of creative work reflects the precarising and self-precarising activities of designers that have considered earlier, but it also prompts designers to respond to his analysis through practice by beginning to use more time and skills for opening up movements of de-proletarianisation, i.e. of an innovation of knowledge and skills to create value that goes beyond the market and that contributes to an unhinging of the procedures that render us and others precarious. However, when thinking of innovation as a process of de-proletarianisation,

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351 Bernard Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p.27.

352 Ibid., p.30.

353 Ibid., p.45-46.

it is also necessary to employ a feminist viewpoint, since proletarianisation implies the creation and perpetuation of a particular type of family, sexuality, and division of labour that guarantees the cheap reproduction of the labour-force. Thus, when considering design towards processes of de-proletarianisation, the values aimed at should take into account how gendered stereotypes of doing might be replaced by ways of structuring our lives according to equality and social justice.

### **Recomposition of fragmented designers and beyond**

What becomes clear when considering how to redirect our time and our movements of innovation is that almost none of it can be done alone without the risk of being ineffectual beyond oneself, without being marginalised, reabsorbed or worn out. In fact, the desire to free our time to experiment with innovative ways to challenge procedures of precarisation, calls for practices of commoning that aim to transform existing practices of fragmentation between people. With regards this transformation of social relations, De Angelis notes that this fragmentation cannot be undone through pure ideological calls for unity or brushed aside by theoretical frameworks, because it is only within our habitual, everyday practices that we reproduce capital's measure and value practices which, in turn, support fragmentation and precarisation. Thus, when we refer to practices of commoning as a means to overcome the fragmentation and precarisation we experience, it is in direct contrast to the divide-and-rule strategies on which a differentiated access to what we need to live is based. In this sense, we can think of the struggle against precariousness not so much as mobilising *for* commons, but *through* commons. Commons not as something to struggle for as a future state of things, but as part of a constituent process that we can actuate in the here and now through value-practices that are not-affirmative of capital, through a collectivisation of reproduction beyond the individual, the nuclear family or public policies.<sup>354</sup>

Consequently, we can confirm that the autonomist feminist discourse of the commons is not only focused on the creation of new subjectivities, but also on the material and social conditions to sustain them. As Dalla Costa points out, we cannot engage in biopolitical production without confronting the reproduction of our

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354 De Angelis, *Beginning of History*, p.238-39.

bodies, as even in the “exodus”, we will still have to eat.<sup>355</sup> With this, Dalla Costa reminds us that material commons are key in protecting us from processes of precarisation, as without them, the pressure to fall into practices of fragmentation in order to secure our reproduction through competitive advantage is enormous. So, in our desire to move from a precarious, individualised and fragmented mode of being towards a recomposition, we might experiment with the material structures that support our lives, as well as the social skills that allow us to find what Revel refers to as ways of “being-with-others,” ways of constituting a shared space.<sup>356</sup>

Hence, on an affective level, undoing practices of fragmentation also means to not shy away from moments of difficulty in which old modes of being seem a safe haven and alternatively, to walk collectively while asking questions, seems too full of uncertainties. It might also mean to not shy away when an individualised mode of doing appears to be the only rational mode with which to deal with others. It is in these moments that being inventive and trusting is as crucial as drawing on the growing number of shared relational techniques that help us to listen, speak, decide and be with others in respectful, supportive, non-hierarchical ways; in this way we might avoid feeling lost and disempowered in what might seem an overwhelming struggle against precariousness.<sup>357</sup>

Considering de-fragmentation specifically in relation to designers, could we imagine the effects of bringing an engagement with relational techniques of commoning into education, both as a subject as well as in teaching methodologies? For design students, who today are all more or less on a trajectory towards becoming precarious workers, having the time to engage with ways of doing that could support networks of solidarity, mutual aid and commoning could represent a precious resource to strengthen them for their future, to support them in dealing with precariousness and in setting up practices that critically engage – as well as inventively avoid – the pitfalls of reproducing precarising procedures. Moreover, particularly for designers wanting to engage in participatory processes, such an engagement could allow them to go into the world without reproducing, often unconsciously,

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355 With “exodus” Dalla Costa refers to Paolo Virno’s terminology regarding the refusal of work. Mariarosa Dalla Costa, “Seven Good Reasons to Say “Locality”,” *The Commoner*, no. 6 (2003): p.1.

356 Judith Revel, “Identity, Nature, Life: Three Biopolitical Deconstructions,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 6 (2009): p.48.

357 See for example: Vercautern, *Micropolitiques Des Groupes*. Starhawk, *The Empowerment Manual: A Guide for Collaborative Groups* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2011); Marianella Sclavi, *Arte Di Ascoltare E Mondi Possibili: Come Si Esce Dalla Cornici Di Cui Siamo Parte* (Milano: Mondadori, 2003).

the practices of social interaction that either perpetuate fragmentation or, despite all good intentions, keep people locked into fragmentation.

Besides this engagement with relational techniques of commoning aimed at supporting the creation of equality, social justice and dis-alienation, could we imagine the recomposition of designers to be supported by introducing them to modes of collective organising and running of their design practices? Becoming familiar with practices of horizontality, of dealing with shared authorship, of fair work contracts, of unionisation and cooperatives, to name only a few, could potentially prepare students for a way of working that does not accept the industries' demand for docile creative workers. Moreover, could we imagine those running design schools beginning to engage with the diversity of issues raised by precariousness? Could they, for instance, intervene in the ways they structure their working contracts or distribute employment, or could they use their resources to sustain graduates who are building up practices that are meaningful and politically engaged but perhaps not necessarily oriented towards the market? Implementing such changes at various levels within design education could attempt to address fragmentation among designers and with it, find a way to support designers interacting meaningfully with the world.

### **Circulation of the commons**

Most of the people interviewed for this research engage, to varying degrees, in practices of collective innovation around the commons – even if they do not necessarily frame it in this way. Artist Kate Rich of Feral Trade experiments with ways in which the trade of goods could follow the routes of sociality and respond to values of reciprocity; educators and sociologists Katarzyna and Paweł Winiarski run a common university in rural Poland that aims at undoing the extreme precariousness and marginalisation that neoliberal capitalism has created in Poland; the designers and makers of Serpica Naro challenge the exploitation in the fashion system not only by attacking it through direct action but also by patiently creating a counter-circuit of garments; the performance artists who occupy the Teatro Valle in Rome, not only create room for a politicised culture in the heart of the city, but take on the Italian legislative system to fight for the right to have the commons written into the constitution.<sup>358</sup>

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358 See appendix C and Brave New Alps, "Designing Economic Cultures".

In all these cases, innovative movements against precariousness can be read as specific instances of commoning. However, if this commoning would remain limited to these instances, the mechanisms of precariousness could not really be challenged: easily self-organised groups, who, within their own circle, follow values other than those of capital, can also be pitted against each other through a need to secure their reproduction. Therefore, a continuous weaving of connections between different groups and instances of commoning is needed, a weaving together to which the skills of designers could substantially contribute. Taking up autonomist media theorist Nick Dyer-Witheford's concept of the "circulation of the common,"<sup>359</sup> as designers, we might imagine how to fuel the activities of de-precarising commoning by applying our skills to facilitate the planning and coordination of sharing goods, skills, knowledges, time and so on, between groups of commoners, in order to reinforce each singular processes of commoning and to thus reinforce their transformative effect on society at large.<sup>360</sup> To innovate as designers in relation to the circulation of the commons could, then, mean coming up with ways in which to organise resources into (re)productive ensembles that create more shared resources, which in turn might provide the basis for the formation of new commons and processes of commoning that are supportive in constructing ways out of precariousness.

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359 Dyer-Witheford is mainly referring to "the common" as theorised by Negri. For my purpose, however, I will use his concept in the plural "circulation of the commons" as it seems more appropriate in relation to undoing precarisation.

360 Nick Dyer-Witheford, "The Circulation of the Common," in *Immaterial labour, multitudes and new social subjects: class recomposition in cognitive capitalism* (King's College, University of Cambridge 2006), p.4.

## 16. CONCLUSION OF PART 2

In Part 2 of this thesis, we set out to explore the potential inherent in the work of designers to undo procedures of precarisation as theorised by autonomist Marxists: if designers are closely involved in the production of social life itself, then this life could also be produced differently. We explored how energies, synergies and subjectivities can be produced when socially and politically engaged designers are given the space to reflect, research and bond together. However, with the *Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative*, we also saw the limitations such experiments encounter, especially when they struggle with a lack of material resources. To engage with how this lack could be tackled in innovative, de-precaring ways, we ultimately explored the potential held in the way resources can be shared and reproduced as common goods rather than as private, exclusive property. Considering autonomist feminist notions of the commons in relation to design practice, then, allowed us to propose how practitioners might concretely intervene in the ways time, innovations and social relations exist as structures in our lives in order that they might contribute to procedures of de-precaring. So, can we from here imagine ways in which we apply our skills in order to bring resources that are private, public or used only by a small circle of people into a circulation that sustains the growth of alternative value-practices? Can we imagine ways in which resources of all kind might be taken out of the circuit of capital accumulation and redirected to create economic cultures that do not rely on precariousness for their functioning?

Having worked through Part 2 along this trajectory, the next step called for is again, almost inevitably, related to practice: How to pull these knowledges and insights together in a further inhabitation and experimentation? How to virtuously embed a further inhabitation in the network of people and practices generated throughout this research? How to bring these ideas for experimentation in de-precaring procedures to other emerging practices in design and beyond? Before enthusiastically setting off into practice to see what can be generated from these questions, it is time to take a breath and to dedicate a conclusion to this three-year period of research: to reconsider the ground covered so far and to evaluate the assembled tool-box in order to be ready for another immersion in the effervescent messiness of practice.



## CONCLUSION

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### Summing up

This research has been animated by a pressing question that has emerged from practice: how to undo the precariousness that often forces designers to give up on social and political engagement in their work in order that they can make a living? To formulate a variety of situated answers to this over-arching question – as well as to the various delineations it has taken throughout the research process – this study has created series of relays between practice and theory aimed at investigating and experimenting with approaches that designers might strategically draw on for undoing the variety of procedures that precarise them.

The trajectory of this research was marked in Part 1 and the Intermezzo by an outward movement that, starting from the personal experience of precariousness, traced – both through theory as well as practice – connections between the conditions designers experience individually, the precarising dynamics of the creative industries and the values of the capitalist economy that influence how designers work and live. This first trajectory of analysis was largely shaped by the blockages encountered during the inhabitation of *My castle is your castle*, the issues highlighted by *Designers' Inquiry* and the questions raised in discussions throughout the seminar series organised in London and Warsaw. Overall, it could be said that Part 1 and the Intermezzo demystified “doing design” as a creative activity and instead considered it as work, thus positioning this resistance to precarisation within a wider genealogy of workers' struggles. The analytical trajectory of this research was subsequently complemented by a more speculative trajectory in Part 2, exploring the de-precari-ising potential of noncapitalist concepts, values and strategies developed within autonomist and feminist-autonomist workers' movements. Here again, the relays created between theory and practice through inhabitations, conversations and situated research groups were crucial for giving direction to the investigation. Together with the designers of the Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative, the participants of Campus in Camps and those joining together as the New Cross Commoners, noncapitalist values were explored in practice, pushed at, questioned and enlarged, in order for them to be applicable as tools for the de-precari-isation of our practices and lives.

To begin tackling the overall question that practice had set out for this research, the thesis traced how the condition of precariousness is not only restricted to designers who want to question given power relations with their work, but that, contrary to what dominant discourses within the field of design makes us believe, it is a condition that affects all designers. Here we saw how draining the effects of

insecure, contingent, flexible and underpaid work have on the present – as well as future – well-being of many designers. Furthermore, we saw how current levels of precariousness, and the procedures that produce them, have developed over the last 30+ years with the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist systems of production. In this passage, it was revealed how many aspects of the contemporary figure of the designer have emerged from that shift and whilst the professional figure of the designer at first benefitted from the move towards informational, service-based models of individualised entrepreneurship in the global North/West, it did not take long for these benefits to be undone.

From this initial overview, the research moved into an inhabitation of the first practical attempt to consider potential de-precarising strategies through the peer-to-peer sharing of resources. This attempt made use of the material resources Brave New Alps had access to at that point in the research process, i.e. the resources made available through an artist residency in Poland. The experiences and reflections generated through the three-month period of sharing resources within the framework of *My castle is your castle*, as well as the concurrent engagement with other socially and politically engaged practitioners through a series of seminars and conversations, led to the first rupture in the research trajectory. It was made evident through these activities that it was necessary to avoid initially concentrating on “material fixes” to the precariousness of designers, but instead to focus on what processes contribute to make designers’ accept precarious working conditions, or even engage in practices of self-precarisation.

Thus, the research moved on to analyse how designers are made creative subjects prone to precariousness. Drawing foremost on the work of Foucault and McRobbie, patterns in design education and in the prevalent discourses of the creative industries were traced, identifying how they contribute to forming designers who are “industry-ready,” i.e. ready to docilely, even eagerly, adapt to precarising working and living conditions, accepting these as the norm to which one is urged to conform in order to “make it.” From this research, it emerged that in order to equip designers with the tools necessary to create and enact de-precarising socio-economic practices, their tool-box needed to be enriched with elements that allow them to recognise the precarising values, norms and procedures present within a capitalist economy and to see how these influence ways of working and formulating ambitions.

The Intermezzo, then, was dedicated to an exploration of why and how a capitalist economy “produces” precarious working conditions. It introduced Marx’s

critique of the political economy and related further Marxist analyses to the working lives and practices of designers. In the first section of the *Intermezzo*, production and accumulation of value in a capitalist economy were considered from the workers' point of view, exploring how capitalist values play out in definitions of what is perceived as productive labour and how docile workers constantly need to be produced (and reproduced) so that they are functional to capitalist processes of accumulation. After this introductory section, the values and practices of the capital social relation were explored in terms of how they affect the ways in which designers practice time, innovation and social relations. With regards to time, it was suggested that a "use" of it that is based on individualistic rationales is eroding the grounds on which designers could formulate their struggle for better working conditions. With regards to innovation, we saw how crucial the values are with which designers judge the innovative elements of their work and how normalised capitalist values can undermine designers' abilities to really produce positive social change through their work. Finally, with regards to social relations, we saw how the competitive attitudes with which designers are expected to perform contribute to pitting livelihoods against each other, whereby debt becomes a further procedure that exacerbates precarisation through intense processes of individualisation.

As a whole, the *Intermezzo* allowed for a better understanding of values and process underlying precariousness. It provided the opportunity for a strategic questioning of the values and practices that, in the field of design, are generally taken as the norm. It also introduced a broader sense of the historical development of precarising procedures and with it, the notion that these are procedures that can be struggled against, modified and undone. Here, it became very clear that strategies against precarisation need to take a collective dimension if they are to make a difference to more than just single individuals or privileged groups of designers. Therefore, this Marxist analysis introduced a series of unsettling questions to disrupt the apparent consensus surrounding how designers need to function in order to make a living. This passage, although destabilising the ground on which many designers base their work, equips designers with analytical tools they can draw on so as to avoid unknowingly, and unwillingly, reproducing ways of doing, organising and thinking that ultimately contribute to render people precarious.

However, since the question of this research was not only how designers can begin to see and understand procedures of precarisation, but also how they can undo them through the creation of other economic cultures, the second part of the

thesis explored autonomist- and feminist-autonomist-inspired proposals of how to “resist and produce, to resist through production, to produce while resisting.”<sup>361</sup> Taking its lead from the experiences and theoretical relays triggered by *My castle is your castle*, which brought to the fore the extent to which designers take precarising modes of working as the norm, Part 2 engaged in the potential for counter-conduct and other ways of doing as theorised by autonomist thinkers. In the first section, following Autonomist proposals to conceptualise design work as biopolitical labour, the potential for counter-conduct inherent to this kind of activity was teased out by framing it as key to creating cultures that allow for the emergence of subjectivities that refuse individualisation and exploitation. With regards the creation of cultures which foster “rebellious” subjectivities, was that of the common, i.e. of the collective production of languages, codes, knowledges and social life that function according to noncapitalist categories of property and that allow for a substantial “becoming other” to unravel.

The research then traced the development of a second inhabitation, the *Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative*, which relayed the concept of biopolitical labour and the commons back to practice. It consisted in the living within a support structure for socially and politically engaged designers in the form of a shared residency for eight weeks, grounded in a desire to foster processes of “becoming other” along noncapitalist, and thus potentially de-precaring, values. Reflection on the experience of these two months, as well as its important developments beyond the period in Milan, brought to the fore the extent to which a collective questioning of the market- and work-logic that renders designers precarious – while at the same time attempting to live out other ways of (collective) practicing – is the very activity that creates a common ground between people and constitutes the support structure that allows them to transform their normalised ways of relating, doing and being. However, this inhabitation again brought an acute awareness of the fact that whilst intellectual and affective processes of transformation are empowering for those involved, they do not immediately undo the very material necessity to make a living through work that is still precarious. Despite the social and intellectual common being immensely important, it does not immediately have the ability to sustain the material aspects of everyone’s livelihood.

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361 My own translation of „Opporsi e produrre, opporsi producendo, produrre opponendosi (...)”, Judith Revel, “Per Una Biopolitica Della Moltitudine,” in *Biopolitica Minore*, ed. Paolo Perticari (Roma: manifestolibri, 2003).

Reflection on the strengths and limitations of this second inhabitation prompted further investigation of how designers might use their skills, knowledges and other resources in order to create a common that could simultaneously undo the social and material procedures of precarisation. To develop the designers' toolbox beyond Italian autonomist concepts of the common, the thesis explored how notions of the commons formulated by autonomist feminist activists and theorists are informed by an attention to how social and material resources can be activated in order to undo the continuous pitting of livelihoods against each other. Their reflections, which focus on care, interdependence and the active practice of commoning, were then tested through collective practice-based engagements within the context of the lives of people in the Palestinian refugee camp of Dheisheh and in the London neighbourhood of New Cross, both of which underlined the feasibility and strength of practices of commoning when given the possibility to develop. Taking inspiration from the practice-theory relays created through these collective engagements, the second part of the thesis concluded with a series of proposals of how designers could re-orient their practices of time, innovation and social relation in order to break out of capitalist definitions of which activities are worthy of our time. These proposed a redefinition in noncapitalist terms of what constitutes a valuable design outcome and how to infuse social relations with solidarity and mutuality, rather than with competition and individualisation. Here, the focus was on how design practices could be mobilised along the noncapitalist values of the commons in order to create support structures that allow for de-precaring procedures to be played out at a variety of empowering collective levels. This passage ultimately revealed how, by connecting up a diverse range of practices of commoning and counter-conduct, designers can intervene in generating de-precaring processes, both at the level of access to material resources for reproduction, as well as in the production of subjectivities that refuse to be governed along capitalist values.

### **Overall concluding thoughts**

Given the ground covered by this research, what overall proposition can we draw from it that might effectively support designers to sustain socially and politically engaged practices? The proposition I extract from it is simple in its formulation, but has important practical implications: it is that socially and politically engaged designers not only focus on the content of what they produce, but also on how the



values of that content are synchronised with how one practices and lives. Emerging from the research was a need to generate a de-precarising culture and ethics *among* designers that goes beyond content produced, a need to generate ways of relating to each other that both undo self-precarisation and collectively challenge the exposure to precarisation from multiple directions. Establishing such a culture and an ethics that breaks with the individualisation and competition currently experienced at all levels of a designer's life, would finally indicate that we see ourselves making socially and politically engaged work not *despite* precariousness, but *against* it.

This proposition echoes Foucault's proposal to construct not only one's discourses, but one's way of life as a strategy of resistance: to engage in ways of doing and relating to others that are not immediately subjected to the normative system of institutions and knowledges which have, for centuries, imposed a specific kind of individuality on us.<sup>362</sup> It also echoes Judith Revel's reflections on Foucault's late work on subjectivity and ethics, in which she proposes a strategy of counter-conduct in order to keep discourses and practices tightly knit together, to the extent that one should not simply live according to ideas, but to live the ideas themselves.<sup>363</sup> To propose that designers adapt their ways of life as strategies to resist precarisation, suggests transforming their lives into the very material of politics. For design practice, this implies a shift from merely proliferating signs and artefacts of resistance, to proliferating ways of doing and relating that refuse to be governed at *all* levels by the more – or less subtle – procedures of precarisation.

In this sense, the overall proposition of this thesis is that designers contribute to create "a new economy of power relations,"<sup>364</sup> to begin to experiment in all areas of life with the noncapitalist values explored in this thesis. It encourages designers to activate their de-precarising potential by creating, extending and also defending, collective socio-economic practices that do not constantly reinforce and reproduce precarising procedures. To be clear, this proposal is not intended as a prescription, but it is certainly addressed to all designers. Given the systemic nature of precarising procedures and their current rapid expansion due to (or justified

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362 Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p.216.

363 "Foucault, le parole e i poteri," lecture by Judith Revel, Department of Philosophy, University of Palermo, 11 March 2013, my translation

364 Foucault, "Subject and Power," p.210.

by) the economic crisis, we cannot imagine undoing them if not through a series of collective and connected multi-faceted experimentations. Whilst the findings of this research are undoubtedly informed by my own situatedness in life and design practice, as well as by the very specific inhabitations, conversations, seminars and workshops that I have participated in over the last three years, I nevertheless intend for the pratico-theoretical tools developed here to find users beyond myself and the collectives I am involved in. I hope that they be mobilised, experimented with and expanded by others, in order to orient their practices more strategically towards the creation and the interlinking of de-precarising economies of support.

### **Personal (en)closures and openings**

Despite my positive attitude towards the overall direction of this research, there are days when I fear that this whole research endeavour might not have any significant impact beyond my own accreditation as a design researcher within a neoliberal university. These are the days when the steps taken over the last three years seem too small and the compromises made along the way seem too big. These are also the days when the design profession seems inevitably lost to any possibility of change and a certain fatigue results from the constant need to justify ways of doing that try to break with the norm. These are the days, when in my various collectives, the pressure to make a living in conventional ways pushes our line between acceptable and unacceptable decisions forcefully towards the latter. I would say that these are the difficult moments that I would like steer clear of at the risk of restricting my imagination. However, I also know that these moments are important because they are a very clear reminder of the obstacles this thesis wants to undo.

Indeed, on the good days, I feel incredibly energised by this research and connected to the people with whom I am undertaking various de-precarising explorations. These are the days when openings are discovered which get me excited about what we could be doing next, when I can look back and see how much of my/our doing and thinking has changed through this research. In these moments, I am unconcerned having to defend our choices and I am not worried about falling, because I am certain that together, we will get up again. These are the days when I can see how supporting the cause of socially and politically engaged designers adds to the bigger picture of radical social change. These are the days when I sit around a table with my fellow conspirators cleaning runner beans for dinner and planning the next steps in turning things upside down.

Then, of course, there are the normal days, when none of the negative or positive thoughts take over. These are the days when I see how this research is one of many efforts across Europe to deal with the proliferation of precarising procedures due to (or justified by) the economic crisis. These are the days when I can weigh the blocking elements against the encouraging ones, when I (or rather I, together with others) can think strategically about how to navigate the complexities of undoing precariousness, when I perceive our de-precaring becoming-other taking place in everyday decisions. These are, then, the days when Fabio and I, but also my fellows of the *Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative* and the *New Cross Commoners*, are able to realistically imagine what to do next, when we are able to plan how to mobilise and interconnect the material, immaterial and social resources we have in order to build support structures that allow us to sustain our livelihoods in de-precaring ways whilst producing socially and politically engaged work.

The effects which the practice-theory relays created throughout this research have had on my practice (and life) with Fabio are substantial: we have, for instance, begun to consider how to reconfigure our practice and construct a resisting way of life through a de-precaring economy of support for ourselves, as well as for others, which interconnects the social and material resources we can rely on in the places we come from in the Italian Alps. Could we connect those elements with the knowledges and (real-life) social networks we have created throughout Europe and beyond? Could we connect these elements in ways that foster practices of commoning in the long-term and at multiple levels, locally and trans-locally, among the people with whom we would share a semi-rural space, as well as among our more widely distributed network of socially and politically engaged practitioners? Could we connect them whilst simultaneously nudging at design education by means of becoming a point of reference for diverse, non-normalised ways of working and living as designers? The answers to these questions – as well as the blockages we will undoubtedly encounter in trying to establish and live out such an economy – are a matter we are eager to explore beyond this thesis. In terms of this further exploration, we acknowledge that there is a need to work through further practice-theory relays in order to investigate, for example, the role technology (in its broadest sense) can play in both strengthening and weakening a multi-faceted support structure, or the precaring roles of gender, race and the global division of labour. Therefore, I would like to close by reminding our future selves that when we want to undo a precaring economic system that constantly builds its strength

on dividing people – according to gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, and so on and so forth – then we need to direct our attention and care towards undoing these power differentials in our movements of creation.<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> Silvia Federici, "Political Work with Women and as Women in the Present Conditions: Interview with Silvia Federici," [http://www.reclamationsjournal.org/issue03\\_silvia\\_federici.htm](http://www.reclamationsjournal.org/issue03_silvia_federici.htm).

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